

A Brief Introduction to Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Women's Literature

Maria Aparecida Ferreira de Andrade Salgueiro
Translated by Shoshanna Lurie

Introduction

Afro-Brazilian women have been writing and publishing in an organized fashion for some years and, like African-American women in the United States, have become a group with specific features of their own. However, due to national cultural traits, and in spite of the fact that a large portion of their work has been translated and become the subject of debate for scholars abroad, recognition of their production and literary value has yet to arrive in Brazil.

In poems, short stories, novels, and essays these writers demonstrate a rare sensibility at mastering the written word. In many ways, this literature reflects a generation in search of lost identity, a central theme in modern and contemporary works. This is a group of women who identify themselves as having African descent, not only for ethnic, but primarily for historical and political reasons (Davies 1995).

Taking the similarities and contrasts into consideration as based on historical specificities, many parallels can be drawn between Afro-Brazilian and African-American writers today. In terms of the United States, literary critics unanimously assert that one of the most influential factors in the recognition of African-American literature was the feminist movement. Since the 1970s, African-American women writers have become a powerful force, producing a large number of texts and reaching an ever-growing number of readers. This group includes authors such as Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, Alice Walker, an important activist during the Civil Rights Movement, and Maya Angelou.

We know, however, that this production is not recent. Literary studies centered on gender theory and familiar with the female literary text have cast light on authors such as Phyllis Wheatley, in the eighteenth century, and Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larson of the Harlem Renaissance who, in Alice Walker's words, were forgotten due to "contrary instincts." This focus has also been influential in defining a cultural profile of the nation that allows for new paths to be cleared within ethnic studies. In Brazil, this search for earlier voices has led to Afro-Brazilian authors such as Josephina Alvares de Azevedo, a nineteenth-century playwright. Or, recalling the ever present Simone de Beauvoir: "In this century, women can recover their destiny for freedom through literature" (Gennari). In Brazil, many Afro-Brazilian women writers are engaged in this battle. As representatives of a women's movement with literary expression, they seek to rescue names forgotten by literary history and to prompt the appearance of others, as well as to express emotions squelched, silenced, and oppressed for many centuries.

Writing from the perspective of both a "woman" and a "black," these writers of African descent examine individuality and personal relations as a way of interrogating complex social issues. By analyzing principles such as racism and sexism that are institutionalized not only in society but also within the family and intimate relationships, these authors bring into focus dilemmas that affect everyone, regardless of race or gender. Nevertheless, passing through anger and pain, these writers place the most value on difference, often expressed through a constructive optimism. Difference appears then as an element of construction and growth.

Beyond presenting a voice that has been ignored or little heard, these groups seek to re-evaluate the concept of a literary canon. Groups (re)organize themselves in society, and this panorama is obviously reflected by cultural production. Literature positions itself under the aegis of a new profile. Groups who had until now been considered lacking in literary production begin to come forward, and raise awareness of a previously unknown text, or one that was considered lost. In a 1974 interview, Toni Morrison stated that one of her greatest goals was to contribute to the creation of a canon of African-American works. Always producing literature and emancipatory polemics that seek to make up for lost time, Morrison discusses these topics in her text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992).

This concept is strongly framed by politico-cultural issues. At a historical moment when “globalization” is being debated, when the number of nationalist rebellions and struggles is rising, and when the very notion of *nation* according to traditional parameters is being severely questioned, it is not surprising that the notion of canon is also being challenged. In the United States and Brazil, for various intrinsic and specific reasons, but with a similar backdrop, we are witnessing a great turning point that sheds light on and values literatures of an “Afro” origin.

In Brazil, in addition to Afro-Brazilian women who are publishing more and more of their writing in an organized fashion, we have the systematic publication of the annual journal *Cadernos Negros*. Since its founding, the journal has alternated between editions of poetry and prose; it has survived and progressed, and has contributed significantly to the dissemination and expression of both male and female Afro-Brazilian writers. Today, *Cadernos Negros* is a basic reference for the analysis of this literature and mandatory reading for any researcher in the field.

Within this panorama of re-vision, though fairly different from the North American case due to differences in our colonization processes and the nationalities involved, one should note that in a masked or latent, implicit or explicit form, the question of race is still only apparently resolved in today’s Brazil. In reality, it is an issue loaded with emotion and prejudice.

Names that have entered into “official” literature are often studied without reference to the ethnic origin of the author. When some reference is made there is usually no analysis of the subject from a contextual, cultural, or historical point of view, as if no difference existed that could lead to cultural enrichment. Specific examples can be found in Castro Alves, Olavo Bilac, Aluísio Azevedo, Machado de Assis, Cruz e Souza, and Lima Barreto. And it should be well noted that no women are included in this list. In truth, the presence of blacks in Brazilian Literature does not escape this marginalizing treatment, and when they are mentioned, as Proença explains, it is either in “literature *about* blacks, on the one hand, and (more recently visible), *black* literature, on the other” (159).

Following the international trend of extensive discussions on ethnicity, Brazil today is discussing the concept of “racial democracy” and its myths. After the broad debate that preceded the 1995 tricentennial of Zumbi—the leader of “Palmares,” the largest fugitive slave village (“*quilombo*”) in colonial Brazil—it has become clearer that racial democracy is possible only with

social democracy. African-American and Afro-Brazilian women have paid close attention to these issues since the 1970s, in conjunction with the Black Movement efforts in Brazil and in the United States.

These activities begin with the apparently most "simple" things, such as the terms used to designate ethnic issues. In contemporary Brazil, the word *negro* is frequently used to place value on color and race. The term *afro-brasileiro* has also begun to appear. Darcy Ribeiro, a contemporary Brazilian writer, anthropologist, and politician, even used this term in his work *O Povo Brasileiro*, written shortly before his death in 1997.¹

The current historical moment in Brazil is similar to the experiences of blacks in the United States. Government gestures, affirmative action, black media, and celebrities seek change through their own initiatives. Groups are organized around different topics related to black culture, many events revolving around discussions related to the black population occur within and outside of universities, and the question of formal education for blacks is widely discussed. Currently, the polemical discussion of quotas for black students in public universities is occurring in the National Congress in Brazil. This is complemented by different cultural manifestations in music, record production, art, theater, and the press with the monthly publication of *Raça Brasil: A Revista dos Negros Brasileiros*—this last being strongly influenced, even in its title, by North American models. All these elements together are slowly creating a new environment that attempts to be specifically Afro-Brazilian.

Afro-Brazilian Women Writers

Authors including Conceição Evaristo, Miriam Alves, Esmeralda Ribeiro and Lia Vieira have been translated and published in works such as the one organized by Carol Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994). Sonia Fátima da Conceição and Geni Guimarães are also part of this group, which is being increasingly solicited to present their work and to have their texts translated abroad. Elisa Lucinda, who has begun to do public shows in Rio de Janeiro, is slowly gaining popularity in Brazil and in the rest of the world. Actually, this phenomenon is typical of Afro-Brazilian literary production. These are writers who, because of the attention they receive abroad—being frequently invited to give talks outside their country and to sign contracts for translations of their work—feel much more recognized abroad than in Brazil. It is only slowly that their production achieves a Brazilian audience.

Some common traits of the authors mentioned are their professional/political activities; their consistent presence in *Cadernos Negros* since the 1980s, not only in publishing and collaborating in the editing process, but also helping in its distribution, which has earned some of them very good reviews abroad; the invitations they receive to participate in and talk at meetings and seminars on women and literature inside and outside of Brazil. Moreover, while remaining completely unknown in Brazil, their works are frequently translated. Finally, these authors develop their own reflections on the issue of black or Afro-Brazilian literature.²

Maria da Conceição Evaristo de Brito, one of the most important representatives of this group, was born in 1946 in Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais. She is a teacher in the city public schools, and has worked for some years at the José Bonifácio Cultural Center—a public city agency for the rescue and dissemination of African-Brazilian culture, particularly that specific to Rio de Janeiro. The center is also a cradle for the activities of the Black Movement. At the cultural center, she is responsible for writing statements, pamphlets, and for disseminating material regarding information on African-Brazilian culture chosen for exhibition and other public events.

Conceição Evaristo is noteworthy for having consistently published in *Cadernos Negros* since 1989. Her literary work, now beginning to be recognized, is divided into published poems and short stories, as well as an unpublished novel. She narrates black women's day-to-day problems with a distinctively feminine perspective. She writes fully utilizing poetic and cultural references, seeking strong historical moments for a culture that is in the process of reconstructing itself.

Miriam Alves is known for her poetry and also for her excellent work in editing and distributing the beautiful bilingual anthology of poetry entitled *Enfim Nós/Finally Us: Contemporary Black Brazilian Women Writers*. According to Caroline Durham, a North American scholar who wrote the introduction, the work "is an important step on the path to present a collective literary vision to the reading public of the Americas" (23). In several texts, Alves challenges the stereotype of the black woman's passivity.

Esmeralda Ribeiro asserts that Afro-Brazilian women can reveal their true selves through literature, and stresses that writing can also challenge negative, stereotypical, and distorted images presented by both past and current male writers, such as that of the "sensual *mulata*."

In *Marcas, Sonhos e Raízes*, Sonia Fátima da Conceição stresses the idea that literature is an instrument in which critical liberating strategies for spreading the voice of black people can be taken advantage of. In this work, Sonia seeks to recreate the atmosphere in black organizations, dealing with the difficulties and conflicts that arise from the struggle for a world without violence and discrimination. The author follows the development of situations through the gaze of a male character, who finds himself trapped by the habits of sexist behavior.

Geni Guimarães stands out for her production of two powerful books of short stories, *Leite do Peito* and *A Cor da Ternura*. In addition, the author has written beautiful poems and children's stories, and some of her work has been translated into German.

Conclusions

Authors of short stories, a few novels, many poems, and essays—this is undoubtedly a production of great value, originality and literary innovation, in search of Brazilian traits and roots. There is no doubt that the study of an emerging literature with African features will significantly aid in the understanding of culture within a contemporary perspective that includes ethnicity.

The themes of motherhood, tradition and identity are only three of the topics approached by these contemporary Afro-Brazilian women writers. The effects of race, gender, and class become evident in the interpretation of these topics. Creative, affirmative, and subversive elements expressed in their works are forms of resistance directed against racism and sexism.

By creating their own history in their struggle, Afro-Brazilian women writers retrace black Brazilian women's minds and hearts, and over time establish themselves as mandatory references in the panorama of their country's contemporary literature. Always combating discrimination, African-American and Afro-Brazilian women writers adopt specific and distinct strategies in their struggle. Nevertheless, there are recurring commonalities, solid and effective personal trajectories that unite them and have an impact on the literary scene. For example, utilizing the art of the written word, they have forced a re-discussion of the canon, a definitive contribution to universal literature for the feminist movement and for the struggle for human rights, whether in Brazil or in the United States.

Notes

¹ Darcy Ribeiro. *O Povo Brasileiro: A Formação e o Sentido do Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995.

² For instance, Conceição Evaristo Brito discusses the use of the adjectives *negro* and *afro-brasileiro* in her master's thesis *Literatura Negra*.

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