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Utopia, or Pleasant Entertainment?

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Latin American Music Review, Volume 31, Number 1, Spring/Summer
2010, pp. 101-121 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lat.2010.0012>



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Il Guarany for Foreigners: Colonialist Racism, Naïve Utopia, or Pleasant Entertainment?



ABSTRACT: Based on José de Alencar's homonymous novel, Carlos Gomes's opera *Il Guarany* (1871) was one of his most successful endeavours, by pandering simultaneously to the Europeans' exoticism fetish, and to the Brazilian elite's desire to be considered European. The novel, a product of the Indianismo literary movement, was for a long time considered a benign fantasy; however, many authors have recently uncovered the political ramifications of this movement, showing how it served as a justification for oppression. The opera librettists received much criticism for cleansing some of the original aspects, creating a conventional and hackneyed operatic plot; thus, Maria Alice Volpe (*LAMR* 23, no. 2) decries the fact that they maimed the mythological grandeur present in Alencar's work. Nonetheless, one might alternatively affirm that this made the opera less dependent on the most pernicious aspects of *Indianismo*, and therefore less vulnerable to the accusation that it is an expression of colonialist racism.



keywords: Carlos Gomes, *Il Guarany* (opera), José de Alencar, *O Guarani* (novel), Indianismo

RESUMEN: Baseada no romance homônimo de José de Alencar, a ópera *Il Guarany* (1871) de Carlos Gomes foi um de seus maiores sucessos, explorando simultaneamente o fetiche europeu com o exotismo, e o desejo da elite brasileira de ser considerada européia. O livro de Alencar, um produto do Indianismo, foi considerado por muito tempo como uma fantasia benigna; porém, vários autores recentemente descreveram as ramificações políticas desse movimento literário, e como ele funcionou como uma justificativa para a opressão. Os libretistas foram muito criticados por terem excluído aspectos originais do romance, criando um enredo operático convencional e banal; dessa forma, Maria Alice Volpe (*LAMR* 23, no. 2) reclama que eles mutilaram a grandeza mitológica do trabalho de Alencar. Todavia, pode-se alternativamente afirmar que isto fez com que a ópera fosse menos dependente dos aspectos nocivos do Indianismo, fazendo-a menos vulnerável à acusação de que é simplesmente uma expressão de racismo colonial.



palavras chave: Carlos Gomes, *Il Guarany* (ópera), José de Alencar, *O Guarani* (romance), Indianismo

"... Carlos Gomes is horrible. All of us have felt it ever since we were children. But since it is a question of one of the family glories, we all swallow all those tunes in *Il Guarany* and *Lo Schiavo*, which are inexpressive, artificial and heinous. . . . It is true! It were better that he had written nothing." Thus spoke one of the lecturers of the famous Week of Modern Art that took place in São Paulo in 1922, a momentous event in Brazilian cultural history. One of the main tenets of the emerging Modernist movement was to create an art that would be truly Brazilian; as Magaldi writes, "the dominance of European culture was then interpreted as a manifestation of colonial shame that needed to be excised."² Therefore, it is not surprising that such venom was used to attack the author who could be facetiously nicknamed "the greatest Brazilian composer of Italian opera." Even a more impartial reviewer, however, commenting on a performance by Plácido Domingo in 1995, is also adamant in asserting that "*Il Guarany* deserves its obscurity. . . . Contradictions and absurd plot turns abound. . . . [Gomes'] clichéd stew of Verdian heroics and Donizettian flightiness [cannot transform this in anything more] than an incoherent pageant of colonialist racism, paternalism, and religious triumphalism."³

Under the light of such criticism, it is difficult to fully grasp the fervor that Carlos Gomes aroused in Brazil during his lifetime, fervour that later catapulted him to a position second only to Villa-Lobos in the pantheon of Brazilian composers. His popularity was such that another lecture in the Week of Modern Art ended in a riot, with "the police interven[ing] to cool down the exalted people in the galleries," after the speaker, "an irreverent iconoclast, raised his sacrilegious hand to overthrow the idol Carlos Gomes."⁴ His works were also quite well received and frequently performed in Europe until the early 20th century, and Verdi himself is said to have commented favourably on them.⁵

The first explanation to these disparities in judgement is definitely the perception that his works are not Brazilian enough, opinion explicitly stated by the Modernists and implicitly glimpsed in the *New York Times* review. Indeed, history usually does not look fondly on artists who are deemed to be mere imitators; they might fare well in their lifetimes, but later the figures of their "better" contemporaries are sure to overshadow them. In an attempt to save Gomes from such fate, a few Brazilian musicologists rushed to his defence, pointing out many hidden attributes of "Brazilian-ness" (read: individuality) present in his music.⁶ Regardless of the validity of these farfetched attempts, it is at least ironic that Gomes' Italianate style, one of the elements that made him so popular in Brazil in the 19th century, and so accessible to European audiences at the time, was the main reason that made him so irrelevant for posterity.

However, in Brazil Gomes' reputation does not seem to have suffered a dent from the persistent attacks it received during the Modernist uprising.

Today, his statue stands proudly in the vast and urine-stenched square that faces Rio's beautiful Theatro Municipal. His status as a national icon does not stem solely from his music, though, which—chauvinistic pride aside—does have some shallow and gaudy moments (coupled with many others of great lyricism and grandeur). Likewise, *Il Guarany*, by far his most famous work, does not seem to have reached this position based on its musical attributes only; even many of Gomes' admirers agree that it is not one of his best operas (honour usually attributed to *Fosca* and *Il Schiavo*).⁷

In fact, one can affirm that both the author and his most notorious offspring owe part of their celebrity to the patriotic overtones with which they have been continuously associated. The premiere of *Il Guarany* at La Scala in 1870 was by all accounts an outstanding triumph that would naturally be seen in Brazil with great pride, and that would nurture the "European" perception that the Brazilian aristocracy enjoyed having of itself (as it will be discussed later). Furthermore, the news of Gomes' success in Italy, as Magaldi points out, preceded by only a few days another auspicious piece of news: the defeat of the Paraguayan troops in the War of the Triple Alliance, which boosted Brazil's morale tremendously (135).

Even more important than the circumstances surrounding the opera's composition and performance, though, is the fact that the opera adapted the homonymous novel by José de Alencar, "the father of the Brazilian novel." *Il Guarany* is the only of Gomes' operas that is based on a very successful novel; in fact, this later turned out to be a symbiotic relationship, the notoriety of both works feeding on each other and helping them become true national symbols. Alencar was a main exponent of the Indianismo movement, which sought to forge a national identity by glorifying Brazil's natives—in accordance with Rousseau's idea of the Noble Savage—and by fantasizing that the only way to achieve this identity was through miscegenation.

Indianismo was, for a long time, considered purely as a literary movement, but recently some authors have shown its connection with politics and with other forms of art as well.⁸ Some of its ideas had far-reaching consequences, and indeed were to become an indistinguishable part of the nation's ethos. While there were some authors (such as Teixeira e Sousa and Gonçalves Dias) who portrayed a more pessimistic, even apocalyptic Indianismo, the kind assumed by Alencar was seen, for a long time, as fairly positive and innocent. However, there is a deleterious aspect to this ideology, if the reader allows him/herself to notice it; as Treece so aptly put it, "the Indianist literature . . . stands as a monument to a compelling irony: as the heroic protagonist of scores and novels, poems, plays, paintings, and ethnographic studies, mourned or celebrated, as exile, ally, or rebel, the Indian became the embodiment of the very nationalism that was engaged in his own annihilation."⁹ The Indianist ideology, under the guise of looking for a compromise between the world of whites and non-whites,

often sanctified the subjugation of the Indian, rationalizing it and making it seem inevitable, nay, desirable (even by the Indian!).

At this point we arrive at the crux of this article. While the criticism levelled at Gomes for not being Brazilian enough—not authentic enough—is, in my opinion, unwarranted (even if true, mimicry can still be very good mimicry), the criticism that could be possible is that *Il Guarany* espouses the ideology of the Indianist movement, ideology that can be understood in many different ways, from a benign fantasy to a vicious justification of oppression. Given the sanctity of Gomes' persona, this criticism has not yet been raised and confronted, to the best of my knowledge. Volpe (2002) has shown some of the differences between the plot and the original novel, and has discussed some of the implications of this as well. Her article comes tantalisingly close to the thought that these differences might somehow also affect the underlying ideology of the opera, but, alas, her impartial and unpoliticized view of Indianismo does not allow her to connect the dots. It might be possible that the Indianist ideology was attenuated by the changes done in the libretto, and by the added dimension of the music. Is *Il Guarany* a work that perpetuates Alencar's biases and his hidden agenda, or is it merely an entertainment intentionally designed to please both Italians (with its exoticism) and Brazilians (with its Italian flavor)? Besides, even as we consider authorial intention ultimately unimportant, how much of Gomes' societal beliefs seeped into his work?

In order to unravel such vast array of issues, at first I must deal with them separately. A good background of Brazil's political and cultural history in the 19th century is surely needed, as it will help us understand how much of Carlos Gomes' life is a unique product of his time and place. A discussion of *Il Guarany* as a cultural artefact of that specific period, satisfying very specific needs in Brazilian imperial society, will ensue. I will then delve deeper in the ideas and objects of the Indianist movement, tracing the connections between literature and official indigenist policies. Finally, I will approach the opera, and analyse how its musical and dramatic features might (or might not) reveal implicit ideas and prejudices.

Before starting, though, let me present a few caveats:

The structure of this article is purposefully disjointed. In its mosaic-like sections, I will peripatetically explore different issues that are somehow related to the opera. The reader might feel as though there is no direct connection between them. The reason for this is simple: at times, there is indeed no such connection. However, in order for my argument to be made, it is beneficial to briefly peruse these aspects. Some of them might not be essential to the main goal of the article, and may even seem to distract from it temporarily, but a piece of writing that restricts itself solely to the essential is bound to be a poor piece of writing. Thus, I occasionally allow some extraneous information whose only reason for being there is because

it enriches our overall perception of Gomes' work and its historical context. The originality of the article does not lie in the facts discussed, but rather in the way in which they are combined in order to achieve a different perspective of the opera, one that may partially contradict the *New York Times* review aforementioned.

I do not claim to present some stunning new insight regarding Indianismo, nor do I wish to have a comprehensive discussion about the complex issues of race and identity. Many other authors—far more capable than I—have explored these problems, and many others will. Just as well, it would be hubristically ambitious to connect the issues discussed here with an analysis of nationalism and colonial theory, either from a global perspective, or specifically in Brazil. My goal in this article is much more modest. By bringing together two ideas—namely, a politicized view of Indianismo and the fact that Gomes' libretto departs significantly from the original novel—I simply wish to argue that the opera avoids much of the racism inherent in Alencar's work by replacing much of his originality with an arsenal of operatic commonplaces. Ultimately, this is an article of comparative literature, but one that needs to superficially deal with issues beyond its domain. Therefore, accuse me not of failing to provide an utterly personal scrutiny of these sociological issues, or of not creating a work that is the fruit of intensive historical research; I have tremendous respect for those who have done so, and I defer to their expertise.

I am also aware that some readers—especially those unfamiliar with Gomes' work—might wish for a more elaborate explanation of the musical and dramatic aspects of the opera. Unfortunately, such discussion would lead me even further astray from the main goal of the article. I have attempted to include the most essential points that aid the understanding of the work, but I strongly encourage the interested reader to listen to the opera and read its libretto in its entirety in order to achieve a fuller picture of *Il Guarany*.



It is often illuminating to ponder how the political and cultural histories of a nation are closely entwined, and how the lives of simple individuals are affected, in unexpected ways, by the grand scheme of time. From this perspective, for instance, Napoleon's decision to invade Portugal in 1807 could be seen as the starting point of a series of events that would eventually lead to the composition of Carlos Gomes' *Il Guarany*.

Being at war with England at the time, Napoleon had ordered Portugal to close its ports to British shipping, to confiscate British properties, and to arrest British citizens on its soil. However, Portugal's traditional alliance with England prevented it from doing so, which caused Napoleon's invasion, thus forcing the royal family to flee to Brazil under British escort.¹⁰

They would encounter a country that was incredibly backwards and underdeveloped, with poor infrastructure, no sanitation, the barest minimum of educational facilities, no libraries, no museums, and no printing presses; in short, a place definitely not suitable for the fifteen thousand members of the aristocracy that had accompanied the royal family.¹¹ This mass hegira boosted the development of the entire colony, and caused Rio de Janeiro, its capital at the time, to undergo a complete transformation in a very short period of time.

D. João VI opened the ports to foreign trade, suspended the printing ban, added illumination and paving to the streets of Rio, and endowed the city with numerous palaces, libraries, schools, theaters, and scientific academies.¹² He also promoted the immigration of countless European painters, musicians, geographers, sculptors and writers, and founded a royal academy of arts and architecture. The Europeanization of Brazilian society was a goal that he pursued relentlessly in his 13 years there, something that would also guide the policies of the Emperors D. Pedro I and D. Pedro II, his son and grandson respectively, and his successors after the country's "independence" in 1822. Indeed, Brazil's bloodless independence, different than what happened in most of the Spanish-ruled Latin America, was marked by a remarkable continuity with the past institutions, and allowed the country to remain intrinsically connected to Europe and all things European.¹³

However, contradictions abounded, and they would constantly remind the Brazilian ruling classes that their European society was but a façade. In spite of all those improvements, in spite of the fact that Rio was basking in glamorous French architecture, its streets were dirty, it had inadequate water and sewage systems, and bouts of yellow fever were frequent. The local aristocracy praised Enlightenment ideals for their fashionability, but remained chained to a past of slavery and patronage, and to its lack of a unifying national identity. Countless European visitors would report a sensation of strange familiarity when coming to the city, offset however by the tropical climate and vegetation, and by a large presence of Africans and Afro-Brazilians in the streets. This "façade society" seemed thus to be a constant source of shame to the elite, who however also profited from keeping it that way.¹⁴

The arts were one of the most efficient ways in which the powerful could fantasize about their European qualities. As Magaldi eloquently writes, "they fantasized about European culture for the opposite reasons that Europeans exoticized their Other; their embodiment of European culture reflected a candid urge 'to be included', to be aligned with what they perceived to be as a more 'civilized' world" (xi). However, at the same time, the arts also tried to create a new identity for the newly independent country, dealing with the oedipal angst of a nation trying to reject its colonizer, but without having something else that could fill the void in an appropriate manner (this would

become one of the main concerns of many Indianist authors, especially José de Alencar). Arts and political conditions were, therefore, fraternally bonded. Furthermore, as Appleby affirms, this bond was even stronger due to the fact that art largely depended on government subsidies in order to exist, since there were relatively few other forms of financial support (39).

Amongst the arts, opera was the ultimate expression of power and prestige in 19th-century Brazil. Opera theatres mushroomed in Rio de Janeiro, and European opera companies—not, by all means, the *crème de la crème*—were enticed to come make their fortunes with Brazil's undiscerning audiences, subsidised by its rich royal patronage.¹⁵ While opera was mostly an imported good, often performed with imported artists, there were 21 operas by Brazilian composers staged in the 19th century; among these, nine were by Carlos Gomes, and *Il Guarany* was by far the most successful one.¹⁶ These Brazilian composers would hardly have followed the same paths had D. João VI not immigrated to Brazil in 1808, with the subsequent boost of culture and education he promoted, and Carlos Gomes' case was not different.

He was born in the small town of Campinas in 1836, during the stormy period of the Regency (1831–1840), which was caused by the abdication of D. Pedro I, who left the throne to his 5-year-old son. This period was particularly marked by a series of Republican revolts, and a desire for decentralization of power. Showing talent in composing, Carlos Gomes left for Rio de Janeiro when he was 18 years old to enroll in the Imperial Academy of Music. After writing two operas in Portuguese in 1861 and 1863, he became a protégé of the Emperor himself, who gave him a scholarship to study in the Milan Conservatory; *Il Guarany* was the first opera he composed there (after writing two musical revues), and it was premiered with resounding success at *La Scala* in 1870. While the opera has undeniable musical qualities, part of the reason it became such an immediate success was due to its use of the exotic topos so prevalent at the time—one obvious example is *Aida*, which would premiere the following year. Carlos Gomes surely used this topos quite deliberately. After all, he had something that no European composer would be able to offer: not only could he pander to the audience's expectations of watching exotic Others on stage, his work would be made so much more authentic by the fact that he himself was part of this Otherness.

The Italian press indeed seemed to love his persona almost as much as it loved his works, and one may assume that Gomes might not have been altogether opposed to being characterized as a *selvaggi del brasil*, since it gave him so much more notoriety and success. For instance, in 1878 the *Gazzeta Musicale* wrote that “[when he is not pleased with the performers], he puts his hands on his vast hair and starts to run on the stage as if he is possessed, and he screams like a savage very similar to the Guarany.”¹⁷ In

another article, written in the late 1860s—thus even before *Il Guarany*—it was reported that “when Gomes walks in our streets—always alone and lost in his thoughts—one would think he is a savage, . . . magically found in the in the middle of our beautiful Milano. [It seems as though] with each step he suspects to find a precipice, a betrayal; in each person, an enemy. . . . He has a noble and generous heart, full of affection for his friends and of enthusiasm for his art; however, he loves, adores, gets excited in his own way: a truly savage way. . . . He is a gentleman: in him everything is noble, but it is a completely naked nobility, primitive, aboriginal.”¹⁸ As if this were not enough, they proceeded by offering a full description of his physique (!), concluding at the end that he was, “unmistakably, a true American aborigine.”

The music of *Il Guarany*, however, presents only a dash of the techniques that were commonly used to portray the “exotic” musically, with most of the rest of the opera being in a style that could be sung by any Western character in a Verdi opera. Among the exotic moments, the most overt one is evidently the 3rd-act ballet, for which Gomes ordered especially crafted “indigenous” percussion instruments. This ballet is associated with the Aimoré tribe, as are the other exotic moments; this is particularly significant, as we will discuss later, since the Aimorés were the “evil, uncivilized” Indians, set in contrast to Peri (chief of the Guarani tribe), the “good, cooperative” (read: co-opted) Indian. Other moments that distinguish the Aimorés as the Other are found in the music played when they are approaching the castle in the end of the 2nd act, and in their main motive in the 3rd act, which is also used in the beginning of the opera’s overture, with its modal flavor and peculiar orchestration. These moments are interspersed, however, with lots of “normal” music. On the other hand, the only exotic sign attributed to Peri is the fact that he is frequently associated with “Nature” music; this strong association, also quite prominent in the novel, connects him to the Brazilian land, enhancing his Noble Savage status, and paving the way for him to become the symbolic progenitor of the future Brazilian race (in the novel, Cecilia also shows a strong attachment to the nature of her adopted land, decorating her bedroom with feathers and tropical plants, for instance).¹⁹

Il Guarany’s Brazilian premiere, performed on D. Pedro II’s birthday, was yet more splendorous than its Italian one. However, as Magaldi points out, “such a warm welcome was hardly an expression of impartial acceptance. Gomes’s success in Rio de Janeiro lay above all in its previous validation by the Italian audience. . . . For writing an opera was an exercise in aligning Brazil with Europe” (138, 140). The original plan was for the opera to have been first presented in Brazil, but Gomes was certainly right in changing his mind, basically gambling his Brazilian fame on the previous acceptance of the Italian audience. An anecdote told by the *Gazetta*

Musicale di Milano—while most certainly apocryphal—illustrates well this fact; it said that, at the end of the *La Scala* premiere, as the enraptured audience claimed for Gomes' presence on stage, nobody could find him. Only after a long time, he was found in the highest part of the theater's scaffolding, planning on killing himself if the public had hissed his work, for this would have made him "completely dishonoured in Brazil."²⁰ Gomes' subsequent lionization in his native land was, in great part, due to the fact that he was the first native-born Brazilian to be a success abroad, thus being able to fulfill the different needs of both foreign and domestic audiences. A few months later, in another felicitous decision, Gomes composed a new overture to the opera. This piece—a pastiche of the opera's best-loved tunes with a fanfare-like opening—would become more well-known than the opera itself, being performed in many civic events, and even becoming the piece that opens the government's daily radio news broadcast since the 1930s. Outside the opera house, melodies of *Il Guarany* were soon found in many piano fantasies, popular dances, and even in Carnival marches, thus enlarging the spectrum of the population that the opera would reach.²¹



Indianismo has been traditionally described as an "invented or imported substitute for a national cultural tradition denied to the country by colonialism."²² While European Romanticism often looked back to the Middle Ages to create a national narrative, Indianist authors would transfer all the attributes of a typical medieval knight to the native Indian; hence, Peri is described in the novel as "a Portuguese knight in the body of a savage," as he saves the young virgin from a parade of countless perils, always with boundless subservience and adoration.

Whereas this explanation is true, it might not be thorough. The fact that Spanish American republics produced relatively few Indianist texts, for instance, suggests that there may be something intrinsically Brazilian for the necessity of such an ideology. Spanish possessions evolved into various nation-states, often after a bloody independence struggle, and their native tribes were organized in a grander scale than the Brazilian ones, who were more fragmented and more dependent on a seminomadic life style, with a less developed economy. This made Brazilian tribes more easily marginalized from the dominant society, and more liable to be conquered individually. As Treece points out, these factors indicate that the unique sociopolitical conditions of the Brazilian Empire were propitious to the birth of the Indianist movement, and that "the roots of [its] durability and appeal lie within the structure of Imperial society rather than in a simple desire to emulate the cultural models of European civilization" (8).

The traditional view on Indianism also tends to emphasize how the authors were inspired by the myth of the Noble Savage, most famously

articulated by Rousseau in his *Contrat Social*. As Sawyer explains, “the Noble Savage is an extension of the oppositional relationship between corruptive society and restorative nature. . . . [D]ue to his lack of contact [with the former], he was purported to be pure, honest and without base intentions” (10). Furthermore, he “embodies many of the ideals of the Romantic movement, including individuality and the cult of nature. . . . [He] symbolizes a national historic past that the New World Romantics were eager to create.”

However, it is fascinating to observe how the formulation of this myth by the Enlightenment intellectuals was itself highly influenced by some descriptions made by the first visitors to the New World. For example, Pero Vaz de Caminha, the scribe that accompanied the first Portuguese ships to Brazil, considered the Indians to be true *tabulae rasae*, living in an Edenic land before Adam’s fall. Their willingness to participate in the Catholic ceremonies of the navigators, rather than indicating a natural curiosity in such strange rituals, meant to him that they could be gently swayed into Western Europe’s values. Coupled to the myth of the Noble Savage, and in a way that almost seems to contradict it, one finds also the myth of the Cannibal in some Indianistic writings (such as Alencar’s *O Guarani*). From a very early stage in Brazil’s exploration, colonizers classified the Indians they met into two main groups: the Tupis and the Tapuias. This rudimentary division was simply a way to distinguish those tribes that accepted Portuguese domination without putting much of a fight, and those who did not; the latter ones were then described as “barbarians,” and were propagandistically associated with cannibalism, even in cases when this was not true.

While the Indianist movement drew much of its inspiration from the Noble Savage myth, it was fundamental in propagating a new myth of its own making: the idea that miscegenation was the solution for the country’s identity crisis, and the basis for a prosperous and harmonious future. This myth was based partially on reality and partially on fantasy. The reality was that there were indeed many people of mixed ancestry in Brazil; since the country was used for centuries as a source of goods for the Portuguese Crown, and not as a place where families were encouraged to settle, the immigration of many single men was certain to create this outcome. However, the myth ignores the simple fact that people of mixed ancestry were then still a minority—if perhaps not in numerical terms, certainly a minority in terms of power. As Haberly observed, for people of *mestiço* origins to gain social status, they would have to undergo a difficult process of “whitening,” through the acquisition of the culture and habits of the dominant class. Sometimes this would not work either, if their somatic traits were too conspicuously non-white. Even when they partially succeeded, the psychological and moral tensions were often too great to bear, and their achievements would remain always tainted with racial undertones.

The innovation that Indianismo introduced was the idea of reversing what was then considered a source of shame into a source of pride. This

myth was very successful in gaining hold of the Brazilian psyche, and would be crystallized in the works of 20th-century sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who claims that “Brazilians had no need to feel themselves inferior to the inhabitants of other nations but should, in fact, recognize their own superiority.”²³ This idea flourished gradually; at first, especially before the abolition of slavery in 1888, miscegenation (literary miscegenation, that is) was restricted between Portuguese and Indians. A quaint symptom of this first phase was the “Indian fever” in the 1850s, when many aristocrats—even the Emperor himself—adopted additional indigenous names or even claimed a fictitious Indian ancestry. Later, Afro-Brazilians were added into the ideology, and “Brazil [as] the end result of the interaction of these three racial groups [became] . . . a commonplace in the national consciousness.”²⁴ In the 1920s, poet Olavo Bilac would already consider the country’s music as the “loving flower of three sad races,” and another poet, Guilherme de Almeida, would describe the nation as a “cross in whose shadow/three races crossed and mixed, three different bloods dripped from three crucified victims.”²⁵

This fantasy of three races united in grief—the Portuguese’s grief for the homeland they left, the Indians’ for the homeland they lost, and the Africans’ for the homeland from which they were taken—completely distorts the reality of the powerful and the powerless in Imperial Brazil. While the extolling of mixed ancestry can be beneficial in a way, by trying to solve the country’s eternal inferiority complex and fantasizing about an inexistent harmony, it glosses over the cruel reality of how the explored masses were treated. Moreover, by trying to offer “a historical model and foundation for the harmonious integration of races, classes, and cultures,”²⁶ it ignores that in the four centuries after 1500, Brazil’s indigenous population is estimated to have plummeted from 5 million individuals to a mere 100,000.²⁷ After the country’s independence, Romantic intellectuals felt they had to create a patriotic art, but they could not turn to the Portuguese, and the African, as the omnipresent slave, was too unpalatable. They had consequently to turn their attention to the Indian, “long since exterminated in most coastal areas or forced into the interior; extravagant virtues and talents could thus be imputed to this dimly remembered creature.”²⁸ As a consequence, schoolchildren in Brazil today are taught to regurgitate this integrationist mythology, which “repeatedly invok[es the Indians’] assimilation into the dominant society as the touchstone for a history of bloodless political, social, and economic integration.”²⁹

It is thus absolutely ludicrous to attempt to separate literary Indianismo from the politics of a country that was struggling to come to terms with its troubled reality. Indianismo was not merely a cultural expression, but rather a political movement that had its roots in the social disputes of the day. It also served as an excuse for that troubled reality. By pledging allegiance to liberal, egalitarian ideals, it “supplied the ruling elite with an imported rhetoric of civilization and progress, allowing it the illusion of

membership to a modern, international bourgeoisie while it presided over an archaic political and social order that remained essentially that of the ancien régime.”³⁰

However, one should also keep in mind that Indianismo was a long and heterogeneous movement, with contradictory approaches that reflected sometimes the political climate of the country. For instance, in the 1830s and 1840s, a period of “liberal” leaning, some authors were more sympathetic to the plight of the Indians; unsurprisingly, though, two of these authors, Teixeira e Sousa and Gonçalves Dias, were themselves victims of some marginalization due to their mixed ancestry. Their writing is permeated by a tragic ethos, maybe best exemplified by a paragraph of Ferdinand Denis, a French writer who spent a long time in Brazil in that period:

Our era of mysterious, poetic fables will be the centuries inhabited by those peoples whom we have annihilated, who astonish us by their courage, and who have perhaps reinvigorated the nations who have left the old world: the memory of their savage grandeur will fill one soul’s with pride, their religious beliefs will bring the deserts to life; their poetic chants, preserved among some nations, will adorn the forests. . . . Their struggles, their sacrifices, our conquests, all this offers brilliant tableaux. On the arrival of the European, they believe, in their simplicity, that they are entrusting themselves to gods; but when they realize they must fight with human beings, they die and are not vanquished.³¹

José de Alencar, on the other hand, was the main exponent of the post-1850s Indianismo, a more conservative and complacent kind, more willing to legitimize the status quo of the Empire and to validate the power of the plantation oligarchies. Again, it should not come as a surprise that he came from a very influential and opulent family, and that he, as his father before him, was actively involved in politics for a period in his life, becoming a member of parliament and even minister of justice for two years. His Indianist novels depict the ideas of conciliation, self-sacrifice and voluntary servitude; as Sawyer comments, “Alencar’s intention was to portray a national identity founded on the understanding and acceptance of social inequality. The colonial system depicted in the novel . . . models the contemporary society of the readers, and ‘noble’ subservience is a model for the oppressed classes to follow.”³² Nonetheless, it must be admitted that even the more sympathetic writers of the earlier phase also could not escape their zeitgeist; they too were never able to question the basic integrationist assumptions of the movement. They too were prisoners of the dichotomy Assimilation versus Annihilation.

Alencar's style has been sometimes described as conventional, didactic, and formulaic. The stereotypical plot features, stock figures, and hackneyed clichés he uses incited Wasserman to compare his novels to paint-by-number canvasses—however, interspersed with some important oddities.³³ Yet, his beautiful prose has also been understood as the source of a keenly constructed national myth that aggrandizes Brazil's self-image. Through this prism, Moreira regards *O Guarani* as “a foundational novel that, by searching for the origins of Brazilian society, invents the primordial couple that engendered the nation and offers an account of the nation's genesis.”³⁴

Influenced by authors such as Chateaubriand and Fenimore Cooper, Alencar's works are marked by a strong deference to the traditional patriarchal regime, but with the adoption of romantic love in opposition to the arranged marriages of the past. The typical formula would set a patriarch in conflict with a marginal figure from a different social-racial background; this conflict would then be resolved through the mediation of a young woman. Thus, in *O Guarani*, Cecilia's love for Peri “succeeds in taming his rebellious, destructive instincts,[but] she is also able to temper the excessive authoritarianism of her father, reaching a mature awareness of her own Brazilian identity in the process.”³⁵

The basic plot, common to both the opera and the novel, could be succinctly summarized thus: Peri, the chief of the Guarani tribe, loves Cecilia, the betrothed of Dom Alvaro, and the daughter of Dom Antonio de Mariz, a Portuguese nobleman who lives with his acolytes in an isolated fortress inside the jungle, either in 1607 (in the novel) or 1560 (in the opera). Dom Antonio's power is being threatened by a band of foreign adventurers (Italian in the novel, Spanish in the opera), and by the barbarian Aimorés, who had one of their maidens accidentally killed by a Portuguese. After many misfortunes, the whole fortress and all the characters are destroyed, except for Peri—converted to Christianity—and Ceci (the new “Indian” name Peri gives her in the novel—but not in the opera).

In both works, Peri is the voluntary slave that tries to protect the well-being of the state; even as he ultimately fails in the end, his willingness to desert his own society and reject his culture makes him the perfect begetter of the future Brazilian race. The superior status of the Portuguese is made explicit by the fact that Peri has to be given permission by Dom Antonio to take his daughter away in the end before the destruction of the fortress. As Sommer noticed, this also provides a curious parallel with Brazil's history, since there is evidence that, when D. Pedro I declared independence, it was with the acknowledgement and support of his father, the king of Portugal.³⁶ Furthermore, Peri is only allowed to rescue Cecilia from certain death if he converts to Christianity (in the novel, he rejects an earlier attempt at conversion, but in the opera this issue shows up only once, and he seems rather nonchalant about rejecting his gods). Ceci's love also helps

him become more civilized, thus “whitening” him further. Sawyer affirms that, “if the novel is an allegory of Brazil itself, . . . adherence to European ideals is the only option for the oppressed class” (205), and Treece agrees: “In making endless sacrifices, Peri is announcing a new Christianity for Brazil, an Empire of conciliation and democracy in which the sins and conflicts of the colonial past will have been wiped away” (190).

Nonetheless, there are also many differences between both works; while some of these differences might seem inconsequential at first—resulting from the natural necessity of trimming out various characters and events from the novel—they might create distinct subjacent meanings. The Italian librettists, Antonio Scalvini and Carlo D’Ormeville, have been criticized from a wide range of sources; Filippo Filippi, a 19th-century critic (and Verdi’s friend), thought that they did not take full advantage of all the extravagant features of the novel, reducing it to a conventional opera libretto,³⁷ and José de Alencar himself said that “Gomes made a big mess out of my *Guarani*,” making it “full of nonsense, [such as] Ceci sing[ing] duets with the Aimoré chief, who offers her the throne of his tribe.”³⁸ The fact that he complained of this specific change is very telling indeed; not the least concerned with Alencar’s mythology-making, with his careful distinction between the “good,” submissive Indian and the “evil,” subversive one, Scalvini and D’Ormeville ended up blurring the lines between both. Whereas in the novel the Aimorés are the subterranean forces that seek to undermine the state, in the opera, on the other hand, they are somewhat humanized, and allowed to express “positive” feelings such as love, compassion, and religiousness. By doing this alteration, the librettists were arguably reducing the racism inherent in the original work (even if unintentionally); this already insinuates the direction that many of the other changes will take, cleansing the allegoric and spectacular flavour of Alencar’s novel, and making it more conventional, more trite, and, yes, more operatic.

When Alencar wrote *O Guarani*, he had deliberately decided to create a work of grand, larger-than-life proportions, providing a national narrative that would be recognized as such; there was nothing subtle or underhanded about his intentions, as he made clear in several opportunities during his lifetime. It is rather interesting to analyse the means by which he achieved his result, and to compare them with the changes perpetrated by the libretto. Firstly, Alencar placed his flamboyant story in a remote period and place. Haberly affirms that “this leap into the past . . . freed him from the strictures of verisimilitude” (44), and, as Brookshaw confirms, the story takes place “at the margins of civilization, at the frontier line of the land to be conquered, a mythical locale that stands so isolated from the metropolis that it can to some extent operate outside historical time and colonial time.”³⁹ The date Alencar chose, though, is of particular significance, because Portugal was under the rule of Spain from 1580 to 1640. In his novel,

which takes place in 1607, Dom Antonio de Mariz is described as a fervent patriot who, not willing to serve under Spanish rule, decided to retreat into his “mini-Portugal” in the jungles of Brazil. The libretto, by unexplainedly changing the date to 1560, omits this side of Dom Antonio’s character, and diminishes the significance of his nationalism to the final outcome.

Another way in which Alencar aides the mythologization of his characters is by accentuating their attributes. Dom Antonio is portrayed in the novel as an extremely enlightened ruler; he has no slaves (African or Indian), he is depicted as a compassionate and virtuous knight, and he even saves Peri’s mother from the hands of his men. In fact, the novel begins with a reciprocal salvation, since Peri also first meets Cecilia when he saves her from a falling boulder.⁴⁰ In the opera, Dom Antonio is still portrayed as a fairly good man, but some details that accentuate his goodness, such as the story of Peri’s mother, are absent. Another absent factor is Dom Antonio’s son; in the novel, he accidentally kills an Aimoré maiden, and Dom Antonio expresses his magnanimity by expelling his own son from the castle due to his act. In the opera, the killing of the maiden—the fuse that detonates the Aimoré revolt—is blamed into an unknown character, and, even though Dom Antonio says that “there is no pardon for the accursed misdeed,” there is no mention of him doing something to the person who committed it.

Peri also does not meet Cecilia by saving her from a boulder (he rescues her from the Aimorés instead); he does not fight a jaguar either, nor he unearths a palm tree with his bare hands, as he does in the novel. Indeed, his physical prowess in the novel endows him with a supernatural quality; he is described as Cecilia’s guardian angel, as “a beneficent genie of the forests of Brazil.”⁴¹ Critics like Filippo Filippi might have been thinking of these colourful scenes, probably excluded due to the difficulties of staging them, when they complained that Scalvini did not take full advantage of the novel. Nevertheless, by eliminating Peri’s Herculean feats, the opera made him more real and human, someone less liable to be transmuted into a symbol.

There are many other characters who are absent in the opera; in Volpe’s opinion, “the oversimplification of [the] libretto . . . disrupted the symbolic relationships that empowered the novel as a mythical narrative of national foundation.”⁴² She correctly points out that, in the novel, Alencar uses some characters as foil for others; for example, Cecilia’s chastity is made greater by contrast with her “cousin” (in fact her half-sister, in love with Alvaro), and with the voluptuous daughter of the Aimoré’s chief. The elimination of some secondary characters, according to Volpe, diminished the opera’s “mythical potential by withdrawing [this] multi-perspective characterization.”⁴³ In the novel, the character of Ceci also undergoes an evolution that does not occur in the opera; at the very beginning, she feels revulsion

towards Peri, sentiment soon changed into pity; she will then consider herself his “sister” until almost the very end. Conversely, in Gomes’ work, she becomes a traditional operatic heroine, singing a true love duet already in the end of the first act.

There is another demythologizing change that displeases Volpe tremendously; in the novel, Peri surrenders himself to the Aimorés, and poisons himself, so that, when they would consume him in a cannibalistic ritual, they would die from his poison. This “sacrificial myth” is dramatically altered in the opera; instead of Peri surrendering to the Aimorés, it is Ceci who is abducted by them, “turning it into a conventional rescue opera motif in which the female awaits to be saved by the hero.”⁴⁴ Peri shows up, is captured, and *then* he poisons himself with the intent of poisoning his eaters, but thankfully D. Antonio and his men come and rescue both of them. The act of sacrificing even his life is the ultimate test for this voluntary slave, but, according to Volpe, it gets weakened by the way it is handled in the libretto.

As Treece demonstrates, the act of sacrifice is only one of many mythical, Christian ideas that are found in Alencar’s work. After Peri takes poison in the novel and is saved at the last minute, he goes through a “mysterious journey into the forest, where a communion with nature brings him from a deathlike sleep to a miraculous revival, resembl[ing] the biblical Resurrection of Christ, the archetypal saviour figure.”⁴⁵ In the opera, there is only a fleeting mention of Peri finding an antidote in the forest, therefore further reducing his mythical status.

Another biblical rip-off is the deluge with which the novel ends, leaving only the primordial couple alive. This is not present at all in the opera, which ends with D. Antonio, in a proud act of self-immolation, discharging an explosion in the castle just at the moment when the Aimorés were arriving (in the novel, the Aimorés are the ones who set fire to the castle before the flood arrives). Volpe understands the deluge as the culmination of a rite of passage for both the nation and Cecilia; she contends that its suppression from the opera “affects the final phase of Cecilia’s initiation into the American environment, subtracting the cosmic endowment of her legitimacy as the mythical female of Brazilian origins,”⁴⁶ placing the starting point of Brazilian history in an incidental, human cause rather than in nature’s might.



Volpe, therefore, laments the absence in the opera of many symbols that Alencar used to raise his story above the level of a normal narrative. However, what if those symbols convey messages that endorse the uglier aspects of Indianism? Our interpretation of the opera indeed turns out to be

very dependent on our perception of the Indianist movement itself. The bowdlerization done in many elements of the story might have left us with a plot that is more innocuous and commonplace, but it also might have saved the opera from embracing a dated and pernicious ideology. This would allow us to enjoy Carlos Gomes' beautiful music without having to bother with our overly sensitive scruples in this age of political correctness. The opera seems at times less concerned with race than with the distinction between the morality of the individual and the mob's morality; even Gonzales and the chief of the Aimorés achieve a degree of humanity and goodness in their solo utterances, something that does not happen when their respective groups sing together.

Nonetheless, for a foreigner unfamiliar with the original work written by Alencar, the impression that *Il Guarany* is "an incoherent pageant of colonialist racism," as the *New York Times* reviewer felt, might indeed seem justified. However, my argument in this article is that, knowing the alterations that were done, one might feel that most of this racism has been expunged or attenuated. By comparing the opera with the novel, one might conclude that the latter is not as supportive of an oppressive ideology as the former. However, foreign individuals with no previous knowledge of Alencar's work (or of the Indianist movement) will not perceive this difference. Likewise, and paradoxically, some Brazilians might also not notice this, even if the previously rosy perception of Indianismo is removed from their minds. Volpe herself said (with a different purpose, evidently) that, although "the opera flaws the network of symbolic relationships rounding off the myth of national foundation,"⁴⁷ its reception has not suffered much with Brazilian audiences; since they would already know Alencar's myths, they could fill in the gaps (besides, because the opera is in Italian, they might not understand what is being sung anyway!). Yet, as this article demonstrates, if one comprehends the changes in the libretto as a move away from many Indianist tropes, and if one has an understanding of the political and negative ramifications of Indianismo, then one can affirm, contrary to Volpe, that the opera actually presents a better story than the novel, since it is a story that is not as dependent on Indianismo's ideology.



In a curious afterthought, it is interesting to notice that Brazilian readers of *O Guarani* have always assumed that the lovers are safe together in the end of the novel, on their way to the harmonious future promised by miscegenation. However, the end is a little ambiguous, as Wasserman points out; there are allusions of death and eternity in the last dialogue, and Alencar simply says that Peri and Ceci, floating on a palm tree, disappear on the horizon.⁴⁸ This interpretation would be more in touch with the earlier, apocalyptic type of Indianismo, which simply could not envision the

successful union of different races to happen. As Sawyer acknowledges, the ending “can be read as the ultimate failure to declare any kind of separate national or cultural identity. [. . .] [T]he absolute dominance of the foreign hegemony is recognized, since it amounts to acceptance of the impossibility of breaking out traditional European social roles” (202).

There is, though, a more positive view of Indianismo, and it would be unfair not to mention it once again in relation to *Il Guarany*. When it comes to the question posed by this article’s title, the answer could be found by simply substituting an “and” for the “or.” The opera does present all those features: it is the inescapable product of a racist culture (even if diluted), it is wonderfully entertaining, *and* it could also be seen as an innocent fantasy, a utopia in which different races get together and create a harmonious future. In the novel, Peri is described as “an ignorant Indian, . . . a friend, but a slave friend.” However, by the end of the story, back to his milieu, he is a king: “the tall mountains, the clouds, the waterfalls, the great rivers, the century-old trees were his throne, his canopy, his cloak and his sceptre.”⁴⁹ The message could be that the desired harmony would only come after the destruction of the old order, and, as Treece comments, the lovers could only get together “removed from the physical and social structures of the patriarchal community that have until now alienated Cecilia from the forest, [with] the barrier between [them] broken down. The relationship can no longer be defined by the hierarchies of class and race, only by their common link to the natural, forest environment that is to be the new Brazil.”⁵⁰ This utopian, escapist view, however, also proves that “the egalitarian partnership between Peri and Ceci could survive only in the imagined seclusion of the forest, safe from the historical truths of slavery, patronage, and dispossession that awaited them outside in the real world.”⁵¹

Even if it is intriguing to try to infer where Carlos Gomes’ positions stood in the political spectrum, one should always remember that his main goal was a private one. He was interested in being a successful composer in a European milieu whose main fantasy was to experience exotic societies vicariously, and in a Brazilian milieu whose main fantasy was to pretend to be European. Regardless of which perception one chooses to embrace, the myth of a peaceful assimilation of the Indian into the dominant society is something that is still deeply embedded in Brazil’s collective unconsciousness. Even if it is a hypocritical fantasy, removed from the dark reality of what really happened, it can have a powerful and sometimes positive effect in Brazilian society; most readers/listeners end up finding a drama of conciliation and tolerance in Alencar’s and Gomes’ works, glossing over the negative parts. As Sommer reminds us, these facts are not contradictory, for “simulacra, after all, can be taken for real cultural horizons, if there are willing takers.”⁵²

Notes

1. Reported in the newspaper *Correio de Sao Paulo*, quoted by David Appleby, *The Music of Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983) 92.
2. Cristina Magaldi, *Music in Imperial Rio de Janeiro: European Culture in a Tropical Milieu* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2004) x.
3. Allan Kozinn, "Feathers and Fireworks in the jungles of Brazil" (*New York Times*, November 11, 1996) C4.
4. Maria Alice Volpe, "Indianismo and Landscape in the Brazilian Age of Progress: Art Music from Carlos Gomes to Villa-Lobos, 1870s–1930s" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2001) 153.
5. See Ronald H. Dolkart, "Gomes: 'Il Guarany'" (*The Opera Quarterly* 3, no. 1, Spring 1985) 181, and Arthur Scherle, "Antonio Carlos Gomes: a Brazilian Opera Composer." (Liner notes, *Il Guarany*, SONY CLASSICAL, 1995).
6. Magaldi 153. Gomes' biographer—and daughter—Atala Carvalho also seems quite preoccupied in defending him against the accusations of being a composer of foreign music. See her *Vida de Carlos Gomes* [Life of Carlos Gomes]. Rio de Janeiro: Editora A Noite, 1946.
7. See for instance Leo Laner, quoted in Gaspare Nello Vetro, ed., *Antonio Carlos Gomes, carteggi italiani* [Antonio Carlos Gomes: letters in Italian], (Milan: Nuove Edizioni, 1970) 45.
8. See David Treece, *Exiles, Allies, Rebels: Brazil's Indianist Movement, Indigenist Politics, and the Imperial Nation-State* (London: Greenwood Press, 2000), David Haberly, *Three Sad Races: Racial Identity and National Consciousness in Brazilian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Maria Alice Volpe, *op. cit.*
9. Treece 3. It seems to me that this deleterious aspect has escaped many Brazilian commentators, maybe blinded by national pride.
10. David Appleby, *The Music of Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983) 28.
11. *Ibid.*, 29, and Haberly, 15.
12. Magaldi, xvi.
13. *Ibid.*
14. One can still see this sense of shame nowadays, when some politicians worry about how to temporarily "sweep under the rug" Brazil's unseemly poverty and violence during visits of important foreign dignitaries, or during events such as the 2006 Pan-American Games.
15. Magaldi, 47.
16. Appleby, 47.
17. Quoted in Vasco Mariz, *História da Música no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2000), translated and mentioned in Magaldi, *op. cit.*
18. Vetro, 12 (my translation).
19. To be entirely accurate, the short motive played in Peri's first entrance by the English horn, and repeated many times later, has a slightly "savage" flavor, but it is very short, and it could have been used in different contexts (and by different composers) to portray various other attributes of "non-savage" characters as well.

20. Vetro, 13. This unlikely tale seems at odds with the fact that he had already sold the rights to publish the opera in the intermission of the 1st night, which seems to suggest he had already caused quite a good impression. Incidentally, Atala Gomes affirms that his lack of business acumen made him accept too little for a work that could have given him financial security for the rest of his life.

21. Magaldi, 141.

22. Treece, 5. David Treece explores the issue in such a thorough and intelligent way that an abundance of his quotations is made necessary; no paraphrase would ever achieve his eloquence and clarity.

23. Quoted in Haberly, 163.

24. Ibid., 2.

25. Ibid.

26. Treece, 15.

27. Ibid., 1.

28. Haberly, 16.

29. Treece, 1.

30. Ibid., 9.

31. Quoted in Treece, 88.

32. Michael Sawyer, "Coloniality and Postcoloniality in Cuba and Brazil: the Noble Savage as Barometer of Subversive Discourse" (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 2000) 200.

33. Renata Wasserman, "The Red and the White: The 'Indian' Novels of José de Alencar." (*PMLA* 98.5, Oct., 1983) 819

34. Maria Eunice Moreira, *Nacionalismo literário e crítica romântica*, Porto Alegre: IEL, 1991 (Porto Alegre: IEL, 1991), quoted in Maria Alice Volpe, "Remaking the Brazilian Myth of National Foundation: 'Il Guarany'" (*Latin American Music Review* 23/2, 2002) 181.

35. Treece, 181.

36. Mentioned in Sawyer, 189–90.

37. Mentioned in both Carvalho and Scherle.

38. João Roberto Faria, *José de Alencar e o Teatro* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1987) quoted in Magaldi, 139.

39. David Brookshaw, *Paradise Betrayed: Brazilian Literature of the Indian* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1988), quoted by Volpe, *Indianismo*, 181.

40. As Treece notes, "this is the initial step in the evolution of the mutually contractual relationship between the novel's two archetypal male figures, the white patriarch and the Indian warrior" (182).

41. Quoted in Treece, 188.

42. Volpe, 182.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 190.

45. Treece, 188.

46. Volpe, 188.

47. Ibid., 190.

48. Wasserman, *Re-Inventing the New World: Cooper and Alencar* (*Comparative Literature* 36, no. 2, Spring 1984) 138

49. Quoted in Wasserman, "The Red and the White" (PMLA 98.5 (October, 1983) 820.
50. Treece, 193.
51. Ibid., 194.
52. Quoted in Sawyer, 206.

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