

Tropical Scheherazade: narratives and dialogues of the Brazilian environmental history¹

Scheherazade tropical: narrativas e diálogos da história ambiental no Brasil

Regina Horta DUARTE

Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil
Contact: reginahortaduarte@gmail.com

Abstract: Evoking narrative elements of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, this essay discusses the appearing and development of environmental history since 1970, in consonance with serious natural imbalances that have threatened the contemporary society. Environmental history enables historians to dialogue with environmental groups, scientists and researchers from various fields of social, cultural and political history. Large and promising research opportunities provide transdisciplinary and transnational approaches. One of the stimulating approaches relates to heritage, opening up perspectives for the study of the urban environmental heritage - as in the case of the ficus in Belo Horizonte city - and also the natural heritage represented by protected areas, such as the Trindad Island, in Brazil.

Keywords: historical narrative; environmental history; natural heritage

Resumo: Por meio da evocação de elementos narrativos d'*As mil e uma noites*, este ensaio discute o surgimento e o desenvolvimento da história ambiental desde 1970, em consonância com graves desequilíbrios naturais que ameaçam a sociedade contemporânea. A história ambiental possibilita diálogos sociais com grupos ambientalistas, cientistas de diversas áreas e pesquisadores da história social, cultural e política. As amplas e promissoras possibilidades de investigação propiciam abordagens transdisciplinares e transnacionais. Um dos enfoques estimulantes diz respeito ao patrimônio. Abrem-se perspectivas para o estudo do patrimônio natural urbano – como no caso dos fícus de Belo Horizonte – e do patrimônio representado por áreas protegidas, a exemplo da ilha da Trindade.

Palavras-chave: narrativa histórica; história ambiental; patrimônio natural.

Scheherazade was a maiden with a thousand qualities. A lady of extraordinary beauty, it is said that she collected storybooks about races and ancient rulers, scrutinized the proceedings and legends of ancient kings and she knew the work of poets by heart. As well as having intimacy with written culture, she knew about the oral narratives of storytellers. She studied philosophy and science, the arts and techniques. She was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, educated and well brought up. The owner of a prodigious memory, her courage was not less admirable, because, as we can see, she faced and mastered the fury of the dreaded Sultan Shahryar. (BURTON, 1885, p. 14-5; 1888, p. 264-72; GALLAND, 2001, p. 38).

With so many talents, Scheherazade is the protagonist of the intriguing and engaging story that is the framework of *One Thousand and One Nights*. This remarkable work of Oriental literature - that has fascinated Western minds for over three centuries - is presented as a novel where tales unfold from one to another. Jorge Luis Borges pointed out the vertiginous sense of this web of intrigue. (BORGES, 2011, p. 155-6).

Todorov also highlighted how Scheherazade continually unfolds one more episode immediately after another, and so on, in an inventive splicing procedure (*enchassement*) that moves the “marvelous story machine” that *One Thousand and One Nights* represents. Each one of the stories brings excesses and extravasations that lead on to the next narrative. Paradoxically, each plot also shows up its incompleteness; and, therefore, demands another, in an attempt as stubborn as it is impossible to achieve a narrative wholeness. Our heroine is the narrator, and every night elaborates a new storyline. She is also a woman-narrative: her story is presented by the anonymous narrator at the beginning of the book, but also thereafter, when she, Scheherazade, tells the story of her own life to the Sultan. (TODOROV, 1980, p. 66-79).

The origin and trajectory of the manuscripts of *One Thousand and One Nights* are controversial. Some researchers identify therein evidence of ancient writings from India and Persia. The posterior and abundant inclusion of other stories composed *Kitāb alf laylah wa-laylah*, the Arabic title of the work. The existence of manuscripts of the work was referred to in the tenth century by Arab scholars, such as Al-Masu'di (known as the Arab Herodotus) and Ibn al-Nadin. Besides the fusion of written traditions, the work was nurtured from the narratives of anonymous storytellers who roamed the roads and villages of the Arab world, enunciating and modifying the stories from generation to generation. Different manuscripts circulated simultaneously, with the constant re-workings and variegated selections of narratives. In short, *One Thousand and One Nights* is an anonymous, collective work, perpetuated in different versions and mutations for over a thousand years since the beginning of its creation. Its compilers have expanded the sequences, added details, enriched repertoires, and eliminated others. (ROSENTHAL, 1990, p. 117; GROTZFELD, 2004, p. 218-28; BORGES, 2011, p. 123-39; 1998, p. 438-57; TAHAN, 2001, p. 15-22; JAROUCHE, 2005; GIORDANO, 2009; TODOROV, 1980, p. 78).

Its discovery by the Western culture dates from the early eighteenth century. Antoine Galland, French orientalist, completed a selection of stories and translated them between 1707 and 1717, in 12 volumes of “sweet taste” and “restrictions inspired by decorum” abolishing scenes deemed immoral and vulgar words. (BORGES, 1998, p. 439). Several translations followed, and each one brought different versions of the book. In 1885, Richard Burton organized quite an original edition, in 17 volumes, in which the erotic content was emphasized. Faced with so many versions, we could talk about many books. *One Thousand and One Nights* is a work that is

impossible to be read in its entirety, consisting of myriads upon myriads of stories, temporalities, authors, compilers, listeners, readers, and translators. As Borges shows, the word 'thousand' in the title is almost synonymous with infinite, and the idea of infinity is inherent with *One Thousand and One Nights*, for "saying one thousand nights is to say infinite nights, many nights, countless nights. Saying one thousand and one nights is to add one to infinite". (BORGES, 2011, p. 127).

If the nights were infinite, the first one was especially decisive for Scheherazade. The Vizier's daughter watched the genocide of young women in the kingdom. Deceived by his wife, the sultan was taken by distrust and hatred towards women. To avoid more betrayal, every night he lay with a virgin, thus ensuring to be the first and last to possess her, and had her executed at dawn. Lamentations filled the homes. Shahryar's foolishness was immeasurable, as he eliminated women of childbearing age; the near future held only aging and then the extinction of the inhabitants of his kingdom. After a while, there were no more maidens and the Vizier could not meet the requirements of the sultan.

Surrounded by death and the specter of the end of the society in which he lived, Scheherazade hatched a strategy and implored her father to offer her as the next bride, in an apparently suicidal attitude. Reluctantly, the Vizier ended up yielding to the tenacious insistence of the beautiful virgin, desolate, he handed her over to the sultan for sacrifice. Shortly after entering the royal chambers, the young woman burst into tears, begging Shahryar to allow the presence of her younger sister, because they were inseparable and it was an evening of farewells. He allowed Dinazard to enter and, after deflowering Scheherazade, they went to sleep. An hour before dawn, the youngest sister woke up her elder sister to hear one of her wonderful stories. This was the longed-for opportunity by Scheherazade to captivate the sultan and take control of the situation. After begging permission to answer the request of her sister - as a last wish -, she engaged all of her narrative skills. She calculated that the exciting story would still be unfinished at dawn. It could be saved for another one, two, one hundred, one thousand, one thousand and one nights. The extermination of virgins had ended, the future became possible.

Todorov notes how several characters from *One Thousand and One Nights* are also narrators. A mendicant Muslim monk escapes the wrath of a merciless genius by telling him a story. A slave can save his life by fascinating his master with an incredible narrative. For the same reason, four accused murderers are spared by the king. However, the lack of narrative is death, as in the story of the king who received a book as a gift. He moistened fingers to flip through the book, but was surprised to find all the pages blank. In a few moments, he began to agonize because the paper was soaked in poison. The blank book led to his death. Therefore, if "all the characters constantly tell stories, it is because this act received a supreme consecration: narrating equates to living". (TODOROV, 1980, p. 73, freely translated).

In a universe of randomness, words have the power to create order, save lives, direct thinking, convince and transform people. (ROSENTHAL, 1990, p. 119). Scheherazade, with her readings, studies, and observations, aware of the power of narrative, instrumentalized knowledge to change, in the gift of her one thousand and one nights, the coming to be of her society. She managed to keep herself alive only to the extent in which she was able to tell stories. However, it was not just her own skin: her narratives saved the whole community, because, if she failed and was killed, the young woman would have just been another victim among the Sultan's misogyny.

We historians are like Scheherazade, because defying death comes not only as a common intention - even if sometimes unconscious -, but also as a task that is always unfinished. The writing of the story deals with lost societies, absent women and men; it envisions cherished possibilities from other times, which are now forgotten. As it duels with death, historical practice knows no rest. Experiencing incompleteness, not as a fault, but as an affirmation of life's complexity, the historian is always willing to resume his/her writing, since the knowledge produced is neither continuous nor necessarily cumulative. Every morning, we resume our work in the relentless attempt to establish dialogs with our contemporaries, not only about the past that we have studied, but also, mainly, about our present and future expectations. As stated by Michel de Certeau, discourses about the past bear the mark of the dead; however, their evocation takes place in an exchange among the living. (CERTEAU, 1982, p. 56; DUARTE, 1991, p. 20-2).

In the study of the history of past societies, we have found that men often accounted the time of their collective life in a predominant horizon of impending chaos and destruction. Jacques Le Goff analyzes numerous groups of eschatologies that pointed to the destruction not only of a particular society, but also of all mankind and even the universe. From ancient peoples and even up to the contemporary world, different religions and cultural aspects predicted the outbreak of the Apocalypse and the inauguration of a new Golden Age, with the restoration of paradise. From the nineteenth century, eschatology was secularized, with the examples of the revolutionary theories of Marxism and anarchism. After World War II, fear arising from the invention and use of atomic weapons was incited by the tensions of the Cold War and fueled the agonizing wait for a catastrophic end. (LE GOFF, 1985, p. 449-51).

Over the last few decades, an uneasy ecological eschatology has come about amid the outbreak of serious problems, which together place life on Earth at effective risk: acid rain; examining the almost total disappearance of tropical forests of immeasurable value (such as the Atlantic Forest); the expansion of desertification; depletion of the ozone layer; the tragic and rampant extinction of millions of species of fauna and flora; pollution of the seas; global warming and intensification of climatic events, such as storms, hurricanes and droughts; contamination of our bodies and of many beings in the food chain in an indelible manner by substances such as mercury,

pesticides, or radioactive elements. In short, events related to contemporary environmental issues portend the possibility of an apocalypse without redemption, in which the definite imbalance in living conditions on the planet would bury any hope once and for all.

In this context, the field of environmental history has been established as a new possibility for research since the 1970s. José Augusto Pádua alerts to the fact that the 'voice on the streets', or social clamor due to the ecological issue is not enough to explain the rise of environmental history. The author shows us - with great propriety - how this discipline integrates the broad and diffuse construction of ecological sensitivity in the modern world present in three decisive epistemological changes: the realization that human action impacts on nature; the revolution of the chronological milestones in the understanding of the universe and the world; and, the design of the biophysical environment in its changing dynamics. (PÁDUA, 2010, p. 81-4). Even considering these broader processes, there is no denying that the unprecedented boom of environmental history in recent decades is attune to facing the threats to collective life that now include, overwhelmingly, the destruction of the natural environment from which human civilization arose thousands of years ago. Here I will highlight the fronts of dialog established by environmental history with three important groups of social players: the environmental movement, researchers in the areas of biophysical knowledge and, finally, historians from other subareas of our own discipline.

Fueled by the contemporary ecological crisis and by environmentalist struggles, environmental history can produce knowledge capable of overcoming the moral judgments that often predominate in social discourses on the protection and conservation of nature. After all, historical analysis points to the emergence, in time, of supposedly eternal values, revealing its creation in arenas for addressing various social players. History also investigates the origins of the diverse practices of men in relation to the natural environment, demonstrating its dispersion and heterogeneity, offering analyses beyond good and evil. (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 15-9). From this perspective, it is not merely to recover the trajectory of a true *homo praedator*, in the continuous and inexorable succession of resource depletion and the devastation of nature. Nor does it satisfy the argument of the hypothetical evolution of an ecological consciousness that would restore the lost harmony between human beings and the natural environment, such as a return to paradise. These perspectives would reduce the historical argument to a "prophecy given beforehand". (CRONON, 1990, p. 1129).

Environmental history flatly answers seductive ideas - such as 'mother nature', 'Mother Earth' - and the increasingly widespread identifications between 'natural' and 'pure', between 'green' and 'good'. There is a lot of the metaphysics in these conceptions, and they often feed on resentment, guilt, and asceticism. Far from being a stable or holistic entity, a kind of divinity capable of remaining indefinitely balanced, as long as men do not disturb it, nature is dynamic and

transforms independently from human life. Nevertheless, the biophysical world only becomes knowable through the linguistic, historical, and cultural mediations of our field of perception.² As William Cronon affirms, the natural environment is real and does not depend on our representations to exist, but the way we describe and understand it can be found amalgamated to our values and assumptions. When we say 'nature', we say as much about ourselves as about the things that we name with this word, we also talk about the society in which we live in and the many conflicts that it is comprised of, whether they are related to class, gender, race and/or ethnicity. (CRONON, 1990, p. 1122, 1128-9; 1996, p. 25). In short, an awareness of impressive complexity and paradoxes involved in the role and place of nature in human life can become important tools for critical environmentalism, mindful of its historic character and its cultural assumptions.

The multiple, complex and interconnected character of environmental issues has stimulated historians to exceed the boundaries of their area of expertise more than ever. In this pursuit, they have followed the tradition started by the founders of the Annales School, as they did not respect departmental 'walls' and definitely took a chance in extraneous gardens of research. (BLOCH; FEBVRE, 1929, p. 1-2). Searching beyond the areas of knowledge there are many paths trodden by historical research - geography, anthropology, demography, architecture, tourism, law and archeology -, environmental historians have broken prejudices and opened fruitful dialogs with traditionally distant areas of historical research: ecology, microbiology, parasitology, oceanography, genetics, botany, zoology, climatology, geology, agronomy, forestry sciences, chemistry and engineering. Environmental history has broadened the scope of our possible dialogs with scientific communities in different areas of knowledge, paving the way for our action together with transdisciplinary groups in the study and routing of solutions as complex as environmental issues often require.

The circulation in other fields of knowledge should necessarily enable a dynamic dialog with history itself. Transdisciplinarity cannot make us become foreigners in our own discipline. This is one of the challenges of environmental history. There are approaches available in the heart of historical knowledge that present themselves as indispensable. The relationship between environmental history and reflections on heritage and the environment (Martinez, 2011) are exciting and promising, the history of cities, genders, social classes, ethnic groups, cultural practices, political struggles, the history of science, the construction of nationalities, the transformation of landscapes. Once nature is claimed as a cultural construction, environmental history cannot lose the chance to explore the wealth of analyses now firmly established by social and political history. (MOSLEY, 2006; CAREY, 2009). Only then can environmental history can be open to dialog, not only with society in general and with researchers from other areas, but also with historians themselves.

In Brazil, the environmental focus still appears to be timid, limited to some researchers spread across different universities, but they have demonstrated the richness of this research area, with increasingly significant results, whose number is already expressive enough for it to be impossible to list them quickly without incurring serious omissions. They have found ground for fertile and under-explored analysis. As observed by José Augusto Drummond, the history of Brazil is a privileged object for environmental focus, and this is for several reasons. The extent of the territory harbors a rich diversity of landscapes and ecological processes, with an incredible variety of biomes. A predominantly tropical geographical situation, coupled with the abundance of water, resulting in a fabulous biodiversity. The presence of indigenous peoples, descendants of Africans, Asians and Europeans has determined a large ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, establishing a long history of contacts and conflicts between traditions, perceptions and experiences in the natural environment. The concentration of most of the population in urban areas from the second half of the twentieth century stimulates studies on urban environmental history, beckoning a wealth of analysis beyond the natural/artificial dichotomy. The historical relations between our society and the rivers; the extensive coastline and its mangroves, tropical forests (such as the Atlantic Forest and the Amazon), river basins and their management through the centuries; the use of various types of energy; the agricultural practices and their environmental impacts; the introduction and domestication of animals and plant species, mining activities, the history of literary, artistic, and intellectual representations about nature, relationships between environmental discourses and practices and national construction are still poorly explored. Last but not least, the relationship between environmental issues and social confrontation open up a fascinating terrain for study. (DRUMMOND, 2002, p. 13-32).

Faced with so many issues, national boundaries are insufficient for analysis from the perspective of environmental history, necessarily attentive to the transnational movement of people, animals, plants, pathogens, pollutant and radioactive substances. In turn, climatic, atmospheric or tectonic phenomena are solemnly extraneous to national borders. Environmental history leads us inexorably to an overall glance, creating dialogs not only disciplinary, but also prominently International. Scheherazade may be tropical, but her stories cannot be constrained by the design of national cartography.

Environmental history thus presents itself as a powerful narrative, as it instrumentalizes the historian to actively participate in one of the most critical debates of our time, the environmental issue. Every day, this topic is presented as an issue of health or disease, hope or despair, abundance or scarcity, life or death. Despite nature being a historical-cultural construction, there is no denying our biological condition of beings that live, grow, reproduce (or not) and die. Our physical survival depends on certain environmental conditions, such as clean air, clean water, suitable temperature,

availability of food, satisfactory balance of epidemiological conditions. This material, corporal existence, cannot be analyzed as a negative limit. After all, the pains, joys, and pleasures of existence are necessarily linked to our body and the materiality of our lives. With this said, I would like to evoke Nietzsche, who argued the positive power of affirming world visions of the body and the material aspects of life. (NIETZSCHE, 1989, p. 90-1).

If, until now, I have spoken of similarities between historians and Scheherazade, the time has come to talk about the differences. History is not fiction, and our analyses are based on careful investigations of data and documents through which we direct our questions to the past, with attention to evidence and according to theoretical and methodological foundations. Our narratives must be plausible, coherent and substantiated in the scope of debates in the historian community. As Thompson says, the 'court of appeal' in historical logic operates without interruption, with evaluation of the relevance and of the character of truthfulness or otherwise of the analysis carried out by historians who mutually point out their flaws. (THOMPSON, 1981, p. 50). Yet, in addition to producing a thorough knowledge, validated by their peers, the historian can hope to impart it to a larger circle of society. There is not, however, any possible dissemination of knowledge without the seduction of the listener or reader. If the historian wants to persuade you about the importance of what he/she says or writes whether to mobilize people through the results he/she produces, he/she must captivate them to effectively conquer the role as an indispensable interlocutor in discussions on collective impasses.

Environmental history opens up a wide range of possibilities for dialog with society. It would be a waste to lose this opportunity. A discourse of power established in time, history is able to establish different regimes of truth in an unceasing dynamic of confrontations that weave the social fabric. To act decisively in the unavoidable challenges posed by the complexity of the role and place of nature in human life, we need to establish our narrative strategies. Faced with multiple threats that lurk on contemporaneity, our fight for history (FEBVRE, 1985, p. 7) is linked to the desire for survival, transformation and the renewal of our society. Like the astute Scheherazade, we tell stories to keep us upright. Nevertheless, as she well knew, this does not deal with telling just any story. One needs to know how to choose those that, far from playing the past as a crippling burden on our shoulders, effectively serve to affirm and renew life. (NIETZSCHE, 1949, p. 97).

I could not speak a lot about narratives without having to tell at least one story, which is what I will do now.³

My story begins with a very nice character, Carlos Drummond de Andrade. In December 1963, the poet lived in Rio de Janeiro and received letters from readers from Belo Horizonte, with photos of the main avenue of the state capital, Afonso Pena, showing the cutting of 350 fig trees that existed there until then, an act ordered by the City Hall. (ANDRADE, 1963, p. 4). The photos saddened him deeply. In the 1920s, Carlos loved to go up the avenue until its highest point, where he used to stare at that “mass of leaves and lights that formed the perspective of the wide central streets”. (ANDRADE, 1930, p. 10). He was not alone: Pedro Nava also left the School of Medicine before nightfall and climbed up to the same point to see the city at his feet and admire the prodigious rows of figs, “whose crowns of green velvet took on precious shades when the waning sun metalized and simmered flickers of enamel on each leaf”. (NAVA, 1979, p. 255).

These trees had been planted in the early twentieth century, shortly after the inauguration of the city in 1897 and formed the landscape proposal for a modern and civilized capital, built according to standards of hygiene and rational planning. Afonso Pena was the backbone of the urban center, projected to a large extent up to the beginning of the Sierra Curral. At the time, *Ficus benjamina* was a fairly common option for urban tree planting. Originally from Asia and easily acclimatized in tropical areas, fig trees grow rapidly until they reach heights of 20 meters or more. With strong roots, thick trunks, and generous crowns, they lent themselves very well to aesthetic pruning of several formats. Over the decades, Afonso Pena became a tunnel of greenery, and the fig trees occupied a significant area of its 50 meters of width. The streetcar passed in the middle of the rows, and the picture postcards of Belo Horizonte always brought the image of the green corridor framed by the Sierra Curral. As a result, Afonso Pena Avenue left the dreams of engineers of a model city; nonetheless, it came to life over time in which it was written about, photographed, visited, modified in its architecture, invented in several trajectories by the men and women who walked on it. It became a shared reference, a location of memory, a practiced space. (CERTEAU, 2000, p. 179-216). Its story was constructed amalgamated with its leafy fig trees, whose shadows refreshed the footsteps of its walkers who, overflowing by such dense green lyricism, advanced on the floor spiked with roots and speckled by their little fruits that crackled - ploc... ploc... ploc... - when stepped on. (MARQUES, 2006). The afforestation of Belo Horizonte, sung in prose and verse by locals and foreigners, has become a common creating element of meaning among the townspeople, invested with the meaning of a collective heritage. (CHACHAM, 1996, p. 213-7). The epithet garden city, or orchard city, has undergone numerous reinventions over the decades, becoming one of the most recurrent ideas when evoking Belo Horizonte.

For all these reasons, Carlos reacted with dismay upon viewing photos of the mutilated trunks. He asked readers not to send others. He confessed his feeling of impotence faced with the

manufacture of ruins by City Hall, “dendroclastic, dendrophobic, or dendricidal authority”. (ANDRADE, 1963, p. 4).

The cutting of trees began without any notice, in the dead of night on November 19, 1963. In the morning, whoever passed by was surprised. In the following weeks, every morning brought an increasingly desolate landscape, with the progressive denudation of the avenue and the shocking scene of the severed trunks. The justification from City Hall was that the trees were infested by a plague, and that cutting them down was the only way out.

Indeed, the fig trees were infested by *Gynaikothrips ficorum*, insects of South Asian origin and pantropical occurrence, scattered throughout various areas of the world where the fig trees were acclimated. Despite staying most of the time together with the leaves, these little insects fly very rapidly when stimulated by wind or excessive heat. In urban areas, they cause great inconvenience to passersby, as they can bite, go in the eyes or stick to the hair, for example. In 1960, there was a major environmental lack of control of these insects in the southern United States - which interestingly were nicknamed *Cuban lauren thrips* - and elsewhere in Latin America. They arrived in Brazil around 1961, infesting trees in Rio de Janeiro, Niteroi, Campinas, Santos and several cities in the Northeast. In Belo Horizonte, the insects found the fig trees quite weakened: after the deactivation of the streetcar line, the plots of fig trees began to serve as parking for cars, whose wheels crushed their roots. The trunks were damaged by the nails of the posters from various advertisements. The chronic water shortage in the city made it impossible to regulate irrigation of the urban vegetation.

The incident occurred in a more general context of major changes and upheavals in the history of the capital of the state of Minas Gerais. Since the 1940s, Belo Horizonte lived through a process of industrialization and developmental momentum with strong State intervention, it became the center of articulation of mining elites who differed nationally and housed a growing middle class. Uniting politicians, businessmen, and technocrats, Juscelino Kubitschek launched the 'binomial energy and transport' as the motto of his administration of the state government, between 1951 and 1956. The flagships of industrial growth were the iron and steel works, and the cement and cellulose industries.

Apart from an economic and financial elite, some sectors of the middle class ascended in their patterns of consumption. Many families began to live the obsession of department stores, electrical appliances, processed foods, toiletries, *prêt-à-porter* clothes and, especially, his majesty, the private car. In the same year as the cutting of the fig trees, 42,000 new vehicles were licensed in the state capital. (DIÁRIO DA TARDE, Dec. 12, 1963, p. 1).

All this growth took place with deepening social injustice. In the interior of the state of Minas Gerais, the expansion of eucalyptus plantations, pastures and farm mechanization drove rural

residents to marginal areas in the city of Belo Horizonte, whose population leaped between 1940 and 1963, from 200 thousand to about 900 thousand inhabitants. In the shantytowns, the population density was dizzying. In 1955, a survey from the City Hall pointed to almost 37,000 shantytown dwellers in 9 thousand households. In 1965, there were approximately 120 thousand shantytown dwellers (nearly 15% of the total population). In the shantytowns, there was no drinking water, sewage system, electricity, or paving. The infant mortality rate skyrocketed in the 1960s.⁴ The sudden increase in population increased water consumption, depleting the nearest water sources and causing the population of Belo Horizonte to live the whole decade of the 1960s with a chronic shortage of drinking water. In those years, the weakness of urbanization in the state capital set up a situation far removed from the title of orchard town.

With the advancement of the plagues on the figs, the newspaper *O Diário* indicated the island of Cuba as the origin of the insects, from where they would have spread due to ineffective communist agricultural methods. Associated with the Cuban revolution, the *Gynaikothrips ficorum* were feared as a deadly threat that could invade homes. (O DIÁRIO, Feb 21, 1963, p. 3). Sectors from the right took advantage of the fact to attack the mayor Jorge Carone, elected by the PTB (Brazilian Workers Party), allied to João Goulart: they raised suspicions of poisoning the trees by City Hall with the aim of weakening them and making the cutting down inevitable. They criticized the lack of implementation of insecticides and sneaky destruction of the common good vegetation. Interestingly, the left-wing newspaper *O Binômio* legitimized the Carone decision, because the avenue needed to be enlarged to better contain vehicular traffic, in the new conditions required by urban development. (RABELO, 1964, p. 3). Opinions were divide; however, to many it seemed to be a reasonable price to be paid in the name of progress.

A few months later, portions of the mining elite played an important role in the civil-military takeover. The *Marcha da Família com Deus* (Family With God March) on March 13, 1964, was held on the Afonso Pena Avenue completely naked and unrecognizable, just as the military parade would be after the overthrow of Joao Goulart. These events inaugurated hard times for Brazilian society. Meanwhile, Belo Horizonte gradually became less green. They continued felling urban forestry for the opening of roads, churches rented their gardens for shops or parking lots, mining activities impoverished the Sierra Curral. To this city, Carlos Drummond refused to return, because, stripped of its green tunnels, it was transformed into a “sad horizon”. (ANDRADE, 1977).

Fifty years later, in March 2013, Belo Horizonte again became the scene of confrontation surrounding its fig trees. This time, the trees in question are to be found in an area near downtown, where they form a respectable mass of vegetation that lessens temperatures and serve as a major corridor for urban bird species. Very old, they were felled by their historical, symbolic, and environmental senses. Finally, they are recognized as cultural heritage of the city.

They were attacked by the ficus whitefly, *Singhiella simplex*, of Asian origin, which has a special fondness for the species *Ficus benjamina*. Although scientifically identified in 1931, this insect was little known in America until 2007, when it fiercely destroyed fig trees in Florida in the United States. Since then it has spread, hitting trees in Rio de Janeiro in 2009, and São Paulo in 2010. In Belo Horizonte, it was identified in 2012, causing major damages to the foliage of several fig trees in some parts of the city. (LEGASPI et al., 2011; AVERY et al., 2011; SECRETARIA, 2013).

The City Hall of the state capital declared a state of emergency and qualified the pest as a natural disaster, which would allow urgent action. Considering that there are approximately 12 thousand fig trees in the urban area and estimating the fly's ability to fly 7 kilometers a week, the City Hall pointed out the risk of contamination of large green areas. Civil defense authorities warned of the danger of falling branches and even entire trees, which justified radical pruning and pointed to the possibility of cutting some individuals. (DECRETO, 2013).

Many of the city's citizens promptly mobilized themselves. The threat to fig trees was a drop in the ocean during a situation of wider unease. The set of urban interventions in preparation for the soccer World Cup determined the cutting of thousands of trees in Belo Horizonte, with the opening of space for large works of urban mobility that actually favored private cars instead of public transport. Many denounce a real extermination of trees due to business and commercial interests, with no real commitment to the quality of life of citizens. The decree of a state of emergency in relation to the fig tree was signed only five days after the decision on various works of urban mobility, rising suspicion that the trees would be cut down to make way for more works. All this has generated a vigorous mobilization that resulted in the creation of the group *Fica Ficus* (Stay Fig Tree), which flag is the defense of urban trees - with all this that means - under the motto, 'mess with a tree, mess with me'. The group organized the occupation of the threatened area, with protests, cultural activities and strict control of pruning carried out by the City Hall. Above all, they attended public hearings in which they firmly demanded the technical justifications of any action taken in controlling the pest. Under pressure, the City Hall conducted experiments with neem oil, widely used in organic agriculture, which also comes from an Asian tree. The results of its application have been expected with great anxiety.

Throughout its manifestations, the *Fica Ficus* group was organized on social networks. The echoes of their activities arrived as far as Istanbul, where protesters revolting against the authoritarian government occupied Taksim Square since May 27, 2013, after the announcement that the trees would be cut down to make way for a shopping center. Connected, *Fica Ficus* and Istanbul protesters welcomed and supported each other. From Turkey, pictures with *Fica Ficus* posters were sent, and vice versa, indicating a global situation of inhabitants of large cities that are fighting for

afforestation and green areas with what confers a reportedly political sense to the defense of these spaces. Faced with the predominance of large enterprise projects in urban reforms in various parts of the world, fighting for the environment in urban areas gained the greater sense of fighting for the rights of the city.⁵

Faced with the movement in Istanbul, Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Prize for Literature, recalled the threat in 1957, the cutting down of an old chestnut tree that stood in front of his house. To prevent the removal of the tree, his father and uncles took turns on watch, day and night. The chestnut tree was saved and became a memory shared by the whole family. For Pamuk, just like the chestnut tree, Taksim square is merged into the memory of millions of people and the history of Istanbul and demonstrates the relationship between nature and city, politics and environment, past and present. (PAMUK, 2013, p. 6). The same can be said of the fig tree in Belo Horizonte.

Although the City Hall flatly denies that it would cut all the fig trees, the feeling of most Belo Horizonte citizens is that they only remained thanks to *Fica Ficus*. New points of conflict arise every day, as in the case of capybaras (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*), who lived peacefully at the Pampulha Lagoon waterfront touching all those who saw them around there with their offspring until the authorities noted that their increase had damaged the lawns and gardens that they intended to display in postcards and to World Cup tourists, and to those that stayed near to the Mineirão Stadium. There are also environmental and health implications involved. Capybaras reproduce very efficiently; each female gives birth to an average of 16 offspring per year. There are no predators in the urban environment and they are ideal hosts for star-ticks (*Amblyomma cajennense*), transmitters of spotted fever, extremely dangerous to man. Nevertheless, against the impending slaughter of hundreds of capybaras, the population has already begun to mobilize itself, and slogans of 'stay capybaras' are already being heard. (SILVA, 2013).

The events surrounding the fig trees in Belo Horizonte, with consequences on the dynamics of everyday life and urban landscapes - as well as the latest issue with the capybaras - demonstrate how the relationship between cities and the natural environment are complex and involve multiple factors. The natural elements present there are like threads in a web of social and political disputes and confrontations and they also show how representations of the city dwellers surrounding what is 'natural' integrate cultural perspectives and political struggles as well as many myths and idealizations.

Since the controversy about the Pampulha capybaras began to unfold, that reproduce uncontrollably and devour the gardens, I remembered about the island of Trindade, currently considered as a true historical and natural Brazilian heritage.⁶ Trindade, a small territory of 10 square kilometers, situated 1,140 kilometers from Vitória, Espírito Santo, found itself almost without vegetation when zoologist Rudolf Barth arrived there in 1957, a member of a scientific

expedition, a participator of the International Geophysical Year. The island had no inhabitants, never harbored indigenous populations, but was full of pigs, goats, sheep, cats and rats. The scientist found traces that the place had another botanical reality in the past and he was horrified by the environmental imbalance reigning there. The goats ate the sparse undergrowth, which now prevailed. Cats destroyed the nests of seabirds that bred on the island, and pigs sniffed out thousands of small eggs that green turtles hatched there in clear moonlit nights. An experienced zoologist, Barth predicted that the island would become a desert in the middle of the ocean.

Trindade was never permanently inhabited, despite its discovery by the Portuguese early in the sixteenth century. In 1700, the famous British astronomer Edmund Halley went there traveling for research on the magnetism of the earth. He landed, took possession on behalf of the Queen and left the flag of his country. Thinking about the future navigators who could succeed him, he released goats and pigs. He probably also left, unintentionally, rats and parasites of mammals.

Over the centuries, the island was the territory of a dispute between the English and Brazil, with a worsening of tensions in the late nineteenth century. It was also the stage for castaways; it attracted the greed of pirates and nurtured legends that there was a great treasure buried there. It received naturalists from several countries, as well as ending convicts during the government of Artur Bernardes. Scene of so many troubled stories, the island of Trindade was still surrounded in mystery when Barth arrived on the *Almirante Saldanha*, the Brazilian Navy vessel.

Nevertheless, this narrative will be interrupted at this point. After all, telling one more story would lead us to another, and one more, which exceeds the acceptable limits of an article. The reader may - who knows, tomorrow - follow the history of the island of Trindade. (DUARTE; HORTA, 2012).

Just as Scheherazade craved every dawn, I also hope to survive and be able to resume the thread of this and other narratives. With intense effort, always unfinished in research and writing, besides the firm conviction of knowledge as a factor of social transformation, I hope to captivate my illustrious and coveted reader with *one thousand and one* stories.

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Notes

¹ I dedicate this essay to our beloved Manuel Salgado and Alcir Lenharo, who bet on history as a tool to transform mankind and the world. Their writings remain among us; and, therefore, remain as alive as Scheherazade, who also told stories to confront death. The text was originally submitted as a conference at the XXVII Simpósio da ANPUH (2013), in Natal, which theme was "Historical knowledge and social dialog". Revision: Armando Olivetti.

² About the ontological independence of the natural world in relation to man, see PÁDUA, José Augusto. As bases teóricas da história ambiental. *Estudos Avançados*, v. 24, no. 68, p. 81-101, 2010, p. 86-88. About the real and knowable, see also THOMPSON, Edward P. *A Miséria da Teoria ou um planetário de erros*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1981, p. 49.

³ The next ten paragraphs are based on the article DUARTE, Regina Horta. À sombra dos fícus: cidade e natureza em Belo Horizonte. *Ambiente & Sociedade*, v. X, no. 2, p. 25-44, 2007, p. 25-44.

⁴ PLAMBEL, *O desenvolvimento econômico e social da região metropolitana de Belo Horizonte*. Belo Horizonte: Plambel, 1974, p. 3-7; GOVERNO DE MINAS GERAIS. *Levantamento da população favelada de Belo Horizonte*. Belo Horizonte: Secretaria do Trabalho, 1966, p. 9-16; WATANABE, Hiroshi; BRAGA, Welber. *Morro do Querosene: alguns aspectos da formação de uma favela*. 1960. Monografia (Bacharelado) – Faculdade de Filosofia da Universidade de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 1960, p. 13-35; MARQUES, Robson. Região de Belo Horizonte e a urbanização. In: MEDEIROS, Regina (ed.) *Permanências e mudanças em Belo Horizonte*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2001, p. 113-39. According to IBGE (Statistics Institute) data: 74.2 deaths/1,000 children born alive in 1960, to 92.3 in 1965, 107.3 in 1969 and 124.8 in 1973. In comparison: in 2010 in Ethiopia, child mortality was 72.46. At the time, the United States, Japan and France had an index of about 25; the UK 22. www.ibge.org.br.

⁵ For information, images and manifestos from *Fica Ficus*, its relations with the rebels from Taksim Square, events in the avenue of Ficus and other documents, see <http://ficaficus.concatena.org>. See also the everyday actions of the Fica Ficus group on Facebook.

⁶ The next four paragraphs are based on DUARTE, Regina Horta; HORTA, Guydo Campos Machado Marques. Barth and the island of Trindade, 1957-1959. *História, Ciências, Saúde - Manguinhos*, v. 19, No. 3, p. 951-68, 2012, p. 951-68.

Regina Horta Duarte is a professor in the Department of History at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. Postdoctoral student at the State University of Campinas under the supervision of Professor Maria Stella Bresciani. Supported by CNPq (National Research Council).

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