

“MY OL’ BLACK MAMMY” IN BRAZILIAN MODERNIST MEMOIRS

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[...] They would bless those that would give them bread for the food and the hard work for the amenity of their lives. The Black Mammy was one of those creatures; her life therefore should not be forgotten, because she symbolizes the existence of a soul blessed with extraordinarily noble sentiments.¹

“Mãi preta” In *A mãi de família*, November 1888

Such words of gratefulness and appreciation for a Black Mammy, taken from a 1888 *folhetim* entitled “Mãi preta” (‘Black Mammy’) fail to reflect the recurring image of slaves in abolitionist literary and political texts of the second half of the 19th century. As Jurandir Costa Freire argues, the “anti-slavery propaganda” in Brazil was founded on the idea of an “irremediable antagonism” between master and slave, whose consequences implicated, among other evils, the degradation or perversion of family values. Regarding the wet-nurse and the foster mother, in particular, her intimate contact with the children of her masters, according to Sonia Giacomini, bestowed her “o lugar privilegiado de agente de corrupção da família branca” [the privileged place of corruption’s agent of the White family] (49). As we read in another 1880s newspaper, *O Mentor das Brasileiras*,

Se a infância de nossos pais portugueses era mal dirigida, a nossa ainda hé peor pela mistura de escravos, os quaes depravão habitos e costumes e o proprio idioma; pois nos communicão suas ideas e barbaridades desde os primeiros momentos em que se desenvolvem as potencias d’alma. [...] Nos entregão as amas que são pretas, commumente escravas e também africanas. Daqui se pode colher qual sera a prática dessas amas, e a influencia dellas sobre as crianças. [If our Portuguese ancestors’ childhood was badly conducted, our upbringing was made even worse by our contact with [Black] slaves, which has corrupted our habits and customs and even our language; because they communicate to us their ideas and barbarities from the very early stages of our soul’s development. [Our parents] deliver us nannies that are Black, commonly slaves and also African. Thus one can infer the quality of these nannies’ practices, and their influence on the children]. (qtd in Giacomini 49-50)

In a time, therefore, when slavery, especially domestic slavery, was associated with the risk of “moral infection” of the masters’ values and customs (Ventura 46), are the words of appreciation at the onset of this paper actually intended to a Black Mammy? The answer, as would be expected, is revealed to us in the text. The *folhetin* tells a story about an enslaved wet-nurse who, as a punishment from her owner, is denied the intimacy of her own newborn child; instead of hatred and revolt, her heart, however, “era acessível ao carinho” [was open to fondness], given to the sentiments of loyalty, acceptance, subservience, and maternal love. When given a white child to breastfeed, “o vagido da recém nascida lhe tocou a alma” [the crying of the newborn has touched her soul], and the black woman goes on to adore it as if it were her own. The literary myth of the Black Mammy thus appears in a seemingly harmless *folhetin* (qtd. in Giacomini 167). A symbol of unconditional fidelity and absolute servitude to the master’s class, the Black Mammy of 19th century literature existed together with the threatening image of the domestic slave—a mixture of “vítima e algoz” [victim and beast], according to an Abolitionist writer of the period, Joaquim Manuel de Macedo.

A number of studies about blacks in Brazilian literature (Sayers 1956; Rabassa 1954; Marotti 1982; Brookshaw 1983) reveal that the myth of the faithful slave—and of the Black Mammy in particular—was more frequent in fiction before the expansion of abolitionist literature after the passing of the Free-Womb Law (1871). According to David Brookshaw,

o estereótipo do Escravo Fiel, embora não desaparecesse por completo, deu primazia aos estereótipos do Escravo Imoral e do Escravo Demônio [...] O Escravo Imoral era a escrava robusta, sempre querendo sexo com seu senhor; o Escravo Demônio era o ‘quilombola’, ou fugitivo, que deu as costas à tutela do senhor branco, confirmando, assim, sua selvageria. [the stereotype of the Faithful Slave, although it never completely vanished, gave way to the stereotypes of the Immoral Slave and of the Demon Slave [...]. The Immoral Slave was a robust [female] slave, always wanting sex with her master; the Demon Slave was a ‘maroon,’ or fugitive, that turned his back on the tutelage of the White master, thus confirming his savagery]. (32)

Through the negation of both her race and gender, the Black Mammy is a docile domesticated counterpoint of these two “fearful” stereotypes. Generally old, corpulent, superstitious, and fervently Catholic, the Black Mammy would have not awakened any danger of moral degradation of the family through copulation with the white master or his sons. Moreover, her faithful nature—more devoted to

the demands of the masters' house than the interests of the slave quarters—would also distance her from the figure of the revolted, vengeful slave.

But if this female version of the Faithful Slave became rather marginal in Abolitionist discourse, as it did in the racial theories that develop at the turn of the century, it returns emphatically in childhood memoirs published between the 1930s and 1960s. Writing about their early years, modernists such as Graça Aranha, José Lins do Rego, Murilo Mendes, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and José Américo de Almeida evoke their “Black Mammies” as an expression of nostalgia reserved for an aristocratic tradition in clear decline. In the specific case of José Lins do Rego, the focus of my analysis, the memorialized Black Mammy constitutes a recovery of the cultural legacy of the Old agrarian Northeast. A primary question raised is: in what circumstances does the myth of the Black Mammy make its return to the literary imaginary beginning in the 1930s? Also, what function and strategic use do these writers imprint upon this myth when exploring it in their memoirs?

In this paper, I propose to examine the impact of Gilberto Freyre's ideas, in particular to Lins do Rego's writings. Freyre was the author of many studies in defense of the black participation in the formation of the Brazilian identity; a participation even greater in Brazil than in other slave nations, according to Freyre, given the “typically Brazilian” proximity between the slave quarters and the masters' house. The myth of the Black Mammy, “the [affectionate, asexual] alliance between the Black Mammy and the white child” (388), as notes Isfahani-Hammond, not only served as supposed evidence of interracial harmony in times of slavery, but also contributed to the composition of the ideal mixture proposed by Freyre: the White assimilation of the Black “culture.” Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond describes this phenomenon as “nonbiological forms of assimilation to produce symbolically Africanized, genetically White figure[s]” (35). Anxieties regarding physical sexual contact between whites and blacks emerge in Freyre's works, and in writings of various modernist writers, in their multiple references to the physical degenerations (*syphilization*) and moral decay (precocious sexuality, homosexuality) that might have occurred from this close contact. In this context, the hygienic relationship between the Black Mammy and the white foster child was configured as a privileged symbol of interracial *fraternization*, both in the Freyreian literature as well as in the memoirs of other modernist authors of his generation.

In one of the pioneer studies about the autobiographical trend among Brazilian modernist writers, Silviano Santiago proposes a revision of the criticism that have frequently focused on the political engagement of these writers with the popular classes. Santiago suggests that, alongside the

Marxist ideology that charted the production of texts such as Carls Drummond de Andrade's *A rosa do povo* [The People's Rose] or Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas secas* [Barren lives], another ideological option emerges within the modernist project, which Santiago names Proustian. Rooted in the Brazilian patriarchal grand families, these writers reveal in the affectionate memoirs of their childhood "o apego aos valores tradicionais do [seu] clã familiar [...], os seus valores econômicos e culturais" [the attachment to the traditional values of [their] family clan [...], [of] their economic and cultural values] (31). For Santiago, this attachment to the aristocratic values of the past reveals the authors' commitment to their class of origin; the nostalgic tone of their memoirs symbolically announces "o retorno do filho à casa do Pai, para que possa assumir, depois da insubordinação [...], o seu lugar, e a volta ao seio da família, para que seja o patriarca" [the son's return to the Father's house, so that, after his insubordination, he can resume his place as the family patriarch] (32).

Perhaps there is no clearer example in Brazilian Modernism of this reattachment to the rural aristocracy's values than José Lins do Rego's first autobiographical novels, which comprise a series known as the sugar cane cycle. Already in his first book of the series, *Menino de Engenho* [Plantation Boy] (1932), the writer proposes to reveal to a mostly urban middle class readership the life of a boy in the plantation houses of the agrarian Northeastern sugar plantations. *Menino de Engenho* narrates the infancy of an orphan boy, Carlos de Melo, in the Santa Rosa plantation state owned by his maternal grandfather, Coronel José Paulino. Under his grandfather's tutelage, Carlos lives like a "free animal," enjoying the liberty of mingling with the inhabitants of the master's house and the blacks from the "streets," the name given to the ones housed in the slave quarters of the Santa Rosa plantation. By socializing with the black women and their children (the so-called "pickaninnies"), the child develops an attachment to the tropical environment, finds the stimulus and satisfaction of his (premature) sexual desires, and discovers the enchanted imagination of the forest. His sensorial experiences derive from the black women's oral narratives; in other words, the experience constitutes a necessary antidote, according to the narrator, for the melancholy of the master's house: his aunts' sobriety and his grandfather's stoicism.

This same idyllic representation of the plantation is painstakingly described in the memoirs, *Meus verdes anos* [My Green Years], that José Lins do Rego published in 1956, just one year before his death. In this autobiographical version of his boyhood, Lins do Rego portrays the Engenho Corredor plantation, governed by his grandfather Colonel José Lins—a man known for his "gentle authority" and paternalistic protection dispensed to the employees, the majority of them devoted ex-slaves who stayed

in the plantation after declaration of abolition in Brazil (1888). Emblematic of the Old agrarian Northeast, the plantation of Lins do Rego's childhood presents traces of a feudal-patriarchal tradition on the verge of its own collapse. For Lins do Rego and other regional writers of his generation, the substitution of the old sugar plantations by factories generated a profound transformation of the Northeastern traditions, moral values, as well as the meaningful social and interracial relations.

Alongside the myths of fraternity between the children of the sugar plantation and their black "milk brothers," or the mutual sexual attraction between these white children and slave women of the master's house, the stereotype of the Black Mammy is one of the most important representations in Lins do Rego's works. Through the Mammy stereotype, the author reconstructs the mythology of the Old Northeast as a utopia of kinship between the two races—White and Black—composing the pre-capitalist sugar economy. As Lins do Rego writes in his memoirs, the "cheiro do mel" [smell of honey] that permeated the fields and the machines during the molasses preparation "adoçava tudo" [sweetened everything] on the sugar plantation (61): it sweetened, for example, the "gentle" authority of his paternal grandfather (*Menino de Engenho* 53); it also sweetened the hearts of the black slaves. As the author describes Generosa, the old cook of the master's house: "a negra Generosa era tão boa como seus doces [...] os moleques sabiam que seu coração era um torrão de açúcar" [the Black Generosa was as good as her sweets [...] the children knew that her heart was a lump of sugar] (*Menino de Engenho* 43).

Besides Auntie Generosa, as she was called, there are descriptions of several old Black women who show all sorts of little kindness and seek to protect the White children whenever they get into trouble: "Maria Gorda, Generosa, Galdina e Romana. O meu avô continuava a dar-lhes de comer e vestir. E elas a trabalharem de graça, com a mesma alegria da escravidão. As suas filhas e netas iam-lhes sucedendo na servidão, com o mesmo amor à casa-grande e a mesma passividade de bons animais domésticos" [Maria Gorda, Generosa, Galdina and Romana. My grandfather continued to feed and dress them. And they would work for free, with the same happiness they had shown as slaves. And their daughters and granddaughters succeeded them in servitude, with the same love for the master's house and the same passivity of good domestic animals] (*Menino de Engenho* 41).

Auntie Generosa had been a wet-nurse for the narrator's mother, and in this way, Lins do Rego writes, "fazia as vezes de minha avó. Tôda cheia de cuidados comigo, brigava com os outros por minha causa" [she would act like my grandmother. All full of concern for me, she fought with others on my behalf] (*Menino de Engenho* 41). Granny Galdina nursed the author's grandfather and was treated with

respect by everyone: “andava de muletas, pois quebrara uma perna fazendo “cabra-cega” para brincar com os meninos [...]. Quando queriam pegar a gente para uma surra, era para junto dela que corríamos. Ela pedia pelos seus netos com os olhos cheios de lágrimas [she would go around on crutches, since she had broken a leg playing blind man’s buff with the children [...]. When they wanted to give us a beating, it was to her that we would run. She would ask for her grandchildren with her eyes full of tears] (43).

When maternity is discussed in Lins do Rego’s work, it is generally interpreted as a symbol *in absentia* – an absence somehow inscribed in the author’s fragmented recollections of his dead “legitimate” mother, temporarily substituted by single maternal aunts. In other words, in spite of the evidence in the author’s autobiographical novels, critics have systematically neglected the themes of the Black Mammy and even black maternity generally. This neglect is also manifested in the critical reception of other modernist writers’ memoirs where, as I have stated previously, the Black Mammy figures equally as an emblem of the cultural and moral legacy of the old sugar and coffee plantations. Despite the importance of the myth of the Black Mammy in Modernism—and her presence, though marginal, in 19th-century literature—not one single study about the evolution of this myth in the Brazilian popular or literary imaginary has been produced.

My critical and theoretical sources refer, therefore, to the presence of the Black Mammy in the United States, a country where the myth had an enormous impact on the popular imagery of slavery, in particular in the Old South (a regional and temporal equivalent to the old agrarian Brazilian Northeast). According to Cheryl Thurber, “Mammy did not exist to the extent that the mythology would lead people to believe. She was a character probably created by nostalgic southern Whites to ease their troubled racial consciences. Significantly, the Mammy, one of the central figures in the plantation legend of the Old South, reached her greatest popularity in the era of the New South and Progressivism” (87). It is clear that the image of the Black Mammy, redressed in “noble” moral attributes and in caricatured physical traits, acquires more of a mythological dimension than a real one. A lack of historical evidence of the Black Mammy stereotype does not invalidate, however, her important role in the project of various nostalgic writers in the reconstruction of the humanitarian South, a kind of “utopian community of harmonious relations” (Thurber 97). As Thurber argues, “[w]ith the expression of pious devotion and support for Mammy proper southerners could convince themselves and others of their own goodness. In a sense they were attempting to redeem themselves for the other wrongs they had done to blacks, because, of course, ‘I love my Mammy’” (98).

Although there exist incarnations of the Black Mammy myth in ante-bellum literature (like the character “Aunt Chloe” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe), she gains literary notoriety in the United States only later, between 1890 and 1920. This period marks the emergence of films, musicals (*The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, *Imitation of Life*) and popular songs that equally glorify the beloved Black Mammy. One can also note the grotesque appropriation of the Black Mammy’s image by the food industry and cleaning products. In 1936, when the writer Margareth Mitchell creates the immortal “Mammy” in *Gone with the Wind* (1936)—a novel set in the Civil War period—the Black Mammy had already become a national icon. Curiously, this sizeable visibility seen in North American literary and popular culture at the turn of the century finds no equivalent in the Brazilian context, a country with a historical context of centuries of slavery and a similar need to reconcile itself with a cruel past. One of the most complete studies about blacks in Brazilian cinema, Robert Stam’s *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* (1997), cites only one Brazilian movie, *Sinhá Moça* [*The plantation owner’s daughter*, 1953], in which the cast includes an old slave woman named Virgínia, who has characteristics akin to the Black Mammy myth. Neither did the Black Mammy become an important television icon, as revealed in Joel Zito Araújo’s study *A negação do Brasil: o negro na telenovela brasileira* [*The Negation of Brazil: Blacks in Brazilian Soap Operas*] (2000).

There are various ways to attempt to explain this invisibility of the Black Mammy myth (or de-mammification) in pre-modernist Brazilian culture, between 1890 and 1920. In “Como e porque a escravidão voltou à consciência nacional na década de 30” [How and why slavery returned to national consciousness in the 1930s] (2003), the historian Dain Borges examines precisely this silence or omission surrounding the topic of slavery that characterized Brazilian public discourse during that period. This silence, as previously argued by other historians, is explained in part by the racism of the Brazilian elite, which refused to acknowledge the legacy of slavery and Afro-Brazilian culture in the formation of a national identity (Borges 207). Nevertheless, according to Borges, “the fact that the republican revolution followed abolition was also not propitious to the recognition of the legacy of slavery. The country was lacking legitimacy, a legitimacy yearned for by a regime that was at once modernist and progressive, and rooted in a Brazilian republican tradition” (210). As such, slavery was evidence of a national backwardness that had to be forgotten, because it conflicted with the modernizing project that the newly republican country sought to institute.

The sociologist Gilberto Freyre was the first intellectual who, according to Borges, had the “courage” and the “audacity”, as early as the 1920s, to “publish what everyone silenced: Slavery’s influence on nationality” (221). Freyre’s article “Vida social no Nordeste: aspectos de um século de transição” [Social Life in the Northeast: Aspect of A Century of Transition] from 1925, an embryo of what was later to become his masterpiece *Casa-Grande e Senzala* [*The masters and the slaves*] (1933), addresses the impact that slavery had on the cultural and domestic life of the great patriarchal Brazilian families, particularly the slave’s importance in the homes of the sugar plantation owners of the Northeast. In his *Manifesto Regionalista de 1926* [1926 Regionalist Manifest], Freyre no longer defines the influence of slavery in the heart of the patriarchal family as a “infecção moral” [moral infection] (an argument used by his Abolitionist compatriots), but as a “strength” or an invigoration (48). And perhaps because Freyre considers maternity to be the most noble of the feminine roles, it is in the “aliança da ama negra com o menino branco” [alliance of the Black Mammy with the White child] (*Casa-Grande e Senzala* 388) that the sociologist finds his best, and surely least threatening, argument in favor of his Brazilian racial miscegenation theory:

Na ternura, na mímica excessiva, no catolicismo em que se deliciam nossos sentidos, na música, no andar, na fala, no canto de ninar menino pequeno, em tudo o que é expressão sincera de vida, trazemos quase todos a marca da influência negra. Da escrava ou sinhama que nos embalou. Que nos deu de mamar. Que nos deu de comer, ela própria amolengando na mão o bolão de comida. Da negra velha que nos contou as primeiras histórias de bicho e de mau-assombrado. [In the tenderness, in our excessive coddling, in the Catholicism that indulges our senses, in our music, in our way of walking, in our way of talking, in the lullaby of a small child, in everything that is a sincere expression of life, there is within us all the mark of Black influence. [The mark] of the slave woman or nanny who cradled us; who breastfed us; who spoon fed us, she herself first mashing the food in her hand; of the old Black woman who first told us stories about the boogie-man and ghosts]. (*Casa-Grande e Senzala* 343).

Gilberto Freyre’s audacious gesture of admitting the participation of slaves in the formation of national identity fostered the reemergence of the Black Mammy myth in the Brazilian public discourse, especially in the childhood memoirs of modernist writers from the “Grand Brazilian families.” Given the invisibility of the Black Mammy in Brazilian historiography, Freyre was likely inspired by the North American construction of the myth, particularly if we consider his readings of, and concrete references to

studies about families in the American South (such as Arthur Wallace Calhoun's classic *A Social History of The American Family*). To begin with, the myth of the Black Mammy served the sociologist's goal of advocating in favor of the presence of Black slaves, and in particular of the wet-nurse's role in the plantation owner's home. Freyre challenged the hygienist representation of the wet-nurse as a dangerous carrier of diseases and purveyor of African beliefs by offering a portrayal of a tender, morally virtuous Black Mammy. Furthermore, the image of the Black Mammy served as one of the most effective tools in the Freyreian construction of a benign view of slavery in the old sugar plantations.

It is well known that in the 1920's Freyre's work would influence an entire group of young writers and artists from the Northeast, of which the sociologist, without false modesty, liked to refer to as his disciples (even though he belonged to the same generation of these young Northeasterners). The critic Luciano Trigo (2002) said that "num certo sentido, o próprio romance moderno do Nordeste teve como motor imediato o pensamento de Gilberto Freyre e o Manifesto Regionalista que saiu do Congresso de Recife de 1926 (embora só publicado em 1952), pontos de partida da nova geração de ficcionistas nordestinos" [in a certain sense, the modernist novel of the Northeast grew out of Gilberto Freyre's thought and the *Manifesto Regionalista*, which came out during the 1926 Recife Conference (although it was published only in 1952); [they served as] the starting point of a new generation of Northeastern fiction writers] (57). Of these new Northeastern writers, José Lins do Rego was undoubtedly the most influenced by Freyre's work, or at least the one who acknowledged publicly the ideological and literary influence of his generation's mentor. In his preface to Freyre's collected essays *Região e tradição* [Region and Tradition] (1941) (republished in *Gordos e magros* [Fat and Thin]), Lins do Rego recognizes the impact that his friendship with Freyre had on discovering his vocational calling, as well as on his adoption of the regionalist/confessional aesthetic that would govern his first novels. In a well-known letter to Freyre (1924), the writer places himself on par with a "escravo mental" [mental slave] in the face of his friend's "absolute" intellectual authority ("Prefácio" 132) – an image reinforced in his preface of Freyre's essays: "escrevo sobre ele, e quase falo de mim mesmo, tanto me sinto obra sua, tanta influência exerceu sobre minha pobre natureza..." [I write about him, and I almost speak of myself, feeling so as I do, like a creation of his, so extensively did he impact on my poor nature...] (132).

According to Lins do Rego, after reading Freyre's essay, *Vida social no Nordeste: aspectos de um século de transição* [Social Life in the Northeast: Aspects of a Century of Transition] (1925), he decided to transform his project of writing a biography about his maternal grandfather, the patriarch José Lins, into

a confessional novel about his life as a child growing up on a sugar plantation. As Freyre himself would later clarify in the 1941 version of that essay (published in *Região e tradição*), “Desde 1925, o autor [ou seja, o próprio Freyre] vinha reunindo material para um estudo da vida de menino no Brasil, especialmente no Nordeste—o menino de engenho, o menino de sobrado e o menino de rua—estudo que abandonou em 1930, tendo entretanto incorporado parte do material reunido, a este e a outros ensaios” [since 1925, the author of this essay [that is, Freyre himself] had been gathering material for a study about the life of a boy in Brazil, particularly in the Northeast—the plantation boy, the city boy, the boy on the streets—a study that he abandoned in 1930, nonetheless including part of the collected material in this and other essays] (151). If Freyre, thus, abandoned his project on the “estudo da vida de menino no Brasil” [study of the life of a boy in Brazil], despite incorporating this material in various essays, his friend/disciple seems, on the contrary, to have tenaciously seized on this idea. Freyre wrote about Lins do Rego’s autobiographical project: “Em 1933, [Lins do Rego] escrevia-me do Rio a respeito de um livro novo do qual já lera trechos durante uma manhã inteira, dizendo-o inspirado em meu projeto de reconstituição da vida de menino no Brasil—nos engenhos e na cidade” [In 1933, [José Lins do Rego] wrote me from Rio about a new book which I’d already spent the morning reading parts of, saying it was inspired by my project of depicting the life of a boy in Brazil—on the sugar plantations and in the city] (“Recordando José Lins do Rego” 97). This note refers to *Menino de engenho*, a novel, according to Freyre, about “para o drama da infância brasileira. Para os pecados e para as virtudes da infância” [the drama of a Brazilian childhood; about the infantile sins and virtues of childhood] (94). Freyre attributes the puerile sins to the “primeiras aventuras de sexo [do] menino senhoril com mulatas magistras [e] muleques crescidos na rua.” [first sexual adventures [of] the plantation owner’s son with skilled mulattoes [and] Black kids brought up on the streets] (94). The virtues, however, came from affectionate, asexual contact between the child and his Black Mammy.

The brevity of this essay does not allow me to analyze the degree of truth and the implicit contradictions in this mutual narrative of the relationship of mental slave/absolute master between Freyre and Rego. In this paper, I focus exclusively on Rego’s appropriation of the myth of the Black Mammy, as it is found in much of Freyre’s writings—a third-hand appropriation, should my hypothesis be valid that Freyre, in turn, had rescued this myth from North American historiography. The vicissitudes of the trajectory made by the Black Mammy’s myth, until it arrived on the pages of Rego’s memoirs, are not as important in this essay as the fact that this myth played a pivotal role in Lins do

Rego's construction of the mythology of the Old agrarian Northeast as a utopian region of interracial brotherhood. As the historian Emília Viotti suggests, there is nothing more opportune for the success of this enterprise than to emphasize the aspects of an aristocratic tradition that favors a harmonious relationship between masters and slaves, "especially in a moment [the 1930s] when blacks organized a Black Front to fight for the improvement of their conditions" (244). Thus, on the one hand, the myth of the Black Mammy served as a compensation or relief (at the imaginary level) of the racial tensions in the society of that period; on the other hand, it fueled an expectation of loyalty and servitude that did nothing to help domestic servants free themselves from their condition of half-slaves. Despite the eradication of wet-nurses in Brazil after the success of hygienist campaigns in the late 19th century, housewives never fully gave up the practice of hiring foster mothers, or nannies, with whom they could share the responsibilities of maternal chores. These domestic servants lacked professional role models that did not conform to the stereotype of the subservient Black Mammy. Furthermore, this myth did nothing to contribute to an awareness of the cruelty of transferred maternity. As pointed out in the *folhetim* cited at the beginning of this paper, the Black surrogate mother is usually denied care of her own children to assume the protection of the white women's offspring.

As with every myth, that of the Black Mammy has the task of hiding a reality under a false pretense of visibility. In an insightful essay about the Black nanny in Brazil, the anthropologist Rita Segato mainly speaks of this invisibility imposed by silence or by stereotypical representation. But who, ultimately, is the Brazilian Black wet-nurse? In order to get a closer look at her reality, one needs to steer attention away from modernist childhood memoirs and search for her story, instead, in other discourses or representative exercises such as testimonial literature, oral history, Afro-Brazilian literature, and contemporary historical feminist studies (Giacomini, Mott, Graham). Only then can one achieve a more heterogeneous, and perhaps a more humane, view of these "Black Mammies"—so close to, yet so far removed from, Brazilian aristocratic and bourgeois families.

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Notes

¹ All the translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.