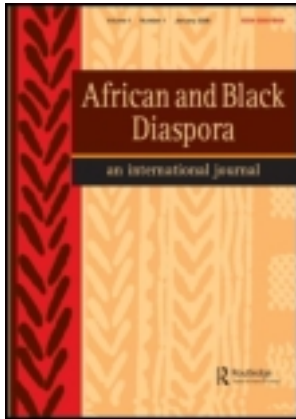


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Embodied voices: embedding contemporary Afro-Brazilian women writers

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The present contribution seeks to examine the works of a selected number of contemporary Afro-Brazilian women writers and activists. From the way these voices have contributed to the advancement of the Black movement in Brazil – especially since the 1980s – particular attention will be given to the way the body figures both a central topic as well as an agent of their work. The overall assumption is that the body (both material and metaphorical) becomes a dynamic site of aesthetic, political, and environmental negotiations, and poetry and literature function as a social practice. By looking at how a new view on bodily cognition and discourse can prove decisive for the reconfiguration of political categories (identity, subjectivity, gender, and race), the assumption is that a novel notion and poiesis of the Afro-Brazilian self can be teased out from these works.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilian literature; racial democracy; body politics

In 1995, when asked in an interview about her role as one of the most prestigious female Black writers and social activists in a patriarchal Brazilian society, Miriam Alves answered with a reference to a poem by Maria da Paixão, ‘Shouting for São Paulo’: ‘It is not easy’, she says, ‘não é fácil’ (Rowell and Alves 1995, p. 971). However, despite the obvious difficulty, Alves continues to speak with an indomitable conviction and passion about the importance of her work and of those who speak up and make themselves heard as Afro-Brazilian women writers today. In regard to the work of these women, poetry seems to play a particularly significant role. As Alves notes, poetry has the function of mirroring reality in a number of ways, but also of negating the same: poetry, thus, ‘passa pela cor, pelo sexo, pela questão econômica, pela condição social, pelas convicções political, sexuais’ (1995, p. 971) (‘touches upon color, gender, the economical question, social condition, political and sexual convictions’).¹ Moreover, in the context of Afro-Brazilian women writers and activists, this is a poetic discourse that insists on being read and heard, notwithstanding the danger of being misinterpreted by others. As Alves goes on to say, ‘o branco, quando não me leva a sério, brinca com a coisa mais séria que tenho, eu mesma; o companheiro negro, quando não me leva a sério, como mulher escritora, brinca com algo ainda mais sério: meu ser’ (1995, p. 971) (‘when a white person doesn’t take me seriously, he is joking with the most earnest thing I have: myself; when a black fellow doesn’t take me seriously as a female writer, he is joking with something even more earnest: my being’).

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The reference to both racism and sexism is charged with meaning in more than one way when it comes to the discourse and in particular to the literature of Afro-Brazilian women writers, both addressing issues related to race, gender roles, sexism and society at large. Their work touch upon discrimination based on race, class, and gender and while constructing alternative responses to oppression, they seek to challenge the conventional image of passivity popularly attributed to African-Brazilian women.² Furthermore, these poets actively endeavor to create new aesthetic and political strategies for Black women in Brazil by undermining the values of the dominant culture and claiming the power of a narrative voice. By doing so, these writers and activists question authority, reinterpret political institutions, and articulate the importance of their African heritage, thus affirming Blackness as an aesthetic and political concept. Therefore, as Afolabi (2001, p. 120) writes, Alves 'does not apologize for having to challenge the establishment and force it to hear black voices that have long been silenced and misrepresented'. Indeed, in this article, the focus will be on the writing of Alves and other contemporary Afro-Brazilian women writers that can be said to constitute a collective effort in their battle against discrimination. My focus will be on their tireless advocacy for Afro-Brazilian self-respect, pride, and confidence. I will pay particular attention to how these works by Afro-Brazilian women writers may be interpreted as a poetological, but also a social, performative practice, drawing on the role of poetry and literature as a discourse of identity and subjectivity formation. In order to prepare the ground for the analysis, an overview of some of the most significant stages of the development of the Afro-Brazilian movement is in place. On the basis that the texts by Afro-Brazilian women writers will be regarded as a site in which racism is challenged, I will contextualize their work by looking at other forms of traditional Black activism.

Racial democracy vs. Black consciousness

The development of a Brazilian Black activism must be viewed in light of the notion of a racial democracy and, more specifically, of the flaws of this concept and the resistance it has been met with on the part of a growing Black consciousness. As Oliveira (2008, p. 19) notes, the Afro-Brazilian activists have had to oppose not only racism, but – absurdly enough – an alleged non-existent racial discrimination, which derives from the concept of a racial democracy. Introduced by sociologist Gilberto Freyre, the notion of a racial democracy was launched with the publication of his book, *Casa Grande e Senzala* in 1933, and fervently propagated by the Vargas regime, whose populist agenda accentuated a national inclusion and integrationist policy. According to Freyre's idea, the mixing between Whites and non-Whites – or the miscegenation between the Portuguese colonizers and African slaves – would contribute to a more harmonious, democratic society/social order than ever seen before. Considered politically incorrect at the time, the Black movement's point of view was that the utopian racial democracy was just another form of a racial myth, and, as Antonio Guimaraes (Souza and Sinder 2005, p. 132) observes, after the military coup of 1964 had destroyed the populist or nationalist command economy pact, which aimed for a complete integration of Black Brazilians by declaring a mixed-race national culture, or implementing regulations to facilitate access to the labor market, the signs of a strain within the Black movement itself became more apparent. The two camps could roughly be divided into, on the one hand, followers

of the views held Freyre, whilst on the other hand, there were those who maintained an emphasis on the importance of the African heritage and who, in turn, sought to reveal the mythical, even utopian aspects of Freyre's idea. Recently, far from realistically affirming a state of unity, the notion of a paradisiacal, racial *métisse* co-existence is declared obsolete; yet the concept of a racial democracy still lives on as a foundational *myth* and as such, has, in the words of Emanuelle Oliveira, 'crystallized in the Brazilian consciousness' (Oliveira 2008, p. 24). However, as Reiter and Mitchell observe in a recent study: 'as the myth of the racial democracy crumbles, so does the ideology of white benevolence toward blacks' (Reiter and Mitchell 2010, p. 224). Could it be, then, that an increase of Black activism would force hitherto privileged groups of the population to re-examine their values and attitudes towards their country's history and, by extension, their own sense of identity? For our present concern, the work of Afro-Brazilian women writers could seem to represent one way in which the mythical status of a racial democracy would be challenged, paving the way for the affirmation of an African heritage.

Political affirmative action

An early example of Afro-Brazilian affirmative action was the creation of the group Brazilian Black Front (1931) and The Black Experimental Theater (TEN) in 1944. For the latter, whose founder was Abdias do Nascimento, the chief ambition was to emphasize difference and assume a viewpoint according to which the domination of a white, European culture was rejected in favor of a focus placed on the importance of an African heritage. This, in turn, led to the '[spawning of] the Afro-Brazilian Democratic Committee (1945–46) and [the convening of] important sociopolitical events, including the National Convention of Brazilian Blacks [...] in São Paulo in 1945 and Rio de Janeiro in 1946' (Da Silva Martins 2004, p. 791).³

Despite the repression of all kinds of activism after the military *coup* of 1964, Afro-Brazilian movements continued their work to heighten the awareness of a Black identity throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s.⁴ With the democratization process of Brazil in the 1980s, the Black movement gained new territories, engaging non-governmental organizations, labor unions, political parties, churches and other religious organizations, as well as cultural organizations, and in the 1990s, this increasing influence of the Afro-Brazilian movement reached a decisive point when a United Nations report concluded the government had 'failed to diminish persistent racial inequalities' (Da Silva Martins 2004, p. 796). In 1995, the National Executive Committee (CEN) presented its *Program for Overcoming Racism and Racial Inequality* to the President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. In general, these movements, with their seat in the local community, introduced a new way in which to 'do politics' and included neighborhood associations, feminist organizations, gay and lesbian groups, and the Black movement, which were instrumental in the process of forming and developing Brazilian democracy (Afolabi *et al.* 2007, p. 157).

The Black movement in Brazil was, furthermore, strongly influenced by other Black soul movements on the American continent. The *blackitude-baiana* movement in Salvador was inspired by Jamaican reggae (Kennedy 1986),⁵ as others were by the *American Renaissance* in New York, the Cuban *Negrismo*, the Afro-French-Caribbean *Négritude* and the American *Black Power* (Toller Gomes 2007). As a result, a more organized form of collective political activism emerged. Interestingly

in this regard, as Hamilton (2007, p. 183) notes, within the Brazilian Black movement, there is an 'ideological schism' between the political militants and the 'culturalists', where the latter are accused of 'placing more emphasis on African-derived cultural forms and practices than on socio-economic parity and black political power'. In view of these considerations, one could say that the Afro-Brazilian women writers and activists play their part by positioning themselves at the intersection between ideological and cultural concerns.

Artistic and literary mobilization: *Cadernos Negros* and *Quilombhoje*

The first publications of Afro-Brazilian literature took place anonymously in the course of the nineteenth century, whose precursor is Domingos Caldas Barbosa (1738–1800) (Toller Gomes 2007).⁶ However, it is a fact that literature remained inaccessible to a vast amount of Afro-Brazilians, because of widespread illiteracy first among slaves and their descendants, and later to a lack of publishing possibilities or even a market for readers of Black literature. The term, 'Afro-Brazilian literature' first appeared in 1975, when Thales de Azevedo held a lecture, *Democracia racial*, in Lisbon. What he envisaged was the possibility of a specific branch of literature by Black Brazilians. According to Azevedo, this was a kind of literary expression, intrinsically connected to a political discourse: 'sendo embora de protesto contra a situação social de contacto com a sociedade *branca*, não tem o negro condições de escapar à própria contra-imagem que dele faz o branco' (Afolabi 2009, p. 51) (Given its nature of protest against social conditions fomented by its contact with the white society, the Afro-Brazilian cannot escape a counter-image against that projected by whites).

In terms of the consolidation of an Afro-Brazilian literary movement in particular, a decisive factor was for Black authors to gain experience in publishing and then to take a collective step, which were to prove decisive for the development of Afro-Brazilian literature, namely the publication of an anthology of Afro-Brazilian verse. The result of this decision was the first volume of *Cadernos Negros* (Black Notebooks) in November 1978. In the introduction to the volume is written: 'We are at the threshold of a new age: the age of a renewed Africa. Inspired by her, we are born anew by ripping off our white masks, putting an end to imitation' (Kennedy 1986, p. 206). The authors of *Cadernos Negros*, then, went on to form a group, *Quilombhoje Literatura* in 1980, which from their base in São Paulo sought to promote Afro-Brazilian participation in arts and literature (Afolabi *et al.* 2008). As Cheryl Sterling (Afolabi *et al.* 2008, p. 21) observes, *Quilombhoje* seeks to reject dominating ideologies, which 'are imbibed and become self-defining within the psyche of the black subject, in order to propel the dialogic encounter towards the second stage, the "politics of representation"'.⁷

Afro-Brazilian women writers: the question of identity politics

Our reading of Afro-Brazilian poetry will suggest one way in which contemporary Afro-Brazilians may redefine, reimagine, and, indeed, recognize their sense of identity and subjectivity. In the words of Carolyn Richardson Durham (Afolabi *et al.* 2008, p. 89):

[Afro-Brazilian women writers] address inequities based on race, class, and gender through their literary work, and their poems challenge the image of passivity popularly attributed to African-Brazilian women while constructing alternative responses to oppression. These poets participate in creating new artistic and political strategies for Black women by undermining the values of the dominant culture, questioning authority, reinterpreting political institutions, reclaiming African cultural values, affirming Blackness as an aesthetic and political concept, and claiming the power of a narrative voice.

From the 1980s onwards, along with the emergence of a feminist movement in Brazil, these Afro-Brazilian women have resisted the concept of a racial democracy by their emphasis on existing imbalances and marginalization of Black women in Brazil. It is along these lines that Afro-Brazilian women writers can be said to merge the realms and discourses of politics and aesthetics. As mentioned earlier, they form a movement similar to other groups of civil protest, particularly those arising in the late 1970s. In the same vein, Afro-Brazilian women writers challenge the existing discursive practices and offer, instead, a new site of exploration of self, identity, and belonging. Furthermore, if these writers exemplify how Black women strive to break out of a given social structure by way of the power of artistic creation, then I would also contend that they *embody* a poetico-political activity and thereby offer an alternative model of cognition and knowledge production insofar as identity and subjectivity formation is concerned. As I will try to demonstrate, with their focus on the body, that Afro-Brazilian women writers can be seen to propose a novel paradigm for a currently emerging body politic.

A poetic voice

On the basis of what has been outlined thus far, a more detailed examination of some central texts by Afro-Brazilian women writers will help to emphasize the aspects of literature as an instrument of politics and, furthermore, as an embodied social practice.

In her poem, 'Eu mulher em luta' ('I woman in battle'), Miriam Alves explicitly merges the poetic with a political discourse, underlining the notion of a female warrior, or of being a woman engaged in both a battle (of the present) and a process of mourning (of her past):

Enluto-me e o poema sai assim
 meio mágoa
 meio lágrima
 meio torto
 toda lança
 enluto-me por aquelas vindas no arrastão atlântico
 enluto-me ao ver dilacerar pele, corpo e mente
 eu mulher em luta
 combato o ócio de quem não vê
 no silêncio das casas os estupros-menina
 cotidianamente
 eu enluto
 toda mágoa
 toda dor
 toda lágrima

enrijeço-me sob o toque domador
 marcando o desejo
 sou toda combate toda força
 eu mulher em toques no teclado
 faço das luzes da tela meu alento
 alimento em palavras
 o meu desejo pleno de ser
 e vou tiquetaqueando retirando das vogais sons
 palavras e imagens
 tamborilando mensagem vou. (Alves 2011a)⁷
 I grieve and the poem comes out like this
 part sorrow
 part tears
 part bent
 full tilt
 I grieve for them that came on the Atlantic drag
 I grieve on watching skin, body and mind torn apart
 I am a woman in struggle
 I fight the lethargy of those that don't see
 the girl-rapes in the silence of the houses
 daily
 I grieve
 full sorrow
 full pain
 full tears
 I harden under a taming touch
 underlining desire
 I am all fight and strength
 I as a woman through keyboard strokes
 see the lights on the screen as my courage
 feed on words
 my desire for full existence
 and I click-clack along extracting sounds from vowels
 words and pictures
 drumming my message as I go.

What this poem articulates first and foremost is a sense of a strong female voice; impersonal ('eu mulher'), saddened, yet courageous, speaking on behalf of 'all' Afro-Brazilian women, who have toiled and suffered in silence in the course of history. As such, the poem speaks of a collective sorrow, but also of a desire to overcome a situation dominated by discrimination and violence. In this sense, the sound of the words now becomes the alimentation and nourishment for those who go into the battlefield. Similarly, Conceição Evaristo's poem, 'Vozes-mulheres' ('Voices-women'), reads:

A voz da minha bisavó ecoou
 criança
 nos porões do navio.
 Ecoou lamentos
 de uma infância perdida.
 A voz de minha avó
 ecoou obediência
 aos brancos-donos de tudo.
 A voz de minha mãe
 ecoou baixinho revolta

no fundo das cozinhas alheias
 debaixo das trouxas
 roupagens sujas dos brancos
 pelo caminho empoeirado
 rumo à favela.
 A minha voz ainda ecoa versos perplexos
 com rimas de sangue
 e
 fome.
 A voz de minha filha
 recolhe todas as nossas vozes
 recolhe em si
 as vozes mudas caladas engasgadas nas gargantas.
 A voz de minha filha
 recolhe em si
 a fala e o ato. (Evaristo 2008)⁸
 My great-grandmother's voice echoed
 child
 in the holds of the ship.
 It echoed laments
 of a lost childhood.
 My grandmother's voice echoed obedience
 to the white-owners of everything.
 My mother's voice
 softly echoed revolt
 at the back of other people's kitchens
 under the bundles
 dirty clothing of the whites
 along the dusty road
 towards the shanty town.
 My voice still
 echoes perplexed verses
 with rhymes in blood
 and
 hunger.
 My daughter's voice
 gathers all our voices
 gathers in it
 the mute and silenced voices
 choked in their throats.
 My daughter's voice
 gathers in it
 the speech and the act.

Like Alves' poem, Evaristo speaks of and with a generational, collective, mnemonic voice, projected into that of a singular voice for the future, which is that of her daughter. In the daughter's voice, thus, we will also hear the sound and the echo of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, whose lives (and voices) were silenced by their oppressors. The poem, then, actualize the remembered, recognized voices of the past, the voices of a hushed revolt, too timid to be heard. Evaristo's words are filled with 'blood and hunger', thus suggesting a will and desire to overcome injustice and disadvantage caused by history.

Interestingly, apart from giving prominence to the 'voice' of the Afro-Brazilian women writers and activists, these writings often emphasize the image of the (mutilated) 'body' hence accentuate the mere physical aspect of the formation and

constitution of identity and subjectivity. Moreover, the relation between the body and voice, or orality and materiality helps connecting to the heritage and tradition of African descendents and to a particular kind of performativity. The body, thus, becomes as a site of production or inscription of subjectivity. As Evaristo writes in the poem, 'Eu-mulher' ('I-woman'):

Uma gota de leite
me escorre entre os seios.
Uma mancha de sangue
me enfeita entre as pernas
Meia palavra mordida
me foge da boca.
Vagos desejos insinuam esperanças.
Eu – mulher em rios vermelhos
inaugura a vida.
Em baixa voz
violento os timpanos do mundo.
Antevejo
Antecipo
Antes-vivo.
Antes – agora – o que há de vir.
Eu fêmea-matriz
Eu força motriz
Eu – mulher
abrigo da semente
moto-contínuo
do mundo. (Alves 1994, p. 71. Trans. Carolyn R. Durham.)
A drop of milk
runs down between my breasts.
A stain of blood adorns me between my legs.
Half a word choked off
blazes from my mouth.
Vague desires ininuate hopes.
I – woman in red rivers
inaugurate life.
In a low voice
I rape the eardrums of the world.
I foresee
I anticipate
I live beforehand.
Before – now- what is to come.
I, the female matrix
I, the motive power
I, woman
shelter of the seed
continual motion
of the world.

In this poem, the body – inseparable from the 'I' – becomes a landscape, or a site, of expression, placed at the intersection between the personal and the impersonal, perhaps even between the concrete and the abstract. Indeed, the language of the body, the corporeal discourse, and the voice become an instrument of communication and of the constitution of the Afro-Brazilian self. By drawing the attention to their bodies, or by *inscribing* and engaging their bodies, and thereby the histories and heritage they express, in a political debate, these women seize the opportunity to

reclaim their place in the official history of Brazil. As for the *re-cognition* of these bodies and selves, these poems represent a challenge to our comprehension of identity. For Miriam Alves, the notion of becoming a genuine self is precisely resident in the promise of a poem, in the words and emotions created by the voice of the body. She writes:

Entre o eu o infinito
 construo a ponte
 a ponte irreversível
 da fala
 da festa
 do ontem
 do hoje e amanhã
 No espelho sou o olhar
 o olhar que me percorre formas
 e pela fresta sou eu espiando-me
 inquieta
 O coração em ritmo tambor
 decifra mensagens
 as palavras voam ao vento
 Vão
 E a cada tan-tan do coração
 novas frases se formam
 Vão
 ao vento
 o meu ser luma no seu contumaz leve brilho Vai
 luzindo emoções indecifráveis
 Voa Vai. Luzir Vai . . . Nos vãos da realidade . . . um sonho Vai no lusco-fusco vespertino
 aonde nos vãos da verdade os sonhos Vão
 janelas abertas
 lufadas penetram
 trazendo sementes
 Naquele meu vasinho de crisântemos que enfeita o infinito da janela
 entre as pequeninas flores- rosa-avermelhadas pousa uma nova verdade
 sementes de um futuro difuso
 um poema se forma
 na forma diáfana do tun-tun-tun-tan-tan do coração em compasso de construção
 desnudando o mundo num futuro crisântemo onde o lusco-fusco é brilho intenso
 onde as despedidas-de-verão se abrem a primaveras de intenções. (Alves 2011b)⁹
 Between me and infinity
 I build the bridge
 the irreversible bridge
 of speech
 of the party
 of yesterday
 of today and tomorrow
 In the mirror I am the gaze
 the gaze that traces curves
 and through the gap it's me spying on myself
 restless
 My heart beating like a drum
 decodes messages
 words fly on the wind
 They go
 And with each thump-thump of the heart
 new phrases form

They go
 on the wind
 My being lights up in its wilful delicate glow It
 lights up indecipherable emotions
 It flies It goes. Light up Go... In the empty spaces of reality... a dream Goes in the
 evening twilight
 where in the empty spaced of truth dreams Go
 open windows
 gusts enter
 bringing seeds.

The poem itself becomes the ‘bridge’ between the self and infinity, between what is perceptible and what is not – that is, between time and eternity. Most importantly, however, in view of the above, the body comes to play a central role in the constitution and performance of the poem, that is, of the poetic *praxis*, which ensues as a result from the musicality, the rhythm and sensory ‘tan-tan’ of the heart. What does this tell us about the significance of the body in terms of knowledge production and, by extension, of a particular performativity connected to the bodies of the Afro-Brazilian self?

Bodies politic and the Kinaesthetic social *praxis*

As Toller Gomes (2007, p. 156) observes, Afro-Brazilian poetry is filled with paradoxes – silence and voice, belonging and estrangement – but more than anything it is a poetry and a discourse characterized by a ‘visceral articulation’, which, in turn, connects it with the historical destiny of Black people in Brazil. On the specificity of Afro-Brazilian literature, she notes that it is crucial for our understanding of it to take into consideration the role played by orality. Moreover, quoting Leda Maria Martins, it becomes clear that the linguistic aspect of the African heritage is closely linked to that of performance:

Esse diálogo com os reportórios textuais de origem banto e nagô amplia nosso universo referencial e cognitivo, nos oferece possibilidades diversas de fruição estética, alçando, ainda, a presença ostensiva desses repertórios e rizomas textuais como fundantes da diversificada textualidade oral brasileira. (Toller Gomes 2007, p. 159)

The dialog with original textual repertoires of Bantu and Nago expands our cognitive and referential universe, offering many possibilities for aesthetic enjoyment, and even raises the presence of unconcealed textual repertoires and rhizomes as founding of the Brazilian-diversified oral textuality.

Orality, in this regard, is a specific characteristic of a mnemonic discourse, connecting vocality with the movement and sensory apparatus of the body. The latter, in turn, becomes a site of cultural performance and, furthermore, connects a ‘natural’ language with aesthetic discourses we find in poetic and dramatic articulations. Moreover, these bodies, one could say, resist a hegemonic (white) discourse and their alternative discursive practices are based on the concept of political affect, in turn effective in the arena of negotiations about gender and race.

Would it be possible, then, to say that this kind of recognition represents a manner by which one is enabled to think *beyond* conventional gendered, racialized discourses? In other words, Is this form of embodied poetico-political activism a way

in which Afro-Brazilian women can reclaim authority over their bodies? In order to consider these questions, I relate the political and poetic activity of Afro-Brazilian women writers to the considerations of the concept of body politics and also bodies politic. In the words of John Protevi, the embodied and embedded character of subjectivity is formed in the overlap between a somatic and a social systems (Protevi 2009, p. 33). He writes:

Individual bodies politic are cognitive agents that actively make sense of situations: they constitute significations by establishing value for themselves, and they adopt an orientation or direction of action. This cognition is coconstituted with affective openness to that situation; affect is concretely the imbrications of the social and somatic, tracking the ways our bodies change in relation to the changing situation in which they find themselves.

In connection with our consideration of Afro-Brazilian women writers, it is precisely the concept of a political cognitive agency, the direction of action, and affective openness to a given situation, which seem important to assess further. The embodied social and the somatic qualities that are translated into writing are, as such, embedded in the communicative activity (organization, structure, and dynamics) of the bodies engaged in a social structure. Furthermore, from the way in which individual bodies respond cognitively to situations, based on collective political categories (gender, class, and race), we may now consider the role of political affect as a somatic, sensory responsiveness, which, in turn, has the potential to enact and effectuate change. Hence, existing historically and socially embedded patterns of corporeal action and reaction contribute to the organization of collective body politics, which, in the case of the Afro-Brazilian movement (as a responsive social system) in general and of its women writers in particular, is at the threshold of what could be a transitional, new era, in which such affective, cognitive, behavioral patterns may change. Change may thus take place in the way the movement understands their situation and, moreover, create a collective body response. Structurally speaking, the reorganization of the self must be seen, first, as embedded within a larger environment, in correspondence and concurrence with other collective, or group body politics; and, second, on an individual (physiological and psychological) level, embedded within the former. The social group is, moreover, constituted by members, who are socially and somatically connected, and whose behavioral patterns, are caused by the triggered interactions of all entities involved, based on a mutual presupposition. These general and somewhat succinct observations of body politics, relating the social and the somatic have prepared for a further examination of Afro-Brazilian identity politics embodied and embedded in a poetic discourse. The latter can be seen as a virtual realm for corporeal organization and constitutions, in turn, modified by the realm of which they are part. Here, by way of discourse analysis, it is possible to observe how the concept of political affect materializes, or is triggered, hence causing both a de-subjectification and a renegotiation of the subject, communicated as poetological praxis and poesis.

Applied to the case of Afro-Brazilian women writers, whose bodies resist a misinterpretation by the dominant, white discourses, we have a case in which the corporeal entities must be viewed as unnamed organic systems, as bare life, as it were, in order to regenerate a person, a subject, and, ultimately, an 'authentic' personhood.

If, as Protevi (2009) notes, it is possible to distinguish between the behavioral patterns of personality, personhood, and the organic system, it is the latter that offers only generic physio-logical behavior, whilst the former is defined by generic responsiveness in a social, cognitive domain. Personhood, in this case, comprises the diversity of personalities, and a *legal* personhood is an 'entity recognized by the state as belonging to the category of a person, and a legally competent person is a subset of that category' (p. 129). The point here is, thus, that in order to find and found an authentic self, one has to reconnect to the body, to begin to recognize from the depersonalized, de-stereotyped, unnameable intensity and affect of the body. From that, a new strategy or paradigm for thinking identity politics may emerge.

A corporeal discourse and performativity

I have prepared the ground for an attempt to examine the corporeal discourse of Afro-Brazilian women writers in terms of its aesthetico-political engagement and enactive response to race and gender politics. My view has been that a radical change of a cognitive paradigm is needed, and that this change may go via the discourse of the body, constitutive of perceptions of a social self. Moreover, it is a question of a change that entails a re-negotiation of an entire discourse on gender and race. In poetological, discursive terms, I rely on a combination of two distinct, yet combinatory discursive paradigms in recent decades, namely the linguistic and the corporeal turns. These two discursive perspectives are related in the sense that, as Tamborino (2002) notes, the corporeal turn goes *beyond* the linguistic turn. He writes: 'Just as the heightened appreciation of language was politicized, illuminating previously neglected dimensions of politics and political thinking, so must appreciation of corporeality be politicized' (p. 135). Moreover, along these lines, corporeality in close connection with linguistic exploration challenges ideal concepts, such as harmony, stability and transparency from the way the corporeal focus influences the use (and function) of language. Writing, in this sense, is conceived as a technique of the body. If we read these lines in light of Afro-Brazilian women writers, it becomes obvious that these women and their writing activity are engaged in a double struggle – both as women and as African-Brazilian women. In addition to encouraging a re-negotiation of the concept of gender, Afro-Brazilian women and their bodies demonstrate what it is like being in a position at the intersection between gender and race. Afro-Brazilian women writers not only remark their bodies aesthetically and politically but also their race. Indeed, this is a kind of writing that strives to become a whole new *praxis* of performing the self. This practice, in turn, leads the discussion of Afro-Brazilian women writers in the direction of an enactive performance, hence, to a discussion of performativity as political activism and protest.

Enactive performativity

In light of these observations, our attention is drawn to a model of subjectivity and identity formation, which allows for a relation of biological and social structures to create a sense of being. As we have seen, the bodies, which underline their performative capacities as discourses of self, become constructs that are either accepted or rejected, fitting or unfitting for given social categories. A mutilation, or

even a restoration of bodies and their vitality and voice have been examined as an attempt or desire to physically reconstruct a self. Along these lines, it is possible to see how a corporeal semiosis or performativity helps underlining the 'African' heritage and discourse, which may seem to counteract the idea of a Western (White) performativity. Speaking of the latter as 'non-referential', theater scholar Fischer-Lichte (2008) writes:

Performative acts (as bodily acts) are 'non-referential' because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts; no fixed, stable identity exists that they could express (p. 27).

From the perspective of a Western theater scholar, Fischer-Lichte's view posits the performing body as a rejection of identity, as an act and enactment, which is predominantly concerned with 'doing something with bodies', which allows the body to generate identity, 'individually, sexually, ethnically, and culturally marked' (p. 27). As we have seen, Afro-Brazilian bodies also need to deconstruct their bodies in order to regenerate a sense of identity, but their bodies never lose their referential significance and capacity. When Afro-Brazilian women inscribe their bodies in a socio-political discourse in protest of how their bodies have been maltreated and bereaved of identity in the past, their performance would rather suggest a use of the body by way of which it would be possible to articulate a self (social and individual) that defies its own historical marking. In other words, these bodies begin to signify with reference to their African heritage and discourse. Furthermore, Afro-Brazilian women writers, by reclaiming their bodies and voices in poetic, or literary form may also be seen to refer to what Irobi (2007) refers to as 'performative literacy', characteristic of African culture. He writes:

Centuries before [European phenomenology was] born, African cultures were existential spaces where life was and still remains an intensely ritualized and performed activity.' [...] 'African societies consciously fashion a corporeal semiology through which the body becomes the symbolic repository of transcendent and expressive as well as philosophical ideas [...] (pp. 898–899).

In this regard, the performative body becomes the central source of signification and identity and ultimately, as a body marked by both a white and African discourse, may shed light on an understanding of 'Carnival' as a spectacle of transcendence:

In recent years, Carnival has become an act of incorporation and atonement. [...] Politically, Carnival has come to represent a collective and dynamic process of subjectivity and creativity that enables Africans in the Diaspora to engage, rethink, redefine themselves, and act out the contradictions of their histories (p. 902).

As referred to earlier, the aestheticized, politicized bodies engage in a process by which historical hierarchies can be torn down and their composition torn apart, only to leave open a zone of multiplicity, hybridity and ruin. As a consequence, a re-metaphorization of the Afro-Brazilian body and self-ensue, a new corporeal discourse in which Afro-Brazilian women writers must be reread. At this stage, then, it is tempting to ask whether these material, corporeal qualities could be translated into a *poetological* methodology, in turn, corporeal, political activism? If

so, then poetry is that discursive fluid, music, rhythms, voices, and sounds which breaks boundaries, bursts forth, leaks, and gushes out of the self, in order to be recognized and reckoned with. It is, as such, a political statement from the way it forces upon us a different perspective on how identities – as discursive bodies – are being produced and socially created. Moreover, we can trace how Afro-Brazilian voices and bodies seek out new paradigms for thinking about identity and subjectivity. These poems, then, function as corporeal entities, interlocking the social (political discourse) with the somatic (corporeal discourse), in order to produce knowledge. Furthermore, this is a case of a social and aesthetic production, which, in turn, permits these bodies to emerge and form new constellations and patterns of interaction. When the poems insist on their materiality, functionality and corporeality – that is, on the interaction between functionality and representation of language and its capacities to act and react – they also bring the poetic language into the realm of the politicized discourse, seeking to insist on a somatic, emotional, and functional *state* of the body, capable of *re-marking* a social pattern discursively. This form of poetological marking, however, demonstrates that the *body as self* cuts right across political categories such as gender, race, and class, and emerges as a self-destructive/self-productive entity, a building work in its own right, feeding on its auto-production of verse/discourse. This is, in other words, an impersonal body, a mere system of production, but also a system, which harbors the potential to recognize a subject and, ultimately, an identity.

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated that the literary works of Afro-Brazilian women writers and activists contribute to a re-metaphorization and re-cognition of the Afro-Brazilian discourse and, by extension, identity and subjectivity, be it historical, cultural, political, or social. Through the corporeal lens, I have tried to identify patterns of linguistic activity (according to poetological, political, or social registers), which, in turn, reflect upon a political marking of a socio-somatic system. Poetry, in this case, functions as a discursive, affective trigger, which causes a change in the organization, or patterns of corporeal behavior and significance. As J. Simon Hutta (Mahoney and Newman 2010) observes, the Afro-Brazilian movement, similar to other social movements is at a stage where a new social engagement is enabled. Textuality, much like corporeality, draws the attention to a sense of presence and physicality, which, in turn, create poems used as weapons. In the words of Sterling, in regard to the ‘Black Art’ poetry, ‘these poems must shoot guns, they must be dagger poems, they are fists and fire, poems that kill’ (Afolabi *et al.* 2007 p. 51). Lastly, to illustrate this notion of a ‘dagger’ poem, Esmeralda Ribeiro will get the last word. Her poem, *Mulher (Woman)*, reads as follows:

MU	MU	MU	MU
	É		
LHER	LHER	LHER	LHER
	DO		SEM
HEMISFÉRIO NEGRO			DEFINIÇÃO
	AO		SEM
HEMISFÉRIO SUL			LIMITAÇÃO
MU	É	MU	

LHER LHER
 FORÇA
 GUERREIRA
 NA
 LUTA AFRICANA. (Afolabi *et al.*, p. 58)
 WO WO WO WO
 IS
 MAN MAN MAN MAN
 OF THE WITHOUT
 DARK HEMISPHERE DEFINITION
 TO THE WITHOUT
 SOUTH HEMISPHERE LIMITATION
 WO IS WO
 MAN MAN
 POWER
 WARRIOR
 OF
 THE AFRICAN BATTLE.

Drawing the attention to the mere mapping of her words, here is an illustration of the fragmentary, yet engendering process of an identity, or body of the Afro-Brazilian ‘woman’. As a discursive constellation, the combinations of discursive patterns are many and the ‘woman’ is not yet named, not yet fully enfolded. However, her discursive, *affective* presence is activated through the writing, and generates a novel process of the imagination, articulation, and creation of who or what may (be)-come of her.

Notes

1. If not stated otherwise, the translations are mine.
2. Afolabi (2001, p. 117) notes: ‘In [a] mixture of social conformism and resistance, the Afro-Brazilian woman is multiply burdened. Often fulfilling the roles of mother, lover, provider, spokesperson, encourager, nourisher, she becomes fragmented in an effort to assert her individuality in the midst of social conventions and racial stereotypes’.
3. The 1st Congress of Brazilian Blacks was organized in 1950 by TEN and held in Rio de Janeiro (Da Silva Martins *et al.* 2004, p. 791).
4. For a more detailed overview, see Da Silva Martins *et al.* (2004, p. 792) and Oliveira (2008, p. 27ff).
5. In terms of the Black movement, Brazil and the USA are comparable, especially when it comes to the topic of miscegenation. However, one should never underestimate the unique development of the *Brazilian* Black movement, in particular, in regard to its relation to the historic ‘Quilombo de Palmares’ (Hamilton 2007).
6. Maria Firmina dos Reis (1825–1917), who is regarded as the first Black female Brazilian writer, wrote her only novel *Úrsula* in 1859 and a book of poetry called *Cantos à beira mar* in 1871. Amongst other early notable activists/poets of African descent in the nineteenth century is the symbolist poet and journalist João da Cruz e Sousa (1861–1898), who also wrote abolitionist chronicles. His works, such as *Evocações* (1896) and *Broquéis* (1893) express his opposition against racial discrimination and contribute to the formation of an early Black consciousness and pride.
7. <http://cadernosnegrospoemas-miriamalves.blogspot.com/2011/03/eu-mulher-em-luta.html>. Trans. Catarina Aleixo.
8. http://pelenegra.blogspot.com/2008/09/vozes-mulheres-de-conceio-evaristo_30.html. Trans. Catarina Aleixo.
9. <http://cadernosnegrospoemas-miriamalves.blogspot.com/2011/02/ser-inteligivel-e-o-inteligivel-do-ser.html>. Trans. Catarina Aleixo.

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