

UCLA

CSW Update Newsletter

Title

Avoiding Maternity: Reproductive Practices in 1930s Rio de Janeiro

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/511391vz>

Author

Roth, Cassia Paigen

Publication Date

2011

Peer reviewed

Avoiding Maternity

Reproductive Practices in 1930s Rio de Janeiro

AT TWENTY MINUTES TO NINE on the morning of December 13, 1932, garbage collector Tiago Dias finished his daily trash route in the Rio Comprido neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Mr. Dias inspected his cart for overflow trash, and, in doing so, he noticed a small but heavy object wrapped in yellowed newspapers amid the rubbish. Upon unwrapping the item, Mr. Dias found a dead infant swaddled in an old blue dress. The ninth district police station, which held jurisdiction over the neighborhood in question, dispatched a police commissioner to the scene who took the infant to the Institute of Legal Medicine. Details are unknown as to how the police knew to

question Rita dos Santos, a young, black native of Minas Gerais who worked as a domestic servant for a family in the neighborhood. The only clue is in the investigation's final report, when the district's police chief wrote that due to the high probability of a crime and "after various diligences, the mother of the infant was discovered."¹

1. Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Pretoria do Rio de Janeiro, 3 (6Z), N. 16784 (1933). Hereafter cited as BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). All deponents' names have been changed. I transcribed this entire document and then translated it to English. In 1940, the Lisbon Academy of Sciences standardized Portuguese spelling, adopted in Brazil in 1943. Before that time, spelling of words and proper names varied. I use the translated version in the text and cite the written text in the footnotes. I stay true to the spelling variations and mistakes in the documents, marked with [sic]. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

An autopsy of the infant occurred three days after its discovery, on December 16, 1932. Doctors cited cause of death as manual strangulation.² While doctors had concrete evidence of an infanticide, police investigators did not know of this fact at the time of Rita's testimony. On December 31, 1932 Rita admitted to giving birth to a

2. The process of 'dosimásia hidrostática pulmonar,' "would say if the infant breathed after birth, or that it would prove that it had been born alive." (95) "For the realization of the exam, it would be necessary that the body of the 'newborn' was not in an advanced stage of decomposition. If, due to the lack of lungs, this exam was not able to occur, it would be difficult to prove the crime of infanticide" Roselane Neckel, Joana Maria Pedro, Vanderlei Machado, Eliana Izabel Hawerth, "Aborto e Infanticídio nos Códigos Penais e nos Processos Judiciais: A Pedagogia de Condutas Femininas," in *Práticas Proibidas: Práticas Costumeiras de Aborto e Infanticídio no Século XX*, Joana Maria Pedro, ed. (Florianópolis: Cidade Futura, 2003), 95.

stillborn infant on December 13: “she felt that she was expelling some voluminous thing through her vagina...and on the floor fell an infant that the witness did not feel move or cry, it seemed to not be alive.”³ Presuming the child was dead Rita placed the infant in the trash. After performing a routine medical (pelvic) exam that ruled out induced abortion on January 2, 1933, the police decided not to take Rita into custody. While the police did not officially accuse Rita of a crime, after her questioning she did not return to her job. Instead, she took up residence at a boarding house. On January 8, 1933 at seven o’clock in the morning, Rita dos Santos committed suicide by lighting her dress on fire. The official cause of her death was cited as general second- and third-degree burns.

Bureaucratic delays may explain the lag occurring between the date of the infant autopsy and its inclusion into the investigation, but, for whatever reason, the infant’s autopsy was not included in the police report until after Rita’s suicide. The final report concludes: “because there still had not been certainty of the existence of infanticide, she [Rita] was let go under supervi-

3. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...sentia que estava expelindo uma qualquer coisa volumosa pela vagina; que sair do vaso, abaixou-se e, no chão, cair uma criança que a depoente não sentia mecher [sic] nem chorou, parecendo não estar viva.”

sion, being put up in 77 Rua da Estrella [sic]. There, possibly touched by remorse for the crime committed, the same committed suicide, setting fire to her dresses.”⁴ The police chief’s words cannot be taken at face value, however, as we do not know whether she killed herself out of ‘remorse.’ Nevertheless, Rita dos Santos confronted serious choices in her young life without the education, support, or resources to make fully informed decisions.

While this case may seem like an extreme example of birth control methods in 1930s Brazil, infanticide was a method that women were familiar with and employed with some frequency. In a brief look at police investigations in the city of Rio de Janeiro from 1900 to 1933, I discovered fourteen criminal investigations of infanticide, thirty-three criminal investigations of appearance of a fetus,⁵ and five investigations of other terms referring to infanticide.⁵

4. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...já por que ainda não houvesse a certêsa [sic] da existencia [sic] do infanticidio [sic] foi ela posta em liberdade, sob vigilancia [sic], recebendo acolhida na casa n. 77 da rua da Estrella [sic]. Ali [sic], possivelmente tangida pelo remorso do crime que praticou, a mesma suicidou-se incendiando as vestes no dia 11 de Janeiro proximo [sic]...” The police chief erroneously writes that Rita dos Santos committed suicide on January 11, 1933. This was the day the information arrived at the police station. The autopsy and obituary both read January 8, 1933.

5. For infanticide see: BR AN, RIO 0I.2872 (1902); BR AN, RIO T8.1773 (1905); BR AN, RIO 7H.671 (1906); BR AN, RIO 7H.821 (1907); BR AN, RIO T8.2480 (1907); BR AN, RIO CS.237 (1908); BR AN, RIO T8.2697 (1908); BR AN, RIO 7E.1626 (1908); BR AN, RIO CS.488 (1910); BR AN,

My goal here is not to employ quantitative methods to look at the frequency of infanticide as a birth control method. Rather, I hope to situate the practice of infanticide—often overlooked in the scholarship on demographics, population politics, sexuality, and the family—within the social and political changes of the period. Specifically, this case study looks at the criminal investigation of Rita dos Santos in relation to the economic instability inherent in domestic servitude and the invasive nature, both physically and emotionally, of police investigations of infanticide. To understand her decisions, we must consider Rita’s

RIO MW.2634 (1910); BR AN, RIO CR.674 (1912); BR AN, RIO 6Z.105 (1912); BR AN, RIO CS.2047 (1917); BR AN, RIO 6Z.19277 (1936); For ‘appearance of fetus’ see: BR AN, RIO 7C.306 (1900); BR AN, RIO 0R.1578 (1901); BR AN, RIO 0R.1647 (1901); BR AN, RIO 7C.495 (1902); BR AN, RIO MW.737 (1903); BR AN, RIO T7.403 (1904); BR AN, RIO T8.1408 (1904); BR AN, RIO T8.1986 (1906); BR AN, RIO 0R.4460 (1906); BR AN, RIO MW.2162 (1908); BR AN, RIO MW.1852 (1908); BR AN, RIO T8.2682 (1908); BR AN, RIO T8.2701 (1908); BR AN, RIO T8.2727 (1908); BR AN, RIO T7.809 (1908); BR AN, RIO T7.0837 (1908); BR AN, RIO CS.359 (1909); BR AN, RIO MW.2273 (1909); BR AN, RIO 7G.1172 (1909); BR AN, RIO T7.1142 (1909); BR AN, RIO T8.3239 (1909); BR AN, RIO T8. 3254 (1909); BR AN, RIO T8.3280 (1909); BR AN, RIO 7G.1311 (1910); BR AN, RIO 0R.7729 (1910); BR AN, RIO T8.3834 (1911); BR AN, RIO 0R.8181 (1911); BR AN, RIO CR.654 (1912); BR AN, RIO 72.901 (1912); BR AN, RIO 72.1043 (1914); BR AN, RIO 72.1407 (1915); BR AN, RIO CS.2819 (1919); BR AN, RIO 70.1074 (1919); For investigations employing a variation on the terms above, including ‘Concealment of Fetus’ and ‘Fetus’ see: BR AN, RIO MW.440 (1902); BR AN, RIO CS.1391 (1907); BR AN, RIO CS.2225 (1912); BR AN, RIO 72.1412 (1915); BR AN, RIO CS.6819 (1933). Maria Pedro also finds the practice of ‘dumping fetuses’ common in early-twentieth-century Florianópolis. “Aborto e Infanticidio: Práticas Muito Antigas,” in *Práticas Proibidas*, 43.

individual agency in relation to the larger structural forces that governed decision-making.

As many scholars note, the social, economic, and political upheaval of 1930s Rio de Janeiro is crucial to understanding simultaneous transformations in gender and race relations. In 1930, the reverberations from the Great Depression were felt throughout Brazil. Rural to urban migration, labor unrest, and political instability caused elites to feel threatened by inevitable socioeconomic change. Women's roles—as laborers, mothers, wives, and daughters—also changed. To many elite men, 'the modern woman' who delayed marriage, worked outside the home, and leisured in public space, was a destabilizing social force.⁶ These men saw traditional women as representing a certain moral stability, one which would preserve a hierarchal social order based on the patriarchal family.⁷ Women's chastity, then, was important in symbolic terms, and a sexual double standard existed that required women remain virgins until mar-

6. Susan K. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1914-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2.

7. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy*, 3, 5; and June Hahner, *Emancipating the Female Sex: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Brazil, 1850-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 75. See also, Joana Maria Pedro, ed. *Práticas Proibidas*.

riage. Chastity also held economic importance. Sueann Caulfield argues that men and women across social and racial divides saw virginity as crucial social capital to secure a good marriage. It provided women with economic stability and men with legitimate heirs. While scholars have traced the role of sex and honor in a changing patriarchal system, few historians have explored the social implications of unwanted pregnancy. It would be three decades before the Pill became widely available in Brazil, and birth control methods were less preventative and more reactive. In other words, abortion, infanticide, and child abandonment served as retroactive methods of controlling fertility. All three practices were illegal in the 1890 Penal Code, in effect when police questioned Rita dos Santos.⁸

The Case of Rita dos Santos

In 1930 Rita dos Santos migrated alone to Rio de Janeiro from the state of Minas Gerais. Working in several different homes in the city as a domestic servant, she eventually ended up under the employment of Adelia Reich, herself an immigrant from Argentina.⁹ It was at Rita's first place

8. *Ibid.*, 37. Only infanticide, and not child abandonment, was criminalized in the 1830 Penal Code.

9. Interestingly enough, every witness in the case immi-

grated to Rio de Janeiro from other Brazilian states in Brazil or other countries. Rita and the trash collector Tiago Dias both migrated from Minas Gerais, a state bordering Rio de Janeiro to the northwest. Adelia Reich emigrated from Buenos Aires, while her mother was originally from Poland and had arrived in Rio by way of Buenos Aires. Finally, the friend who had accompanied Tiago on his trash route that fateful morning was from Portugal. A simple glance at the persons involved with the case highlights the changing demographic nature of 1930s Rio de Janeiro.

10. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). "...e come ele teve muitos contactos carnisais, fora de casa, nos matos proximos [sic]..."

11. *In Defense of Honor*, 75-6.

grated to Rio de Janeiro from other Brazilian states in Brazil or other countries. Rita and the trash collector Tiago Dias both migrated from Minas Gerais, a state bordering Rio de Janeiro to the northwest. Adelia Reich emigrated from Buenos Aires, while her mother was originally from Poland and had arrived in Rio by way of Buenos Aires. Finally, the friend who had accompanied Tiago on his trash route that fateful morning was from Portugal. A simple glance at the persons involved with the case highlights the changing demographic nature of 1930s Rio de Janeiro.

10. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). "...e come ele teve muitos contactos carnisais, fora de casa, nos matos proximos [sic]..."

11. *In Defense of Honor*, 75-6.

been discharged from the military police for numerous absences.”¹² By the time Rita gave birth, she had not seen Moreno in four months.

Rita mentions no family or friends in Rio de Janeiro. Single, young, and alone, Rita could not rely on her absent boyfriend or distant family to support her during and after a pregnancy. The absence of family had economic repercussions. In her discussion of deflowering cases that ended in pregnancy (twenty six percent), Caulfield argues men could easily shun their responsibilities as fathers:

Unless she were living ‘in concubinage’ with the father or could prove that he had sequestered her when the child was conceived, a woman and her children born out of wedlock had no way of obtaining material assistance from a father who refused to legally recognize his paternity in writing...¹³

There was no more permanent manner to damage one’s honor—and ability to marry—as having a child. It was physical evidence of one’s moral transgressions. More importantly, however, single mothers

12. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...soube que o mesmo tinha sido excluído [sic] da Polícia Militar porque havia faltado muito ao serviço...”

13. *In Defense of Honor*, 112.

faced serious economic barriers, as they could not legally press the fathers for child support. Rita was in one such precarious position, as she had no family to economically support her.

Domestic Servants

Scholars have noted the dismal employment conditions black and mulata women faced after the abolition of slavery in urban centers across Brazil. June Hahner argues that employment opportunities for black women were strikingly similar both before and after abolition. Women labored as maids, cooks, nursemaids, unlicensed vendors, laundresses, and prostitutes as slaves and free laborers.¹⁴ Sandra Lauderdale Graham cites that Brazil’s high manumission rates during slavery meant that slaves and freed blacks labored alongside each other in similar tasks. During the late-Imperial and early-Republican periods, urban black women most often worked as maids or wet-nurses inside upper-class homes.¹⁵ Forty-four years after abolition, work circumstances had not changed. Rita worked as an unskilled

14. *Emancipating the Female Sex*, 91.

15. *House and Street: The Domestic World of Servants and Masters in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 5, 31-36.

worker in middle-class homes. She was not guaranteed workers’ rights, as informal domestic servitude fell outside the purview of labor unions.¹⁶ The instability inherent in the life of a domestic servant, especially a young, single, black woman is clear. Loss of a job meant loss of one’s livelihood.

From Rita’s various jobs, it seems that she found new employment somewhat easily. Rita’s testimony does not tell us if having a child would have cost Rita her job. Rita says, “that with fear of her bosses knowing that she was a mother” she wrapped her child in an old dress and placed it in the trash.¹⁷ The case does not tell us the actions Rita’s employer, Adelia Reich took after the infanticide occurred, but after Rita testified to the police, she stopped residing at her employer’s home.

Scholars studying these issues in other areas of Brazil have found that most women charged with the crimes of infanticide held a social position similar to that

16. As Susan K. Besse writes, “Not only did they [domestic servants] suffer from a lack of legal protections, very low pay, and exploitative working conditions, but the nature of their work reinforced disempowering stereotypes of female nature,” *Restructuring Patriarchy*, 8, 150. For São Paulo see, Joel Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men: São Paulo and the Rise of Brazil’s Industrial Working Class, 1900-1955* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

17. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...que a declarante com receio de que seus patrões soubessem que ela tinha sido mãe...”

of Rita. That is, these women “were widowed, single, born or raised in rural areas, or lived in their bosses’ homes in urban areas.”¹⁸ Caulfield argues that, “...it was extremely difficult for a young woman to support a family alone. Many women lost their jobs when they became pregnant and continued living with their parents, with or without the fathers of their children.”¹⁹ Were women with support networks more likely to keep their child? Did domestic servants resort to infanticide and abortion at higher rates than other women? Did job categories correlate with reproductive choice?²⁰ Education, race, and support networks played important roles, and these questions require more study.

18. “Aborto e Infanticídio: Práticas muito Antigas,” in *Práticas Proibidas*, 53.

19. Interestingly enough, Caulfield finds that mothers, and not fathers, usually instigated deflowering accusations against their daughters’ lovers. According to Caulfield, “The difficulties of single parenthood were all too familiar for many of the girls’ mothers, which explains in large part the urgency of mothers’ attempts to force the deflowerers to marry their daughters. In *Defense of Honor*, 135.

20. In Sueann Caulfield’s work, unemployed women filed the most deflowering petitions, at 39 percent. Domestic servants came next with 37 percent. More secure jobs such as factory workers, commerce workers, or seamstresses comprised a much smaller percentage of complaints. White women had the highest number of complaints with parda women at the second highest and black women last. In *Defense of Honor*, 157-159.

Public Castigation, Invasive Exams, and Legal Proceedings

The 1890 Penal Code clearly punished infanticide by imprisonment. Article 298 of the code cited official punishment as follows:

*To kill a newborn, this being, an infant in the first seven days of life, employing direct and active methods, denying the victim the necessary care for the maintenance of life and the impeding of its death: Punishment – imprisonment for six to twenty-four years. Only exception: If the crime was perpetrated by the mother to hide her own dishonor: Punishment – imprisonment from three to nine years.*²¹

Honor had a profound influence on the severity of criminal punishment. If a woman committed infanticide “to hide her own dishonor,” she faced a greatly reduced prison sentence. It is beyond the scope of this paper to tease out the meaning of honor in relation to criminal punishment and reproductive control.²² Nevertheless, a strict reading of the law shows that morality, and not the crime itself, was punished,

21. José Henrique Pirangelli, *Códigos Penais do Brasil: Evolução Histórica* (Bauru: Ed. Javoli, 1980), 303. Quoted in Joana Maria Pedro, ed. *Práticas Proibidas*, 104.

22. For an interesting discussion of this topic in relation to the legal discourse in deflowering cases, see Sueann Caulfield, *In Defense of Honor*, esp. 108-112.

as the law implied that infanticide committed in the name of honor was a lesser offense than one committed without honorable motives.²³

Rita does not mention honor in her testimony, only that she feared her employers would find out she had given birth. In fact, Rita’s testimony implies the opposite.

“That not being a virgin anymore, the deponent, having been deflowered in Minas Gerais by her boyfriend there whose name she does not know anymore, the deponent gave herself to the soldier Márcio Moreno.”²⁴ Rita dos Santos knew how to read, but did she know the intricacies of the law in regards to infanticide and honor at the time of her initial testimony? If Rita had had the support of family who understood the importance of honor in public cases of sexual activity, would she have answered differently?

Rita’s actions were in response to the world in which she was living. In this sense, public opinion served as another form of punishment. According to Rita, public knowledge about and judgment of her pregnancy stopped her from admitting to her actions. For example, after placing the infant in the trash, Rita had gone back to bed. The following day, she went about her work as usual. When “she saw the infant

23. Neckel, Pedro, Machado, and Hawerth, “Aborto e Infanticídio nos Códigos Penais,” 92.

24. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...que não sendo mais donzela a declarante, por ter sido deflorada em Minas Gerais por um seu ese [sic] namorado que não mais sabe o nome, a declarante entregou-se ao soldado Márcio Moreno...”

being withdrawn from the trash cart...she had the wish to say that it had been her who had had the child, something she did not do with fear of the scandal that would involve her name.”²⁵ Rita herself contributed to this public castigation. In Adelia Rech’s testimony, Adelia mentions Rita’s comments on the morning the infant was found in the trashcan: “Rita was at her side and even commented on the courage of the mother that had committed that perversity.”²⁶ Adelia’s mother, Carmen, corroborates this story in her account of the morning. “Everybody in the street commented on the case, [and] Rita declared that she did not know how a mother could do such a thing as that [and] that for the witness [Carmen] the revelation that the mother of the infant in the trash was Rita came as a surprise.”²⁷

We can determine two points from this testimony. To begin with, whether or not Rita actually felt that this act was a ‘perversity,’ she understood that social opinion did. Scholars studying the

25. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...e no dia seguinte presenciou a retirada da criança da corroça de lixo, tendo vontade de dizer que fôra [sic] ela que tivera tal filho, o que não fez, com receio do escandalo [sic] envolveria seu nome.”

26. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “[Rita] estava a seu lado e ainda comentou a coragem dam ãe que tinha cometido aquela perversidade”

27. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...todos na rua comentaram o caso, Rita declarou que nnao sabia como podia uma mãe fazer uma cousa d’aquela que para a depoente foi uma surpresa a revelação de que era maria a mãe da criança que apareceu na corroça de lixo.”

southern city of Florianópolis, argue that social opinion of infanticide expressed in the press used a discourse of brute animalism and perversion.²⁸ The press conveyed that elite lawmakers and medical practitioners saw infanticide as standing in the way of a civilized, modern nation.²⁹ Second, as scholars have cited, neighborly condemnation served as an on-the-ground implementation of police surveillance. In Florianópolis, “In the legal proceedings in which doubts in respect to who was the mother of the found fetus hung over the case, the authorities also resorted to the neighbors’ watch.”³⁰ Even neighborly vengeance appeared as a denunciation motive. This spiteful motive shows up in one interesting Rio de Janeiro investigation.³¹ In 1915, two young women were questioned after the area’s presiding judge received an anonymous letter denouncing one woman for having an abortion and the other for helping in the process. The entire process turned out to be a cruel hoax, and the fetus allegedly buried in a hill close to the young women’s homes turned out to be a small doll. This neighborly surveillance is an example of what Michel Foucault calls “the panopticism of ever day.” For Foucault, there is no limit to

28. Joana Maria Pedro, “Introduction.” In *Práticas Proibidas*, 11.

29. Joana Maria Pedro, “Aborto e Infanticídio: Práticas Muito Antigas,” in *Práticas Proibidas*, 5, 21.

30. Neckel, Pedro, Machado, and Hawerroth, “Aborto e Infanticídio nos Códigos Penais,” 90.

31. BR AN, RIO CS.1602 (1915).

legal-judicial practices because they are internalized in its subjects: “What generalizes the power to punish, then, is not the universal consciousness of the law in each juridical subject; it is the regular extension, the infinitely minute web of panoptic techniques.”³² Whatever the true motives, public surveillance enhanced police knowledge and control.

A third form of punishment pertained to the medical exam. Writes Joana Maria Pedro, “[control over the accused] was done through publicity of the woman’s body and its products.”³³ This occurred on two levels. On the surface, women were forced to hide the physical signs of pregnancy: “Large clothes, tight belts, and little contact with the public, [were methods used] to try to hide the rounded figure.”³⁴ Rita’s employer, Adelia comments in her testimony that since hiring Rita, “that young woman continually had period pains...[but] apart from being slightly heavily, the witness [Adelia] did not ever suspect that [Rita] had been pregnant, because she seemed very well, and she [Adelia] did not notice any enlarging of

32....Although the universal juridicism of modern society seems to fix limits on the exercise of power, its universally widespread panopticism enables it to operate, on the underside of the law, a machinery that is both immense and minute, which supports, reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law.*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 223, 224.

33. “Aborto e Infanticídio,” 46.

34. *Ibid.*, 52.

the belly.”³⁵ Carmen, Adelia’s mother also tells a similar story: “that apart from the witness herself being a mother, she never noticed in Rita any signs of pregnancy, besides the fact that she noticed Rita was slightly overweight.”³⁶ It seems that Rita’s weight covered up physical signs of pregnancy. Even Rita ignored the physical signs: “[she] noticed that her belly was slightly larger but she ignored that she was pregnant because she did not feel any symptoms of pregnancy.”³⁷

On a more personal level, in cases of presumed abortion or infanticide, a pelvic, or ‘supposed-birth,’ exam occurred. At the time of Rita’s exam, the police delegates’ doctors were looking for signs of an induced abortion. Women did not have a choice to deny the exam, and I have found no cases where women refused.³⁸

The autopsy of Rita and her infant also followed normal procedure in determining the cause of death and possibility of sui-

35. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...que essa rapariga continuamente tinha colicas [sic]...que apesar [sic] de ser um tanto cheia de corpo a depoente não suspeitou nunca que a mesma estivesse grávida [sic], porque a mesma aparentava muito bem, não deixando notar qualquer volume do ventre...”

36. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “que apesar [sic] da depoente ser também [sic] mãe nunca notou em Maria qualquer demonstração de gravidez, não obstante notar que ela tinha o corpo um tanto gordo...”

37. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “...notou que o ventre estava um pouco crescido mas ignorava que estivesse grávida [sic], porque não sentia nenhum sintoma de gravidez...”

38. In her study of ‘deflowering exams,’ used to prove if a woman was a virgin or not, Sueann Caulfield finds five cases out of 250 where women refused to be examined. *In Defense of Honor*, 121, 122.

cide. The presence of suicide proved Rita dos Santos guilty in the eyes of the police. As the police chief wrote, “The accused, however escaped the punishment of her crime through the door of suicide.”³⁹ In the end, Rita’s own body was used as evidence against her.

Conclusions

Overall, this case exemplifies the lack of options poor women had to control their reproduction in three ways. On the level of proactive methods, Rita was at a disadvantage. Hormonal birth control methods did not exist in 1932. The most traditional form of birth control, *coitus interruptus*, existed, but it was, and is, male-controlled.⁴⁰ Condoms, cervical caps, and diaphragms were sold publicly by the end of the nineteenth century, but more research needs to be done to know the prevalence of these methods of contraception in Brazil during the first decades of the twentieth century. Rita either did not know about them or did not have access. On the level of retroactive methods, Rita

39. BR AN, RIO 6Z.16784 (1933). “A acusada, porem fugiu á [sic] punição de seu crime pela porta do suicidio [sic].”

40. See Fabíola Rohden, *A Arte de Enganar a Natureza: Contracepção, Aborto, e Infanticídio no Início do Século XX* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fiocruz, 2003), 30, 45.

also was at a disadvantage. An abortion required the knowledge of effective herbal remedies or medical procedures, or of midwives who performed the service.⁴¹ If Rita knew of effective abortion methods did she have the time and money to go through with the procedures? Finally, Rita was at a disadvantage after the birth of her child. At that time, many poor young mothers left unwanted children at orphanages.⁴² Rita’s vulnerable position as a poor migrant restricted her knowledge about the choices she had. Most interestingly, Rita dos Santos gave birth when child-mother welfare was becoming a central focus of the Vargas welfare state. Yet she did not benefit from these ‘universal’ social services aimed at maternal-child welfare. In the end, not all women were included in the modernization of the ‘Brazilian family.’

Cassia Paigen Roth is a doctoral student in the History Department at UCLA, and a concentrator in Women’s Studies. She received a CSW travel grant from to support her in presenting this paper at the Western Association of Women Historians Annual Conference in Spring of 2011.

41. Sandra Lauderdale Graham touches on herbal remedies in *House and Street*, 84.

42. *Ibid.*, Between 1859 and 1908 roughly 17,000 children were left at the Santa Casa de Misericórdia orphanage in Rio de Janeiro.