

## Exploring the memory of the black Brazilian family: a conversation with Luciana Diogo

Luciana Martins Diogo (USP)

**Interviewer:**

Nathália Augusto Pereira (UERJ)

In this interview, we had the honor of exploring the fundamental contributions of Luciana Diogo, a black intellectual and researcher at USP (FFLCH), whose most recent work, *Maria Firmina dos Reis, vida literária* (2022), published by Editora Malê, stands out as an expression of her research on the pioneer of black Brazilian literature. The conversation allowed us to delve into the complexities of her current research, entitled “Writing for oneself, reinventing oneself for the other: the memory of creation and the testimonies of literary invention in the diaries and letters of Maria Firmina dos Reis, Ruth Guimarães, Carolina Maria de Jesus and Conceição Evaristo”, a study that further enriches the field of literature by black authors.

During the conversation, we also reflected on the meeting of the interviewee’s and the interviewer’s trajectories, which began during the Flup training course in 2021, which was partly aimed at female writers from the Santa Cruz neighborhood, in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro. This initiative also resulted in the work *Cartas para Esperança* (2022), a collection organized by Carmen Kemoly, Eliana Alves Cruz, Fernanda Felisberto, Mirian dos Santos, and Luciana Diogo herself, published by Malê. In the preface to the chapter *Por uma avenida chamada Brasil*, organized by Luciana, she highlights that reading this work invites us to travel “an intense journey through the intimate history of the black Brazilian family.” The same can be said of the literary trajectory of Maria Firmina dos Reis. We invite our readers to delve into this interview and reflect on the perspectives raised by the writings of black intellectuals.

## PALIMPSESTO

1) To begin, could you tell us about the research process on black female memories that culminated in the publication of the book *Maria Firmina dos Reis: vida literária*?

## LUCIANA DIOGO

Nathália, my dear! Every day, I have been thinking about the paths of my research based on the image of a living energy network: the intertwined threads start from a shared experience – the memories of the diaspora and captivity – and follow the plots of an equally shared objective – the (re)construction of an identity based on the right to memory.

I believe that the refinement of this skill – that of (re)constructing identity – is one of the greatest contributions we have to make to the world as a social group and perhaps it is also our greatest intelligence.

Do you know why? Because if you stop to think about it, our identity has been constructed from the inheritance of experiences lived within the limits and possibilities of being enslaved, that is, within the limits of humanity itself. What I mean by this is that these legacies were built on the unstoppable dreams of our ancestors of building and rebuilding freedom and emotional and social ties, and from this experience, we have been developing a whole set of virtues that make up a system of values and a body of wisdom used to constantly improve our experience in the world, namely: the art of choosing between the things we are not, who we are. Our ancestors taught us this.

Do you know how I imagine it? I imagine that deep within each slave quarters; deep within the dense forests of escape routes; deep within the holds of slave ships; deep within the Atlantic Ocean – in that last beat of all black hearts – I imagine that a dream of profound ardor shone... these dreams are the stars that illuminate us today, our guides. They are also the threads of energy released by these hearts that propel us towards new futures and throw us into networks to structure increasingly better possible universes for future generations.

Thinking like this, I ask myself: what was Teodora dreaming of when her heart beat its last? Where did her intentions go? Who did/do they reach? How does Teodora

help shape the present reality and project the future? What trace did our ancestors leave in the world?

I believe that this information is transmitted and transformed in the flow of convergences that circulates in this energy network; these convergences configure the crossroads. Each connection in this web is a diasporic crossroads that enhances knowledge from various areas of knowledge.

Our meeting – mine and yours – was/is a diasporic crossroads. Thus, if what one generation thinks will be the humanity of the future, today we are something dreamed of deep in the hearts of our ancestors. This is how I understand the ancestral future. So, to satisfy this intellectual and existential curiosity/need, I set out to study black female memories in an attempt to weave together history, sociology, anthropology, literature and existence. This is the genesis of this book.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

2) It is so beautiful! We would also like you to comment on the construction of the image of Maria Firmina dos Reis on the cover of the book. How did the uncertainty surrounding Firmina's physiognomy generate convenient misunderstandings in the recent past, and how was the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the figure of this black intellectual addressed in your book?

## **LUCIANA DIOGO**

The figure of Maria Firmina dos Reis began to be recovered from Maranhão, in the 1970s, more precisely on November 11th, 1973, when the interview with Nascimento Moraes Filho reporting his research into the author's discovery was published in the Maranhão newspaper *O Imparcial* and this interview was publicized in national newspapers as a way of tribute to the anniversary of the writer's death. With the same celebratory purpose, on November 11th, 1975, the article "A primeira romancista brasileira" by Josué Montello was published in *Jornal do Brasil*, and on the same day, the article "Maranhense é a primeira romancista" was also published in the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*. From then on, without portraits or photographs, the image of Maria Firmina dos Reis was established in the popular imagination as that of a pioneering

woman, an artist with a respectable intellectual level, whose birthday had been chosen as “Maranhense Women's Day” in 1975.

However, information about her blackness was gradually erased from the visual representations that were being created and speculated about her appearance, to the point of completely whitening her. The image of Maria Firmina dos Reis was, for example, for a long time confused with the portrait of the writer from Rio Grande do Sul, Maria Benedita Bormann (1853-1895). This confusion is a good case to think about because it corroborates people's expectations regarding the impossibility of considering, at first glance, the possibility of a literate and intellectual black woman in the 19th century. Thus, this image that circulates to this day on social media and in promotional materials ends up revealing an attempt to conform the image of an important woman – holder of cultural capital – to the expectations of finding such attributes, essentially, in the image of a white woman. In other words, from this “convenient mistake”, as you rightly defined it, we can see the delicate contours of the issue of attributing and representing blackness to well-known public figures, in order to reaffirm the tendency to whiten black people who achieve a certain status in Brazilian society.

We know that this did not only happen with the image of Maria Firmina; other prominent black figures were also whitened. As I state in my book, I believe that the misconceptions about Maria Firmina dos Reis's physiognomy are based on what researcher Tatiana Lotierzo, when analyzing the painting “Ham's Redemption” (1895), by painter Modesto Brocos, calls “the weight of the aesthetic dimension in the formation of racial prejudice and racism”, because for her, when attributes specific to the pictorial form are combined with a certain understanding of racial relations, the result is the reproduction and incorporation of social structures in the pictorial representation. We can update this logic of 19th-century painting to the current advertising logic, for example.

The construction of the cover of my book was a process of dialogue and teamwork. In 2021, Fernanda Miranda, Marília Correia and I launched the magazine *Firminas – pensamento, estética e escrita*, which is a magazine focused on the artistic and intellectual production of black women, and last year we released the preview of issue 2. The magazine promotes a dialogue between literary and academic texts and the visual arts. The first issue was dedicated to Maria Firmina, in honor of the 162nd anniversary of the novel *Úrsula*, and we curated the work of artist Carolina Itzá to cover the entire magazine,

stitching together and expanding meanings and interpretative possibilities. So, when Vagner Amaro invited me to think about this book and publish it through Malê – a publisher I had approached in 2021, in partnership with Professor Algemira Mendes, and proposed a project to publish a series of studies on the work of Firmina dos Reis – he went to the website and suggested an image he had liked in the magazine for the cover. Based on this image, we contacted Itzá and invited her to rethink that work based on the composite portrait of Firmina, which had been produced based on testimonies that Nascimento Moraes Filho collected from the sons, daughters, and students of Maria Firmina dos Reis, back in 1974/75. Carolina Itzá lent Firmina all her depth and aesthetic sensitivity. This sensitivity was amplified by Dandarra Santana's layout.

### **PALIMPSESTO**

3) Considering the concept of “self-writing” as an act of collective memory, in which the author writes about her own experiences, identity and worldview, how do you evaluate the construction of this other possible image of Maria Firmina dos Reis, based on her own writings, in which she portrays herself, describes herself and observes the world around her?

### **LUCIANA DIOGO**

There has been a collective effort to return Maria Firmina dos Reis to her colors, tones and textures. In the last ten years, we have begun to blacken her. This has happened more intensely since 2017, with the celebrations of the centenary of the writer's death. In 2018, for example, Flup (Festa Literária das Periferias – RJ) launched a contest that invited artists to draw Firmina's face (I was also part of the judging panel). The winning image represented the writer as a dark-skinned black woman (a little different from what she really was: a mixed-race woman with lighter skin). This selection sought to highlight the author's belonging to the black Brazilian community. What is most interesting when we analyze the constructions of these possible images of Firmina is that we can see the multiplicity of representations of blackness: many black Firminas have been imagined in different ways based on greater knowledge of her work. And this is magical because we see Maria Firmina emerging every day through the stitching together of her work, with her diary, with academic research and with the deliberate will of the artists.

## PALIMPSESTO

4) Now, delving deeper into the work of Maria Firmina dos Reis, what kind of space was created in the Brazilian literary scene of the 19th century with the publication of the novel *Úrsula*, taking into account Firmina's role in the literary and cultural scene of the time?

## LUCIANA DIOGO

With the publication of the novel *Úrsula* and, a year later, with the publication of the novel *Gupeva*, Maria Firmina dos Reis establishes, in the Brazilian literary and cultural scene of the 19th century, a new way of literary imagination. In this new way of storytelling, black characters are represented in more complex ways, revealing their subjectivities; indigenous characters are elaborated based on their leading role in relations with the colonizers; and the construction of female characters highlights the different forms of oppression that fell upon black women, indigenous women and elite white women or white women from the impoverished free sectors, also establishing possibilities for thinking about the condition of women in an intersectional manner.

Thus, by subverting the national discursive order – based on the elitist male perspective – the writer highlights the point of view of the subalternized and oppressed sectors of the patriarchal and slave-owning Brazilian society, proposing, with this, a new humanism in the literary and journalistic universe of the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. In doing so, she sought to universalize themes such as freedom, solidarity, equality, love, the right to memory, the right to motherhood and the expansion of citizenship, for example, with an ethical and aesthetic treatment not yet explored by nineteenth-century male authors.

## PALIMPSESTO

5) And, regarding the history of the literate black family from the 19th to the 21st century, how does research into letters and diaries written by black women, called in your book an “exhumation” of black existences, consolidate counter-historical narratives and revisit scenes of slavery without repeating violence?

## LUCIANA DIOGO

This is a very good question and touches on a very sensitive and very relevant point in my research, because it is exactly here that I begin to better understand the brutal value that relationships of affection had in the constitution of Brazilian black culture. Accessing these documents – letters and diaries – is accessing a source of dreams of freedom and plans for the realization of love that allowed the survival of the human being in slavery.

I return to Teodora (the incredible woman I mentioned above) to answer this question. Teodora was an enslaved African woman who dictated letters to a Creole who was also enslaved and a literate bricklayer. Teodora lived in the Limeira region (the region where the city where I currently live is located) and used the written word to search for information about her husband and son, since her family had been separated by being sold to new masters.

What did Teodora think? What did she feel? What did she plan? What meaning did she attribute to life?

Her worldview certainly goes beyond the possibilities that Official History offers us to think about black lives. If we look at the first lines of the letters addressed to her husband, we will see, within the formalities of the genre, the pulsating time:

*Muito heide estimar que esta va achar **voce esteije com saude que meu desejo voce me mande contar para hande você esta morando [...]***

*Muito estimo a **sua saude como pra mim desejo noto bem para vance me faça o favor de ajuntar [aquele dinheiro]***

*Eu heide estimar que esta [...] gozando **a sua felicidade como para mim desejo noto bem para mi fazer o favor de vir [falar comigo sem falta].***

*Escrevo **para Vancê se lembra daquela promessa que nos fizemos eu hei de procurar por você***

Teodora wanted a world of health, of happiness, a world in which she, her husband and her son would meet again and return to Africa: real territory where she and her husband made a promise to die together; sacred territory because it would be the only legitimate place that would welcome her spirit after death; ancestral territory because the

Conga that spoke to her at night, in her dreams, came to remind her of the promise she had made and that her soul would not be saved by Christian baptism, she would need to return, and if the priests told her one day that she was being enslaved in order to save her soul, then, by force of logic, rationality and the Christian god himself, the priests should help her with her life project – to save her soul by returning to Africa with her family reunited.

These were the persuasion strategies that Teodora planned and sought to put into action, these strategies demonstrate this woman's capacity for agency and her attempt to implode from within the slave system that restricted her existence.

What moved this woman? Love! I bet that when her heart beat its last, it was this love giving its last impulse... I firmly believe that this pulse reaches us and moves us.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

6) This certainly inspires us to follow in the footsteps of the pioneers who came before us. In the book *Maria Firmina dos Reis: vida literária*, you wrote a letter to Maria Firmina dos Reis, in which you construct the image of a contemporary black intellectual, mother, teacher, student, researcher and resident of a university residence. The letter also mentions the launches of important and out-of-print books, as well as aspects of daily life, such as the opening hours of the ATM and the working relationships of the teachers and cooks at the university restaurant. Could you talk a little about this letter and what it represents?

## **LUCIANA DIOGO**

Wow! This letter!! It was born in that Flup course “Cartas para Santa Cruz” (“Letters to Santa Cruz”), a very special course that I had the honor of designing and coordinating and that gave me the opportunity to meet you and all those impressive black women. This course had a profound impact on me. And it was from that experience that, when I was invited to publish an article in the feminist magazine *Lucía*, edited by the wonderful team at Tenda de Livros, I thought: this article has to be a letter!

In fact, I start the letter with a Hello! I borrowed that hello from the letter you wrote so beautifully to Cláudia Siqueira, an artist from the “Coosturart” cooperative, which is located in the Santa Cruz region. So, I used all that wonderful energy from the discussions held in eight meetings, between September and November 2021, and put it



all into practice in the text. Thus, everything we built together came out naturally: when I talked about Firmina's trajectory as an educator, I couldn't help but see myself in all of that, even as a possible result of Firmina's actions back then. She educated enslaved black girls. So, if today we can exercise our intellectuality as black women and share it socially, the foundations were laid back in the 19th century, by women like Maria Firmina dos Reis.

So, regarding my own life as a black woman, a black researcher, a student mother who needed a very broad support network, for example, one thing I will never forget: the support of the cafeteria workers – when we, the mothers, arrived with our sons and daughters, they always served us with plenty of food, affection and encouragement... without this kind of affectionate relationship, perhaps it would have been easier to give up. So, I have a deep feeling of gratitude when I look back on my academic career. Much of the researcher I am today was forged within the university and outside the classroom. The classroom was fundamental, but the magic that happens when we connect with our peers in these elite spaces elevates our education to an octave higher.

With all of this, I realized that the universe that can be mobilized within the genre of letters, this inter/multidisciplinary and polysemic space, can be very liberating. A space to experiment with our writing and also a space to reinvent ourselves.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

7) What reflections can we draw on the relationship between the working conditions of teachers and students addressed in your research?

## **LUCIANA DIOGO**

In fact, we need a reflection that can be transformed into an education policy, training and respect for workers. As a sociology teacher, which is a subject that returned to the national curriculum in 2009 and is offered in a maximum of two classes per week, teachers are required to work in different schools and different periods. In addition, within the periods themselves, we have the issues of schedules or timetables. Let me explain better: I once had a semester in which, on Monday, I taught all the morning classes and then had to return to school to teach the last class of the night, from 10:20 pm to 11:00 pm. Does it seem absurd, does it seem like a lie, does it seem cruel, does it seem like a

test? Well, that is how we are often received in schools. With an incentive to give up. I got through the semester, taught the last classes, and there was even a time when I arrived late, especially because the schools are locked like prisons and, that day, I had forgotten my cell phone. By the time someone heard me pounding on the iron gate full of padlocks, the class bell had already rung and, believe it or not, the students were waiting for me, when we know that any delay in the last class is reason for the whole class to leave happy, but they waited for me and the school principal greeted me by saying: “You’re in good standing with the class, huh! They’re still waiting for you there...”

So, in the end, what I remember most from my experience as a public school teacher was the effective exchange we had with the students in the classroom. I wasn’t studying black female writers at the time, but I remember taking Billie Holiday’s autobiography to work on a passage in a class... I had to wait in line to borrow the book, several students wanted to read it. Looking back now, I think that was where a bit of my master’s project was born.

But it is urgent to review the teaching and learning conditions and the working conditions of Brazilian teachers, because we form the basis, the foundation of the intellectuals of our country.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

8) And I believe that many teachers will find themselves in this story, as I did. And speaking of teaching, you designed and coordinated a course in which the development of creative letter writing occurred through reading the diaries and letters of black women who built today’s Brazil, such as Maria Firmina dos Reis, Ruth Guimarães, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Conceição Evaristo and others. This resulted in the book, which I had the pleasure of participating in. My letter is in the section “Para além de uma avenida chamada Brasil”, which contains letters that women from the Santa Cruz area wrote to black women who carry out outstanding work in the region. For me, it was a difficult learning experience to measure, because in addition to the educational path, I had the opportunity to learn about our stories through the female narrative that resembled the memories of the women in my family. What was this experience like for you?

## **LUCIANA DIOGO**

I've already talked a little about the impact of this meeting, but I want to add to it by addressing another point that I haven't touched on, which is the methodology of the writing process. To think about that course, I had to reflect on how I could develop an objective method of approaching our corpus and propose an objective method for composing texts. I had never taught a creative writing course, but I was an intern in the only course that existed at the USP School of Languages, in 2015, that worked on creative writing. I think the course was called Creative Writing Workshop and was taught by Professor Maurício Salles de Vasconcelos. Since I also dabble in writing short stories and poems, I decided to intern with him. It was incredible and I used a lot of what I learned from Maurício to think of a possible "method" that combined observation, reading, reflection and a certain transcendence of observation itself. From this, I proposed practical exercises such as: creating cards with information for the senders, the recipients and for Santa Cruz; rewriting or continuing the published letters of the writers I worked with; or even taking notes on "writing on the go". I tried to create a course that, in the end, would offer you the possibility of perfecting the writing process based on a more conscious way of producing literary texts.

#### **PALIMPSESTO**

9) This methodology has helped me a lot to improve my writing and also helps me to rethink my teaching practice. Now changing the subject a little, and regarding the curation and launch of the Flup book, how was the dialogue between the organizers that resulted in the selection and arrangement of the texts and the titles of the sections?

#### **LUCIANA DIOGO**

Nathália, for this process Flup brought together another team that I was not part of. The result was a surprise to me too.

#### **PALIMPSESTO**

10) And the result is a dense book, with sections organized by varied themes and that highlight the polyphony of women's memories. Looking to the past and projecting the future, you visited Piauí and Maranhão, lands of Esperança Garcia and Maria Firmina dos

Reis, as part of your research. What were your impressions and what are the possible consequences of this experience? Would you highlight any memorable moments?

## LUCIANA DIOGO

Sis!!!! This trip was a turning point in my life. It was the first time I left the southern and southeastern regions of the country. Teaching the course on letters from black women in Piauí was a gift from the universe. The first known letter written by a black woman was Esperança Garcia's letter to the then governor of the province of Piauí. A manifesto letter. An open-hearted letter. A thunderous letter. Everyone was moved and thrilled by the opportunity to learn about the stories of Esperança, Teodora, Firmina, Carolina and so many others. Even reducing the course to one or two classes, the impact did not diminish. I realize that the students are truly touched by the powerful existences of these women who are references in our literature.

And I had the opportunity to teach this course in Maranhão for high school classes!!! It was a tearjerker, I met my favorite official letter interpreter from São Bernardo, just as you were the official interpreter in Santa Cruz, remember? Every day I become more passionate about this work because it puts me in deep connection with other women, of different ages and places, and thus, the dialogue only expands.

I also had the opportunity to visit Guimarães, the city where Firmina taught, produced her work and lived for 70 years of her long life of almost a century. I visited all the places of memory: the houses where she lived and taught, the school she opened in Moçoricó, the church she attended, where her grandmother is buried, or her own grave, in the city cemetery, where I made a point of leaving a rose that I picked from the garden in the backyard of the house where she died – she, who loved flowers so much –, in addition to setting my eyes on the landscapes that Firmina sang so much about, such as the beaches of Cumã in *Cantos à beira-mar*, the vast green fields described in *Úrsula*, the centuries-old hills depicted in poems and prose, and listening to the songs of the birds that so often drew flights in her imagination. I had the honor of talking to the teachers from the public school system there. It was incredible. I am very grateful to Professor Algemira Mendes, researcher Agenor Gomes, and Professor Régia Agostinho who welcomed me and hosted me on this trip.

A memorable moment among so many? It was a spiritual experience I had at the Centro de Cultura do Mestre Amaral, which preserves the memory of Bumba meu Boi and Tambor de Crioula. There I found my people and myself; it was magical! It was a turning point. It was a breakthrough!

## **PALIMPSESTO**

11) To conclude, after such a rich account, I must say that your research, writing and teaching work is a great inspiration to me and, certainly, to many other black women. What paths would you recommend to those who wish to venture into the current scenario of research, literature and illustration?

## **LUCIANA DIOGO**

What is expected from literature? From art? What do readers seek when they open a book? Most likely, they seek to connect with other life experiences to, perhaps, experience what it is like to be the other, what it is like to have another sex, another color, live in other lands where other languages are spoken... in other words, perhaps the great adventure of reading is the possibility of appropriating a different way of seeing the world. Therefore, research is also an art, it presents the diversity of perceptions of the world and promotes conditions to place readers in this state of novelty. Of seeing with new eyes. Thinking this way, I have felt that this is a special moment for us, black women. A time when we can strengthen our networks because there is a very strong climate of creativity, reflection and desire for visibility of our art and our voice. We are bearers of this unique, diverse and profound experience that rises from the base of society and rises, layer by layer, bringing with it information and perceptions from all of them. When a black woman verticalizes her experience and reaches the top, the entire society is reviewed. And that is what everyone needs to know.

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