Chapter Nine

The Word, the Database, and the Algorithm

Minha terra tem palmeiras,
Onde canta o sabiá,
Se o Haddad é Lula aqui,
O Lula é Haddad lá.
(popular chant, 2018 Presidential campaign)

As long as Brazil is, “Canção do exílio” will be its poem. An instant “hit” in the 1840s, the poem has inspired and will continue to inspire thousands more responses. Yet, many critics over the years have downplayed the popularity of the poem, at times even hoping for its demise. In 1932, an anonymous journalist compared “Canção do exílio” with, in his opinion, the far superior work of Olavo Bilac, a Parnassian poet. Wrongfully attributing “Canção do exílio” to the Romantic Casimiro de Abreu, the critic writes:

Bilac é o Poeta brasileiro ... É o intérprete do anseio nosso. Por isso, não tem época, determinada, no calendário literário. Em 1932, ainda é expoente. Sê-lo-á no ano 2000. O que não será possível é trazermos Casimiro de Abreu, choramingando, para apresentá-lo como um símbolo das nossas letras. Esta história de minha terra tem palmeiras onde canta o sabiá, passou. (“A literatura em 1907 e em 1932”)

Half a century earlier, in 1887, the poet and diplomat Lúcio de Mendonça made a similar remark while comparing Gonçalves Dias to Castro Alves. In his short critique, L. de Mendonça declares that the poem “Tyrana da Cachoeira de Paulo Affonso,” a poem that few people would remember today, “é muito mais brasileiro e muito mais belo que as insulas quadrinhas, não sei porque tão populares: ‘Minha terra tem palmeiras / Onde canta o sabiá’” (“Castro Alves” 178). But, despite their assertions to the contrary,
these pronouncements only confirm the poem’s continued relevance in the Brazilian imaginary. Indeed, as demonstrated in the preceding chapters, the assertion that, by the year 2000, Gonçalves Dias’s poem would be long erased from the nation’s collective memory could not be further from the truth.

With a referential power in Brazilian culture that is unmatched by any other work of literature, “Canção do exílio” holds the unique position of being the most popular poem in Brazil. Through close readings, distant readings, computational, modal, and algorithmic readings, this study has attempted to systematically represent the characteristics of the metamorphoses of the poem’s lines over the course of the last two hundred years. Based on the computational principles of Digital Humanities, as defined by Stephen Ramsay, our experimental readings of the 500 intertexts attempt “to employ the rigid, inexorable, uncompromising logic of algorithmic transformation as the constraint under which critical vision may flourish” (32). Yet, our algorithmic readings (Syntactic Templates, Modes, Types and Tokens, Frequency Analysis, etc.), although inspired by or derived from computation, have not worked in opposition to traditional literary readings. Much to the contrary, they have enhanced them. In this vein, Ramsay notes that, while the principal modes of inquiry in the Digital Humanities are computer-based, algorithmic criticism “looks neither to the bare calculating facilities of the mechanism nor to the promise of machine intelligence for its inspiration” (32). He continues, “The hermeneutic proposed by algorithmic criticism does not oppose the practice of conventional critical reading, but … reenvision[s] its logics in extreme and self-conscious forms” (32). Corpora of large numbers of texts are often well served by such a systematic methodology and our algorithmic approaches have helped to normalize the processes of analysis across all 500 texts, making broad perspectives and insights possible.

Guiding our approach to a motley collection of digitized, book-bound, and born-digital texts, the idea of the database has also played an important role in this study’s organization. Manovich, speaking of the ways that the digital revolution is re-shaping culture, writes: “a computer database becomes a new metaphor that we use to conceptualize individual and collective cultural memory, a collection of documents or objects, and other phenomena and experiences” (Language 215). The logic of the database, that ubiquitous element of new media, is “a cultural form in its own right …
offering a particular model of the world and of the human experience” (*Language* 37). Simply put, this study employs the idea of the database as an unordered collection of discrete items, not favoring any single text over another except for the original. With this idea in mind, the study has gathered a representative sample among thousands of “Canção do exílio” variations and, applying various critical lenses, attempted to group them in meaningful ways for analysis.

Relatedly, it is the idea of the algorithm that serves as inspiration for creating these groups of related texts for analysis, although we do not typically think of conventional critical reading as algorithmic. But let us suppose that an algorithm is to the database what a word is to the alphabet or a melody to a piano keyboard. Manovich makes another analogy: “Just like the game player, the reader of a novel gradually reconstructs the algorithm (here I use the term metaphorically) that the writer used to create the settings, the characters and the events” (*Language* 225). Applying Manovich’s metaphor to literary criticism, the critic, through analysis, defines a specific path through a determined text or group of texts to create a reading, distant or close. Emphasizing certain aspects of a text (or texts) over others, she metaphorically defines her path or algorithm. Thus, each reading is an algorithm, which is, in turn, literally and figuratively, a journey through a database of words. Distant readings apply this algorithmic logic to a large group of texts, often with the aid of computers. Or as Moretti put it, distant reading “allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems” (“Conjectures” 57) while close reading systematically reorganizes elements of a single text. In the case of “Canção do exílio” and its intertexts, the organization of algorithms, or critical readings, some distant, others close, are meant to offer a comprehensive understanding of the trajectory of the original poem in Brazilian history and culture, examining the emerging narratives from interdisciplinary perspectives.

Another key concept of this study has been Kristeva’s “intertextuality.” In her original exposé, she offers the “word,” or as she put it, the “minimal textual unit” (37), as intertextuality’s most basic unit of data for analysis. Applying this logic to the texts at hand, our many analyses have focused on the words of the original “Canção do exílio” as they have traveled through space and time to reappear in subsequent texts. Like the “modularity” of Manovich’s
new media elements, words from the original poem can be shared and re-combined across a limitless number of subsequent texts which, in turn, represent new cultural and historical realities while still maintaining a relationship to the original text and its context. “Media elements, be they images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples … These elements are assembled into larger-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identities. The objects themselves can be combined into even larger objects—again, without losing their independence” (Manovich Language 30).

Thus, the principal hermeneutical task has been to develop a multitude of readings from the reappearances of the words and phrases of the original in later texts, and to consider what these associations tell us about Brazilian culture and identity in the distinct periods under consideration. This methodology has allowed us to directly link nineteenth-century print culture to contemporary digital culture as manifest through the repetition of the original, conceiving each text as a separate data point on a Cartesian plane ordered by similarity to the original (y) and date of publication (x). In this way, Gonçalves Dias’s original functions as what I have called a strategy urtext, a discrete text in which can be located, in chronological terms, the earliest occurrence of a specific pattern of words. This strategy urtext inhabits the gravitational center of a textual universe around which all other texts in the study coalesce in related groups and periods, depending upon the chosen reading, or “algorithm.”

Our critical lens has zoomed in on individual texts from specific historical periods, and within those periods, specific words and phrases, while it has also zoomed out to consider trends across the 500 texts as a whole. This dual approach has made the power of counting words, if you will, apparent, showing how the poem rhetorically links Brazil’s past and future selves, presenting a grand mise-en-scène of Brazilian identity across a multitude of contexts. Returning to Anita de Melo’s quip cited at the beginning of this study, “O Brasil é mesmo uma poesia de Gonçalves Dias até no inferno” (Melo).

In closing, let me provide just two more late examples. As seen in the epigraph which began this chapter, even the 2018 presidential election was not immune to the influence of “Canção do exílio.” The poem inspired a popular chant heard in the streets and echoed on Twitter by supporters of Fernando Haddad, the Partido dos Trabalhadores’ candidate. Specifically, this variation equated
Haddad with the nation’s ex-president Lula da Silva. The “cá” / “lá” dialectic of the original, instead of comparing Portugal to Brazil, communicates the message that Lula, who was “there” in prison in Curitiba and ineligible for election, was represented by Haddad “aqui” among voters on the campaign trail. The campaign’s slogan “Haddad é Lula” echoed the same message, denoting that a vote for Haddad, who promised to faithfully carry out the party’s agenda focusing on social justice, was the same as a vote for Lula. Linking the campaign to “Canção do exílio” made not only for a catchy rhyme, but also sent the message that today’s exaggerated political struggle between the left and right is also a battle over the identity of the nation. Haddad lost the election in a close run-off to Jair Bolsonaro.

Another response that has recently gone “viral” online, composed by two young students from Rio de Janeiro, is a handwritten parody composed, like many other recent variations, in response to a school assignment. First posted in April 2017 by a friend of the students’ teacher, the poem was shared over sixteen thousand times on Facebook. Commenting on the violence of the Penha neighborhood in Rio where the two boy authors live, the variation obviously struck a deep chord with Brazilians, who are ever preoccupied with the entrenched violence of the favelas of Rio and other urban peripheries: “Minha terra é a Penha / O medo mora aqui / Todo dia chega a notícia que morreu mais um ali […] Se cismar em sair à noite / Já não posso mais / Pelo risco de morrer / E não voltar para os meus pais” (qtd. online by Satriano). Nicolás Satriano, in an online report for G1 Rio, considers the reasons for the explosive popularity of this particular response: “[Esta] versão carioca rapidamente comoveu a web: expõe, de modo poético, a triste realidade de quem vive em meio à violência que mata inocentes diariamente—inclusive dentro de colégios, como na morte da menina Maria Eduarda.” With the neighborhood of Penha and the fear of a violent death replacing the original’s “palmeiras” and “sabiá,” this text once more reiterates the poem’s uncanny ability to reinvent itself with every generation.