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Guimarães Rosa's "São Marcos" and Race and Class

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Paulo da-Luz-Moreira, "Guimarães Rosa's 'São Marcos' and Race and Class"
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Abstract: In his article "Guimarães Rosa's 'São Marcos' and Race and Class" Paulo da-Luz-Moreira analyzes a pivotal short story in João Guimarães Rosa's oeuvre. Published in *Sagarana*, Guimarães Rosa's first short fiction collection, "São Marcos" has an extremely complex structure in its juxtaposition of layers of idiosyncratic and careful ethnographic and literary erudition, making the story a challenge to critics and readers alike. Guimarães Rosa worked exhaustively on this unique piece that touches with disconcerting openness on issues of strained racial and class relations in Brazil and expounds on the power of language and on the delicate point upon which one's identity, beliefs, and social class hinge. da-Luz-Moreira argues that "São Marcos" is a seminal text that suggests a potential social contract based on respect and humility in Guimarães Rosa's description of Brazilian society and where the characters represent protagonists in most of his fiction -- *jagunços*, cowhands, *posseiros*, *agregados*, ex-slaves, gypsies, beggars, vagrants, children, prostitutes, and other marginal figures -- whom Guimarães Rosa never demonized or idealized, but observed and described lovingly.

Paulo DA-LUZ-MOREIRA

Guimarães Rosa's "São Marcos" and Race and Class

In 1937 the yet unknown João Guimarães Rosa wins a prestigious award at Academia Brasileira de Letras with *Magma*, a poetry collection. In the very same year Guimarães Rosa submits (under the pen name *Viator*) a collection of short stories to the *Prêmio Humberto Campos*, sponsored by the publishing company José Olympio Editora. The five-hundred-page book simply named *Contos* and written, in the author's own words, in "seven months of exaltation and amazement" (*Escritura de Sagarana* 12; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine), fails to win, although it creates a stir among the jurors. Shortly after that, Guimarães Rosa separates from his wife and leaves Brazil for Hamburg for the beginning of his diplomatic career (he would eventually be interned in Baden-Baden by the nazis when Brazil and Germany severed diplomatic relations). That book rested for seven years, was revised in 1945 in "five months of reflection and lucidity," and became *Sagarana*, whose title was to be Guimarães Rosa's first neologism, applying the Nheengatu suffix *-rana*, meaning "in the manner of" to the word *saga* (see *Cadernos de Literatura Brasileira* 15). Of the nine stories that survived from the original twelve, "São Marcos" was considered by the author the "piece I most worked on" (*Veredas de Rosa* 59) and it is a measure of Guimarães Rosa's regard for this story that he wanted to republish "São Marcos" two years later in the popular magazine *Vamos Ler?* (see Guimarães Rosa, *Cadernos de Literatura Brasileira* 22).

Every story in *Sagarana* has an epigraph taken from folk songs. In "São Marcos" the epigraph sets forth the theme of elusive identities: it tells playfully of a man on top of a coconut tree who turns out to be just a coconut that turns out to be the baldhead of a monkey that turns out to be the whole monkey. At first, narrator and protagonist are one in "São Marcos" but they soon separate into two related figures, João and José, that play an elusive game of identities. The relationship between narrator and protagonist is apparent in the way the narrator introduces these two names. He identifies himself as João in a passing comment about the bird named *João-de-Barro* [a Rufous Hornero], claiming the bird as his namesake (228). A few lines later, a premonitory episode takes place as the protagonist sets about his customary Sunday walk into the woods: "I was moving along without a thing on my mind, stumbling, not even looking where I went, and it gave me a shock when I heard a shout well behind me: 'Play the man, Joe!' I shivered and looked back, because, in this story, I, too, am called Joe. But I was not the one referred to. It was another Joe, Joe Popinjay, who, thirty yards ahead of me, was trying to keep his seat on a neurastenic bucking roan" (187-88). This uncanny voice, coming so close from behind and yet unidentified, re-baptizes the protagonist as it addresses someone else who is ahead of the protagonist on the path into the forest. Monitory warnings are audible in the passage: the injunction to "take the hit" and implicitly not to "fall from a horse" (*cair do cavalo*, an idiom in Portuguese meaning "losing face"). Furthermore, the derogatory epithet "*Zé Prequeté*" -- still used in Minas Gerais to refer to someone adept at turning himself into an ostentatious fool -- echoes the narrator's self-deprecations, charged with dubiousness about associating himself with events that had a humbling effect on this man.

The opening sentence of "São Marcos" constitutes a distancing gesture between the first person narrator and the protagonist in time, place, and beliefs: "At that time I was living in Fried Lizard, and did not believe in conjure men" (224). Looking patronizingly at his former self, the narrator's irony borders on the sarcasm as he lists seventy-two superstitious interdictions he nonetheless dutifully followed at that time. This indirectly points to the precise nature of this man's learning experience: José is not about to learn respect for magic -- he did that already; he is about to learn something else, something the narrator somehow still resists: to respect conjurers. The first-person narrator, João, relates crucial events that have changed him to such an extent that he now refers to his past self as a sort of an alter-ego, the protagonist José. However, as the climax of the story nears, the gap between João and José (established in temporal terms as well as in terms of his understanding of the ways of the world) narrows dramatically. It is in this collapsing of the divided self that the protagonist/narrator is deeply transformed. The tale told by the narrator becomes the story of the narrator as a character who is taken over by the tale, reliving vividly a past experience that has marked him indelibly. The

trauma still resonates and we should bear in mind that the epigraph to "São Marcos" about elusive identities is a "song to drive away evil spells." Back in 1937, "São Marcos" had a more explanatory title: "Envultamento," which means the act of bewitching or harming someone by witchcraft performed with parts of one's body (nails, hair, etc) or objects that belong to the bewitched or by making a representation of that person (for instance, with a doll) or of a specific part of his or her body (a model made with wax). João/José is haunted by a close encounter with conjuring he has yet to fully recover from, and the source of his initial disbelief and lingering resistance has sources other than mere skepticism.

This João who calls himself José is highly conscious of his elevated cultural and social status. This man never declares a profession or occupation, or a reason for his temporary stay in Calango-Frito, but he is one of the many transient outsiders, usually doctors, that feature more or less prominently in several of Rosa's key stories. José's self-satisfied narcissistic awareness explains his former dismissal of the efficacy and danger of conjuring, as well as João's current bitter ambiguity toward his former self. Offering a telling detail, the narrator admits to having kept his snake-bite protection charm "folded in his wallet" (224) instead of properly displayed in a "scapular made of red *baeta*" (red fleecy wool fabric) because he felt it would be humiliating for a man of his stance to make such public display of superstitious beliefs. This social self-consciousness reflects his behavior in other ways as well: on his Sunday walks he dutifully carries a gun that he personally considers cumbersome, although he admittedly has no intention of hunting, because he fears being ridiculed. Rather, this weapon is a concealing accessory that covers his actual hunt: José is embarrassed to let people know that he goes into the woods just to watch plants and small, harmless animals such as ants, crickets, water spiders, tortoises, and small birds. In another indication of his extreme self-consciousness, José dislikes the company of dogs, which he describes as loud creatures obsessed with hunting, because he remembers with disgust the "disapproving frowns" (228) of a dog at his failure to fire a single shot when the amateur naturalist made one of his first excursions into the woods. Later in the story, João will ironically admit that his extreme self-consciousness will leave him literally "caught in the woods with no dog around," an expression that means being in trouble by oneself with no chance of finding guidance or help of any kind.

The lesson learned by the narrator/protagonist of "São Marcos" is related to José's aggressively disrespectful disbelief toward conjuring, but, most importantly, towards those who have reached a certain social status -- unacceptable to him -- because of conjuring. The name of the settlement (Calango-Frito) is highly evocative: *calango* is the name given to small lizards commonly found all over Brazil and *calangos* may sometimes be associated with the devil and with conjuring, featuring, fried or otherwise, as an ingredient in magic potions. After admitting to no less than 72 interdictions plus a few other small superstitions and describing Calango-Frito as a place where conjuring and magical beliefs were widespread even among children, the narrator reaffirms he adamantly refused to believe in conjure men: "but, no, not conjure men" (225).

Arthur Ramos's pioneering and influential 1934 volume, *O negro brasileiro*, is illustrative of the intellectual elite's sense of embarrassment at the pervasive influence of conjuring and belief in other forms of magical practices across a wide spectrum of social classes in Brazil. As Ramos contends: Brazil is impregnated by magic. Medicine-men -- sorcerers -- have higher prestige among our people than the leaders of our destinies -- it takes courage to confess it. … In the dead of night, elegant ladies and gentlemen of high manners visit *macumbas* to consult with the invisible power of Pai Joaquim, Zezinho Curunga, or Jubiabá. Padre Cícero is able to thrill huge crowds. Santa Dica is considered an inspired being. And any prophet with cabalistic formulas or conjure man with magic family remedies attracts a large number of clients" (*O negro brasileiro* 320). Ramos is clearly embarrassed by the prominence of characters such as Padre Cícero and Santa Dica, who held considerable political power in the backlands in the 1920s because of their healing or prophesizing powers and were seen as anachronistic remnants of the backwardness of the First Republic in the early thirties. However, this scholar is even more palpably ashamed by the influence exerted on respected members of the upper classes, "elegant ladies" and "gentlemen of high manners," by these figures he characterizes with names such as "Pai Joaquim," which indicate Afro-Brazilian religious origins.

José -- and his alter ego João -- feels the incompatibility between his social and intellectual posture in the community and the complexity of his unspoken and (like his scapular) hidden beliefs. This discrepancy will be spelled out in "São Marcos" by Aurísio Manquitola, a fair-skinned *mameluco* (the child of a white person and a Native Brazilian or someone with any combination of Native Brazilian and European blood), described as a man "with an exaggerated sense of color and caste" (231), which he encounters further on the path to the woods. Aurísio tries respectfully to admonish José against using the powerful *reza-brava* "São Marcos" and against teasing conjure men. Calling him a "*stincted* [distinct] man of high category and high faith" (232), Aurísio states that, because of José's social and racial status, it is dangerous and inadequate for him to believe in or to meddle with conjuring. This conversation between Aurísio and José helps establish the social connections that tie conjuring to black life and make conjuring and other magical practices anathema to official Catholicism and the elite. Aurísio identifies himself with the protagonist, showing admiration and reverence while making derisive racial comments about those whom he views as inferior to himself and to José. When José insinuates sarcastically that Aurísio has come from an appointment with a conjure man, Aurísio denies it vehemently and states that he is coming from Sunday Mass instead. When the narrator mocks his fear of cemeteries and conjure men, Aurísio also boasts about his daring and bravery and reacts to José's mordancy by violently disparaging blacks (and explicitly connecting conjuring and blackness): "I don't like black buzzards … iffen I did, I'd angle a bunch and carry them around under my arm" (231).

For all his contemptuous mockery, José is not much different from Aurísio Manquitola as far as his sense of ambiguity toward conjuring is concerned. Even João, the narrator, seems to join José and Aurísio when it comes to expressing open scorn fraught with racism, directed particularly at João Mangolô, one of most famous conjurers in Calango-Frito. João Mangolô inspires fear and respect among the people of Calango-Frito, who come regularly to his house for various consultations. Two other references made in passing point to sources other than simply conjuring for so much respect and/or fear. Mangolô is a veteran from the sedition called "Ano da Fumaça" (the year of the smoke): in 1833, Ouro Preto, then capital of Minas Gerais, was taken over by the *caramurus* who wanted the return of Dom Pedro I to power. Inspired by rumors or concrete promises of freedom, several bands of slaves were convinced to support the rebellion (see Andrade). Mangolô also fought in a more notorious war, against Paraguay, which lasted from 1864 to 1870 and represented an opportunity to achieve freedom for many slaves that joined the army either sent by their masters or as voluntaries and thus obtained their manumission (see Salles 63-77).

The name Mangolô is suggestive in many ways: it may refer to the origin of this African character (places in the Benguela region in western Congo and in Angola bear this name) or to a tree, whose bark is used by witchdoctors for trials by ordeal and to cure fevers. The name may also refer to *mangolo*, which means "letters," "orthography" or "spelling" in another Bantu language. João Mangolô is an African man who will have the protagonist go through a trial by ordeal, passing on a message that turns the narrator into the bearer of a certain lesson of cultural literacy; a lesson much needed, but hard to swallow. The *Catimbó*, or conjuring, that João Mangolô practices is more syncretic than *Candomblé* and less structured as a religious practice in its strict institutional sense than *Umbanda*. The roots of Catimbó are European, African, and Indigenous, and its rituals deal mostly with pragmatic practices such as healing, the confection of lucky charms, providing protection, and soothsaying; and incantations very much like the *reza-brava São Marcos*, which gives the title to the story. It is still fairly easy to find *catimbozeiros*, or at least their modernized counterparts, in urban Brazil nowadays.

The respect and/or fear that the locals have for João Mangolô and his female counterpart, Nhá Tolentina, is not merely a fictional exaggeration. The *mineiro* Sebastião Vitorino Teixeira dos Santos, aka *Catone* whose father was a *quimbandeiro*, recalls the respect even despotic landowners granted people thought to be able to conjure: Thus, in Minas they had the highest regard for my father, he was much respected … even the landowner … the only sharecropper he never beat was my father. Because once he raised his hand to my father and he stopped right there" (Lopes 136-37). In a fashion of fairy-tale foreshadowing José is warned three times against his lack of respect towards conjure men in general and Mangolô in particular, by Nhá Rita Preta (José's house servant), by Aurísio Manquitola, and by the mysterious voice that addresses the rider called by the narrator a "Zé-Prequeté." Despite of all these warnings, José insults gravely the black conjure man with racist epi-

thets as he passes by the old man's house on his Sunday walk, doing so significantly at the exact time of the Holy Mass in town: "'Hey, there, Mangolô!' 'May Our Lord Jesus bless you, sir' … 'I thought you were the stump of a burned-over black rosewood.' 'You will have your little joke, sir' … 'with a basket of cotton on top!' 'Just listen to him!' 'You must know the nigger commandments. Remember how they go? First: every nigger is a boozer' … 'Heavens above!' 'Second, every nigger is lazy.' 'Blessed virgin!' 'Third: every nigger is a conjure man' … 'Hey, Mangolô: there's a nigger at the ball, hit him with a mall!'" (229-31).

At first, when José mocks the color of Mangolô's skin and his nappy hair, the conjure man takes it lightly, but as the protagonist keeps pitching ever stronger racist epithets, Mangolô frowns, mumbles something to himself, turns away, goes back into the house, and slams the door behind him. At this crucial moment in "São Marcos," João seems to forget the distance he has established from José and glosses this heretical and derisive catechism of race hatred with equally hateful comment. The gap between the narrator João and the protagonist José narrows and the story significantly begins to be told in the present tense from this moment on. However, anecdotes about conjuring and other uncanny episodes that have dominated the story up to this moment seem to slip into oblivion as the narrator marches on into a leisurely journey into the depths of the woods, a long intermezzo over nine pages of intensely lyrical prose that distills the narrator's (and also the author's) genuine love of nature conveyed through sensuous and minute observations of the vegetation and the animals.

The name of the woods, *Três Águas* (three waters or three water courses), seems to evoke *Três Barras* (three river banks), the grand old farm of the Guimarães family, located to the north of Rosa's Cordisburgo. In a newspaper *Crônica* called "Dois soldadinhos mineiros" (*Ave, Palavra* 318), Rosa recalls a visit to the farm (now owned by a friend, Pedro Barbosa) in 1945, a year before the publication of *Sagarana*. Although ostensibly about two World War II veterans coming from the *sertão* of Minas Gerais, Rosa's *crônica* mentions childhood memories and points to the fact that this farm is where his maternal great-great-grandfather was killed by one of his slaves and that that slave was sentenced to death and killed in nearby Curvelo in the last public hanging in Minas Gerais. In "São Marcos," Três Águas is the property of a man called Colonel Modestino Siqueira, mentioned when the narrator sardonically explains the reason for a long detour in the trail: the path must pass by the door of the farm house of Modestino, a man with the same last name as the powerful family that protects the *jagunço* named Damázio *dos Siqueira* in "Famigerado" (*Primeiras estórias* 56-61). *Siqueira* is a traditional family in São Paulo (where the family's roots go back to the sixteenth century), linked to Minas Gerais because of the *bandeirante* from Taubaté, Bartolomeu Bueno da Siqueira, one of the most important adventurers to explore Minas Gerais in the seventeenth century.

This extensive, lyrically infused interval contains yet an *intermezzo* within the *intermezzo* -- something the narrator calls "a sub-story, yet incomplete" (236) in which João and José, narrator and protagonist, fully converge into a single entity. The narrator spins this yarn when he recalls passing by bamboo bushes on which he has inscribed poems in a bizarre *desafio* (a poetic challenge), with weekly matches since his arrival at Calango-Frito. The name of the settlement, previously associated with a general predilection for conjuring, also refers to *Desafio Calangueado*, a form of *desafio* with African Brazilian roots which is considered by some a rural ancestor of samba. The *Calango* involves two troubadours accompanied by an accordion who take turns improvising stanzas of variable sizes following a fixed rhyme scheme called *linha* (thread) and these verbal and musical battles may last hours, ending only when one of the contestants finally stumbles.

João/José (now the distinction seems not to matter anymore) admits his rival could be many different people, but prefers to imagine him as a single individual whom he names "I-Wonder-Who" (239). On his very first trip to the woods, João/José notices a stanza carved on the bamboo canes between node-framed spaces dedicated to a woman called *Marieta*. Right below he responds by carving the odd-sounding names of the lion-kings, ten ancient Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs. To explain his reasons for such an odd choice, João/José takes the reader into yet another *intermezzo* within the *intermezzo* within the *intermezzo*, discussing the aesthetic principles that determine his poetic choices, which some critics have wrongly identified as Guimarães Rosa's. The eccentric sounding names of the lion-kings are valued in themselves independent of their meaning, because of the "intact sharpness of the words seldom written, even more seldom seen, rarely used, better if never used at

all" (238). As the narrator expounds, he proceeds to furnish a list of examples of the power of words, a complex enumeration built as a series of clauses subordinated to an enigmatic "it's not for nothing," which implies that there is an unspecified reason for all these things. The opening sentence establishes the central concept to which the others are subordinated: that words are living things endowed with the capacity for producing sights (feathers) and sounds (song), for communicating, actively and passively. There follows the illustrations: an illiterate peasant in a store mispronounces *caixote* (cardboard box) because he considers the biscuits inside too fine a product and the ordinary pronunciation too pedestrian; the need for constant innovation in slang; a man of similar stance as the narrator's managing to broaden the horizons of a narrow-minded fellow by teaching him eight rather sophisticated words; the general preference of the people in Calango-Frito for the sermons of the old priest, which people could not fully understand, to the sermons of the new one, which are plain and simple and thus not as edifying; a mere Latin quotation, *sub lege libertas* (freedom under the law), which prevents an imminent riot during a political rally; a simple rhyme repeated so many times by a little boy he gets scared as the lyrics turn "wild" again; and, finally, the "open sesame" that opens the cavern in Ali Baba's story in *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*.

The examples vary widely in grotesque conjunction from the most mundane to the plainly absurd, but they all somehow center on two points: language made fresh has power in itself, but its power is realized in the way people relate to it. Indeed, the point is made through the sheer verbal virtuosity that piles these wildly disparate examples one after the other, juxtaposing Assyrian kings to biscuits, children's rhymes to sermons and quotations in Latin to *One Thousand and One Nights*: the narrator's extravagant romp moves from the openly comic to the ridiculously pedantic without losing the focus of his disquisition.

I-Wonder-Who is not particularly impressed by the erudition of João/José and, before inscribing a new stanza, comments succinctly -- "Turkish gibble-gabble!" (239). Nevertheless, João/José feels that I-Wonder-Who and he have become friends and the two proceed with their *desafio* now around the theme of heaven and earth with folk motifs around the tale of the "Feast in the Sky" and the *surucuá* (the South American relative of the *Quetzal*) until the narrator admits that his rival's mastery of folk poetry ultimately beats him. Listings such as this one are a specialty and an obsession of the narrator João. The narrator starts his narrative by itemizing his 72 superstitions and several examples of the widespread influence of conjuring in Calango-Frito and there follows at least twelve other lists in "São Marcos." These lists are, in themselves, in their idiosyncratic meticulousness, their taxonomic emphasis, humorous and, at the same time, highly informative. This tendency to expound in catalogue fashion is also a recognizable feature of Rosa, who kept files of annotations from his "field trips" in search of material for his fiction, newspaper clippings about himself (all negative pieces pasted upside down) and all kinds of lists of names. In an interview for the DVD that accompanies the commemorative edition of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, Antonio Candido recalls that he first heard about Rosa from Vinícius de Morais, a fellow member of the diplomatic service, who told Candido about a strange colleague of his who wrote fiction using a self-fashioned system of files where he catalogued all sorts of information (historical, ethnographical, geographic, etc) about his region, information which he used in his writing. Candido says that when he first read Sagarana he immediately guessed that Guimarães Rosa must be the colleague Vinícius de Morais had mentioned. The lists in "São Marcos" compile varied items such as superstitions, forms of conjuring, possible causes for a very sore foot, possible remedies for such pain, things to observe in the woods, breeds of dogs, ancient kings, water birds, ants, trees, etc.

There are also seven loosely connected stories woven into the central plot of "São Marcos." Four are short anecdotes: the enigmatic tale of Saturnino Pingapinga, Nhá Rita's cautionary tale of a washerwoman victim of conjuring with a voodoo doll, the story of a harsh schoolteacher who almost gets killed by a conjure spell made by his own students with their urine, and the story of the dog who frowned upon José as he failed to fire a single shot during a trip to the woods. Three other stories in "São Marcos" are significantly longer. Aurísio Manquitola tells two connected tales to warn the protagonist against the dangers of meddling with the *São Marcos* incantation prayer. In the first story, a man named Gestal da Gaita, having recited the prayer, is possessed and almost kills his friend Silivério in the middle of the night; Gestal then walks up the wall, hits his head on the roof, and falls back on the

floor head first. In the second story, the same Gestal da Gaita teaches the dim-witted Tião Tranjão the São Marcos (his teaching methods are evocative of slavery: first Gestal gives Tião Tranjão cachaça and then, as the student still fails to memorize the words of the incantation, the teacher proceeds to teach him by giving him severe beatings until he is finally able to recite the *reza-brava*). Tião Tranjão uses the São Marcos to escape miraculously from jail and beat up his wife and her lover, who are guilty of having plotted against him. The third and most complex story is the long intermezzo relating the narrator's *desafio* with an anonymous poet, the writing battle that consists of scribbling rhymes on bamboo canes.

This *mise-en-abyme* of *intermezzos* within *intermezzos*, these convoluted lists, and these smaller narrative structures are integral to the aesthetic of labyrinthine procrastination that shapes this and many other stories by Guimarães Rosa. In many ways, "São Marcos" emerges from the idiosyncratic impetus provided by smaller narratives that are themselves marked by a compulsion to tell and to repeat, to shift back and forth from a seemingly arbitrary pattern, to shape chaos into a meticulous and exquisitely articulated design. "São Marcos," as well as much of Guimarães Rosa's fiction, goes against the commonplace assertion that short fiction is necessarily about concision and single-minded focus. Built upon a wide array of perspectives and an accumulation of ethnographic information, these short stories are nuanced narratives of the experience of time that point to varying speeds in the ebb and flow of temporality, underlining the complexities of remembered narratives, circularities and conflations of history. This plural discourse and rich orchestration of voices and cultures also characterize Guimarães Rosa's only novel, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. The difference between these multi-vocal and layered stories and Rosa's only celebrated novel is quantitative rather than qualitative.

But "São Marcos" is not a cacophony of forking paths: it remains the tale of an educated man's education. The narrator's epistemological journey is summed up in one enigmatic anecdote, dexterously delivered in one single sentence in the third paragraph of "São Marcos." Adopting a tone of confession, the narrator admits: "And it is only today that I realize that I was the worst of all, even worse than Saturnino Pingapinga, a backwoodsman who -- the story is an old one -- mistook his house, slept with a woman who was not his wife, and was cured of his *Mal-de-Engasgo* with the doctor's prescription in his pocket, as he did not have the money to fill it out" (185). This complex allegory of contrition, presented initially as a riddle, tells of idiosyncratic coincidences bringing an unexpected cure to a man that had a solution of a different sort at hand, but was not able to use it then. *Mal-de-Engasgo* is a medical condition called dysphalgia, a paralysis of the pharynx, thought to be caused by repeated malaria infections or the *Chagas* disease typical of Minas Gerais, first mentioned in 1823 by the German naturalists Johann Baptist von Spix and C.F.P. von Martius in their *Viagem pelo Brasil*. The person who suffers from such condition has an obstructed throat and finds it difficult to swallow. For José to be cured from such illness means that he is going to have to learn to *engulir* João Mangolô (here, *engulir* means literally to swallow, but also to put up with, to accept or to learn to tolerate, unwillingly but forcefully). The journey into the woods will culminate in José's harsh education, the learning ritual that will turn this overbearing, confident man into an at least slightly wiser person, the narrator João.

Just as José reaches the heart of the woods, the insulted man, the powerful João Mangolô, pierces the eyes of a *manipanço* (a small idol of African origin) with needles and strikes the protagonist completely blind as a result. An absolute darkness unlike anything experienced before horrifies the narrator/protagonist and it is significant that it takes João/José a while to realize that he is the only one afflicted and that the world around him remains unfazed by his catastrophe: "So if they were all going about their business, none of these little folk was frightened. Therefore … could I be … blind? Like that, all of a sudden, without pain, without cause, without warning? … Then I understood that the tragedy was my own private affair and that, amid so many eyes, only mine were blinded, and that only for me were all things dark. The horror!" ("São Marcos" 202). At first the panic paralyzes José, but the fear of being eaten by a *maracajá* ("small jaguar") impels him to action. He hears again the same strange injunction from the beginning of that day's journey he now takes it to be an order: "Energetic and friendly, deep, advising resistance" (249). Counting on his now enhanced sense of hearing and smell and on his intimate knowledge of the surrounding nature, feeling his way from rock to tree trunk to recognizable sounds and smells, José tries to get himself out of this *mato sem cachorro* guid-

ed by his intuition, only to realize in desperation that he has managed to get himself farther into the woods than he has ever ventured.

Blinded and now completely lost, João/José hears the injunction once again (253) and starts instinctively to recite the *São Marcos*, the *reza-brava* ("wild prayer"), which he has memorized, but not taken seriously before. The ritualized words of the "São Marcos" are an example of Brazilian syncretism. This ancient European incantation aimed at protecting cattle and quieting children has been brought to Brazil and adopted for taming wild cattle; later blacks would add to the magic formula, changing it considerably, transforming the words in an magic incantation of a different sort. In "São Marcos," we read only the opening words of the *reza-brava* (232) when José wishes to frighten Aurísio Manquitola, who interrupts the protagonist. In Manquitola's cautionary tales the "São Marcos" is used to grant demonic super powers to whoever recites it, but the "São Marcos" is an ambiguous text in itself, mentioned by *cronista* João do Rio and by Rosa himself (in "Reza Brava," one of the poems in *Magma*) as an incantation used to bring back a loved one who has left.

Still blind but possessed by the demonic powers granted by the incantation, José runs through the woods and gets back to João Mangolô's house, which he recognizes by the sound of the old man's heinous hogs. José has passed by Mangolô's fat hogs when he insulted the old man and the animals are seen as extensions of their owner, almost invulnerable frighteningly hungry beasts: "they eat anything; even snakes -- for not even the fangs of a fer-de-lance can go through their lard. But at midnight, it is better not to come around, for at that hour hogs turn to beasts; they even want to rip their owner, or any other citizen, to shreds" (189). The narrator recalls forcing himself into Mangolô's house and beating up the famed conjure man with murderous fury. Admitting his guilt and releasing José from the charm that has blinded him by removing the needles from the *manipanço*, Mangolô feigns a humility that is belied by his sarcasm: "I didn't mean to kill, I meant no harm … I just tied this little strip of black cloth over the eyes of this likeness, so that Massa couldn't see for a while … Better keep the eyes closed, so Massa doesn't need to see no ugly black man" (254). In spite of his feigned meekness, perfectly understandable as the old black man is at the mercy of a man in a fit of demonic rage, João Mangolô teaches the protagonist a necessary lesson. Unable to admit fully his defeat, José describe his "triumph" as he warns the conjuring man not to try to do him harm again because he has "a good angel, a good saint, and a *reza-brava*" (254). Nevertheless, he gives Mangolô money, compared here to a "white flag" (254). José's final offering is the proof of his ultimate recognition of the power and authority of a man the rest of Calango-Frito had always respected, or at least feared.

The figure of the slave born in Africa was an important component of slave narratives in Brazil. As *Seu* Julião (the grandson of former slaves) recalls, African-born men and women would walk through a path and no one would see them, they would go to work the master's farm and the hoe would work by itself … They didn't have to work … It was the *reza-brava*. They had it. And the masters couldn't find out. That was the law in Africa ... Whoever came from Africa would make noise and the masters couldn't hear … When they wanted to go somewhere … the masters didn't see. … It was real black magic, black magic from Africa. There was nothing like this here before because it was them that brought it from there" (*Memórias do cativeiro* 69-70). In this catalogue of the power of blackness, Julião concludes that "They were pure Africans" (70). Rendering their masters blind (and deaf), these mythical men (not unlike João Mangolô) were thought to be able to conquer the freedom to come and go as they pleased and to escape the hard toil reserved to ordinary slaves. José is reduced to tatters, "my clothes in rags, blood and bruises everywhere in my body" ("São Marcos" 255). Nevertheless, he is relieved to be able to see once again his beloved natural landscape. There, in the distance, he spots "a white ox with a white tail" (225), an animal that plays a prominent role in an old Bantu tale about the reconciliation of two long estranged brothers. This Bantu tale proclaims that "the white ox is a sign of peace, and peace can be made by it" (*The Soul of the Bantu* 196-98). The two *joões*, Mangolô and the narrator, come to an uneasy peace at the end of the story, as the narrator still struggles "to swallow" his lesson.

Guimarães Rosa was not a devout Catholic, but was deeply immersed in an eclectic mysticism that is, to a certain extent, very Brazilian. Such non-dogmatic beliefs were important for Rosa as an artist; he thought they protected his fiction against what he saw as the excesses of rationalism, something he once famously called "the Cartesian *bête noire*" (Bizarri 90). "São Marcos" is a fundamental piece in

which Guimarães Rosa works with folk mysticism within the particularities of rural culture of Minas Gerais, making a careful meditation on the many meanings attached to these practices, integrated and carefully circumscribed by a precisely drawn social and cultural milieu. "São Marcos" is also a story moved by a deep love for language and its power and for nature and its beauty -- and the two, language and nature, were to become fundamental elements in all fiction written by Guimarães Rosa. *Sagarana* is Guimarães Rosa's first book but it is a mature work that waited almost ten years from its inception to publication and it would be revised by the author several times until 1958 (see Versiani). In conclusion, "São Marcos" is a seminal text that suggests a potential social contract based on respect and humility in Guimarães Rosa's description of Brazilian society and where the characters represent protagonists in most of his fiction -- *jagunços*, cowhands, *posseiros*, *agregados*, ex-slaves, gypsies, beggars, vagrants, children, prostitutes, and other marginal figures -- whom Guimarães Rosa never demonized or idealized, but observed and described lovingly and quietly.

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