

## The museum of black magic of the Rio de Janeiro

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**Abstract:** This short paper analyzes the Black Magic Collection of the Museum of the Civil Police of Rio de Janeiro, which was preserved by Brazil's institute of history and culture [IPHAN] in 1938, according to Lévi-Strauss's theoretical framework as laid out in *The View from Afar* (1986).

**Key Words:** Black Magic; Museum; Anthropology; Cultural Heritage.

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### El Museo de la Magia Negra de Río de Janeiro

**Resumen:** Breve texto de análisis de la colección el Museo de la Magia Negra de la Policía Civil de Río de Janeiro, que fue preservado por el instituto brasileño de la historia y la cultura [IPHAN] en 1938, según el marco teórico de Lévi-Strauss.

**Palabras Clave:** Magia Negra; Museo; Antropología; Patrimonio Cultural.

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This short paper analyzes the Black Magic Collection of the Museum of the Civil Police of Rio de Janeiro (which was preserved by Brazil's institute of history and culture [IPHAN] in 1938) according to Claude Lévi-Strauss's theoretical framework as laid out in *The View from Afar* (1986). An investigation of the cultural meanings of this eccentric facet of the pantheon of Brazil's contemporary cultural heritage, culminates in the description of the different *gazes* upon the Black Magic museological charter, and characterizes the meaning of this museum collection, classified and inscribed as the first piece of ethnographic heritage in the country. This analysis scrutinizes through a relativistic lens the *gazes* belonging to the various agents of cultural preservation: the *Spahn Academy*, the poets and modernist literati, the detectives and experts of the Civil Police, and finally, the anthropologists who researched this archive beginning in the mid-1970s.

The confluence of these *gazes* demonstrates that confinement within one of them reduces one's cultural and patrimonial scope. The final attempt to establish the collection as an 'Afro-Brazilian' archive suffers from a lack of contextualization within the social-modernist imagination, which was in formation in the early decades of the 20th century. Contrary to the officially-held position, this work proposes to find the point of *interaction* within this intercultural nexus, for, as Jorge Barreto suggests in a parallel with music theory (jazz), "the essence of the medium lies in *improvisation*." (Melo Pimenta 2010). This approach led to an encounter with the biography of the *carioca* poet Dante Milano<sup>2</sup>, the first director of the Museum of the Police, and revealed the capacity of the collection's *interaction* to articulate a *meeting point* between complicated cultural processes and demand an expansion of our understanding of the collection's singular cultural meaning.

The Museum of the Police, which houses the archive of Black Magic, is located in downtown Rio de Janeiro and was established next door to the official headquarters of the Central Police. Currently, this neighborhood is going through a process of gentrification, intense real estate speculation, and pronouncements of urban revitalization. Yet, neither does any reference to this museum collection

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appear in any of the *cidade maravilhosa's* tourism promotional materials, nor does it lie on the itinerary of even the most alternative city tour.

IPHAN has an ambivalent attitude toward this archive: until 1989, it did not appear on the list of preserved cultural heritage sites in the country. The Civil Police itself maintains the archive on 'technical reserve.' At this point in time, the building is undergoing architectural restoration, made necessary by the intense April rains of 2010 and shaking of the structure due to surrounding PETROBRAS<sup>3</sup> construction activities. What is strange is that even card-carrying researchers are unable to gain access to this officially-preserved cultural asset, independent of the physical obstacles.

The Museum's building dates from the beginning of the 20th century, apogee of triumphant positivism. It reflects in its eclectic architecture the *belle époque* modernist aspirations of the nation, recent addition to the rolls of Western republics. Amid this backdrop of scientific ambitions, the building became, unfortunately, the site of atrocities that have defined our recent history: it housed, during the height of the military dictatorship in 1960-1970, the old DOPS (Department of Political and Social Order, an official police branch in charge of the political repression during the military regime). The memory shrouded there coalesces and preserves the suffering that awaits an opportune revelation of its secrets.

After tracing the historical trajectory of the formation of the Museum of the Police, we now proceed to analyze the literary modernism within the Brazilian social imagination. This work of unearthing, in search of symbolic and cultural substance, was inspired by the discovery of the poetry of Dante Milano. Its study confirms the importance of its cultural legacy, beyond the ethnologic niche that eventually saw its relegation to stigmatization and neglect. This poetry constitutes both the turning point of this reflection and the most important anthropological *find* of this project. In fact, the original contribution that this work offers to Brazilian cultural heritage studies is the literature of Dante Milano. The discovery of this still little-known figure opened the door to more occult meanderings, revealing meanings that had remained uncovered by the quick and hurried readings of experts. We turn to an archeology of the literary imagination of this *carioca* poet who was the first director of the Museum of the Police and author of the official order directing its preservation by the old SPAHN, in 1938.

Through the course of this archaeological effort, two other literatures of universal value emerged. Milano was the translator of the works of Dante Alighieri and of Charles Baudelaire. In reading the texts of the *carioca* poet, who is considered one of the top five modernist Brazilian poets, we find a literary legacy of primary importance to this anthropological interpretation. The dialectic of *Céu* and *The Inferno* revealed itself as the fundamental locus that should orient this reflection, for the two works advance in complementary directions within the modernist imagination. After paying visits to *The Divine Comedy* and the symbolist poet of *The Flowers of Evil*, we approach, as well, dadaism, surrealism, and cubism: Arthur Rimbaud; Tristan Tzara and Andre Breton; and Pablo Picasso, especially during his "African period."

Nevertheless, the work of historico-cultural contextualization is not sufficient to the task at hand, and it becomes necessary to question the boundaries of singularity: "All human knowledge, to be knowledge properly speaking, should be inter-subjective." (Flusser 1998) Through the life and work of Dante Milano, our 'marginal modernist,' we can access his "sinister anti-lyricism, his phantasmagorical and visionary" literary production. As is well known, along with his friends in the 1920s, he witnessed the fertile movement of renewal in Brazilian modern art. In the Bohemia of the Lapa Carioca, Jaime Ovalle and Manuel Bandeira, with Heitor Villa-Lobos, Ribeiro Couto, and Cândido Portinari, modernized the cultural 'clock' of the nation. However, our hypothesis holds that Dante Milano's literary production, along with the role that he played as the director of the Museum of the Police, between 1945 and 1956, together possess, in an intrinsic and complementary relationship, a revelatory aspect. It is in this sense—after examining a literary and poetic corpus of extraordinary worth—that this interpretive study risks including the hypothesis of Hermano Vianna, in his *The Mystery of Samba*. It is a hypothesis of 'distabuzação' [dis-taboo-ization]<sup>4</sup>, a process identified in samba that is here employed in the context of magic. It's true that this theoretical intuition was originated by Gilberto Amado:

Gilberto Freyre speaks of 'a kind of psychoanalytic cure' for the whole nation; Gilberto Amado speaks of "distabuzação." These expressions tend to point up the sudden and discontinuous character of discovery and appreciation of that which could be 'authentically' Brazilian, of that which before had been 'stopped up' by a false Brazil. (Vianna 1995)

Our argument rests on various empirical data and is the heir to recent influences that seek to integrate a complex epistemology of the *gaze*. We conclude that this collection is the fruit of intercultural *improvisations*, and can be understood as result of the same socio-cultural process that produced various aspects of Brazilian arts and culture, such as *Samba*, *Bumba-Boi*, *Tambor de Crioula*, *Jongo*, etc. Magic

has been put through processes of 'distabuzação' toward a spectacle of aestheticized 'anthropophagy,' driven by a new 'touristification,' that is, by symbolic appropriations that serve to reduce its value, devouring and cannibalizing its original meaning, transforming it into one more product for easy consumption by the urban middle classes. The cultural and artistic forms that before were prohibited and repressed are today enthroned as the official identity of the states and regions of the nation. They have been drained of conflicts, of cultural resistances and latent confrontations, and turned into pacified theatres of mediated entertainment, of 'touristified' spectacle.

Amid the intense dialogue with these new mutations within the arena of social representations of folklore, cultural heritage, and social memory, this study proposes a new view of the 'Museum of Black Magic.' But this new proposal faces varied resistance... One can inquire into the future of this process of 'anthropophagic hybridization,' however, it is clear that the most virulent effect of this process of cultural 'cannibalization' is the 'sanitizing' of the Brazilian religious landscape, carried out primarily by the institutionalization of neo-Pentecostal Christian magic. (Dossier MAGIA 1996) Such churches and sects have promoted persecution against 'Afro-Native-Brazilian,' magico-religious forms, directly affecting this collection of magic...

Contrary to those who maintain that one way to resist such persecution—or the indifference of cultural agents—would be to frame the collection as 'Afro-Brazilian,' this study considers it more precise to affirm plurality and polyphony as key traits of this archive. It is a collection in which we find the interweaving of multiple *gazes* upon the question of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery in modern Brazilian society—especially in its relations to the State, which increasingly presents curious metamorphoses, exhibiting mutations in the service of forming an elaborate and sophisticated 'magic of the state.' (Taussig 1997)

It appears that we are dealing with a Museological Collection about the category of *evil* in Brazilian society, the first 'museum of evil,' in dialogue with the Museum of Crime, of the Police, of Weaponry, etc. In this way, we amplify the semantic field to include the social space of anthropology's polyphonic meanings. In this critical approach that attempts to perceive the conservatism that still dominates the space of cultural heritage and museology in our Latin American country ("the new is created by opening up the old to the still-unarticulated" (Flusser 1998), this study employs, with a more provocative tone, a poem by another great Brazilian poet. It is increasingly urgent to think of the museum metaphor in Brazilian culture: "while the culture continues to be encountered as a collection of *goods*, and not as a ludic collection, our Revolution will continue to be threatened..." (Flusser 1998) Inspired in this way by João Cabral de M. Neto<sup>5</sup>, we see in his poem *Museum of Everything* (1976) a singular distillation of the investigative effort presented herein. For, if anything can be *museum-ified* in a world that increasingly worships the speed of changes, in a hallucinatory and devouring transformation, then the 'museum of everything' "is a depository of everything that is there." Why couldn't there be a *Mephistophelean Museum*?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Brazilian Institute for Cultural Heritage (1937).

<sup>2</sup> He was born in Rio de Janeiro to Italian immigrants. He had his first poem published in 1920 when he was working as an accountant. He had successes in poetry after that and in 1935 organized an anthology of modernist poetry. In 1947 he married a woman named Alda. His poetry has been compared to Manuel Bandeira's. In 1988 he won the prestigious Prêmio Machado de Assis. Three years after that he died in Petrópolis.

<sup>3</sup> Petróleo Brasileiro or Petrobras is a semi-public Brazilian multinational energy corporation headquartered in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> Gilberto Amado speaks of "**distabuzação**" ("dis-taboo-ization") page 120, University of North Carolina Press, 1999, Hermano Vianna, John Charles Chasteen *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*.

<sup>5</sup> João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920–1999) was born in the state of Pernambuco, Brazil, and is considered one of the greatest Brazilian poets of all time. In a career that spanned more than 50 years and inspired two generations of younger Brazilian writers, Mr. Cabral earned a reputation as a cerebral, even difficult writer who in collections like "The Dog Without Feathers" and "Museum of Everything" demonstrated an unflinching, cinematic eye but showed little patience with romanticism or sentimentality. "To me, poetry is something that is built, like a house," he once said.

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