

# DECODING THE INVISIBLE INK: BLACK READERSHIP OF MACHADO DE ASSIS IN THE PAGES OF *GETULINO*, *O CLARIM D'ALVORADA* AND *A VOZ DA RAÇA* (1923-1933)

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**Abstract:** In this essay, we examine the resonance of Machado de Assis in the São Paulo Black Press during the early twentieth century. Despite relentless attempts to whitewash his image, we analyze the pioneering efforts to read Machado as an Afro-Brazilian author through an exploration of four engagements with his oeuvre in the newspapers *Getulino* (1923-1924), *O Clarim d'Alvorada* (1924), and *A Voz da Raça* (1933). By decoding the "invisible ink" in Machadian writing, the Black readership pursued a dual goal: legitimizing their own literary endeavors within a predominantly White and hostile framework while making historical anti-Black violence and the echoes of slavery in republican Brazil more intelligible.

**Keywords:** Machado de Assis; São Paulo Black Press; Black Readership.

## DECODIFICANDO A TINTA INVISÍVEL: LEITORES NEGROS DE MACHADO DE ASSIS NAS PÁGINAS DE *GETULINO*, *O CLARIM D'ALVORADA* E *A VOZ DA RAÇA* (1923-1933)

**Resumo:** Este ensaio examina as ressonâncias de Machado de Assis na Imprensa Negra Paulista no início do século XX. Apesar das tentativas de embranquecimento de sua imagem, o texto analisa esforços pioneiros de lê-lo como escritor afro-brasileiro, explorando quatro engajamentos com a obra machadiana nos jornais *Getulino* (1923-1924), *O Clarim d'Alvorada* (1924) e *A Voz da Raça* (1933). A partir de um processo de

*decodificação da "tinta invisível" na escrita de Machado, leitores negros buscaram, por um lado, legitimar seus próprios projetos literários dentro de uma estrutura predominantemente branca e hostil, e, por outro, conferir inteligibilidade à violência antinegra e aos ecos da escravidão no Brasil República.*

**Palavras-chave:** Machado de Assis; Imprensa Negra Paulista; leitores negros.

Machado de Assis's work has undergone extensive critique over the past century, embedded in Brazil's transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Scholarly analyses recognize his literary contribution as a standout achievement in the Brazilian canon (CALDWELL, 1960; CANDIDO, 1975; JACKSON, 2015; SCHWARZ, 2000). He is celebrated for his narrative innovation, employing unreliable narrators, metafictional elements, and an erudite interplay of language (SARAIVA; ZILBERMAN, 2020; SECCHIN; ALMEIDA; SOUZA, 1998). His works have been examined for psychological insights, complex characters, and existential themes (BOSI, 1999; SANTIAGO, 2000). Critics also commend Machado for his virtuosic use of satire and irony in dissecting his era's societal norms and political landscapes (LEAL, 2022; SALOMÃO, 2019). Furthermore, his influence on Brazilian culture is acknowledged as successive generations of readers and writers have found inspiration in his techniques and thematic explorations (GUIMARÃES, 2017; SCHWARZ, 2006).

Although Machado de Assis has consistently been acknowledged as an Afrodescendant author in the English-speaking world (CALDWELL, 1960; DIXON, 2010; FITZ, 2009), it is noteworthy that his narratives have historically encountered a bewildered reception (DUTRA, 2020; 2022). Nevertheless, his oeuvre continues to captivate readers with its enduring relevance, solidifying him as a quintessential figure in Brazilian literature. Eduardo de Assis Duarte (2020, p. 270) enhances our understanding of the author's reception by proposing three dimensions through which scholars have interpreted Machadian work: Universal/Western, Brazilian/National, and Afro-Brazilian. While most scholarship has gravitated towards the first two dimensions, the third has recently gained currency,<sup>1</sup> embodying a more

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<sup>1</sup> Monteiro (2024, p. 7) mentions the international efforts to reassert Machado's Black identity, citing the recent edition of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* in the Penguin Classics collection in 2020, which introduces him as "one of the greatest Black authors in the Americas". In addition, Monteiro (2024, p. 19) and Dutra (2020, p. 132) also recognize the role of contemporary Black scholars in understanding

comprehensive understanding of the author's literary project and producing the reassessment of Machado's contributions within the Brazilian literary canon.

One of the less-explored aspects within the last dimension is how Black readers have engaged with his literature over the last century. Aligned with Duarte's proposition, we examine Machado de Assis's legacy by analyzing how the Black intellectual community of the first half of the 20th century perceived and engaged with his writing. This exploration sheds light on two facets: first, how Black readers/writers sought to legitimize their literary endeavors within a hostile, predominantly White framework by positioning Machado as an intellectual role model; and second, how they aimed to make historical anti-Black violence and the echoes of slavery in Brazil more intelligible by unveiling concealed layers of meaning within Machadian narratives. The objective is to demonstrate that, alongside Machado's relentless whitening process, there was also a pioneering effort to interpret him within the context of his identity. How did Machado's texts affect the Black readership of the early 20th century? If such an impact exists, what does it mean to recognize and assert him as an Afrodescendant author in the 1920s and 1930s, when whitewashing or the erasure of any African ancestry was the norm? Furthermore, what implications arise when Machado's narrative shifts from being significant solely within a White-centred context to acquiring significance within a Black framework?

Speculating on these questions, this essay renders visible four engagements materialized in the pages of the São Paulo Black Press: *Getulino* (1923 and 1924), *O Clarim d'Alvorada* (1924), and *A Voz da Raça* (1933). Throughout these critical interactions, where the recollections and revaluations of Machado de Assis's narratives take center stage, we argue that Black readers not only approached Machadian's texts with a unique perspective—affirming his African ancestry—but also strategically ascribed value to his literary astuteness. They reframed him as an intellectual role model serving to empower the agency of Black writing and the rewriting of his work to gain deeper insights into racial issues during a period of republic consolidation in Brazil. While discerning his "snail style"<sup>2</sup> (DUARTE, 2020;

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Machado's "delicate" and "negotiated" position as an Afrodescendant intellectual "who wrote the best literature of the moment".

<sup>2</sup> Machado's "snail writing style", as defined by Eduardo de Assis Duarte (2020), is marked by an ambiguous connection between the author and the narrator with the reality of their time. It is further characterized by verbal evasions, nuanced yet sharp remarks, and preferences for irony over

MONTEIRO, 2023), Black readers perceived Machado's "*capoeirista*" talents (LIMA, 2002) and "Caliban-like" maneuvers (SOMMER, 2018, p. 330) as tools to be re-employed to gain a critical understanding of the failed integration of Black individuals in Brazilian society, which, according to Florestan Fernandes (2021), is marred by persistent racial inequalities, systemic racism, and a devaluation of intellectual contributions, rendering it a challenging and often unsuccessful process.

Although Machado never explicitly embraced nor denied his African heritage (DUARTE, 2007), the 1920s and 1930s marked a crucial juncture for Black associativism in Brazil, mainly in racial discussions. This period witnessed active participation from Black associations, contributing to a heightened discourse around racial identity and increasing awareness regarding the legacies of slavery and the obstacles faced by Black citizens in their "integration" into the newly consolidated republic (ANDREWS, 1991; MEDEIROS DA SILVA, 2021). With the emergence of the Frente Negra Brasileira (FNB), a new generation of Black intellectuals and activists endeavored to forge a Black cultural and political standpoint, affirming their Afrodescendancy. Notwithstanding, comprehending the plight of a Black writer demands exploration beyond mere identity; it requires situating authors within the social and cultural contexts of their temporal and geographical scope, as this position presents consequences.

Cuti (2010) stated that when Black writers explicitly identified as Black in their texts, they likely considered the potential consequences and expected reactions to such disclosure. Self-identification involves not only revealing oneself but also shedding light on the other within the context of the disclosed information.

Historically, the reception of a text by a Black writer among White audiences has been hostile. Overcoming this hostility, rooted in the reluctance to share power with someone who, for four centuries, had minimal power, represents the main journey for the Black writer aspiring to embrace their Black identity in their writing (CUTI, 2010, p. 51).

The act of identifying as a Black author within any period of Brazil's history often results in the marginalization of one's work, denying any literary accolades that their mainstream White counterparts readily receive, thus

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peremptory discourse, the parody of myths and foundational narratives, and the satire aimed at those in power. All these elements are expressed through a literary form adorned with various disguises.

perpetuating inequity in recognition. Furthermore, self-identifying as a Black author, particularly in the early twentieth century, when the myth of “racial democracy” prevailed as a national ideology, unveils the dynamics of one’s relationship with whiteness. This recognition presents a disruptive force that questions the artificial nature of racialization and prompts a reassessment of both the construction and functioning of race within our cultural systems. It also provides an opportunity for a genuine expression of the Black historical experience in Brazil. The Black author, attuned to the intrinsic power embedded in the written word, understands that the way in which it is articulated not only influences the conveyed message but also serves as a catalyst for the revelation of hidden meanings, subtexts, and layers within the text.

In examining the repertoire employed by Black writers to assert their literary authority and navigate within White literary frameworks, Sommer underscores a key strategy: their proficiency in manipulating various codes. The utilization of multiple codes by Black writers in the diaspora, as they engage in the creation of “imaginative literature communicat[ing] self-determination and self-fashioning” (SOMMER, 2018, p. 319), proves pivotal to comprehending how their work is received and reutilized. This diversity in codes facilitates the creation of meaning that authentically embraces a Black reception framework. A Black framework includes a particular mode of reading. Toni Morrison (1995, p. 91) discusses how the Black writer must rely on their “own recollections... [and] also depend on the recollection of others”, which invites readers to co-participate in the meaning-making process of the writing. Sommer also makes a significant distinction, which is aligned with Morrison’s analysis in discussing Black readership. She claims:

What distinguishes the liberties in Afrodescendant writing from the sometimes comparable moves made by white Creoles to deal with racialized hierarchies is, I think, the level of complicity with their readers. It is probably fair to say that black writers assume that black readers will recognize the conflicting systems that structure the literature, while white readers might miss the sign (SOMMER, 2018, p. 320).

The extent of readers’ “complicity” with a text entails their ability to perceive what Morrison terms the “invisible ink”. She proposes that an author’s writing style affords readers the chance to actively “participate in the text”, allowing them to discern the occluded nuances within that particular

literary project and, therefore, reposition themselves to co-create new narratives. She emphasizes that the “invisible ink is what lies under, between, and outside the lines, hidden until the right reader discovers it [...]. The reader who is ‘made for’ the book is the one attuned to the invisible ink” (MORRISON, 2020, p. 852-853). The decoding of the invisible ink, a discovery facilitated by the readers attuned to both the text and the cultural and intellectual currents shaping not only the text but its interpretative framework throughout history, exposes the reader’s complicity with the work.

The concept of invisible ink is crucial, as it is intertwined with the liberties taken by Afrodescendant authors to render their work accessible in various codes to their readers, who are accomplices in this circle of literary creation and legitimation. In the case of Machado de Assis, it is impossible not to assert that this complicity is rooted in a Black reception framework that enhances the political and cultural project aimed at combating racism and the remnants of colonialism and slavery. The invisible ink, unveiling itself to readers whose complicity aligns with the text and context, serves as a means to authorize and validate the aesthetical value of another Afrodescendant’s work for its audience.

In the subsequent sections, Black readers, who are simultaneously Black writers/activists, undertake a political reading of Machado’s text with the explicit goal of reviving Black agency in literature. This Black agency, transpiring via the invisible ink within Machado’s oeuvre, encompasses the acts of reframing, remembering, redacting, and resuscitating facets of his African heritage, his anti-slavery convictions, and the vindication of the humanity embedded in Black people.

### Re(a)d/actions I: "Pai contra mãe"

The initial appearances of Machado’s texts in the Black Press are traced back to the pages of *Getulino*. Machado is cited twice in the complete print edition of a *folhetim*. This *folhetim*, titled *Scenas de Captiveiro: A Boa Severina*, authored by José de Nazareth, unfolded across forty-nine installments between 1923 and 1924.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative describes the ruthless “scenes of captivity” around the 1850s. From the perspective of the enslaved, the story grants voices endowed

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<sup>3</sup> This *folhetim* has been the subject of only two critical studies. See Duarte (2005) and Reis (2017).

with the sensible agency of their shared humanity, offering a portrayal that transcends the boundaries of historical anti-Black violence in Brazil. The reader knows the names of Maria Cassange, Pai Pedro, the *Quilombola* Ângelo, Marciano, and Casemira, among others. We also know some of their origins, thoughts, feelings, and the atrocities they endure. In addition, the narrative weaves a love story between “the good Severina” and Laurindo, both ensnared by enslavement. Severina, a *mucama*, and Laurindo, a skilled tailor, find their path tangled in a world where manumission fails to liberate them fully. Narrated in the third person with occasional authorial intrusion addressing the reader—as it is customary in Machadian narratives—the tale unfolds within the context of the Solano coffee plantation, situated amidst what is now the intersection of Minas Gerais, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro.

However, narrating the horrors of slavery is not the primary objective of *A Boa Severina*. The narrative’s central thread revolves around the diverse forms of freedom that different characters either possess or acquire. In contrast to the predominant historical focus on dismissing and objectifying the enslaved experience, this text adopts a distinctive approach. The writer follows the path laid out by Machado de Assis, allowing gaps and silences absent in the official historical discourse to surface. Readers are given the space to envision what might have been—a form of “counter-history of slavery” or “critical speculation” (HARTMAN, 2008). As Hartman (2008, p. 6) insists: “The dream is to liberate them [the enslaved] from the obscene descriptions that first introduced them to us”.

Laurindo is described “much like an errant Jew, born in Benguela, who had been stolen from maternal affection as a child, coming to Rio de Janeiro, where he was sold to the capital of Minas Gerais” (GETULINO, 1923a, p. 2). Nazareth’s authorial voice emerges as he writes *Scenas de Captiveiro: A Boa Severina*—the title itself indicates multiple codes or significations—to encourage readers to reconsider “stories as a form of compensation, or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive” (HARTMAN, 2008, p. 4).

Little is known about José de Nazareth. The editors of *Getulino* praise him as an essential Black author who “writes with purity, crafting a well-regarded style that is perfect and faithfully portrays the firmness of his character and the concision of his ideas” (GETULINO, 1924c, p. 3). We find two other short stories and one essay under his name in *Getulino*, but there are no more collaborations in the Black Press. The mystique surrounding the author deepens with speculation that the name is a pseudonym used by

another Black writer, Lino Guedes—an author whom Machado de Assis influenced. In the biographical sketch of Guedes, featured on *O Portal de Literatura Afro-Brasileira*, it is noted that:

There are compelling indications, pending confirmation, that Lino Guedes is the author of the serialized novel "A Boa Severina", published in *Getulino* between 1923 and 1924, under the pseudonym José de Nazareth. Among Afro-Brazilian authors of his time, he unquestionably stands out as the one who most openly disseminated his writings (LINO GUEDES, online).

Guedes upholds Machado's legacy through the lens of his Afrodescendant heritage, undertaking this task just over a decade after the passing of the founder and first president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters. Guedes demonstrates a profound comprehension of the lasting impact of slavery, sparking speculation, as implied by Duarte (2005), that he might be the author of the *folhetim*, which gains further credibility as Guedes gives a thorough exploration of similar themes in his book *Ressurreição Negra* (1928). Notably, this work includes two articles: one of them, titled "Uma Santa Cruzada", delves into the decline of coffee plantations in the southern states of Brazil, echoing the narrative presented in the *folhetim*; the second article, "A Escravidão", addresses post-Abolition discrimination faced by Black people, also aligning with themes depicted in the *folhetim*. Such inescapable continuity of themes strengthens the argument for Guedes as a plausible author of the narrative.

Guedes might have found resonance in Machado's literary craftsmanship for various reasons. Similar to Machado, he maneuvered through different roles as a self-taught journalist, novelist, poet, translator, and chronicler. The degree of complicity he had as a reader becomes apparent not only through his life experience but also more acutely in the adept use of irony (CAMARGO, 2016, p. 38). Guedes stands out as the most prolific writer of his time (MEDEIROS DA SILVA, 2017), with approximately thirteen single-authored books to his credit (CAMARGO, 2016, p. 53-54). Thus, akin to Machado, he contributed to the mainstream press—an uncommon accomplishment among Black intellectuals of his time—and also, like Machado, he maintained a complex relationship with his contemporary Black intellectuals (DOMINGUES, 2010; LEITE; CUTI, 1992). However, he diverged from Machado by explicitly embracing a Black identity despite the hostility.



The question of whether Guedes authored the *folhetim* or actively engaged as a critical reader of Machado's texts is noteworthy. However, what holds paramount significance is that the author of *Scenas de Captiveiro* not only makes reference to Machado's short story "Pai contra mãe" (1906) and the poem "Sabina" (1875) but also reads Machado de Assis as a crucial Black influence in his own creative process. Moreover, drawing from Machado, he condemns the lingering impact of slavery in Brazil, advocating against the mistreatment of Black women and Afro-descendants at large.

In the *folhetim*, the act of quoting Machado's texts transcends mere citation; it evolves into complicity, which is a practice of remembrance, and "redaction", which involves decoding the invisible ink in Machado's writing. Christina Sharpe (2016) contends that confronting the "dysgraphia of disaster" in the afterlife of slavery demands new approaches to writing, reading, and making-sensible the objects of our cultural system. In Sharpe's (2016) conceptualization, the dysgraphia of disaster refers to the challenges of capturing and articulating the experiences of Black people in the aftermath and ongoing echoes of slavery and colonialism. New approaches to writing, reading, and making-sensible involve adopting alternative strategies for reframing narratives, countering the persistent re-inscription of Black daily life experiences into a perpetual state of physical and symbolic death.

Dysgraphia, as an expression of subjugation and the historical anti-Black violence, highlights the emergence of "Black annotation" and "Black redaction" as two counter mechanisms providing alternative approaches to conceiving history. While annotation literally involves the addition of notes by furnishing attachments and supplementary data, redaction encompasses the multifaceted processes of transforming something into a new form, the actions of editorial revisions. Sharpe (2016, p. 115) characterizes Black redaction as a process of "thinking into the gap" of the colonial archive by "imagining responses to the terror visited on Black life and the ways we inhabit it, are inhabited by it and refuse it [...] despite that terror" (SHARPE, 2016, p. 116). Her objective is to actively extract meaning from the fissures within the historical archive of trans-Atlantic slavery, which overlooked the voices of enslaved individuals and their descendants.

The act of redaction by José de Nazareth (or speculatively Lino Guedes) on Machado de Assis's texts reaffirms the critical value inherent in a Black reader and writer combined. In this duality, the pair reader/writer perceives within the works of another Afrodescendant of Machado de Assis' stature a profound recognition of the shared humanity of Black characters/individuals.

While the narrator of the *folhetim* draws on concrete facts sourced from historical accounts, statistics, news, and laws to convey the severity of enslavement, the incorporation of literary texts serves a distinct purpose, which is amplifying the agency of Black people.

The excerpt from “Pai contra mãe” (1906) that is referenced transports the reader to the scene where Cândido Neves apprehends the fugitive Arminda. The quotation appears within the middle section of the narrative, where the narrator interweaves accounts of various acts of violence against enslaved individuals, extending beyond the plantation to include incidents in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Preceding this specific quote, the story recounts the harrowing lynching of a blind older man falsely accused of murdering a cashier. This awful event underscores the broader context of systemic brutality faced by the enslaved population, adding depth to the narrative’s critical exploration of the pervasive inhumanity embedded in modern postcolonial societies. The narrator states:

A few days later, in his final moments of life, a man at the Santa Casa de Misericórdia confesses that he was the actual murderer and asserts that the poor blind Domingos Moçambique was asleep when the crime was committed! The cruelty of the masters was the result of the barbarity of the laws (GETULINO, 1923b, p. 2).

Subsequently, the narrator incorporates Machado’s text with the intention “to describe how inhumane, for example, was the very manner in which a runaway Black person was captured” (GETULINO, 1924a, p. 2). Machado’s scene depicts the capture of Arminda, culminating in the tragic outcome of her miscarriage. Through the skillful construction of a narrative centered on the enslaved, Machado elicits different reactions, or more precisely, nuanced responses from his readers, particularly within the context of this specific story.

As Sommer (2018, p. 330) asserts, the “matter-of-factness was a stylistic slap for readers accustomed to the ingratiating embrace of informants. The effect of his zero-degree style of neutrality and equanimity was to double the points of view, underlining the horror of slavery with the dispassionate observations of business as usual”. However, and more importantly for the Black readership, Machado’s narrative serves the purpose of unveiling the slave’s humanity by allowing readers to actually empathize and imagine themselves in that position (HARTMAN, 2003, p. 184). The quotation from Machado, redacted or recontextualized in a different context (in 1924: the

post-Abolition, Republican era), recognizes the impending death of the enslaved or their Afrodescendant altogether, akin to the narrator who positions himself as a Black individual/reader/writer/redactor. This act not only exposes the unnoticed, invisible ink to the mainstream (White) readership of Machado but also, to return to Morrison's (1995) terminology, becomes a contested site of memory where one writer critically and politically reutilizes another's work, thereby reinforcing the human agency of the Afrodescendant and formerly enslaved.

### Re(a)d/actions II: "Sabina" and *Helena*

The second instance involves Machado's poem "Sabina" (1875). The quoted passage appears in the *folhetim* when the narrator delineates Laurindo's love for Severina. Initially, the narrator employs a historical reference from French writer Ferdinand Denis' "Descrição Histórica do Brasil" to depict Severina's physical attributes. The narrator states: "She, a Crioula descendant of the Mina race, and he, an African born in Koromantun, and both belonged to races that harbored mutual animosity, akin to the Moçambique and Conga" (GETULINO, 1924b, p. 2). This excerpt gains significance in displaying not only the author of *A Boa Severina's* mastery of the written word but also his knowledge of existing narratives surrounding enslaved individuals.

José de Nazareth's prowess is amplified by the subsequent content in the *folhetim*, which unveils the omniscient narrator's perspective on the specific "type" of *mucama* that Severina epitomizes. The invisible ink becomes apparent to those familiar with the varied constructions of the term *mucama* during the turn of the century. This paragraph merits quoting in its entirety:

Severina differed from the *mucamas* extolled by other poets. Unlike Machado de Assis's Sabina—"If someone lights her gazelle eyes, it's a person of importance; it's the young master"—or Castro Alves's Maria—"You carry some secret today... as you turned back in fear at the call of the Great kiskadee"—or Gonçalves Crespo's portrayal of the creature that "For her, they said, the Overseer wandered lost in love", Severina aligns more with Arthur Azevedo's sentiment: "There was no servant girl with such beautiful qualities" (GETULINO, 1924b, p. 2).

Nazareth engages in designing the image of the *mucama* Severina. In this portrayal, her fate is seemingly destined for eternal captivity—in her beauty,

functionality, subjection—despite being a morally upright Christian. Severina cannot bring herself to forgive Laurindo for “stealing” a ring to secure his manumission and, subsequently, purchase her freedom. Her destiny, though anticipated, nuances her human condition.

The third occurrence of a text by Machado de Assis is found in *O Clarim d’Alvorada*. Authored by Maria Rosa, one of the scarce female writers featured in the São Paulo Black Press, the article explores the political potency of the prayer (*prece*). This prayer is directly quoted from Machado’s third novel, *Helena* (1876). The intertext reveals the writer’s complicity with Machado’s protagonist, Helena. Helena, the natural child of conselheiro Vale, is confronted with her half-brother and paternal aunt as per the will of her deceased father’s request. While readers are aware of the enigma surrounding Helena’s background, Machado leaves room for the reader to redact the invisible ink: is she mixed or Black?

Machado is not merely cited but consistently and deliberately redacted by Maria Rosa. The article opens with the following: “The prayer, as expressed by Machado de Assis, resembles Jacob’s enigmatic ladder: through it, divine consolations descend, and thoughts ascend to heaven” (*O CLARIM*, 1924, p. 3). This instance of interaction introduces Rosa’s ideas of listening to oneself pray to engage one’s soul, which “is the solitary forest”, to become divine.

The excerpt cited is from *Helena*, chapter XIII, and depicts the moment when Machado’s protagonist prays for guidance while engaged in the act of writing a letter. Engaging with Helena, a fictional character who is also a writer, becomes crucial in validating Maria Rosa’s contributions to the Black Press, a space where few female authors had opportunities for publication and recognition. The passage also encourages readers to embrace prayer as a means to reveal their souls and humanity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of spirituality and writing. In addition, quoting from and redacting *Helena* is crucial for fostering the process of producing literary value from Machado’s work and its fame with a Black readership.

The act of Black redacting Machado’s characters and narratives as a process of finding oneself in that position underscores how these two Black writers, José de Nazareth (or Lino Guedes) and Maria Rosa, within the São Paulo Black Press, unveiled the invisible ink that often eluded the mainstream White readership of Machado. By imbuing significance within their Black reception framework, they bestowed agency upon Afrodescendants, reflecting and reaffirming their identities. Moreover, through the act of redaction—mentioning, incorporating quotations, and annotating Machado’s

works in their writing—both authors assert their authority as Black authors, transcending the challenges posed by the hostile environment in which they expressed themselves.

### (Re)cognition: Machado as "the great novelist of Black origin"

The last instance in which Machado de Assis is read occurs in the 1930s through the pages of *A Voz da Raça*. Serving as the official newspaper of the FNB, sixty-seven issues were published from 1933 to 1937 under the editorial direction of Deocleciano Nascimento—an influential yet often overlooked Black writer—alongside Pedro Paulo Barbosa and A. de Campos. Intriguingly, during this period, there was a notable absence of direct quotations from any of Machado de Assis's texts, in contrast to the preceding decade, as evidenced in earlier examples. Instead, the complicity with the author takes on a different dimension: (re)cognizing him as a Black intellectual role model.

The term (re)cognition extends beyond an acknowledgment of Machado's African heritage; it encapsulates a cognitive understanding and deep identification with the experience of the esteemed writer as a Black author and intellectual in an exclusionary, predominantly White socio-cultural framework. In the 1930s, a decade marked by the whitening of Machado's figure (GUIMARÃES, 2017; MONTEIRO, 2023; SILVA, 2014) and the ideological shift towards discourses of "racial democracy" and *mestiçagem* shaping perceptions of racial relations (MUNANGA, 1999; SCHWARCZ; STARLING, 2015), (re)cognizing becomes particularly significant in political and cultural terms.

In the 1933 article titled "A vitória do negro está no livro", João B. Mariano underscores the importance of literacy, coupled with literary, cultural, and political cohesion, in advancing the cause of Black individuals and the struggles against racism. This emphasis gains particular significance within the context of the establishment of FNB, poised to transition into a political party in 1936—an endeavor cut short by the 1937 coup led by Getúlio Vargas (DOMINGUES, 2008; SOTERO, 2015). The allusion to Machado de Assis as not only a 'refined' Black writer but also an intellectual who has revealed hidden layers of the slave society serves to accentuate his (re)cognition as a fundamental point of reference, aiding other Black individuals in bolstering their self-esteem and providing a framework to challenge national myths critically.

The overarching objective of the article was to “close ranks in the moral and intellectual development of the great Black race” (*A VOZ*, 1933, p. 4). In the excerpt, João B. Mariano advocates for the consolidation of unity and strength within the intellectual and moral development of the Black community. The call to “*cerrar fileiras*” suggests a collective determination to advance the moral and intellectual growth of Afro-descendants in Brazil and, therefore, combat the racial injustices left by centuries of slavery. This signifies that Black-authored literature serves as a tool to foster unity and political progress among Black people.

Education frequently served as an avenue for upward mobility and navigating the intricate journey toward “integration” in a whitened societal structure. In this process, (re)cognizing the success achieved by literary figures such as Machado de Assis, perceiving in his literary project deep insights to unveil Brazil and reframing the problematic integration of Afro-descendants into the Republican order, is crucial in inspiring others to pursue similar paths. Mariano articulates:

To say, ultimately, that there is no talent within the Black community is to diminish the environment in which we live, undermining the memory of our great and unforgettable ancestors of struggles, whose spirit of acknowledged ability persists in the minds of the Brazilian Black community (*A VOZ*, 1933, p. 4).

Remembering and (re)cognizing Machado de Assis function as a means of resurrecting a collective memory that dispels the illusion that Afrodescendants were not considered equal in terms of intellectual and creative capacities. It is well-known that death is a recurring and extensively explored theme within Machadian writing (BOSI, 2006; DIXON, 2009; GLEDSON, 1984). Nonetheless, this act of resurrecting undertaken by the Black readership extends beyond the characters to encompass the author himself and his literary legacy within the São Paulo Black Press, placing Machado as one of them, a writer of African descent possessing the “spirit of recognized capability” and a foundational Black intellectual role model.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In *A Voz da Raça*, we find another reference to Machado de Assis within an article discussing the planned 1937 Congress organized by the FNB, slated for October. Titled “A Frente Negra Brasileira está organizando um grande congresso nesta capital”, the piece outlines the event themes, including “Blacks and literature, arts, and science”. Amadeu Amaral Junior is cited as intervening on how Machado is “the great novelist of Black origin” (*A VOZ*, 1937, p. 4). The title of this final section borrows from this quotation.

This assertion aligns with Saidiya Hartman’s exploration of the “afterlife of slavery”, where the historical violence against Black bodies reverberates through time, manifesting itself in every cultural document on the Black experience in the Americas, which demands a constant form of epistemological resuscitation. In literature, this practice involves not only unearthing concealed layers of meaning within Machadian narratives—the invisible ink—but also repositioning the author to be indefinitely reread based on what he reveals by hiding or hides by revealing. Therefore, Hartman (2007) encourages us to reassess the lingering reverberations of slavery trauma in Machado’s oeuvre and to underscore the imperative for Black readers to breathe life into figures that have undergone an often overlooked dimension of historical anti-Black violence in Brazil: the whitening of his image, his intellectual contributions, and his reception.

### In conclusion

Machado de Assis has been read as a Black writer since the early 20th century, countering discourses that his Black reception emerged only in recent decades. This early engagement by Black readers/writers/activists represented a pioneering “complicity” with Machadian literature. Actively participating in the remembrance and (re)cognition of his legacy, their complicity went beyond mere citation, serving as an apparatus to decode the “invisible ink” within Machado’s writing and address the complexities of Brazilian society in the first half of the twentieth century.

Furthermore, it facilitated Black writers in ascribing value to their literary projects, stimulating a structure of thought and feeling vital for addressing racial injustices. In this context, Black readership transformed Machado de Assis’s text into a radical force (MORRISON, 2020), crafting new narratives that heightened the comprehension of historical anti-Black violence and the repercussions of slavery in Brazil. In this process, they interpreted Machado through the lens of their realities, co-creating new narratives inspired by Machadian resonance in their literary endeavors. This entailed adopting Machado’s “snail” or “capoeirista” style, integrating quotations, and commenting on his oeuvre to assert their authority as Black writers, thereby resurrecting Machado de Assis’s anti-slavery convictions and the vindication of humanity evident in the portrayals of enslaved characters in the author’s narratives.

In the São Paulo Black Press of the 1920s and 1930s, literature arose as a potent instrument for confronting the erasure of the Black experience in Brazilian history—often distorted, trivialized, romanticized, or omitted in official records. When a Black author references a Black intellectual role model, addresses a Black audience in a Black newspaper, reclaims their Black identity, and recognizes the vicissitudes of their shared Black experience, it becomes an act of resistance against the world of social death that marks the lives of Afro-descendants in the Americas. This underscores that Brazilian Black writers then were acutely aware of the historical challenges they faced in a hostile White context, leading them to wield Machado’s work as another weapon against racism.

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