Images of Madness
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Imagens da Loucura
UMA PERSPECTIVA INTERDISCIPLINAR

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The Strange Nation of Rafael Mendes

Moacyr Scliar is not the only protagonist but many, a multitude of ancestors and descendants who bequeath and inherit a name, a religion, a sense of destiny, and a peculiar existential perplexity as they echo one another’s experiences throughout history. Roberto González Echevarría has pointed out that genealogy is a “fundamental element” of modern Latin American literature (158), and Scliar’s foregrounding of genealogy in The Strange Nation is certainly comparable to García Márquez’s hyperbolic multiplication of Buendías in One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) or the ancestor worship that characterizes much of Borges’s poetry and short fiction. Indeed, family history is an explicit concern of Scliar’s text, since the bulk of the novel purports to be a collection of “genealogical stories” inspired by painstaking research carried out by a genealogist on behalf of the penultimate Rafael Mendes, or Dr. Rafael, the mysteriously absent father, whom the text’s final Rafael has fortuitously been given the opportunity to encounter, if only through his journals. This textual journey of family history and self-discovery incorporates numerous other themes, including the history of the Jewish “Nation” since Jonah, Brazilian social and political history, religious persecution, the values of contemporary Brazilian society, the tension between socialist utopianism and exploitative capitalism, the search for personal identity, and the nature of madness. But in Scliar’s text, these important concerns, as well as the discourses evoked by their narration (the historical, the religious, the psychological, etc.) really function as outgrowths or mutated iterations of the text’s primary obsession with the rhetoric of genealogy, its metaphorical iconography of roots and branches, and its hereditary logic.

Beyond the perplexity posited as a trait shared or, more accurately, inherited not only by the Mendeses but also by their companions from The Nation (Marranos and other Jews of the Diaspora), the text makes numerous allusions to obsessions, psychological traumas, nightmarish hallucinations, mental instabilities, and outright bouts of madness. Consistent with the novel’s genealogical focus, where everything is literally interrelated, these tendencies or symptoms — generally viewed by society and clinicians alike as undesirable and worthy of psychotherapy — are cast as hereditary conditions, unavoidable consequences of having a particular lineage. In addition to making such implicit and explicit connections between genealogy and the hereditary nature of madness and related psychological symptoms, Scliar’s novel casts the exposure to genealogical knowledge — in effect, learning about one’s ancestors and family history — as a form of narrative therapy akin to psychoanalysis. In this study I offer a reading of The Strange Nation that explores the novel’s internal logic of hereditary madness and analyzes its particular approach to family history and genealogical discourse. Given the conflation of the discourses of genealogy and psychoanalysis that the novel reinforces on several levels, my study also explores the psychological ramifications of an approach to genealogy that seems to be at
odds with the stabilizing influence attributed to conventional forms of family history, including, most notably, the Hebrew genealogical tradition.

Although the influence of genetic factors on the development of mental illness continues to be debated by researchers, the notion that family history predisposes one to specific forms of madness is prevalent, thanks to fictionalized treatments of insanity in everything from television detective series to bestselling novels. Although Freud himself was unsure of the exact role of heredity in the etiology of the neuroses and psychoses he studied and documented, he seemed convinced that what he termed "neurotic heredity" was "indispensable in serious cases" (154). Expert opinions aside, the novel begins with its own meditation on the consequences of heredity as Scliar's protagonist, the last Rafael Mendes, is confronted with images and events that remind him of his own childhood "traumas," including the upsetting news that his daughter, Suzana, has been out all night. In contrast to his wife Helena's hysterical reaction, Rafael, who seems well versed in pop psychology, calmly considers whether Suzana's having witnessed a sex act between her parents at a very young age may be to blame for her recent spell of erratic and defiant behavior (25). This pseudo-Freudian interpretation is quickly supplanted in Rafael's mind, however, by a hypothesis rooted in the family's genealogy: "Could it be that Suzana inherited something of her grandfather's character, a predisposition to sudden instability? Could this be something genetic, inevitable?" (27).

Indeed, Rafael is quick to extend his theory of genealogical trauma even further into the past:

And on his father — what kind of trauma did Rafael inflict? It would be more logical to think that it was Rafael's father who had inflicted a trauma upon Rafael as a result of a trauma his grandfather had inflicted on his father, and so on and so forth from generation to generation; a distressing picture it is, but isn't this just like the history of humanity? (27)

Rafael's seemingly casual comparison between family history and human history here prefigures the alignment of various types of histories — religious and national, for example — to the patterns of the novel's treatment of genealogy. Rafael's concern that mental instability might run in his family intensifies later that morning when, upon reading a notebook sent to him by his father's genealogist, he recalls a client who remembered Dr. Rafael as kind but "eccentric." At this point, Rafael is inclined to fear the worst about his most immediate ancestor: "Yes, but what does she mean by seviria? That Dr. Rafael was crazy?" (40). The possibility of a type of hereditary predisposition to madness suggested in what is essentially the novel's frame tale will be echoed many times over as Rafael reads the stories of his ancestors contained in his father's notebooks.

The materials Rafael has received that same morning from the genealogist claiming to know his father include an invitation to visit and learn more as well as a leaflet promoting the genealogist's services. Despite comparing genealogical research to various occult "sciences" — chiromancy, graphology, astrology, phrenology, telepathy, etc. — the leaflet claims that "[g]enealogy is a positive science" capable of providing a sure, inter-generational foundation for self-understanding: "Who was your father? Who was your grandfather? Our ancestors determine our fate — the living will always be, and increasingly so, governed by the dead" (45). Intent on finding answers to his questions about his father, Rafael decides to seek out the genealogist, who calls himself Professor Samar-Kand. It is in this initial meeting with the aged family historian, who clearly functions as an embodied metaphor for genealogical discourse, that the dual nature of family history as madness and treatment is first made manifest. The genealogist is described in terms that conjure up an image of an old man suffering from some form
of dementia, what Deleuze and Guattari may have in mind when they use the term "genealogist-madman" (Anti-Oedipus 78). Professor Samar-Kand’s nonstop chatter alternates between lucid rationality and seemingly contradictory gibberish, and Rafael’s first impression of him is that he is sincere and “genuine, whether madman or con artist” (65). The connection between genealogy and psychotherapy, as well as the notion that genealogy is assigned a therapeutic role within the novel’s logic, is reinforced not only by Rafael’s dual motivation — he seeks out the genealogist to obtain information about a relative and to fill in certain lacunae in his own sense of identity — but also by Professor Samar-Kand’s affirmation that he is amply qualified to attend to questions of mental health: “I am a psychologist, a parapsychologist, and a psychiopsychologist” (62). Accordingly, the visit bears traces of a therapy session, including a moment in which Rafael breaks down into tears upon confiding to his newfound genealogist-therapist his desire to know more about the man who deserted him as a child (64). Quite literally, the course of therapy recommended by Professor Samar-Kand is to get to know his father and other, more distant ancestors through genealogical research, which, in Rafael’s case, has already been completed and made available in the form of two notebooks authored by his father, also an avid historian and genealogist. The first notebook, entitled “Genealogical Stories,” consists of accounts of various Mendes ancestors (most of whom are also named Rafael Mendes) going back to the Biblical prophet Jonah. The second is an autobiographical text containing material that the genealogist claims to be “valuable in general, and valuable in particular to a son” (65).

In addition to discovering that all of his ancestors were Jews or New Christians that maintained their religious traditions despite the constant vigilance of the Inquisition, Rafael’s readings of the notebooks reveal that many of them witnessed and even played influential roles in key events in Brazil’s history, including the discovery of the New World, the Dutch occupation of Pernambuco, the Tiradentes conspiracy, and the Farrapos War. A motif that surfaces in each of the disparate tales of the Mendes ancestors and descendants is the idea that certain traits are inherited and passed down through the generations. The most ubiquitous of these is a general sense of perplexity, which functions as an indicator that an individual is part of The Nation, and possibly a direct Mendes ancestor as well. In this regard, the text reveals Maimonides, the famous twelfth-century physician and philosopher, a Spanish-born Jew and author of The Guide for the Perplexed, to be one of the earliest Mendes forbearers. Generations later, a sixteenth-century Rafael Mendes, the first to arrive in Brazil, informs his wife that like all Mendeses, the couple is “condemned to perplexity” (134). Likewise, in his autobiographical narrative, Rafael’s father makes several, more self-conscious references to his own perplexity, and as Rafael completes his reading of the first notebook he is somewhat frustrated to realize that he “remains just as perplexed as before” (195).

While perplexity is the most obvious manifestation of the novel’s hereditary logic, the notebooks also suggest that madness or symptoms of mental instability also affect generations of the Mendes lineage — not to mention other members of The Nation with whom they come into contact — with some regularity. Like the perplexity motif, the legend of the Gold Tree is introduced early in the novel, and reappears throughout almost all of the generations of the Mendes line. The Gold Tree motif is significant for two reasons: (1) it functions as an obvious emblem of genealogy in general and of traditional or Biblical genealogy in particular, inasmuch as the text links it to the trees of the Garden of Eden which figure so prominently in the Hebrew story of the origins of mankind, and (2) as a collective, inherited obsession, it reinforces the hereditary nature of madness posited by the novel, motivating the constant uprootings and migrations that make the Mendeses a nomadic clan. The story of the earliest identifiable Mendes
ancestor, the prophet Jonah, introduces the first of dozens of references to the Mendes family’s obsessive search for the Gold Tree and also makes the connection between the myth and madness explicit. Convinced that Jehovah has forsaken him after his mission to Nineveh, Jonah deliberately mistakes a shade tree provided by divine intervention for a more lucrative payoff: “He began to rave like a madman. It’s the Gold Tree! I’ve found the Gold Tree!” (83; my emphasis).

Not all of the Mendeses will pursue the Gold Tree to the point of losing their minds, but the text provides plenty of additional signs that madness comes with being a Mendes. In some cases, these are left to the reader to discern; in others, the topic of madness is openly addressed by the narrator or by the characters themselves. In the case of Maimonides, for example, the reader glimpses behavioral red flags, such as when the physician resorts to treating imaginary patients because the sultan Saladin refuses regular check-ups (101). Later, while fighting off depression during a cholera outbreak, Maimonides undertakes to write a treatise on the disease but ends up burning the manuscript in despair, after which the narrator observes that “his state of mind deteriorates quickly” (103). When the sultan comes down with signs of the disease, the physician struggles with the diagnosis even as he self-consciously questions his faculties: “Relax, Maimonides murmurs to himself, stop acting like a madman; think, damn it, think” (104). Just before the sultan dies, both he and Maimonides present another symptom often associated with the deranged — involuntary laughter in the face of misfortune: “The two of them laugh and laugh, delightedly, unrestrainedly; Maimonides laughs so hard that he rolls on the couch; and there he remains, panting, lying alongside Saladin” (106). Other Mendeses, or their companions from The Nation, will echo this tendency in subsequent generations. When Afonso Sanches and one of the first Rafael Mendeses are imprisoned by the Inquisition, Afonso’s accusation that Rafael awakens him with fits of laughter following their grueling torture sessions leads to speculation that one or both of them may be insane. Rafael cannot remember having laughed, but concedes, “Believe me, Afonso! I admit I laughed, but I have no idea why. Perhaps it’s weakness […] or madness” (123). They are probably both crazy, reasons Rafael; after all “It’s not the first case: Many have lost their minds in the dungeons of the Inquisition” (122). When another Rafael Mendes meets Christopher Columbus and is invited to join his expedition as a cartographer, the diagnosis, as delivered by his own father, is more to the point: “‘Madness,’ said the calligrapher Mendes. […] ‘You’re crazy, young man, completely crazy’” (114).

Other symptoms of mental illness that befall some of the Mendeses include hallucinations, fits of delirium, and nightmares. The Rafael Mendes who befriends and advises Tiradentes is overcome with hallucinatory delirium during the rebel’s final days as is Dr. Rafael, who dies during his voyage to Spain in pursuit of Débora, an unresolved love interest from his days in medical school. In his own autobiographical notebook, Débora appears to be emblematic of both desire and madness. At one point during medical school, Débora asks her enamored classmate, “Am I crazy, Rafael? Tell me, do you think I’m crazy?” Although Rafael hesitates, a study partner is quick to offer up an opinion: “She’s daffy, Rafael, nutty as a fruitcake” (209). Not only does Débora express interest in the emerging field of psychoanalysis, she is also drawn to “mental patients” and demonstrates obsessional tendencies with regard to her work as a medical researcher, behaviors which eventually lead a former professor to question her sanity: “In her case, we shouldn’t exclude a psychiatric problem” (211, 251). Given such a profile, then, Dr. Rafael’s uncontrolable urge to pursue Débora could be interpreted as a sort of fatal attraction — not just to Débora, but to the madness she represents. This might explain, given the novel’s hereditary logic, the fact that Rafael finds himself married to Helena, a woman characterized more than once as “hysterical” and given to fits of crying and anxiety despite consulting multiple psychologists (10). Also significant is the
fact that the apparent breakdown of Rafael's father is punctuated by references to his genealogical past: "Doctor Rafael was often delirious, when he would talk about things which made no sense to bystanders, such as, the eyes of the prophet, the Inquisition, caravels, the head of Tiradentes" (259). For Rafael the son, who has often experienced terrifying but inexplicable nightmares replete with mysterious images tinged with a historical aura, the familiar ring of this description of his father's delirium can only mean one thing; he has also likely inherited the Mendes' susceptibility to madness.

At first glance, the idea that genealogy might function as a form of therapy, that knowledge of family history can provide a basis for self-understanding, seems almost antithetical to The Strange Nation's clear portrayal of madness or mental instability as hereditary conditions to which the Mendeses and their companions from The Nation, by virtue of their overlapping lineages, are particularly prone. But such a judgment depends on traditional and overly simplistic definitions of and attitudes toward both genealogy and madness. For example, Stephen Sayers is clearly referring to an idealized, traditional form of genealogy whose truth value is assumed to be beyond question when he writes that "the psychological significance of genealogy in western societies lies in its capacity to inspire personal identities and to moderate the exigencies of everyday life, as well as in its provision of the grounds of orientation to both the social and the internal worlds" (163). Nevertheless, upon finishing his reading of both notebooks he has received from the genealogist, a somewhat frustrated Rafael initially feels that he has wasted his time and that his search for answers has yielded only uncertainty and negative results:

The genealogist had tried to convince him that it was something good [...] but what is the good of being the descendant of a prophet, of an illustrious physician? Actually, judging from his father's description of them, they were weirdos; perplexed creatures. They didn't pass on to him any values, whether material or moral; nor the secret — well, the legend, yes — of the Gold Tree; nor any ennobling instances that he in turn could pass on to his daughter [...] or to his grandchildren. (277)

Such reactions reflect not only a traditional understanding of genealogy but also a prejudicial view of madness, whose symptoms Rafael is loath to inherit. Within a few hours, however, Rafael will undergo an epiphanic transformation that leads him to embrace a more positive interpretation of his family history, a perspective that I will show to be more in line with a closer reading of the notebooks by answering two key questions: How does the text ultimately cast genealogy and genealogical discourse, and what impact does its treatment of family history have on the issue of hereditary madness? Answering these questions and deciding whether Rafael's exposure to his genealogy ultimately holds any value as a treatment strategy requires a closer analysis of the relationships the text proposes between genealogy and madness as well as a problematization of both concepts.

In the discussion that follows I distinguish between two broad but opposing conceptions of genealogy: conventional or traditional genealogy on the one hand and what might be called alternative or theoretical genealogies on the other. I use the term "theoretical" for the second class only because its iterations are products of overly theoretical texts, mostly from the late twentieth century. Both conventional and alternative genealogies have theoretical potential in the sense that both are highly ideological forms of discourse, as Goldie Morgenthaler points out: "Genealogies, then, despite the seeming lack of imaginative scope permitted by long, dry lists of family names, actually carry a pronounced ideological punch, and as such have metaphoric uses when adapted to fiction" (28). Under its heading for Genealogy the Oxford English Dictionary provides a succinct definition of the
from a single trunk supported by deep roots, synthesizes the
ideological assumptions of this modality. Conventional
genalogy bestows meaning on the lives of individuals by
signaling their place within a larger, interconnected narrative
context and sequence. According to Sayers, “The experience
of being rooted in unchanging historical grounds can provide
a bulwark against a fragmented and unpredictable social
world” (162).

In opposition to the task of reconstructing a faithful and
legitimate line of descent from a distant origin stand those
approaches to genealogy that could be classified as alternative
or theoretical. As we have seen, Hebrew culture is the
primary influence behind the traditional conceptions of
heredity and genealogy. But classical myths and ancient folk
traditions, which prefer sexual unions between humans,
animals, and supernatural beings or creatures as well as
magical metamorphoses to explain the dynamics of heredity,
have provided alternative explanations of human
development for centuries. Opposed to the monotheistic
Hebrew view that ties heredity to a linear conception of time
modeled on the successive reproduction of familial
generations, the “individualistic” classical tradition, with its
“circular and regenerative” timeframe, is “informed by a
pantheistic and animistic worldview, is polymorphous, fluid,
and multiple, recognizing no boundaries of time or of
substance, and no distinction between the living and the
inanimate” (Morgensteler 31). Such characteristics anticipate
and complement those arising from modern and postmodern
revisions of traditional genealogy. For all practical purposes,
we can point to Nietzsche’s critique of the notion of origins
in his preface to On the Genealogy of Morals as a sort of
“beginning” — a term subsequent theorists prefer to
“origins” — of a series of critiques of the premises, practices,
and ideologies of traditional genealogy. Nietzsche is harshly
critical of the idea that the origins of complex phenomena,
such as morality, provide authoritative interpretations or can
even be recovered when he equates origin-seeking to “gazing
around haphazardly in the blue after the English fashion” (21). Rather than rejecting the notion of origins altogether, Nietzsche promotes a painstaking investigative process that demystifies them and calls into question the absolute meaning or truth-value that their remoteness supposedly puts beyond scrutiny. Foucault echoes and further problematizes this Nietzschean perspective on genealogy: “Genealogy is gay, meticulous, and patently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (130). In Foucault’s conception, the notion of primordial origins is judged to be extremely suspect for the true genealogist:

If the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is “something altogether different” behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. (142)

“What is found at the historical beginning of things,” Foucault observes, “is not the inviolable identity of their origins; it is the dissention of other things. It is disparity” (142). Madan Sarup observes that for Foucault “[g]enealogies focus on local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge” (59).

The influence of Foucault and other post-structuralist thinkers has also contributed to a deconstruction of the principal metaphor of traditional genealogy. According to Gian Balsamo, who critiques the structural purity of what he calls “orthodox” or “epic” genealogy,

[6]one must engage genealogy as a construct, whose contrived architecture is best exemplified in the trope of the genealogical tree: a modular assemblage of legitimate filiations, a treelike structure, whose ramifications, apparently all-inclusive, hide the intricacy of exclusion, discrimination, and abusive graftings. (17)

Although Balsamo’s rationale and language clearly bear Foucauldian and Derridian traces, his critique of the tree metaphor is more in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s assault on what they call “arborescent” thought. In the opening chapter of A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Deleuze and Guattari lament the tyranny of the “tree logic” whose structure determines the development of practically all domains of human understanding: “We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicals. They have made us suffer too much” (15). In their view, arborescent systems undermine understanding because the metaphor they are based upon is hopelessly inadequate: “The tree and the root inspire a sad image of thought that is forever imitating the multiple on the basis of a centered or segmented higher unity” (A Thousand Plateaus 16). Deleuze and Guattari propose the rhizome as a more appropriate image of a world that “has become chaos […] radical-chaosmos rather than root-cosmos” (6). They point to examples from nature, such as swarming bees, burrowing rats, potatoes and crabgrass as manifestations of the random, anti-structural relatedness characteristic of rhizomes (6-7). In contrast to the tree model, the rhizome “is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation” (21). Deleuze and Guattari have already made explicit their aversion to tree logic when they state dryly that “[t]here is always something genealogical about a tree” (8). Clearly, among the key targets of their rant against tree logic are the ideological premises reflected in the structures and strategies of traditional genealogical rhetoric and practice, a point made even more explicit by their claim that “[t]he rhizome is an antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory, or antimemory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (21). It is important to note that these antigenealogical, rhizomatic features
constitute one of the many “plateaus” in Deleuze and Guattari's radical, anti-psychiatry campaign aimed at liberating forms of madness, most notably schizophrenia, from what they see as the tyranny of the Oedipus complex and Freudian treatment strategies (22). In terms of ideology, alternative genealogies or “antigenealogies” — to appropriate and broaden Deleuze and Guattari’s term — stand in contrast to the premises of traditional genealogy in that they question the supremacy of remote origins as guarantors of truth and legitimacy; they value local, discontinuous, and politically situated forms of historiography; they privilege multiple, arbitrary, and provisional linkages, horizontal flows, illegitimacy and alliances, unpredictability, memory loss, borderless movements (i.e., nomadism, emigration, diaspora) and irrationality; and they reject the rigid structure, symbolism, and logic of the genealogical tree in favor of organic metaphors that are more complex, protean, and subterranean.

As the examples and analysis that follow will show, despite activating a certain tension between the approaches to genealogy that we have just defined as conventional and alternative, The Strange Nation makes only superficial, almost parodic references to the former while manifesting a sustained and more imaginative proclivity for the latter. Even in the first section of the novel, which occurs in the present for Rafael, before the stories of his ancestors and the autobiography of his father dominate our attention, genealogy emerges as a key concern. Following his genealogical musings on the origins of Suzana’s rebelliousness cited above and prior to his contact with the elderly genealogist, Rafael's reflections introduce us to two other genealogy-obsessed individuals. The first of these is the man that operates the elevator at the finance company where Rafael is a vice president. The narrator’s synopsis of the man’s family history emphasizes traditional functions, such as ancestor glorification, the pairing of family and national history, and the idea of incremental, generational progress:

He’s a black man. Whenever he talks, he talks about his ancestors — one of his favorite topics, by the way — he remarks that many of them were slaves. He mentions Palmares, a hideout for runaway slaves in the seventeenth century, and recalls his grandmother eulogizing the Lei Áurea, the law that abolished slavery in Brazil. His grandfather worked in the fields from sunrise to sunset, but now he operates an elevator. (32)

A second, more significant genealogical portrait involves Rafael’s boss and longtime friend, Boris Goldbaum. Genealogy in the traditional, identity-affirming sense is extremely important to Boris, who, like his ancestors, is prone to manipulate it to his own advantage. His last name is, of course, a reference to the legend of the Gold Tree, the symbol of wealth he has astutely adopted as the emblem for his finance company. We are told that “the family name Goldbaum was adopted by Boris's great-grandfather in Europe under the conviction that a name or a family name can condition one’s destiny” (34). Boris invests much of his considerable wealth in genealogical research in an effort to prove that he is descended from what he sees as the first family of Jewish financiers, the Rothschilds, of German origin (35). This obsessive campaign represents a caricatured version of the premises and motivations behind traditional genealogical research — the search for legitimacy and honor in a remote and prestigious origin, the hereditary claim on beneficial resources and talents, etc. At several points in the novel, other characters make casual comments that reveal their bias for traditional genealogical values, in particular the importance of being a member of an illustrious family. Dr. Rafael's father-in-law criticizes his unwavering faith in Débora’s abilities as a physician by pointing out that “[s]he comes from a rootless family, they have no self-respect, no dignity, nothing. But you, Rafael, you come from a good family” (239). At the end of the novel a friend of the late Dr. Rafael tells his ailing son that “all the Mendeses were refined
people, such an illustrious, traditional family” (293). Such references to traditional genealogical values serve not only to underscore the centrality of genealogy to Selin’s novel but also to parody the ubiquitous and influential status that notions of pedigree continue to enjoy in contemporary Brazilian society. Accordingly, the truth value and any of the other positive virtues of traditional genealogy are discredited when Boris, who is ultimately revealed to be a shallow and cowardly individual, confirms that the miniature Gold Tree housed in a shrine in his office is in fact a fake, meant only to intrigue potential investors.

Several of the tendencies Deleuze and Guattari identify as rhizomatic or antigenealogical are reflected in the novel’s treatment of the ever-entwined and mutually dependent discourses of genealogy and historiography, which operate on three equally interconnected levels — those of the Mendes family, the Jewish Nation, and Brazilian society. Primary among these are the discontinuity of the genealogical-historical chain (the disjunctions of its flow); the privileging of short-term memory; its secretive, subterranean nature; and its proclivity for nomadic movement — not to mention its penchant for irrationality or madness, which we have already documented. In contrast to the ideal of traditional genealogy, which seeks to document the links between each generation, the Mendes genealogy and, by analogy, aspects of Jewish and Brazilian history, are presented as unconnected strands separated in some instances by centuries. In sweeping assertions such as “his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren lived in Spain […] first under the rule of the Romans, then of the Visigoths, and later of the Moors” the novel’s insistent connection between genealogy and historiography is reinforced, but even minimal documentary evidence linking the generations is missing, detracting from its potential truth value even as it makes for more engaging fiction (94). Conventional family history is facilitated by long-term memory, aided by the transmission of anecdotes, relics, and documents from one generation to the next, but Rafael is emblematic of another antigenealogical tendency of the disjunctive Mendes ancestry in that “he hardly remembers anything from his childhood. […] It’s as if he were looking through the past through opaque glass. Shadowy forms, nothing but shadowy forms” (38). When Rafael’s father turns from a general fascination for history to the task of writing his family history, he defines himself as a member of a traditional, Catholic family with “deep roots” in Rio Grande do Sul (199). However, although he knows of his father and grandfather, he has no oral or written family history to aid in his recovery of earlier generations: “As for the distant roots, no one had ever talked to me about the New Christians, or the Inquisition, or the Essenes, or the Prophets — or the Gold Tree” (199). It is clear from references in the first generational notebook that such lacunae in the intergenerational memory of the Mendeses are due in part to the family’s necessity to conceal its identity and heritage in the face of the constant threat of persecution by agents of the Inquisition to anyone openly flaunting Jewish ancestry or traditions on the Iberian Peninsula or in colonial Brazil. According to Dr. Rafael’s account, the Mendeses are living in Spain in 1536, when the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition is established and its limpieza de sangre statutes bring a new focus to the intersection of bloodlines and faith: “People are carefully investigated in order to weed out those of Jewish Ancestry; only ‘noblemen of pure blood’ can hold positions of civil service” (117). From that point on, the Mendes genealogy is forced to operate underground as it were, a rhizomatic trait first evoked by the reference to Jonah’s sojourn in the belly of the whale and later echoed by the description of another prominent antigenealogical metaphor of the text, the dimly-lit, corridor-filled, burrow-like dwelling of the genealogist Samar-Kand. It is significant that upon leaving the genealogist’s home Rafael observes that “[g]etting out of this house feels like emerging from an unreal subterranean world” (70). As if pressure from the Inquisition weren’t enough to keep the Mendes clan from putting down
roots in a single region and establishing a stabilizing connection between family and geography, the legend of the Gold Tree also contributes to the constant geographical dispersion of its generations. Primarily because of these two influences, the Mendes family history provides an example of what Deleuze and Guattari call Nomadology in that it resists both literal and figurative forms of “territorialization” and is characterized as a flow in continuous movement, prone to sudden flight in unpredictable directions, as it traverses deserts, oceans, and jungles (*A Thousand Plateaus* 23). One of the first Mendeses to flee what might have become a territorialized genealogy was the cartographer son of the calligrapher I first referred to in my discussion of madness. The calligrapher tries to convince his son that cartography is lunacy by extolling his own art as synonymous with rationality, control, and responsibility:

“Letters,” the old man would say, “are well-defined, codified symbols that have the exactness of logic. […] As for maps,” he would go on, “what are maps? Nothing but winding lines traced at random; even when accurately traced, these lines merely reproduce geophysical accidents, which don’t follow any human design.” (111)

Understood in light of arguments made by Deleuze and Guattari, the presentation of the terms of this father-son disagreement contributes forcefully to a resolution of *The Strange Nation*’s opposition between traditional and alternative notions of genealogy in favor of the latter. One of the reasons that Deleuze and Guattari bemoan the development of fields based on arborescent models is that “[a]ll of tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 12). Traditional practitioners of fields such as psychoanalysis and linguistics are condemned to the poverty of “tracing, on the basis of an overcoding structure or supporting axis, something that comes ready-made” (12). This critique of the calquing of an existing template is particularly pertinent to tree-inspired genealogy, whose operative verb is *to trace*. For Deleuze and Guattari, a more adequate form of discovery is in fact cartography: “The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing. Make a map not a tracing” (12). A map, they argue, is truly rhizomatic, because it “is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual or group, or social formation” (12).

When we consider the fact that Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhizomatic ant genealogy is an important piece of their broader theoretical project critical of Freudian psychoanalysis and its negative views on mental illness, the bias for antigenealogical discourse borne out in these examples from *The Strange Nation* has significant implications for determining how the text ultimately resolves the question of hereditary madness. In the view of Deleuze and Guattari, conventional genealogy and psychoanalysis are complementary discourses since they are both, like traditional historiography and linguistics, prominent manifestations of “tree logic,” discourses concerned with tracing meanings that are in fact pre-determined by rigid underlying structures. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari decry the master narrative of psychoanalysis and its reductive “daddy-mommy-me” logic, accusing it of “domesticating a genealogical form and content that are in every way intractable” (13). For the schizophrenic, whose desire has resisted or overrun Oedipal triangulation, genealogy is multiple, fluid, disjunctive, and evasively creative: “[H]e deliberately scambles all the codes, by quickly shifting from one to another, according to the questions asked him, never giving the same explanation from one day to the next, never invoking the same genealogy” (*Anti-Oedipus* 15). The “schizo,” according to Deleuze and Guattari, “liberates a raw genealogical material, nonrestrictive, where he can situate himself, record himself, and take his bearings in all branches
at once, on all sides. He explodes the Oedipal genealogy” (Anti-Oedipus 78).

What happens in The Strange Nation is that Rafael, searching for answers about his own identity and explanations for certain traumas, is subjected, by virtue of his readings of his unconventional family history, to an unexpected and intense session of antigenealogical, schizoanalytical treatment. Although certain revelations about his ancestors’ apparent lunatic tendencies are initially troubling to him, his fear of succumbing to their pattern of hereditary madness is replaced by a serene acceptance of the complex multiplicity he has inherited:

Suddenly he realizes. All of them have the face he saw in the mirror a while ago; all of them are him, he is all of them. Now he understands the Notebooks of the New Christian; they are his father’s legacy to him — Rafael is no longer beset by doubts. Instead of solutions, fantasies; instead of answers, imaginary possibilities. (296)

As a consequence of his antigenealogical readings, then, Rafael has given up his search for logical, transcendent, identity-affirming answers. To borrow the words of Deleuze and Guattari, in true schizo fashion, “[h]e has simply ceased being afraid of becoming mad” (Anti-Oedipus 131). However, the antigenealogies presented in The Strange Nation of Rafael Mendes have implications that go beyond its protagonist’s concern about hereditary madness if we consider, as the novel constantly suggests, that each of its multiple Rafael Mendeses are emblematic not only of the Mendes family but also of the Jewish Nation and of Brazilian society in general. In this respect, it is important to point out once again that Sciar’s subversion of conventional genealogy equates with an upending of conventional historiography. A final example from the text is indicative of this tendency. When the first Rafael Mendes to cross the Atlantic encounters what he assumes to be Indians native to the New World, he is astounded to learn that they speak Hebrew and that their forefathers emigrated from the Holy Land centuries before Europeans began to explore the Brazilian coast: “After a long time,” Rafael is told by the cacique, “their ship came to these shores. We are the descendants of those Hebrews. […] Many of us no longer speak Hebrew, but in each generation, there is always once person in charge of taking care of the Torah, which our ancestors brought with them from Jerusalem” (128). Imprisoned on a quilombo, another Rafael Mendes will hear an African leader make a similar claim to Jewish origins (158). This is not to say that Sciar is seriously suggesting that each of the three interrelated psyches he analyzes in The Strange Nation embraces a schizophrenic view of genealogy, history, or identity. However, what my analysis has shown is that, in an ironic maneuver for a Jewish writer, Sciar subverts the traditional, Hebrew-inspired mode of genealogy in order to suggest that the role of Jews has been excluded from or downplayed in official “genealogies” of Brazilian nation-building and subjectivity. In so doing, he provides an alternative to official versions of Brazilian history and clears a space for the inclusion of other marginalized voices, whether they belong to indigenous populations, African slaves and their descendants, or unlikely heroes lost among anonymous generations of madmen.

Notes

1 The Strange Nation includes references to several different Rafael Mendeses, the most important of which in terms of the novel’s narrative structure are the last Rafael Mendes of the family and his father, the author of the genealogical stories that comprise most of the text. For the sake of clarity, I refer to these characters as Rafael and Dr. Rafael, respectively, throughout the rest of this essay. When I refer to the protagonist, I am generally referring to Rafael the son.

2 According to Rachman and Hodgson’s review of the relevant literature, when it comes to obsessive disorders, for example, “the case for a specific genetic contribution to [their] development […] is inconclusive, but the possibility of a general genetic contribution, through the vehicle of an increased predisposition to anxiety, or to neuroses generally, cannot be excluded” (41).
For an interesting discussion on the connections between the metaphoric usage of traditional genealogy and historical narrative, see Nietzsche. O'Toole provides a convincing account of the structural similarities between conventional forms of genealogy and other forms of narrative.

In the online posting "Reclaiming the Text — or Reclaiming Voices," Sciar reflects on his Jewish roots and provides a cursory genealogy of the Jewish-Brazilian tradition of writers.

This specific usage of the term "beginnings" is usually associated with Edward Said, who advocated avoidance of the "passivity of origins" by substituting the intentional beginning act of an individual" (32). Said rejects what he calls the "dynastic tradition" or "dynastic ideology" in favor of "adjacency" (13, 66). His intent is to replace the "sacred" or patriarchal model of genealogy with a "gentile" or alternative theory of beginnings (13), a project that reinforces the opposition between the Hebrew origins of traditional genealogy and alternative conceptions.

Castro notes the ironic nature of the Santo Oficio's appropriation of the bloodline standard to prove legitimate Catholic status and to justify its persecution of the Hispanic Jews: "Los hispano-cristianos calcaron en este caso un sistema de valoración individual y colectiva muy propio del hispano-hebreo, tan reciclado y odiado. [...] Cuanto más perseguían al hispano-hebreo, tanto más se encarnaban los cristianos en el sistema semítico de la pureza de linaje" (44-45).

Works Cited


