

# Nation, Childhood and its Otherness: Brazilian Children's Literature from the Nineteenth to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century<sup>1</sup>

*Nação, infância e seus outros: literatura infantil brasileira do século XIX ao início do XX*

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## ABSTRACT

Brazilian children's literature has been a disputed field of power since it first emerged. This article intends to show that, regardless of the various political affiliations of its creators, the correspondence between "Brazilian childhood" and the European phenotype was hegemonic in the production aimed at future citizens. At the same time, erasing population diversity through the whitening of the population of African origin and the association of indigenous peoples with savagery – among other textual stratagems – contributed to naturalizing the image of Brazilians as white people. Notwithstanding the scant attention historiography usually pays to children's literature, the argument presented highlights the role undertaken by editing and mediating this reading matter in the maintenance of structural racism, thereby denying fundamental rights and citizenship to a considerable part of the Brazilian child and youth population.

## RESUMO

A literatura infantil brasileira tem sido um campo de poder disputado por diferentes projetos político-ideológicos desde o seu surgimento. Neste artigo, visamos evidenciar que, independentemente das variadas inclinações políticas de seus proponentes, a correspondência entre a "infância brasileira" e o fenótipo europeu foi hegemônica na produção dirigida aos futuros cidadãos. Paralelamente, o apagamento da diversidade populacional, por meio do embranquecimento da população de origem africana e da associação dos povos originários à selvageria – dentre outros artifícios textuais –, contribuiu para naturalizar a imagem de brasileiros e brasileiras como brancos. Malgrado a pouca atenção que a historiografia costuma dedicar à literatura infantil, o argumento apresentado aponta para o papel que as práticas de edição e mediação dessas leituras assume na manutenção do racismo estrutural, negando os mais fundamentais di-

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reitos e cidadania a considerável parte da população infantil e juvenil do Brasil. Palavras-chave: literatura infantil brasileira; infância nacional; racismo estrutural; cidadania; literatura cívica.

## QUESTIONING THE CANON, RETHINKING HISTORY<sup>2</sup>

“They say that miscegenation liquefies that racial crystallization that is the character and gives some unstable products. This in the moral – and in the physical, how ugly! [...] The blacks of Africa, hunted down by shooting and brought into slavery by force, took their revenge on the Portuguese in the most terrible way – with mulatto-ness and dilution, giving them that residual something that comes out of the suburbs in the morning [...].”

(Monteiro Lobato, 1944 [1908])

The opening paragraphs of *A Menina do Narizinho Arrebitado*, Monteiro Lobato's first children's book, published in 1920, introduce the setting and some of the main characters in the book that inaugurates his extensive and well-known oeuvre. In a few lines, readers are introduced to Dona Benta, “a sad old lady, over seventy years old”, who “lives happily” thanks to Lucia, the orphan granddaughter who lives with her and has the nickname *Narizinho Rebitado* (“Snub nose”) referred to in the title, and to two other residents who make up this family of women: “Aunt Anastácia”, whom he refers to as “an excellent pet black woman”, and “Her excellency, Ms. Emília, a cloth doll, made by the black woman”.

It took almost a century from the release of this book for the voices of the black movement to call attention to the damage racist language does to children. Considered the greatest exponent of Brazilian children's literature, Monteiro Lobato has the aura of those authors who belong to the literary canon, that is, who are identified in the collective memory with what is best in national identity. This is why there are many academics, journalists and other intellectuals who defend the writer by trying to “explain” and contextualize the man and his books, ignoring the plurality and context of the readers and their reading communities.

Many childhood readers of Lobato simply do not admit the author's explicit racism, which appears in the language used in his texts and, according to other sources, also punctuates his biography. The adherence to the pseudo-scientific theories of white superiority spread by the eugenic discourse, and the

sympathy for the Ku Klux Klan, are some of the manifestations documented by Lobato's correspondence and analysed in theses and dissertations (Chiaradia, 2008; Habib, 2003). The existence of these sources even suggests that derogatory ideas and images could be read as vectors of a political-intellectual project. A more productive hypothesis than the variations of the cliché of the "man of his time". (Hansen; Gomes, 2016; Velho, 2003).

The controversy made evident that readers of different generations and racial identities establish distinct affections with Lobato's work (Coli, 2019; Miguel, 2013; Reginaldo, 2019). And this is basically what allows us to pose a series of questions about the relationship between children's literature, national identity, and citizenship in Brazil: Is there such a thing as ideologically neutral children's literature? Who determines the authors and the works that constitute the canon of this literature? What image of the nation and nationality is presented? How do we deal with the different reading matters produced by changes in the historical contexts in which these works are received? And finally, what allows this work of children's literature, considered one of the best exponents produced by Brazilian culture, to have been spreading potentially humiliating images for 100 years to a society consisting mostly of people who identify themselves as black or brown?

In seeking a path for reflection on these issues, the article tries to offer an analysis of aspects of the production, circulation, and appropriation of books for children at a time when these were considered scarce or even non-existent. This notion, which gained momentum after the Proclamation of the Republic, was mobilized by Lobato himself, to present himself as the "creator" of Brazilian children's literature decades later (Lobato, 1933). More than the impression of radical rupture that certain periodization of history usually creates, mostly focused on events and creative personalities, what we propose is to consider Brazilian children's literature in the framework of the power relations that run through the production, circulation, and reception of this type of cultural good (Hansen, 2016).

#### "NATION-BOOKS", CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND CITIZEN TRAINING

"To my young fellow countrymen, I dedicate"

(Coelho Netto, 1897).

The international trend for a civic-pedagogical literature aimed at children is a remarkable phase in the history of Western children's literature between the

end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. This phenomenon is the product of the convergence of at least five factors related to nineteenth-century nationalism and its means of cultural expression. They are:

- the widespread production and dissemination by artists and intellectuals of representations of modern nations aimed at diverse audiences;
- the understanding of language and literature as expressions of national identities;
- the change in the perception of time, which results in greater social importance being given to childhood, the phase of life that comes to embody the future of the nation;
- the expansion of school systems and educational reforms, making public education the principal means by which nation states promote language standardization, the construction of a common past, and the training of citizens in accordance with the prevailing political regimes;
- the maturity of the publishing industry and trade, which allows for the expansion of the circulation of printed media throughout the national territories.

Histories of children's literature produced in several countries from the late 1920s onwards treated this literature differently, including or excluding titles and authors according to varying criteria. Didactic use or pedagogical character was an argument often mobilized for the exclusion or deprecation of texts in some countries, Brazil included, although titles of the genre are considered classics elsewhere.

The gigantic intellectual and editorial investment in national children's literature during the second half of the nineteenth century was accompanied by the creation and expansion of educational and curricular systems and reforms aimed at the nationalization of education. Both processes were a manifestation of what Philippe Ariès identified as a new "sentiment of childhood" (Ariès, 2006). It is worth mentioning that Michelle Perrot says this sentiment did not yet contemplate the notion of "child interest" but reflected the importance of their newly acquired status as "social beings". In fact, the interest of the State selectively overlapped that of the families, with greater or lesser incidence on domestic privacy, according to their economic and social status. As the author underlines, the child "does not belong only to the parents: he is the future of the nation and the race, producer, reproducer, citizen and soldier of tomorrow" (Perrot, 1999, p. 148).

National children's literature exhibited ideals of nationhood in the repre-

sentation of childhood and youth contained in books. The profile of what I call here civic literature does not refer to texts produced within associations or institutions such as schools, civic leagues or scouting, but is made from the explicit way in which texts and editions challenge the child reader as a citizen of the future, so as to impute to the child segment of the population a commitment to being aware of an idea of nationhood. Its ideological content is therefore evident in that it represents a “national childhood” (Creech, 2019; Darr, 2008; Hansen, 2007).

In terms of reach, taking into account the low rates of literacy and access to books, but also of representativeness – that is, the identification of the reading children with the characters, the social and regional scenarios, the historical and biographical references – what can be noted is that, under the unifying varnish of this addressee identified by the various terms that refer to the notion of national childhood, the representations conveyed are always exclusive and hierarchical, along the lines of the “imagined political communities”, i.e. the nations in which they are inserted (Anderson, 2008).

In the field of fictional civic-pedagogical literature, two narratives are considered founders of a new category, designated by Cabanel as “school novel” (Cabanel, 2007): *Le tour de la France par deux enfants*, by the French author Augustine Fouillée, published under the pseudonym G. Bruno in 1877, and *Cuore*, by the Italian author Edmondo De Amicis, published in 1886, were the main models for national children’s novels in various parts of the Western world. Despite their differences, they ushered in a new type of reading book, adding civic content to this type of schoolbook that generally had the format of an anthology or “selection” of classics. This is therefore an innovation in relation to the structure of both reading books and civic instruction handbooks, which generally followed an encyclopedic format. This mixture allowed the incorporation of the pedagogical model of the coming-of-age novels, one of the influences of these narratives. Moreover, the books referred their readers to recent political and social experiences about which the respective populations were sensitive, such as the territorial loss resulting from the Franco-Prussian war and the Italian unification process.

The approach to sensitive political topics by civic literature was a novelty, even though the treatment of such topics at the time was radically different from the ways in which more recent children’s literature addresses issues considered difficult for children. Regardless of the identity character that underpinned all these approaches, in narrating the nation and nationality, civic literature embedded images of national childhood with which its readers could

or could not identify and, in the same process, identify their “others” – subalterns or superiors, allies or enemies.

The fluidity of boundaries between the types of books aimed at children and the reading practices associated with them is more evident in the analysis of the “props” that accompany them and serve as “reading protocols” for the main text than in the text itself (Chartier, 2001).

See the example of the book *A História do Brasil ensinada pela biografia de seus heróis* (*The History of Brazil taught by the biography of its heroes*), by the well-known intellectual Silvio Romero (1890). The date is significant: in 1890, the republican regime had its first anniversary, and the abolition of slavery its second. The provisional government of Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca was still in force and a new Constitution was under discussion, which would be promulgated the following year. The Brazilian political situation meant that nationality and citizenship were fields open to different projects. The book, presented on the cover as intended for “civic education” and “primary classes”, is only one among several examples of the strong engagement of established intellectuals with the production of reading matter for children at that time. This was particularly true in Portugal and Brazil, countries in which children’s literature had not grown much since Eça de Queirós denounced its non-existence in the column *Letters from England*, ten years earlier (Queirós, 1881, n.p.).

In the preface, João Ribeiro, who described himself as a “patriot who rejoices to see his great countrymen come down to school like Paul Bert, Sarmiento, Benjamin Franklin, Andres Bello and speak to children to talk more closely to the future”, discussed the difficulties of civic instruction. Among the aspects considered, he spotlighted the total lack of agreement on “what a thing” was “civic instruction”, stressing the innovative character of the “narrative-biographical genre” chosen by Romero to promote civility among Brazilian children. After a discussion of legislation in various countries, the preface concluded:

Civic education constitutes an unclassifiable knowledge: it has the characteristics of neither a science nor of an art. [...]

One of the most curious and noteworthy things is precisely the fact that no legislation determines the quality or quantity of the subject: one speaks only of actions on organic laws, another requires history together with notions of the Constitution, yet another introduces some rudiments of political economy and there is no shortage of people who ask for a little heraldry.

As we can see, nobody knows how to define the subject, and civic instruction is reduced to a kind of domestic recipe where homemade recipes and fruit preserves are nudged together (Ribeiro, 1890, p. VI).

Also in 1890, José Veríssimo called attention to the “patriotic indifference” of the existing reading books in Brazil, in his influential text *A Educação Nacional* (*The National Education*, Veríssimo, 1890, p. 6). This idea was to be developed in the following years. On the pretext of the publication of *Coração* (*Heart*), Veríssimo published the article “Educação Nacional (a propósito de um livro italiano)”, in the *Revista Pedagógica* of February 1892, subsequently including it in the fourth edition of the book, in 1894. In it, the Italian situation was treated as a paradigm of national unification through education.

Everyone knows that the task of the reconstitution of Italy is certainly a long work of national education, done by its writers, its poets, its artists, its orators, its statesmen, as the work of perfect unification is continuing to be the effort and action not only of these but systematically of the school, too (Veríssimo, 1894, p. XI).

Further on, the author reflects on the possibilities of using *Coração* in the moral and civic education of Brazilian children:

De Amicis’s book is unquestionably Italian in its inspiration and conception, in its object and end, in its spirit and in its dominant and exclusive idea. I know of no school today that has such a finished manual of moral and civic education as this perfectly simple and unpretentious reading book. [...] To the Brazilian schoolboy, just as to the French or Portuguese schoolboy, it will teach the highest and most sympathetic morals; but it will only speak to them of a country which they neither know nor can love and whose life and whose glories, whose struggles and triumphs, are indifferent to them. For our school, therefore, the greatest value of this book is lost. What it needed was not a translation, but an adaptation or imitation (Veríssimo, 1894, p. XII).

It can be said that the first Brazilian “adaptation” of *Coração* would be done by Coelho Netto. Published in 1897 with the title *América*, the book makes a probable reference to the Americano college, founded and administered by Veríssimo in Pará (Gomes, 2009). The main scenario of the narrative, *América* is the name of the school described in the memories of the protagonist and narrator Renato as a true republican utopia.

It was also in this novel that the author inaugurated the civic ideal of the republican woman/mother in Brazilian children’s fiction. The place of white women in the construction of the nation was a disputed field in this literature. Authors claimed the importance of the education of future “housewives”, con-

sidering their role in a necessary transformation of the domestic environment and in the education of men in the future.

Coelho Netto puts the discourse of clarification about the limits of domestic education in the voice of Renato's mother, right at the beginning of *América*.

— I could continue my studies at home with Dr. Lima, I stammered.

— No, my son, it is necessary that you spend some time at the school, it is your initiation into life. [...] You will go as if to a greenhouse where there are all the examples of man still in bud, [...] above all you will deal with men who, like you, will be the factors of the greatness of the Homeland. [...] Living always by my side, you will go out into life naïve, knowing only your heart; [...] this sacrifice is for your benefit. I want you to be like your father: dignified without haughtiness, serious without audacity, thrifty without being greedy, gentle without humility, strong without vainglory, modest with simplicity, discreet, charitable and true (Coelho Netto, 1897, p. 4).

This stereotype is returned to convincingly in 1907, by Julia Lopes de Almeida, in *Histórias de nossa terra* (*Stories of our land*), a book that clearly breaks the bond between patriotism and masculinity in civic-pedagogical literature. Published by Francisco Alves & Cia., *Histórias de nossa terra* reached its 6th revised and enlarged edition in 1911, almost catching up with *Contos Pátrios* (*Homeland tales*), a highly successful book that was in its 7th edition in the same year, despite having been launched three years earlier, in 1904.

The first chapters of *Histórias de nossa terra* are illustrated with photographs of girls dressed in school uniform, around the national flag and in a classroom (Almeida, 1915, pp. 6; 10). In the various texts, many in the form of letters, the author presents an alternative ideal of patriotism and civility, as well as of national childhood, thus positively reinforcing representations of friendship and female paid labor, and images of masculinity different from the military-spartan stereotype that was the most often seen.

In the chapter “Uma pergunta” (“A question”), a boy presents his various options to his mother when challenged to “take from our history a page that would make our hearts beat with enthusiasm and pride”. From Jesuits fighting cannibalism and the resolution through “the episode of the destruction of the Palmares republic, the end of everything, when the defeated blacks preferred death to slavery”, passing through the “struggles of the abolitionists, in the unforgettable profiles of Luiz Gama, of Ferreira de Menezes, of Joaquim Serra, of Patrocínio”, their characters are all characterized by the fight against injustice



or the promotion of some type of “progress” not directly associated with violence<sup>3</sup>. It is worth highlighting the numerous list of black heroes, composed mainly of abolitionist intellectuals, and the negative representation of indigenous peoples, always treated as “savages”. The mother begins by recalling the “heroic deeds” of the Pernambucan revolt, but then adds: “I hate wars, I abhor them in every respect. [...] The labors of peace are those that make nations great”. In a didactic way, the author closes the chapter by affirming her conception of patriotism and masculinity through that civic “mother”:

[...] being strong and being patriotic is not knowing how to kill, but knowing how to love, to honor one’s name and to work without hatred or rancor for anyone.

Remember, at all times, that my maternal aspiration is this and only this: that my children should be good men, and through that, be useful to their homeland (Almeida, 1915, pp. 155-158).

In the next chapter, “República” (“Republic”), a father explains to his son the differences between the new regime and the monarchy, based on information about the proclamation event that the boy brings back from school, illustrating the role of home education in promoting civility:

— The main difference is this: the Republic is the government of the whole people, and the monarchy is the government of a single family. In monarchies there is a privileged family, which considers itself and claims to be invested with a divine right, which authorizes it to govern the nation for all time, [...].

— And in the Republic?

— In the Republic it is not like this. The modern Republic has this slogan or motto: “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”. Now, as all men are free, equal and brothers, the people freely choose among the most competent, the most honorable, the wisest, the one who is to govern and direct it, and who is to be its direct representative and the highest authority of the nation; [...] (Almeida, 1915, pp. 159-161).

The representation of the mother or father as agents of civic education, or even of an “uncle” or “grandfather”, is used in texts with different political biases and suggests ways of inscribing the homeland in the family and domestic domain, whether in the form of the author dedicating the book to their children, or in the voice of characters.

It is interesting to consider that in fact, despite the presence of graphic, material, or textual elements indicating the use of many of these books in schools, the circulation of civic reading matter was not restricted to instruction

and teaching. The possibilities of reading practices in line with these family representations are supported by sources that record the reading of civic and patriotic content as entertainment or as part of family education.

The most famous book of patriotic children's literature, *Porque me ufano do meu país* (*Why am I proud of my country*), by Afonso Celso, is one that is not presented as a book for school use. In the French edition, for instance, it is indicated as a "popularizing work" (Celso, 1912), a category that did not imply limiting the use of the book to a pre-defined space or school age/stage. This is not to say that it was not adopted in schools, and there are sources that refer to such use, only that it was not written or published with that audience in mind.

The author used a literary formula common to children's books, namely that of presenting it as though written for his children. But the varied reading practices of these books could happen in any environment, and their association with other reading materials also served to inform a certain way of reading and grasping their content. According to Maria Helena Câmara Bastos, Gastão Pernalva "remembers a distant holiday when he packed his suitcase with Amicis's *Cuore*, Jules Verne's *Around the World*, Castro Alves's *Poesias*, Affonso Celso's *Porque me ufano do meu país* – 'the most patriotic book ever published in Brazil'" (Bastos, 2002, p. 14).

Coelho Netto, on the other hand, dedicates *América* to his "young fellow countrymen" and, in 1910, dedicates *Alma, educação feminina* (*Soul, women's education*), to his daughters. In the first paragraph of the preface, the author characterizes the book as "a set of small narratives, like advice, supported by moral and civic precepts" (Coelho Netto, 1928). The chapter "Pátria" ("Homeland") illustrates the relationship he made between female education and patriotism:

Do not think that patriotism consists only in the sacrifice of blood made by the soldier... war is the extreme bid. [...]

And to the woman, my daughter, the weak being, belongs the greatest responsibility in this work, because, as the Lord, in the words of the books, created the soul of Man by infusing his divine breath into his body, the woman mother must inspire the heart of her child with the good example which is the germ of perfection.

Therefore, it is convenient that the woman's education is guided with all attentiveness, [...] (Coelho Netto, 1919, pp. 139-141).

In Coelho Netto's vision, the civic importance of the woman and her education was subordinate to her responsibility in the creation of male children for the homeland<sup>4</sup>.

The nationality of the literature offered to children was not only in relation to the content of the books, but to the actual production/publishing of these objects as a function of the perceived existence of “national” readers. Inasmuch as the scarcity or non-existence of reads for this public became an omnipresent theme in prefaces and notes from the end of the nineteenth century, almost everyone who did something to make up for that shortage stood out or was highlighted in the flattering reviews, as having fulfilled a “mission”, civic “duty” or, at the very least, a “service” to the homeland.

Alberto Figueiredo Pimentel, for example, one of the most influential chroniclers of the Belle Époque and responsible for Pedro Quaresma’s collection of children’s books at Livraria do Povo, has this to say about his *Histórias da Avozinha* (*Granma’s Stories*), from 1896:

In fact, both these books – we are proud to say – have come to fill a sensitive gap: [...].

The Brazilian children, to whom we have dedicated this series of popular books, will find in *Histórias da Avozinha* a pleasant pastime, [...].

And with the satisfaction we get from being useful to our young fellow countrymen, we consider ourselves well paid for our work (Pimentel, 1896).

Books such as those by Figueiredo Pimentel for the Children’s Library of the Livraria do Povo were popular editions and not intended for use in schools. But the exaltation of the civic and patriotic spirit in the making of a work, in that time of “lacuna”, boosted the value of the product. In other books, references to the homeland or to national symbols were included alongside short stories, poems, and texts with the most diverse subjects, with varying frequency. In *Alma Infantil: versos para uso das escolas* (*Child’s Soul: verses for use in schools*), by siblings Francisca Julia and Júlio da Silva, from 1912, a “Hino à Pátria” (“Hymn to the Homeland”) appears alongside three other “hymns” dedicated respectively to “study”, “school” and “work”. In the *Hino à Pátria*, the greatness of Brazil was attributed to divine grace, according to the Catholic vanity that had its finest expression in the famous book by Afonso Celso:

Beloved country, where the light so brightly shines,  
 There are so many splendors in you,  
 That you are the greatest wonder  
 Of those that exist created by God (Julia; Silva, 1912, pp. 172-173).

The homeland was referred to in the prefaces, summaries, titles, and illustrations of the books published at that time. More than a theme treated in specific texts, the presence of homeland ended up being a reading key, from which various subjects and topics, such as work or school, for example, gained a “patriotic” sense that they did not have on their own.

This intertextual dialogue appears clearly in *Poesias Infantis* (*Children’s poetry*) by Olavo Bilac, first published in 1904. In it, the famous poem “Pátria” (“Homeland”), alongside others on work, the seasons, the stages of life, the family, and nature, lets the secular political and intellectual project of social transformation that unfolds throughout the author’s work shine through.

The first half of the poem expresses vainglorious amazement punctuated by exclamations:

Love, with faith and pride, the land where you were born!  
Child! You won’t see any country like this!  
Look at that sky! What a sea! What rivers! What a forest!  
Nature, here, perpetually in celebration,

The second half, on the other hand, exposes the utilitarian vision of nature, a hallmark of the capitalist and liberal bias present in most of these texts, alongside ideas such as the value of science as innovation, of industry, of progress, and, in this case, of work and meritocracy:

See that great expanse of forest where,  
Fruitful and bright, the eternal spring rules!  
Good soil! Never denied to those who work  
The bread that kills hunger, the roof that shelters...  
Those who with their own sweat fertilize and moisten it,  
See their efforts rewarded, they are happy, and get rich!  
Child! You won’t see any country like this:  
Imitate in greatness the land where you were born! (Bilac, 1904, p. 339).

In the preface to the 1st edition, Bilac said, “What the author wants is that what is recognized in this little volume is not the work of an artist, but the good will with which a Brazilian wanted to contribute to the moral education of the children of his country.” (Bilac, 1904).

Civic texts were not a homogeneous group in genre or ideology. On the contrary, this literature was an arena in which we can observe disputes for collective memory, for the meanings of citizenship and patriotism, and identify

different projects at stake in the form of poems, short stories, novels, and others. The most prominent ideology was represented by “ufanismo”, a kind of chauvinism sometimes understood as a “spirit of the times”, but corresponding specifically to the overly optimistic projections of that segment of authors who associated the natural riches of the homeland with divine grace. Its greatest exponent was Afonso Celso, whose book gives rise to the term. This vision, which expressed projects of a religious and conservative nature, found a secular and liberal counterpoint in authors who understood that their books had a role to play in turning children into agents of progress. These republican education enthusiasts often referred to Brazil as a new country, “where everything is still to be done”, a statement repeated in several places (Hansen, 2012).

Writers with a liberal and utilitarian view of nature, concerned with overcoming backwardness through the good use of the riches of the territory, saw that the ideas of Catholic and conservative “ufanismo” were an obstacle to proper respect and appreciation of work and industry, as well as to the purpose of an education guided by science and the encouragement of individual merit. In the words of Olavo Bilac, “ufanismo” was a “poorly thought patriotism, which can be fatal to the homeland and the patriot” (Bilac, 1996, pp. 681-693).

## BRAZILIAN CHILDHOOD AND ITS OTHERS IN THE COUNTRY OF THE FUTURE

“Forgetting, and even the historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality. Historical inquiry, in effect, throws light on the violent acts that have taken place at the origin of every political formation, even those that have been the most benevolent in their consequences. Unity is always brutally established. [...]”

(Ernst Renan, 2015 [1882])

*América*, like the rest of the republican civic literature of the time, adopted “whitening” as a way to narrate the integration of African descendent children into the representation of Brazilian childhood. This republican strand also associated the values of the aristocratic elite who owned land and slaves with backwardness.

In the most striking episode of the narrative, the school headmaster is confronted with a fight between a boy described as “very rich”, named Castro, who “insults” another student characterized as “mulatto” and “very poor”,

named Libânio, by saying that he was “a black” and that his “mother was a slave”. Although Libânio had responded physically to the verbal aggression, the headmaster supports him, as well as all the colleagues who testify that he had been insulted, and makes it clear that, in that school, from “the gate inwards only merit establishes distinctions between my students; here there are no castes and if there is any superiority it is the one that Mr. Libânio can allege, who, being a boy with the most dignity I have known, is one of the best students of my school” (Coelho Netto, 1897, pp. 54-55).

As can be seen from the reaction of the highest authority of the school, who understood verbal violence to be more serious than physical violence, calling someone “black” and the son of a “slave” should be considered a serious offence, and therefore this type of practice had to be strongly reprimanded so that prejudices could gradually be corrected through education.

It is interesting that Castro’s punishment was both a pedagogical solution and a narrative solution, along the lines of the lessons about national dates under different pretexts that punctuate the civic books. It is the only example of a situation of reparation for racist offence in Brazilian civic literature of the period. Besides the apology to Libânio, Castro is required to write an essay about “Treze de Maio” (“May 13”), which gives the chapter its name. Consistent with the project that runs through the novel, the vision of history presented in the text downplays the royal family as protagonist in the abolition and gives to the event a nationalist, republican, and democratic content: “This Law, although it is claimed to have derived from the imperial heart, came from the imperative will of the People: it was the Nation that imposed it on the throne and it was no longer possible to contain the violence of the wave when the dam was run – and since that day the prejudice disappeared from the Homeland, all men socialized together [...]” (Coelho Netto, 1897, p. 58).

More than a decade later, in 1910, another character appears who fulfils the role of representing the socializing between white and mixed-race children. Juvêncio, from *Através do Brasil* (*Through Brazil*), written by Olavo Bilac and Manoel Bomfim, serves as an instrument to construct the belonging of Carlos and Alfredo, the protagonists, to the same “imagined political community”. In the description in chapter XIII, which reinforces his otherness in relation to the boys, Juvêncio is presented as: “a young boy of sixteen or seventeen, dressed in the fashion of the hinterland, a thick white cotton shirt, striped cotton jacket and trousers, shoes, and red leather hat. He was a nice guy, dark, between *caboclo* and mulatto – with a broad face, a wide mouth, lively and intelligent eyes” (Bilac; Bonfim, 1917, p. 69).

The differences between the characters are evident right from the start. In the chapter in which he is introduced, the countryman naturally chases away a snake, to the surprise of the brothers, who were not very close to nature. Soon after, however, in a passage that can be read as being about the ignorance of the people of *Sertão*, represented by Juvêncio, or about the absence of the State in rural areas, the character, not by chance, is corrected by the younger brother:

— Eh! – exclaimed Juvêncio – nobody lives here... And now we'll stay right here; I'm not leaving, not even by order of the king!

Alfredo, now more excited at the prospect of the rest he was about to enjoy, couldn't help laughing:

— What king! There is no longer a king in Brazil! Now it is the President of the Republic who can give orders!

— Well, whoever it is – said the boy, also laughing. – I'm not leaving here today! (Bilac; Bonfim, 1917, p. 72).

In the case of the older brother, Juvêncio's subalternity is constantly remembered. Although the boy is younger than him, Juvêncio only calls him "*Seu Carlinhos*", and at no point is this called into question. The representation of friendship and companionship in *Através do Brasil*, therefore, differs from the one in Coelho Netto's utopian republic, in which all children are identified by their status as students. In *América* the character showed resistance to a subalternity dependent on the color of his skin and on poverty, and Libânio's equality was recognized by the authority of the school and by the majority of the students, even though the exceptional nature of his inclusion was at every moment remembered as the result of individual merit, being the only student referred to by the marker of race.

Bilac and Bomfim, in turn, by describing the friendship of brothers Carlos and Alfredo with Juvêncio as "fraternal", make sure that this feeling is always recognized by the white boys. The relationship is represented throughout the book in an asymmetrical way, and the inequality between them is always expressed by Juvêncio or shown by the situations described. The friendship between different people in this and other civic books follows the dynamic that underlies the perception of the nation as an "imagined community", which means that "regardless of the effective inequality and exploitation that may exist within" the nation, according to Benedict Anderson, it is "always conceived as a deep horizontal camaraderie" (Anderson, 2008, p. 34).

To this end, authors of "nation-books" made extensive use of "historical

error” and “forgetting”, according to Renan’s advice (1882). It is worth noting, in this regard, the disciplinary paradox established in this context, which testifies to the development of the critical method of a history-science committed to the truth, and the claim of history teaching as “citizen pedagogy” (Furet, 1990). In other words, the national framework, which conferred meaning to historical knowledge and its teaching and learning, would have its existence threatened by disciplinary progress.

History had a central place in civic books in its purpose of nation-building, since the past narrated as history was the foundation of the “great solidarity” that linked past, present and future, creating an imagined common space-time and its political existence.

The short story “Mãe Maria” (“Mother Maria”), by Olavo Bilac, is one of those narratives in which the description of the characters shows how a liberal republican, while hierarchizing race and gender, perceived the mismatch between the values and rules in force in the public and private spheres in the last years of slavery. Under the imperative of building national unity, the entire domestic environment and its practices based on slavery are described as something that belonged to a distant past, making the elements of that composition seem anachronistic. This impression is reinforced by the author’s strategy of punctuating the text with interpellations to the reader, such as: “It is still this, at the end of my long life, [...] the deepest memory I keep within my soul” (Bilac; Coelho Netto, 1904, p. 15).

At one end, the narrator himself, a rich boy, a *sinhô-moço* (young master) raised by a black woman, the mother Maria of the title, like so many generations of white children. At the other end, the “old” mother Maria, his “real mother”, a slave woman remembered in her extreme kindness, who replaces the mother who is “beautiful”, but “immobile” and “paralyzed”. In the memories of his childhood, the narrator Amâncio shows himself as a child who would always be endowed with power and authority over others, which is expressed in the designation of *sinhô* that is reserved for him. This attribute, for its part, derived from his social and family position of heir, is not subject to any criticism.

Thus, old Maria was my real mother. [...]

When I had to go to college – a serious boarding school which pupils only left once a year – I cried for a long time, hugging Mother Maria, clinging to her thick, blue-striped skirt. [...]



A year of school had been enough to transform me. And now I appeared to the old babysitter as a new *sinhô-moço* – a *sinhô-moço* who was eleven years old, who already knew how to read and write, who already thought he was a man, and who preferred quoits and gymnastics to the silly stories of mother Maria [...] (Bilac; Coelho Netto, 1904, pp. 17-34).

The narrator explains that, not knowing anything about mother Maria's past, he knew "only that she was African", because: "Buying and selling slaves was, at that time, a natural thing. No one asked a bought black man about his past, just as no one sought to know where the meat he was fed on or the cloth he was wearing came from." (Bilac; Coelho Netto, 1904, p. 16).

Associating enslaved people with African origin and differentiating skin tones meant that valuing lighter skin was a way to condition nationality and citizenship to whitening and miscegenation. In the writings of Bilac and Coelho Netto, all dark-skinned people with just one exception<sup>5</sup> were African, "old" and had been enslaved. This characterization allowed the authors of civic texts to avoid dealing with the identification of Brazilian children with phenotypes that strayed from the white.

Extended patriarchal families with a strong presence of slaves and servants were negatively represented in the republican civic literature. One of the main reasons was the notion that contact with "slaves" or "servants" harmed the development of children by instilling, for example, "fears" and "superstitions" such as the stories of mother Maria. The education of children was then a matter about which parents had to be vigilant, and this was more feasible in urban nuclear families.

Amâncio's memoirs, as well as the words of Renato's mother in *América*, describe the contrast between the boy's experiences in the domestic environment and at boarding school. In both texts, the idea is that the female presence, dominant in the home's daily life, was detrimental to the boys' education. The republican ideal of masculinity was increasingly the Spartan model, an image, in fact, that will be explored in the introductory texts of the *Manual do Escoteiro Brasileiro* (*Brazilian Scout Handbook*, Guinle; Pollo, 1922), written by Bilac and Coelho Netto.

The way of life of the traditional economic elites, linked to *latifúndia* and the exploitation of slave labor, became synonymous with backwardness in the work of these authors. In contrast, the new elites of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie, regarded as productive and enterprising, and the liberal professionals specialized in technical and scientific areas, were now associated

with progress. Markers such as age, gender, race, level of education, origin, physical health, class, are repositioned on the scale of values of this literature. Changes of meaning that occur in the context of construction of the “national community”, taken as a “cultural system”, and of political and ideological disputes for its future<sup>6</sup>.

The reduction of people who happen to bear certain social markers of gender, race, and class to their economic value as a productive force also affected the domestic work to which black women were assigned. This was further disparaged by male authors who saw in its presence a pernicious effect on the education of Brazilian children, with emphasis on the influence on girls.

Decades after Abolition, texts and images from civic literature still fixed (for children) the subordinate place of black people in Brazilian society, the jobs they were destined to fill, the miserable or non-existent value of this type of work, and the association between intellectual superiority and light-skinned people.

## CONCLUSION

“So, children are expected to reproduce in a natural way the dealings that the writer had with his character. How do I know? Because I was there in Taubaté in the ‘90s, studying in public schools that fed on Monteiro Lobato’s work all year round.

Racial offences took on a painful meaning for me and most of the black students. There was no color variation for the impregnated racism, everyone was ‘coal black’ or ‘mud-colored’ as Tia Nastácia was once referred to [...]”.

(Ale Santos, 2018)

Unlike countries where children’s publishing was already well established, which made the specialization of publishers and authors, and the topic diversity in supply possible, Brazilian children’s literature emerged alongside the growth of the nationalism that led the world to the World War I. That nationalism was expressed in the abundant production of cultural and symbolic goods that disputed meanings and identities within the frame of references of this new “cultural system”. The civic-pedagogical phase of children’s literature belongs to this context, with its varied topics and characteristics. Some stereotypes and clichés will have been crystallized in the material and immaterial children’s culture since the end of the nineteenth century, spreading across a

world organized into nations: invalid war veterans, soldiers who give their lives for their country, boys who “act like men”, “virile”, “honorable”, “hardworking”, often early providers in a situation of orphanhood; virtuous girls and women, republican teaching mothers.

Responding to national contexts, these roles will be occupied by people characterized by markers such as skin color, class, education, ethnicity, religion, family origin, gender etc., which will help to naturalize prejudices, inequalities, and exclusions. The use of markers of difference in the imagination of a Brazilian childhood and its others by children’s literature operated in this way, often linked to uses of history. Authors of civic literature followed Renan’s prescription of forgetfulness and remembrance in their projects of nationhood, in the context of the newly established republic and free labor. Many seemed to believe in a progressive extinction of the practices, values and experiences of the slave-owning, monarchical and aristocratic society through the school education of white children, modifying the attitudes and values in them while traces of the African origin past would be diluted little by little by *mestizaje*.

This civic literature continued to be produced and re-issued, even with competition from texts that were seen as its complete opposite, such as those by Monteiro Lobato.

To resume the discussion at the beginning of this article, if the controversy around the racism of Lobato and in other children’s books can teach us a lesson, it is that children’s literature is always a place of power. Selecting some texts as defining nationality means that others will be excluded by criteria of “literary value” and taste, political censorship or commercial decisions, reasons that are often interconnected. In the current context, where certain actors invest in a “culture war”, attention must be given to the processes of canonization, the entrenched values of certain authors and titles, and the mechanisms of silencing, which operated in the past and still inform reading matters in the present. Discussing and questioning these processes brings with it a potential for change.

Like all texts and objects recognized as expressions of a particular national community, children’s literature mediates the representation of social groups according to the power they must make themselves represented. Its potential for transformation – in the case of Brazil, the urgent disconnection between representations of the nation and white supremacy – is linked to the movements of the subjects, which shake the benchmarks upon which established social hierarchies rest. The emergence and dissemination of a greater diversity of voices in the public arena through networks and platforms has been

the main factor in changing of the reading publics. While they have never been passive in the appropriation, signification, and re-signification of texts and images, they are now finding new ways to participate in the creation, production, and circulation of the cultural goods they consume.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Carina Martins for reading and commenting on the draft of this text.

<sup>3</sup> On Julia Lopes de Almeida's educational project, see Rocha (2020).

<sup>4</sup> On "future housewives", see Patroclo (2019).

<sup>5</sup> The short story "A borboleta Negra" relates the rescue of a baby abandoned by two white children. For an analysis of this tale and the representations of blacks in Olavo Bilac, see França; Mello (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Here I follow Benedict Anderson, who proposed "an understanding of nationalism by aligning it not with consciously adopted political ideologies, but with the great cultural systems that preceded it, and from which it emerged, even to combat them". These "culture systems" would be: "the religious community and the dynastic kingdom. For both, in their heyday, were uncontested reference structures, as is the case today with nationality. Therefore, it is fundamental to analyze what conferred a self-evident plausibility to these cultural systems [...]" (Anderson, 2008, p. 39).



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