What must be demanded of the writer above all is a certain intimate feeling that makes him a man of his time and his country, even when dealing with themes remote in time and space.

(Machado de Assis 1873)

Introduction: Maria Firmina dos Reis’s Historical Context

The nineteenth-century canon of novelists constructed by Brazilian literary history has always featured names like José de Alencar and Machado de Assis. Both authors appear as major stars in a context in which Joaquim Manoel de Macedo, Bernardo Guimarães, Aluísio Azevedo and Raul Pompeia are also remembered, among others regarded as minor. Women’s writing – including that of Maria Firmina dos Reis – traversed the nineteenth and twentieth centuries practically forgotten both by the textbooks of literary history and by criticism in general. It has taken a lot of effort, mainly over the last few decades, to recover texts by female authors and make them available to readers and thereby to challenge the predominant masculinity of the Brazilian literary canon.

Maria Firmina dos Reis is a case in point. An Afro-descendant born in 1822 in the remote province of Maranhão, this author did not have access to regular school education, nor did she attend university. A poor and orphaned woman, she lived most of her 95 years in the countryside, finding in reading the bridge to connect to the problems and predicaments
of her time, among them slavery. Self-taught and a voracious reader of everything that came within her reach as a primary school teacher, Maria Firmina dos Reis published *Úrsula* [*Ursula*] in 1859, a moment in which the Brazilian novel was taking its first steps. This feat makes her not only the author of the first abolitionist novel of Brazilian literature, but also, if I’m not mistaken, the first woman to publish an abolitionist novel in Portuguese and the first Afro-descendant woman to publish a novel throughout the whole of Latin America. Perhaps owing to the forcefulness of certain passages, *Úrsula* was not reissued in the nineteenth century and had to wait no less than 116 years for a second edition to be released in 1975.2

Before Maria Firmina dos Reis, other Brazilians, such as Nísia Floresta, spoke against slavery through poems, *crônicas* and other writings, but without risking writing novels. Nineteenth-century Latin American female authors such as the Cuban-Spanish Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, the Argentines Juana Paulo Manso de Noronha and Juana M. Gorriti, the Peruvian Mercedes C. Carbonera and Clorinda Matto de Turner and the Bolivians Lindaura Anzoátegui, Adélia Zamudio and Maria Josefa Mujía wrote and published novels, but they were white women who belonged to the economic and social elites of their respective countries.

Maria Firmina dos Reis innovated not only in highlighting the inhumanity of a system that transformed men and women into commodities, but also in assuming the perspective of the enslaved and thus evading the stereotypes deriving from the slaveholding mindset that reduced Africans and their descendants to inferior beings in all senses. In doing so, she came much closer to the writings of black female authors published in England and the United States than to those of her white counterparts in Latin America.

The nineteenth century witnessed the publication of dozens of ‘slave narratives’ – mostly autobiographical accounts, printed on both sides of the North Atlantic to fuel the ongoing abolitionist campaign in the United States. Dramas experienced by Olaudah Equiano (in the eighteenth century), Frederick Douglass, Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua and Solomon Northup, among others, add to the accounts of Harriet E. Wilson, Kate Drumgoold, Harriet A. Jacobs and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in denouncing the cruelty of slavery from the perspective of its victims. In these writings, autobiographical testimony generally prevails, and does to the end of the nineteenth century, as a way of recording a past that everyone wants to see superseded but which leaves its consequences in the form of racism and social inequality.
If men’s slave narratives favoured the form of autobiography, among women’s writing fiction took a prominent place. Knowing the appeal of the romantic novel, authors such as Maria Firmina dos Reis and Harriet Wilson questioned slavery through strategies similar to those used in the roman-feuilleton – a genre widely accepted among the readership of their time.

The subject of the enslaved black person had been present in Western women’s writing since Aphra Behn published *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave: a True History* in 1688. Behn is considered to be the first woman in England to make a profession of literature. The plot of this novel of hers is situated in the Caribbean and revolves around Oroonoko – an African who becomes the object of white curiosity owing to his ‘primitive’ knowledge in dealing with nature. But this happens only up to the moment when he rebels against his condition and is then arrested and tortured to death in a public square.

Another nineteenth-century novel that deals with the issue of the enslaved black is *Sab*, written by the Cuban-Spanish Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. Published in 1841, *Sab* tells the story of the impossible love between an enslaved young man and a master’s daughter. Even though it does not criticize the regime of slavery, the book was banned from circulating in Cuba, a Spanish colony at the time. This was because the ideas it conveyed opposed the hegemonic European doxa that depicted black people as subhuman beings dominated by instincts and devoid of reason and feelings.

However, none of these publications had the same repercussion as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*, published in 1851 and translated into Portuguese two years later, obtaining great circulation in Brazil. A white and Christian author, Stowe saw her text win the crowds and turn into a great manifesto against slavery. President Abraham Lincoln even asserted that Stowe’s narrative ‘provoked the civil war’ that divided the country and led to the abolition of slavery. But *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has a benevolent and idealized tone when it comes to slavery, a tone marked by the image of the good lord and the slave reconciled to the destiny that God gave him. This led some critics to regard the black women’s writing published after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a response to the romanticized slavery constructed by Stowe’s narrative.

A classic example is Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), considered the first novel by a black female author, not only in the United States but in any English-speaking country. Like Úrsula, *Our Nig* was relegated to oblivion for more than a century, being reissued only 124 years later, thanks to Henry Louis Gates, Jr,
who signed the introduction of the new edition along with R. J. Ellis. This historical erasure constitutes the first point of contact between the texts of Wilson and Reis.

**Colonial Black Reason**

In his essential study of the history of the meanings of the word ‘black’, the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe maps and questions what he calls ‘black reason’: a set of mythical, philosophical and even ‘scientific’ narratives that aim to build a knowledge that establishes a ‘paradigm of subjection’. Since its beginning, at the dawn of the era of European navigation and discovery, the goal of this metanarrative was always to confine black people in a permanent ‘attribute of inferiority’, intended to transform them into subhuman beings, that is, ‘differentiated’ by being devoid of reason and dominated by instinct.

Once naturalized and internalized, this attribute works by forging what Mbembe calls a ‘psycho-oneiric complex’, which in many cases is assimilated by the victims themselves. Such a set of beliefs, ‘a kind of giant cage’, links the noun ‘black’ to an intricate and perverse network of qualifiers that have in the idea of ‘race’ one of their main foundations. As a ‘form of primal representation’, the idea of race establishes what the philosopher calls a ‘pervasive complex’ that affects both Europeans and Africans. Its consequence is the generation not only of a ‘colonial system of exploitation and depredation’, but also of ‘fears and torments … especially of infinite sufferings and, ultimately, catastrophe’.

One of these catastrophes is ‘altruicide’, that is, the ‘constitution of the Other not as similar to oneself but as a menacing object’ – therefore as someone that, even when exploited as submissive workforce, must be repudiated, watched and if necessary incarcerated and eliminated. In this context, the myth of racial superiority that came from Europe marked indelibly the age of discovery and the expansion of mercantile capitalism. It served thereby the Western Hemisphere’s strategies of power, since it produced in the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, and in the narratives that supported slavery, what Mbembe describes as the ‘baptismal fonts of modernity’.

To do so, from the mid fifteenth century onwards it was necessary to ‘produce Blackness’ and, consequently, ‘produce race’ as a result of what Mbembe calls ‘fantasizing’ – and we need to stress that the word ‘race’ at that time served to designate only non-European human groups. In parallel, it was also necessary to produce a locus – a space and an origin – in
which this Other could be located. This locus came to be Africa, although it has always been known that not every black is African and not every African is black. It was necessary, still, to produce a discursive system that could make of these people a group marked by a ‘social link of subjection’ and a ‘body of extraction’, both male and female.

Thus, as ‘a system of narratives and discourses of academic pretensions’, European black reason also designates a cluster of practices that involved the ‘daily work’ of constructing an image – and a meaning – of savagery, of ‘moral disqualification and practical instrumentalization’, that is, a ‘reservoir that provided the justifications for the arithmetic of racial domination’. As one can see, for centuries have been reproduced statements, comments and myths that, however disparate they may be, end up confining the black person within a frame of permanent subhumanity. Achille Mbembe’s book only maps and ratifies something previously known. From a historical point of view, it is established that, just as the East has always been a Western construction – to engage with the ideas of Edward Said (1978) – the black person, as depicted in Europe, has always been a construction of white people interested in exploiting them. In that regard, statements of Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) may be recalled, as well as ones in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* two decades later. The *Lectures* simply exclude Africa from the ‘universal spirit’, that is, from the civilized world, owing to the supposed inability of its inhabitants to attain the ‘Idea of Reason’. Ethnocentrically viewed by Hegel as a ‘childish world, wrapped in the blackness of the night’, Africa was plunged into ignorance and cannibalism, uncultured and without religion, submerged in a ‘sensual arbitrariness’ that approximates humans to animals. Thus, as a ‘species’ that ‘hesitates’ between these two forms of life – human and animal – the black person constructed by the Hegelian narrative appears to be a ‘statue without language’ and without ‘self-consciousness’, therefore ‘devoid of universality’. For Mbembe, this whole discourse is nothing more than the result of an ‘imaginary relationship’ with Africa, sustained by a ‘fictional economy’.

It is evident that such manipulation, historically interpreted as true, concealed behind it political and economic interests linked to the establishment, especially in the Americas, where colonization was based on forced labour, whether of the native peoples or trafficked Africans. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel idealizes the enslaved as those who hand over their freedom in order not to lose their life, thus granting to the enslaved free will over their own actions and future, as if this option really existed for the millions of Africans deported to the Americas. In another book, *The Philosophy of Right* (1821), the philosopher remarks,
Yet if a man is a slave, his own will is responsible for his slavery, just as it is its will which is responsible if a people is subjugated. Hence the wrong of slavery lies at the door not simply of enslavers or conquerors, but of the slaves and the conquered themselves.\textsuperscript{13}

Widely known, these excerpts speak for themselves. Let us leave the discussion there, as far as Eurocentric discourse is concerned. In opposition to this white dimension of black reason there is that written by the blacks themselves, as a result of the ‘Black conscience of Blackness’,\textsuperscript{14} within which black people strive to rescue, activate and revitalize their traditions and their memory, in order to finally rediscover the ‘truth of the self no longer outside of the self but standing on its own ground’.\textsuperscript{15} This new current was strengthened in nineteenth-century abolitionism, and later in anarchism, Marxism and other anti-capitalist movements. The twentieth century witnessed the slow and progressive blossoming of the vast worldwide network that has formulated the modern black imaginary.

\textbf{At the Beginnings of a New Black Reason}

From the beginning of \textit{Úrsula}, Maria Firmina dos Reis uses Christian axiology to stigmatize the slave regime and its methods. The narrator’s voice and that of almost all the characters are pervaded by belief in Catholicism and its values. The text thereby appeals to the convictions of its readership at the same time that it indirectly targets the hypocrisy of the Church that gave moral support to slavery: ‘Lord God! When will Thou enclose in men’s breast Thy sublime maxim – love thy neighbour as thyself – and cease to oppress with so reprehensible injustice Thy fellow! … that who was also free in his country … that who is Thy sibling?’\textsuperscript{16}

The narrator’s outlook is made clear in the first pages of the book, where is staged the meeting of a slave with an elite young man lost on a deserted road. By depicting whites and blacks as ‘brothers’, the novel turns Christian discourse against its alleged adherents inhabiting the colonial slave master’s house.

The particular treatment Maria Firmina dos Reis gives to the racial relationship between blacks and whites pervades the novel from beginning to end. In the first chapter, the young Túlio, in whose veins runs ‘African blood’,\textsuperscript{17} sees a man lying unconscious on the road, the victim of an accident in which he has ended up under the carcass of a horse. The man’s name is Tancredo and he and Úrsula will later form the romantic pair who star in the narrative. Under the scorching tropical sun, Túlio
feels pity ‘before the painful scene that was being offered to him’, since ‘slavery had not brutalized his soul’. It should be emphasized at the outset that the author does not condemn slavery solely because a specific slave has a noble character, as one can read in abolitionist narratives of the time, both Brazilian and foreign. It is a question of condemning slavery as a system that defies religion and morality, which the author does by resorting to the very kind of speech deriving from white hegemony.

The composition of the character indicates the perspective that guides the representation of the coexistence of masters and captives in this novel. Slavery is ‘hateful’, but it does not harden the young black man’s sensibility. This is the key to understanding the authorial strategy of combating the regime without overly attacking the convictions of white readers. Túlio is victim, not tormentor. His revolt is experienced in silence, for he has no means to confront the power of the masters.

The first chapter aims to present the two male characters who will embody the moral centre of the text: one white, one black. Thus they make their appearance on the scene: first Tancredo; then Túlio. By using the artifice of the accident, the author makes the latter take the place of the former to stand out as a character. From the beginning, the reader comes to know Túlio for his virtues, while the other is known only for the mental shock that caused his fall. So the black man tries in every way to revive the horseman. He succeeds in his efforts and successfully transports the wounded young man to the farm’s main building. When Tancredo awakes from his faint, he finds the black man in front of him. In spite of the daze that begins to dim his senses again, Tancredo sees in the slave the good man who saved him. It is worth mentioning the first words exchanged between these two characters:

– Who are you? – asked the young man to the slave as soon as he had come out of his lethargy – Why do you show such interest in me?
– Sir! – stammered the black man – Your state... I – he continued with shame, generated by slavery – I suppose I can render you no service, yet I wish I could be useful to you. Forgive me!
– I? – said the gentleman with great gratitude – I, forgive you! May all hearts resemble yours.19

Thus, already in the opening scene, the text reveals the foundations of the worldview that sustains it. Faced with Tancredo’s question, the slave hesitates, because he knows he is before a representative of a high social rank. Yet Tancredo is grateful to the one who has saved him; later on the
reader will find out that Tancredo was betrayed by his own father, who has abused his trust and filial love. In the face of this, Tancredo’s voice carries a very special meaning: it is the young and sensitive white man – the ideal of a new man, for a new society – who finds in the unknown black man nothing less than a *model of virtue*:

Despite the rising fever, the gentleman began to coordinate his ideas, and the slave’s statements, and the services that he had rendered him, touched his heart. *The fact is that feelings as noble and generous as those that animated the young black man’s soul burned in his heart*: so, in a moment of intimate and generous gratitude, the young man, pulling off his glove, extended his right hand to the man who had saved him.  

The scene is unique in Brazilian literature of the period. At the height of the slavery regime in Brazil, the unusual gesture of this white man – to greet the slave as an equal – has a paradigmatic meaning in the face of the reduction of black people to the inferior attributes identified by Mbembe. The outstretched hand of the white man crowns the elevation of the black man as the moral reference of the narrative. Charles Martin, analysing the scene, aptly points out that the author makes the slave the ‘basis of comparison for the young white hero’. The humane gesture seems natural before the noble morality of Túlio, who thanks God for having arrived at the scene of the accident at that moment. From then on, the novel demonstrates the strong empathy that binds the black man to the white man depressed by the patriarchal order. It suits, moreover, the title of the chapter: ‘Two Generous Souls’. 

The narrative then highlights the embarrassment experienced by Túlio before the gesture of the injured man. Owing to his enslaved condition and the ‘distance that separates them’, he wants to kiss the white hand stretched out in front of him. Tancredo responds, ‘Were you not, by chance, my saviour?’ and then shakes the slave’s ‘coarse hand’, in which he ‘discovered with satisfaction, loyalty and purity’. Tancredo adds, ‘Túlio, my friend, I evaluate the uncured pain you carry in your soul, I understand your bitterness, and I curse in your name the first man who enslaved his neighbour.’ Surprised by the gesture, the black man cannot conceal his happiness. The narrative voice concludes, ‘He was the first white man who had said such sweet words to him.’  

According to the omniscient narrator, the black man is, therefore, a parameter of moral elevation. Such a posture reverses the values of the slave society and argues against the ‘scientific’ theories about the ‘natural
inferiority’ of Africans. The discourse of the novel shows, from the begin-
ning, commitment to the dignifying of black people’s character, while
at the same time expressing the cultural and axiological territory that it
claims: that of Afro-descendants’ commitment to opposing the hegemo-
onic black reason of the author’s time. This perspective can be seen in
the sympathy the text gives to Túlio and the other characters submitted
to captivity. Thus, the discourse of Maria Firmina dos Reis stands at the
antipode of the Eurocentric doxa and against the altruicide mapped by
Achille Mbembe, which carries within it the whole historical charge of
ethnocide and also of epistemicide.

By harbouring the wounded horseman at his mistress’s house, Túlio
enables their meeting and also the beginning of the passion that leads
them to a brief happiness. Once again, the zeal and the dignity of the
young black man stand out. He ends up gaining manumission as a sign of
gratitude from the white man. A strong bond of friendship comes to unite
them. From then on the black man becomes an inseparable companion to
the young white one. And Túlio plays the role of the good young lad, who
respects the lady for not having mistreated him, while he feels indebted
to the one who freed him. However, his new condition is questioned by
Mother Susana when she ironizes the ‘freedom’ of the freed – which will
eventually lead him to his death – comparing it with the life she used to
live in Africa:

You! You free? Oh, do not deceive me! – exclaimed the old
African woman, opening her eyes wide … Freedom? I enjoyed it
in my youth! – Susana went on bitterly. Túlio, my son, no one has
enjoyed it more broadly than I, there was no woman more blessed
than I.25

In addition to reinforcing the Afro-Brazilian identity of the text itself, the
introduction of the old African woman increases the density of political
layering. The territory of origin is mentioned bluntly, contrary to what is
seen in other writings of the nineteenth century, including those signed
by Afro-descendants. What emerges is the diasporic condition experi-
exenced by characters who got torn from their lands and families to live
in exile the imprisonment represented by forced labour. According to
Zahidé Muzart, ‘it is Mother Susana who will explain to Túlio, freed by
the gentleman, the meaning of true freedom, which would never be that
of a man freed in a racist country’.26 Of the tension that defines the cen-
tral conflict of the novel, Cristina Pinto-Bailey remarks,
In Úrsula, the only concrete solution to redress the injustice of slavery is the manumission of a particular slave, Túlio, by the white hero. … This could be seen as one of the flaws of the novel, for it does not offer any structural solution to the question of slavery. It can be argued, however, that the main social function of a literary work is not to solve problems, but simply to denounce them and expose them, which Maria Firmina does very well and with great appeal to the readership.  

Literature by itself could not interfere in the structure of the slavery regime that had dominated the country since colonial times, in order, like a magic trick, to alter reality. The author’s narrative acts on another front by exposing by confrontation the ethnic tensions then in force and by denouncing – using white and Christian morality – all the unjust brutality of that mode of labour exploitation. This becomes explicit when the narrative makes space for the story of the African Susana, which occupies the whole of Chapter 9:

Harvest time had come, and corn and yam and peanut were abundant in our fields. It was one of those days when nature seemed to indulge in gentle pleasure; it was a smiling and beautiful morning, like the face of an infant, though I had a heavy weight in my heart. …

I had not yet overcome two hundred metres of road when a whistle, reverberating through the woods, informed me of the impending danger that lay before me. Immediately two men appeared, and tied me with ropes. I was a prisoner – I was a slave! It was in vain that I begged them in the name of my daughter to restore my freedom: the barbarians laughed at my tears, and looked at me without compassion. I thought I would go crazy, I thought I would die, but I could not … fortune lay still a lot of fighting in store for me. …

They put me and three hundred companions of misfortune and captivity in the narrow and infected basement of a ship. Thirty days of cruel torments, and absolute lack of all that is necessary to life we spent in this grave until we approached the Brazilian shores.

Among the scenes in which blacks are depicted in nineteenth-century Brazilian literature, especially women, this one is undoubtedly the most shocking. The imprisonment and the kidnapping of Susana have, in my view, the same importance and the same symbolism as the scene in Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas [The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás
Cubas], written 31 years later. There, Machado de Assis has his protagonist, still a child, ride on the back of the boy Prudêncio as if on horseback, a perfect allegory of the situation of the black in the slave-based regime: poor little Prudêncio is made to get down on all fours and serve as a mount for the heir of the master’s house, who assaults him and also calls him ‘beast’.

On the other hand, Firmina adopts a different, straightforward tone, without the ironic subtleties of Machado de Assis’s discourse when he relates Brás’s ‘joke’. In Úrsula, the person who speaks in the first person is an adult African, born free, married, the mother of a family, an inhabitant of a structured community; in short, a human being who knows her duties in coexistence with her equals. She does not hesitate to call her captors ‘barbarians’ when she loses her ‘homeland, husband, mother and daughter’. In so doing she not only assumes the indignation of the unjustly imprisoned human being but also reverses the attribute of inferiority inherent to the doxa present in European black reason: barbaric is the one who kidnaps … barbaric is the one who enslaves.

The tone of confrontation against hegemonic thought could not be more explicit. Let us remember that this is the first time that the capture and enslavement of Africans are depicted in Brazilian literature. Úrsula is the inaugural gesture of an entire abolitionist lineage in Brazilian letters. Published more than a century and a half ago, but not recorded by the manuals of literary historiography, the novel stands out by the forcefulness with which it exposes the methods of those who transform human beings into merchandise and submissive labour force. The diegesis, tone and even the choice of vocabulary make explicit the authorial perspective, identified with the sufferings of the victims.

The agents of this ‘nefarious trade’ at the service of European mercantile and colonial interests are readily classified as inhumane, unmasking the civilized image flaunted by the settlers in the narratives that had circulated since the age of discovery. The woman transformed into an object has her humanity highlighted, like the social relationships she is forced to abandon: ‘homeland, husband, mother and daughter’. The novel thus establishes itself as a phenomenon previously unheard of in Brazilian literature. For the first time, Africa is thematized and emerges as a space of civilization in which the individual and the community are harmonized, in which one plants and harvests, marries and bears children, in which there are values and feelings of family and homeland. This space is suddenly invaded by traffickers at the service of the most nefarious aspect of European expansion, albeit a practice that had been usual since the beginning of the discoveries of new lands.
Besides Africa – and, above all, the aggression suffered by its inhabitants – another space also appears for the first time in Brazilian literature: the slave ship’s hold. Described in detail, this place immersed in pain is the stage on which are exposed the methods adopted to address the complaints of the chained – hungry and thirsty women and men:

They gave us filthy, rotten water, given with pettiness; the food was bad and even dirtier: we saw many companions die beside us for want of air, food and water. It is horrible to remember that human creatures treat their fellow men like this and that their conscience does not hurt for taking them to their grave asphyxiated and hungry.  

The impetus to denounce is evident both in the crudeness of the description and in the ethical appeal. In both, an unprecedented first-person narrative voice expresses the drama of the victims in order to accuse and judge their abductors. This subjugated black self soon transmutes into an us in order to amplify the historical anchoring of the plot. Both the commitment to inform through the means of the novel and the effort to narrate from inside the problem are made explicit, in order to configure another interpretation and another meaning of the regime that was the central foundation of the mode of production adopted by colonial expansionism in the Americas. In accordance with this purpose, the tone of the narrative approaches orality. In spite of its grammatical correctness – a requirement of the literary norm of the time – it resorts to noun and verb repetitions, among other devices, to strengthen verisimilitude. This strategy is successful and marks in vivid colours both the voice of the character – which attains the status of a testimony – and the narrated facts:

In the last two days there was no more food. The people suffering most began to scream. Good God! From the hatch they threw upon us boiling water and pitch, which scorched us and came to kill the leaders of the riot.

The pain of losing homeland, loved ones and freedom was smothered on this journey by the constant horror of such atrocities. I still do not know how I resisted – God wanted to spare me to prove the patience of His servant with new torments that awaited me here.

Mother Susana’s narrative mixes the account of imprisonment and resistance with the adjudicative power of Reis’s anti-slavery discourse.
The text reiterates the accusation that blames the colonizer not only for the abduction of human beings, treated by their captors as ‘ferocious animals of our forests that are used by the potentates of Europe as recreation’,\(^3\) but also for the atrocities committed during the voyage. Barbarism is met with resistance, which attests to the humanity of the prisoners, aware of the risk and the high price they will pay for their protest. It should be noted that the ship and its hold are configured as places of memory, as Pierre Nora teaches us. For him, the main reason for the place of memory to exist is ‘to stop time, to block the work of oblivion, to fix a state of affairs, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial – gold is the only memory of money –, capturing maximum sense in a minimum of signs’.\(^4\)

By naming the hold as ‘grave’, Reis’s text echoes the designation of ‘tomb ship’ (in other words, slave ship) for the vessel used to carry ‘human commodity’. According to Nei Lopes, this designation (‘tomb ship’) ‘alludes to the conditions in which enslaved Africans were transported to the Americas’. It also refers to the procedure of taking the dead to their grave.\(^5\) The term, therefore, suggests the constitution of a semantic field marked by the signs of agony and death. In such a way the text brings to the Portuguese language the voice – and the perspective – of the Africans through attentive listening to what they have lost: civilization, freedom, homeland, family and, for many, their own lives. And it does so without losing sight of the perspective of those who survived to tell the story.

The position of subject of remembrance immediately emerges, in which the personal joins the collective. It is the voice of the Other making the voice of the enslaved heard. The novel advances with realistic description outweighing fiction. Thus, while the text achieves historical and human density, it loses something in terms of psychological depth and the development of the plot, which is interrupted to provide the perspective of the victims. The narrative of Mother Susana’s life in Africa and her imprisonment takes up the whole of Chapter 9 and is inserted precisely at the moment when the liberation of a young captive is depicted, putting Túlio’s manumission into perspective as the victory of freedom.

This reading is corroborated when compared with, among others, the memories of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua – called José da Costa in Brazil – a slave who arrived in the Brazilian northeast in 1845 and two years later travelled to the United States, where he succeeded in escaping from his master and gaining freedom. Literate in English, Baquaqua wrote an autobiography, becoming one of the first Africans to publish his memoirs. Considered a precious document, his text precedes by five years the novel of Maria Firmina dos Reis and often confirms the tone and
various details of the hell narrated by the Brazilian novelist. Describing the crossing of the ocean, he says,

The only food we had during the voyage was corn soaked and boiled. I cannot tell how long we were thus confined, but it seemed a very long while. We suffered very much for want of water, but were denied all we needed. A pint a day was all that was allowed, and no more; and a great many slaves died upon the passage. … When any one of us became refractory, his flesh was cut with a knife, and pepper or vinegar was rubbed in to make him peaceable (!) I suffered, and so did the rest of us, very much from sea sickness at first, but that did not cause our brutal owners any trouble. Our sufferings were our own, we had no one to share our troubles, none to care for us, or even to speak a word of comfort to us. Some were thrown overboard before breath was out of their bodies; when it was thought any would not live, they were got rid of in that way.36

Thus, fiction and autobiography are illuminated and converge in both the description of the trafficking and the condemnation of its inhumanity. The similarity of the two texts, distant from each other linguistically and geographically, is astonishing: it can be seen in the indignant tone transposed into a discursiveness that appeals to God as a greater emblem of justice, in the denunciation of murder as a form of coercion and in the horrific details of the ‘grave’ and the ‘tomb ship’. Reis and Baquaqua emphasize the brutishness of the traffickers in the sadistic and prolonged torture as well as in the burning of corpses. The distinction of the biographical narrative from the fictional one dissolves in the holds where the memory of pain dwells. The distance that separates Detroit – the place of publication of Baquaqua’s writings – from São Luís do Maranhão disappears in the shared histories of the Black Atlantic to inaugurate a transnational perspective in which fiction and testimony come together to build another vision of the history of the African diaspora in the Americas.

Seemingly isolated voices, Reis and Mahommah Baquaqua are united by the hand that seeks a political gesture in writing, and in the construction of a diasporic identity that refers back to Africa and repudiates enslavement. Both texts cause the reader to ask questions about barbarism and about who is truly civilized. It is noteworthy that the account of experience, which in Baquaqua’s case is true to his memories and central to his narrative, is also present in Úrsula as a documentary source of a fiction committed to critiquing the mode of production still in force at that time in many parts of the Americas.
Inscribed in the fiction as a testimony, the voice of Susana contests Western black reason and demystifies it. It starts from the point of view of those who have lost their freedom in order to detail the cruellest moments of that process and question the logic that reduces the humanity of Africans so as to justify their imprisonment and commercialization. Upon arriving in the world in which she will now live, the newly enslaved woman ‘freezes with horror’ and pities her siblings, the victims of a vicious master and his instruments of torture and the prisons where he ‘buried them alive’, ‘chained in iron’. The semantic field of death is thus amplified. It extends now to a whole life of submission and annulment of the self – the new destiny of those who have just arrived. Charles Martin remarks,

Maria Firmina dos Reis evidently makes a definitive contribution to abolitionist literature: it represents a standpoint of opposition to the general tendency, providing the Negro with their own mental pattern in the context of the New World. This means a revolution in the depiction of the other and in the depiction of authority. Not only does the other come to have a self, but they also come to express themselves. When Mother Susana and Antero remember, they are at the same time self-representing. In other words, they not only show themselves, but are also shown.

On the other hand, Reis’s voice is skilful in avoiding the Manichaeanism so common to the feuilleton. The narrated conflicts are not subject to generalization that puts all virtue on one side and all villainy on the other. This makes it possible for Mother Susana to recognize that there is goodness and compassion among the oppressors, which mitigates but does not extinguish her suffering. The slave devotes to the young Úrsula a motherly love which only heightens her humanity. Nevertheless, she does not forget her losses: ‘The pain that I have in my heart only death can erase! – my husband, my daughter, my land … my freedom.’

In addition to the painful memories of the old woman and the Christian frame that presides over the existence of Túlio, Úrsula also addresses another type of slave: one who loses his self-esteem and indulges in addiction. Here emerges the decrepit figure of Father Antero, a good-hearted man, but dominated by alcoholism. Missing the customs of his land and the ‘palm wine’ that is drunk in the African ritual of weekly rest – which Reis names ‘fetish feast’ – Antero functions as the dramatic counterpoint to Túlio’s noble morality. By highlighting this character’s addiction, the text seeks to avoid an excessive idealization – of either
black or white people – which had become a rather common feature of Brazilian romantic fiction.

With Antero, the structure led by Mother Susana is closed, and the black triad gradually mobilizes the attention of the reader and supersedes in importance the predictable love triangle of the white characters. On the other hand, the reference to palm wine and the African festival reinforces a textual link with traditions erased by colonization and absent from the hegemonic discourse. Once again, the fictional text acts as a place of memory by referring to practices left behind during the process of enslavement. Of the representation of slaves in the novel, Juliano Carrupt do Nascimento remarks,

Túlio, Preta Susana and Antero add moral characterizations that distinguish them from the stereotypes articulated by the cultural and literary processes of the nineteenth century. Their roles as characters force upon the narrative events that would not be possible if they were constructed differently. … Their voices appear in dissonance with the traditional historical and literary discourses, because they characterize themselves as African and persuasive, and do not appear only as voices of slaves who accept subordination to the patriarchal and slaveholding power.⁴⁰

The incidents the black people are involved in are part of a novelistic structure based on embedded narratives in which characters narrate their life stories. They almost always experience extreme situations, marked by chance and abrupt changes of fate. The plot is linear and the characters lack great psychological complexity. By setting Úrsula in the context of the feuilleton narrative, one can assess to what extent the writer appropriates the techniques of the popular novel for the purposes of her project of dignifying the oppressed – and not only the enslaved.

**Intersectionality and the Critique of Patriarchal Reason**

The love triangle formed by Úrsula, Tancredo and the Commander (the uncle who appears as the incarnation of all evil on earth) occupies centre stage. Besides murdering her father and abandoning the protagonist’s mother who had been confined to bed for years, the Commander cuts the sadistic figure of the cruel master who exploits his captive workforce to the limits of their strength.
This old and immoderate uncle embodies the incestuous passion typical of what Northrop Frye calls ‘romance’. Other traits of this genre are still dear to the general public: multiplicity of time, space and actions; Manichaeism in the construction of protagonists and villain; exaggerated feelings; remorse and madness as punishment; the myth of love at first sight (love can both harm and heal); overabundance of feelings in scenes characteristic of romanticism (sadness kills, unpleasant surprises lead to fainting); all of which is crowned by a narrative strategy marked by flash-forwards and forebodings of all kinds to capture the reader’s attention.

At the end, maddened with jealousy, the Commander kills Tancredo on the very night of his wedding to Úrsula, which causes the heroine’s madness and death and the inconstant remorse that also leads her uncle to his death, but not before he releases his captives and is confined in a convent. Discarding a happy ending, the text opts for the schemes enshrined in the gothic novel, to which may be added a path full of obstacles to be overcome.

The novel situates slavery in a context of the supremacy of the master’s will as absolute power. In this context a female character is also seen as a nullified individual and as submissive, in short, a person shaped for obedience, in an unprecedented intersection between gender and ethnicity. Úrsula is the typical white woman attached to land ownership and her orphan status. Something similar is true of her mother, whose being in the world is aggravated by illness. By sheltering Tancredo and foreseeing the possibility of love that will bind him to her daughter, she thanks God for the arrival of a potential bridegroom, the only possibility of altering her destiny and that of the heroine. On the other hand, through the voice of the young man, the author points out the ‘tyranny’ of marriage according to the patterns established by the slave-owning patriarchy of those times as incapable of producing love. Thereby the novel denounces the social triangle at whose apex is placed the will of the master as untouchable, oppressing those under his tutelage: the woman and the enslaved.

It is, therefore, as a woman and an Afro-Brazilian that the author narrates the drama of young Úrsula and her unfortunate mother. To that are added the misfortunes of Tancredo and the tragedy of Túlio, Susana and Antero, whose narrative treatment is marked by an internal point of view based on a faithful rendering of the unofficial history of the African diaspora in Brazil.

Thus, between the positivity and naive goodness of the young Afro-Brazilian, the negativity represented by the decadence of the elderly African and the permanent harassment by patriarchal power against a
defenceless woman, Reis makes room for the voice of Mother Susana, a living connection to ancestral memory and to the consciousness subalternized by the regime. A sort of alter ego of the novelist, Susana configures that feminine voice which is the bearer of historical truth. She also intersperses the action with moralizing comments and interventions, sometimes as an oracle weaving the past, present and future through foreshadowing that, on one hand, prepares the reader and accelerates the progress of the narrative and, on the other, encourages reflection and criticism. Susana’s voice, thus, arises from the margins of the story’s action and gives it density, just as Úrsula’s author arises from the margins of Brazilian literature to add to it an instigating supplement of meaning: Afro-Brazilianness. By establishing a discursive difference from the hegemonic abolitionism in the Brazilian literature of her time, the author of Úrsula seeks to establish the place of an Afro-Brazilian literature of female authorship.

The discourse of emancipation runs through almost all Reis’s work. Her short story ‘A escrava’ [‘The Slave Woman’] published in Revista Maranhense in 1887, at the height of the campaign for abolition, also contains the testimony of an aged captive, the character Mãe Joana. This African voice brings to Brazilian literature the supplementary meaning configured by an ancestral trace coming from another continent and another civilization, apparently left behind, and perhaps for this very reason repressed by the hegemonic discourse.

Both characters – Mãe Susana and Mãe Joana – refuse the role of objects ready to satisfy the sexual appetite of the master and his equals. Thus they disrupt roles imposed by customary practices implanted since colonization, among which was to serve as an enjoyable body, as is evident in the etymology of the term mucama – which comes from the Kimbundu language [mukama] and can be translated as ‘concubine’, a ‘slave mistress of her master’.

Brazilian literature has always foregrounded the figure of the sexy Afro-descendant woman who is always available to the white man. Moreover, Brazilian literature has distinctively constructed the image of the black woman with all the trimmings of pleasure without consequence or commitment. This was done in a subtly disguised way because, especially for ‘mulatto women’, sex never leads to procreation. However, the opposite happens with the characters of Maria Firmina dos Reis. Besides lacking the charm of the ‘sensual mulatto women’, both Susana and Joana figure as procreators and zealous mothers. Susana mourns until the end the absence of her daughter who was left behind in Africa; Joana witnesses the growth of her children, suffers at the treatment they
receive from the overseer and goes mad when she sees her children sold and sent to an unknown place.

The image of a zealous and caring mother is also portrayed in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. That, like *Úrsula*, *Our Nig* was forgotten for more than a century is a first point of connection between these texts. Wilson’s novel also engages with the reality of racial relations in her time. The book has been described as a mixture of novel and ‘third-person autobiography’. The similarities with *Úrsula* emerge even in the words that precede the beginning of the narrative. Wilson shows humility in her foreword and appeals to the reader’s complacency:

> In offering to the public the following pages, the writer confesses her inability to minister to the refined and cultivated, the pleasure supplied by abler pens. It is not for such these crude narrations appear. … My humble position and frank confession of errors will, I hope, shield me from severe criticism. Indeed, defects are so apparent it requires no skillful hand to expose them.

Maria Firmina dos Reis adopts a very similar stance to Harriet E. Wilson’s. This modest tone was very common among female writers of the nineteenth century. In her foreword, Reis describes *Úrsula* as a ‘petty and humble book’ written by a ‘woman, a Brazilian woman, of poor education and without the manners and conversation of enlightened men’. She also conceals her authorship, signing only as ‘Uma Maranhense’.

*Our Nig* features a child as its main character, Frado. She is abandoned by her mother in a white family’s home – the Bellmonts’. Although there is no formal slavery in the Bellmonts’ home and her lady is an alleged Bible scholar, catechist and teacher of religion, Frado experiences the presence of the ‘shadows’ of the old regime. Each in its own way, both novels are centred in the condition of woman – poor or enslaved. In *Úrsula*, Susana is imprisoned and loses her children and family. In *Our Nig*, Mag is forced to abandon her daughter because of the destitution that has haunted her since she was a child. Herself abandoned in the past, Mag will repeat the same behaviour, leaving her daughter behind to the care of others. Thus, the conditions of class, gender and ethnicity are articulated to provide both plots with a historical and social foundation. The superficial construction of the characters is very evident – a popular trait in nineteenth-century novels.

Harriet Wilson’s narrative focuses on the trajectory of Frado, a child who is adopted but exploited, having to do demanding jobs incompatible
with her age. In the narrative, slavery exists not in the cruelty of the slave trade, but indirectly, in the ‘shadows’ it casts on the white family’s behaviour and in the rough treatment meted out to the girl. This is something Frado endures from the age of six till she is 18 years old. Thus she experiences 12 years of a kind of slavery, that of the ‘dependant’ – a subaltern human being who, though not formally enslaved, lives in a condition of dependency in a patriarchal household. The ‘dependant’ was a very well-known figure in the context of nineteenth-century patriarchy, in both Brazil and the United States. Túlio in Úrsula is an example of a ‘dependant’ who, though free, dies attempting to save the white man who released him from slavery.

In Our Nig, the shadows of the ideology of slavery are present in the smallest details and draw a frame in which the characters’ behaviour is ruled by the most harmful consequence of this ideology: racism – a mindset and posture that have survived the end of the slavery regime, the American Civil War and all the movements of ethnic affirmation in the United States throughout the twentieth century. In the novel, Mrs Bellmont does not allow Frado to attend religious services, even though she is a teacher of religion and should, theoretically, be intent on expanding her ‘flock’. In the absence of her husband and children, the villain has no difficulty in expressing how much she discriminates against black people: ‘Religion was not meant for niggers.’

In Chapter 4, there is a climax of physical aggression in the scene in which Frado brings pieces of firewood to the fireplace, but never the small pieces required by Mrs Bellmont. The girl cries quietly, already knowing what awaits her, since there is no more firewood of the required size:

As she expected, Mrs. Bellmont, enraged, approached her, and kicked her so forcibly as to throw her upon the floor. Before she could rise, another foiled the attempt, and then followed kick after kick in quick succession and power, till she reached the door. Mr. Bellmont and Aunt Abby, hearing the noise, rushed in, just in time to see the last of the performance. Nig jumped up, and rushed from the house, out of sight.

The scene shocks the reader for its cruelty and makes Our Nig similar to Úrsula and also to autobiographical accounts, such as Solomon Northup’s Twelve Years a Slave (1853), that are equally marked by the absurd punishments imposed on the enslaved.

The boundaries between autobiography and fiction are tenuous when it comes to narratives of black and female authorship, especially
those produced in the nineteenth century. In *Our Nig* and *Úrsula* the historical foundations upon which the plots are built are clearly evident. Wilson and Reis anchored these texts in memory that is individual but also collective; a memory that exists in the orality of Afro-Brazilian *causos* and American tales – oral narratives transmitted through generations of people of African descent.

Thus, the Afro-Brazilian and African-American narratives are very similar in the means of resistance they both mediate. They are also close to each other in opposing the submission that marks the depiction of Afro-descendants imprisoned by servility. Each in her own way, the authors are women of ‘their time and country’ (as Machado de Assis says) in search of a perspective other than that of the oppressor, to slowly create the ‘Black conscience of Blackness’ that would flourish in the twentieth century. They do so by resorting to memory, both individual and collective, and by appropriating a European invention – the melodramatic *roman-feuilleton* – a genre that provoked so much shedding of tears, until people awoke from the centuries-old nightmare through which the New World was built.

**Notes**

1. This chapter reproduces previous writings, especially the afterword to the seventh edition of *Úrsula* (Reis 2018). Translation by Harion Custódio.
16. Reis 2018, 32.
17. Reis 2018, 32.
18. Reis 2018, 32.
19. Reis 2018, 33, emphasis added.
20. Reis 2018, 34, emphasis added.
22. Reis 2018, 34.
23. Reis 2018, 35.
29. Reis 2018, 103.
30. Reis 2018, 103.
31. Reis 2018, 103.
33. Reis 2018, 103.
34. Nora 1993, 22.
37. Reis 2018, 104.
41. Frye 1957.
42. Lopes 2004, 456.
43. This role is remembered, even with some nostalgia, by Gilberto Freyre in Casa-grande e senzala [The Masters and the Slaves] when he emphasizes the role of the ‘mulatto woman who initiated us in physical love and transmitted to us, on the creaking of the bed, the first utter sensation of being a man’ (Freyre 1984, 283).
44. Gates 1983, xiii.
47. Reis 2018, 23.

Bibliography


