

BLACK, WHITE AND GRAY IN MEMÓRIAS PÓSTUMAS DE BRÁS CUBAS

Fernanda Gasparini
Universidade de São Paulo

Abstract: This article examines how racial dynamics operate in Machado de Assis's *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) through narrative ambiguity rather than explicit thematic statements by arguing that race in the novel emerges through indirect literary strategies: character construction, lexical choices, and grammatical structures. Particular attention is given to the ways Machado employs linguistic devices to reflect the hierarchical social structure of Brazilian society. By examining its characters, the study demonstrates how ambiguity is key to Machado's method. Rather than presenting overt political commentary, the novel reveals the racial contradictions of nineteenth-century Brazilian society through irony and narrative distance. This reading contributes to contemporary machadian criticism by situating Machado's treatment of race within the broader stylistic framework of his fiction.

Keywords: Machado de Assis, Race Relations, Translation Studies, Ambiguity, Literary Project

Despite being his fifth novel, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) by Machado de Assis was long considered by many to be the first of his works truly worth reading, because it displays the full capacity of his genius. However flawed, this notion is comprehensible when one considers what he achieved in this work, both in terms of form and content, as well as its international relevance. *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* was the first of his novels to be translated into English and remains the one with the most translations—five so far. From the start, it pleased international readers and introduced the author to English-speaking countries, and its latest translation went viral online nearly 150 years after the novel was published in Portuguese, proving that Machado still has what it takes.

The novel follows the life of Brás Cubas, a wealthy slave owner from Rio de Janeiro who leads a rather unfulfilling life in which he achieves little or nothing. He does not marry or have children; he does not have to work or struggle, and he never manages to bring his grand ideas to life. He is, in fact, a small winner. The originality of the book, at first glance, lies in the fact that

he is the narrator of his own story, but he is also dead. This creates an interesting combination of closeness to and distance from the events of the plot, and the narration becomes ironic both because of the absurdity of the situation and because of the absolute nothingness of it.

Over the years, critics and scholars have analyzed the novel in terms of its originality of narration, themes, and format; its irony and philosophical reflections; and its historical and sociological representation of nineteenth-century Brazil. Some argue that it represents Brazilian society in a very literal way and should be read as a piece of activist literature because of how it critiques society, while others see it as a more abstract representation of the world that should be taken primarily as a work of literature rather than as an account of Machado's time and place. Some critics condemn the author for being too cynical, making fun of things that should be treated seriously, while others claim he is not Brazilian enough or not "woke" enough (they have not used this word, but they probably would have, had it existed at the time) (Santiago, Schwarz, Bosi).

All of this suggests that the image of Machado de Assis as one of the greatest names in Brazilian literature has been under construction since his own lifetime (Guimarães, 2017). It begins with the idea of the author as an "exceptional writer," detached from local literary traditions, and evolves into the great realist critic of nineteenth-century Brazilian society. This trajectory moves from descriptions of him as a "poor mulatto boy" who wrote with crystalline clarity to the "statue" or the "Greek"—the great national writer, deracialized and disembodied. Today, some critics place him in the position of a committed Afro-descendant writer rather than a detached observer of the racial issues of his era.

While it is true that these various personas say more about the projections of his readers and the critical climate of each era, it is also true that little of this latest image has been built from the actual text. Even if readings are often guided from the outside in (Jauss, 1994), the language of his novels also communicates from the inside out. It must therefore undergo analysis through a contemporary lens, making it possible to find in his linguistic choices a source of multiracial expression.

Using analytical and contrastive methods, this article aims to describe how the Brazilian racial context of the nineteenth century permeates *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* at the level of character construction, language, imagery, lexicon, and grammar. By describing these initially" categorized in this way because another, more ambiguous category will be addressed later, covering the gray area referenced in the title of this article.

Second elements in the novel, this study proposes a racialized reading of Machado de Assis—one that demonstrates how his treatment of racial issues goes beyond thematic anthologies and biographical data, thereby contributing to a Machadian criticism relevant to the twenty-first

century.

This text follows two major paths. First, it examines the characters in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*—their construction, their interconnections, and how this construction affects our perception of Machado’s literature. The characters are initially categorized into three groups: racialized non-white characters, racialized white characters, and non-racialized characters. They are “the gray aspects of the novel extend to its linguistic constructions.” Rather than focusing only on word choice, the aim is to discuss how aspects of Machado de Assis’s prosody also reveal elements of his literary project. His grammatical choices, for example, further situate him among writers who are ambiguous and mischievous, writers who comment on their reality in implicit ways.

Reginald Daniel (2012), who studied race relations and wrote *Machado de Assis – Multiracial Identity and the Brazilian Novelist*, provides a useful starting point for this discussion. It is particularly interesting to consider how a U.S. scholar approached Machado de Assis, given the different experiences of racial formation in Brazil and the United States. Because Daniel was an outsider in both time and place, his perspective brought a fresh sociological lens to Machado’s work. Daniel writes:

When considering Machado as the chronicler, the novelist, the short story author, and as himself along with his different narrative voices in different genres and periods of his life, one needs above all to avoid confusing the narrators and the author's voice. That said, it's difficult to determine when the narrator is speaking and when Machado is speaking. Indeed, Machado's ambiguity is center stage whenever critics try to understand the deceptive narrative voice in his work (p. 84).

Daniel’s emphasis on ambiguity is crucial in challenging many Brazilian critics’ earlier interpretations, which claimed that the novelist was not sufficiently local. His supposed refusal to address “the negro problem,” despite being a negro—or, more precisely, a mulatto—himself, was considered a mistake, a lack of empathy for his country and his people’s struggles, and even an attempt to present himself as better or superior than he should aspire to be, given his multiracial background.

On the other hand, this perspective is also important for countering the opposite tendency that emerged in the early twenty-first century, when some scholars (and society more broadly) appropriated Machado de Assis as a symbol of Black empowerment. In this reading, his works became the epitome of Black activism, and critics attempted to find explicit thematic links in many of his short stories, chronicles, poems and novels to prove that Machado de Assis, the mulatto writer who had once been criticized for not being Brazilian or Black enough, was in fact one of

the leading figures of anti-slavery literature. Daniel (2012) continues shortly thereafter:

Although African Brazilian characters are rare in Machado's novels and short stories and are never protagonists, they appear more frequently there than in the works of most other nineteenth-century Brazilian writers of urban fiction. Moreover, Machado develops some of these characters more fully than other writers of his time or earlier had done, and he presents all of them in consistently sympathetic and meaningful ways (p. 85).

Machado de Assis, as a multiracial author, has often been accused of being silent on race and of not being “multiracial enough” in his writing. While it is not the purpose of this article to discuss Machado the person, it is crucial to acknowledge this perception and to note how non-white writers are often subjected to harsher expectations, as they are placed within a shapeless mass of projections and demands from their audiences.

My goal is therefore to move beyond the definition of Machado as someone who failed to address race relations, but hopefully not in a way that stretches his contributions to racial debates to the point of turning him into a hidden treasure of anti-slavery activism. The core idea here is that we should view the racial components of Machado’s writing through the same lens we use for his other literary components: as ambiguous and gray.

Needless to say, this analysis is only possible because of the work that has been done before. In order for twenty-first-century critics to examine nineteenth-century writers in the ways for instances of rebellion expressed through his characteristic implicit and ambiguous style.

When they do today, earlier forms of criticism had to exist, as well as a long tradition of readings over time. Some of these earlier interpretations still resonate in contemporary criticism. As the world develops rapidly (perhaps faster than ever) academic works on a specific author multiply, and perspectives on their art can change rather quickly. This study may simply be another. The first question to ask is: why would Machado, considered by many one of the most ironic and ambiguous authors of all time, treat race differently from every other aspect of his writing? Readers have often expected him to address race as explicitly as some of his contemporaries, but doing so would turn him into something he simply is not. I argue that readers must instead look

We examine non-white racialized characters in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, the original Portuguese text provides a vocabulary contribution to that ongoing process of twenty-seven different terms used to describe them. These words categorize different aspects of the characters. For example, “enfermeiro” (nurse) is a neutral word, and from the twentieth century onward it even became a feminine one, but in the context of the novel it refers by default to an enslaved, non-white person in Brazil. “Mucama” designates a house slave, typically serving the lady of the

house. We also find terms such as “besta” (beast) and “negros” (black people). This variety of terms reflects the detailed and complex reality of slavery in Brazil¹.

In comparison, William Grossman’s 1952 translation, *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, offers a much smaller set of terms to refer to the same characters. Most rely on the words “black,” “servant,” or “negro” to convey their meaning, for example “negro house boy,” which in Portuguese would simply be *moleque*. This suggests that the U.S. experience of slavery, while rich in its own vocabulary, did not have direct linguistic equivalents for the specific details described in the Portuguese text. This reduction in lexical detail—even in a language as rich as English—underscores that while Machado is not explicit about race, he is deeply aware of its complexity in Brazil.

Nonetheless, it is safe to say that non-white characters in the novel are always described as non-white—whether implicitly, through contextual clues in the original text, or explicitly in the translations. One reason for this is that whiteness, as the default setting for Western identity, requires no further explanation. Readers tend to assume that characters are white unless the author states otherwise. This helps explain why, in stark contrast, few characters are explicitly racialized as white—and those who tend to be female. This makes sense, given that fair skin was considered a desirable beauty trait for upper-class women during the period, rather than a necessary element of characterization for the author.

Virgília, Brás Cubas’s long-term lover, is described as white in multiple ways: “fair,” “very fair,” “rosy,” “a statue of Pentelic marble,” and possessing “milk-white skin.” These descriptions—referencing statues and angels—were common in nineteenth-century literature, and Machado clearly uses them here. However, it would not be unreasonable to interpret Virgília’s construction both as a nod to literary tradition and as a somewhat twisted depiction of a character who maintains an affair with the protagonist throughout the story. This interpretation aligns with Machado’s ironic use of Romantic naming and characterization techniques, as discussed by Campos (2019). It is also possible that Virgília functions as a counterpoint to other female characters in the novel who occupy a grayer racial space.¹

Venância, Brás Cubas’s niece, is another possible white female character. She is referred to as “a lírio do vale” (a lily of the valley), a white flower, and that is essentially the extent of her description. While comparing women to flowers has long been common in literature, Machado’s choice of a white flower may hint at her racial identity. Translators such as William Grossman and

¹ For further reading on the topic, see Fernanda Gasparini, “Racialidade e racialização: a construção dos personagens brancos, não brancos, e não racializados e suas relações em *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*”, 2024. Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo, M.A. thesis. *Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations of USP*, <https://doi.org/10.11606/D.8.2024.tde-22012025-185710>.

Flora Thomson-DeVeaux, for example, use the adjective “fair” when referring to her. Yet this may also be another trick played by Machado de Assis, a well-known literary trickster (Flynn et al, 2007). It could even reflect the translators’ own choices, using “fair” to convey beauty historically associated with whiteness, though not necessarily implying it directly. Although it is impossible to know for certain, it is notable that Machado explicitly describes a character’s color elsewhere—such as in the case of Virgília—and therefore his silence regarding Venância may well be deliberate.

Marcela, though generally considered non-racialized by Brazilian readers, is described as Spanish. For many U.S. readers, the term “Spanish” can carry non-white connotations, which adds complexity to her characterization. Moreover, she functions as an antagonist to Virgília and is perceived as inferior racially, economically, and, of course, morally. In a sense, the female characters in *Memórias Póstumas* appear arranged along a ladder of ideal beauty, purity, and whiteness. At its lower end stands a racialized non-white character distinct from the enslaved but still unworthy of the protagonist’s love. Eugênia, the “dark young girl” whom Brás Cubas briefly courts in the countryside, represents this category. She is non-white and non-enslaved, expanding the range of racialized female figures and further demonstrating Machado’s apparent awareness when distributing these characters within the narrative. As for other racialized non-white characters in the novel—namely the enslaved—most serve primarily as background to the plot: servants, slave boys, nurses, old negros, and so on. Few are named: Paulo and Prudêncio. Of these, only Prudêncio receives further development. His narrative arc can be summarized through Paulo Freire’s concept of oppression in two acts. We first encounter him in Brás Cubas’s childhood memories, when the narrator describes riding him like a horse and calling him “beast.” Later, Brás Cubas encounters Prudêncio again, now a freed man, beating one of his own slaves. Despite Prudêncio’s new status, Brás Cubas still refers to him as “my slave boy,” and Prudêncio addresses him as “master.”

This episode is among the novel’s most famous and illustrates Freire’s concept of oppression strikingly. Prudêncio not only endured brutal punishment; he now reproduces the same violence upon another enslaved person. In doing so, he continues to obey the power dynamics established by his former master.

What the analysis of Prudêncio reveals is the embodiment of what Daniel describes as a new conception of black characters in Machado’s novels. Machado develops these characters with a degree of depth that was uncommon in nineteenth-century Brazilian fiction. They are not necessarily developed progressively more deeply, but they do become progressively more distinct from one another across Machado’s novels, suggesting an effort to portray them as individuals

rather than as interchangeable figures.

This depth becomes even more striking when contrasted with the presumably white—or at least non-racialized—elite characters such as Brás Cubas, Cotrim, and similar figures across Machado's works. They often resemble one another: snobbish, mediocre, and entitled (Candido, 1995). Meanwhile, enslaved or freed male characters such as Prudêncio (from *Brás Cubas*), Raimundo (from *Iaiá Garcia*), or Vicente (from *Helena*) suggest that Machado was attempting something new. Although he did not place them at the center of the narrative as protagonists, he endowed them with a complexity rarely found in contemporary literature.

How, then, should we define these non-racialized characters? Brás Cubas presents the most intriguing case. Although readers tend to assume he is white—since whiteness often functions as the default in Western literature—he is never explicitly described as such. Some critics, such as Gabriella Koleman, argue that within the context of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, Brás Cubas's wealth, his status as a slave owner, and his social environment strongly imply that he is white.

Other critics, however, including Paulo Dutra, argue that given Machado's characteristic irony and ambiguity, we cannot assume a character's race if it is not explicitly stated. If we do not assume a character is non-white when race is unspecified, why should we assume they are white? For this reason, I place Brás Cubas in the category of non-racialized characters. He may well be white—especially if we read Machado strictly as a realist—but this cannot be asserted with certainty.

The construction of this character further highlights his non-racialized status, almost as if Machado was begging us to color him. As a mischievous child, he is affectionately called “menino diabo” (“little devil” in Grossman's translation and “devil child” in Thomson-DeVeaux's). This is almost an endearing label applied to the terrible behavior of a wealthy—very possibly white—child, even more so when the remark comes from enslaved people within the household. When his social status is emphasized, he is simply “a Cubas,” a member of a wealthy and influential family. His surname becomes his primary marker of identity. Moreover, the very existence of a family name and lineage was historically a privilege reserved for white people in Brazil, since many enslaved Africans were forced to abandon their original names and origins.

His father, Bento Cubas, another non-racialized character, dismisses his son's misdeeds as the actions of a mere “little rascal,” consistently protecting him. This behavior corresponds to what Cida Bento (2002) calls the *Pacto Narcísico da Branquitude* (narcissistic whiteness pact): an implicit agreement among wealthy, white—especially male—individuals to minimize one another's misconduct, thereby protecting their broader social class. If a father dismisses his son's

cruelty as a youthful prank, it is because he expects similar protection for himself. After all, boys will be boys. Even if the Cubas family is not explicitly described as white, their position clearly differs from that of characters representing the “Other,” such as enslaved individuals, non-white women, or even white women. The novel thus reveals the intersectionality of discrimination without being explicitly socially and racially engaged.

Another aspect of Machado de Assis’s writing that is often overlooked even though it contributes greatly to the gray area explored in this article is his language itself. If we cannot expect Machado to be explicit, because explicitness is not characteristic of his style on any subject, then where should we look to understand his perspective on race? In Chapter 10, Brás Cubas describes his baptism celebration:

I relate these things briefly just as I heard them related years later... I know that the neighbors came or sent their compliments to the newborn and that during the first few weeks we had many visitors. There was no chair or stool that escaped service. Many Sunday coats and fine breeches put in an appearance. (Grossman, p. 53)

In Portuguese, Machado uses the word *cadeirinha*, meaning *liteira*. Grossman translates this as “chair or stool,” but a *liteira* is actually a sedan chair—a means of transportation used by wealthy, mostly white individuals and carried by enslaved people. By referring to the object rather than the people who carry it, Machado employs the rhetorical figure of synecdoche: the enslaved workers are represented through the tools of their labor. Grossman’s translation therefore loses this implication. The word “sedan chair” appears elsewhere in his translation, which serves as evidence for the missed nuance in this case. Flora Thomson-DeVaux’s translation renders the phrase more accurately: “No sedan chair was left idle.” For attentive readers, this suggests that no enslaved person was left idle, even though Machado never states it directly.

Another example appears in the description of a celebration of Napoleon Bonaparte’s defeat:

Out came the Flanders linens, the great jars from the Indies. A barrel pig was slaughtered. Compotes and marmalades were ordered from the nuns of the convent. Drawing rooms, staircases, candlesticks, sconces, the immense lamps and all the trappings of classical luxury were washed, scoured, polished. (De-Vaux, p. 71).

The passive voice appears repeatedly: the pig “was slaughtered,” marmalades “were ordered,” everything “was washed, scoured, polished.” But by whom? The enslaved workers, who remain unnamed and even grammatically absent. Meanwhile, the luxury objects—the silverware, linens, and jars—are given explicit pedigrees: they are “from (grandfather) Cubas,” “from Flanders,” “from the Indies.” The objects are valued and traced; the labor that makes the celebration possible

is erased through the passive voice. Machado's grammatical choices implicitly highlight the invisibility of enslaved labor.

These examples demonstrate that Machado's engagement with race in *Memórias Póstumas* cannot be measured simply by counting explicit references to black characters or slavery. Explicit references may be rare; implicit ones are constant. Machado addresses slavery and enslaved people throughout his work, but readers must know how to recognize the signs. His treatment remains implicit because implicitness is central to his literary style.

I argue that Machado de Assis can indeed be considered a realist—but not in strict alignment with the literary school of Realism, which he himself resisted, I say partly because it was closely linked to Naturalism, determinism, and scientific racism, partly because he owed too much to the Romantic tradition. He is a realist in the sense proposed by Roberto Schwarz: an author capable of capturing nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro with its slavery, colonial legacy, and political transition from Empire to Republic. Even so, his realism must be approached with caution. Machado should also be viewed as a multiracial author who addressed race in a unique and indirect way.

Some writers are activists, some openly conservative, some even politicians. This is also true of Brazilian artists, and such positions do not necessarily determine the quality of their literature. Aligning Machado de Assis with one ideological side or another would not diminish his work. Yet if there is one author who consistently positioned himself as an observer—someone who steps back, looks at everything from the outside, and mocks it—it is Machado. His position is neither left nor right, up nor down, but outside.

For this reason, we cannot frame him simply as an Afro-descendant activist, because he was not. At the same time, there is no evidence that he ignored the social problems surrounding him. Rather, he chose to remain outside the conflicts he criticized. This position is neither inherently good nor inherently bad, and it is understandable that some readers might wish he had been more openly activist. Yet searching for explicit declarations in his work is counterproductive, because his ambiguity permeates his themes, his narrative style, and his language.

Finally, we must remember that literature is not a direct reflection of reality. It is fiction that shifts perspectives. We cannot expect to find in Machado too many instances of explicit racial struggles because that was not his literary project. He was not Luís Gama nor Lima Barreto. What he was, however, remains extraordinary. Academia has been trying to catch up with him ever since he published *Ressurreição* and have not yet been successful (and probably never will). I hope that this research—made possible by the work of many scholars before me—contributes to seeing his treatment of race in the same way we see the rest of his work: in a truly Machadian manner.

Fernanda Gasparini is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Classical and Vernacular Languages at the University of São Paulo (USP) and holds a Master's degree from the same program. Her 2024 dissertation addresses the racialization of characters in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) and the implicit literary devices employed by Machado de Assis to discuss race relations in his work, examined through the Portuguese text and selected English translations. She has also published on the novel's onomastics, and her current research analyzes how racialized characters are constructed throughout Machado de Assis's novels, from *Ressurreição* (1872) to *Memorial de Aires* (1908). Email: fernanda.souza.gasparini@usp.br

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