

# “A invençó do Brasile”: Juó Bananére and Non-Italian Italian literature<sup>1</sup>

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This essay focuses on the fascinating case of satirist Juó Bananére—a non-Italian, outside of Italy, who chose to write *as though he were Italian*—to propose an experiment in how literary historians might conceive of Italian literature from comparative perspectives internal to Italy’s multiple global interactions.<sup>2</sup> Here I can only offer one such perspective. In order to begin the heuristic work, however, one must ask: what is Italian literature? Faced with this inevitable but deceptively candid query, Peter Brand and Lino Pertile supply a sensible answer in their preface to a representative work, *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*: “Italian literature is here taken generally to mean literature in the Italian vernacular: it has been possible, in a volume of this size, to mention only briefly a considerable output of dialect works which, however vibrant and illustrative of Italian genius, are nevertheless accessible to only a limited section of the Italian people.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than giving a rigorous, peremptory definition and thereby de facto excluding other tenable purviews, the editors’ answer spells out a pragmatic editorial criterion. If this criterion leaves much out on the level of potentially problematic particular cases—a “considerable output,” as the editors recognize—it is able to build up and retain the contextual coherence and categorical generality—“literature in the Italian vernacular”—that allow the concept of the particular case to be intelligible in the first place, with the added restriction that it be “illustrative of Italian genius.” Nevertheless, while producing a general category is a necessary step towards a more robust answer to our opening question, is that answer sufficient in itself?

Tarrying a little longer with this conundrum, one dreams up *The Cambridge History of Other Italian Literature*, a hypothetical publication following a set of editorial criteria conceptually complementary, but not necessarily ancillary, to those of the original volume.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The first—very different—version of this paper was read at the 2019 CICIS conference, whose theme was “Italy’s centers and peripheries.” I would like to thank Professors Laura Ruberto, Claudio Fogu, and Albert R. Ascoli for their questions and comments at the event, and for the encouragement to turn the presentation into an article; and my anonymous peer-reviewers, for the sensible comments and productive suggestions. I would also like to give warm thanks to my colleagues in the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages at Stanford University, Romina Wainberg, Evan Altermann, and Joseph Wager, for commenting on an advanced draft and keeping me in check. Finally, I would like to thank Prof. Marília Librandi. It was during her seminar on Aurality and Literature, in 2018, at Stanford, that the idea first emerged to take Bananére’s work out of the Brazilian studies niche and treat it as a case for Comparative Literature writ large.

<sup>2</sup> In recent years, the concept of Italian diaspora has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. See, for instance, Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (London: UCL Press, 2000); Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom, eds., *Italian Mobilities* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), especially Pamela Ballinger’s essay, “Beyond the Italies? Italy as a Mobile Subject?” in the latter collection.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brand and Lino Pertile, eds., *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xix.

<sup>4</sup> Something like a more globalizing, internationalizing version of Franco Brevini’s splendid anthology *La poesia in dialetto* or Luigi Bonaffini’s work on dialect poetry, in which the concept of *dialetto* incorporates a “cartographic” understanding of language, language in internal self-variance resulting from mobilities and interactions with other languages, cultures, and traditions. See Franco Brevini, *La poesia in dialetto: storia e testi dalle origini al Novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), and Luigi Bonaffini, “Italian dialect poetry,” last modified March 18, 2015, <http://userhome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bonaffini/DP/index.html>.

Read against each other, the two books should give a picture of Italian literature as a dense grid of often asymmetrical relations between different incoming and outgoing social, material, linguistic, and cultural force-fields in time and space. These are both internal—within “Italy”—and external—within Europe and, perhaps more intensely in the last hundred or so years, within the “world at large”—each producing zones of pressure upon, in, and/or against one another at varying speeds and degrees of intensity. Charting the historical interplay of these force-fields is, of course, the permanent *desideratum*, as well as the occasional achievement of scholarship and criticism, just as it is the precondition for reassessing the critical reach and potential of criteria such as those adopted by Brand and Pertile.

In this essay I will present an odd and amusing episode in the literary history of Brazilian modernism, which I will frame as an as-yet-uncharted episode in the possible histories of Italian literature. This essay, then, is meant as an *assay*, a focused experiment in how one might tell a history of *Other Italian Literature* without downplaying its value; a contribution, by no means exhaustive, to a larger discussion about the currency of the concept of national literature in the age of hyperkinetic global—literal and literary—translation.

In a recent article titled “Italy and the Literature of Immigration,” critic Francesco Durante, editor of the massive two-volume anthology *Italoamericana: Storia e letteratura degli Italiani negli Stati Uniti*, reminds us that historically, because of the linguistic diversity of the Italian peninsula, the approach to Italian as a national literature has always been a contentious and fraught endeavor and, he argues, one likely to remain so.<sup>5</sup> In the last thirty years, the country has seen the emergence of a new wave of authors embodying another sort of diversity, one bound to their various national and cultural backgrounds, whom Durante calls “hyphenated writers”: Senegalese-Italians, Albanian-Italians, Algerian-Italians, Somali-Italians, Indo-Italians, and so forth.<sup>6</sup> Those are immigrants or children of immigrants who have chosen the Italian vernacular as their main language of literary expression, conceivably to establish readership, but one is doubtful that decision has much to do with a concern to illustrate “the Italian genius.” To further complicate matters, Durante considers a second group of authors, those standing in the opposite situation, like the ones anthologized and discussed in *Italoamericana*: emigrant Italian-born authors, or their children, who chose to write in standard vernacular Italian or in dialect while living abroad (in Durante’s work, that means in the United States) and who have been forgotten or summarily dismissed by historians of Italian literature as “anachronistic, amateurish, and unbearably ‘wild’.”<sup>7</sup> Durante’s characterization is amusing insofar as it reminds us that literary history is particularly sensitive to a certain level of “wildness”; it seems that *wildness* is much more bearable when it befits narratives of history-as-innovation, as the commanding feature of works representing perceived avant-garde gestures or simply exceptional originality.

Behind Brand and Pertile’s criterion are the unnamed concepts of “center”—the Italian vernacular—and “periphery”—whatever dialects Italians happen to speak. In Durante’s article, the unnamed center and periphery are, above all else, geographical markers, the Italian national territory standing, understandably, as the center. I would like to suggest, however, that in both cases this conceptual pair functions less as a rigorous description of realities and more as geometric metaphors that point towards functions, relations, and roles implying a perspective

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<sup>5</sup> Francesco Durante, “Italy and the Literature of Immigration,” trans. Antony Shugaar, *Words without Borders* (September 2016), <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/september-2016-italy-the-literature-of-immigration-francesco-durante>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Italics mine. See Francesco Durante, *Italoamericana: The Literature of the Great Migration, 1880-1943* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), ix.

that both structures their distribution and supplies, accordingly, a value for that distribution. It is the importance of this, the *perspective*, that I wish most of all to harness in my discussion of what the concept of Italian literature can mean. In the case of such an intricate, vast subject, the reader will recall that well before the Italian peninsula coincided with modern-day Italy and could therefore be called “Italy’s center” in terms of the global scene of Italian cultural dynamics and power relations, there was the extraordinary plurilingualism of the peninsula itself, one that reflected everyday life-worlds (and, therefore, perspectives) without the precociously unified “national literary language.” That linguistic dynamic, per modernism scholar Albert Sbragia, can be characterized as “Trecento Tuscan and Florentine forms and Cinquecento prescriptions, [...] suitable for ‘high’ literary expression while everyday communication continued to be carried out in local dialect, to the point that Italy’s first king, Vittorio Emanuele II, habitually used his native Piedmontese dialect even in meetings with his ministers.”<sup>8</sup>

At the moment of Italian unification in 1870, the linguist Graziadio Ascoli observed—note his terminology—that “the *centrifugal* pull of the various dialects of the Italian peninsula had for centuries remained uncountered by the *centripetal* forces necessary to the establishment of a truly national language.”<sup>9</sup> As the emerging political and economic nucleus of a new, increasingly self-aware life-world, Italy rose as “a case of fragmented diglossia,” a weak center surrounded by strong peripheries, which Sbragia calls “epicenters of dialect in tension with written and literary Italian.”<sup>10</sup> But these epicenters of dialect also produced that “considerable output” nominally recognized but practically ignored by histories such as Brand and Pertile’s, a literary body of writing that prompted philologist Gianfranco Contini, one of Carlo Emilio Gadda’s earliest champions, to go so far as to write, perhaps with some patriotic pride, that “Italian is substantially the only great national literature whose production in dialect constitutes a visceral and inseparable corpus with the rest of the patrimony.”<sup>11</sup>

There were additional centrifugal forces active in the new Italian nation. The fact remains that “at the very moment national unity was being achieved with the conquest of Rome in 1870, impoverished individuals began to emigrate in ever-swelling waves, first from the regions of Northern Italy (Liguria, the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, Lucchesia or Piana di Lucca, Piedmont, and then Venetia, Trentino, and Friuli), and subsequently, to an even more dramatic extent, from the central and southern regions (Sicily, Calabria, Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Basilicata, Puglia, southern Lazio, and Umbria).”<sup>12</sup> For Durante, “no matter how short our memory, [the Great Migration] undoubtedly remains the most significant fact of our entire history”<sup>13</sup>—and here I gather “our” must mean the entire history of the geopolitical entity called the Italian nation. Durante’s arguably hyperbolic assertion requires interpretation, but in the context of literary history it is significant *in itself* that such a statement can not only be *made* but also *meant*, that

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Sbragia, *Carlo Emilio Gadda and the Modern Macaronic* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Italics mine. See Tullio de Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell’Italia Unita* (Bari: Laterza, 1979), 16-17. Quoted and translated in Sbragia, *Carlo Emilio Gadda*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Sbragia, *Carlo Emilio Gadda*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Gianfranco Contini, *Quarant’anni d’amicizia: scritti su Carlo Emilio Gadda (1934-1988)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), 26. Gadda, the celebrated author of the novel *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (in English translation, *That Awful Mess in Via Merulana*), was notorious for his extensive use of dialects.

<sup>12</sup> Durante, “Italy and the Literature of Immigration.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

“the most significant fact” in a nation’s history is the extranational footprint it has left behind—that its central fact is a pulling away from the center.<sup>14</sup>

Durante’s research concentrates on the Italian presence in the United States. At the heart of his assertion one finds a—deliberate or not—suggestive appropriation by inversion for the Italian case of an often heard and repeated opinion, in the U.S., concerning the centrality of immigration to U.S. history. I propose that we extract from Durante’s move a lesson in how to conceptualize a framework for literary history by inverting a perspective prevalent in one of the terms of an interaction. In other words, what sort of picture of Italian literature emerges once we reshuffle the value, for Italy, of a process—its outgoing wave of emigrants—usually more emphatically prized on the other side of the relation—the U.S., the receiving end of the incoming wave of immigrants?

To that end, this essay will focus on a charismatic yet little remembered figure who adds a surprising, third category to Durante’s diasporic taxonomy: that of a non-Italian, outside of Italy, who chose to write as though he were Italian, in a language only an Italian immigrant could have realistically spoken. His name is Juó Bananére. In the Bananére’s case, the other side of the relation is Brazil at the time of the First Republic (1889-1930). Curiously enough, as though the other side of the Atlantic had become an inverse holograph of Italy’s social geography, the massive wave of emigration from the south of the peninsula headed mostly to the north of the American continent, while the northern influx went southbound. Historian Zuleica Alvim writes that between the decades of 1870 and 1920, 1.4 million Italians emigrated to Brazil; of those, about 965,000 settled in the territory that today corresponds to the state of São Paulo.<sup>15</sup>

These large numbers belong in the social history of coffee, a centripetal force in a faraway center. Along with sugar, coffee was one of Brazil’s economic staples. Franco Cenni, in his comprehensive history of Italo-Brazilian relations, explains that the booming success coffee met with in foreign markets at the beginning of the nineteenth century intensified the demands for field laborers in Brazil, a search made more salient by the ban on slave-trafficking decreed in the Treatise of Paris in 1814, and further reinforced at the Congresses of Vienna (1815), Aix-la-Chapelle (1818), and Verona (1822).<sup>16</sup> England, in particular, had adopted a more aggressive attitude to extinguish that most abject mode of human commerce, seeking, to that end, agreements with Spain in 1815, and a second one, with Portugal, that same year. Slave trafficking in Brazil continued, however, even after the declaration of independence on September 7, 1822, after which England continued to pressure Portuguese prince Pedro I, the newly crowned emperor of Brazil, to abolish it definitively. The conditions thereto, Cenni

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<sup>14</sup> Compare this to Elisabetta Bilotta’s more measured appraisal: “Italian emigration throughout the world represents one of the most peculiar and yet characteristic features of the entire history of contemporary Italy.” See Elisabetta Bilotta, “L’emigrazione italiana all’estero: problemi di valutazione e di misura nel XIX secolo in periodo pre e postunitario,” in *L’Italia in movimento. Due secoli di immigrazione (XIX-XX)*, ed. Ercole Sori and Anna Treves (Udine: Forum Editrice Universitaria Udinese, 2008), 430.

<sup>15</sup> Zuleica Alvim, *Brava Gente! Os italianos em São Paulo* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986), 25. Scholarly opinions on the total number of immigrants vary; of the 3,390,000 immigrants who arrived in Brazil between 1871 and 1920, at least 1,373,000 were Italian. See Sheldon Maram, *Anarquistas, imigrantes e o movimento operário brasileiro, 1890-1920* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1979), 13. Giorgio Mortara, a statistician, suggests something on the order of 1,540,000 (Giorgio Mortara, “A imigração italiana no Brasil e algumas características do grupo italiano em São Paulo,” *Revista Brasileira de Estatística* 11, no. 42 [1950]: 332). Scholars often omit the criteria used for determining that number. Census records do not suffice, as thousands of Italian immigrants left Brazil for other places in South and North America during this period, and many returned to Italy. Mortara provides a detailed description of the demographic within that group.

<sup>16</sup> Franco Cenni, *Italianos no Brasil: “andiamo in ‘Merica-”* (São Paulo: Edusp, 2003).

remarks, had become more favorable, and from the 1820s onwards, the imperial government took constant measures to encourage immigration from Europe. Between 1847 and 1857, those immigrants, mostly of Portuguese origin, settled in Brazil, founding over sixty farming colonies.<sup>17</sup>

This is not the place to discuss the great Italian diaspora in depth, but it seems appropriate to recall additional factors Durante evokes as its primary causes, such as overpopulation, abusive taxation, unequal land partition in a primarily agrarian economy, and, more emphatically, mass starvation.<sup>18</sup> Those circumstances were beneficial to the economic processes happening in Brazil, which knew how to take advantage of them: in 1877, the imperial office of Dom Pedro II helped install a hundred settlers from the Venetian province of Treviso to work for private land-owners in the region of Tijuacu, in the environs of São Paulo; two years later, another Italian settlement was created in the grounds of Fazenda São Caetano, which formed the nucleus of what is today the city of São Bernardo do Campo, in the São Paulo industrial belt; finally, in 1884, the government of São Paulo created the Sociedade Central de Imigração, an office dedicated to funding travel and organizing the job placement of migrant workers.<sup>19</sup> In Italy, some saw the benefits of this: private landowners saw themselves less pressured and threatened by potential land-claims, and bankers disputed emigrants' monopoly on financial transactions as the latter sent income earned in Brazil back to Europe. Some have argued, in fact, that the internal prosperity of Italy in the years preceding the First World War came, to a large extent, from such remittances.<sup>20</sup>

From 1877 to 1887, the Italian diaspora was stagnant. 1888, however, saw a sharp intensification of immigration, an event that converged with a major episode in Brazilian history, the signing of the abolition laws of May 13, 1888, which created a sudden and urgent demand for farm workers to replace African slave labor on sugarcane and coffee plantations.<sup>21</sup> In 1889, Brazil's constitutional monarchy fell; army officers proclaimed the first Republic, and General Deodoro da Fonseca became Brazil's first president. In the first twenty years of the new Republic, i.e. between 1890 and 1910, there was a steady demographical exodus from the countryside to the largest urban center in the country, the city of São Paulo. In 1920, Italians comprised one-third of the city's population, where they joined in mass numbers the struggling but resilient industrial working class, settling in neighborhoods such as Bexiga, Brás, and Bom Retiro.<sup>22</sup> Upon her visit to São Paulo in 1906, Gina Lombroso, daughter of the famous criminalist Cesare Lombroso—whose own landmark works had been motivated by the soaring crime rates in Italy during the early decades of economic distress—, remarked that on its streets she could “ouvir o idioma italiano com mais frequência do que em Milão, Turim ou Nápoles,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 203-04.

<sup>18</sup> Durante, “Italy and the Literature of Immigration.”

<sup>19</sup> Mario Carelli, *Carcamano e comendadores: os italianos de São Paulo, da realidade à ficção (1919-1930)* (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1985), 23.

<sup>20</sup> On this, see the documentation gathered in Constantino Ianni, *Homens sem Paz: os conflitos e bastidores da emigração italiana* (São Paulo: Difel, 1963).

<sup>21</sup> See George Calafut, “An Analysis of Italian Emigration,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas* 14 (1974): 310-31. According to the Direzione Generale di Statistica, 97,730 Italians emigrated to Brazil in 1888, compared to 31,445 the previous year; according to the Brazilian statistics, in 1888 the number was 104,353 versus 40,157 the previous year. The sharp increase from one year to the next was also observed in the United States. See U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *A Statistical Supplement. Historical Statistics of the U.S. Colonial Times to 1957* ([Washington, D.C.], 1960), 56-57.

<sup>22</sup> Núncia Santoro de Constantino, *Italiano na cidade: a imigração itálica nas cidades brasileiras* (Passo Fundo: UPF Editora, 2000), 38.

uma vez que nessas cidades predominavam os dialetos” (“hear the Italian tongue spoken more often than in Milan, Turin or Naples, since in those cities dialects predominated”).<sup>23</sup> Aureliano Leite, a Brazilian politician, observed in his memoirs that he “desconhecia cidade mais italiana que São Paulo nos anos 1910. Lá a língua de Dante predominava sobre a língua de Camões” (“did not know a more Italian city than São Paulo in the 1910s. There the language of Dante overpowered the language of Camões”).<sup>24</sup> This is where and when the story of Juó Bananére begins.

Juó Bananére—a *nom de plume* meaning something like “Johnny the banana salesman”—was one of the hundreds of thousands of Italian immigrants comprising São Paulo’s working class during the First Republic. Except that he was not. A veritable literary oddity, Juó Bananére was the creation of the satirist Alexandre Marcondes Machado, born in 1892 in Pindamonhangaba, a municipality in the state of São Paulo. A civil engineer by profession, Machado moved to the city as a young man, and there he occasionally composed verses and attended the polytechnic school in the neighborhood of Bom Retiro, which had a high concentration of immigrants from the Veneto.<sup>25</sup> In 1911, Oswald de Andrade, author of the famous *Manifesto Antropófago* of 1928 and arguably the most influential and controversial figure in Brazilian modernism, began editing the comic weekly *O Pirralho* (*The Brat*), which featured a column, *Cartas d’Abax’o Pignes*, signed by one Annibale Scipione. Scipione, one of Andrade’s many personae, wrote in an “Italo-paulista” idiom of Andrade’s own invention. That same year, Andrade left for a visit to Europe which would prove to be intellectually eventful, and it was then that Bananére replaced Scipione as the author of the column. As momentous as this replacement was, scholars have scarcely explored the deeper intellectual affinities between Bananére and Andrade, something which I will do below. Bananére’s work for *Cartas d’Abax’o Pignes* followed Andrade’s precedent, albeit with a jest and style all his own; his texts alternated verse parodies of Romantic poetry and prose pieces featuring clever social commentary on current headlines and everyday trivialities. Mixing biting invectives against the military government with occasional flights of fancy verging on the nonsensical, they were accompanied by the wildly popular drawings of cartoonist Lemmo Lemmi, best known as Voltolino, himself the child of Italian immigrants.<sup>26</sup> Some of Bananére’s most popular satirical poems published in the column would later be collected in book form as *La Divina Incrensa* (*The Divine Mess*), a clear parody of Dante. That book was a best-seller when it first came out in 1915, becoming a successful stage play in 1918, and receiving a much-expanded ninth edition in 1925.<sup>27</sup> To this day, it remains Bananére’s best-known work and is, perhaps, the most popular book not in Portuguese to have ever been written by a Brazilian for Brazilians.

Bananére continued to publish *Cartas d’Abax’o Pignes* until 1917, writing in a language that can perhaps be best described as modern macaronic, a *sui generis* Latinate idiom conflating the inflections, vocabulary, and mannerisms of the Italo-Portuguese dialect presumably heard in the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 38. Translations mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>25</sup> Juó Bananére and Benedito Antunes, *Juó Bananére: as cartas d’Abax’o Pignes* (São Paulo: Fundação Editora UNESP, 1998), 18.

<sup>26</sup> See Ana Maria de Moraes Belluzzo, *Voltolino e as raízes do modernismo* (São Paulo: Editora Marco Zero, 1992). Internationally, Lemmo Lemmi’s work has received considerably more attention than Marcondes’.

<sup>27</sup> The play was performed thirty-six times that year. See Cristina Fonseca, *Juó Bananére: o abuso em blague* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2001), 136 and 199.

neighborhood where he attended college, with a simple, informal, yet witty register.<sup>28</sup> This idiom Bananére deployed to denounce military republicanism, on the one hand, and the fastidiously refined verse of the Parnassian school of Olavo Bilac, the aesthetic favored by nationalist tastemakers, on the other. There is no indication that Machado ever actually studied the Italian vernacular: on the side of the writer as well as the reader, Bananére’s language seems to be a case of *xenoglossia*— “the intelligible use, through speech, aural comprehension, reading, or writing, of a natural language one has not learned formally and/or does not know.”<sup>29</sup> Besides *O Pirralho*, Bananére wrote regularly for other irreverent outlets such as *O Queixoso* (*The Complainer*) and *A Vespa*, and he also authored a number of plays. Around the time of his premature death due to anemia in 1933, at the age of 41, Machado had held an executive role in the Democratic Party, which had been founded in 1925. In short, Bananére was a committed Democrat; his aesthetic sensibility was modernist, but it belonged with a comic-popular lineage very different from the hyper-erudite, highbrow strain of Mario de Andrade and the interventions that shook up the art scene of São Paulo in 1922.

I would like to briefly show two characteristic excerpts of his writing. The first, a selection of which appears below, is titled “A metapizicose—As immigrazione das animas—O Hermese da Funzega—O Capitó—Carrapato Traveis” (“Metempsychosis—The Immigration of Souls—Hermes da Fonseca—The Captain—A Tick Once Again”). Here, Bananére employs, as he often did, an improbable and quirky referential framework—the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, called metempsychosis in ancient Greek philosophy—both to reiterate his Italian origins and attack then-president General Hermes da Fonseca (a nephew of Deodoro da Fonseca).<sup>30</sup>

Una volta io mi stava leggendo uno libro, quano mi fiz spantu pur causa di una storia che stava scritta lá, ingoppa u libro.

S’immagine che istu libro stava dicendo che as animas da gente stó facendo a immigrazione.

Os intalianos també stó facendo a immigrazione, però ellos immigrano per o Brasile, p’ra Xina, p’ra Zan Baolo, p’ro Xapó e tanti altri paese.

As animas, inveiz no! istas immigrano mesimo inzima os animalo e també ingoppa os uominis.

Primiere Zam Giovanni ci fabbrica as animas tanto pichinignas come as formicia e juga tutta as animigna sopra do Globulo tirrestro.

Qui inda a terra ellas amuntano sopra das puligas, dos carrapati, das formicia ecc. [...]

In ista maniere ellas vô amuntano nos gatto, nos caxorro, nos burro, nos cavallo, nos alifanto, nos lió e finalmenti si pigliano ingoppa os uominis. [...]

Intó, io piguei di marginá a storia dos mios acunhecidos.

S’immaginei chi o Hermese da Funzega já fui carrapato, já fui caxorro, burro, cavallo, sordado e oggi è presidento da Republiga.

<sup>28</sup> The first to characterize Bananére’s work with that tag was the erudite literary critic Otto Maria Carpeaux, himself an Austrian immigrant. See Otto Maria Carpeaux, “A voz da democracia paulista,” in *La Divina Incredula: reprodução integral da primeira edição de 1915*, ed. Juó Bananére, Otto Maria Carpeaux, and Antônio de Alcântara Machado (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> See Jennifer Scappetone’s entry on “Xenoglossia” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Curiously enough, Bananére was far from being the only modernist interested in metempsychosis. One will remember the concept in the “Proteus” and “Calypso” chapters of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

Ma istas genti té cada una?! Intó o Hermese já fui burro?<sup>31</sup>

(I was reading a book once, and I was shocked because of a story written in it. Imagine that! This book was saying that our souls are immigrating. The Italians are also immigrating, but they go to Brazil, China, São Paulo, Japan, and many other countries. Souls, however, immigrate into animals and also into men. First Saint John fabricates the souls tiny as ants and spreads the tiny souls over the terrestrial globe. Here on earth they creep into fleas, ticks and ants, etc. [...] This way they get into cats, dogs, donkeys, horses, elephants, lions and men. [...] Then I started to imagine the story of some acquaintances of mine. I imagined that Hermes da Fonseca had once been a tick, then a dog, an ass, a horse, a soldier, and now he is president of the Republic. These crazy folks come up with such stories! So... Hermes used to be an ass?)

Even when translated into prosaic English, the piece's comic effect comes through. Observe his jest, his panache, his calculated disregard for coherence, seen in his unexacting treatment of minutiae: the unprincipled list—Brazil, China, *São Paulo* (!)—the arbitrariness of his storytelling (Saint John!), the feigned surprise at the end. For the readership of *O Pirralho*, primarily composed of the growing class of educated, liberal professionals in São Paulo, the comic effect would have certainly been even more impactful: the aural charm of Bananére's prose is untranslatable, but even today, any reader of Portuguese willing to get through the immediately off-putting graphic aspect of his language—here *xenoglossia* is also *xenographia*—will recognize the idiom that fills the airwaves of large Brazilian cities while retaining features that cannot be dissociated from Italian. From an aesthetic as well as a political point of view, this was a considerable achievement: a xenoglossic language, supposedly barely communicative—less accessible than either the Brazilian or the Italian vernaculars—was deployed to communicate to a large audience of non-speakers eager to deal with its intractability and recalcitrance.<sup>32</sup>

The hypothesis that readers would have perceived Bananére as hilarious *because* he embodied a stereotype by parodying immigrant speech is not wholly baseless, as Italo-Brazilian relations in São Paulo at that time had their share of conflict.<sup>33</sup> However, such a hypothesis strikes me as simplistic. I would argue, on the contrary, that Bananére's contemporary readers were primarily attracted to his writing because of his openly democratic message, which was conveyed as humor, an aspect amplified and strengthened by the idiosyncratic yet recognizable immigrant voice that delivered it.<sup>34</sup> I would like to emphasize this point by turning to another of

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<sup>31</sup> Juó Bananére, "A metapizicose—As imigrazione das animas—O Hermese da Funzega—O Capitó—Carrapato Traveis," Cartas d'Abax'ó Piques, *O Pirralho*, December 23, 1911, repr. in Bananére and Antunes, *Juó Bananére*, 109-10.

<sup>32</sup> A thorough linguistic analysis can be found in Carlos Eduardo Schmidt Capela, *Juó Bananére: irrisor, irrisório* (São Paulo: Nankin Editorial, 2009). Capela understands Bananére's work in terms of its relationship to Portuguese, and takes that language as the basis for dialectal deviation. It would be worthwhile to invert the perspective to study Bananére's linguistic inventions in their relationship to the Italian vernacular.

<sup>33</sup> Mario Carelli, *Carcamanos e comendadores*, 22-29.

<sup>34</sup> This argument, however, would benefit from more research to identify the demographic distribution of Bananére's readers.



his short texts, “A invençó do Brasile” (“The Invention of Brazil”), which is, besides the satirical poems of *La Divina Increnca*, perhaps his best-known piece:

Chi inventò o Brasile fui o Pietro Caporale.  
O Pietro Caporale fui un portoghese nassido no Portogallo in quello tempo che  
Portogallo era inda a Molarchia, uguale come o Brasile quano era també  
Molarchia. [...]  
O indiscobramento du Brasile fui un fatto molto vulgarissimo.  
Tenia di sê, nê che o Pietro Caporale non quera.  
Si signori! Illo tenia di í p’ra Afriga pur causa di buscá a scravatura i intó si perdê  
nu meio  
do oceanimo. [...]  
Tambê, che si pensa? O oceanimo intó non tê fin?  
Aóra, certamente illo tenia di batê na terra, ma siccome illo stava perdido i non  
sabia andove stava, intó illo vignó p’ru Brasile e incontró os servagio, o Bó Ritiro,  
as intalianigna bunitigna, i també o migno avó che ero veterinario da forza  
publiga. [...]  
O Pietro Caporale gustô molto da festa, e io també.<sup>35</sup>

(The one who invented Brazil was Pedro [Álvares] Cabral.  
Pedro Cabral was a Portuguese born in Portugal in the time when Portugal was  
still a monarchy, just like when Brazil was also a monarchy. [...]  
The discovery of Brazil was a most vulgar event.  
It had to be, even if Pedro Cabral had intended it otherwise.  
Yes sir! He had to go to Africa to fetch slaves but then got lost on his way there.  
[...]  
Well, what was he thinking? That the ocean never ends?  
Naturally, he was bound to find land anyway, but since he was lost and had no  
idea where he was, he ended up in Brazil, where he found the savages, the Bom  
Retiro neighborhood, the cute Italian girls, as well as my grandpa, who was a  
veterinary in the public service. [...]  
Pedro Cabral loved the party, and so did I.)

Here we have a “nonsensical,” almost entirely counterfactual retelling of the genesis of Brazil. Nonetheless, as is often the case with satire, nonsense is not the goal: Bananére’s exaggerated distortions are there to communicate not so much the deeper, let alone the factual, truth of Brazilian nationhood, but rather the more urgent truths of actual, emerging local life-worlds. By the 1910s, one could claim heterogeneous genealogies for the Brazilian nation, for the society emerging in a city like São Paulo belonged, arguably, to a new, singular class: the postcolonial cosmopolis. Bananére had both cause and poetic license to rewrite Brazilian history, downplaying its heroic myth of discovery—as in a game of probabilism, a lost Cabral stumbled upon the Brazilian shores simply because the ocean is finite—and claiming its new Italian origin. Brazil was not so much discovered as invented, Bananére goes on to say, and the piece ends most tellingly as a love note to the country that received him with open arms.

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<sup>35</sup> Juó Bananére, “A invençó do Brasile,” *Cartas d’Abax’o Pigues, O Pirralho*, May 3, 1913, repr. in Bananére and Antunes, *Juó Bananére*, 236-37.

If the centralizing demands inherent in the process of Italian unification had as a correlate centrifugal forces that prompted mass emigration, in pre-modernist São Paulo, the figure of the immigrant became a central, strategic pivot in the imagination of thinkers and activists (such as Oswald de Andrade—that other faux-Italian, Annibale Scipione, Bananére’s precursor) who were dreaming of a modern, democratic nation free of the “ontological nationalism” of the first republicans, to use Haroldo de Campos’ cruelly precise phrase.<sup>36</sup> Arguably, in some important ways the Italian immigrants had become an essential part of Brazilian urban culture and its economy, as the rising workforce that had replaced the immense crowds of freed slaves who were now largely disenfranchised members of a weak and unresponsive infant polity. Juó Bananére’s satire, an exercise in criticism against what he perceived as a self-serving, obtuse government by and for an elite of military careerists and oligarchs, was not projected to be in any way a foreign observer’s cool, detached, dismissive report: it was the invested socio-cultural commentary of one who was not from Brazil, and precisely because of that, one who could offer a viable image of the many things “Brazilianness” could hope to be.

In this specific sense, Bananére’s work seems to have been well-aligned with Oswald’s thinking at the time, which coalesced in the latter’s expressive *Manifesto Antropófago*, the document that launched the movement known as *Antropofagia*, arguably the most culturally consequential descriptive framework of Brazilian self-identity available. For the *antropofagistas*, the figure of the human cannibal stood for, among other things, an ideal of socio-cultural renewal via tactical appropriation of difference, a radical strategy for founding and sustaining a hybrid national identity by means of various acts of “masticating” foreign discourse. As one of the most quoted lines in the *Manifesto* goes, “só me interessa o que não é meu” (“I’m only interested in what is not my own”).<sup>37</sup> The word “hybrid” fell short of describing national identity: to be from Brazil always already meant to be its alterity. For *Antropofagia*, the mouth has nothing to declare unless it has devoured the Other. As the ever-good-humored Oswald purportedly said in a private conversation with literary critic Antonio Candido, “o problema não é ontológico, é odontológico” (“the problem is not ontological, it is odontological”).<sup>38</sup> As the logic ran, as a post-colonial, peripheral nation, Brazil had no Brazilianness *a priori*; to be a Brazilian national meant being extranational. Accordingly, to direct criticism of Brazil to Brazilians, Machado chose to become Bananére, an Italian immigrant who had urgent things to say about Brazil in a language which was the national language of neither Italy nor Brazil, but the epiphenomenon of tensions in force-fields of which the Italian and Brazilian nations were but components.<sup>39</sup> From an “italocentric”

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<sup>36</sup> See Haroldo de Campos’s famous 1980 paper, “Da Razão Antropofágica: Diálogo e Diferença na Cultura Brasileira,” repr. in *Metalinguagem e Outras Metas* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2006), 233-35 especially.

<sup>37</sup> Translation mine. A complete English translation of the manifesto can be found in Pedro Neves Marques, ed., *The Forest and the School / Where to Sit at the Table?* (Cologne: Akademie der Künste der Welt, 2014), 99-107.

<sup>38</sup> See Antonio Candido. “Antonio Candido fala em Paraty”. *O Estado de São Paulo*. July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. <http://cultura.estadao.com.br/blogs/flip/antonio-candido-fala-em-paraty-parte-2>. Accessed 12/11/2019.

<sup>39</sup> See Anthony Julian Tamburri, “Afterword: Rethinking Labels: The ‘Italian’ Writer as Exemplar, or Distinct Categories as Quixotic,” in *New Italian Migrations to the United States, Vol. 2: Art and Culture since 1945*, ed. Laura E. Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 194-202. Tamburri proposes a promising semiotic framework for studying Italian literature as a global phenomenon, whereby Italy ought to be understood as a sort of “Ur-sign,” /Italy/, sitting in a dynamic referential network. This allows him to sketch a model that, instead of insisting on tribalistic notions of “Italian-ness,” proposes that we understand literary production in terms of vectoral relationships to that Ur-sign. What “the so-called ‘migrants’ within Italy who write in Italian, Italian-language writers who live outside of Italy, and, let us add, Italian American writers” (198) have in common is that they all “dialogue with the sign we know as /Italy/” (ibid.). Instead of the somewhat essentialist category of “Italian writers,” there is the potential for a concept of Italian literature made up of the centripetal and centrifugal

perspective, one could say that this potent new language was the residuum of centrifugal processes from the point of view of Brazilian literary history, of centripetal processes implicating the actors of what would become locally known as Modernism. Juó Bananére did not write in the Italian vernacular, did not write to illustrate the Italian—or Brazilian, for that matter—genius, and did not take the vernacular as the basis for his macaronic language. Yet he had a wide, admiring readership in a society significantly composed of Italian immigrants and Italian Brazilians. Italy, for him, was a suitable raw material, and one that was indispensable for him to become himself. Whatever he was, he stood at a threshold: an Italian writer of non-Italian literature, and a non-Italian writer of Italian literature. These descriptions of identity seem unwieldy from the conventional point of view of national or vernacular literary history. However, the difficulty of fitting Bananére into such methodological frameworks should not obscure what, in my view, it in fact underscores: a dynamic, multi-vectored yet singular process that, if charted carefully, promises a conceptually richer account of how literary history actually unfolds.

To conclude, I would like to suggest to our literary historians that mirroring Durante's attitude of *appropriation by inversion* in the Brazilian case, assuming the cannibal's perspective for Italian studies, may not be an outlandish methodological move after all. On this point, I refer to another excerpt of Durante's article, a wonderfully pluralistic characterization of Italy:

Many centuries before geographers even knew enough about the existence of a small island called Lampedusa to include it on their maps, Italy was the destination of substantial and repeated migrations: waves of Hellenic, Celtic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Slavic, Arabic, and Balkanic peoples. The Italians are one of the most elaborate and cunningly crafted cocktails that world history has come up with to date: they are Latins and Longobards, Goths and Greeks, Arabs and Normans, Illyrians and Turks, and much, much more. It would therefore be possible (and quite interesting) to compile a multicultural anthology of Italian literature, perhaps following in the footsteps of the one conceived and edited by Werner Sollors and Marc Shell for the United States.<sup>40</sup>

The projected achievement of Durante's envisioned anthology would not consist in *arguing for*, but rather in *displaying*, a framework for literary history where Italy, like the Brazil of cannibal modernism, has no Italian *a priori*. By deflecting the sense-making gravitational pull of the nation and, consequently, of national history, it would encourage historians and critics alike to employ their ingenuity and creativity to design models of literary history less anxious to show how certain processes satisfy and confirm national and vernacular identities, and more engaged in describing the many ways in which literary works are implicated in the dynamic, multidirectional interactions between and across force-fields both preceding and exceeding national and vernacular identities.

Because it cannot be reduced to origins and destinations, arrivals and departures, the phenomenon of migration, as an experience of lived motion, challenges traditional frameworks in a way that is particularly suggestive and intellectually stimulating for literary historians. What

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exchanges (*arrivative* and *derivative*, in Tamburri's terminology), and reciprocal contaminations, between the Ur-sign and the more specialized semiotic subsystems.

<sup>40</sup> Durante, "Italy and the Literature of Immigration." The book referenced is Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, *The Multilingual Anthology of American literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

would a history of Italian literature that considered Juó Bananére among its writers look like? What framework(s) would it require? One that pulled him in not just because he was supposed to be Italian, but because he stood at the virtual thresholds of what Italy can be: not an end, a chimera, a cipher, or a destiny, but rather a springboard, a possibility; a foil for other Italies, other histories still to come.