

ON THE RECOVERY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZILIAN WOMEN PHILOSOPHERS

Sobre a recuperação de filósofas brasileiras do século XIX

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Abstract: Our aim in this paper is to analyze the challenges and propose a strategy for the recovery and recognition of 19th-century Brazilian women philosophers. To this end, in the first section we begin from the controversy surrounding the very existence of a Brazilian philosophy and show how this impasse is intensified in the case of women, due to the topics they addressed, the textual genres they used, the forms of publication of their writings, as well as the barriers of gender and geography. In the second section, we present our strategy which consists of two interrelated movements: a metaphilosophical reflection, that seeks to review and expand the criteria for what counts as philosophy, and a hermeneutical reading, capable of reinterpreting their works on their own terms. If a less biased history of philosophy also depends on the inclusion of women philosophers, we argue that a revision of the political and methodological criteria that define philosophical practice is one of the paths to enable such inclusion and to correct the bias.

Key Words: Brazilian philosophy. Women philosophers. Philosophical canon.

Resumo: Nosso objetivo neste artigo é analisar os desafios e propor uma estratégia para a recuperação e o reconhecimento das filósofas brasileiras do século XIX. Para isso, na primeira seção, partimos da controvérsia em torno da própria existência de uma filosofia brasileira e mostramos como esse impasse se intensifica no caso das mulheres, devido aos temas que abordavam, aos gêneros textuais que utilizavam, às formas de publicação de seus escritos, bem como às barreiras de gênero e geográficas. Na segunda seção, apresentamos nossa estratégia, que consiste em dois movimentos interrelacionados: uma reflexão metafilosófica, que busca revisar e expandir os critérios sobre o que pode ser considerado filosofia, e uma leitura hermenêutica, capaz de reinterpretar tais obras em seus próprios termos. Se uma história da filosofia menos enviesada também depende da inclusão de mulheres filósofas, defendemos que a revisão dos critérios políticos e metodológicos que definem a prática filosófica é um dos caminhos para viabilizar essa inclusão e corrigir o viés.

Palavras-Chave: Filosofia brasileira. Mulheres filósofas. Cânone filosófico.

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Introduction

Since 2016, the philosophical Brazilian community has been dedicated to reflecting about the representation of women in philosophy, resulting in a movement that has come to be known as “*Primavera das Filósofas*” (Araújo, 2020). This initiative reflects similar concerns to those that gained prominence at international level in the 80’s (Waithe, 1987). However, the attention devoted to the Brazilian women philosophers, although ongoing (Pugliese, 2022), is a relatively recent phenomenon and faces an additional challenge: the difficulty of legitimizing them precisely as philosophers. This is part of a larger problem, which is the very question of the legitimacy of philosophy produced in Brazil, especially in the period prior to its institutionalization in the 1930s.

In this context, our aim in this paper is to reflect on the criteria and methods involved in the recovery of nineteenth-century Brazilian women philosophers and their posterior incorporation into the philosophical canon. By “recovery,” we mean the process of identifying, retrieving, reading, and analyzing works of such philosophers. By “incorporation into the canon,” we refer to the institutional, curricular, and editorial process that establishes certain authors and works as legitimate representatives of the philosophical tradition. Thus, while recovery is an initial stage of recognition, the process of incorporation into the canon concerns the consolidation of a philosopher within formal spaces of philosophical legitimation, such as anthologies, encyclopedias, curricula, and so on. The underlying idea here is that it is not enough to simply include women philosophers in the canon without also reflecting on *how* to do so (Gardner, 2013, p. 5).

To this end, we divided the text into two parts. We begin by offering an overview of this debate in the Brazilian context, especially highlighting the divergent positions regarding the legitimacy of a Brazilian philosophy. We then introduce some Brazilian women philosophers of the nineteenth-century, such as Nísia Floresta, Maria Firmina dos Reis and Josefina Álvares de Azevedo, and the challenges surrounding their full legitimation as such. First, we emphasize strictly *methodological* issues, such as the interdisciplinarity of their themes, textual genres, and forms of publication. Second, we consider the role of *gender* and *geography* in shaping their philosophical reception and the implications of these categories.

Following this initial diagnosis, in the next section we will present our recovery strategies. We argue that at least two interconnected moves are necessary: a

metaphilosophical and a *hermeneutical* ones. More specifically, we first argue that is necessary to develop a metaphilosophical discussion aimed at revisiting the criteria commonly used to assess what counts as philosophy; second, we argue that is necessary to propose new philosophical criteria that take into account the historical, geographic, social, and institutional conditions in which philosophical work is produced so that these works may be understood on their own terms.

1. The question of Brazilian philosophy and its women thinkers

1.1 Is there a Brazilian philosophy?

In Brazil, the discussion surrounding the philosophical canon begins with the very formulation of Brazilian philosophy and its thinkers as a problem in itself (Cruz Costa, 1945, 1967; Paim, 1991; Cabrera, 2013; Margutti, 2013, 2018, 2020, 2021; Prado Júnior, 2023; Canhada, 2017, 2022; Ceppas, 2021; Domingues, 2017; Haddock-Lobo, 2016, 2021; Noguera, 2021). The complexity of this issue can be observed through two main factors. First, in the frequent questioning of whether what has been – and continues to be – produced in Brazil can be, in fact, recognized as philosophy. Second, in the uncertainty about how to name it: Brazilian philosophy, philosophy produced in Brazil, or philosophy from Brazil?² These initial questions unfold into a series of others: is there a genuinely Brazilian philosophy? If so, what are its characteristics? Who are its subjects and what are its texts? Are there philosophical problems that are specifically Brazilian? If so, does it seem to imply the affirmation of a national identity? What elements constitute such identity?

Some authors argue that it is indeed possible to speak in terms of Brazilian philosophy. Reale justifies this claim by stating that contemporary Brazilian philosophers were already original when compared to the “great thinkers”. Vaz argues that Brazilian philosophy became possible starting in the 1920s, whereas Ruy Fausto identifies the 1960s as a turning point (Nobre e Rego, 2000, p. 21-154). Noguera (2021) asserts that Brazilian philosophy would be

² These terminological distinctions are established by Cabrera (2013). The term Brazilian philosophy (*filosofia brasileira*) presupposes a philosophy with a defined national identity. Philosophy in Brazil (*filosofia no Brasil*) refers merely to the philosophical activity carried out in the country, without assuming any national specificity. Philosophy from Brazil (*filosofia desde o Brasil*) also does not start from this nationalist presupposition but refers to a situated philosophical production that carries elements of the Brazilian context and, therefore, could not have been produced anywhere else (p. 28-30). In other words, there is a significant difference between Brazilian philosophy and others, as well as a subtle but equally important difference between philosophy in Brazil and philosophy from Brazil. Margutti (2018) challenges the relevance of these distinctions.

composed of African, Afro-diasporic, Indigenous, and Amerindian references. Bello (2025) argues that it is plural and encompasses both Indigenous peoples and the African diaspora, suggesting that one concept potentially capable of defining it is *amefricanidade*, as proposed by Lélia Gonzalez. Lacerda (2021) claims that Brazilian philosophy does not consist solely of philosophers who interpret and comment on classical works, but also includes those who create concepts to interpret Brazil itself, such as González, Chaui, and Carneiro. Haddock-Lobo (2016, 2021) contends that there is not one single Brazilian philosophy, but *many*, and that they can only be understood through engagement with Yoruba and Amerindian thoughts. Chaves (2021) maintains that Brazilian philosophy has always existed; the problem is that it has always been evaluated through external standards. Ramos challenges the resistance to such an affirmation by drawing analogies with other fields, such as literature, sociology, and economics, in which the idea of a specifically Brazilian production is widely accepted (Anpof, 2025).

Others, on the other hand, reject this possibility. Porchat Pereira states that Brazilian philosophers “have not yet had the personal and cultural conditions to develop a philosophy of their own” (Nobre e Rego, 2000, p. 126), although he sees a promising future in the new generations. Prado Júnior (2023) and Coutinho (Nobre e Rego, 2000) criticize the idea of a Brazilian philosophy, arguing that it presupposes the existence of a national identity, which would be contrary to the necessarily universal nature of the discipline. Chaui (Nobre e Rego, 2000, p. 309-310) also problematizes the expression due to philosophy’s universal character. Nunes (Ibid, p. 79) rejects the notion, at least insofar as “Brazilian philosophy” implies a worldview that is exclusive to Brazil. Frateschi (2021) contends that there is no specifically Brazilian philosophy and that we should not insist on seeking a national identity, so that the plurality of philosophical practice can be valued. Although the author acknowledges the work of several Brazilian thinkers, she argues that there is still no original and authorial philosophical production in Brazil, primarily because university-level teaching remains predominantly exegetical.

Canhada (2021) brings together the names of Sílvio Romero, Leonel Franca, João Cruz Costa, Antonio Paim, and Paulo Arantes under a common interpretation, asserting that all these historians of philosophy disqualify Brazilian productions. In fact, they do not directly answer whether there is a Brazilian philosophy, since they do not recognize the works

produced in Brazil as philosophical. However, this indirectly implies a negative answer to the question, given that what has been produced here would not be deemed worthy of the name. As we can see, there is no definitive or consensual answer to this issue. Despite the fact we agree that there is a Brazilian philosophy, it seems to remain an open debate, one that continues to mobilize different reflections and conceptual disputes. In the next section, we will focus specifically on the situation of women philosophers in Brazil.

1.2 Brazilian women philosophers

As a result of both this broader context and of the *Primavera das Filósofas* (Araújo, 2020), a movement has been gaining increasing prominence: the recovery of the work of women who wrote in Brazil and were ignored by the philosophical historiography (Jourdan, 2020; Pugliese, 2022, 2023; Frateschi, 2022; Pontes, 2023; Peixoto, 2024; Meurer, 2024; Secco & Pugliese, 2024; Prikladnitzky & Da Costa, 2024; Prikladnitzky, 2025; Vaccari, 2025; Bello, 2025). This effort involves not only rescuing their names, but also reflecting on the criteria used to recognize the philosophical elements of their work. As a result, a number of questions arise, such as: Who are these women thinkers? Are they literary figures, poets, philosophers? To which field of knowledge do their writings belong? How should we evaluate them? How should we read them? Is it possible to characterize their work in relation to the philosophical field? If so, how? How can they be recovered? What methods should we use to carry out their incorporation into the philosophical canon? Is there a specific strategy? What should be taken into account? Without claiming to be exhaustive, these are the kinds of questions that guide the discussion.

Although it is not our intention to establish such a rigid temporal framework and neither to ignore the fact that there is also resistance to recognizing more contemporary Brazilian women as philosophers, such as Lélia Gonzalez and Maria Beatriz Nascimento³, we have chosen to focus our attention on the recovery of women whose historical period predates the institutionalization of philosophy, especially from the 19th century. Nísia Floresta, Maria Firmina dos Reis, Beatriz Brandão, Delfina da Cunha, Tereza Margarida Silva e

³ These examples were chosen due to the recovery and research work being carried out by the *Laboratório de Filosofias Brasileiras* (Filbras) on Gonzalez and Nascimento.

Orta, Ana de Barandas, Josefina Álvares de Azevedo, Júlia Lopes de Almeida, Francisca Clotilde, Emília Freitas, Francisca Senhorinha da Motta Diniz and Anna Rosa Termacsics dos Santos are some of the representatives of this period.

The choice of the pre-institutionalization period, that is, before the 1930s, is methodologically valuable for discussing the criteria of legitimacy in philosophy. This is because the philosophy of that time was often considered uninteresting (Canhada, 2017) or even undeserving of being characterized as philosophy at all due to being evaluated according to external criteria. But we can also point to other reasons. First, because the spaces of philosophical production during that time were marked by less rigid boundaries between fields such as literature, education, law, politics, sociology, and journalism.

Here are some examples: Teresa Margarida da Silva e Orta, through literary narrative, argued that women and men possess the same virtues; Ana de Barandas wrote what is considered the first feminist theatrical dialogue in the country; Nísia Floresta criticized the belief in the supposed intellectual superiority of men and, in addition to publishing several works, founded her own school for girls in Rio de Janeiro, offering instruction in languages, social sciences, and natural sciences; Francisca Senhorinha da Motta Diniz, like Josefina Álvares de Azevedo, advocated for moral, political, and educational equality for women in their writings. Maria Firmina dos Reis went even further, denouncing slavery and defending equality not only between genders but also between races (Pugliese, 2022, p. 293-310). Thus, we see that all of these Brazilian thinkers (among others) produced philosophically significant ideas, primarily on gender, but also on race, law, politics, citizenship, work, education, and other topics.⁴

Regarding the second reason, many women of this period expressed themselves through textual genres considered “minor” in philosophy or not philosophical at all such as novels, letters, pamphlets, press articles, newspapers, and educational essays. Many Brazilian women wrote literary novels, including Teresa Margarida da Silva e Orta, Francisca Senhorinha, and Maria Firmina; chronicles, poems, and sonnets, like Ana de Barandas; pamphlets, letters, and travel diaries, like Nísia Floresta; songs, short stories, and poetry, again by Maria Firmina; theatrical works and journal articles, like Josefina Álvares de Azevedo. Many also made strategic use of the press to reach a broader readership. Thus, publishing in

⁴ Lima Duarte (2019) reconstructs the history of Brazilian feminism based on these and other women thinkers.

newspapers and periodicals was a widespread practice. Francisca Senhorinha worked as a journalist and created the periodical *O Sexo Feminino*. Josefina Álvares de Azevedo was also a journalist and founder of the newspaper *A Família* (Pugliese, 2022, p. 293-310).⁵

If we were to consider only the examples associated with each of these two reasons, it might seem that this issue is not limited to Brazil or to Brazilian women, since the overlap between different fields of knowledge and the difficulty of legitimizing textual genres outside those traditionally recognized by philosophy may be more widespread phenomena. It is in the *third* reason, then, that the *gender* marker becomes particularly salient, connected with *geography*: the fact that we are talking about women who engaged in intellectual production in a colonized country of the Global South⁶, and often before they were even allowed access to formal educational institutions, that is, to universities. In other words, in the case of Brazilian women, these factors operate more visibly, as there is a combination of gender and a context of production situated outside major academic centers.

Although some caveats must be made here, the gender marker also appears in two other areas. We list the first of these as the fourth reason: when analyzing syllabi from undergraduate courses that include subjects on the history of Brazilian philosophy, we notice a lack of female representation.⁷ Fifth, when examining books that portray the history of Brazilian philosophy, we observe the same pattern. On the other hand, such materials generally include figures like Silvio Romero, Tobias Barreto, Cruz Costa, Farias Brito, Gonçalves de Magalhães, and Leonel Franca, and often devote extensive analysis to the work and

⁵ Specifically regarding the 19th century, Muzart (1995) states that, compared to men, women published little, but did not write little. In other words, there was still the issue of limited access to means of publication and circulation of ideas, both in general, due to editorial constraints, and because of the impossibility of signing works with their own names.

⁶ We understand the term “Global South” in line with the majority of the literature: encompassing Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Nonetheless, we also agree that the Global South is not a homogeneous or fixed category, but rather a relational and historically situated one, which points to global structures of inequality and political, economic, and epistemic subordination (Berger, 2020, p. 12).

⁷ We analyzed the corresponding syllabi of the courses *Filosofia no Brasil* at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (PUC-RS), according to the curriculum in effect in 2001/1 (we thank Andrea Cordeiro for sending the document), and *História da Filosofia no Brasil I*, *História da Filosofia no Brasil II*, and *História da Filosofia no Brasil III* at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), according to the currently valid curriculum structure. Margutti (2021) states that at USP there used to be a course on *Filosofia Brasileira*, which was later removed in curricular reforms. We observed that the same occurred at PUC-RS.

influence of Auguste Comte and positivism in Brazil.⁸ Margutti (2019, p. 9) argues that information about Floresta, for example, is scarce in the bibliography on the history of Brazilian philosophy, and that researchers fail to even mention her.

However, as mentioned, some caveats are necessary. First, because the examples presented here are limited and drawn from specific course plans from particular universities, which prevents us from making broader claims without first having access to an extensive, detailed, and systematized database of curriculum from Brazilian universities. Nevertheless, we chose to include them because they may be symptomatic of a broader context of erasure and, if that is the case, they may be useful for developing a more general reflection on the possible reasons behind it, whether political and/or methodological. Second, because the courses whose syllabi we analyzed seem primarily focused on treating Brazilian philosophy as a *problem* in itself, thereby placing the analysis of the philosophical thought of Brazilian authors in a somewhat secondary position. In other words, the emphasis tends to fall on questions such as whether it is possible to speak of a genuinely Brazilian philosophy, what would characterize it, how it should be defined, among other issues previously discussed.

Nevertheless, there is a widely disseminated narrative in the specialized literature that identifies the roots of the problem of the delegitimization of Brazilian philosophy and its thinkers as going back to the beginning of undergraduate philosophy programs in Brazil. Broadly speaking, this institutionalization began in the 1930s, with the founding, in 1934, of the Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas at the University of São Paulo (FFCL-USP). From that moment on, when philosophy became a properly academic discipline, we would have inherited both the objects and the methods of European philosophical inquiry. This happened due to the so-called “missão francesa uspiana,” a project that brought French professors to Brazil with the aim of consolidating philosophy (as well as anthropology and other fields) in Brazilian universities. Especially in philosophy, intellectuals such as Victor Goldschmidt, Jean Maugüé, and Martial Guérout are said to have influenced the

⁸ Some examples are: Cruz Costa (1945, 1967), Crippa (1978), Paim (1991), Domingues (2017), Engelmann, Engelmann & Corrêa (2023). The books of Paulo Margutti are an exception, since there is Nísia Floresta (2019, 2020).

incorporation of structuralism as the most appropriate method for reading philosophical texts.⁹

Over time, structuralism, initially developed at USP, eventually spread to other departments across the country and came to be seen as a dominant paradigm. As a result, it is suggested that Brazilian philosophical research became methodologically dependent by consecrating structuralism as the legitimate method of reading and doing philosophy. The suspicion, then, is that this scenario seriously affected the way the history of Brazilian philosophy came to be interpreted: Brazilian intellectual production prior to USP would have been read as lacking the rigor demanded by European academic philosophy (Canhada, 2017). If this argument is correct, from the moment a specific way of doing philosophy is established, it is clear that traditions not aligned with that method, or, in other words, that do not engage with the European conceptual and methodological framework, end up being dismissed. Since this standard form is exclusively European, consequently, philosophical approaches that emerge from other cultural, historical, or epistemological contexts are excluded.

However, this narrative has been relativized. In a recent paper, Sampaio (2023) proposes a less generalizing reading of Brazilian philosophical historiography by suggesting that structuralism did not reach as wide a national scope as is often claimed. The author supports this claim with four reasons: first, his own personal experiences at the Universidade Federal do Ceará and the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, where he did not encounter structuralism. Second, the accounts of professors Oswaldo Porchat Pereira and Bento Prado Jr., who stated that structuralism was neither the only nor the dominant teaching method at USP in the 1960s (2023, p. 3-12). Third, the fact that up until the first half of the 1970s, there was limited communication among faculty members in Brazilian departments. Fourth, because there were other French teaching traditions at FFCL-USP (2023, p. 13). The author concludes by calling for the construction of a *regionalist* genealogy of Brazilian academic philosophy, one capable of accounting for the formative particularities of more specific contexts.

But still regarding the USP context, Margutti (2018, p. 229) points out an important nuance: the ideological split experienced by the Brazilian philosophical community at the time

⁹ Basically, structuralism is a systematic and exegetical method for reading philosophical texts. For detailed characteristics and techniques of the structuralist method in philosophy, cf. Goldschmidt (2023) and Gueroult (2007).

when philosophy became institutionalized in the country. In that context of the 1930s, intellectuals aligned with the left-wing, mostly from the department of philosophy, denied the possibility of a distinct philosophical tradition in Brazil. On the other hand, right-leaning thinkers, many from the department of law and under the leadership of Reale, upheld the thesis that it was indeed possible to speak of a national philosophy. In other words, this ideological division may have influenced the way in which the possibility (or impossibility) of a Brazilian philosophy came to be conceived.

An additional reason that may help explain the problem of delegitimization is also raised by Margutti (2018). The author argues that the invisibility of Brazilian philosophers in their own country was caused by the prejudices created by the first historians of our philosophy:

Silvio Romero began the process, with his harsh criticisms of certain 19th-century authors. Tobias Barreto continued it by stating that Brazil does not have a “philosophical mind.” Cruz Costa and Leonel Franca, in turn, brought the process to a close with a flourish, the former ridiculing his predecessors as “philosophizers,” “dilettantes,” and “philoneists,” and the latter disqualifying them as “autodidacts” (2018, p. 228).

The result of this characterization is the fact that, there remains to this day a widespread belief that Brazil has not produced anyone who could be recognized as a philosopher in the full sense of the term. For Margutti, this perception, still quite common within the Brazilian philosophical community, is symptomatic of the application of European criteria in the evaluation of philosophy produced in the country. The underlying logic is as follows: since it does not conform to Eurocentric standards, Brazilian philosophical thought is not qualified as such, which in turn results in its authors not being recognized as philosophers either. Once the exclusion of these philosophers has been acknowledged and its possible causes examined, we are now in a position to propose strategies for their recovery. This will be further developed in the following section.

2. Toward the recovery of Brazilian women philosophers: some strategies

In this paper, we argue that, among other possible actions, at least two are necessary for recovering the Brazilian women philosophers. The first consists in the development of a prior metaphilosophical discussion that allows for the problematization and revaluation of the

criteria commonly used to define what is recognized as philosophical. This approach is necessary both to make explicit the assumptions underlying such criteria and to understand how they may function as mechanisms of exclusion. This is one of the steps needed so that, in the end, we can better identify and understand the philosophical character of these women philosophers' intellectual production. We understand metaphilosophy as being "the branch of philosophy that asks what philosophy is, how it should be done and why we should do it" (Overgaard, Gilbert & Burwood, 2013, p. vii).

Thus, metaphilosophy asks questions such as: what is philosophy? What are the criteria for considering someone a philosopher? What characterizes a problem as philosophical? What topics can be philosophical? How is philosophy done? Through which methods? What are the possible spaces for philosophical discourse production? How is philosophy published and disseminated? What textual genres can be philosophical? Must philosophy necessarily deal with objects in abstract and universal terms? What kind of abstraction and universality is that? What do these categories encompass? Are there concrete forms of oppression that cut across all these concepts and boundaries? We do not intend to offer definitive answers to all these questions, but it is around them that we orient our inquiry.

To discuss philosophical criteria and methods is to engage in a metaphilosophical reflection, a field admittedly marked by divergences and the absence of consensual definitions. We know that, to this day, there is no exact definition of what philosophy is or how it should be done. There have been some attempts, such as those found in the classical analytic and continental traditions. There are also those who argue that a precise and timeless definition is not even desirable. Cabrera (2013, p. 21-25) is one of the figures in this debate in Brazil who strongly advocates for a plural perspective on philosophizing. On the other hand, the lack of consensus on the concept of philosophy cannot constitute an impediment to working with it. Of course, this does not mean that the search for precise definitions is irrelevant or unnecessary, as that would run counter to one of philosophy's own activities. What we mean is that it is possible and acceptable within philosophical practice to proceed from provisional definitions, since these concepts may gain clarity as the debate advances.

In this way, we argue that one possible initial solution would be to adopt a provisional definition, such as the one proposed by Pugliese (2022, p. 286), who understands philosophy as a rational exercise concerning questions related to the foundations of things. Broad

definitions like this may serve as a kind of “umbrella”, capable of encompassing different themes, traditions, and philosophical styles, including those developed outside of European standards or even outside academia itself.

This move is necessary in the context of canon formation because, as we have already pointed out, this work is not limited to merely rescuing their names, but also involves examining how their works can be philosophically interpreted. Shapiro (2024, p. 35-36) argues along similar lines when she states that it is not enough to find their names and works; we must also read and understand what is *philosophically significant* in them. The point is, for that, we need at least a minimal criterion – although we know it may seem problematic. We may ask to what extent our insistence on a definition continues to generate exclusion, that is, to what extent it can operate in a way that does not reject works that do not fit within it. However, we may interpret the definition provided above as not necessarily exhaustive and definitive, but rather as initial, with the intention of being as open, receptive, and plural as possible.

We also argue that the availability of such a criterion, nevertheless, must be accompanied by a second step: the effort to acknowledge these many philosophies on *their own terms*. This means affirming that it is not enough to establish criteria without taking into account the historical, geographical, social, and institutional conditions in which the works were produced. Wuensch (2015) makes a similar point, arguing that we must seek expanded categories of analysis that are capable of revealing these women thinkers (p. 123-133). Otherwise, we risk interpreting them in unjust and anachronistic ways. Pugliese puts the point as follows:

There is a profound injustice in the fact that we consider the foundational landmarks of philosophy in Brazil to be tied to the production that took place in European universities throughout the 16th century, to participation in Jesuit seminars and schools in the 17th and 18th centuries, to the courses offered by law schools, and to engagement in academic debate within the few institutions of higher education in the 19th century, which were closed to women. If we take these exclusionary landmarks focused on academic debate centered on the interpretation and commentary of classical authors as our starting point, then it is not even possible to consider as philosophical the works published by women of that time. In this way, they are left out by the criterion of demarcation, and not because of the philosophical interest of what they did or did not produce (2022, p. 285-286).

Pugliese points out that if we consider these highly restrictive historical and institutional criteria in determining what counts as philosophy, the intellectual production of

Brazilian women will be automatically discarded. Therefore, this discussion also involves a problematization of dominant paradigms that determine which are the (1) valid *objects* of philosophical inquiry, that privilege (2) certain *genres* of philosophical production (3) in certain *spaces*. We know that these paradigms are represented by a philosophy concerned with relatively specific problems, written in treatises, carried out in academic settings, formally debated among peers, and claiming universality, that is, by a traditionally European philosophy that standardized and demarcated a supposedly “correct” way of doing philosophy.

We can draw on Shapiro (2024) to talk about the first point. She problematizes the centrality that certain philosophical objects hold in the history of philosophy and their relationship to the canonization of certain male philosophers. More specifically, she argues that this process is not merely due to the intrinsic value of their ideas, but above all because it is understood that they offered relevant answers to philosophical problems considered fundamental. Shapiro cites some that became classics in metaphysics and epistemology, e.g., the essence of substances and the justification of beliefs (p. 31). When we treat such problems as more than central, but as practically mandatory in philosophy, we generate a kind of fixed agenda that determines what deserves to be discussed and valued. In other words, what is understood as philosophy becomes tied to the repetition and preservation of a traditional agenda which, in turn, unfolds into exclusionary criteria.

As for the second point, we can draw on Detlefsen (2023). She argues that philosophical genres have always been in constant flux throughout history even within the European tradition. Although it is true that today formats such as books and papers prevail, especially in Western departments, they do not exhaust the possibilities of philosophy. Detlefsen calls attention to the case of women philosophers whose work often deviates from traditional forms of publication and states that this occurred, in part, due to (1) *objective* reasons, such as limited access to or poor quality of education available to them, and (2) *subjective* reasons, tied to experiences of epistemic injustice based on gender. Nevertheless, the fact remains that they were engaged in philosophical questions and, for that reason, their works should be recognized as such (2023, p. 41-42). These efforts to rethink objects and genres of publication in the revision of the canon prove especially relevant in the case of Brazilian women. This is because, as discussed, they often addressed feminist topics and

broader political questions concerning women, issues commonly viewed as non-philosophical, and published in textual formats likewise considered “non-standard” or “non-traditional”.

Even so, the erasure of Brazilian women philosophers cannot be explained solely by thematic or stylistic factors, as even those appear to be intertwined with a complex network of oppressions, especially gendered and colonial ones. In other words, questions of theme and textual style do not necessarily operate in isolation, but are also entangled with these forms of oppression. We can illustrate this connection with two examples: Rousseau (2022) [1762] wrote about education and, despite his openly problematic theses (Wollstonecraft, 2016 [1792]), his work was never excluded from the field of philosophy; on the other hand, Nísia Floresta (2023) [1853], who also dedicated herself both in theory and in practice to educational issues, still does not receive equivalent recognition.¹⁰ Similarly, Stuart Mill (2010) [1861] addressed slavery and received full philosophical recognition, whereas Maria Firmina dos Reis (2018) [1859], who wrote on the same subject, continues to be read predominantly within the field of literature.

It is true that the selection of themes and authors is arbitrary, but it serves to raise the suspicion that the criteria for philosophical validation may also be conditioned by *who* is speaking and from *where*. This is why the argument that part of the reason women philosophers were excluded is that the philosophical questions they addressed were not part of the canonical agenda, as suggested by Shapiro (2024, p. 40), does not fully hold. Even if that may have been the case at certain times, these few examples are enough to show that, even when such questions were part of the mainstream philosophical agenda, since having already been addressed by canonical philosophers, women, in doing the same, were still not recognized as philosophers, nor were their works recognized as philosophy.

The third point, concerning spaces of discursive production, also involves an unequal condition, and for that reason, we can mention two equally illustrative and contrasting examples: the formation of intellectual circles and the possibility of access to formal educational institutions. European women philosophers attended universities, relied on the work of already established philosophers, and remained in dialogue with their peers, such as

¹⁰ The recovery and study of Nísia Floresta in philosophy is one of the most significant recent examples, as shown in the works of Brazilian philosophers Margutti (2019), Pugliese (2021, 2022, 2022a, 2023, 2023a, 2024) e Secco & Pugliese (2024). Although Lima Duarte comes from the field of literature, her research also engages with Nísia Floresta’s thought (2008).

du Châtelet, Bohemia, Conway, and von Druskowitz. Although also marginalized in the canon, they were in contact with Voltaire, Kant, Descartes, Leibniz, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.

Now, when we look at philosophy in Brazil, we see that the scenario is not the same. We can cite, among other reasons, two in particular. First, because Brazilian women were only officially allowed to access universities starting in 1879 (Brasil, 1879; Wuensch, 2015). Second, because there is no evidence of the existence of a proper and cohesive philosophical circle in Brazil (Prado Jr., 2023, p. 17-18), much less one involving women. Examples such as the correspondence between Nísia Floresta and Auguste Comte (Margutti, 2020, p. 521) and the 19th-century Brazilian “*mini-querelle des femmes*” (Pugliese apud Pallares-Burke, 2022, p. 301) may be exceptions. However, as far as it is known, it seems that these dialogues occurred sporadically and somewhat fragmentarily.

These examples and comparisons show us that contextual differences require that the criteria for philosophical analysis take into account the particularities of each reality. For by ignoring them, we adopt perspectives that overlook the specificities of thought developed outside the European circle, ultimately delegitimizing the philosophy generated within the core of our own sociohistorical condition. Philosophy does not exist only when it conforms to the academic standards established by European ethnocentrism (Margutti, 2018, p. 228). That is why adopting a more attentive perspective and granting Brazilian philosophical production the same dignity we recognize in European thinkers is essential if we truly want to overcome not only the erasure of women, but also the colonialism still present in Brazilian philosophy today (Haddock-Lobo, 2016).

Margutti’s proposal (2018) moves precisely in this direction. The author proposes a revision of philosophy produced in Brazil from a descolonial perspective, which implies thinking in terms of criteria suited to the Brazilian reality, rather than the European one (p. 230). In discussing the panorama of colonization in Brazil, Margutti identifies three forms of colonization: of *space*, of *time*, and of *thought*. The first refers to the epistemological prejudice generated by a geographic marker: while the European thinking subject was recognized as such, the colonized subject was not. The second refers to the idea of a supposed evolutionary linearity, in which Indigenous peoples were seen as representatives of a primitive past, whereas Europeans were associated with historical maturity and a prosperous future. The third refers to the imposition of European categories as the exclusive standard of

understanding, resulting in the internalization of an ethnocentric worldview by the colonized themselves, who began to evaluate themselves according to that vision (p. 231-232).

Margutti proposes adopting a principle of *philosophical tolerance*, according to which a philosophical work should be evaluated based on criteria appropriate to the specific context of its emergence, not on Eurocentric criteria. This principle would operate with a *principle of relativity*, understood as the recognition that our ways of relating to the world and to others are conditioned by specific causes. From this, it is acknowledged that different cultures, in different historical moments, produce different cultural artifacts – including philosophy – which take on varied forms depending on the context in which they are developed (p. 233).

To that end, two practical actions would be necessary: first, the revaluation of Brazilian philosophical historiography in order to reveal its limitations and the prejudices caused by colonization. This would require a more flexible understanding of the concept of philosophy capable of recognizing reflections on Brazilian reality as philosophical, even if they do not meet European criteria for what does or does not count as philosophy (p. 233-234). Second, the elimination of the “invisibility that prevents the recognition of more original Brazilian thinkers,” which must be addressed through a more attentive and unbiased reading that ultimately enables deeper and more appreciative investigations of our Brazilian philosophers (p. 234).

It is possible to see that Margutti’s proposal aligns closely with ours, particularly in its shared defense of expanding the concept of philosophy. One of the aims of articulating this proposal in these terms is precisely to avoid the risk of falling into an “extreme relativism,” as the author himself warns (p. 233), which would result in the impossibility of establishing any form of philosophical evaluation. In this way, the result is not the emptying of the concept, but an expansion that can make room for multiple philosophies that exist at the margins. This is exactly the strategy we presented and defended here.

3. Further considerations

Nevertheless, we can find a counterpoint to our argument in Dotson (2012). In questioning whether philosophy is capable of understanding “diverse people from diverse contexts and on diverse topics”, the author answers negatively, because there is a limitation in philosophical theorizing due to what she calls the “culture of justification.” This culture of

justification would be a demand to prove, according to traditional and historically normative standards, that a given work is, in fact, philosophical. The problem for Dotson is that the very concept of philosophy is “constricted, oppressive, and ethnocentric” and, for that reason, it excludes and oppresses diverse people and perspectives, in which “diverse” includes “not only racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, and ability diversity, but to also include diverse approaches to philosophy, Eastern, applied, engaged, fieldwork, field, public, experimental, literary approaches” (2012, p. 5).

Therefore, the author is not concerned with providing possible answers to the question in the paper’s title, “how is this paper philosophy?”, but rather with drawing attention to the fact that this question is symptomatic of an exclusionary culture, one that demands legitimation based on rigid and standardized criteria. These criteria are not neutral: they reflect a restrictive view of what counts as philosophy and exclude alternative, innovative, or marginalized approaches. In other words, this culture values adherence to established models more than openness to a plurality of philosophical forms. As a consequence, forms that do not fit these models are not recognized as philosophical.

Dotson explains that the culture of justification has three symptoms: “1) manifest value placed on legitimation narratives along with a presumption of 2) commonly-held, 3) univocally relevant justifying norms” (2012, p. 8). That is, for something to be considered philosophy, it must conform to certain criteria that determine which narratives can or cannot be legitimized as philosophical. One of the problems pointed out by Dotson is that this framing depends on the norms considered relevant by whoever poses the question “how is this paper philosophy?”. In other words, it depends on the value assigned to them. Furthermore, it requires that the work presented demonstrate how it conforms to norms that, although not always explicit, are presumed to be universally accepted and necessary for any philosophical undertaking (2012, p. 8-11).

Because of the fact this results in exclusion, Dotson proposes that legitimation is “one kind of vetting process among many” (2012, p. 5) and/or should be replaced by what she calls a “culture of praxis” (p. 6) and/or “may begin with a shift from the values upheld in a culture of justification to values upheld in a culture of praxis” (p. 16). We are using the expression “and/or” here because, in our view, Dotson does not make it entirely clear whether she is

advocating for adding another kind of evaluative process (the culture of praxis) or arguing for a transition and eventual overcoming of legitimation as a mode of evaluation.

The culture of praxis would have two characteristics: first, “value placed on seeking issues and circumstances pertinent to our living, where one maintains a healthy appreciation for the differing issues that will emerge as pertinent among different populations” and, second, “recognition and encouragement of multiple canons and multiple ways of understanding disciplinary validation” (2012, p. 17).¹¹ Dotson states that this proposal is not another method of justification – which would imply legitimating norms – but rather validation. The author thus establishes a difference between philosophical *legitimation* and *validation*: the former must align with a narrative already legitimized by norms, and the latter with its contribution to philosophy. Thus, one would no longer be required to justify one’s work based on a fixed set of justificatory norms, but rather based on the identification of a specific *contribution* to philosophy, whether through engagement with current philosophical debates, in dialogue with other fields of knowledge, or by addressing other concrete, historical, and social experiences that surround us (2012, p. 18).

Dotson’s paper addresses other aspects that would merit further analysis; however, those necessary for our discussion have already been presented. Indeed, we understand and agree with the main points she raises: that other criteria of philosophical validation are important, and that what has traditionally been labeled as philosophy is in fact constituted by exclusionary assumptions. Nonetheless, it seems that even then we are, ultimately, brought back to the necessity of referring to the concept of philosophy, even when we focus on “validation” rather than “legitimation,” as she proposes as the better path. And in that sense, something must still be philosophy. Otherwise, we are left with no criteria at all. What we propose in this paper is to investigate and reveal the assumptions that underlie what philosophy is and the origins of the answers to that question, so that, from there, it becomes possible to *transform* the criteria, not discard them entirely. What we aim for is that this

¹¹ Like Waithe (2015) and Hagengruber (2015), we do not agree with the suggestion of formulating “multiple canons,” as this could imply advocating for the creation of a separate canon of women philosophers, and there is no reason to separate them from the general history of philosophy. The history of philosophy is built upon dialogues among authors, traditions, and different periods. What we advocate throughout this work is the integration of women philosophers into the general historical narrative of the discipline.

transformation leads to a conceptual expansion and openness capable of embracing other, new, and diverse figures, texts, contexts, and geographies that produce philosophy.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that the legitimation of nineteenth-century Brazilian women philosophers faces some specific challenges. In the broader background lies the problematic status of philosophy produced in Brazil, especially in the pre-institutionalization period, whose legitimacy remains questioned. There is also the factor of the topics addressed, many considered peripheral or non-philosophical, such as women's rights, education, abolitionism, often developed through equally unconventional textual genres, such as pamphlets, novels, chronicles, and newspaper publications. Added to this are issues of gender and geographic location, which have acted both as exclusionary factors in themselves and as objective barriers to formal education. In other words, we argued that, for Brazilian women philosophers, the absence of legitimacy of Brazilian philosophy, lack of insertion in established intellectual networks, limited access to academic training and prestigious institutions, as well as the historical marginalization of thought produced outside the European circle, constitute additional layers of exclusion that further hinder their legitimation within the philosophical canon.

Given this, we advocate the need to establish new methodological criteria constructed from at least two interrelated attitudes. First, a metaphilosophical reflection that problematizes what is traditionally legitimized as philosophy, including objects of investigation, methods employed, writing genres, publication formats, and other institutional criteria that delimit what counts as philosophical. Second, a revaluation of the criteria for the philosophical interpretation of the works produced by these women, so that these criteria are fairer and more consistent with the socio-historical reality of Brazil at the time they produced their works. This revaluation requires taking into account issues of gender and colonial oppression because it is from this perspective that we construct criteria capable of guaranteeing recognition of philosophies produced by certain agents, in specific historical contexts and periods, and outside the European circle. Insisting on framing them according to external parameters perpetuates not only an injustice but also an anachronism that continues to hinder full recognition of their contributions.

At the end, we also analyze a possible objection to our argument, formulated by Dotson, who criticizes the search for legitimation criteria because it continues to cause exclusion. We agree that as long as legitimation operates solely according to the standards of the hegemonic canon – European, white, male, heterosexual, debated among peers, written in treatises, on specific topics, in university environments, etc. –, it will be exclusionary and, therefore, problematic. But this does not mean that the practice of justifying, evaluating, or recognizing intellectual productions as philosophy according to certain criteria should be abolished; rather, it must be methodologically restructured. It is precisely this revaluation that we advocate here, which, according to our understanding, must be undertaken through a metaphilosophical reflection that takes into account contextual and structural issues of oppression. The expected result is a broader, more diverse, and inclusive understanding of what is meant by philosophy and related issues so that, finally, many philosophies may be recognized as such – philosophies made by women, from the Global South, under adverse sociohistorical conditions, and with other characteristics already mentioned.

At first glance, the proposal to adopt a broader definition of philosophy and, at the same time, to interpret Brazilian women philosophers on their own terms might appear contradictory. However, we view these strategies as functioning on different levels: the former serves as an initial conceptual shift that allows these works to be taken seriously within philosophy; the latter guides the methodological work by understanding their contributions within their specific contexts (such as historical and geographical) and forms (such as the genres and methods) of production. A general definition makes inclusion possible; contextual interpretation ensures it is done justly. Thus, rather than opposing each other, these strategies can be understood as complementary.

As became clear in the paper, we did not develop a specific or systematized method for including Brazilian women philosophers in the canon. The paper is an introduction to the debate, which justifies, for example, the mention of certain thinkers without in-depth analysis, as well as the absence of a more precise historical and temporal delimitation, particularly in the initial stages. The reasons for our scope were discussed in the second section of the paper. We recognize that such decisions may be seen as methodologically problematic. However, our goal was not abstract theorizing, but rather to present strategies that, although general, could

encompass the largest possible number of women whose work gravitated around philosophy but were not named as such.

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