

Loving Nature in João Guimarães Rosa: The Non-Human as *Amável*

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Abstract: In the present article, I locate an implicit environmentalism João Guimarães Rosa's writing from the 1950s and 1960s. This sensibility is easy to miss, in part because it transposes political debates on damage inflicted in the name of development and progress onto the affective-ethical plane; however, it does so in a way that resists sentimentality or projecting a misplaced innocence onto the non-human world. Focusing on emotional relationships between humans and non-humans, I read "As margens da alegria" and "Os cimos" as expressing an eco-critical discourse that was already latent in *Grande sertão: veredas*. Recasting the natural world as a site of both unfathomable otherness and relations of tenderness, Guimarães Rosa presents the emotional hold that nature has on humans and the cost of cleaving oneself from it—a cost that includes diminishing the human capacity for delight, wonder, and eros.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, affect, posthumanism, *Primeiras histórias*, *Grande sertão: veredas*

In *Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology of Emotion*, Kay Milton asks, "Why do some people care more about the future of the natural world than others do?" (1). Drawing on work in anthropology, psychology, and cognitive science, Milton argues that one's relationship with the natural world is not solely culturally determined but also depends upon direct experience with one's environment. The conclusion that people need to experience nature firsthand in order to be invested in its well-being seems intuitive to many conservationists. Milton goes a step further, however, to argue that positive affective experiences in nature, particularly those characterized by enjoyment and identification, create subjects who are inclined to extend the notion of personhood beyond the human realm. This propensity, though common in many Amerindian cultures, nevertheless

challenges deep-seated hierarchies in Western thought.¹ For this reason, as Mel Chen has argued, acknowledging certain capacities—agency, sentience, and the ability to affect and be affected—in the non-human world is a radical gesture with far-reaching ethical and ecological implications.

One encounters a subject who is so predisposed in the young protagonist of João Guimarães Rosa's short stories "As margens da alegria" and "Os cimos," which bookend the 1962 collection *Primeiras estórias*. As many children do, the unnamed boy treats his toy, a monkey dressed in human clothing, as a fully sentient person, referring to it repeatedly as his "companheiro" and empathizing with its experience: he lifts it up to look out the window of the plane and insists the monkey "não merecer maltratos" (153). His treatment of the toy monkey might seem like mere child's play, free of any ecological overtones, if the boy's emotional well-being were not deeply intertwined with the non-human world all around him. He is particularly entranced by birds and grieves for the loss of their lives, habitat, and freedom. Guimarães Rosa's narrator points out, for example, that when the boy realizes a peacock with which he had been enthralled has been killed for supper, "o menino recebia em si um miligrama de morte" (10). He later feels physically ill at the sight of a tree being felled, feeling the violence of the blows of the axe and the tree's ensuing limpness in his own body: "o pulso da pancada. O menino fez ascas [...]. Ele tremia. A árvore, que morrera tanto. A limpa esguez do tronco e o marulho e final de seus ramos" (11).

This capacity to identify so deeply with the non-human world that one feels its pain as one's own lies at the heart of the ecological sensibility Milton calls "loving nature." Granted, Milton's conceptions of "nature" and the "natural world," developed in a European context, cannot be seamlessly transposed to the Brazilian context, where these ideas are differently freighted. Nevertheless, their status as "ideias fora de lugar," to borrow Roberto Schwarz's term, make them useful. In part because she writes primarily about the British countryside, Milton does not fall into the trap of equating nature with wilderness or lack of human

¹ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has observed that many Amerindian cosmologies do not categorically distinguish between humans and animals (230). Instead, in the model he calls *perspectivism*, all animals (human and non-human) appear as persons to members of their own species, and "certain transspecific beings such as shamans" can perceive the personhood of members of other species (198).

presence, a move which is more common in the Americas.² Like Guimarães Rosa, she upends this fetichized conception of nature as a world apart by focusing on encounters between humans and the non-human world that take place in the contact zone where the built landscape meets its natural counterpart.

Joining deep ecologists, Milton insists that the moral imperative to protect and honor the natural world becomes redundant for subjects who feel its loss as their own. It follows that the best antidote to capitalistic developmentalism, which permits nature to be ravished in the name of economic progress, is to cultivate in as many people as possible a relationship of care for and identification with the non-human. Milton considers the nurturing of such a sensibility to be dependent upon first-hand experiences with the natural world; however, I am interested in the possibility that certain literary texts might not only model “loving nature” for the reader but also inculcate this sensibility through aesthetic experience. On this point, I take inspiration from Jane Bennett’s reading of Theodor Adorno: “aesthetic exercises,” she proposes, allow one to cultivate perceptual openness to the non-human and learn to accept an ethical enmeshment in parts of the material world that escape capture by human language and knowledge (14).

In the present article, I examine how such “aesthetic exercises” play out in Guimarães Rosa’s work to highlight an environmentalism that critics have, with a few notable exceptions, ignored.³ The politically radical nature of this commitment is not obvious because Guimarães Rosa transposes the injustices inflicted in the name of development and progress onto the affective-ethical plane. Following Chen, I use “affect” to encompass both the “emotions contained within a body” (11) and what Bennet calls “impersonal affect,” that is, forces that operate beyond and between individual bodies, “surround[ing] and infus[ing]” those who are “caught up” in them (4). Guimarães Rosa’s poetics implicitly challenge the boundedness of individual subjectivities by depicting affect as something that circulates between landscape, plant life, human and non-human

² For instance, the discourse developed by the first Brazilian national novels tended to privilege the natural, the autochthonous, and the indigenous, minimizing the presence of the mestizo, the urban, the European. The result is a noticeably virginal and atemporal national landscape (Süssekind 28).

³ Victoria Saramago, Marília Librandi, Marília Cecilia de Moraes Leonel, and Maria do Socorro Pereira de Almeida, among others, have dealt with this topic. Given the extensive scholarship on Guimarães Rosa, however, these relatively isolated studies represent a minor vein in the overall reception of his work.

animal life, and language. Beyond simply representing such affective currents, I maintain that the text catches the reader up in them, thus imparting an aesthetic-ethical lesson on how to relate to the natural world.

My analysis centers on “As margens da alegria” and “Os cimos,” which Marília Librandi has read together as an expression of *saudade* for the all-too-quickly vanishing presence of nature on the edges of the city (“*Sertão*”). These stories trace their young protagonist’s affective experience of the ecological destruction accompanying the construction of the city of Brasília: the love and wonder he feels for the animals he glimpses at the city’s edges, the alienation he feels from the progress-oriented adult world, and the profound disenchantment he undergoes upon witnessing the willingness of the latter to sacrifice the former. I locate in these stories an environmental discourse that goes beyond underscoring the ecological costs and injustices accompanying capitalism’s incursions into previously remote and undeveloped areas and points to the psychic costs of severing affective bonds with the natural landscape. Just as importantly, though, these stories find hope in the enduring potential for affective connection with the non-human world. In these texts, the alienation from nature characteristic of urban modernity never fully forecloses the possibility of being enchanted by it once again. In fact, I conclude, Guimarães Rosa’s poetic language plays a crucial role in preserving this potentiality. I begin by tracing the sensibility Milton calls “loving nature” in *Grande sertão: veredas* (1956) before turning to the more direct treatment of ecological destruction in “As margens da alegria” and “Os cimos.”

Nature, Love, and Saudade in Grande sertão: veredas

For Riobaldo, the narrator-protagonist of *Grande sertão: veredas*, the natural world is colored by and inseparable from his love for his fellow *jagunço* Diadorim. This point has been eloquently developed by Patricia Carmello, María do Socorro Pereira de Almeida, and Donaldo Schüler, among others. Almeida notes that throughout *Grande sertão*, birds in particular carry positive affects for Riobaldo and are linked to his *saudade* for Diadorim (62). It was Diadorim who taught him to see beauty in the natural world and identify birds by their songs and plumage; it was Diadorim who once told him: “É preciso olhar para esses com um todo carinho” (159). As a result of this affective education, Riobaldo

refrains from objectifying the natural world. As Schüler and Carmello suggest, Guimarães Rosa's descriptions of the *sertão* cannot be reduced to local color; on the contrary, they depart from the reifying conventions of the naturalist regionalist novel.⁴ Rather than presuming to describe this landscape objectively, Riobaldo incessantly avows the affective relationship through which he knows the land, what Schüler calls *o convívio*:

Convive com a paisagem e com os objetos, não como observador imparcial, mas como homem [...]. A descrição de Riobaldo está longe de ser realista. Não descreve como quem sente o dever de mostrar o cenário dos acontecimentos. A paisagem, na descrição de Riobaldo, está banhada de amor. Uma pessoa querida, Diadorim, tornou bela a paisagem que lhe era indiferente antes. (Schüler 365)

As Riobaldo remarks: “Diadorim me pôs o rastro dele para sempre em todas essas quisquilhas da natureza” (45). After the death of Diadorim, the natural world remains sacred for Riobaldo not only because it is saturated with the memory of his lost love, but also, more importantly, because Diadorim taught him to observe it with affection, joy, and careful attention.

If Riobaldo cherished the natural landscapes he once shared with Diadorim only for their association with his beloved, one might object that nature is reduced to a symbol or conduit for affective bonds between human beings, that Riobaldo does not truly see let alone love the non-human world on its own terms, and thus that *Grande sertão* does not break the anthropocentric frame. But Riobaldo does not express his *saudade* for Diadorim by sentimentally inscribing the natural landscape with memories of their time together; instead, he continually practices the intimate knowledge of and tenderness toward the region's non-human inhabitants that he learned from Diadorim.

One might take, for example, the episode in which Riobaldo discovers that he is undeniably in love with Diadorim, a truth he has hidden even from himself because of the taboo on homosexual desire. In the middle of his confession of

⁴ Drawing on the work of Michel Collot, Carmello sees the landscapes conjured in *Grande Sertão: veredas* as subjectively colored landscapes of experience (63-64).

overwhelming love for Diadorim, Riobaldo pauses to recall the place where this revelation hit him. In what might at first appear to be an unrelated tangent, he reveals that his feelings of longing, tenderness, and delighted curiosity are not limited to Diadorim, who, it turns out, has wandered away from Riobaldo in this moment. Instead, these affects spill over, saturating the entire scene, which I quote at length to show the quantity, detail, and loving quality of the recollections that Riobaldo devotes to the non-human world:

Por lá, nas beiras, cantava erro o João-pobre, pardo, banhador. Me deu saudade de algum buritizal, na ida duma vereda em capim tem-te que verde, termo da chapada. Saudades, dessas que respondem ao vento; saudades dos Gerais. O senhor vê: o remôo do vento nas palmas dos buritis todos, quando é ameaço de tempestade. Alguém esquece isso? O vento é verde. Aí, no intervalo, o senhor pega o silêncio põe no colo. Eu sou donde eu nasci. Sou de outros lugares. Mas, lá na Guararavacã, eu estava bem. O gado ainda pastava, meu vizinho, cheiro de boi sempre alegria faz. Os quem-quem, aos casais, corriam, catavam, permeio às reses, no liso do campo claro. Mas, nas árvores, pica-pau bate e grita. E escutei o barulho, vindo do dentro do mato, de um macuco – sempre solerte. Era mês do macuco ainda passear solitário – macho e fêmea desemparelhados, cada um por si. E o macuco vinha andando, sarandando, macucando: aquilo ele ciscava no chão, feito galinha de casa. Eu ri – “Vigia este, Diadorim!” – eu disse; pensei que Diadorim estivesse em voz de alcance. Ele não estava. O macuco me olhou, de cabecinha alta. Ele tinha vindo quase endiretio em mim, por pouco entrou no rancho. Me olhou, rolou os olhos. Aquele pássaro procurava o que? Vinha me pôr quebrantos. Eu podia dar nele um tiro certo. Mas retardei. Não dei. Peguei só nu pé de espora, joguei no lado donde ele. Ele deu um susto, trazendo as asas para diante, feito quisesse esconder a cabeça, cambalhota fosse virar. Daí, cainhou primeiro até de costas, fugiu-se, entrou outra vez no mato, vero, foi caçar poleiro para o bom adormecer. (306-07)

In these descriptions, Riobaldo demonstrates his willingness to see non-human subjects as persons, his intimate familiarity with a natural world that nevertheless remains partially enigmatic to him, and his affective imbrication in its well-being. Beyond deciding not to shoot the *macuco*, Riobaldo grants it personhood by focusing on its reciprocal, indecipherable gaze and acknowledging its ability to retreat once more into the brush, where he can only speculate about its activities. Meanwhile, he exhibits knowledge of the natural world that comes from living with it and attending day-in-and-day-out to its sights, sounds, smells, rhythms, and relationships. He knows the sound that palm fronds make when a storm approaches and in which months the *macuco* is solitary versus joined by a mate. Finally, he associates his personal well-being with the contented grazing of the cattle, whom he calls his neighbors, and the birds, whose diverse species, calls, and behaviors he remembers in vivid detail.

It is worth dwelling on the way in which passage cited above both is and is not about Riobaldo's love for Diadorim, who is conspicuously absent (a fact that anticipates the latter's absence in death by the time Riobaldo tells his tale). Diadorim, who taught Riobaldo the names of the birds and to look at them with tenderness, is no longer present to observe his pupil putting these lessons into practice. Rather than diminishing in Diadorim's absence, Riobaldo's love and delight spread to non-human actors such as trees, birds, and the place itself. Yet, the underlying logic is not metaphoric (i.e. animals and plants as allegoric stand-ins for Riobaldo's lost love) but rather metonymic. Like the wind, which flows through Riobaldo's memory, carrying sounds and awaking *saudades*, Riobaldo's longing flows from Diadorim to the landscape, from the song of the *joão-pobre*, to the song of the buriti-palms. The metonymic fluidity of affective intensities in Rosa's world configures love as something that does not reside in a single object; instead, it is passed on.

In similar fashion, Diadorim's love of nature is transferred to Riobaldo and (potentially) to the reader. Because Diadorim is out of earshot, the narrator's interlocutor, O Doutor, and by extension, the reader, is implicated in his stead as co-witness to this scene and called to cultivate attention and affection.⁵ Riobaldo asks his listener to participate in the scene, as if he too could sensorially and

⁵ The novel takes the form of an extended monologue, in which Riobaldo recounts his adventures as a young man to his visitor, an urban intellectual known only as O Doutor, often read as a stand-in for the author and the reader.

affectively engage with it: “O senhor vê,” he instructs us; “o senhor pega o silêncio põe no colo,” he implores. We are thus asked to grab hold of the silence between gusts of wind and hold it to our own bodies, to cherish it as Riobaldo does. This moment alludes to what Victoria Saramago has called Guimarães Rosa’s investment in the sensorial, tactile, or “epidermic relationship between reader and book” as a technique for generating proximity between the reader and the *sertão* (127). Saramago further notes that, for Guimarães Rosa, the effects that the work of art should have on the viewer include inspiring the desire “to caress it” (126).

In dialogue with Saramago, and following the work of Chen and Francine Masiello, I argue that it is the very materiality of language—as sound, rhythm, and texture—that engenders the affective and bodily intimacy that Guimarães Rosa wishes the reader to have with the *sertão*.⁶ In attending more fully to the materiality Guimarães Rosa’s language—its oral cadence, poetic repetition, and alliterations—the reader goes beyond merely registering the effect these landscapes, plants, and animals have on Riobaldo and begins to perceive this world with their own senses and affects. Masiello has argued that in poetry such acts of engaging corporally with the voice of the text are what open dialogue and create bonds— affective, ethical, and political—between the reader and the poem, between the self and the other. In the case of the *sertão*, this other includes the natural world as well as human subjects such as Riobaldo and his fellow *jagunços*, whom the official narrative of Brazilian modernity has marginalized and left behind.⁷

It is likewise crucial to point out that the language of this passage exudes Riobaldo’s *saudade* for places and forms of life that no longer form part of his present. These recollections come directly after Riobaldo notes that the name of the place has been changed and that “Agora, o mundo quer ficar sem sertão” (305). His personal nostalgia—for Diadorim, for the sound of palm trees in the

⁶ Chen argues that language is alive, material and animate: “Words more than signify; they affect and effect. Whether read or heard, they complexly pulse through bodies (living or dead) rendering their effects in feeling and active response” (54).

⁷ Carmello notes how Guimarães Rosa makes room for “os esquecidos da história” in a historical moment when there is great pressure to exclude the ‘backward,’ the ‘mad,’ the impoverished, and the unruly from the official vision of modern Brazil: “São representantes dos que ficaram mantidos à margem da história, e que o GSV reúne num universo único, como restos, resíduos a quem o Brasil modernizado não concedeu lugar apropriado” (73).

wind, for the smell of cattle—is thus inscribed into a larger project of mourning (or, more properly, melancholia) for a disappearing landscape and way of life, as the *sertão* is progressively “civilized,” domesticated, and developed.⁸

This backwards-looking temporality stands in tension with the temporality of progress that predominated the political climate of the 1950s, when Guimarães Rosa penned his most groundbreaking fiction.⁹ The Brazilian state had attempted to vanquish the backwardness, unruly violence, and underdevelopment represented by the *sertão* throughout the First and Second Republics, and the ambition to civilize it once and for all resounded in the rhetoric of the progressive government of President Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961). In fact, the construction of the new capital, Brasília, in the interior state of Goiás is often seen as the symbolic culmination of the “avanço da civilização sobre os sertões” (Bolle 311). The crown jewel in Kubitschek’s ambitious development plan, which promised fifty years of progress in five, the new, modernist capital city in the heart of the *sertão* was to be a beacon of civilization and progress. Whereas the *sertão* had long represented the unreachable hinterlands on the outskirts of the nation and of modernity (Nielson; Saramago), the new capital literally brought the central government to the *sertão* and promised to unite the country. As the inauguration of Brasília in 1960 marked the incursion of the city into the *sertão*, it also paved the way for the transformation of the world’s most biologically rich savannah, which would gradually be populated and reduced to soybean monoculture (Librandi 61).

In the face of imminent loss, *Grande sertão* refuses to adopt the elegiac tone deployed by previous representations of the *sertão*, most notably Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões* (Bolle). Because this landscape has historically been associated with backwardness and violence, the possibility that the *sertão* has not completely disappeared opens the door to cutting political critiques of the modernity and “civilization” achieved by the Brazilian nation, critiques which are at least as poignant today as they were in the 1950s. Álvaro Andrade Garcia and Luiz Roncari, for example, have each alleged that in the absence of environmental and social protections, the rule of organized crime and the

⁸ See Carmello’s treatment of melancholia in the novel.

⁹ I have described the temporality of *Grande sertão: veredas* as “queer,” insofar as it subverts the linear teleology of both modernization and heteronormative narratives of psychological development (“Queer Temporality”).

informal economy has produced a neoliberal state as lawless and violent as the mythologized *sertão*.¹⁰ In *Grande sertão*, however, the persistence of the *sertão* in the present signifies far more than the failure of civilization to conquer *barbarie*. The *sertão* that Riobaldo's narrative keeps alive is not simply the that of Hermógenes, brutal and lawless; it is also the *sertão* of Joca Ramiro, governed by quasi-chivalric codes of honor, and that of Diadorim, filled with birds, plants, streams, and serene natural beauty. By conjuring a *living sertão*, Riobaldo's narrative threatens nationalistic articulations of Brazilian modernity while also actively renewing the affective allegiances of Riobaldo's youth.¹¹ These include a fondness for the non-human world, which does not appear to have faded for Riobaldo. Even after the physical landscapes have been transformed, Riobaldo's love for them remains accessible and even transmissible. The heightened sense of love and loss that accompany the transformation of natural landscapes will be felt even more acutely by the young protagonist of "As margens da alegria" and "Os cimos," stories which foreground the ecological violence of developing the *sertão*.

Where the City Meets the Sertão

"As margens da alegria" and "Os cimos" chronicle the conflicting emotions of a young boy who visits Brasília while it is in the process of being built. Staying at his uncle's house on the edge of the city-under-construction, the boy finds happiness, as the first story's title suggests, in *as margens* where the cleared land meets the forest. Much as in *Grande sertão*, birds provide the entry point to a positive affective relationship with the natural world, one characterized by joy,

¹⁰ Andrade Garcia argues that the city has thoroughly merged with the barbarity of the *sertão*: "Sertão e cidade já não são mundos distintos e distantes, mas a mesma extensão que agora abraça a Amazônia, sua última fronteira geográfica em território brasileiro [...] fruto de um processo de desenvolvimento predador, invasivo e excludente" (38-39). Along the same lines, Roncari argues that the neoliberal state is disconcertingly similar to the liberal regime of the First Republic, in which *Grande sertão* is set: both are ruled by private powers, and in both violence is a way of life (360-61). Roncari argues that the laws and "civilization" of the city have failed to eliminate the savagery of the *sertão* and that "the backlands have invaded the city" (366). Since the publication of these works, the neoliberal policies, permissiveness toward environmental destruction, and systemic neglect of wide swaths of the Brazilian population under Jair Bolsonaro's government have only intensified the situation described by Garcia and Roncari.

¹¹ See Bolle for an excellent elaboration of how Rosa refuses to consummate the deaths demanded by Brazil's modernization narrative.

wonder, and identification. Their songs are described as “o que abriu seu coração” (8). The boy’s enchantment with the non-human world will center around a peacock in the first story and a toucan in the second, both of which inhabit the border space between city and *cerrado*. It is here that the treasures nature conceals in her dense forests and vast backlands become visible and loveable: “Todas as coisas, surgidas do opaco. Sustentava-se delas sua incessante alegria, sob espécie sonhosa, bebida, em novos aumentos de amor” (9). Significantly, the boy’s happiness is described as *sustained by* that which emerges in the contact zone between city and *sertão*. These same borderlands will be the site of the boy’s disillusionment, as he learns of his relatives’ willingness to kill and eat the peacock and to cage the toucan in misguided efforts to please him and as scenes of birds and trees are increasingly replaced by scenes of dust, rubble, and construction equipment.

What is most remarkable about “As margens da alegria” and “Os cimos,” however, is the way the defiled landscape retains its potential to enchant. Throughout both stories, the mood of the outer scenery transforms rapidly to reflect the boy’s inner affective state. Much as Schüler has observed of the landscapes in *Grande sertão*, the environment is not presented as an objective backdrop but rather as thoroughly colored by the boy’s emotions. His first airplane ride, for example, is steeped in positive affect. The trip is described as “inventado no feliz,” and the boy’s carefree sense of joy and anticipation seeps into the world he beholds outside his window: “o amável mundo,” “as nuvens de amontoada amabilidade” (7). In contrast, during the second trip to Brasília, when the boy’s mother is gravely ill, the clouds take on frightening shapes, expressing his anxiety (153). The forest and shrubland around the edge of the city prove similarly changeable. Though it was this landscape that originally awoke in him feelings of love, the death of the peacock turns everything nightmarish and threatening: “A mata é que era tão feia de altura [...]. Tudo perdia a eternidade e a certeza” (10). For the boy, the willingness of the city-builders to sacrifice and instrumentalize the natural world drains his reality of beauty, certainty, and eternity, leaving behind an ugly landscape where he once saw wonder.

Following the boy’s moment of disillusionment, the incipient city also transforms from a beacon of hope into an ominous sign. When he first encounters the city, he sees its potential for grandeur through the optimism and pride of his adult relatives: “Esta grande cidade ia ser a mais levantada no mundo” (9).

Immediately after the death of the peacock, however, the boy's personal devastation bleeds over into his perception of construction, in which he sees only destruction, death, and loss:

Sentia-se sempre mais cansado. Mal podia com o que agora lhe mostravam, na circuntristeza: o um horizonte, homens no trabalho de terraplenagem, os caminhões de cascalho, as vagas árvores, um ribeirão de águas cinzentas, o velame-do-campo apenas uma planta desbotada, o encantamento morto e sem pássaros, o ar cheio de poeira [...] no mundo maquinal, no hostil espaço. (10)

The neologism “circuntristeza” expresses the all-encompassing circumstance of sadness that now colors his world, draining it of marvel, birds, and life, leaving only a hostile, machine-like existence. Of course, the transformation of the external world is real and not merely a projection of the boy's shifting affective state; the natural world is objectively being destroyed and replaced. Yet in *as margens*, a spatial and temporal border zone where city and *sertão* meet, both realities and their attending moods coexist. In this liminal space, it is the inner state of the observer that determines which of these affective moods—enchantment or despair—colors the external landscape. With the death of the peacock, for example, the boy's disillusionment casts a pall over the contact zone between city and *sertão*: beauty, wonder, and hope suddenly recede from its visible surface like wild animals, “coisas surgidas do opaco,” that can just as easily return to the dark depths from which they emerged.

Yet the ending of “As margens da alegria” suggests that the loss of enchantment is not complete nor irreversible. On the contrary, the newly nightmarish world remains “amável” to the boy, in the sense that it still harbors positive affects—love, happiness, wonder—in a latent state. These affects become accessible to him once again when he wanders outside at dusk to inspect the scene of the peacock's death and sees, to his astonishment and then horror, a peahen pecking savagely at the decapitated head of her mate. The boy feels utterly overwhelmed by the unfathomable darkness of the natural world, until he sees a firefly and cannot help but admire it. “Era lindo!”—he exclaims, and as it disappears, his happiness returns. “Era, outra vez em quando, a alegria,” read the last lines of the story (12). What has been lost has not been restored, but one sees

that neither have death, destruction, and disillusionment fully and permanently exhausted the natural world's capacity to enchant.

To be clear, in emphasizing resilience, I do not mean to suggest that Guimarães Rosa paints a world in which nature can fully withstand the destruction inflicted upon it by human activity. On the contrary, the boy's resilience is linked to continued contact with a natural habitat that has not yet been fully penetrated and depleted. I am likewise not suggesting that the story calls for sealing nature off from human contact. As Anne-Lise François argues in relation to the enclosure of private property, there is in fact a strange continuity in capitalist logic between "putting [something] off limits (sealing it off from contact with other species) and freeing it up for exchange" (242). Both depend upon replacing fluid and porous boundaries (*as margens*) with discreet and impermeable borders and replacing the logic of the ecosystem with that of the commodity. It is moreover precisely the ongoing relationship between the land and its human and non-human inhabitants that makes for relations of care, stewardship, and interdependency, as distinct from instrumental use, consumption, and depletion (François 248). In Guimarães Rosa's fiction, I would add, contact and fluid circulation of feeling between the human and non-human world are also what engender affective connections that can be passed on: like the winds Riobaldo describes with *saudade*, the affects that animate Riobaldo's memories of Diadorim also course through palms, rivers, birds, the entirety of the landscape. These can, in turn, be communicated, from Diadorim to Riobaldo, from Riobaldo to O Doutor, and then to the reader.

What most urgently needs protecting in the world Guimarães Rosa creates is, in Librandi's words, "the place where city and forest communicate" ("*Sertão*" 70). Always already abutting human activity and thus always already under threat of a destruction that has not yet been fully consummated, the natural world enchants not as a function of its being untouched, but rather, as a function of its ongoing ability to touch and be touched. This capacity would be lost were it to be fully subjugated. Much like Guimarães Rosa's language, characterized by an unabashed experimentalism that renders it as indomitable as the *sertão* itself, the natural world he depicts still has unfathomable depths of opacity into which it may retreat. These are not reserves put aside for some future use, nor are they fetishized as pure. In fact, far from a sentimental projection of innocence, the natural world in "*As margens da alegria*" and "*Os cimos*" is a site of

incomprehensible violence. As the enigmatic ending of “As margens da alegria” suggests, however, it inspires love *because* of and not despite its awe-full darkness.

The Loveability of Nature’s “Outra-Parte”

“Os cimos,” further illuminates how the unseen side of the natural world—that which is not comprehensible from the human perspective—holds the key to the resilience of nature and humans alike. In this story, the same boy, now slightly older, returns to Brasília under more difficult circumstances: his mother is gravely ill, and he has been sent to stay with his relatives until she recovers. This “circuntristeza” weighs down his entire world with anxiety and foreboding, until a bird once again unlocks the boy’s capacity to contemplate his surroundings with love and awe.

Each day at dawn, the boy goes to the window, “animoso de amar” (157), to witness the majestic flight of a toucan over the treetops. Its splendor, much like that of the firefly in the earlier story, is fleeting. Every day, the sacred ritual of watching the sunrise and the flight of the toucan gives way to the profanity of the human world and the relentless progress of the construction of the city: “Depois do encanto, a gente entrava no vulgar inteiro do dia [...] as sacudidelas do jipe [...]. Os mil e mil homens muitamente trabalhavam fazendo a grande cidade” (157). The iterative nature of the ritual, however, comforts the boy, as he learns to trust that the toucan will fly again the following morning: “Mas o Tucano, sem falta, tinha sua soência de sobreviver, todos ali o conheciam, no pintar da aurora” (157). The boy treasures the memory of its flight throughout the day, as a salve against the violence of the rational, destructive world of human progress: “O voo do pássaro habitava-o mais [...]. O menino o guardava, no fugidir, de memória, em feliz voo, no ar sonoro, até a tarde. O que podia se servir para consolar-se com, e desdolorir-se, por escapar do aperto de rigor—daqueles dias quadriculados” (158). By allowing the bird’s flight to “inhabit him” and console him during the intervals between its fleeting appearance, the boy manages to feel the presence of—and nurture himself from the bliss and love inspired by—that which is absent. The tension between *guardar*, the same verb used in the sense of to guard a prisoner or a treasure, and *fugidir*, an invented noun or gerund derived from *fugir* (“to run away”), suggests that the work of memory is more

complex than simply preserving sights, sounds, and emotions. It is, like the boy's relationship with the toucan, a dynamic play between letting the beloved escape and inviting it to grace him, to inhabit him once more. This affective dance, rather than a relation of possession, is what allows the boy to keep close that which the forward march of progress (towards modernity and also perhaps towards adulthood, cynicism, and alienation from the natural world) threatens to drive into exile.

It is tempting to read this story, which revolves around the absence of the boy's mother, as an allegory for the lesson of object-permanence and to see the ailing mother figure as a stand-in for the natural world. By the end of the story, the boy's mother recovers, and on the flight home, the boy realizes he has lost his cherished toy monkey. As if demonstrating the faith he has gained in the persistence of that which is absent, the boy reassures himself that the monkey is not really lost: "Não, o companeirinho macaquinho não estava perdido, no sem-fundo obscuro no mundo, nem nunca. Decerto, ele só passeava lá, porventura e porvindouro, na outra-parte, aonde as pessoas e as coisas sempre iam e voltaram" (159). The description of the "outra-parte" where people and things disappear to always to return again evokes the boy's earlier musings about where the Toucan goes between its daily appearances at his uncle's house: "Se donde vinha e morava – das sombras do mato, os impenetráveis? Ninguém soubesse seus usos verdadeiros, nem os certos horários: os demais lugares, aonde iria achar comer e beber [...]. Mas o menino pensava que devia acontecer mesmo assim—que ninguém soubesse. Ele vinha do diferente, só donde" (158). The boy's own resilience in this story seems to stem from the fact that he has learned to accept the mystery of "o diferente" and to trust that it nurtures rather than robs us of that which we hold dear.

In essence, the boy copes with absence not by taking control of the situation but by embracing the enigmatic and contingent nature of that which disappears and reappears at its own will.¹² He thinks the impenetrable mystery of the bird's whereabouts is how it should be; nobody should know its secrets nor control its movements. It is for this reason that the boy is devastated by the idea that his uncle would trap and cage the bird for the boy's enjoyment: "Não e não—

¹² This model contrasts with that of Freud's "Fort-da!" anecdote, wherein the child copes with the intermittent absence of his parents by throwing a toy and making it disappear and reappear at will.

zangou-se, aflito. O que cuidava, que queria, não podendo ser aquele Tucano preso” (158). What he loves is the freedom of the bird to not always be present and the gift of its return each day, a gift that is all the more precious because it cannot be taken for granted.

The ability of the toucan to sustain the boy emotionally depends on its ability to recede into the unknown, “o diferente.” What were to happen, then, if the city were finally and thoroughly to “acabar com o sertão” (*Grande sertão* 183) as Riobaldo puts it? If nature were to be fully subdued and civilized? If there were no more dense vegetation into which birds disappear from view to later reappear as if by magic? There would remain only a world with no depths, no latent reserves of hope and solace upon which to be drawn, a cold, rational, profit-driven world of “dias quadriculados” (Guimarães Rosa, “Os cimos” 158). There would be a sky without birds but only airplanes, wondrous feats of engineering that, like the city of Brasília (famously shaped like an airplane), lose their power to enchant once their novelty wears off. Without the *sertão* surrounding the city, without the dark but love-inspiring spaces it harbors at the margins of modernity, Guimarães Rosa seems to suggest, the human capacity for love, awe, and faith would cease to be renewable resources.

The Potential of Poetic Language

How might poetic language help stave off the loss of affective depth? Given that Guimarães Rosa’s *sertão* is as much a linguistic space as it is a geographic referent or a political territory, preserving its openness is as much a matter of insisting on the dynamism and multivalence of language as it is about resisting physical enclosure or the imposition of federal rule. Rosa professed that the political commitment of his work lies in his quest to renew the world through a renewal of the Portuguese language: “Somente renovando a língua é que se pode renovar o mundo” (Lorenz 88). As Guimarães Rosa puts it, his intention is not to invent a new language (though he is often credited with doing so) but rather to recover the lost expressive potential of words and expressions that have become ossified and cliché in common usage: “quero voltar cada dia à origem da língua, lá onde a palavra ainda está nas entranhas da alma” (Lorenz 84). The originary language Guimarães Rosa seeks is not an essential state of stable truths and fixed meanings. On the contrary, he persistently seeks a state of openness and infinite

possibility. As Eduardo F. Coutinho explains, Guimarães Rosa aims to “*explorar as possibilidades latentes* dentro do sistema da língua com que está lidando e conferir existência concreta àquilo que existia até então *como algo meramente em potencial* (205, emphasis mine). His poetic-political project is, in other words, the renewal of the very potentiality of the Portuguese language.

Neologisms and unconventional syntax abound in Guimarães Rosa’s prose, but there may be no better example of his linguistic project than his subtle defamiliarization of the word *amável*. In his work, it refers not to the conventional sense of “pleasant,” “kind,” or “friendly” but rather to the more literal condition of harboring the possibility of being loved. This meaning is latent in the etymology of *amável*, but it has faded through the word’s use over time. Guimarães Rosa draws this latent meaning to the forefront of the reader’s attention in *Grande sertão* through the proliferation of similarly defamiliarized adjectives formed by adding the suffixes “ável” and “ível” to verbs. Many of these are neologisms or at least uncommon formations such as “existível” (575), “vivível” (500), “cantável” (504), “narrável” (152), and “gritável” (594). More often than not, these descriptors speak to the capacity for experience to be understood and transmitted, one of Riobaldo’s primary preoccupations throughout the novel. Riobaldo speaks of that which is “vivível” but not “achável” (500) and “existível” but not “revelável” (592). He insists that “tudo nesta vida é muito cantável” (504), but he regrets that “a vida não é entendível” (156), much less “narrável” (152). In one of the last lines of the novel, Riobaldo describes the Rio São Francisco as “amável” (624).

The unexhausted potentiality evoked by neologisms such as “existível” (capable of existing, whether or not it ever has) or “gritável” (capable of being screamed, whether or not it ever has been) fits within the framework of what Librandi calls Guimarães Rosa’s “poetics of latency,” in that his texts call forth “a state of suspension, silent and hidden, prior to any enactment, when nothing occurs and anything is possible” (“Nuvens” 1). In other words, Guimarães Rosa evokes an alternative temporality, one in tension with the linearity of narrative, historical progress, and capitalistic development. He presents a state of being not yet fully realized and also not yet fully depleted. This indefinitely suspended

state of potentiality exemplifies the openness of Guimarães Rosa's *sertão*, which Silviano Santiago has described as an untamable backlands of the imagination.¹³

Just as radical, though, is how Guimarães Rosa invites his readers into an affective relation with this landscape, even as he signals the limits of the written word as a means of capturing and transmitting experience. That which is “existível,” “vivível” is rarely “entendível,” “narrável,” but it is still “amável.” Reading Guimarães Rosa's poetic prose, with its enigmatic lack of exposition and its slippery, multi-valent neologisms, in fact cultivates in the reader the capacity to love and care for that which one cannot fully comprehend, possess, or instrumentalize. As Saramago notes, there is a mimetic relation between the text's materiality—its expansiveness, indeterminacy, and indomitability—and Guimarães Rosa's *sertão*; although neither is easily navigated, both are nevertheless available to the reader's caress (133). It follows that Guimarães Rosa's environmentalism lies only partially in encouraging his reader to engage lovingly with the materiality of text and *sertão* alike. Beyond this, he also leads his reader to love the depths of what cannot be fully seen or known. Guimarães Rosa does his most critical environmental work, in fact, by helping readers to recognize the life- and soul-sustaining force of a natural world whose presence cannot be commanded. This sensibility is modeled by characters who love the natural world they cannot (and would not) possess, even as it conditions the very exercise of reading texts that remain deeply enigmatic.

For Guimarães Rosa, the cultivation of an affective relation with the natural world requires that one neither seek to master nature nor seal oneself off from it. It is a question, rather, of entering into communion and communication (“communioncation” to engage in the sort of wordplay Guimarães Rosa favors) with nature and allowing oneself to be affected by it. Though this relation is by no means reciprocal (human pangs of loss are not commensurate with the sort of destruction we habitually inflict on the natural world), it is important to come away with the sense that such destruction is ultimately self-harm, and that the loss of the natural landscape is human loss, as well. This sense of loss, moreover, does not only afflict readers who have personally known and loved the *sertão*. As Librandi argues, one of the most remarkable qualities of Guimarães Rosa's

¹³ Santiago compares *Grande sertão* to a perennially untamed monster, reflecting the ability of the *sertão* to remain wild and unruly in spite of numerous campaigns to “civilize” it.

writing is its capacity to generate *saudade* “for what we have never lived but have only heard of” (“*Sertão*” 67). Given that the landscapes conjured by Guimarães Rosa were already by the 1950s beginning to undergo a profound transformation that continues into the present, it is with every passing year more likely that his urban, coastal readers will have had little or no direct contact with them. The literary encounter must then make one feel the double loss of natural landscapes sacrificed in the name of progress: the loss that accompanies their disappearance and that which stems from never having known them first-hand.

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