

## Machado de Assis and Nationalism: The *Americanas* Case

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Translated by Andrew Jager

**Abstract.** There are at least three angles from which to view nationalism in the work of Machado de Assis. In this essay, those angles are critically studied and revised in order to show that there is a new way of reading the issue of nationalism in Machado de Assis' work. It is argued that when he chose to publish *Americanas*, in 1875, and thereby retake a cultural tradition in which the first steps of a definite nationalism in Brazilian literature are rooted, Machado was answering a still present tendency in the tastes of the day.

There are at least three angles from which to view nationalism in the work of Machado de Assis. The first is that of Machado as a literary critic dealing with topics that relate to nationalism. The second is that of literary criticism, speaking of the presence or absence of nationalism in Machado de Assis' work. The third is the presence of the national question in Machado's own work. However, it is important to point out that the possible intersections between Machado and nationalism have received little attention from critics, theoreticians, or historians of Brazilian literature.

Although it is basically correct to remove them from romantic affiliations when speaking of the novels of Machado's maturity—as Roberto Schwarz does<sup>1</sup>—in general, nationalism in Machado's work as a whole is often spoke of only to discard it, or to specify that Machado was opposed to romantic nationalism. As proof, Machado's famous text of 1873, "Notícia da atual literatura brasileira—Instinto de nacionalidade" ("News of Contemporary Brazilian Literature—Instinct of Nationality") is often cited, although a more

detailed analysis of this text is still lacking. In fact, in this text Machado refers directly to a trend of Brazilian romantic literary nationalism, specifically rejecting the belief in “local color”—an expression of Madame de Staël, who came to Brazilian literature principally via Ferdinand Denis and Almeida Garret.

In this text, Machado considers to be erroneous the opinion that only “recognizes the national spirit in works that deal with a local subject, a doctrine which, to be exact, would greatly limit the wealth of our literature” (“Notícia” 803). He adds:

There is no doubt that literature, above all nascent literature, should mainly be nourished by those subjects that its region offers; but let us not establish doctrines so absolute as to impoverish it. What should be demanded of the writer before anything else is that he has a certain intimate feeling, which makes him a man of his time and country, even when he deals with subjects that are remote in time and space. (804)

Throughout this work, I strive to summarily demonstrate that Machado indeed refers to the romantic characteristic of local color, but softens the preceptive tone of the romantics, entering into dialogue with them and returning to the question of the national. My main focus is the reprise of Indianism—that emblematic nationalist-romantic movement—in Machadian poetry. To achieve this, I choose as an object *Americanas* (1875), a work that has received little or no attention from contemporary literary criticism, despite its having been Sílvio Romero’s focus in an entire chapter of his often mentioned polemical book *Machado de Assis* (1897).

As far as my argument is concerned, Romero’s approach gives evidence that the criticism of the late nineteenth century judged Machado according to “nationalist criteria” (Romero), although questions about this classification had already arisen. I also attempt to show that this “nationalist criteria” need not focus exclusively on local color and that Romero himself ends up incorporating the Machadian perspective in locating an *instinct of nationality* outside of this defining characteristic.

#### **Sílvio Romero, José Veríssimo, and nationalism**

Sílvio Romero (1851-1914) and José Veríssimo (1857-1916) were probably the most famous Brazilian critics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although it is true that the two were adversaries, occupying antag-

onistic positions throughout the courses of their respective careers, I call attention to the fact that, in the Brazilian intellectual system of the nineteenth century, they both spoke from the same place.

Public networks of meaning constitute a *place*. In it, symbolically mediated public interpretations are concocted, including those about the meaning of the place and what it means to be there. In a place, elements circulate—in relation to which subjects interpret their experiences as well as texts they read—and somehow these elements impose meaning on the singular experiences of the subjects, just as they direct their actions. In other words, the place is always a source of preconceived notions that in some way contribute to the elaboration of our speech, as it is in this place that we situate speech's system of references—including the determined universe of themes, interests, terms, etc.<sup>2</sup>—which by nature establishes the limits within which our field of enunciation is defined.

Both Romero and Veríssimo lived in Rio de Janeiro—seat of the court in the Empire, and later the capital of the Republic—where they were, among other intellectual activities, journalists and professors at the most prestigious educational institution of the era, Colégio Pedro II, as well as members of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, which was founded and presided over by Machado de Assis. Therefore, it is not surprising that they were both strongly influenced by the currents of thought in vogue at that time—positivism, Darwinism, scientific “isms” of various molds, etc. Also, both worked with the question of nationalism in an ethnic key. What is the significance of this?

For Romero and Veríssimo, the Brazilian “way” and “race” were important factors to be considered in the analysis of works and authors. If this means paying tribute to Hippolyte Taine and his followers, as was the fashion in the era of Realism-Naturalism-Parnassianism, one must not forget that, in the conception of the national as an “inherited identity,” nationality is an inheritance that is conferred upon being born in a certain land, belonging to a certain race, and speaking a certain language (see Jobim, “Nacionalismo”). As a result, beginning with this conception, it is thought that upon birth an individual acquires the spirit or soul of his people, independent of the individual's will. This allows for phrases such as “That's how Brazilians (Argentines, French, Americans, Germans) are,” since one is presuming that there is a “soul” or “spirit” of a people (Brazilian, Argentine, French, American, German) that is inevitably acquired and connected to the national character in an inescapable fashion.

When Silvio Romero, in his aggressive (and already mentioned) work against Machado de Assis, discredits Machadian humor by claiming it was

imported from the English, for example, he presumes an English "soul," a characteristic of which would be English humor.<sup>3</sup> In the same way, he discredits Machadoian "pessimism" because this would not be an essential element of the Brazilian "soul":

We Brazilians are not in any way a pessimistic people. In our national soul, in our ethnic psychology, there are not to be found the tremendous tendencies of morbid disinterest nor the conscious resignation in the face of misery, cruelty, and the incurable nothingness of human existence. (Romero 255)

Both Romero and Veríssimo give great emphasis to the question of "miscegenation," although not in the same terms. Thus, the idea of "a land, a race, and a language," the basis for a nationality of inherited identity, suffered an alteration. The specificity would not be seen by Veríssimo, for example, as derived from the purity of a single race, but rather as the fusion of diverse races:

Our geographic means was not an obstacle to the growth of the seeds planted here by Portuguese heredity. On the Brazilian coast, where they were set free, they spread out and developed, and, despite the heat, the qualification of extreme heat does not fit, as there it is moderated by maritime winds, the humidity of the forests and the numerous rivers, some of which are quite considerable. The people of Southern Europe, such as the Portuguese, became easily accustomed to the climate, and *proliferating with the native Brazilian and the Negro would generate the mestizo, the root of our nationality*, from where the most eminent representatives of our national intelligence in the arts, letters and politics would arise. (49-50, my emphasis)

Thus it is of interest to see how each of these critics would associate the question of the national to the work of Machado de Assis, as we will now see.

#### **Romero and Veríssimo: Nationality in Machado de Assis**

As I have already mentioned, Silvio Romero dedicated an entire book to Machado de Assis. This book seems to have been a response to a critique that Machado had made against him when Romero was beginning his career. Romero considered it to be a "thrashing," and decided to return the insult nearly two decades later. But let us attend to the facts.

In December of 1879, the article "A nova geração" ("The New Generation") appeared in the *Revista Brasileira*, in which Machado, besides rejecting Realism

as a doctrine and crediting Romero as “one of the most studious representatives of the new generation,” “hard-working and able,” discredits him as a writer and poet. According to Machado, his non-literary texts lacked style—“I am not referring to the flowers of ornamentation, the gymnastics of words; I am referring to the style, an indispensable condition of the writer and of science”—an omission that, in the educated prevision of the writer, Romero “would fill with time,” since his texts would be a “praiseworthy proof of study and application” (“Nova geração” 828). Regarding his poetic texts, Machado is more direct:

The *Cantos do Fim do Século* [*Songs from the End of the Century*] can also be a proof of application, but they do not allow one to know a poet; and to say it all with one word, Mr. Romero does not possess poetic form. (828)

Nearly twenty years later, Romero made it clear that he was responding to that critique of 1879: “I did not retort (to the article of 1879) and now I do it” (74). He thought that in the Brazil of that time, a critique at the outset of a would-be writer’s career could be devastating:

It is a matter of the beginning of a career, a way to appear: if the would-be writer, for whatever reason, was well-liked, was appreciated by the newsmen and received a positive review, he can be sure that his career is secure. The public, *more pectoris*, no longer changes its mind; from that point on, a man can speak idiocies to his heart’s content. However, if for any reason, this unfortunate one should have the misfortune of upsetting them, he will be excoriated and from that point on is lost. (56)

Since the other famous enemy that Sílvio Romero had was José Veríssimo himself, who was a great admirer of Machado’s work, it is not surprising that he took advantage of the situation to criticize the novelist and literary critic on various points at the same time. As my focus in this piece is nationalism, I will limit my scope to that aspect. I begin by saying that Romero cited Veríssimo’s own words on Machado to discuss the matter. Let us examine the following quotation (keeping in mind that most of it is composed by Romero quoting Veríssimo in order to contradict his adversary):

*The literary work of Mr. Machado de Assis cannot be judged along the criterion that I, with permission, call nationalistic. This criterion, which is the directive base of the History of Brazilian Literature and of all the critical works of Mr. Sílvio Romero,*

*reduced to its simple terms, consists in investigating the way in which a certain writer has contributed to the shaping of national character. In other words, to what extent his contribution has affected the development of that literature which, due to a portion of differential characters, could be consciously called Brazilian.*

Such criterion, applied to the work of Machado de Assis by the cited critic and others, would certainly relegate it to an inferior position in our literature. It seems to me, however, that though it may be legitimate in a certain fashion, it is too narrow to allow us to form from it an exclusive principle for criticism. *If the base of any literature is nationalist feeling, what makes it great and rich is not only this feeling. We would be narrowing the field of the literary activity of our writers far too much if we refused to recognize the talent with which a work is conceived of and created independently of that inspiration that comes from the national life. This is why the work of Mr. Machado de Assis must be seen in another light, and above all must be viewed without the prejudices of literary theories and schools.*

*If we were, for example, to judge it according to the criteria which I have called nationalistic, it would be null or practically null, which is enough, given its undeniable value, to show how unjust the systematic application of critical formulas can be. I, personally, believe less and less in them. (64-65, my emphasis)*

Leaving no doubt, Romero affirms that, “Mr. José Veríssimo is not correct at all.” According to Romero, Machado could and should be judged according to “nationalistic criteria,” as “he offers himself to the task, but he also goes beyond” (65-66). Of interest in this is the verification that Romero’s argument sought to deny any attempt to associate his supposed “criteria” with the romantic project of dealing with national *subjects*.

Perhaps he wished to clarify that the heart of the project of the construction of nationality, undertaken by the romantic generation in Brazil—with its topographic surveys, detailed descriptions of various aspects of the national life, chronicles or dissertations on ethnography, inventories of flora and fauna, and biographies of illustrious Brazilians, which from then on would be considered the public domain of the newly independent nation—was not exactly his project. It is for this reason that he produced arguments, which refute the necessity of *local color* and of explicit national referents in literary production, which was an idea that held great sway in that generation. All in all, as we will see, Romero ended up using Machado de Assis’ very lines of reasoning in formulating the argument of the famous article he published in 1873, “Notícia da atual literatura brasileira—Instinto de nacionalidade.”

After affirming that “national spirit is not strictly in the choice of the theme, the election of the subject,” Romero explained:

The national character, that almost indefinable *quid*, is found, contrarily, in the nature, intuition, internal vision, and psychology of the writer. [...] Give Machado de Assis a motive, a subject among the slave legends, and he will always treat it as a Brazilian, which is to say, with that way of feeling and thinking, that internal vision of things, that *tic*, that special *sestro*, if I may so speak, which is the manner of the spiritual representation of the Brazilian intelligence.

There is no book less German on the subject than Faust, there exists no other more German in spirit. The theme is universal, the execution is Germanic. Machado de Assis does not escape from common law, he cannot escape, and woe is he who does. It would be worthless. He is one of ours, a genuine representation of the Brazilian racial miscegenation, however strange it may seem to touch on this point. (66)

Silvio Romero’s use of the same line of argument as Machado in his 1873 essay stands out where the former claimed that to recognize “national spirit” only in works that deal with the local subject would be erroneous, as the author may deal with subjects that are remote in time and space and do so with a national spirit. Let us, then, read Machado’s own words:

I ask [...] if *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Cesar*, and *Romeo and Juliet* have something to do with English history or with the British territory, and if Shakespeare, beyond being a universal genius, is not essentially an English poet. (“Notícia” 804)

If in Machado the “universal” is concomitant with the “national,” it is relevant to note that regarding the national element there is a flagrant similarity between the argumentation of Silvio Romero and that of Machado de Assis. In other words, they both use an analogous conception of “national spirit,” presuming a certain inheritance received upon being born in Brazil, and assuming that the spirit or soul of the people to which an author belongs, independent of his will, will be manifest in his work, whether or not he is speaking directly of his people or his land. However, it refers to a certain type of nationalism, which is predominantly based on a certain idea of “national character,” which is to say, different from that which assumes “local color” as the absolute.

Perhaps this is why Afrânio Coutinho said that, even after Romanticism had dried up as a source of literary inspiration, the preoccupation with the search for

a national character in Brazilian literature continued (4). In the following section, I attempt to show that Romanticism had not yet dried up as a literary reference for Machado de Assis when he published *Americanas* in 1875.

### *Americanas*

In a text that had already been published in the *Revista Brasileira* in December 1879, Machado warned that, while the new generation “sometimes gratuitously attacks Romanticism,” if the “romantic muse’s destiny” is to be substituted by the young men there would be a certain ingratitude in it: “For some of them, if it be the new muse that suckles them, it was that great moribund [the romantic muse] that created them, and there are even those who still have the scent of the pure milk of Romanticism” (“Nova geração” 810). As Machado himself did not take a position of absolute disdain towards Romanticism—which is a position he actually criticized—it is not so odd to affirm here the tribute he pays to the “great moribund” in *Americanas*.

*Americanas* is a legitimate descendent of that trend of Romanticism that is held up until this day as an outstanding example of Romantic nationalism in Brazil: Indianism.<sup>4</sup> Further, when dealing with Indianism, one must first point out that Machado did not maintain a consistent opinion on the theme throughout the length of his career.

Speaking of Basílio da Gama’s *Uruguai* in 1858, Machado said that the work “Was not national, because it was indigenous, and the barbaric indigenous poetry of *boré* [native Brazilian flute] and *tupã* [native Brazilian God] is not national poetry.” Machado added that: “What do we have in common with this race, with these primitive inhabitants of the country, if their customs are not the characteristic face of our society?” (“O passado” 785). By 1866, reviewing José de Alencar’s *Iracema*, he had changed his tone:

If poets like José Basílio, Gonçalves Dias, and Magalhães drew inspiration from the customs and history of the Indians, it is because they drew original creations and new inspirations from these. (“José de Alencar” 848)

Later still, in 1873, he made the following evaluation:

[After Gonçalves Dias] there occurred [...] a certain reaction. The opinion that not all poetry was about the semi-barbarous customs that preceded our civilization, which was true, became prominent. Shortly thereafter appeared the idea that



poetry had nothing to do with the extinct race, which was so different from the triumphant race—which appeared to be an error.

It is certain that Brazilian civilization is not connected to the Indian element, nor did it receive any influx from this element; this in itself is enough to not go looking among all the defeated tribes for our literary personality. However, if this is true, it is no less certain that anything can become material of poetry once the conditions of beauty or the elements it is composed of are brought in [...]. It is certainly an error to constitute it [the Indian element] as the exclusive heritage of Brazilian literature, as great an error as would be its absolute exclusion. (“Notícia” 805)

Two years after this evaluation, Machado published *Americanas*. The very title of this book clearly refers to Gonçalves Dias, who gave the title “Poesias Americanas” (“American Poems”) to the initial sections of both his *Primeiros Cantos* (*First Songs*; 1846) and his *Últimos Cantos* (*Last Songs*; 1851).

Notwithstanding Sílvio Romero’s comments that Brazilian Romanticism “passed through the period of Americanism” (44), the expression “*americanas*” seems to indicate a certain textual typology associated with the content of those sections of Gonçalves Dias’ work. In the initial sections of Dias’ 1846 and 1851 works, we find all of his most famous Indianist poems, as well as “Canção do exílio” (“Song of Exile”), the opening poem of his 1846 work—perhaps his most well-known composition. Thus, it is not surprising that the majority of Machado’s poems in this book have an indigenous theme. In fact, Machado even dedicated a poem to Gonçalves Dias himself, whom he called “America’s singer,” and whom he explicitly cited in note K (*Americanas* 254-259).

As early as the first pages of *Americanas*, the heroine “Potira,” a Christianized Tamoia Indian, is captured by Anagê, an Indian chief who wants her for a wife but ends by killing her when she will not yield to his desire. From Anagê’s viewpoint, the problem is that Potira adopted the religion of the Jesuits:

[...] one by one

The daughters of Tupã run after them [the priests],

With them the warriors, and with all

our old faith. The day nears

In which, in the immensity of these deserts,

By the cold moonlight of these long nights

The pagé [native Brazilian shaman] will sigh sad and alone

With neither a people nor Tupã! [native Brazilian god]. (186)

This passage echoes Gonçalves Dias' "O Canto do Piaga" ("The Shaman's Song") when the spirit reveals to the *piaga* that the European will bring "[...] heavy shackles / under which the Tupi tribe will wail"; he finishes: "you will escape in search of asylum, / Sad asylum in an arid bush; / With pleasure Anhangá will laugh, / Seeing how few of you there will be" (Dias 110-111).

The poem "A visão de Jaciúca" ("Jaciúca's Vision") presents an even greater parallel with "O Canto do Piaga." Here, in a function similar to that of the specter that brings the terrible vision of the future to the native wizard, we have Içaíba, a brave dead warrior, a "tough chief of the indomitable tribe" (247), who appears to Jaciúca, also to warn him that "some strange people will force the tribes to escape and yield" "[...] with blood, / The virgin land to the barbarous enemy" (250). The allusion to slavery—note the mention of "heavy shackles" above—is another point of contact. "[...] It was death / The least of anguishes; I saw curved / And captive dragged away in the earth's dust / The warrior's brow" (251). Still, there is a new development: the dead warrior's plea to Jaciúca to cease war with the other native tribes: "At least save the last relics / of this defeated nation; do not pierce one another / Chests of brothers born under the same sun / whom *Anhangá* [native Brazilian evil spirit] turned into enemies" (252).

José de Alencar's Indianist leanings also resonate in the work of Machado. We must remember that the review that Machado wrote of *Iracema* in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* in 1866 called attention to the label "American School," attributed to the "movement that attracted the national muses to the treasures of native traditions," and, although he criticized this label, he used it repeatedly in the review ("José de Alencar").

Machado's explicatory notes on his poems in *Americanas* equally remind one of José de Alencar's techniques in *Iracema* and *Ubirajara*—novels with footnotes, so to speak. The *Corografia Brasileira*—where Pero Vaz Caminha's letter was published for the first time—was also a source for both for the historical observations they make, but Machado was more economical in the references he made to the chronicle writers than Alencar. In the poem "Potira," it is also interesting to observe the reference in the notes to two works by Father Simão de Vasconcelos—*Notícias Antecedentes, Curiosas e Necessárias das Cousas do Brasil* and *Crônica da Companhia de Jesus do Estado do Brasil*.

In fact, José Antonio Andrade de Araujo (see Vasconcelos) informs us that the two books are part of a single work, because *Notícias Antecedentes, Curiosas e Necessárias das Cousas do Brasil* was published as an introduction to *Crônica da Companhia de Jesus do Estado do Brasil* in 1663, but was cut by the

censors and the existing copies were taken out of circulation. In 1668, Simão de Vasconcelos published the introduction to *Crônica* that had been censored under the title *Notícias Curiosas e Necessárias das Cousas do Brasil* (1668), which even had a second edition printed by the National Printing Office in Rio de Janeiro in 1824. It is possible that Machado consulted this work.

As for *Crônica*, it had a second Portuguese edition printed in Rio de Janeiro in 1865 under the tutelage of Joaquim Caetano Fernandes Pinheiro—an important figure in the city's cultural circuit. It is worth repeating, however, that Vasconcelos said that the first “name that this part of America had was *Terra da Santa Cruz*” [“Land of the Holy Cross”],” and the “second name that it had was *America*; this taken from the eminent geographer Amerigo Vespucci” (Vasconcelos, my emphasis). Might there be another intersection with the title of Machado's work in this?

Furthermore, it should be noted that Machado explicitly presumed that *Americanas* would be met by a reading public familiar with the Indianist conventions, as in “Note I” he affirmed the following regarding the Tupi word “cauim”:

It is idle to explain in notes the meaning of this word and others, such as *pocema*, *mussurana*, *tangapema* and *kanitar*, which every Brazilian reader is already familiar with, thanks to the use that poets and prose writers have made of them. It is also unnecessary to substantiate the scene of prisoner sacrifice with passages from the chronicles, in stanza XI; these are commonplace things. (*Americanas* 368)

Based on all that has been said up to this point, one may conclude that, at the time of the publication of *Americanas*, Machado believed the reading public would still be familiar with Indianism as a reference. *Americanas* seems to be a work crafted under the presupposition that the resources and themes of that movement were still part of the repertoire of readers' preferences, therefore remaining alive in the system of literary references of the era.

Astrojildo Pereira, one of the most provocative scholars of Machado's work, believes that “only beginning in the decade of 1870 do the objective and subjective conditions that permit the stable delineation of nationality in its multiple economic, political, and cultural features become possible” (65). It seems that, in this delineation, there is a place—even if it is questioned and questionable—reserved for the path previously blazed by Gonçalves Dias, José de Alencar, and others, since everything indicates that when he chose to

publish *Americanas* in 1875 and thereby reprise a cultural tradition in which the first steps of a definite nationalism in Brazilian literature are rooted, Machado was answering a still present tendency in the tastes of the day.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Between 1880 and 1908, Machado de Assis wrote four or five novels and a few dozen short stories of a much higher quality than Brazilian fiction—including the prior works of Machado himself—had offered to that point. They are books that distance themselves from the romantic mixture of local color, romanticism and patriotism, or better, from the simple and infallible formula that the reading public of the young nation took pleasure in” (Schwarz 9).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent discussion on the Brazilian intellectual system in the nineteenth century, see both Mello and Rocha.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Araripe Júnior: “The Portuguese do not have a humoristic temperament.” Araripe also says that *humor* is an “exclusive product of the Anglo-Saxon race.” Araripe Júnior 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Jobim, “Indianismo, nacionalismo e raça na cultura do Romantismo.”

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