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Life stories as a research methodology: a case study of the biographical narrative of the journalist Lira Neto¹

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Abstract

The topic of this paper is the application of the life history method, widely used in the social sciences, as a means of gathering news, understanding facts and guiding writing in the field of Communication research and, above all, Journalism. As an object, it employs the life and work of the Brazilian journalist João de Lira Cavalcante Neto. Better known by his family name, Lira Neto is currently considered one of the most successful Brazilian biographers. Data was collected through the technique of the in-depth interview as well as the literature review. On an epistemological level, the textual experimentation of this article starts from the premise that it is possible to merge the density of the theoretical approach on the biographical method with the narrative fluency studied in Literary Journalism, suggesting that an academic text can be both consistent and engaging.

Keywords: Literary Journalism. Methods in journalism. Life history. Biographical Narratives. Lira Neto.

Trajectory decisions - Professional choice and vocation

April 26, 2018, 3 pm. A hot and late golden summer afternoon in São Paulo. In the district of Perdizes, in the west zone of the city, dozens of Father Cícero's statuettes are on display in the large living room of the apartment overlooking the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP). The political/spiritual leader is known as “Padinho Ciço” (Little Father Ciço) by his fellow countrymen or devotees (LIRA NETO, 2018). Between one

1 This paper is a revised and expanded view of the work presented at the 2nd Panel of Literary Journalism of the International Association for Literary Journalism Study (IALJS)/Network of Media Narratives (Renami), of the Brazilian Association of Researchers in Journalism (SBPJor). It was presented on November 8, 2018 during the 16th. National Meeting of Researchers in Journalism, an event organized annually by SBPJor. This study is the result of the Scientific Initiation research “Literary Journalism: Reflections on history, epistemologies, theories, methodologies and praxis”, developed at the University of Sorocaba (UNISO). The authors would like to thank the panelists, who allowed the improvement presented here.

category and the other, João de Lira Cavalcante Neto, or simply Lira Neto, may lean more towards the first. But, at this moment, this is still a conjecture to be investigated in the hours ahead during the interview that almost did not happen.

The three-hour interview will, however, pass in a snap. To start with, Lira Neto says he has no more patience in dealing with journalists. Once burned... But he is impeccable with journalism students, as the meeting will prove that. And, if in the beginning was the verb, he doesn't hesitate and begins right from the start: he came from a large family, one of five children in the house. On the day of our meeting, he is shaken by the news that his 89-year-old mother is not in good health. He shows the bandaged finger and nervously mumbles he had "taken out a steak" of it when preparing lunch that day for the family. The next day he would embark for his homeland, and his wife, the journalist Adriana Negreiros – who is a staff writer for the magazine *piauí*, the Brazilian *New Yorker* – suggested to him to cancel the interview. Luckily for this article, Lira Neto decided to go ahead with the appointment. Shortly thereafter, three events would mark the author's life, which would become posts on the social network Facebook, on which he is very active (although he hates phones in general, including his cell phone).

The first event would be the death of his mother, shared with his followers on May 3rd: "The pain of loss is enormous. The longing, immense. Greater than anything, however, was her sublime capacity to flood our lives with smiles, lightness and affection. Dona Darcy. 30-12-1928 / 01-05-2018" (LIRA NETO, 2018a - Our translation). The second event, dated May 30th, would celebrate the launch of his wife's first biography – actually his second wife, with whom he has two daughters. "The biography of Maria Bonita, written by Adriana Negreiros, is coming out by Objetiva in August. Yes, I am suspicious, but I guarantee that the role of "Rainha do Cangaço" has never been approached from this feminist perspective and without the key to macho romanticism that naturalizes violence against women in the backcountry banditry of that time" (LIRA NETO, 2018b - Our translation). Finally, the third event that would stand out in his Facebook feed, dated July 13, would be his return to the United States as a writer-in-residence: "It is always very good to be back – for the third year, as a writer-in-residence and teacher of Brazilian culture – at Middlebury College, one of the oldest higher education institutions in the humanities in the United States, in the state of Vermont " (LIRA NETO, 2018c - Our translation). Among the three posts, records of two major losses for Brazilian journalism: Alberto Dines (1932-2018), on May 22nd, and, eight days later, Audálio Dantas (1929-2018), on May 30th.

Dines' death during the development of this research may have been called a synchronicity by Jungian psychologists, i.e., a simultaneous occurrence of events which appear significantly related but have no discernible causal connection (JUNG, 2012). As Galvão argues, biographies had a boom in the 1970s in Brazil, when the authors based themselves on research to illuminate "celebrities of the land", such as politicians, singers, artists and football idols (GALVÃO, 2005, p. 1 - Our translation). However, Dines is considered the first Brazilian journalist to write a biography, with *Morte no Paraíso* (Death in Paradise - Our

translation), released in 1981 (VILAS-BOAS, 2008). The book was translated into German in 2006 with the title *Tod im paradies: die tragödie des Stefan Zweig* by Büchergilde. The work, which earned an expanded fourth edition in 2013, tells the life of the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), who committed suicide in Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro (ZWEIG, 2013). When Dines was considering writing the book, he sought advice from literary critic and encyclopedist Antonio Houaiss (1915-1999), who guided him: “Dines, you are a journalist, just be a journalist” (VIEIRA, 2018, p. 4 - Our translation).

Born in the State of Ceará, like the statuettes of Padim Ciço that populate his living room in São Paulo – at the time of the publication of this article he is a doctoral candidate at the University of Porto –, Lira Neto is a top journalist like Dines. And he perceives himself like this. “I prefer to identify myself as a journalist (...). And as a journalist, I see myself more and more like a reporter (...). So, this journalistic genre of reporting is what increasingly mobilizes me, it is what I increasingly identify myself with, I feel more comfortable in the reporter nomenclature than in any other (VIEIRA, 2018, p. 10-11 - Our translation).

From the 1980s, many biographies were released in Brazil and, especially from the 1990s, much research was conducted on the theme (MARTINEZ, 2004, 2014a, PENA, 2006, VILAS-BOAS, 2008, among others). And Lira Neto, born in Fortaleza on Christmas Day, 1963 (therefore 54 years old at the time of the interview), became one of the standard-bearers when it comes to the writing of biographies by journalists. We are, as many scholars suggest, in the field of Literary Journalism, which uses different formats, such as the profile, “appropriating sometimes genres from other literary sources (...) as sometimes biography and memories can be” (LIMA, 2016, p. 3 - Our translation).

Lira’s last 19 years were dedicated to the production of biographical narratives, starting with that of the writer, pharmacist and public health pioneer Rodolfo Teófilo (1863-1932), who at the turn of the 20th century fought the smallpox epidemic that victimized one-fifth of the population of Fortaleza (LIRA NETO, 1999). The author does not consider launching a new edition of the book, now out of print, whose copies on second-hand book sites like *Estante Virtual* are worth R\$ 220. This initial milestone, like the biography of Padim Ciço (LIRA NETO, 2009), reveals one of his interests: rescuing historical characters from his home State, Ceará, as in the case of former Brazilian president Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco (1900-1967), whose book was released by Editora Contexto (LIRA NETO, 2004), and the writer José de Alencar (LIRA NETO, 2006).

Brazilianess or, to be more specific, “Cearaness”, is something that evidently matters to him. Lying on his comfortable sofa, on April 26, 2018, surrounded by the many statuettes of Padim Ciço, Lira Neto dives into his own memories. It is touching to see a specialist trained in the art of narrating the lives of other people making room in his busy schedule to talk about himself. The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) says that “the so-called life is a short episode between two great mysteries that, in fact, are one” (JUNG, 2018, p. 89 - Our translation): birth and death. On the eve of his mother’s death, but perhaps already sensing it, Lira says that she wanted him to pursue a military career. But in high

school, he opted for the topography course, which lasted “four long years” (LIRA NETO, 2018). Perhaps the description of land and regions was not really at his destination. So much that, after graduating, Lira’s pursuit of a career as a topographer was brief: it lasted only two days, to be precise, the period he stayed in the first and only job he tolerated in the area. However, he still did not intuit that, in the future, he would outline, to the minutest detail, the most complex geography of all: that of human beings.

The next academic choice distanced him completely from the world of calculations and geographic accidents, when he took the entrance exam for the Philosophy program in 1981. “I took a few terms at the Faculty of Philosophy of Fortaleza, Fafifo”, a university maintained by the local arch-diocese” (LIRA NETO, 2018 - Our translation), which is currently no longer in activity.

At first, his paycheck as an X-ray technician was sufficient to cover the college monthly payments. However, things did not go as he expected. The graduation fee weighed heavy in his pocket and the institution was maintained by the Catholic Church, which did not completely please him. In 1983, he left the Philosophy program to embark on the Literature course at the State University of Ceará (UECE). “Since I was very young, I was intimate with the world of books. I imagined that somehow it wasn’t the numbers, but the words that would attract me to something” (LIRA NETO, 2018 - Our translation). The wait for Literature training ended up becoming a frustration. After taking the basic courses, the Literary Theory “chair” finally appeared on the grid, but it was far from what he expected – it was about grammar and did not satisfy at all his craving for real Literature. As he had previously left topography and philosophy, he left the Language Department without looking back. At the age of 21, he jumped from one bus to the next to reach the four schools where he taught the subjects of Writing, Literature and History to support himself.

From proofreader to ombudsman

Outside the apartment, the afternoon gently begins to fall. Inside, Lira Neto’s narrative verve recalls the method of filmmaker Eduardo Coutinho (1933-2014), who said that all stories are capable of being narrated, but that the secret was in finding a good narrator (LINS, 2004, SILVA; MARTINEZ; AZOUBEL, 2016). It is not even necessary to take one of the questions out of the roll that undergraduate student Aline Albuquerque had prepared with such care, but kept within reach just in case, while listening carefully to the biographer.

The career as a journalist started in a late, almost at random way. The advice of a friend took him to the position of proofreader for the newspaper *O Diário do Nordeste*, and initially it was only an addition to his monthly income. After a test, the hiring resulted in the daily correction of texts produced by the newspaper’s journalists, back in 1988. At the age of 25, Lira was married and was the father of the first child, Ícaro. One day, he had to go to the newspaper’s section of the office to make a call, because the room where the proofreaders worked did not have a telephone. He didn’t know it yet, but the bell on

those devices would be a thread of great changes in his life. When he opened the door, the sound of telephones ringing constantly, the sound of typewriters, the smoke of journalists' cigarettes and the frantic rhythm won him over to the point that he definitely wanted to be part of that team.

To join the newspaper's editorial staff, it was necessary to have a degree in journalism. Lira Neto again took the entrance exam, this time for the Social Communication Program at the Federal University of Ceará. Once admitted, he tried a job at *O Diário do Nordeste*, but at that time no position was available. Still in the second semester of his required course, he knocked on the door of the traditional newspaper *O Povo* in search of an opportunity. Once again, the phone came on the scene. Days later, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *O Povo* called the *O Diário do Nordeste* newsroom to ask the then-undergraduate student if he was interested in a post that had opened up in the Economy section. In the first article produced for the editorial board, Lira was in charge of interviewing a renowned professor at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation. "I did the interview, took it back to the newsroom, but I didn't know how to use the typewriter" (LIRA NETO, 2018 - Our translation).

After six months in the Economy section, Lira Neto managed to be transferred to Varieties. He finally discovered his vocation. Soon he won a weekly page on literature, where he wrote reviews, reports on the editorial market and interviewed writers. It was there that he met the biographer Fernando Morais, in a first interview that yielded a full page of the newspaper. In the absence of higher education in biography then, Alberto Dines points out the existence of an informal learning school through which the younger generations were taught the art of being a biographer by the masters of the field, such as Mário Magalhães who worked with Fernando Morais (VIEIRA, 2018, p. 6 - Our translation). And the phone rang again in the newsroom:

One day, Fernando Morais calls the newsroom for he needed a researcher to work on Floro Bartolomeu, who was going to be one of the characters in a book Morais never wrote, the Unfinished Century and the Side B Character of Brazil and so on. And when he called the newsroom looking for a journalist with a researcher profile, the staff indicated me. [...] Fernando hired me, I worked for him for a long time, it was [a freelancer job] badly paid, but I liked it, and I learned a lot from him. Then everything that I had done in an intuitive way, I now had a Fernando giving me some tips, even taking me away, robbing me out of that literary language in change of a more journalistic one. And then I saw that it was possible to do journalism right there in the book. That was when I started to plan the Castelo [project on biography of the former president Castello Branco] (VIEIRA, 2018, p. 7 - Our translation).

The spotlight on Lira Neto helped him obtain an editor's post at the newspaper *O Povo*. José Hamilton Ribeiro (RIBEIRO, 2006) and Eliane Brum (MARTINEZ, 2014b)

regret this “professional upgrade” from reporter to editor, as it represented the loss of a good reporter, who assumed the editor post in general due to the better wages. Even so, Lira Neto continued to produce reports every other fortnight. His vocation for writing made him ask the newspaper’s editor-in-chief to become a reporter again. He then became a feature reporter, having one week to deliver each report, published on Sundays on two full pages of the newspaper. When the newspaper created a culture section, he became responsible for editing the texts for two years.

In 1998, as the newspaper’s ombudsman, he had the opportunity to reflect on journalism and journalistic practices (LIRA NETO, 2000). “The duty of the ombudsman position made me realize the existence of an entity called reader. As an ombudsman I was requested by readers all the time” (LIRA NETO, 2018 - Our translation). The job contract, which had already lasted a year, could have been extended for another one, but the newspaper did not renew it. According to Caio Túlio Costa, Carlos Eduardo Lins da Silva, who was the first ombudsman at *Folha de S.Paulo* from September 1989 to August 1991 (COSTA, 2009), declared that journalists in general do not like the independence associates with this post. And it did not please the Ceará daily as well. After all, the work consists of the task of, through the analysis of complaints from readers, listeners, viewers, internet users, confronting and exposing the weaknesses of the productions of reporters and editors (OLIVEIRA; PAULINO, 2012, p. 78 - Our translation). At that time, Lira Neto already showed signs of disenchantment with daily journalism. “From then on, I realized that I needed to take a turn in my life and that the newsroom no longer seduced me as much as before” (LIRA NETO, 2018 - Our translation).

From newspaper staff writer to biographer

“I want to break free, I want to breathe” (LIRA NETO, 2018 – Our translation). Back in 1998, Lira made the decision to leave the fast pace of daily newsrooms to write books with the story of other people. The first work was done as a special reporter, when he collected material for *O Poder e a Peste* (The Power and the Plague - Our translation), the biography of the sanitary professional Rodolfo Teófilo, who undertake, without government support, a vaccination campaign against the smallpox epidemic that was spreading in the city at the turn of the 20th century (LIRA NETO, 1999). He began to make biographies as a way of “telling the whole life of a person, living or dead (...), sometimes using elements typical of literary journalism” (LIMA, 2009, p. 425 - Our translation).

His new job, this time as a book editor, would be at the Demócrito Rocha Foundation – which would also publish two of his books (LIRA NETO, 1999, 2000). It is a private, non-profit institution created in 1985 by the Grupo de Comunicação *O Povo* to promote human development through education, citizenship and cultural production. “My life is made up of restarts, reinventions. I was never afraid of that, I was never concerned with maintaining certain comfort zones, because at that moment I said ‘it’s not the newsroom

anymore’, no matter how much that I was once in love with that vibrant environment that kept me mobilized for so long” (LIRA NETO, 2018 - Our translation).

Leaving book publishing to become a writer was considered by his friends to be an insane move. The fact is that Lira realized that at the beginning of the 2000s there was a movement to renew the biographical market in Brazil. This was due, in part, to a favorable combination of factors, including the emergence of new authors and also the configuration of a new political and marketing framework, which included the editorial houses:

[...] it is [the publisher] Companhia das Letras that has the greatest biography know-how. So much of the rediscovery of the genre in Brazil is due to Companhia das Letras and to Fernando [Morais] and Ruy [Castro], who, there in the 1980s, wrote masterpieces. Fernando with Chatô², mainly, and Rui with *Chega de Saudade*, *Garrincha*, *Nelson*, *Carmen*³. (...). So they rediscovered a genre that quickly became publicly accepted, I think for a number of reasons, first because they write very well, second because they knew how to choose good themes, third because, at that time, there was a moment of emergency in our society; it had just come out of a tough one, the stories were very badly told or not told, and Fernando and Ruy reached a large audience telling the story of Brazil. Then people started to understand the history of Brazil from Fernando’s and Ruy’s books. There is an inevitable component in a good biography, which is a hint of voyeurism that also draws people’s attention, this archeology of the individual’s private life and how this private life affected public trajectories. I think that all of these are ingredients that explain a little the success of the biography (VIEIRA, 2018, p. 7).

During the interview, the judicial recovery process of two major bookstore chains in the country had not yet been filed, prompting the founder of Companhia das Letras to launch on November 27, 2018 a dramatic appeal that highlighted the financial uncertainty of this market in Brazil (SCHWARCZ, 2018). In this still calm moment, the couple’s two daughters, Alice, 9 years old, and Emilia, 14, burst into the apartment coming from school, looking like they didn’t want to disturb us. They kiss their father in the corner of the sofa, play with the good-looking golden labrador on the living room floor and, like any contemporary teenagers, they soon run to their respective rooms to stay in the company of their tablets. They wouldn’t

² *Chatô* is the nickname of media mogul Assis Chateaubriand (1892-1968), founder of the Associated Journals, the largest network of radio stations and newspapers in Latin America between 1930s and 1960s.

³ *Chega de Saudade* (Enough of Longing, in a free translation) is about the history of the Brazilian music style bossa nova, which was developed and popularized worldwide in the 1950s and 1960s; *Garrincha* is the biograph of Manuel Francisco dos Santos, nicknamed Mané Garrincha (1933-1983), was a Brazilian footballer best known as one of the greatest dribblers of all time; *Nelson* is about Nelson Rodrigues (1912-1980), was a Brazilian journalist, novelist and playwright best known for composing his characters in a psychological way and for using colloquial dialogue, as in his play *Vestido de Noiva* (The Wedding Dress, in a free translation); *Carmen* is the book on Carmen Miranda (1909-1955), a Portuguese-Brazilian singer and actress known for her Latin rhythms and exotic costumes and hats made of fruit.

be there, maybe, if it weren't for the separation of the first marriage, made official by Lira's need to reinvent himself once again... which had led him to meet his current wife, Adriana Negreiros (NEGREIROS, 2018). At that time, the journalist was going to Salvador to work at *Veja* magazine. Lira then settle accounts at the Demócrito Rocha Foundation to leave the company, married his second wife and traveled along with her to São Paulo.

A new phone call launched him on a different path. It was then Governor of Ceará, Lucio Alcântara, inviting him to join his government's press team. The experience in the political field lasted only six months, since Lira's wife was already in the capital of São Paulo – where Lira finally joined her and started working at the publishing house Contexto, specialized in academic books. In this publishing sector, he would launch, in 2004, his next biography, *Castello: a marcha para a ditadura*, (*Castello: The March towards the Dictatorship - Our translation*) on the verge of the 40th anniversary of the military dictatorship (LIRA NETO, 2004). The book had a good circulation, about eight thousand copies, but for the author the work was not good enough due to the time factor. That made him decide to leave his position at Contexto publishing house to dedicate himself to writing books, continuing from then on as a freelancer – at a time when the journalistic market was not so precarious in the country (PAULINO; NONATO; GROHMANN, 2013) and such an initiative was still possible.

José de Alencar enters the scene to be profiled by the biographer. *O Inimigo do Rei: uma biografia de José de Alencar, ou, a Mirabolante aventura de um romancista que colecionava desafetos, azucrinava D. Pedro II e acabou inventando o Brasil* (The Enemy of the King: A Biography of José de Alencar, or, the Novelist's Amazing Adventure that Collected Foes, Maddened D. Pedro II and Ended up Inventing Brazil - Our translation), was launched in 2005 by Editora Globo. Here another feature of Lira Neto's production method stands out. While some authors, such as the American journalist Lilian Ross (1926-2017), dedicated themselves to profiling characters for which they had sympathy, such as the American writer Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) (ROSS, 2005, SUZUKI JÚNIOR, 2005), Lira Neto starts from the idea that it is not necessary to like the character – an approach that, in fact, he had already used to profile General Castelo Branco. Rather, the different intrigues him and moves him to understand the world from the perspective of the other, which can be transformative. He, who detested the writer from Ceará in his childhood and adolescence, changed his mind when he had contact with Alencar's work. This book provided his first Jabuti Award⁴.

The notion of otherness in the productive sphere suggests that biography is a journalistic event because it is a construction of meaning within the scope of the world (FONSECA; VIEIRA, 2010 - Our translation). Studies suggest that the construction of journalistic biographies, as well as reporting books, can be observed, “on the one hand, journalism, but, nevertheless, their discursive logics are substantially different from

4 Created in 1958 and annually awarded by the Brazilian Book Chamber (CBL in Portuguese), the Jabuti Award is one of the most traditional and prestigious literary prize in Brazil.

other vehicles” (SOSTER, 2015, p. 29 - Our translation). We are, therefore, in the field of subjectivities, since “when the journalist clarifies his contradictions and limits, he is also admitting that the biography is constructed by options and selections and that subjectivity permeates the entire work produced” (MAIA; LELO, 2013, p. 16 - Our translation).

They say in Brazil that a book is like a baby. When you have one, people immediately ask you when the next one will come. Soon after the delivery of the first manuscripts of the book on the writer José de Alencar, the editor asked Lira about his next character. A coffee at the house of the now friend Fernando Moraes prompted Lira’s make up his mind to write a biography of a woman. In the words of the author “a moody woman”: Maysa Figueira Monjardim, better known as Maysa Matarazzo, or simply as the singer Maysa (1936-1977). Fernando drew his phone and contacted a fundamental source for the construction of this new character: Jaime Monjardim, the only son of the tragically deceased singer in her 40s, victim of an automobile accident on the Rio-Niterói Bridge. Monjardim is a Brazilian television director, who debuted in the cinema directing *Olga*, based on one of Fernando Moraes’ books. He did not initially approve the idea of biography, but Fernando insisted.

Once again tracing directions in Lira Neto’s life, Lira’s home phone rang. On the other side of the line, Jaime Monjardim informed that he would come from Rio de Janeiro to São Paulo to deliver “something” to him. The biographer thought it was a record or photo of the singer. When he went to meet the singer’s son at the arrival at the city airport of São Paulo, Congonhas, he saw Monjardim arriving with a backpack, pushing a luggage cart with a huge tube television box. “What’s in there?”, asked Lira Neto. He received an unexpected reply: “It is my mother who is here”. The box contained the entire family collection about the singer, such as photos, diaries and letters, vital material for the composition of the work *Maysa: Só numa multidão de amores* (Maysa: Alone in a Crowd of Admirers - Our translation) (LIRA NETO, 2007). Lira Neto accepted the collection, but imposed one condition: Jaime Monjardim would only see the work when it was finally printed, like the other readers. Monjardim accepted it, but later did not approve what he read. Two years later, the miniseries *Maysa: quando fala o coração* (Maysa: When the Heart Speaks - Our translation) was produced by Rede Globo at a cost of R\$ 9 million, without paying a penny of royalties to the writer. However, he could not sue the network because Lira’s biography was cited in the final credits as a source. This apparently reinforces the number one rule by biographer Ruy Castro of only writing about a person who died more than ten years ago and did not leave a family (CASTRO, 2006).

The imbroglia with the directors Manuel Carlos and Jaime Monjardim, responsible for the miniseries of the singer Maysa, was so great that it caused the author to break his contract with Globo publishing house to produce his next book, *Padre Cícero: poder, fé e guerra no sertão* (Padre Cícero: Power, Faith and War in the Backlands - Our translation), and publish it with Companhia das Letras instead. Telling about the production of Father Cicero’s book, Lira Neto looks away from the two interlocutors to the ubiquitous statuettes in the room. The afternoon has fallen and the room is plunged into darkness, but it is still

possible to see the writer's eyes shining when he says: "I may not believe in him, but I think he believes in me a lot" (LIRA NETO, 2018 - Our translation).

If with Maysa the biographer lost the powerful Globo Network publicizing machine, on the other hand he gained a notable editor. The partnership with Luiz Schwarcz, founder of Companhia das Letras, has since assumed a fundamental role in his work, which refers to the case of William Shawn in *The New Yorker* magazine (MEHTA, 1998, ROSS, 1998). Lira Neto knew of Schwarcz's desire to publish a biography about Getúlio Vargas⁵ (1882-1954), and that several biographers had previously rejected the project. He said to Schwarcz that he would not produce one book about Getúlio, but ... three. And he outlined the project, which would narrate not only the trajectory of the former president, but the history of the 20th century in Brazil. The work took about five years and involved, in addition to the interviews, cataloging a collection of more than 500 books. The first volume *Getúlio (1882-1930): dos anos de formação à conquista do poder* (Getúlio (1882-1930): From the Formative Years to the Conquest of Power) (LIRA NETO, 2012), was launched in 2012. Next came *Getúlio (1930-1945): do governo provisório à ditadura do Estado Novo* (Getúlio (1930-1945): From the Provisional Government to the Dictatorship of the New State) (LIRA NETO, 2013), and *Getúlio: da volta pela consagração popular ao suicídio, 1945-1954* (Getúlio: From the Return for Popular Consecration to Suicide, 1945-1954) (LIRA NETO, 2014). The result was the sale of 100 thousand copies until the closing of this article, a tremendous editorial success based on a trinity that consists of choosing a good theme, approaching the field of Brazilian history and rigorously investigating the subject, clearly evidenced in the sources that support the work. Therefore, an important question is touched upon per Literary Journalism studies: the importance of the look of the journalist-writer, in the case of style and authorial voice (ASSIS, 2016, CHRISTOFOLETTI, 2004, CONNERY, 1992, 2011, LIMA, 1993, MARTINEZ, 2014b, MARTINS, 2016, MEDINA, 2014, SILVA; SILVA; FERNANDES, 2014, SIMS, 1995).

In the room, now in near darkness, Lira Neto continues talking about Getúlio's trilogy, pointing out the similarities between the book's writing period, the moment when the impeachment process of ex-president Dilma Rousseff began in Brazil and the similarities of Getúlio Vargas' historical period with the present. After Getúlio, however, once again he "did not know where to go". When he told his editor at Companhia das Letras that he simply wanted to have fun, dance and samba, Schwarcz suggested that he worked on samba, a typically Brazilian genre. The result was *Uma História do Samba. As Origens* (The History of Samba: The Origins - Our translation) (LIRA NETO, 2017). Police files were one of the primary sources of research, since at the time samba was a marginalized genre and many of the *sambistas* had been arrested (LIRA NETO, 2018). Again, in terms of studying the

5 Getúlio Vargas was a Brazilian lawyer and politician, who served as interim president from 1930 to 1934; constitutional president from 1934 to 1937; and dictator from 1937 to 1945. After resigning in 1945, Vargas was elected president in 1951, serving until 1954 when he committed suicide.

methods of producing biographies, the relevance of documentary sources and the interface with other areas of knowledge, such as history, is paramount.

Back to studies

In this late, summer evening of 2018, the night gently enters through the apartment window with views onto the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC), in the district of Perdizes, on the west side of São Paulo, tinting the interior of the room black. Now there is no more to be distinguished than the figure of the biographer in the corner of the sofa and the dozens of images by Padre Cícero. Lira Neto does not seem to notice or to be disturbed by the dark, as if the point of transition from light to shadow had the power to quiet his uneasiness that turns itself into books. The Lira Neto who often feels the need to reinvent himself now narrates the return to a side that was asleep until then, that of the academic studies.

Back to 2016, one of his former professors from the undergraduate program in journalism in Ceará, Gilmar de Carvalho, a doctor in semiotics himself, recommended that Lira talk to Jerusa Pires Ferreira⁶, coordinator of the Center for Orality Studies at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), who would become his master's advisor in Communication and Semiotics, a course that was completed in a year and a half. Like his 2017 book, Lira's object of research was samba, addressing, from the perspective of semiotics, the transformations of the samba language provided by Radio Nacional⁷ (LIRA CAVALCANTE NETO, 2018). The dedication of the work, almost a haiku, was: "For Adriana, Emília and Alice: ground and seeds". Another academic project administered in parallel by Lira is the Brazilian History and Culture course, which he has taught for three years at Middlebury College, in Vermont, United States, where he was at the end of the writing of this article. In fact, maintaining references throughout the production of this life story was less a way of observing academic canons (a must, one would say) and more to illustrate the methodological rigor that the biographer currently prints in his productions – something that distinguishes it from its peers. Perhaps, even a reflection of his recently defended master's degree. Or not, since his supervisor, as only old masters can, know and dare to do, encouraged him to pay less attention to the Brazilian Association of Technical Standards (ABNT) style norms used in the academic field and more to the text, that is, she encouraged Lira Neto to be more himself.

More than three hours after starting to tell his own story, Lira Neto gets up from the sofa and flips the switch beside him. Light floods the room, blinding three pairs of eyes. The biographer and images of Padim Ciço are once again crystal clear. With twelve books published, the final question could, perhaps, be what's next? Even though he is one of the few journalist-biographers to have received advanced royalty payment from copyrights to dedicate himself to a work, Lira Neto has, like any mortal, monthly bills to pay and the show

⁶ Born in 1938, she passed away on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, after losing the battle to cancer.

⁷ Founded in 1936, Rádio Nacional is a Brazilian radio network now belonging to the government-owned corporation EBC.

– in this case the books – evidently must go on. It is the only question that he awkwardly leaves unanswered, as contractual restrictions prevent him from talking about future projects [by the time that this article was about to be published, he had already disclosed in the press that it would be the story of the Sephardic Jews persecuted by the Inquisition in the Iberian Peninsula who, having first sought refuge in Amsterdam, arrived in Brazil on board of the Dutch invaders’ ships]. When we are saying goodbye by the elevator’s door, the phrase that Lira Neto quoted at some point in the interview about the country writer Rachel de Queiroz (1910-2003) flashes in one of the interviewer head: “She said she didn’t like to write, she prefers to have already written” (LIRA NETO, 2018). The reflection is certainly valid for articles as well.

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