In 2005 I became an American citizen. My path to citizenship was a conscious choice. For me the decisive factor was that, as a citizen, I would have the right to vote, to engage in this country’s public sphere in a full-fledged manner. In my route to citizenship, I passed various signposts, which culminated in the oath-taking ceremony—and, for me, in voter registration. Registering to vote was my first act as a newly minted American citizen, and this deed felt more momentous than the oath-taking ceremony.

But before I was an American citizen, I was (and still am) a Brazilian citizen. Unlike my American citizenship, my Brazilian one was inherited from my Brazilian father. Though I was not born on Brazilian soil, there was no decision making involved in becoming an integral subject of the Brazilian nation—at least from a legal standpoint. All my life, I used my (until recently) dark-green Brazilian passport to travel to other countries, including the United States. This document gave me rights in my home country and also certain responsibilities.

As a Brazilian citizen, I partook in the expected rituals that come with this role, including voting.1 In 1984, I participated in the “Diretas Já”2 campaign that made many Brazilians heady with the prospect of casting a direct vote for president, a promise that was delayed for four years. And in 1989 when I voted for the first time in my life, I was able to cast my ballot in Brazil’s first direct elections in over two decades. More than ten years later, I cast another “first” vote, this time in the 2008 US presidential elections.
Though most of us are nominally citizens of one or more nations, this can have different meanings depending on national and historical contexts and, often, on variables such as socioeconomic status. Citizenship has symbolic and material gradations. Even when equal rights are apportioned to all subjects of a nation in writing, as they are in the 1988 Brazilian “citizens’” constitution, citizenship is crisscrossed by cracks that extend into the nation’s physical and imagined body politic. The concept of citizenship, which implies both duties and rights and entails participation in the civic, political, and social spheres can be allotted, enacted, or denied at multiple levels. Social capital especially is often distributed unevenly, leading to disenfranchisement in other domains of citizenship, particularly in the civil arena.

Brazil’s redemocratization, the drafting of a new constitution in 1988 and the country’s recently improved social indicators (such as the emergence of 28 million people from poverty) have brought the issue of citizenship to the forefront of political, civil, social, and cultural discussions. Citizenship has become an increasingly important word in Brazil’s public ambit in recent years, first because of the 1988 “Citizen’s Constitution” and second because of the term’s valorization since the 1985 democratic transition (Holston, Insurgent; Carvalho). Being a citizen (cidadão, cidadã) no longer has a derogatory signification (DaMatta). Rather, it is synonymous with rights and can mean access to them. The prominence of the issue of citizenship and social disparity in Brazil since 1985 is reflected in the country’s recent literary production.

Citizenship and Crisis in Contemporary Brazilian Literature considers how recent literary texts address the socioeconomic and political changes that Brazil has undergone since its 1985 democratic transition and what these alterations have meant for the understanding and performance of citizenship in the literary realm. The manuscript discusses a total of nine literary texts that thematize differentiated and insurgent citizenship in Brazilian cities by four contemporary Brazilian writers: Luiz Ruffato’s Inferno provisório (Mamma, son tanto feliz [Mamma, they are so happy, 2005], O mundo inimigo [The enemy world, 2005], Vista parcial da noite [Partial view of the night, 2006], and O livro das imposibilidades [The book of impossibilities, 2008]); Fernando Bonassi’s Subúrbio (Suburb, 1990) and O menino que se trançou na geladeira (The boy who locked himself in the fridge, 2004); Reginaldo Ferreira da Silva’s, better known as Ferréz, Capão Pecado (Capão sin, 2000) and Manual prático do ódio (Practical handbook of hate, 2003); and Marcus Vinicius Faustini’s Guia afetivo da periferia (Affective guide of the periphery, 2009). These literary