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Righting/writing the black female body in contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature

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Resumen

Este artículo utiliza una aproximación histórica con el propósito de discutir y analizar cómo las escritoras afro-brasileñas Cristiane Sobral, Conceição Evaristo, Esmeralda Ribeiro y Elisa Lucinda (re)diseñan las imágenes de los cuerpos femeninos afro-descendientes/negros en sus respectivas obras poéticas. A través de sus textos, argumento que estas escritoras ofrecen una perspectiva crítica de las imágenes históricamente engranadas en el imaginario colectivo brasileño. Considerando a la literatura como un espacio donde las representaciones culturales son forjadas, perpetuadas o incluso cuestionadas, este estudio finalmente examina la manera cómo los textos afro-brasileños seleccionados han (re)(des)articulado imágenes estigmatizadas de los cuerpos femeninos afro-descendientes/negros dentro del discurso dominante del *mestiçagem* y cómo han abierto posibilidades para el reconocimiento y reafirmación de las subjetividades de las mujeres negras desde múltiples perspectivas e identidades culturales.

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[Awake and sober, I wrote that black story
for you to perceive once and for all
that between my skin and the paper that
wraps up
your notebooks,
there is no plausible brown comparison,
there is an ocean,
the same ocean-cemetery that shelters my
murdered ancestors,
by the same slavery that still
oppresses us.

I wrote
I write
I will write
With upper-case bright-red letters,
For you to remember there was a flood of
blood.]

Escrevi aquele conto negro bem sóbria,
pra você perceber de uma vez por todas
que entre a minha pele e o papel que
embrulha os seus cadernos,
não há comparação parda cabível,
há um oceano,
o mesmo mar cemitério que abriga os
meus antepassados assassinados,
por essa mesma escravidão que ainda
nos oprime.

Escrevi
Escrevo
Escreverei
Com letras garrafais vermelho-vivo,
Pra você lembrar que jorrou muito sangue.

(Cristiane Sobral, from the poem “Petardo”)¹

Afro-Brazilian poet and novelist Conceição Evaristo, during an interview where she discusses the roles and images usually attributed to black women in Brazil, says: “[...] it is expected for a black woman to be able to play some specific roles, such as cooking very well, dancing, singing –but not writing. Sometimes, people look at me and ask: ‘But do you sing?’ I say: ‘I neither sing nor dance’”². Evaristo’s statement reveals not only some preconceived notions about black women prevailing in Brazil, but it also points to a more complex, intricate image of the black woman, historically constructed and

1 This poem by Cristiane Sobral was published in the 1998 volume of *Cadernos Negros* (17). The free English version is mine. As I am discussing works by Afro-Brazilian writers not yet published in English, I am going to refer to these works in their original version (Portuguese), providing my own translation along with the citation of the original. Although presenting significant limitations in terms of the preservation of the literary quality of the original versions, my aim in providing the translation here is simply to mediate the reading and the understanding of the general ideas conveyed in the texts.

2 This translation of Evaristo’s quote is mine. The original version was published in the magazine *Raça Brasil*, March 2006, where she says: “[...] espera-se que a mulher negra seja capaz de desempenhar determinadas funções, como cozinhar muito bem, dançar, cantar - mas não escrever. Às vezes, as pessoas olham para mim e perguntam: ‘Mas você canta?’. E eu digo: ‘Não canto nem danço’”.

culturally imposed by colonialist perspectives over black female bodies all over the world, and very strongly in the so-called “New World”. However, this is not a “new story”, it is intrinsically connected to the history of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas, a consequence of the economic needs of both African and American colonies³.

Looking back at this history, it is not difficult to conclude that the black female body has continuously been considered an object of speculation, exploitation, and “bestialization” throughout the centuries. Inscribed in slavery, black women were pushed into a process that sought to promote the legitimation of a system of oppression that subsequently generated and contributed to perpetuate, in cultural and social practices, a series of stereotypical and derogative images. In her essay *Black Women Intellectuals* (1991), African American feminist-activist bell hooks explains that, in order to justify the exploitation and rape of enslaved black women, the dominant culture created “an iconography of Black female bodies” as hypersexual –“the perfect embodiment of primitive, unbridled eroticism” (hooks, 1991: 153). In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins also discusses the use of stereotypical images of black women in the US as part of the “generalized ideology of domination”, with the purpose of maintaining elite groups in power and justifying the oppression of US black women (2009: 76). Hill Collins demonstrates how important it is for elite groups to define and control societal values that are linked to symbolic and cultural spheres, because the “controlling images of black women”, as described by Hill Collins, do not only serve to naturalize racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice, but they are also “key in maintaining intersecting oppressions” (2009: 77). Depicting black women as the “other” and inserting them in binary oppositions that shape the understanding of human difference, configures one of the elements in

3 In the 1996 book *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, Claire Robertson’s article “Africa into the Americas?” discusses the multi-dimensional aspect of the economics of slavery involving both African and the colonies in the New World. By arguing that wealth, in this context, was related to land ownership, and therefore cheap labor recruitment was a key factor in order to increase the wealth in both places, Robertson then debunks the mythical notion of an idealized free “Africa” (and Africans) when affirming that Africa not only benefited from and assisted with the slave trade, but that it was also connected to the Americas slave trade (5-6).

the ideological apparatus that supports ongoing systems of domination and hierarchies of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The “controlling images of black women” discussed by Hill Collins circulate the African diaspora and, as in the US context, they function in Brazil as an instrument for maintaining the structures of domination (2009: 78-79).

The poem “Pertado” (“Petard”) by Afro-Brazilian poet Cristiane Sobral, cited here as an epigraph, refers to the act of “rememory” (to use an expression coined by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*) as a necessary process in order to critically re-think the past and what it means to write about history from a critical perspective, acknowledging that, “[...] há um oceano,/o mesmo mar cemitério que abriga os meus/antepassados assassinados,/por essa mesma escravidão que ainda nos/oprime” (“[...] there is an ocean,/the same ocean-cemetery that shelters my/murdered ancestors,/ by the same slavery that still/oppresses us”).

Bringing this discussion to contemporary times and regarding literature as a space where cultural representations are forged, perpetuated or even challenged, this article aims at investigating how contemporary Afro-Brazilian writers have (re)(de)constructed prevailing and stigmatized images of the black female body in their literary work, and how these new constructions open up for the reaffirmation of black female subjectivities from multiple cultural perspectives and identities, and at the same time, how these constructions expose the cultural and social contradictions and ambivalences in which they are inscribed.

The black female body and its historical legacy

Besides transforming the black female body into a tool and resource for economic profit, colonization has also made it a singular and intensified expression of “otherness”, from the perspective of the colonizer. Drawing upon a series of narratives by male European travelers from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, historian Jennifer Morgan demonstrates that the bodies of African descendant women were used as the signifier of racial difference and as an evidence of cultural deficiency. Supported by the

European travelers’ narratives, Morgan shows that “the process by which ‘Africans’ became ‘blacks’ who became ‘slaves’” – a process connected to the Eurocentric perspective of the “other” – started through a series of encounters, documented in travel narrations and descriptions, and finally transported and incorporated into slavery and colonization (2004: 13). In this process, the black female body, placed in dichotomy with the white norm, not only connoted the inversed mirrored image of “beauty”, but it gained, throughout the centuries, contours that also indicated a lack of femininity: the male European gaze establishes a process of animalization of their bodies, which served as the base for their utility – the reproduction of crops and laborers (2004: 14). In Morgan’s words, the black woman was in this sense, “a monstrous laboring beast” (2004: 15).

Having their bodies objectified and then used to serve the purposes of the dominant social system, black women were at the same time regarded as creatures with no intellectual capabilities. These images, hooks explains, have gradually and progressively been installed in the collective consciousness and reinforced the idea that the black female body belongs to a category placed very far from intellectual life (hooks, 1991: 154), as Evaristo pointed out in her interview.

It is important to point out that this gaze has always been permeated by an ambivalent combination of sexual desire, a sense of superiority, and repulse. The white Anglo-Saxon patriarchal Christian set of moral principles and beliefs is not only fundamentally a repressor of sexual impulses and desires, but it also rejects everything that is different from its norm in order to confirm and legitimize the very core of assumptions that constitute its standard of “normalcy”. Thus, overwhelmed by the “otherness” of African peoples’ bodies, culture, religions, and social arrangements, the Euro-American eyes are both repelled and feel attracted to their vision of the “other”. But since colonization is the ultimate end, this vision is depicted in ways that justify and legitimize its final end: the domination of those who serve as support for the perpetuation of the colonial power.

This is, for instance, how racial ideologies fundamentally originated and how the black bodies of African descendant women have been stigmatized

throughout the centuries. In an essay published in the book *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong* (2002), black feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall discusses this historical legacy imposed over the black female bodies. According to Guy-Sheftall, this historical legacy, constructed at least over two centuries through “exploration travels” around Africa and the New World before the establishment of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, is mainly attached to Eurocentric perceptions of Africans’ dark skin and nudity, characteristics that “would be laden with intense racial/sexual meanings for hundreds of years” (2002: 17).

The end of the nineteenth century is marked by “scientific” explorations and theorizing about the hierarchies of human species. In this context, racial differences gained pseudo-scientific explanations according to which the assumed racial inferiority of Africans –and the sexual connections between African women and apes, in particular– was understood as bestial, lascivious, and savage. One of the most emblematic figures that illustrate how black women were target of pseudo-scientific speculation and exploitation is Saartjie Baartman, or the “Hottentot Venus”. A Khoisan woman, captured in the Cape of South Africa, Baartman was taken to Europe by Dutch exhibitor Hendrik Cezar and put on display, as a mythical and exotic-shaped specimen of the “Hottentot”. Her body was dissected later by French anatomists and her genitalia exhibited in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974. Only in 2002, her remains were repatriated and sent back to South Africa, where she was finally buried⁴.

The characterization of the black female body as ugly, unfeminine, and lustful was not only a mark of difference, but it later served to rationalize the use of the black female bodies in the fields from sunup to sundown, as Guy-Sheftall points out, in order to “fulfill white men’s lust and to give birth to slave children who would keep the plantation system afloat” (2002: 23). Underlying this discourse and practice, there was also the moral devaluation of enslaved black women, their incapability of playing “appropriate” roles as wives and mothers, and their promiscuity, indecency and vulgarity (a result of their hypersexuality and “deviant” sexual behavior). As Guy-Sheftall explains, while constructed in contrast with the

⁴ More on Baartman, see Stephen Jay Gould’s 1985 “The Hottentot Venus” in *The flamingo’s Smile: Reflection in Natural History* (New York: Norton Press).

prevailing notions of the “ideal woman” –virtuous, pure and decent white European women– the discourse that emphasized the animal sexuality of black women could also be used “to justify their sexual exploitation in the hands of white men” who could “turn to them for the uninhibited sex that was denied them by virtuous, chaste white women” (2002: 25).

In the narratives by US southern white men of the late nineteenth century analyzed by Guy-Sheftall, the animality of black women was also portrayed in the manifestation of anger they expressed during fights and quarrels with others in the black community (2002: 26). In these descriptions, the angry faces, gesticulation, and coarse manners are usually highlighted as an expression of black women’s bestial and uncontrolled nature. In relation to this particular aspect, Barbara Bush’s 1990 book *Slave Women in the Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* and Lucille M. Mair’s 2000 article “The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies During Slavery”, contribute to understand the flipside of this Euro-American perspective of black women’s “angry” attitude.

Both Bush and Mair acknowledge enslaved women’s active participation in different forms of collective and individual resistance to slavery (a portion of history usually removed from the records and silenced in great part from recent scholarship). While both authors address the question of resistance among enslaved women in the Caribbean by making references to more blunt forms of resistance such as *marronage*, plotting and conspiracy, armed resistance, slave revolts, and runaways; they also refer to more subtle (but not less fierce) ways by which captive women expressed their opposition against the oppression they were subjugated to, such as verbal confrontation, poisoning, work avoidance, and work absenteeism.

It is clear that the research developed by Bush and Mair also contribute to debunk stereotypes imposed on enslaved blacks in general, some of which refer to the way they are sometimes portrayed as “contented slaves” in images such as Sambo/Quashee, Uncle Tom, or mammy, and in particular those images historically attached to black women like Jezebel or the superwoman. Ultimately, these texts also contribute to illuminate the history and experiences of enslaved African women who fought as hard and as consciously as their male counterparts in pursue of freedom and dignity.

Although these discourses, images, and practices navigated through the centuries and were incorporated in many instances of contemporary social and cultural life, the organizing, the artistic and political actions, as well as scholarship developed by black women, in Brazil and in other parts of the diaspora, have systematically tried to deconstruct these notions. By highlighting the interlocking systems of oppression affecting black women as a historical phenomenon, black women's production, especially the scholarship of the past forty years, has exposed male and white supremacy, as well as imperialism, as the destructive systems of oppression that have trapped and denigrated black women's bodies and subjectivities for centuries. Following the tradition of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, and Anna Julia Cooper, to name a few, researchers such as Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Michele Wallace, and bell hooks, in the US, as well as Lélia Gonzalez, Sueli Carneiro, Luiza Bairros, and Thereza Santos; are all pioneers in the analysis of the specificities of women of African descent and the particular ways in which they experience oppression. This study also benefits from the body of this scholarship in order to perceive how prevailing images of black women's bodies are deconstructed.

In order to understand how some of these images became culturally ingrained in Brazil throughout the centuries, it is important to understand also some aspects of this country's historical background and how slavery and the discourses about African descendant peoples were developed in the national scenario.

Racial democracy, miscegenation, and the stereotyping of black female bodies

In Brazil, the black female body incorporates a series of different inscribed stereotypes, which I would call "the iconography of *mestiçagem*" (miscegenation). The politics of miscegenation and the ideology of racial democracy, two fundamental forces that have informed Brazilian racial order for three centuries, gave rise to the Brazilian color spectrum, predicated, however, on the objectification and sexual exploitation of Afro-Brazilian wom-

en. It is important to highlight that the cordiality and intimacy posited by Gilberto Freyre in his classic 1933 *Casa Grande & Senzala* (The Masters and the Slaves) rested on the nursery and kitchen duties of Afro-Brazilian domestic workers, in great part constituted by black women.

In her 2007 book *Negras in Brazil*, Kia Lilly Caldwell proposes an examination of "the centrality of racial hybridity in Brazilian nationalist discourse" (2007: 28). By doing so, the author attempts to "deconstruct dominant representations of Brazil as a racially hybrid society and examine the political and psycho-subjective implications of these representations" (Caldwell, 2007: 28). She demonstrates how the historical construction of a "whitening ideology" in Brazil (prevailing in the nineteenth century) accepted intermediate racial types and rejected blackness as a "pure" category—an expression of the notion of "Aryanization". As Caldwell argues, this ideology did not contribute to establish a more egalitarian social structure for *mestiços*, nor helped deconstruct degrading images connected with mixed-race populations. In fact, it helped promote and perpetuate notions of inferiority of the *mestiços*, having the whitening process as their only way to achieve the heights of civilization; and it also contributed to maintain the political, social, and economic hegemony of white elites. The twentieth century is marked by the discourse of racial democracy and the so-called Luso-tropicalism by Gilberto Freyre, whose cultural and anthropological analysis of colonialism and slavery played a central role in the way popular and official views of race were shaped in the country. Freyre's Luso-tropicalism highlights the system of cultural values through which European colonizers were able "to overcome racial and ethnic divisions and construct racially harmonious societies in the tropical climates" (Caldwell, 2007: 32-33). Freyre's conceptualizations of *mestiçagem* prepared the grounds on which to set the notions of *mestiço* essentialism, strategically and selectively used to either valorize or evade blackness (Caldwell, 2007: 39). Thus, Caldwell argues that "*mestizaje* ideologies have largely served to deny ethnic and racial divisions and differences" and have also been "central to the cultural logic of racism in Latin America and the Caribbean" (2007: 40-41).

This is not to say that the phenomenon of *mestiçagem* did not occur in Brazil. On the contrary, it is actually, as mentioned by Caldwell, a con-

stituent of Brazilian historical formation and a nation. The point here is that in any way this historical process cannot be read as the creation of a hybrid paradise located in the southern hemisphere. It is not a secret that racial discrimination based on the skin color or African phenotypical features is a reality in Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, taking place sometimes in subtle ways, depending on the context. The *doxa* of racial democracy constructs for Brazil the image of a *mestiço* nation –nor black, nor white–; it is the product of a harmonious mixture among the races that were gathered together for the formation of this peculiar people. Following this logic, *mestiçagem* is transformed into a mark of national identity, which as a social construct, promotes a sense of accommodation that usually guides the understanding of the inter-ethnic relations in Brazil. As a consequence, this ideology dilutes the possibility of confronting the reality of racial relations in a country with conflicts that delineate the invisible mask of a myth used to explain that reality.

When applying her analysis of *mestiçagem* to the study of the social representations of women of African descent, Caldwell (2007) demonstrates that Brazilian women of different color categories (*mulatas*, *morenas*, *negras*, and many others)⁵ are placed in unaltered or unexchangeable social roles, which clearly point to the engendered contours of the ideology of racial democracy. Dominant notions of womanhood and femininity are attached to whiteness, while subaltern notions of the same categories are connected to the absence of whiteness. According to the color spectrum that categorizes women of color in Brazil, they are portrayed in ways that are always considered distortions (hypersexuality and promiscuousness of the

5 It is important to note here that this Brazilian categorization is based on the color hierarchy that characterizes the country's racial formation. In short, the term *negra* refers to black, while *mulata* and *morena* are “brown” categories, the first darker than the second. These terms and many others are used in Brazil with different meanings, depending on various regional and social contexts. They are not always used as derogative terms for blacks and browns, but the point I want to make here is that they were constructed according to the discourses of *mestiçagem*, historically manipulated by white elites in order to guarantee the maintenance of the power structures and on the expense of the physical and psychological exploitation of women of African descent. For a sociological study of the racial terminology and hierarchy in Brazil, see for instance Edward Telles' *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

mulatas) and/or inferior roles (domestic labor, for instance) in relation to the white norms. Caldwell also shows that historically, from colonial times to the contemporary scenario, Afro-Brazilian women have systematically been placed in a social structure where they play roles usually attached to their “service” to white elites, both sexually and economically. In this historical process, these roles/images designed for Afro-Brazilian women have contributed to the systematic naturalization and legitimization of sexual exploitation and economic domination (Caldwell, 2007: 55).

Following the color spectrum that categorizes women of color in Brazil and by studying the iconography of *mestiçagem*, it is possible to perceive certain patterns in terms of representation. By considering literature as a space in which cultural representations are forged, perpetuated or even challenged, I can think of some classic examples of Brazilian literary representations of black women attached to stereotypical images: one of them is personified in the characters of Rita Baiana and Bertoleza in the 1890 novel *O Cortiço*, by *mestiço* writer Aluísio Azevedo⁶. While Rita Baiana is the personification of the hypersexual *mulata*, Bertoleza, who is an enslaved black woman, embodies an unquestionable subservience throughout the narrative. In the twentieth century, poet Jorge de Lima has also used the image of the “devil” *mulata* and immortalized the recurrent figure of the “*negra Fulô*”, a “pretty” enslaved black young woman who works in the slave owner's household and is accused of theft, being punished then with a whip. What is striking in this famous modernist poem by Lima is that the event, including the whipping of Fulô, is described as a game of seduction in which Fulô's “misbehavior” is compensated by the vision of her nudity while she is under the whip.

Also involved with the Brazilian modernist movement, novelist Jorge Amado is probably one of the Brazilian writers who most frequently portrayed the *mulatas* and *morenas* in his novels. His 1958 novel *Gabriela, Cravo e Canela* (Gabriela, Glove and Cinnamon) is iconic in this sense.

6 The term *cortiço* to which Azevedo's novel refers, means an urban housing area where many people, families, have to share a small room and severe conditions of poverty. *Cortiços* differ from *favelas* (Brazilian shantytowns) in usually being large houses divided into small rooms, rather than autonomously-built poor neighborhoods. People who live in *cortiços* are normally families in one very small room who have to share a bathroom and have little or no privacy.

Once again, as a character, the *morena* Gabriela does not break with the stereotypical representations of Afro-Brazilian women in Brazilian nationalist discourse. On the contrary, it reinforces the notion of the hypersexual exoticized *morena*, which has played a central role in constructing social and cultural identities of Afro-Brazilian women through the naturalization of colonial practices of racial and gender domination. As a *morena* of lighter skin color, Gabriela is naïve but extremely eroticized and objectified; as an exotic and “primitive” figure, she has no control over her sexual impulses and is always sexually available.

However, this scenario has been changing all over in the past three decades. The articulation of the black movements in the 1970s and the organizing of the black women’s movements in the 1980s are, in great part, responsible for this change. Consciousness-raising and cultural militancy have been strong components of many groups in Brazil in the struggle against racism and for a critical understanding of the country’s historical process, as explained by James H. Kennedy in his 1986 article about recent Afro-Brazilian literature:

It seems clear that such literary output, a natural result of growing racial consciousness, can be directly linked to shifts in the political life of the country. During the post-1964 revolution years, censorship imposed by the military regime and heavily enforced as of 1968, together with the constant threat of police repression, successfully stifled virtually any expression of the newly awakening black consciousness among Brazilians. The major liberalization in the political order, which began in the 1970s coincided with a marked rise in black consciousness among Afro-Brazilians as well as a growing disposition to challenge the country’s racial status quo. (1986: 209)

In this context, many Afro-Brazilian writers fought for creating spaces and conditions for the publication of their works, and it is explicit that this period is marked by a political intervention in the art produced by these writers. As the number of Afro-Brazilian women writers increases, they play the role of rethinking and challenging prevailing images of black women in the country.

Contemporary Afro-Brazilian women writers: reclaiming the black female body

During the last three decades, Afro-Brazilian women writers, working together with black movements and black women’s movements, have committed themselves to construct new paradigms of cultural expression and representation, analyzing critically, deconstructing and denouncing forms of oppression operating on the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. This articulation has allowed for the creation of new grammars of meaning and signifiers of multiple identities of black women in literature.

This is particularly evident in the publication of *Cadernos Negros* (Black Notebooks) and the foundation in 1980 of the publishing group *Quilombhoje*, established and run by black Brazilians. Based in the city of São Paulo, *Quilombhoje* was created with the objective of deepening the discussion of the Afro-Brazilian experience in literature⁷. Its first publication series in 1978, *Cadernos Negros* was born out of the necessity of creating space for and making the Afro-Brazilian literary production visible and marketable. The result also extends to a larger scale, since the publication challenges the Brazilian literary canon, which is predominantly white and male. *Cadernos Negros* has systematically published poetry and short fiction by various black writers, among whom, black women writers stand as a significant and constant presence. In this sense, *Cadernos Negros* has represented an important vehicle for a number of Afro-Brazilian women writers. Conceição Evaristo, Miriam Alves, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Geni Guimarães, Cristiane Sobral, Elisa Lucinda, Ruth de Souza Saleme, Lia Vieira, and Sônia Fátima are some of those writers whose texts are always present in the volumes of *Cadernos*.

In this article, I would like to travel across some of these writers’ texts and explore the possibilities they offer in order to understand, from multiple perspectives, the reconfigurations of the black female body according to their own voices. Conceição Evaristo’s poem “Eu-Mulher” (“I-Woman”) (*Poemas da Recordação e Outros Movimentos*, 2008: 18) is not only a reaf-

⁷ This is a statement published by the group on their website, which I am translating here into English: <http://www.quilombhoje.com.br/quilombhoje/historicoquilombhoje.htm>.

firmation of an embodied female subjectivity and self-valorization, but it points to the expression of sexual desire as empowerment and valorization of the black female body as liberation. The poem also carries a set of female-centered images of the world, of their creative power and nature:

Uma gota de leite
me escorre entre os seios.
Uma mancha de sangue
me enfeita entre as pernas.
Meia palavra mordida
me foge da boca.
Vagos desejos insinuam esperanças.

Eu-mulher em rios vermelhos
inaugura a vida.
Em baixa voz
violento os tímpanos do mundo.

Antevejo.
Antecipo.
Antes-vivo.
Antes-agora-o que há de vir.
Eu fêmea-matriz.
Eu força-motriz
Eu-mulher
abrigo da semente
moto-contínuo
do mundo.

[A drop of milk
runs down between my breasts.
A stain of blood
adorns me between my legs.
Half a word choked off
blazes from my mouth.
Vague desires insinuate hopes.

I-woman in red rivers
inaugurates life.
In a low voice

I ravish the eardrums of the world.
I foresee.
I anticipate.
I live beforehand.
Before-now-what it is to come.
I, the female-matrix
I, the power-motive
I-woman
shelter of the seed
continual motion
of the world.]

Evaristo's use of the image of menstrual blood as a symbol of creative power deconstructs the naturalized notion that this blood is related to impurity. Placing the female body as the matrix of the world, this metaphor also connects the female body to the idea of continuous renovation, a source of self-sustainability, resistance, intervention, and transformation. The history of slavery shows that black women's fertility, as their labor, have been exploited and used to serve the interests of the colonial power. In reclaiming her body, the speaker in the poem acknowledges her fertility as her own power for change and creation. The speaker is able to live the present (she "inaugurates life"), but she is also able to "anticipate" the future, which demonstrates a profound awareness of her own power to intervene in the world.

In a very short poem entitled "Dúvida" ("Doubt") (*Cadernos Negros*, 1998: 61), Esmeralda Ribeiro, poet and one of the editors of *Cadernos*, defies the discourse of racial democracy in Brazil and, by posing her doubts, she questions the racial hierarchy prevailing in the country where race, gender and class are literally embodied in the social position of the majority of black women in Brazil:

Se a margarida flor
é branca de fato
qual a cor da Margarida
que varre o asfalto?

[If the daisy-flower
is actually white
what is the color of the Daisy
who sweeps the road?]

By playing with the word “margarida” (“daisy”), both the flower name and a female name, Ribeiro is able to intersect many layers that reveal the racial, gender and class-interlocking systems of oppression operated on Afro-Brazilian women, but are normally invisible and naturalized in Brazilian social structures. Margarida, as a flower (a conventional symbol of delicacy, fragility, purity, and femininity), is also related to the notions of womanhood more closely connected to whiteness; while Margarida, the person, is the exploited woman worker whose racial identity and oppression becomes invisible and naturalized in the dominant social systems. Ribeiro (1998), therefore, exposes the social mask that covers the ways in which the system of oppression operates and its effects on Afro-Brazilian women. The question posed by the poem (“qual a cor da Margarida/que varre o asfalto?” [what is the color of the Daisy/who sweeps the road?]) uncovers the ways in which racism in Brazil is combined with class and gender dynamics. The job of sweeping the road, considered to be an inferior one, is typically carried out by workers who belong to a lower class status, which in the Brazilian social hierarchy is largely made up of Afro-Brazilian populations. The contrast implied by the images of the delicate white flower (daisy) and the brutal and strenuous work done by Daisy, the woman (who logically is dark-skinned), is solely understood when the woman’s color/race is revealed by the silent and implicit answer to the question. Therefore, “Doubt” not only represents certain reasoning about a social situation, but it also functions as a denunciation of the veiled, masked, and silenced racist rhetoric and logic of the Brazilian racial dynamics.

On the same note of denunciation, Cristiane Sobral’s “Petardo” (“Petard”, see epigraph in this article) highlights the impossibility to mask the reality of racial discrimination and social oppression imposed on the Afro-descendant populations since slavery – a reality the myth of racial harmony and the discourses of *mestiçagem* have historically tried to cover up. The very act of writing a *conto negro* (black story) with sobriety represents not only the act of “rememory”, as commented before, but it also implies a level of (self)consciousness about a period of history in Brazil that is often neglected or dismissed. By persistently navigating across the “mar cemitério” (“ocean-cemetery”), a shelter for millions of “antepassados assassinados” (“murdered ancestors”), Sobral’s poem connects past and present in order to speak up about the ongoing oppression that still prevails (“essa mesma escarvidão que ainda nos/oprime” [the same slavery that still/oppresses us]) in a social arrangement where “não há comparação parda cabível” (“there is no plausible brown comparison”) (*Cadernos Negros*, 1998: 17). As a petard, Sobral’s explosive poetics demolishes and defies the discourses of *mestiçagem* used to camouflage racism.

Poet and actress Elisa Lucinda depicts a case of sexual and racial harassment where the victim, a “mulata with green eyes”, is insulted by a “white male intellectual”. The poem “Mulata Exportação” (“Mulata-Exportation”) (*O Negro em Versos*, 2005: 83-84) plays with the stereotypical representation of the hyper-sexualized “mulata”, which is so deeply incorporated and naturalized in the larger Brazilian culture. Ironically and humorously, the poem describes the real nature of the “proposal” made by the “white male intellectual” to the “green-eyed mulata” whom he calls “nega”, a short name for “negra” (black) – a word that can be very derogative for black women in Brazil but that can also be used as a term of endearment. The entire poem is constructed as a dialogue between the “mulata” and the white man, always playing with the dualities incorporated in the veiled intention of the proposal, the language used to refer to the “mulata”, and the black and white dichotomy established between the black woman and the white man:

Mas que nega linda
 E de olho verde ainda
 Olho de veneno e açúcar!
 Vem, nega, vem ser minha desculpa

...

(Monto casa procê, mas ninguém pode saber, entendeu meu dendê?)

...

Vem ser meu folclore, vem ser minha tese sobre nego malê.
 Vem, nega, vem me arrasar, depois te levo pra gente sambar.

[What a pretty *nega*
 And green-eyed
 Eyes of poison and sugar!
 Come, *nega*, come be my excuse

...

(I'll put you in a nice condo, but nobody should know, ok my sweetie?)

...

Come be my folklore, my thesis about the black maroons.
 Come, *nega*, come, destroy me, then later I'll take you to samba.]

The poem presents many different layers of meanings and representations. There is the notion that by having a relationship with a white man, black women somehow find a way to uplift their social status and this is the “benefit” underlying this man’s proposal in exchange of his sexual use of the black woman’s body. However, in contrast with this view, the poem goes on to describe not only the black woman’s repudiation of the white man’s proposal, but also her decision to take the case to the police who act in total compliance with the male character. She then goes to court, but the judge sentences the man to a short period of imprisonment with special benefits because he is a “white intellectual”. When all the legal resources are exhausted –resources linked to white male-dominated institutions–, the black woman then turns to the white man and confronts him with his attempt to gain from her sexual benefits:

Eu disse: “Seu juiz, não adianta! Opressão, Barbaridade, Genocídio,
 Nada disso se cura trepando com uma escura!”
 [I said: “Your honor, it doesn’t matter! Oppression, Barbarity, Genocide,
 None of these are resolved by fucking a black!”]

The black woman’s way of responding to the sexual proposition can be understood as sexual agency. In her famous book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins notes that, “sexuality in the individual, interpersonal domain of power becomes annexed by intersecting oppressions in the structural domain of power in order to ensure the smooth operation of domination” (2009: 185). In this sense, Lucinda is able to inscribe the sexual agency performed by the black woman in the poem as the very expression of the character’s struggle for liberation –liberation of her body as a whole. In her protest, the speaker’s language is permeated with political self-consciousness with which she is able to understand that both the event in the present and the discrimination she is subjected to, are in fact a consequence of the history of slavery in the country and its masked racial oppression, making explicit reference to Gilberto Freyre’s classic work. She then points out that the only way to truly transform the reality of racial oppression is by first acknowledging its intrinsic connection to the discourse and ideology of *mestiçagem*. In the final lines of the poem, another proposal is made, but this time the black woman takes the initiative and suggests that a different story needs to be written –consciousness and the transformation of old paradigms are here, where the bottom line is:

Olha aqui, meu senhor:
 Eu me lembro da senzala
 e tu te lembrás da Casa-Grande
 e vamos juntos escrever sinceramente outra história
 ...
 Porque deixar de ser racista, meu amor,
 não é comer uma mulata!

[Look, sir:
 I remember the slave quarters

and you remember the “Casa-Grande”
and let’s write together and sincerely another history
...
Because not being a racist, my dear,
is not fucking a mulata!]

Conclusion

The texts selected for this study offer an opportunity to listen to one’s own body and voice and acknowledge its beauty, its complexities, and even its oppression in an act of subversion of a long-imposed set of degrading images of the black female body. This act of reconfiguring one’s own body may also represent a tool with which Afro-descendant women are able to build self-consciousness, self-affirmation, and self-liberation. None of the texts discussed here, nor the interpretations drawn from them, offer an easy path toward these processes; none of these texts provide a recipe on how to succeed in the achievement of racial and sexual liberation, consciousness, self-valorization, self-affirmation, or alleviation from oppression. In relation to the body politics that literary aesthetics may be engaged to, each one of these texts contributes to the understanding of the ideologies and conditions that have sometimes led Afro-descendant women, in particular Afro-Brazilian women, to feel and be seen as inferior or worthless when elements of those ideologies are culturally internalized. Ultimately, Sobral, Evaristo, Ribeiro and Lucinda show that Afro-Brazilian female bodies are historical and, by being so, are inserted into a process that opens up the possibilities of cultural reinvention and political agency for Afro-descendant women in the communities to which they belong.

Although I have solely focused my analysis on the poetry of contemporary Afro-Brazilian women writers, this study has the intention to connect to further discussions on the ways Afro-descendant women writers articulate and negotiate the body/cultural politics in their works across the African diaspora in the Americas. Within this context, I finally argue that by re-writing the Afro-descendant female body, identities, and subjectivi-

ties into literary representations of multi-layered racial, gender, and sexual discourses; contemporary Afro-Brazilian writers do not only challenge the celebratory postmodern discourses that equal hybridity to the capacity of transcending racial divisions, blurring the lines of racial differentiation; these writers also use representations of multiple identities to re-elaborate universalizing notions of selfhood and the complexities of subjectivity, while retaining a sense of cultural and historical specificity. Considered as a product of the history of the African diaspora in the Americas, these literary representations open up paths to re-address the memory of the oppressions that mark this history –the embodiment of colonization and conquest (Hill Collins, 2009: 158-159).

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Insurgents and advocates: women's claim-making in El Salvador*

Mneesha Gellman**

Resumen

Este artículo aborda las formas de participación de las mujeres en El Salvador en procesos de reivindicación con el Estado y cómo sus experiencias de violencia han informado las mismas. Utilizo una serie de viñetas basadas en mi trabajo de campo y literatura de testimonios para ejemplificar las razones por las cuales las ex-combatientes escogen diferentes posibilidades de reivindicación tanto durante la guerra civil como después. Al enfocarme en las mujeres que fueron activas durante la guerra y por tanto, estuvieron expuestas a la violencia perpetuada por el Estado (y que continuaron sus luchas después de los Acuerdos de Paz), sitúo la forma a partir de la cual la violencia facilitó una renegociación de demandas entre los y las ciudadanas y el Estado.

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