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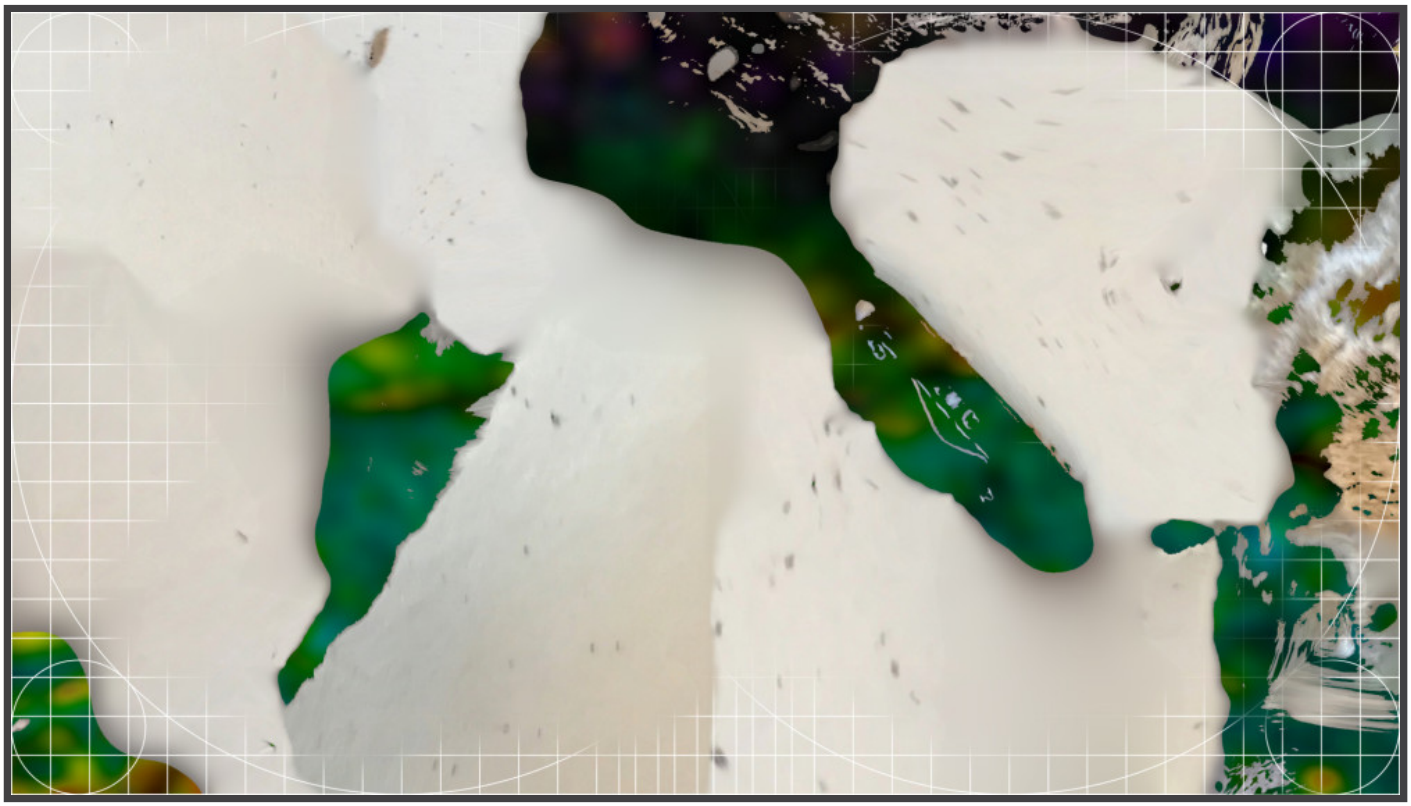
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The Phantoms of the Opera

tales, prayers and spells to cast evil away [v.1]

Túlio Rosa

One day, walking in the streets of Milan, the Brazilian composer Carlos Gomes happens upon an Italian translation of *Il Guarany*. The love story between an indigenous warrior and the daughter of a Portuguese nobleman seemed a perfect plot for a new opera, aligned with the imperial desire for compelling national narratives and the European fascination for everything exotic. But what the maestro didn't know is that going back in time can have consequences, and together with the sixteenth characters he evoked, other forces came into play.



Dramatis Personae

José de Anchieta
Fire Snake / Boitatá
Father
Writer
Carlos Gomes
Woman

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Brazilian composer Carlos Gomes was living in Milan, under the auspices of the emperor of Brazil. One day, walking in the streets, he happens upon an Italian translation of a novel set in Brazil, *Il Guarany*. The love story between an indigenous warrior and the daughter of a Portuguese nobleman seemed a perfect plot for a new opera, aligned with the imperial desire for compelling national narratives and the European fascination for everything that could be characterized as exotic. But what the maestro didn't know is that going back in time can have consequences, and together with the sixteenth century characters he evoked, other forces came into play.[1]

Overture (*setting the theme*)

São Vicente, the last Portuguese settlement facing south in the year of the Lord 1560, at the end of the month of May.

Even in stones you can find something to admire and praise the omnipotence of the supreme and great God, as in the one that serves to sharpen swords; any part you touch becomes as flexible as leather, you move it like a thing tied in a knot, so that it does not look like a single stone, but many joined together by several joints.[2]

He has been battling pen and paper for days, trying to describe everything that is «worth of admiration» and unknown on the other side of the ocean. Animals and indigenous wizards, birds and countless tales of conversions, what else could follow?

This is all that occurs to me to say about the trees, plants, and stones.[3]

One of the young boys recently arrived from Lisbon—the cutest of them, Sebastian, beautiful curly brown hair, blue eyes and pale skin—passed in front of the window carrying a torch. I'm not sure if it was his image or the flames, but something brought back the images of the night before.

That's right. After nature, it was time for the unnatural. Every good story needs a hint of horror.

I will now add a few words concerning the nocturnal specters.

It's common knowledge that there are certain demons, who often attack Indians in the bush, whip them, hurt them and kill them. There are also others who live most of the time by the sea and the rivers and are called Boitatá, which means «thing of fire» or «that which is all fire.» You can't see anything but sparkling flames running from here to there. What this is we still don't know for sure.[4]

Staring at the paper, he understood: a new creature had just been born.

Act One

I. 1996 Duet

Every Sunday there was a football tournament in this place called Tira-Teima. From our house, in the city center, it was about three kilometers by foot. *Agora tá tudo emendado*, but by then it was a big distance. We were in a big group, *tava a Marilda, a Maribel, não sei a Nida tava também*… now I can't remember everyone, *mas era tudo moleque, piazadinha*. On the way, just outside Santa Rosa,[5] there was an area where they dug to take some sand for the work they were doing *na BR 101*.[6] *E ali tinha uma curva*.

It was the end of the afternoon. We were coming back, it was getting dark already, and when we were passing by this road, I looked to my side and saw these things of fire. *Como que vem*, the hill was on my right side and where the road finished, on my left, *tinha um barranco*. *Ali* I saw these three *bolas de fogo*. *Eu gritei pra todo mundo*, everyone saw it. Three balls of fire, moving. They passed in parallel to us and then disappeared.

I remember I got goosebumps. Even now, *eu fico todo arrepiado*.

This image is extremely vivid in my mind. I heard it from my father in a summer night when we were sitting in front of the house looking at the stars and telling stories. I can recall it almost as if it was my own story, my own memory, my first sight of this thing of fire called Boitatá.

II. 1867

He was tired of how the same Indian stories controlled the artistic imagination of that time[7], but he was also aware of the complications. Slavery was off the list, the wars of secession produced animosities among the elites, and stories of poor Italian immigrants would only have public appeal a century later, when the television companies eventually discovered that Italians with blue eyes were perfect heroes for soap operas.

The idea was far from original: an Indian and a beautiful doncella fall in love, fight for the good, escape from evil, and give birth to a nation. This kind of love stories involving European travelers and indigenous people was already a trend, but *Jaguarita L'indienne*[8] wasn't epic enough and *L'africaine*[9] wouldn't appeal to the Brazilian audiences. Besides, there was a reason behind the emperor's support, and he knew it.[10]

A group of men crossing the stage, carrying dead selvaticci bodies on a pole.[11]

When he imagined the first scene of *Il Guarany*, the association between hunting «savages» and genocide didn't seem that obvious, so he followed his impulse. Aristocracy wasn't very fond of deep thinking anyway. Besides, Henrique Bernadelli would only consolidate the hunting of indigenous peoples in the iconographic history of the country half a century later, with the opening of the Ipiranga Museum[12]. If Halevy could do it, why not him?

That night, after another long discussion with Scalvini,[13] Carlos had a strange dream. He was sitting in one of the old velvet chairs of the stalls, close to the central corridor, when he felt the cold touch of a snowflake. He looked around, as if to check he was where he thought to be. He recognized the frescos, the curtains, the box (no. 17) from which he listened to Marie Sass[14] for the first time. But the colors were muted, faded. The ceiling was now an immense hole from where the cold breeze was entering. At the center of the stage there was a sculpture. Walking towards the proscenium he realized it was his image carved in an ice block. His right hand was holding a baton as if conducting an invisible orchestra. The image was impressively accurate. He stared at it for a few seconds until he noticed the sculpture was melting. He tried to get closer, but the snow had now become water and the floor resembled a lake. His body was wet, his clothes had become heavier, it was getting more and more

difficult to move. Driven by a strong sense of urgency, he climbed onto the stage. The sculpture was losing its shape, the head slowly falling backwards. He tried to hold it together, but the struggle to put the pieces back in place only accelerated the melting. The lightest touch was enough for the heat of his body to turn the ice into water.

When he woke up, his mattress was wet, and the room was filled with a strong smell of urine.

III. 1870

All over the city. Posters the size of a man, the size of a house, the size of a theater: Il Guarany. *Public curiosity grew a rising tide. Two, three, ten, twenty people gathered in front of the posters.*

Il Guarány! *some read.*
Il Guárany! *others affirmed.*

There were people who simply read to themselves, which made for a vast favor to the etymology of the word. The show was scheduled for the 19th of March at eight o'clock. At six, it was already difficult to break through the crowds. Jealousy and admiration turned towards the success of the Brazilian maestro.[15]

IV. 1870 Aria

The movement behind the curtains might have been a warning, but they were not trained to hear it.

Talks were going on for days. Some were tired of being represented as timid animals of silent beauty, inevitably destined to be pierced by arrows and bullets, chopped into pieces and hanged on walls as ornamental reminders of «bravery»; others refused the passivity of an existence relegated to the often imprecise bidimensional painting in the background; and there were those portrayed as exotic dangerous creatures, symbols of predation by excellence, who claimed the right to be seen as complex beings, to show their sweetness, fragility, and their tears.

But they were not trained to hear it.

It started just like a little breeze entering from an open window, a fevered promise yet to be noticed. The first touch was tough, cold. The wall was not very receptive but there was no turning back. Like a warm breath whispering softly through the wooden floor, flickering in an ancient rhythm, it curled and stretched until it touched a piece of fabric. The curtain of dense black velvet was so soft and heavy, so tall. And yet, it offered itself so freely, so openly that it ignited an unspeakable pleasure, the beginning of a flaming paradise.

Growing in every direction, wrapping around curves and folds, it was like a lover trying to taste every bit of skin, to feel every texture. Relentlessly, it licked wood and metal without shame, climbed to the rafters and teased the delicate crystals of the chandelier until they shattered and fell like a silver cascade. The seats, worn by countless audiences, trembled. The fabric peeled away, and the sweat that had long lived in its fibers rose to the air, filling the space with an intoxicating scent. The beams surrendered to the growing warmth, and the theater quivered and moaned under passion and greed.

It didn't take long before it became a giant. The flames swelled in a final dance, under a symphony composed of the cracks of burning wood and the sound of things falling into each other, together with baritones and sopranos, in and out of pitch, crying for help.

V. 1560 Intermezzo (*theme's variation*)

There are also other specters that are just as terrifying, which do not only attack the Indians, but also cause them harm by these and other similar means. The devil wants to make himself so formidable to these Brazilians who do not know God and exercise such cruel tyranny against them.[16]

VI. 2024

First, she saw from afar the grey column of rising smoke and thought it created an almost magic connection between the soil and the sky. When she reached the square in front of the theatre, she found a mass of people staring at the fire, immobile, terrified, and fascinated by such terrible destruction.

Que a tua desgraça fertilize o solo que alimentará o porvir.

She took from her pocket a rectangular paper that smelled like the old memory da quermesse, *da festa de santo da paróquia*, and for a moment, stared at the warm heart of that yellow-orange, almost red, hungry being.

Que a cinzas do teu corpo sejam alimento para terra que um dia alimentará outras gentes.

She slid her finger over the figure, gently, as if holding the beads of a rosary, she closed her eyes and started to pray:

corpo de fogo que a estória alumia,
que rompe a cena, abre o torto, desfarela o bom,
que corre e lambe sem pecado e sem perdão
sem raiva e sem compaixão,
guarda em nós o poder
guarda em nós o pó
de desfazer as manhas,
de romper as artimanhas,
que a fumaça defume
que a cinza fertilize
leva o que já não deve ficar,
deixa o que há deixar,
aqui,
junto de nós
que o teu brilhe ilumine o caminho
que a força da tua cor flamenjante seja também a nossa
seja também nossa luz e nosso guia
que assim seja

ACT TWO

I.

The Phantoms of the Opera is part of a larger research project concerned with the interrelation between the processes of nation building in the late 19th century and the narratives produced by Jesuits and playwrights since the first decades of Pindorama's invasion.[17] It looks at how stories and myths have operated throughout the centuries as colonial infrastructures, intended to sustain power hierarchies and produce a sense of homogenization in a vastly diverse country. In this text, I imagined how the fire snake Boitatá, first described in 1560 in a letter by José de Anchieta, reappears in 1870 to claim the theater where *Il Guarany* is being

staged—an opera that transforms the encounter between settlers and indigenous peoples of Brazil into a little Christian fairy tale set, not coincidentally, in the year 1560.

Il Guarany was composed by the Brazilian Carlos Gomes and produced by the Teatro Alla Scala, in Milan, one of Europe's most prestigious opera houses. The story, based on a novel by José de Alencar written a few decades earlier, draws on Brazil's colonial history to produce a foundational national myth. Both works, the opera and the novel, are central works of Indianism —a 19th-century artistic movement that idealized Indigenous peoples as symbols of national identity—and essential to understanding later movements, such as Brazilian Modernism and Tropicalism, which sought to develop a «genuine» aesthetic rooted in Brazil's cultural hybridity and history.

Anchieta's letters and the story of *Il Guarany* are both important elements in the formation of the Brazilian imaginary. But the ghosts of Anchieta and the characters of the opera also represent a clash between two different times: the time of mystery, when so-called «fantasies» were the very operation of describing the world, and the time of manipulation, when narratives were consciously being constructed to promote political agendas. What can emerge from the encounter between these two times?

II.

I grew up in a small village in the south of the country, where it is still possible to see balls of fire coming down the hill, where saints visit our houses, and prayers can last for nine days. In the process of writing this text, I looked for elements of popular culture that, opposing the opera's formality, could challenge my writing and activate other imageries. This is how I arrived at the *santinhos*, these little prayer cards that people keep in their wallets. I remember how, no matter the problem, there was always a prayer and a saint to guide us.

Spirituality has always been very present in my family. My great-grandmother, Vó Virginia, was a kind of *rezadeira*, someone who practices healing through prayer—just like her mother, her grandmother, and her daughter today. Among candles and herbs, in the back of their houses, in rooms full of images of saints and other entities, these women operate on the edge of religion. They not only challenge the authority of the priest—according to the Roman Catholic Church, the only one authorized to give a blessing—but also keep alive other forms of knowledge excluded from the Western European Christian belief systems.

When I was a baby, I had trouble sleeping and cried a lot during the night. My father decided to go to Vó Virginia seeking for help. She asked him for black sheep's wool and leaves from a plant we call *espada de São Jorge* (sword of Saint George). When she came to our house, she placed the wool under my mattress and made a cross with the leaves on top of it. She made the same cross on the door of my room. And then she prayed. After that, I am said to have stopped crying and slept normally again. According to her, bad spirits had been troubling me.

To me, this story is more than a simple anecdote. It speaks of how power and magic exist in certain places of the world, of how prayers can become spells that transform the material world, shifting the conditions in which existence take place. If technology is the application of knowledge for practical purposes, could we consider these prayers an ancient technological tool that operates through different notions of time and space?

Brazil, and what is conventionally called syncretism, is marked by a sort of «impurity»—everything contains a bit of something else. The ability to trust a saint, an *orixá* or a force of nature can be a form of resistance to the absolute rationality of the Enlightenment and the Western forms of thinking inherited through colonization. Rather than

clarity and truth, it nurtures relational ways of understanding the world, refusing binaries such as reason versus superstition or nature versus culture. Syncretism thrives on the coexistence and entanglement of diverse forms of knowledge and modes of being. Boitatá is not simply an indigenous myth translated into the Portuguese imaginary, but an entity created in the encounter between these two worlds. Yet another figure in the Brazilian pantheon that refuses categories and challenge easy divisions.

III. Finale

When I first imagined these scenes, the fire consuming a theater as a sort of curse brought back unintentionally by *Il Guarany*, the most recent fires that covered Brazil in ashes hadn't yet started. Not that fire is a novelty to us Brazilians. Just in the last decade we watched the burning of the National Museum, the Museum of the Portuguese Language, the Cinematheque, and so many square miles of forest that no comparison, number or graphic can make us understand its scale. But, in these last months, the whole country has been unable to breathe under criminal smoke. The text, and the prayer that is part of it, have now a completely different meaning.

Boitatá is, in many ways, the opposite of the political-economic regime that has led to the destruction of Brazilian biomes. Acknowledging its existence is to accept that the world is full of mystery, that there is more at play than is possible to perceive. Mirroring the woman who looks at the burning theater and prays for Boitatá's wrath to be a form of purification, I read this prayer now as political gesture, a surrendering of power and an attempt to work together with all these other forces we are often trained to ignore. And with the Brazilian fires and the future they announce in mind, I invite you, dear reader, to fill this prayer with intentions, to read it out loud and trust that it can be a tool of resistance and, in due course, transformation.

If we are to live through fire, then let's pray to the fire snake.

Oh body of fire
that runs and licks without sin or forgiveness
without anger or compassion,
save in us the power
to uncover deception
may the smoke purify
and the ashes fertilize
take away what should be taken
leave what is to be left
here
with us
may your glow light the way
may the strength of your flaming color be ours
be our light and our guide
amen

[1] This text was originally written to be spoken. Its language, including the interplay between Portuguese and English, that responds to that intention. The fragments in Portuguese are used in such a way that the reader can follow the text without accessing a direct translation. Some

of these fragments appear in English later in the text.

[2] José de Anchieta, «Letter of San Vincent (1560),» in *Cartas Informações, Fragmentos Históricos e Sermões do Pe. Joseph de Anchieta (1554–1594)*, edited by Afranio Peixoto (Rio de Janeiro: Civilação Brasileira S.A., 1933), pp. 103–143. Translation by Túlio Rosa.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Santa Rosa do Sul is a village in the State of Santa Catarina, southern Brazil.

[6] BR 101 is one of the biggest highways in Brazil, connecting the south with the northeast. It crosses 12 federal states and has a length of nearly 4,800 km.

[7] Daniel Padilha Pacheco da Costa, «A retrotradução de C. Paula Barros para o português das óperas indianistas O Guarani e O Escravo de Carlos Gomes,» Coleção Digital PUC Rio de Janeiro, 2019, https://doi.org/10.17771/PUCRio.TradRev.45913 (accessed December 18, 2024).

[8] Three-act comic opera composed by Fromental Halevy in 1855, to a libretto by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Adolphe de Leuven. Set in the so-called Dutch West Indies, the plot is centered on the love story between a Dutch explorer and an indigenous «queen.»

[9] Grand opera in five acts composed in 1865 by Giacomo Meyerbeer with a libretto by Eugene Scribe. It focused on the life of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in the south of the African continent and India.

[10] David Treece, *Exiles, Allies, Rebels Brazil's Indianist Movement, Indigenist Politics, and the Imperial Nation-State* (London: Greenwood Press, 2000).

[11] A. Carlos Gomes, *Il Guarany: Grand opera in four acts* (San Francisco: Francis, Valentine and Co., 1884), p. 3.

[12] At the end of the 19th Century, Afonso de Taunay commissioned four large scale paintings representing the major economic cycles of the country. Among them was the *Cycle of Indian Hunt* by Henrique Bernadelli, finished ca. 1920.

[13] Ítalo Scalvini was an entrepreneur and the first librettist of *Il Guarany*, completed later by Carlo D'Ormeville.

[14] Marie Sass, or Maria Saxe, was a dramatic soprano born in Belgium. She sung the opera's leading role, Cecilia, in its first cast.

[15] Luis Guimarães Jr, *A. Carlos Gomes: perfil biographico* (Rio de Janeiro: Typographia Perseverança, 1870). Translation by Túlio Rosa.

[16] José de Anchieta, «Letter of San Vincent (1560),» in *Cartas* 1933, pp. 103–143. Translation by Túlio Rosa.

[17] Pindorama is the name given to Brazil by the indigenous communities of the Tupi-derived family of languages. It means «Land of the palm trees.»

TÚLIO ROSA

Túlio Rosa (1989, BR) is an artist and PhD researcher at Leiden University's Academy of Creative and Performative Arts and the Royal Academy of Art of The Hague (PhDArts). Combining writing, visual, and performative practices, his work proposes a critical and sensible approach to the history of colonialism and explores the possibility of rewriting personal and collective stories as a gesture of reparation.

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