Werner Herzog’s avant-garde classic Fitzcarraldo (1982) is a film about a man who undertakes an absurd quest to build an opera house in the Amazonian jungle. Its eccentric protagonist is also a phonograph fanatic. For all viewers know, Fitzcarraldo’s only experience of “live” opera consists of a few furtive minutes during the opening sequence when he arrives at the Teatro Amazonas in Manaus, Brazil, to see Enrico Caruso perform the final death scene from Verdi’s Ernani. Back in his home base of Iquitos, Peru, an even more remote outpost on the capitalist frontier, he lugs around a Victor Talking Machine and plays recordings of Caruso for the local indigenous children, a parrot, and a pig. For the blond, blue-eyed maverick, these recordings fuel the desire to repeat the feat of the operatic entrepreneurs in Manaus and lure his idol ever deeper into the Amazon—to reattach the Voice to a visible body in another far-flung place. His audience, on the other hand, has no experience or knowledge of the operatic ideal, and what they hear (or so the film suggests) is not the aural reproduction or representation of a prior performance on a distant stage, but the auratic voice of a divine machine.

The phonograph, however, fails to convince the local rubber barons who control the capital on which the realization of Fitzcarraldo’s dream depends. Perhaps they know the boom is about to bust—rubber production had begun to shift to Asia by this time—or perhaps they sense that the apogee of opera has already passed. Whatever the reason, they would rather feed dollar bills to their carnivorous fish than invest in a lasting monument to art. So Fitzcarraldo sets sail down a tributary of the Amazon on an improbable mission to establish a rubber plantation deep in the heart of a region known as Cayahuari Yacu—“the land where God did not finish Creation.” As the ship advances into the territory of headhunting jíbaros, the intrepid explorer and his crew are surrounded by the beating of drums and ritualistic cries, sounds whose source is enveloped by the thick foliage and invisible to the eye. His terrified men abandon the ship, and out of desperation Fitzcarraldo fights fire with fire: he mounts the phonograph on the prow and projects His Master’s
Voice into the vast unknown. Just as he is about to concede defeat and turn around, his observers emerge from the trees in canoes and approach to offer him their labor, having taken him for the white god of their legends who has returned to finish his work—or so Fitzcarraldo believes, though he has an inkling that something is amiss, a suspicion that the only mind ensnared by this fantasy of a god who needs no means of coercion other than a beautiful voice might turn out to be his own. Sure enough, the indigenous crew cunningly foils his plan, leaving it unlikely the opera house will ever be built. The film, however, redeems this failure in one final twist when Caruso and his fellow cast members arrive all the way from Manaus and sing a Bellini opera from the deck of the battered ship for the rubber barons, children, pig, and all.

On the evening of May 11, 1927—two decades or so after Fitzcarraldo’s spectacular failure, if fictional and factual chronologies can be compared—another man with an affinity for opera embarked on a journey up the Amazon. In the previous chapter, which revolved around the Week of Modern Art held at the Theatro Municipal in February 1922, the rising stars of São Paulo’s self-declared vanguard hailed Mário de Andrade as the Brazilian counterpart to Parsifal: a mixed-race, vaguely queer variant of the hero of Wagner’s last opera who wanders the wild forest in search of the Holy Grail. Now, as if to make good on his sobriquet, the knight-errant of modernismo joined a group of locals and foreign tourists aboard a steamship on a three-month-long excursion that set sail from Rio de Janeiro and skirted the northern coast before venturing into the interior. Along the way he recorded his impressions of Belém, Solimões, Maceio, and Manaus—though strangely, he took no note of the Teatro Amazonas, perhaps because the opulent opera house had fallen into disuse and disrepair. Nor did he enrapture the natives with the otherworldly sounds of a U.S.-made machine. Armed with nothing but a pen and paper, he transcribed the tunes of the toadas, bumba-meu-boi, and other “popular” performances he heard and saw as the vessel traveled upriver all the way to Iquitos and then just past the Bolivian border before doubling back and heading for home.

On his return to São Paulo, Mário followed in the footsteps of his cinematic predecessor by taking on the role of cultural prophet. Selling the local tycoons on the virtues of high opera was not his concern: just ten years earlier Caruso himself had sung at the Theatro Municipal, the local equivalent to the Teatro Amazonas, built with the profits of the coffee boom that was fueling the city’s rapid expansion and incipient industrialization. In the pages of the Diário Nacional, a daily newspaper and official organ of the recently formed Democratic Party, Mário entertained his urban readers with anecdotal accounts of his travels, piquing their curiosity about the unfamiliar sounds he had encountered, but also issuing a dire warning: “Our popular music is a prodigious treasure, condemned to death. Phonography imposes itself as a remedy of salvation.”
Several years later, as the founding director of São Paulo’s Department of Culture, Mário de Andrade would carry out his own injunction by sending researchers far afield with phonographs and cameras and establishing one of the largest archives of ethnographic recordings in the Americas. At the time he sounded his clarion call, however, the international economic crisis that would bring Latin America’s Export Age to an end was still a year away; the top-down Revolution of 1930 had not yet installed the populist Getúlio Vargas in power; and the cultural infrastructure Mário and some of his fellow modernistas would help create only existed in the form of unfulfilled desires and increasingly audible demands. In its absence, Mário drew on his own fieldwork as well as the collections of friends to create a homegrown equivalent for the operatic art that the elite imported from the Old World. Toward the end of 1927, while finishing revisions of *Macunaíma*, he drafted an outline of scenes for an operatic version of his novel, which features a race- and shape-shifting “hero with no character” who undertakes an epic journey out of the Amazon to São Paulo. The following year he completed a libretto for a comic opera about a folklore figure named Pedro Malazarte known for his perpetual wandering, penchant for trickery, and evasion of manual labor. Plans for the musical component of *Macunaíma* never came to fruition, but *Pedro Malazarte* was scored by Camargo Guarnieri, a young composer who shared Mário’s desire to create a legitimately “national” opera by weaving together performance traditions of the disparate races and regions of Brazil. Over the next few years Mário would also begin drafts for an operatic ballet and a three-act opera about the collapse of the coffee economy. But although his collaborators’ music was publicly performed, he failed to finish most of the libretti, and even during his tenure at the Department of Culture, when he oversaw programming at the Theatro Municipal, this Parsifal never sought to see his own operas staged.

The last chapter revisited one of the foundational moments of the modernista avant-garde. In explaining the simultaneous centrality of the operatic stage and the absence of theater at the Week of Modern Art, I drew on Roberto Schwarz’s notion of “ideas out of place,” which traces a peculiar sense of dissonance at the core of Brazilian identity back to the late nineteenth century, when the country’s increasing integration into global commodity circuits cast into stark relief the incongruity of ideals such as liberty, equality, and economic rationalization in a society founded on slavery and the practice of patronage. The late 1920s, though, was a time of impending crisis when long-standing tensions within modernismo flowered into open animosity. If opera had originally served as a lingua franca among modernista artists, it now became a prism for refracting their growing ideological differences; and if references to race had once reinforced the modernizing claims of paulista exceptionalism, the geographical diffusion of modernismo set the stage for debates over the symbolic value of the “primitive.” These shifting conceptions of national culture were connected to changes in the global economy—a dynamic evident in the efforts of recording companies to expand their operations in Brazil by opening local
studios, building factories, and supplementing their imports of classical music (such as opera) with more recordings of “popular,” “Brazilian” genres.

In what follows I tease out a sinuous, shared logic linking Mário’s national opera project to his passion for the phonograph, a technology with the ability to record and reproduce sounds at a different time and in a distant locale, or “out of place.” The first part of the chapter offers a synoptic account of the early phonograph industry in the United States and Brazil, laying the groundwork for the subsequent sections by tracking common concerns of temporality, ephemerality, and race across the realms of ethnographic, operatic, and “popular” recordings. Central to this narrative is the Victor Talking Machine Company, not only because it was the industry leader and was especially known for its opera selections, but also because Mário had close ties to its personnel in Brazil. I delve into these details in the following section, which connects the modernistas’ turn toward the “primitive” to the mass culturalization of the malandro: a trickster-like folk figure who lives by his wits (rather than “productive” work) and became notorious in samba songs for his womanizing, quasi-criminal ways. Finally, the last part of the chapter considers how all these elements coincide in Mário’s project to create a national opera, namely in his libretto for Pedro Malazarte and discussions surrounding a never-drafted opera of Macunaima.4

Though partly based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in situ, Mário’s operas de- and recontextualize cultural traditions, incorporating Amazonian dance-dramas into plots set in other parts of Brazil and integrating emboladas into arias. Malazarte (Bad Art) and Macunaima (Great Evil): the protagonists of his first two operatic experiments are itinerant figures, moving agents and mediums of exchange whose names also indicate their deviation from the “good,” or “fine” arts (belas artes). Both exemplify what Esther Gabara characterizes as Mário’s “errant modernism”—a term she derives from his predilection for the verb errar, meaning “to wander” but also “to err.” Gabara, like many critics, sees such “erring” in positive terms, as both an ethical and aesthetic strategy that allows Mário to formulate a kind of “critical nationalism.” This chapter, on the other hand, resists the impulse to redeem these two malandros and explores their role in circulating all the “bad” feelings Schwarz associates with ideas out of place. My readings show how Malazarte and Macunaima’s conflicted stance toward capital plays out not only in their aversion to physical labor, but also in the implicit aversion to performance at stake in Mário’s would-be operas, which seem to have been written for the archive—as though the archive were a spectral stage.

**Fugitive Sounds**

In a discussion of the phonographic face-off between red men and white conqueror in Herzog’s film, Michael Taussig identifies this scene as an example of
what he describes as one of the “frontier rituals of technological supremacy.”

In the United States and parts of Europe, the image of naive natives entranced by the talking (or singing) machine became a staple during the early decades of the twentieth century, turning up in everything from ethnographic field notes and docudramas to popular travel narratives and advertisements for the phonograph. Taussig turns the anthropological tables and asks: why was (and is) the white man so fascinated with the fascination of the other? Pointing to a primitivism interwoven into the Western rationalization of technology, he argues that what is really at stake in staging such encounters is a desire to replenish the magical power of mechanical mimesis. If the first public demonstrations of the phonograph following its invention in 1877 had been greeted with a sense of wonder and awe, the later replication of this scenario on the far edges of empire serves to “emphasize and embellish the genuine mystery and accomplishment of mechanical reproduction in an age when technology itself, after the flurry of excitement at a new breakthrough, is not seen as mystique or poetry but as routine” (208). But he neglects to mention that *Fitzcarraldo* adds another twist: although the film underscores the irrationality of its title character’s passion and his ironic affinity with those he exploits, what their apparent reverence restores for him is not only the primitive power of the modern machine but also the enchantment of an increasingly “outmoded” art.

Released in 1982 (the same year the first commercial compact discs were produced), *Fitzcarraldo* revels in a counterlogic of capitalist development driven by the energy of the residual and soon-to-be obsolete. Adorno is not the only critic to note that even in its heyday opera almost always depicted the feudal relations of an earlier era; obsessed with the political intrigues of medieval counts and the ill-fated loves of ancient Ethiopian princesses, it resembled “a museum of bygone images and gestures, to which a retrospective need clings.” The phonograph, in contrast, was initially tied to an emergent mode of managerial capitalism due to Edison’s original decision to market it as a dictation device for use in offices and tout its potential to boost productivity. Yet it too was imbued from the very beginning with an air of déjà vu: in borrowing the name of his invention from a system of shorthand called phonography (sound writing) first introduced in 1837 and subjected to numerous revisions, Edison also echoed a long line of promises to offer a more accurate means of capturing what he fancifully referred to as “sounds hitherto fugitive.” The earliest tinfoil recordings were so fragile they perished when removed from the machine, and even wax cylinders quickly wore out. Despite this, one of the most common claims for the phonograph’s novelty and technological prowess was its ability to permanently preserve the voices of the dead. Jonathan Sterne situates its emergence in the context of changing attitudes toward death in the late Victorian era and likens sound recording to a process of “embalming” the voice. Just as the embalment of bodies for funereal display (a relatively new custom at the time) chemically
transforms and fixes the tissues of the body in order to maintain its outward appearance, sound recording “preserved the exteriority of the voice while completely transforming its interiority,” detaching it from the living subject and nexus of social relations out of which it arose in order to preserve—or rather re-create—the semblance of its original sound.

This capacity to artifactualize aural experience also explains the phonograph’s appeal for those seeking to save the sounds of “dying” cultures. Throughout the nineteenth century there had been numerous attempts in the United States and in parts of Spanish America to circumvent the limitations of the Roman alphabet by devising phonetic systems of notation for indigenous languages. (Strangely, there is little evidence of such efforts in Brazil.) Unsatisfied with the results, the Harvard ethnologist Jesse Walter Fewkes transported a phonograph and a box of wax cylinders up to the coast of Maine in March 1890 to record the songs and speech of the Passamaquoddy. He later repeated the experiment among the Zunis of New Mexico, and within a few months he had published a spate of articles announcing that the marvelous invention offered new hope for “preserving the songs and tales of races which are fast becoming extinct.”

As Brian Hochman has pointed out, Fewkes’s insistence on the scientific value of the phonograph was not fundamentally about its accuracy; in fact, the range of frequencies the early machines could capture was relatively restricted. Rather, it had to do with the possibility of eliminating errors of interpretation and minimizing the mediation of fickle ears. Just a year earlier the anthropologist Franz Boas had explained the problem of “alternating sounds,” or seeming variations in the pronunciation of indigenous words, by arguing that the issue lay not with the speakers or singers, but with the faulty perception of their nonnative listeners. In keeping with the paradigm of cultural relativism for which he became known, Boas contended that culture shaped the senses, leaving people prone to a form of “sound-blindness” when it came to distinguishing the unfamiliar phonemes and inflections of other groups.

Race was no less of a factor in the first commercial recordings, which frequently evoked an impression of ephemerality by drawing on listeners’ experiences of the popular stage. Although blackface minstrelsy had been popular in the United States for decades, it gained a new lease on life right about the same time as the Passamaquoddy experiment when several fledgling companies started to record music to be played in the new “automatic phonographs,” coin-operated machines with earphones located in hotels, train stations, saloons, movie theaters, circuses, and eventually in “phonograph parlors.” The improvisatory ethos of minstrel shows, with their lively exchanges between actors and audience, may have helped to underscore the
relative fixity of recordings versus the contingency of what would later come to be called “live” performance. The remediation of blackface minstrelsy in coon song recordings is only the most striking example of how the phonograph destabilized what Lisa Gitelman calls the “visuality of music” and its connections to the vexed visuality of race.13 Noting that the height of the “coon craze” coincided with the Plessy v. Ferguson case of 1896, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of segregation laws and established the so-called one-drop rule, Gitelman contends that “on the heels of the Plessy decision, which had determined ‘blackness’ to be a matter of blood, not skin color, the meaning of music thickened” (134–135). Specific melodies, dialects, and musical traits such as syncopation came to bear the burden of signifying an intrinsic racial or ethnic difference; paradoxically, the split between sight and sound facilitated a kind of “aural essentialism” while also allowing elements of blackface and other working-class forms to enter the parlor rooms of the middle-class (136). Karl Hagstrom Miller, too, argues that between the 1880s and the 1920s both the music industry and the newly professionalized discipline of folklore studies engaged in a process of “segregating sound” that willfully obscured the hybrid origins of the blues, hillbilly music, and other “southern” genres.14

An important if underacknowledged aspect of this dynamic was the geopolitical pretensions of Uncle Sam. The U.S. intervention in the Cuban war of independence and the subsequent conflict in the Philippines were a boon for the nascent recording industry, which had started to market the phonograph as a home entertainment device only two years earlier. The top hit of 1898 was “A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight,” a coon song adopted as the quasi-official anthem of Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders. Ragtime numbers said to be favorites of the troops acquired a patriotic flair in recordings by military brass bands, and a new genre called the “descriptive selection” purported to re-create the cacophony of notable battles.15 The consolidation of the industry coincided with the U.S. occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico (and later Haiti), the construction of the Panama Canal, and an influx of U.S. investments in mining, railroads, and export agriculture, all of which in conjunction gave rise to what O. Henry—in a novel that grew out of a short story about a phonograph—first called the “banana republic.”16 Early on, companies realized that although there was money to be made in importing phonographs and records of U.S. and European music, customers also desired to hear the voices of prominent local musicians and more familiar “national” styles. Columbia started to make recordings in Mexico City in 1903, and Edison and Victor quickly followed suit; within a few years all had established a presence elsewhere in Latin America, with Havana and Buenos Aires the prime spots.

Brazil, in this respect as in many others, marched to a slightly different drum. Although the first documented exhibition of the phonograph took place in Rio de Janeiro in February 1878, just six months after its invention,
it was not until 1889 that a local representative of Edison’s National Phonograph Company undertook a systematic effort to popularize the machine. Among its most eager enthusiasts was the emperor, Dom Pedro II. Over the course of several days leading up to the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic, which would force them into exile, Edison’s agent made recordings of Dom Pedro and other members of the royal court speaking and singing. As Flora Süssekind writes, “The recordings had a somewhat ambiguous effect: at the same time that they preserved and reproduced the voices, they also seemed to divest them of their earlier aura, in a cruel way. The voice of the emperor, recorded on November 9, was the voice of a deposed monarch only one week later.” Yet nostalgia for the empire lingered, as Fred Figner discovered nearly two years later when he arrived in the northern coastal city of Belém. Figner, a Czech emigrant naturalized in the United States, had spent fifteen months organizing phonograph exhibitions throughout the rest of Latin America before deciding to try his luck in Brazil. In Belém he played recordings he had brought from the United States and made cylinders of lundus, modinhas, and songs from operettas, as well as (amid other miscellanea) a humorous diatribe against the republic delivered by a local lawyer. Following a lengthy detour up the Amazon River to Manaus, he returned to the coast and headed south to Fortaleza, Natal, Recife, and Salvador, arriving in Rio on April 21, 1892.

The ventures of Figner offer a glimpse into the dizzying geographies of culture and capital out of which the industry emerged. For several years he continued to tour through Brazil, making forays to Montevideo and Buenos Aires and eventually to Milan, where he recorded opera stars at La Scala and reportedly gave Verdi his first introduction to the apparatus. In 1897, when a Canadian engineer resident in Rio began to import phonographs to Brazil, Figner went into business selling cylinder recordings and discs. His first catalogue (issued in 1900 under the name Casa Edison) was made up entirely of imports, but just two years later it featured many selections he himself had recorded, including fifty modinhas, eighty-one lundus and cançonetas, fourteen speeches, sixteen polcas (polkas), and five maxixes. These were released on seven- and ten-inch discs under the label of Zonophone, a short-lived, Berlin-based company that established a partnership with Casa Edison. In fact, Figner worked closely with all the major foreign firms operating in Brazil: in collaboration with an Englishman named Bernard Wilson Shaw, he started a series of graphophone clubs to help popularize the Columbia brand, and he engineered many of the early Brazilian recordings released under the Columbia and Victor labels. His closest relationship, however, was with Odeon, another Berlin-based company founded in 1903 by a group that included Fredrick M. Prescott, the former head of Zonophone—now under the control of the U.K.-based Gramophone Company. Odeon’s Brazilian discs were originally fabricated in London by the Italian-based Fonotipia Company, but at the end of 1912 it opened the first major record factory in
South America in the Tijuca neighborhood of Rio on land owned by Figner, who oversaw its construction and management.\textsuperscript{22}

For more than a decade thereafter Odeon would continue to dominate the Brazilian market with the aid of Fred Figner and Casa Edison, which opened branches in São Paulo as well as a number of other cities and acted as the exclusive distributor for Odeon until 1927. But while none of its rivals came close to matching the quantity and diversity of its “Brazilian” recordings, Odeon faced stiff competition from the Victor Talking Machine Company with regard to imports of opera and other classical music recordings. Victor had grown out of the failed business ventures of Emile Berliner, the Prussian-born inventor of the gramophone (which played discs as opposed to cylinders).\textsuperscript{23} In 1901, after a legal dispute forced Berliner to fold his operations, he sold his U.S. patent rights to Eldridge Reeves Johnson, a machinist in the company who reorganized the business under the name of Victor and quickly formalized his already close working relationship with the Gramophone Company of England, an entity established a few years earlier to license and market the Berliner technology in Europe. As part of their agreement Victor acquired the right to share Gramophone’s trademark image of the little dog Nipper, along with the caption “His Master’s Voice.”\textsuperscript{24} But what would prove even more significant was their deal to share recording matrices and divvy up the world market, with Victor laying claim to North and South America and parts of Asia, while Gramophone staked out Europe, the British Empire, Russia, and Japan.\textsuperscript{25}

There is a reason that the phonograph Fitzcarraldo hauls with him on his sylvan trek is a Victor. Among its competitors the company was known for its carefully crafted image, the fruit of a dual strategy involving an unprecedented emphasis on advertising and a concerted campaign to distance the phonograph from what one historian calls its “honky-tonk past.”\textsuperscript{26} Until then the apparatus itself had been a functionalist affair, with its mechanical parts on display for all and sundry to see; in a bid to rebrand it as a marker of domestic gentility, Victor shrouded it in ever more elaborate wood casings and billed it as better than a box seat ticket at the Palais Garnier or La Scala.

Opera had been popular in the United States for much of the nineteenth century, with works (or liberal adaptations) often performed in translation and on the same playbill as farces or minstrel shows. During the Gilded Age, however, what Lawrence W. Levine refers to as the “sacralization of culture” enthroned it as the epitome of “highbrow” art.\textsuperscript{27} Although the Metropolitan Opera House in New York opened its doors in 1883—just a year before construction began on the Teatro Amazonas in Manaus—the genre came to owe much of its cachet to a medium that denuded the music of its hyperbolic gestures and sumptuous settings. In 1903 Victor signed the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso to an exclusive contract, and over the next two decades he would anchor their Red Seal line of records, which were sold at inflated prices to assure their prestige. In truth, most listeners only learned the three-minute
excerpts featured on discs, and many of the songs recorded by opera stars weren’t opera at all: Victor records often included both arias and popular tunes performed in an operatic style, such as the Romanian soprano Alma Gluck’s version of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” (written by the African American minstrel composer James A. Bland) or the Irish folk songs sung by the U.S. tenor John McCormack.  

Although the company sold three times as many records under its cheaper Black Label (including everything from minstrel numbers and turkey trots to white Dixieland jazz), fewer of these discs seem to have made it to Brazil.  

Victor registered its name there in 1904, but it had started to sell its wares even earlier through Casa Edison; in 1907 one of its representatives (perhaps Figner) held a session with local artists such as João Barros and Cadete, and the former circus clown and future opera singer Mário Pinheiro recorded dozens of discs at Victor’s headquarters in Camden, New Jersey, in 1910.  

Almost all of the singers were white, though some of the composers were not, and a number of the songs were rhythmically or thematically marked by race: notable titles included “Mulata vaidoza,” or “Vain Mulatta” (a lundu), “A abolicionista” (by the female soloist Medina de Souza), and “Imitação d’um batuque africano” (an imitation of an “African” percussion session, though the piece features a male vocalist and guitar). Still, Victor’s local recordings paled in number to those put out by Odeon. To an even greater extent than in the United States it put its stock in the operatic anxieties and classical predilections of the elite and a small but aspiring middle class: advertisements featured the same drawings of Caruso or genteel couples envisioning distant orchestras while seated before a Victrola, and the text was often a direct translation from ads in English.  

This situation would undergo a major shake-up in the 1920s. During World War I the disruptions to the market in Europe opened up opportunities for recording companies in both the United States and Brazil, but by late 1924 the entire industry found itself in a crisis provoked in part by the arrival of broadcast radio. Salvation came in the guise of what one Brazilian magazine called the “Revolution of 1925”—the conversion from acoustic or “mechanical” recording to a new electrical era. Before this time recording had involved no microphones or other means of amplification; sound waves were simply funneled through one or more metal horns to the recording diaphragm, which was linked to a stylus that cut grooves into the surface of a wax master disc. Amid great secrecy Victor and Columbia cut a deal with Western Electric, which had developed a new microphone-based electrical system that resulted in a dramatically sharper sound and accurately reproduced a much wider range of frequencies. Victor took the lead in promoting the new technology, particularly in Brazil, where the enthusiasm was fanned by the formation of phonograph clubs sponsored by Casa Paul J. Christoph, an importer with stores in Rio and São Paulo and the sole distributor for Victor during this period. In its inaugural edition, dated August 15, 1928,
the Rio-based journal *Phono-arte* explained its own appearance by declaring that yesterday, the phonograph was a “simple machine, looked on with curiosity and disapproval by ‘cultured people’ and people ‘of judgment.’” Yet due to the vast improvement in sound quality, it now “gathers around itself an elite of amateurs, artists, musicians, and critics. A noisome fairground instrument with a twangy sound of old tin, suitable for augmenting the vulgarity of popular joys, the phonograph presently delights the most delicate and demanding ears.”

Surprisingly, the contents of the magazine were not quite as stuffy as such rhetoric might lead a reader to expect. To be sure, there were articles on opera and classical music, along with updates on new developments in the industry. But the serious attention and space the journal dedicated to “popular” music suggests that the category of “art” was in flux. In the United States, even Victor had ceded to the trends by making tentative incursions into the market for “race records” made by and marketed toward African American audiences: although the company was better known for its hillbilly music and white jazz orchestras, it began a successful campaign in 1926 to record black blues and jazz artists, signing stars such as Jelly Roll Morton and Ben-nie Moten. In Brazil, on the other hand, the absence of any equivalent to Jim Crow laws (or a codified tradition of blackface performance) contributed to a more diffuse configuration of musical “authenticity,” embodiment, and race. The first electrical recordings made in Brazil, released in 1928 by Casa Edison in association with Odeon, were of Francisco Alves (a white songster) singing a new, more syncopated style of samba from the favela of Estácio in Rio, an area commonly known as Little Africa; just a few months later two of the composers, Ismael Silva and Alcebiades Barcelos, were among those who founded Deixa Falar, the first of Rio’s legendary samba schools. The following year Almirante and his Bando de Tangarás (also white) scored a hit for the Parlophon label with “Na Pavuna,” the first studio samba to abandon orchestral accompaniment in favor of the percussive *batucada* instrumenta-
tion of *samba de morro*. Rather than segregating sound, the rise of samba and its popularization via radio and recordings fostered the emergence of a so-called national rhythm celebrated as the common patrimony of a people defined as racially mixed.

Samba was also a prime factor in the nationalization of a new cultural icon called the *malandro*: a street-smart, womanizing hustler who enjoys the good life and flaunts his consumption of wealth but refuses to commit himself to a steady, “honest” job. Marc Hertzman has connected this figure to antiva-grancy campaigns in the postslavery period and struggles over social mobility in the context of an emerging mass culture industry. Following abolition and the declaration of the republic, new penal codes required individuals to dwell in a fixed residence and made it illegal to exercise occupations deemed offensive to good morals; although applicable to all, the laws were selectively applied and accompanied by rhetoric stigmatizing Afro-descendants as lazy
and ill suited to a modern labor regime. Musicians were frequent targets—not only because their profession lacked the “discipline” of wage work, but also because sound recording and other new cultural forms such as teatro de revista, or musical revues, aroused elite anxieties by affording black and mixed-race musicians greater visibility (as well as audibility) and alternative means of monetary gain. Circulated in song lyrics and adopted as a persona by singers, the malandro put a positive—or at least ambivalent—spin on the negative stereotypes associated with the ideologia da vadiagem (ideology of idleness). The first high-profile, self-declared malandro, a black musician named Eduardo das Neves who recorded “O malandro” for Odeon in 1910 and was a featured performer for Casa Edison, wore a blue suit jacket and silk hat, flouted his disdain for manual labor, and boasted of his prowess with white women. Yet in contrast to a tendency to stress the malandro’s pre- or anticapitalist qualities, Hertzman highlights Neves’s efforts to secure authorship rights to his songs and style himself as an “audacious entrepreneur who embraced wealth, capitalism, and the promises of republican citizenship.”

Samba was not the only game in town: Phono-arte also commented on, carried advertisements for, and published the lyrics of toadas, maxixes, marchas, ranchos carnavalescos, cócos nortistas, canções sertanejas, and choros, among others. Some were urban genres, but others were “folk” traditions from rural regions whose mutation into mass cultural commodities was the result of migration and urbanization, the growth of folklore studies, and the expansion of the recording industry. Odeon, which had long had a corner on the market for “national” discs, soon discovered it had company. Brunswick, the second-largest U.S. phonograph company, gained a license to sell its products in 1927 and quickly established recording facilities and a factory in Rio. The following year the German company Parlophon followed suit, while Columbia switched it up by building its pressing plant in Rio but basing its studio in São Paulo. Victor did the reverse: although it opened a factory and secondary studio in São Paulo, it located its main studio in Rio, where the acclaimed black composer and flautist Pixinguinha led its house orchestra. The company continued to brandish its operatic image, but if Caruso (who died in 1921) had once been its public face, it now courted Carmen Miranda (who later gained fame in the United States as the “lady in the tutti frutti hat”) and pioneered the practice of sending musicians out on trucks to play its artists’ new tunes before Carnaval and drum up demand.

Michael Denning has used the phrase “noise uprising” to describe the sudden surge in recordings of vernacular music genres in Brazil and other (post) colonial countries around the world at this time. Yet to hear Victor tell it, its mission was anything but making noise. On October 21, 1928, the Diário Nacional of São Paulo carried an article on the Victor factory, which was still under construction, and related a conversation with W. G. Ridge, the inspector general of Victor’s operations in Brazil. Putting a new spin on
a familiar discourse, Ridge begins by stating that the progress of a people
depends on art, and in modern society there is no better “stimulus” than the
phonographic disc. During a live performance errors can be forgiven, but
a recording immortalizes every defect, demanding nothing short of perfec-
tion from the performers. In explaining why the company chose to locate
its headquarters in São Paulo, he shamelessly panders to the residents’ sense
of self-importance, giving kudos to all the (unnamed) artists in the city who
earn applause at home and abroad, and praising the local music organiza-
tions over and above those in Rio, which are said to suffer from a paucity
of government support, cohesion, and (he puts it bluntly) “artistic spirit.”
Nor is this all: along with its “perfectly organized, complete orchestras” and
other musical institutions “perfectly prepared to record a series of magnifi-
cent discs,” the city boasts “skilled, diligent workers.” São Paulo is a place
where “artistic advancements run parallel with material advancements,” and
where people “can distinguish good art from bad.”

In other words, São Paulo was a place where capitalism was in place. This
dream of a modern music factory where the division of labor was an
“obligatory rule” (as it was at the Victor headquarters in Camden) seems to
have impressed the reporter for the Diário Nacional, but there was evidence
of unease from other quarters. José da Cruz Cordeiro Filho, one of the edi-
tors of Phono-arte, would take a job with Victor in 1931, two years after it
was sold to the Radio Corporation of America amid a series of mergers and
acquisitions in the industry. Despite this, and despite its own obsession with
the ins and outs of the business, the journal occasionally got its nationalis-
tic feathers in a bunch. Not long after the new factory in São Paulo started
pressing records, an editorial on the changing nature of audition took a curi-
ous flight into science fiction as it envisioned a future in which “American
managers will rationalize musical production, just as they have done with
the automobile and agricultural machines.” The “Yankees,” it predicted,
would reduce the “truly fantastic” quantity of musical material and limit the
number of orchestras, leaving only as many as were required to carry out the
diffusion of all remaining works across the globe. The “elite figure” whose
sensibilities had been entirely formed by recorded sound would of course live
apart from the “inferior races”— yet contrary to what one might expect, and
“as a curiosity, in certain picturesque countries deprived of easily exploitable
natural riches, some primitive tribes will be authorized and even invited to
live according to antiquated forms of civilization, out of historic interest and
as a pastime for scholars [os sábios].”

Progress depends on the persistence of the primitive. The editorial ends in
the same bitterly ironic tone, with its authors imagining that “once in a while
a civilized person, summoned by ancestral memories, will ask himself with a
certain apprehension if the industrialization of art constitutes an unalloyed
benefit.” If his answer is no, the editors of Phono-arte suggest, he would be
wise to remain silent lest the “eugenic judges” sentence him to sterilization.
Chapter 5

Wayward Primitives

It is amusing to imagine the expressions of horror and disgust the scholars in this scenario might make if in their travels they encountered a primitive like Macunaíma—the improbable, grossly inappropriate protagonist of Mário de Andrade’s novelistic masterpiece and could-have-been (but wasn’t) dramatic dance and opera. This “hero without any character” is inspired by a legend of the Pemon people, and his name in their language means “Great Evil,” but the novel is a ribald pastiche that mocks any pretense of anthropological authenticity. Born in the Amazon to the fictitious Tapunhama tribe, Macunaíma is an aberration, a black man-child who morphs (temporarily) into an elegant white prince. He is rude, crude, lazy, infantile, amoral, and lascivious—a primitivist fantasy gone epically awry. Unlike Fitzcarraldo, and in contrast to his own creator, he journeys out of the jungle to São Paulo in search of the *muiraquitã*, an amulet given to him by his lover but later lost and now in the possession of a man-eating Peruvian capitalist. After outwitting his enemy and traipsing through the strange flora and fauna of the city, Macunaíma returns to the forest with the *muiraquitã*, only to lose it again when he is seduced and dismembered by a *iara*, or river mermaid, at which point he decides to call it quits and turn himself into the constellation of Ursa Major. Before ascending to the heavens, he tells his story to a parrot, which—as readers learn in the epilogue—repeated the tale to the author one day when he came upon the place where Macunaíma and his tribe had lived. The Tapunhamas and their language are now extinct, leaving only a bird to record and replay the sounds of their dying culture: “In the silence of the Uraricoera only the parrot had rescued from oblivion those happenings and the language which had disappeared. Only the parrot had preserved in that vast silence the words and the deeds of the hero.”

If the modernista movement was São Paulo-centric in its origins, it became more dispersed as the 1920s progressed and clusters of artists and writers in other parts of the country established ties to the paulistas through personal correspondence, the circulation of journals, and visits to the city. Meanwhile the loose coalition convoked for the Week of Modern Art in 1922 dissolved, and more of the participants began to look outward to the diverse regions and cultures of Brazil. One early milestone was the “modernista caravan” of 1924, when a group that included Mário and Oswald de Andrade and the painter Tarsila do Amaral escorted the French writer Blaise Cendrars on an excursion to the old colonial mining towns of Minas Gerais during Holy Week. A stranger case was the embrace of indigenous mythology by the conservative wing of modernismo known as *verde-amarelismo* (a reference to the green and gold colors on the Brazilian flag). It was at the end of 1926 that Menotti del Picchia, Plínio Salgado, and Cassiano Ricardo issued their first call for the “Revolution of the *Anta*,” adopting as their emblem the tapir, a short-snouted ungulate said to serve as a totem for some Amazonian
groups. An herbivore that ingested indiscriminately, the tapir stood for the lack of racial prejudice in Brazil, its capacity to absorb waves of immigrants, and the desire for a “Tupi nationalism” that was not “intellectual” but “practical” and “sentimental.” The Tupi were the only race that had “objectively disappeared”—less than half a million indigenous remained—yet in doing so they lived on in the assimilationist spirit of Brazil, becoming “the only race that subjectively exercises over all the others the action that destroys their characteristic traits.”

It was partly in response to this bizarre “school” that Oswald de Andrade and his collaborators launched their infamous Revista de Antropofagia. Whereas the Tupi nationalists recycled the image of the passive Indian whose destiny was to disappear, the Anthropophagists put a new spin on the stereotype of the cannibalistic Indian who bites back. The original inhabitants of Brazil had ritualistically consumed their enemies in order to absorb their strength; according to Oswald and company, the way for modern-day Brazilians to escape the cycle of cultural dependency was to follow their predecessors’ lead and not simply reject influences from Europe or the United States, but rip them to shreds and creatively digest them to generate something new. The avant-garde writer set the tone for the movement’s campy primitivism in his manifesto, published in the inaugural issue of the journal in May 1928 and dated “in the 374th Year of the Swallowing of the Bishop Sardinha”—an allusion to the fate of the first Catholic bishop of Brazil. Playing on the fact that Montaigne had drawn inspiration for his “noble savage” from the egalitarian customs of the Tupinamba, Oswald flippantly declared, “We already had Communism. We already had surrealist language. The Golden Age.” Back in 1922 on the stage of the Theatro Municipal, he had mockingly evoked the embarrassing spectacle of Il Guarany, Carlos Gomes’s opera (based on a novel by José Alencar) in which white actors wearing feather dusters enacted a foundational fiction all the more implausible for being sung in Italian. In a further twist on that motif, he now boasted that in contrast to Europeans, “we were never catechized. What we really made was Carnaval. The Indian dressed as senator of the Empire. Making believe he’s Pitt. Or performing in Alencar’s operas, full of worthy Portuguese sentiments.” The movement was all about the “anthropophagist in knickerbockers and not the operatic Indian,” yet in shrugging its shoulders at logic and making mincemeat of Romantic notions of authenticity, it also paradoxically redeemed the incongruous image of the white man in Indian drag.

As one of the few modernistas (and certainly the most prominent) who was clearly of mixed race, Mário de Andrade stood in an awkward relation to all of this. Menotti del Picchia and Plínio Salgado had made innuendos about his skin color since the Week of Modern Art, but Mário would have his bitterest exchanges with the Anthropophagists. Oswald too had a penchant for making jests about his skin color and sexuality, and the tensions between the two friends came to a head in 1928–1929. From the outset Mário had
been wary of the new movement’s aggressive irony, and perhaps also of the way it dragged the figure of the Indian into the middle of increasingly ideological battles: following the Revolution of 1930, Oswald would join the ranks of the Communist Party, and Plínio Salgado would found the fascist Integralist Party. The straw that broke the camel’s back seems to have been when the Revista de Antropofagia took to identifying Mário as “our Miss São Paulo translated into the masculine” and “Miss Macunaíma.” Based on extensive (if still mostly secondhand) research into indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultures, Macunaíma had been hailed as an unrivaled masterpiece of modernismo, and the Anthropophagists had been quick to claim it as a realization of their principles. Its author’s decision to break with their leader sent ripples far and wide, prompting even writers and artists in distant cities such as Recife to declare their allegiance to one or the other.

The “humor” of the Miss Macunaíma jab had to do with the contrast between Mário’s absurdly lewd, hypersexual savage and his own famously discreet, virginal persona. It also took aim at a certain purchase on the primitive that he enjoyed as a result of his ambiguous racial identity as well as his scholarly expertise and recent firsthand experience. The copious references in his novel to indigenous mythology and Amazonian flora and fauna had mostly come from the writings of the German ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg, and his depiction of a candomblé ritual in Rio drew on information from the musician Pixinguinha. But not long after finishing his first draft, in May 1927, the author himself embarked on his three-month journey up the Amazon River. Much to his chagrin (or so he claimed), he showed up to the dock in Rio to find himself the lone gentleman accompanying Olívia Guedes Penteado, daughter of the first (and last) Baron of Pirapitingui and a wealthy patron of the arts, who was traveling with her twenty-year-old niece Margarida and Dulce, daughter of Tarsila do Amaral. The Brazilian president had alerted officials in cities and towns along the way to the arrival of the “Coffee Queen,” as Mário jokingly called his esteemed companion, and lavish receptions awaited them at their major stops. In his quixotic diary of his travels, Mário blatantly blends fantasy with fact and depicts himself as an awkward turista aprendiz (apprentice tourist), parodying the scientific pretensions and conventions found in the writings of earlier explorers, including Koch-Grünberg and the Brazilian sertanistas who led government-funded expeditions in charge of surveying the interior. Rather than a redoubt of absolute otherness like the one burlesqued in the Phonoarte editorial, his Amazon is one where the same U.S. film is showing in every little cinema along the river. Yet it is also a sonorous place, and in addition to his diary and hundreds of photographs, Mário returned to São Paulo with notes on songs and other performance traditions he had read about but never before heard or seen.

Not until several years later, with the creation of the University of São Paulo in 1934 and the arrival of visiting professors such as the young Claude
Phonography, Operatic Ethnography, and Other Bad Arts

Lévi-Strauss, would anthropology in Brazil start to acquire the outlines of a formal academic discipline. Mário himself would play a pivotal role in this process: along with Lévi-Strauss and his wife Dina he established a Society of Ethnography and Folklore within the Department of Culture, and he is still acknowledged as a founder of the field of ethnomusicology for his copious writings in this area and his commissioning and collecting of ethnographic recordings. As early as 1921, however, he had started to amass notations and observations of popular music genres in and around São Paulo. Following his return from the Amazon, while finishing revisions to Macunaíma, he completed his landmark Ensaio sobre música brasileira, which proposed to systematize the study of Brazilian music and provide a catalogue of melodies he and his growing network of correspondents had notated. He also started to write for the Diário Nacional, the new newspaper of the Partido Democrático (PD). Founded in early 1926, the PD comprised members of a growing middle-class of liberal professionals with key allies among the coffee planters. Its principal demands were the secret vote, the independence of the judiciary, and an end to the corruption associated with the Partido Republicano Paulista (PRP), which had held a tight grip on the state’s political scene for half a century. For Mário, who on multiple occasions throughout his life confessed his discomfort with politics, the appeal of the party lay in its national outlook and emphasis on expanding government action in the areas of education and culture. Along with a handful of other modernistas including Sérgio Milliet and Antônio de Alcântara Machado, he formed part of a small cultural wing of the party that gathered at the home of Paulo Duarte, one of its founders, to discuss their shared interest in folklore, draw up hypothetical plans for new institutions devoted to Brazilian culture—and listen to phonograph recordings.

The Diário Nacional allotted ample space to all of these preoccupations. Shortly after Mário’s return from the Amazon the newspaper interviewed him about his trip, and a few months later he recounted his experience as a spectator at a ciranda, a dance-drama revolving around the death and resurrection of a carão (the limpkin or crying bird). According to Mário, he and other tourists happened upon the scene in a small settlement of tapuios, or acculturated (often mixed-blood) Amazonians, near the town of Tefé on the Solimões River. Dressed in “extravagant” apparel and looking like explorers in their “pull-overs” and “colonial hats,” the outsiders observed a jovial parade of young women and men in equally odd attire, with hats inspired by native headdresses and shirts and trousers of those “same crude colors with which Tarsila do Amaral so wisely Brazilianized her paintings.” A buffoonish figure playing the part of a priest led the procession to the home of a Syrian rubber trader, where the ciranda took place. All of the action, Mário notes, was narrated by soloists, whose role he compares to the Testo, or Istorico, in classical oratorios—a genre closely related to opera (as the last chapter explains), though the drama is only sung rather than fully staged. Tellingly,
he dismisses the dramatic aspect of the performance as a poor knockoff of the *bumba-meu-boi*, a ritualistic dance-drama from northeastern Brazil in which a bull is killed and brought back to life. The ciranda’s dance, much like a children’s circle dance, was similarly “monotonous, without any originality, primitive.” Yet the poverty of these elements only highlights the fact that “what is really of value is the music.” Mário singles out for its particular beauty the chorus’s lamentation over the death of the *carão* bird, one of the two motifs he was able to notate. Finally, he ends with a revelation: this music is astonishingly similar to Scandinavian folk songs, differing only in certain “rhythmic deformations.” Deep in the Amazon, “among people absolutely untraveled and isolated,” are sounds that seem uncannily out of place.

This amateur ethnographer’s desire to separate out and redeem the musical dimension of the performance from both the dance and the drama also sheds light on another new passion he shared with readers. Printed under the bold heading “O PHONOGRAPHO” and sandwiched between obituaries and brief updates on the theater world, his column in the February 24, 1928, edition opens by hailing the “extraordinary perfection” the latest models of the machine had achieved. Just a year earlier the Italian government had established a discothèque, or phonographic “museum,” to preserve “regional” or “popular” songs that were essential to the ongoing formation of a national musical tradition but would soon (according to Mário) be “abandoned in the voice of the people.” And in Brazil? The author cites the case of Edgar Roquette-Pinto, an explorer of the Amazon whose rare recordings of indigenous music had been entrusted to the National Museum only to be worn out or broken through misuse and neglect. Folklorists had collected tunes from other regions in the form of handwritten notations. But in a near-exact echo of an argument voiced almost four decades earlier by Walter Fewkes following his recording sessions with the Passamaquoddy, Mário insists that the hand is unable to keep pace with the speed of song; it cannot register the nasal intonation of the vocalists, nor can it record the irregular *rubatos* and rhythmic fluctuations unique to certain styles. Unlike in Italy, however, there was little hope government institutions would take on the task of archiving these traditions. Vacillating between the prospect of loss and the promise of technology, Mário warns of the imminent demise of a “prodigious treasure” and states that civic organizations must step up and mobilize the potential of the phonograph, which “imposes itself”—or alternatively, “is imposed” (*se impõe*)—as the “only remedy of salvation.”

That curious turn of phrase hints at the contradictions in which Mário’s newfound enthusiasm was caught. Like audio ethnographers in the United States, he invokes what Jonathan Sterne calls the “nostalgic language of anthropological mourning” while proposing as a solution a technology indebted to the same “modernizing” forces responsible for these cultures’ ostensible death. In Brazil, this discourse was even more vexed given the dominance of foreign corporations in the recording industry—an industry
that would play a prominent role in mediating the emergence of a “national” music tradition. As a follow-up note in the paper revealed, Mário’s article prompted an invitation from the Paul J. Christoph Club in São Paulo, where he spent more than an hour listening to Victor recordings and left even more convinced that with the advent of the electric era, the medium had achieved the status of a “perfectly legitimate and pleasant musical manifestation of art.” On this occasion the recordings in question seem to have been of European music, and given Victor’s catalogue as well as Mário’s predilection, opera was no doubt in the mix. By the end of the year, however, the company had opened its factory in São Paulo and the boom in “Brazilian” recordings had begun.

The Victor Talking Machine Company would have an outsized influence on Mário’s relationship to this changing soundscape. Several letters in his archive reveal his attempts to procure a reasonably affordable and portable phonograph to take with him on his second “ethnographic voyage,” a more scholarly expedition to the northeastern states of Pernambuco, Alagoas, Rio Grande do Norte, and Paraíba from December 1928 to February 1929. Although apparently unsuccessful, he acquired one shortly after his return—most likely with the assistance of his friend Paulo Ribeiro de Magalhães, a local Victor representative and a fellow member of the Partido Democrático who also frequented the nocturnal gatherings at Paulo Duarte’s home. Over the next few years Magalhães would give Mário more than 250 Victor discs for his personal collection, which eventually grew to more than five hundred recordings of various labels, including a wide range of opera and art music (from Verdi and Wagner to Schoenberg), Brazilian popular and “folkloric” music (sambas, choros, toadas nortistas, batuques de macumba), and equivalent genres from throughout the Americas and Europe (among them jazz, the foxtrot, son, bolero, fado, and milonga). Magalhães also occasionally assisted Mário in collecting ethnographic data, as he did in November 1930 while in Piracicaba, a town in the interior of the state of São Paulo where he was recording duplas caipiras as part of a project led by the folklorist Cornélio Pires. A few months later, for reasons related to his job, Magalhães relocated to Rio, where he became a friend and eventual flatmate to Mário’s close confidante, the poet Manuel Bandeira. In a letter to Mário, the Victor rep complained that “yankee capitalism” was “sordidly exploiting” him: due to a downturn in business, Victor had cut his and other employees’ salaries. Yet both he and Bandeira often wrote about new recordings in their missives to Mário, and their frequent allusions to communal listening sessions leave little doubt that Magalhães’s Victrola was the hub of their (homo)social circle of intellectuals and artists.

In his contributions to the Diário Nacional, as in his annotations of the recordings in his personal archive, Mário leveled his fair share of critiques. The confusion of the U.S. recording engineers at Victor when faced with the new sounds and styles of singing in Brazil was to blame for some lamentable
“errors,” and at best only around 30 percent of all commercial recordings could be said to “escape awfulness” (escapam do ruim). But Mário was willing to risk the ruim—a word often used as a close synonym of mau or mal to mean “evil,” “harmful,” and “morally corrupt,” though it can also carry the connotation of counterfeit, inartistic, and of poor quality. By the late 1930s, he would grow far more skeptical of the music industry’s effects on urban genres such as samba. Yet in contrast to the claims of many critics and historians, he was far from a purist at this earlier point, when the industry itself was more fluid and open to innovation. In 1930, for example, he contributed the lyrics for “Canção Marinha,” a song composed by Marcelo Tupinambá and recorded by Edgard Arantes for Brunswick. A composer and pianist whose great-uncle had composed the first opera written in Portuguese and debuted in Brazil, Tupinambá had a background in “erudite” music but found his calling playing in cafés and writing tunes for teatro de revista (musical revues) and film; the French modernist Darius Milhaud had quoted a number of his maxixes and tangos in his own work, later passing them off as “folkloric” music, and Mário praised his imminently popular melodies for capturing the “heterogeneous indecision of our racial formation.”

Radio, which started to steal the show in the early 1930s, was a medium toward which Mário was always ambivalent. In these early days broadcasts were all “live,” meaning that listeners shared a temporal if not physical space with the performers and each other. Sound recording, on the other hand, had affinities with Mário’s own compositional practice. In an unpublished preface to Macunaíma, written shortly after he drafted the novel during two weeks in December 1926, he explained his allusion to the protagonist in the subtitle as an herói sem nenhum caráter—a hero without any character. Voicing a common refrain in his writings from this time, he argued that unlike other groups (the French, the Yoruba, or even the Mexicans), Brazilians were a composite people who lacked their own “civilization” and “traditional consciousness.” His response to this situation in the novel was to “disrespect geography and geographical flora and fauna” in order to “deregionalize my creation to the greatest extent possible at the same time as I achieved the merit of literarily conceiving Brazil as a homogeneous entity = a national and geographical, ethnic concept.” Just as the phonograph seems to detach sounds and songs from their source in order to replay them in distant locales, Macunaíma uproots not only plants and animals but also myths and other cultural references from their original contexts and transplants them to other parts of Brazil—or combines them in the impossible person of its itinerant race-changing and shape-shifting antihero. Registering but also working against the strong regional identities Mário saw as a cause of the country’s political woes and institutional deficiencies, both the recording industry and his novel created the conditions for a shared national culture by acting simultaneously as archive and agent of a process of cultural diffusion regarded as incomplete.
In some respects, this was similar to the teatro regional and teatro sintético movements discussed in chapter 2, which involved artist-ethnographers documenting and drawing on indigenous traditions as the basis for the creation of “synthetic” pieces to be performed for (and eventually by) Mexicans of all classes, regions, and races. In both cases the ethnographic impulse to particularize and preserve a multiplicity of traditions existed in tension with the desire to reshape and subsume their objectified elements into a new national, homogeneous “race.” Even in his call to save dying songs, Mário values such music primarily as raw material for the creation of “national music schools”; for all its differences, his archival logic shares the assimilationist impulse of the Anta group in consigning indigenous life ways and embodied practices to disappearance. Technology was central to this process: far from assuming the transparency of recordings, Mário increasingly came to insist that the phonograph was not simply a “reproducer of alien sounds” but an instrument that re-presented prior performances with a timbre and “special sonorities” of its own.69 Whereas in Mexico the anthropologist Manuel Gamio and others saw the documentation and subsequent stylization of indigenous songs and dances as a way of standardizing or “fixing” repertoires, Mário recognized that “it is the great phonograph houses that now take charge of the fixation and evolution of our dance songs.”70 In a country where there had been no revolution and no government agencies existed to fund performance (or large-scale anthropological) projects such as the one at Teotihuacán, the accumulation and integration of culture was dis-placed into the virtual theaters of literature and commercially recorded sound.

Roberto Schwarz (readers will recall) argues that national identity in Brazil hinges on an ambivalent attachment to “ideas of out of place,” a strange sense of discord and dislocation that he sees as symptomatic of economic and cultural dependency. Schwarz traces this dynamic to the late nineteenth century and the air of inauthenticity surrounding the liberal discourse of the new republic: ideals such as equality, individual autonomy, and the universality of law defied all credulity in a country where slavery was just ending and where the boom in exports of raw materials continued to fuel relations of patronage and forms of labor deemed by liberalism as obsolete.71 These contradictions were still in play during the late 1920s but were experienced differently among intellectuals making a push to nationalize cultural production—to bring ideas “into place.” Mário never quite put his finger on the paradoxical role of international capital in the “fixation” of a national music tradition, at least not in this moment. He never remarked on the Taylorist fantasies associated with the new Victor factory in São Paulo, or on how its efforts to rationalize the production of art might have jarred with the “backwardness” of Brazil—and all the more so given that most of the genres it helped “nationalize” had historical roots in rural regions or among communities of slaves. In Macunaíma, however, he (partially) redeems incongruity and anachronicity as artistic principles and as hallmarks of an unfinished Brazilian identity,
employing a practice of “deregionalization” that also conveniently coincides with the avant-garde predilection for unexpected juxtapositions and collage. Backwardness and futurity meet, and a “national shame” becomes a “national originality” (to cite Schwarz) in the guise of the celebrated protagonist—a charming if self-centered cipher who lacks any psychological or moral character but is often characterized by critics as a malandro.  

It was Antonio Candido, an important influence on Schwarz, who first pointed to *Macunaima* as the novel in which the malandro was “elevated to the category of a symbol.” In a now-classic essay from 1970, Candido identified a national novelistic tradition initiated by Manuel Antônio de Almeida in his *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* (1854), a text unusual for its era in its use of colloquial language and its reckless, charmingly amoral protagonist who owes obvious debts to the tricksters of Brazilian folklore, such as Pedro Malasarte. Contesting the notion that the novel was a precursor to realism, Candido notes that it omits almost any mention of the ruling classes or slave labor; instead it works by capturing a “general rhythm” of Brazilian society that he dubs a “dialectic of malandragem,” an oscillation between order and disorder characteristic of a system in which slaves were the axis of production and almost all others “abandoned themselves to idleness, repeating the surplus of parasitism, of contrivance, of munificence, of fortune, or of petty theft” (95). As Schwarz writes in his gloss on Candido’s essay, the novel “gives general relevance to the experience of one sector of society, the intermediate one, which lacks regular work, does not accumulate wealth or issue orders and which in this sense seems the least essential of all.” Not by coincidence, this is the same sector Schwarz himself would single out in explaining the peculiar cast of Brazilian ideology: legally free yet dependent on the patronage of the rich, it was poor men whose experience most clearly showed up the discord between Brazilian reality and liberal ideas.  

But while both Candido and Schwarz cite the modernista movement as the moment when this dynamic became predominant, neither remarks on the racialization of vagrancy or the mass cultural metamorphosis of the malandro at around the same time. For both, the malandro (like other free men of his class) is either explicitly or implicitly white. What this overlooks is that *Macunaima* responds most immediately to a context in which this “unproductive,” mediating figure was becoming mixed-race or black.

**A Peculiar Badness**

Although Mário was attuned to the racialization of the malandro, he also discerned that this figure’s deviation from moral and aesthetic norms had correlates in other cultural realms. Over the course of September 1928, he waged a relentless campaign in the pages of the *Diário Nacional* against
an annual opera series staged at the Teatro Municipal (with the help of subsidies from the city government) by the privately owned Empresa Teatral Italo-Brasileira. His evaluation of the performers was favorable overall, but he had a long litany of other critiques: the repertoire (Manon, Tosca, Traviata) was predictable and stale, too much money was spent on showy sets, the exorbitant ticket prices excluded the vast majority of the city’s residents, and there were no operas with national themes or musical influences that might appeal to a broader audience. Outraged by this use of public funds for the entertainment of a philistine elite, he went so far as to proclaim that the “false flower it produces has been systematically unfurling since aspirations of vanity led to the construction of that architectonic trifle [quinquiharia] that is the Teatro Municipal. Useless, false, hypocritical luxury of an unhappy city in which the people count for nothing.” For Mário, there was no reason why opera had to be elitist, and if it was a “foreign” art, the same could be said of every other tradition (including indigenous music) in a country where a national culture did not yet exist. In his Ensaio sobre música brasileira, he notes the similarity between an old toada (or popular tune) from Minas Gerais and a melody from Il Guarany; asking if Carlos Gomes might have taken his inspiration from this regional song, he suggests that even in Gomes there is an “indefinable something, a badness that isn’t exactly bad, it’s a peculiar badness . . . a first fatal sign of a race ringing from afar” (um não-sei-quê indefinível, um ruim que não é ruim propriamente, é um ruim exquisito . . . uma primeira fatalidade de raça badalando longe). In addition to “peculiar,” other possible translations for exquisito (now spelled esquisito) are “weird,” “eccentric,” or “queer”—in the dated, not necessarily sexual sense of “queer,” though depending on the context it can carry this connotation. Notably, Schwarz also uses the nominal variant of the word when he refers to the oddity of ideology in Brazil as nossas esquisitices nacionais, or “our national peculiarities.”

In fact, the process Schwarz describes is right here, in this recuperation of the ruin as the seed of something “ours,” a source of shame but also pride. For Mário, this would become a deliberate strategy in his effort to create a national opera. Sometime toward the end of 1927, while still revising Macu

naíma, the author sent scene descriptions for an operatic version to his friend Oscar Lorenzo Fernández, a professor at the Instituto Nacional de Música in Rio and a composer known for drawing on indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, and “folkloric” motifs while maintaining a devotion to classical technique. Fernández frequently wrote to Mário requesting information and transcriptions of melodies, and his best-known vocal piece from this period, “Toada pra você” (1928), was a collaboration with the writer. His response to this particular proposal, however, was decidedly mixed. Fernández waxed enthusiastic over Macunaíma but sheepishly suggested that the theme might be a bit “monochromatic” for an opera, which in his view should be based on a “universal” legend endowed with local color. What it really came down to,
he confessed, was that “I’m very afraid of sticking Indians in any operas. You understand, after Carlos Gomes . . . I wouldn’t make an Indian sing Italian melodies.” In order to avoid repeating this traumatic absurdity, he proposed to minimize the theatrical element and go the route of a symphonic poem, or better yet, a dance, which as a “modern art” was more suited to the “atmosphere of fantasy” the indigenous subject matter evoked. Even then, he said, Mário might want to reconsider the first scene, where Macunaíma drags the Queen of the Icamiabas (or Amazons) across the stage by her foot and has to appeal to his brothers to save him when she tickles him into submission with her spear. In a novel this was one thing, but in the theater it would be “ridiculous.” The solution? Eliminate the brothers and reduce the scene to an elegant “stylization of Instinctive Love” in which Macunaíma defeats Ci with his “virile beauty.” Needless to say, it should end in a long kiss—though Fernández admits to not knowing if Indians actually kissed, “and much less if they kissed in the style of American cinema.”

If the composer found this first scene gauche, one can only imagine what he thought of the five following it. Mário’s proposed opera skips over most of the novel, eliminating the character’s journey out of the jungle to São Paulo to recover the muiraquitã given to him by Ci before her death but lost during his dalliance with a talking waterfall and pursuit by the mythic elf Capei. As a result, there is no face-off with the capitalist cannibal Venceslau Pietro Pietra, the jarring juxtapositions of the “primitive” and the “modern” are gone, and rather than a symptom of a contradictory and characterless nation, Macunaíma returns to being the mythic Makunaíma (maku, “evil,” + ima, “great”), who appears in the stories related by Koch-Grünberg as the creator of the Taulipang, or Arekuna, people. But while tame in comparison, the would-be opera still includes a few eyebrow-raising moments. Mário notes in his description of the second scene that “it will be necessary to stylize” the part where Macunaíma and Ci engage in vigorous lovemaking in a hammock, though he reassures his reader this will be “easy to do without shocking anyone, I’ll take charge of that.” Presumably he also had something up his sleeve for the moment when a black snake slinks in during the night and sucks on Ci’s sole breast, leading her to unwittingly poison her infant son. He is equally vague as to how he would stage Ci’s death and transformation into a twinkling star, and while Fernández was perhaps correct that modern dance offered more ways of rendering such scenes “poetic,” it is hard to see how even dance could redeem the sight of Macunaíma wailing and childishly sucking his thumb. The scene outline ends on a dark (but perhaps grotesquely comic?) note, with the bloodied protagonist dragging himself out of the pool of water into which he had been seduced by the iara, and then dying as she and her mermaid companions sing a “joyful chorale.”

On this point, however, the author proves flexible and states that if a more “apotheotic” ending is desired, Macunaíma can climb up a vine and become a constellation, as he does in the novel.
Fernández evidently failed to convince the writer to set aside his operatic aspirations in favor of an art less bound by historical baggage and mimetic expectations. Nor did Mário jump at a proposal from Heitor Villa-Lobos, who wrote to him from Paris following the publication of Macunaima expressing a desire to compose a dramatic dance based on the “Macumba” chapter, where the protagonist is possessed by the orixa Exú at a candomblé ceremony at the home of the famed mãe-de-santo priestess Tia Ciata.81 Villa-Lobos, who had little formal training and boasted of his early explorations of Brazil, had already gained celebrity among the Parisian avant-garde for his eclectic blend of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous themes, urban street music such as choro, and elements of Romanticism and impressionism. In his letter, he told Mário that for more than a year he had been working on a dance “nostalgic [saudoso] of the fetish music of our fanatical macumbeiros.” No title had come to mind, and inventing plots was not his area of expertise, but this could be solved by calling his dance Macunaima and basing the storyline on the novel’s relevant scene. He had already used several of Mário’s poems to “complete” his own “sonorous ideas,” so why not continue the collaboration?

No such dance was ever composed (at least not under the proposed title), and although Villa-Lobos had written a few operas earlier in his career, there is no evidence Mário tried to talk him into an operatic version of Macunaima—perhaps because the composer was too well known and had already developed his own signature style, or because Mário had decided to swap out his race-changing protagonist for a slightly more manageable substitute. Drafted between August 27 and 29, 1928, just a month after the publication of Macunaima, Pedro Malazarte (originally titled Malazarte) is a libretto for a comic one-act opera written expressly for Mozart Camargo Guarnieri, one of many young composers and writers Mário would mentor over the course of his life. A twenty-one-year-old student of Lamberto Baldi, an Italian who had first arrived in Brazil as the conductor of a touring opera company, Guarnieri (the son of an Italian barber-cum-musician) had no formal conservatory training and perhaps for this reason was an optimal candidate to compose an imperfect opera of “peculiar badness.”82 Pedro Malazarte (sometimes spelled Pedro Malasartes) was in many ways a predictable protagonist for such a work. A folk figure of Iberian extraction in a series of stories told throughout much of Brazil, he is a perpetual wanderer, an unscrupulous trickster who lives by his wits, and the very character Antonio Candido cites as a model for the novelistic malandro. The initial story of the cycle presents Pedro Malazarte and his older brother João, the two adult children of elderly parents who have fallen on hard times; to support the family João goes off to work as a hired hand on a plantation, where the avaricious patrão forces his employees to sign contracts impossible to fulfill and subjects them to cruel abuse. After his brother returns home empty-handed, Pedro exacts revenge on the plantation owner—in one tale
he tricks the *patrão* into shooting his own wife—and all of the subsequent tales revolve around his outrageous schemes to make an easy buck. For the anthropologist Roberto da Matta, the character’s restlessness is motivated by the desire to evade the relations of dependence and patronage in which the Brazilian worker is trapped. Malazarte refuses to treat his labor power as a commodity, relying instead on his own inalienable cunning. Yet rather than participating in any collective, systematic resistance, he operates as a highly individualized “man of the interstices who keeps returning to the existing order to exact his revenge.”

Mário was not the first to try corralling this rambling man within the confines of the theatrical stage. Graça Aranha, the honored elder of the Week of Modern Art and a man Mário held in low regard, had written a three-act drama called *Malazarte* in 1911, during his days as a diplomat in Paris. Staged by the famed symbolist director Lugné-Poe, the play universalizes the malandro as a Dionysus-like force who is by all indications white, and although the plot gives a nod to some indigenous myths, the use of formal, written Portuguese even in the dialogue marks its distance from the popular realm to which it alludes. In 1921 Heitor Villa-Lobos composed a three-act opera that appears to have been an adaptation of Aranha’s play (though it was never performed and is now lost), which would also serve as the basis for an opera by Oscar Lorenzo Fernández composed in the early 1930s and debuted in Rio (in Italian) in 1941. Mário himself had begun to put his own spin on the character in a series of chronicles he wrote for the journal *América Brasileira* between 1923 and 1924. Here Malazarte forms part of a trio along with the author himself and a figure called Belazarte whose name translates as “fine art” (literally “beautiful art”)—a dialectical counterpoint to Malazarte’s bad, popular art. Belazarte has a constructive spirit and seeks to put down roots but frets that Brazilian civilization is no match for microbes or the forces of nature; his peripatetic antagonist responds that Brazilians are “proudly savage,” and that this “innate and historical savagery of a people without traditions, without a past of twenty centuries of critical intelligence” should be the object of envy by Europeans. Both positions, the author concludes, are “illusions” and “lies,” and his own role is to mediate between them—though notably, it is Malazarte who lends his name to the title of the chronicles.

Mário’s operatic *Pedro Malazarte* allegorizes this struggle to synthesize the *malas* and *belas artes*, not only at the level of the plot but also in its style and form. Instead of opting for the pomposity of grand opera, the Brazilian Parsifal chose to pursue his nationalist ambitions in the minor mode of comic opera, a genre that was originally performed in the interludes between more “serious” works and revolved around relatively ordinary characters rather than nobles and gods. In a letter to the poet Manuel Bandeira, he gleefully referred to the text as his *libretinho-merda*, or “shitty little libretto,” and the simple, unpolished dialogue lends credence to his claim that he dashed it off in just two days. The outlines of the plot come from one of the most
commonly told episodes in the Malazarte cycle as related in a collection of folk tales from Minas Gerais published by Lindolfo Gomes in 1918. In Gomes’s version, the eponymous protagonist sets off on foot after the death of his father and stops at the first house he passes to ask for food, only to be turned away by an adulteress wife who is preparing a feast for her illicit suitor. Malazarte climbs onto the roof to eavesdrop on the woman and her black maid, and when the man of the house unexpectedly returns home he knocks on the door again, this time garnering an invitation to join them for a simple meal. Eager to partake of the elaborate dishes the wife has stashed in the cupboard, the vagabond claims his pet vulture has told him that the wife learned in advance of her husband’s early return and has prepared a banquet in his honor. The guilty woman is forced to play along by revealing the hidden food, Malazarte gets his sumptuous meal, and the clueless husband is so taken with the magic powers of the vulture that he buys the animal for a generous sum.

Mário was at least nominally familiar with the Teatro del Murciélago, the short-lived collaboration between members of the estridentista avant-garde and artist-ethnographers who had worked under Manuel Gamio at Teotihuacán and later in Michoacán: from 1927 to 1929 Luis Quintanilla, the artistic director of the project, served as a secretary to the Mexican ambassador in Rio, and just a month after Mário dashed off the libretto for Pedro Malazarte, Quintanilla mentioned to him in a letter that the top theater impresario in Berlin had asked him to organize an “indigenous theater” similar to the Murciélago that would also include scenes from Brazil. Like the Murciélago, Mário’s opera has a self-consciously quaint and old-fashioned air, though its objectification and decontextualization of “primitive” traditions coincides with compositional practices typical of the avant-garde. Whereas the Mexican revue juxtaposed scenes of indigenous culture with urban tableaux, Pedro Malazarte integrates disparate elements from far-flung parts of Brazil into a single plot, enacting the same gesture of deregionalization found in the novel Macunaíma, though absent in its would-be operatic adaptation. (Significantly, however, Mário added the qualifier texto regional to the subtitle of the libretto in his second draft, explicitly acknowledging that his work of deregionalization remained unfinished.) Although the source story comes from Minas Gerais, the dairy capital of Brazil and a region with a long history of slavery, Mário’s libretto transposes the action to Santa Catarina, a state in the extreme south of country known for its large population of German and Austrian descent and its small, family-owned farms. The feast the wife prepares also defies any regionalist conception of authenticity: although the main dish is beans with beef tongue from Rio Grande do Sul (a cattle state bordering Santa Catarina), the more exotic treats later revealed include doce de bacuri (a dessert made with an Amazonian fruit), tacacá com tucupi (a manioc soup eaten in the Amazon), and the alcoholic caninha de Ó, or cachaça (made from sugarcane most likely grown elsewhere in Brazil). Even
more significant, however, is the mishmash of musical genres indicated in the libretto. The chorus, sung by children playing outside the house, is a ciranda, the Amazonian dance-drama revolving around the death of a totemic bird about which Mário had written for the Diário Nacional. The young wife (a soprano) plays the guitar and sings a modinha, a type of sentimental love song common in both Portugal and Brazil, and her husband (a tenor) sings a toada, or simple regional tune. At one point Malazarte (a baritone) hums a maxixe, a genre that originated in Rio and mixes elements of polka with the Afro-Brazilian lundu, but his major recitative is an embolada, an improvised prose poem from northeastern Brazil:

I am Malazarte. My part is in every part,
And my land is in every land
Where the saw of my art errs.

Sou Malazarte, minha parte é em toda a parte
Minha terra é em toda a terra
Em que erra a serra da minha arte. (62)

The strange depiction of his art as a “saw” (serra) evokes associations of manual labor and construction, but this is immediately followed by the information that his art “errs” (erra), which can simultaneously mean to wander, to go morally astray, and to be wrong. In the source story collected by Lindolfo Gomes, the house symbolizes stability and fixity, though the adulterous intentions of the young wife threaten to undermine its role as a site of social reproduction; paradoxically, it is the wily wanderer who restores order (or at least its appearance) by passing off the feast as a sign of her devotion to her husband while selling him a “magic” animal able to divulge any future transgressions. Mário’s opera gives this domestic drama a twist by racializing all of the characters and depicting each as “out of place.” Gone is the black maid who lets Malazarte in on her mistress’s secret. Gone too is the absent, anonymous adulterer: here the illicit lover is Malazarte himself. Although his provenance is never specified, Malazarte is described as moreno, an ambiguous term that can simply mean dark-haired but often means dark-skinned. Dressed with “foppish elegance” (elegância almofadinha), he cuts a striking figure in a short black jacket and long pants, casual shirt unbuttoned at the chest, white shoes, and jaunty checkered hat. The wife, clothed in a pink house dress and referred to as The Baiana, is a “legitimate branca-rana,” or light-skinned mulatta, and her name identifies her as being from Bahia, a northeastern state known as the most “African” part of Brazil. Her “very blonde, ruddy” husband is called The German, though he turns out to be the son of immigrants (59). Of the trio, he is the most buffoonish in his velvet green tunic, yellow knickerbockers, yellow shoes, and velvet brown hat adorned with wildflowers. His absence is explained by a trip to the city to sell
his agricultural wares, and his unexpected return is made all the more comic when Malazarte tumbles out of the rafters where he is hiding and lands at the alpine traveler’s feet.

Here the specter of adultery not only calls into question the purity of lineage and property rights (since another man is enjoying the fruits of the breadwinner’s labor); it also represents a potential deviation from the racial whitening promised by the union between the mulatta and her Teutonic mate. Strangely, however, this particular incarnation of Malazarte is uninterested in either sex or food. When he arrives he embraces the Baiana with indifference, and even after he wriggles his way into the German’s good graces, he only pretends to eat great quantities of the delicacies served. So what does this shifty character really want?

In chapter 2 I noted that in his work on turn-of-the-century regionalism in the United States, Brad Evans traces a connection between the anthropological principle of cultural diffusion, which emphasized the “detachability” and circulation of cultural elements, and the contemporaneous vogue for local color fiction. The appeal of local color, he argues, has less to do with its roots in a particular people or place than with the “aura of dislocation” it accrues when it enters into circulation in an (inter)national art market. As in Macunaima, the deregionalization of culture in Pedro Malazarte mimics the logic of objectification and commodification endemic to mass culture. Despite its operatic trappings and rural setting, the libretto could also lend itself to an adaptation in the guise of comic opera’s twentieth-century successor, teatro de revista, which featured many of the same singers and songs whose voices circulated on phonograph records. The absurd foreigner or country bumpkin (in this case the German) was a common figure in revistas, and the whitening of the historically black baiana seen in Mário’s light-skinned mulatta was being performed around this time by the Portuguese-born Carmen Miranda, who was known for her exaggerated portrayal of the same figure. Shades of Eduardo das Neves and other recording and revista stars who styled themselves as malandros are also apparent in the dandyish Malazarte, who disdains physical labor but reaps the rewards of capital—not by making music for a talking machine, but by selling the story of a talking animal (in Mário’s version, a black cat).

The sale of the cat marks Malazarte’s complicity in the system he mocks. An incongruous act of bad faith, it compounds the negative feelings that undercut the hilarity of the action. Years earlier in his first chronicle about Malazarte, Mário had written that “happiness is a monotonous thing, full of itself, disappointing even, because it is an end, a ‘goal.’ ” Malazarte’s constant movement instead evokes a sense of saudade—a nostalgic, melancholic longing for someone or something no longer present. In the opera he wears black because his father has recently died, and his devil-may-care demeanor is interrupted on occasion by moments of somber distraction. The other two characters share this sadness. At one point, the German wistfully notes that
he has forgotten the songs of his father’s homeland. The Baiana, too, is alienated from her roots (not a single culinary dish from her home region appears on her table), but she is most bitter about the domestic cage keeping her in (her) place. When her inebriated husband falls asleep at the table, she desperately begs Malazarte to take her with him, because although the German is a good man, “every single day in this house is the same as the one before.” Hinting at her racial bond with the protagonist, she notes that while “the German has hair the color of corn, you have black hair like mine” (66). Malazarte tells her to stay with her husband, and his subsequent swindling of the man adds insult to injury, even if her tears lead him to lower his asking price. At the end of the opera, the couple stands at the door and slowly waves goodbye as the malandro moves on.

Behind him he leaves a vivid impression of absence and loss, just as phonograph recordings of popular performances “condemned to death” generate a sense of absence and loss. There is no phonograph in this picturesque little home, or any other sign of “modern” technology; yet it seems possible, perhaps even likely, that if this opera had been staged at the time, a hidden phonograph would have been used during those moments when the audience hears but does not see the children outside, dancing the ciranda and singing of the death of the totemic bird.  

In the creation of a Brazilian culture the flesh must be sacrificed, though the tradition is resurrected in song.

A Necessary Tradition

Mário gave his “shitty little libretto” to Camargo Guarnieri immediately after finishing the draft, without bothering to edit it. The young composer sat with it for a while but concluded he was not yet up to the task. He came to the same conclusion when he went back to it three years later, and so over the course of 1931 he studied the libretto and all the relevant musical genres, until in the very first days of 1932 he threw himself into the project and completed the score in just over a month. Guarnieri was still relatively unknown, and not until early in 1935 was the orchestral overture to Pedro Malazarte publicly performed; the full score was first heard in public at the opera’s debut in Rio in 1952, seven years after Mário’s death, and again in 1959. Reviews were mixed: one deemed it a “failed,” “frustrated opera,” though another considered it charming, if hardly a masterpiece. One of Mário’s other collaborations from this period achieved more success: Francisco Mignone’s Maracatú do Chico-Rei, inspired by his outline for an operatic dance about a legendary slave who rose to become a mine owner, was composed in 1933 and debuted in Rio the following year. The piece was never choreographed, however, and so the dramatic element remained unrealized. A decade later Mário would write his second and last libretto, O café, with Mignone in mind, but the composer was unable to finish the music before Mário’s death in 1945.
The subject of this second opera—the collapse of the coffee economy—points to the momentous changes that occurred during the handful of years when Guarnieri was sitting on the libretto for *Pedro Malazarte*. The international crisis prompted by the stock market crash on Wall Street not only brought an end to the Export Age; it also set the stage for the Revolution of 1930 and the rise of Getúlio Vargas. Like many other members of the Partido Democrático, Mário was cautiously optimistic that this turn of events would foster the development of a national culture and rein in the regional oligarchies that had ruled the republic. A discouraging experience assisting his friend Luciano Gallet in an effort to reform the National Institute of Music was among the factors that led his enthusiasm to wane, and when the Partido Democrático joined forces with the Partido Republicano Paulista in a revolt against the new central government, Mário lent his support. The paulistas were defeated in the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932, but they managed to regain some of the privileges the region had lost. Three years later Paulo Duarte led several other members of the now-defunct Partido Democrático in creating a municipal Department of Culture and undertaking a multifaceted effort to “democratize” access to “culture”—a project that would be brought to a halt after the declaration of the Estado Novo dictatorship at the end of 1937. Mário was asked to take the helm of the Department of Culture, Sérgio Milliet became head of its Division of Historical and Social Documentation, and Paulo Ribeiro de Magalhães was assigned to Theater and Cinema. Mário lost his pipeline to the Victor company (which had become RCA Victor amid a great wave of mergers in the late 1920s and 1930s), but with the new resources at his disposal he established the first public audio archive in Brazil—a collection including European classical music, the works of Brazilian composers, and ethnographic recordings such as the 1,299 tracks collected by a team of four researchers he sent out on a “folkloric mission” to the hinterlands of the Northeast.

Thirteen years after the Week of Modern Art, when Mário cut his poetry reading short and fled the stage, he became the man who (in conjunction with Magalhães) oversaw programming at the Theatro Municipal. One of his first decisions was to create a standing orchestra and appoint Camargo Guarnieri as its director, a move that led to the first performances of the composer’s major works. Throughout his three years in office he worked to open up the theater to nonelite audiences by offering free concerts of classical music and the works of Brazilian composers, among them Guarnieri and Mignone. Yet there is no indication he ever attempted to see his own opera performed.

Why write an opera destined for the archive rather than the stage? The opposition is familiar, and by now has been subjected to thorough critique: whereas archives are associated with permanence, stability, and material remains, performance is imagined in terms of ephemerality, disappearance, and loss. In her attempt to destabilize this opposition, Rebecca Schneider emphasizes the way “the archive itself becomes a social performance of
retroaction. The archive performs the institution of disappearance, with object remains as indices of disappearance and with performance as given to disappear.”

Mário was obsessed with archiving not only songs, but also his own activities, and his voluminous archive (now partially digitized) holds his handwritten text of Pedro Malazarte as well as two typed copies. Part of the issue may have been logistics, because while he managed to organize a standing choir and orchestra during his three years with the Department of Culture, coordinating an opera production takes time. Still, as his casually disparaging reference to his libretto suggests, he seems to have thought of it from the first as a mere prompt for the production of music. Onstage he would have had to clarify certain ambiguities, such as Malazarte’s physiognomy; the allusions to racial mixture might have acquired a political edge and provoked dissension among an operatic audience; and perhaps its affinity with commercial theatrical revues would have become more readily apparent. If Malazarte uses his wiles to avoid lending his body to the production of capital for another, Mário’s disinclination toward performance also has to do with the desire to maintain the possibility of an alternative mode of deregionalization and nationalization, one independent from the circulation of international capital. Deterritorialized and integrated into the increasingly “outdated” genre of opera, his “dying” traditions are restaged as the “bygone images and gestures” Adorno described, and the aura of the archive cloaks them in a sense of nostalgia or saudade for a foundational performance that never occurred.

But Mário knew that the creation of a national culture was dependent on more than unfinished operas and experimental novels. In 1939, at a point when the major multinational recording companies had long since consolidated, he attended an annual song contest sponsored by the music industry in the lead-up to Carnaval. More than 300,000 people, “from the whiter-than-white well-to-do, to stray mulattas and lanky malandros” (desde a granfinagem mais de branco até as mulatas desgarradas e os malandros esguios), streamed into a fairground in Rio over several days to hear the new releases performed live and cast their votes for the hits.

In reflecting on the experience, he drops the glib irony to which he was prone and comes as close as he ever did to laying it on the line. On the one hand, he says, samba has become a species of “submusic”—“flesh to feed radios and discs, an element of romance and commercial interest with which factories, businesses, and singers sustain themselves, stirring up the cheap sensuality of an entranced public” (281). Yet he also acknowledges, and goes on to describe, how beautiful it was to see such a range of Brazilians gathered, all at the same time and in the same place, and all so passionate over the same thing. With unabashed romanticism, he reflects on the melodic characteristics responsible for the melancholic quality of samba do morro, the samba from the hillside favelas that can still on occasion be heard. “Such is the current sadness of samba,” he concludes, though within a few years this could all change, “because all
urban music . . . is imminently unstable and transforms easily, like things that have no basis in a necessary tradition.” He pauses for a beat, takes a paragraph break, and then ends on an ambivalent note: “And, in that case, our national character, undefined, shot through with internationalisms and fatal foreign influences, would be that necessary tradition” (282).

Despite its wistful tone, this is not so far from what Roberto Schwarz would make explicit decades later in his analysis of ideas out of place: “Brazilian” culture owed its existence to the same forces of international capital that condemned it to remaining incomplete.