

The Flight of the Maiden

Representations of Women & the Guitar in Brazilian Culture

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TO THINK ABOUT WOMEN AND THE GUITAR is to raise questions — contentious questions, at times — about discourse and its constructs. Women have made a profound and indelible imprint on the history of the guitar, and yet in Brazil, settings and records in which the guitar is depicted in female hands are significantly lacking. In the wider culture, certainly, the guitar is generally associated with the realm of men, but this does not imply an innate hierarchy or discrepancy in worth: on the contrary, it raises important concerns about failures of documentation and about the manner in which women and the guitar are depicted in relation to one another.

The problem of gender representation and the guitar is not an isolated case but the reflection of a bigger picture — that of a systemically sexist society. This is widely discussed in the literature: Tedeschi suggests that because of gender inequality and the way in which patriarchal ideology molds social roles and identities, “marginalized groups, such as women, have played an active role in history but have been consigned to anonymity.”¹ Lord goes further:

Indeed, male dominance is a historical process; it is at once both product and cause of social relationships. As Bourdieu has observed, there is a long and continuous creation of processes through which the historical structures that enabled and consolidated male dominance have been made unconscious.²

Rather than a natural condition, then, male dominance is a construct of historical forces whose mechanisms of power and privation act to suppress female memory. For Tedeschi, memory is “affected, culturally and collectively, by representations of

1 Losandro Antonio Tedeschi, “Os lugares da história oral e da memória nos estudos de gênero,” *OP SIS* 15, no. 2 (2015): 333, <https://doi.org/10.5216/o.v15i2.33931>. [Throughout this article, all translations of quoted material are my own.— Trans.]

2 Lúcio José Dutra Lord, “Desigualdade de gênero e literatura brasileira: Um olhar a partir da sociologia,” *Revista Entrelaces* 1, no. 14 (October–December 2018): 131, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7552-3637>.

gender,” produced as it is by “individuals who determine what is and what is not true in culture,” so that “whatever does not find meaning in this frame is either forgotten or silenced.”³

The mechanisms that establish and strengthen dynamics of societal constraint—often imperceptible in everyday life or made to seem natural through the passage of time—operate by means of language and discourse.⁴ Thus, concrete instances of male oppression can be found in Brazilian literature, as in many other fields. According to Lord, “these world views, which ultimately defer to male power, are recorded in works of literature, both in the construction of characters and in the way that female authorship is permitted or prohibited.”⁵

It is no different in the music world: in academic circles, concert programs, historical records, in the repertoire that is produced and performed, and in institutions of music, one can observe what Rosa and Nogueira call “the mechanisms of validation that exclude women’s works and ways of producing,”⁶ mechanisms with which we must deal on a daily basis. Women instrumentalists, improvisers, composers, and intellectuals are kept out of the public eye—as opposed to teachers or singers, whose professions are deemed a better fit for an idealized concept of feminine nature. This gap occurs because

activities that bring together feminine work and intellectual work are considered transgressive to this model and suffer both veiled and explicit punishment, based on a tacit and presumptive conception of the work being unworthy, in which the [musical work’s] link to a gender determines its perceived value.⁷

In this study of women and the guitar in Brazilian culture, I will explore some of the possible manifestations of the “broad network of metaphors and cultural practices associated with masculinity or femininity” that underpin the system of gender relations. In reviewing the accepted discourses and values of this system, I shall examine the absence of female agency—which “is so ubiquitous that it comes to seem normal”—as well as some of the narratives that have been normalized, perpetuated, and institutionalized.

Also discussed is the recurring association of the guitar with the female body, an objectifying discourse that reinforces certain stereotypes and behaviors. At the same time that the charming and seductive guitar is used as a representation of the

3 Tedeschi, “Os lugares da história oral,” 335.

4 See Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); translated into Spanish by Consol Vilà I. Boadas as *Género y Historia* (Mexico City: FCE, Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, 2008).

5 Lord, “Desigualdade de gênero e literatura brasileira,” 133.

6 Laila Rosa and Isabel Nogueira, “O que nos move, o que nos dobra, o que nos instiga: Notas sobre epistemologias feministas, processos criativos, educação e possibilidades transgressoras em música,” *Revista Vórtex* 3, no. 2 (2015): 48.

7 Rosa and Nogueira, 50–51. Both quotations in the following paragraph are from the same source, p. 48.

woman, as is commonplace, in feminine discourse it acquires connotations of violation, spoliation, and abandonment. Ultimately, one can observe that these dominant narratives continue to be replicated in Brazilian literature while depictions of women playing guitars are underrepresented or even erased altogether. Women guitarists, despite their significance, too often reside on the margins.

I

"Listen not, daughter, to the melancholy song! Shut the window and flee!"

In the field of comparative studies, an investigation of references to the guitar (and related instruments) in Brazilian poetry will reveal how associations with the male sphere predominate, while settings in which a woman is playing the instrument are sparse.⁸

In his 1870 poetic scene "Uma página de Escola Realista: Drama cômico em quatro palavras" (A Page in Realist Style: Comic Drama in Four Words),⁹ Castro Alves places the guitar in the feminine hands of Sílvia. In a small alcove, at the deathbed of Mário, she cries "in an undertone, accompanying herself on the guitar." The author's stage direction indicates that "upon her last arpeggios, she sheds a tear," and Mário, "seeing her cry," declares:

Sílvia! Deixa rolar sobre a guitarra, Da lágrima a harmonia peregrina!	Sílvia! Let the pilgrim harmony of your tear roll over your guitar!
Sílvia! Cantando — és a mulher formosa!	Sílvia! Singing — you are woman's loveliness!
Sílvia! Chorando — és a mulher divina!	Sílvia! Weeping — you are woman's divinity!

In this passage, three elements stand out: first, the arpeggios, which foreshadow in metaphor the tears that roll down Sílvia's face as she weeps "over the guitar"—the instrument becomes her support, her pillow. The second element is the fascination stirred by Sílvia's singing and playing, enchanting her listener-lover. The third and last aspect refers to the "pilgrim harmony," which marks, in historical, musical, and symbolic terms, the various roads along which the instrument has traveled. As companion to so many wandering figures (such as *seresteiros*, troubadours, *tropeiros*, soldiers, and *ciganos*),¹⁰ the guitar reveals its devotional aspect and its ability to

8 See Cláudia A. Garcia, "Amores, volúpias e memórias: Um retrato do violão na poesia brasileira," doctoral thesis, Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais, 2019.

9 In Castro Alves, *Espumas flutuantes* (Bahia: Camilo de Lellis Masson, 1870; Cotia, São Paulo: Ateliê, 2005), 241–47. Citations refer to the Cotia edition. All ellipses are in the original text.

10 *Seresteiro* is a Brazilian term for an artist in the style of *seresta*, a traditional Brazilian serenade; a *tropeiro* is a driver of horses or cattle in Brazil, especially during the eighteenth century but still present in Brazil nowadays; *cigano* is an exonym for the Romani people in Portuguese, used also to refer to nomadic people and activities.—Trans.

journey through distant lands. This portability allows for—and partly explains—its extensive spread, its democratic use, and its inclusion in the instrumentation of such contrasting musical styles as, say, the *modinha* and *lundu*.

Though bound by the “cold padlocks” of Mário’s “white fingers,” Sílvia begins to write a note: it reveals her longing for freedom, her overflowing desire—and the name of her true beloved:

“Paulo! Vem à meia-noite. . .	“Paulo! Come at midnight. . .
Mário morre! Mário expira!	Mário dies! Mário fades!
Vem que minha alma delira	Come, because my soul raves
E embalde cativa estou. . .”	and I am captive in vain. . .”

In this mixture of tragedy and comedy—two elements that surround complicated romantic relationships—the tension created by the love triangle is released with Mário’s death. Having surreptitiously read the “captive” woman’s confession, he “frees” her to follow her path:

Sílvia! a morte abre-me os dedos,	Sílvia! death opens my fingers,
És livre, Sílvia. . . caminha!	You are free, Sílvia. . . walk!

For Sílvia, freedom comes only through loss.

Although, in this example, the guitar is pictured in female hands, this is not the case for most of the material collected for this study. This point, however, must be understood in a broader context than that of literary discourse, which merely gives substance to shared cultural perceptions of the instrument. Given the structure of gender roles in Brazilian culture, the guitar’s placement in the realm of men becomes a distinctive and recurring feature of Brazilian literature, relegating women to a passive, remote role as inspirer or recipient of the poetic-musical expression.

In literary portrayals of this type, which evoke the image of the *seresta* (the traditional serenade), the muse in her purity (associated with a rose or a flower bud) is usually described as being asleep.¹¹ From this sleep (the stuff of myth and fable)—a sleep of enchantment that numbs her desire—the woman is awakened by the sound of the enamored man’s arrival.

The serenader or *seresteiro* personifies the guitar’s alleged link to bohemia and vagabondage. This character, inclined to nightlife, is seen as belonging to the streets, bars, and *botecos*,¹² places considered inappropriate for a lady. But he is also a marginal figure, living freely—something considered dangerous or even reprehensible for a

11 Note that an *image*, as the word is used here, may be vague and half-formed, conditioned as it is by both personal experience and sociocultural context. When an image is evoked, historical considerations come into play, as do the meanings assigned to it by collective culture and the reader’s acceptance of such meanings.

12 A *boteco* is a small, simple-looking bar, where customers can get cheap drinks and finger food.— Trans.

woman—because he escapes social conventions and confounds the expectations of others.

The image of the serenade also evokes the predestination-prohibition duality (as in the Shakespearean balcony and Romeo and Juliet’s archetypal youthful love), marked by physical and social distance between the muse on the balcony, protected—curbed—by the house, tradition, and the patriarchy, and the lover beneath, with his contemptible guitar and way of life.

The danger represented by the guitar and the guitarist is that the sound of the instrument passes through all barriers and acts directly on the woman in her dilemma—to open the window or not? On this subject, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, in the poem “A serenata” (The Serenade), is emphatic:

Não há garrucha que impeça:	No weapon can interfere:
A música viola o domicílio	Music violates the dwelling
e põe rosas no leito da donzela.	and lays roses on the maiden’s bed. ¹³

It is not only the threshold of place or dream that is crossed: the violation extends to the woman herself. For the vagrant guitar—harbinger of the *malandro* or rogue¹⁴—is associated with another important character: the seducer. As in the archetypal Don Juan, this hedonist and womanizer, along with his “scandalous” guitar influences his female audience, arousing desire at the same time as inflicting pain and disenchantment. If she surrenders to the seducer—to his call and his guitar—the woman will suffer disillusion, violation—of her life and body—and ruin.

Because of these risks, a censorious cultural discourse bids the woman close the window and escape from the fascination exerted by the seducer, as in this 1887 sonnet by Raimundo Correia:

ÁRIA NOTURNA	NIGHT ARIA
Da janela em que olhando para fora, Bebes da noite o incenso a longos tragos, Claro escorre o luar. . . Em sonhos vagos, Atrás da sombra espreita, rindo, a aurora. . .	Through the window where you, gazing out, drink the perfume of the night in long drafts, the moonlight streams clear. . . In vague dreams, daybreak lurks in the shadows, laughing. . .
Longe uns dolentes, músicos afagos, Sentese? . . . Não é o rouxinol que chora Nas balsas, nem o vento que desflora A toalha friússima dos lagos. . .	Do you feel doleful, musical caresses from afar? . . . It is not the nightingale that sings on the balsas, nor the wind that plucks the frigid, misty veil of the lakes like a flower. . .

13 In Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *Boitempo e A falta que ama* (Rio de Janeiro: Sabiá, 1968), 24.

14 *Malandro* is a term for a man who uses cunning, malice, and often unethical or illegal ways to gain advantage (similar to *rascal*, *rogue*, or *scoundrel*). The character of the *malandro* is commonly found in Brazilian culture and especially (though not exclusively) linked to the state of Rio de Janeiro.—Trans.

É ele; e vaga toda a noite, enquanto O luar macilento e o campo flóreo Tressuam mole e pérfido quebranto. . .	It is him; and he wanders all night long, while the feeble moonlight and the flowery field wafts soft and perfidious bewitchment. . .
Não lhe ouças, filha, o canto merencóreo! Fecha a janela e foge, que esse canto Vem da guitarra de D. Juan Tenório!	Listen not, daughter, to the melancholy song! Shut the window and flee, for that song comes from the guitar of Don Juan Tenório! ¹⁵

But locks and latches can prevent neither enchantment nor dishonor (from a rosebud to a flower torn to pieces), leading the woman who surrenders to endure heartbreak, violation, and abandonment. Let us see what is revealed about this topic when the guitar is placed in female hands, as in this poem by Cecília Meireles — poet, folklorist, and writer:

O VIOLÃO E O VILÃO	THE VIOLÃO ¹⁶ AND THE VILLAIN
Havia a viola da vila. A viola e o violão. Do vilão era a viola. E da Olívia o violão.	The village had a <i>viola</i> . A viola and a <i>violão</i> . The viola was the villain's. And the violão was Olívia's.
O violão da Olívia dava vida à vila, à vila dela. O violão duvidava da vida, da viola e dela.	Olívia's violão enlivened the village, her village. The violão lacked confidence in life, the viola, and Olivia.
Não vive Olívia na vila. Na vila nem na viola. O vilão levou-lhe a vida, levando o violão dela.	Olívia doesn't live in the village. Not in the village and not in the viola. The villain took her life, taking away her violão.
No vale, a vila de Olívia vela a vida no seu violão vivida e por um vilão levada.	In the valley, Olívia's village holds a vigil for a life lived in her violão and taken by a villain.
Vida de Olívia — levada por um vilão violento. Violeta violada pela viola do vento.	Olívia's life — taken by a violent villain. A violet violated by the viola of wind. ¹⁷

15 Raimundo Correia, "Ária noturna" (Night Aria), *Versos e versões* (Rio de Janeiro: Moreira Maximino, 1887), 38, <https://digital.bbm.usp.br/handle/bbm/5032>. Ellipses in original.

16 *Violão* (pronounced /vɨoˈlẽõ/) is the Portuguese term for an acoustic or classical guitar. In the translation of this poem, translating the word to English would severely weaken alliterations and assonances in the text, so it has been retained in Portuguese. *Viola* probably refers to the *viola caipira*, a Brazilian guitar-like instrument with five double-string courses. — Trans.

17 Cecília Meireles, *Ou isto ou aquilo*, illustrated by Odilon Moraes, 7th ed. (São Paulo: Global, 2012), 41.

Although it is taken from a children's book, *Ou isto ou aquilo* (Either This or That)—Meireles's last work, published in 1964, the year of her death—this poem invites multiple interpretations.¹⁸

“The *Violão* and the Villain” deploys simple, everyday vocabulary, with short words and sentences, brief, recurring rhythms, alliterations, assonances, and rhymes that create a phonetic play by their constant repetition. The entangled phonemes make the poem challenging to recite, resulting in the sort of tongue twister that is so apt for the world of children.

Thus the guitar lends rhythmic and thematic impulse to the poem and determines its sonorities and meaning. But it is not my intention here to provide in-depth structural analysis or to dwell on the poem's childlike aspects; let us rather focus on its meaning to adults and the profound feeling it communicates.

This backwards “fairy tale” does not identify the male character: he is loosely referred to as the “villain.” Named or not, his symbolic significance is clear. The woman, on the other hand, assumes her individuality undisguised; her name—Olívia—is divulged along with her story-poem, her uncertainties, disillusion, and painful violation.

Through lexical play, important oppositions are identified as references to—and attributes of—each character:

Olívia ↔ *vilão* (villain)
violão ↔ *viola*
dar (give) ↔ *levar* (take)
violeta (violet) ↔ *violento* (violent)

The distinction between the two instruments—the *violão* (guitar) and the *viola* [*caipira*]¹⁹—is essential to the game; they cannot be taken as synonyms, as that would negate the contest, the antithesis, and its implicit violence.

Although the names of the instruments are nouns with concrete definitions, it is possible to find other meanings in them. *Viola*, in Portuguese, can refer to the instrument but can also be a verb: it is a conjugated form of *violar*, “to violate.”¹⁹ Through this lens, the act of violating (*violar*), which is attributed to the villain, lends a deeper meaning to the word “guitar” (*violão*), which now represents the woman's body and life.

If on the one hand the guitar gives life to the village and to Olívia, on the other it holds back: it lacks confidence in “life, the viola, and Olívia,” revealing a creeping insecurity and foreshadowing the woman's destiny. The pain that the hands and sounds

18 On the possibility of reading this book in various ways, Carlos Drummond de Andrade states in *Correio da Manhã*, on July 10, 1964: “Just for children? I believe that adults are delighted by this new book that is not meant for them.” He then concludes, “A meeting of the little ones with poetry: lucky are those kids who stumble upon this box of surprises. . . . I can't decide if I should pass the book along to the tiny people in my circles or keep it to myself.” “Imagens de flautinha: *Ou isto ou aquilo*,” 6.

19 *Violar* can and has been used as an informal neologism as well, meaning “to play the viola.”—Trans.

of the villain-*viola* inflicts on Olivia-*violão* takes away her “touch”—her connection with her music and her body.

In the final stanza, a change in the poem’s flow and accentuation marks the symbolic annihilation that the woman is forced to endure. Intensifying the ending of the story, the phonetic reiteration is broken by the first appearance of the consonant [t]; as it repeats, its unvoiced and explosive pronunciation reinforces the semantics of words such as *violento* (“violent”) and *vento* (“wind”). These words, which communicate the violence of the villain’s acts, also convey the fricative [v], which permeates the poem with its continuous outflow of air. Thus, both the villain (associated with the blowing wind) and the *violão* have their sounds and meaning amplified by the phonetic effect.

In “The *Violão* and the Villain,” the experience of loss cannot be ignored, only made tolerable. As she endures the pain of life, disillusion, and ruin without prospect of relief, the woman is left with nothing but violation and abandonment. These sentiments connect us to collective and universal perceptions, which are marked by the rules of the game, by disenchantment, and by the impermanence of life. Through Olívia’s guitar—her instrument and a metaphor for her body, by means of shape and association—we see the representation of the silenced woman. Only pain and hollowness remain at the core of this “violated violet.”

II

*“Harvesting moonbeams, he made silver ropes, which, when stretched,
vibrated the woman’s naked body”*

In female discourse, then, the guitar as a metaphor for a woman betokens her desire for freedom and the shattering effects of violation: this is Olivia’s story. But there is another side: even now, and with society’s blessing, a comparison between the shape of the instrument and the female body continues to be perpetuated in stereotyped and hypersexualized imagery.

In the song *Violão* (Guitar), by the songwriter and poet Paulo César Pinheiro (born 1949 in Rio de Janeiro), the instrument comes from the sculpted body of a woman, made of pine wood, by the hands of a craftsman:

VIOLÃO

Um dia eu vi numa estrada
Um arvoredo caído
Não era um tronco qualquer
Era madeira de pinho
E um artesão esculpia
O corpo de uma mulher

GUITAR

Once I saw by the road
A fallen tree
It was no ordinary wood
It was the wood of a pine tree
And a craftsman was carving
The body of a woman

Depois eu vi pela noite	Then I saw in the night
O artesão nos caminhos	The craftsman on the paths
Colhendo raios de lua	Harvesting moonbeams
Fazia cordas de prata	He made silver ropes
Que, se esticadas, vibravam	Which, when stretched, vibrated
O corpo da mulher nua	The woman's naked body
E o artesão, finalmente,	And into this wooden woman
Nesta mulher de madeira,	The craftsman, at last,
Botou o seu coração	Put his heart
E lhe apertou contra o peito	And he pressed her to his breast
E deu-lhe nome bonito	And gave her a beautiful name
E assim nasceu o violão.	And so the guitar was born. ²⁰

Pinheiro's male character, who carves and collects, is the one who gives—from himself—a heart and a name to his creation (invoking the power of language). In a parallel with the narrative of Genesis,²¹ the guitar comes into being when, into this wooden woman, he inserts not a rib, but his heart.

In the song, the craftsman plays a fundamental role in the conception of woman and guitar, while the woman is embedded in the sequence of creation (tree → woman → guitar). The image of a woman is therefore superposed to that of a guitar to such an extent that they blend together. This perspective, for all its poetic force, tends to objectify women and to reinforce certain patterns—creating stereotypes that can be found throughout history and in media of all sorts.

This blending together is made explicit in “A Woman Called Guitar,” a descriptive piece by “Poetinha” (Little Poet)—nickname of the Brazilian poet and diplomat (and guitar player) Vinícius de Moraes:

A WOMAN CALLED GUITAR

One day, I casually told a friend that the guitar, or *violão*, was “music in the shape of a woman.” The phrase delighted him, and he has been spreading it as if it were what the French call *un mot d’esprit*. I must argue that it is no such thing; it is rather the truest of facts.

The guitar is not only music (with all its potential orchestral possibilities) in the shape of a woman, but it is also, of all the musical instruments that draw inspiration from the female form—viola, violin, mandolin, cello, double bass—the only one that represents the ideal woman: neither too big nor too small, with slender neck, round, smooth shoulders, small waist, and broad hips; cultured but not arrogant; reluctant to flaunt herself, unless by the hand of the one she loves; attentive and obedient to her

20 Sueli Costa and Paulo César Pinheiro, *Violão*, in Fátima Guedes, *Pra bom entendedor*, Rio de Janeiro, Velas, 1993, compact disc.

21 “And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.” Gen. 2:22 (New Revised Standard Version).

loved one but without losing her character and dignity; and, in the couple's intimacy, tender, wise, and passionate.

There are violin-women, cello-women, and even double-bass-women. But because they refuse to establish that intimate relationship that the guitar offers; because they refuse to be made to sing and would rather become the object of solos or orchestral parts; because they respond poorly to the finger's touch when one tries to vibrate them, instead preferring such implements as bows and picks, they will in the end always be rejected in favor of a guitar-woman, whom a man can, whenever he wants, hold tenderly in his arms, and with whom he can spend hours in wonderful isolation, without the need to hold her in an unchristian position, as happens with a cello, or to stand in front of her, as with a double bass.

Even a mandolin-woman (that is, a mandolin) is out of luck, if she does not find a Jacob of her own.²² Her voice is too shrill to be tolerated for over half an hour. And that is why the guitar, or violão (that is, the violão-woman), has all the advantages. In the hands of a Segovia, a Barrios, a Sainz de la Maza, a Bonfá, a Baden Powell,²³ it can shine in society as brightly as a violin in the hands of an Oistrakh or a cello in the hands of a Casals. Those instruments, on the other hand, can hardly achieve the peculiar pungency and swing that a guitar can, let it be played modestly by someone like Jayme Ovalle or Manuel Bandeira, or adroitly by the likes of João Gilberto or even the *crioulo* Zé-com-Fome, from Favela do Esqueleto.²⁴

Divine, delicious instrument that marries so well with love and everything that, in the fairest moments of nature, induces wonderful abandon! Not for nothing is one of its most ancient ancestors called the viola d'amore, as if it foretells the sweet phenomenon of so many hearts stricken daily by the melodious timbre of its strings... Even the way it is played—against the chest—recalls a woman who nests in her loved one's arms and, saying nothing, seems to beg with kisses and caresses for him to take her completely, make her vibrate to her core, and love her above all else, because otherwise she can never be truly his.

Set in the high sky a quiet moon. Does it ask for a double bass? Never! A cello? Perhaps, but only if a Casals is behind it. A mandolin? Not in a million years! A mandolin, with its tremolos, would disturb its luminous rapture. Then, what does one need (thou might ask) under a quiet moon high up in the sky? And I shall answer thee: a guitar. For only the guitar, of all musical instruments created by the hands of men, is capable of hearing and understanding the moon.²⁵

22 Jacob do Bandolim (1918–69) was a Brazilian composer, musician, and mandolin virtuoso.— Trans.

23 Luiz Bonfá (1922–2001) was a Brazilian guitarist, singer, arranger, and composer. Baden Powell de Aquino (1937–2000) was a Brazilian composer and guitar virtuoso.— Trans.

24 *Crioulo* is a term that originally referred either to a Black man born in colonial Brazil of African parents or to a Caucasian man born in Brazil from European parents. Nowadays, the term usually refers to Black people in general and is widely considered offensive. José Gonçalves (1908–54), also known as “Zé da Zilda” and “Zé-com-Fome,” was a Brazilian composer and singer.— Trans.

25 Vinícius de Moraes, “Uma mulher chamada guitarra,” in *Para viver um grande amor: Crônicas e poemas* (Rio de Janeiro: Self-published, 1962), 7–8 (ellipsis in original).

In his desire “for a guitar-woman, whom a man can, whenever he wants, hold tenderly in his arms,” Moraes creates a connection between the woman and the instrument that, for all its lyricism, borders on objectification. This objectification is implied by both the masculine imperative (when Moraes endorses the submissive attitude of a woman who is “attentive and obedient to her loved one”) and the association of forms, where the shape of the guitar is “the only one that represents the ideal woman: neither too big, nor too small; of elongated neck; round, smooth shoulders; small waist and broad hips. . .”

This gluing together of concepts is also found in the metaphorical images of the body and the effects of the male touch on the guitar and the woman — both nested “in her loved one’s arms.” When he touches the guitar, the man also touches, by symbolic extension, the female body.²⁶

All these elements expose the way in which standards of beauty and behavior are dictated to women, reinforcing old structures that expect the woman to maintain “character and dignity” in the eyes of society but subservience “in the couple’s intimacy,” where she is to be “tender, wise, and passionate.”

The ambivalent femininity that unites a supposed spiritual superiority of women with submission and passivity toward the wishes of men is contaminated with a controlled, socially sanctioned code of conduct. Thus, an ideal standard is sought after, defined by Rosa and Nogueira as a “woman, mother, wife, lover, and successful professional, and the bearer — but not owner — of a body cultivated under standards that are dictated daily.” In this model, a woman’s validation depends on the approval of a man, “whether the father, husband, teacher, or colleague”; yet all the while, she must act so as not to “pose a threat to the feminine community.” Still, according to Rosa and Nogueira,

this desire for approval with which the construction of feminine identity deals, explicitly and at the same time subliminally, disguises itself, in Western culture, with an aura of “just the way it should be,” coated with a dictatorial cruelty that affects the very existence of the majority of women.²⁷

26 Figures of speech related to sensuality and sexuality occur in several works from different historical periods, such as Castro Alves’s Don Juan, who in the poem “Os três amores,” addresses all the women he has seduced by exclaiming: “Loving maidens / You know me in the laments of the guitar!” (“Donzelas amorosas / Vós conheceis-me os trenos na viola!”). (The Portuguese term used here is *viola [caipira]* or Brazilian guitar.) Besides the sexual fulfillment suggested by the verse, the guitar can represent a woman’s body both in a broader perspective — after all, the maidens are familiar with the seducer’s abilities — and suggestively, as in the touching of intimate parts. This erotic connotation, representing not only the sexual act but also the female body, can also be found in Gregório de Matos (1636–96): talking about “Anica” and — with no romantic pretenses — “shattering the guitar,” he brings out the sexual connotation of the encounter, “for I had fallen so low / that I fiddled with the peg / and played around the hole” (“já que fui tão desgraçado, / que buli co’a escarvelha, / e toquei sobre o buraco”). See Gregório de Matos, *Obra poética* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1992).

27 This and the previous quotations from Rosa and Nogueira are taken from “O que nos move,” 50.

Returning to Vinícius de Moraes, it is striking that the text refers not only to important guitarists in classical music (such as Segovia, Barrios, and Sainz de la Maza), but also to those of the popular realm (Bonfá, Baden Powell, João Gilberto, Jaime Ovalle). Also included are admirers of the instrument and marginal characters (such as “the *crioulo* Zé-com-Fome, from Favela do Esqueleto”). Besides their passion for the guitar, what they have in common is the fact that they are all men.

Although this passage reveals the instrument’s ability to cross boundaries and accommodate several different musical genres, and to be played by both expert and inexpert hands, and even though it names essential characters of guitar history, the focus on men underscores the lack of any reference to women.

Of course, I recognize that all these characteristics and names serve the text: one can respect the author’s expressive liberty without demanding historical or musicological accuracy. And yet when literary or cultural discourse treats the guitar’s actual history so ambiguously, broader questions arise. In this perspective, the prevailing narrative fails to address the broad reach that the guitar has historically achieved among women, in the home and in *estudantinas*,²⁸ as well as in the work of important performers. Given traditional stigmas associated with the guitar, it is no accident that women’s hands have done so much to reevaluate and mitigate them.

III

“Fairy hands, indeed”

Throughout the guitar’s history in Brazil, several women have played a role in popularizing the instrument, playing significant roles in performance, teaching, recording, composing, and in heightening its reputation. While acknowledging the importance—but also the impossibility—of covering the power, achievements, and influence of these women, let us cite only a few names before focusing on the shifting discourse around the instrument and its symbolism.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, extensive social segregation in Brazil and negative perceptions of the guitar presented major obstacles to the instrument’s acceptance in classical music circles. The newspaper *Jornal do Commercio* (1916) mentioned that attempts to increase acceptance had been in vain up until that point, because even “when a virtuoso tries to extract from [the guitar] more elevated effects in the art of sound, they can never achieve either their goal or even a seriously appreciated result.”²⁹

28 An *estudantina* is a group of students dedicated to playing music, either vocal or instrumental.—Trans.

29 Quoted in Márcia Ermelindo Taborda, “Violão e identidade nacional: Rio de Janeiro 1830/1930” (doctoral thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2004), 63.

Change in the guitar's status in Brazil—especially as a solo instrument—would depend on the quiet contributions and pioneering spirit of some Brazilian guitarists and the arrival of concert artists from abroad: chief among the latter were the Paraguayan Agustín Barrios (1885–1944) and the Spaniard Josefina Robledo (1892–1972).³⁰ This process is described in a 1917 review in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, which relates that “currently, [the guitar] is starting to rehabilitate its reputation: it is already sparking interest in artistic circles and proving its qualities as an aristocratic instrument in the great halls.”³¹

In this process of rehabilitation, Robledo would play a crucial role. The narrative built from the picture of the guitar in a woman's hands would be surrounded by a fable-like charm, a charm of the moon and the heart, of sweetness and daintiness, as exemplified in this 1918 article from the newspaper *O Rebate*:

Fairy hands, indeed, for only a fairy's can be the hands that hold the frailty of that magnificent guitar, and dig to the depths of its soul, and from it unearth moonlight-made sonority, and make that sonority spread across the room, now embalmed with the gentlest poetry, and penetrate the hearts of those who listen, elating them in the sweetest caress. It is clear that the artist who can achieve that much is a perfect artist. And so is Josefina Robledo, for her infatuating technique that allows her to master this instrument, which is among the hardest ones there are.³²

As one might imagine, this new set of metaphors and associations helped to dislodge or at least weaken all the masculine meanings given to the guitar—a tool with which to seduce and “corrupt” muses in serenades, an instrument found in streets and bars.

By revising these meanings and working to balance the two poles—feminine elegance and delicacy versus contempt for guitars and guitarists—Robledo prompted people to think about the guitar in new ways: “Thus, one can see that the slender fingers of her aristocratic hand resemble wings that rustle and flutter, conveying a

30 Robledo studied with the composer and guitarist Francisco Tárrega (1852–1909), generally considered the founder of the modern school of guitar. She lived in Brazil, and her work as a teacher not only influenced the outlook and education of Brazilian guitarists but also broadened the musical and technical possibilities of the time, “lavishing valuable teachings on upper-class ladies and young men of true merit.” Through her, “the guitar has infiltrated São Paulo's upper classes and is affectionately cultivated.” Aristodemo Pistoresi, Francisco Pistoresi, Oswaldo Soares, and Yvonne Daumerie, “O violão em S. Paulo,” *O Violão* (São Paulo) 1, no. 2 (1929): 24.

31 Quoted in Gilson Antunes, “Américo Jacomino ‘Canhoto’ e o desenvolvimento da arte solística do violão em São Paulo” (master's thesis, University of São Paulo, 2002), 43.

32 *O Rebate*, 1918, quoted in Patrícia Pereira Porto and Isabel Porto Nogueira, “Imagem e representação em mulheres violonistas: Algumas reflexões sobre Josefina Robledo,” in *Congresso da Associação Nacional de Pesquisa e Pós-Graduação em Música (ANPPOM)* (São Paulo and Anais: ANPPOM, 2007), 17:7. https://antigo.anppom.com.br/anais/anaiscongresso_anppom_2007/musicologia/musicol_PPPorto_IPNogueira.pdf

hymn of love and of life's emotions, on the strings of a vulgar instrument that she makes noble."³³

To be sure, for the guitar to be redefined and accepted into the classical music world much else would be required: an expanded solo repertoire, transcriptions of celebrated works, the spread of modern technique, and performances in concert halls (in particular in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo). And yet when we consider that in Robledo's hands, the guitar "is no longer a subordinate instrument, casts off its role as a simple accompaniment to *modinhas*, and appears transformed, speaking to our sensibilities and our emotions,"³⁴ we realize what ambassadorial power she wielded in the instrument's intricate journey toward equality. Despite the prejudice that was still firmly attached to the instrument, the newspaper review insists that

Ms. Robledo's guitar looks nothing like the popular guitar, of serenades and vagabonds, of *bailaricos* and improvised familiar dances.³⁵ There is a hierarchy for everything in this world, and one can find it everywhere. As for the musical world, it suffices to say that "virtuosity" has found, in the guitar, a soul, and it has managed to elevate that soul to the same level as those of the noblest instruments. And the very limited number of its interpreters is compelling proof that absolute mastery of this instrument is as hard as or even harder than that of the piano, violin, or cello.³⁶

Whether an "ungrateful" instrument of "noctambulists and serenaders" (from the turn of the century) or something "affectionately cultivated," the guitar finds great popularity in the hands of women, being "present in the social and family groups of *estudantinas*, where young men and women of society played the guitar, along with mandolins and mandolas."³⁷

The instrument would also become a key part of the everyday life of ladies from "good families," enlivening the cultural ambience of Rio de Janeiro. "In the late 1920s," Taborda recounts,

there was novelty in Rio de Janeiro's guitar scene, which echoed across Brazil's principal capitals: young ladies of society dedicated themselves to the instrument, bringing to the public a repertoire of typical Brazilian songs. Further celebrated by the founding of clubs and guitar societies, the movement would unite two trends that strongly characterized Brazilian modernism: on the one hand, it represented the return of the regionalist and nationalist approach, which was reflected in the careful selection of

33 *O Rebate*, 1918, quoted in Porto and Nogueira, "Imagem e representação em mulheres violonistas," 7.

34 *Jornal do Commercio*, 1917, quoted in Taborda, *Violão e identidade nacional*, 68.

35 A *bailarico* is a popular gathering for dancing or a Portuguese folk dance.—Trans.

36 *O Estado de São Paulo*, 1917, quoted in Antunes, "Américo Jacomino 'Canhoto,'" 46.

37 Porto and Nogueira, "Imagem e representação em mulheres violonistas," 4.

repertoire; on the other, it crowned the manifestation of cosmopolitanism that was symbolized by the presence of young, beautiful, and independent women.³⁸

According to Taborda, this was more than a return of mere “regionalism”: “these women’s involvement reflected their legitimate desire for civil rights and above all, the feelings and innovations nourished by ‘modern life.’”

Taborda also points to the vogue for singing with simple guitar accompaniment. Although these details of repertoire sound unexceptional, she argues that playing the guitar would have been innovative and daring at the time, given that the activities considered proper to women were teaching and housework: “In this context, learning the guitar meant more than just studying music, it meant taking action. Performing it publicly, reaching beyond the boundaries of domestic life, and possibly even starting a career meant even more: an affront, a defiance.”

It should be remembered, however, that the spread of plucked-string instruments in female circles dated from much earlier, representing, from the early nineteenth century, not a movement towards independence and transgression, but an affirmation of the social role assigned to women. In this context, the ability to play the guitar would be one of the “endowments” required of a lady, through which she could stand out culturally and socially, especially in situations approved for socializing, such as soirées.

Rarely did such musical activities become a professional career. Regardless of her aptitude or desire, music education was an obligatory part of a lady’s upbringing. Even if she had no intention of becoming a musician, playing an instrument could be of use as a form of entertainment, as an embellishment to social occasions, or as an accessory to “the short time period between a girl’s and a woman’s life”—a period when “the lady dedicated herself to learning music and manners and took an interest in dresses while awaiting the arrival of a husband.”³⁹

Alternatively, it is possible to think of choosing the guitar as a kind of transgression, owing to the instrument’s notorious reputation, especially in comparison to the piano, which was at the time a symbol of social status and cultural sophistication and thus the preferred instrument for a lady’s education. Porto and Nogueira underscore this possibility:

The association of women with an instrument that was still reasonably uncelebrated, less socially distinguished than the piano, and at the same time subversive, modern, and revolutionary might signify a wish to be associated with the image of a reviled instrument. However, it might also indicate a wish to redeem the instrument through its practice—a feminine practice, sanctioned by society, that would bring new meanings to the instrument through their association.⁴⁰

38 These quotations from Taborda are taken from *Violão e identidade nacional*, 154–57.

39 Gilda de Mello e Souza, *O espírito das roupas: Moda no século dezenove* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987), quoted in Dalila Vasconcellos de Carvalho, *O gênero da música: A construção social da vocação* (São Paulo: Alameda, 2012), 39.

40 Porto and Nogueira, “Imagem e representação em mulheres violonistas,” 4.

Figure 1 “The princesses at a gala.” The Brazilian group Princesses of the Guitar. *Violão e Mestres*, no. 5 (1966): 23.



Apart from a few documented exceptions, such as Josefina Robledo (who was foreign), Nair de Teffé, and Maristela Kubitschek, the overwhelming majority of these women — Paqueta Baylina, for example — ended their musical careers when they married.⁴¹

Women did not enter the Brazilian guitar scene in a straightforward way: research on the subject continues to develop. In this story, several names stand out, such as Olga Prager Coelho (1909–2008), a leading figure between the decades of 1930 and 1960; Monina Távora (1921–2011), who, despite being foreign, lived in Brazil for over thirty years and taught important Brazilian guitarists; and Maria Lívia São Marcos (b. 1942), daughter to guitarist Manoel São Marcos, who began her musical education at a young age, performed in countless recitals in Brazil, and established her international career in the 1960s.

The second half of the twentieth century was also characterized by a large number of women playing the guitar, as shown by the magazine *Violão e Mestres* in its fifth issue, published in 1966. This periodical mentions the success of an all-women music group called *As Princesas do Violão* (Princesses of the Guitar), directed by Prof. Julieta Corrêa Antunes.⁴² The group’s name has romantic connotations; a photograph of them (**figure 1**) offers a historical record of women playing the guitar, reaching beyond the limits of domestic life, and establishing themselves on stage.

- 41 Nair de Teffé—the First Lady, married to Brazilian president Hermes da Fonseca—not only studied the guitar but also maintained contact with popular composers, such as Catulo da Paixão Cearense. Maristela Kubitschek, daughter to then-president Juscelino Kubitschek, studied under the guitarist Dilermando Reis. Paqueta Baylina, musician from the state of Rio Grande do Sul, studied under the blind guitarist Levino Albano da Conceição but interrupted her musical activities when she got married in 1923.
- 42 As seen in her interview for the magazine, Prof. Julieta not only thinks that “the guitar was meant for women and has dedicated herself to it from an early age” but is also “one of the people who believe that knowing how to accompany a singer is essential to a good guitarist’s education.” “Julieta Córrea Antunes e as ‘Princesas do Violão,’” *Violão e Mestres*, no. 5 (1964): 22.

Many other women played decisive roles in the history of the guitar in Brazil. This female strength in the guitar world is much more widespread, of course: it extends throughout Latin America, Europe, and all over the world. It emerges and renews itself, breaking through the mechanisms (veiled or not) of historical erasure.

From the perspective proposed in this paper, one can see that, notwithstanding the predominance of the male voice, women — despite being silenced — are very much present, and not in exclusively passive roles — as inspirations, themes, or objects of conquest and desire — but as active participants in the guitar scene.

IV

This study of the relationship between women and the guitar through the lens of Brazilian literary and cultural discourse has revealed the coexistence of polarities, characterized on the one hand by representations of femininity — of delicacy, charm, and purity — and on the other by cultural notions of the female body — of voluptuousness, sexuality, and sensuality.

Combining themes of exaltation and seduction, this discourse portrays women as inspirers and dedicatees of poetic and musical gesture. But the guitar whose arpeggios depict *Silvia's* feelings and desires, the guitar that expresses *Olívia's* sorrow and disenchantment, and the guitar that can be found in the hands of so many great female interpreters in the instrument's history escapes all stereotyped expectations of frailty, revealing a strength that is all too often stifled by that discourse and by the impositions of culture.

In the literary material collected for this paper, one is struck by the significantly smaller number of works that are written by women or that represent women playing the instrument. Regarding this observation, it is necessary to highlight two main points, starting with female authorship, given that in the literary canon, so few women writers mention the guitar in their work.

Regarding this aspect, Lord reminds us that in quantitative terms, gender inequality is a feature of literary production itself, “regardless of the time period analyzed.” Because “men had the right to produce literary narratives” ever since writing began, “then it was by exclusion that women were silenced or denied that right.”⁴³ To reproduce these discrepancies is to legitimize this male dominance, to reinforce the choices made by those creating and giving meaning to the narrative, and to presuppose the exclusion of female authorship and modes of production.

And yet the works of female authors, while scarce, are not apathetic. On the contrary, they manifest the restlessness, the drive to be free, and the subterfuges that women adopt to fulfill their wishes. When they appropriate writing (and the guitar), women challenge the process that weakens their subjectivity and wastes their expression. Time and again, women break through boundaries and escape the roles expected of them.

43 Lord, “Desigualdade de gênero e literatura brasileira,” 132.

The second important point concerns the paucity of records of the guitar or related instruments in female hands throughout Brazilian literature. Whether in fictional or nonfictional literature, the prevailing images of literary discourse reinforce the notion of masculinity with which the guitar is imbued and fail to reflect the strength and importance of women for the instrument—who are still underrepresented in guitar history itself. This is a relevant observation because the activities of women guitarists (including troubadours as well as young women who dedicated themselves to the instrument and all the many female concert guitarists throughout history) are rarely reproduced in literary expression and cultural discourses.

Therefore, this very lack of records reveals the importance of the active and restless female voice. At the same time, it shows how female expression is silenced or limited, and it exposes the mechanisms by which women's freedoms are restricted.

To paraphrase Adélia Prado: amid conflicts, dualities, and impositions, “this species, still ashamed,”⁴⁴ goes beyond the cold and pure image of a maiden in order to “carry the flag” and pursue her desires. The woman opens the window, composes verses, and in accepting “the subterfuges that are my due, with no need to lie,” escapes the confines of society and culture. Once the protected and idealized muse of serenades, she is now the one expressing herself and her freedom through the guitar, whether at home or on stage.

As we follow this path, we must “listen from the margins,” reassess boundaries, open the frontiers to acknowledge difference and otherness, dislodge traditions of dominance, and make amends for historical silencing. Given the alienation of women from the canon—guitaristic, musical, literary—it becomes necessary to refute what Rosa and Nogueira characterize as the “hegemony that does not take us into account, does not contemplate us, does not represent us, . . . that denies and excludes the existence of women as creators, thinkers, people—that which is a direct attempt to blot out their accomplishments and their existence.”⁴⁵

In spite of this “burden that is too heavy for a woman” (Prado), it is necessary to realize that to be a guitarist is not a “gift,” an attribute, or even a concession. It is rather an active form of expression, vibrant and defiant throughout a long period of erasure. It is crucial, then, to allow the female voice and the female sound to reverberate, drawing attention to the many women in the guitar scene who are as yet anonymous.

Let us support historical research and initiatives to publicize and encourage the work of women guitarists; but let us also engage in a sustained discussion of stereotyped views of femininity. This entails shifting readings and interpretations, rewriting history, reformulating historical analyses, revising existing material, breaking free from old structures and impositions, “and returning to instances of marginal knowledge, of

44 This paragraph weaves into the text extracts from Adélia Prado's well-known poem, “Com licença poética” (With Poetic License), *Poesia reunida*, 7th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2021), 17, my translation. “This species” refers to women. For a complete translation, see *Alphabet in the Park: Selected Poems of Adélia Prado*, trans. Ellen Watson (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 6.—Trans.

45 Rosa and Nogueira, “O que nos move,” 26.

forgotten knowledge, the knowledge of women, [who are] both present and absent from the plan of historical subjectivity and from the process of their humanization.”⁴⁶

I argue, therefore, that it is essential to uproot limiting customs and to unsettle collective assumptions, so that these images, solidified by time and culture, can be revised and reshaped.



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46 Tedeschi, *Alguns apontamentos sobre história oral, gênero e história das mulheres* (Dourados-MS: UFGD, 2014), 25.

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