



Elciene Azevedo, **Orfeu de Carapinha: A trajetória de Luiz Gama na imperial cidade de São Paulo**. Campinas, Ed. da Unicamp, 1999.

by *Cristina Mehterns*

In *Orfeu de carapinha*, Elciene Azevedo has produced a rich account of the renowned abolitionist Luiz Gonzaga Pinto Gama (Bahia 1830 – São Paulo 1882). Based on extensive research, including exemplary use of local newspapers, court records, and federal archives, Azevedo has portrayed masterfully the elusive and seldom understood world of race and class in imperial São Paulo.

Before the 1930s, biographical work about Gama resulted from memoirs or criticism on his works' literary and aesthetic value. Immersed in the historical spirit of São Paulo of the 1930s and its ongoing quest for political identity, Sud Mennuci wrote Gama's most comprehensive biography in 1938, the 50th anniversary of abolition. Aiming at registering "the heritage of a people who triumphed over destiny" (22-23), Menucci praised Gama in superlative tones, presenting him as an abolitionist legend. And it was as a legend that historians continued to depict Gama, building on his heroic pilgrim's journey from slave to professional (doutor).

In order to escape this limited conventional treatment, Azevedo's work focuses on the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in Gama's different life activities. Within these ambiguities, Azevedo interprets and brings to the surface the cultural and socioeconomic boundaries of a city whose "streets swarmed with slaves, free men, [and] scholars..." (33). Azevedo effectively argues that a comprehensive account of Gama's role, ideas, and aspirations embraces race and its core, pervading and illuminating other complexities of the imperial nineteenth-century city of São Paulo.

The book focuses on Gama's life in four parts: 1) public employee and poet of *Primeiras trovas burlescas de Getulino* (Getulino's First Burlesque Balads, 1859); 2) journalist and Paulistano Abolitionist Club speaker and member, who sided with the city's aristocracy in two distinct, though interdependent, social spaces (1869-1871); 3) political activist and the Paulista Republican Party (PRP) member, who shared the same space as the whites (1870s mainly); 4) lawyer and the professional with license (*rábula*) to advocate, who gave new meanings to the imperial, pro-bondage juridical code (1859-1882).

Part one reveals a calculatedly "humble" Gama struggling in intensely personal poems to keep the flame of his African origin burning. Azevedo got the book's title from one of these poems, in which, through a Greek metaphor, Gama embodied a black Orpheus with woolly hair (*carapinha*, 58) striving his way into the legitimized white world. Based on reports emerging from the original lands of Afro-Brazilians, Gama built a positive black identity as a constitutive element of Brazilian society. For Gama, the African background (*africanidade*) was part and parcel of the Brazilian identity (*brasilidade*).

Part two portrays a stubborn Gama who, after getting fired from his middle-class public job as a police secretariat clerk, makes the best of his sociopolitical connections, whether as part of the editorial staff of *O Radical Paulistano* or a member of the Masonry. By turning his personal struggle into that of the political party and philanthropic association to which he belonged, Gama gathered public support and made the abolitionist cause coincide with the struggle against monarchical power. Gama's efforts illuminate contemporary cultural tensions, conflicts, and values in the local group's patronage, traditions, and identities.

Part three depicts a combative, polemical, intransigent PRP member (perrepista) tightly adhering the party's republican and democratic principles (the "abolition now" crusade). Gama struggled, in the abolitionist radical PRP wing, against the coffee planters' conservative PRP side on different issues related to immigration, municipal elections, and the press. By exploring the PRP's conflicts and internal disagreements, Azevedo illuminates the way politics was then made and Gama's republican profile and place within the party. Gama's particular political practices permitted him to weave within delicate boundaries, diverging but never dissenting from the party. Gama masterfully used the PRP for partisan advantage, and was used by it, as the party benefited from Gama's own public recognition and prestige.

Part four presents Gama an impertinent, insistent, provocative *rábula* who took race and class to court and the newspapers. By legitimizing his legal practice through his undeniable competence, Gama mastered jurisprudence and had the ability to transform a simple dispatch into an effective polemic, cleverly employing legal principles to support abolitionist propaganda with strong public impact. This meticulous legal connoisseur molded the available legislation to his particular and very selective interpretation also by using the press as a "fundamental and indispensable forensic extension" (228). Gama's court performance in support of the struggle for freedom serves to reflect the imperial city in its ambiguities and contradictions. Azevedo traces Gama's visions of liberty through his interpretations of the intricate laws that supported slavery in Imperial Brazil.

Though Azevedo effectively expands our conventional understanding of Gama, her treatment does raise a question in the mind of the reader. Was Gama a model for black people or simply an advocate for them embedded in a white world? Could other ex-slaves follow him as a professional model or only as a protector? Most importantly, Azevedo restores Gama's works and life experience to the full context of an abolitionist struggle – something that gave meaning to his poems, articles, and legal battles, but went far beyond them. In this way, Azevedo illuminates relationships among different social sectors, their alliances and fissures.

In sum, Azevedo's work opens many previously unexplored themes and it is a most welcome and important work, not only for graduate students and faculty specializing in Brazilian history, but also for Latin Americanists and historian dedicated to comparative and Atlantic studies.

Cristina Mehrtens
University of Miami

*Published in *Luso-Brazilian Review* – Summer 2000 – vol. 37, N° 1