

Machado de Assis on Popular Music: A Case for Cultural Studies in Nineteenth-Century Latin America

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Abstract. Dialoguing with a recent essay by composer and critic José Miguel Wisnik, this article discusses Machado de Assis' "Um Homem Célebre" and "O Machete" against the background of the music of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, particularly the evolution of polka into the first Brazilian urban genre, the *maxixe*. The premise is that Machado's fiction can help us rethink a number of questions pertaining to the then emerging realm of mass culture, the professionalization of musicians and writers, and the complex interaction between Brazilian and European cultures in the nineteenth century.

In nineteenth-century Latin American urban fiction, music often appears as a key element for plot and characterization. In Machado de Assis' novels and short stories, music takes on the role of a symbolic and class mediator, while his *crônicas*, written for Rio's foremost papers of the time, offer an overview of several decades of musical activity in Rio de Janeiro. The study of Machado's representation of music will lead us to a number of questions pertaining to the relationship between popular and erudite practices, the professionalization of writers and musicians, and broader issues related to cultural production in peripheral, or postcolonial societies. In Machado's work the opera, the sonata, the waltz, the polka and the never-explicitly mentioned *maxixe* are all musical genres that are represented in a tension between creators and mere executors: they become symbolic ciphers of a number of conflicts in Brazilian culture. In "Marcha Fúnebre," the main character is torn between his desire to die to the sound of a waltz and his terror that a polka would be

playing at the moment of his death. Machado's works register a wide range of figures involved with music: creators still sponsored by the church, composers already inserted in the professionalization of the emerging mass culture but maintaining an anguished relation to it, musicians divided between a professional instrument (say, the fiddle) and an artistic instrument (say, the cello), or yet popular subjects who use their musical virtuosity as a ticket to acceptance in upper-class circles. This essay is a study of how Machado de Assis embedded a reflection on Brazilian culture in the convergences and contrasts between musical instruments, genres, and rhythms.

A light-skinned mulatto, Machado de Assis was born in 1839 and died in 1908 in Rio de Janeiro, and is to this day recognized by critics as the foremost Brazilian writer of all time. He penned nine novels, countless short stories, a number of plays, and seven volumes worth of newspapers *crônicas*, in addition to a few collections of poetry, usually taken to be the weaker part of his production. His first four novels are considered relatively standard Romantic texts, but the work of his mature phase is credited to have expanded the horizons of the nineteenth-century novel to a degree unprecedented in Latin America and perhaps even in Europe: In *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, Machado mocks realist literature's pretension to impartiality by creating a dead narrator recapping his life from the grave, and therefore in a position to be fully objective (there would presumably be no reason left to tell lies after death). In *Esau and Jacob*, a novel about twin brothers symmetrically opposed in everything, Machado pokes fun at the recent Brazilian Republic, implying that in fact it was not that different from the Monarchy. In *Dom Casmurro*, Machado turned the adultery novel upside down by eliminating the third person narrator and placing the story in the mouth of the jealous husband, whose suspicions are never confirmed or denied by the text. Machado's trademarks are Swiftian irony and bitter skepticism, and he has been lauded by critics from Susan Sontag to Harold Bloom as a precursor of postmodern fiction and a master of ambiguity or undecidability.¹

The dominant trend in Machado criticism has been the sociological or Marxist-inflected approaches that grew primarily out of the University of São Paulo, and it is in dialogue with that school that I will set my arguments. During Machado's lifetime, Brazil witnessed the first cycle of a process of an uneven modernization that did not substitute for or eliminate the social structures inherited from the colonial experience, but rather superimposed itself on them. The militarism that followed the Paraguayan War (1864-

1870) was the major force behind the proclamation of the Republic in 1889, but it did not consolidate, strictly speaking, a bourgeois and republican civil society. Positivism, the main philosophical current informing the Brazilian military at the time, imposed a scientific and lay ideology, but it never really eliminated pre-modern practices associated with a system of clientelism and favor. The successive restrictions on the slave trade in the latter half of the century—culminating in the abolition of 1888—did not significantly alter the subaltern social position of Afro-Brazilians. The military-republican state apparatus was, then, the instrument of a precarious, subordinate, and incomplete entrance into modernization. That is to say, the consolidation of a modern society in Brazil toward the late nineteenth century combined innovation and conservatism, republican ideals and colonial heritage.

The dominant reading of Machado has focused on his portrait of the Brazilian elite's adaptation of the ideological constructs of metropolitan countries.² It was in dialogue with Machado's work that the Marxist critic Roberto Schwarz coined his illustrious phrase "misplaced ideas." The term refers to the double disjointedness of liberal European ideas when appropriated by an elite that was still, for all intents and purposes, slave-holding and pre-modern. According to Schwarz, that disjointedness was not only double but mutually necessary. In other words, the "falsity" of those ideas was organically necessary. In Schwarz's words: "liberal ideas could not be put in practice, yet they could not disappear" (26).³ For Schwarz, Machado was the great analyst of this predicament of Brazilian, and by extension, all postcolonial elites.

Much less explored are Machado's incursions into the realm of the popular. The standard line in criticism regarding the subject is that as a mulatto from an underprivileged background, Machado developed his Englishman-like irony and his refined sensibility as a way of negating and overcoming his social origins. While it is true that Machado was no champion of progressive causes, and while the privileged universe of his fiction is the monarchic and early Republican elites, it is also true that this universe often receives the impact of cultural practices whose origins are in other social classes. It is my contention here that music and dance are one of the privileged entryways to the status of popular culture in nineteenth-century Latin American literature. I will analyze the two major Machado short stories where he addresses popular musical genres and dances.

The first story, "Um Homem Célebre" ("An Illustrious Man"), was published on 29 June 1888 in *Gazeta de Notícias*, and reprinted in 1896 in *Várias*

Histórias. The events narrated in it take place in the 1870s and 80s, precisely the period of the emergence and consolidation of what was then being called “polka brasileira”—or yet “polca-cateretê” or “polca-lundu”—different names for roughly the same phenomenon. The polka was introduced in Brazil in 1845 in São Pedro theater, in Rio, right after the ending of the fifteen-year-long interruption of the opera spectacles in the city—there was an interval without opera in Rio between 1830 and 1845, a period in which the waltz, with its time signature of $3/4$, dominated elite dancing in Brazil. A tremendous wave of polka dancing follows, and in 1846 a Polka Society is constituted in Rio. Soon it would replace the waltz in the preferences of the Imperial elite in Rio. A fundamental rhythmic transformation takes place, as the polka’s $2/4$ in allegretto elicited a hopping or jumping movement that contrasts with the waltz’s more graceful gliding. According to music historian José Ramos Tinhorão, the polka was better equipped to express the euphoria proper to that moment of political stability and economic prosperity for the wealthier classes in the capital of colonial Brazil. Be that as it may, it is an undisputed fact that the polka was the crucial genre in offering a frame for the greater portion of the urban music that would develop later, namely, the *maxixe*. That transformation takes place as Brazilian blacks began dancing and playing the polka, in addition to revolutionizing the genre by making it receive the impact of Afro-Atlantic polyrhythms.

The *maxixe* has its roots in the polka, yet some fundamental differences have arisen between the two: 1) *maxixe* no longer relies on a regular $2/4$, cometric (that is, regular and symmetric) time signature, but begins to experiment with a number of compound times; 2) it is no longer a ballroom dance, but rather a street practice, directly and openly evoking the presence and performance of the Afro-Brazilian body in the city. No wonder then that the *name itself* was a taboo in Brazil throughout the late 1870s and 1880s—a ban that only ended as *maxixe* was incorporated into the *teatro de revistas* as a spectacle for white audiences. The ban on the term led the foremost Brazilian pianist in the late nineteenth century, Ernesto Nazareth, to come up with a sanitized name, *tango brasileiro*, for compositions of his that were in fact *maxixes*. The genre was considered licentious, lascivious, indecent: undoubtedly, the ghost evoked by this genre for the elite of the time was the implicit reference to Afro-Brazilians occupying a place in the polis as active subjects of their own performances.

In “Um Homem Célebre” (“An Illustrious Man”), Machado ciphers in the figure of the main character Pestana the image of a maladjusted composer

who is, however, unique and original in his dislocation. John Gledson has noted that the contrast between instruments such as the cello and the *machete* (later called *cavaquinho*, the four-string guitar that is a fundamental component of samba and *choro* circles) figured the writer's own search for combining seriousness with playfulness, the "Brazilian local" with "European tradition" (Gledson 52). Pestana had been raised in the ideals of Beethoven sonatas, and his piano was blessed by the portraits of "Cimarosa, Mozart, Beethoven, Gluck, Bach, Schumann" hanging over it. Pestana suffered while trying to compose classical music: he realized that every idea that he had was the "just the echo of a piece authored by another, that his memory repeated and he assumed he had invented" (499). Pestana's originality, however, was that he *was* a successful composer in a genre that he despised, the popular polka. Whenever he tried to compose classical pieces—especially the sonatas that were the standard of erudite art for him—he would insistently repeat something already done. Whenever he was led by commercial constraints to compose the polkas he despised, he would not only produce successful compositions but would produce lively, seductive, irresistible polkas. Pestana reacted "vexed and embarrassed" at the success of his own polkas, and more than once "the portraits on the wall made him bleed with remorse" (500). The definitive epiphany comes after his marriage, when his wife, Maria, plays on the piano a nocturne—"Ave Maria"—that he believed to be of his authorship. As she plays he realizes that the piece has not passed the test of plagiarism. After his wife's death he decides to compose a requiem in her honor. He studies Mozart's requiem for a whole year, but the composition fails to coalesce; pressed by economic needs, he agrees to another contract for writing a polka that celebrated the ascension of the liberals in 1878, "Hurrahs for Direct Election!" The story ends with Pestana on his deathbed—he lives until 1886—sardonically leaving two polkas, one for the return of the conservatives and another, "just in case," for when the liberals are back in power. As always in Machado, the political choice turns out to be an election between two sides of the same coin. And here we could pursue the question of the presumed "skepticism" of Machado, or even of his political conservatism.⁴ But instead let us take our cue from the portrayal of music in the story.

In Machado's story, the titles of Pestana's successful polkas are quite telling. "Não bula comigo Nhonhô" and "Candongas não fazem festa" are titles that say a lot in themselves. "Nhonhô" is how slaves called their owners, and "bulir" (*playing, teasing*) alludes to the constant sexual advances women slaves

had to experience. “Candonga” is also a word primarily used by popular classes. The story makes references to Pestana’s successful polkas, but only familiarity with the historical context and with the lexicon used in those titles gives the reader a clue as to what is really being alluded to here. The names of those compositions bring to the fore the most important development of Brazilian popular music between the 1870s and the 1890s, namely, the process by which the polka is thoroughly transformed by the encounter with Afro-Brazilian polyrhythm—which eventually, due to the influence they impose upon the dancing of the polka, gives birth to the first distinctively Brazilian urban genre, the *maxixe*.

In the best essay yet written on this story, José Miguel Wisnik argues that Pestana dramatizes not a binary opposition between the popular polkas and the erudite sonatas but something more complex altogether, a structure with four variables: the polka is the visible, acceptable side of the popular. The realization of it does not realize the desire for art; the sonata, the erudite ideal whose non-realization frustrates, i.e., does not realize the model that emanates from the pictures; the requiem for his deceased wife is a form as erudite and classical as the sonata, with the difference that the failure there is the decisive moment in which he abandons his classical aspirations; the non-realization of the requiem realizes something, therefore, insofar as it defines his position once and for all; the fourth item is the unnamed, censored, and despised Afro-Brazilian dance whose realization brings to the fore an unknown potential of the polka. It is the forbidden and censored genre, the *maxixe*, that is the silent undercurrent of this incipiently professionalized musician created by Machado in the story. As Wisnik points out, the *polca maxixada* goes beyond the closed spaces and class contexts implicated in ballroom piano culture: “it is connected with the *machete* in the streets [...]. It is not only a mass commodity, but also an imponderable cipher of the Brazilian world” (78).

The musicians portrayed by Machado in his fiction systematically appear as precarious subjects. This precariousness usually takes two different forms: in the case of the erudite musician, he is victimized by the lack of cultural capital, or, in the case of the popular musician, he is marginalized from circles of symbolic recognition. Machado’s originality was to explore the disjointedness between erudite and popular musicians as well as the disjointedness of each group with itself. In the case of semi-professional musicians such as Pestana, monetary compensation for what they perceived to be “pure art” brings with it the anguish associated with the commodification of art—a

predicament to which Pestana responds in pendular fashion, now lamenting the loss of social relevance of the art he cherishes, now giving in to the temptation of producing commodities in the form of song.

Another story by Machado gives an ironic twist to these questions. “O Machete” —a story that narrates the dissolution of a family—was, ironically, published in the *Jornal das Famílias* in 1878. Also, Machado never selected it for any of his volumes of short stories. Would it be too speculative to suppose that it was due to its multicultural, daring, and sexually charged content? *Machete*, as pointed out above, is the designation of the instrument later known as the *cavaquinho*, the small four-string guitar that would become a key part of the Brazilian musical language *par excellence*, the *choro*. Registered uses of the word in Portuguese as the designation of a musical instrument date back at least to 1716. The etymology of the term harks back to the Spanish *machete*, meaning a sword or a short knife, according to uses registered in sixteenth century. All of these meanings resonate, as we will see, in Machado’s story. The instrument clearly evokes a new musical culture, one that is bohemian, street-based, and markedly popular. While in the latter half of the nineteenth century the music preferred by the elites in Brazil was either opera or ballroom dances such as the waltz, polka, mazurka, the schottische, or the quadrille, an instrument like the *machete* indicates a remarkable displacement and gives witness to the emergence and consolidation of other cultural practices. The instrument’s natural habitat was no longer the reception and execution of European genres in the ballroom but rather the *choro* circles that in the 1870s were already in transit between kitchens/backyards and the streets of Rio, i.e., the city’s public spaces.

The story is Machado’s most remarkable register of the birth of an urban popular culture in Rio. Inácio Ramos learns his musical trade from his father, a church musician. After acquiring the skills to read music, he becomes a first-rate instrumentalist as a fiddle player. We will later see that Inácio repeats a predicament quite common among Machado’s musician characters: they are impeccable players, but they cannot create. Already a mature fiddle player, Inácio begins to search for an instrument that would correspond to the “sensations of his soul” (857). He is captivated by the cello of a German musician during one of his excursions to Rio. He becomes a cello player, and begins to live the split existence between the “mere means to earn a living,” i.e., the fiddle played for money, and “his art,” the cello, for which he “reserved the best of his intimate aspirations.” The opposition between art and commerce reap-

pears here, but instead of provoking a split within the character, as is the case with Pestana, in "An Illustrious Man," Inácio will have to live that opposition inside a love triangle. As we shall see, there is a correlation between the temptations of adultery and the temptations of popular culture, understood as a practice in which the body takes center stage, as opposed to the "sensations of the soul" associated with erudite culture.

Inácio is a sort of erudite musician condemned to tropical sadness—to use Lévi-Strauss's felicitous phrase. As the agent of "misplaced ideas"—in this case misplaced musical notes—he is the happy, naive replica of the anguished Pestana. Both of them are attached to a form of art that is divorced from experience (an entire Benjaminian argument). The narrator tells us that Inácio would "play the fiddle for the others, the cello for himself, at the most for his old mother" (857). The story suggests that his mother is the only one who is able to penetrate the realm of her son's "pure art," which "made the old woman cry with joy and melancholy, as his music inspired in her both of those feelings." His mother's death leads him to compose an elegy on the cello, which, the narrator tells us, "might not be perfect as art, but certainly was as personal inspiration," which subtly suggests the character's mediocrity as a composer. Inácio breaks his silence eight years after getting married, in front of his wife Carlotinha (who appears in the story in a clearly substitute role vis-à-vis the mother: "he did not see the woman, nor the place, not even the instrument: he saw the image of the mother and imbibed himself in a world of celestial harmonies" (858). As always in Machado, the word "celestial" appears in an ironic register, pointing to something that is being lightly mocked. It is no different here, where the word indicates a kind of music that is *divorced from the body*. When his wife Carlotinha bursts into a celebration of the piece with shouts of "Bravo, beautiful," Inácio perceives her reaction as an offense, as if she has misunderstood the melancholia of the piece.

When Carlotinha gets pregnant, Inácio promises to compose a second piece when the child is born, which provokes her ominous reaction: "the third one will be when I die, right?" (859). Upon the birth of their first child, a boy, Inácio composes and plays the piece to a group of friends in their house. A couple of passersby, law students on vacation, hear the music and yell "bravo, divine artist." Of the two students, one, Amaral, is described as "a soul full of German music and Romantic poetry," the other, Barbosa, in contrast, is described as a "mediocre spirit, alien to those things, as much as to law, which he was at pains to force into his head." The Romantic Amaral

and his mediocre friend Barbosa are invited in and become regulars in the house. In a subsequent visit, Inácio discovers that Barbosa is also a musician. Their dialogue is an interesting testimony to the rift between erudite and popular cultures in nineteenth century Rio:

- So you too are a musician.
- Yes, but a little less sublime than you are, sir, Barbosa responded with a smile.
- What is your instrument?
- Let us see if you can guess.
- Maybe the piano...
- No.
- The flute?
- Of course not!
- Is it a string instrument?
- Yes, it is.
- Wow, I can't believe you're a fiddle player, asks Inácio as if waiting for a confirmation.
- No, it's not the fiddle. It is the *machete*. (860-1)

Here Machado directs the reader's attention to one of the typical inadequacies of his characters vis-à-vis real experience. Inácio is a musician and lives in Rio in the late 1870s, but he has never heard of any string instruments other than those common in European ballroom music. He has, then, no register for the lively process of constitution of a Brazilian musical language in the *choro* circles that congregated in the kitchens, backyards, bars, and streets of Rio. Machado's choice of instruments here could not be more telling: the cello represented, in the late nineteenth century, an erudite musical culture already in decadence, not in tune even with the preferences of the bourgeois public. When Inácio invites Barbosa to a demonstration, he does so almost as an ethnographer looking at an exotic curiosity that would never deserve to be called art. Until the performance starts:

Barbosa sat at the center of the room, tuned the *machete* and put his virtuosity to work [...]. What he played was not Weber or Mozart; it was a song of his time, of the streets, a work of occasion. Barbosa played it, let us say, not with soul, but with nerve. All of him followed the gradation and variation of notes; he inclined over the instrument, stretched his body, leaned his head to one side and to the

other, raised one leg, smiled, winked, or closed his eyes at the places that looked pathetic to him. Hearing him play was not much. Seeing him was everything. Someone who only heard him would not understand him. (861)

As noted by Wisnik, “the contrast is complete between the virtuoso show of exteriority by the smart guitar player and the sober and concentrated aspect of the cello player, alien to all exhibitionism and all turned toward the essentiality of music, in order for his craft to reach transcendence in art” (24).

For Machado, the problem is that Inácio’s “pure art,” unlike that of the Barbosa’s *machete*, is one that is divorced from experience. As time goes on, their jam sessions begin to be dominated by the popular instrument. Amaral, Barbosa’s friend schooled in German Romanticism, cannot understand how a “mere pastime” could compete with “high art.” Amaral, whose background is a European idealist tradition characterized by a clear-cut separation between those two concepts, struggles to come to terms with the emergence of popular artistic forms that increasingly challenge that hierarchy. As the jam sessions progress, another important difference between the two musicians becomes visible: while Inácio has authored *two* compositions in his entire life and basically plays pieces by the “old masters,” Barbosa, the popular artist, plays songs that are either of his own authoring, apocryphal, or collective. Again, Machado seems to imply something about the impossibility of true authorship for peripheral, postcolonial composers who maintain a relationship of idealization with the classical music that comes to them from elsewhere. They are tied to the anxiety of influence. In contrast, the story depicts the popular musician as the bearer of a promise. The story is, in fact, about the beauty of that promise—the promise of an artist free from the anguish of authorship and originality, a musician who is free to improvise and to bring the body into the music.

After the return of the two law students—Amaral and Barbosa the musician—to São Paulo (where they are from), the story concludes with them coming back to Rio for another visit that was supposed to last for a few days. It does last only a week for Amaral, but Barbosa lingers on at the request of both Inácio the cellist and his wife Carlotinha, who grows more and more enthusiastic about Barbosa’s performances. When Amaral returns months later for another visit, he no longer finds Barbosa or Carlotinha in the house, only Inácio, the husband, with the cello between his legs and a one-year-old boy sitting by the instrument, seemingly “enthralled by the music.” Amaral

hears the story from Inácio himself: “she ran away, away with the *machete*. She didn’t want the cello, which is too somber. She is right. The guitar is better.” As José Miguel Wisnik has seen, the story ends by replicating the formula of melodrama: “the husband’s soul wept, but his eyes were dry. An hour later, he went mad” (865).

First, let us note the symbolic gestures with which the story ends: the narrator stresses the fact that Amaral finds the abandoned husband Inácio holding the cello between his legs, a position that contrasts with the gestures elicited by Barbosa’s *machete*, all of which are directed towards the outside. If we recall that the first registered meaning of *machete* in Spanish (1550) is “stick, sword, or short knife,” then the phallic nature of the performance is inscribed in the word itself. Considering that the root of “macho” also resonates in the word “machete,” it becomes clear that the story is interweaving the question of erudite vs. popular cultures with the question of masculinity. While it is true, as critic Wisnik pointed out, that the story ends with the formula of melodrama, it is also true in melodrama that the experience of going mad usually happens *to the woman*. It is rather rare to find in traditional melodrama the formula of maddening applied to the male hero. The recourse to melodrama in Machado’s story is, then, problematized by a reversal of the gendered roles and attributes proper to the genre. This displacement has important consequences.

The etymology of melodrama is germane to the discussion: *melos drama*, in Greek, is musical theater. Melodrama is, then, in its strictest etymological sense, the theatrical mimesis of life done through and in music. It is, therefore, a genre that maintains a memory of the origins of tragedy in music—according to the Nietzschean hypothesis. Naturally, the melodramatic hero has little to do with the tragic hero: in tragedy the hero is isolated from society, so as to understand better the moral weakness of him/herself and of the society that he/she inhabits (culminating in the impossibility of preventing the disaster that is beyond the character’s control). In melodrama, on the other hand, the hero is a normative character that allegorizes incorporation into the social order (Brooks 227). In that world, the dictates of the heart are always in tune with those of society. From that it does not follow for me, as it does for most Machado criticism, that melodrama is a necessarily conservative and conformist genre. I prefer to side with cultural studies scholars on this one: the fact that the central theme of a genre stages an incorporation into the social order does not imply for me, as it does for Wisnik, that sub-

versive and unsettling effects are not occurring parallel to it. This is, then, my difference with Wisnik's monumental study. I do not subscribe to the notion that Machado's text "supposes and promotes the positive identification with the world represented by the cello, in a clear opposition to the world represented by the cavaquinho" (25). As much as one can detect in Machado a certain nostalgia for the time in which erudite art—represented metonymically here by the cello—had not yet lost its cultural capital, that "identification" is less clear and automatic than Wisnik assumes it to be. The story is, after all, a great parable about the inadequacy of that high art; the narrator visibly takes ironic distance from Inácio Ramos's character, a figure dislocated from its time not for being subversive or untimely, but simply for being anachronistic. That ironic distance is not taken into account if one assumes that Machado's story promotes "identification" with high art.

The character who represents the more prestigious cultural form falls victim to the lack of connection between that cultural form and real experience in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro life. Barbosa, described as "mediocre" by a narrator who seems, at times, to share the assumption about the superiority of erudite music, triumphs primarily because he brings a musical knowledge that is connected with experience. The cello player brings a cultural capital that is residual, originary of an art that was formerly hegemonic and in which the relationship with tradition is primarily one of reverence; the machete player's art, on the other hand, is emerging and fundamentally improvisational. The relation between the two spheres is, then, not only dynamic but also dialectic. It was the first chords of the *maxixe*, the first Brazilian street genre, which marked once and for all the divorce between certain forms of European erudition and real social experience in Brazil.

Machado's gaze upon the Brazilian musical field is, then, not binary. As in an Afro-Atlantic rhythmic pattern, couplings are produced and undone so as to generate not only pairs, but also triangles. Inácio is "authentically erudite" only insofar as erudition can be authentic in peripheral lands, i.e., he is a perfect executor, not a creator. He is, so to speak, inauthentically authentic—he lives in full inauthenticity, but he does not know it. Pestana, the character in the first story, created in fact ten years later, is the emblem of the moment in which that inauthenticity becomes aware of itself. He is, in that sense, the opposite of Inácio: he is inauthentically authentic, that is to say, in his very anguish for not being what he wants to be, he offers an insight into the real conditions of Brazilian musicians that is not available to the more conformist character of Inácio.

Yet insofar as we limit ourselves to these two characters, we are still in the vicious circle of postcolonial elite culture. It is only with the entrance of a third, of Barbosa, the musician of the popular classes, that the “ping pong between ambition and vocation” is resolved. Barbosa can break with the vicious circle precisely because he starts from a position of total inauthenticity—he is completely deprived of any cultural capital and social recognition: suffice it to recall the long questioning to which he is submitted by Inácio, when he tried to ascertain what instrument Barbosa played. Barbosa’s ascension, unlike that of Pestana in the first story, does not entail any concession, any embrace of inauthenticity as an inescapable condition. We are now facing another phenomenon altogether, a complete redefinition of the very notion of authenticity. Barbosa’s trajectory alludes precisely to the consolidation of Afro-Brazilian musical practices. The incorporation of *maxixe* into theater (just fifteen to twenty years after its emergence as a cursed and demonized dance), and the later emergence and nationalization of samba are two key moments in that process.

Machado’s work was frequently accused of ignoring the popular classes and of presenting an “elitist” picture of Brazil in the late monarchy and early republic, but he was the first to register the dawn of a modern urban musical culture in Brazil. This trajectory shows that the dilemmas of authenticity in which so many other characters were immersed had nothing universal about them; they were dilemmas related to the constitution of a Europeanized elite culture in a pre-modern, slave society. Machado’s fiction shows that the rupture of the vicious circles of postcolonial elite culture can only be effected by the arrival of an outside subject, one not previously represented in the circle. It would be an exaggeration to see any triumphant celebration of popular culture in Machado, yet he was the first to testify to the all-encompassing character of popular music as a sphere that expresses, like no other, Brazilian social life as a whole.

Some conclusions can be drawn here for contemporary debates in cultural studies and literary theory. The sociological and Marxist-inspired branches of criticism—represented in Brazil primarily by the São Paulo school of Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz—were successful in mapping the inconsistencies and paradoxes governing the translation of metropolitan concepts by elite literature—Schwarz’s notion of “misplaced ideas” representing the culmination of that line of analysis—but they were far less successful in understanding popular practices. Still trapped in the modernist valorization of lit-

erature as a privileged purveyor of national dilemmas, those sociological schools were not really equipped to see the popular classes as subjects of cultural processes. Signatory of highly sophisticated theoretical models, the Marxist-inspired thought of São Paulo was trapped in what one might call the predicament of postcolonial elites when it comes to dealing with the class struggle in literature. In this sense, the intervention of cultural studies, showing the inscription and the agency of popular subjects, was a healthy corrective. However, much cultural studies produced in Latin America renounced literature altogether, opting for a relatively simple replacement of literature with other cultural products where presumably popular agency was more fully present—this clear-cut separation between literature and the popular can only be overcome by an approach that does not renounce literature as a site for popular agency. Such agency is never unproblematic, certainly, and in writers such as Machado it will only manifest itself in precarious, incomplete, fragmented form. But they are an invaluable testimony to the traces left by popular subjects in a cultural form, literature, which may turn out to be a much more contested and uncertain terrain than we once thought.

Notes

¹ For a classic and still useful biography of Machado, see Pereira. The landmark account of Machado's life—his best and most trustworthy biography—continues to be Magalhães Júnior.

² An important moment of that school's work was Faoro's analysis of how Machado's fiction was the first to register a social structure in which "the class of speculators had achieved the dominant position" (Faoro 389).

³ Another important landmark of the sociologically inflected paulista reading is Moog. I have critiqued the simplistic representation of Schwarz's theory in Anglo-American circles as a mere "discrepancy between representation and reality." See Avelar, "Machado" 258-59.

⁴ I proposed a reading of this story from an altogether different angle than what I will pursue here in Avelar, *Untimely* 135-42.

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