

Sônia Roncador. *A doméstica imaginária: literatura, testemunhos, e a invenção da empregada doméstica no Brasil (1889-1999)*. Brasília, DF: Editora UNB, 2008. 255 p.

Sônia Roncador's *A Doméstica Imaginária: literatura, testemunhos, e a invenção da empregada doméstica no Brasil (1889-1999)* is the first full-length study of literary representations of domestic workers in Brazilian literature. Roncador's intent is to employ literary representations of the domestic as a means to examine the specific historical periods in which they emerge. In so doing, Roncador makes a cogent analysis of the strategic and evolving usage of these representations in imagining the Brazilian national narrative.

A Doméstica Imaginária is distinctive in that it not only privileges the works of women writers such as Júlia Lopes de Almeida, Clarice Lispector, and Lenira Carvalho, but also considers male writers such as José Lins do Rego, Gilberto Freyre and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, bringing to the fore rich and nuanced perspectives on the period from 1889 to 1999. Roncador's reading across this period does not merely serve the purpose of historically situating the different texts, literary genres and representations, but, more interestingly, charts the evolution and political uses of these representations throughout Brazilian history from turn-of-the-century hygienic and anthropological discourses regarding transculturation and cultural miscegenation to the their resonance in the contemporary era.

In chapter one, "As criadas de Júlia: empregadas domésticas no imaginário literário da Belle Époque brasileira", Roncador analyzes Júlia Lopes de Almeida's *A Viúva Simões* and *Livro das Noivas* to explore the place of the *criada* or *doméstica* in post-abolition Brazil and the beginning of the Belle Époque. To place the domestic within a larger historical framework, Roncador also offers a brief discussion of José de Alencar's popular 1858 play *O Demônio Familiar*. This chapter examines how the *doméstica* was positioned as antithetical or as a counterpoint to notions of ideal female domesticity. Interestingly, Roncador shows how Almeida's novels sought

to create a climate of fear and hysteria in her white female readership, through the deployment of graphic and detailed descriptions of contamination, contagion and violence. These themes are exemplified in the person of the envious domestic who zealously covets the life of her *patroa*, and wreaks havoc in the domestic sphere. Roncador shows how Almeida's writing proved almost cautionary, and sought to incite an appreciation of *domesticity* in her bourgeois readership.

Chapter two, "Memórias dos fundo: sinhamas, bás, mucamas e muleques nas memórias de infância modernistas brasileiras", explores Brazilian patriarchal myths of the loyal *Mãe Preta* and the cordial and seductive mulata, both in their role and representation in modernist childhood narratives, such as José Lins do Rego's *Menino de Engenho*, Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-Grande & Senzala*, and the poetry of Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Roncador devotes a large portion of this chapter to interrogating the recuperation and reappropriation of the asexual *Mãe Preta* that was effectively posited during the Belle Époque as a symbol of disease and contamination, as shown in the first chapter. However, as Roncador perceptively argues, the 1920s Brazilian modernist movement recuperates the *Mãe Preta* as a form of nostalgia or longing for an aristocratic past, and more expressly as a symbol of transculturation and affective interracial fraternization. Roncador demonstrates that the modernist recuperation of "racialized others" served to present them as facile consumable objects. This chapter also places the historical figure of the *Mãe Preta* in conversation with the North American figure image of *Mammy*. Roncador briefly looks at the *Mammy* figure in the film *Gone With the Wind* and Harriet Beecher Stowes' seminal *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her discussion of these North American texts vis-à-vis modernist representations brings to the fore very important questions regarding the promulgation of racial myths and mythology in an inter-American context.

Chapter three, "Como[re]tratar a empregada": desencontros com a empregada doméstica no jornalismo de Clarice Lispector", examines the depiction of the domestic worker in Clarice Lispector's columns and crônicas in *Jornal do Brasil*. Roncador underscores Lispector's preoccupation with the intrinsic difficulties resulting from the *patroa-empregada* relationship. In her reading of Lispector's journalism Roncador argues that Lispector attributed the "thorniness" of this relationship not to a problem with a *doméstica*'s personality or her services, but to the domestic's subservient position in relation to her *patroa*. Roncador explores Lispector's guilt and ethical disquiet which she brought to her reader regarding her position as *patroa*, involved in a complicated relationship of dependence and

exploitation. Ultimately, Roncador shows Lispector to be greatly concerned with the humanity of the domestic worker, with the intent of liberating her from the stereotypes of hegemonic representation.

Chapter four, “Escritoras de avental: um estudo sobre a literatura de testemunho de empregadas domésticas”, analyses the testimonial literature by domestic workers that emerged principally in the 1980s. Roncador analyzes in this culminating chapter the testimonial narrative of Lenira Carvalho, founding member of the *Sindicato das Trabalhadoras Domésticas* in Recife. Here Roncador explores some of the problematics and challenges that Carvalho’s use of the testimonial genre poses, most notably its resistance to the dictates and imperatives of bourgeois and hegemonic conceptualizations of autobiography. She shows how Carvalho’s narrative benefits from and privileges the collective voice and language implicit in the testimonial genre. Ultimately Roncador’s concern in this final chapter is to examine the ability and means through which the voices within these texts construct and position themselves as political agents. The deployment of the body’s experience as narrative serves not only to denounce but also to imagine and write community and solidarity.

In conclusion, Sônia Roncador *A Doméstica Imaginária: literatura, testemunhos, e a invenção da empregada doméstica no Brasil (1889-1999)* provides more than the analysis of the representation of a figure, but how through this figure we can come to understand critical, and often silenced questions of race, gender and political desire in the Brazilian national narrative. *A Doméstica Imaginária* is a well-researched and very welcome addition to Brazilian cultural and literary studies and studies of women and gender.

Lamonte Aidoo
Duke University