

A Woman from Garimpo: The Autobiographical Novel by Nenê Macaggi in Roraima*

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Abstract

This text proposes to contextualize and analyze the novel by Maria (Nenê) Macaggi (1913-2003), “*A mulher do garimpo: o romance no extremo sertão do Amazonas*” (The woman from the garimpo: the romance in the Amazon’s extreme backlands), published in 1976 by the Official Press of Manaus, drawing a parallel with the author’s biographical trajectory. In the 40’s, Nenê Macaggi participated in an expedition to the northern region of the country and ended up settling in Roraima. It was in the region of the Tepequem and Cotingo rivers, where Nenê discovered the garimpo and worked as an indigenist for the Indian Protection Service (SPI). Several excerpts from the author’s fictional narrative resonate with her trajectory and based on the novel, it is possible to think about historical and gender aspects of artisanal small-scale mining, currently also called garimpo in Brazil. The book tells the story of two characters: Ádria, an orphan born in a tenement in Rio de Janeiro. She was raised as a boy, thus “turning” into José Otávio. As an adult, he migrates to the Amazon region, traveling through several cities, stopping at a mine located at the time in the Territory of Rio Branco, today the State of Roraima. Also Pedro Rocha, a migrant from Ceará to the north of the country, who became a gold miner, but also an extractor of the Amazon’s natural riches: rubber tree, natural rubber (caucho and balata) and Brazilnut. The present article also intends to extract information about the garimpo and the gold miners in Roraima, in the second half of the 20th century, present in the descriptions of some chapters of the novel. By presenting elements that can be highlighted in the universe of the garimpo of this region and time, which may come to collaborate towards a better historical understanding of artisanal mining or prospecting in this region. Divided into two parts: trajectory and novel, the article tries to relate literary text and biographical elements of the novelist’s work in relation to mining, in order to explore its proximity to the context and history of the mining theme in Roraima.

Keywords: Nenê Macaggi, Woman and *garimpo*, *Garimpo* in Roraima.

* Received on 10 September 2020, accepted on 20 May 2022. Translated by Operacional - Foco Traduções.

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À Mariza Corrêa (*in memoriam*)

Introduction

This work, presented in two parts: trajectory and novel - aims to analyze the information and relevant data of the novel and the biography of Maria (Nenê) Macaggi. It contributes for a better understanding of the *garimpo* daily life, called also as small-scale mining in the Amazon, from the 1940s of the last century in the region of Roraima. It has as a background, the female participation in these contexts.

The path

He lived in the mine for four years. He picked up the sieve and pan. He washed gold and burned it clean of quicksilver in a tablespoon. He fought, suffered, had days of glory and bitterness and almost lost his life to the evil tertian (Xaub, 1976:421).

Little is known about Maria Macaggi other than the footnotes and prefaces of her books, or the restricted literary universe of Roraima¹. Born in Paranaguá (Paraná), she studied in Curitiba and later moved to Rio de Janeiro². In the then federal capital, she began to work as a journalist writing reports and later as a writer of “tragic tales” for some periodicals: *Ilustração Brasileira*, *Revista da Semana*, *O Malho*, *A Seleta*, *A Carioca*, *Diário de Notícias*, and *Jornal do Brasil*. While living in Rio de Janeiro, she published two books of short stories and a novel: *Chica Banana*, (1938), published by Irmãos Pongetti Editors; *Contos de dor e de sangue* (1935), published by A. Coelho Branco Editor; and *Água parada* (1933), by Calvino Filho Editor.

Although she had already published in important literary and artistic newspapers and magazines in Rio de Janeiro, it was in the “extreme north sertão” of Brazil that Nenê Macaggi achieved regional/local “literary recognition” only years later, at the end of her life. She took a path contrary to that of most people of her time in the country. Probably, Nenê had a strong personal political network in the capital, which favored her nomination to work as a journalist for the Vargas government, describing the situation of the Amazonian federal territories.

At the end of 1938, after World War II had already been declared and she was passionate about things in the Amazon, she obtained letters of introduction from Catete to all the interveners and then began what she called the Wonderful Journey. He went to Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata, from there she entered Rio Grande do Sul and went up to the Amazon, always writing about the works of the period Estado Novo and publishing his stories, no longer tragic but sentimental, in newspapers in capitals and main cities she traveled through, being hosted by the Governments (Xaub, 1976:419).

¹ I thank Elena Fioretti, director of the Integrated Museum of Roraima, for sending the new edition of the book and for providing additional information about the author's trajectory. According to Fioretti, the Integrated Museum of Roraima has a significant collection of Nenê Macaggi composed of some newspaper and magazine clippings with her publications as a journalist during the 1930s, photographs in slides from the 60s of the writer among the indigenous people on the Uraricoera River, personal objects, letters to friends and institutions. Elena Fioretti is also responsible for the documentary “Nenê Macaggi: Roraima entre Linhas”, winner of the EDITAL DocTV II (2001), which addresses Nenê's trajectory, her novel, and especially the relationships between cattle ranchers, prospectors and indigenous people in the region of Rio Tepequem, using excerpts from the novel and biographical information, revisiting the places mentioned and collecting images of the old mines mentioned in the novel. I also thank the team of the Fapesp Project (462.17.201) “Sustainability Transformations in Artisanal and Small-scale Gold Mining: Transregional and Multi-Actor Perspectives” (‘Gold Matters’) (2018 – 2022)”, funded by Belmont Forum and NORFACE Joint Research Program on Transformations to Sustainability, for the review and dialogue in the polishing of this text, especially to Professor Marjo De Theje. Finally, I thank the researchers Daniela Manica, Dalila Mello, Madiana Valéria de Almeida Rodrigues and Lia Gomes Pinto de Sousa for their reading and support.

² There is probably a kinship relationship between Nenê and the contemporary and countrywoman poet Ada Macaggi Bruno Lobo (born 05/29/1906). A normal teacher, daughter of Narciso Macaggi and Maria Dias de Paiva, Ada Macaggi died in Rio de Janeiro in 1948. Ada published “Vozes Ephemeras” (poems, 1926); “Taça” (stories and novels, 1933); “Ímpeto” (stories, 1941). Ada is mentioned in the novel analyzed here (pp. 222). In his other book, “Exaltação ao verde” (1984), Nenê dedicates it to Olivina and Flora Macaggi (in memory).

The region of Roraima, at the time as Federal Territory of Rio Branco, later called the Federal Territory of Roraima (1962), and elevated to State only in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, was one of the places visited by Nenê on this excursion. Where the writer ended up staying from 1941 and closer to the context that the novel presents. She was appointed Special Delegate for Indians at the Indian Protection Service (SPI) at the end of the 1940s, and worked in the region of the municipality of Amajari, which in the first half of the 20th century, concentrated areas of mineral exploration, especially diamond and gold.

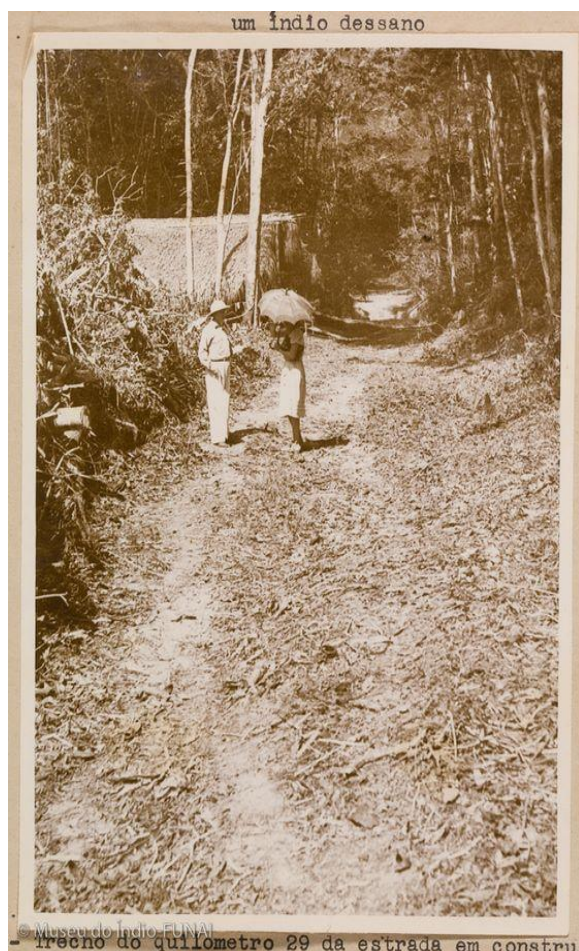
She made many trips from Belém to Manaus, in the small cages of the SNAPP [Service of Navigation in the Amazon and Administration of the Port of Pará], always collecting data for his reports and also for his future book, both from the on-board staff and passengers and riverine inhabitants in all ports where they stopped to collect firewood or ranch (Xaub, 1976:420).

In Manaus, in 1940, Nenê won two honors for this “Marvelous Journey”: “*Fã Número 1 do Amazonas*” and “*Rondon de Saias*” (“*Number 1 from Amazonas*” and “*Rondon with Skirts*”), the latter title due to “... places where the Great Rondon (Marechal Cândido Rondon) had passed and who later became his great friend in the SPI” (Xaub, 1976:420).

He slept in many malocas (the largest of them, from the tuxaua Axi, at the base of [Monte] Roraima), ate their damorida [pepper broth] and drank their pajuaru and caxiri. He watched the death ritual and the beating of leaves by the shamans, both very interesting. She danced with the Tuxauas in the caxiris, made friends with the shamans, was intimate with the uses and customs of the savages and fought for them, slandered and alone, misunderstood and eternally without help. A woman who alone braved the mountains and farms of this state without losing her femininity, but with a firm wrist showing in the forties what a woman could accomplish (Xaub, 1976:421).

In the file available online from the Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (SPI) (Indigenous Service Protection), under the custody of the Museu do Índio (Indigenous Museum), it was possible to find a photograph (Figure 1) that records the presence of Nenê in the region. The photograph is attached to the Report of the indigenist agency referring to the 1944 exercise, prepared by Alberto Pizarro, responsible at the time for the SPI Inspector of Rio Branco, and mentions Nenê as a journalist (“the journalist”). Unfortunately, it is not possible to see his face in the photo. In the available digital collection, no other documents (reports, official documents, photographs) of Nenê Macaggi in this public function were found. However, further research still needs to be carried out.

Figure 1: Photograph Nenê Macaggi



Source: Archive of the Indian Protection Service (SPI), Indian Museum- FUNAI- Rio de Janeiro.

The photograph reproduced above (Figure 1) is originally captioned with a reference to a road under construction. It is worth clarifying that, in the 19th century, “national” or “royal” farms were created in the region of Roraima, based on the production of cattle, taking advantage of the typical fields/ploughs of the region and the indigenous villages, as strategies of the Portuguese imperial government for the permanence of borders (Farage, 1991). Only more recently, in the first half of the 20th century, the exploration of minerals started, driven by the State itself, especially gold and diamonds, which provoked migratory waves and a new colonizing flow. Policies to encourage the colonization of the Midwest and the Amazon emerged, which became of public interest, but also of private interest due to unregulated areas. In the last forty years, new colonization policies have emerged, implemented by federal agencies such as the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) and by the National Development Plan and National Integration Plan, which have stimulated large-scale agricultural exploitation, especially of cattle and rice.

The exploitation of mineral resources remains, to this day, one of the main economic activities in Roraima and is the subject of conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous people. There is little information about the participation of indigenous populations in this economic extractive process, which in the novel is mentioned and limited to the use of indigenous labor in the region’s mining, through logistical support such as local guides who know the territory and location of mineral resources: “*At that time, it was the Indians who carried the cargo of the miners, as there was no passage for trains in the mountains*” (Macaggi, 2012:359). However, there is no mention or more detailed data on the relationship between indigenous peoples and mineral extraction practices.

It can be seen that Nenê’s trajectory as a public servant of the indigenist agency brings an apparent contradiction: she has been the tutor of the Indians and at the same time she has carried out the mining. The footnote on page 181 mentions a certain veracity of parts of the book with the

author's biography: "The *garimpo* notes are all transcribed, in full, from the originals that she keeps as a souvenir".

Here it is, finished and polished, the book by the only Brazilian writer who was really Delegado [sic] of Índios no Amazonas (and why not say it from Brazil?) and who wielded a sieve and a pan.

There is no fiction in *A Mulher do Garimpo*. It is pure reality and in it there are countless characters who are still alive and live in Boa Vista or in the interior of the Territory" (Biographic note, Xaub, 1976:421).

After he settled in Roraima, Nenê published other books besides the ones we analyzed here: "Conto de Amor", "Conto de Dor", "Exaltação ao Verde: romance do Baixo Rio Branco" (1984), all published by the Official Press of the Government of the Federal Territory of Roraima; "A paixão é coisa terrível" – this one in the 90s; "A terra volta o que da terra veio" and "Amargura"; "Minha virge santa, é mêmo o diabo!" His last novel "*Nara-Sue Uerená – O Romance dos Xamatautheres do Parima*" was only published in 2012.

At the end of her life, Nenê still worked as a proofreader and journalist for the Official State Press. She died in Boa Vista in 2003. The Palace of Culture and the Hall of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Roraima are named after her and the day of her birth was declared the Day of the Roraima Writer, in her honor. Although she is unknown in the indigenous and national literary scenes, she seems to have occupied a prominent place in the artistic and political context of Roraima communication. She was a member of the Academia Roraimense de Letras (Roraima Literacy Academy), which she would have helped to found and became recognized as a local icon for her commitment to valuing the culture, history and identity of Roraima, through regional literature.

The book "*A Mulher do Garimpo*" seems to be considered the starting point of literary production in the State. The book was adopted as a mandatory reading for candidates for the 2009 entrance exam at the Federal University of Roraima (UFRR), but was soon removed from the list due to its absence in bookstores and libraries. In 2012, a second edition was published, confirming the importance and political role that the author plays in the regional universe of Roraima to establish a literature focused on issues of the construction of identities and local history.

Unlike other contemporary female characters from the Brazilian indigenist/ethnological, political and scientific universe that inspired literature with their trajectories (Corrêa, 2004), Nenê seems to have written her own story in the form of fiction. In several excerpts of the book "*A mulher do garimpo: o romance no extremo sertão do Amazonas*" the fictional narrative of the novel is confused with the trajectory of the author.

Relating Nenê's life trajectory and autobiographic fictional narrative with an anthropology/ethnography of *garimpo* in the region of Roraima seems to be a possible path, taking into account the perspective brought by Kofes and Manica (2015:17), who understand the conception of the narrative of the life history as something beyond an ethnographic document, in which "... the very notions of life, "individual"/"person", anthropos/ethnos, can be expanded and tensioned when thinking about lives and spellings in anthropology".

Many biographies are written with the aim of creating this admiration or aversion, or even with the aim of making distance the objective writing of a lifetime. What is fascinating to note in biographical narratives is how they begin in different ways, how they configure different themes: memory, migration, family, rural and urban work, productions of genre, speech, particular ways of using language and narrative forms of beliefs, religiosity and mythical characters, of attribution of names and constitution of people, of art and science. This relationship between biography and narration, the nexus between orality, writing, and visibility, the interconnections of the biographical act, retaining evocations and information between real (person) and fiction (character), refer to the ambiguous status of biographical work in the human sciences (Kofes; Manica, 2015:37).

With that inspiration, let's move on to the novel.

The romance

The history of the novel begins in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, in the center of the city, approximately in the first two decades of the 20th century. The main character of the novel, Ádria, is born from the relationship between a young and “naive” mulatto woman with a pimp, who abandons her as soon as he discovers that she is pregnant. The mother dies in childbirth and the child is raised by the grandmother until he is three years old and then by the godfather until he is young. Afraid that the goddaughter will suffer when she becomes a woman, the godfather cuts the girl's hair, dresses her in men's clothes and teaches her to behave like a man, thus transforming her into José Otávio.

This “transvestite” character, José Otávio, then migrates from the southeast to the north³, with the expectation of enriching himself in the Amazon and returning to the south in the future. While the other character, Pedro Rocha, from Ceará, who is only introduced to the reader at the end of the book, presents a migratory trajectory from the northeast to the north, representing a common migratory and colonizing flow, which was also the target of public policies of the Brazilian government at the time for the exploitation of rubber.

Pedro Rocha becomes a rubber soldier “He leaves in demand for the rubber plantations of Acre. Ouro-negro calls it what he called it and destroyed hundreds of Ceará sertanejos” (Macaggi, 2012:284). The author describes in detail (pages 305-306) the form of rubber exploitation, the placements, rubber roads, the way of bleeding and cutting the tree, smoking and the supply system (indebtedness of rubber tappers to rubber bosses, owners of the sheds).

However, Pedro Rocha then explores *caucho*, which is also described in detail by Nenê in its form of bleeding, overturning, the types of gum that are produced and its strong Peruvian influence in this plant extraction process. He does the same with the extraction of the chestnut (pp.335-337) and the balata, called in the novel the “milk cow”, also described on page 341. Finally, Pedro Rocha ends up in the Roraima mine, meets José Otávio and begins then a friendship between the two. During the plot, the relationship becomes closer and more intimate, until the moment when José Otávio reveals his female identity in order to experience the previously forbidden love. When the relationship materializes, the couple decides to leave the mining to live the romance.

Often the book seems to assume a didactic and pedagogical objective about life, people and especially the environment both in the specific region of Roraima and the Amazon, bringing varied and encyclopedic information about the constitution of the soil, geography, the natural riches that constitute the “Amazonian wonder”, always with the aim of extolling and demonstrating its natural beauties and riches and resources yet to be explored. The very division of the book into 18 parts and 59 chapters, some of which are eminently informative for the reader, with texts on specific themes that can be considered only as an explanation of the scenario of the novel. These chapters look like passages/parts of the novel separate from the plot, characters, and narrative plot.

References to the universe and female characters in mining are rare in the novel. Interestingly, the character herself needs to “change” her gender to fit into the mining universe, reaffirming a vision of mining as a male place in which there is no room for the female. It is worth remembering that the character José Otávio poses as a man until the end of the story.

As Cano (2004) demonstrated, “strategic cross-dressing” is common as a female tool in the Mexican context:

adoption of masculine attire to impersonate a man – which some women resort to in times of war, whether to protect themselves from the sexual violence that usually increases during armed conflicts, or to reach military posts, or simply to fight as soldiers, without the social restrictions of gender that weighed heavily on female soldiers, rural women who, since the wars of the 19th century, marched in the rear of armies, taking charge of the supply of troops and care for the wounded and occasionally of messages and smuggling of weapons and provisions, and only exceptionally took up arms (Cano, 2004:119).

³ In the narrative, José Otávio travels on the Indian Protection Service (SPI) boat.

Nenê does not bring in the novel roles usually associated with the presence of the woman from the mining. She does not mention prostitution or the work of common cooks and usually associated with or reserved for women, seeming to bring an ambiguity of this presence and thus invisibility. The author presents a main character who practices mining (*cata*), which is not common in mining contexts, since to this day there remains in many contexts a view that “women bring bad luck in the mine”. The novel features secondary female characters who are usually wives of gold miners. She thus seems to want to highlight or even displace other interpretations, roles and positions of the feminine in mining⁴.

At the same time, Nenê, through fiction, highlights credible and current situations in mining stories, such as the trajectory of *Marina Meu Caso*⁵ (Roraima and Pará) and situations of transgressions, games and gender transformations that mining brings.

A literary parallel can be established between the novel by Nenê Macaggi and “Grande Sertão, Veredas” by João Guimarães Rosa, published exactly 20 years earlier (1956) not only because of the “strange love” or friendship between two “men”, present in both stories, but through the use of a language of oral influence and regional representation, with local terminologies. And mainly for an appreciation of a rural, local, literary regionalism as demonstrated by Almada (2017).

In addition to the literary features and parallels, the novel brings numerous descriptions of the daily life of mining, systematized, and localized information on the mineral and natural wealth of the Amazon, especially of Roraima. Regarding the mineral resources in the region, Nenê presents on pages 119 and 120 a survey of the main resources and their locations in the Vale do Rio Branco region:

What about mineral resources then? Gold and diamonds in Cotingo, Maú, Quinô, Tepequém, Urucá, Serra Verde, Serra Pelada and Serra do Sapão. Gold with diatomite, in the fields between Surumú, Itacutu and Maú, where there are more than fifty thousand cubic meters in sight. Sulfur and copper in Alto Cotingo, rock crystal in Serra do Cristal, main granite massif in the Alto Rio Branco Zone. Copper in Parima, Magnesian Mica, limestone, saltpeter in Serra de Mina, Bauxite, Cotingo, and Quinô. Bitumen in the Anauá and cassiterite, jade, nerite, agate, tin in the Upper Uailang, a tributary of the Maú. And according to radiosthesia scholars, there are strong signs of oil on the sides of the Mucajaí and also to the north, on the border with Venezuela.

Several excerpts provide information on quantity, circulation values, trade in gold and diamonds extracted in the *garimpo*:

All that gold is twenty-four carats! At other times, searching, they find gullies that go down and from so much rolling on the stones, they form pots or holes, inside the stones themselves, filling them with water and generously depositing the material there.

Gold really flows! There are people who take thirty grams in a single batch and always twenty-four carats!

There Pedro dispatches the caboclos, paying them with farms and trinkets, staying with a companion, Domingos, to spark gold, which is worth it, as the grass is sixteen cruzeiros. The diamond is worthless. [Venezuelan] Don Julio himself, not having anyone to sell a beautiful set of good diamonds he had, had it sold in English Guiana and he was only paid forty thousand réis per carat.

He goes to Venezuela with him, to mine in the Pátria mine, but he cannot enter because the Venezuelan government forbids Brazilians to enter there (Macaggi, 2012:359; 360).

The chapters “Livro Sexto – Garimpo”; “Livro Sétimo – O Tepequém”, and “Livro Décimo” until its end present in a more detailed way the daily life of *garimpos* in the region of Roraima. In a

⁴ On page 167, a dialogue is presented between a mother in which her son wore feminine clothes and looked like a “cunhantã” and other “cases” of man-woman-man changes.

⁵ Available in: <https://folhabv.com.br/coluna/Personagem-da-Nossa-Historia/1917>. Access in August 11 2022.

diluted form, but especially in the chapter “Livro Sexto – O Garimpo” there are several descriptions about the way of mining and the daily life of the *garimpo* that can serve as historical data for a better characterization of the time with regard, for example, to the quantities of minerals extracted, work and exploration techniques, perceptions, and uses of the environment, association between *garimpo* and other Amazonian extractive practices, among many other interesting elements for future research on the subject.

The novel also mentions the contradiction of the gold miner category, which is currently maintained, because at the same time it tries to demonstrate the structures of the social organization of the *garimpo*, its history, characteristics, social rules and to value the work carried out, it also brings elements that collaborate to their marginalization and common sense.

In the mine it is like in the forest: the worker is helpless from everything. But here [*garimpo*] is more out of negligence and selfishness. From the planada to the tapiri [shelter, hut, rustic house] and from the tapiri to the planada... On holy days and Sundays, no one has anything to do because they don't read, don't write, don't want to learn to read and write, being too lazy to clean the tapiri, to cover up the holes... Why such a nuisance? think. It's temporary there... and this provisional lasts for years... So, if you have money from the sale of your production, you go to someone else's tapiri, even if it's far away and play there all day and get drunk, losing everything you took. Returning later full of debts he hopes to pay with the next wash. Vegetable garden? Farm? For what? In this way, the prospector is brutalized, dulling his good qualities, when it is not pneumonia, beriberi or malignant tertian that kill him once and for all. What a beautiful example of work and dignity she transmits to her children! That is why the mining service is synonymous with trickery. But that it's hard, really hard, is it true or isn't it? (Macaggi, 2012:202).

Final considerations

The life story and texts of Nenê Macaggi are also interesting because they present a female voice at a time when the presence of women was almost unnoticed in various social spaces, especially in the *garimpo*, because they were considered masculine. However, Nenê participated in some of these consecrated spaces: public policies, literary groups, the press, and also *garimpo*. Thinking and trying to understand the presence of this woman as an indigenist, literate, prospector can collaborate to reduce the historical invisibility of women in various fields of activity and knowledge, including gender discussions in the Amazonian *garimpo* universe itself.

On the other hand, it is necessary to take into account that the invisibility of women in public arenas must always be contextualized, asking which women are we talking about? The concern is not to incur an approach that reiterates the category of woman in a monolithic way, so criticized by feminists in the 1980s/1990s. Certainly, the southern origin, literate and probably from political circles already established in the former federal capital, even before arriving in Roraima, characterize the “prominence” of Nenê Macaggi.

More extensive future research on Nenê Macaggi may help in studies interested in mapping and demonstrating the presence of women who were engaged in professional fields, where the female presence was still seen with strangeness, and who were in the shadows in these spaces, discussing, for example, if invisibility would be more in the forms of knowledge production than in the public performances of women per se.

An interesting recent example that may yield future parallels is the indigenist work of Wanda Hanke, researched by Sombrio (2011). Although Nenê Macaggi does not configure itself as an example of female participation in the field of science – perhaps not even Wanda Hanke herself – but rather in politics and the arts, her production and trajectory can help to access elements that help us to compose the mining activities of a time, and to relate it to other networks and relationships restricted to women.

At the same time, when updating or dialoguing with the transvestite (woman-man) also reported by Guimarães Rosa in the story of “Grande Sertão: Veredas”, Macaggi reaffirms, from the context in which she lived in the mine, the difficulties and (im)possibilities – real and/or fictional – of transit for women in this universe.

Many elements can still be explored in this non-exhaustive research on the trajectory and novels of Nenê Macaggi: her literary production, the context of her work in the *garimpo*, her relationship with the indigenous policies of the region and even her “autobiography”, as well as a more detailed analysis of the historical elements of the novel, the gender roles represented in it, and its many transvestments and transgressions, contributing to the reflection and possible bridges with varied interdisciplinary research of complementary themes.

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