

Lovers' notes in public view: Hidden messages and meetings announced in *Jornal do Commercio* (1870s)¹

*Bilhetes de namoro abertos ao público:
mensagens e encontros às escondidas anunciados
no Jornal do Commercio (década de 1870)*

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RESUMO

O artigo recupera e analisa uma série de bilhetes de namoro publicados nas seções de anúncio do *Jornal do Commercio* ao longo de toda a década de 1870. Mesmo diante das estritas regras morais existentes, em particular no interior das famílias mais abastadas do Rio de Janeiro, o namoro gradualmente ganhou amplitude e tirou proveito das novas práticas de sociabilidade que se instauraram no cenário urbano após a chegada da Família Real portuguesa. Assim sendo, exploram-se as principais temáticas presentes nessas mensagens com o intuito de mapear algumas dinâmicas, bem como dilemas e expectativas do namoro no cotidiano da vida na corte imperial. Palavras-chave: namoro; século XIX; *Jornal do Commercio* (Rio de Janeiro).

ABSTRACT

This article draws on and analyzes a series of love notes published in the classified sections of *Jornal do Commercio* throughout the 1870s. Notwithstanding the existing moral rules, in particular within the richest families of Rio de Janeiro, courtship gradually gained amplitude and took advantage of the new practices of sociability established in the urban scenario after the arrival of the Portuguese Royal Family. The principal themes present in these messages are explored, with the purpose of mapping the dynamics, as well as the dilemmas and expectations, of courtship in the life of the imperial capital.

Keywords: courtship; nineteenth century; *Jornal do Commercio* (Rio de Janeiro).

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“M.

I loved you; treating you with disdain was not out of choice. – F”

(*JC*, 11 Oct. 1870)

“X.

Today, at the time you know, there I will be... yours – Z”

(*JC*, 17 Nov. 1872)

“S. M.

Ptdqu udqsi cd orarafdi gaid zt ptzsqn d ldbz.
Pcd rztezedr, zmin ptiqhen!”

(*JC*, 18 Mar. 1876)

COURTSHIP IN THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Throughout the nineteenth century, in particular in the context of the imperial capital, courtship gained amplitude and shook the hearts of young people, accustomed until then to the restrictive perspective of contracting matrimony when still young, in accordance with the wishes of their parents. As a social practice, courtship was confronted with the strict moral standards of the patriarchal Brazilian family, however, after the arrival of João VI in the country, advantage was taken of the new dynamics of sociability which were established in the urban scenario.

Women from the economic elite, until then confined in the domestic space, under the merciless vigilance of their parents and husbands, began to frequent public festivities, theaters, social gatherings, religious meetings, and dances, with the exchange of glances, pinches, taps,² and declarations of love becoming ever more frequent. In 1849, Álvares de Azevedo, at that time a student at the Faculty of Law of São Paulo, told his mother that while the dances of Rio de Janeiro glittered “with all the magic of splendor and lights,” in the capital of São Paulo he had to be content with an insipid and tedious life (Azevedo, 1976, p. 71).³

Very conservative people did not like the new customs that were coming into vogue in the country and proudly remembered the epoch of the viceroys, when there was “nothing of balconies, nothing of pianos, nothing of walks,

companies, theaters” (*O Espelho Diamantino*, 1 Nov. 1827). Also feeling nostalgic about a past in which women were treated severely, the author of a fictional narrative published in *Novo Correio de Modas*, in 1853, wrote:

They were happy times! The young women would go to mass at daybreak: during the day no one would see them: and if on a day of festivities anyone wanted to go for a walk with their grandmother or aunt, they would have to go in their litter. For good reason our elderly cry for those times, when their daughters, since they did not know how to write, neither sent nor received notes.⁴

Members of the most elegant families of Rio de Janeiro sought on various social occasions to establish or consolidate advantageous ties of friendship or intimacy. Marriage in this scenario was a valuable means of maintaining social prestige or social ascension, and it was expected that young women, in conformance with the ideas of honor, virtue, and modesty, would be courted in the presence of their parents by young men from well-established families who had a serious intention of marriage. Without any delay, after the first demonstrations of affection and interest, there was an expectation for a letter to be sent to the father, formalizing the request for marriage.

The various manuals for writing love letters published in the nineteenth century contained examples which illustrated how a well-educated and intentioned young man should address the father of his future wife. In the section “To a father to ask for his daughter,” from the book *Mensageiro dos amantes ou carcás de frechas amorosas*, the following can be read:

Sir,

Since I have had the joy of frequenting your house, I have seen in it the example of all virtues, and if I am worth anything, I owe it to your company. To this motive for recognition, I add another even more powerful, if You... approve the feelings that I have conceived for you daughter, Miss N....

To all the attractions of her sex she adds the qualities that lead to esteem. The secret of my heart did not escape me: it is to its best friend that I dare show it, it is from your mouth that I wish to know my own luck.

The confidantes of my inclination are solely my parents, for six months my letters about your enchanting daughter have entertained them. They approve my choice and are happy about the honor of the alliance.

If your response is favorable, in the heart of the one I live there is no obstacle,

I will hasten to give my parents part, so that they arrange with you, what is necessary for the said union.

I have the honor, etc. (Casamenteiro, n.d., pp. 73-74)

Even without the consent of the parents to the matrimony of their children, we can see in this letter, published in the 1840s, the presence of a timid space conferred on the feelings of young people of marital age. After meeting a young woman in a family environment, the young man only trusted his parents about his intentions. After obtaining from them the due consent, he got courage and wrote, following the due etiquette, a formal marriage proposal, putting the destiny of a possible alliance in the hands of the father of the young woman.

Other models of letters continued to be published in the following decades. In these volumes, which in general were called the *Secretary* or *Counselor of Lovers*, *Manual of Gallant Letters*, amongst others, there was always a section of letters aimed at the father of the young woman, responsible for the destiny of the future couple. In 1882, the book publisher Cruz Coutinho based in the city of Porto, in Portugal, but also in Rio de Janeiro, published *The New Counsel for Lovers*. In its pages a supposed young man declared: "I have not yet dared to consult her, since what use would be the certainty that she would agree to my project, if her father's will is the opposite?" (Silveira, 1882, p. 37).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the severe rules of behavior and honor which fell on the shoulders of the girls coming from the richest social groups in Rio de Janeiro, in the daily life of the imperial capital a series of strategies were gradually installed whose principal objective was to allow the possibility of some proximity between two people with reciprocal feelings of affection. Some young men and women, from different social levels, as well as older women or widows, rich men or those without fortunes, immersed in their own amorous experiences, when faced with family and mora impediments temporarily suspended modesty and silence to engage in various guiles that allowed the possibility of amorous dialogue, certainly restricted, though free of mediation and the presence of parents and other relatives.

It was in this context that the exchange of notes and letters gained amplitude and drama, sliding everyday through the hands of sweethearts and their accomplices. The Englishwoman Maria Graham, who was travelling through Brazil at the beginning of the 1820s, noticed one night beautiful women in an elegant gathering in the neighborhood of Botafogo when she heard the sarcastic comments of a contemporary who had been in the country longer.

According to him, “in that room there were at least ten ladies with notes which they let slip into the hands of their men,” “both the married ones and the single ones” (Graham, 1990, p. 271).

Often, however, the notes only arrived at their destination through favors of accomplices, in certain cases paid, messenger boys and trustworthy slaves. In a cartoon published in the newspaper *O mundo da lua*, a young white woman, who in her toilette, asked the slave beside her:

— So, Rita? Are you content, right? I am getting married!

— What? Ahhhh! I am sad. Now I will get no more tips for the notes from the boys! Poor me! (*O mundo da lua*, no. 5, p. 4)

These notes, passed from hand to hand between men and women with distinct individual trajectories, came undone over time, victims of forgetfulness or destroyed by those who feared intrigue and gossip. Nevertheless, a small part of this discourse managed to survive, thanks to the initiative of *Jornal do Commercio*⁵ of selling space, in the classified section, to those who wanted to publish personal message, signed only with initials. Sweethearts who had not found trustworthy bearers or some other safer means⁶ saw in these pages, open to all those who knew how to read, a useful means of communication. In the absence of a better option, they wrote love notes exposed to the public and protected themselves as they could, thanks to the anonymity constructed by initials and false names, as well as allusive and cut up sentences, in theory capable of being understood only by the person who shared the same secrets.

The notes published in *Jornal do Commercio*, evidentially, do not contain the words exchanged by lovers in the intimacy of a possible meeting without witnesses. The permanent fear of being discovered conferred on this discourse a series of filters, self-censored and reticent. The constant exchange of initials and even the discontinuous and temporary use of these announcements does not allow us to closely follow the sentimental contours of a couple for more than a few weeks. However, despite their fragmentary and dispersed nature, these writings constitute a privileged path of access to the mental universe of subjects who, at a certain period of their lives, dared to walk along the “social paths of courtship” (Candido, 1997, p. 127).

This article, thus, has the aim of exploring the principal themes present in these messages with the purpose of mapping some characteristics of the social life of the capital related to the daily experience of courtship in the 1870s,

a period in which these notes appeared in significant numbers in the pages of *Jornal do Commercio*. More specifically, I have the intention of showing how these dialogues printed on the pages of a daily newspaper elucidated in their fashion the conflicts, expectations, and fears present in the new dynamics and arrangements of the Brazilian urban family.

During the nineteenth century, the model of the large patriarchal family model, owning lands and the principal means of production and consumption, by gradually entering the urban scenario in the capital, increasingly governed by the expansion of commerce, business practices, the professions, and individual contracts, came to experience conflicts and mismatches arising out of its own rigidity and decadence. Most matrimonial ties no longer needed to assure, especially given the dowry which the bride brought to the matrimonial union – consisting to a large extent of land, cattle, and slave labor –, the acquisition and administration of a productive property (Nazzari, 2001). In the urban environment of the nineteenth century, men who had earned for themselves a degree, enriched themselves through commerce, or obtained significant earnings from capital, no longer depended on the possession of land to constitute a family. From this view, marriages stopped being ruled essentially by economic agreements between families, slowly coming to take into account personal affinities and reciprocal feelings of affection.

In turn, this new scenario conferred changes and readjustments on gender relations. In other words, a young male student, or one already working within his profession in a paid job, whether in the private sphere or in some bureaucratic position in the monarchical government, was not in a hurry to take up the responsibilities for supporting a family, while young women, with the disappearance of the dowry, were concerned with winning a good husband, the guarantee of a relatively secure financial future.

But it was not only young women from the richer classes who were anxious about a promising marriage. The rapidly expanding middle classes, with single, widowed, and impoverished women – who moved in distinct manners in their networks of sociability, carrying out some paid activities or possessing income from the rent of slaves or small inherited properties –, also brought to the center of the amorous sphere of Rio de Janeiro hope for relationships which could be favorable in their life trajectories (Corrêa, 1981; Dias, 1995; Caulfield, 2000, p. 30; Sbravati, 2008, pp. 23-27). Moreover, in step with the development of cities and the increasing movement of social subjects coming from ever more heterogenous and diffuse social groups, the number of formal and informal unions increased, which were made and unmade in the increasingly

unpredictable meetings between the various men and women of the nineteenth century.⁷

In this sense, the love notes published in *Jornal do Commercio*, full of the sentimental feeling so dear to the romanticism of the time, dialogued, as we will see below, directly with this process of the reconfiguration of the social, affective, and family dynamic, in particular in urban of the space of the imperial capital. In these words we can find a variety of arrangements and possibilities which gained drama in the breaches and fragilities of the rigid patriarchal model, based on the sexual honor of women and the commands of paternal authority.

In the attempt to obtain a significant *corpus* of published notes, I looked through the classified sections of *Jornal do Commercio* for all the 1870s.⁸ In general, in the same week there were one or two courtship messages. However, on lucky days up to three messages could be seen, printed in the middle of numerous reports of escaped slaves, announcements about the renting of wet-nurses, temporary rooms, the services of teachers, lawyers, and midwives, as well the sale of books, hats, machinery, and medicine.

FALLING IN LOVE

“I.

I saw you yesterday on the veranda, how fortunate!”

(*JC*, 9 June 1872)

Protected by initials and pseudonymous, the identity and the social profile of the authors of the love notes published in *Jornal do Commercio* reach those who nowadays flick through the pages of this newspaper only in a diffuse and slippery manner. While some women walked with some freedom through the public space of the city in order to guarantee their survival, others, probably more circumscribed, distant from paid activities thanks to the more favorable economic conditions of their families, walk on walks or to festive occasions only in the company of close relatives. Given this scenario, managing to speak with or meet one of these women was something which demanded great effort, strategy, and daring. I think that many of these notes were aimed at them.

The notes published in *Jornal do Commercio* mention recurrently the distance imposed and with this the birth of amorous feeling through sight. Seeing a young woman and feeling fond of her, a young man would quickly

seek out information about her address, make signs to her, and write her notes in an attempt to start some type of communication:

R.

Since I saw you for the first time in H. C. O. I have never forgotten you, vainly I inquired and searched for your house; after wandering lost and sad through all the streets, and suffering for much time the martyrdom of your absence, I had the joy to discover that you were going to live on Rua S. C., which happened; today I consider myself most happy because I can see you almost every night, but I cannot see you during the day because you never come to the window... goodbye – C. (JC, 27 April. 1877)

S.

I made you some signs and it to me that they were corresponded, what put me in doubt was the distance that separated us; you were dressed in black, standing out on your shoulders a certain whiteness which made you so bright. I asked myself how to send the letters to your presence. Accept a tender longing from the aspirant to your love...

I am missing you already today!... P.B. (JC, 15 July. 1879)

X.

It is with the above initial that I will have to address a few lines to you, since I do not see how I can send you a letter, nor how to talk to you, for you to know who is talking to you; I remind you that it is the one who in morning appears before you and sometimes who is beside the *fountain*; yesterday I put a *scarf* around my neck and today I will do the same thing, a signal which, if you do the same, will convince me that I am being answered and I will continue through this means – Z. (JC, 25 Oct. 1872)

In these messages, the men sought to identify themselves so that the young women, certain as to who was courting them, could permit some type of approximation or the sending of letters. The vigilance of relatives and close friends and, consequently, the constant lack of opportunity, demanded in certain cases patience and perseverance from the young man:

P..

Only on 17 August of last year did I begin to notice your writings, which caused me great pleasure, because I have also felt attracted to you... your M. (JC, 13 Jan. 1873)

When the young woman consented her affection, allowing herself to be seen or answering the letters addressed to her, enthusiastic declarations of love took over the tone of the messages published in *Jornal do Commercio*:

B...?

I find myself possessed of such joy, that I do not know what to say to you; the last time we talked you addressed to me such pleasant words that still today I feel ecstatic with some much virtue and grandeur of the soul. – Stubborn. (*JC*, 9 Nov. 1870)

M.

After fifteen days I had the pleasure of seeing you, I increasingly love you with greater ardor, I received the letter which you sent me in which you appease my sufferings since you declare that you love this misfortunate. – *P.C. Tino*. (*JC*, 14 June 1870)

Having commenced the courtship, the couple began to meet each other. Having agreed a convenient place and feasible days and times, the notes published served to provide more precise and last minute information. These messages, in an attempt to confuse the curious, were full of ellipses, allusions, implicit meanings, and paradoxes:

C...

Tomorrow. – A... (*JC*, 17 Feb. 1870)

J.

Today at 5 I expect to see you at the window to give you an object; however, send a messenger. – *L*. (*JC*, 20 Feb. 1870)

I wrote yesterday in the large column; look at it and I will wait for the hour of the beautiful sight on Saturday, in, in p... in the garden; only at half eight; you already know the reason; Monday I will go at the hour of the violets, yes: you are the one who can make me happy. Goodbye, only me. Other. – *M.S.* (*JC*, 6 set. 1871)

It is difficult to precisely know the place of the meeting and the degree of proximity that the authors of these managed to reach. In some messages, the young men ask the women, on arranged times and days, to go to the window, but also asked for their presence on Sunday in the *Passeio Público park*, in

theater presentations, churches, by the statute of the devotional saint, and in the houses of acquaintances. It is probable that moments alone were few, however even if brief they could be useful for the exchange of portraits, presents, the swearing of love oaths, secrets, and intimacies.

SUFFERING FOR LOVE, REQUESTS FOR CONSTANCY, AND RESIGNATION

“R.

I struggle with your absence, love, and longing: have you no mercy?!”

(*JC*, 7 June 1872)

Despite the joy that emerged from amorous feelings that were corresponded to, a large part of the notes published in *Jornal do Commercio* expressed the anguish of those relations marked by distance, communication difficulties, misunderstandings, insecurities, intrigues, and frustrations. “How much have I suffered for not being able to see you these days,” confessed H. (*JC*, 10 Apr. 1870). The pleasure of looking at the loved woman could be as rare as uncertain, which created ‘states of affliction,’ restlessness and begging for some type of news or demonstrations of affection.

Sudden absences, without any type of explanation, equally generated every type of doubt and suspicion. “After the last letter which you wrote to me through J. I have had no more news of you,” said X., who then made his request to his sweetheart: “I really want to know how you have been, look for a way of writing to me to tranquilize me” (*JC*, 27 Apr. 1872). “What has happened to you?,” in turn, asked a woman who signed her letter with the words “always the same” (*JC*, 2 May 1877).

Silence in the hidden courtship in the nineteenth century left the couple permanently at the mercy of intrigues and misunderstandings. After all, given the difficulties of communication, envious rumors and comments proliferated and could not always be undone. “Who plotted everything was someone from your house,” said B., and putting an end to his relationship, defended himself: “I only have to say that I was faithful to you, ungrateful. Goodbye forever” (*JC*, 27 June 1871). Some young men were more understanding and, given the supposed naivety of their sweetheart, offered their pardon:

J. L. F.

You did not want to take the advice that I gave you, but at least do not treat me

with contempt; you were deceived by the false friends I always warned you about. Ah ! J. L. E., soon you will be sorry; tell me where you are, I will look for you, forgiving you for everything you did on 29 January 1876 – Your A. L. L. (*JC*, 2 Feb. 1876)

Not by chance, attentive to the difficulties they faced, the sweethearts asked their promised partners for promises, oaths, requests for patience, but especially 'constancy,' a word used among those who had little dominion over their destiny:

S.

I could not go to see you yesterday. I am very sad for this and missing you a lot. Remember the fatal walk, my commitment, and afterwards the little cross? I wish very much to talk to you. Z. (*JC*, 21 Aug. 1877)

N...

Constancy and firmness is what I ask of you. When they do something or say something to you, do not let be concerned. Do not be shocked: be patient and hopeful, and victory will not make you wait. – Yours forever... N – P.S. Regards. (*JC*, 8 Oct. 1872)

Nevertheless, the best protection for this type of courtship appeared to be the secret, discretion, and anonymity. "I do not allow the intervention of the third person, this secret is, and should be, exclusively ours," said one unsigned announcement (*JC*, 24 Jan. 1871). The young man who complained that being together was 'bittersweet' and a pain which 'did not kill,' but brought with the power that of 'consuming' him, in his way, asked his beloved for caution: "do not forget the recommendation that I made you the last time we were together, say nothing, nothing even to that person" (*JC*, 4 July 1878). It was common for couples to count on the favor or benevolence of a 'safe carrier,' as could be read so often in the notes published in *Jornal do Commercio*. However, in the case of the exchange of letters, the secrets shared, which came and went through third parties, were constantly at risk. "The means of correspondence you found is dangerous. I ask you for the love of God not to use it. We have to meet," said one anonymous author (*JC*, 19 Dec. 1872). In the wrong hands, the letters could cause irremediable harm, especially to young girls who, aware of this, used to demonstrate concern with their sweethearts. Some responded, "I received it, do not fuss, it contains nothing that can harm you" (*JC*, 17 Aug.

1871). Often, however, they asked for those papers to be destroyed, “I want to know your name, finish reading, tear it, bye-bye” (*JC*, 18 Mar. 1871).

It was in the careful evaluation of risks that some preferred to publish their messages in *Jornal do Commercio*. This is because, after managing to pay for the publication of a note, even when directed to one person in particular, those words belonged since the very beginning to the public domain. No one would be compromised by their possession.

All of this showed that hidden courtships required great effort, ability, and attention. Women, aware of the fragile place they occupied in social life, often entered in these relationships with great discernment. Aware of the norms and expectations of moral conduct, they acted and reacted, sometimes corresponding to looks and signals, sometimes withdrawing and showing indifference, which sometimes seemed to arouse the interest of the young men (Simmel, 1993, pp. 94-95; El Far, 2014). “I knew you were not upset,” wrote the author of an unsigned note, “since you go for a walk every day, and even once seeing me you turned your back on me, thus not knowing to what I could attribute this procedure I made you a proposal” (*JC*, 3 May 1877).

However, all courtships became riskier when the father of the still single young woman, aware of the situation, refused his consent. In the message, he came to be seen as the one responsible for the couple’s misfortune, inspiring words of resentment and indignation. “This dragon,” said J. to his beloved, “who now prevents our happiness and has caused us so much harm, with way of acting, with his unfounded words, soon he will have to pay; and you my love, I beg you, do not be upset, do not cry, treat all these things with disdain” (*JC*, 6 May 1876).

Faced with the displeasures they experienced, some deposited in the nobility of resigned conduct the hope of one day having their dreams fulfilled. “Full of resignation,” said X., “I hope that the future converts all this suffering into true joy” (*JC*, 18 May 1872). Others demanded, at this moment, unconditional trust, which could lead some young women to decisions with no return and premediated flights. As was the case of N., who received from her boyfriend promises and the appeal of blind obedience:

N...

I know what there is and the difficulties to be overcome on your part to give me news of you!

Well, preserve that promised constancy with all the tenacity and let this savage oppression of your tormentors pass by: it will stop without a doubt when you

resolve to obey me blindly. If you lack the esteem that you deserve, you will find it in me.

In a few days I will tell you terrible news! However, rest: let them say what they want, close your ears to any stories even when told by a person of your sex.

Have faith and constancy that you will not be abandoned by your *N.* (*JC*, 2 Oct. 1872)

The honor of a young woman tied above all to her virginity did not have the same weight and significance for the different social layers of the imperial capital. Young women from the richest groups, when single, found themselves under the incessant vigil of their parents, who not rarely sought to marry them as soon as possible to rid themselves of possible misfortunes. Under the title of “Today’s Weddings,” a columnist from *Jornal das Famílias* complained in June 1875, that there was still in “Brazilian society” “too much excitement in marrying young women quickly.” Instead of educating them, mothers, he stated, sought to marry them quickly.

Nevertheless, in general cases of deflowerment were increasingly expressive and gained the attention of readers when they reached the mainstream media or were portrayed in novels inspired by realism, as was the case of *Casa de pensão*, written by Aluísio Azevedo in 1884. Their story sought to return to the famous ‘Capistrano question,’ which occurred in 1876 and involved a student from the Polytechnic School who, after seducing and deflowering a young woman and being absolved in court, was murdered on Rua da Quitanda by her brother. Both in the Empire and the first decades of the Republic, families used to resort to the police to demand the defense of the honor of their young women, demanding from the accused, through marriage, the repair of the damage committed.⁹

In that period, it was expected that women, above all from bourgeoisified or gentrified social groups, would adopt behavior of virtue and modesty, would recognize the benefits of domestic life, and faithfully obey the words of their parents. In step with the moral rules, it was believed that the support of the family could protect them from the false promises from frivolous flirts who did not have serious intentions of partnership. In harmony with this perspective, a young woman who mentioned her ‘simplicity’ and equally her ‘lack of experience in the world,’ loudly repudiated those who only seemed to be concerned with their own ambitions. She said:

To...

I give infinite thanks to the Almighty for having moved away from you and yours, who, taking advantage of my simplicity and lack of experience, slowly prepared my disgrace. I only trust in mine, in whom I recognize my true friends and protectors. Forget about any intention you may have and forget me forever, as I have already done of you. – E. (*JC*, 1 Feb. 1871)

Despite the false promises and the risky position in which many women placed themselves, courtship and flirting were part of the routine of the imperial capital. The announcements in *Jornal do Commercio*, the cartoons, or reports from the time which mentioned the constant coming and going of love letters and notes, and even the birth in the 1880s of a periodical entitled *O Cherubim* (1885-1887), indicated that courtship was expanding rapidly, and even that a special language and secret codes had been created, which could assure the continuity of these relationships but also allowed space for a series of confusions and, always unwanted, interventions of others.

BETWEEN SIGNS AND SECRET CODES

“To...

Was the announcement on the first, signed M., yours?

Were those sweet words yours?!

Answer me tomorrow in the *Jornal*. – O”

(*JC*, 11 Feb. 1870)

In publishing a message in *Jornal do Commercio*, the authors of these notes were subject not only to the curiosity of the public, who could accompany on a daily basis the development of their luck in love, but also printing errors and the uncertainty of authorship.

Q. I.

On 19 of this month an article of mine was published in the *Jornal* and I was of firm resolution that it would be the last; I find myself however, obliged to tell you that the articles these days are not mine, and that I will never again trace on any paper the initials which symbolize how I treated you. Goodbye – V... I... (*JC*, 25 Jan. 1872)

My dear A***

To certify to myself that it was you who wrote the letter which is in today's *Journal* (2 January) I wish that you would give me a signal or a name of any object of our knowledge through this newspaper. Tell me where and when I can see you. – J*** (JC, 3 Jan. 1872)

There was thus no shortage of requests for confirmation through agreed signs. While some made gestures with arms, hands, hats, fans, and canes, others wore on their clothes handkerchiefs and flowers. The use of determined colors also could be agreed by the courting couple, among so many possibilities. However, this did not guarantee the correct understanding:

J.

I call all your attention to the signs agreed between us, asserting that what you gave me yesterday, instead of clarity there was confusion. – And...., you left, and did not see me.... Because... – *Alf.* (JC, 7 May 1871)

In this scenario of many attempts and doubts, some couples opted for cryptographing their messages, making them unintelligible to those who did not have access to the previously established conventions. The codes, based on various combinations of numbers and letters, resulted in a series of phrases without any meaning for the common reader, and permanently involved the challenge of being correctly deciphered. Such as, for example:

L...

N1 c3g5nd1 123r1 pr2c3s4 f1111rt2, 2sp2r1m2 n415gir d4 c4st5m2. D4 L... (JC, 10 Mar. 1872)

I?

Sahataxe. Gamesá. Senain. hachirim. harbá. hachará; obragué. comestaxe. chagué. hachirim. senahino ahochirim.

I do not know how to pay you for so many roses and flowers which you surround me with; but, you also do not know the value which I have in my heart; I ask you not to say more – *halajer* – in yours, because this you say to someone who does not come back again; thus, some day when there is an occasion. – 21.1.5.9.1.9.2. P.S. I want you to make me see if you have understood this. (JC, 10 Jan. 1879)

V.

I do not know how to decipher this enigma, and for this reason I cannot explain. – G. (JC, 26 Oct. 1870)

In other words, the distances imposed, the vigilant stares, the severe norms of conduct which especially marked the affectivities of those who possessed strong ties of social and economic dependency on their families, in the context of new forms of sociability in the urban space, ended up propelling the creation of numerous strategies, languages, and secret codes which gained form and complexity in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the interstices of moral conventions, clandestine meetings were arranged and fulfilled. The woman was prohibited from going out by herself, she would stay near the window. A severe distance was imposed between men and women who were not united by matrimony, thus there emerged the veiled dialogues, the hidden glances, and the secret codes which temporarily banished silence. Affective relations between people of the same sex were condemned, they appeared as a brief and subtle mention in the pages of *Jornal do Commercio*: “Oh, my Z, I am your J. S. C.” (JC, 6 Apr. 1872). In other words, in the heterogenous amorous universe of the imperial capital each subject dealt in their own way with affective choices.

SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The words written in these love notes illustrate, in their totality, that having some autonomy or liberty, a variety of men and women, present in the daily life of Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the nineteenth century, sought means to give voice to their personal feelings and affective choices. The reading of a decade of these amorous messages shows a plurality of subjects, coming from different social and economic groups. While some texts demonstrate a visible difficulty of writing, with malformed and difficult to understand sentences, others exalted poetry and phrases in a foreign language. “*Mon bon petit ami,*” said a woman to her sweetheart, “*es que je désire tant ne m’a pas réussie; j’en suis resté toute triste, car c’est aujourd’hui la seule consolation que je désire avoir*”¹⁰ (JC, 17 Jan. 1870).

This diversity of anonymous authors had, nevertheless, something in common: a secret, a situation possible only in societies with a certain level of individualization. In his inspirational essay on the secret, the German sociologist Georg Simmel stated that with the development of social life, the possibilities of dissimulation become more frequent, allowing the individual to retire to the private sphere with greater facility. The expansion of society meant that gradually “what is public became ever more public” and what is private more private. In this sense, in the middle of the murmur of meetings which came to count on a growing number of people, new languages and behaviors emerged

with the intention of “keeping private matters secret” (Simmel, 2004, pp. 149-151).

A reader of Simmel, David Le Breton, also from this perspective, emphasized that the secret “is silenced in a deliberate form to safeguard a reputation, prevent grief or disappointment.” For this, “a dividing line was established between those who know and the others.” A “symbolic frontier of belonging,” which created a “powerful socialization” of making all those who participated in it solidarity. The risk of seeing the secret revealed also demanded discipline from those involved and the safeguarding of words when needed (Le Breton, n.d., p. 117).

While, on the one hand, the authors of the love notes published in *Jornal do Commercio* ran the risk of seeing their secrets revealed, which could have left them under the uncomfortable and painful moral judgement of their peers, on the other hand, what they kept to themselves with great reserve sometimes offered space, in the private world for daydreams and sentimental projects allocated above all in a valorized notion of ‘I,’ so dear to the romantic period. Thus, despite moving in a restricted and limited manner, the sweethearts of the nineteenth century dared to navigate a more wide-ranging, fantastical, and intensely sentimental psychological universe, proclaiming to the four winds eternal oaths of love, promises of joy, as well as the terrible suffering of the soul in love. Sometimes these laments even bothered those who gave little credit to all this romanticism. “My dear little doves,” complained one reader of *Jornal do Commercio*, “your love letters are a perfection of style; everyone has admired them; but for the love of God, enough, enough, finish with this, which is now boring” (JC, 24 May 1878). Others were ironic, taking advantage of the repetitive style of these messages to announce products in liquidation! The joke made by a textile shop, for example, illuminates with humor, vocabulary and intonations which used to give format and tonality to love notes:

E...

You cannot imagine how much I have suffered.... only you could have hurt so much my poor heart. I ask you not to miss being in the designated place, since I have to go there to buy a cut of fine linen and silk... Equal to C...., since today they are selling them at 500rs... but it is worth 1\$200; do not forget than it is on Rua da Assembleia no. 102 – *Liquidação Francesa*. (JC, 2 Dec. 1877)

We can thus say that the notes announced in *Jornal do Commercio*, seen in all their variety, help us perceive the new social and family dynamics in the life of the imperial capital in the nineteenth century. Courtship, almost

non-existent in previous centuries, shed light on this moment of rising individualism, the fragilities of paternal authority, letting through the gradual valorization of personal affinities and feelings to the detriment of marriages arranged and imposed among families.

However, this does not signify that love in that period hovered over everything (Gay, 1990, p. 89). Although the nineteenth century offered lovers the sensation that the amorous feeling could dissipate obstacles until then insurmountable – such as, for example, social position and racial differences –, the choice of an affective partner was still for many a question of calculation. Since, at this epoch, courtship was a short moment under constant vigilance which, above all, should lead to marriage, it was known that a wrong choice would be the harbinger of a life of difficulties, financial hardship and bitterness. For this reason, even when entering into conflict with parents in the hope of greater freedom of choice, as explored various times in the literature of the epoch,¹¹ both men and women appeared to be aware of the gains and losses which marriage could offer. As a result, flirting, as a newspaper emphasized in 1876 was also not free of certain ponderations and meticulous evaluations:

In the various adventures of life there are those who use love by calculation.

In this case, sighs, glances, laughs and complaints are born directly from the union of ambition and calculation.

In flirting they are subject to figures. (*Revista Ilustrada*, 1 Jan. 1876)

Over time the custom of publishing love notes in the classified section of *Jornal do Commercio* became obsolete. Thanks to the growth of professions, of paid services, of the development of education, and the greater insertion of women in the public space of the city, the distance imposed between sweethearts gradually diminished, conferring increasing opportunities, privacy, and intimacy for those who possessed reciprocal feelings of affection.

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NOTES

¹ This article resulted from wider research about the universe of courtship in the nineteenth century, and counted on funding from the Research Support Foundation of São Paulo (Fapesp) between 2011 and 2014.

² Both in Portugal and Brazil in the nineteenth century, pinches and taps were common as demonstrations of affective interest between young women and men (PAIS, 2007, p. 34; PRIORE, 2012, p. 126).

³ In relation to the new forms of sociability established in the nineteenth century, see also: BORGES, 2001.

⁴ This citation was taken from Ana Laura Donegá's masters' thesis entitled *Publicar ficção em meados do século XIX: um estudo das revistas femininas editadas pelos irmãos Laemert*. See: DONEGÁ, 2013, pp. 124-125.

⁵ *Jornal do Commercio* (hereafter cited as *JC*) was created in Rio de Janeiro in 1827, by Pierre Plancher, and survived the nineteenth century with an "unalterable tranquility," exempt from "partisan clamors," which may have guaranteed its accentuated prestige in Rio society (SODRÉ, 1977, p. 216).

⁶ "My J., I am writing here since I do not have trust in others" (*JC*, 15 May 1872).

⁷ Although in the urban space there was a greater number of people who contracted formal matrimony, in the general framework of Brazil this practice was still carried out by a minority. In *A mulher e a sociogenia*, whose preface was written in 1887, Lívio de Castro stated that in Brazil only 27.16% of people were married. 4.81% were widowed, with the greatest part of the population, in other words 68.03%, remaining single. Faced with these numbers he concluded: "In a country where 27% of the population marry, clandestine marriage is the law, legal marriage is the exception" (CASTRO, 1893, p. 195).

⁸ As it is a newspaper still in circulation, and for this reason is not available on the internet, I consulted the microfilms of these editions of *Jornal do Commercio* in the periodicals collection of the National Library.

⁹ In the nineteenth century, the historian Martha Esteves, focusing on police investigations, analyzed the discourse before judges of young women who had been deflowered. In the first decades of the twentieth century, this question was returned to by Sueann Caulfield, who explored the changes in the meanings of honor for the different social actors involved in these cases of family offenses (ESTEVEVES, 1989; CAULFIELD, 2000).

¹⁰ "My good sweetheart, what I so much wanted I did not get, I was very sad, since this is the only consolation I would like to have" (my translation).

¹¹ The novel *Elzira a morta virgem*, for example, written in 1883 by Pedro Ribeiro Vianna, sold thousands of examples for years in a row circulating the dramatic story of the girl, belonging to the aristocratic neighborhood of Botafogo, who got fatally sick after her parents forbade her to marry the boy with whom she had fallen in love (VIANNA, 1913).

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