

# 79 | **nature, nurture and nation: Nísia Floresta's engagement in the breast-feeding debate in Brazil and France**

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## **abstract**

This article looks at the way the Brazilian writer and educator Nísia Floresta addresses issues of race and class within her construction of nationhood. This is achieved through a consideration of the specific subject of maternal breast-feeding as discussed by Floresta in two texts, written in Brazil and France, respectively. A comparison of these works reveals a very different engagement with race and class factors in determining women's claim to citizenship. Floresta, in common with early 19th-century European feminism, believed this claim to lie within the domestic sphere, primarily in the role of mother and educator. The article considers how, as a vital aspect of that role, she portrays maternal breast-feeding as both natural and patriotic. It also highlights the extent to which Floresta was influenced by the prevailing concerns of her contemporaries regarding the risks of wet nursing and the threat posed by household slaves, before going on to consider how this discourse leads Floresta to exclude black slave women from her vision of patriotic motherhood, while acknowledging the maternity of women of all classes in a European context. Patriotic concerns, shaped by racial prejudices, overshadow Floresta's feminism, prohibiting the kind of unifying discourse of motherhood, which she claimed to profess.

## **keywords**

Brazil; 19th century; Nísia Floresta Brasileira Augusta; breast-feeding; wet nurse; France

The Brazilian writer and educator Nísia Floresta Brasileira Augusta (1810–1885) published prolifically in the decades following Brazil's independence in 1822 on a wide range of subjects. Her greatest concern, and the subject of most of her work, was the position of women in society, their rights (primarily to a better education) and, often more importantly, their responsibilities as wives and mothers. For this reason within her native Brazil, Floresta has long been and continues to be considered the forerunner of women's emancipation, and her early works founding texts of Brazilian feminism. As Seidl remarked in 1933, 'to Nísia Floresta belongs, without any doubt, the title of precursor of feminism in Brazil, and perhaps in South America'<sup>1</sup> (Seidl, 1933: 9. See also Duarte, 1995: 24; Câmara, 1997: 57).

**1** All translations are my own except where otherwise indicated.

However, to date, this canonical status has not been subjected to serious feminist critique regarding race or class considerations. The present article will therefore endeavour to initiate such a critique by looking at one specific aspect of women's domestic duties as described by Floresta: the importance of maternal breast-feeding as a natural responsibility and an essential part of women's role in the nation-building project. Firstly, it will consider to what extent she echoes prevailing medical and moral discourse, heavily influenced by enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, in presenting breast-feeding as both natural and patriotic, thus contributing to a gendered construction of nationhood and citizenship, which located women solely in the private sphere, excluding them from participation in public life. Secondly, it will look at how, by excluding slave women from her consideration of motherhood and by emphasizing the natural bond between the white mother and child, Floresta's writings naturalized the exclusion of the black slave population from Brazilian patriotic discourse and denied black women's part in the nation-building project and their resulting claim to citizenship.

Although Floresta excluded black slave women, her vision of motherhood was not a uniquely white one. She also portrays the native Indian woman feeding her child. However, this romantic, idealized image serves an essentially symbolic purpose within a discourse of nation-building concerned with white women's behaviour and status. In fact, her very different treatment of these two non-white components of Brazil's racial identity reflects a much wider pattern in post-independence literary and popular consciousness, which saw the largely exterminated Indian elevated to mythical status while the black majority was condemned or simply excluded from nationalist discourse (Davis, 1999: 15; Treece, 2000: 14). Davis observes that due to their perceived cultural and racial inferiority, 'Brazilian national identity would not, indeed could not, include blacks as equal participants in the nation' (Davis, 1999: 15).

Two of Floresta's texts deal with the subject of breast-feeding. The first, *Opúsculo Humanitário*,<sup>2</sup> was published in Rio de Janeiro in 1853; the second, an essay entitled *La Donna* (Woman), appeared in a collection of five essays published in

**2** All quotes are from the recent

re-edition: Nísia Floresta (1989).

**3** The collection, entitled *Scintille d'un'Anima Brasileira* (Scintillations of a Brazilian soul), was finally translated into Portuguese in 1997, and it is from this edition that quotes are taken: Nísia Floresta (1997: 83–159).

**4** For a comprehensive study of the life and works of Floresta. See Duarte (1995).

Floresta in 1859,<sup>3</sup> but was written in Paris 2 years earlier, referring specifically to the French situation. However, writing as a Brazilian (and she always publicly identified herself as such), her discussion of the French situation contains an inferred comment on and comparison with Brazil. Throughout her life, Floresta sought to construct herself as patriotic, always using the name 'Brasileira' (Brazilian woman) as part of her pseudonym and making frequent positive references to Brazil when publishing in Europe. Her professed devotion to her native country would seem to be at odds with the fact that she chose to spend more than half her life in France. Born in the rural northeast of Brazil she was widowed, at the age of 22 years, with two infant children. From then on she supported herself by writing and teaching, establishing a school for girls in the then capital Rio de Janeiro, which attracted press attention, both positive and negative, due to its advanced teaching methods and the broad range of subjects offered. As an independent woman in a deeply conservative society, it is not surprising that the comparative intellectual freedom of Paris held so great an appeal. After an initial visit to France in 1849, she returned there permanently in 1856, but she continued to believe in Brazil's great potential, making frequent reference to its glorious future.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, while *Opúsculo* is the only surviving Floresta text published in Brazil that deals with the issue of breast-feeding, the subject is touched on only briefly as the text focuses primarily on the need for better education for women and considers many aspects of their role as wife and mother. By contrast, *La Donna* includes a lengthy and detailed discussion of the circumstances of wet-nursing in France, a discussion which constitutes the first quarter of the essay and serves as an introduction to (and perhaps a disguise for) a wider discussion of women's role in society. In fact, it seems valid to suggest that Floresta made use of the burgeoning anti-wet-nursing sentiment in France to attract a greater readership and provide a vehicle for the expression of her views on women's education and position. What is clear from both texts is that for Floresta, breast-feeding was never an issue in isolation but part of a much more comprehensive vision of women's natural patriotic duty to society and the nation. A comparison of the two texts, of Floresta's portrayal of wet-nursing practices, and of the nurses and mothers in the very different contexts of Brazil and France will indicate that the writer was able to engage with the class issues of the French system more comfortably than with the racial issues so essential to a consideration of wet-nursing in Brazil. The very fact that she makes little more than a passing reference to the system in her own country while entering fully into the debate in France would seem to support this analysis.

According to Floresta, the most important responsibility of every mother was as educator of her children, a situation which she considers preferable to formal public education. In fact, in later works she implies that the main if not sole purpose for educating women was to enable them to perform this function

(Floresta, 1997: 143), in line with 'the Victorian ideal of the enlightened mother, devoted exclusively to the domestic sphere' (Loomba, 1998: 219). Central to this role was the need for mothers to breastfeed their own children so that their positive influence might begin at the cradle, not only in the example set but also because it was still widely believed that both physical and moral attributes were passed on to the child in the milk.

*Opúsculo Humanitário* and *La Donna* both portray breast-feeding, and indeed women's wider maternal responsibilities, as every mother's patriotic duty to the nation. This was a common theme in anti-wet-nursing discourse in Brazil and France. The primary concern of most writers was to reduce infant mortality rates (Sussman, 1982: 7) at a time when industrial capitalist societies required an ever greater workforce to develop and compete; however, most observers looked beyond simple demographics. A mother's duty was to raise sons who were both physically and morally robust, so that they might be properly equipped to become good citizens and defenders of the nation. Hence the considerable concern that a wet nurse's milk might not only contaminate the child with disease but also with her vices. This dual interest can be seen, for example, in a medical essay published in Rio in 1834:

So, mothers of Brazil, if you truly love our beautiful country, you should actually nurse your own children, for in this way you will contribute greatly to the reform of our customs which is sorely needed and to the increase of our population which is so necessary for Brazil to develop its vast natural resources, and for its future prosperity.

(Maia 1834: 10)

This echoes Rousseau's observation in *Émile* that 'when mothers deign to nurse their own children, there will be a reform in morals' (Rousseau, 1911: 13).

Enlightenment thought held that by becoming better mothers, and with it better wives, women could bring about a transformation of family life, making men better husbands and fathers, strengthening marital ties and affections and exercising greater moral influence over their husbands. As Diana Coole puts it, 'the potential radicalism of 17th-century individualism was thus surrendered to a vision of the sentimental family, which would offer a new rationalization for women's private and subordinate role and which would thrive from the 18th century on' (Coole, 1988: 103). This belief is clearly shared by Floresta a century later: in *La Donna*, she states that the surest way for a woman to secure her husband's respect and affection is to be a good mother to his children (Floresta, 1997: 143).

This vision of the unified patriarchal family is also central to Enlightenment concepts of citizenship and civil society. The family is the basis of society and a 'miniature fatherland' where devotion to the state is learned through devotion to one's family members. Rousseau, for example, asks: 'Is it not the good son, the good husband, the good father, who makes the good citizen?' (Rousseau, 1911: 326). This question encapsulates women's entrapment within the private

sphere, which is inherent to patriarchal liberal democracy. To them falls the responsibility of producing good citizens, yet they themselves are denied that right to citizenship. Carol Pateman observes that 'almost everyone' in the 19th century, even the early feminists accepted the doctrine of public and private spheres, holding them to be separate but of equal importance and value to society and the nation; however, beneath the rhetoric of the social value of motherhood and a stable family, this division was maintained by 'the belief that women's natures are such that they are properly subject to men and their proper place is in the private domestic sphere' (Pateman, 1995: 120 and 127).

It is precisely women's 'nature' that is at the heart of the definition of their role within the domestic sphere and this is particularly evident within the breast-feeding debate. To breastfeed is widely described by doctors, philosophers and essayists as a woman's 'natural' duty or ordained by nature, and those mothers who neglect this duty are frequently portrayed as denatured (Maia, 1834: viii; Coutinho, 1849: 145). The nature/culture dichotomy has always gone hand in hand with the public/private divide, and the construction of women as 'natural' is central to their exclusion from the 'culture' of civil life and the public sphere. Women provide a link between nature and social life. As representatives of the 'natural' human relationships and interaction identified within the family, they give civil society a 'natural base' for self-justification (Lange, 1991: 105–106).

It was not only patriarchal male discourse that emphasized women's natural role in the private sphere. For 19th-century feminists, 'maternity had become not only the strategic common ground for women's solidarity, but also the vehicle for their liberty' (Offen, 1998: 351). Floresta's failure to acknowledge slave motherhood is therefore extremely significant. In the context of Brazil, this focus on the domestic sphere demands a consideration of female slavery in relation to nation-building discourse because most household slaves were women and it was these domestic slaves who were widely perceived to be the greatest threat to the stability of the family and thus to the nation, an issue that I will develop further below. Slaves themselves were widely portrayed as lacking any stable family life and slave women in particular were accused of promiscuity, although Slenes challenges this portrayal, still prevalent today, indicating that permanent, monogamous unions were in fact common (Slenes, 1996: 140). At a time when the family was particularly closely associated with constructions of the nation, even by most feminists (Offen, 1998: 351), this denial of slave families compounded slave women's position by destroying the claim to citizenship that only the private sphere of family life could afford women.

Beyond the representation of women as the natural foundation of men's cultural edifice and their role as moral guardian and producer of citizens, there is another more fundamental symbolism that civil society ascribes to woman – that of the nation itself, or the land on which the nation is founded. Mother Earth is an image inextricably tied to breast-feeding as the mother who nourishes her children and

sacrifices herself for their good. Ania Loomba observes that 'the nation-state or its guiding principles are often imagined literally as a woman' (Loomba, 1998: 215), giving Britannia and Mother India as examples of this global phenomenon. As symbolically representative of the nation, it is women's behaviour that marks the moral boundary of that nation. Anne McClintock states: 'Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body-politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit' (McClintock, 1995: 354). In this way, women are projected as both constructor and construction of the nation, while being simultaneously excluded from the greater part of its public, cultural and civic reality.

When writing in Brazil, Floresta can be seen to adopt both of these symbolic, patriarchal configurations of women, but she allocates the different roles racially. The white mothers to whom she addresses her appeal are to be the constructors of the nation, producing its citizens while the idealized figure of the Indian woman, whom she presents as a model of perfect motherhood, is the mythical embodiment of the nation itself. The black woman as mother is conspicuously absent from this dual representation of nationhood, as any kind of element, either participative or symbolic. When contrasted with the relative realism of *La Donna*, it becomes clear that patriotic motivations shaped the Brazilian text rather differently than the social and feminist concerns Floresta expressed in France.

The debate about wet-nursing is central to Floresta's racial imagining of Brazil. The practice was common in Brazil and France during the 19th century; however, the circumstances under which it occurred were extremely different. In Brazil, the wet nurse was almost invariably a black slave girl, sold or hired out, usually without her own child, and who lived and worked within the suckled child's household. The mother who employed her was white, bourgeois or upper class, part of the urban elite or from a plantation-owning family (Giacomini, 1988). In France, the wet nurse was usually a poor woman living in a rural area who nursed the child in her own home alongside or after her own child, unless that child had died. The mother who employed her was most commonly an urban, working woman, employed in a factory or family business (Sussman, 1982). This effectively means that, although in both cases breast-feeding is essentially a question of female behaviour, and is approached as such by Floresta, race comes to the fore in Brazil, inextricably tied in with attitudes towards slavery and the captive black population, while in France, class is the underlying factor, which shapes the discourse in terms of the social status of both nurse and mother. When, as noted above, motherhood is so central to women's perceived position within the nation-building project, this racial difference, and the social structures it subsumes, must also be seen as relevant to the construction of female citizenship and the nation.

Although Floresta clearly found both the Brazilian and French systems equally abhorrent, condemning the neglect of mothers on both sides of the Atlantic with equal vehemence (Floresta, 1989: 93, 1997: 87), she never drew parallels between

the two, despite close similarities in the debates provoked by each. In fact, in each case, the writer used the other nation as a positive contrast to the evils of the country whose system she was considering. When describing the situation in Brazil in 1853 she writes:

If Rousseau, in his *Émile*, shamed French mothers for their neglect of this first duty of motherhood, in France, where the nurses have at least some education and are known for their cleanliness, how must Brazilian mothers feel, who understand that book well, on seeing their children hanging from the breast of wretched African women who on many occasions pass from under the whip... straight to the innocent's cradle to offer him their milk.

(Floresta, 1989: 93)

However, just 4 years later, when she writes about the circumstances characteristic of the system in France, she describes French nurslings as:

That innocent part of humankind, abandoned by the supposed progress of civilisation in such misery, which my good mother would deplore as much as I if she were also able to bear witness to it! But she never left her own country, where such enormities are as yet unknown.

(Floresta, 1997: 95)

The reason for this seeming economy with the truth is not difficult to determine. When writing for a Brazilian readership she is appealing to the popular conception in Brazil of Europe, and in particular of France, as a model of all things enlightened and progressive and an example to be followed. While she condemns the use of wet nurses in France as well, she suggests that the situation is ameliorated by education and hygiene and that Brazilian mothers can learn from the shame felt by their French counterparts when shown the error of their ways. However, she makes it patently clear who she is including in her definition of Brazilian motherhood: those mothers 'who understand that book [Rousseau's *Émile*] well' would have been only a small number of educated women from Brazil's white elite. In this way, Floresta normalizes white motherhood, implying that the white, educated mother is representative. On the other hand, when writing for a European audience, Floresta remains patriotically silent on the equivalent situation in Brazil, even implying that there is no such equivalent.

It is evident from the quote above that the transmission of black physical and moral traits was central to Floresta's argument against slave wet-nursing. In this, she was clearly influenced by prevailing medical and moral discourse, which based much of its condemnation of wet-nursing on the continued belief that it was not only the diseases of the nurse that could be passed on to the child in the milk but also her physical attributes, virtues, vices and moods. This was in fact a very ancient idea (Fildes, 1988: 1), although medical and

popular opinion still favoured it. The confirmation of this belief can be found in a large number of medical and socio-medical texts published during the 19th century in Brazil and France, where it is often 'proved' by dubious examples from nature or antiquity, such as the account given of a cat, reared by a dog, which ends up behaving more like a dog (and even barks) (Machado, 1853: 6), or the child fed tiger's milk to make him brave (Maia, 1834: 19). Inevitably, this concern about the transmission of attributes was particularly acute in the anti-wet-nursing debate in Brazil. That the nurse should be a black slave was extremely problematic for those writing on the subject, as it was widely believed that the slaves were prone to sickness and morally weak. The following description is typical: 'Transported from barbaric and savage countries, superstitious, full of vices and diseases, what manner of evils are they implanting in these poor creatures whose care they are charged with?' (Meirelles, 1847: 14).

Floresta endorses this prevailing attitude when she describes the black wet nurses as 'wretched African women' and their milk as 'impure', contaminating the child's 'physical and moral constitution' (Floresta, 1989: 93), implying that the practice is worse than the employment of a white wet nurse.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to her sympathetic portrayal of the poverty of the French nurses, discussed below, she shows no pity towards the black slave nurse. She describes them as wretched and demoralized (Floresta, 1989: 95) not out of compassion for their fate, but rather out of concern for the pernicious influence on their charges. Although her criticism is still aimed at the idle, white bourgeois woman, the slave woman remains a figure of corruption, both as wet nurse and companion.

In addition, considerations of infant feeding were profoundly influenced by the very common 19th-century concern regarding the perceived corrupting influence of household slaves, who were to be found at the heart of Brazilian family life in general. Sonia Giacomini documents this in her study of female slaves, quoting from a text entitled 'A substituição dos braços escravos pelos livres' (The substitution of slave labour for free) published in the Rio newspaper *O Americano* in 1850:

As a friend of our fellow countrymen and being interested in the peace of our nation's families, we should not cease to advise you to substitute, or at least reduce the number of these brute enemies who nourish themselves at our breast.

(Giacomini, 1988: 146)

The choice of allegory is particularly significant here, not only because the author suggests, apparently with no sense of irony, that it is the white family that provides for the slave and is the victim of his/her greed, inverting the reality of the black woman feeding the white child, but also because the (white) Brazilian nation is clearly being constructed as a (white) nursing mother who is involuntarily suckling the 'enemy' to the detriment of her own offspring. The writer thus excludes

**5** It is important to note that an opposing discourse existed until the mid-1800s, which held that white women, weakened by the tropical climate, were incapable of nursing their own children. Black women, supposedly better suited to the conditions, were therefore in this context, considered to be the best and healthiest choice of nurse (Graham, 1988: 125).

categorically, if obliquely, the black slave family from his/her definition of 'our nation's families'.

Floresta's negative portrayal of slave nurses and their influence makes it clear that, while she condemned slavery as a system, and in particular the slave trade (Floresta, 1989: 151), she was unable to shake off the prevailing attitudes of her day, which constructed the slave as a threat to national peace and prosperity; at best the slave is perceived as the unfortunate victim of a cruel system, but certainly not an intellectually and spiritually equal human being with equal rights, and much less a valuable citizen of the Brazilian nation. This was indeed the norm, even among abolitionists, for whom the end of slavery meant an escape from the African past (Davis, 1999: 18). Davis observes that 'even liberals who supported abolition did so not because they wanted slaves to be citizens, but because it was detrimental to their international image and their elite concept of nationhood' (Davis, 1999: 19).

Before beginning her harsh criticism of wet-nursing practices in her native country, Floresta makes it clear that it is not a traditional 'Brazilian' custom, laying the blame squarely at the door of pernicious European influences. In fact, she introduces the subject thus: 'A dangerous habit often fatal to our children, a crime, we might cry out, has been introduced into Brazil, for it is not Brazilian in origin' (Floresta, 1989: 93). As well as being an indication of Floresta's patriotism, this is a typically anti-colonial reflex in which the colonial power is held responsible for the newly independent nation's failings. Within a construction of the nation demarcated by women, as McClintock proposes (McClintock, 1995: 354), Floresta is seeking to disassociate 'negative' female activity, in this case the neglecting of maternal duties, from a more authentic Brazilian identity.

Floresta effectively confirms this point in a later chapter when she describes the native Brazilian Indian woman, whom she presents as an example of ideal motherhood precisely because she nurses her own children:

Do you want to see a mother in the sublime simplicity of maternal love?... Go and see them [indigenous women]... joined day and night by stronger ties of natural affection than many mothers of our society, not leaving their babies, as many of the latter do, to nurse at a stranger's breast, in order to take part in the pleasures of the world or satisfy social etiquette.

(Floresta, 1989:147–148)

The Indian mother represents woman in her most natural (and therefore most virtuous) state, shunning the cultural constructions of civil society in which only a man might properly operate. Here is the clear implication that in seeking to participate in public social life, a woman neglects the essential duty of motherhood and moves away from her 'natural' destiny. But in this picture of

maternal devotion the Indian woman is of course merely a symbol, an image or exhibit to be visited and observed without interaction. In fact, she corresponds to that 'national emblem' described by Ania Loomba 'called upon to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation' (Loomba, 1998: 215). She is a kind of Brazilian 'mother/land', the original mother of a good and healthy Brazil without the corrupting influence of degenerate western customs and morally and physically 'weak' Africans. After independence, the native Indian was retrospectively reconstructed as a symbol of national identity, idealized in literature and art as the 'original' Brazilian (Treece, 2000: 1–15). It is very much within the framework of this discourse that Floresta uses the Indian woman as a potent symbol of patriotism as the mother of the nation, nourishing her child with complete dedication.

Floresta's focus on poverty and class in the French text and even her change in writing style offer an interesting contrast with regard to her different perceptions of 'natural' maternity. In contrast to the lack of concrete detail and the figurative imagery found in Floresta's very brief consideration of infant feeding in *Opúsculo*, she describes the French system in painstaking, almost journalistic detail, painting a vivid picture of the dirty and impoverished surroundings in which the nurses live. However, the biggest difference comes in the portrayal of the wet nurse herself: she portrays the French nurses as humble, polite women and pities their poverty and the sacrifices they must make to support their families (Floresta, 1997: 85–105). This is the complete antithesis of her representation of the black nurse in Brazil. She is able to acknowledge the white French nurse as the victim of a corrupt system, while casting the black slave much less favourably as corruptor and infector, despite the fact that wet-nursing in France was at that time a 'significant commercial enterprise' which contributed massively to the rural economy of some areas (Sussman, 1982: 101, 123–125). She is also able to portray the French nurses as individuals in their own right, something which is entirely lacking from her references to slave nurses, whom she considers *en masse* purely in terms of their effect on the white children they suckle. Most significantly, she is able to recognize the French nurses as fellow wives and mothers, making frequent reference to the nurses' own children whom they must endeavour to nourish as best they can alongside the nurslings (Floresta, 1997: 97). In contrast, when describing the black slave nurses, she makes no acknowledgement of their own maternity, although a wet nurse was by definition also a mother. Slave mothers are firmly excluded from her vision of universal motherhood. By extension they, and their offspring, are also excluded from the Brazilian nation, which patriotic motherhood produces, while their French counterparts, who are depicted as struggling to support their families, are cast as better citizens than the French urban mothers who neglect their children, thus implying a kind of comparative scale of biological maternity in which both still figure as mothers.

Floresta herself implies in *La Donna* that her recommendations apply to the universal family of nations. She writes, 'Forget about yourselves, worthy mothers of all nations and all classes! Forget about yourselves in the fulfilment of your sublime task,' (Floresta, 1997: 153). However, it is very apparent that while her definition of universal worthy mothers might, rather optimistically, include all classes, it certainly does not include all races. Therefore, if she wished to include Brazil among those nations of worthy mothers, as she clearly did, it was only as a white Brazil, which denied the nationhood of the large black population. It becomes increasingly apparent that, despite employing similar arguments in each text, Floresta's use of the breast-feeding debate serves different ends in the French and Brazilian contexts.

There are, in principle, two ideas that appear consistently in both texts, ideas which are recurring themes in discourse relating to breast-feeding and women's wider duties in Rio and Paris alike. First is the concept of the repellent unnaturalness of a mother who neglects this sacred responsibility. In *Opúsculo*, we find an expression of instinctive repulsion: 'Nothing seems more revolting to us than the sight of a mother who, without a reason justified by nature, allows her child to feed at a stranger's breast' (Floresta, 1989: 93). In *La Donna*, this idea has crystallized into a direct accusation:

Oh you heartless mothers, who have abandoned the most sacred duties of nature, before your eyes I want to sketch this deplorable scene... which will betray the process of your *denaturalisation* to future generations!

(Floresta 1997: 87, my italics).

The second idea found in both texts is that of the immense value to society of a woman's role within the family, as moral guardian and producer of healthy, virtuous children. In *Opúsculo* Brazilian mothers are urged on for their 'own benefit, the dignity of the family and the glory of the fatherland' (Floresta, 1989: 112), and in *La Donna* we can once again see that the idea has been expanded and clarified when Floresta writes:

Forget about yourselves, worthy mothers of all nations and all classes!...society, regenerated by you, will offer the world, with your love and your sacrifice, all the exquisite virtues of womankind and the embodiment of true and holy charity.

(Floresta, 1997: 153)

When writing in Europe, Floresta was contributing to a well-established discourse that Karen Offen terms 'relational feminism', an enlightenment feminist discourse which sought to elevate women's social status by emphasizing their natural role as mother-educator and 'their responsibilities to a broader collectivity' (Offen, 1998: 331), and which embraced women of all classes. In the French text, Floresta uses both the above arguments to include all (white) mothers, neglectful urban mothers

and struggling rural nurses alike. In fact, as a mother who feeds and cares for her own child, the wet nurse emerges in a more positive light than her client, although it is implied that she too could fulfil her maternal duties more effectively if she was not responsible for the nursling. That is to say, a return to maternal breast-feeding would enable women of all social classes to claim a position of value as 'citizen-mothers' (Offen, 1998: 337). In the Brazilian context, the black slave woman is not given the chance to be natural or patriotic for she is not recognized as a fellow mother. Thus, when writing in Brazil, and concerned primarily with the importance of breast-feeding in representations of female patriotism, Floresta's own patriotism appears to disable her feminist concerns, precluding any universal vision of womanhood that might include all races. Constricted by prevailing racist attitudes coupled with the hugely negative connotations attaching to slavery, she was unable to envisage a scenario in which black slave women could operate in the same space as educated white women, be ascribed the same patriotic role and thus be of equal value to society. She was obliged to exclude them from the construction of motherhood, which afforded that value. As Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham observes, racism 'thwarted the development of a female world and sensibility capable of uniting black and white women' (Brooks-Higginbotham, 1989: 127). Thus, read across the French and Brazilian contexts, maternal breast-feeding serves not as a matrix of universal motherhood but as a kind of index of female biology deployed for different political ends, excluding and subjugating some women while elevating others.

Curiously, the exclusion of the black slave population and slave mother, in particular that we find in *Opúsculo*, is not as marked in Floresta's other works. Just 2 years later in 1855, she wrote a short narrative about the life of a male slave inspired by Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a book that she had already read and even praises in *Opúsculo* (Floresta, 1989: 42–43). In this story, the title of which translated into English as 'Pages of an Obscure Life',<sup>6</sup> Floresta portrays a saintly and noble slave, worthy of greater respect than his cruel, cowardly master. The text includes a rather more sympathetic portrayal of slave wet nurses, as she writes, 'who has not seen... the mother whose soul they tear out by taking her little child away in order to make more money from her as a wet nurse' (Floresta, 1855: 31). However, developed female characters are absent from the story, which includes only the motif of the cruel mistress mistreating her slave girl. Floresta's choice of a male slave 'hero' is revealing; she addresses the subject of race and abolition as an essentially masculine issue, while her feminism is expressed only in terms of white women.

A more general consideration of Floresta's life and her writings reveals a similarly multi-contradictory position. Not only was she a 'patriot' who turned her back on the country she so frequently claimed to love; as an independent, self-sufficient woman, she led a much more public life than that which she ascribed to her fellow women and she wrote in support of the patriarchal system from which she had largely freed herself, in action if not in thought. Like her feminist contemporaries, Floresta wrote as a member of an 'inferior' sex within a 'superior' race. As Margaret

<sup>6</sup> This text was published in serial form over eight issues of the fortnightly Rio paper *O Brasil Ilustrado*.

Strobel points out, 'this contradictory position brought ambivalent results' (Strobel, 1998: 389).

It is Floresta's participation in 'relational' feminist discourse, which 'consciously recognized the validity of female experience and emphasized values that women articulated' (Offen, 1998: 332), that has earned her the status of 'precursor of feminism in Brazil' (Seidl, 1933: 9). There can be no doubt that she sought to accord (white) women's activities a greater value in society, and as a woman participating in a traditionally male, medical discourse on breast-feeding, she created a discursive space for herself as subject rather than object. However, the emphasis on women's natural biological functions, which Floresta reinforced, leaves women excluded from the 'unnatural' construction of culture synonymous with public life, and so their field of operation is defined entirely within the private sphere. By condemning wet-nursing in France, where the motivation was financial for both mother and nurse, Floresta effectively contributed to a discourse that sought to deprive women of the opportunity to enter and participate in the public sphere as wage-earners. This was typical of the bourgeois feminism that was to be condemned by socialist feminists by the end of the century (Offen, 1998: 332).

More importantly, Floresta only applies this limited discourse of female citizenship within a white arena. For Floresta, writing in the Brazilian context of widespread domestic slavery, race was a central issue and her failure to address it must be considered in an appraisal of her work as a feminist. Such an appraisal would surely 'call into question the concept of a universal womanhood by underscoring the unity of white men and women in determining (American) racial thought and policy' (Brooks-Higginbotham, 1989: 125). Above all, it must be recognized that Floresta operated within, and failed to challenge, the hegemonic, racist, patriarchal discourse that reinforced white, bourgeois constructions of Brazilian patriotism and national identity. In 'Pages of an obscure life', she accuses the male elite of gross hypocrisy, saying: 'Slavery, that monstrous product of despotism... was sanctioned by the very men who sacrificed everything to free themselves from the yoke of their oppressors and assume the category of free nation!' (Floresta, 1855: 15). Ironically, this occurs precisely within Floresta's own discourse on womanhood.

## author biography

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400202