Representations of the Classics in the Works of Two Mulatto Writers in Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

Luís Gonzaga Pinto da Gama (1830-1882), and Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839-1908) are prominent Brazilian writers from the imperial and republican periods. They are part of the Brazilian literary canon, hence also part of the academic curriculum of secondary schools and universities. Luís Gama is a poet, and Machado de Assis, the foremost Brazilian prose writer of novels, short stories, letters, and journalistic pieces (crônicas), all of which have been translated into English and other languages. In this paper I specifically address Gama’s and Machado’s handling of classical allusions in their works with respect to Brazilian identity formation shaped by, and conscious of, racial and racialized thinking. Gama’s and Machado’s works present us with fundamental and incidental ways in which these authors received and engaged with the classics, notably through satire and irony. Since both writers were mulattoes (a derogatory, though customary, term used to refer to mixed-race people, specifically the mixing between blacks and whites), I look at how their biracial identity influenced the ways in which they deployed the classics in their works.

The inclusion of these writers in Reception Studies dealing with race and identity is relevant and important, first because Brazil has the largest black population in the Americas, indeed, the largest outside of Africa, yet the representation of black writers who write on issues of race and identity, socially or artistically, continues to be scanty. The lack of visibility of black Brazilian writers, particularly those who write as black subjects, is not only due to racial marginalization, but also to geography and language; therefore, their works depend on literary and cultural translations. The second reason for the relevance of including these writers in Reception Studies is the pervasive and ubiquitous use of classical material in their works, which can be located within the context of Black Classicism – theoretical and critical questions about the interactions among the Classics, race, and identity, specifically, in regard to blacks of the diaspora.

BACKGROUND

As a general background, one can say that Brazilian classicism, or the classics in Brazilian literature from colonial times onwards, is the result of a constant and steady gaze towards the literary movements in Europe, such as Romanticism, Neoclassicism, Realism, the Parnassian School (with its pastoral, and bucolic themes), and the Belle Époque, known as the Gilded Age in the United States. In tension with this look north and east towards Europe, Brazilian literature was from early on also preoccupied with forging its own authentic literature separate and distinct from Portugal, such as we see in the Indianist movement during the Romantic period (from the early-mid 19th to late 19th centuries) which praised the native as an idealized being, not yet corrupted by the ills of civilizations. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Modernism itself had as its central mission the conception and formulation of an authentic mode of Brazilianism through an aesthetics of cultural cannibalism (Anthropophagic Movement), that is, the idea of eating and digesting all the disparate aspects of the culture and coming up with something other and new. Despite such an avant-garde outlook, the classics in Brazilian literature from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries were often used to legitimize literary refinement and to compensate for the existential periphery of Brazilian intellectuals vis-à-vis their European and American counterparts. The classics afforded the kind of universalism that could reconcile the old Portuguese-European civilization with the exotic native and the African slave, thus giving shape to the still current and common narrative that Brazilian national identity is the result of the contributions of the three races, or the “three veins in the same block of marble,” as the famous ethnographer Luís da Câmara Cascudo put it, though each contribution was valued at a different weight.

Black writers are keenly aware that they are writing from the margins of the predominantly white Brazilian literary culture, outside the international literary culture, and outside the Anglophone world, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom. Whether they deliberately choose to position themselves politically and
literally in these marginal spaces, (Luís Gama), or to distance themselves from them by redrawing the map of centers and margins, so to speak (Machado de Assis), these writers’ handling of the classics and classical aesthetics and ideology takes into account that classical antiquity, and Greece in particular, is at once a distant historical reality and a persistent signifier of European identity and superiority as distinct from that of other groups. How, then, do black writers interact with, play with, or translate the classics in their works so as not to further alienate themselves from themselves, from the mainstream cultures, and from their own literary achievements? These questions have been raised and approached in the United States, the United Kingdom, as well as in Africa, for some time, and have produced illuminating works ranging from discussions of the impact of classics on blacks, to artistic adaptations of classical material and themes, to scholarly criticism.7

In a sense, these questions may appear to be direct and clear for writers who outright reject the classics as guilty by association with European colonial narratives.8 But for writers who do not outright reject the classics, the question still is one of authenticity, the way a writer positions himself or herself vis-à-vis the classics. Nevertheless, some have found in the classics an attractive polysemantic world that makes unstable any single colonial narrative linking Greeks and Romans to the Portuguese aristocracy, to the exclusion of everyone else. Historians of Brazilian literature have remarked that in the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, between 1871 and 1930 (the period of the Belle Époque), a writer could not be considered erudite and sophisticated enough, if he or she did not engage with Hellenism, and that this engagement was often superficial and decorative.9 Indeed, both Machado de Assis and Luís Gama fully explored this obsession with Greece in literature, a phenomenon that was informed by philosophical positivism (faith in progress and science, along with the impulse to systematize branches of knowledge, including racial categories) influenced by trends in post-First World War France, Italy, and Germany. Machado, especially satirized such literary mannerisms.

LUÍS GAMA

Luís Gama, born in 1830 during slavery, was an autodidact, and having received some patronage from a law professor at the University of São Paulo, trained himself as a lawyer, and worked for a time in the justice system representing illegally held Africans brought to Brazil after the abolition of the slave trade.10 Thus, his political, social, and poetic programs were all aligned, and his poetic persona comes out forcefully in his single published collection of poems, titled Trovas Burlescas de Getulino (1861), Getulino’s Burlesque Songs (trovas means ballads, songs, verses, lyrics, and Getulino was Gama’s pen name). Gama is the first black poet in Brazil to proudly and unapologetically identify and represent himself as a black subject in his writings. In his mostly satirical poems, written in rhyming couplets, Gama appropriates the classics to highlight the inherent contradictions within a Brazilian society that wanted to be part of Republican modernity, but supported a corrupt colonial system, and had a slave-owning class with claims to racial purity. Moreover, he often uses classical figures and vocabulary to construct a model against which he sets African aesthetics in a game of besting, that is, the attempt to outdo, and outwit the mannerisms of high literature, and to beat it at its own game, so to speak. Nevertheless, by showing off his knowledge of classicisms alongside Africanisms, Gama’s poems can often sound more like a manifesto in defense of racial and cultural hybridism than rivalry for cultural superiority, in some ways anticipating the Modernist movement decades later in its insistence on cultural miscegenation. In one of his most famous poems “Quem sou eu?” (Who Am I?), Gama responds to a man who had called him a “bode” (goat), a racial slur for a mixed-race person at the time:11

What I am and what I think,  
Here it goes, and with good sense . . .  
I know well that I’m a low-life,  
Bothersome and poor in style,  
And powerful men  
Afraid of trouble  
Will call me an idle talker,  
A goat, a negro, a Mongibelo [here, hot-headed person]  
But I don’t get upset.  
Whether I’m black, or a goat,  
It matters little; What of it?  
There are goats of all castes,  
For the species is mighty vast . . .  
There are grey ones, and striped ones  
Brown, colored, and freckled ones.  
Negro bodes and white bodes  
And, let’s be frank,  
Some plebeians, some nobles . . .
—All lock horns and all bleat—
In the highest heights,
Where Divinity lives,
There are sanctified *bodes*
Adored by us all.
Among the chorus of angels,
There are many baby goats.
Syrrinx’s lover
was furry and malodorous;
The god of Memphis, as they say
Had horns sprouting up;
Jove, when a baby-boy,
Suckled on goat milk;
And according to the old myth,
Faun was also a kid.
In the domains of Pluto,
A *bode* watches over the Koran;
In the *lundus* and popular songs
*bodinhas* are sung;
So, if everyone has tail?
Why such high tales?
Let peace and joy reign,
Enjoy and play the *bodaria* [goatery]
Yield, therefore, you morning song,
For all is *bodarrada*! [a whole bunch of goats]

Gama avoids any sentimentality around the insult of racism and the negative effects of racial slurs by satirically cataloguing illustrious *bodes* of the past. We see the theme of hybridism and miscegenation ubiquitously deployed, especially on the level of language, through diction that conveys a desire to speak playfully, but also fast and directly (e.g. *bodaria* and *bodarrada* in the last few verses). For instance, the word *Mongibelo* (line 8 of my translation) is a wonderful illustration of a *portman- teau* of Latin *mons* (mountain) and the Arabic word *gebel* (mountain), and is another name given to Mt. Etna in Sicily, and, by extension, to its volcano. In fact *mongibelo* figuratively means a *passionate* and *explosive* person just as Gama describes himself and his own volcanic (poetic) eruptions in the opening of the poem below, “Lá Vai o Verso!,” popularly known as “Orfeu de Carapinha” (Kinky-hair Orpheus).

The poem, which continues to mix various worlds, plays with both epic and lyric traditions, deploying conventional devices, such as invocation of the muse, the presence of nymphs, simile, the reference to ancestors, all in praise of the African presence - the music, the dances, and the poet himself, as a *Kinky-hair (Black) Orpheus*.

Deep in the night, as I felt my head
Full as a volcano with ardent flame,
A light pen I grasped unable myself to contain
The thread of ideas I began to sketch.
The nymphs I invoked to witness
The burning in my voracious inspiration
And later flying back to the firmament
Would fix upon it the Poet’s name
Oh! Muse of Guiné, \(^{16}\) color of coal,
Statue of denigrated granite
Before you even the Lion [Achilles, Herakles?] surrenders,
Divested of the fury of his savage bravery
Lend me the *caça da urucungo* \(^{17}\)
Teach me to shake your *marimba* \(^{18}\)
Inspire me with the science of *candimba* \(^{19}\)
To the streets, take me down from the great heights.
I want to take down the glory of ancient poets,
From the times of arms-potent heroes;
Homers, Camões \(^{20}\)—blazed with gold
Singing of Barons of my fatherland
I want to record on bright columns
The dark power of idiocy
And take abroad the fame of vile dimness
To the furthest regions of old Bactria!
I want the world to face me and see
A thundering Orpheus with kinky hair,
Who values less the lyre, for she is mean
A thundering Kinky-haired Orpheus
Who by the sounds of the august *marimba* recites.

Luís Gama, a black poet, is explicitly and boldly rivaling Homer, Virgil, and Camões. He weaves, displaces, and subverts expectations by juxtaposing and interlocking unconventional couplings, such as *mean lyre* in one verse and *august marimba* in another, creating a confusion of Greeks and Blacks. Gama borrows the language of poetic praise to ask that the world *face and see him*, underscoring the invisibility that is the constant factor of the black experience in diaspora spaces. Moreover, he plays with the Portuguese epic tradition by ironically rejecting the heroes in Camões’ *Lusiad* (1572), in the same...
way that Camões had rejected the ancient Homeric and Virgilian epic heroes in favor of the Portuguese heroes of the age of naval exploration, particularly Vasco da Gama (humorously, the poet’s namesake). Compare, for example, this fragment of the second stanza of Canto I of the Lusiad, translated into English by William Julius Mickle in 1776:

Let Fame with wonder name the Greek no more,  
What lands he saw, what toils at sea he bore;  
Nor more the Trojan’s wand’ring voyage boast,  
What storms he brav’d on many a perilous coast:  
No more let Rome exult in Trajan’s name,  
Nor Eastern conquests Ammon’s pride proclaim;  
A nobler hero’s deeds demand my lays  
Than e’ter adorn’d the song of ancient days,  
Illustrous Gama, whom the waves obey’d,  
And whose dread sword the fate of empire sway’d.

Gama has inserted himself in the poetic tradition of competition alongside all other poets. The time has come for his own brand of poetic heroism, whereby Achilles’ anger, Aeneas’ suffering, Ammon’s pride, and Vasco da Gama’s new world adventures are now the domain and concerns of a black man in the Americas, a former slave, a singer, a Black Orpheus. It is interesting to note that, in contrast to the film Orfeu Negro (Marcel Camus, 1959),21 where the operative, critical, and subversive word is, of course, negro,22 Gama’s reference to Orpheus’ kinky, curly-hair texture (carapinha) adds to the list of physical attributes that so concretely signify black race in the most reductionist, biological terms, and points to the objectification of the black body in the construction of racial hierarchies. Gama’s claim that he is a Kinky-hair Orpheus, amounts to a proclamation of his place and existence within a tradition that renders him both hyper visible (the black body) and invisible, outside the realm of subjectivity and rationality. Gama puts down the lyre (for she is mean) and with it, the tradition whence it came. The poet chooses the African drums, instead, and in the following verses from “Lá Vai o Verso” (“Orfeu de Carapinha”), one could even conjure up Dionysus, a multi-ethnic divinity, invoked here by the conflation of joy from music and dance, and the spiritual trance which they bring about. The first two verses are repeated from the passage quoted above:

A thundering Orpheus with kinky hair . . .

Who by the sound of the august marimba recites . . .  
To the drum of the tambor23 and zabumbas,24  
To the sound of thousand-thundering applause  
Among Gingás25 grandchildren, my relatives  
Jumping up for pleasure and for joy  
In the dances I will enter the high spirits.

MACHADO DE ASSIS

By contrast with Gama’s explicit representation of race, Machado de Assis’s novels, short stories, letters, and journalistic pieces often deploy the ancient Greek world in a double manner: on the one hand, Machado uses the classics as a trope for his social commentary on the bourgeoisie’s obsession with the classics as cliché; on the other hand, Machado’s handling of classicism underscores the cultural and ethnic hybridism in Brazil and suggests similar complexities for ancient Greece. His language is full of philosophical irony meant to represent a Brazilian national character able to incorporate ancient Greece in its cultural and literary fabric precisely because of Brazil’s miscegenation in biology and culture. Machado represents Greece and Brazil in equivocal terms by choosing to represent a rich range of characters—the poor, the rich, ordinary people, mixed-race people, the educated and the illiterate who habitually cross paths with each other, and who make their appearance in a setting that Machado constructs as concomitantly national and foreign, contemporary and antique, without fixed hierarchies.

In his article “A Grécia de Machado de Assis” (Machado de Assis’ Greece), the scholar Jacynthia Lins Brandão explores the various possible ways one could read Machado’s pervasive dealings with the classics, and accepts Machado’s own articulation of the nature of the Greek spirit: “. . . diversidade é o próprio espírito grego . . .,” “diversity is the Greek spirit itself” (“Saltadores de Tessália,” in Crônicas Avulsas 1859-1906). Brandão contrasts Machado’s nuanced, and sophisticated vision of Greece with that of the idle mannerisms of the Belle Époque, and rearticulates this vision as a literary expression and inheritance from Homer (in reference to the broad scope of the epic), from Lucian, as well as from Voltaire. Brandão’s rephrasing of Machado’s Greece is worth quoting at length:

Let us underscore this definition [diversity is the Greek spirit itself], reminding ourselves that, etymologically, diversus is that which is different, the dissimilar, the thing that parts the way, what dis-

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tracts, digression, in sum, all that diverts, that is, misleads, deviates, differentiates. Nothing more precise: in fact, the Greeks, precisely because they not only accepted but cultivated diversity, show this extraordinary capacity to engage in different dialogues across with different times, and persons, not repeating the same one, but adapting themselves to each one's understanding. This same definition can be applied with great precision to Machado's classical reminiscence, which physically occupies the space of digression, destined to amuse [divert] the reader, deviating her from the beaten path and the most attractive one. In other words, Greece allows Machado to put into practice what he expresses in an 1878 newspaper column [crônica]: “one speech, two understandings.” (140).

Although Brandão does not address any issue relating to race and racial identity as part of his analysis of Machado's Greece, some critics have revisited Machado's conception of Greece as a construct that pushes back against any implicit or codified racism in belletrism. Broca, for example, in his A vida literária no Brasil 1900 (1975) writes that: “This obsession with Greece . . . was a means, sometimes unconscious, by which many Brazilian intellectuals reacted against growing miscegenation, trying to conceal the true racial origins in a country where slavery had stigmatized the contribution of blacks” (104). Indeed, this widespread fear of miscegenation is acutely explicit in a letter written by Monteiro Lobato (1944), the iconic author of children's stories, to his friend Godofredo Rangel (a journalist). Lobato had recently reread Homer, and this literary journey to ancient Greece, followed by a visit to Rio de Janeiro prompted him to express the following:

What a counter-Greece Rio is! They say mulatism corrupts character. . . and this in respect to the moral aspect—as to the physical, what ugliness! . . . What a world of difference! In Greece, beauty; here, deformity. There, Achilles; here Quasimodo . . . Blacks from Africa hunted at the point of a gun and brought forcibly into slavery, took revenge on the Portuguese in the most terrible way, by making him a mulatto . . . . How to fix these people? . . . What terrible problem have African blacks created for us here in their unconscious vengeance? Maybe salvation will come from São Paulo and other parts which more intensely inject themselves with European blood (44).

In contrast to this sentiment, Machado's satire goes about undoing the ancient and modern conventional tradition that opposes Hellenism and barbarism, Greeks and barbarians, an opposition which in the tropical space is replaced by Greeks and mulattoes, or to follow Lobato's language, Greece and counter-Greece. In this regard, those critics are correct who see Machado as an exception to the Greek vogue because of the deeply ironic ways he deploys classical presences in his writings—not to decorate them, but to give them meaning. While for some (e.g. Broca), this exception is evidenced by Machado's use of classicism as ancillary appropriation to aid in his satire, including racial satire, for others (e.g. Brandão) Machado's classicism and Hellenism involve a broader, deeper, and more vigorous engagement with the classical tradition itself. As illustration of this latter view, below is an excerpt from Machado's penultimate novel, Esaú e Jacó, Esau and Jacob (1904), about the twins Pedro and Paulo, the protagonists, who are both the same for being twins, but opposites and rivals in every other aspect, mirroring the national political divisions in Brazil during this time following the recent proclamation of the republic. The novel is divided into short chapters, and the narrator (also a character in the novel) is counselor Aires, the cleric, and the twins' teacher, whose writings (the novel itself) had been found in his office after he died:

At the end of lunch, he [Aires] gave them [the twins] a quote from Homer, in fact two [the Iliad and the Odyssey], one for each, telling them that the old poet sang them [the Iliad and the Odyssey] separately; Paul, at the beginning of the Iliad recites: “Muse, sing the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus, the anger fatal to the Greeks, who rushed to Pluto's realm many valiant souls of heroes, delivered the bodies to the birds and dogs” . . . . Peter, at the beginning of the Odyssey: “Muse, sing that wily hero who wandered for so long after sacred Ilium was destroyed”; this was a way to define the character of both [brothers], and neither of them took the application badly. On the contrary, the poetic quotation was akin to privately dispensed pedigree. The fact is that both smiled from faith, acceptance, gratitude, as they thought that not a word or syllable belied the appropriateness of the verses. He, the counselor, after quoting the verses in our parlance [Portuguese], repeated them in their own Greek text and the twins felt even more epic, certain that translations are not worth their originals. What each one did, however, was to give a negative appraisal to what was applicable to his
Machado’s engagement with the classics was part of the author’s aesthetic program, it is also true, as some have pointed out (e.g. Eduardo Assis Duarte), that Machado’s satire of the Brazilian obsession with Greece would, by extension, represent an ethical program against the other ideological referents of a putative Hellenic culture, namely Eurocentrism, racism and, of course, the negative view on miscegenation. It seems clear, however, that Machado does present us with an ancient Greek world conceived and understood in ambivalent and humorous ways, exemplified in the passage above in the contrast between Paulo and Pedro as Achilles and Odysseus (the pairing of the Greek heroes is, in itself, ironic, as the biblical twins Esau and Jacob are the obvious and intended comparanda). In other words, through Aires the reader receives Greece, not so much as a definite space and time, but as an interpretive mode for understanding difference along the same category, in this case the paradigmatically contrasting heroic identities, embedded in the epic tradition itself. The following excerpt is from the opening of *Ésau e Jacó* and exemplifies this definition. In this passage, the twins have not yet been born. Their mother, Nativity, is still pregnant with them, and decides to consult a diviner concerning their future:

Nativity [the twins’ mother] and Perpetua [her sister] knew other areas, besides Botafogo [upper middle-class neighborhood], but Castle Hill, [Morro do Castelo, site of favelas] . . . and the *cabocla* [mixed-race female diviner] who ruled there in 1871, was to them . . . strange and remote. The steep, uneven, badly paved slope hurt the feet of the two poor ladies. Nevertheless, they continued to rise, as though this was penance . . . The morning brought some movement; women, men, children descending or ascending, washerwomen and soldiers, some employed, some shopkeepers, a priest, everyone looked amazed at them, though they dressed in great simplicity; but there was a certain air that did not deceive, and it was not common in those heights . . . A creole woman said to a sergeant: “You want to bet that they’re going to the *cabocla*?” . . . The two ladies discreetly sought the *cabocla’s* house number . . . The house was like the others, mounted on the hill. Someone asked them if they had come to consult the diviner . . . Nativity gave her birth name only, Mary, and received a card . . . with the number 1,012. There is no need to be surprised at this number; the parish was booked over many months. There is also nothing to grieve about the custom, which is old, very old. Reread Aeschylus, my friend, reread the Eumenides, there you will see the Pythia calling those who came to query: “If there are Hellenes here, come closer, according to the custom, in order, marked by lot” . . . Lot, then, numbers, now, so long as the truth fits with the priorities and no one loses their turn for an audience. (Chapter I).

Machado juxtaposes high and low, not only in topography (Castle Hill), but also in social order, as the hills were sites of *favelas* (slums, and shanty towns). He places the Pythia, the high priestess of Apollo at Delphi, alongside the *cabocla* (diviner), creating a parallel whereby for a moment all are Hellenes, then and now, there and here, and such parallels are ubiquitous in this novel, and throughout his work. Finally, Aires’ exhortation to the reader that he become reacquainted with the classics suggests that the comparison between Pythia and *cabocla*, which might seem misplaced at first, can be understood only by those who have actually taken the time to read the classics, at least once, and not superficially.

Particularly meaningful is the word *Hellene*, which extends to Machado’s own literary persona. The author described himself as a Greek: “Veja como ando grego” (*Look how Greek I am*) in correspondence with his friend, the writer Mário de Alencar (Broca, 1975, 102), referring to his quiet readings of Greek classics late in life (he had been reading Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* and Plato’s *Phaedo*). Machado’s self-identification as a Greek (at least qua reader) is especially fascinating because others applied the epithet to him as a mark of distinction. He was a *Hellene among barbarians* (“um helênico no meio dos bárbaros”), as writer Graça Aranha put it (Magalhães Júnior, 1981, 232, Broca, 1975, 106), and a Greek soul, exiled in our homes (“uma alma grega exilada em nossas terras”) according to Antonio Salles (Nava, 1974, 261). Interesting too is the way the substantives *Hellene* and Greek (*grego*) are used as direct opposition to negro. This opposition was clear in a newspaper piece written by author José Veríssimo on the 30th day following the death of Machado (*Jornal do Comércio*, 1908):

These qualities—measure, sensibility, and good
In the article “O ano da morte de Machado de Assis” (The year of Machado de Assis’ death), Silvia Maria Azevedo (2008) points out that in this newspaper piece José Veríssimo reminisced about his daily contact with Machado. In this case, one could say that Veríssimo’s liberty to refer to the author as mixed-race, or mulatto, was either an indication that Machado himself did not mind being identified as such (maybe he even described himself this way in private, and to friends), or that Veríssimo completely misapprehended (or ignored) Machado’s desire for non-identification in terms of his race, or more obviously (as the concessive clause indicates), Veríssimo simply displayed the common prejudice against the idea, and hence the surprise, that a mixed-race person could attain to such literary heights. In fact, the article caused some consternation in the politician and abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco, who pushed back against Veríssimo’s characterization of Machado in a letter (1908):

Your article in the newspaper reads beautifully, but this phrase caused me to wince: “Though Mulatto, he was in fact a Greek of the best era.” I would not have called him mulatto and I think that nothing would cause him more pain than such a synthesis. I ask you to take this part out when you do your final edit. The word is not literary, and it is pejorative. Machado to me was white, and I believe he considered himself as such. Whatever foreign blood he might have had, this did not affect his perfect Caucasian characteristic. I at least saw in him only Greek.

I underlined the word synthesis to underscore the fact that the opposition between grego (to stand in for whiteness) and negro is precisely that, an opposition, not antithesis with a possible synthesis, a resolution, by which Nabuco means miscegenation. The utter absence of irony in both Veríssimo’s and Nabuco’s thoughts contrasts sharply with Machado’s self-parodying (Look how Greek I am). Machado, at least, understood the element of kitsch in the faux-Hellenism of the Belle Époque, and as antidote, or counter example of true Hellenism, offered his own investment in becoming a Greek, at least temporarily as reader. This demonstration is more ironic, as he too must have known (and perhaps even shared in) the prejudices of the era, which juxtaposed grego against negro. In this regard, Machado’s humorous self-identifying comment Look how Greek I am, is ultimately ironic, not because he may finally be giving in to the Hellenic fad, but because in Brazilian society he could not have carried himself simultaneously as a Hellene and a mulatto, but judging from his writings, the simultaneous act seems to be precisely what he performs — to be both and neither, and in turns.

Finally, his irony itself is explained in one of Machado’s short stories, the 1882 “Teoria dos Medalhões” (Theory of Great Men), a short story in dialogue form about a father’s advice to his son on the eve of his 22nd birthday. The advice is on how to reach a respectful position in society with the help of the right kind of rhetoric, which of course must include the accoutrements of Greco-Roman references, the very decoration Machado satirizes:

You can employ a few significant figures, the hydra of Lerna, for example, the head of Medusa, the cask of the Danaids, Icarus’ wings, and others that romantic, classical, and realistic authors employ without hesitation, when you need them. Latin sentences, historical sayings, famous verses, legal aphorisms, maxims, it is wise to bring them with you to the dessert speeches of congratulation or appreciation. Caveat consules is an excellent closing political saying; the same is true for Si vis pacem, para bellum. Some like to update the flavor of a quotation by interpolating it in a new phrase, original and beautiful, but I do not advise this artifice: it would take away the vetustas. Better than all this, however, which is no more than mere adornment, are the clichés, conventional phrases, formulas consecrated by years, embedded in individual and public memory. These formulas have the advantage of not forcing others to a futile effort. . . . Only you must not employ irony, that movement on the corner of the mouth, full of mysteries, invented by some decadent Greek, contracted by Lucian, transmitted to Swift and Voltaire, the very feature of skeptics and the experienced. No. Use rather the chalaça [funny jokes, poking fun at someone] our good old chalaça, friendly, plump, round, frank without dissimulation or veil, which gets on people’s faces, pops like a spanking, makes the blood skip in the veins, and laugh till breaking the suspenders.
Machado’s definition of irony as sophisticated humor contrasted with chalaça (that causes a belly laughter) is an apt demonstration (intended or not) of the very Greek formulation on the one hand... on the other hand, which expresses contrast, ambivalence, equivalence, and difference. The interchange between father and son is so humorous that the reader cannot help responding with both that movement on the corner of the mouth, and spontaneous laughter.

CONCLUSION

Luís Gama proclaims the power and beauty of the black subject over all things classic, and his rejection of the mean lyre, and of the savage heroes of old in favor of the marimba and of himself as a kinky-hair Orpheus affect a pattern, whose dominant strand is not just the obvious resistance and response to racism, but is also a presentation of Greeks and Blacks as entities struggling against cultural domestication. This struggle is illustrated on the one hand by the poet’s insistence on the realities of colonialism, slavery, and racial prejudice over the fantasies of the Portuguese aristocracy, and on the other hand by the strangeness of what passes for high culture, specifically the wildness of Greek myth (e.g. Zeus nurtured by a goat). Gama has refashioned himself and the Greek bard of old into a Kinky-hair Orpheus to sing his black body, not to legitimize it with the mantle of antiquity. Differently, Machado de Assis presents his readers with the very character of ambivalence, equivocality, and equivalence, not opposition, between blacks and whites, mulattoes and Greeks, Pythia and caboclas, gregos and negros. Finally, the reception of the classical aesthetics in the works of these two authors involves the classics more deeply with questions of literary authenticity and cultural translations, both in antiquity and presently, and the specific ways in which these questions interact with ethnic and racial identities from a diasporic and tropical point of view.

NOTES

1 This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the panel for the American Classical League during the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in Boston. I am thankful for the comments and questions from my co-panelists, and for their own intellectually stimulating research in Reception Studies. I am especially grateful to Ronnie Ancona and Jared Simard for the opportunity to have been part of that panel and for their helpful insights.

2 The so-called post-colonial period ended in 1815, seven years before the independence of Brazil from Portugal in 1822. The official dates for the various historical periods are as following: Colonial Period (1530–1815), United Kingdom (1815–1822), Empire (1822–1889), and First Republic (1889–1930). However, the colonial realities remained in effect well beyond 1822, particularly slavery, abolished in 1888.

3 The most recent translation is The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis, translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson (2018). I am not aware of any translations of Gama into English.

4 See, for example, Gonçalves Dias (1823–1864), who eulogized the indigenous as the noble part of Brazilian identity (e.g. Últimos Cantos, “Canção do Exílio,” Os Timbiras). For a Romantic treatment of slavery and abolitionist causes, see Castro Alves’s famous poem “Navio Negreiro” (Slave Ship). As far as the African part of Brazilian culture, see especially Cascudo’s Made in Africa (1965, 2001). In this work, however, Cascudo tends to trace the origin of many African customs to Europe via Portuguese colonization (passim).

5 Cascudo (1951) 5. For an analysis of this work with a focus on Classical Reception, see Kouklanakis (2016).

6 In Cascudo’s Literatura Oral (1965, 2011), the author’s appraisal of the African contribution to Brazilian identity accorded one part to Africans, compared to three for Amerindians, and five for whites (passim).


9 This embrace of superficiality is especially true of the French-inspired Parnassian school. Notable among the Parnassian writers are Euclides da Cunha, who wrote the famous Os Sertões, in 1902, later translated into English by Samuel Putnam in 1944, as Rebellion in the Backlands (Univ. of Chicago), and Monteiro Lobato, creator of the legendary children’s book series (and later TV series), O Sítio do Picapau Amarelo (The Yellow Woodpecker Farmhouse, 1920–1947). These were episodic stories about adventures on a plantation, replete with racial stereotypes.
For an article on the posthumous conferral of a law degree to Luís Gama see http://sao-paulo.estadao.com.br/blogs/edison-veiga/luiz-gama-1830-1882-enfim-advogado/

All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

A type of African music.

Ginga is the diminutive form of bode, but in the feminine plural, it is a type of song.

Like saying goaerty, as in foolery.

In the Trecanni Encyclopedia the entry for the word is as follows: mongibèllo s. m. [comp. tautologico di monte e dell’arabo giabal «monte» (v. gebel)], non com. – Propriam., nome proprio, altra denominazione dell’Etna, vulcano della Sicilia, esteso talora, nell’uso letter., al sign. generico e antonomastico di vulcano, o a indicare, in similitudini e come termine di paragone, violenta fiammata, accensione improvvisa, anche di passioni e sentimenti, o persona impulsiva . . . . (mongibèllo s. m. [Comp. tautological of monte and the Arab giabal «monte» (see gebel)], not common – Properly a proper name, other denomination of Etna, the volcano of Sicily, extended sometimes from its literal use to the generic meaning, by metonymy, of the volcano, or to indicate by similarity, and as term of comparison, a violent blaze, sudden ignition, also of passions and feelings, or an impulsive person . . . .)

Guinea, country in West Africa.

African musical instrument.

Afro-Brazilian religious rites.

Luís de Camões is the epic poeta laureatus of the Portuguese age of navigation in the 16th century, author of Os Lusiadas (1572).

The film was based on Orfeu da Conceição, the 1956 play by Vinícius de Moraes, an adaptation of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice set in the favela in Rio de Janeiro.

Just as it is the case with Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay “Orphée Noir,” in the preface to Léopold Senghor’s Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache (1948).

African musical instrument.

African musical instrument.

Ginga is associated with the ancestor of the famous King Zumbi, the leader of the 17th century slave fugitive community (a quilombo), which lasted for nearly a century. Ginga sometimes stands for Zumbi himself.


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