



“Noite de Almirante”: Interracial Love in Machado de Assis’s Nineteenth Century¹

“Noite de almirante”: Raça e relações amorosas no século XIX de Machado de Assis

Paulo Dutra

Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas / Estados Unidos
dutrapp@sfasu.edu

Abstract: In the twenty-first century some scholars started revisiting the works of the mulatto Machado de Assis through discussions about his racial identification and posture with regard to race. As a consequence a new range of reading possibilities has been released. The racial identification of the characters, hence, their interpretations, customarily based on an ideal hegemonic white model of society, began to be revised and challenged. Having racial marks attributed to the characters as the starting point while approaching them reveals Machado’s keen eye on the tension involved in the negotiations of spaces in the not always harmonious relations developed in the extremely mixed-race nineteenth-century Brazilian society. This essay resorts to the short story “Noite de almirante,” hitherto excluded from this perspective, as a case study to demonstrate the potential of such a reading.

Keywords: race; Afro-Brazilian literature; Machado de Assis.

Resumo: Com o advento do século XXI, uma parcela dos estudiosos da obra do mulato Machado de Assis iniciou um processo de arejamento das discussões sobre sua identificação racial e postura diante da questão da raça. Um novo leque de possibilidades de leitura foi aberto e a identificação racial das personagens, e por conseguinte suas

¹ I would like to thank my colleagues Joyce Johnston and Paul Dixon for carefully reading previous versions of this article and for their enlightening comments.

interpretações, tão costumeiramente alicerçadas num modelo de sociedade ideal e hegemonicamente branca, começa a ser revista. Uma leitura das personagens machadianas feita a partir das marcas raciais a elas atribuídas, revela um olhar ainda mais aguçado do Bruxo sobre a tensão envolvida nas negociações dos espaços nas nem sempre harmoniosas relações desenvolvidas na extremamente mestiça sociedade brasileira do século XIX. Aqui, o conto “Noite de almirante,” até o momento excluído dessa perspectiva, servirá de caso de estudo para demonstrar o potencial de tal leitura.

Palavras-chave: raça; literatura afro-brasileira; Machado de Assis.

Until some decades ago we were accustomed to believing that we could appreciate or fully understand Machado de Assis’s work while neglecting his Afro-Brazilian constitution, the social context regarding Afro-Brazilians in the nineteenth century, and the impact of such elements on his literary production. Lately, there have been a slightly increasing number of attempts at addressing these elements. Such a posture is a response to a mainly Eurocentric/Western-oriented alignment of the analytical tools with which scholars, previously, have approached his literature. Throughout the twentieth century, Machado’s “literary profile was made so Western that it would end up leaving its mark not only upon the public image constructed throughout time, but even upon physical appearance.”² As a result, a member of the African Diaspora in Brazil, the mulatto Machado de Assis, became an “emblematic effigy of the process of identity whitening that occurred in lands south of the equator”.³

Throughout history, scholars who addressed racial issues in Machado de Assis arrive at conclusions that range from his complete integration to the lusophone tradition to a more inclusive proposition. The former line of inquiry assumes a racial identification dissociated from African origins, the latter aims at a restoration of Machado de Assis’s place among the diasporic authors. If compared to the number of studies, built around his life and work, that either disregards or renders race and racial implications unimportant, the numbers of studies that address the importance of race is rather small. Nevertheless, this little segment has gained renewed breath and, in addition to steadily expanding the scope of the inquiries, it is impacting academic circles.

² DUARTE. Machado de Assis’s African Descent, p. 134.

³ DUARTE. Machado de Assis’s African Descent, p. 134.

This essay addresses the importance of unveiling characters' racial makeup in Machado's short story "Noite de almirante" to a better understanding of his works. The text was first published in *Gazeta de Notícias* in 1884 and, later in the same year, incorporated into *Histórias sem data*. In addition, the short story came to light in between *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* and *Quincas Borba*. That was a very fertile, and productive period, in which an already well-established Machado de Assis also published *O alienista* and another collection of short stories, *Papéis avulsos*. The conflictive and unusual love triangle between Deolindo Venta-Grande, Genoveva, and José Diogo has never been approached as promising material for racial inquiry. "Noite de Almirante" is widely overlooked by scholars who addressed racial issues in Machado de Assis's works.⁴ Nonetheless, this tale, which not only has stood the test of time but also presents mixed-race characters, adds an essential aspect to our understanding of Machado de Assis's work and racial identification.

Short stories "Pai contra mãe" and "O caso da vara" are the typical⁵ examples that promptly come to light when racial issues are under scrutiny. Marli Fantini, assuming that Neves is a white man, sums up the situation created in the former: "Candido Neves and the escaped slave are both part of this marginalized portion. What gives alternatives [...] to Candido Neves and his descendants [...] is color and anomie".⁶ And Dixon introduces the impasse presented in "O caso da vara": "a young man becomes complicit in the beating of a young black girl, handing a switch to the tyrannical Sinhá Rita, because he is the victim of repression and depends on Rita to intervene in his behalf".⁷ According to Proença Filho the short stories "are not centered on the ethnic question, but on the

⁴ It does not appear in the anthology *Machado de Assis afrodescendente: escritos de caramujo* (2007) prepared by Eduardo de Assis Duarte. In fact, it is not listed with any of the works that deal with race. Not even Selma Vital's book, published in 2012, dedicated to the racial question in Machado's short stories, mentions Deolindo Venta-Grande's and Genoveva's adventures.

⁵ There is also the famous episode in *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*.

⁶ "Cândido Neves e a escrava fujona fazem ambos parte dessa porção marginalizada. O que dá alternativas [...] a Cândido Neves e a sua descendência [...] é a cor e anomia" (FANTINI. Machado de Assis, p. 157, my translation).

⁷ DIXON. Machado de Assis' Early Mulato Narratives, p. 41.

problem of human egoism and the *lukewarmness* of the character”.⁸ In any case, different scenarios present resembling situations and identical outcome: the suffering of a black female who is always sacrificed in the end on behalf of an apparently *white* male. And both of them only can do it due to the implications of the place people from different races occupied in Brazilian nineteenth-century social hierarchy.

Among the scholars who addressed the issue in the twenty-first century, is Eduardo de Assis Duarte⁹, who makes a solid case for the inclusion of Machado de Assis in the hall of Afro-Brazilian writers. Duarte organized the anthology *Machado de Assis afrodescendente: escritos de caramujo* which contained samples of a variety of Machado’s work in which racial issues were addressed. Nonetheless, the anthology proved to be incomplete because Machado did not always address the issue explicitly. For example, the short story “A mulher pálida” was omitted from the collection.

Perhaps the same explanation for the absence of “A mulher pálida” from Duarte’s anthology can be used in the episode of seaman Deolindo and his absence from the studies that deal with this question. As Duarte himself states regarding “A mulher pálida”, “let us not forget that Machado is a man of his time and country. The signs ‘white’ and ‘black’ only seemingly are out of the narrative”.¹⁰ The same rationale applies to “Noite de almirante” because black and white (primarily white, as I show later) are indeed signs that are only apparently out of the narrative. Bearing in mind the relation I just laid out, I reach the point

⁸ “[...] não se centralizam na questão étnica, mas no problema do egoísmo humano e da tibieza de caráter” (PROENÇA FILHO. *A trajetória do negro na literatura brasileira*, p.172, my translation).

⁹ Duarte is the organizer of *Literatura e afrodescendência no Brasil* (published in 2011) and has worked on the still under development concept of *Afro-Brazilian literature* (see DUARTE, 2008). Although I am aware of the problems the use of the terminology “afro” and “negro” as synonyms posits, I decided to avoid the latter here due to the historical load imposed on the word in English. For a discussion on the implication of the terminology in Brazil see Cuti’s *Literatura negro-brasileira*.

¹⁰ “não nos esqueçamos de que Machado é homem de seu tempo e de seu país. Os signos ‘branco’ e ‘negro’ só aparentemente estão fora da narrativa ... A mulher pálida” (DUARTE. *A capoeira literária de Machado de Assis*, p. 36, my translation).

where “Deolindo Venta-Grande (it was an on-board nickname) left the Navy arsenal and walked down the street of Bragança.”¹¹

Identifying his main character by name and nickname thus Machado begins this tale that has always aroused the curiosity of readers and critics. Paul Dixon, Alfredo Bosi, Wilberth Salgueiro, Crismery Moratori, and Dutra are among the scholars who have examined the short story. According to the latter, “usually what concerns the critics is the role Genoveva plays in deceiving the poor sailor”.¹² And this is typically due to the peculiar figure of Genoveva and her phrase: “Well, yes, Deolindo, it was true. When I swore, it was true”.¹³ Dixon draws attention to the fact that the short story creates an expectation in the reader.¹⁴ Salgueiro points to the importance of the love triangle described in it and states that “the way in which such a triangle behaves makes us think [...] in certain aesthetic and ideological values of our nineteenth century, a thought that we can extend, with the necessary mediations, to the present times”.¹⁵ Substantial as it is, two details were left out of Salgueiro’s analysis nonetheless. Firstly, there is no particular mention of the fact that, aside from being a woman in the nineteenth century, Genoveva was a *caboclinha*. Secondly, Deolindo Venta-Grande’s big nostrils may not only echo venture and wind as Salgueiro pointed out but also posit another meaning. Although it is subtle, it suggests that a physical trait commonly associated with blacks in Brazil, the size of the nostril, discloses Deolindo’s racial makeup.

The historical record indicates that Machado had grounds to construct his character upon the model of a real life black or mixed-raced seaman. According to Prado Maia, as early as 1823, “the Brazilian officers and sailors were a very small number, and even slaves offered by

¹¹ “Deolindo Venta-Grande (era uma alcunha de bordo) saiu do arsenal de Marinha e enfiou pela rua de Bragança” (ASSIS. Noite de almirante, p. 170, my translation).

¹² DUTRA. *Cervantes’ Heritage in Latin America: A Reading of Machado de Assis’ and Jorge Luis Borges’ Cervantine Literature*, p. 66.

¹³ “Pois, sim, Deolindo, era verdade. Quando jurei, era verdade” (ASSIS. Noite de almirante, p. 174, my translation).

¹⁴ DIXON. *Os contos de Machado de Assis: mais do que sonha a filosofia*, p. 92.

¹⁵ “o modo como tal triângulo se comporta faz pensar [...] em certos valores estéticos e ideológicos do nosso Oitocentos, um pensar que podemos estender, com as mediações necessárias, aos tempos atuais” (SALGUEIRO. Nomes não mentem (quase nunca), p. 31, my translation).

their lords were enlisted as sailors and cabin boys”.¹⁶ Gilberto Guizelin and José Arias Neto add that presenting “men of the ‘second class’, mixed with blacks and browns – in short, the nation’s maritime forces were completely mixed”.¹⁷ Although it is less explicit in Deolindo, the characterization of the protagonists of the tale as a *cabocla*¹⁸ and a black (or at least mixed-race) man is a crucial interpretative key that has, hitherto, broadly gone unnoticed. Machado did not categorically state that Deolindo was a black or mixed-race man. However, there is abundant supporting evidence for us to secure this line of interpretation. The key is audaciously put before our eyes and therefore Machado hides it, employing explicit exposition, so to speak, in the last place that one would think: right before us. For those who will remember that Machado de Assis avidly read Edgar Allan Poe and the plot of Poe’s short story “The Purloined Letter”, Machado’s artifice of hiding Deolindo’s race in plain sight may become more evident.¹⁹

Reading Deolindo as black or mixed-race allows for an immensely enriched understanding of Machado’s literary technique, Machadian criticism’s alignment thus far, and, more importantly, Machado’s keen eye to his country’s and time’s social configuration. According to Moratori, “the sailor Deolindo corresponds to the model of predictable character, of which the narrator (and [...] the reader) knows every movement of interiority: thoughts, doubts, hatred, despair, hope”.²⁰ Because we intimately know this character that truly fits into such a model, we readers forget to pay attention

¹⁶ “os oficiais e marinheiros brasileiros constituíam número reduzidíssimo, aceitaram-se até como marinheiros e grumetes, escravos oferecidos por seus senhores” (MAIA. *Através da história naval brasileira*, p. 29, my translation).

¹⁷ “homens de ‘segunda classe’, misturados a negros e pardos –, enfim, as forças marítimas da nação mostravam-se totalmente mescladas”. (GUIZELIN; NETO. “Negros na Marinha de Guerra do Brasil (1822-1831)” online, my translation).

¹⁸ Strictly speaking: someone of mixed Indigenous Brazilian and European ancestry.

¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that the meanings of the verb *aventar* range from “insinuar” (insinuate), “enunciar” (enunciate), “expor” (expose), “sugerir” (suggest), and “prever” (predict), to “captar” (capture), “notar” (notice) or “descobrir pelo *faro*” (sniff out) ou “*olfato*” (smell).

²⁰ “O marujo Deolindo corresponde ao modelo de personagem previsível, do qual o narrador (e [...] o leitor) conhece todo movimento de interioridade: pensamentos, dúvidas, ódio, desespero, esperança” (MORATORI. *Machado de Assis, a moral e a transgressão: O ethos de uma arte afirmativa*, p. 169, my translation).

to his outward characterization and his big nostrils. Not even Salgueiro, who stopped for a few moments to inspect the majestic external openings of the sailor's nasal cavities, thought of such a possibility. Although it is in the body of the character, and while Salgueiro²¹ intuitively feels that Machado refers to the "sailor's huge nostril"²² and not the nose, it should be duly noted that the possible and subtle²³ allusion to the physical characteristic associated with Afrodescendants escapes him.²⁴ Salgueiro evidently does not take into account the possibility of Deolindo being a black man. As a result, we are presented with an important but incomplete appraisal of the situation Machado de Assis portrayed.

How can one explain why, for over a hundred years, we have turned a blind eye on Deolindo's big nostrils and the characterization of Genoveva as a *cabocla*? The answer lies in the breadth of the "process of identity whitening that occurred in lands south of the equator".²⁵ Such a process developed mechanisms intrinsically linked to our perception of the world, history, literature, and Machadian literature. That is why "we believe[d] that this mulatto author deals exclusively with white people like 'us'".²⁶ We were indeed awfully accustomed to believing that Machado deals exclusively with white people like "us". As a result, we failed to cogitate the possibility of Deolindo being a black character, and we forgot that Genoveva was a *cabocla*.

²¹ SALGUEIRO. Nomes não mentem (quase nunca).

²² "narina avantajada do marujo" (SALGUEIRO. Nomes não mentem (quase nunca), p. 36, my translation).

²³ In case it has not become clear, the reference to the size of the opening of the nasal cavity and not the nose itself is a crucial element here. While a big nose is a general characteristic that can be found in any individual, the "venta" *i.e.* both the opening and the vulgar terminology used to refer to it subtly points to a characteristic usually, broadly, and racist one may say, associated with blacks in Brazil.

²⁴ After this manuscript was completed, *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis* came out. It is worth mentioning that the translators (Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson) also missed this detail and translated *venta* as "nose", which reinforces traditional assumptions on the alleged lack of racial issues in Machado's work (see ASSIS. Admiral's night).

²⁵ DUARTE. Machado de Assis's African Descent, p. 234.

²⁶ "[...] acreditamos que este autor mulato trata exclusivamente de gente branca como 'nós'" (VITAL. *Quase brancos, quase pretos: representação étnico-racial no conto machadiano*, p. 32, my translation).

The treatments scholars have given to Machado's female characters have changed over time. The most remarkable illustration of a chauvinistic treatment is probably Capitu's alleged adulterous conduct. This notion, crafted by the boy Bentinho and the adult lawyer Bento Santiago, was widely propagated by many scholars and readers. Not without prompt contestation,²⁷ Helen Caldwell was probably the first female scholar to provide *legal representation* to Capitu in Bentinho's, and his supporters's, court of law: a chauvinist system that operates both in the real and fictitious world.²⁸ With the fortunate advent of feminist theories, however controversial some believe they might be, and the greater access to academic spaces, scholarly publications, and visibility of female scholars, less unsuitable treatments have been given to female characters in general. Although scholars cannot ignore it anymore without being fiercely and appropriately confronted, even after Caldwell's already classic commentaries, some chauvinistic approaches can still be spotted and they have also targeted Genoveva. Alfredo Bosi's is probably the most obvious one: "Genoveva told the truth of the facts when approached by Deolindo, not because she was candid, not because she was naturally incapable of lying, but simply because she had already lied enough".²⁹ However, Salgueiro and Dixon have demystified such ideas about Genoveva. The former showed that Bosi, "poorly disguising a Christian perspective, proceeds to a moral analysis of the female character".³⁰ The latter demonstrated that "one vision of the world is concentrated on the character of Genoveva [...] The world, like Genoveva, is not cruel, it is inconstant".³¹ Nonetheless, a perchance-greater issue remains

²⁷ See Hélio de Seixas Guimarães's note to his translation of "Our American Cousin, Machado de Assis" (CALDWELL. *Nosso primo americano*, Machado de Assis, p. 1).

²⁸ See CALDWELL. *Nosso primo americano*, Machado de Assis.

²⁹ "Genoveva disse a verdade dos fatos quando abordada por Deolindo, não porque fosse cândida, não porque fosse naturalmente incapaz de mentir, mas simplesmente porque já mentira o bastante [...]" (BOSI. *O enigma do olhar*, p. 115, my translation).

³⁰ "[...] mal disfarçando uma perspectiva cristã, se enclausura numa análise moral do personagem feminino" (SALGUEIRO. *Nomes não mentem* (quase nunca), p. 38, my translation).

³¹ "[...] uma visão do mundo está concentrada na personagem de Genoveva. [...] O mundo, como Genoveva, não é cruel, é inconstante" (DIXON. *Os contos de Machado de Assis: mais do que sonha a filosofia*, p. 95, my translation).

unaddressed: Genoveva's racial makeup and the implication of it to her approach to romantic relationships in the nineteenth century.

As Salgueiro accurately pointed out, the tale can make us think of aesthetic and ideological values regarding women's social role in a patriarchal society such as Brazil's nineteenth century. However, Salgueiro did not take into account that the places white and mixed-race women occupied, especially in literature, were quite different. The black female character's dreadful denouement in "Pai contra mãe" and "O caso da vara" attests such a fact. Flynn, González and Souza built a compelling argument in favor of the indetermination of Cândido Neves's race.³² Despite the potential risk of encouraging the broadly spread idea that poorness truly would equal blacks and whites in Brazil, and, by extension, revitalizing the dreadful fallacy of the racial democracy that haunts us all, reading him as a non-white character is not only conceivable but also very appealing and totally worth the risk. It may lead to a more thorough interpretation of Machado's keen eye for his time and extremely mixed-race society configuration.³³ There is no definitive physical indication of his race; therefore both readings are accurate, possible, and not necessarily conflictive. My reading of Cândido Neves as a white man is deliberated and has no grounds in the whitening process or the pseudo-signs and the allusions to whiteness that are indeed "far from proving that the characters are white".³⁴ Flynn, González and Souza correctly rendered them null as definite proof. My choice of reading him as a white man here is grounded in a comparison of the role Machado assigned to male characters in the female character's denouement in "Pai contra mãe", "O caso da vara", and "Noite de almirante". Because the two female characters in "Pai contra mãe" and "O caso da vara" face a very different end from Genoveva's and because Machado's work allows for connections between his different texts, in this context, I am compelled to read Damião and Cândido Neves as white characters.

³² See FLYNN; GONZÁLEZ; SOUZA. Whiter Shades of Pale: "Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil.

³³ For a reading of Cândido Neves as an "afro-descendant" see ROCHA. "Father versus Mother": Slavery and its Apparatuses.

³⁴ FLYNN; GONZÁLEZ; SOUZA. Whiter Shades of Pale: "Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil, p. 17.

I concur with Flynn, González and Souza's argument that Machado may have deliberately misled the reader by not making explicit Cândido Neves's whiteness.³⁵ Machado indeed "invites the reader to assert his or her own prejudices".³⁶ Nonetheless, without denying the possibilities Flynn, González and Souza's conclusions may evoke, I find another reason for Machado's attitude. Machado could be subtly debating the allegedly fundamental values behind *blackness*, and not *whiteness* as Flynn, González and Souza conclude, that were also already being "embedded [...] into the Brazilian imagination of hierarchy".³⁷ Compared to Cândido Neves and Damião, Deolindo is the only one who presents a physical trait that can identify him as non-white. Machado provides no description of Damião. On the one hand the historical record indicates that Afro-Brazilians attended seminars. On the other hand, nonetheless, Lucrécia addresses him as master ("sinhô"). None of the above can be definitive for establishing Damião's racial identity either. Reading Cândido Neves as a non-white may demonstrate that Machado's works indeed call "whiteness into question"³⁸ and the allusions to whiteness in "Pai contra mãe" indeed "provoke a debate around the fundamental values behind whiteness".³⁹ However the fundamental values Machado was calling into debate were the positive traits associated a priori with whiteness. All the negative traits usually associated with and imposed as inherent to blacks are found in Cândido Neves. They can also be attributed to the "fujão"⁴⁰ Damião to a certain degree. Therefore the lack of certainty pertaining to the characters can also be a result of Machado's delicate position.⁴¹ Exposing explicitly the fact that negative features imposed

³⁵ FLYNN; GONZÁLEZ; SOUZA. Whiter Shades of Pale: "Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil, p. 8.

³⁶ FLYNN; GONZÁLEZ; SOUZA. Whiter Shades of Pale: "Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil, p. 5.

³⁷ FLYNN; GONZÁLEZ; SOUZA. Whiter Shades of Pale: "Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil, p. 17.

³⁸ FLYNN; GONZÁLEZ; SOUZA. Whiter Shades of Pale: "Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil, p. 17.

³⁹ FLYNN; GONZÁLEZ; SOUZA. Whiter Shades of Pale: "Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Runaway. One who repeatedly attempts to escape.

⁴¹ Selma Vital's accurate assessment of Machado's position may clarify the point: "unlike most of his critics, Machado lived the reality of being a mulatto in nineteenth-century

on blacks are also found in whites could have convulsed Machado's tricky position.

Genoveva lives in the same patriarchal nineteenth-century society Salgueiro refers to indeed, but, despite Deolindo's potentially threatening hard feelings and jealousy, she does not experience a dreadful end. She does not have a nineteenth-century racially empowered white male as the antagonist. Therefore she is not "a demure Alencarian heroine",⁴² as Salgueiro correctly concludes, but, exactly, because she is a *caboclinha* and because Deolindo is not a white man. Bosi's moral analysis of Genoveva's conduct has no place in Machado's world. A *caboclinha* did not have any moral or otherwise obligation to abide by the model of conduct prescribed for the white females Bosi trusts. Bosi fails to see that that "vision of the world [that] is concentrated on the character of Genoveva"⁴³ is Machado's.

All the scholars, who have addressed "Noite de almirante", have treated the characters of the tale either as if they were white, or, at least, as if racial issues were unimportant or absent. If Genoveva and Deolindo were white, the tale and the love triangle would have to have been staged in another setting and with other tones, other colors, and other values. Our nineteenth-century readers would have most likely frowned upon such a plot if white characters (especially a female) were portrayed in it. In our nineteenth century, a motive as commonplace and exhausted as the love triangle gains fresh breath because Machado created a woman who possesses the capacity for choice and argumentation in her favor in a patriarchal world. Such an outcome could only be reached because the tale has, as main characters, a *cabocla* and a black man. A brief comparison to other love triangles present in Machado's

Brazil and [...] for that reason *any intervention* on his part would be interpreted before as *pamphleteer, overshadowing its intrinsically literary value*" ("ao contrário da maioria dos seus críticos, Machado vivia a realidade de ser um mulato no Brasil finissecular e [...] por essa razão *toda e qualquer intervenção* de sua parte seria interpretada antes como *panfletária, ofuscando seu valor intrinsecamente literário*" (VITAL. *Quase brancos, quase pretos: representação étnico-racial no conto machadiano*, p. 25, my translation, my emphasis).

⁴² "[...] uma recatada heroína alencariana" (SALGUEIRO. *Nomes não mentem* (quase nunca), p. 5, my translation).

⁴³ "[...] visão do mundo [que] está concentrada na personagem de Genoveva" (DIXON. *Os contos de Machado de Assis: mais do que sonha a filosofia*, p. 95, my translation).

work and that of his contemporaries would suffice to make noticeable the fact that Genoveva can only, first, date a black low-ranking sailor, second, exchange him for the farm peddler, and third, affirm “when I swore, it was the truth”⁴⁴ because she is a *caboclinha*. A white woman could never have acted in such a manner without prompting immediate and scandalous repercussions. No author could have penned such a plot either, without causing even greater scandal. This detail about the way romantic relationships functioned is a contextual aspect of Rio de Janeiro’s nineteenth-century society that has been widely overlooked in the readings of “Noite de almirante”.

The third element of the love triangle in the tale is a farm peddler named José Diogo. A more detailed study of farm peddlers could be quite revealing of the role he plays in the short story. Here it suffices to observe that, in addition to the fact that Muscat⁴⁵ was a large slave market in the early nineteenth century,⁴⁶ there are indications in the historical records that suggest a high probability that Afrodescendants were not among those who dedicated themselves to this business. According to Frédéric Mauro, typical peddlers were usually French, Jewish, or Italian.⁴⁷ Another example that can be listed is the well-known “War of the Peddlers” (1710-1711). The historical event whose protagonists were the landowners and sugar cane plantations owners and Portuguese traders pejoratively nicknamed peddlers. Of course, in neither case is Machado’s Rio de Janeiro the scenario. Therefore, affirming, at this moment, that the *Fluminense* peddlers were exclusively white, would be irresponsible, but the suggestion that they are is consistent with Machado’s literary technique.

Machado’s tale comprises the three main racial representatives of urban Brazil since, in addition to presenting blacks and mixed-race as protagonists, he relegated to the white man a place outside the body of the narrative. José Diogo, in spite of having a main role in the triangle, at no time *appears* in the story (very bright irony). Duarte can be then taken quite literary in this case since black (Deolindo’s possible but not explicit

⁴⁴ “[...] quando jurei, era verdade” (ASSIS. Noite de almirante, p. 174, my translation).

⁴⁵ The Portuguese word for Muscat, a city in Oman, is *Mascate*, which also means “peddler”.

⁴⁶ See HISTÓRIA Geral da África, v. VI, p. 889-890.

⁴⁷ MAURO. *O Brasil no tempo de D. Pedro II, 1831-1889*, p. 78-79.

racial make-up), and white (José Diogo's possible but not explicit racial make-up) are only apparently outside the narrative. Machado introduces a *cabocla* i.e. mixed-race, and two characters that indeed, according to the reasoning exposed so far, can represent the white and the black components of urban Rio de Janeiro society. And considering Machado's literary pattern and the fact that the mixed-race completion of Genoveva was unequivocally presented, it even strengthens the possibility of Deolindo being black (not even mixed-race) and José Diogo being white.

"Noite the almirante" does not conform to the most common traditions of depicting blacks in Brazilian literary history. Blacks are usually portrayed either as exotic or stereotyped characters in Brazilian literature. "Noite de almirante" does not present the massively imposed stereotypes or exoticism to which we, ultimately, grew accustomed. If we do not see them, we are unable to see the characters as blacks and mixed-race. Machado does not elevate the characters of "Noite de almirante" to the status of "epic heroes of the race or Maroon leaders".⁴⁸ Machado "does not limit them to the narrow format coming from the dominant stereotypes in the social imagination of the Second Reign".⁴⁹ Therefore, he does not jeopardize the "likelihood of the urban and bourgeois universe"⁵⁰ because in the micro universe of the story it is simply absent and, therefore, uncompromised.

Notwithstanding Duarte's, and his followers' efforts and compelling evidence, there seems to be a tacit reluctance on accepting Machado's Afro-Brazilian literature as such. Consequently it has been, at best, perceived either as a charming but minor and expendable trait, or as solely a lesser fragment of his broader work (or even ignored altogether). Such a practice may have its roots in the "accusations that [Machado] refrained from supporting abolition, and therefore betrayed his racial heritage",⁵¹ a notion upheld by some of his fellow writers throughout the twentieth century. However as Dixon and others have already shown,

⁴⁸ "[...] heróis épicos da raça ou a líderes quilombolas". (DUARTE. *Machado de Assis afro-descendente: escritos de caramujo*, p. 265, my translation).

⁴⁹ "[...] não os limita ao formato estreito advindo dos estereótipos dominantes no imaginário social do Segundo Reinado" (DUARTE. *Machado de Assis afro-descendente: escritos de caramujo*, p. 265, my translation).

⁵⁰ "[...] verossimilhança do universo citadino e burguês" (DUARTE. *Machado de Assis afro-descendente: escritos de caramujo*, p. 265, my translation).

⁵¹ DIXON. Machado de Assis' Early Mulato Narratives, p. 40.

such allegations are the result of facile, hasty and ideologically charged mischaracterizations of Machado and his work. The reclamation of Machado's black literature should not be seen as a way of discarding the immense critical production his life and works have fomented so far. Serious readers of Machado de Assis cannot interpret it as a threat. Reading Machado's literature as black literature, on the contrary, will immensely enrich the established mainstream criticism while exposing his work to an expanded readership. This reading of Deolindo and Genoveva, which enriches Salgueiro's enlightening appraisal of the short story (and that would not even be possible without it), is but one illustration of what we can all achieve and how much we can profit from such a posture.

Dixon correctly posits that Machado "never assumed his own persona when he wrote".⁵² Moreover "there is little or no evidence that Machado identified himself in a public way with the descendants of Africa".⁵³ The same rationale can be applied, nonetheless, to the opposite possibility: Machado's identification with descendants of Europe. Machado indeed "resorts to irony, humor, diversity of voices, and other devices to inscribe his positioning".⁵⁴ The evidence of Machado's identification is to be found in the context of his indirect discourse as Dixon pointed out.⁵⁵ Why, then, is he still openly depicted and imagined as a white man?⁵⁶ That is a simple question that cannot be easily answered. Possibly the answer partly lies in the fact that "the lusophone literatures of the nineteenth century have long been considered an essentially 'white world'".⁵⁷ It is also undeniable that "Brazil's literary

⁵² DIXON. Machado de Assis' Early Mulato Narratives, p. 52.

⁵³ DIXON. Machado de Assis' Early Mulato Narratives, p. 52.

⁵⁴ "[...] vale-se da ironia, do humor, da diversidade de vozes, e de outros artifícios para inscrever seu posicionamento" (DUARTE. *Machado de Assis afro-descendente: escritos de caramujo*, p. 253, my translation).

⁵⁵ DIXON. Machado de Assis' Early Mulato Narratives, p. 52.

⁵⁶ Caixa Econômica Federal's TV ad is probably the most blatant example outside academic circles. Since he was a former client, Caixa Econômica Federal aired a commercial in 2011 whose protagonist was Machado de Assis. To the surprise of a portion of Brazilian society, the actor chosen to represent him was white. Subsequently, this version of the commercial was removed. The new version presented Machado de Assis in darker complexion.

⁵⁷ DUARTE. Machado de Assis's African Descent, p. 134.

tradition leads to Europe rather than to Africa”.⁵⁸ Such conditions could explain the process of Machado’s ascension to the Western canon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They do not fully satisfy, nonetheless, the question of why “the literary profile and the social configuration of Machado de Assis [...] remain in our notions of intellectual history as having been of an exemplary member of the above alluded to white world”⁵⁹ in the twenty-first century. Considering then the social configuration of Brazil, the history of Brazilian literary criticism, and “the process of identity whitening that occurred in lands south of the equator”,⁶⁰ why could one not say that Machado’s racial identity and or affiliation is in the eyes of the bereader?

The mainstream approach, which used to ignore Machado’s Afro-Brazilian constitution, the social context regarding Afro-Brazilians in the nineteenth century, and the impact of such elements on his literature, generated an ample critical reception much to our benefit. However, in the twenty-first century, can we still agree with Dixon’s assessment: “race was clearly not the dominant theme of his writings”?⁶¹ Perhaps. But let us imagine for a minute how much more could be attained if we took Duarte’s point of view one step forward: “in our view, the Afro-Brazilian perspective guides much of Machado’s work, without impacting the chain of senses constructed by the national/universal binarism”;⁶² and from there just took a more decisive step towards a more inclusive approach to his works. Because underestimating the relevance of race in Machado’s life and works leads to seeing race as a minor feature in nineteenth-century Brazilian society we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of upholding such a practice any longer.⁶³ We must change the way we approach the matter and rid ourselves of the “white-tinted” glasses we

⁵⁸ DUARTE. Machado de Assis’s African Descent, p. 134.

⁵⁹ DUARTE. Machado de Assis’s African Descent, p. 134.

⁶⁰ DUARTE. Machado de Assis’s African Descent, p. 134.

⁶¹ DIXON. Machado de Assis’ Early Mulato Narratives, p. 40.

⁶² “[...] a nosso ver, a perspectiva afro-brasileira orienta *boa parte* da obra machadiana, sem que isto tenha logrado até o momento impactar a cadeia de sentidos construída pelo binarismo nacional/universal” (DUARTE. Memórias póstumas da escravidão, p.16, my translation, myemphasis).

⁶³ It would be contradictory to sustain in the twenty-first century that the best Brazilian author would have ignored the most important issue in Brazilian history: race and its role in the formation of Brazil.

remain accustomed to and awfully comfortable with, and see race, at least until otherwise proven, as the dominant theme; and, from there, start a refreshed scrutiny of “one of the richest oeuvres in all of the Americas”.⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ DIXON. Machado de Assis’ Early Mulato Narratives, p. 52.

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