CHAPTER 5

"Blister you all"

Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and the Calibanic Genealogy

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THIS CHAPTER is an attempt at situating Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's *Roots of Brazil* (1936) within a long line of thought, especially present in essays, that sees Latin America, or Ibero-America, as a civilizing "option" different from and *superior* to the one represented by the United States. However, I won't discuss *Roots of Brazil* directly. Instead, I will trace, in broad strokes, the curve of that Latin Americanist line of thought that envisions *another* kind of America, the other side to the mirror of America. My reflections will then lead up to the debate generated in Brazil when U.S. Latin Americanist scholar Richard Morse's study *O espelho de Próspero* (Prospero's Mirror) was published there in the late 1980s.

But where shall one begin? Perhaps with a short essay on Edgar Allan Poe in which Rubén Darío recalls his arrival in the United States at the port of New York at the end of the nineteenth century. There the poet sketches a misty, marvelous scene: "On a cold damp morning I came for the first time to the enormous country of the United States." One particular detail in this scene is worth noting: squeezed in between the vast extent of Long Island and the shape of Staten Island, even before the formidable skyline of Manhattan came into view, it was the beauty of it all, says Darío, that tempted "the pencil rather than the camera, due to the dim light" (17).

What do Latin American poets and essayists see when they glimpse that other America? What kind of terribly seductive mirror does it hold up to

them? How do they imagine or intuit their *own* America, supposedly so different from North America? What is it that joins together such a diversity of intellectuals around a difference that, once postulated, turns them into demiurgical agents of national and regional discourse, privileged revealers of the secrets of an entire collectivity?

In this poet's provocative thoughts as he enters "enemy" territory, we can already hear, prefigured as it were, echoes of all the "Arielisms" that would come to mark so deeply the imagination of Latin America. That imagination, or rather that fantasy shaped by intellectuals about Latin America, was introduced by Darío even before Rodó, when, in the abovementioned essay on Poe, originally published in 1894, the Nicaraguan poet suggested that on the other side of the mirror it was Caliban who ruled:

> "Those Cyclopes. . . ," says Groussac; "those fierce Calibans. . . ," writes Peladan. Was the strange Sar right to characterize in this way these men of North America? Caliban rules over the island of Manhattan, over San Francisco, over Boston, over Washington, over the entire country. He has managed to impose the rule of matter, ranging from its mysterious form created by Edison to the apotheosis of the pig in the overwhelming city of Chicago. Caliban there is soaked in whisky just as in Shakespeare's drama he was soaked in wine; he thrives and grows; and, no longer the slave of any Prospero, nor made to suffer by any spirit of the air, he fattens and reproduces himself; his name is Legion. (20)

Here we find established the main lines of a discourse about the divided territory of America. In supposing Europe split into the land on one side or the other of the Pyrenees, one ends up projecting an America that is also severed by a fundamental boundary, which replicates the broader nineteenth-century idea of the North/South civilizational division of the European continent. In this case, however, rather than a "Latin" America, what we have is an "Iberian" America, as Rodó would later call it.

These shadows cast upon North American civilization awaken Shakespeare's characters and make them speak of a world whose *newness,* however, is not restricted to Darío's present moment or to Rodó's. What's at issue is a question about the future—about the future of all nations, no less—at the precise moment when the South's eyes peer into an imaginary territory which, if we are to believe Darío, could only be circumscribed by the freedom granted to an exceptional pen. (On the "moral aristocracy" of fin-de-siècle intellectuals in both Spanish and Portuguese Americas, see Sarah Moody's chapter in this volume.)

We should remember that this Shakespearean reference has a history of its own. In an enlightening study, Chantal Zabus traces that "Calibanic genealogy" that leads to a critical and poetic recuperation of the savage, making it possible to suppose that, by an inversion of values (with Caliban supplanting Ariel and, moreover, subverting the powers of Prospero), a move of fundamental importance has been effected. The author of *Tempests After Shakespeare* associates such a move with the postcolonial imaginary that makes it possible to reread Shakespeare in the shadow of an old Calibanesque recuperation, which originates in Renan's *drame philosophique* entitled *Caliban, suite de* La Tempête, of 1878.

It's not at all accidental that it would be during the turbulent decade of the 1960s that a more or less ferocious critique of the United States would be rekindled in Latin America and the Caribbean by way of various reinterpretations of this Shakespearean legacy, such as those of Roberto Fernández Retamar, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon, which in turn can be added to the earlier arguments of ethnopsychiatry, with Dominique Mannoni and his well-known "Prospero complex" (Zabus 15–23).

But long before this deprivileging of Prospero, which would transform Caliban into a postcolonial hero—so palatable to the kind of theory now dominant in North American academia—it had been Ariel who had awakened the admiration of intellectuals living on the margins; in other words, those looking at the North from the South, or looking back at the South upon entering the North.

I don't propose to delve here into the genealogy of the concept of Latin America, which is often assumed to be an original product of French imperialist thought. I shall only recall how reactions against the corrupt world of the North may also lead to that *hispanismo* that Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, in his broad recontextualization of the turn of the nineteenth century, has associated with the Spanish-American war and its "silent referent" which is the United States. For this Puerto Rican critic, behind the quest for "fabulous fathers" who might compensate imaginarily for the threat posed by the North American invaders of 1898, there unfolds a Freudian "family romance," replacing the real fathers with "more grandiose persons" (Díaz Quiñones 131).

At any rate, it's with Rodó, but in his later *Mirador de Próspero* of 1913, that we can see the reduction of the concept of the Ibero-American and the definitive inclusion of Brazil in the mental perspectives of the continent:

> We South Americans do not need to speak of a Latin America whenever it is a question of legitimating our racial unity; we do not need to call ourselves Latin Americans in order to assume a broader name that will comprise us all, because we can call ourselves something else that signifies a greater unity which is much more intimate and concrete: we can call ourselves "Ibero-Americans," grandchildren of that heroic and civilizing race which has only politically been fragmented into two European nations; and we could go even further and say that the same name of Hispano-Americans is fitting for the natives of Brazil. (qtd. in Díaz Quiñones 131–32)

This lineage that imaginarily coalesces in this more or less cosmic race is a long-standing one, which in the Brazilian context would include names such as those of Joaquim Nabuco and Manoel Bomfim, not to mention certain later essayists of the 1930s or the widespread anti-Americanism that has continued to shape the imagination of Brazilian intellectuals.

Neither is it fitting here to list the innumerable Hispanic American authors who, with greater or lesser solemnity, have treaded the path of this idealization of an America that is Hispanic or, more specifically, Iberian. I shall look only, within the limits of this chapter, at the idea of that "intimate unity" referred to by Rodó, which readers of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda will immediately associate with that incisive dictum found in *Roots of Brazil*: "Inside, we are still not American" (139).

The lack of that double referent—the American, and an America of our own—gives rise to a passionate quest, pervaded by the ambiguity of refuting an Other which is also, and perhaps unconsciously, an object of esteem. Just think, for example, of those marvels of ambivalence, of both love and unlove for the United States, that are the texts José Martí published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación*, especially those he wrote in the cyclopean city of New York.

The belief in an American race—that race about which, like Martí's readers, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda must have been thinking before he declared that this was an entity that had not *as yet* taken shape[1]—suggests the paradox, quite "Latin American" in flavor, of a collective unity to be based, in the final analysis, on the impurity of mixture and encounter. The most enthusiastic readers will see here a praise of hybridism, which is such fertile soil for the imagination and which Brazilians know so well, because they had the probable fortune of seeing it cultivated, starting in the 1930s, by someone of Gilberto Freyre's stature.

In any case, the more or less *mestizo* or more or less *moreno* civilization that took shape outside North America presupposes a unifying "intimacy" which intellectuals have been the first to be able to detect and savor (see,

1. That dictum ("Inside, we are still not American") appears in connection with the name of D. H. Lawrence—"one of the great poets of our time," Sérgio Buarque will say—in whose *Studies in Classic American Literature* the Brazilian writer will find the idea that "the blood is chemically reduced by the nerves, in American activity" (Holanda, *Roots* 139, 181).

apropos, Alfredo Bosi's chapter in the present volume). I think here of the final scene in Rodó's *Ariel,* where the master awakens hope in his disciples and then immediately withdraws. This gesture of withdrawal marks a "conquest of souls" thrown down as a challenge to a spiritual elite that will be the civilizing agent of the New World. The estheticizing aspect of this gesture did not escape the attention even of Unamuno (Castro 94).[2]

Rodó's call and solemn gesture reached, in 1920, a young man of seventeen who would write and publish, in the newspaper *Correio Paulistano,* an article entitled "Originalidade literária." In his first periodical text, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda would defend an "intellectual emancipation" which, for him, dispensed with any political emancipation. One of the authors immediately evoked by the young essayist is the Peruvian Francisco García Calderón, an *arielista* of the first rank, concerned, Holanda tells us, with the "complete spiritual emancipation of the New World, and, in particular, of the part dominated by the language of Cervantes" (Holanda, *O espírito e a letra* 35–41).[3]

A subsequent text that Sérgio Buarque, now eighteen, published in the *Revista do Brasil* in May 1920 is a review of *Ariel,* which also serves as an obituary for the recently deceased Rodó. This article is a veritable denunciation of the decadence of all those nations that kneel down before the grandeur and progress of exotic "races." Its author enthusiastically shares Rodó's diffuse reservations with regard to North Americans. "Yankee utilitarianism" is here the principal villain, and the young Brazilian never fails to associate it with the republican condition of the United States, clearly revealing his own monarchist ideals (Holanda, *O espírito e a letra* 42–46).

Rodó's elitism takes on, in Sérgio Buarque's review, a broad spirit that makes it possible to see in the United States "a tainted air of corruption emanating from the ruling classes which it is hard to find in Europe. Utilitarianism and the concern with making money, that *aura sacra fames,* have taken over the North Americans to the detriment of their intellectual spirit, their political morality and their own individual freedom" (43).

There's an enormous distance between the tone of these words and the critique of authoritarian thought that Sérgio Buarque would develop, sixteen years later, in *Roots of Brazil.* But it's worth noting what a strong impression the Latin Americanist cause had made upon this eighteen-year-old. And it's true that the cold, prosaic empiricism of the North Americans would reappear, though in an attenuated form, in the Weberian theses that provide a

2. See also, of course, Ángel Rama's classic *La ciudad letrada.*

3. On the young Holanda's Arielism, see Robert P. Newcomb's Nossa *and* Nuestra América.

framework for Sérgio Buarque's arguments in *Roots of Brazil*—a book that can be read as one long inquiry about a civilization that rejects the unfettered quest for efficiency and utility that would characterize the modern world and, especially, the great laboratory for civilization that was the United States.

Let's retain here the idea that a basic triangulation marks the imagination of the "Latin American" or of what, in the spectrum joining Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Richard Morse, would be called *Ibero-American.* Let's see now how that triangle works.

In the realm of *hispanismo,* an imaginary reconstruction of Spanish roots provides an important compensation for the pride wounded in the war of 1898 and by the North American conquest of territories that were "Hispanic." Going even further back in time, *hispanismo* also functions as an antidote to the imperialism of the Monroe Doctrine. But Brazil too, considered within this broad American context, would have its own share in affirming an identity that, in the final analysis, reinforced the division of America into two parts. To put it more clearly, I don't think there can be any conceptualization or poetic imagination of origins, nor even any possible fantasy about a definitive severing of roots, without first postulating a third angle along which, as in a vertex (or even a vortex), the United States is projected with its constant threat to the integrity of that tumultuous world south of the Rio Grande.

In that same year of 1920, in a powerful invective against the United States published in the magazine *A Cigarra,* Sérgio Buarque de Holanda would react harshly to the "chimera of Monroism" which, according to him, was leading many of his compatriots to find, in the shadow of North America, a benevolent antidote to "all the attempts at colonization that European powers might see fit to make in the New World" (Holanda, "A Chimera do Monroismo").

It's amusing to see this young essayist so taken with that same European intellectual prowess which the Brazilian Modernists would treat so facetiously. Let's recall that, after the beginning of the 1920s in Brazil, Oswald de Andrade's "anthropophagous" reversal would allow Brazilian intellectuals to imagine they were devouring their own fathers and show that the real strength belonged not to the Europeans but rather to their *mestizo* descendants.

To summarize what I've set forth up to this point, I'll say that the inversion of the signs that associate Latin America either with the spiritual powers of Ariel or with a Caliban as reinterpreted by postcolonial struggles hardly conceals the fact that, in both cases, whether we are on the side of Ariel or that of Caliban, the antidote to "Anglo materialism" serves the same psychological purpose, which is to react against the seductive power of the monster of the North. This is what José Guilherme Merquior proposed, in a lapidary formu-

lation, when, referring to the publication of *O espelho de Próspero* in Brazil, he suggested that "Morse's Calibanism vindicates, eighty years later, Rodó's Arielism" (Merquior 71).

Among the reactions to *O espelho de Próspero* upon its publication in Brazil, the harshest was that of Simon Schwartzman, who saw in Morse's book a "nostalgia for totality and for transcendence," as if it concealed a vicious "Sorelian millenarianism" and an idealized "lost millenarian essence" (187, 191–92).

However, before disqualifying Morse's thesis as a simple populist vestige, as if he were only seduced by the idea of an organic State, it's well to analyze what's at issue in the polemic generated by *O espelho de Próspero.* In a keen article, Mauricio Tenorio reconstructs the theoretical context from which the book must have arisen, claiming that when

> Morse speaks of a "different tradition," of the need to recognize in Latin America a "new ideology," he is simply echoing (and very much in tune) notes that have sounded from Lévi-Strauss and Eliade to Marcuse, Adorno, Foucault and Dumont. And one of the fundamental purposes of such echoes consists in a reevaluation of myth, a factor that gains importance as a form of knowledge and life, on the same level as scientific knowledge. (119–20)

Basically, Morse would be contributing to the "critique of modernity" found in an important segment of the social sciences and historiography that developed in the United States after the 1960s. However, it would not be as a simple "return" to a moment prior to modernization, but rather a recuperation of the role played by *myth* in the formation of collectivities, which suggests a closer relation to tradition. As Otávio Velho acutely observes, the secularization and desacralization of the world are forms of separation from that transcendent sphere that is always projected onto a *beyond* and is preserved there, on a level that at every moment threatens to return (96). In terms dear to Morse, which evoke Dumont and point to his later thought after *O espelho de Próspero,* it was the *holistic* character of neo-Iberian societies that compensated for North American *individualism.*[4]

Thinking in terms of an overall history of the social sciences in Latin America, one should recall that, beginning in the 1950s and 60s, there emerges a profound critique of modernism, or more precisely of its destructive effects,

4. See Morse, *New World Soundings.* Any detailed analysis of that redemptive view of Latin America should also take into account Morse's time as a student at Princeton University, where, as the historian himself recalls, Augusto Centeno "opened my eyes to García Lorca, San Juan de la Cruz, Ricardo Güiraldes" and where Américo Castro, "the great man of the Generation of '98 in Spain," also taught (Bomeny 130).

which the periphery, more than any other space, would understand. In other words, around the middle of the last century there is a turn that suddenly makes it possible to change the settings of analyses that had assumed that Latin American reality was inherently refractory to modernization. Reasserting the Latin Americanist imaginary, the continent gave itself over to the vertigo of an alternative project or to the dream of an autochthonous modernity. Either in the epic quests of revolutionaries or in the restrained fury of reformists, a different kind of modernity shined forth in many forms, even before Cuba attempted to embody the fantasy of a radical departure.

The possibility that the periphery might gain the status of a creative center corresponded fully to previous ideas concerning the most deep-seated modernist projects—projects that, especially in Brazil, focus on the mirage of a radical reversal of the relationship of *dependency,* a word that, not accidentally, gained such prestige in Latin America.

Perhaps the strongest metaphor used by Morse, who believes the "mirror" ought to be turned around (as in an *inverse teleology*), finds its origin in his bold preference—always somewhat quixotic, to be sure—for the models and proposals of a society supposedly deviant with regard to the traditional arrangements of Western modernity. Another West, another America, another Europe, even another geography, were proposed in order to picture an alternative future based on the belief in and preference for a singular past, which leads this historian's abundant imagination to formulate the **paradox** of a *promising past.*

To conclude, let's bring Sérgio Buarque de **Holanda** back into the picture. Obviously Sérgio Buarque isn't Richard Morse. *Roots of Brazil* is a much more ambiguous work, uneasy, moreover, with regard to an "Iberian" civilizational path. And yet, in both cases, *secularization* is the main theme.

The problem is perhaps that the "demythification of the world" turns literature, and along with it grand essays on national and regional interpretation, into a constant reconstruction of the *enigma* that secularization itself promises to unveil and do away with. I think here of Jorge Brioso's proposal which, focusing on Rubén Darío, aims to "recuperate the different settings in which Latin American modernist texts, even as they assume their profane and disenchanted condition, restore enigma, revelation and a sense of the sacred" (87).

How, then, can we explain *Roots of Brazil?* Where can we situate Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's book along that line that runs from secularization to a full reengagement with myth? If, on one hand, it's possible to imagine *Roots of Brazil* as a veritable "preface to modernity," as Antonio Candido recently told me, on the other hand, it's possible to contrast Sérgio Buarque's book with Richard Morse's lucubrations, in order to see to what degree, in *Roots of Brazil,* there is also the vision of a reenchanted world.

In concluding, I propose, then, a few questions: might it not be that, in examining the effects of secularization, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's book ends up paradoxically raising Latin America to the category of an enigma? Might it not be interesting to connect the examination of neo-Thomism found in *O espelho de Próspero* to the continuation of a Catholic horizon in Brazilian political thought in *Roots of Brazil?* Doesn't this Counter-Reformationist horizon suggest, in fact, that political contracts require transcendence, that is, require all that lies beyond the individual? And finally, thinking in Weberian terms, doesn't this same *disenchantment* with the world make the impossible quest for *meaning* more anguished and urgent than ever?

The contrast between *O espelho de Próspero* and *Roots of Brazil* may remind us, finally, that the nature of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's book isn't always "Apollonian."[5] This is a non-Apollonian character that, in his own Latin Americanist passion, Sérgio Buarque's North American counterpart Richard Morse may reveal in all its extent and breadth, by at last having plunged unrestrainedly into the continental truths of poets and novelists.

Perhaps it's now time to revisit *Roots of Brazil,* no longer in search of its internal coherence or admirable architecture, but rather to sound the dark depths that this luminous book conceals.[6]

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5. The use of Nietzschean categories for an understanding of *Roots of Brazil* was proposed by Luiz Dantas.

6. This chapter is an abridged version of my arguments developed in *Signo e desterro: Sérgio Buarque de Holanda e o Brasil* (Hucitec 2015), which will soon appear in English as *The Other Roots: Wandering Origins in* Roots of Brazil *and the Impasses of Modernity in Ibero-America* (University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming in 2017).

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