

Luiz Gama, first a slave himself, then a lawyer, liberated hundreds of people from slavery. But does anyone still know him today? Bruno Rodrigues de Lima, scholar at the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, is keeping his memory alive. As the young lawyer from Brazil says, the human rights activist's work is anything but done.

TEXT: MARTIN TSCHECHNE

At some point, this image will almost surely make its way to the screen—a Hollywood movie, or perhaps a Netflix series: A boy, still a child, is leaning over a railing. The ship, the *Saraiva*, a floating death trap weighing 152 tonnes, puts out to sea from the quay wall in November 1840 to take a shipment of slaves from Salvador de Bahia to Rio de Janeiro, 1600 kilometers to the south along the coast. There is crowding on board and rats running around on deck; they gnaw away at ropes, papers, everything. Just then, the boy understands what is happening to him. “Father,” he cries out as the mainland recedes from him, “Father, you’ve sold me!” That is how the first turning point in Luiz Gama’s life could have unfolded. The life of the Brazilian lawyer, a slave who became a liberator of slaves.

Nearly 200 years later, at the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory in Frankfurt, Bruno Rodrigues de Lima moved a reading chair in front of the window in his office. The bookshelf beside him is full of old books, legal texts from his

Brazilian homeland behind fragile leather spines, comments, tracts, and documentation. Lima, just 35 years old, slim with black curls, contemplates the collection. His search for the causes of the state of his country and its prospects for the future constantly leads the researcher deep into the sediments of archives and libraries.

Copies of case records are stacked on the table, their calligraphic flourishes attesting to the respect and zeal the court clerks had for the cases written down 150 years ago. Lima salvaged the originals piece by piece from the courts of his homeland. For nearly 20 years, he traveled across that vast country from one end to the other, yet it was here, in the overwhelming library collection of the Max Planck Institute in Frankfurt, that he found the texts that are helping him discern patterns, the ideas behind the legislation, political intentions, and economic and ecological impacts. Every now and then he leaps to his feet, shuffles through the mighty stack of papers, pulls one of the tomes from the shelves, and swiftly locates the proper passage, a footnote, a cross-reference, or a quote. “Here, you see?” He is talking about a life emerging from the lines before him. Or rather, at least two lives—strictly speaking, 500 or more. Lima has a remarkable story to tell.

Salvador de Bahia on Brazil’s Atlantic coast, November 10, 1840. Luiz Gonzaga Pinto da Gama is a ten-year-old who had, until that point, grown up in a two-story house at Rua do Bângala, and is torn

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VISIT TO

BRUNO RODRIGUES
DE LIMA



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Bibliophile researcher: the extensive library at the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory has proven to be a treasure trove for Bruno Lima.

away by the turmoil of the times. His father came from a family in the Portuguese upper class – a gambler and drinker, affluent at first but frivolous and soon so deep in debt that the only way for him to acquire credit was to sell his son. From now on, his father will no longer play a role in Luiz Gama's life. His mother, Luiza Mahin, had been brought to the country as a slave from West Africa. A beautiful woman, her son would later report, strong and full of ire. She sold fruit on the street and saved up the money until she had enough to buy her freedom. Her outrage seethed on. When African slaves in the city rebelled against their enslavers in 1835, she made her house available to them as a command center. She got involved and was the only woman among the leaders of the revolt. But the rebellion was put down. The leaders were shot or imprisoned; Luiza Mahin's trail disappears in Rio. Like many others, she was probably taken onto a ship bound for Africa and banished. The mother would never see her son again.

day no one can say how he managed that. A very young man who could not even spell two or three years ago. At the age of 19, he started working as an assistant to the inspector and law professor Furtado de Mendonça in São Paulo. And what a stroke of luck for the young man, who craves knowledge, that his sponsor not only teaches in the law school, but also has a key to its library...

There would be a hard cut now in the film, a jump a century and a half in the future to the year 1996. We would see a very thin boy almost eight years old in the New York neighborhood of Queens. The boy is wearing a printed T-shirt and extra-wide pants like many in the neighborhood, yet he seems singularly alien in his setting. "We were in the U.S. illegally," Lima says today, bluntly, "undocumented immigrants." Fleeing social insecurity in their own country, the family sought refuge with relatives; his father cleaned at a golf club, and his mother worked in a kitchen. The boy's quick grasp of concepts stood out, and since the school years of his old and new

Lima learned. He also learned the rhythm of the streets, rap, which originated from the chants of Black slaves.

Scenes with the color and dynamics of a film appear repeatedly throughout the story of Luiz Gama's life: 1847 in São Paulo, the grandiose house of the slave trader Antonio Pereira Cardoso. Luiz, now 17, has made his way here after years of humiliation. He works as a domestic servant and is treated decently. A student who lives in one of Cardoso's rooms even takes the time to teach the boy to read and write. Since law is his discipline, he also kindles his young friend's interest in this field. Luiz must have felt the possibilities that were opening up for him. Less than two years later, he has gathered all the papers he needs to become a free man. His mother was a slave who legally bought her freedom, his father a man who cannot assert any claim to ownership concerning his son – since the sale eight years ago was illegal. Luiz has everything in black and white. To-

home countries didn't quite line up, it was decided he would start classes in the next grade up. The fact that he hardly understood the language was not a problem. That was the case for many people there. He learned it. He also learned the rhythm of the street, rap that had evolved from the speech songs of Black slaves on the plantations in the South of the United States. When English was not enough, the boy simply added words and rhymes from his native language, Portuguese. He was really good back then, Lima says. But he disliked the country, the foreign culture, and a language that, for him, did not come close to his own in terms of poetry and nuance at the time and still fails to do so.

Two years later, the family returned to Brazil. And since his academic leap repeated itself, Bruno Lima



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The researcher spends a lot of time in libraries and archives. He has already gathered thousands of Gama's writings to make them accessible to the public.

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reckons he entered fifth grade at the age of nine, law school of the Catholic University of Campinas at 16 and made it into the newspaper. The youngest student in the history of the law school, extremely gifted, sponsored early on by the Brazilian Ministry of Education. Accredited as a lawyer in Brazil at the age of 25, he received his doctorate at the Goethe University in Frankfurt with the distinction *summa cum laude*, was awarded the 2022 Walter-Kolb-Gedächtnispreis for his dissertation, a le-

gal biography about Luiz Gama, as well as the 2023 Otto Hahn Medal of the Max Planck Society. And he always had the same clear goal in sight: to gain a deep understanding of the aftermath of slavery in his country, so as to redress the legal situation of the most vulnerable members of society, the descendants of former slaves.

Now the film could cut to a scene in November 2002. His family is living in Itatiba, north of São Paulo. A



very elderly woman from the neighborhood, the daughter of a former slave, has entered the house and is speaking with his mother. A few days before, on October 27, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, had been elected president the first time. Bruno Lima's parents had been amongst the founding members of the labor party PT in 1980. Now the desperate woman hoped for intervention: the mayor had ordered her family and 33 others to leave their quilombo, the settlement on the outskirts of the city where they had lived for more than a hundred years.

Quilombo, Bruno Lima explains, is a key concept for understanding Brazilian politics to this day. The destruction of these residential settlements is invariably driven by economic interests: husbandry or crude oil, deforestation, expansion of plantations for coffee or soy. And the inhabitants, many of them descendants of former slaves, are driven from their land. In principle, a new constitution adopted in 1988 clearly regulated their right to property. How-

ever, it was quite a different matter in practice, as the adolescent learned in his mother's kitchen. It remains that way to this day: Lima estimates that a good 5,000 quilombo communities are still fighting for recognition and continued existence before the courts – even for their lives, he says.

At the time, his mother suggested he could find out whether the visitor's quilombo really did exist before slavery was officially abolished in 1888. That was the criterion stipulated by the Constitution 100 years later that determined whether the woman could remain. But did anyone who wanted to establish a palm oil plantation in the jungle heed it? At that moment, he remembers, he was aware of hearing the name Luiz Gama for the first time. According to the elderly woman, he was a person who, like a hero, had taken a stand against the land barons, a corrupt government, a complacent justice system on behalf of the slaves – both those who had been set free and those still in bondage. And he used everything at his brilliant mind's disposal: pieces of evidence and intricately developed arguments, the power of the published word, and legal shrewdness, mockery, and sarcasm.

The 14-year-old set out on a search, digging for days in the local archives. In the end, he managed to discover papers needed to help the inhabitants of the quilombo gain their rights. The incident laid the foundation for Lima's research on the life of Luiz Gama – he collected and read everything of Gama's he could find. It was not much at first, he remembers, 51 poems and 25 newspaper articles. But today, four voluminous tomes of writing are lying on his desk at the Institute in Frankfurt. Seven more are to come in the next two years. Bruno Lima searched for them in the archives of his Brazilian homeland, and edited and published what he found: records of court proceedings, an autobiography, furious comments for the newspapers, and even satirical verses Gama had written. In total, there were 1,100 original texts and a couple thousand explanations and references – the researcher's pride is noticeable. His collection is his treasure. As soon as he opens a book, he murmurs the number of the page and footnote he wants to cite. Correctly, of course. At some point he mentions that Luiz Gama's life lasted 52 years, two months, three days, and seven hours until his death on the afternoon of August 24, 1882.

Bruno Lima leaves little doubt that he considers every day in Gama's life an exemplary day in the legal history of his country. Because his goal is to discover and rehabilitate a man who not only represented his

Bruno Lima's award-winning doctoral thesis, a biography of Luiz Gama, has been published as a book.



PHOTO: KATRIN BINNER FOR MPG

own case single-mindedly, but also quickly rose to become one of the most strident lawyers representing the repressed in Brazil. One who traveled the entire country; demanded human rights like the ones Brazil's constitution had established long ago (but, as Lima adds, does not guarantee to this day); dissected the wording of purchase contracts, inheritance agreements, and the wills of slaveholders; and did not stop until his clients were free. There were two million slaves in Brazil during his lifetime, around 20 percent of a population of 10 million. Lima's research proves that Luiz Gama won freedom for at least 500 of them in court. However, they could have numbered 1,000 or more. The young researcher's search is not over by any means. At the Max Planck Institute in Frank-

furt, Lima has the perfect constellation to continue investigating the legacies of slavery in Brazilian law. "Slavery cuts deep, from the lives of Black people in the favelas to the trees in the Amazon forest," says Lima.

is the brilliant beginning of a career as a lawyer fighting against slavery.

A film that cuts together the life stories of Luiz Gama and Bruno Lima needs to jump and shorten time where the images of the past are not clear. Gama founded newspapers and wrote pamphlets against the evils of bondage. He wrote verses that pull the venerable lawyers around him to pieces. Bruno Lima, who tested his joy of the rhythm and wit of language as a rapper in Queens, does not shy away from comparisons. With Bertolt Brecht, for example: he says there is no doubt Luiz Gama was the better poet. Indeed, the statement may be a bit bold, but it testifies to Lima's deep respect for the lawyer and human rights activist.

Bruno Lima collected and read everything by Luiz Gama that he could find.

In 1870 Gama gets his big chance. Commendatore Ferreira Netto, residing in Porto, Portugal, dies. Childless. Before his death, Ferreira Netto had operated coffee plantations in the region around Santos in Brazil. His legacy poses extremely complex challenges for the local authorities: Who is entitled to the seigneuries in South America? And to the slaves, since slavery has now been abolished in their master's homeland Portugal? The judges divide up the proceedings, Gama manages to secure a mandate and delves into his work. In the end, 217 slaves win their freedom in one fell swoop. Bruno Lima has salvaged over a thousand pages about the case, which was hardly known until he did so. "It is probably the largest collective freedom suit in the history of the Americas," says Bruno Lima. Luiz Gama triumphed, despite everyone who had argued about the inheritance unanimously turning against him, even threatening him with death – it

Rio de Janeiro, February 2024. Lima has flown to Rio for Carnival, from the cold winter in Frankfurt to the heat of the teeming urban canyons. Portela, one of the largest samba schools in the country, transformed the story of Luiza Mahin, who bought her freedom and was banished, and her son Luiz Gama into a spectacle of rhythmic stamping, singing, and dancing involving nearly 3,000 women and men in flamboyant makeup. Bruno Lima helped reconstruct the story and bring it to the street. But is that the final scene in his story? "Oh, no," the researcher makes plain. "It is just the beginning." Slavery is officially abolished in the country, which put more people into bondage than any other. But as long as history is written by those who have shaped it for hundreds of years, as long as the black descendants of slaves fear for the fate of their property and may become famous soccer players – but never president – Lima wants to do his part to make sure Luiz Gonzaga Pinto da Gama does not remain a footnote in history. With a legal biography, 11 volumes of his collected works and more than a thousand texts finally available across libraries around the world. With drums and trumpets and 3,000 dancers in tow. ←