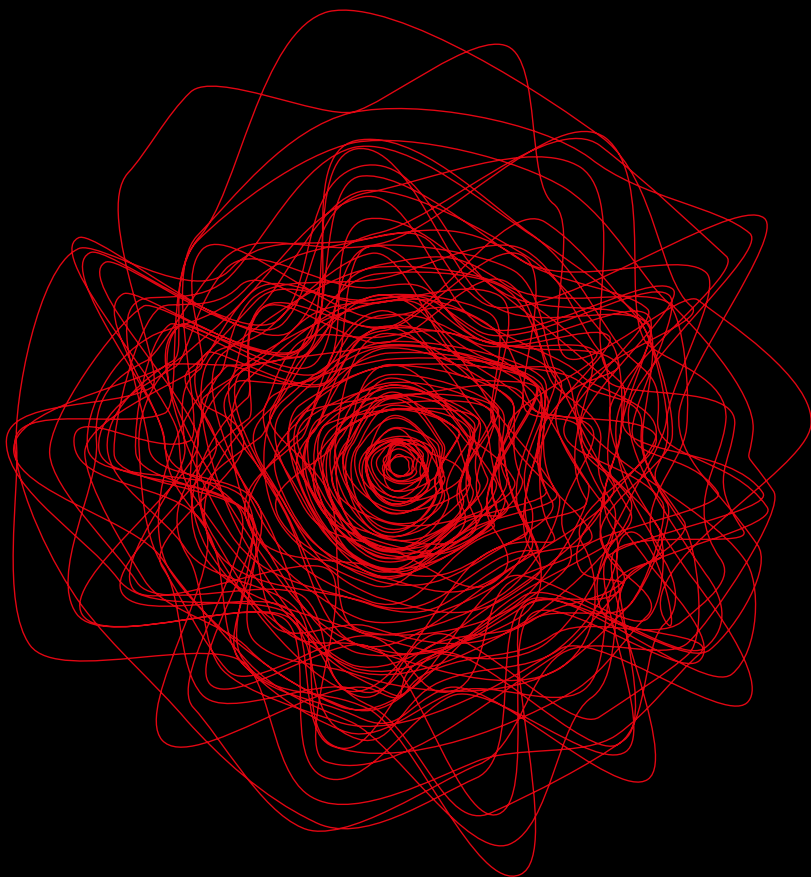


# Pandemonium

NINE NARRATIVES BRIDGING  
SÃO PAULO-BERLIN



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# Mons Rlint

ALEXANDRE RIBEIRO

*Translated from the Portuguese by Daniel Persia*

WAITING HURTS AT BERLIN CENTRAL STATION. A world in decline is the aesthetic that paints my eyeline. It's me and forty-some others waiting for the bus, at the platform, terrorized. My vision atrophies like the smashed-up baggage at the bottom of the bus. Here, we are all anxiety. Ready to go home, for life to end, to vomit. I'm alone, plural. A virus infecting humanity shows how small we are. Running home is all we have.

It's not my first time in the city. In the '90s, I came to Berlin three times in the same year. Sebastião, a brother given to me by the violent streets of Cidade Tiradentes, was the one who first introduced me to the German capital.

Tião moved to Berlin after being persecuted by the governor of São Paulo, our home state. To think about blacknesses is to rebuild societies, and our governor was never keen on revolution. Together, we wandered the streets of Schöneberg and Charlottenburg. Each step of my swollen feet was a history lesson. Tião, like me, was a black man with light skin, bordering on obese (for someone who's lived through hunger, that sounds like a victory). Whatever Tião carried in weight, he doubled in memory. He was the founder of Black History Walks, an organization that sought to boost the self-esteem of the black population by sharing the history of the streets.

Yes, I was born of a generation hardened to jump over bodies and keep on walking. Those years are in the past, though. Today I'm someplace else. Our parents faced the dictatorship, faced racism so that we could pursue a decent education. At least in this, I've succeeded.

*O colorido brasileiro.* That was the term I proposed to explain the failed plan of whitening that we are, *pardos*. *Pardo*, one of the oldest terms in the history of our country. Upon the arrival of the Portuguese to Brazil, in 1500, Pero Vaz de Caminha wrote a letter to the King of Portugal, in which he described the natives as "dark [*pardos*], somewhat reddish, with good faces and good noses."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Translation from *The Voyage of Pedro Álvares Cabral to Brazil and India: From Contemporary Documents and Narratives*, edited by William Brooks Greenlee. First published in 1938.

*Pardo: of a poorly defined color, somewhere between yellowish, grayish and chestnut. Pardo; someone born out of miscegenation, whether mulatto, caboclo, cafuzo, mameluke or mestizo. Pardo: dirty white, darkened. Pardo: me.*

The word *pardo* was used to erase rapes, kidnappings, and genocides, and to transform the mixing of races into something occasional, something that, at some point, was bound to happen. A way of putting out hate's fire with masked cordiality. For us, within the black movement, the term *pardo* was useful only on paper. We agreed to call ourselves black, a dark-skinned movement.

Carrying this nomenclature on my birth certificate, I decided to read up on the subject. Thanks to Sebastião, during the opportunities I had to travel abroad, I was able to see the issue firsthand: how do we define *pardo* in the world? In declaring ourselves black, our African, European and Caribbean companions would say: you all aren't black, you should call yourselves *colored*. Interestingly enough, even in German there was a term for this: *farbenfroh*, which means *colorido*.

My love for poetry brought me to the word *colorido* on a mission: to implement a poetic-aesthetic that would unite our younger generation through an organized movement. That's how *o colorido brasileiro* was born. I presented a series of scientific articles that highlighted the benefits of identifying people, and how that identification moves various aspects of society. I suggested to my comrade, Luís Inácio,<sup>2</sup> that we implement several public policies. The campaign *Brasil dos coloridos* reached the federal level and became the new ethnic-racial definition of the Brazilian majority.

In light of this theory, I was invited to share my thoughts at the *Black Identities* conference, at the University of Humboldt. The virus had already been circulating in Brazil days before my arrival in Berlin. Still, none of us

<sup>2</sup> Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, former President of Brazil (2003–2010).

were taking the pandemic seriously. Not once did it cross the organization's mind to cancel the event; they had already begun selling tickets, and various venues had sold out.

It was Tuesday. I woke up at 5:45am. I went to shave. A disheveled face stared back at me in the mirror. A notification, from my sister. In Brazil, it was two in the morning. I read the message, anxious:

*Roberto,*

*I know you're probably really busy at the moment, good luck, and I hope things go well at the conference. Don't get all worked up over this message: everything's fine.*

*I'd been home for about three days when mom started to get a cough. She was having trouble breathing, I took her to the hospital and we both got tested for Covid-19. The results came back positive.*

*We're not feeling bad, and mom's symptoms are gradually fading away. I just want you to take care of yourself over there, okay? You know what I mean.*

*With love,*

*Ju*

We've been here before, the three of us; I know my sister, alone again. I take a deep breath; my beard came out crooked. There's nothing I can do from here. Again. The symphony of chaos plays on with another message:

*Dear Dr. Soares,*

*In accordance with recommendations from the Gesundheitsamt (Ministry of Health), we deeply regret to inform you that the conference Black Identities, at the University of Humboldt, has been cancelled.*

*Due to such a critical, rapid decline in the availability of international flights, we have determined it best to end the conference and ensure a swift return home for all participants.*

*Given that no more flights will be departing from Germany, we have arranged for a bus to take you to Møns Klint, in Denmark. From there, you will catch the first flight back to Brazil.*

I laughed at myself, realizing I was grumbling while reading that email in a four-star hotel. I wasn't worried about the fact that the world was being devastated by a pandemic. I was thinking about something that struck much deeper: I was angry about being forced to take the bus.

*13 March 2020*

*Berlin Central Station, Germany*

I CAN'T EVEN REMEMBER the last time I was in a bus station. I came to Berlin by plane, on a flight that cost more than ten times the monthly minimum wage. And now, embracing my own resentfulness, I surrender to the ancient nightmare of being poor: eight hours on an overcrowded bus.

My chubby legs hold my Swiss luggage in place while the sleep twitches try to take over. The flight is important. I know because I've been on the losing side: eight at night, on my way home from work, sleeping on the bus to Diadema. They took my fanny pack, with a cassette tape and half my wages.

Bus N80 – Berlin – Møns Klint reaches its destination, shifting me back to the present. I try to balance myself, my body, my luggage and ticket. My right leg falls asleep as the driver announces our current location. We've arrived at Terminal Swinemünde-Møns Klint. They instruct us to get off the bus and make our way through immigration.

A snail-shaped line. Five employees sit at countertops slightly above eyeline. False images of power, that foolish will of oppression only man can appreciate. As usual, during each brief interview, the officer in charge induces psychological torture and questions one's belonging to the land.

A few minutes pass and I see two young black men being taken to a room next door. Two young Arabs are leaving that same room, weighed down by handcuffs.

Aside from the theory of *o colorido brasileiro*, I've thought about writing the theory *no border guard will ever miss an opportunity to be a brazen racist*. During our brief, three-minute interaction, I was questioned intensely and had to present a series of documents before I was released.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience and understanding. In light of Covid-19, the terminal is now full and tickets for the express train through the tunnel have sold out. We have made adjustments to our route accordingly and will be taking the ferry boat. Please remain on the bus until further notice."

The ferry boat! The light of the sunset intensifies the whiteness of the cliffs at Møns Klint. Giant cliffs made of chalk brighten my field of vision. Ocular magnetism, as if my body needed such a glow. The wind caresses my curly hair, and the atmosphere sweeps me back into the fields of memory.

July 1993  
Hamburg, Germany

MY LEFT EYE COULDN'T QUITE CLOSE with the wind blowing. It was just the two of us, on the open-air deck, on the last ferry boat crossing the Port of Hamburg. Our beauty was the color of clay. We were enjoying the late-setting sun. It was almost ten o'clock when he took my hand and held it, tightly, pulling me to the far-end of the boat. We bent over to look at the water, intertwined.

"You're scared, aren't you?"

He already knew the answer. My fear of depths was born from water, but it was reflected in relationships, too. He let go of my hand for a moment, then pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. The strong winds rustled the flimsy little sheet. He read a poem. I kept silent, my natural re-



action to beauty. He was hoping for something else. My silence made the air uncomfortable.

He always had to have the last word. Laughing, he asked, "You didn't get it, did you? What I meant was that I want your name, Roberto." My name? He was interrupted by the noisy apparatus of the boat docking. That space, now free of curious children and tarnished adults, was ours. A strong kiss, a fear of being rejected. We didn't know that we were making memories. We were just having fun.

*March 2020*

*Denmark*

THE CHAINS OF THE BOAT COLLIDE WITH CONCRETE. Time to get back on the bus. Walking, I feel a vibration in my pocket. My youngest sister's picture lights up the screen. Juliana is calling.

"Roberto, where are you?"

"Roberto?! How long before you're back?"

"Roberto, please say something...I can't do this all on my own, not this time."

All on my own. She was referring to the death of our father, a victim of dengue and neglect. Juliana had to deal with all the paperwork, the burial arrangements, the mourning. And me? I was at a conference, in Zurich, a long, long way from my family, and home.

"Our mother, Roberto, she didn't make it."

The silence was broken by my abrupt coughing, followed by a solitary tear. No reaction. No crying.

Juliana knew about it all. She had witnessed, helplessly, the day I had been thrown out of the house. Packing to run away, I was hunched over on the floor, gathering my clothes, when he came into my room and kicked me in the ribs.

"Shame on you, you faggot!"

We knew the wardrobe was at its breaking point a long time ago. Our father saw it too, and he didn't hesitate. He ripped off the door with obvious intent: to smack me with the metal of its dangling hinges. As I stumbled onto the street, my torso started to bleed.

"And don't you go crying, you little pansy. This is so you'll stop being a fag!"

Our mother could never get a word in. She was paralyzed, sobbing, in the corner of the room.

"Roberto?!"

My sister had always been there for me. This time, she wouldn't be alone. I promised her that, in a few hours, I would be back to São Paulo.

The virus that infected Mom came straight from Italy. Dona Fátima had been her employer for at least twenty-five years. And, every single year, Dona Fátima vacationed in Europe. This time, when she returned, she already knew she was infected. And still, she insisted that her maid — my mother — come to her house. Dona Fátima was afraid of dying alone. The world stopped, the borders closed, but the slave quarters were still standing. And me? I wanted to get Mom out of there, but she hadn't spoken to me since the day I had been kicked out of the house.

*1 January 2001*

*Møns Klint, Denmark.*

*Dear Roberto,*

*This isn't one of those "come back to me" letters. It's one of those "when will we come back to ourselves again?" Love doesn't end, it just transforms. Remember?*

*The moving boxes are still here in the living room. I try and try and try and try, but without you, you bastard, none of these stories make any sense. I got sick of Berlin, so I went to live in Hamburg. I got sick of Hamburg, so I went to live in Venice. I got sick of Venice, so I ended up in Møns Klint, Denmark.*

*You know we're both made of the same clay. But I'm tired, you know? I'm tired of running, tired of pretending to be who I'm not just to be a part of a movement. A movement that doesn't respect us and isn't ever going to respect us. I want to love you, I want to be complete. I want to forget my political body, I want to be happy in that dream we created together. Do you remember the ferry boat?*

*You are light, Beto. Light made of the purest dark matter. And to stray from that light is stupidity. They'll tell you I've disappeared, but the truth is I've moved. I've moved for us. If one day the world ends, know that you can come home. At the end of the day, running home is all we have.*

Yours,  
 Sebastião Maia  
 Stengårdsvej 8,  
 4971, Møns Klint, Denmark.

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ALEXANDRE RIBEIRO is a writer and poet. A columnist for Itaú Cultural, he is the author of the poetry collection *Inflorescência* (Miudeza, 2018) and the novel *Reservado* (Miudeza, 2019), winner of the 2018 ProAC Award (Cultural Action Program of the Department of Culture of the State of São Paulo), which independently sold more than 2,000 copies. A high-school student active during the 2015-2016 school occupation in Brazil, he participates in literary projects in quebradas around the world and in chapters of Fundação Casa. He grew up in Favela da Torre, in Diadema (São Paulo), and currently lives in Germany.

DANIEL PERSIA has served as Regional Leader for the US-Brazil Fulbright Commission and Editor-at-Large for *Asymptote Journal*. His work has appeared in a number of literary journals, including *Asymptote*, *Exchanges*, *Your Impossible Voice*, and *KRONline*. His translation of *Escritos (Writings)*, by Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida, was published in 2019 for the re-opening of the Chillida-Leku museum in Hernani, Gipuzkoa, Spain. Working primarily from Spanish and Portuguese, his research explores collaborative frameworks for translating Afro-Brazilian literature. He is a PhD candidate in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and a Lassen Fellow in Latin American Studies at Princeton University.



**PANDEMÔNIO EDIÇÕES**  
*(e outros atos ilícitos)*