

From “Death in the family” to “Freud’s Nanny”: an homage to Mariza Corrêa*

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Abstract

This article, an homage to Mariza Corrêa, looks at two of her most important works: *Morte em família* [Death in the Family] (1983) and “A babá de Freud e outras babás” [Freud’s nanny and other nannies] (2007). In the first, Mariza revealed the articulations between gender and class that permeate the legal system’s treatment of crimes committed by men and women in conjugal relations. In the second, her next to last article, the issue of Freud’s nanny is the inspiration to examine the torn fabric of relations between class and race in Brazil. Far from being a “minor” issue, Mariza shows that the theme of nannies is important to both the understanding of the economy of emotions and to the feminist reflection in contemporary Brazil.

Keywords: Mariza Corrêa, gender, class, race, feminism.

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Minimalist and discrete, this is precisely how Mariza Corrêa presented herself in the opening text of her professional CV, which she wrote in the third person:

She was a professor in the Department of Anthropology of the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences at Unicamp for thirty years and is currently a researcher at Pagu/The Nucleus of Gender Studies at the same university, at which she coordinated a thematic project of Fapesp about gender and corporality. She is a member of the faculty in the field of gender in the Doctoral Program in the Social Sciences at Unicamp. She is a CNPq fellow and former president of the Brazilian Anthropology Association.

With an aversion to mundane exhibitionism, she was highly elegant in her manner and dress and always eloquent in her texts. Mariza had a passion for literature, for anthropology and for the written word. She was one of the first people who I knew to readily use email at a time when it was a novelty. She used this media to communicate with pleasure and registered everything, including her disdain for the four-hour class module, which was introduced in the social sciences at Unicamp at the turn of the millennium. On March 24, 2000, she noted:

Helô, I have arrived from class and of course I still can’t sleep. The class was very funny: I had two crazy students who took their dog to class today: he (the dog) is called Cogumelo [Mushroom]. That tells you about their tone, right? At the break, the dog went to the bar – it seems that crossed cousins (the subject of the class) was too much for him. Let’s see if he makes it till the end of the semester...Another thing from these two: I ask: - hypergamic and hypogamic marriage, what is the difference? The boy said: “Well, we take three people...” General laughter even among the ignorant. My internal clock has still not adapted to the famous four-hour class: after three hours I feel like I have been with the students for a month on a desert island

(how come this doesn't happen in the master's and doctoral courses?").

Mariza's fine humor contrasted with the disturbing and tragic theme of her first influential essay, *Morte em Família*, [Death in the Family]¹ which focused on homicides and attempted homicides in Campinas in the 1950s and '60s. Known as "crimes of passion" for involving the death of a spouse, mostly women, they were judged according to an arrangement specific to the legal logic and the dominant values that defined the role of men and women in Brazilian society at the time – and other countries, as we have seen recently in numerous cases.

Mariza's book has dual merit: it definitively revealed the articulations between gender and class that permeate the legal order; it showed the strength of anthropological analysis when applied, with rigor and complexity, to precise and unexpected domains of social life. Mariza's approaches to the reflection about the construction of her object of study are also surprising. Instead of using the research sources, which in this case are court documents, as merely a place from which the research gathered information about the crimes in question, Mariza revealed the social and symbolic logic invested in this material. Using the teaching of English social anthropology, she undertook that which according to Bourdieu (1982:10), is one of the central challenges of sociology: to understand "the unconsidered categories of thinking, which delimit the thinkable and predetermine what is thought".

This is the compass that guided Mariza through the court documents, for which she sought assistance from the concept of fable to understand them as a specific construction of reality. It is the legal documents and not the acts that are the central focus of her analysis. The choice of the word fable to designate these documents emphasizes the idea:

¹ Cf. *Morte em família: representações jurídicas de papéis sexuais* (Corrêa, 1983).

That the facts [to which the documents refer] are suspended, that there is no longer any possibility of reviving them, to take the inverse route and reach the real facts, the concrete relations existing behind each crime (Corrêa, 1983:26).

The object of this book is thus focused on the ways that the legal system processes the death of one person by another, when both are involved in legal or consensual relations of marriage. Serving as a mediator between the events, the legal system transforms the events into documents, selecting some, excluding others. In this context, the facts become versions and the concrete loses nearly all importance. The debate takes place fundamentally between the legal actors, “each one of them using the part of the ‘real’ that best reinforces their point of view”. The real, in Mariza’s words, is “processed, ground, until an elementary scheme can be extracted from it about which a model of guilt and a model of innocence is built” (Corrêa, 1983:40).

The legal apparatus orders reality according to the pre-established legal norms, that is, written norms. It updates them through unwritten social norms, which are at the base of the differentiation and structural asymmetry of gender relations in our society. As Mariza shows, while all the protagonists of the cases that she studied broke the norm “thou shall not kill”, not all of them were judged in the same manner, nor did they receive equal punishments. What determined absolution or the intensity of the sentence depended on the violation (or not) by the accused, of other social norms.

Practicing an eminently relational analysis, averse to essentialist typologies, Mariza shows that the cases against men who killed their wives are only understandable - from the point of their ordering and codification by the legal order - when seen in conjunction with the suits against women who had killed their husbands. The most emphasized obligation for women was fidelity. To this responsibility corresponded the right of the men who could, in addition to demand fidelity, punish its non-

compliance – or not. But to be able to completely demand this right, the men had to adapt to the social identity of the husband, whose main obligation was to be the provider for the home, responsible for its maintenance. This responsibility was linked to the right of women, not to punish non-compliance, but to seek new areas of protection. The defense of honor, this perverse legal figure that is applied to crimes perpetrated by men, had as a counterpart legitimate defense in the case of women, whose extreme act – to kill a companion or husband – could be understood as the sole possible response to the violent action initiated by the spouse. If granted absolution, it was less the crime that was judged and more the “situation in which it was committed and the biography of who committed it” (Corrêa, 1983:310).

This synthetic summary of the analytical argument of the book and of its foundation, although insufficient for grasping the entire complexity of Mariza’s analysis, allows appraising its importance and inferring the reasons for its impact. To contextualize them, I also want to mention two contingencies that are involved. The first, a fortunate one, is related to the fact that the text was written as a master’s dissertation, at a time when neither students nor their supervisors were as pressured by time as they are today. Not that the author was slow, to the contrary. She had a bachelor’s degree in journalism, and had full command of the artifices of writing when she shifted her professional direction towards anthropology. For this reason, she edited the work at a pace that was faster than normal at the time. This was fortunate for her, her supervisor Verena Stolcke, and for the Ford Foundation that financed the study. It was fortunate above all for the graduate program in social anthropology that was created in 1971, thanks to the wise initiative and coordination of Antonio Augusto Arantes. The new program had the honor to have this work as its first master’s thesis. Defended in 1975, two years after Mariza entered the course as a student and one year before she became a professor at Unicamp, her examiners were Roberto DaMatta and Peter Fry.

The second contingency refers to the author’s trajectory. Having lived in the early 1970s in the United States, where the feminist movement was very strong, Mariza was shocked when she returned to Brazil by the silence that accompanied the acquittal of engineer Roberto Lobato. In 1973, he had shot and killed his ex-wife, Jô Souza Lima, in a crime that received tremendous attention in the press, because it involved members of the Minas Gerais elite. Mariza’s interest in the theme, stimulated by a well calibrated dose of feminism and intellectual curiosity, resulted in this study, written as an “arduous exercise”, to the degree to which it appears to the author to have little effect, considering the terrible situation of the so-called crimes of passion. These crimes make visible an institutional and systematic violence, directed not only against women, but against all those who, unable to count on support from legal specialists, are compelled “through intimidation, to the constant violation of minimum legal protections, to torture” (Corrêa, 1983:16).

Fortunately the doubts that tormented Mariza at that time did not impede her from undertaking the study, defending her thesis and publishing this vigorous and pioneering book, which is a mandatory reference for understanding the intricate connections between relations of power, gender and class in Brazilian society.

If, in 1975, Mariza had doubts about the effectiveness of her study, these were discarded five years later. Not by an act of the author’s individual will, but by the definitive entrance of the theme of gender violence to the feminist struggle. On October 10, 1980, in a public act held in front of the Municipal Theater of São Paulo, SOS-Mulher was launched. The demonstration began at six in the afternoon by assembling a jury to reach a verdict on two cases of assassinations of women by their respective husbands in São Paulo in the months of August and October of that year. The theatrical jury led by actress Ruth Escobar found the assassins of Esmeralda Dias and Anne Marie Armichaub to be guilty. They

asked for the punishment of the men who killed their wives. They also asked for justice for the women.

Violence against women was no longer a private issue, restricted to the family realm and confined to the legal order, to become appreciated and understood as a social and political problem of broad scope. “Those who love do not kill” became the theme of the event, which culminated in the realization of the first feminist march in the city of São Paulo (Pontes, 1986).²

Mariza’s book *Morte em família* [Death in the family] thus entered the history of Brazilian feminism and anthropology.

Mariza’s attraction to the subject of nannies, the focus of her next to last article (2007), was related to her interest in corporal fantasies, in sexuality from the perspective of children, in the various forms of family, and to the readings that she had been making in the field of psychoanalysis.

When I read the article for the first time, I found it fascinating, as was everything that she wrote. But I did not fathom, at that time, its potential for revealing crucial dimensions of Brazilian society. Upon re-reading it recently, I realized that it contains much more than the demonstration of Mariza’s restless and visionary spirit. The subject of Freud’s nanny was the incentive to examine from the inside the torn fabric of the relations between class and race in Brazil. Far from being a “minor” issue, Mariza showed that the theme of nannies is of

great relevance, not only in the domestic economy and in the economy of emotions, of the nineteenth century in Vienna and elsewhere in the industrializing world, but also

² A detailed description of this event is found in my master’s dissertation, “Do palco aos bastidores: o SOS-Mulher e as práticas feministas contemporâneas”, [From the stage to backstage: SOS-Women and contemporary feminist practices] defended in 1986, two months after the defense of the “O Negócio do michê: a relação entre o prostituto viril e seu cliente”, by Nestor Perlongher. Nestor and I were colleagues in the master’s program and Mariza’s first supervisees.

for a feminist reflection in contemporary Brazil (Corrêa, 2007:64).

Freud’s interest in nannies, which stems from his self-analysis and the analysis of some of his most famous patients, is at the origin of his “theory of seduction”. For this reason, and to advance the subject, Mariza began the article with a summary of this theory.³ In 1896, Freud published a polemical essay, in which he attributed the cause of hysteria to sexual trauma suffered by his female patients and also by some male patients, which ranges from indecent assault to sexual abuses committed by family members – uncles, fathers, brothers, tutors, school colleagues and nannies. In Freud’s words, the trauma was caused, “unfortunately and with great frequency [by] a close relative” (*apud* Corrêa, 2007:65). One year later, Freud doubted this inference and wrote to Fliess: “I no longer believe in my neurotic [theory of neuroses]” (*apud* Corrêa, 2007:65). Although he continued to mention it, Freud came to treat these denunciations as his patients’ fantasies.

Constant and regular figures in bourgeois Viennese homes, nannies were omnipresent in the family drama in Freud’s circles and that of his patients; like the boy Hans, who had a fear of horses, rode on the maid’s back and told her to take off her clothes. “The good mother and the bad nanny, or the good nanny and the bad nanny, appear constantly in Freud’s analyses, as if many of his patients repeated the trajectory of this boy” (p.71).

The intromission of the nannies – or of the subaltern classes – into bourgeois homes is returned to as an object of historic analysis by Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather*. By articulating the categories of gender, race, class and sexuality, McClintock suggested, according to Mariza’s reading, that

³ Here I am following Mariza’s reasoning as expressed in the article considered. Because it involves a close reading of the text, I have transcribed in this section the lines of argumentative strength, the narrative development and the empiric evidence presented. To not burden the presentation with repeated mentions of the date of publication of the article, I only indicate the page numbers of the passages cited.

The liminal figure of the nanny or of the servant – always at the door between the house and the street, the family and perdition – shows that the Victorian split between the good and bad woman – the saint and the whore - began not in a universal stereotype, but in the class structure of the domestic unit (p. 87).

To “our nanny’s”

Guided by Freud’s self-analysis (which revealed interior fantasies and their duplication in the good mother/bad nanny), Mariza uses McClintock’s concept of abjection to point to the specificity of nannies in Brazil, recalling that “the abject is something rejected, but from which we do not separate ourselves” (p.74). Abjection “supposes something that we incorporate in childhood and from which we cannot free ourselves: a fascination or a repulsion” (p.76).

Mariza’s brilliant decision to analyze “our nannies”, and thus to reveal perverse and persistent dimensions of the Brazilian social structure, is solidified by her evocation of famous Brazilian intellectuals such as Machado de Assis, Rui Barbosa and Gilberto Freyre, and the ties that they had with nannies and maids. Gilberto Freyre affirmed that an intimate conviviality with “black mothers”, gave origin to and developed into the attraction of white men, as adults, for black women. In *Casa Grande e Senzala*[The Masters and the Slaves], he sketches

A convincing portrait of the intromission of women “of color” into the intimate life of the white, or not so much, Brazilian family, which had resulted, he affirmed, in an also intimate conviviality between white men and black women in our country – even if rarely the reverse (Corrêa, 2007:82).

This attraction appears to be crystalized, in Mariza’s words, “in the Brazilian myth of the ‘luscious mulatta’, which can only be constituted by the denial of the black negro woman” (p.82). If the black mother gives way to the mulatta in the Brazilian imaginary,

wouldn’t this result, Mariza asks, from the “ambivalence between the two mothers – the black and the white?” (p.82).

What is denied and what is incorporated from this emotional conviviality in childhood had yet to be analyzed, Mariza ponders. Observing, however, any middleclass Brazilian neighborhood, one notes the persistence of daily conviviality of white children with black nannies.

Mariza’s analytical sharpness is in questioning what is denied and what is incorporated from this emotional childhood experience, to use McClintock’s suggestion about the duplicity present in the Victorian domestic unit, to highlight the ambiguity that the nannies (also found in the figure of the nursemaid/maid/domestic servant) incarnated in 19th century Brazil and carry until today. To give morphological density to this “today” Mariza cites official statistics from 2006 (the article is from 2007): “94.3% of domestic workers were women and 61.8% are black or brown” (p.80).

Attacked in the fictional or medical literature, or portrayed in a sentimental register by families, the nanny/nursemaid

embodied an ambiguous figure, which could be good and bad *at the same time*. This ambiguity would only be [undone] with the determined defense, by the part of doctors, of maternal nursing and the consequent attack on “mercenary nursemaids” – both blacks and whites, who entered the market through immigration – when their figure was then transformed into good-mother/bad-nursemaid (p.83, emphasis in the original).

The repeated use of poor and darker women as nannies reinforces the ambiguity of the relationship of the child with this female worker and the “family anxieties in relation [to her] that, when seen in a benign manner is “like part of the family”, and when seen in a malign manner, is someone who brings the evil of the world into the house” (p.84).

For this reason, according to Mariza, more than a century after Freud had abandoned the theory of seduction, the nanny continues to be evoked

to name the ‘danger’ (or the phantom) that haunts middle class and elite families. That is, an outside phantom (or danger) – that denies, or forgets, the “interior dangers” produced in the families themselves and placed in scene, a long time ago, by various analysts (p.85).

It is this psychoanalytical scene, revealed from an anthropological perspective, that Mariza makes visible by reflecting on how the nannies occupy the position of second mother of children in vast areas of the world. This scene, Mariza highlights, helps us to reflect on how the crossings of the socially subordinated categories with the categories of ages influences the experience of childhood and its importance for adult life. That is, on one hand are the nannies, who are subordinated by the position of race, class or age (due to their belonging to ethnic, migrant or immigrant groups) and on the other, the babies and children from other classes who are under their care.

Seen and sensed as “dangers” that come from the outside (from the outside in, from the street to the house, from the public to the private), nannies, although essential for managing domestic life for the privileged segments, place at risk - on the plane of fantasy and in the self-perception of those who employ them - the family relations. As guardians of a history that few know, they “bring into homes thorny dimensions of the structural intersection between the classes in Brazil” (p.86). For this reason, Mariza adds, news reports in 2006 of the gratuitous beating of a domestic worker at a bus stop by middle class boys in Rio de Janeiro, “pointed to a larger problem than expressed in the *faits-divers* of the newspapers, or in the indignant commentaries of the editorials and letters from readers” (p.86).

This event exposed the “structural intersection between classes in the country, which has been historically present for a

long time and which may be related to an attempt by the youth to avenge in the street, the abjection that they incorporated at home” (p. 87). We recall that the abject is “something rejected, but from which we do not separate” and that the notion of abjection “supposes something that we incorporate in childhood and from which we cannot free ourselves from: a fascination or a repulsion” (p.76).

Thus, Mariza concludes, given that abjection is a concept that expresses incorporation and expulsion (which brings to within and expels) it gains in the Brazilian case a special analytical power for considering the relations and the scarred ties between the classes and their incidence in the crucial experience of childhood.

In Mariza’s words, “perhaps we, feminists, should dedicate ourselves more to reflecting on this” (p. 87). The convocation of feminist militants reverberates in her position as an anthropologist who is attentive to dissensions and corporal fantasies, framed from the perspective of anthropological conventions, which is the theme of her final study. Beginning with the issue of female genital mutilation, she moved on to consider male genital mutilations in western societies, in the form of surgical interventions on the bodies of children to correct what is considered a sexual ambiguity. In this case, male bodies tended to be feminized on a larger scale, because doctors begin with the presumption that it is “easier to create a vagina, as a passive organ, than a phallus, with sufficient erection and size” (Corrêa, 2004:129).

Making use of the concept of convention, which is dear to the history of art, Mariza reveals how the analytical treatment anthropologists give to the issue reiterates the partition between Western and non-Western. When practiced among the former, genital mutilation, in addition to receiving little attention, is covered by the mantle of secrecy. Among the non-Western, it is treated in the realm of the sacred. These were the two anthropological conventions Mariza found in the required bibliography until she looked at the issue head on, shuffling the boundaries, and showing that “conventions” – and the dissent in relation to them – maintain a more intricate relation than [we

anthropologists] usually believe (Corrêa, 2004:130). This is the source of her effort to not Orientalize practices that also take place among our societies and use the conceptual grade of anthropology to understand, “the similarities between our practices and practices conducted elsewhere” (Corrêa, 2004:131).

As an anthropologist and feminist, Mariza revealed with majesty, in her work and in the classroom, that vigorous intellectual work requires a specific type of curiosity that must be practiced obstinately by any respectable researcher. Not a curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is that should be known, but that which, in the precise words of Foucault (1984:13),

Separate ourselves from ourselves. What is the value of the obstination of knowing – the philosopher asks – if it only assures the acquisition of knowledge and not, in a certain way and as much as possible, a detour from that which is known?

“There are moments in life when the question of knowing if we can think differently than is thought, and perceive differently than what is seen, is essential for continuing to look or reflect” (Foucault, 1984:13). These wise words of Foucault perfectly synthesize the importance of Mariza’s authorial work and the scope of her impact and that of her work.

Having the luck and the privilege of having been initiated by Mariza in the uncertain, tumultuous and captivating adventure of academic research, I can now, as her first supervisee, shuffle the chronology of memory. Situations like this in which we pay homage to essential people are also moments of affirmation of what is worthwhile (and not worthwhile) experiencing, even in the realm of professional life. Who better than Décio de Almeida Prado, the great historian of Brazilian theater, summarized this many years ago when he emphasized the importance that the College of Philosophy at USP had in his life. In Decio’s words, the college gave him “everything or nearly everything: a wife, friends, income, intellectual interests, ways of thinking” (1989:11). I am

certain, for all that Mariza did in and for the university, that Decio’s experience was also hers.

For this reason, and many more that I cannot mention here, I want to express my deep gratitude for all that I and all her supervisees, students, colleagues and friends learned with her. Thank you very much Mariza!

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