

Maria: the traveler, the warrior and the empress

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My contribution to the exhibition dialogues with a series that I started in 2020, generically and ironically entitled *School Research (Pesquisa escolar)*. Its starting point was the teaching material found among books and papers that I inherited from my grandmother. She was a teacher in working-class schools for several decades, and she organized *dossiers* with magazine and newspaper clippings, rich resource material that she used in her classes. In those *dossiers*, we could find stories of the heroes of the Independence of Brazil and of the Proclamation of the Republic, and other information of a civic character.

One of the rare women identified in my grandmother's teaching material is **Maria Quitéria de Jesus – or Maria de Jesus**, as she is referred to in the abbreviated form found in Maria Graham's *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil, and residency there, during the years 1821, 1822, 1823*. Maria Quitéria was a volunteer combatant in Bahia during the Brazilian War of Independence (1822-1823). Her portrait only exists because it was commissioned by Maria Graham from the English artist Augustus Earle (1793 – 1838), who made the drawing, which was engraved in turn by Edward Finden (1791–1857), as shown in the lower margin of the work reproduced in Graham's *Journal*. But if I inherited reproductions of Maria Quitéria's portrait from my grandmother, I also became aware of her character (which was never part of my imagination) a few years ago through a dialogue with Nathan Gomes, a student in art history at the university where I teach. Upon receiving Janice Glowski's invitation for this exhibition, I immediately remembered Nathan's research on Quitéria's representation, developed as a conclusion of his studies. Our email exchanges over the last few months were decisive for the new developments of the School Research series, which I present at the exhibition. I mention this fact to expose the network of transmissions and influences that make up the work process, and also because I think that interest in Maria Quitéria and Maria Graham has been growing in recent years in Brazil.

In his monograph on Maria Quitéria, Nathan mentioned another Quitéria: “There is a *pombagira* in Umbanda called Maria Quitéria, whose manifestations would happen, in some cases, through mediums dressed in military uniforms” (Gomes, 2018, p. 24). His statement refers to an oral legend surrounding Maria, which has not been proven, but which has produced an interesting imagery. *Pombagira* is a female entity associated with streets and crossroads. As Luiz Antonio Simas wrote: “The religious crossroads where the *pombagiras* were born – and where the various cultures of African origin, Amerindian rites, European traditions and strands of popular Catholicism found themselves – spurred a wide range of spiritual practices in Brazil based on the possibility of interaction with ancestors, enchanted ones and spirits through bodies in trance”. Also, he continues: “*Pombagira* is the result of

the encounter between the vital force of the power of the streets that cross each other (...) and the performative trajectory of enchanted women (“encantadas”) or spirits of women who inhabited the street in different ways (the court of *pombagiras* is vast), they had great loves and expressed their vital energy through an expansive and free sensuality” (Simas, 2020, p. 21-22).

For all these reasons, it did not seem absurd to me to associate the two representations of Maria Quitéria – the woman soldier admired so much by Graham, and the spiritual entity – and bring them closer to Maria Graham. In my readings, I was not very interested in Graham's marriages, even if we know very well that the institution of marriage necessarily shaped the lives of women in the 19th century. **And I would say that Graham herself could be a terrible snob (as Jennifer Hayward has recognized), and severely critical of what she described as a certain “vulgarity” in the sensuality of the women of Brazil. But** I found it very interesting to know about a possible romantic involvement between Graham and Maria Leopoldina, the unfortunate Brazilian empress, who died at age 29, after being notoriously humiliated by the emperor. In a lecture commemorating the 200th anniversary of Maria Graham's visit to Brazil, Jennifer Hayward mentions that Graham and Leopoldina are featured on a website dedicated to lesbian relationships in history, and highlights the uniqueness of the two women, their intellectual affinities and the explicit affection that linked them, which can be observed in their correspondence.

In this way, the main axis of the work process that informs my art for this exhibition is driven by the figures of women, all called “Maria,” that Christian name, so beautiful and common to so many, but which erases so many other names, from so many cultures and traditions.

Needless to say, the process of working with images and materials is itself a form of thinking. The interests mentioned above guided the production in an intuitive way. The image that emerges is always a surprise, something I have little control over. The first work in the series was a portrait of Graham animated by the multiplicity and the ambiguity that to me seemed inherent in her “gaze” on Brazil. What interested me was building her face with her own landscape drawings. One of the most fascinating, I believe, is the one she did before arriving in Brazil, but which integrates the publication about her experience in the country, thus somehow integrating that landscape into the imaginary territory of Brazil in the 19th century. It is the drawing of the Dragon Tree of the Canary Islands, which, as Graham observes: “is the slowest of growth among vegetables, it seems also to be slowest in decay”. (Graham, 1824, p.85)

Her observations on the Dragon tree have great affinities with the tradition of German romanticism, but they are also incredibly contemporary. Graham looks at the tree as a living monument, as a living person, maybe. In Graham's description and drawing (engraved by Edward Finden), we find an incredible indissolubility between nature and culture. She writes: “Humboldt has celebrated this tree in

its vigour; it is now a noble ruin. In July, 1819, one half of its enormous crown fell: the wound is plastered up, the date of the misfortune marked on it, and as much care is taken of the venerable vegetable as will ensure it for at least another century. I sat down to make a sketch of it” (Graham, 1824: 85). Unfortunately, Graham's prediction did not come true, as the tree was toppled by a typhoon in 1867. Somehow Graham's remarks in front of the Dragon tree touch on several topics I've been dedicating myself to: transmission, monument, time, ruin.

But back to Quitéria.. It is worth mentioning that in the etching made by Earle, and reproduced in Graham's book, her character isn't effectively integrated with the surrounding space. The palm tree and the battle are vague backgrounds that feature a scene that seems to take place apart from the female character who poses in the foreground, with the decoration (“Cruzeiro do Sul”) given by the emperor D. Pedro I on her chest. Aside from the uniform and weapon, only the elongated shadow growing to the right of the picture belongs to her. We could cut out the figure like a paper doll (which I think is a nice idea for a future work). I believe that this lack of integration with the surroundings, which we notice in the engraving, is, in fact, significant for the symbolic place that Quitéria occupies in our history. At the end of the War of Independence, she is sent back to her home in Bahia by the emperor himself. As Nathan Gomes highlighted, “it is an aspect present in several of Quitéria's biographies: she, yes, fought in the war, acting politically, but finally returned, married and had a daughter, fulfilling the destiny that a system reserved for her” (Gomes, 2018, p. 14-15). My interest in bringing together Quitéria, heroine of war, and Quitéria, *pombagira* (lady of the crossroads), is an attempt to literally open her paths. Also, it seems to me that the roads bravely traveled by Maria Graham are in line with this powerful spiritual entity that lives in the Brazilian imagination.