

***Toward a Concept of Afro-Brazilian Literature*<sup>1</sup> by Eduardo de Assis Duarte**

Translated by

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At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Afro-Brazilian literature passed through a period full of realizations and discoveries that initiated a broadening of its corpus, both in prose and in poetry. This increase occurred in concert with the academic debates about the nature of its solidification as a specific field of literary production – distinct, although in permanent dialogue with Brazilian literature *tout court*. While many still question whether Afro-Brazilian literature really exists, every day, new research points to the vigor of this writing: for as much as it is contemporaneous, it is also long established, reaching well back into the eighteenth century to Domingos Caldas Barbosa. Likewise, for as often as it is written in large urban centers, by dozens of poets and authors of fiction, it also has a strong presence in rural areas and regional literatures. Take the example of the Maranhense José do Nascimento Moraes, author of, among other texts, the novel *Vencidos e degenerados* (1916).<sup>3</sup> It tells the story of the decades that follow the abolition of slavery in Brazil (May 13, 1888), and attempts to show how the mentality produced by the institution of slavery continued even after its end. In short, this literature doesn't merely exist; it makes itself known across the various historical periods and spaces relevant to our coming together as a people. It doesn't simply exist; it is multiple and diverse.

Since the 1980s, the work of writers who identify openly as individuals of African descent has grown in volume and has started to occupy a space in the cultural scene, just as, at the same time, the demands of the black movement have grown and acquired institutional visibility.<sup>4</sup> Since then, there has also been a similar increase in academic studies about such literature, which, for most of the twentieth century, had been almost exclusively the object of study by foreign scholars like Bastide, Sayers, Rabassa and Brookshaw, among others.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared in Portuguese in *Literatura e Afrodescendência no Brasil: antologia crítica; Volume 4: História, teoria, polêmica*. (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2011.)

<sup>2</sup> Translators' note (hereafter abbreviated to "T.N."): Duarte's essay is the final chapter of a four-volume anthology organized by the same author. The essay seeks to synthesize the material that precedes it, and readers will find more information about the writers that Duarte mentions in the anthology itself. We have endeavored to reproduce faithfully the content of the essay. As such, excepting small changes necessary to preserve meaning in translation, we retain all of the text's original emphases (italicization, quotation marks and emphatic punctuation), paragraph structure and notes. In moments where we felt it necessary to add words or phrases in order for an English-speaking readership, we enclosed such additions in square brackets.

<sup>3</sup> T.N.: The word "*Maranhense*" refers to an individual from the state of Maranhão, located in the northwest corner of Brazil and far from the famous urban centers of the southeast (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte).

<sup>4</sup> T.N.: For a number of reasons, publicly identifying as black or of African descent in Brazil is a politically charged act. Duarte and several other contributors to the anthology take up the issue, which merits much more dedicated analysis than the space of an explicatory note would allow. Suffice it to say that many of the same questions that Duarte raises about Afro-Brazilian and Black literature apply to the notion of Afro-Brazilian identity. For example, some authors choose to distance themselves this genre of literature, preferring instead to identify their work simply as "Brazilian literature." The same occurs with Brazilians and their national or ethnic identifications.

<sup>5</sup> T.N.: Roger Bastide, Raymond Sayers, Gregory Rabassa and David Brookshaw.

Certainly, the seminal work of poets and writers who make up organizations like Quilombhoje, a group based in São Paulo but with satellites in Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre and other capitals, has contributed enormously to Afro-Brazilian literary production as a whole. Because of its unrelenting effort to broaden the horizon of its reading public, Afro Brazilian literature continues to acquire legitimacy in universities, evidenced in the growing number of undergraduate and graduate courses available to students, as well as in the publishing world. For example, the *Cadernos Negros* series has experienced three uninterrupted decades of continuous publication.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, an epic novel dedicated to the retrieval of the unofficial history of enslaved peoples and their forms of resistance, entitled *Um defeito de cor*, by Ana Maria Gonçalves (2006), was published by a prominent editor and went on to win the much-coveted literary award, *Prêmio Casa de las Américas*.

Two factors have contributed to creating a more favorable and receptive environment for arts marked by an ethnic identification with African descent. The first factor is the rise of the so-called black middle class, constituted as it is by an increasing number of professionals with postsecondary degrees who are seeking a place in both the work market and in the consumer world. The second is the institution of mechanisms like Law n° 10.639/2003 and affirmative action policies.<sup>7</sup> Such phenomena often fall outside of the purview of literary criticism and also, admittedly, the objectives of this essay. I mention them simply to provide a proper background for the discussion presented here and to remind the reader that the greater the public and the demand, the greater the responsibilities of the agents who occupy spaces of research and of knowledge production, in particular the institutions of higher learning.

Thus, the moment is ripe for the construction of theoretical tools that are effective enough to foster further critical reflection. We must equip scholars with more precise working instruments. With that in mind, it would be useful to evaluate the “status of the art” of two of these instruments, specifically, the concepts of *Black literature* and of *Afro-Brazilian literature*.

The publication of *Cadernos* added much to the discursive construction of a concept of Black literature. Since 1978, the series has consistently published work, be it prose or poetry, which is marked predominantly by a tone of protest against racism, preserving, as Florentina de Silva Souza demonstrates, the militant tradition of the Black Movement (2005). And, from this perspective, certain themes in *Cadernos* stand out: that of black people, as individuals and as a collective, and the theme of social recognition and cultural memory. Moreover, the series actively searches for a public of African descent, which it has achieved through the institutionalization of a language that rejects stereotypes as discursive agents of discrimination. For instance, in an interview with Luiza Lobo, Ironides Rodrigues, one of the most vocal intellectuals of the generation that preceded Quilombhoje, declares the following:

Black literature is that which is created by a black or *mulato* author who writes about his race from the perspective of what it means to be black, to be black in color, to identify publicly as black, and to discuss the issues that matter to him

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<sup>6</sup> T.N.: In keeping with the original text, references to *Cadernos Negros* are sometimes shortened to *Cadernos*.

<sup>7</sup>T.N.: Instituted in 2003, Law 10.639 mandates curriculum changes in in the Brazilian education system, with the purpose of allocating a certain amount of the syllabus to themes having to do with contemporary Africa, current relations between Brazil and African countries, and the history of Africans in Brazil.

as such: religion, society, racism. He has to identify openly – to declare publicly – that he is black. (266)

Throughout its existence, *Cadernos* seldom distanced itself from this adamant position – which soon became its trademark –, a position which ended up pulling it away from a line of thinking that is less committed to militancy, like, for example, that expressed by poets Edmilson de Almeida Pereira and Ronald Augusto, by prose writers like Muniz Sodré, Nei Lopes, Joel Rufino dos Santos or, in the field of children's literature, by Júlio Emílio Braz, Rogério Andrade Barbosa, Joel Rufino dos Santos (the same as above), along with Heloisa Pires de Lima, just to cite a few of the contemporary authors.

On the other hand, looking back to the first half of the twentieth century, we would be remiss not to mention the modernist tradition of *negritude* exemplified in the work of: Jorge de Lima, Raul Bopp, Menotti del Picchia, Cassiano Ricardo or the writers of the group *Leite Criolo* in Minas Gerais, among others.<sup>8</sup> There would be no way for us to compare such examples to the work of Cuti, Miriam Alves or Conceição Evaristo: what could possibly be similar, from any theoretical angle, between Ponciá Vicêncio and Nega Fulô?<sup>9</sup> The point-of-view that orients the perspective of *Poemas negros*, by Jorge de Lima, is totally other, external and folkloric, something akin to what Oswald de Andrade called “*macumba* for tourists.”<sup>10</sup> And for as much as *Urucungo*, by Raul Bopp, employs rhythms and intonations derived from an Afro-Brazilian oral culture, there is no way to deny that the black literature of these authors is entirely other.

In line with the legendary modernist tradition, Benedita Gouveia Damasceno also confers on the concept [of *negritude*] a distinct meaning and one that is even opposed to that which Quilombhoje practices: a meaning marked by a thematic reductionism that doesn't account for ethnic belonging and authorial perspective. For Damasceno, the “least important” element is “the color of the author,” which then allows her to include Jorge de Lima, Ascenso Ferreira and Raul Bopp in her study of black poets (13).<sup>11</sup> In general, this has been a tendency in our criticism, and the privileging of theme above all other elements of writing reminds us once again of the stronghold of the modernist influence in Brazilian culture. Although she recognizes the challenges and difficulties facing the establishment of a “black aesthetic,” given that “a ‘white aesthetic’ doesn't exist,” in the end Benedita Damasceno concludes that “there are subtle differences between black poetry written by Afro-Brazilians and that written by whites” (13, 125).

Conscious of the limitations of seeing theme as the dominant criterion, Domicio Proença Filho looks for a middle ground between the two notions [of *Black literature*

<sup>8</sup> In *Vanguardas latino-americanas*, Jorge Schwartz critically contrasts the concepts of *negritude* and *negritude*, examining their manifestations in Brazilian literature as well as in the literature of the Spanish-speaking Americas. He rearticulates the distinctions that characterize each of the two movements, as well as how the movements are differently perceived in various countries. For Oswald de Camargo, the discourse of *negritude*, when used by a white person, acts like the *indianismo* of the Romantics, which reduces the indigenous person to the colonizer's object of fantasy.

<sup>9</sup> T.N.: Ponciá Vicêncio is the protagonist of Conceição Evaristo's novel of the same name, and Nega Fulô is the object of Jorge de Lima's poetic imagination in “Essa Nega Fulô.”

<sup>10</sup> T.N.: *Macumba* is one name for Afro-Brazilian religions, like *Umbanda* and *Candomblé*. The word “*macumba*” is often used pejoratively to case such religions as “black magic” or “witchcraft.”

<sup>11</sup> T.N.: De Lima, Ascenso and Bopp are white writers, and, as the title suggests, the book is about “black poetry in Brazilian modernism.”

as that which is written *by* versus *about* black people], proposing a double meaning for the term [black literature]:

In light of these observations, then, a literature would be *black*, in the restricted sense, if it were created by black people or descendants of black people who self-identified as such, and, in so doing, it would reveal worldviews, ideologies and practices that, due to the force of atavistic, social and historical conditions, would be characterized by a certain specificity, linked to a clear intention of achieving cultural singularity.

*Lato sensu*, it would be literary art created by anyone, so long as it contained dimensions specific to black people or their descendants. (“O negro” 78, Duarte’s emphasis)

The critic would once again take up this reflection in a later piece, adding that, in the first sense [*stricto sensu*], “the black person [exists] as a subject and as such, is politically committed to issues concerning black communities and identities” and, in the second sense [*lato sensu*], “the black condition as an object, viewed from a distance.” In this manner, the concept of black literature would include both “literature about black people” and “literature by black people” (“A trajetória”159). Such a dichotomy compromises the operability of the concept of *Black literature*, since it requires that the concept house the type of text that is committed to restoring social and cultural dignity to African descendants alongside its opposite – the type of production that is “uncommitted,” to use Proença’s term, a text which perpetuates the exoticism and reproduction of stereotypes bound to the semantics of prejudice.

The work of Zilá Bernd shares Proença Filho’s conciliatory position. Her book *Introdução à literatura negra (Introduction to Black Literature)* analyzes both the discourse “of black people” as well as the discourse “about black people” and examines the poetry of Castro Alves and Jorge de Lima, with the goal of comparing their differences with those that exist between Luiz Gama and Lino Guedes. Thus, she employs the thematic criterion but also relativizing it. Focused on poetry, her study establishes some “fundamental laws” of black literature, such as: the “reversal of values,” combined with the construction of a “new symbolic order” opposed to hegemonic beliefs; the “construction of the black epic poem;” and, above all, the “emergence of an enunciating I”:

Black poetry comes into being through the (re)taking of the position of the subject of enunciation, a fact that fuels the rewriting of History from the point of view of black people. Constructing itself as a privileged space of the manifestation of subjectivity, the black poem reflects the transition from alienation to consciousness.

As such, the speaker’s claim doesn’t limit itself to the request of mere recognition as such, but instead it extends its boundaries through the act of reappropriating its own existential space. (77, Duarte’s emphasis)

Bernd doesn’t address the issue of the writer’s skin color, but rather the declaration of belonging. With that, she appropriately describes the growth of the individual voice as it moves towards identification with a community, a moment in which the “I-that-wants-to-be-black” meets with the “collective we” (77). Without disagreeing with the importance of recognizing this voice, we nevertheless need to trouble its circumscription to the poetic text, a fact which limits significantly its application to the discourse of fiction, given the added complexity of the presence of a narrator and given the multiple means of disguise open to the author him/herself. For Luiza Lobo, “this

definition seems to imply that anyone can identify existentially with the condition of being of African descent—which is by no means true considering the sociocultural stage in which we find ourselves, at least in Brazil” (328). Lobo argues that the concept [of black literature] shouldn’t include the work of white people, and, along with Brookshaw, she understands such literature to be only that “written by black people.”

Clearly the question is controversial and, as such, has been kept alive in the reflections and debates conducted over the last few decades. But there exists yet another complication, which has to do with the notion of a *black* text as being synonymous with detective narratives of mystery and suspense, known as *roman noir* in the publishing industry. In Brazil, this genre has achieved success through Rubem Fonseca and others, and even managing to establish different nuances between the concepts of the *black novel* and the *police novel*. If we take the example of Peter Winner, the writer-character of *Romance negro*, by Rubem Fonseca:

... we understand that the black novel is characterized by the existence of a crime, involving a victim whose identity is soon revealed; an unknown criminal; and a detective, who will ultimately discover the identity of the criminal. After all, there’s no such thing as the perfect crime, right? (151)

In the tale, whose protagonist is a famous writer of police stories who happens to be speaking at an event that brings together other authors of the genre, Fonseca weaves together action and metalanguage in order to outline the genealogy of *roman noir* dating back to the eighteenth century, a genre which incorporates Edgar Allan Poe and other founders: “the basic rules of the *roman noir*, black novel, *kriminal roman*, police novel, mystery novel or whatever other name it goes by, were established by Poe with the publication of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” here in this very same magazine in front of us” (161). To which Fonseca’s fictitious author adds: “one critic confirmed that my books, which contain violence, corruption, social conflicts, misery, crime and madness, could be considered genuine texts [in the style] of the black novel” (164).

Thus, by way of just this short summary of the issue, one deduces that, ranging from militancy to identity celebration to *negrismo* that is “uncommitted” and borders on exoticism, from texts that espouse these positions to texts that denounce them, there is no single *black literature*. This variety, at the very least, weakens and limits the efficacy of the concept as a theoretical and critical tool. Not to mention there is also the semantic issue of the adjective [“black”] which, all the way back to the pages of the *Bible* and in practically every spoken language of the West, bears marks of negativity, inferiority, sin, death and every type of witchcraft, as Brookshaw points out.

The term *Afro-Brazilian*, on the other hand, in its very semantic con figuration, reflects the tense process of cultural mixing present in Brazil ever since the arrival of the first Africans. It reflects a process involving ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural hybridization. According to a conservative view, it might be said that Afro-Brazilians are also all of those who prove themselves to be part of or belong to the oldest families, whose genealogies date back to the great migratory fluxes that have occurred since the nineteenth century. Due to the non-essentialist character of the term [Afro-Brazilian], other revisions of history, like the above, could also be invented. For Cuti, the term functions as a mitigating element that diffuses the political sense of identity affirmation contained in the word *black*. Certainly, in that they encompass the entire gamut of phenotypic variations inherent to *mestiçagem*, terms like Afro-Brazilian or Afro-descendant risk taking on the homologous sense of the word ‘*pardo*,’ a risk as

present in the statistics of the IBGE as it is execrated by the fundamentalists of racial pride who live by the slogan “100% black.”<sup>12</sup>

Leaving aside sociological, political and anthropological polemic issues, we can say with certainty, and above all in Brazil, that a 100% Black literature, where the word “black” is a synonym for the word “African,” doesn’t exist. As Appiah (1997) shows, not even Africa is homogenous in that way. Nor is the novel, the short story or the poem a construction that emerges uniquely out of the Black Atlantic. In a cultural universe like ours – where true discursive constellations, which are as geographically situated as they are located in what Nora calls “places of memory” that are constantly being rewritten –, to insist on an essentialist bias will only generate more polemics instead of creating theoretical tools that are necessary for the pedagogical work of educating readers.

The discussion [about the term Afro-Brazilian] involves yet other concerns. Luiza Lobo sees a more incisive character in the concept:

We might define Afro-Brazilian literature as the literary production of Afro-descendants who identify publicly and ideologically as such, and who use a voice derived from this identification. Therefore, Afro-Brazilian literature would distinguish itself immediately from the literary production by white people who write about black people, either as an object or as a stereo typed theme or character (e.g. folklore, exoticism, regionalism). (315)

This definition echoes Bernd’s proposal of a subject of enunciation combined with the insistence on belonging and the ideological commitment formulated by Ironides Rodrigues. Lobo continues: “In order to release Black literature from the reductionist stronghold of general literature that treats it as something folkloric, exotic, or as a stereotype, it must necessarily be seen as Afro-Brazilian literature” (331).

It is undeniable that Afro-Brazilianness, when applied to literary production as a requirement of authorship and as a mark of origin, supplements the line of thinking that opposes the idea of Brazilian literature as such, especially that which sees itself as an offshoot of Portuguese literature. But just as relevant as the presence of a “subject that speaks for itself,” in which an enunciating I or a narrator declares itself to be black or an Afro descendant is the *point-of-view* that such literature takes on. A good example might be the work of nineteenth century authors, with its African traces, authors who were forced to submit to the hegemony of whitening policies as a supposed vaccine against social death, and moreover, forced to accept a scientific thinking that prohibited them from publicly identifying as black or mixed-race people, as was the case for Maria Firmina dos Reis. These are authors who were forced into a suffocating *negricia* or *negrura*, whose literature employed a form of expression characterized by “the return of the repressed,” as is the case of Machado de Assis.<sup>13</sup> In both [Firmina and Machado], there is no authorial voice that declares itself to be a black person, like we find, for example, in Luiz Gama’s “Orfeu de Carapina.” From there one is hard-pressed

<sup>12</sup> T.N.: The word “*pardo*” is one of many terms that were invented in an attempt to classify the citizens in Brazil’s official records. *Pardo* literally means “brown,” and other examples of such terms include *moreno*, *moreno escuro*, *moreno claro*, etc. This system of classification makes evident the social stratifications fomented by institutionalized racism. “IBGE” refers to Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística/ Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics.

<sup>13</sup> T.N.: These are variations of *negrismo*.

to call a text like Machado's "Pai contra mãe" or Úrsula Black literature, and not simply due to the fact that the concept of Black literature carries certain political or folkloric significances. That said, the works of both of these authors – and there are many – cannot be classified as having a point-of-view that is "uncommitted" or outside of a black identity or Afro-Brazilianness. The Machadian text speaks for itself, and just like that of Firmina, it takes on a vision that is definitively not white and not racist. The work of neither of these authors, therefore, ought to be categorized as "*negrismo*" or as "literature about black people. Ultimately, just as relevant as determining the origin of an author – or perhaps more so – is the *place* from which the author expresses his or her vision of the world. In this context, I see in the concept of Afro-Brazilian literature a more elastic (and more productive) formulation, one which spans both the explicit self-identification of an ethnic subjectivity – which is present in a range of authors that goes from Luiz Gama to Cuti, and even includes Lima Barreto's "black or *mulato*, however they want" – as well as the use of a diffuse and less explicit point of enunciation, found in the work of Caldas Barbosa, Machado, Firmina, Cruz e Souza, Patrocínio, Paula Brito, Gonçalves Crespo and many others. For this reason precisely, Afro-Brazilian literature makes itself into a theoretical concept capable of spanning the variety of discursive demarcations that people use to express their Afro-descendant identity/ies in their literary works.

I believe, then, in the greater relevance of the concept of Afro-Brazilian literature, which has in fact been present in our literary studies ever since the pioneering work of Roger Bastide (1943). This text is certainly not without its equivocations, which the historical moment didn't allow him to overcome, especially when it came to his analysis of Cruz e Souza. The concept of Afro-Brazilian literature is also present in the reflections of Moema Augel, and even more enthusiastically, in that of Luiza Lobo (1993, 2007). It is a term adopted, finally, by practically all who address questions of identity today, including the authors of Quilombhoje, whether in the subtitles of *Cadernos Negros*, or in the work of theory that the group published in 1985, called *Reflexões sobre a literatura afro-brasileira* (*Reflections about Afro-Brazilian Literature*).

Here the work of poet and scholar Edimilson de Almeida Pereira is useful, as it highlights the inherent risk of ethnic and thematic criteria as a basis for inclusion in literary genres, as such criteria function as "preemptive censors" of the authors' ideas. Pereira's concern mirrors what Proença Filho calls the "terminological risk" inherent to expression, which has the ability to relegate further this writing [what would be Afro-Brazilian writing] to the ghetto, consequently moving it further away from canonization ("O negro" 77). Pereira calls for the adoption of "pluralist criteria" derived from a "dialectical orientation" which might reveal Afro-Brazilian literature as one of the many faces of Brazilian literature – the latter once perceived as an entity composed of diverse elements" (1035-6).

In effect, the scholar turns Afrânio Coutinho's well-known postulation on its head and conceives of Brazilian literature as created through a "fractured tradition" typical of those countries that went through a process of colonization. Therefore, within the environment of this historically multifaceted phenomenon – an environment which undermines the notion of a singularity – one finds a space for the configuration of an Afro-descendant literary discourse and for the constellation of "hues" that constitute it.

What elements, finally, distinguish this literature? Along with the conceptual discussions, some identifying components can be described: an Afro-descendant authorial voice, explicit or not in the discourse; Afro Brazilian themes; linguistic constructions marked by Afro-Brazilian tones, rhythms, syntaxes or meanings; the

discursive presence of a political project that intends to speak to a large readership, explicit or not; but, above all, a *point-of-view* or *place of enunciation* that is politically and culturally identified with Afro-descendance, as both an end and as a beginning. Taking into consideration that this is a concept under construction, let's look more closely at each one of these elements.

## Theme

They laughed at our beliefs  
 They erased our dreams  
 They stepped on our dignity  
 They suppressed our voice  
 They transformed us into an island  
 Surrounded by lies on every side  
 – Carlos de Assumpção

Theme is one of the elements that helps us to determine whether or not a text should be called Afro-Brazilian literature. For Octávio Ianni, it doesn't involve simply the creation of an Afro-descendant subjectivity, in the individual sense, but also the creation of a "human, social, cultural and artistic universe on which this literature sustains itself" (209). This calls to mind the texts that seek to resuscitate the histories of black people in the Brazilian diaspora, people who went through the trauma of slavery and its aftereffects, and it also recalls the glorification of heroes like Zumbi dos Palmares. The trauma of slavery appears in the aforementioned Úrsula, by Maria Firmina dos Reis, in *Motta Coqueiro*, by José de Patrocínio, in the work of Cruz e Souza and in some of Machado de Assis' novels, short stories and journalism, much like in the work of other authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Certainly the glorious achievements of the *quilombolas* are present in both Solano Trindade's *Canto dos Palmares* (1961) and in Domício Proença Filho's *Dionísio esfacelado* (1984).<sup>14</sup> And it is also found in many other texts committed to reconstructing the memories of people who fought rather than submitting to captivity, like in Oliveira Silveira's work and in the fictionalized biography of Zumbi by Joel Rufino dos Santos. Such writing challenges colonial discourse which, as Fanon argues, endeavors to erase from history the cultures and civilizations that lived at the edges of dominant white society.

An Afro-Brazilian thematic also includes the cultural or religious traditions that were transplanted in the New World, themes which draw on the richness of myths, legends and an entire imaginary almost always expressed orally. Examples like Mestre Didi, author of *Contos crioulos da Bahia*, or Mãe Beata de Yemonjá, who penned *Caroço de dendê* and *Histórias que minha avó contava*, take part in this movement to recuperate a multifaceted ancestral memory. Beyond this, ritual and religious elements are consistently present in the work of several authors. *Exus* and *pombagiras* inhabit *Cidade de Deus*, by Paulo Lins, while *orikis* transported throughout the Black Atlantic

<sup>14</sup> T.N.: *Quilombolas* are people who lived in communities known as *quilombos*. Generally, such communities were built in rural areas by escaped or formerly enslaved people, hidden from the view of slave owners and *capitães-do-mato*, men hired to recapture people who had escaped enslavement. Zumbi is perhaps the most well-known leader of a *quilombo*, which was named Palmares.

appear in the poetry of Edimilson de Almeida Pereira, Ricardo Aleixo and many more.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Abdias Nascimento's theatrical piece *Sortilégio* brings to audiences not only the *terreiro* and the *Peji* as scenery, but also renders Afro-Brazilian practices and ancestral memories as fundamental parts of the identity of black characters, one of the fulcrums of the plot.<sup>16</sup> And alongside those that contain explicitly religious themes, one also observes the reoccurrence of texts that celebrate links to an African ancestry, such as Oliveira Silveira's "Elo." He writes: "Here is my thick umbilical cord/ transporter of sap /on this side of the ocean, / in this great placenta. / And Africa is there/ at the other end of the cord" (3).

Another example of this thematic diversity situates itself in contemporary history and seeks to present to the reader the socio-economic and socio-political dramas lived out in modern-day Brazil, which has islands of prosperity surrounded by misery and exclusion. From Lima Barreto and Nascimento Moraes to Carolina Maria de Jesus; from Lino Guedes, Adão Ventura and Oswaldo de Camargo to Eduardo de Oliveira, moving to the poets and prose writers represented in *Cadernos Negros*, there are many who address the stigma of May 14, 1888—the long *day after* of abolition, which lasted through the following decades and well into the twenty-first century. As a result of this process, new motifs emerged in these texts, like the suburb or margin, the *favela*, the critique of prejudice and of whitening, marginalized crime, and prisons.<sup>17</sup> One also notes an increased presence of figures like Di Lixão, Ana Davenga, Natalina, Duzu-Querença, the characters of Conceição Evaristo's short stories, such as the housekeeper Maria, who, after being one of the victims of an assault in a city bus, is lynched by the other passengers for also being the ex-girlfriend of one of the criminals.

That said, the portrayal of past and present conditions of life for Afro descendants in Brazil cannot be considered obligatory, otherwise it could become a straightjacket for the author, which could eventually weaken his or her writing. This is not to suggest that material or issues about black people shouldn't appear in the writing of white people. Ever since the very first signs of vanguard aesthetics in the twentieth century, a strong Afro-focused tendency, coming from cubist appropriations of African imaginaries, permeated other arts and countries, especially in Brazil. Many texts shaped by this perspective are considered classics today. In the end, the use of Afro-focused themes shouldn't be examined in isolation but rather in conjunction with other factors like authorship and point-of-view.

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<sup>15</sup> T.N.: *Exu* and *pombagira* are examples of Afro-Brazilian deities (*orixás*), who differ based on religion. Variations of these deities appear in religions throughout the Americas, the Caribbean and in some African countries. *Orikis* are similar to prayers.

<sup>16</sup> T.N.: The words "*terreiro*" and "*peji*" refer to sacred spaces in Afro-Brazilian religions like *Umbanda* and *Candomblé*. The *terreiro* typically refers to a space of a particular "house" of worship, including the grounds, the building itself, the *peji*, etc. *Peji* is a Nagô word for the altar (also called "*Casa de Orixá*"), which houses various objects related to and offerings for Afro Brazilian deities (*Orixás* and Catholic saints).

<sup>17</sup> T.N.: Although "*subúrbio*" in Portuguese translates to "suburb" in English, in this case, the two are false cognates. Though both the suburb and the *subúrbio* are found in areas surrounding cities, quite often the people living in U.S. suburbs, for example, have much more capital than those occupying Brazilian *subúrbios*. In some ways, they are the reverse of one another, with the Brazilian upper middle class occupying the country's city centers and that of the U.S. moving to the suburbs.

## Authorship

There is the theme of the black individual  
and there is the life of the black individual . . .  
But a black theme is one thing and a black life is another.  
– Alberto Guerreiro Ramos

As we saw in the first part of this essay, the issue of the author is extremely controversial, as it requires the consideration of biographical or phenotypic factors, and recalls all of the complications and debates such considerations create, not to mention the staunch defense made by those who study Afro-Brazilian literature written by white people. First, we have to keep in mind the implicit broadening that occurs under the denomination Afro-Brazilian, which has the goal of encompassing the combined identities that come out of a process of cultural and biological mixing. Secondly, we run the risk of reducing this work to *negrismo*, understood as the exploitation of issues relating to black people. Moving beyond thematic reductionism and to put this another way, one could hypothetically reread Castro Alves and conclude that, despite his being named “the poet of the slaves,” his work still wouldn’t fall under the rubric of Afro-Brazilian literature.

At the extreme opposite of *negrismo* are authors who, despite being Afro descendants, don’t see themselves as such and aren’t interested in including related themes in their literary projects, as is the case of Marilene Felinto and many others.<sup>18</sup> This should remind us of the need to avoid sociological reduction, which, at its extreme, might lead us to interpret a text based solely on factors external to it, like the author’s skin color or social condition. Ultimately, it is necessary to understand authorship not as an external fact but as a *discursive constant* that is integrated into the materiality of literary construction. In this way we discover new angles, whether it be in the poetry of Cruz e Sousa or in the work of Machado de Assis, particularly in the journalistic pieces he wrote under a pseudonym.<sup>19</sup>

For instance, in the case of Cruz e Souza, biographic information, slight though it may be, points to the existence of other interpretive possibilities that differ from the obsession with whitening that many allege is the author’s poetic project. The angst-ridden confession present in “*Emparedado*” (“Walled in”) makes clear that Cruz e Sousa is not a “black man with a white soul,” despite his Europeanized education and refined knowledge of Western poetry and cultures. The imprisonment [the experience of being walled in] to which he is subjugated by the historical fact of slavery, reinforced by the persistence of stigmas through which people who have dark skin continue to be oppressed even after the formal end of the slave regime, echoes in his writing, creating alternative readings of his work. Just like in the case of Machado de Assis and others, the poet’s journalistic texts must be taken into account, including those which are confessional, in order to comprehend completely his profound contempt for the elite that turned slave labor into a source of wealth and power. Based on this, the work as a whole will have more ample dimension.

In order to fully understand how authorship is a foundation for the existence of Afro-Brazilian writing, we must consider the relevance accorded to the relationship between

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<sup>18</sup> See Duarte, 2005 *Literatura, política, identidades*, page 120.

<sup>19</sup> T.N.: For an excellent explication of Machado’s corpus as it relates to slavery, African descendants in Brazil and Afro-Brazilians, see Duarte’s *Machado de Assis afrodescendente* (2007).

*writing* and *experience*. Indeed, many authors take the time to address this relationship in their work, be it through a claim to an identity and a community, or by commenting on their own training as word artists. First of all, we might recall the collectivist impulse that drives many authors to serve as the voice and conscious of their communities.<sup>20</sup> In many ways, this act draws on the African tradition of the *griots*, who are guardians of ancestral knowledge preserved in oral form, just like Brazil's Afro-descendant population preserves many of the habits and customs of the nations from which their ancestors came. Indeed, the *griots* serve as a critical and theoretical foothold for militant intellectuals like Abdias Nascimento, Solano Trindade, Carlos de Assumpção, Cuti and many more.

In fact, the incorporation of life experiences that are marked by obstacles of every kind has been a constant feature of the writing of African descendants in various countries. Autobiographical traces appear on the pages of innumerable authors from the past and the present, as they weave together prose, poetry and testimony, including in the work of Cruz e Sousa, Lima Barreto, Carolina Maria de Jesus and Geni Guimarães, among others. At the moment, the person who most regularly employs a documentarian lens is Conceição Evaristo, who confers on her texts the statute of *escrevivência*: "in the origin of my writing, I listen to the shouts, the calls of female neighbors leaning out of the windows, or in the doorways, narrating aloud, for one another, their sadnesses along with their joys" (19).<sup>21</sup> The cramped quarters of the *favela* and the proximity between one person and another brings together the alleyways and also the lives that run into one another there, a socio-spatial scene which would memorialize such experiences in the mind of the future writer:

I believe that the genesis of my writing came out of the accumulation of everything I heard since my infancy... I would close my eyes, pretending to sleep, and then I turned on all of my other senses. My whole body received words, sounds, murmurs, voices that were laced with pleasure or pain depending on how things had played out. With my eyes closed, I would mould the faces of my characters, real and speaking. It was a game of writing in the dark. In the body of night. (19)

She concludes: "Our *escrevivência* cannot serve as a 'nest for the people living in the big house' but rather it must interrupt their stolen sleep" (21, Duarte's emphasis). In the end, authorship must be understood as intimately connected to point-of-view. Literature is discourse, and skin color must be valued as a *textual translation* of an individual or collective history.

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<sup>20</sup> Here we might recall the words of the Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire, which could have been written by any Brazilian writer or intellectual of African descent: "Yes, we constitute a community, but a particular type of community, recognizable by what it is, by what it was; that, above all else, made itself into a community: firstly, a community that suffered oppression, a community of imposed exclusion, a community of profound discrimination. Well understood, and in its honor, it is a community of continuous resistance, of a tenacious fight for liberty and of undying hope" (Césaire 104).

<sup>21</sup> T.N.: The word *escrevivência* plays on a number of Portuguese words. It is a combination of *escravidão* (slavery), *escrita* or *escrever* (writing, to write) and *sobrevivência* (survival), which (re)claims for enslaved Africans and for Afro-descendants the power of writing as a means of survival.

## Point-Of-View

To Africa  
Sometimes I feel you like a grandmother  
other times I feel you like a mother.  
When I feel you like a grandson  
I feel like myself.  
When I feel you like a son  
I don't feel much like me,  
I feel like something  
that was ripped out of you.  
– Oliveira Silveira

Point-of-view refers to the author's worldview and the axiological universe alive in the text, in other words, the convergences of values that underlie all of the aspects of the text, even the vocabularies used. In light of this, it's clear that an author's African ascendancy or the use of certain themes are not the only elements of Afro-Brazilian literature. In addition to these elements, the author needs to take on a perspective identified with the history, the culture, ultimately, the entire problematic inherent to the lives and the conditions of existence of this important segment of the population. In *Trovas burlescas*, published in 1859, Luiz Gama, who called himself "Orpheus with curly hair," conveys Afro-descendance in his texts by calling on the "muse of Guinea" and to the "muse of black amber" so that he might subsequently produce a ruthless carnivalization of the elites. Similarly, in her novel *Úrsula*, also published in 1859, Maria Firmina dos Reis adopts the same perspective by using the slave Túlio as the text's moral referent, thereby confirming through the narrator's voice, that Tancredo, one of the most prominent white people in the story, possesses "feelings as noble and generous as those that liven the heart of the young black man" (25). Later, the text speaks through the voice of Mãe Suzana, an elderly enslaved woman who talks of her free life in Africa, how she was captured by "bar baric" European traffickers and of the daily "cemetery" of the hold of a slave ship. In an era in which very few even acknowledged that black people were human, these novels and their Afro-identified perspectives arise as revolutionary gestures that would distinguish them from the rest of Brazilian literature of the period.

The example of Machado de Assis is clearly emblematic. He was poor boy born in Morro do Livramento, the son of a housepainter and a wash woman, and a youth who made a name for himself in the world of letters.<sup>22</sup> He was a journalist, a literary critic, a poet and a writer of prose, and not once in his vast body of work do we encounter a single word in favor of slavery or alluding to the inferiority of black or mixed-race people. Much to the contrary. And, setting aside the rhetoric of propaganda, we note that the ironic tone of his texts (quite often even sarcastic), coupled with the carnavalesque verve with which he spoke of the plantation class, tells us much about his vision of the world. The place from which he speaks is that of the oppressed, and this is a persuasive reason to include at least part of his work under the Afro-Brazilian umbrella. Even though he was the founder of the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* (Brazilian Academy of Letters) and despite being canonized as a white writer, Machado

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<sup>22</sup> T.N.: Morro do Livramento is a neighborhood in central Rio de Janeiro.

escapes the role for which most free men in the slave society were destined: that of a ventriloquist's puppet and defender of hegemonic ideas, a pawn of the plantation elite. Following Chalhoub (2003), who disagrees with Schwarz's reading (1977), Machado's criticism does not simply seek to improve paternalism but rather to denounce it.

As a worker of the imperial government, Machado should be admired for financing the freedom of innumerable slaves. And, as a writer, he adopts in his texts a point of view consistent with his role as a citizen. The accusation that many level at Machado—his purported omission of slavery—falls apart in the face of hundreds of abolitionist texts published by *Gazeta de Notícias*, a newspaper of which he was a founder. Moreover: in his journalist work, whenever he mentioned the issue of captivity, he added criticism that variously lamented the living conditions of slaves, praised the philanthropy of those who freed them, or criticized those who supported or benefitted from the system. All of this matches what we read in the work of Raimundo Magalhães Júnior (1957). With respect to his poetry, we see that Machado published works like "Sabina" and other satiric verses in newspapers, where they would have the widest impact. Such writing is followed by short stories like "Virginius," "Mariana," "O Espelho," "O caso de vara," or the very intense "Pai contra mãe," all dressed in a style and espousing a posture that is markedly Afro-Brazilian. In his novels, the viewpoint that oversees the actions of the story and that fleshes out the characters is never that of a white explorer, much less that of a slave owner.

Moving into the twentieth century, we can look first at the example of the poet Lino Guedes. In 1938, he published *Dictinha*, an entire volume dedicated to the exaltation of black women and, at the same time, a volume which issues a practically unedited challenge to the social prejudices faced by black women, who were victims of both racism and sexism. Consider this verse:

I think that perhaps you ignore,  
Simple and sweet Dictinha,  
Who in this area  
Is the most beautiful little black woman:  
If it weren't such an insult  
I'd call you . . . little French girl!<sup>23</sup>

Guedes and other poets in the first half of the twentieth century like Solano Trindade or Aloísio Resende celebrate the figure of the black woman. Having published during the middle of the Modernist heyday, they make a compelling counterpoint to Jorge de Lima's "Negra Fulô." In the

verse cited above, we note the author's decision to invert the moralist discourse of white society, reclaiming such discourse as its very weapon. That is, the sexual discourse with which, more so than anyone else, the English and the Germans stereotyped French women. Once the poem mentions the "little French woman" [Francesinha], who is cast in a pejorative light, the "little black woman" emerges vindicated and valorized. This is the tactic of parodic appropriation, which utilizes the language of prejudice against prejudice itself. We know the risks incurred in adopting this strategy, as it will remain in the sphere of social exclusion that stems from segregationist thinking. But the parody of colonial discourse, in and of itself,

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<sup>23</sup> T.N.: We have opted to convey meaning rather than be faithful to the original rhyme scheme.

nevertheless constitutes a move away from the pure and simple assimilation advocated in the work of others, those bearing white souls and using white aesthetics. Taking on an Afro-Brazilian point-of-view would really come into being in the *Cadernos Negros* series. The introduction to the very first volume emerges as a manifesto and illustrates the following affirmation:

We are on the cusp of a new age. An age of Africa, a new life, one that is more just and freer and, inspired by that new life, we are born again, tearing off these white masks, putting an end to imitation. We discover the brainwashing that pollutes us and we own our blackness, beautiful and strong. We are cleansing our spirit of the ideas that weaken us and that only serve those who want to dominate and explore us. (*Cadernos Negros 1*).

The metaphor of rebirth calls for people to adopt their own vision of the world, one that is distinct from that of the white person; it demands that people overcome European models and part with a mode of cultural assimilation that is posited as the only means of expression. In order to overcome the colonizer's discourse in its various forms, both past and present, the Afro-identified perspective constructs itself as a *discourse of difference* and acts as an important link in this discursive chain.

## Language

Once the slaves  
took back writing  
the slave owner said:  
-- precision, synthesis, rules  
and good manners!  
they are your duties  
– *Cuti (Cadernos Negros 19, 36)*

Literature is usually defined, above all else, as language, as a discursive construction shaped by an aesthetic aim. Such a definition is anchored by the formalism that characterizes the Kantian norm of beauty—the “finality without end” of a work of art. Still, we recognize other aims besides that of aesthetic fruition, aims which express ethic, cultural, political and ideological values. Language is, without a doubt, one of the factors that bring cultural difference into the literary text. In that sense, Afro-Brazilianness becomes visible through a vocabulary that contains linguistic features that originated in African countries and that went through a process of transculturation during their journeys in Brazil. Afro-Brazilianness also becomes visible through a discursivity that retains rhythms, intonations and a semantics all its own, one which many times is committed to the work of resignification that challenges hegemonic meanings in the language in question. As we know, no language is innocent, and no sign lacks an ideology. Terms like *negro*, *negra*, *crioulo* or *mulata* (black man, black woman, negro or colored, mixed), just to mention the most obvious examples, circulate in Brazil, conveying pejorative meanings and often becoming genuine linguistic taboos under the auspices of the “politeness” that characterizes racism in Brazil.

Some examples: who could forget the verses of Manuel Bandeira (1990): “Black Irene, good Irene, Irene who is always in a good mood?” Or of the salacious *mulata*, who never comes out during the day and is only a woman of the night; she is never a spirit, just flesh; she never has a family or work, just pleasure? And we are all too familiar

with the masculine counterpart of this fantasy: the rascal *mulato*, who has always just arrived from a debaucherous party, and who represents social degeneration and disequilibrium. These and several other inventions return from our slave past to inhabit Brazil's contemporary social imaginary, where they keep figures like the "good owner" or the "nice master" company; as well as the "happy slave" and his opposite, the bloodthirsty criminal or psychopath, naturally inclined towards crime. These and other malicious misrepresentations write themselves into our literature, just as often as they implant themselves into film, television, or the popular radio programs. They are widespread social stereotypes that even their victims tend to assimilate; they are signs that function as powerful elements in the maintenance of inequality.

Within this context, an Afro-descendant discourse seeks to "break with the contracts of writing and speaking that have been dictated by the white world," pushing instead for the configuration of "a new symbolic order" that reflects a "reversal of values," according to the analysis of Zila Bernd (22, 85, 89). And the affectionate tone imprinted on the language of Henrique Cunha Júnior (1978), at a moment where he discusses one of the main proponents of racial prejudice, gives us a good idea of the strength of cultural reterritorialization undertaken by Afro-Brazilian literature. The poet says:

Curly curly hair  
 Hair made of little coils  
 Hair to which nature gave the luxury  
 of being formed and not simply left to chance  
 falling randomly  
 Kinky hair  
 Hair of black people  
 (*Cadernos Negros 1*)<sup>24</sup>

The sign of hair as a mark of inferiority – difficult hair, awful hair, "what comb could comb this?," the musical lyric that we have heard over and over for decades – is taken back and seen through the lens of positivity expressed through language: the term "*enroladinhos*" ["curly"], in phonic (and semantic) conjunction with "*pequenos*," ["little"] recalls the "luxury" of the "coils" that are formed by nature, contrary to straight hair, cast as the product of "chance." There are numerous examples of similarly-minded literature, like "*Outra Nega Fulô*," by Oliveira Silveira, or "*Minha cor não é de luto*," by Márcio Barbosa, which also utilize parodic reversal to critique hegemonic discourse.

As for the particularities of rhythm and intonation, there are many examples in which texts express sonorities marked by the rich Afro-Brazilian imaginary. Among many, we might remember the war sounds of the poet Bélsiva – "Brother, beat the drums/Beat, beat, beat them loud/Beating the drum is our art" (1978) – in which the anagrammatic use of an African musical instrument makes it such that the poetry takes on a meaning of collective and liberatory ritual. We could examine other examples as well, based on the strong presence of words from African languages in Brazilian Portuguese, like in "*Tristes maracatus*," by Solano Trindade (1981): "*Maracatus* beating/in my young soul/Beautiful black doll of my childhood/from the 'black black man' of São José/in the

<sup>24</sup> T.N.: Note that the word "coil" has two meanings here. "*Caracóis*" can refer to "coils" or to "snail shells" (which take the shape of a coil), so the line could be "Hair made of little coils" or "Hair made of little snail shells."

waters of calunga/to Kambinda my inspired love/the first cafuné in Mato Verde/from the fields of Bodé” (64- 65).

Thus, the use of a language that is “uncommitted” to the dominant “contracts of speech” then acquires political meaning, as Conceição Evaristo confirms:

When it is undertaken by black women, who have historically moved through cultural spaces that differ from those occupied by elite culture, writing takes on an element of insubordination. It is an insubordination that can be seen, many times, in writing that subverts the ‘cultural norms’ of language, like Carolina Maria de Jesus does, or that can also be seen in the choice of material that such writers address. (21).

## The Public

I write to awaken  
the sleeping and sluggish consciousness  
of our people to poke with daggers/  
words the marginalized people who are my characters  
and who probably – not for want of effort on my part –  
won’t even read my texts.  
– Paulo Colina

That this literature intends to create and educate an Afro-descendant public separates it from the project that orients Brazilian literature in general. The creation of this specific public, marked by cultural difference and by the anxiety of identity affirmation, adds a utopian facet to the Afro-Brazilian literary project, represented above all in the work of Solano Trindade, Oliveira Silveira and other contemporary authors. This call to action and to a political gesture necessitates the creation of other mediating spaces between the text and the recipient, like: the literary meetings in the periphery, book launches, theatrical shows, poetry and rap slams, the political demonstrations connected to May 13 and November 20, among others.<sup>25</sup> In this case, the subject who writes does so not only with the intention of reaching a determined segment of the population, but s/he also does it based on an understanding of the role of the writer as a spokesman of the community. This explains the reversal of values and the fight against stereotypes, goals that contribute to the social responsibility of literature in the building of self-esteem. Add to that the fact that titles like *Axé*, *Cadernos Negros* or *Quilombo das palavras* immediately identify a target audience whose expectations the writer hopes to meet.

The responsibility that writers take on is ambitious and far from negligible. It involves intervening in a complex process and in an unwelcoming field, given the difficulty of convincing people of the *pleasure* and *habit* of reading, above all children and teens, most of them poor, in an environment dominated by electronic means of communication. To illustrate, I recall the reflection of Ezequiel Teodoro da Silva, in the 80s, with respect to what was then called the “reading crisis.” According to the author, this crisis fed on “*lei-dura*” [a play on the words “*lei*” or “law” and “*leitura*,” or “reading”]—a conjunction of restrictions that impedes the success of reading and which has left it in a crisis situation. For him, the first mandate of “*lei-dura*” claims that only the

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<sup>25</sup> T.N.: May 13 commemorates the signing of the 1888 Abolition law in Brazil, known as “*Lei Áurea*,” and November 29 is the National Day of Black Consciousness (*Dia Nacional da Consciência Negra*). Zumbí, the great leader of Palmares, was assassinated on November 20, 1695.

dedicated elite ought to read; the people have to be separated from books. That is because certain books stimulate criticism, complaints and transformation—elements which, according to the theorist, endanger the existing social system.

In such an adverse environment, two tasks arise: first, that of bringing Afro-Brazilian literature to the public, so that the reader has access not only to the diversity of this production, but also to new models of identification; and, secondly, the challenge of dialoguing with the reader's range of expectations, of fighting prejudice and inhibiting discrimination without simply falling into Manichean simplification that often accompanies propaganda.

The search for a reading public echoes *Quilombhoje's* mission, in São Paulo, to go "where the people are," selling books at events and through circuits outside of the publishing world. This also explains the multiplication of sights and portals in the internet, in which the reader finds less costly ways to enjoy the pleasures of reading. It remains, then, to strive for an increasing digital inclusion in order to use this strategy to find a way past existing challenges, both those in the publishing world and in consumer market, where fewer and fewer people have buying power.

### **Conclusion**

Based, therefore, on the dynamics between these five significant factors – theme, authorship, point-of-view, language and public – we observe the outright presence of an Afro-Brazilian literature. Such components act as discursive constants present in texts produced in distinct historical moments. The five categories emerge as differentiating criteria and as critical theoretical assumptions that found and enable the reading of such literary production. We must remind ourselves, once again, that none of these elements can be said to belong to Afro-Brazilian literature on its own, but instead only as part of an interrelated constellation of elements. Whether it be theme or language, authorship, point-of-view or even reading public, none of these elements exist in isolation.

*Afro-Brazilian literature*: process, becoming. Besides being a segment or offshoot, a component of a wide range of discursive styles. Both "inside and outside" Brazilian literature at the same time, just as Octávio Ianni claimed back in the 1980s. A production that clearly calls for redirections of a reading public and for revisions to established literary history. A production that is *within* Brazilian literature because it utilizes the same language and virtually the same forms and processes of expression. But one that is *outside* because, in addition to other factors, it doesn't locate itself within the romantic ideal of instituting a national spirit. A literature committed, yes, but to a project of supplementing (in the Derridian sense) canonical Brazilian literature: the project of constructing a type of writing that would not simply be the expression of Afro-descendants as agents of culture and art, but one which points out the ethnocentrism that excludes them from the world of letters and from very civilization. From this we understand Afro-Brazilian literature's character, quite often marginal, because it is founded in *difference*, one which questions and undermines the progressive, linear trajectory of our literary history.

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