

A LITERATURA CONTEMPORÂNEA DE MULHERES NEGRAS NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS E NO BRASIL: POSSÍVEIS ARTICULAÇÕES DIASPÓRICAS

CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN'S WRITINGS IN THE U.S. AND BRAZIL: POSSIBLE ARTICULATIONS ACROSS THE DIASPORA

DOI: 10.15668/1807-8214/artemis.v20n2p117-127

Resumo

Este artigo pretende apresentar uma análise panorâmica da escrita de mulheres negras dos E.U.A. e do Brasil, examinando como estes escritos estabelecem uma relação dialógica entre si no espaço diaspórico das Américas. A partir das considerações acerca da diáspora feitas por Brent Edwards (2003), argumentarei que as escritoras contemporâneas Afro-Brasileiras e Afro-Estadunidenses re-escrevem o corpo da mulher negra segundo representações literárias multi-facetadas nas interseções dos discursos de raça, gênero, e sexualidade. Lidos lado a lado, seus projetos literários contribuem para a reelaboração de idéias universalizantes sobre o “eu” e as complexidades da subjetividade em relação ao sujeito feminino negro, ao mesmo tempo em que retêm suas especificidades históricas e culturais. Através de um olhar comparativo e transnacional, este artigo debruça-se sobre algumas das obras literárias de escritoras como Conceição Evaristo, Miriam Alves, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Cristiane Sobral, e Elisa Lucinda (Brasil); e também, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, e Danzy Senna (E.U.A.), dentre outras.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres negras. Literatura contemporânea. Diáspora Africana. Corpo feminino negro.

Abstract

This essay aims at delineating a panoramic analysis of contemporary black women's writings in the U.S. and Brazil in order to examine how these writings establish a dialogic relationship with each other across the diasporic space in the Americas. Taking on Brent Edwards conceptualizations of diaspora (2003), I will argue that contemporary Afro-Brazilian and U.S. Afro-American women writers re-write the black female body into literary representations of multi-layered racial, gender and sexual discourses. Read against and with each other, their writings contribute to re-elaborate universalizing notions of selfhood and the complexities of subjectivity, while retaining a sense of cultural and historical specificity. Within a comparative and transnational approach, this essay will discuss some of the writings by Conceição Evaristo, Miriam Alves, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Cristiane Sobral, and Elisa Lucinda (Brazil); as well as some of the works by Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Danzy Senna (U.S.), among others.

Key-words: Black women. Contemporary literature. African Diaspora. Black female body

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The experiences inscribed in the African diaspora have in common the horrors, fissures, fractures, and fragmentations of slavery. However, the social and cultural marks of this history of dispersal in the Americas are also the site of resistance to domination and subjugation. In this sense, I consider the African diaspora both as a process in its ways of manifesting itself historically and culturally, and a condition of the racial, gender, class, and sexual arrangements and hierarchies. Understood as such, the reading/writing of the African diaspora involves what Brent Edwards classifies as “a process of linking or connecting across gaps – a practice we might term *articulation*”, which he explains further: “Articulation here functions as a concept-metaphor that allows us to consider relations of ‘difference within unity’, non-naturalizable patterns of linkage between disparate societal elements” (Edwards, 2003: 11).

The articulation of the African diaspora implies, thus, an analysis of these “non-naturalizable patterns of linkage” in disperse and fractured narratives of resistance, which are not always inevitable, and rarely continuous, homogeneous, and/or univocal – that is precisely the reason why they need to be *articulated*. In exploring the potentiality of articulation, Edwards suggests that the term *diaspora* implies neither “an easy recourse to origins” – claiming supposedly sacred roots – nor a “foolproof anti-essentialism” from which principles of continuity arise at a level of abstraction. Rather, Edwards’ suggestion provides us with the ground where “discourses of cultural and political linkage” intersect only “through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor” (Ibid., 13). Within this framework, the diasporic connections can be understood as an ongoing and ever-changing process of negotiations of the multiple intersecting categories of difference; it opens up to possibilities, rather than fixations and monoliths; it entails convergences as much as it embraces divergences.

If the articulation of the African diaspora leads to an articulation of difference (internal and external difference, as Edwards points out), the African diasporic literature is both a process and a condition of articulating “difference within a unity”. What that implies is an analysis of the diasporic processes that bring together identities, cultural artifacts, and political strategies as commonly African descendant; but it is also an analysis of how these processes are shaped distinctly throughout the diasporic space within their particular histories.

Within this context, I am interested in discussing here the possible articulations of the literary diasporic discourses by contemporary U.S. and Brazilian black women writers. Read against and with each other, my purpose is to examine how some of these writings offer multiple articulations of black female subjectivities and identities, as they navigate across the intersections of race, gender, and nation. Thus, it is crucial to consider how these

representations are associated with their particular historical contexts and narratives both in the U.S. and Brazil and how they reveal the historical complexities of racial and cultural formation, as well as gender representations, in both countries. In addition, considering the period between the 1960s and 1980s as formative of contemporary black political consciousness and organizing both in the U.S. and Brazil, I will direct my attention to the discussion of literary movements of this era in these two national contexts and how the cultural projects these movements built are ideologically and aesthetically linked to the ways in which U.S. Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian women writers re-defined both their literary work and their politics.

Black Women Writing the Diaspora: U.S. and Brazil

Inscribed in the discourses of primitivism and exoticism; placed in direct contrast with the standards of white “normalcy” – historically considered as objects of both sexual desire/conquest and repulse – black women have been at the center of the colonial project across the diaspora, because theirs are the bodies which produced and reproduced the economic surplus and labor force that sustained the colonial system based on the use of slave work. In this sense, black women’s bodies are both the target and the evidence of colonial exploitation.

In her novel *Corregidora* (published in 1975), Gayl Jones explores the inter-subjective dimensions of storytelling and its repercussions on the lives of four generations of *Corregidora* women, namely Ursa (the protagonist), her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother – the generations of enslaved women in the Brazilian plantations. Ursa’s ancestors, who suffered from the absence of written records reflecting the inhumanity of their experiences, inscribe such stories on their bodies. They ensure their continuity by bearing children who would “leave evidence” through the transmission of the ancestral legacy. Through Ursa’s recollection of a conversation with her Great Gram Here, it is clear that the material survival of the body – the black female body – becomes the crucial element that enables women to testify to their historical legacy of oppression that started in slavery:

When I’m telling you something don’t you ever ask if I’m lying. Because they didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done – so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to have evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn’t be no evidence to hold up against them (Jones, 1975: 14, italics in the original version)

The bodily materialization of the history of oppression constitutes one of the central elements in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (published in 1987). Here, the narrative establishes a relationship between the history of the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (Morrison, 1988: 274) - the "Sixty Million and more" - and the reincarnated daughter, Beloved, who literally embodies the diasporic dimension of the Middle Passage. Both the ghostly presence of Beloved and later her reincarnation function as constant reminders of a painful past. Sethe, the mother, tries to keep at bay - yet carrying its burden as a scar on her back from being violated and whipped: "the branches of her chokeberry tree" (Ibid., 17); "a revolting clump of scars" (Ibid., 21). The narratives of *Corregidora* and *Beloved* use the black female body as a sign and evidence of the historical embodiment of the pained body in slavery across the diaspora: in this scenario, black women's bodies (those of Ursa's ancestors and Sethe's) become instruments for the perpetuation of domination. However, one could ask, is the story of the pained body the only story underlying these narratives?

As discussed by Patricia Hill Collins (2009), the legacy of enslavement of women of African descent have symbolic and material repercussions to the ways black women are subjected to oppression. Collins highlights that the uses of stereotypical images of black women in the U.S. as part of the "generalized ideology of domination" are designed with the purpose to maintain the elite groups in power and justify the oppression of U.S. Afro-American women (Collins, 2009: 76). The author demonstrates how important it is for the elites to define and control societal values that are linked to the symbolic and cultural spheres, because the "controlling images of black women" do not only serve to naturalize racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice, but they are also "key in maintaining intersecting oppressions" (Ibid., 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 the ideological apparatus that support the systems of domination and hierarchies of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Ibid., 78 - 9).

On one hand, the narratives of Ursa and Sethe can be read as cyclical stories of oppression, in which the structures of domination, as pointed out by Collins, imprison their bodies and their sense of self. On the other hand, it is also possible to read their stories as a necessary recovery of the past of slavery in order to project into the future new possibilities for black women to re-configure and re-assert their subjectivities. By repeating the statement "This is not a story to pass on" (275) in the end of the narrative, Morrison's narrator in *Beloved* signifies the marks of slavery imprinted in black women's history in the diaspora does not represent the end point - yet it is a past that has to be re-visited, re-covered, re-articulated.

The "controlling images of black women" discussed by Collins circulate the African diaspora, and, as in the U.S. context, they function in Brazil as an instrument to maintain the structures of domination. Sueli Carneiro talks about the ways in which Afro-Brazilian women become trapped into objectifying categories socially and culturally constructed: "Yesterday we were in the service of frail mistresses and rapacious plantation owners; today we are domestic workers for 'liberated' women and housewives or mulattas-for-export" (Carneiro, 1999: 218). When considering the cyclical movement of oppression in the Afro-Brazilian context, the novel by Conceição Evaristo, *Ponciá Vicêncio*¹ (originally published in 2003; English version in 2007), offers a striking illustration: Ponciá is not only the daughter of the fourth generation of enslaved ancestors, struggling with the poor rural conditions inherited by colonial slavery; she is also trapped by a system of oppression that subjugates her consistently and systematically, even when she decides to leave her family behind to try new opportunities in the city. As a black woman, coming from a poor rural village, carrying with her only "a small bundle of clothes tightly to her bosom" (Evaristo, 2003: 26), Ponciá quickly discovers that the city offers her no redemption: without better alternatives, and fighting for subsistence, she spends years working for upper-middle class families, living in the Brazilian "favelas". Surrounded by misery and violence, Evaristo's protagonist embodies a hopeless and purposeless existence that becomes "consumed by the emptiness" (Ibid., 52) - a deep feeling of emotional vacuum and isolation. Ponciá's days are filled with long periods of reminiscing and longing for the family life she left behind.

It is worth noting that, just like Sethe, Ponciá tries to keep her past at bay, but she is told as a child that "Grandpa Vicêncio had left an inheritance for her" (Ibid., 20): as she pieces together the fragments of her family's past, Evaristo's heroine manages not only to unearth the root causes of her community's suffering, but also to embrace the African past that marks her own identity. Although Evaristo's novel does not bring any precise marks of time, the narrative spans from post-abolition to several decades after slavery in Brazil, always building connections between the characters' development and their relationship to the history of enslavement carried forward through generations.

The fact that Ponciá, Ursa, and Sethe re-stage and embody imposed conditions dictated by the logic of patriarchal and racist societies, in different post-slavery

¹ As I am discussing works by Afro-Brazilian writers, originally written in Portuguese, I am going to make direct reference to their English version in my analysis only when the works have already been published in English - as it is the case of Evaristo's novel. When the English version is not yet available in print, I am going to refer to the works in their original version (Portuguese), providing my own translation of key terms and sentences as needed for the purpose of analysis.

contexts, highlights at least two aspects of the diasporic experience. On one hand, it signals that the violence and exploitation of black women has been perpetuated throughout the history of slavery in the Americas, whether the narrative is situated in the years closer to the aftermath of slavery – as it is the case of *Beloved* – or many years later – as in *Corregidora* and *Ponciá Vicêncio*. On the other hand, these narratives give evidence to the fact that contemporary Afro-diasporic women writers have engaged in a project of re-claiming this history of oppression in order to articulate subjectivities and re-imagine identities in the making of a present-day consciousness. For instance, Ponciá's reunion with her family towards the end of the narrative; her re-encounter with the “mother-waters” of the river in the land of her ancestors; and, finally, her continuous “imaginary act of creating” (Ibid., 132) the image of ancestors by molding the clay in the river, configure elements that point to the possibilities of this diasporic articulation.

It is worth noting that the black female protagonists in these novels have to struggle with the burden of their past as it impacts their present – slavery is, then, a shared memory that haunts these women as the threads of their story intersect in the history of the African diaspora in the Americas. Memory – or “rememory”, to use Morrison's term in *Beloved* – functions here as a common territory from which black women can forge alliances and work across the differences and commonalities of their diasporic experiences. When discussing the works of some of the contemporary U.S. Afro-American women writers, Dana A. Williams (2009) highlights the relevance of “rememory” in Jones' *Corregidora*, which is, ultimately, a diasporic practice in black women's writings:

By invoking history and the legacy of slavery, *Corregidora* suggests not only that connections must be made between the past and the contemporary moment but that only those usable elements of the past must be retained if the present and future wellness is to be ensured. (Williams, 2009: 75)

Williams' argument suggests that the exercise of memory is also an exercise of selecting and filtering the past. A practice that, instead of defining a purported truth about the diasporic experience, promotes re-interpretation and transformation: in the processes of “rememory” depicted in their writings, black women writers are able to open up paths to re-think identity, womanhood, motherhood, family ties, and their (and their characters') own creative process of re-invention of themselves and their work, re-elaborating “non-naturalizable patterns of linkage”, to use Edwards' words once more.

As an illustration in the poetry by Afro-Brazilian writers, the poem “Pertado” by Cristiane Sobral (2005: 106), also refers to this act of “rememory” as a necessary process in order to critically re-think the past:

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.

The very act of writing a “estória escura” (“dark story”) and a “conto negro” (“black story”) with sobriety also represents an act of “rememory”. In addition, this act of (re)writing implies a level of (self) consciousness of a portion of the history of Brazil often silenced, neglected or dismissed. By persistently navigating across the “mar cemitério” (“ocean-cemetery), shelter of millions of “antepassados assassinados” (“murdered ancestors”), Sobral's poem connects past and present in order to speak up about the on-going oppression that still prevails (“essa mesma escravidão 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”). As a petard, Sobral's poem is an explosive device designed to break down the walls of history.

The craft of a fragmented, non-linear narrative (as it is the case in Jones, Morrison, and Evaristo, for instance; or the broken lines/sentences in Sobral's poem) is positioned in counterpoint with the development of the subjects' sense of self as whole human beings, truthful and honest to their place and role in history. The non-linearity and fragmented linguistic form is also figurative of the fractures caused by the history of dispersal in the diaspora. In the continuous and relentless movement between fragmentation and (re) integration, the literary work by Afro-diasporic women writers depict black female subjects and characters whose sense of womanhood and blackness are central to the historical legacy they bear witness, as well as to the relationship with their communities, their lovers, their ancestors, and the identities they choose for themselves.

Knitting an African Diasporic Fabric: Connections in the U.S.-Brazil Literary Production

If the act of “rememory” leads to a process of re-evaluation and re-elaboration of the past into the present in communal and personal levels, it is possible to think about black identity as both a product of other people's choice/imposition in the history of colonialism, as well as a project of resistance, when dominated and oppressed peoples re-shape their own history. In this sense, I want to consider the politics of identity in the African diaspora as negotiation. Taking into account how this negotiation takes place across borders, in their particular historical moments

- not necessarily in synchrony with one another - I will focus here on the connections of two literary projects: the one connected with the Black Arts Movement (BAM) in the U.S., and the one materialized by the *Quilombhoje* group in Brazil. My focus on these two literary projects is intrinsically linked to the selection of black women's writings I decided to discuss here: their work have been ideologically and aesthetically influenced by these movements, not to mention that many of them have a history of active participation in these projects as activists, collaborators, leaders. Also, as political activists and artists, black women writers of the BAM and *Quilombhoje* have played the important role of contributing to re-define sexist and masculinist notions of "blackness" from inside and outside the movements, pushing the boundaries of patriarchal structures and discourses.

The 1960s and 1970s represent the era during which the BAM flourished in the U.S., creating, as Cheryl Clarke affirms, "a new lexicon of prescriptive and proscriptive blackness, which continues to influence the practice of African American culture" (Clarke, 2005: 2). The same period represents, in the Brazilian scenario, the harsh years of political repression of the military regime, which only ended in the mid-1980s. For Afro-Brazilian activists and artists, most of who were aligned with leftist groups, that era was a period of ideological and artistic suffocation and persecution. Emanuelle K. F. Oliveira demonstrates that during these years the discussions over racial issues stimulated the development in Brazil of a marginal black press that "sought to reach out to the community at large and to promote consciousness-raising within the lower strata of the population" (Oliveira, 2008: 39) – particularly in the Southeast of Brazil. Oliveira explains that "Circulation of the alternative press was limited, but it was instrumental in the development of political opposition to military rule" (Ibid., 39). The creation of the black literary journal *Cadernos Negros* in 1978 was deeply influenced by the echoes of several political and cultural movements for black liberation across the Americas. For instance, black Brazilian intellectuals and artists connected with the guerilla art of the BAM and the Black Power Movement's motto "Black is beautiful" represented black self-empowering expressions and "a direct result of the influence of such cultural movements as Black Soul and Funk", as Oliveira documents (Ibid., 41). Another illustration of diasporic ideological connection for the 1980s black Brazilian movement is the use of the concept of *négritude*: a strategy to relate the *Cadernos*' pursuit for a collective black identity to the other black movements in the African diaspora (Ibid., 56 – 7). Within this context, a collective tone of protest permeated most of the initial works published in the *Cadernos*, as illustrated in the poem "Negritude" by Celinha (1998: 34):

De mim
 parte um canto guerreiro
 um vôo rasante, talvez rumo norte
 caminho trilhado da cana-de-açúcar
 (...)
 De mim
 parte N E G R I T U D E
 um golpe mortal
 negrura rasgando o ventre da noite
 punhal golpeando o colo do dia
 um punho mais forte que as fendas de aço
 das portas trancadas
 da casa da história.

Concerned with the aesthetic development of the Afro-Brazilian literature and with a black school of literary thought, writers such as Cuti, Oswaldo de Camargo, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Márcio Barbosa, and Paulo Colina, among others, decided to found a group that would function as a forum of debate for the Afro-Brazilian literary production and criticism, and *Quilombhoje* was born in 1980 in the city of São Paulo (Oliveira, 2008: 70). In a similar dynamics of the BAM's literary gatherings, *Quilombhoje* started with informal meetings at the writers' houses until it later developed into the main vehicle for publishing black literature in Brazil, including the volumes of *Cadernos Negros*.

Both the BAM and *Quilombhoje* opened a space for black women writers to voice their concerns, ideas, and publish their work – in ways that is unprecedented in the history of both Afro-Brazilian and U.S. Afro-American literary tradition. Although I consider that there are undeniable evidences showing a strong, and, in many spheres, dominant misogynist and masculinist discourses and practices among the BAM and *Quilombhoje* artists and intellectuals, I want to provide a counterbalance to this perspective: one that demonstrates that black women artists were at the same time engaging with and criticizing the movement "within and without the circle", as suggested by Cheryl Clarke in her discussion on the impact of black women's work inside and outside the BAM (Clarke, 2005: 49).

Although one could argue that Celinha's "Negritude" is charged with a collective, Pan-Africanist tone, conferring a seamless, undifferentiated identity based on the commonality of blackness, I argue that the possibility that the black female subject (both the one who writes the poem, and possibly the one who speaks in the poem) claims for herself the source of "negritude" - literally giving birth to it - shows a particular, gendered inflection to the idea of "negritude" itself. It provides a change in perspective of the rhetoric of black collective identification and the call for a collective black consciousness. This kind of inflection also constitutes a possible reading of June Jordan's "Calling on All Silent Minorities": "HEY/ C'MON/ COME OUT/ WHEREVER YOU ARE/ WE

NEED TO HAVE THIS MEETING/ AT THIS TREE/ AIN' EVEN BEEN/ PLANTED/ YET" (Jordan, 2007: 149). Here, it is important to perceive that this call is directed to an audience that is "silent" and needs to "come out". Taking into consideration the historical context of 1970s, and the debates inside and outside the organizations of this period, Jordan is investing her poem with the same perspective nurtured by movements such as the Combahee River Collective, which were committed to understanding the depth of black women's oppression, but which were also open to form alliances with other oppressed groups of the African diaspora in the struggle against racism, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism.

June Jordan, just like Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, have brought to the circle of the BAM, as well as to the black and white feminist groups, the notion that difference and dissonance do not have to collide with a common effort towards liberation. Writing as black lesbian feminists, they challenged and confronted discourses of homophobia and sexism, present in the black movements, and racist notions and attitudes permeating the predominantly white feminist movement of the era. Afro-Brazilian writers, such as Sônia de Fátima da Conceição, Miriam Alves and Esmeralda Ribeiro, actively involved with the Brazilian black movements of the 1980s and the *Quilombhoje* group, also defied the masculinist and sexist discourses in those arenas. In her poem "Trapos e Nudez", Miriam Alves places the black female subject in struggle to oppose dominant "controlling images" and to have the right of self-definition (Alves, 1983: 50-51). Using the mirror as a metaphor, Alves' poem illustrates the difficulty of engaging in a process of identity construction, shifting away from the male gaze over black women. The black female subject in the poem highlights her struggles with the notion of self-affirmation in the intersections of race and gender:

Vesti minhas roupas
velhas roupas
os farrapos que tirei do armário
olhei no espelho e não vi
meus olhos

Os farrapos que vestia
perderam-se nos espaços
(inúteis trapos)
E ao estatelar-me no chão
na poça desta vida
envergonhei-me da minha nudez
(...)
Minha negritude inteira amostra
pelos
pele
chocando o mundo
o mundo chocando-me

In the poem "Objetando" (Alves, 1990: 54), Alves challenges the idea of objectification of women by syntactically transforming the noun *object* into the gerund *objecting*: a linguistic maneuver that shifts the position of the black female subject as commodity to a position of agency. As each one of the three stanzas of the poem opens with the word "objeto" (which can be read as both the present tense verb in the first person and the noun, in Portuguese), the poem's play on words suggests the possibility of resistance by overthrowing the masculine gaze and forming new black female representations. In dialogue with Alves' "Objetando", Audre Lorde's poem "Now" is embedded by an urge of taking action in the struggle for liberation (Lorde, 2000: 121). In a progressive construction line by line, Lorde's poetic subject true liberation is only possible when it is inclusive of all oppressive groups – and black women is in forefront of that struggle because they constitute one of the most oppressed groups in history:

Woman power
is
Black power
is
Human power
is
always feeling
my heart beats
as my eyes open
as my hands move
as my mouth speaks

I am
are you

Ready.

Although Lorde was involved in the activism of multiple groups in the 1960s and 1970s – leftist groups, black (lesbian) feminist collectives, black writer's workshops, and sectors of the white feminist movement – she never claimed membership in any of them. The title of the collection of her essays, *Sister Outsider*, is emblematic of how Lorde positioned herself in relationship to all the political causes and groups she supported and/or acknowledged: someone who was at the same time part of the family, yet looking at it from the margins. In "Who Said It Was Simple" (Lorde, 2000: 92), Lorde uses sophisticated irony to describe the different ways by which the politics of identity functioned in various movements of her time (in the case of this poem, the 1970s). The contradictions in the process of forging identities are pictured in the scene where a group of (feminist white) women that gather together in the fast-food restaurant "Nedicks" "before they march", "discussing the problematic girls/ they hire to make them free", completely oblivious of "the slighter pleasures of their slavery", while "an almost white counterman" ignores the "waiting brother to serve them first". In this depiction of a

complex social scene where race, gender, and sex intersect to shape the dynamics of social interaction in the U.S. of the 1970s, Lorde not only criticizes the contradictions and fragmentations of the so-called liberatory movements and discourses of her time, but she also puts herself as part of her own questionings, self-conscious. of the many identities that constitute her sense of whole (“... I who am bound by my mirror/ as well as my bed/ see causes in colour/ as well as in sex”).

Looking at the work of Audre Lorde, it is evident that she was, like Jordan, concerned with (and aware of) how black peoples of the diaspora struggles within different systems of oppression. For instance, in *Sister Outsider*, the essay “Notes from a Trip to Russia” registers Lorde’s experiences and reflections about the relationship between race, gender and class issues inside and outside the U.S. Having observed Russia during the Soviet Union’s the Era of Stagnation in the late 1970s, Lorde compares the ways in which human beings are treated in Russia and in her home country, to which she concludes:

...when you find people who start from a position where profit is at the core, as opposed to a position where profit is at the core, the solutions [to problems in Russia and problems in the U.S.] can be very different. (...) I am not always convinced that human beings are at the core here, either, although there is more lip service done to that idea than in the U.S. (Lorde, 1984: 28).

In another essay of the same collection, she talks about her connections with mother’s birthplace - Grenada, in the Caribbean: “Grenada Revisited” reveals Lorde’s sharp critical eyes in denouncing the “tactics of quelling a conquered people” and the truculence of an imperial war in the intersections of class, race, and gender, within the context of the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983 and its aftermath (Lorde 1984, 184).

The fact that Jordan and Lorde – among many other women writers of the BAM – were writing about oppression in the African diaspora, and how it operates in the intersections of multiple social categories, does not only indicate that these writers had a decentered view of the problem: actually they were bringing to their art and activism the possibilities and complexities of articulating diasporic black alliances inscribed and forged in multi-layered black communities and realities across and beyond U.S. borders.

If one considers that by the 1970s black artists and activists in Brazil were also circulating in many spaces where debates about issues related to racial oppression in the diaspora were taking place, one could also wonder whether these ideas (and even alliances) circulating in the U.S. and Brazil have in fact been exchanged across borders. In a 2008 bilingual edition of collected essays and fictional prose by Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian scholars and

writers, Cheryl Sterling’s essay tell us about how a meeting between Sonia Sanchez and a collective of Afro-Brazilian artists (some of them affiliated with *Quilombhoje*) in 2000 in Brazil inspired her to think about the connections between the BAM and *Quilombhoje*. Sterling concludes her remarks by reinforcing the idea of international exchange and articulation she was able to witness among those black people and their art:

For it was not just a meeting between poets, it was a meeting of two seemingly different worlds, two different epochs, whose commonality transcended these special and temporal divides. ... This moment demonstrates the ways in which the local quest for agency of the black subject becomes a collective quest for black peoples, who are girded by axioms of white normalcy. (Sterling, 2008: 30)

As a diasporic collective quest, black artists in the U.S. and Brazil have forged alliances through their actions and their art to re-inscribe black voices in the narratives of history and the making of literary articulations. The local contexts for that quest have become the stage for historical acts of resistance to what Sterling calls the “axioms of white normalcy” – its ways to manifest in particular contexts in the U.S. and Brazil and the elites in power that sustain its discourses constitute an important element of difference in the “collective quest for black peoples”.

The “Color Line” and the Color Spectrum: Blackness Re-Considered in Afro-Brazilian and Afro-American Women’s Literature

In 1903, Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* discussed the racial dilemma in the U.S. and asserted: “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (Du Bois, 1965: 209). Du Bois’ premise would underlie the analysis of racial segregation in the U.S. in the post-abolition era. Decades later, in Brazil, Gilberto Freyre’s 1933 *Casa Grande & Senzala*, an anthropological treatise celebrating Brazil as the paradise of racial harmony and immortalizing the myth of racial democracy. In the book, Freyre concludes: “Every Brazilian, even the light skinned fair haired one carries about him on his soul ... the shadow or at least the birthmark of the aborigine or the negro” (Freyre, 1986: 278). Both Du Bois’ and Freyre’s racial analyses would greatly influence research work for decades, but their framework would also give evidence to significant limitations. Du Bois’ first elaborations on the issue of the color line did not include an analysis of how oppressive systems impose discrimination beyond lines of color in a much more complex operation. Also, behind Freyre’s celebratory tone in regards to racial *mestiçagem*, his ideological framework aligned with the project to deny ethnic inequalities (and identity), propagating the elimination of the so-called “inferior races” through

“whitening”. Niyi Afolabi demonstrates how deeply Brazilian society has been “brainwashed” with the myth of racial democracy throughout the years to the point that it “pervades Brazilian identity, life, and culture as manifest, above all, in the legitimization of racism” (23).

In the Brazilian scenario, articulating a black identity becomes a great social and discursive challenge, because the doxa of racial democracy is, in fact, the framework for the image of a *mestiço* nation – nor black, nor white: the product of a harmonious mixture among the races which were gathered together for the formation of this peculiar people. When applying her analysis of *mestiçagem* to the study of the social representations of women of African descent in Brazil, Kia L. Caldwell (2007) shows that Brazilian women of different color categories (*mulatas*, *morenas*, *negras*, and many others²) are placed in unaltered or unexchangeable social roles, which clearly points 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 *mulatas*) and/or inferior roles (domestic labor, for instance) in relation to the white norms. 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” (Caldwell, 2007: 40 - 41).

In a very short poem entitled “Dúvida” (1998: 61), Esmeralda Ribeiro, poet and now one of the editors of *Cadernos*, defies the discourse of racial democracy in Brazil and, by posing her “doubt”, questions the racial hierarchy prevailing in the country in which race, gender and class are literally embodied by the social position the majority of black women in Brazil occupy: “Se a margarida flor/ é branca de fato/ qual a cor da Margarida/ que varre o asfalto?”. By playing with the word “margarida” (“daisy”), both the flower name and a woman’s name, Ribeiro is able to intersect many layers that reveal the racial, gender and class interlocking systems of oppression operated on black women, but normally invisible and naturalized in the Brazilian social structure. Margarida,

2 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 the 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.

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 the “Margarida” individual is the exploited woman worker whose racial identity and oppression becomes invisible and naturalized in the dominant social arrangements. Ribeiro then exposes the social mask that covers the ways in which the system of oppression operates and its effects on black women.

Poet and actress Elisa Lucinda depicts a case of sexual and racial harassment in which the victim, a “mulata with green eyes”, is insulted by a “white male intellectual”. The poem “Mulata Exportação” (2005: 83 – 84) plays with the stereotypical representation of the hyper-sexualized mulata, 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; with the language used to refer to the mulata; and with the black and white dichotomy established between the mulata and the white men. In the larger national context, there is the notion that by having a relationship with a white man, black women somehow find a way to uplift their social status. – in the poem, this is the “benefit” underlying this man’s proposal in exchange of his sexual use of the mulata’s body.

However, opposing this view, Lucinda’s poem goes on describing not only the mulata’s repudiation of the white man’s proposal, but also her decision to take the case to the police and then to court. When all the legal resources are exhausted – resources linked to (white) male-dominated institutions -, the black woman then turns to the white men and confronts him with his attempt to gain from her sexual benefits: “Eu disse: ‘Seu juíz, não adianta!/ Opressão, Barbaridade, Genocídio./ Nada disso se cura trepando com uma escura!’”. 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 by political and self-consciousness with which she is able to understand that the event in the present and the discrimination she is subjected to are, in fact, consequences of the history of slavery and Brazil’s veiled racial oppression. The speaker then points out that the only way to truly transform the reality of racial oppression is first to acknowledge its intrinsic connection to the discourse and ideology of “mestiçagem”: “Eu me lembro da Senzala/ e tu te lembrás da Casa-Grande/ e vamos juntos escrever sinceramente outra história”.

Discourses defying or reinforcing mixed-race identities are not a particular trace of the Brazilian literary universe, but it is also present in the U.S. literary tradition. Suzanne Bost (2007) discusses the contemporary deployment of discourses of mixture as “a sign of millennial shifts in American identity” that, on one hand, forges the idea of a “new” America populated by mixed-race heroes and, on the other hand, underline the fears of groups who resist the notion that they might become a minority and of those who, by holding on to unitary categories, were able to build social movements for political and social leverage (Bost, 2007: 4). It is worth noticing that for Bost the discourses of race-mixture in contemporary U.S. is founded on the intertwined connection between race and sex: “Throughout popular culture and literature, debates about the nature of mixed-race identity are mapped out on the body of a woman because thinking about racial mixture inevitably leads to questions of sex and reproduction” (Ibid., 2). Bost then develops her argument based on the idea of mixture or mixed identities (racial, sexual, cultural, and transnational mixtures) as discourses that “challenge universalizing notions of selfhood and highlight the complexities of subjectivity” (Ibid., 6).

The questions of complex and multi-faceted identities (gender/sexual and racial, not to mention class) constitute indeed a recurrent theme in Audre Lorde’s work. Poems such as “Naturally”, “Blackstudies”, “Revolution Is One Form of Social Change”, “Woman”, and “Recreation” illustrate the persistence of this problematic and the writer’s uneasiness with fixed and ascribed classifications of womanhood, blackness, and sexuality. A similar thematic thread composes the scope of Pat Parker’s poetic production. In the introduction to the 1999 expanded edition of Parker’s *Movement in Black*, Cheryl Clarke affirms the following in relation to Parker’s multi-layered identity and work: “What some writers see as masks black women use to undermine self-knowledge and intimacy, Parker (and many other black feminists) sees as multiple strategies deployed simultaneously sometimes, and sometimes not – depending on context” (Clarke, 1999:16).

The debates about mixed-race identities, which complicate fixed notions of “blackness” in the U.S., feature the 1998 novel *Caucasia*, by Danzy Senna. Senna’s novel, in which dozens of characters, black and white, young and old, male and female, orchestrate their own conversation on race, is a story about visibility and invisibility. Opening in Boston in the 1970s, it has at its heart the Lee sisters: Birdie (the narrator) and Cole, the daughters of Sandy, their white mother, and Deck, their father who is black. They are youngsters who wake up each morning in their attic bedroom to a city which “still came in black and white, yellowing around the edges” (Senna, 1998: 1). In this scenario, Birdie lives with a kind of nostalgia for a lost blackness she never really owned. As a small child, looking into her older sister’s face, she had considered

Cole’s “cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired, serious” traits to be “the reflection that proved [her] own existence” (Ibid., 5). Sandy’s “radical” politics in the context of the 1970s lead her to harboring political fugitives and then to letting herself be talked into storing weapons in her basement. Suddenly, she and Birdie are on a panicky run into a life of assumed names, improvised histories and paranoid shifts of identity, while Deck, the father, jotting endless notes for his never-finished treatise on the origins of racism, is harassed by whites and ridiculed by militant blacks for his blond wife and pale daughter. Convinced he can find a racial Utopia, Deck then leaves to Brazil with Carmen, his new black girlfriend, and Cole. Having to deal with the devastation of being separated from her sister and father, and finally exasperated with passing not only as white but as Jewish in rural New Hampshire, Birdie throws herself on a journey of both rebellion and renewal. In following Birdie’s sometimes painful, sometimes jubilant trajectory, Senna leads us to consider a world where no spurious mysteries about race are constructed to distract U.S. from the real and urgent task of discovering the complex truths of our common humanity: as Birdie is finally reunited with her sister, she contemplates the “utterly ordinary” multi-ethnic children getting on board of a school bus, surprised to acknowledge that life had simply to go on, in spite of its complexities and pain (Ibid., 413).

While the resolution in Senna’s *Caucasia* might not be ideologically clear, as she depicts the racial tensions of an era, and even poses a critique to the Brazilian myth of racial democracy, it is clear that her narrative dismantles fixed notions of blackness in the U.S., problematizing Du Bois’ notion of the color line and expanding the boundaries of understanding identity politics. Ultimately, Senna’s novel, as well as the work of Lorde and Parker and other contemporary black women writers, open up paths for the articulation of more complex, multi-layered identities – identities constructed in and by internal and external diasporic experiences of domination and resistance.

Final Remarks

The literary representations offered by contemporary U.S. Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian women writers are considered here as starting points from which it is possible to rethink the commonalities and singularities of multiple identities of black women in the African diaspora across the Americas. They provide symbolic constructs that have the potential to challenge hegemonic notions of purportedly unified national/cultural identities and pre-defined racial, sexual and gender categorizations.

The writings discussed here offer an opportunity to listen to black women’s voices as they negotiate their identities and subjectivities, acknowledging the complexities of this process and the oppression that mark their stories 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 identity may also represent a tool with which black women of the diaspora are able to build self-consciousness, self-affirmation, and self-liberation. None of the texts discussed here offers an easy path towards this process; none of them provides a recipe of how to succeed in the achievement of sexual liberation, consciousness, self-valorization, self-affirmation or alleviation of oppression. In relation to the identity politics that literary aesthetics may be engaged to, each one of these writers contributes to the understanding of the ideologies and conditions that have sometimes led black women feel and been seen as inferior or worthless when elements of those ideologies are culturally internalized.

Finally, I argue that by re-writing the black female body, identities and subjectivities into literary representations of multi-layered racial, gender and sexual discourses, contemporary Afro-Brazilian and U.S. Afro-American women writers do not only challenge the celebratory postmodern discourses that equals 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 offer alternatives to re-address the memory of the oppressions that mark this history – the embodiment of colonization and conquest (Collins 2000, 158-9). Read altogether in the historical processes in the Americas, these texts establish a dialogic relationship with one another in an attempt to articulate the multiple meanings of blackness, womanhood, and the politics of identity across differences. Their voices become a collective shout of defiance and resistance to the exploitation of black female bodies; their voices echo the music of liberation, as Conceição Evaristo's poem "Vozes Mulheres" declares (Evaristo 2008: 10):

(...)
 A voz de minha filha
 recorre todas as nossas vozes
 recolhe em si
 as vozes mudas caladas
 engasgadas nas gargantas.
 (...)
 Na voz de minha filha
 se fará ouvir a ressonância
 o eco da vida-liberdade.

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Recebido em outubro de 2015 e aceito em novembro de 2015