FICTION AS HISTORY:
The Case of João Ubaldo Ribeiro

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Hayden White suggests in *The Content of the Form* that historiography depends upon the existence of a social center that allows the historian to locate events in relation to one another and "to charge them with ethical or moral significance" (White 1987, 11). This center makes it possible for the historical narrative—as opposed to the annals and the chronicle—to achieve closure. White specifies, however, that "in order to qualify as historical, an event must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence" (White 1987, 20). According to this perspective, the historical narrative is informed by the historian's need to assert his or her authority over other competing accounts of the past.[1] In questioning the privileged position traditionally held by historians and suggesting that historians' discourse is only one of many paths leading to a truthful (re)presentation of the past, White's version of historiography holds particular appeal for those of us who, despite having been trained in fields other than history, consider ourselves to be authoritative interpreters of Brazil.

It will be argued here that literature plays a unique role in the recording and interpretation of reality that makes the work of writers and literary scholars indispensable to efforts to make sense of the complex and paradoxical scene in twentieth-century Brazil. Others have also claimed such a role for literature. For example, in an article written at the end of the transition from military to civilian rule, Brazilian novelist and literary critic Silviano Santiago showed that much recent Brazilian fiction has been characterized by the search for alternative angles from which to reconstruct the country's past and give forgotten or marginalized groups a voice. According to Santiago, writers as diverse as Antônio Callado, Lya Luft, Márcio Souza, Autran Dourado, Ivan Angelo, and others have sought to recover the past as a partner rather than a servant of his-

1. According to White, "Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened. The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable by the imposition on its processes of the formal coherency that only stories possess" (White 1987, 20).

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tory.[2] The seminal writings of literary scholars like Antônio Cândido and Roberto Schwarz also highlight the centrality of literature and literary scholarship in seeking to comprehend Brazil.[3] Even historian Richard Morse, who at his most contentious has claimed that "history is by nature transdisciplinary" and proclaimed historians to be the "cosmic race of Latin American studies," draws heavily on literary works to support his idiosyncratic interpretations of Brazil.[4]

Many works by the writers of the generation born in the 1940s and reaching literary maturity in the 1970s would undoubtedly make good cases for reflecting on the issue of "fiction as history." In my view, however, no writer from that generation has had a literary career more closely involved in the ups and downs of Brazilian history over the last two and a half decades than João Ubaldo Ribeiro (b. 1940). The dilemmas and concerns central to each phase in Brazilian history since 1968 have found their way into Ribeiro's fictional texts. Yet his fiction is never a mere illustration of recent Brazilian history. Openly skeptical about the ability of historical discourse to provide a full account of reality, Ribeiro turned to fiction to create alternative voices that supplement and enlarge the historical perspective. Thus while exhibiting a deep sensitivity to the complex currents in Brazilian society, Ribeiro's novels and short stories also display a keen awareness of the problematic relationships existing among history, fiction, and truth.

This article comprises three major segments. The first provides a chronological overview of Ribeiro's fiction, set against the background of Brazilian history of the last twenty-five years. This overview is designed to show that despite the interconnections between Ribeiro's fictional texts and historical events, Ribeiro's fiction does not merely reflect social reality. As Lucien Goldmann has convincingly demonstrated, although literary forms emerge out of a historical, social, and economic reality, literary works are not passive reflections of historical, social, and economic condi-

2. See Silviano Santiago, "Prosa Literária Atual no Brasil," written in 1984, in Santiago (1989). In this article, Santiago also pays considerable attention to recent memorialist literature, particularly the autobiographical accounts of the victims of political repression by the military regime, which he regards as indispensable sources for any thorough study of the period. In his view, this new memorialism is substantially different from the old memorialism of the early modernists like José Lins do Rego, which he thinks did not add a significant alternative perspective to official history.

3. Antônio Cândido and Roberto Schwarz have written so many indispensable studies in this area that it is difficult to mention only a few. I would like to single out Cândido's monumental *Formação da Literatura Brasileira* (1959) and three of Schwarz's essays: "Nacional por Subtração" in Schwarz (1987); "As Idéias fora do Lugar" in Schwarz (1981); and "Cultura e Política, 1964–1969" in Schwarz (1978).

4. The quotes are taken from the essay "Stop the Computers, I Want to Get Off" (written in 1970), in Morse (1989). The overstated claims about the historian's activity belie Morse's constant references to literary texts in his essays and his thorough knowledge of Latin American literature, particularly of Brazilian literature.

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tions: "The relation between collective ideology and great individual, literary, philosophical, theological, etc. creations resides not in an identity of content, but in a more advanced coherence and a homology of structures which can be expressed in imaginary contents very different from the real content of the collective consciousness" (Goldmann 1975, 9).

The middle segment of the article begins by discussing such theoretical topics as the nature of historical and fictional truth and the role of interpretation in historical and fictional discourse, then considers specifically Brazilian cultural and ideological issues raised by Ribeiro's 1984 novel, *Viva o Povo Brasileiro* (translated by the author and published in the United States as *An Invincible Memory*). This monumental historical novel bears witness to the centrality of fiction for Ribeiro's project of reconstructing the past and making sense of Brazil's multifaceted and often contradictory reality.

The final segment assesses the resurgence of the genre of the historical novel in Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s and contrasts the new Brazilian historical novel with the classic historical novel of the nineteenth century. This section also addresses the ethical and political implications that the new historical novel holds for the contemporary reader.

RIBEIRO'S FICTION AND RECENT BRAZILIAN HISTORY

Ribeiro's first novel, *Setembro Não Tem Sentido* (September has no meaning), was published in 1968. It is an introspective, semi-autobiographical work about young intellectuals searching for their identity in the still provincial city of Salvador (capital of the state of Bahia). Although the novel was published prior to the military takeover in 1964, it depicts the anxiety, insecurity, and hopelessness faced by Ribeiro's generation when Brazil was approaching the period later named "*o sufoco*" (the suffocating years from 1969 to 1974). This period followed the "coup within the coup" on 13 December 1968, when military hard-liners assumed complete control and gained de facto dictatorial powers.

Ribeiro's second novel, *Sergeant Getulio*, and *Vencecavalo e O Outro Povo* (Vencecavalo and the other people), a collection of five interconnected short stories, represent the cultural impasse generated by the authoritarianism of the early 1970s. During this dark period, writers and other artists had to resort to allegory, symbolism, and experimental techniques to elude the constraints of ubiquitous censorship. *Sergeant Getulio* is structured as a rambling monologue by the title character, a ruthless gunman for hire capable of the most savage actions. Determined to carry out his assignment to capture and bring back one of his boss's political enemies, Getulio refuses to bend even as his boss changes his mind, betrays his henchman, and sends federal troops to relieve him of the prisoner. Thematically and formally, *Sergeant Getulio* is Ribeiro's most sub-

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versive work. It was published at the height of the "economic miracle" of the early 1970s, when the military government sought to create a sense of national unity and pride by promoting slogans such as "Ninguém segura este país" ("No one can hold this country back"), "Pra frente, Brasil" ("Let's move ahead, Brazil") and "Brasil, ame-o ou deixe-o" ("Brazil, love it or leave it"). In contrast, Ribeiro presents Brazil as a country marked by discontinuities and misunderstandings. And in depicting Getulio's cold-blooded cruelty, the novel explodes the myth of innate Brazilian benevolence while exposing the reality of violence in Brazilian society, particularly significant at a time when torture had become institutionalized. The striking narrative technique and the harsh poetic prose employed in *Sergeant Getulio* violate the reader's expectations of time and space and thus function as correlatives of the theme of violence.

The collection of stories entitled *Vencecavalo e o Outro Povo* is an iconoclastic satire that addresses in a mock-heroic tone a host of "national" issues ranging from government corruption and ineptitude to authoritarianism, colonialism, and dependence. The stories also poke fun at many aspects of the Brazilian national character. Displaying a Rabelaisian delight in linguistic excess, the collection relies on parody, allusion, and allegory as its antidotes to the solemnity with which national questions were being treated officially at the time.

Ribeiro's more recent works bespeak the growing liberalization that began with the *distensão* (decompression) of the period from 1975 to 1979 and the *abertura* (opening) from 1979 to 1985 and continued into the "Nova República," which began in 1985. The novel *Vila Real* deals openly with the controversial subject of a group of backlanders' struggle against an all-powerful company. Such a topic would have been inconceivable during the more repressive years of the military regime. *An Invincible Memory* typifies the renewed interest in the national past and the preoccupation with redefining the Brazilian national identity that marked the transition from abertura to the Nova República. Finally, *O Sorriso do Largarto* (The smile of the lizard), published in late 1989, depicts with biting satire a corrupt society that has lost its moral bearings. This story of decadence represents a literary counterpart to the aimlessness and ineptitude of the government of José Sarney (1985–1990).

Of all Ribeiro's works, *An Invincible Memory* deals most thoroughly with the complex interconnections between fiction and history. This massive novel consists of a series of subplots centering on the intersection between the personal and family histories of dozens of characters with different class and racial origins. Deliberately shunning the linearity preferred by historians and realist novelists, Ribeiro transports the reader back and forth between Bahia, Rio, Lisbon, Paraguay, and the "pampas" of southern Brazil over a time span ranging from 1647 to 1977. Moreover, the novelist provides only small amounts of information at a time, leaving

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many gaps in the narrative to be filled later. Much in the tradition of the classical "historical novel," *An Invincible Memory* mixes imagined situations with historical events like the Farroupilha Revolution, a nineteenth-century rebellion in Rio Grande do Sul against the imperial government, and Brazil's bloody war against Paraguay (1865–1870). While creating this vast panorama, Ribeiro comments on various aspects of Brazilian life. His main targets are the pretentious upper classes, whom he satirizes for their tendency to ape European tastes and fashions, their contempt for the lower classes, and their obsession with concealing any tinge of black blood in the family line—a difficult task in a society where miscegenation is a daily fact of life. The oppressed lower classes fare much better in this novel. As suggested by its original Portuguese title, which translates as "Long Live the Brazilian People," Ribeiro regards them as the strongest and most authentic element of Brazilian society.

FICTION, HISTORY, AND TRUTH

An Invincible Memory opens with an epigraph that forecasts some of the central questions raised in the novel: "The secret of Truth is as follows: there are no facts, there are only stories." Ribeiro's own words, this epigraph parodies claims by nineteenth-century novelists that their novels were truthful representations of reality rather than fanciful products of the imagination.[5] Thus via parody Ribeiro highlights one difference between his novel and the nineteenth-century realist tradition, particularly its ties with the notion of history as a scientific, objective investigation based on supposedly "true facts."[6] It is nevertheless important to point out that contemporary literary theory has demonstrated convincingly that parody (unlike satire, with which it is often confused) generally entails an appreciation of the model being parodied.[7] Thus even while criticizing the nineteenth-century realist tradition, Ribeiro is not completely abandon-

5. To cite only one example from Brazilian literature, naturalist novelist Aluísio Azevedo chose the following aphorism to open his novel *O Cortiço* (published in English as *A Brazilian Tenement*): "La Vérité, toute la vérité, rien que la vérité" (The truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth). Here Azevedo was echoing Stendhal in *Le Rouge et le noir,* "La Vérite, l'âpre vérité" (The truth, the bitter truth).

6. The most often cited examples are Honoré de Balzac's *Comédie humaine* and Emile Zola's saga of the Rougon Macquart, called *Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire.* In "Bençāo Paterna," the preface to Brazilian novelist José de Alencar's novel *Sonhos d'Ouro* (1872), the writer discusses how his novels are supposed to create a complete panorama of Brazilian life, from precolonial days to the present.

7. Thomas Greene has proposed that "every creative imitation mingles filial rejection with respect, just as every parody pays its own oblique homage" (Greene 1982, 46). Linda Hutcheon explains, "I see parody as a method of ascribing continuity while permitting critical distance" (Hutcheon 1985, 20). And Mikhail Bakhtin said in discussing parody in classical literature, "Parody here was not, of course, a naked rejection of the parodied object" (Bakhtin 1984a, 127).

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ing the belief that the novel can be a truthful representation of reality. What he is denying is that a supposedly objective examination of facts is a sufficient basis for arriving at truth. It should also be noted that Ribeiro's epigraph uses the word "stories" in the plural, suggesting that any truthful representation of the past must take into account the plurality of voices that comprise reality.[8]

It is not difficult to recognize the links between Ribeiro's epigraph and contemporary theories like those of Hayden White, which call attention to the analogies between history and fiction. White agrees with Northrop Frye's proposition that "history is a verbal model of a set of events external to the mind of the historian," but White also stresses that history is a different kind of model from a map, a photograph, or a scale model of a plane or ship in that the reader of history cannot examine the originals to ascertain whether or not the historian has adequately represented them. White explains,

> This is what leads me to think that historical narratives are not only models of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings. Viewed in a purely formal way, a historical narrative is not only a reproduction of the events reported in it, but also a complex of symbols which gives us directions for finding an icon of the structure of those events in our literary tradition. (White 1978, 88)

White argues further that historians rely on "emplotment" as much as writers of fiction do: "And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with 'fictions' in general" (White 1978, 83). Ribeiro, however, is reluctant to identify history and fiction as closely as White does. To the contrary, Ribeiro stresses the differences between history and fiction to suggest that fiction can get even closer to truth than history. His reasoning holds that fiction is more willing to admit openly that its discourse is partial, in the dual sense of being both incomplete and biased, thus acknowledging the impossibility of completely recovering the past as an object.

The relationship between fiction and history is problematized as early as the first chapter of the novel, which recounts the death of Warrant Officer José Francisco Brandão Galvão at the hands of the Portuguese troops during the war to consolidate Brazilian independence.[9] Although

8. It may be useful to remember that R. G. Collingwood thought that historians were above all storytellers and that historians through their "constructive imagination" made a plausible story out of a series of facts that in themselves make no sense at all.

9. Although all the characters in *An Invincible Memory* are creations of Ribeiro's imagination, many of them appear to be composites loosely based on a variety of historical and popular prototypes. Composite examples include Brandão Galvão, Perilo Ambrósio, Amleto Ferreira, Júlio Dandão, and Maria da Fé.

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the official version of Brandão Galvão's death asserted that it was an act of heroism, Galvão was no national martyr. In fact, he was a simpleton, whose "heroism" consisted of failing to realize that, when obviously outnumbered by the Portuguese troops, the right thing to do was not to resist but to flee, as his fellow soldiers did.

Displaying a caustic humor characteristic of Ribeiro's style, this episode launches a debate about the issue of historical truthfulness: although the fact that the young officer lost his life in the war against the Portuguese was indisputable, what was transmitted to posterity was not that fact but one interpretation of its meaning as mediated by the discourse of official history. This interpretation is neither neutral nor objective, for it responded to the specific, immediate interests of those holding political power. By parodying traditional historiographic language and employing subtle irony, Ribeiro calls into question the truism that history equals truth: "Fortunately, as the brigs came into view, tacking into the bight, only the warrant officer remained at the station he had assigned himself, while the others, from the apothecary to the parish priest, from sailors to shellfish pickers, beat a retreat to the woods in the vicinity of Amoreiras, thus preventing, with their astute, prompt, and courageous action, the Revolution's suffering casualties of inestimable consequence."[10] Thus the opening episode of *An Invincible Memory* presents one of the fundamental themes of the novel: the contrast between official discourse and the marginalized discourses without which authentic reconstruction of the past is impossible. This episode also introduces two key components of Ribeiro's narrative method. Foremost is a reliance on parody, which Mikhail Bakhtin has shown to be a double-voiced discourse.[11] Almost as important is Ribeiro's use of a variety of literary and conversational styles. Both elements require the reader to be aware of what Bakhtin terms *heteroglossia,* the plurality of voices coexisting in every social context. In Bakhtin's view, heteroglossia is the essence of the dialogic discourse of the novel, an element that tends to be repressed by the monologic discourse of history as traditionally conceived.[12]

The account of the death of Brandão Galvão is followed by an episode centering on another false hero, Perilo Ambrósio Góis Farinha, the

10. João Ubaldo Ribeiro, *An Invincible Memory,* translated by João Ubaldo Ribeiro (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 5. All citations are taken from this edition and will be indicated in parentheses following each quotation.

11. Bakhtin observed, "To introduce a parodic and polemical element in the narration is to make it more multi-voiced, more interruption-prone, no longer gravitating toward itself or its referential object" (Bakhtin 1984a, 226).

12. According to Bakhtin, *dialogism* is characterized by the interaction of many voices, consciousnesses, or worldviews, although no one of them is central or dominant: "On all its various routes toward the object, in all its directions, the word encounters an alien word and cannot help encountering it in a living, tension-filled interaction" (Bakhtin 1981, 226). *Monologism* is marked by the supremacy of a dominant voice, consciousness, or worldview.

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future Baron of Pirapuama. Seeking to win renown as a brave soldier in the war for independence despite having carefully avoided direct participation in combat, Perilo Ambrósio fakes a battle injury by stabbing his slave Inocêncio to death and smearing himself with the other man's blood. To avoid having his fraud exposed, Perilo Ambrósio cuts off the tongue of the only eyewitness, another slave of his named Feliciano.[13] Even so, the story of Perilo Ambrósio's cruelty and wickedness is transmitted to the slave community and becomes one of their main reasons for hating him and eventually seeking a bloody revenge. Although Feliciano cannot speak, he communicates by means of gestures, which are skillfully interpreted by his friend Budião.

The severing of Feliciano's tongue obviously symbolizes the attempt by the socially powerful to suppress the speech of the socially weak. This attempt succeeds only partially because although Perilo Ambrósio is undeservedly hailed as a hero of the Brazilian independence and accorded the title of Baron of Pirapuama, Feliciano manages to break the silence imposed on him via the empathetic interpretation of his gestures by Budião and bring about disclosure of the deception of the official version. The reader soon realizes that this is only the first of many attempts to suppress the speech of those at the bottom of the social ladder. For example, in a subsequent episode, itinerant storyteller Justina Bojuda, a black woman from Armação de Bom Jesus, is interrupted abruptly by Perilo Ambrósio's wife, Antônia Vitória, who orders Bojuda to stop telling "anecdotes of low morals and high debauchery." She vows to "have a hot egg shoved into the mouth of the first . . . who repeats such a word of this vile tale" (p. 59). In both episodes, the characters' speech is suppressed to eliminate a perceived threat to the established order.

This order is shown to be based on a big lie perpetrated by those in power and their presumptuous successors. Notable among the latter are the descendants of the mulatto Amleto Ferreira, Perilo Ambrósio's cynical and manipulative former deputy. Amleto succeeds in climbing the social ladder via unbridled corruption. Using deftly counterfeited documents, he constructs a fantastic genealogy that links him to the British nobility and magically erases all traces of black blood in his family. He assumes the pompous name of Amleto Nobre dos Reis Ferreira-Dutton, disavows his dark-skinned mother, and spends the rest of his life trying to keep all the family skeletons hidden safely in the closet. These include his African origins, the madness of his daughter Carlota Borroméia Martinha Nobre dos Reis Ferreira-Dutton, the homosexuality of his son Clemente André (a Catholic priest), the mediocrity of his son-in-law Vasco Miguel (a son of the Baron of Pirapuama), and the dishonesty and immorality of most of

13. The names "Inocêncio" and "Feliciano" are obviously ironic choices.

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his descendants. This pretentious and inhuman elite is portrayed as having reached the top of the social ladder through corruption and oppression of the disadvantaged.

Presented in contrast are the lower strata of society, populated by characters who remain faithful to such fundamental human values as compassion and respect for communal values. Two of these characters stand out. Maria da Fé, a mulatto woman who was born of the rape of her slave mother Daê by the insufferable Baron of Pirapuama, combines the bravery of Joan of Arc with the fortitude of Bahia's own heroine Maria Quitéria. The second exemplar is Júlio Dandão, who holds the secret of the mystical "Brotherhood of the Brazilian People," a source of strength and renewal for the community. These two characters become folk legends in their own time for acting in defense of the dispossessed. They also epitomize the Brazilian people's capacity to endure. Ribeiro's emphasis on popular culture is a key element in the novel: the authentic communal values on which popular culture is based are transmitted orally, in contrast to the vacuous pretensions of the elite, which are based on papers of dubious moral authenticity, like the baron's title, or of spurious legal authenticity, like the documents used to "prove" Amleto's fantastic genealogy.

These points are underscored in the fifth chapter, set during the celebrations of the feast of Saint Anthony (between the twelfth and fourteenth of June). This chapter opens with Perilo Ambrósio raping his slave Daê (also known as Venância) and ends with his slaves plotting to poison him. The evening of the rape, the slaves are forced by Antônia Vitória to take part in a vigil honoring Saint Anthony, the beginning of the traditional celebrations of the month of June (*festas juninas*). Although they have been baptized, the slaves have only weak ties to the Catholic religion imposed by their masters and can barely remember the words of the prayers. Catholicism is thus presented as a cultural violation of the Afro-Brazilian community, one paralleling the physical violation of Daê by Perilo Ambrósio. This segment is contrasted with the account of the alternate celebrations organized by the slaves. Unlike the dreary ceremonies of the *casa grande*, these slave celebrations held in the woods reflect a joyous spontaneity and a strong sense of community:[14] "Yes, they were really not the same, those blacks, they did not have the same frisky demeanor they had

14. Brazilian anthropologist Roberto da Matta has called attention to the contrast between the home and the street as two fundamentally different spaces that characterize Brazilian social life. It is interesting, however, that da Matta views the street as a space marked by insecurity and suspicion of others, as opposed to the security and stability of the home. In defining the space outside the home as the space of freedom, this passage from *An Invincible Memory* subverts da Matta's dichotomy, suggesting that the latter may be based on an ethnocentric view of Brazilian culture. In all fairness to da Matta, however, it should be pointed out that he does observe that Brazilians' suspicion of the street is linked to Brazil's slave past. See Matta (1979) and the chapter entitled "A Casa, a Rua e o Trabalho" in Matta (1986).

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sported at the celebration; here they did not belong to anybody, as they would anywhere else. And at least tonight they could beat their drums, because the baron, the baroness, and their guests had left" (p. 109). Outside the house, the slaves call each other by their original African names, surrender to the sensual rhythms of their African drums, and freely practice their sensuous religion of the *orixás*.

CARNIVALIZATION, DIALOGISM, AND MULTIPLE ETHICS

This chapter is unquestionably an example of what Bakhtin has called carnivalization, a process central to understanding Brazilian culture.[15] As Bakhtin has demonstrated, the inversions of established norms that characterize carnival are ways of contesting the official order, subverting the ordinary social hierarchy, and creating a sense of community.[16] Although Bakhtin focuses on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and does not believe that modern societies are capable of authentic forms of carnivalization, his research suggests that in a certain sense every society at every stage manifests a set of activities that could be described as carnivals. In the United States, these activities include Fourth of July parades, presidential inaugurations, university commencements, and the Super Bowl—all of them events that in one way or another contain carnivalized elements. There are, however, fundamental differences between these U.S. examples and what is being portrayed in Ribeiro's *An Invincible Memory*, especially because the process of carnivalization is more widespread and prevalent in Brazil. In this regard, Richard Morse has advanced a useful thesis in his essay "Notes towards Fresh Ideology." He first contrasts two major studies of race relations in the United States and in Brazil, Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) and Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933, published in English as *The Masters and the Slaves* in 1947). Morse concludes that the ideas that make up the "American creed"—the traditions of liberty, equality, a government of laws rather than of men, a shared common weal, respect for the governed, and the ideal of the perfectibility of human beings—are so compelling and pervasive that even blacks accept them. In contrast, there is no analogous "Brazilian creed," no "official creed of legal equality" that enjoys "popular recognition as a prevalent or enforceable ideal" (Morse 1989, 144). This

15. See Matta (1979), particularly the first three chapters: "Carnavais, Paradas e Procissões," "Carnaval em Múltiplos Planos," e "Carnaval da Igualdade e da Hierarquia."

16. According to Bakhtin, "In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its own laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (Bakhtin 1984b, 7).

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situation is partly the result of Brazilian society being based on what Brazilian anthropologist Roberto da Matta calls "multiple ethics."[17] As Morse explains, "Here . . . an oppressive institutional order whitewashed by individualist, egalitarian ideology is complemented by a family of subcommunities aspiring to an egalitarianism that is personalist rather than individualist and therefore consistent with holism. . . . Such a society classifies the single person relationally in the shifting context of his affiliations rather than atomistically by precepts of a common 'creed.' In the American case the creed and the culture are seen as conjoined; Brazilians see them as unyoked" (Morse 1989, 144–45). Thus according to Morse, Brazilian society is more truly pluralistic than American society to the extent that it accepts and is better equipped to deal with the coexistence of competing value systems.

When analyzing Ribeiro's text, one notices that the Catholic and the Afro-Brazilian religious celebrations are not mixed but appear instead as two different and competing manifestations of Brazilian religiosity. By setting up his narrative in this fashion, Ribeiro contests the official ideology of syncretism,[18] a supposedly national trait often invoked to account for the incorporation of Afro-Brazilian traditions into Brazilian culture. Syncretism is frequently cited to explain how the religions imported from Africa have mixed with and adapted to the Catholicism imposed on the slaves by their masters. It is true that over time the African deities or orixás became more and more closely identified with the Catholic saints to which they were initially matched in an artful ruse that allowed the slaves to preserve some of their religious practices. Nevertheless, the Afro-Brazilian religion of *candomblé* is far from a perfect harmonization of African and Western elements. Moreover, by focusing on the harmonizing of disparate elements, syncretism skirts the controversial issue of the systematic crippling of any African cultural elements that appeared to be a threat to the dominant Europeanized elites.[19]

Ribeiro's *An Invincible Memory* calls into question the accepted view of syncretism as a totally benevolent phenomenon. The novel shows that

17. See Matta (1981). In this essay, he argues that Brazilian society lacks a single predominant ethic: "After investigating rituals and studying other domains of the Brazilian society, I am convinced that the system values the economic axis (and turns it into a course of power and prestige) but also values other social goods because, precisely as in other traditional societies, hierarchy is dissociated from power and hierarchy is always favored, as I have tried to show elsewhere" (Matta 1981, 250). He perceives the Brazilian system of values as characterized by "complementary but dissociated lines or categories" (Matta 1981, 251). Umbanda, messianism, and carnival are all Brazilian expressions of these multiple ethics.

18. I am using *ideology* in Morse's sense of "the beliefs and moral sentiments of a community having a shared history" (Morse 1989, 139).

19. Beatriz Góis Dantas offers a lucid analysis of how the elites manipulated religious syncretism to foster their own model of Brazil as a harmonious racial democracy. Of particular interest is chapter four, "A Construção e a Significação da 'Pureza Nagô' " (Dantas 1988).

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although syncretism is generally presented as an example of the Brazilian tendency toward conciliation, syncretism actually demonstrates the Brazilian inability to choose between alternatives, an example of the unique Brazilian pluralism that Morse discusses.[20] In setting the narrative in a period before the religion of the orixás and Catholicism become intermingled, *An Invincible Memory* exposes the national myth of syncretism as a kind of repressive monologic discourse.[21] For if Catholicism was forced on people of African descent and was never completely accepted by them, then the benevolent, harmonizing face of syncretism masks the grim reality of violence against the marginalized by the dominant powers.[22] Ribeiro's novel thus contests the tendency among the Brazilian elites to attempt to resolve any conflict by appealing to an ideology of harmony or synthesis, which obscures the differences among the various elements in Brazilian society. In contrast, *An Invincible Memory* replaces synthesis with difference, or, to use Bakhtin's terminology, substitutes dialogism for monologism.

This replacement is clearly demonstrated by Ribeiro's handling of the relationship between Maria da Fé and Patrício Macário, the rebel son of the hypocritical Amleto Ferreira. An obvious intertextual connection exists between the relationship between these two lovers from distinct social strata and those between indigenous natives and white Europeans in José de Alencar's Indian novels, such as Peri and Ceci in *O Guarani* (1857), or Iracema and Martim in *Iracema* (1865). Reflecting the nineteenth-century project of creating the myth of a cordial Brazil, whose population would be the product of the mixture of races, José de Alencar's novels attempt to show how different elements have harmonized to create a unique Brazilian reality. Closer examination of these novels, however, reveals no real synthesis because the Indian element is always assimilated into the European. By contrast, Ribeiro's *An Invincible Memory* demonstrates a recognition of differences that result in a better balance between Maria da Fé

20. Whereas U.S. culture could be described as a "culture of either-or," Brazilian culture could be described as a "culture of and." This point is clearly exemplified in the Brazilian classification of race. Unlike the U.S. perspective that relies on broad racial categories like "blacks," "African-Americans," and "whites," Brazilians have hundreds of racial categories. Marvin Harris reports that his research uncovered 492 different terms used in Brazil to identify racial differences. Most of them avoid an absolute separation between blacks and white, and many suggest that a person can be simultaneously black and white (such as *branco africano* and *preto claro*). See Harris (1970). A more recent and equally indispensable source for studying racial terminology in Brazil (and Latin America in general) is Stephens (1989). The hundreds of terms listed and defined meticulously by Stephens substantiate Brazilians' need to convey extremely subtle nuances in racial classification.

21. Bakhtin believed that myth is characterized by *monologism:* "An absolute fusion of word with concrete ideological meaning is, without a doubt, one of the most fundamental constitutive features of myth . . ." (Bakhtin 1981, 369).

22. This point is discussed in considerable detail by Clóvis Moura in Moura (1988), particularly in the second chapter entitled "Sincretismo, Assimilação, Acomodação e Luta de Classes."

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and Patrício Macário. He knows that she is "indomitable by words or by force" and that his own affinity with the black people of Itaparica did not mean "the assumption of a life identical to theirs, but one that made all his former existence absurd" because he had learned that "everything can be seen in different ways, very different from that which people think is the only one, the correct one" (p. 381). At the same time, Maria da Fé, when talking about her fateful relationship with Patrício Macário, recognizes that "if we wanted to live together one of us would have to stop being what we are" (p. 384). Using Bakhtin's perspective, one could say that whereas the treatment of the relationships between Martim and Iracema or between Peri and Ceci are monological, that of the relationship between Maria da Fé and Patrício Macário is dialogical. Significantly, Lourenço, the son of Maria da Fé and Patrício Macário, takes the ideology of equality (perceived by Morse as characteristic of the American sense of egalitarianism) to task by showing it to be a mystifying product of the official, monological discourse of the abolition movement and the nineteenth-century Brazilian Republic: "Our objective is not really equality, rather it's justice, freedom, pride, dignity, good coexistence. This is a fight that will go across centuries, because our enemies are very strong. The bullwhip still prevails, poverty increases, nothing has changed. Emancipation didn't abolish slavery. The Republic didn't abolish oppression, it created new oppressors" (p. 455).

It should be noted that the Portuguese title of the book, *Viva o Povo Brasileiro*, does not end with the expected exclamation point. Ribeiro's novel was not intended to assert naively the superiority of the values of "the people" nor merely to condemn the values of the elite. On the contrary, the novel seeks to reposition the terms of the debate over the question of national identity by deconstructing such "national" ideologies as syncretism, the love of harmony, and the innate cordiality and benevolence of the Brazilian people while emphasizing the differences and unresolved conflicts among the many voices that make up the Brazilian nation. Despite his respect and admiration for the Brazilian lower classes, Ribeiro (unlike Jorge Amado) does not fall into the trap of portraying a simplistic Manichean polarity between the wicked and decadent bourgeoisie and the good-natured and morally superior "people."

THE NEW BRAZILIAN HISTORICAL NOVEL

As has been suggested, *An Invincible Memory* is not an isolated literary case but part of a general flowering of historical fiction in Brazil during the last two decades. Many examples of this trend could be cited, among them: Márcio Souza's *Galvez, Imperador do Acre* (1976, published in English as *The Emperor of the Amazon* in 1980), a parodic account of life in the Amazon region during the rubber boom at the turn of the century;

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Antônio Callado's *Sempreviva* (1981, Everlasting), an examination of the repression between 1968 and 1975; Moacyr Scliar's *A Estranha Nação de Rafael Mendes* (1983, published in English as *The Strange Nation of Rafael Mendes* in 1987), a reconstruction of several centuries of Jewish history; and Nélida Piñon's *A República dos Sonhos* (1984, published in English in 1989 as *The Republic of Dreams*), a multigenerational history of an immigrant clan.

But a key question remains to be answered. Why did these writers return to the model of the historical novel, a genre whose heyday ended with the nineteenth century? What were they trying to accomplish by writing historical novels in the 1970s and 1980s? As Jean Franco has convincingly demonstrated, in Latin America "well into the twentieth century, the intelligentsia would appropriate the novel and there work out imaginary solutions to the intractable problems of racial heterogeneity, social inequality, urban versus rural society" (Franco 1989, 204). This description especially fits the Brazilian novel, which from José de Alencar to João Ubaldo Ribeiro has played a key role in the still unfinished project of defining Brazilian identity.

It is important, however, to bear in mind that whereas most nineteenth-century historical novels participated in the process of myth-formation sponsored by the elites (yielding what Franco calls "blueprints of national formation"), these recent historical novels express open skepticism about the modernization project embraced by the elites in the twentieth century. Unquestionably, the attitude of writers toward the established powers has changed drastically from that of partner to that of critic, from collaboration to contestation. Readers have noticed a conscious attempt on the part of Brazilian writers of the 1970s and 1980s to distance themselves from anything "official." This attitude is reflected in the novelists' predilection for stories focusing on the marginalized or the forgotten and for characters representing atypical individuals in a social and political space marked by discontinuities and fragmentation, rather than types who embody national ideals.[23] Thus the return to the historical novel can be viewed as a response to the social and historical conditions of the 1970s and 1980s. Faced with the realization that the optimistic definition of Brazil based on harmony and unification, as forged in the nineteenth century and manipulated by military rulers from 1964 to 1985, conflicts with the reality of a society that is fragmented politically and socially, Brazilian writers have turned to the past in search of explanations for the divisions they perceive in the present.

23. I am using the term *type* in the Lukácsian sense of the character who represents a synthesis of the individual and the universal and whose personal drama embodies the essential dilemmas of society at large. See Lukács (1962), particularly the first chapter, "The Classical Form of the Historical Novel."

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To the extent that these novels are self-conscious attempts to redefine the relationship between fiction and history, they could be regarded as examples of what Linda Hutcheon has termed *historiographic metafiction:* "Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon 1988, 5). But even while recognizing the undeniable links between novels like *An Invincible Memory* or *The Emperor of the Amazon* and "historiographic metafiction," one must not lose sight of the specific context in which the genre of the historical novel was revived in Brazil. First of all, as Jean Franco has suggested, many of the characteristics of recent Latin American historical novels have to do less with style than with Latin America's peculiar historical situation:

> Such texts may seem "postmodern" because of a sum of characteristics—pastiche, nostalgia, and the like—and because they reflect the dissolution of any universal system of meaning or master discourse, a dissolution which clearly affects Latin America's relation to metropolitan discourse. Yet just as national allegory fails to describe adequately the simultaneous dissolution of the idea of the nation and the continuous persistence of national concerns, so postmodernism cannot adequately describe those texts that use pastiche and citation not simply as style but as correlatives of the continent's uneasy and unfinished relationship to modernity. (Franco 1989, 211)

Moreover, the historical novels of the 1970s and 1980s must be seen as interlocutors in an intertextual dialogue with a literary and cultural tradition that dates back to the decades immediately following political independence and continues into the twentieth century. This tradition is exemplified by fictional and nonfictional works like Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* (1902, published in English in 1944 as *Rebellion in the Backlands*), Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1928, published in English in 1984 under the same title), Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's *Raízes do Brasil* (1936, Roots of Brazil), and others. Much like their nineteenth-century counterparts, recent historical novels serve as vehicles for understanding and defining Brazil. In my view (which differs somewhat from that of Jean Franco), it is not the notion of Brazil as a single nation that is being contested but an officially endorsed version of Brazil based on discredited myths and ideologies. Ultimately, these novels aim to redefine the collective past and present of Brazil in terms that can account for the heterogeneity and difference that may paradoxically constitute the essence of "Brazilianness."

Published just at the time when the military regime (1964–1985) was rapidly giving way to the growing movement toward full redemocratization that eventually led to the so-called Nova República, *An Invincible Memory* is unquestionably one of the best examples of the new Brazilian historical novel. As has been shown, Ribeiro's novel rejects the concep-

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tion of history as a scientific, detached reconstruction of the past. First suggested by the epigraph, this position is expressed explicitly in the story recounted by a blindman named Faustino. He is introduced in the novel as being on his way to the town of Canudos, the site of the bloody rebellion against the young republic in the late 1890s immortalized in da Cunha's *Os Sertões*. After affirming the truth of his story, which turns out to be the story line of *An Invincible Memory*, Faustino goes on to explain, "History is not just the one that's written in the books, if for no other reason than that many of those who write books lie much more than those who tell fairy tales." He adds, "all history is false or half false, and each generation that arrives decides about what happened before, and so book history is as invented as newspaper history, where you read so many lies your hair stands on end" (pp. 385–86). Thus in insisting that multiple versions of a story are indispensable for reaching truth, *An Invincible Memory* calls into question any all-encompassing, univocal explanation of reality, as exemplified by the authoritarian model of Brazil imposed by the moribund military regime. Moreover, in privileging fiction over history, the novel rejects any form of deterministic control by the past over the present—and, by extension, any form of control over the present. At the same time, the novel subversively encourages creative projections into the future. Here Ribeiro seems to share Hayden White's view that as long as historians continue to believe that they can "render a literal copy of a presumably static reality" (White 1978, 50), they have failed to grasp the true meaning of human history. As this novel attempts to show, the truth about the past lies not in a rationally organized sequence of static facts but in the outwardly chaotic multiplicity of conflicting stories.

This multiplicity places an enormous burden on the reader, who must play an active role in producing the text. In this respect, it is useful to recall what some contemporary literary theorists studying reader response have said about the experience of reading as an opening of new perspectives within the reader. Wolfgang Iser argues in *The Act of Reading* that the reading process results in a "heightening of self-awareness" that "enables us to formulate ourselves and thus discover an inner world of which we have hitherto not been conscious" (Iser 1978, 157–58). Hans Robert Jauss goes even further, suggesting in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* that "the experience of reading can liberate one from adaptations, prejudices and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things" (Jauss 1982, 41).

To the extent that the reader of *An Invincible Memory* is led to question the traditional myths regarding Brazilian identity and to share in the imaginary construction of new possibilities, he or she is not a passive recipient but an active participant. For it is only through fiction that the reader, historically a member of the elite, can reinvent himself or herself as a "marginalized person" and join what the novel calls the "Brotherhood of

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the Brazilian People." More "fictional" than "historical," the "Brotherhood" "perhaps was founded forever and will persist forever, perhaps it is all a lie, perhaps it is the most patent truth and for that reason unperceivable, but no one knows, because this Brotherhood kills and dies, but does not speak" (p. 158). What is needed to join is an act of faith, similar to the "suspension of disbelief" required of readers of fiction. This is the lesson that Rita Popó, the trustee of the secrets of popular religion, teaches to Patrício Macário:

> That was why people mentioned so much the need to have faith for things to happen, for after all, faith is nothing but a way to see the world that makes it possible for the things you wish to happen. Faith, therefore, is a knowledge, a knowledge he didn't have and no one could give him, only he himself could do it, though he could be helped. She was willing to help him if he wanted, and as long as he understood that the world can be seen in many ways. He certainly knew that people who are excessively sure that there's only one way and one truth, a truth entirely known to them, are dangerous and prone to all types of crime. To know the truth and try to impose it on others, in a world where everything changes and is cloaked under all kinds of appearances, is a serious madness. (P. 446)

CONCLUSION

The magical trunk containing the secrets of the "Brotherhood of the Brazilian People" is opened on the day when Patrício Macário turns one hundred and dies. At this point, two visions corresponding to two different views of the future are offered to the reader. The first, which the thieves glimpse when they look inside the trunk, consists of a long list of the mistakes, abuses of power, and white-collar crimes committed by the elites over the three and a half centuries covered by *An Invincible Memory.* If the present is to be explained solely by these facts, then perhaps Brazil has reached the end of its history and there is no way out. In this version, the future perversely coincides with the past, creating a circular and closed conception of time reminiscent of the ending of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967).

But in the last paragraph of *An Invincible Memory,* another vision of the future is introduced that hints at the possibility of breaking the chain of repetitiveness. As blood begins to ooze out of the walls of the flour house, the Souls' Perch (from which the Brazilian souls allegedly return to be reincarnated) begins to vibrate. In a parody of the Revelation, a southeasterly wind begins to blow, rain starts to pour, and something extraordinary happens: "No one looked up, and so no one saw in the middle of the storm the Spirit of Man, errant but full of hope, hovering over the lightless waters of the great bay" (p. 504). This vision portends a different version of history, the history of a people who have endured suffering and oppression but, having survived all kinds of adversity, are ready to move ahead—although in a very different sense from the "Let's move ahead"

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slogans conceived by the military government in the early 1970s. Ribeiro's *An Invincible Memory* does not deny that it is necessary to look into the past to understand the present and prepare for the future, but it refuses to accept the notion that the present and the future are determined by an irreversible sequence of "facts." On the contrary, the novel asserts the need to be aware of the many versions of the past, to account for those elements in the past that have been obscured, and to tell the stories that have been suppressed. Fiction thus does not passively reflect a historical moment but shares with history the task of reconstructing the past. In this sense, Hayden White's suggestion that historians should learn from fiction writers is appropriate:

> In my view, history as a discipline is in bad shape today because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination. In the interest of appearing scientific and objective, it has repressed and denied to itself its own greatest source of strength and renewal. By drawing historiography back once more to an intimate connection with its literary basis, we should not only be putting ourselves on guard against merely ideological distortions; we should be by way of arriving at that "theory" of history without which it cannot pass for a "discipline" at all. (White 1978, 99)

Despite the dismal future prophetically revealed to the thieves when they look into the trunk, *An Invincible Memory* ends on a mildly hopeful note. In this respect, the novel typifies the optimism that characterized the final months of the transition to the Nova República. Such optimism is significantly absent from Ribeiro's next novel, the more somber and bitter *O Sorriso do Lagarto.* It is important to keep in mind, moreover, that the final paragraph of *An Invincible Memory* does not offer an ultimate utopian solution. Such an ending would be out of place in a novel that questions traditionally conceived notions of patriotism and teaches its readers to be suspicious of any totalizing view of the world. But even more important, the ambiguous ending of *An Invincible Memory* is intended to make us aware of the tortuous paths of history and to remind us that our history is made up of the multitude of stories told by fictionists as well as historians.

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