

Stories of Unlikely Readers in the 19th and 20th Centuries¹

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Abstract: Based on four cases, this article analyzes how individuals and social groups became readers despite belonging to contexts in Brazil's 19th and 20th centuries that would have had low probabilities of achieving this status. Employing the notion of "scale games," the analysis is primarily based on previous research and secondary data. It draws on frameworks from Cultural History and the History of Written Culture. The analyzed cases highlight the significance of certain instances, such as school, family, city, work, religion, and social movements, in facilitating this "improbability." Furthermore, they reveal that although pragmatic uses of reading tend to predominate among "unlikely readers," aesthetic and literary enjoyment are also present. Finally, they demonstrate that the change in the scale of observation in the analysis allowed for both confirmation and a complexification of findings observed in other studies.

Keywords: history of reading; written culture; Brazil; 19th century; 20th century.

1 Introduction

Based on four different cases, this article aims to analyze how individuals and social groups actively got closer to written cultures, becoming readers, even though their marks of belonging in the contexts they lived – 19th and 20th centuries in Brazil – would offer them little possibilities to reach this condition. Here, we refer to "written culture" as a symbolic and material place occupied by the written word in/for different individuals, social groups, and societies in a certain historical moment (Galvão, 2010). However, we prefer to use the expression "written cultures" to highlight the plurality of these places, even when referring to the same time and territory (Chartier, 2002).

First, we should stress that the category of 'unlikely' readers could encompass all Brazilians until approximately 1960 when the literacy rate in the population of 10 years old or

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more surpassed the illiteracy in the country². These elements immediately pose a relevant issue: mass literacy is historically recent in Brazil.

However, there are people and social groups to which the term “unlikely” is more adequate because they lived/live in “exclusion contexts”. The literacy rates among these people/groups were/are higher than the population average. From this perspective, we discuss some of these cases in this article. Two questions guide our focus to these groups and individuals analyzed: 1) Can we identify regular patterns among them³?; 2) If so, in which aspects can these patterns be observed?

These questions unfold into many others: What instances allowed this “improbability” to happen? Were these instances considered “authorized” to teach how to read and write in each society and time? What type of readers did these people and/or social groups become? Are they considered legitimate readers in Bourdieu’s (2008) sense of the expression? Do the ways these people and/or groups read coincide with more prestigious ones? Or, as shown by studies about self-taught⁴, do they continue to fumble, seeking for directions to know if they were reading “right” or “wrong”, as they were not taught in places that dictated the legitimate ways? In this same direction, what they read was considered prestigious readings? In other words, did these people continue in exclusion contexts even after becoming readers? Was the promise of freedom through reading fulfilled to them? Can these cases help us to complexify the equation, also anachronous, between school and reading? Do they help to think of the apparent paradox that is the illiterate person who reads? Where are orality and performance (Finnegan, 2015) in our works about reading? We cannot answer all these questions in this article. However, they have been guiding a group of studies we have carried out in the last decades. Hence, we believe they can instigate the production new studies about the theme.

As mentioned, to discuss them, we sought to “think by case”⁵, an epistemological and methodologic attitude that allows us, when changing the observation scale, to transform the configuration of the phenomenon studied. It is not, as Revel (1998) states, taking a dimen-

² In the 1950 Census, the population of illiterate people with 10 years of age or more was 51.5%. In 1960, for the first time, the literacy rate surpassed the illiteracy one: 60.3% and 39,7%, respectively (Ferraro, 2009).

³ We are particularly inspired by the work of Bernard Lahire, “*Sucesso nos meios populares: as razões do improvável*”, originally published in France in 1995, with a first Brazilian edition published in 1997. On this work, the author analyzes 26 cases of families from French popular classes and finds several common elements among them that explain the “reasons for the unlikely. It is interesting to notice that in the original title in French (“*Tableaux de familles. Heurs et malheurs scolaires en milieux populaires*”, which could be translated in English as “*Family portraits. Schooling joys and sorrows in popular classes*”), the word “unlikely” is not present.

⁴ See, among others, Hébrard (1996) and Manke and Galvão (2018).

⁵ We refer here to the title of the book organized by Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel, *Penser par cas: raisonner à partir de singularités*, [Thinking by cases] published in 2015.

sion of the social world as hierarchically superior to another but, in a “game of scales,” to be able to understand it through other lenses, in its complexity and multidimensionality.

Therefore, the article is not based on a single research but the result of several studies that have been developed in the *Grupo de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre Cultura Escrita* [Study and Research Group about Written Culture], of *Faculdade de Educação* at *Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais*. There are many cases like the ones we will analyze in these works. Thus, it is important to highlight that these are not rare and exceptional stories but trajectories of common men and women that, often due to the lack of life records in official documents, are thrown into a type of limbo in historical research.

So, this text is an essay based on studies already conducted about the theme, considered more broadly or as protagonists in certain analyses, in my studies and secondary data. In this discursive genre, which consists of a logical and reflexive exposition about a given theme about which the author accumulated experience during their intellectual production, there is more freedom to defend a position without necessarily resorting to an abundant empirical research and/or exhaustive bibliography (Severino, 1986).

2 The cases in 19th century Brazil

For the 19th century, due to the available documentation, we will consider two groups as analytical objects: black population and “the blind”. The first has been widely study, and, gradually, enslaved, freed, and free black people have been come to light as active participants in the written cultures. However, the studies regarding those with visual disabilities, as we would call them nowadays, are rarer.

What is the profile of black individuals that read? Some studies conducted (see, for instance, Bergamini, 2017; Peres, 2020 e 2022; Moraes, 2007) show that, among the enslaved, some who had a specialized trade stand out, such as carpenters, cooks, tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, and masons. They were frequently “*escravos de ganho*”, that is, those who worked in the urban centers in different occupations and gave part of what they received to their owners. Regarding their ethnical belonging, those of Muslim origin stand out, who, in their original territories in Africa, already knew how to read and write (Paiva, 2006; Reis, 2003). Considering gender, black men and women seemed to participate in the world of the written word. Based on advertisements and newspaper articles, Peres’s (2020, 2022) analyses show that white women often taught free and enslaved girls how to read and write, as well as the household chores (sewing, starching clothes, and embroidery).

What roles did the black population from the 19th century attribute to the written word? The studies developed show that reading and writing were used in everyday life as information tools, spiritual protection, collective organization, and the fights for rights, even

among illiterate people. Viana, Ribeiro Neto, and Gomes (2019) analyzed several writings they called “insubordinate”, produced by enslaved people and used in collective actions, such as insurrections and rebellions. This type of use of the written word had already been studied by Reis (2003) in his work about the “Malê uprising”, which occurred in January 1835 in Salvador. However, the fight for rights could be more subtle, as Cowling (2018) shows regarding the gradual emancipation process of black women and their children in Rio de Janeiro and Havana. Based on the “free womb” principle, they took advantage of legislation loopholes to take legal actions, supported by a network of mutual support. Furthermore, the written word – in prayers placed inside scapulars and amulets – was used for spiritual protection (Reis, 2003; Wissenbach, 2002). Close to the body, the enslaved people could also carry a manumission letter, often produced by them or by someone’s demand, allowing greater mobility and circulation (Wissenbach, 2002; Barros, 2017). It is also reasonable to consider that the black population also read newspapers of general circulation and those from the so-called black press (Pinto, 2010). In the same direction, if there were black literature authors - from Maria Firmina dos Reis (Cruz; Matos; Silva, 2018) to Machado de Assis (Duarte, 2020) – there certainly were literature readers among the black population. Though we do not have precise data on the separate abilities of reading and writing, it is plausible to suppose that even among those who could not read, the proximity with the written text created oralized readings with someone’s mediation (Moysés, 1995; Barbosa, 2016).

Despite all the information revealed by recent studies, which do not associate black people with the lack of written culture, why do we consider as an unlikely case this social group who lived in 19th century Brazil? From the quantitative point of view, while illiteracy rates in 1872 were 82.33% among the general population with 5 years or more, it reached 99.91% among the enslaved population (Brasil, [1874?]). The numbers are not much different when comparing men and women: 99.88% among men and 99.94% among women. Furthermore, though reading and writing were not necessarily taught in school, it is important to stress that, in general, the legislation forbade enslaved people to attend public classes. This does not mean that they did not attend private classes (Silva, 2000; Peres, 2020; Peres, 2022) or were not found in public classes (Vidal, 2008)⁶. It also does not mean that they did not attend other places where they learned how to read, such as religious brotherhoods, professional associations (Luz, 2013; Mac Cord, 2013), and charity institutions. Nonetheless, the formal learning spaces were much more restricted to the enslaved popu-

⁶ In my own studies, I found the following record, published as a private letter from Curitiba, at *Jornal do Commercio* in Rio de Janeiro, edition number 136, from May 16, 1884: “Thus, will attend the schools in the capital, besides the children subjected to obligatory education, in a number four times higher than last year, many children younger than 7 and older than 14 years old, all *naïve*, many adults and even slaves in night classes; the *prisoners* in the jails; the *squares* of the bodies here stationed in the regimental classes: finally, the *deaf-mute*” (original highlight).

lation than the free one. Regarding the free black population, those individuals did not face legal restrictions to attend schools and, in some classes, they comprised the majority of students in public classes (Fonseca, 2009; Fonseca; Batista, 2022). Hence, certainly, there was a higher number of readers/writers and schooled people among this group than among the enslaved. Unfortunately, we have no general statistics about it (Brasil, [1874?])⁷. However, it was stigmatized by the “color defect”⁸, which also allows us to classify it as “unlikely”. As Veiga (2022) shows, the discourses on the inferiority and inability of black and Indigenous people were recurrent in the whole of Latin America at the time in a systematic process of socio-racial subalternization.

What regularities can we see when studying the case of black populations in the 19th century compared to other examples described by the literature and/or evidenced during this article? Some tendencies can be perceived. First, the ‘unlikely’ black readers seemed to be concentrated in urban centers. As shown in studies conducted in the field of written culture history (Petrucci, 1999; Castillo Gómez, 2021; Roche, 1996), living in the city brought people closer, even illiterate ones, to the use of the written word as it was everywhere – from the signs of commercial places to the tombstones. In the urban environment, access to widely circulated printed material was easier and the space that concentrated institutions with writing in their structure and function. The cities also tended to concentrate on certain types of sociabilities involving the written world, such as reading newspapers out loud on the sidewalks (Galvão *et al.*, 2017). However, though, in general, we can make these statements, they will be nuanced in other cases we will discuss in this article.

In the case of the black population from the 19th century, participation in other educational instances, such as social and religious movements, played an important role in the formation of readers. The engagement in collective movements, as discussed, was significant in approximating the subjects to the written culture, as has been researched about the more recent period. The association between religion and reading has been broadly studied in works about the history of literacy and the written culture (Viñao Frago, 1993), particularly in protestant countries (Johansson, 1977), but there are few studies, as shown in this article, about the relationships between the use of the written word and the different religiosities of enslaved, freed, and free black populations⁹.

⁷ At the 1872 Census (Brasil, [1874?]), the literacy and illiteracy rates are not discriminated by race (“white,” “brown,” “black,” and “*caboclo*”) when referring to the free population.

⁸ We refer here to the title of the novel from Ana Maria Gonçalves (2006): *Um defeito de cor* [A color defect]. Regarding especially the associations in the time between illiteracy and the black population, see Galvão (2022).

⁹ For contemporary times, there is the instigating study by Lisa Castillo (2008), about the relationships between orality and writing in *candomblé*.

We notice that working in specialized occupations, mainly those conducted in public spaces, even if not demanding literacy and schooling, was also related to the written cultures, as with the *escravos de ganho*. In cases where the work itself demanded knowing how to read and write, this is more evident in some jobs, such as an accountant, a notary, a judge, a teacher, and a typographer, favored readers' formation.

Finally, access to literacy can be considered a relevant factor when building the trajectory of proximity to the written cultures. However, we have no precise information about those people that, even without knowing how to read, listened to the written word through the mediation of others.

On the other hand, we observe some "irregularities" in the case of the black population living in 19th century Brazil: there were few distinctions between the literacy levels of enslaved men and women, which did not happen among the free population¹⁰.

Both equally experienced exclusion contexts characterized, among other factors, by the non-access to reading and writing, except in some cases of little quantitative significance, as indicated above.

The study of the black population also shows aesthetic/literary uses of the written word, though the pragmatic uses stand out. The debate on the different ways of living the experience of reading and writing has also mobilized studies conducted mainly in the field of the sociology of reading. Many authors, based mainly on the theories of Bakhtin (1997, 2008) and Bourdieu (1996, 2008), have shown that among the 'unlikely' readers, belonging to low-income groups and 'non-inheritors', the ethical, and not aesthetical sense, stand out in their cultural experiences. In other words, these individuals tend to give a practical sense, normally connected to their daily lives, to the experiences that were originally void of use. Lahire (2002) particularly focuses on complexifying this apparent dichotomy, revealing that, even among these subjects, there are moments in which the aesthetic experience prevails – and the contrary is also true. In a previous work, we can notice the presence of literary fruition regarding *cordel* readers/listeners, which show that they read/listened to the booklets because they were "pretty," the words "rhymed," they "lightened up life," were "fun" and "killed the horrors of life" (Galvão, 2001).

Still about the 19th century Brazil, as said, we will analyze the case of the blind people who attended the *Instituto Imperial para Meninos Cegos*. We based our analysis on Leão's (2023) work. The author reconstructed the process of conception, production, and circulation of school books written in braille during the second half of the 19th century in that institution, based on a extensive documentation. The *Imperial Instituto dos Meninos Cegos*, founded in 1854 in the Empire's capital, was the first formalized space in Brazil focused es-

¹⁰ Among the free population, the illiteracy taxes were 86.56% among women and 76.56% among men. As mentioned, there were no relations in the 1872 Census between educational level and race. (Brasil, [1874?]).

pecially on the education of blind people. It was also the pioneer in the production of didactic books in the Braille System in Brazil.

The analysis conducted by the author (Leão, 2023) allows us to see that there were, within the *Instituto*, conditions that allowed boarded children and young people to actively participate in the written cultures. This participation was built through different pedagogical practices. The students copied books in braille in class: the teachers dictated to them the books in ink, using rulers or slates and stylus, producing the works in salient points. When directly contacting the process of producing the object book – which, although handwritten, had a codex form – students certainly built greater possibilities of becoming readers. They also felt as belonging to a certain discursive community. As Chartier (1990) states, the use of shared modalities of reading is fundamental to understand the meanings attributed to the texts read in each time and place.

Besides enabling the production of handwritten books, the institution offered typography and bookbinding workshops (Leão, 2023). After graduating, the students who attended it became, in some cases, workers in the *Instituto*, carrying out qualified work. Though, according to the author, the workshops had not produced many books in braille in the Empire period – what would mainly happen in the Republican period – the participation of blind students allowed, once more, their familiarity with the production process of the object book. It is reasonable to suppose that this would contribute to their formation as readers and authors. As Leão (2023) shows, the transformation process of the book in ink for the book in braille involved resignifying several elements of the work to adequate them to the tactile reading, which demanded a more active role among those producing them. Hence, students participated in more than one moment in the circuit of book production (Darnton, 1990), as text and printed material definitely did not mix. As the studies on Cultural History have been showing, even among the books in ink, there is no text outside the support in which it is written, that is, “there is no understanding of a text (...) that does not depend on the ways through which they reach the reader” (Chartier, 1990, p.127). In this transformation of the text into printed material, the role played by editors/printers is fundamental. In the case analyzed, this role is even more central because the “fabrication” of a book in braille demands a significant number of interventions in the text and its materiality. Therefore, blind students who took part in the workshops were active participants in building the meaning of the text itself. We stress that participation in typography and bookbinding workshops was restricted to boys, excluding the female boarders – who followed a specific curriculum.

Leão's (2023) work also shows that the *Instituto* had a library composed of works handwritten by students, those created in the workshops, and others imported from Europe, mainly France because the institutions had a strong relationship with the French blind institute. There were materials originally in braille and adaptations of the books in ink, didactic

or not, in French and Portuguese (Leão, 2023). There were also other pedagogic materials. Even though the author, due to the specificity of the sources mobilized in the research, had not reached the senses attributed to the written materials by the boarded children and young people in contact with this diversity of written materials, it is plausible to suppose that the experiences of reading books in braille were much different from those emerging through the contact with the book in ink, because tact was its decoding form. As Fulas (2021) affirms, it is “almost a carnal” relationship between the reader and the book. The analysis of the authors corroborates what Chartier’s (1990) studies have shown even regarding the books in ink: the meanings attributed to the text by readers can only be understood when considering the devices produced by the editorial decision or the work in the shops, which result in the passage of the text to the book/printed material.

Leão (2023) concludes that this intense contact with the practice of book production and reading among the students in the *Instituto* even allowed the complexification of stigmas to which the blind population was associated at the time, as the book established itself as a cultural artifact associated to the legitimate culture, considering that the majority of the Brazilian population at that historical moment, as we mentioned, was illiterate, with low schooling, and the access to books was very restrict. Therefore, it was a very small portion of the blind population in the period. The Census of 1872 (Brasil, [1874?]) indicated that there were 15,848 blind people in Brazil, out of which 13,444 were free (7,954 men and 5,390 women). According to the institution’s report in 1896 between its foundation and 1896, the total number of students enrolled in the *Instituto* – all free as enslaved people were not admitted – was 201, 137 men and 64 women, from different Brazilian provinces and some foreign countries (Leão, 2023). If the numbers seem insignificant from the quantitative perspective, the same cannot be said regarding the symbolic meaning of these experiences.

Why do we consider the case of blind people in the 19th century as unlikely? Although the first Brazilian census from 1872 (Brasil, [1874?]) did not measure the literacy rates among people with “physical defects” (“blind,” “deaf-mute,” “crippled,” “demented,” “alienated”), blind people were seen, as shown in Leão’s (2023) work, under the stigma of social and economic uselessness. The analysis of the institute’s sources allowed the author to see that the discussion on blind people’s physical, moral, and intellectual (in)capacity was frequent.

What irregularities can we identify when analyzing the group of students from the *Instituto Imperial dos Meninos Cegos* compared to other cases? First, the school role: as we affirmed, it was a very specific group of blind people – those attending an educational institution focused on their education. Even though the role of school in readers’ formation is neither universal nor a-historical, with time, this institution became one of the first instances of written material circulation in many countries. School effectiveness as a literacy agent

depends, however, on many factors: the offer of public schooling for different levels; the presence of reading and writing in the school's routine; teachers' mediating role; the offer of activities and extracurricular spaces related to reading and writing; the equality of conditions in the access and permanence in the institution, and public policies to support the schooling of different populational groups, as shown in the case of blind people in the *Instituto Imperial*. In this direction, we highlight the role of school library.

We can also identify that those who had greater possibilities to have a more intense contact with books were the ones who participated in the typograph and bookbinding workshops, that is, they were preparing themselves to carry out a qualified job. We also highlight the urban life because the *Instituto* was located in Rio de Janeiro, that is, in the most urbanized territory in the country, which concentrated most equipment considered as "civilizing" by the elites. Finally, similar to what the bibliography has been showing, men were more privileged because only boys could participate in those workshops.

Regarding the "irregularities", considering other cases, we can identify the strong role of the State – in this case, the Imperial government – in the investment to promote the formation of readers and writers among the handicapped population that had over themselves the stigma of incapacity and economic uselessness. As Leão (2023) analyses in his work, the foundation of the institution was related, among other factors, to the need of the imperial government to show that Brazil had experiences comparable to the more "advanced" and "civilized" countries in the world.

What type of readers did these blind students become? In the sources analyzed by Leão (2023), few indications allow us to answer this question, but we can affirm that the pragmatic uses of the written word predominate because school manuals and "civilizational" books, such as catechisms and the Empire's Constitution, stand out in the documents studied.

3 The cases in 20th century Brazil

Regarding the 20th century, we will analyze two cases of individuals: a man and a woman whose formative processes took place, respectively, in the first decades and mid-century.

The base to present Luís Gonzaga dos Santos's case is in two studies: Galvão (2013) and Fadul (2023). In both works, the main source used was his autobiography, *Memórias de um carpinteiro* [A carpenter's memoir], published in 1963 by the publishing house Bernardo Álvares in Belo Horizonte. Born in Diamantina, Minas Gerais, in 1898, Luís declares, in his memories, that he was the great-grandson of enslaved people and the son of "blacks".

The family of the subject analyzes had a peculiar configuration: his father, born in 1855, was “adopted” from a very young age by the nuns of Colégio Nossa Senhora das Dores, from the *Congregação de São Vicente de Paulo*, a traditional school in the city which was exclusively female (Martins; Martins, 1993). Adão – as he called his father – was then raised in the institution where he received “some primary education” and religious education. He was a sacristan and did outside tasks in the city and surroundings in the name of the schools, such as “carrying out businesses,” taking and bringing correspondences, and making short trips. Later, he became a Carpenter in the *Colégio*, a job he learned from the man who did this job in the institution. When he got married, to a confectioner that supplied sweets for the students in the seminar in the city, Adão started living outside the school but continued to work on it. When Luís was 10 years old, his father left the job and, according to his narrative, the family started to go through several financial hardships.

Thus, Luis, the son of a carpenter and a confectioner, retells the story of an economic childhood, without any luxuries but also no significant restrictions (Fadul, 2023). He was enrolled in elementary school for literacy classes at seven years old; later, he attended the first school in the city of Diamantina. In his autobiography, he tells how he worked in his father’s workshop since his boyhood. Besides helping the family, the work was simultaneously a formation into a specialized trade. Luís was a carpenter most of his life, working in the *Colégio* itself and other schools from the same congregation. He also wrote about the several migrations to other cities and states seeking better life conditions.

Besides school, other instances seem to have contributed to Luís’s approximation to the written cultures. One of them is related to work: the associations of mutual help. The author initially refers to the *União Operária Beneficente*, an entity founded in Diamantina in 1891, under Freemasonry influence, which later, since 1897, had close bonds with the Catholic Church (Martins, 2012). According to Santos (1963), the *União* kept a library and a night school for children and adults. He also mentions taking part in the foundation of another “workers’ society” with many associates with different statues from the first one.

The author’s memories also indicate the relevance of another type of instance responsible for approximating him to the written cultures: a truly religious one. During his childhood, Luís participated in catholic rituals, under his father’s influence and interference. Even though some of these rites, such as the novenas and the liturgy of hours, were basically oral, supported in the memorization and recitations, they were also based on written texts, such as the Bibles, books on the lives of saints, and chants. Other moments were situated between the oral, the written, and the performance, as was the case of theatre plays, which also had religious themes. As Fadul (2023) analyzes, his participation in Catholic associations seems to have the greatest contributions to his formation as a reader. This participation was, once more, influenced by the father, who was an active member of *Sociedade de São*

*Vicente de Paulo*¹¹, founder and treasurer of *Legião da Luz* – another religious association. This catholic *ethos* has certainly influenced Luís's trajectory as a reader because the Bible is one of the most cited reading objects in his autobiography.

Though not directly connected to the written cultures, the presence of stories from the oral tradition in the trajectories of people with similar profiles has been another element associated to an aesthetic formation and a familiarization to the narrative structure (Galvão *et al.*, 2017). In his autobiography, Luis retells the experience of listening to mysterious and "hidden things" stories that, supposedly, had happened in the city of Diamantina. These experiences seem relevant in the formation process of readers.

Why do we consider Luís an unlikely case? The literacy rates in Diamantina, in 1920¹², comprised 36% of the population aged 15 years or more (Brasil, 1929). At the same time, it was one of the few municipalities in Minas Gerais (12.4% of the total), in the early 20th century, which had the five indicators of written culture analyzed in the previous work (Galvão; Frade, 2019): press; libraries; typography; institutions of secondary, normal, vocational, and higher education. These data show that there was in the municipality a reading and writing elite that carried out intellectual activities in parallel to the large illiterate majority.

Because of that, the first "regularity" we can observe in Luís Gonzaga dos Santos' case is life in an urban environment, mainly regarding a city in which the written word was everywhere. Though the majority of the population could not "decipher it," it showed its strength in the everyday lives of the men and women that circulated in the urban spaces.

Family is another commonly studied instance that appears in Luís's case. The role of this literacy agent among the children of middle and intellectual elites in the history of Brazil has been shown for decades, but it also seems relevant among popular groups. This contribution could be direct when, for instance, one would learn to read at home; family members participated in reading and writing practices; there were written materials in the household. The family could also indirectly become an instance of reader formation when mediating the written material in oral interlocutions; the practice of telling stories was part of the family routine; the oral discussion was stronger than physical coercion; there was a family moral that favored organization, discipline, and intellectual work; there was a daily investment in activities that surpassed the daily struggle for survival, mainly regarding school. These conclusions reiterate and complexify what many studies have shown, even in other countries (Lahire, 1997; Heath, 1983; Galvão, 2013; Silva, 2005).

¹¹ Created in 1833 in France, the *Sociedade de São Vicente de Paulo* (SSVP) is a civil organization formed by laic people. It reached Brazil in 1872. Available at: <https://ssvpbrasil.org.br/a-ssvp/>. Accessed October 21, 2024. Since its foundation, they promote reading and writing meetings of different materials.

¹² We opted to bring data from 1920 Census because the one from 1900, closer to Luís's birthdate, is considered very imprecise (Ferraro, 2009). In 1910, a general census was not conducted in Brazil.

In Luís's case, the role of orality forms stands out, which facilitated this participation in the written cultures directly and indirectly related to written artifacts, as well as those from the oral tradition. Though the latter were not necessarily based on the written word, they seemed to contribute to the formation processes of aesthetic/literary taste and the subjects' familiarization with the narrative structures.

We also highlight the role of religion in Luís's trajectory and in his formation as a reader. In the Brazilian case, the fact that Catholicism was not strongly institutionalized caused this association to be neglected for a long time. However, studies have also shown that we need to understand better the place of the written word in the religious, "popular" (Souza, 2009), and institutionalized practices. We also should better research the extend of Catholicism in different dimensions of social life. Belonging to the Catholic religion often granted legal existence to people in low-income contexts and rural areas, even after the end of the Patronage regime. Catholicism, on the other hand, also contributed to erasing other religiosities in Brazil and their contributions to approximate common people to the written culture, such as the Kadercism (Reis, 2018) and the Afro-Brazilian religions, as mentioned.

Other patterns are repeated in the case of Luís: the role of school; the exercise of a specialized work; the participation in mutual support associations; the presence of a library; and the fact of being a man.

The greatest "irregularities" we can highlight in the analyzed case is that he was black and from low-income groups. These points are even more relevant when we consider the period studied - post-abolition – and the region of Diamantina, in which the enslaving of African structured society. Black people comprised a significant part of the population but, as said, the white and elite population concentrated the effective mastery of reading and writing.

What type of reader did Luís become? If we consider his records in his autobiography, we can affirm that reading had predominantly pragmatic ends: he read written artifacts to become informed and to participate in specific communities of readers – work associations and religious groups. He was also the author of an autobiography, published by company with predominately local/regional reach. Thus, it does not seem that he became a "legitimate" reader/writer.

The case of Maria Isabel Carlos¹³ will be analyzed based on an investigation that aimed to understand the relationship between written cultures and women in low-income, African-descendant, and migrant groups in the mid-20th century (Galvão *et al.*, 2010). At the time of the research, these women participated in the cultural group "Meninas de Sinhá"¹⁴,

¹³ We use her real name, with her permission, granted by the Informed Consent Form she signed at the time of the research.

¹⁴ For more information about the group, see: <https://meninasdesinha.org.br/>. Accessed Oct. em: 20, 2024.

located at Alto Vera Cruz, a community in the East region of Belo Horizonte. The trajectory of the 33 women who participated in the group at the time were reconstructed mainly based on interviews conducted under the assumptions of oral history. Participant observations were also conducted and, when was the case, the analysis of the writings she produced. Isabel's case, as we will try to show during our analysis, stands out for a number of factors but mainly through the relationship she established with reading and writing.

Born in 1938 in a rural community in the district of Pedra do Anta, which then belonged to the municipality of Teixeiras, in the *zona da mata* region in Minas Gerais, Isabel died in 2016. She was the oldest of a family of seven siblings. When Isabel was a child, she worked at home helping her mother, who was a seamstress, to clean, organize the house, and take care of her siblings. She also helped to cook for her father, who was a sharecropper on the farms of the region, for the other family members, and for the workers. In our interviews with her, she also remembered the games and religious parties she attended during her childhood. In the family evenings with the neighbors, the stories told from the oral tradition and a fantastic universal were still present in Isabel's trajectory, familiarizing her, as happened with Luís Gonzaga dos Santos, with the narrative structures and aesthetic fruition. Isabel married when she was 16 years old. She had 11 children; 8 of them survived, and she never worked outside her house. She migrated to the capital, Belo Horizonte, in the early 1960s.

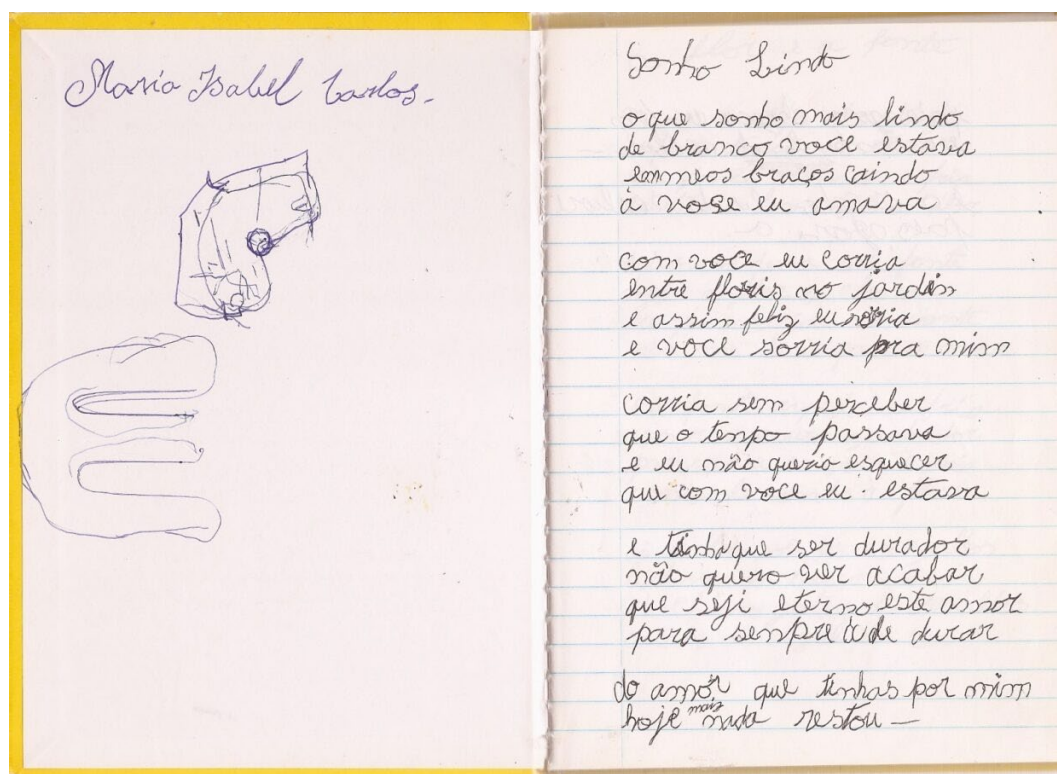
Isabel learned how to read and write with her father. She never attended school. According to her narrative, due to the lack of written material circulating in the property where they lived, her father made holes in pieces of paper (newspapers or wrapping papers) and overlapped them with the existing texts for her to identify the alphabet letter by letter. To learn how to write, Isabel and her father used pieces of coal. She remembers that she learned how to read and write gradually and became a fluent reader.

Isabel says that since she started reading, she would read everything she could find, from soap packages and old newspapers to the words written on the fences around her house. The role of the magazine *O Cruzeiro*¹⁵ stands out in her formation as a reader. The issues of the magazine, and other written materials, reached her at the *roça* – as she refers to the rural area she was born and spend her childhood – mainly through a cousin that went to Rio de Janeiro for a health treatment. Among her several reading memories she raised during her interviews, she particularly remembered the impact she had when reading an article about the moon landing in the magazine. Her mother was so concerned with the reaction to the written word over her daughter – believing that reading would “ruin her understanding” – that her young self started to hide the magazines under her pillow because she had to “hide the words.” Reading was Isabel's daily companion until she

¹⁵ Considered one of the main illustrated magazines circulating in the Brazil in the 20th century (1944-1975, *O Cruzeiro* was the research focus of several studies. See, among others, Meyrer (2010).

died, even after having a brain stroke: “I learned to read, and I love it, love, love to read.” Gradually, she started to write, mainly small poems, generally quatrains, music lyrics, and autobiographical writings. At the time we interviewed her, this material was gathered in a notebook she kept with much care and love. Later, a book with some of her writings was posthumously published (Carlos, 2017), and some of her songs were recorded. Other writings had already been part of compilations.

Figure 1 – First page of Maria Isabel Carlos's notebook.



Source: the author.

Why should Isabel be considered an unlikely case? Around the time she was born, according to the 1940 Census, the city of Teixeira had 12,887 inhabitants with 5 years or more, of which 37.65% knew how to read and write (Brasil, 1950). Among women, this rate was 30.65% (Brasil, 1950). Most of the population lived in rural areas, living out of agriculture – mainly coffee -cattle raising, and forestry. The main area of the city and the village of Pedra do Anta were the main urban agglomerations in the municipality, but both concentrated only around 20% of the population. The existing schools were mainly situated in these two nuclei.

Which regularities can be perceived when Isabel's case is compared to others? Her trajectory confirms that literacy and access to written materials are two relevant conditions

for becoming a reader. It also indicates the important role of orality through the collective narratives of oral tradition stories. It also highlights the relevant role of the family – in this case, the father – in approximating people to the written cultures. In Isabel's case, this fact can help us understand the trajectories in which, even in the absence of school, parents can engage in the process of literacy and the formation of their children as readers.

Which “irregularities” can we see in Isabel's case? For the contemporary eyes, the lack of schools stands out. However, as we stated at the beginning of this article, the relationship between literacy and schooling is relatively recent in Brazilian history. Many individuals learned to read and became readers in other spaces and through other practices, as shown, for instance, in the study about readers/listeners of *corde* literature (Galvão, 2001). In this aspect, perhaps what distinguishes Isabel's trajectory the most from other similar cases is that a man— her father— taught her to read and write. As other studies have shown (Fadul, 2023), it was common for fathers and, later, husbands to prohibit (or create barriers) for women to learn how to read and write, arguing, among other factors, that these abilities could help them write notes for boyfriends or prospective boyfriends. Fadul's (2023) work highlights the importance of considering gender in our research analysis, mainly when focusing on periods before the mid-20th century. In many trajectories, gender seems to override other social markers because even women from the elites – mainly in rural areas – had difficulties accessing schooling and reading.

Another singularity of her case lies on the fact that Isabel's initial reading trajectory took place almost entirely in the rural area – even though the access to written materials was made possible by those living in urban centers. Nonetheless, this element cannot be considered an “irregularity” in all parts of Brazil, as studies show the presence of “strong readers” in rural areas, mainly in regions of European immigration (Manke, 2021; Thies, 2008). Though we can affirm that in these rural areas, the presence of the written word was, in fact, more sparse, this statement needs to be nuanced for several reasons. The equipment related to the written cultures tended/tend to be concentrated in some areas of the city and there are large differences between central and peripheral areas (Galvão *et al.*, 2010). The writing word can be rarefied in small municipalities, even in the center of the city, or in urban agglomerations.

We also highlight that Isabel did not have a qualified work— nor in the public space – during her lifetime. Finally, we highlight Isabel's ethnic-racial belonging: being an African descendant has certainly restricted her possibilities of becoming a reader and, after, a writer.

What type of reader did Isabel become? Her narrative indicates that, anthropophagically, she read everything that was (scarcely) available: from wrapping paper to magazines and books. Therefore, there were aesthetic and pragmatic inclinations regarding reading. Regarding reading, the same types of uses are repeated: literary fruition for poems and lyr-

ics and ethical uses for memoirs. Isabel's case, besides others, as readers/listeners of *cor-dei* literature (Galvão, 2001), already mentioned, helps to complexify the idea that popular groups would only be able to grant utilitarian roles to the written word.

4 Final remarks

The cases analyzed during this article show the existence, during Brazilian history, of social groups and individuals that can be considered “unlikely” reader, as, though living in exclusion contexts, they had restricted access to literacy, schooling, written materials, spaces, and tools that allowed an active participation in the written cultures: enslaved populations, blind boys and girls, men and women from low-income groups, black people, rural and city dwellers. Though the analysis was predominantly based on results of studies already conducted on the theme, the type of discussion held here was not the object of a more elaborate systematization, mainly based on two main questions that guided the argument woven during the article: the instances responsible for the formation of unlikely readers and the types of readers they became.

The cases show the relevance of some instances for the “improbability” to happen. Some of these spaces are considered classic in the studies about the history of reading: school, family, city, work, and religion. This does not mean that the trajectories studied only confirm the studies conducted because they brought elements to complexify these issues, such as the presence of readers in the rural areas, carrying out non-qualified jobs, families with low cultural access, no access to school, and the strong presence of oral tradition narratives in the formation of an aesthetic sense. However, other instances should be incorporated into the studies, at the risk of becoming invisible. The history of reading in Brazil should certainly consider, mainly when focusing on some territories, other instances, such as the radio (Neves, 2018), the street markets, the cinema, the theater, the press, and different religiosities.

Another question that guided this article refers to the type of reader these people and groups became. As we analyzed throughout the text, though tending to predominate among the “unlikely reader” the pragmatic uses of reading, in which informative reading and guidance for practical life, the cases studies also show the presence of aesthetic and literary fruition because, among the subjects and analyzed groups, the ideas of beauty and uselessness, associated to reading, are also present.

Finally, the cases analyzed here show that the change in the scale of observation, as Revel (1998) argues, produces knowledge effects because it modifies the “form” and the “web” of the phenomenon studied. When focusing on the scale of the individual and social groups, it was possible to confirm and, simultaneously, complexify what other studies have

been showing regarding, mainly, the main instances responsible for forming for forming “unlikely readers.” From this finding, we can ask, as a conclusion for this article: If there were more studies about similar trajectories, would these cases no longer be considered “unlikely”, though they would continue to be a quantitative minority? Has the way we conduct our studies on the history of reading in Brazil been contributing to the visibilization of those cases or making them imperceptible?

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