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Whiteness, Maleness, and Power: A study in Rio de Janeiro

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WHITENESS, MALENESS, AND POWER: A STUDY IN RIO DE JANEIRO

Valeria Ribeiro Corossacz

This article discusses the accounts of a group of upper-middle-class white men of Rio de Janeiro about their sexual access to domestic workers (empregada) during their adolescence. After a brief discussion of the specific characteristics of whiteness in Brazil, the interviewees' sexual experiences are discussed in relation to Freyre's description, in Casa-Grande e Senzala, of the sexual relationship of the white slave master's son with the mulata slave. This sexual relationship was recognized by the interviewees as a symbolically dense site for understanding their own experiences with empregadas even if the empregada's skin color is considered less relevant than her class. I argue that these sexual relationships contribute to shaping the interviewees' experiences of whiteness. In particular, interviewees' silence about empregadas' skin color is also a silence about their own skin color and part of the larger silence surrounding whiteness understood as a site of class and color privilege.

Keywords: Brazil; race; class; and gender hierarchies; whiteness; social privilege; female domestic worker

Introduction

In this article, I offer some reflections on the articulation of class, gender, and color hierarchies as experienced by a group of upper-middle-class white men in Rio de Janeiro. I conducted 21 interviews between 2009 and 2012 with men who self-identify as white and upper-middle class; at the time of the interviews, they were aged from 43 to 60 years old. Upper-middle class in this case indicates individuals belonging to what are defined in Brazil as the A-B classes, those representing the top of the social pyramid (ABEP, 2011).¹ Three of them were or had been in more or less stable romantic relationships with men, while the others dated women. The interviews addressed various issues surrounding their biographical experiences of the construction of whiteness and masculinity.² In this article, I propose to focus on one of the elements that emerged from the interviews: how young upper-middle-class white males' sexual access to the bodies of poor women employed as domestic worker as a form of 'sexual initiation' during adolescence represents a social space that contributes to shaping the interviewees' experiences of whiteness. I use the term social space to refer to a relationship whose value and meaning is determined not only by individual experience but also by the history and social representations that have

defined the characteristics of this kind of social relationship in the shared imaginary (shared, but not unanimously so). The color classification of the female domestic worker remains obscured or un-problematized in the interviews and represents one of the central nodes through which to analyze how gender, color, and class hierarchies articulate these men's experiences of whiteness.

This article concentrates on the analysis of the interviews as a moment of re/producing representations of gender, color, and class, but also as a moment in which the interviewee, in responding to the anthropologist's questions, relates these representations to his own biographical experiences. Although the sample cannot be considered representative, the analysis that the interviewees formulate depicts key elements of Brazil's historical formation as a mixed-race nation as it has been developed by white subjects. It is thus interesting to consider these interviewees' accounts as part of a widespread (if contested) set of social ideas and representations that evoke the history of Brazil.

In order to understand the perception that Brazilians of every class and color have of Brazil and of themselves, it is necessary to appreciate the central role played since the 1930s by *mestiçagem* as a trait considered positive and foundational to national identity. *Mestiçagem* refers to the historical process of cultural and 'racial' mixing among the three populations that contributed to the formation of the country (indigenous people, Portuguese, and Africans), populations that were subsequently joined by other groups of immigrants.³ Behind this idea of 'racial' mixing, which is to say a mixing among people considered to belong to 'natural' and distinct groups (i.e., 'races'), there lies the idea of sexual union among people of different origins. The model of sexual union between male owners of Portuguese origin and their female slaves of African origin has played a particularly prominent role in Brazil's history and national identity.⁴ For this reason, I decided to address this model of sexual union with interviewees by reading a few brief extracts from Freyre's *Casa-Grande e Senzala*, a text published in 1933 and considered one of the most important works framing Brazilian national identity. I tried therefore to develop an analysis of whiteness based on the articulation between socio-historical narrative, as a source of collective imagination, and contemporary accounts through the analysis of several interview extracts.

Whiteness in Brazil

I have chosen to concentrate on whiteness in Brazil in an effort to further develop an analysis of racism by focusing on the pole that, in this society, has historically named and defined the Other. Pinho has noted that 'from its very inception, whiteness in Brazil has never been constructed as the "oppositional" identity, a place that has been historically occupied by blackness. As a transnational force, whiteness has, throughout the Americas, been established as the "norm," the "standard," against which the identities of "others" have been produced' (2009, 44).

My aim is to investigate those elements that have long been left unspoken and obscured in dominant discourse about (gender and color-based) difference: Other than who? Different from whom? As Guillaumin writes, 'difference is thought of (a) in a relationship, but (b) in a relationship of a particular type where there is a fixed

point, a centre which orders everything around it, and by which all things are measured, in a word, a REFERENT. This is in fact the hidden reality of difference' (1995, 250). In order to analyze the category of the *referent* that lies hidden within racism, I have chosen to study that which most completely represents the self, understood as normative in the Brazilian context: white, urban, upper-middle-class males.

As many scholars have pointed out, whiteness is not a uniform or monolithic category, although it may appear as such (Frankenberg 1993, 2001; Ware and Back 2002). On the contrary, it constantly intersects with other sociological variables – including gender, sexuality, class, religion, and national origin – that may modify it but never fundamentally transform it in its relation with blackness. With this research project, I seek to capture the highest degree of whiteness in the Brazilian context and the way it serves as a 'reference point' social category on the basis of which can be viewed and defined all relationships and 'other' social groups: blacks, indigenous people, *favelados*,⁵ marginal populations, peasants, white, and black women. The Brazilian context displays points of intersection with the context in the United States in relation to this issue: as a matter of fact, Lorde referred to this referent as something everyone must confront in their own conscience as the mythical norm: 'In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure' (2007, 116).

Although I chose to investigate the form of whiteness that appears to represent the most fully realized social expression of its normative character (upper-middle-class men), I did not interview only heterosexual males, who correspond to the highest degree of norm, including also homosexual men. It is interesting to note how closely the interviewees' sociological profiles conform to the definitions given by Connell (1995) and Kimmel (1994) of hegemonic masculinity. In other words, how they conform to the figure of the white, middle-class, adult, and heterosexual male that functions as a standard of masculinity against which Other forms of masculinity are defined. In relation to this article's focus, the relationship between white males and female domestic workers, I would argue that sexual orientation does not necessarily have much effect on interviewees' experiences of whiteness.

One of the most discussed issues in whiteness studies is the socially invisible character of whiteness, which has contributed to its historically defining itself as the social norm, the normality from which others diverge. In the US context, Frankenberg has referred to this feature of whiteness with the phrase 'unmarked marker': it is an empty signifier, something that indicates racial locations that are simultaneously existent and transparent, un-nameable, but which nonetheless define themselves as the norm and normality (Frankenberg 1993). Many authors have noted that whiteness is only invisible to white people themselves (Ahmed 2004; Frankenberg 1999; Morrison 1992), and Frankenberg herself has helped to analyze how its invisibility is actually a mirage (Frankenberg 2004).

In Brazil, it is likewise possible to observe this tendency for whiteness to remain invisible to whites (Piza 2000, 2003), to be difficult to perceive at the social level (Guerreiro Ramos 1957), and to set itself up as the norm that embodies modernity (McCallum 2005). According to Sovik, 'the invisibilization of white Brazilians in

public discourse, along with the valorization of *mestiçagem*, is the traditional form of representing racial relations for which Brazil is known internationally' (2010, 15). And yet there is a particular feature of the Brazilian context that renders the 'invisibilization' of whiteness even more accentuated: the tendency in everyday relations between nonintimate individuals to avoid overtly referencing a person's color (regardless of skin color, but especially if the person is considered black) and, if making such a reference, to choose diminutives and nuanced color categories (in accordance with the *continuum* classificatory system) and, ideally, the all-encompassing category of *moreno* that invokes the inclusive imaginary of *mestiçagem*.⁶ An individual's color definition depends not only on skin color but also on other physical traits (hair, nose), social class, and context, and this contributes to rendering the action of perceiving and defining color quite flexible – although not flexible enough to overcome the white/black opposition (Pinho 2009; Ribeiro Corossacz 2009; Telles and Flores 2013). Sheriff argues that, in Brazil, silence is the shared cultural convention through which all Brazilians deal with racism, and that it performs as a form of cultural censorship (2000). I would add that silence, as a communicative act, can also include the act of classifying a person's color. Avoiding naming an individual's color can imply recognition that the system of color classification is not neutral but rather imbued with racist meanings, the value difference between white and black. However, as Sheriff also notes, silence about racism and color can have different meanings depending on the social position of the individual who produces it: silence may express a form of resistance to discrimination or, on the contrary, a means of preserving social privilege as discussed in the literature on the invisibilization of whiteness enacted primarily through silence (Frankenberg 1999; McIntosh 1997; Morrison 1992; Piza 2000; Ribeiro Corossacz 2010a, 2012).

Many scholars have argued that class is a more important basis of social organization for Brazilians than is color. From UNESCO research in the 1950s to the recent debate about university quota policies for self-identified black students (Bastide and Fernandes 1971; Cicalo 2012; Steil 2006; Wagley 1952), the relationship between class and color has often been discussed in terms of class prevailing over color, which sometimes risks reducing the complexity of the definition of these two categories in the lives of individuals and the overall social structure. Many sociological and anthropological analyses have instead revealed how class and color are not distinct but rather interlocking principles (Guimarães 1999, 2002; Hasenbalg and Silva 1992; Hasenbalg, Lima, and Silva 1999; Sansone 2003), and, furthermore, that the inclusion of the gender variable is key to understanding interactions between class and color in people's lives (Lovell 2006). The theory of intersectionality is one of the most commonly used tools in feminist approaches to the study of how different variables – gender, color, class, and sexuality – can combine to produce multiple forms of oppression and identity understood as social processes rather than static structures (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Dorlin 2009; Kergoat 2009; McCall 2005; Nash 2008). However, as Nash notes, 'generally, intersectional literature has excluded an examination of identities that are imagined as either wholly or even partially privileged' (2008, 10). For this reason, I actually found it more helpful to engage with the literature on racism and whiteness understood as a social construction determined

by other social variables to investigate a group that occupies a position of structural privilege within class, color, and gender relations.

The valorization of *mestiçagem* as a national feature went to join the former and deeply rooted social practice of valorizing whiteness through the project of *branqueamento* (whitening). Between the 19th and the 20th century, this term indicated a 'scientific' theory originating in racist ideology as well as a political project for managing migration flows that the Brazilian state carried forward in order to facilitate the entrance of migrants who were considered 'white' (Seyferth 1989, 1991; Skidmore 1974). The idea was that the introduction of the 'white' European migrant who would eventually amalgamate with the local population would have whitened, that is to say, Europeanized, the Brazilian population, thereby mitigating the indigenous and African features that were considered degrading. Even today, *branqueamento* might potentially manifest when individuals who are considered black and feel the social stigma of this classification tend to choose a paler color category when self-classifying themselves in both daily life and institutional classifications.⁷ However, there is currently a shift in Brazilian society in terms of the role color plays in defining identities and social relations, owing to the fact that, in the last decade, public opinion has been involved in an extensive and heated debate on racism and the institutional tools tasked with combating it (Steil 2006). One of the most evident outcomes of this debate has been the growing number of Brazilians who self-identify as black and *pardos*⁸ (50.7 per cent), the two of which exceeded the percentage of those identifying as white in the most recent census (47.7 per cent) (IBGE 2011).

These ideologies appear in opposition, in that the ideology of *mestiçagem* promotes the idea of a society that includes black and indigenous people (but in subordinate positions, below white people), while *branqueamento* aims to liberate the nation of the descendants of Africans and indigenous people. However, they have coexisted within Brazilian society.⁹ The combination of the valorization of *mestiçagem* and of whiteness (through *branqueamento*) has produced a context in which white purity is not valorized, but whiteness continues to constitute a social value and a form of status whose power is rendered invisible.¹⁰ According to Pinho, 'the analysis of whiteness in Brazil should consider both phenomena: whiteness as a nonmarked yet ongoing and pervasive force, and whiteness as an element that at times is intentionally brought to the surface' (2009, 45).

The valorization of *mestiçagem* and *branqueamento* are characterized by a common centripetal force leading toward sexual relations among individuals of different origins that place the social enactment of sexuality at the center of discourses and policies on national identity. In the scientific literature, significant attention has been paid to sexual relations and *mestiçagem* with a focus on various specific aspects such as unions that are exogamous in terms of color (Berquó 1987; Petrucci 2001; Silva 1992a), marriage choices as a form of social advancement (de Azevedo 1975; Silva 1992b), sexist and racist violence that constructs *mulatas* as sexual and sensual objects (Corrêa 1996; Giacomini 2006), the production of racialized, gendered male and female figures (Pinho 2004), and the values and social representations attributed to emotional-sexual relations among individuals of different color positions (Moutinho 2004). As far as I am aware, however, the way in which whiteness comes to be

defined, performed, and produced through mixed sexual relations has yet to be analyzed. With this essay, I concentrate on whiteness experienced by men in order to offer some initial steps toward such an analysis.

The Interviewees: Whites in a World of Whites

The signs of Rio de Janeiro's colonial past remain highly visible even today, evident in both the architecture and the city's demographic composition according to color-based groups. For a long time, the city was the capital and heart of Brazil as a colony and as an empire, and it thus hosted a significant presence of African-descended slaves. After the abolition of slavery (1888), other freed slaves came to Rio de Janeiro from the country's poorest areas in search of better living conditions. Between the end of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries, the city also attracted European immigrants of various national origins employed in commerce and the growing industrial sector. Beginning in the second half of the last century, Rio became the destination for new migration flows from the northeast (the inhabitants of which are called *nordestinos*), the driest and poorest part of the country. In Rio de Janeiro, the term *nordestino* is generally associated with people who display a pale complexion and facial features that can be reminiscent of indigenous origins.

These migratory flows have shaped the development of the city's urban landscape: at the end of the 19th century, the first *favelas* were created on the city's characteristic hills. These sprawls of shacks and houses were built illegally in undeveloped areas and inhabited by former slaves and poor workers who had been pushed out of the central neighborhoods, which in those years were undergoing urban restructuring (Garcia 2009; Rolnik 1989). The *favelas* have continued to develop from the 19th century to the present due to migration flows and the housing crisis generated by the chronic lack of public housing policies capable of sheltering the poorest segments of the population, which include a significant proportion of black people. Rio currently has a population of approximately 6.2 million residents, 3.2 of which are whites, 2.3 of which are *pardos* and 720,000 of which are blacks.¹¹ The men interviewed are residents of the Zona Sul neighborhoods, an area developed around the coast which is the wealthiest and the most prestigious urban region. In Rio, the distribution of color groups varies according to geographical area: the percentage of *pardos* and black people in the Zona Sul is only 16 per cent of the population, while white people constitute 84 per cent and, in some neighborhoods, as much as 93 per cent of the population (Garcia 2009, 184). As far as my research is concerned, at the time I carried out the interviews only three of the men lived in buildings that hosted black residents, who at any rate represented an exception in relation to other residents identified by interviewees as white; one interviewee had had black neighbors in the past. Moreover, many of the interviewees reported that, in the course of an average day, they only encountered black people in subordinate positions or on the bus (which they did not commonly use).¹² Likewise, my interviewees described having spent their childhoods and adolescences in settings where black people were present but almost always in the capacity of service workers (cleaning women, gardeners, nannies, and servants). As this picture shows, *mestiçagem* has not produced a more

egalitarian social fabric (at least not in the more well-off neighborhoods); rather, mechanisms of racial discrimination continue to coexist alongside a discourse that negates their existence.

The majority of interviewees come from wealthy families, and some have succeeded in reaching a social position that is superior to that of their parents. Their families of origin are described as white or *misturadas*, meaning mixed. Some of them stress the foreign origins of their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents (Spanish, Portuguese, Lebanese, or Italian), while others recall an indigenous grandmother or great-great-grandmother. In some cases, their ancestors' origins are defined in terms of color, but more often they are described in terms of nationality. None of the interviewees is currently in a stable relationship with a black woman or man, although four of the men had relationships with black women when they were young, six of them had casual sexual relationships with black partners (two of which were men), and one had a relationship with a black woman when he was living in the United States. These figures confirm the stereotype of the black woman and *mulata*¹³ as a potential sexual partner, but not as a wife with whom a white man would establish a family. Not all of the interviewees have children, but those who do define the children as white.

While many defined their family of origin as *misturada*, none of them defined their immediate family as such. It is worth noting that for the interviewees the concept of a mixed family does not include the presence of African-descended individuals, which shows how the valorization of *mestiçagem* can serve to reproduce the exclusion of blackness.

I would also like to briefly address some elements surrounding the relationship between the ethnographer and her interviewees. My own social classification in terms of color, class, and gender was in fact a central element in the development of the interviews. As a white, middle-class Brazilian (although currently living in Europe), these men identified me as one of them. In some cases, the similarity they attributed to me represented an obstacle to speaking about whiteness because they did not expect me to consider whiteness as an object of reflection for understanding social relations any more than they did. As Back notes, 'having things in "common" is not necessarily the prerequisite for insightful dialogue on the social construction of whiteness' (2002, 48). Although I considered whiteness to be both a valid object of research and a social problem, the social proximity between me and my interviewees allowed me to 'understand' their resistance to recognizing and talking about it and thus to experience that particular combination of difference and likeness that Back refers to. In addition, being identified as a woman did not usually constitute an insurmountable obstacle to speaking about issues generally considered to be intimate, such as sexual relations. At many points I had the impression that being identified as a white, middle-class woman researcher – that is to say, near to the interviewees' social setting – actually facilitated dialogue in that participants felt they were able to reference perceptions and representations that were 'shared'. The interviewees tended to identify with me so closely in terms of our shared class and color positions that it did not occur to them I might possibly feel empathy for the figure of the *empregada* on the basis of my gender. None of the men I interviewed displayed any shame in

recounting acts of violence against other women, disregarding the possibility that these accounts might generate tension with me as the interviewer. Although the issues addressed in this article revolve around the relations among gender, class, and color-based groups, class and color were the most significant dimensions comprising the ethnographic relationship.¹⁴

The Colonial Past

The interview began with an introduction in which I outlined the themes I hoped to address, namely whiteness and masculinity among the upper classes. Taking a biographical approach, I asked the interviewee to recall some moments from his life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood). The first part focused on his own color and the color of those he interacted with, while the second part focused on how he learned and was socialized into masculinity. Both parts included questions addressing the intersection between color, class, and gender. In an effort to address the experience of whiteness in relation to the articulation of gender, color, and class hierarchies, I chose to read the interviewees a few brief extracts from a text that has played a central role in the formation of Brazilian national identity: Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-Grande e Senzala* ([1933] 1986).¹⁵ Meant for a general public rather than social scientists, this text offers a reconstruction of the history of the northeastern plantations that was strongly shaped by American cultural anthropology, focusing on the analysis of the patriarchal family treated as the foundation of the social, political, and economic life of the rural colonial world. The author presents an interpretation of Brazil and Brazilian people that is based on a description of the habits and daily practices of large plantation life, describing not only the role of the Portuguese-descended big land owners but also the indigenous people and African slaves. What represented an innovation for the time was that Freyre carried out a 'restrictive valorization'¹⁶ of these latter two groups and their cultural traditions; up to that point, these groups had been seen as necessary to the establishment and development of the nation and yet also as inferior and culturally backward 'races'. At the same time, however, the entire text represents a reading of the colonial experience and national character from the standpoint of an upper-class white man, a gaze that presents itself as neutral and the viewpoint on Brazilian history with which everyone is expected to identify. The book is characterized by a continual overlap between the perspective of a subject that (although implicitly) is understood to correspond to a wealthy, white man and the perspective of a subject that presents itself as the universal reference point for understanding the formation of Brazilian society (see Needell 1995).

I chose to bring some parts of this text to the attention of interviewees with the intention of assessing whether the relations among color, class, and gender-based groups represented in the book were recognized by them as useful elements for reflecting on their own lived experiences or a cultural matrix they might reference, or whether Freyre's representations were instead seen as a part of the past that had been left behind. In particular, I was interested in seeing if my interviewees also recognized the figure of the *mulata* slave as a sensual and sexual subject, a figure that Freyre represents throughout the book and whose characteristics of pure sexuality

have also been described by other male authors.¹⁷ I presented the extract in question at the end of the second part focused on masculinity in order to avoid influencing the interviewees with the model of interpreting Brazil's history that the extract contains.

Having chosen to work with upper-middle-class participants, I expected to find interlocutors who were interested in reflecting on the basis of this text; after all, Freyre's work has been recognized as central to the definition of the Brazilian national character. To my surprise, even before being presented with the extracts from Freyre, in many cases my interviewees initiated an historical analysis to provide the frame for understanding the current state of Brazilian society, making particular reference to the relationship between male masters and male or female slaves as the historical origin of current inequalities in Brazilian society. In their accounts, interviewees frequently referred to the *Casa-Grande* and the *Senzala*¹⁸ as symbolically dense sites for understanding current relations between masters (the well-off classes) and subalterns (the lower classes). Vecchi's insight thus appears fitting in relation to my interviewees when he observes that 'slavery is not only the fundamental historical form for understanding the formation of Brazil. It is equally a crucial conceptual figure for interpreting Brazilian contemporaneity' (2007, 89). In interpreting their social world through reference to the world of the *Casa-Grande* and the *Senzala*, interviewees made use of the conceptual figure of slavery. I propose to analyze the discourse of my interviewees in order to understand the present implications of this use of the conceptual figure of slavery in relation to the contemporary articulation of color, class, and gender hierarchies.

Thus, although the setting for the interviews and the interviewees' biographies was the present-day urban landscape, the men described experiences that (sometimes even in their own words) evoked models of genders and colors relations that referenced Brazil's slave-based past. In particular, the social relation between a wealthy, white male and a poor black woman employed as a domestic worker or caretaker evokes a model of social relations among colors, genders, and classes that was traditional to colonial Brazil: the relationship between the descendant of Portuguese or European colonists and his family and one or more female slaves of African origin who worked and lived in his house, taking care of adult and children family members. Freyre presented this model of relations, which were at once social, labor-servile and familial, as one of the pillars of the creation of the Brazilian cultural and national ethos; indeed, the subheading of *Casa-Grande e Senzala* is 'The formation of the Brazilian family under the patriarchal economic regime'.

In a previous article, I have examined interview extracts to analyze how the childhood relationship with a black nanny emerged for some interviewees as a core of meaning that they draw on to speak about or allude to their own condition as whites (Ribeiro Corossacz 2014a). In the following pages, I seek to develop an analysis of the sexual aspects of the relationship between wealthy white men and low-class serving women, commonly defined as *empregada*.¹⁹ According to recent studies, there are 7.2 million domestic workers, 93 per cent of which are women; of these, 61.6 per cent are black women (IPEA 2011, 4).²⁰ Studies show that 21.8 per cent of the black women who are employed work as *empregada doméstica* as compared to only 12.6 per cent of white women who are employed (IPEA 2011, 5). The same study observes

how 'domestic work is in reality – and always has been – an occupation carried out for the most part by women in general and black women in particular. The profile for this form of employment comes out of not only the slave-owning roots of Brazilian society but also traditional conceptions of gender, which represent domestic work as something that women are naturally skilled at' (IPEA 2011, 4).²¹ In cities such as Salvador, where the majority of the population is black and poor and black women are one of the most economically vulnerable groups, class differences continue to be strongly marked by color to such an extent that McCallum argues that 'the social relationships that structure this [domestic] work are deeply racialised. In day-to-day parlance, the expression *casa de família* is often used interchangeably with *os brancos*... A family home is implicitly a domestic group composed of the family and one or more domestic servants. The core kin group is normatively white; the employees, black' (2007, 56). In Rio de Janeiro as well, *casa de família* is understood as the home of a well-off white family. Despite this strong correlation between women domestic paid work and blackness, however, interviewees' accounts display a persistent tendency to avoid mentioning or treating as relevant the skin color of the *empregadas* they refer to. Indeed, the domestic space has historically been and continues to be a central site for analyzing Brazilian society, as Pinho and Silva note when they argue that home is 'a site in which relations of gender, class and race are constantly produced in tandem with the larger social world' (2010, 109).

Class, Gender, and Color: Talking from a Dominant Position

After having addressed experiences of perceiving whiteness and masculinity in various moments of their biographical trajectories with interviewees, I read them a passage by Freyre about the sexual initiation of the plantation owner's young son with a *mulata* slave: 'The mulato girl who initiated us into physical love and, to the creaking of a canvas cot, gave us our first complete sensation of being a man' ([1933] 1986, 278). I encouraged my interviewees to comment on this sentence, asking them if they identified with this model of relations between genders, classes, and color-based groups, and how so. It is worth noting the use of the personal pronoun 'us', which invites the reader to identify with this experience (and other content described in the paragraph), and which conveys a subject who is implicitly identified as a well-off white man.

My aim was to give interviewees the chance to speak about their experiences of whiteness and masculinity beginning from a framework that was well-defined but which might also offer further openings. Indeed, the sentence can be read as an allusion to a young, wealthy white man's 'sexual initiation' with a female domestic worker, often classified as black or *mulata*, a phenomena which I as Brazilian have known since childhood to be widespread and often treated as a stereotype. On more than one occasion growing up I heard stories of male family members having sexual relationships with female domestic workers or their daughters²²; these were carried out in a way that was supposedly secret but actually common knowledge. This kind of occurrence was considered common in the upper-middle-class white setting I belong to and was treated as a cultural feature of Brazilian society – indeed, it was viewed

almost like an element of folklore. Upon reaching adolescence, I began to view this kind of relationship as one of the points of articulation between sexism and racism in Brazilian society. The implicit key and problematic aspect of the overlap between the two experiences of 'sexual initiation' (that of the colonial owner's young son and that of the young, well-off man) lies specifically in the shift from the figure of the *mulata* slave to that of the female domestic worker, for whom social classification takes place primarily through class and less so through color.

Although I was already familiar with this kind of power relation between affluent white men and the women working in their houses, I was nevertheless struck by the realization of how common it was among the interviewees to consider (and talk about) the sexuality of the women working in their houses as part of the services these women offer. Indeed, some of the interviewees actually spontaneously referenced this dynamic during their interviews. Although not all of them experienced this type of 'sexual initiation', all of them knew that it was considered *normal* and recognized it as part of a collective imaginary.²³

Carlos, a 52-year-old entrepreneur engaged to a woman, spoke about this when I asked him if he had ever witnessed episodes of racism:

No, I've never witnessed episodes of racism in Brazil, because I've lived abroad. Here I've seen things about social class that were also about racism. For example, I remember that the boys my age, when I was a teenager, the ones who still hadn't had sexual relationships, they had them with *empregadas*. I remember one of my brother's friends who told us how he used to go behind there, and... You see, she's treated like an animal, lots of times she is a white *nordestina*, or half indigenous, or a black woman. So that's how it is, is it about color? I don't know, it's about class.

In this extract, Carlos responds to a question about racism by speaking about 'social class' and establishes a connection between racism and classism that actually serves to flatten racism in favor of classism. It is significant that Carlos does not recognize the gender-relations dimension of the model of social relations that he refers to, but only the difficulty of identifying racism as a component. And yet from his account it is clear that the location of the *empregada* in class and gender relations, regardless of skin color, renders her *completely* available to her employer in a sexual sense as well. Additionally, there is an evident contradiction when he states that the boys 'who still hadn't had sexual relationships, they had them with *empregadas*'. As a matter of fact, interviewees justified sexual relations with *empregadas* on multiple bases, including as a consequence of the fact that girls from their own social context were not available and willing to have sexual relationships with them. Indeed, Carlos' statement reveals that these boys consider sexual relations with girls from their own social background to be distinct from relations with the *empregada*, which appear to be more a form of appropriation than an actual relationship. The figure of *nordestina*, described as 'white', also introduces the issue of different forms of whiteness and underlines the fact that not all *nordestinos* are perceived and classified as white.²⁴ In fact, in this case the woman's white skin is not sufficient because it is diminished by her social class, in turn also linked to her geographical origin.

The adjective of *nordestino* is associated with physical features that are not valorized and often considered socially degrading, although *nordestinos* are still considered

more desirable than blacks in roles such as doorkeeper or restaurant worker precisely because they are not classified as black and are thus seen as more ‘presentable’.²⁵ In many contexts in Brazil, whiteness is only considered fully white when associated with European origins, including the groups who migrated to Brazil between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (Germans, Poles, Italians, Portuguese, and Spanish). At the same time, Cicalo notes, ‘whiteness can make people look richer, but only if this whiteness is white “enough” and is supported by the right clothing, educational background, and lifestyle, evoking middle-class models’ (2012, 252). The social category of whiteness thus does not appear to coincide with Europe origins alone; rather, it achieves its completion in the cultural and social codes inscribed in class relations.

In another case, an interviewee framed the topic of the ‘sexual initiation’ of the young, wealthy man with the *empregada* (this time introduced by me) through reference to Brazil’s colonial past even before I asked him to comment on Freyre’s passage. Julio, a 51-year-old professional photographer engaged to a woman, admitted that when he was 13 he wanted to *pegar* (literally, seize, take, or metaphorically, sexually abuse) an *empregada*; he then recalled how common it was for ‘sexual initiation’ to take place with a female domestic worker or prostitute.²⁶ According to Julio, everyone wanted to *pegar empregada*, a behavior that was considered ‘a relatively normal thing’. When I asked him why he thought this was the case, he answered:

I think it’s unfair, kind of a slave owner thing. It is the person’s lower class, she is here to serve me. Don’t you serve me all day long? Why can’t you serve me in bed, too? Why don’t you sit on my lap? Why don’t you satisfy my sexual desire? Because the master-*empregada* relationship here in Brazil is still very complicated. At that time it was even more so.

After having recalled that Brazil was one of the last countries, the last one, actually, to have abolished slavery, Julio concluded by noting that ‘from 1888 [the year when slavery was abolished] to 1958, when I was born, is not really that many years. And so I think that this [slavery like relationship] has remained somewhat frozen in our society’. In this case as well, social class appears to constitute the lens for interpreting relations between white, wealthy men and lower-class female domestic workers, although Julio also perceived a continuity with slavery and the colonial past. In particular, the nonchalant way that Julio described how he wanted to gain access to the *empregada*’s sexuality is also worth noting: the verb *pegar* evokes the idea of a subject taking an object. I believe that this nonchalance should be read as an indication of the cultural acceptance enjoyed by this behavior that, although framed within a ‘complicated’ relationship, is actually considered perfectly *normal*.

When I read them the passage from Freyre, neither Carlos nor Julio identified with the figure of the young man; their sexual initiations were not captured by this passage. Nonetheless, they noted correspondences between the relationship Freyre describes and a relationship between a young, well-off young man and an *empregada* or prostitute, underlining that the key point now is class rather than color. In their opinion, the *empregada* or prostitute’s skin color is no longer important; rather, what

matters is that they are women in a position subordinate to that of the subject, a well-off white man.

In contrast, other interviewees did identify with Freyre's passage or perceive their own experience to be very similar to what he describes. This was true of César, a 56-year-old doctor, currently single but having maintained stable relationships with men in the past:

- Interviewer: Do you identify with this sentence; does it remind you of something?
- César: It reminds me, it reminds me a lot, because it really was like that for me. This sentence has everything to do with my history. The woman who initiated me was *mulata*... I think that, for people my age, this sentence sounds like a very common thing. Maybe if you interviewed a young man today, this sentence would not resonate with him because he is already going out with a girlfriend, and so it is different. But my history is just like the *Casa-Grande e Senzala*.

César's identification with the world of the *Casa-Grande* and the *Senzala* is linked in part to his familial background in that his father came from an inland state with a strong tradition of landed estates. When César was young, he used to spend his holidays at his father's family's manor, where he came into contact with a setting he describes as remaining immersed in the characteristic relations of slavery. However, the figure of the *mulata* woman in César's past overlaps with the figure of the prostitute rather than that of the *empregada*. As a matter of fact, César had described his first sexual relationship as occurring in a brothel with a prostitute he described as *mulata*, even before commenting on the passage from Freyre. For César, this was a negative experience as he had not yet recognized his homosexuality, due in part to the strong pressure his family exerted on him to show he was a 'real man'. These visits to the brothel were organized by his cousin on the premise that 'to be a real man, you have to go to a brothel', and despite his discomfort, César was obliged to come along.

Francisco, a 49-year-old electronics engineer married to a woman, came to Rio from the northeast region of Brazil to pursue his university studies. In his youth, he lived on a sugarcane *fazenda* owned by his paternal grandfather. His sexual initiation with the *empregadas* occurred very early on: 'By the time I was eleven, I was going after all of them ... so many were sent away, poor girls. I made their lives hell'. To better describe his experience, Francisco asked me if I had read José Lins do Rego, a well-known writer from the 1930s who describes social life in the *engenhos*, the sugarcane production units in the northeast, at a moment when they were in decline but still characterized by traditional servile relationships: 'What is described [in Lins do Rego's book] is my life on the *fazenda*'. This invocation of literature to speak about himself suggests identification between his own history and the national narrative and specifically the *fazenda*, with its specific social relations among classes, genders, and color groups, as a privileged site for the formation of all Brazil, both rural and urban. Francisco stated:

You can imagine the son of the factory or *fazenda* owner, the owner's grandson, with those *cablocas*. We thought we owned those girls, you know? We were always pestering

them to let us see their genitals and touch their breasts. I spend my time wanting to have [sexual] relations with those girls.

The word *caboclo* used here, which literally means an individual with indigenous and white European origins, is important because it indicates not only social position but also color. The term refers to people whose skin may be light but who are nonetheless not considered white. Once he moved to the city with his family, Francisco went on to reproduce the same hassling mode of interacting with the *empregadas* in a continuity between rural and urban environments that also represents a continuity between a rural present still rooted in a past built on slave relations and an urbanized, modern, and middle-class present. When I asked him what he thought of the Freyre quote about sexual initiation, Francisco answered: 'That was my experience'.

Fabio, a 46-year-old professor and Department Chair living with his wife and children, also acknowledged a similarity between his own lived experience and Freyre's description:

- Interviewer: What do you think on hearing this sentence? Do you identify with it?
- Fabio: No. Umm... I think about the *empregada*.
- Interviewer: Nowadays?
- Fabio: In my adolescence, I don't know what it's like today, but in my adolescence...
- Interviewer: Was sexual initiation with the *empregada* very common when you were an adolescent?
- Fabio: Yes, not in my case, but... We had an *empregada* that I fondled, but I didn't... It was very common. What was it we used to say? TED: *terror das empregadas domésticas*. You were kind of made fun of, but at the same time you bragged about it. You were made fun of and praised at the same time [for this behavior].

Fabio thus also describes a world in which it is perfectly commonplace for young, well-off adolescent males to have access to the bodies of *empregadas* for sexual purposes; it was so commonplace that it deserved an acronym that expresses, in a supposedly ironic way, the condition of abuse and violence.²⁷ The expression TED reveals an awareness of the degree of violence ('terror') characterizing young men's behavior toward the *empregadas*, but this violence is normalized through irony. The result is paradoxical: although it names a dominant relationship and its effects (terror) on those occupying a subordinate position (the *empregada*), the expression TED is used humorously because it describes the double register of making fun and praising among peers that these behaviors elicited. In Fabio's experience, there is thus an acknowledged continuity between his own experience and Freyre's description, a continuity that is built on this double movement: young son of the master/well-off young man vs. *mulata/empregada*. This case also lacks an explicit reference to the skin color of the *empregada*, suggesting that the aspect of color is considered irrelevant.

Lastly, I present the account of Davi, a 53-year-old doctor who is married with one daughter:

- Interviewer: I'm going to read you a sentence by Freyre and I'd like you to comment on it, to tell me what you think, and whether or not you identify with it.

- Davi: In my case she was not *mulata*, I don't identify very much.
- Interviewer: Do you think it's a sentence that...
- Davi: But I understand what it means, because I know what it's about, and everything.
- Interviewer: What is it about?
- Davi: It's about the sexual initiation of the white boy with the *empregada* or slave, in the case of *Casa-Grande e Senzala*...
- Interviewer: This thing of sexual initiation is quite common, I heard about it in my interviews. In your case, did you have some kind of relationship with the *empregada*?
- Davi: I did.
- Interviewer: Was she white or black?
- Davi: I think she was *nordestina*... In the past I tried to *eat* (to screw, translator's note) another one, but I wasn't able to..
- Interviewer: How did she react? For her, was it something...
- Davi: Oh, I think I was just another one, for her. She probably gave it away to all the doormen. Someone far from her family, who came from far away to work at your house, lives in a cubicle. What the hell must be going on in her head?

In Davi's account, there is an explicit overlap between the figure of the *empregada* and that of the slave in the role of a woman who is available for the sexual initiation of the young white man precisely because she is carrying out the function of *empregada*. The blunt way that Davi describes his experience communicates how 'natural' this kind of behavior was considered in the setting where he lived. Indeed, Davi himself exhibited no embarrassment in telling me about this episode. Furthermore, Davi attributes his dominant perspective on this relationship to the *empregada*, who is in a position of oppression. In so doing, he negates her right to have her own point of view, separate from that of the dominant perspective. 'I was just another one, for her', or in other words, one of many, which serves to diminish the violence of this specific experience and at the same time legitimize it as *normal* by insinuating that, after all, it was consensual ('She probably gave it away to all the doormen'). As Mathieu (1990) so clearly argues, one of the characteristics of the violence of male domination over women lies precisely in limiting their access to representations, including representations of the domination itself. For the *empregada*, the only possible point of view would be that of the man who 'ate her'.

In the end, when I asked Davi if the female domestic worker he had his first sexual experience with was white or black, he responded *nordestina*. As mentioned above, this reply suggests that the category of *nordestino* lies between white and black, being neither white nor black. For Davi, there is thus a divide between his own whiteness and that of the female domestic worker, who is socially less white because of her social and geographic origins. Once again it is evident how gender, social class, and geographic origin may serve to modulate the experience of whiteness.

Conclusions

The picture that interviewees paint of relations between the *empregada* and the young man of a well-off white family depicts a situation characterized by servile relations and work conditions as well as violence; these relations are strikingly linked to the

slave-owning past that has left its mark on Brazilian society and culture. However, it is also necessary to ask what additional meanings can be found in the interviewees' words. What does it mean that the colonial past, specifically in terms of the relationship between the male master and female slave, is used or recognized by these men as a lens for examining their own biographical experiences? What are the implications of their anchoring of recent times in a past that we might say has never ceased to re-emerge?

On the one hand, invoking slavery relations to grant meaning to social relations among people who are free yet occupy hierarchically opposite positions (well-off white man/poor, non-white woman) can be a way of describing and accounting for the level of inequality that characterizes these social relations. On the other hand, I believe that this rhetorical strategy has a double effect of immobilizing time: it obscures differences with the colonial past, conflicts or transformations, and above all it prevents these men from seeing themselves as subjects who acted in the past to contribute to reproducing the very social relations they describe. By contextualizing their own 20th-century experiences within the frame of the colonial and slave-owning past, these men describe a condition that is outside of time, eternal, already generated by history and therefore outside of historical relationships. In the gender, class, and color relations that they describe as unequal, they hold a position that is a *de facto* condition, absolute and inevitable. In other moments of the interview, the men described themselves in this *de facto* condition when speaking about their own whiteness as an experience lived exclusively in terms of social class, allowing them to access privileges; however, these privileges were seen as a sort of inheritance, something that the men received independent of their own will and actions and that therefore could not be changed.

What characterizes these quotes is an odd balance between the description of a social structure that is hierarchical and violent in terms of class and gender (less so for color), and a lack of interest in perceiving their own experience as being an integral part of this structure and contributing to reproducing its inequalities. In reflecting on whiteness and masculinity, McIntosh (1997) has analyzed the parallel between white privilege and male privilege, underlining how some men recognize the widespread nature of male privilege but not the fact that they themselves benefit from it. Specifically, McIntosh notes how rarely men recognize that 'privilege systems might ever be challenged and changed' (1997, 291). I would argue that the continuity my interviewees perceive between a colonial and slave-owning past and their own biographical experiences, in an era based on principles of equality (although still only formal, in some cases), is a way of resisting prospects of radical change that would call into question all systems of privilege – class, color, and gender-based. The result of their narrative and rhetorical choices is that the inequalities permeating the relations they recount are rendered inevitable (Acker 2000).

In order to understand how the intersection of white and male privileges is defined, it is necessary to uncover that which remains unspeakable in these accounts. First of all, the fact that domestic and caretaking work is carried out by a woman, and specifically a paid woman from outside the white, heterosexual family, or in other words that it is not possible to divide this work between the partners.²⁸ This silence reflects the

socially deeply rooted belief that domestic and caretaking work is a woman's duty in that women are naturally suited to do it, whether paid or unpaid. Pinho and Silva's investigation of domestic work confirms this, revealing that 'men's disengagement from housework and the transfer of housework to paid domestic labor' remains a constant (2010, 109).

Secondly, the fact that the *empregada's* social class is treated as more relevant than her skin color appears to be a means of diminishing a social reality in which, as the data show, black women make up the vast majority of domestic workers. This phenomenon is linked to 'Brazilian society's slave-owning heritage, which has combined with the construction of an unequal context in which black women are less educated and subject to a higher level of poverty, and in which unqualified, unregulated and low-wage domestic work represents one of their few employment options' (IPEA 2011, 5).

Above all, however, interviewees' silence about the skin color of *empregadas* is a silence about their own skin color and part of the larger silence around whiteness. The point is not only that the *empregada's* color is seen as irrelevant in relation to class; the point is that the young man also considers his own color to be irrelevant in his relationship with the *empregada*. When analyzing accounts like those quoted above, we could conclude that class really is more important in defining social positions in Brazil. Alternately, we could propose a different hypothesis: that color and class combine and reciprocally define each other. In the context of this research project, the tendency to slip into using class (also understood as the historical class structure of masters and slaves) to define social positions takes on a larger significance in relation to the common Brazilian practice of considering class more relevant than color. Class seems to constitute the only possible register for the interviewees to orient themselves in social relations, but also a means of escaping one of the key elements of class in Brazilian history – that is, skin color. As a matter of fact, in the course of Brazilian history class has been formed on the basis of a very marked color connotation, by referencing historically determined bodies. In Brazilian society, class is not a socially transparent category; it is thus necessary to decipher its meanings when it is used in relation to color and to consider the subject who is using it. In her ethnography in Salvador, McCallum describes the naturalization of class and 'the dynamic and sequential intersubjective constitution of race and class' (2005, 113). With this in mind, interviewees' silence about color (of both the *empregada* and the young man) can be interpreted as the product of a process of reciprocally molding class and color with the result that to speak of class is also to convey imaginaries of color.

Finally, I would note that the homosexuality of some interviewees did not appear to enable them to question the structure of hierarchical relations of gender, color, and class that is characteristic of Brazilian society. As Connell notes, 'men who have sex with men are generally oppressed, but they are not definitively excluded from masculinity'; gay men 'may draw economic benefits from the overall subordination of women' (1992, 737). In this research, the men who identified as homosexual also participated (if not directly) in defining the *empregada* as a woman who is there to serve, a woman whose entire person is available for use.

The overlap between the *mulata* slave in Freyre's passage and the figure of the *empregada* that emerged in the interviews enables us to understand how these men's whiteness is also constructed through the axis of what we might term 'racialized heterosexuality', that is, through the figure of the poor black woman who serves the family house or at any rate the lower-class woman carrying out domestic work and whose sexuality is perceived as available and accessible to the upper-class white men, even if they choose not to access it. The interviews revealed that this imaginary does not require direct sexual experiences with the black female domestic worker, and this is true for homosexuals as well: this imaginary is present regardless; it is recognized as a real possibility and thus becomes constitutive in the formation of an upper-middle-class white man's identity. As Pinho and Silva argue, whiteness and blackness are constructed through domestic relations and they astutely note 'how the widespread use of paid domestic labor strengthens the association between whiteness and power and the naturalization of black women's subservient position' (2010, 109).

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Notes

- [1] According to recent research, the A class comprises 82.3 per cent whites and 17.7 per cent blacks; see http://www.bbc.co.uk/portuguese/noticias/2011/11/111116_saude_negros_brasil_mm.shtml (accessed 11 August 2012).
- [2] Some data from this investigation were published in Ribeiro Corossacz (2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2014a, 2014b).
- [3] For an analysis of *mestiçagem* as a nationalist ideology and a lived process in other Latin American societies, see Wade (2001, 2005).
- [4] I analyzed how this sexual relationship was incorporated into the narrative of the formation of the Brazilian nation through its naturalization, that is to say, the negation of its social meaning, in Ribeiro Corossacz (2005).
- [5] Dwellers of *favelas*, low-income settlements.
- [6] This relationship between the invisibilization of whiteness and *mestiçagem* is not found only in Brazil; for an overview of Latin America, see Telles and Flores (2013).
- [7] At the same time, it is worth noting that some light-skinned Brazilians may classify themselves as *morenos* and valorize sun tanning to look less 'white' (see Norvell 2002).
- [8] Essentially used for official statistics, the category *pardo* means brown.
- [9] In relation to this, Loveman makes an important distinction between whiteness in Latin America at an individual level vs. collective level: while at the individual level whiteness was considered self-evident and stable, at the collective level it was constructed as a variable and malleable trait (2009, 226).
- [10] See Moreno Figueroa for a discussion of the Mexican context, in which the ideology of *mestizaje* also made it possible to reproduce the valorization of whiteness (2010).
- [11] These statistics date from 2010 and are drawn from the Rio de Janeiro government website www.armazemdedados.rio.rj.gov.br (accessed 10 July 2012).
- [12] Sheriff also notes that the middle-class white people she interviewed do not usually encounter black people 'outside of the servant-employer relationship' (2000, 119).

- [13] The term *mulato* has racist origins and indicates a person born of one white and one black parent. The term is not used in institutional color classifications and, in my fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro, I rarely encountered it in daily language. The term *mulata*, however, is much more common, especially when used to reference its sexual and sensual connotations and as a national symbol associated with *Carnaval* and the *mestiçagem* process of national formation.
- [14] For further reflections on the implications of the ethnography of whiteness, see Back (2002).
- [15] Freyre (1900–1987), a social anthropologist who trained with Boas, is one of the most important figures in the formation of Brazilian national identity. His work offered a positive and optimistic interpretation of Brazilian society that valorized the paradigm of *mestiçagem*, which at the time was considered one of the causes of Brazil's backwardness (for a critical analysis, see Ortiz 2003; Skidmore 1974; for an intellectual biography of Freyre, see Needell 1995; Pallares-Burke 2005).
- [16] An expression Guillaumin (2002) uses to indicate how, within racist ideology, minority groups are valorized only in specific and delimited spheres of human action, making it possible for the majority group to express itself freely and successfully in all spheres.
- [17] I recall Jorge Amado, among many others. See for some reflections on the *mulata* woman as a 'mythical or imaginary figure', Corrêa (1996).
- [18] The master's house and the residence of the slaves in the *fazendas* of the large plantations.
- [19] Literally 'employed', implicitly domestic. Such a minimalist definition highlights the key features of this person's condition, that is, the state of being employed by others to carry out domestic and caretaking work, thus erasing her professional profile.
- [20] For an analysis of the enormous extent to which unpaid domestic work overall falls on women without significant variation in relation to color, see Bruschini (2006).
- [21] On the symbolic ties between black female gender and domestic work, see also McCallum (2007). For some data on black women's incorporation in the labor market, see Lima (1995), Silva Bento (1995), Bruschini and Lombardi (2002), and Lovell (2006).
- [22] In the 1980s, it was still common for women living at their employer's houses to keep a son or daughter with them.
- [23] This kind of relationship was considered so 'normal' that it also provided the subject matter for a field of cinematographic production located between pornography and comedy, called *pornochancada*, that through comical representation normalized a subject presented as an innocuous game of 'seduction'. One of the most well-known of these is *Como é boa nossa empregada* ('How hot is our domestic worker', 1972), in which the use of the pronoun 'our' serves to indicate the film's implicit subject (a middle-class white man). I thank Afrânio Garcia Jr. for having drawn my attention to this field of film production as a locus for reproducing and legitimating the color, class, and gender hierarchies it represents.
- [24] Although not in reference to *nordestinos*, Pinho notes the importance of regional differences in defining whiteness and blackness, and speaks appropriately of 'degrees of whiteness' (2009, 40).
- [25] In the United States, the concept of white trash and the initial exclusion of some immigrant groups from the category of white display characteristics similar to those experienced by *nordestinos* in Brazil, see Warren and Twine (1997) and Wray (2006).
- [26] The *empregada* and the prostitute have different social roles: the former is paid to carry out domestic activities, which also would seem to include being sexually available, while the latter is paid for a specified sexual performance. There is an explicit agreement underlying a sexual relationship with a prostitute, whereas interviewees express that their relationships with the *empregadas* were imposed, a kind of domination. However, the interviews revealed continuity in men's experiences of interacting with the two figures revolving around men's processes of learning and taking on a heterosexual, racialized and class-inflected sexuality (see Ribeiro Corossacz 2014b).
- [27] One of the episodes in the film *Como é boa nossa empregada* is titled 'O terror das empregadas'.
- [28] It was not always possible from the interviews to establish how much unpaid domestic work was carried out by the interviewee's mother.

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