



## The discourse of sexual excess as a hallmark of Brazilianness: revisiting Brazilian social thinking in the 1920s and 1930s\*

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### Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyze the discourse of sexual excess produced by Brazilian social thinking in the 1920s and 1930s and its dialog with the medical discourse at the time. Inspired by Foucault, it is within the field of the history of knowledge and is supported by sociology and medical documents from the period in question. Within the framework of the twentieth century re-codification of the imagery of Brazilianness, the topic of sexual excess was revisited by local thinkers in the field of sociology and seen either as disturbing the national civilizing project, or as a trait that should be seen in a positive light because it permitted the cultural hybridization of its sources of identity.

Keywords: sexual excess; miscegenation; Brazilian social thinking; *Casa-grande e senzala*; Brazilianness.

During the first half of the twentieth century – especially the 1920s and 1930s – an intricate discourse on Brazilianness unfolded. The texts of the Jesuits and the first travelers are taken up again within national sociological thinking, in an attempt to define the traits that make up our identity. This interest turned into an obsession in certain Brazilian intellectual circles linked to different ideological lines that sought to find solutions for the problem of the viability of the Brazilian nation, called into question since the end of the nineteenth century, based on the discussion on miscegenation.

Recourse to the reconstruction of an origin will be seen as a means of redefining the country's political direction. The essays published in the 1930s that attempted to interpret Brazil represent a critical contribution to the monumentalist history that had been produced on the Brazilian past until then. The attempts to find solutions for the race question, the certainty of Brazil's lack of viability and the hypothesis of whitening through immigration policy had reached saturation level (Skidmore, 1989; Schwarcz, 1993). It is in this context that questions on Brazilianness makes sense, especially with respect to sociological reflection and the modernist avant-garde.

In this archive of Brazilianness, sexual hyperesthesia appears as one of its deepest characteristics. This idea permeates many documents over the centuries: the letters of the first travelers, the record of the Jesuits, which were revisited, centuries later, by texts on the social formation of Brazil, by the modernist avant-garde and the racial hygiene discourse. Even today the imagery of (and on) Brazil is marked by descriptors such as sensuality, lust, and malice. Characteristics that in other nations are seen as individual character traits, here became inherent to our national identity. What is the meaning of this perpetuity? How has it been sustained in discussions on Brazilianness?

In this article we intend to analyze the discourse of sexual excess as a privileged hallmark of Brazilianness, creating hypotheses to this end based on the ideas of Paulo Prado and Gilberto Freyre, important writers on Brazilian social thinking from the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, we are initially interested in situating the sociopolitical source from which these ideas grew, namely the creation of the idea of a nation linked to Brazilian modernity, in which the problem of miscegenation was discussed. Then we will see, with Paulo Prado, how eroticism is related to sadness through the psychophysiological reading of this author, treating sexual excess as a pathology inherent to the Brazilian racial situation. Finally, we will discuss Gilberto Freyre's ideas on sexual excess, taking the eroticism of the plantation house and miscegenation as keys to the analysis.

## **Nation and miscegenation**

The debate on miscegenation in the 1920s and 1930s presented itself as a new solution – turning miscegenation into something positive by analyzing the intermixing of black, white and indigenous ethnic stock – for an old problem: how to form a nation whose human stock was condemned, given miscegenation and its association with degeneration. Linked to a specific appropriation of social Darwinism (Domingues, Sá, Glick, 2003; Schwarcz, 1993), the idea of degeneration suffered here a curious translation of its basis: miscegenation was considered degenerating and only mating of people of the same race would lead to improved offspring.

Schwarcz (1993) clearly describes the paradox in the debate on race at the end of the nineteenth century. Her hypothesis is that the racial argument became a new way to justify social differences, while jeopardizing the emerging national project with the birth of a republican Brazil that had just abolished slavery, since miscegenation, with the strong contribution of the African and indigenous races, was interpreted by these theories as degeneration. It attempted to encounter a local solution for the assimilation of racial theories based, principally, on the social Darwinism of Spencer, which had to coexist, on the one hand, with the creation of new arguments for social stratification, previously legitimized by slavery, and on the other hand with the viability of a miscegenated nation.

In his book entitled *Les bases de la morale évolutionniste* (1892, p.10), Herbert Spencer sought to show, comparatively, the dependence of the evolution of behavior on the sophistication of biological structures and functions, of the “inferior human races”<sup>1</sup> and “superior human races.” The evolution of behavior was defined by the ability to adapt actions to purposes, in order to prolong life. Comparing the longevity of “savages” to that of civilized men, Spencer tries to convince us that behavior is more evolved in the “superior races,” even though their way of life is not always the longest lasting. He then attempted to measure evolution by comparing the complexity of a person’s lifestyle, expressed by the complexity of their thinking, actions and sensations, with their ability to increase their lifespan. The “inferior races” supposedly had not improved their behavior related to “preservation of the species;” only individual preservation, which implies a less evolved stage of structural organization than the preservation of the species through the intergenerational and social care that the “superior races” supposedly employed.

This sociobiological reading was quite convenient when confronting social embarrassments of the late nineteenth century in Brazil, since progress and naturalization of social differences coexisted side by side in the Spencerian philosophy. Not coincidentally, the reception of Darwin’s ideas in Brazil, marked by so many controversies, was strongly mediated by that author. The discontinuity and randomness present in Darwin’s idea of natural selection were, it seems, aspects that caused resistance, since they did not admit the idea of progress, much less any reference to creationism (Domingues, Sá, Glick, 2003). Therefore, it was mainly through Spencerism that the Darwinian perspective was more or less assimilated by the Brazilian intellectual elite, since this reading favored accommodation for the racial paradox cited earlier.

When incorporating the racial theories of the nineteenth century – based on evolutionism (theory founded on the idea of progress and a common origin for all races, and thus monogenist) and social Darwinism (which assumed different origins for the different races) – Brazil’s intellectual elite (principally physicians and attorneys) had to encompass both liberalism and its opposite, racism. The former made use of the notion of free will in order to guarantee legal equality and, as a consequence, establish criteria with which to judge the behavior of individuals, whereas the latter naturalized social differences, reaffirming them, using the notion of race (Schwarcz, 1993). In the late nineteenth century, this challenge shaded the discourse on race in a frankly disenchanting manner. Given a degenerate, sick, mestizo people, with a variety of physical and mental defects, what could Brazil’s future be like?

The project of building a strong nation was not a strictly Brazilian problem. Nationalism, which appeared linked to the strengthening of nation-states, represented, in the nineteenth century, one of the solutions for dealing with conflicts between peoples, territories and the formation of national identities. Beginning in the nineteenth century, “nation” becomes a notion linked to consolidation of the State. Despite different formats, nationalisms were predominantly linked to reactionary political forces that, imbued with the value of patriotism, intended to capture individuals and social groups in their political strategies. Moreover, nationalism took language as the organizing axis of nation-states (“linguistic nationalism”), since the establishment of a territory (“territorial nationalism”), inherited from the French Revolution, was not sufficient to establish a national identity in several cases (e.g. Jews). Finally, this project claimed independence for States, ensuring the prerogative of sovereignty in their decisions. Indeed, nation-states were an important part of the broad social homogenization that began taking place then (Hobsbawn, 1995).

Miscegenation was, however, the issue that dominated the nationalist debate in the Brazilian context, because it was identified as the main obstacle to the affirmation of a sovereign nation. The idea of a healthy population meant a group both racially pure and free from hereditary defects. With the link between the health of the people and racial purity, miscegenation was equated with specific translations of ideas on ethnic differences, disease, degeneration, crime, addiction, and sexual hyperesthesia. This problem occupied several generations of physicians, lawyers, and educators, or in other words those tasked with finding a solution to the racial paradox, namely justifying social differences – which was done by the naturalization present in the category “race” – and addressing the disenchantment that resulting racial “inferiority” produced in relation to the project of a strong, healthy nation.

### **“They were sad, in a radiant land:” sadness and eroticism in the portrayal of Brazilianness**

One of the sources of the theme of sexual excess as a hallmark of Brazilianness was Paulo Prado, in his book *Retrato do Brasil*, published in 1928, and which other interpreters of Brazil who succeeded him, for example, Gilberto Freyre (2005), would draw upon. This author’s hypothesis is that Brazil is a country marked by sadness, caused by sexual excess and greed related to gold. His reconstruction of the formation of Brazilian society highlights the idea of the bad colonizer (Portuguese) and moral corruption by the African slave.

Prado (2002) defended the argument, built on an uncritical reading of his sources, that the Europeans who came to colonize Brazil – mostly Portuguese – had been “banished” from the Old World, seduced by the natural paradise to be found here. Drawing on descriptions of North American colonization, the author points out that, unlike Iberian America, the British had to struggle against a range of adversities: hostile climate, hunger, and disease. It was what he called austere colonization, undertaken with hard work and dedication by people who cared for the land they conquered and had protestant discipline. This old story, retold since elementary school, helped to define an interpretation of Brazil that sees it as the product of two tragedies: an usurper colonization and a degenerate race.

European exiles<sup>2</sup> arrived in Brazil and had to colonize their land – they did not have enough people to do that, not even white women. Coming from a civilized culture that repressed its excesses, the “bad colonists,” described as “moral mestizos,” succumbed “to the passions of their uncouth souls” (Prado, 2002, p.42). The combination of indigenous wantonness and the dissipation of the colonizer produced, according to this author, a Brazilian way of being, being marked by the hybridization of these traits, disdained in his text:

In the adventurer, the seduction of the land aligned with the hurry of adolescence. For men who came from a policed Europe, the ardor of temperament, the amorality, the lack of civilized decency – and all the continuous voluptuous tumescence of a virgin nature – were an invitation to a free, unbridled life in which everything was allowed. The indigenous inhabitant, in turn, was a lecherous animal, living without any constraint on the satisfaction of their carnal desires. ... our primitive mestizo races arose from the contact between this sensuality and the profligacy and dissolution of the European conqueror. Land of all vices and crimes (Prado, 2002, p.38).

The idea of excess is the key to the author’s reading of the Brazilian identity and permeates the entire text: sexual excesses, immoderate ambition, and paralyzing lassitude. Prado (2002, p.66) attributed the “exaggerated eroticism” of the Brazilian to three contributing factors: the climate, the land, and women, both indigenous and African. The Brazilian sadness, which he believed himself to have portrayed accurately, supposedly came from the preoccupation with eroticism: it was the strenuous sex effect, along with the frustration of greed for gold, which he even claims to be a “derivative” of the sexual appetite, which produced the characteristic sadness in Brazilians. His explanation was psychophysiological: sexual excess supposedly depletes sensory and vegetative functions; produces psychic and somatic disorders, leading to what physicians termed “‘collapse,’ physical and moral depression, of short duration in certain normal conditions, but ongoing in the case of repeated excesses. In Brazil, sadness resulted from the colonist’s intense sexual life, diverted to erotic perversions, and a markedly atavistic background” (Prado, 2002, p.67; emphasis in original).

Interestingly, when reading the documents of the Inquisition in Brazil, as well as the letters of the Jesuits and travelers, from which he extracts the image of the country as a “morass of flesh,” according to the Jesuits, Prado sees sexual sin as a “pathological abnormality.” He unqualifiedly replaces the prior code – sin – whose historically contingent value could have been better discussed, with the newer code, which gave medical knowledge the authority to redefine the eroticism that allegedly served as the basis for Brazilianness.

He revisits these seventeenth-century documents with a sexual psychiatric discourse. His interpretation approach reveals a Brazil that originated as if from a sexual disease. Its children were like entries in a sexual psychopathology manual – sodomy, pedophilia, homosexuality, bestiality. And on the impressionist screen he uses as a metaphor to translate how history was made, with its weakly-drawn contours, there was clearly one interpretation blaming Africans: “Lust, greed, and melancholy. In societies, as in individuals, it arises from a psychopathic framework: physical and moral dejection, fatigue, numbness, apathy, and sadness” (Prado, 2002, p.67).

It is his hypothesis, not Freyre’s (2005), that the fact of being a slave, and not just being black, was one of the factors contributing to strong social degradation in Brazil. The physical

and moral degradation that blacks supposedly brought to Brazilian society were their revenge in payment for slavery. But Prado's text is somewhat ambivalent with respect to the situation of Africans. He does not place importance on the race question. But at the same time, the alleged separation between social status and race in the case of Africans sometimes disappears. Like in an impressionist painting, as he liked to describe his work:

The captive black was the basis of our economic, agricultural and industrial system and, as if in retaliation for the horrors of slavery, disturbed and poisoned the formation of the nation, not as much by the mixing of his blood, but rather through the relaxation of customs and the dissolution of the society's character, with incalculable consequences (Prado, 2002, p.72).

In his postscript, Prado claims black labor was superior to indigenous labor and adds, in his analysis of the sexual excess of slaves: that sexual hyperesthesia favored an intimacy between whites and blacks that would not have been possible otherwise; he alleged that this prevented the segregation observed in the United States. In this framework Brazil was sick, poor, backward, lazy, mestizo, with a climate conducive to laxity and sexual excess, and with "indolent patriotism," with Brazilians attached to their constructed image of a tropical paradise.

Prado was extremely skeptical of the Brazilian civilizing project, which supposedly mimicked European romanticism, which Prado associated with a fragile republicanism, guided by the liberal ideas of popular sovereignty, individual freedom, racial and political equality, and the infallibility of the nation. Thus: he synthesizes the portrait of Brazilianness: "Physically weak due to exhausting the nervous machine, in an instinctive reaction of vitality, seeking survival in an almost female hallucinatory eroticism. It thus represented the asthenia of the race, the addiction, of our mestizo origins. They lived sadly, in a radiant land" (Prado, 2002, p.85).

Vainfas (1989) states that *Retrato do Brasil* was one of the most pessimistic essays written about the country, causing a strong impact at the time, although it was accompanied by more disagreement than congratulations. Imbued by what he describes as "moral spirit," the book, in his view, condemns Brazil to the precariousness of rules and deregulation of instincts. Although not a historiography, he claims that Prado's work provided important clues for historical work and created innovative connections for the time. The commentator points out that Prado addressed the issue of sexuality, but his argument was influenced by an uncritical adoption of the Jesuit discourse and scientific racism of his time.

Vainfas (1989) reinforces the argument that *Retrato do Brasil* is strongly marked by the absence of critical distance in the reading of the documentary sources, which is manifested in the way he accepts the writings of the travelers and the Jesuits as the truth, above suspicion. On the topic of sexual excess, this methodological error helped crystallize an essence of Brazilianness marked by primitivism and degeneracy, which was repeatedly pointed out by his critics. The Jesuit perspective adopted by Prado had the convenience of supporting the argument of the inferiority of mestizo and black Brazilians, echoing the racism of his era, albeit ambivalently. On the one hand, he recognizes the devastating effects of slavery, but on the other, he imputes responsibility for it to the slaves, while employing a clever

strategy that shifts the problem of “blood” to the “relaxation of morals.” In his analysis of the reception of the book, Vainfas notes that Prado’s racism, curiously, did not arouse further questioning at the time, with the debate focusing on sadness. However, as we shall see later, Gilberto Freyre, whose work *Casa-grande e senzala* (CGS) broadly influenced the interpretation of Brazilianness, contested a significant portion of the racist arguments that supported Paulo Prado’s arguments.

### Original defects

Five years after the publication of *Retrato do Brasil*, in 1933, the theme of sexual excess was once again addressed in interpretations written by Gilberto Freyre (2005), in his famous work CGS, in which he returns to some of Prado’s main arguments, but to the contrary and with different nuances. In Freyre’s discourse, we find the reaffirmation of the idea of sexual excess, but in a positive light. Additionally, the argument that identified African and indigenous peoples as great sources of sexual hyperarousal was given new meaning. This topic was, however, a tactic for re-addressing the problem of miscegenation.

In CGS, Freyre reaffirms the discourse of sexual excess, but places it on the colonists’ side, although, at the same time, he accommodates the image of the “purgatory of the metropolis” (Souza, 1989). He relativizes the argument that Brazil was colonized by the dregs of Portuguese society, described as “shameless stallions,” by Paulo Prado. He also believed that it was an exaggeration to state that all the colonists during that period were perverts, criminals or crazy. Based on secondary information from Portuguese criminal cases in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Freyre warns that many deportations were due to reasons (atheism, witchcraft, mysticism) other than perverted sexual conduct or criminal acts.

Moreover, “colonization by individuals” (soldiers of fortune, adventurers, exiles, new Christians fleeing Tridentine persecution, slavers, parrot smugglers etc.), as he calls this first period in the settlement of Brazil, would not have left traces on the country’s economic and political formation, and did not, therefore, constitute a “system of colonization.” He also adds that, even if they were really sexually overaroused, this would be more a trait of the colonizer to favor the colonization of such vast, barren land. Freyre found a civilizing purpose for the sexual excess of the deportees.

But, interestingly, he emphasizes the genetic effect of this migration. From the “initial ethnic defect,” cited by Azevedo do Amaral, Freyre concludes that the initial period of colonization, characterized as promiscuous, was marked by racial heterogeneity and was not a strictly Portuguese period, as their contribution was only in the predominance of the Portuguese language. It demarcated a national prehistory, because of its influence on the formation of the Brazilian people, once again establishing characteristics that freed the Portuguese of responsibility for hereditary defects. Although he argued that the great availability of indigenous women must have favored sexual selection, favoring good descendants, he sees these sexual interactions as the origin of the “ethnic defect” at the source of the Brazilian people.

Freyre transforms the “initial ethnic defect” into a “initial syphilitic defect,” perhaps explaining the importance of the demarcation of a pre-history during the first sixty years of

Portuguese colonization in his reading of Amaral. Brought to Brazil by Europeans, syphilis was the only vestige of this colonization by individuals, mentioned earlier, remaining in the local population:

Even those who disappeared into the darkness of indigenous life without a trace imposed their legacy through the evident consequence of their procreating and syphilis-infecting actions, for those who study the genetic history of Brazilian society. For better or worse, they were the founders of this society. The formation of Brazil was contaminated by them with one of the most persistent and characteristic vices: Azevedo do Amaral would call them ethnic defects, we prefer to call them social defects (Freyre, 2005, p.111).

The debate on the origin of syphilis appears as a great articulator of different discursive maneuvers on the racial degeneration of Brazilians. That is why Freyre examines this origin minutely. The European syphilitic slag came to Brazil and found the “easy woman” of the tropics, a somewhat facetious formulation, but it illustrates the theme of sexual excess as constitutive of the “gametes” that formed Brazilian society. Drawing on the analysis of Oscar da Silva Araújo, Freyre reconstitutes the hypothesis of the European origin of syphilis: syphilis could have been brought to Brazil by the French, who suffered an epidemic of this disease in the sixteenth century, and by the Portuguese, whose mobility also contributed to their promiscuity, with the spread of syphilis in the East being imputed to them.

In counterpart, he refutes the hypothesis that syphilis originated in America and was brought to Europe by the colonists. In particular, supposedly clear evidence of venereal symptoms and indications of syphilis in pre-Columbian graves, as reported by travelers, was held up as evidence. Another proof that he will question is the report (by a medical expedition to Guatemala led by the American physician Shattuck) that the Mayans were resistant to the syphilis virus and that proved the American origin of the disease: “The Mayas’ extraordinary resistance to syphilis is a fact; the American origin of the disease, as inference based on this fact, is a hypothesis” (Freyre, 2005, p.153). As an argument against the hypothesis of an American origin for syphilis, Freyre draws on the studies of Roquette-Pinto, Murilo de Campos and Olímpio da Fonseca Filho to indicate that no vestiges of syphilis had been found in indigenous peoples isolated from contact with whites, reinterpreting the testimony of travelers who, according to these authors, had probably “mistaken some dermatosis for syphilis, in addition to having had contact only with natives who had already had contact with Europeans” (p.112).

The other aspect of the hypothesis of an initial ethnic defect to refute was that our ancestors were sexually overaroused. Freyre (2005) uses anthropological information to affirm that both Africans and indigenous groups were marked by a sexual deficit, and for this reason used rituals to arouse themselves, which were incorrectly interpreted by travelers and not duly criticized by writers on Brazil, including Paulo Prado, a frequent voice in CGS. Contrary to the immoderation described by travelers and missionaries, supposedly characteristic of indigenous sexual morals, Freyre investigated some of these restrictions in order to negate the hypothesis of “sexual intoxication:” (1) exogamy: the groups were divided into exogamous halves and then divided into smaller groups and clans; (2) incest and consanguinity, marked by the kinship structure that considered the paternal lineage off limits for sexual unions [but

not the maternal]; (3) totemism, in which men and women descendant or protected by the same animal could not unite sexually.

He rejects the interpretation of the indigenous and African rituals as signs of sexual excess – still based on anthropology – stating that these rituals were emblems not of sexual excess, but precisely its lack. He uses as an example the tupinambás practice called *membrum virile*, which consisted of producing penile swelling by contact with a venomous animal, in order to attract native women. Freyre's interpretation – contrary to that present in the seventeenth century documents, that the tupinambás were “highly libidinous” and unsatisfied with their virility and, for this reason, wished to increase the size of their genital organs – was that the “savages” used these rituals like aphrodisiacs to create a state of sexual arousal, and thus could not be considered priapic. In contrast, he offers the observation that, among the “civilized,” arousal could be obtained without major mediation, since preoccupation with sex was constant. The sexology of Havelock Ellis appears explicitly in his texts, an inspiration that follows him through various phases of his intellectual biography (Bocayuva, 2001; Pallares-Burke, 2005).

The same argument is used in the analysis of African rituals, marked by erotic dances. The stigma of “sexual hyperarousal” weighed more heavily on them than on the indigenous groups, as we saw earlier. By deflating the eroticism of Africans, Freyre provides arguments for refuting the hypothesis that Brazilians, predominantly mestizo, are degenerate, and this is why he devoted a good deal of attention to sexual desire in the plantation house. There was a widespread idea, including in medical works on childhood hygiene, that the sexual life of Brazilians – especially the males – was marked by precocity, induced by the lasciviousness of the slave quarters, or more precisely, of the African women. Freyre does not disagree with this hypothesis, but gives another explanation for it.

### **Distant equilibrium: the miscegenation debate**

In an attempt to translate his contradictions in a balanced manner, Gilberto Freyre analyzes miscegenation as a positive effect of the hybridization of different cultural sources, and as a hallmark of the Brazilian identity. This perspective distanced itself, simultaneously, from skepticism on the viability of the Brazilian nation and from the whitening strategy, both ideas in the debate on the racial question in Brazil since the end of the nineteenth century. This theme disturbed him since his youth and manifested itself, amorphously, as a sort of racist amazement at what was considered the imagery of Brazilianness:

I saw once, after more than three long years far from Brazil, a group of Brazilian sailors – African-white and African-indigenous mestizos – from either the São Paulo or the Minas, I don't remember which, descending into the soft snow of Brooklyn. They seemed like caricatures of men. And I remembered the sentence that I had just read from a book by an American traveler on Brazil; ‘the fearfully mongrel aspect of most of the population.’ That was the result of miscegenation (Freyre, 2005, p.126-127; emphasis in the original).

We must state that CGS is a disruptive work not only due to the solution given for the question of miscegenation, but also in relation to the intellectual biography of its author. During the years leading up to his masterpiece, Gilberto Freyre was frankly seduced by

American scientific racism, and showed his discontent with Brazilian miscegenation. Pallares-Burke<sup>3</sup> (2005) shows us how Freyre sustained, for years, his belief in the inferiority of the black race, which is taken by the author as the main obstacle to the development of CGS. The author takes us, in her excellent intellectual biography of Gilberto Freyre, along the path that led him from his master's thesis to his seminal book.

After some years of unquestioned adherence to American scientific racism, Freyre began to take seriously the distinction between race and ethnicity, learned from American cultural anthropology of the time, inherited mainly from his contact with Franz Boas, although he still refused to renounce his interest in biologically substantiating his opinions. He began to reflect on how the physical environment produced effects on the adaptation of a "race." And this journey allowed him to make some important corrections on his perception of slavery.

It is under the influence of American anthropology that he describes the architecture of the Brazilian plantation house and differentiates it from the continental Portuguese equivalent, to assert that "a race is not the same when transported from one continent to another; it assumes new features as it occupies a new territory" (Freyre, 2005, p.129). We can see, in the Neo-Lamarckian hypothesis that the environment is capable of modifying the characteristics of individuals in a way that can transmit them to heirs, one of the pillars of his thinking on race. There is a compromise between the side that understands that the environment recreates the race and another (which will anchor his analysis of the plantation house) to the contrary: that the race also recreates the environment in its own way. This statement is relevant in that it allows us to see that Freyre questioned European purity. With the argument of cultural "hybridization," the affinity between the Portuguese and the colonization of Brazil was highlighted, destabilizing, with this maneuver, the stigma of the Portuguese as a "bad colonizer." This problem was deemed to be strictly related to the quality of the racial stock inhabiting Brazil, seen as a country with a degenerate race, principally due to the miscegenation between blacks and whites.

He used ample documentation to sustain the idea of Portuguese prowess as a colonizer. Once again, the attempt to compromise between opposing views is seen as an important aspect of Freyre's arguments that, without excluding negation, sees the positive in his antagonist. While recognizing Brazilian inferiority, he conceals it by putting a positive spin on traits that strengthen Brazil's identity and rebuilds its nation project. He digs deep into the history of Portugal to encounter support for his hypothesis.

Halfway between Europe and Africa, the Portuguese ethnic heritage was a blend of what he called Germanic hardness," Arab miscibility and the wandering Semitic character, which he claimed enabled Portuguese's successful colonization of a country as vast as Brazil. Mobility is emphasized as a reason for the success of the Portuguese as colonizers, since, otherwise, how could such a small country "manfully sprinkle its blood and culture" in different regions of the world. A better adaptation to the climate of the tropics, compared to other Europeans, would have been an advantage, thanks to the malleability of the Portuguese climate, more African than European. Moreover, this very miscibility, initially between Portuguese and Indigenous, would have made it difficult to discern between the adaptability of the white colonizer and that of mestizo offspring, as this miscegenation occurred as soon as the first Portuguese landed in Brazil. Another aspect of Portuguese colonization was its capacity for

“national unity” in spite of regional variation and different regional groups. Here, separatism never gained strength, which was due to a centralizing policy. While unity between the captaincies was stressed, they also shared rivalry for the motherland’s special treatment, which prevented nationalism from gaining enough strength to lead to a desire for emancipation.

Together, all of these Portuguese predispositions – ethnic hybridization, adaptability, miscibility and mobility – arguably guaranteed a unique tenacity for colonizing the Americas, since the adverse conditions also seemed greater here than in North America, for example, where the climate and the diet facilitated adaptation, contrary to the case in Brazil.

For the Portuguese colonizers, the shortage of white women in Brazil created the challenge of populating such a vast territory, but the ground was fertile for Portuguese colonizing traits. It is interesting that Freyre does not reject the category of “race,” but makes it malleable to the constraints and potential of the social formation of a people, using the stratagem of applying a new version of Lamarckism. Valuing the potential of the characteristics acquired served both to remove the degenerating stigma that haunted the project of a modern nation-state, focusing on the great mass of mestizos and morally unsound who were prone to hereditary defects, and affirming the plasticity of the hereditary: what seemed to be insoluble, inherited and weakening deviations were converted through the hope that, since social causes were at the forefront of causality, interference in its future course would be possible. Heredity is no longer seen as pertaining exclusively to the domain of genetics, with the social determinants of “race” inserted along the way.

Almost all aspects of African heritage were seen as valuable by the sociologist from Pernambuco: the affectionate maternal treatment with which nursemaids cared for the children of their masters, their physical beauty, intelligence, sensuality, religious rites and diet. The serialization of these qualities, which were even highlighted in CGS for their eugenic value, just opened the door for detractors attributing degeneration to Africans: that black women sexually corrupted the plantation house, with their racial disposition for sexual overarousal. Freyre did not disagree with the claim that black women sexually interfered in the plantation house, but it was not her race, but rather her status as a slave, her position in the patriarchal landowner-monoculture slaveholder regime that socially and politically formed Brazil, denouncing, ironically, the game of domination that the hypothesis of sexual hyperaesthesia concealed:

Among us, we have seen that Nina Rodrigues considered the mulatto woman to be abnormally sexually overaroused; and even José Veríssimo, ordinarily so sober, described the Brazilian mestizo woman as: ‘a solvent of our physical and moral virility.’ We, the innocent: ‘they, devils dissolving our morals and corrupting our bodies’ (Freyre, 2005, p.462, emphasis in the original).

The idea of making new races through their migration to a new environment appears both in the Brazil-adapted architecture of the plantation house and the lasciviousness of the female slave, the sexual servant of her master. Much of the potential of the African race was blunted by their slave status; however, their condition imposed on them much of what seemed to him to be racially degenerate. Freyre avoids the temptation to romanticize the indigenous people, despite not retreating from the affirmation that they were treated cruelly.

This is an interesting maneuver, because in a single stroke he reveals what the condition of slavery produced in the indigenous groups, but also criticizes the tendency of those who romanticize the natives to claim that the Africans are inferior to them.

We found that the climate issue is treated differently by Freyre compared to studies that claimed that the heat of the tropics was one of the main reasons behind racial degeneration. Without denying the importance of this variable in the formation of society, he shifts the focus from the direct effects of climate on the racial “nature” of individuals to the pernicious social effects that the monoculture plantation system forced on the Brazilian people. Both due to how it was sustained – slavery – and due to the repercussions it would have on the impoverishment of the diet of Brazilians, a source of fragility, the Brazilian economic regime should be held responsible for the impoverishment of its people, and not the dysgenic effects of race, as had been erroneously claimed by eugenicists. It was a crucial trump card for shifting the argument of racial degeneration to Neo-Lamarckism – according to which the environment coordinated phenotype changes that, in turn, modified genotypes – applied to the “racial” reality of the country against the eugenicists, thanks to the influence of Edgar Roquette-Pinto.

In 1929, at the First Brazilian Eugenics Conference, held in Rio de Janeiro, the medical examiner, teacher, anthropologist, ethnologist, writer and archaeologist and writer Edgar Roquette-Pinto, from Rio de Janeiro, gave a talk about Brazilian anthropological types that was quite dissonant in the eugenics chorus of the time. Faced with the economic problem of the need to settle Brazil and the argument of the lack of Brazilian productivity, Roquette-Pinto responds stating that its origin was in the “lack of national organization,” a direct attack on the Brazilian elite, who took refuge in the argument of Brazilian indolence to conceal the real causes, which were certainly social. More precisely, he defines social organization as: education, nationalization of the economy and circulation of ideas and wealth. Based on this definition, he states that even the supposed “efficiency” of the immigrant, when exposed to the same conditions in Brazil, would be compromised. In fact, the unfavorable condition was the environment (and not race). He denounces the evil expedients used by the Brazilian settlement policy: “They slaughtered the natives; imported African slaves (admitted as a necessity), but brutalized them; they sent for white people, at the cost of much of gold, with no selection process, no supervision, immediately providing them with appreciable capital – land, house, tools, and assistance; and abandoned the best national elements to their sad fate” (Roquette-Pinto, 1929, p.123).

Based on this argument, Roquette-Pinto (1929) questions the authority of the national elite (including the eugenicists) to claim that Brazilians are “morally degenerate” and refutes the eugenicist argument that the Brazilian race was physically degenerate. After a long anthropometric analysis he concludes that there was no stigma of anthropological degeneration in the anthropological types; on the contrary, he considered their characteristics to be of high quality. He refutes the thesis that miscegenation is dysgenic, even criticizing the idea of race mixing, a definition used in Brazil at the time, and argues that miscegenation was actually like a combination (in the chemical sense of the term), that would impose new features not reducible to those of the parents on descendants. He attributes the large number of somatically disabled individuals in Brazil to the absence of consistent sanitary and educational policies, concluding with the following sentence: “Anthropology proves

that Brazilians need to be educated, not replaced” (Roquette-Pinto, 1929,p.147). This was a notable influence on Freyre’s reconsideration of the miscegenation issue.

Freyre did not fully reject the idea of the inferiority of the Brazilian mestizo, a political merit that he could have obtained, but attributed social and not racial reasons for this. It is true that he viewed the colonizer with benevolent eyes: when he tries to convince us that slavery was not as cruel here as elsewhere; when commenting on the supposed benevolence of the white master who freed some of his slaves on his deathbed; or even when he seeks to reconstruct a (sadistic) eroticism in the plantation house that resulted in greater interaction with the slave quarters, which would not have been possible otherwise. However, the complexity of his thinking resides precisely in variegating this antagonism, sympathizing with the dominated to reveal the atrocities he suffered; revealing the persistence of the dominated culture hybridized by the dominating, to enhance the strength of the former. It is interesting that the Portuguese identity is constantly targeted by Freyre, both to deconstruct their stigma as poor colonizers, and to question the purity and consequent racial superiority of whites compared to blacks.

Freyre has been identified by many commentators as having spread the idea of racial democracy. The sociologist from Pernambuco has been interpreted by some as nostalgic for the era of slavery, claiming that he took the viewpoint of the plantation owner (Cardoso, 2005), concealing the cruelty of the slave system. The image of a tropical paradise is addressed by Hermano Viana (12 mar. 2000), who recognized the hypothesis of a racial democracy, an expression that Freyre would never have used. According to this author, a meta mythology was created in Brazil, in which a hasty reading produced the myth of the myth of racial democracy.

All of *Casa-grande e senzala*, which is admittedly a text without ‘emphatic conclusions,’ and not a thesis, seems to have been written with one objective: to safeguard this always precarious, very fragile ‘balance of antagonisms,’ which can easily degenerate into a ‘conflict of antagonisms,’ the balkanized ‘indigestible part’ of any civilization. Therefore Gilberto Freyre seeks, almost desperately, any hint of fraternization. This appraisal, certainly tragic, does not deny the existence of conflict, and we indeed think that it is premised on the assumption that there are no societies without conflict. The evolutionism in *Casa-grande e senzala* does not prophesize that, at the end of history, there will be a society without conflict, in which conflict disappears completely. The ‘social metaphysics’ of *Casa-grande e senzala* is relativistic: there are only societies in which conflicts are more ‘in equilibrium’ than in others (Vianna, 12 mar. 2000, p.3; emphasis in original).

We located some authors that helped spread the idea of a “racial democracy”: the American Donald Pierson, for example, who, in a 1947 work, said that the development of a racially democratic civilization was one of the reasons why this book is crucial to understanding Brazil. Freyre defends himself against this same author in a long note when he analyzes the notion of instinct, as he was attacked for his supposed imprecision when using the term “economic instinct.”

According to Franco (1985), in an article originally published in *O Jornal* in February 1934, the incontestable tone of CGS’s conclusions and its literary style were met with ambivalence

by his commentators. Sometimes defective, sometimes virtuous, the fact is that Freyre's undisciplined thinking had great impact on how foreigners saw Brazil and how it saw itself. According to Franco (1985), who appears to admire the author of CGS more for his style than for his sociological analysis, interspersing his impressions with sharp criticism, CGS is a Rabelaisian book, which addresses ideas with very different affective tones in a single series:

That prodigious tome on horny friars, mulatto women and Indians that docilely lie down, of recipes for sweets, of (even intimate) clothing, of battles, of (venereal and other) diseases, of floor layouts, castles, mills, orchards of acts of sodomy and bestiality with herds, love and dance could only be Rabelaisian. Everything well shaken and stirred, store in a cool place and take when convenient. A copious, pantagruelic environment founded on culture and malice, littered with knowledge and instincts, fables and scientific observations, magnitudes and ingenuousness (Franco, 1985, p.3-4).

Risério and Gil (17 abr. 2000), despite recognizing the merit of Freyre's having unveiled an essentially mestizo country, claim that he wrote from the perspective of a plantation owner:

But of course this deep admiration never caused us to agree with all of Freyre's vision. To put it concisely, what he described, splendidly, was the viewpoint of the plantation house. It is an upper class, aristocratic reading of the Brazilian world. And we arrived on the scene covered with mud from the slave quarters. Not that Freyre avoided the cruelties of colonial slavery. He speaks of violence against the natives. Of the sadism that presided over relations between master and slave. Of the oppression of the blacks brought from Africa. But the truth is that the conflicts, pain and antagonisms of Brazilian life were diluted in his portrayal. In this sense, what we have in Freyre's work is the landowner's idealization of our past, which ended up affecting our present. Yes: CGS generated a historically unsustainable fantasy, that Brazil produced an enviable kind of racial paradise.

But at the same time that the supposed "racial democracy" is taken as a fallacy, we are surprised by the recognition that Freyre was able to make others value the nation's solution to the racial question, when compared with the reality of other countries. They argue, however, that racial democracy is a desirable myth.

In the early 1990s, CGS was closely analyzed by Ricardo Benzaquén Araújo (2005), providing a rigorous, delicate approximation of Gilberto Freyre's thinking. Drawing on lessons from its object, Araújo presents a text that expresses the effort to temporize, among other intentions, the principal accusation against Freyre – that of having created, in the Brazilian imagery and on Brazil, the idyllic scene of a tropical paradise – present in the critical works briefly described above on "racial democracy." Without discrediting the bases for these critical responses and agreeing that they are, to some extent, valid, the author reminds us of the political significance of the book, returning it to the historical soil from which it originated.

The question of the persistence of racial logic, as we indicated throughout this section, anchored in a biological foundation that made it difficult to independently define the positive ethnic characteristics of each of the races that contributed to this hybrid social formation, is there reopened so that the meanings of the concept of race that inspired Freyre's reading of the Brazilian situation can be discussed. Clearly originating in the context of the egalitarian claims of the Enlightened project for society, the notion of race in CGS contradicted the

nineteenth century tradition with respect to the race issue. This would occur both in relation to polygenism, averse to miscegenation (as it maintained the supremacy of the white race as a standard), and also in relation to monogenism, since CGS extolled the contributions of each component of the Brazilian “race” – which defied the idea dear to supporters of the belief in a single origin for mankind, that miscegenation caused degeneration.

Pointing out that this position failed to include either polygenism or monogenism, Araújo (2005, p.37) reminds us of the “environment” as an important mediator of the hypotheses expressed in CGS, since they justified a Neo-Lamarckian analysis of this concept, which transmitted to humans “an unlimited ability to adapt to different environmental conditions and emphasizes, above all their capacity to incorporate, transmit and inherit the characteristics acquired through their interaction... with the environment.” Minimizing the possible accusations of evolutionism in Freyre and of biologicism incompatible with the lessons from culturalism, this commentator tries to emphasize praise for the diversity that would arise from Freyre’s Neo-Lamarckian use of the concept of race.

Following Freyre’s analytical path in relation to the formation of Portuguese culture, Araújo (2005, p.41) recovers Freyre’s insistence in appreciating the intense, diverse interactivity as a hallmark of this people, to highlight a reading of Freyre’s understanding of “miscegenation.” In this sense, this notion is defined (contrary, for example, to Roquette-Pinto’s definition) as affirming the maintenance of the singularities of each of the groups in the composition of the miscegenated society: “We have the affirmation of the mestizo as someone who represents the indelible memory of the differences in his forefathers.” This was precisely the notion that would have allowed Freyre to construct a hybridized image of Brazil.

Another aspect of the hypothesis of the “tropical paradise” to be addressed by Araújo (2005) concerns the creation of an atmosphere of fellowship between masters and slaves. Resorting to an important digression about the sources of ideas about slavery, he points out an ambiguous belonging in Freyre, both in the classical conception of the slave relationship, marked by despotism, and in the Christian tradition, centered on the landowner’s role as spiritual master, in order to ensure the conversion of the slave through his example. This ambiguity could be located in the contradiction, described above, in the treatment of slaves, and more particularly of female slaves. In it, the despotism of the slave owner in using (including sexually) the bodies of his slaves coexisted with the sharing of intimacy and inclusion of the slave in the plantation house.

### **Sadism in sexual relations in the plantation house**

Without refuting the idea of sexual corruption of the plantation house by female slaves, Freyre attacks the core of this statement: it was not a black woman but a female slave who was responsible. The statement is similar to that of Prado, but differs from it, in the case of Freyre, due to the interpretation which he gives to the relationship between the slave and her master. Recall that, in Prado’s argument, the moral corruption of the family by the slave was explained as revenge. The slave intended to repay the pain she had suffered.

As a slave, black women were subjugated to the power of the patriarch, who assumed sovereign control over her body, which was very different from the situation in her culture

of origin. It was the labor force, but also the wombs of the slaves, that tended to increase the patriarch's "herd," converted almost into animals by the monoculture plantation regime. The body of the slave also served as a solution to the contradictions of family relationships: she was a sexual servant of her master, whose sexual relations with white women followed the insoluble dualism of desire, on one side, and an alliance, on the other. The black woman is, in Freyre's work, one who, in a sexual calculation, coaxes out (welcomes and regulates) her "owner's" excesses.

The weak owner sometimes took a black woman as his "concubine", according to Freyre, because she was able to impose her will over that of the whites. He returns to the figure of the immoderate colonizer, who he claims gained strength beginning in the seventeenth century, to affirm him not as the result of race, but rather as a product as the slave-holding monoculture plantation system. With no need to work, the slave owner spent his days in a hammock, giving orders and partaking in debauchery. Despite a certain lenience toward the colonizer, Freyre is far from excusing him for his sadism, lassitude, and greed for wealth.

Freyre's torsion in the contact between whites and other races is interesting. Without ignoring the asymmetry and violence involved, the author dilutes these characteristics with a dose of miscegenating tenderness that introduces a feature different from the encounter between superiors and inferiors: that of reduction in social distance due to the need for social reproduction. It follows that the "miscegenated" children have more positive features, because despite the violence contained in relations between master and slave, the need to build a family produces a new meaning for this sexual encounter.

This promiscuous segregation of master and slave – a relationship in which Freyre situates the possibility of sustaining the socioeconomic regime of colonial Brazil – in this game of desire, permeated with sadism, resulted in a relationship that otherwise would not have existed. In the intimacy of the plantation house, the ambivalent relations between white women and slave women – their rivals and allies – were revealed. In their dispute for the love of the master's children and his desire, the wife and the female slave were on equal terms. The white woman also perpetrated sadistic acts when, demeaned by betrayal, she mutilated the female slave to punish her husband. In the bowels of the colonial quotidian, Freyre lets social formation have its voice; it is through the circulation of desire that he reveals the domination games between masters and slaves. Mediated through this interaction – promiscuous, violent, ambivalent – miscegenated cultures are transformed into inferior and superior races.

Its genealogy of patriarchal sadism runs along the lines of social formation since childhood, arriving at the sexual encounter between the master and the black female slave. Childhood occupies a privileged place in Freyre's thinking on Brazilian social formation. He analyzes the hypothesis, present in nineteenth-century medical discourse that satanized wet nurses, that the sons of slave owners are sexually corrupted by the black women in the slave quarters. Freyre relies on psychological arguments to trace the genesis of this affective attachment.

In the intimacy of the plantation house, the relationship between the young master and his wet nurse assumes affective features that make her a loving reference for the child. He even mentions that certain men prefer black women exclusively. Thus, he stressed the affective relationship between the dominant and the dominated, emphasizing the importance of black

women in mothering, with this role often transferred from the white woman to the black slave. Shading this relation with emotion meant transforming it into something positive.

The “devil boy” appears in the plantation house as the product of adult cruelty, after years of suffering through childhood diseases and potty training. From unpretentious games like “spinning tops” or “kite wars” (Freyre, 2005, p.452), to pinching girls and animals, one can see an escalation of cruelty that reproduces the universe of the adult who whips or paddles slaves to subjugate them. From childhood he learned, through physical and mental corporal punishment (kneeling on corn, improving handwriting, dressing as a clown) to exercise the cruelty of patriarchal authority. Later, the child would exercise it. An adult raised in a hurried manner and sadistically refined day after day.

By the age of 10 or 12, the “devil boy” had become a serious, unsmiling adult. He was anxious to contract syphilis, which, in that symbolic universe, was synonymous with virility, becoming a man. The figure of the boy devil defines sexual restlessness par excellence, which he sought to satisfy with slave women. The apparently sudden rupture occurred when the slave woman became a “sexually overaroused woman,” contrary to in her culture of origin, marked by a sexual deficit. Both the “feminization” of the boy through excessive pampering, by the maintenance, through a second infancy, of an accentuated erotic connection with the mother or nursemaid (through feeding or at bedtime or bath time), and his early sexual awakening – due to the “freedom of the white boys to hang out with naughty boys in the yard, deflower slave girls, impregnate slave women, and abuse animals” (Freyre, 2005, p.459) – are highlighted by Freyre as essential to the formation of the Brazilian slave-holding society.

It is precisely the sexual interaction between master and slave that returns us to the topic of sexual excess. Araújo (2005) clarifies that sexual excess, taken as a central explanatory category in CGS, which codifies the image of the tropics, is presumably the principle link between the ambiguities in the relationship between masters and slaves: Freyre was the one who combined despotism and shared intimacy, marked not by Christian charity, but rather by the fury and violence of passion. He highlights, however, that Freyre’s position cannot be reduced to “praise of excess” (Araújo, 2005, p.56), since CGS also describes the rationality implicit in the calculation of this relationship between owner and slave (regulated by the scarcity of white women to increase the labor force needed for sugarcane plantations), based on the premise that the colonization of Brazil was only possible due to slave labor. He also warns, rightly, that this sexual excess is not, in most cases, described by Freyre in a positive tone; on the contrary: identification of the excess is followed by a gruesome description of the master’s cruelty toward his female slave. The excess was also accompanied by its morbid and deadly effects: syphilis brought by the Europeans and the worms and diseases with which Freyre ends CGS abruptly. Thus, sexual excess was present both “in that which degrades and that which redeems social life, in violence and despotism in the same way as through intimacy and fraternization” (Araújo, 2005, p.70).

Sexual excess, previously interpreted as evidence of the degeneration of the Brazilian race, was reinterpreted by Freyre. In his work, Carrara (2004) identified the tactic of “evaluative subversion,” in which the values assigned to scientific facts are contested, not the facts themselves. Without being denied, Brazilian sexual excess was not interpreted as determined by climate and race, but rather arising from important social and cultural conditions, like

certain traditional customs, or even certain social constraints, such as in the moral and sexual subjugation of black women due their condition of being the property of slaveholders.

## Final considerations

Brazilian social thought of the 1920s and 1930s re-codified the imagery on Brazilianness based on a historically contingent need: to manufacture a Brazilian identity capable of driving a viable project for the nation. As we saw, the sociological gesture of seeking in the origin of social formation the discursive inputs for the definition of a Brazilian identity was founded on notions that arose in the context of the discussion on race in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It is from this perspective that the topic of Brazilian sexual excess was revisited by sociologists, forging it, on the one hand, as a disturbing element in the national civilization project, and on the other hand as a trait that was seen in a positive light as the condition that enabled cultural hybridization as a constitutive part of the Brazilian nation.

The discourse of sexual excess as hallmark of Brazilianness was not confined to social thought. What we are trying to highlight here is that these two authors – Paulo Prado and Gilberto Freyre – provide different viewpoints in a debate which, however, was part of a broader scientific and cultural discussion in the 1920s and 1930s. It is important to remember that this state of affairs existed in a land already fertilized by the psychiatric discourse of degeneration. This discourse, by instituting sexual hyperarousal linked to miscegenation as a hallmark of Brazilianness, justified – in the political plan of Brazilian modernity – a set of intervention programs of a hygienic and eugenic nature, to ward off the social propagation of madness, crime, venereal diseases, and alcoholism, signs of what was considered social degradation at the time.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In this and other citations of texts from non-English languages, a free translation has been provided.

<sup>2</sup> This “exile” was punishment meted out by the Portuguese crown, which deported individuals who violated convents to abduct nuns, fornicated with relatives or with relatives of a host, raped orphans or minors under guardianship, adulterers, sexual corruption or pimping of innocent or chaste women, homicides, witchcraft, and others (cf. Vainfas, 1989). Its social function was to purify the motherland, converting the colony into what Laura de Mello e Souza (1989) called “purgatory.”

<sup>3</sup> Pallares-Burke (2005), in her intellectual biography of Freyre, reconstitutes the formative years of young Freyre and shows us in detail his adherence to American racist hypotheses in the period prior to writing CGS, which formed an obstacle to the production of that work. The “embryo” (according to the author himself) had been his master’s thesis, defended at Columbia University 11 years earlier, in 1922, entitled *Social life in Brazil in the middle of the nineteenth century*. In a careful comparison of Freyre’s works during this

time period, the author noticed that, despite many indications that CGS would become a widely known work, his interpretation of mixed races was very similar to the racist and eugenic hypotheses in vogue at the time. Freyre defended, for example, the idea of whitening, believing that the “slave race would be improved” by interbreeding with Europeans. There was no lack of expressions of his belief in the inferiority of blacks, despite the inclusion of some sociological considerations. Until 1925, according Pallares-Burke (2005, p.269), he was still convinced that miscegenation represented a “pathology.” She clarifies that many passages, both in his thesis and in his 1925 book – *Vida social no Nordeste: aspectos de um século de transição* – that exemplified the racist ideas of the author, such as, for example, the legitimacy of the cruelty of the punishments meted out by slaveholders to their slaves, concurrence with the sexual superarousal of the mulatto woman and the representation of “black blood” as weak, were eliminated in later versions.

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