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## **MOVING AGAINST CLOTHESPINS:THE POLI(POE)TICS OF EMBODIMENT IN THE POETRY OF MIRIAM ALVES AND AUDRE LORDE**

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**MOVING AGAINST CLOTHESPINS: THE POLI(POE)TICS OF EMBODIMENT  
IN THE POETRY OF MIRIAM ALVES AND AUDRE LORDE**

A Dissertation Presented

by

FLÁVIA SANTOS DE ARAÚJO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2017

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies

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## DEDICATION

To Miguel and Henrique, my most precious gifts -  
*no horizonte, vejo vocês.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research has been a journey – a literal and a symbolic one. Since my departure from João Pessoa (Brazil) on July 26, 2008 bound for the U.S., there have been times I *felt* alone, but I am grateful for *knowing* I have never been alone. The following is a brief acknowledgment of those who offered support to my work and my dreams. Without their support, I would have never been able to accomplish my academic goals and the completion of this work.

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At UMass, I was fortunate to serve as research assistant for the Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies (CLACLS) and its Afro-Latino Diasporas Research Working Group from 2008 and 2010. During that period, I was able to connect with and learn from an amazing team of scholars and experts in the field, particularly Dr. Sonia Alvarez, Dr. Agustín Lao-Montes, and Dr. Aurora Vergara Figueroa. Being surrounded by their enthusiasm, academic sophistication, and working-festive gatherings – nourished by intellectual creativity, salsa, merengue, and a bit of samba – helped me face the difficult first years of my doctoral program and cultural adjustment.

In 2012, I gratefully received the Summer Pre-Dissertation Research Award by CLACLS, a grant that helped support the archival research at the Audre Lorde Collection, housed by the Women's Research and Resource Center at Spelman College – an important step towards the accomplishment of this research.

The teaching assistantship at the W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies offered me with an opportunity to bring into the classroom some of the discussions I explore in this work. I am grateful for the invaluable input provided by my students in the Introduction to Black Studies course. Their critical perspectives over the intellectual and artistic production by black women in the U.S. and beyond helped me build my research framework.

For the past three years I have worked as the Graduate Program Assistant for the Women of Color Leadership Network (WOCLN) at the Center for Women & Community at UMass. WOCLN has been an enriching working space where I could learn and develop my skills as mentor, advisor, educator, and organizer. I am grateful for having worked with talented and empowered women of color in the WOCLN staff team. In particular, I am indebted to my powerhouse-friend-visionary-mentor-supervisor Hind Mari, WOCLN Director.

During my journey, I was fortunate to meet and be inspired by amazing women scholars. Some of them shared with me the agony, challenges, and victories of the graduate school odyssey. Supported by their brilliance, encouragement and resilience, I was able to regain perspective, a sense of belonging, and moments of laughter when all seemed impossible. At different stages, they became my accountability partners, writing buddies, and sounding boards. Special thanks to my peers at the support group for Women in Academia: Surviving the Dissertation at the Center for Women & Community, a.k.a. "Warrior Club": Johanna Ortner, Crystal Donkor, Jamele Watkins, Annette Hunt, Allison Page, Ogechi Nwaokemeleh, and Elizabeth Cartier. Also, Leta Hooper and

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I would like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions from the members of my dissertation committee. My advisor, Dr. James Smethurst, for being respectful of my voice and pace, and for his understanding when life was just hard. Dr. Karen Y. Morrison, my dear “Kym”, for fruitful intellectual provocations and shared moments of intellectual passion. Dr. Steven Tracy, for the inspiring curiosity about my work and prompt feedback. Dr. Sonia Alvarez, for showing me new routes in the initial phase of my research. Dr. Antonio Tillis, for helping me navigate – and expand - the boundaries of language and style in my writing.

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As I wrap up the final pages of this dissertation, I become aware that it all started a long time ago deeply in my heart. I owe my mom, Maria do Socorro, my love for literature, my hunger for justice, and my thirst for learning. Her strength and dignity, despite all the storms our family has gone through, has sustained me all the way from the South to the North Atlantic.

Years ago, as I was preparing to embark on this journey overseas, my children, Miguel and Henrique – now two young men – said to me: “Mãe, vai e escreve uma estória bem bonita!”



["Mom, go ahead and write a beautiful story!"]. Since then, the three of us have been moving across five thousand kilometers of *saudade* – The Netherlands (where they now live), the U.S., and Brazil. I am certain that it has been by far the most difficult dance we have had to learn together. I am endlessly grateful for my sons' trust in me, even before I started my doctoral program. I write this "story" filled with appreciation for their courage, resilience and independence; for their ever-present love, despite the transatlantic distance. I hope I have fulfilled their wish.

ABSTRACT

MOVING AGAINST CLOTHESPINS: THE POLI(POE)TICS OF EMBODIMENT  
IN THE POETRY OF MIRIAM ALVES AND AUDRE LORDE

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This dissertation examines literary representations of the black female body in selected poetry by U.S. African American writer Audre Lorde and Afro-Brazilian writer Miriam Alves, focusing on how their literary projects construct and defy notions of black womanhood and black female sexualities in dialogue with national narratives and contexts. Within an historical, intersectional and transnational theoretical framework, this study analyses how the racial, gender and sexual politics of representation are articulated and negotiated within and outside the political and literary movements in the U.S. and Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s. As a theoretical framework, this research elaborates and uses the concept of “poli(poe)tics of embodiment”: a multi-layered artistic endeavor interwoven with the body politics Afro-diasporic women artists articulate and negotiate vis-à-vis the cultural, historical, and political communities in which they exist. A significant contribution of this study to the field of Afro-diasporic literary studies is, therefore, to historicize black women’s writings, examining their politics/poetics as interlaced threads of their literary production, as well as the writers’ trajectories as artists, intellectuals, and activists. In addition, this research aims at unraveling the socio-historical implications of Lorde’s and Alves’ literary representations in re-

configuring essentialist, nationalist, and heteronormative perceptions of the black female body. The close reading of their poetry – supported by a discussion of their theoretical work, archival research, and interviews – pays attention to three dimensions of these artists’ poetic (re)constructions of the black female body: first, the black female “self” in re-imagined configurations against histories of fragmentation and violation; second, alternative iconographies of the black female sexuality against discourses of sexual/racial manipulation; and finally, the black female body as historical agent moving against narratives of objectification. This analysis suggests that Lorde’s and Alves’ writings promote multiple and polyphonic representations of the black female body within a historical continuum of black women artistic production across the diasporic space in the Americas.

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## INTRODUCTION... OR WHERE, HOW, AND WHY I ENTER

*Mulher*  
*sou eu esta mulher*  
*rolando feito confete*  
*na palma de sua mão*

*Mulher – retalhos*  
*a carne das costas secando*  
*no fundo do quintal*  
*presa no estendal do seu esquecimento*

*Mulher - revolta*  
*Agito-me contra os prendedores*  
*que seguram-me firme neste varal*

(Miriam Alves)<sup>1</sup>

This study starts with an imagery in one of Miriam Alves's best known poems, "Pedaços de Mulher" ["Pieces of a Woman"], first published in 1985. In that imagery, the poetic subject reveals her multiple layers - the woman-confetti, the woman-shards-of-flesh, the woman-revolt – and exposes the struggle, the search, and the desire for reintegrating all the parts of a historically fragmented black female body into a re-membered self. On one hand, the poem conjures up a historical legacy of physical and emotional abuse of black women's bodies. On another hand, the poetic verses unveil the erasure of those bodies from hegemonic narratives of historical protagonism and agency. Against this historical legacy of exploitation and deletion – the clothespins - Alves' poetic subject moves in a dance of resistance. Alves' poetic construction functions like a puzzle in which

the rebelled pieces of a woman are put back together to re-build an identity based on her own reclaiming of the inseparable parts of her body, her sexuality, her history, her past, her present, and the possibilities of a liberated self.

It matters, for the purpose of this study, to hear this female poetic voice as a *diasporic black* female poetic voice. The very materiality of the textual creation from and through which this woman speaks – contradicting Gayatri Spivak’s predicament in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) – is culturally, historically, and politically informed by the Afro-diasporic conditions of its production. Here, both creator (the artist) and creation (the text) are shaped by the Afro-diasporic realities of “being a black woman in the world”, as pointed out by another Afro-Brazilian writer/creator, Conceição Evaristo (2007). From that notion, from “thinking critically” about what it means to “be a black woman in the world”, Evaristo elaborated and conceptualized the term *escrevivência*. In combining two words in Portuguese, *escrevivência* constitutes the act of writing/creating (*escrever*) that is forged from the experiences (*vivência*) of “being a black woman in the world”. I argue that Miriam Alves, as a “black woman in the world” who is an artist, also writes as *escrevivência*. Considering Evaristo’s conceptualization, my other argument is that Alves’ creations (her poetry, in particular) – among those by other Afro-diasporic women artists I will discuss, such as Audre Lorde in the U.S. – complicate, reveal, and review understandings of what it means to create as *escrevivência* when one considers how racial, sexual, and gender discourses are articulated throughout multiple socio-historical Afro-diasporic contexts.

In a world that too often imagines black women either for their labor capacity or with an over-emphasis of their supposedly negative social behaviors, my work expounds on diasporic black women’s intellectual creativity and its ability to question the



mechanisms of their marginalization and those of their racially defined communities. Taking Alves' dance against clothespins as an analytical tool that guides my comparative, transnational, and intersectional research approach, I examine literary representations of the black/Afro-diasporic female body in selected poetry by U.S. Afro-American writer Audre Lorde and Afro-Brazilian writer Miriam Alves, paying particular attention to three dimensions of these artists' poetic constructions:

- 1) how the black female "self" is recreated and reimagined against common and distinct histories of fragmentation and violation;
- 2) how the black female subject embodies alternative iconographies of the body that allow for the exploration of "the erotic as power" and transformative force – as Lorde advocated (2007) - against various discourses of sexual/racial manipulation;
- 3) and finally, how the black female body is resituated as historical agent against silencing and objectifying narratives.

The selection of poems covers Lorde's later publications in the late 1970s to 1990s – more specifically, the anthologies *The Black Unicorn* (1978), *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986), and *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* (1993); and Alves' first publications in the late 1970s until the present time – including poems published in several volumes of *Cadernos Negros*, the solo anthologies *Momentos de Busca* (1983) and *Estrelas no Dedo* (1985) - as well as more recent publications in social media. This chronological focus facilitates the analysis of the global and local historical contexts that inform Lorde's and Alves' literary productions, as well as their political trajectories as intellectuals and activists.

A significant contribution of this study to the field of Afro-diasporic literary studies

is, therefore, to historicize black women's writings, examining their politics/poetics as interlaced threads of their literary production, as well as the writers' trajectories as artists, intellectuals, and activists. As a comparative Afro-diasporic feminist literary investigation, situated in the triangulation of racial, gender and sexual politics of Afro-poetic representations, I wrestle with the following question: how do these intersectional elements of Afro-diasporic literary representations are *articulated* and *negotiated* in the dynamics of power structures vis-à-vis commonalities and divergences in histories of slavery, colonialism, sexism, and racism in the Americas? In order to answer that question, I also analyze how Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves have built their trajectories both as poets and activists as interlaced threads of their larger contribution and significance. For that purpose, I use Lorde's self-identifying term as a "sister outsider" as trope to locate both artists within discourses of national identity and ideologies in the U.S. and in Brazil.

As a "sister outsider", Audre Lorde became a self-declared ally and critic of the liberation movements that spanned from the 1960s to the early 1990s. A prolific and versatile artist-intellectual, Lorde's trajectory was built both on her political and artistic alliances with the black, gay/lesbian, and women's movements, as well as on her critiques and ruptures with circles within the movements. I invest in the significance of becoming a "sister outsider" to examine both Lorde's and Alves' political and artistic trajectories, investigating how they have chosen to fuse "sister" and "outsider" as integral part of their political, intellectual and creative paths. In so doing, I choose to use the plural form "sisters outsiders" to refer to both artists, maintaining the syntactic inflection from Portuguese and pluralizing both words. By making this choice, I want to preserve the power of what each of these words mean – independently and in correlation – to the political positionings Audre

Lorde and Miriam Alves chose to take.

Bringing together Alves' and Lorde's political-literary perspectives, my purpose is to illustrate some of the transcultural articulations within a symbolic, representational diasporic continuum. Alves' and Lorde's work and positionalities are discussed from the perspective of what Carole Boyce Davies defines as "multiple and variable subject positions", taking into account these writers' "particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist" (Davies 1994, 9). Within this perspective, I am ultimately interested in looking at how Alves' and Lorde's artistic projects dialogue with traditions of other Afro-diasporic women artists (in particular those from the U.S. and Brazil), promoting continuities and ruptures with those traditions.

Despite the differences between the Brazilian and the U.S. historical processes of racial formation, the literary production from both countries and their respective writers have been historically connected by a number of different cultural and political movements and exchanges<sup>2</sup>. The examination of these connections – not always documented and not always in synchronicity - allows for the elaboration of a transnational framework of comparative analysis which, on one hand, acknowledges the divergences in the historical and cultural processes of both countries; and, on another hand, it opens up paths to consider them in their dialogic relationships in the making of the Afro-diasporic networks and their (cultural, literary, and political) discourses in the Americas. In examining Lorde's and Alves' trajectories as sisters outsiders, I highlight many of these transatlantic connections, tracing parallels of historical moments, movements and outcomes. Meanwhile, this study also pinpoints socio-historical and cultural divergences between Lorde's and Alves' contexts, mapping out the specificities of their poetics and politics.

With that in mind, I paraphrase the famous phrase by Anna Julia Cooper<sup>3</sup> in the title for this introduction. Cooper's "when and where I enter" framework points out that this research is also part of my own academic journey into (re)thinking the Afro-diasporic literary connections throughout history. The writers selected for this study – and their respective production – do not necessarily constitute an obvious choice for a comparative analysis of Afro-Brazilian and U.S. Afro-American women's writings. As I will discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters, these artists are neither in synchronic relationship with one another nor connected by concrete historical evidence<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the poetics and politics of Lorde and Alves are studied here as part of what Brent Edwards classifies as "a process of linking or connecting across gaps – a practice we might term *articulation*" (2003, 11). Edwards explains further: "Articulation here functions as a concept-metaphor that allows us to consider relations of 'difference within unity', non-naturalizable patterns of linkage between disparate societal elements" (Ibid). In this sense, the historical and cultural conditions of the literary works studied here allow for an analysis of the multiple ways in which the Afro-diasporic experience has been negotiated across the Americas.

Considering such connections as both geographical and symbolic phenomena, my purpose is to investigate how these geo-symbolic articulations travel across space-time-imagination, not necessarily described by tangible historical documentation. Within that context, I am considering at least three main criteria that promote a possible dialogue among these writers and their writings, which I intend to develop in the following chapters:

1. By analyzing their writings (both literary and critical), as well as their trajectories, this study demonstrates that Lorde and Alves are committed to a process of re-reading and re-thinking the historical constructs and narratives shaping the images

of Afro-diasporic women;

2. As Afro-diasporic women artists, Lorde and Alves are ideologically and aesthetically engaged in reflecting upon the roles of women in general, and women of African descent in particular, from a diasporic perspective – one that complicates and interrogates notions of nation, sexuality and black identity;
3. Although they are affiliated to the literary and social movements of their era, these writers keep an acute critical positioning in relationship to the ideologies that permeate the movements they are associated with.

In exploring the potentiality of articulation, Edwards suggests that the term diaspora implies neither “an easy recourse to origins” – claiming supposedly sacred roots – nor a “foolproof anti-essentialism”: it provides us with the ground where “discourses of cultural and political linkage” intersect only “through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor” (Ibid 13). If the articulation of the African diaspora leads to an articulation of difference (internal and external difference, as Edwards points out), the Afro-diasporic literary representations investigated here are both a process and a condition of articulating “difference within a unity”.

By reading contemporary U.S. and Brazilian Afro-diasporic women writers with and against each other, this study provides an analytical framework to examine black women’s intellectual creativity as they navigate across the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Lorde’s and Alves’ black diasporic literary articulations become, then, a manifestation of what I define (and elaborate in the following chapter) as *poli(poet)ics of embodiment*: a multi-layered literary/artistic endeavor interwoven with the body politics black women artists/intellectuals articulate and problematize, in conversation with

particular socio-historical contexts. As a framework for analysis, the poli(poe)tics of embodiment is rooted in the notion that culture and politics are developed as historical interplay. From that perspective, the poli(poe)tics of embodiment enables a transnational study that pays attention to the tension within rather distinct contexts in Afro-diasporic streams.

This research contributes to expand the comparative/transnational studies of black women's literary production in Anglophone and Lusophone diasporic contexts in the Americas – still a rare scholarly endeavor. Previous studies such as Carole Boyce Davies' *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1998), Emmanuelle K. F. Oliveira's *Writing Identity: The Politics of Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Literature* (2007), Dawn Duke's *Literary Passion, Ideological Commitment: Toward a Legacy of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian Women Writers* (2008), and Monique-Adelle Callahan's *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* (2011) represent some of the most significant contributions in recent years for the U.S.-based scholarship in the field of African diaspora literary studies with a focus on Afro-Brazilian women's literature. In Brazil, the research developed by Maria Aparecida Andrade Salgueiro is an important reference for the comparative/transnational study of U.S. Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian literatures, including her book *Escritoras Negras Contemporâneas - Estudo de Narrativas: Estados Unidos e Brasil* (2004) and her more recent projects involving the research group "Tradução, Mediação de Culturas e Estudos Interculturais" ["Translation, Cultural Mediation and Intercultural Studies"]. Besides that, Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida (2006; 2012) and Roland G. M. Walter (2009) have also offered significant contributions to expand the transnational scholarship in African Diaspora Studies in Brazil.

In this scenario, this research deepens the transnational dialogue in the scholarship, while developing a black diasporic feminist framework in the field of Afro-Latin literary studies<sup>5</sup>. This study contributes to decenter the U.S. approach to the so-called “black experience” according to which the triangulation of race, gender and sexuality have been often defined. The U.S. -centered research paradigms in the field - often dictated by the U.S. academy - rarely account for specific historical processes in the Afro-Latin world. The research method informing this study relies heavily on the legacy by Afro-Brazilian scholars, intellectuals, and artists. For instance, the pioneering theorizing on the diaspora in the Americas by Afro-Brazilian intellectuals such as Beatriz Nascimento and Lélia Gonzalez, whose notions of *diasporic transmigration* and *Amefricanidade* (“Amefricanicity”), respectively, precedes the widely-spread concept of the “Black Atlantic” by Paul Gilroy. Therefore, by re-arranging the clothespins on the theoretical clothesline of this research, I also hope to contribute to decentering hegemonic approaches to black diasporic feminist literary criticism. The decentering of such approaches intrinsically connects with the choices in the use of terminology and the methodological procedures that guide this research.

### **Research in (Con)Text: Delineating Boundaries, Methods and Terminology**

The terms “black” and “blackness” are used here as important political signifiers in their capacity to retain meanings of resistance in the face of discourses embedded by ideas of whiteness as normalcy, cultural standards, and positions of dominance – particularly within socio-historical contexts from the 1970s and 1990s. Although acknowledging the

strategic and political dimensions of these signifiers, this study also acknowledges the different ways Afro-diasporic women express and perform the terms of their identities and subjectivities under different categories associated with blackness. For that reason, it is crucial to interrogate the uses of these terms in distinct contexts and their multiple meanings. In her article about the relationship between diasporic studies and the contemporary feminist literary studies on women's writings, Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida emphasizes multiplicity, polyphony, and difference in literary feminist criticism, particularly the one developed within a diasporic framework, as the potential to question simplistic notions that equates identity to nationality; as well as the act of writing to a national project (Almeida 2006, 192). Following Almeida's considerations, this study refers to black women and black women's writings as a changing political site of Afro-diasporic articulations and polysemy.

Focusing on Afro-diasporic polysemantic articulations, my use of the prefixation "Afro" (as in "Afro-Brazilian" and "U.S. Afro-American") accounts for the history of dispersal of African peoples in the continent through the Middle Passage, preserving, on one hand, the reference to the identity and cultural connections among the Afro-descendants in the continent. On another hand, this prefixation also attempts to highlight the distinct historical processes of racial formation in the Americas – particularly in Brazil and the U.S. - and their respective racial, gender, and sexual dynamics.

While I am rejecting a totalizing sense of the use of "Afro-American" as an exclusive reference for people of African descent in the U.S. (understanding that being Afro-American is being part of the African descendant world in the entire American continent), I am also aware that the term "African/Afro-descendant" (or "afrodescendiente")



in Spanish and “afro-descendente” in Portuguese) is relatively new in many parts of Latin-American<sup>6</sup>. The perspective of the diaspora advanced in hyphenated terminology relates to an understanding of “African/ Afro” as a negotiated identity within on-going historical and regional processes of transformation, rather than a fixed and homogenous sign that essentializes the idea of “Africa” (Appiah, 1997; Mbembe, 2001). This ideological terrain of racial terminology and identification is far from being universal, univocal, or homogenous. It is located in contested territories where gender, class, sexuality, and the specificities of distinct histories interfere and change the ways by which the term is articulated, incorporated, and/or understood by different black communities in the Americas.

In examining literary representations of black women’s bodies from an Afro-diasporic perspective, the tensions arising from these articulations and negotiations are not considered here as dissonant aspects of a purportedly unitary black identity or aesthetics. Instead, they are constituents of the ways in which black women explore the differences and the contradictions that destabilize a monolithic conception of black female identity/subjectivity across the diaspora in the Americas. Some of these tensions are mapped out in the trajectories of Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves and their position as “sisters outsiders” within different social and cultural movements – a strategy that enabled them to act as both critics and an allies.

This study looks into Lorde’s and Alves’ trajectories by accessing a variety of sources. Lorde’s published essays, interviews, as well the archives from the Audre Lorde Collection at the Women’s Research & Resource Center at Spelman College constitute the secondary materials for the analysis of key elements of Lorde’s political and poetic vision.

The two documentary films on Lorde's life and legacy also provided a wealth of information for this research: *A Litany For Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1996), produced by Ada Griffin and Michelle Parkerson, offers an epic portrayal of the writer from her childhood roots in NYC's Harlem to her battle with breast cancer; Dagmar Schultz's *Audre Lorde the Berlin Years, 1984 to 1992* (2012) focuses on Lorde's involvement with the Afro-German group of women intellectuals and writers in Berlin, during the years she sought alternative cancer treatment in Germany. In addition, Alexis De Veaux's 2004 biography of the poet and the 2016 bio/anthology by Gloria I. Joseph offer significant insights for the analysis of Lorde's politics, her diasporic connections in Europe and the Caribbean, and the transnational scope of her literary production. All these sources are combined with a close reading of Lorde's extensive non-fiction writings and a large number of critical materials about her career and her production<sup>7</sup>.

Miriam Alves' on-going intellectual and literary production is examined through collected interviews she gave to a number of news outlets, journals, and blogs since her insertion in the literary group *Quilombhoje* in São Paulo – including a personal interview given in 2012. These interviews are juxtaposed with Alves' non-fiction writings - available in a number of printed materials, her own blog ("Escritora Miriam Alves") and Facebook page. Additionally, there is also a limited but growing number of critical materials on Alves' literary production, including recent academic papers, theses, and dissertations developed mostly by Brazilian scholars. Differently from Lorde, a significant portion of Alves' poetic work has not yet been largely anthologized. Besides Alves' aforementioned solo poetry volumes, the sources for the selection of her poems include various volumes of *Cadernos Negros* and her Facebook page. Alves' use of social media is particularly

significant for this study because that has become the platform where she assembles her poetic text in juxtaposition with images. The multi-media assemblage of her work online offers a source for my analysis of contemporary strategies black women artists have recently used to display their creative work.

Although benefiting from research of biographical and archival materials, this study does not engage in a biographical approach to Lorde's and Alves' poetry. Instead, the examination of their trajectories (personal, literary, and political) contributes to an understanding of their poetic production as inseparable from their positionalities as activists/intellectuals; and from their vision of a diasporic space in which they situate the making of their literature. The interplay of these conjoined elements of the artistic, intellectual, political, and activist nuances in black diasporic feminist creations also represent a fundamental component of their poli(poe)tics of embodiment.

The challenges and limitations presented in the development of this research are connected with the imbalance in the bibliographical materials available about the writers. This aspect of research development and methodology is important not only because it determines how this study is conducted within a comparative framework; but also because it reveals some of the key elements of Lorde's and Alves' different conditions of production within the African diaspora in the Americas. On one hand, the chronological distance between the authors' productions and trajectories could partially explain that imbalance. For instance, the amount of scholarly materials, academic studies, interviews, anthologies, and other compilations on Audre Lorde's work and legacy, published throughout the past four decades, is incomparably larger in relationship to what is available on Miriam Alves, whose work started being published two decades after Lorde's.

However, that chronological factor does not even begin to reveal the other, more complex, causes for such an imbalance. The conditions for publication and the access to publishing channels and circulation surrounding Lorde's context in the U.S. from the 1960s to 1990s are dramatically different from those Alves has struggled with in Brazil from 1970s to the present. A phenomenon present in most South American countries, the economic barriers for black writers are imposed by an elitist publishing industry in combination with the mechanisms of invisibility developed throughout the history of the establishment of an "official" literary canon that denies the very presence of an Afro-Brazilian literary tradition. Within this context, one would have tremendous difficulties in finding, for instance, a "black literature" section in a regular bookstore in Brazil, or even in larger library collections.

The myth of a *mestiço*<sup>8</sup> nation, generating the idea of one single national/cultural identity for Brazilians, has serious implications in the literary world. Eduardo de Assis Duarte clarifies that the historical process of *mestiçagem* and the politics of whitening in Brazil have created a series of obstacles for the delineation of a historiography of the Afro-Brazilian literary production and its circulation: from the strenuous difficulties of the very materialization of this production and the restricted circulation of materials – in many cases published in precarious conditions – to the deliberate erasure of the authorial, or even textual, connections with the Afro-descendant ethnicity (Duarte 2005, 114).

Despite the fast-growing interest in and efforts towards the making of a scholarship on Afro-Brazilian literary tradition in past three decades, the field is still confronted by what Duarte defines as "the maintenance of a curtain of silence" by the custodians of academic knowledge and curricula, leading to the public ignorance about the Afro-

Brazilian literary legacy and penalizing most Afro-Brazilian writers with invisibility (Ib. idem 115). Thus, for Afro-Brazilian women writers, such as Miriam Alves, pursuing a literary career in which the racial, gender, and sexual components of their identities are the very subject of their literary production represents a struggle against a national narrative and a publishing industry that does not recognize, much less validate, the “Afro” in the Brazilian literary history.

This context can not be dissociated from the legacies of slavery as a national institution and a post-emancipation socio-political and economic structure that not only fragmented the Afro-descendants in Brazil as an ethnic group, but it also created material barriers for Afro-Brazilian political organizing<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the two decades of military regime in Brazil – between 1964 and 1985 – dismantled the on-going political organizations considered a threat to the regime and violently repressed any attempt for dissident political organizing, including the black movement groups, particularly during the first fifteen years of its operation (Kennedy 1986, 201).

Within the intersections of a racist social structure and patriarchal system, Afro-Brazilian women writers have historically struggled against the mechanism of invisibility and erasure in a larger national scenario and within the black movements where many of these writers have developed their trajectories. Only in late twentieth-century, for instance, the academic scholarship highlights the plausibility of Afro-Brazilian origins for the Romantic era in Brazil. With that recognition, the 1859 novel *Úrsula* by Afro-Brazilian Maria Firmina dos Reis arguably becomes the first abolitionist novel ever published. Literary scholars highlight that dos Reis, as a black woman writer in late nineteenth century, had to use the pseudonym “uma Maranhense” (“a woman from Maranhão”)<sup>10</sup> in order to

guarantee the publication of her writings in local newspapers.

The question of invisibility and the ideological, cultural, political, and economical mechanisms that support the “maintenance of the curtain of silence” for black women writers are not unfamiliar territory in the U.S. However, a much longer tradition of intellectual work has been dedicated to critically analyze the multiple ways in which black women’s writings in the U.S. have been placed at the margins of institutionalized canons (Smith 1982b, 157-8).

The consolidation of a body of scholarship that acknowledges black women’s literary tradition in the U.S. and its political significance represent a power struggle carried out by the groundbreaking work of black women intellectuals such as Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull, Claudia Tate, among others, particularly since the 1970s. Furthermore, as Angelyn Mitchell and Danielle K. Taylor highlight, the institutionalization of U.S. African American literature and literary studies (with the foundation of Black Studies programs) and the rise of Women’s Studies programs in the 1960s – both indebted to the civil rights and women’s movements - “helped to make literature by both African American men and women more accessible and visible to all of American society”, as well as a field of increasing scholarly interest (Mitchell and Taylor 2009, 2).

The institutionalization of Afro-Brazilian Studies academic programs is still an on-going process - with important achievements along the way, nonetheless. In the 1980s, when the country starts a process of re-democratization after the military regime, academic centers for the study of Afro-Brazilian culture were founded in major universities, such as the IPEAFRO (Instituto de Pesquisa e Estudos Afro-Brasileiros/ Research Institute for

Afro-Brazilian Studies), founded in 1981 at the Ponticífia Universidade Católica (PUC), in São Paulo (transferred to the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro in 1984). In 2003, the Federal Law 10.639 makes mandatory the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in all public schools. The 2003 new legislation has led up to the elaboration and publication of a series of pedagogical materials focusing on the matter<sup>11</sup>.

The conceptualization of black Brazilian literature has evolved in the last three decades in scholarly discussions led by Zilá Bernd (1988), Florentina Souza and Maria Nazaré Lima (2006), Luiza Lobo (2007), and Eduardo de Assis Duarte (2011). The evolving concept of “Afro -/ Black Brazilian literature” holds multiple meanings, interpretations and signifiers, located in disputed territories. As Duarte states, “ Afro-Brazilian literature” is a concept “in process; in transformation” particularly because this body of literature is the result of a “fractured tradition” born from a history marked by colonization (Duarte 2011, 399 - 400)<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the historical process shaping the development and institutionalization of Afro-Brazilian Studies (Afro-Brazilian literature, in particular) characterizes the on-going conceptual construction of the field itself and the creation of specific academic centers and departments dedicated to the study of Afro-Brazilian culture and history.

Therefore, it is important to highlight here four asymmetries that constitute the specific contexts in which Lorde and Alves emerge as artists and intellectuals: 1) the imbalance in the scholarship produced on Lorde’s and Alves’ work (Miriam Alves is still an unfamiliar name even among scholars who work with Brazilian literature); 2) the material conditions in which Lorde and Alves publish their work; 3) the ideological and historical background that shapes the racial discourses in the U.S. and Brazil; and 4) the

structures of power defining the “location” of black literature in the U.S. and in Brazil. It is against and within these four elements of difference that Lorde and Alves build their poli(poe)tics of embodiment, establishing a dialogue with particular national scenarios and power struggles.

Within and from these particular scenarios, Lorde and Alves also construct a platform for anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic poli(poe)tics, honoring a diasporic lineage of black women “warrior poets” – to use a term Audre Lorde invokes for herself. This lineage of warrior writers from the U.S. and Brazil includes, for instance, Frances Harper and Maria Firmina dos Reis in the nineteenth century; Zora Neale Hurston and Maria Carolina de Jesus in the twentieth century; and June Jordan and Conceição Evaristo in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; among others. The silencing of black women’s voices and the imposed invisibility of their artistic and intellectual work are part of the history of the African diaspora, but so is their resistance in the face of that suppression (Collins 2000, 3). That is, ultimately, the center of the poli(poe)tics of embodiment in Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves.

### **The Organization of Chapters**

The organization of the subsequent chapters in this study follow the metaphor in Alves’ poem used as the epigraph in this introduction: the clothesline of my analysis serves as the structure where the pieces of this study are held in place. In developing a framework for the study of Audre Lorde’s and Miriam Alves’ political/poetic trajectories, I elaborate the concept of poli(poe)tics of embodiment – a model for engaging with a variety of



theoretical and literary positions. Chapter 1, “Identifying the Clothespins: The Poli(poe)tics of Embodiment in African Diaspora Literary Contexts”, underlies the theoretical and literary basis of this framework from which to understand how Lorde and Alves navigate across borders (national, cultural, racial, gender and sexual), inscribing themselves – their identity and body politics – within and in relation to the larger context of the movements they participated in. The framework of poli(poe)tics of embodiment also highlights the cultural/literary strategies used by black women writers in the Americas in order to build, as the term “embodiment” suggests, an aesthetic space where politics becomes flesh, and flesh becomes politics.

The conceptualization of poli(poe)tics of embodiment prepares the ground for an examination of Lorde’s and Alves’ trajectories as intellectuals, activists, and artists – the focus of Chapters 2 and 3, both informed by the notion of “sister outsider”. Arranging the clothespins of the writers’ trajectories, these chapters delineate the historical background shaping not only the literary works analyzed here, but also the cultural constructions and discourses of race, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. and Brazil. The chapters will discuss the tensions within those intersecting discourses as they shape the trajectories of the writers as “sisters outsiders”. By situating Lorde and Alves within particular historical and cultural contexts, each one of these chapters illuminates why, for Alves and Lorde, the political is truly personal: their ways of positioning themselves as black lesbian/queer activists and artists involve political (and personal) acts in defiance of homophobic and racist social contexts.

Considering that both Alves and Lorde are writing “within and without the circle”, as suggested by Cheryl Clarke (2005, 49), Chapter 2 and 3 will analyze how these artists

(and their work) at the same time engage with and criticize the movements of their era. In Chapter 2, for instance, I discuss Lorde's positionality in regards to particular ideologies present in the Black Arts/Black Power Movement (particularly in New York), the feminist and gay/lesbian circles. In Chapter 3, I highlight how Miriam Alves' changing relationship with sections of the black movement (particularly the "Movimento Negro Unificado" - MNU), the literary group *Quilombhoje* in São Paulo, as well as sectors of the feminist movement. These chapters demonstrate that Alves and Lorde are part of a constellation of other black women artists and intellectuals who engaged with different liberation movements, pushing their boundaries and promoting a radical agenda for transformation. Their work has contributed to the construction of a nuanced understanding of how multiple systems of oppression operate in society - across and beyond national boundaries.

Coming from cross-cultural contexts "within and without the circle", Lorde and Alves have crafted poetic projects that unravel representations of the black female body at the crossroads of individuality and community, ruptures and continuities, desire, pain, and empowerment. Chapter 4, "Re-Arranging the Clothespins: Sisters Colluded in the Diaspora - Re-Affirmation, Transformation, Liberation", focuses on the comparative analysis of these poetic representations of the black female body, unveiling three dimensions of Lorde's and Alves' poli(poe)tics of embodiment. This chapter is subdivided in three integrated parts that offer a comparative analysis of Lorde's and Alves' poetry side by side.

In Part I, "Re-creating the Self, Re-inscribing the Body", I analyze how Lorde and Alves design poetic discourses that take us into a poetic inward journey for the reclamation of the black female self (or selves), re-inscribing the fragmented body into a re-imagined sign of multiple and liberated expressions of black female subjectivity. Without losing

perspective of these writer's larger literary production, I offer close readings of five poems by Alves – “Pés Atados, Corpo Alado”, “Trapos e Nudez”, “Fusão”, “Objetando” and “Armado” – with and against four poetic pieces by Lorde – “Outside”, “A Woman Speaks”, “From the House of Yemanjá”, and “Call”.

The second part in chapter 4, “Liberating the Erotic Power, Transforming the Body”, examines a particular nuance of black women's self-recreation: the use of the erotic as a source of transformative power for individual and collective liberation – a notion defined by Lorde in her iconic essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”, published in *Sister Outsider*. Here, I explore multiple poetic representations of eroticism that challenge normative narratives of black women's sexualities, including those inscribed in discourses of *mestiçagem*. I offer close readings of seven poems by Alves' - “Despudor”, “Bolindo Sexualmente”, “Amiga Amante”, “Escondido na Noite”, “Revolta dos Desejos”, “Casa Solteira”, and Interrogatório” - and five pieces by Lorde – “Woman”, “In Margaret's Garden”, “Recreation”, and “Echoes”.

The third and final part of chapter 4, “Re-telling History, Re-locating the Black Female Body”, pays attention to how Lorde's and Alves' poli(poe)tics of embodiment take ownership of historical narratives, events, and figures in order to reconfigure the black female body as historical agent. The poetry analysis in this section unravels the historical traumas inflicted on the diasporic black female body, as well as a poetics of resilience, survival, healing, and resistance. This final part brings close readings of four of Alves' poems – “Carregadores”, “Mahin Amanhã”, “Sumidouro Brasil”, and “História” – and four of Lorde's poems - “Sisters in Arms”, “Equal Opportunity”, and “Diaspora”.

Within the framework of the poli(poe)tics of embodiment, the comparative study

developed here examines black women's body politics and poetics within different historical moments and regional spaces. In that sense, the analysis of the selected literary texts, as well as the discussion of theoretical and critical materials, are integrally related to their original sources either in Portuguese or in English. The translation of all the texts originally available in Portuguese – literary or non-literary – are, thus, offered by me, unless otherwise indicated. My translations serve as a tool to mediate meaning and to facilitate the access to this research within U.S. academic contexts – a mechanism I prefer to call “trans-facilitation”. I highlight that the aesthetic richness, linguistic specificities, and syntactic/semantic nuances of Alves' poetry, in particular, can be fully appreciated in the original materials. In many instances when a certain text is heavily charged by a dense context or multiple-layers of meaning, I opted for a well-established practice in translation studies: I direct my reader to endnotes in order to provide them with further explanation for the use of certain linguistic choices. That common practice is used here to prevent my analysis from being “lost in translation”, privileging, therefore, the reference to original sources.

As Maria Aparecida A. Salgueiro points out, the translation work (especially in the area of literary translation) is a complex process that involves analysis of cultural and historical aspects embedded in the textual fabric (Salgueiro 2015, 76). Very often, Salgueiro explains, the translation of literary texts implies processes of selection, construction, and omission:

... silêncios e falhas em textos traduzidos – assim como a não tradução (ou, também chamada, tradução zero) de textos inteiros – são aspectos fundamentais e reveladores da política de tradução em contextos culturais

específicos (Salgueiro 2015, 76).

[the silences and gaps in translated texts – as well as the non-translation (or the so-called zero translation) of entire texts – are fundamental and revealing aspects of the politics of translation in specific cultural contexts]

The process of translation is inextricably connected with issues of cultural domination, assertion or resistance, as Salgueiro highlights (Ib idem, 77). Therefore, it crucial to understand the role of translation as one of the main tools in establishing cultural constructs in colonial and post-colonial contexts. In that regard, particularly considering black women's literature, processes of translation intersect with questions of power, access, and visibility. The translation work I offer in this study (inserted in between brackets after citations in the original language) acknowledges those connections and favors the analysis based on the original contexts of linguistic production.

The conclusive chapter of this study states once again the foundational premise and promise of this project. It also remarks the limitations and boundaries of its scope, outlining the necessity for revisiting and rethinking the literary and historical articulations in the writings by black women across the diaspora. The hope and the efforts invested in this study rely on the idea that the literary representations offered by contemporary U.S. Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian women writers function as starting points from where to see the commonalities and singularities of multiple identities of Afro-diasporic women – its harmonies and dissonances. Their poli(poe)tics of embodiment provides symbolic constructs that challenge hegemonic notions of purportedly unified national/cultural identities and pre-defined racial, gender, and sexual categorizations for black women. In contemporary global contexts of continuing exploitation, violence, and objectification of

black female bodies, the study of Lorde's and Alves' literary and intellectual reimaginings, individually and in connection with one another, provide an opportunity to listen to black women's voices, experiences, and perspectives as they negotiate the complexity of their identities and subjectivities. That opportunity is, thus, offered on the pages to follow.

## CHAPTER 1

### IDENTIFYING THE CLOTHESPINS: THE POLI(POE)TICS OF EMBODIMENT IN AFRICAN DIASPORA LITERARY CONTEXTS

*¡Y ya comprendi!  
- ¡Al fin! -  
¡Ya tengo la llave!  
- ¡Al fin! -  
¡Negro!, ¡negro!, ¡negro!, ¡negro!,...  
¡Negra soy!*

(Victoria Santa Cruz)

*In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps,  
laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love  
it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh.  
They despise it... You got to love it, you! ...This is  
flesh I'm talking about here.*

(Toni Morrison)

*A carne mais barata do mercado é a carne negra!*

(Elza Soares)

As artistic expressions from different parts of the African diaspora in the Americas, the epigraphs above tell stories about how the black body has been situated as a sign of political and cultural meanings. Simultaneously, they highlight a history of exploitation and violation against that body, as well as the forms of resistance against those acts of violence. The poem “Me Gritaron ¡Negra!” by Victoria Santa Cruz, performed by her and a group of Afro-Peruvian artists in 1970<sup>13</sup>, recounts a personal story of racial trauma. The traumatic experience in Santa Cruz’ poem-story illuminates the lifespan of a five-year-old

black girl who grows up with the painful memory of a discriminatory bullying (“Me gritaron ¡Negra!”). From rejection and self-hatred to empowerment and self-love, the term “negra” – first shouted by *others* as an insult, then taken as *self*-affirming identity - is embodied by the Afro-diasporic female subject in a life-long process of consciousness transformation. In Morrison’s 1988 novel, self-love is possibly the most revolutionary strategy of individual and community survival: Baby Suggs’ sermon, quoted above, preaches love for the flesh – the black flesh – as a the counter-narrative to the history of enslavement of black bodies in the post-emancipation Southern U.S. Through Morrison’s artistry, Baby Suggs’ command “Love it. Love it hard” represents the authoritative and wise voice of a black woman prophet who carries in her own flesh the marks of abuse and testifies to her own survival, human dignity, and yearning. The contemporary configurations of slavery inform the song “A Carne”, whose title can be translated with a double and interrelated meaning of flesh/meat. Interpreted by the emblematic high-pitched voice of Afro-Brazilian singer Elza Soares, the song insists on turning our attention to the cheapest flesh/meat of the “market”: as an object of consumption, the black body figures as one of the most regulated bodies in the African diaspora<sup>14</sup>.

As black women artists, Santa Cruz, Morrison and Soares articulate - through their poetics, politics, and bodies - discourses that reclaim the black body from the long-lasting effects of trauma, captivity, and regulation. The visual artistry of their embodied performances (on stage, as it is the case in Santa Cruz and Soares; and on the page, as it is the case in Morrison’s novel) overlap with the textual meanings they create, producing poetic and political articulations of Afro-diasporic female desire for liberation within the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and nation. The transatlantic creative projects these



artists embody are at the center of what I call the *poli(poe)tics of embodiment*: a diasporic black feminist artistic project according to which the black female body is not only a sign of the poetic discourse, but in which its materiality – its tactile and historical dimensions - becomes integrally involved in the (re)writing of that body. In Houston Baker’s words, the writing and the theorizing of the diasporic black body is not only a matter of “‘symbolic construct’ at stake, but rather an essential embodiment” (Baker 1988, 351). In the following pages, I want to explore the theoretical threads with which I weave the conceptual fabric of poli(poe)tics of embodiment. As I move forward in the concept-weaving process, I also want to venture into different cultural manifestations in order to build a critical analysis of artistic productions by Afro-diasporic women.

### **Writing the Black Female Body: “Escrevivência” and “Rememory”**

Considering the diasporic materiality of the black female body, as well as its symbolic significance within the diasporic tradition of black women’s writing, the poli(poe)tics of embodiment gravitates towards at least two significant spheres: a revisionary and a revolutionary one. As a revisionary literary project, it promotes a re-reading of history and the foundations of national identities across the diaspora in the Americas; it is invested in offering paradigms of representation that potentially challenge long-established discourses of national homogeneity and unity; it revisits the historical record in order to reclaim the voices silenced by official narratives. As a revolutionary project, the poli(poe)tics of embodiment re-arranges the narrative structures, subverting pre-determined roles of enunciation and breaking the mechanisms of silence of black

women's voices and the invisibilization of their bodies. Due to its revolutionary nature, this diasporic black feminist artistic project opens up multiple, complex, intersectional routes towards identity politics.

Within this perspective, the concept of poli(poe)tics of embodiment is propelled by two literary notions that I borrow from Afro-Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo and U.S. Afro-American writer Toni Morrison, respectively: the idea of *escrevivência* and “rememory”. Evaristo’s conceptualization of *escrevivência* helps reframe how to think about black women’s diasporic literary and intellectual tradition. Morrison’s novel *Beloved* introduces the notion of “rememory” which is here used to address the relationship between historical and cultural memory and the creative process – a theoretical route Morrison herself explores in her 1984 essay “Memory, Creation, and Writing”. These notions are put in dialogue with each other in my framework of analysis not only because they both refer to and are created from the making of contemporary black women’s intellectual and creative writings, but also because these notions represent – in combination – an important tool to understand the question of embodiment in black women’s artistic tradition in the diasporic space.

The poli(poe)tics of embodiment developed in this study focuses on the literary production by black women writers in the diaspora who respond to, recreate, and reconfigure the conditions shaping their existence as black women and their creative processes – as it is the case of Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves. In that sense, the textual/literary artifact becomes, as Evaristo describes, “um lugar de autoafirmação de minhas particularidades, de minhas especificidades como sujeito-mulher-negra” [“a site for the self-affirmation of my particular circumstances, of my specificities as a black-

woman-subject”] (Evaristo 2007a 19)<sup>15</sup>. In her essay-testimonial, Evaristo poetically describes how her act of writing is informed by the circumstances surrounding the black community she grew up in. From that background, Evaristo develops a sense of self as a black woman, while accessing the creative tools that enable her to transform that experience into writing:

Mas digo sempre: creio que a gênese de minha escrita está no acúmulo de tudo que ouvi desde a infância. O acúmulo das palavras, das histórias que habitavam em nossa casa e adjacências. Dos fatos contados à meia-voz, dos relatos da noite, segredos, histórias que as crianças não podiam ouvir. Eu fechava os olhos fingindo dormir e acordava todos os meus sentidos. O meu corpo por inteiro recebia palavras, sons, murmúrios, vozes entrecortadas de gozo ou dor dependendo do enredo das histórias (Evaristo 2007a, 17).

[I always say this: I believe that the genesis of my writing is found in the accumulation of everything I heard since my childhood. The accumulation of words, of stories that inhabited our home and our surroundings. Of facts told in whispers, of night accounts, secrets, and stories children were not allowed to hear. I used to close my eyes pretending I was asleep and then I woke up all my senses. My whole body received those words, sounds, whispers, and broken voices of pleasure or pain, depending on the plot of the narrative.]

Evaristo’s account unveils a personal and collective experience of “being a black woman in the world”; her story relates to a broader sense of ancestral belonging, as well as the history of oppression and resistance of black communities in different parts of Brazil. This

is also a sensual and generational (or ancestral) experience happening in the body – her black body learns from the sensations of stories inhabited in the bodies of other black women in her community. As a literary device, the writer uses *escrevivência* to re-inscribe the black female body as a historical agent. In her novel *Ponciá Vicêncio*, for instance, the black female protagonist – Ponciá - struggles to understand the fragments of her memory and her family history. Ponciá’s trajectory leads the reader through a path in which the persistent marks of slavery and colonialism are reconfigured along the way, in time and space: from her childhood to her adulthood; from the rural to the urban scenario<sup>16</sup>. These cyclical reconfigurations of oppression, stitched together by a textual patchwork that moves back and forth from past and present, also serve as a reconstitution of Ponciá’s family ties and her final re-conciliation with her Afro-Brazilian inheritance, as a “link and heir to a memory newly uncovered” (Evaristo 2007b, 132).

Therefore, Evaristo’s notion of *escrevivência* is intrinsically connected to an embodied creative process that establishes a relationship between a deep sense of self (or “being a black woman in the world”) and a critical and broad perspective of the history of black women’s resistance and survival. The symbiosis between the embodied experience (“vivência”) and the act of writing (“escrever”) represents, according to Evaristo’s framework for black women’s literary creation, the ultimate gesture of subversion – a song of insubordination:

Escrever pressupõe um dinamismo próprio do sujeito da escrita, proporcionando-lhe a sua auto-inscrição no interior do mundo. E, em se tratando de um ato empreendido por mulheres negras, que historicamente transitam por espaços culturais diferenciados dos lugares ocupados pela

cultura das elites, escrever adquire um sentido de insubordinação... A nossa *escrevivência* não pode ser lida como histórias para “ninar os da casa grande” e sim para incomodá-los em seus sonos injustos (Evaristo 2007a, 21).

[Writing presupposes a kind of dynamism particular to the subject of writing, which promotes her self-inscription in the interior of the world. And, when dealing with an enterprise developed by black women – historically situated on the margins of cultural spaces designed for the cultural elites – writing acquires, then, a sense of insubordination... Our *escrevivência* can not be interpreted as lullabies for those in the “Master’s House”, but a relentless song to wake them up from their dreams of injustice.]

This movement of insubordination in Evaristo’s *escrevivência* has a double layer: it is a movement of the black female body in dislocation from marginalization to self-inscription; and it is a movement that re-locates the literary artifact within the Afro-diasporic literary tradition. In the Brazilian scenario, the notion of *escrevivência* implies a reclamation of Afro-Brazilian women’s literary tradition (and other artistic expressions) and a re-reading of the historical background in which this artistic production has been created. More specifically, this context has produced discourses of *mestiçagem* as a powerful political and cultural device, facilitating the development of the ideology of *branqueamento* (whitening) and the notion of racial democracy in the beginning of the twentieth century. On one hand, the historical context of the 1920s – the Brazilian modernist era – is responsible for the folklorization of the Afro-Brazilian cultural element as part of a national

emblem<sup>17</sup>. On another hand, this same context promotes the disguise of processes of black identification as a political instrument, promoting the erasure of Afro-Brazilian historical protagonism.

The question of black women's self-inscription and the reclamation of the black female body as historical agent is reflected in the poli(poe)tics of embodiment as strategies to access memory as a creative device. In that sense, the notion of ““*escrevivência*””” relates to what Toni Morrison defines as the use of memory as “the deliberate act of remembering”, “a form of willed creation”: “The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (Morrison 1984, 385). According to Morrison, fiction, memory, and history overlap not as an account of factual and objective historical realities, but as an artistic tool used to reconstruct repertoires of the painful human/historical experiences that have been discredited, silenced, or even dismissed for so many years.

In that sense, the text also becomes a territory for explorations of historical (im)possibilities; an arena where author/reader are propelled to see/read/feel beyond and across facts. Taking the novel *Beloved* as an illustration of this textual re-creation, it is possible to observe how Morrison develops a platform where silenced black female bodies can speak - the reason why the embodiment of Beloved, as a character-ghost, becomes a crucial narrative element to re-constitute the family and the community history in the story. Beloved's appearance certainly brings back the history of those “dismembered and unaccounted for” – the memory of the “six million and more”; but her ghostly re-incarnation also functions as a reminder to heal old wounds of racial trauma, to mend a broken community, to look ahead into the future (Morrison 1988, 256). The

phantasmagoric presence of Seth's murdered daughter at 124 – the re-membered pain of infanticide when death is the only possible way into freedom – and its oppressive force on the lives of those who survived propels the village women to intervene: through a gesture of community care, healing takes place. Those are the potential functions of “rememory” in *Beloved*. This textual (re)making in Morrison's novel relates to what Saidiya Hartman defines as “the capabilities of the subjunctive”, because the textual creation is designed “to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling” (Hartman 2008, 11).

The same way Morrison seems to be aware of the use and ruse of memory as a creative device to activate and amplify the unspoken, hidden possibilities of the historical archives – the sites where trauma, resistance and healing take place – the author is also concerned about the aesthetic construction of the text as an expression of U.S. Afro-American cultural artifact. Such as Evaristo reclaims the use of storytelling as an act of insubordination, Morrison, as a black woman artist, advocates for the use of the embodied legacies of Afro-diasporic culture in textual translations: its antiphony, its improvisational nature, and its on-going relationship to audience performance and receptivity. In Morrison's words:

Working with those rules, the text, if it is to take improvisation and audience participation into account, can not be the authority - it should be the map. It should make a way for the reader (audience) to participate in the tale. The language, if it is to permit criticism of both rebellion and tradition, must be both indicator and mask, and the tension between the two kinds of language is its release and its power (Morrison 1984, 390).

In that sense, examining the poetry of Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves also becomes an investigation of how these artists (re)construct and use elements of the Afro-diasporic cultures that inform their trajectories and their visions. In creating their poli(poe)tics of embodiment, Lorde and Alves, I argue, also provoke the kind of linguistic tension Morrison describes by elaborating a map of multiple possibilities of identity politics; a map that does not aim at hiding or resolving social controversies; rather, it offers routes for navigating these controversies.

Afro-Brazilian historian and poet Beatriz Nascimento theorized about the socio-historical and regional complexities of identity formation and articulation in the diaspora almost a decade before Paul Gilroy's famous conceptualization of the "Black Atlantic". Studying and documenting the history of *quilombos* (maroon communities) in eighteenth-century Brazil – particularly the Quilombo dos Palmares<sup>18</sup> - from 1976 to 1994, Nascimento constructed an historical analysis of what it means to hold a "trans-Atlantic" identity as an Afro-diasporic individual and as a community. Her theorizing addressed the correlation between Afro-diasporic corporality (as territory) and the transformations, ruptures, fragmentations experienced by Africans and their descendants in the New World. In his study of Nascimento's intellectual and artistic production, Alex Ratts highlights that the historian elaborated the notion of "diasporic transmigration", developing a framework through which she characterized the formation of *favelas* and traditional *samba* schools as urban re-configurations of *quilombola* territories. Within these trans-Atlantic quilombo-territories, Afro-Brazilians created ways to preserve and nurture aspects of Afro-Brazilian culture and spirituality as expressions of individual and community Afro-diasporic identity (Ratts 2006, 66 - 68).



A particular emphasis of Nascimento's theorizing of trans-Atlantic subjectivities is her intersectional perspective over the role of black women as radical agents of transformation. In her critique of the triangular inter-connection of race, sexuality and gender discourses, for instance, Nascimento advocates for black women's empowerment in their construction of "self" – a construction originated from a critical understanding of black women's unique experiences of racism and sexism in the Brazilian society (Ratts 2006, 73-75). Nascimento's intersectional approach establishes a dialogic relation with Lélia Gonzalez' notion of *Amefricanidade* as an analytical device to understand the articulation of multiple Afro-diasporic identities and subjectivities within racial and sexual hierarchies in the Americas (Gonzalez 1988, 73).

Informed by the contemporary black feminist theoretical framework pioneered by intellectuals such as Nascimento and Gonzalez, the notion of poli(poe)tics of embodiment approaches the literary production of Afro-diasporic women artists as re-imaginings of *quilombos* in potential for self-affirmation, resistance, autonomy, and community-building. The movement against the clothespins of intersecting systems of oppression developed and re-configured across historical (dis)continuities becomes, therefore, a crucial gesture towards the promise of a *quilombola* encounter in black women's writings - the potential for identity articulations across the diaspora. The words of Nascimento in the documentary film *Ori* by Rachel Gerber described this potential:

O quilombo é uma história. Esta palavra tem uma história. Ela tem também uma topologia. Ela varia de acordo com cada região, com sua ordem no tempo, e com seu relacionamento com o território. É importante dizer que hoje o quilombo traz pra gente não mais o território geográfico, mas o

território a nível de uma simbologia... A terra é o meu quilombo. Meu espaço é o meu quilombo... Onde estou, eu sou. A nós nos cabe valorizar esta história. A nós nos cabe ver o contínuo desta história (Gerber 1989). [Quilombo is a history. This word has a history. It also has a topology. It varies according to region, to its order in time, to its relationship with the territory. It is important to say that today *quilombo* offers to us no longer a geographic territory, but a symbolic one... The land is my *quilombo*. My space is my *quilombo*... Where I live, I am. Our responsibility is to value this history. Our responsibility is to bear witness to the continuum of this history.]

As an aesthetic project, the poli(poe)tics of embodiment of contemporary Afro-diasporic women's literature allows for disruptions and fragmentations of non-linear linguistic structures invoking principles of the representative Afro-diasporic cultural tradition of black women's artistic and intellectual production. The politics of this aesthetic project engages the grammar of difference in its capacity to generate multiple routes towards beauty because its focus on the plural ways black women articulate the "self" and community differently across the diaspora: it challenges normalizations and fixations in all kinds of essentialist categories. That is not to say that categories such as "blackness" and "woman" become ideological sites of imprecise and ahistorical fluidity. However, as diasporic signifiers, these terms, in dialogic relationship with each other, become attached to the particular cultural and historical contexts that produce or disrupt its meanings in various parts of the diaspora.

The dialectics of the poli(poe)tics of embodiment in black women's writings in the diaspora resists the temptation of post-modern announcements of the "splintering of the subject", as Chandra Mohanty highlights, which "privileges multiplicity in the abstract" (Mohanty et al 1991, 37). The multiplicity of the poli(poe)tics of embodiment is rooted in agency, history, geography, and the material conditions that shape black women's artistic production.

### **From Otherized Bodies to Self-Representation**

The idea of multiplicity and complexity, embedded in the way black women artists articulate identity, foregrounds the parenthetical meanings of the term poli(poe)tics of embodiment. Considering the contextual and historical specificities of diasporic black women's artistic creations, the visual aspect of the conceptual term relates to what Lorde often referred to as "the hyphenated people of the world" when she addressed issues impacting the lives of people of color globally, such as imperialism, racist and sexist systems, and the potentialities of alliances across differences. As an alternative to the hegemonic representations of the black female body as a "monstrous laboring beast" (Morgan 2004, 13), the parenthetical suggests a strategic detour that reveals how black women's writings negotiates black female subjectivities in the intersections of cultural transnational borders delineated by racial, gender, and sexual ideologies. Located on intersectional sites of identity articulation, black female subjectivities are performed within internal contradictions, particular histories, and different strategies to approach identity politics.

While these complicated locations of “migratory subjectivity” in black women’s contemporary writings – a term used by Carole Boyce Davies (2004, 36) – generate multiple possibilities for the representation of black female bodies, the migratory aspect of these articulations also imply a desire to re-connect and to re-member – as Morrison highlights. While the idea of “migration”, associated with subjectivity, suggests distancing oneself from essentialist definitions of self; “rememory” suggests a kind of return to what and how it used to be – a reconstruction of self. In a broader sense, the tension between migration and belonging has been central in the structuring of black thought in the diaspora: from the legends of the “flying Africans” originated in slavery in the U.S. to the formation of *quilombos* in colonial Brazil; from Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement and his predecessors to the Pan-Africanist ideals of Du Bois, C. R. L. James, Abdias do Nascimento, as well as the *Négritude* movement of Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor and Nicolas Guillen. Within processes of re-membering, the challenges of “boundary crossing”, as Davies explains, are intrinsically related to recognizing that this gesture might mean the occupying of someone else’s territory (Ib idem, 17). And that seems to represent a lasting challenge for black diasporic feminist articulations – politically and artistically, an aspect that Audre Lorde’s theorizing of difference has signaled: “As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change” (Lorde 2007, 112).

As a literary/artistic project of diasporic re-invention, the poli(poe)tics of embodiment carries the legacies of a “reterritorialized corporality”, in the words of Leda Martins (2000, 83). As a corporeal reterritorialization, the literary manifestations created by black women in the diaspora can be understood as a re-encryption of the black female

subject, her body, and her culture within a dimension that engenders a sense of cumulative temporality – the black female body becomes both signifier and signified of the diasporic reinventions, the hiatus caused by the oceanic crossings, and the contradictions inherent to this process of reconstitution. For instance, the use of Afro-diasporic symbolism of different African cosmologies in the poetry by Lorde and Alves represents a gesture of recovery of non-Western epistemologies for the representation of black women’s subjectivities, but it also represents a mechanism of *transcreation*. The poetic myth-making based on Yoruba and Dahomean deities reveal new paths towards black female empowerment and erotic force, without shying away from the contradictions embedded in the ways desire and sensuality is historically associated to black female bodies.

Artist Kara Walker’s 2014 exhibition at the Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn, NY, provides a graphic illustration of the corporeal reterritorialization of the poli(poe)tics of embodiment. The exhibition – ironically entitled “A Subtlety” - featured Walker’s white sugar sculpture known as the “Mammy Sphinx”. The gigantic proportions of the figure (75.5 feet long, 35.5 feet tall and 26 feet wide) exacerbated the commonly assigned phenotype of the Mammy – her lips, breasts, flanks, and backside. As a corporeal reterritorialization – or a recreation of the myth – the Mammy Sphinx impacted viewers with a blatant reference to how sugar figures within the history of slavery and the exploitation of black female bodies. But Walker goes beyond that historical revisit. The artist provokes the viewers’ (re)readings of the black female body and its stereotypes – what Patricia Hill Collins called “controlling images” – and our own familiarity with those images (Collins 2009). Walker forces us to revisit our (mis)conceptions of the black female body: on one hand, the asexual, overly maternal black body, whose forced labor on

plantations and in the master's house have been historically romanticized; on another hand, a caricature of the black Venus, whose reproductive capabilities and sexuality have been fetishized. Yet, Walker's Mammy Sphinx is on display at a contemporary configuration of art consumption, coded by an aesthetic language that entices audiences into the very fetishized notions the artist piece is intended to expose.

Kara Walker's white sugar Mammy Sphinx also serves as a reminder that the body has always been of pivotal importance when it comes to control or colonizing a people. It is one of the first spaces to be violated during conquests. While all kinds of atrocities were enacted upon African and New World black bodies, colonizers could not entirely destroy the body, at the risk of also destroying the dream of a new and better life for themselves in and outside of the Americas. Within that context, the black female body also becomes a profitable tool and the ultimate site of difference. It becomes a site of contradictions in which the tension "desire-repulsion" underlines the exploitation and control of black women's labor, reproduction, and sexuality: a framework manifested in "two distinct and paradoxical stereotypes – they were disgustingly lustful... but exceptionally unfeminine. They were alluring but unattractive; they attracted and repelled at the same time" (Guy-Sheftall 2002, 23).

The image of the black female body has been manipulated to prove white superiority – as in the picture of "Delia", the black subject used by Louis Agassiz in his nineteenth century experiment in South Carolina plantations; or to prove abnormality – as illustrated by the Hottentot Venus. And for every other black Venus history has given us, we know their fate well, as Saidiya Hartman explains: "no one remembered her name or

recorded the things she said, or observed she refused to say anything at all. Hers is an untimely story told by a failed witness” (Hartman 2008, 2).

The legacies of colonization produced a number of images that may classify the black female body as simultaneously juicy, succulent, plump, abnormal, sensual, exotic, exceptional - certainly contentious. The otherizing of the body represents, in this scenario, the main obstacle for a black feminist stance of self-definition and identification. In her article “Who’s Afraid of Black Sexuality?”, historian Stacey Patton highlights how that legacy is cyclical and provides a list of freshly invoked tropes for the black female body in contemporary U.S. popular culture:

Old tropes have continued to permeate popular culture and public commentary, whether a national furor over Janet Jackson’s exposed breast, a recent blog post on Psychology Today’s Web site (later retracted) to the effect that black women are less physically attractive than other women, or the barrage of news stories about a “marriage crisis” among black women who cannot find suitable mates. Witness remarks about the artists Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, the tennis star Serena Williams, or Michelle Obama that harp on their ample backsides. Remember last year, when Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, a Republican from Wisconsin, quipped about the first lady’s “large posterior”? And this summer, when the Killers’ drummer, Ronnie Vannucci, described how he accidentally found himself “grabbing her ass” during a hug? (Patton 2012, n.p.).

Old tropes also permeate the Brazilian imaginary and they seem to always find their way back, as Patton hinted above, in various forms of commodification of otherness. bell hooks

explains that, in order to justify the exploitation and sexual violence imposed on enslaved black women, the dominant culture created “an iconography of Black female bodies” as hypersexual – “the perfect embodiment of primitive, unbridled eroticism” (hooks 1991, 153). In Brazil, the black female body incorporates a series of different inscribed stereotypes which I would call, inspired by hooks, the *iconography of mestiçagem*. As briefly discussed in the introduction to this study, the discourses of *mestiçagem*<sup>19</sup> and the ideology of racial democracy, two fundamental forces that have informed Brazilian racial order for more than three centuries, gave rise to the Brazilian color spectrum and racial hierarchy, predicated on the objectification and sexual exploitation of Afro-Brazilian women.

When analyzing how representations of Afro-Brazilian women were created according to the iconography of *mestiçagem* and the color spectrum of racial hierarchy, it is possible to perceive that Brazilian women of different color categories - other than white - are placed in unaltered or un-exchangeable social roles. Although some of the lighter-skinned women, such as *morenas* and *mulatas*, have access to restricted social mobility and might even benefit from their status to enter certain public and private spaces, their bodies are encoded by the grammar of exoticism, objectification, and sexualization. As icons of *mestiçagem*, the bodies of Afro-Brazilian women follow, ultimately, patriarchal guidelines according to which miscegenation connects with sexual assault. Thus, according to the color spectrum, categories of Afro-Brazilian women with darker skin are often associated to domestic labor, while Afro-Brazilian women whose complexion are closer to white standards of beauty are often perceived in sensual or sexualized ways (Caldwell 2007, 51-2).



The effects of the discourses of racial harmony in Brazil affect both the textual representations of Afro-Brazilian female bodies and the categorization of those who create the texts – the writers. As pointed out by Eduardo de Assis Duarte (2005), the country has a long history of denying or masking the long – however marginal – tradition of Afro-Brazilian literary production. When the criteria of that identification includes the recognition of Afro-Brazilian writers as *black writers*, the iconography of *mestiçagem* also serves the purpose of whitening their bodies in order to include them in a more palatable, unifying, less contentious category of *mestiços* – a gesture of denial well-captured by Lilian Moritz Schwarz when she used one of the most common Brazilian ways of negating blackness by embracing *mestiçagem*: “Não sou preto, nem branco... muito pelo contrário!” [“I am neither black nor white... on the contrary!”] (Schwarz 2013). The ambiguity (and confusion) of such an affirmation reveals how profoundly the ideal of *branquitude* has become as normalized as desired within Brazilian forms of identification. Within the iconography of *mestiçagem*, however, the Afro-Brazilian female body of multiple shades do not escape engendered and racialized sexual stereotypes, class categorizations, and regional connotations that highlight their difference.

Afro-Brazilian writer Ana Maria Gonçalves shares an intriguing story that illustrates the complexity of the iconography of *mestiçagem*. At the 2011 conference “Mulher e Literatura” in the city of Brasília, Gonçalves’ talk – later published in the *Revista Forum* – elaborates on her own processes of (self)discovery and (self)identification as an Afro-Brazilian, taken as *mestiça* (not black) in Brazilian contexts, but recognized as a “sista” in her interactions with New Orleans black women. Gonçalves’ narrative provides

significant elements of her response and reflection right after being called “sista” by *other* black women from *another* context:

Havia apenas três ou quatro meses que eu tinha chegado à cidade e ainda me adaptava à perda da ambiguidade mestiça brasileira. Lá eu era inquestionável e definitivamente negra, e isso me dava tranquilidade para trabalhar essa questão identitária que eu havia me imposto... Aqui, eu sempre tinha sido, e sido tratada como – a depender da situação e do interlocutor – morena, moreninha, mulata, mestiça, parda e, às vezes, até branca... Naquele momento, aquelas duas palavras fizeram todo sentido pra mim: *welcome* e *sista*... Eu, elas, Mahalia, Oprah, a caixa do supermercado, a atendente da biblioteca, a fiscal de imigração, a secretária de estado, éramos todas *sistas*. Minhas duas novas irmãs cantavam e eu rezava baixinho, *Thanks, Lord! Now I feel who I am!* (Gonçalves 2011).

[There had been only three or four months since I had arrived in the city, and I was still adjusting to the loss of the Brazilian *mestiça* ambiguity. There I was unquestionably and definitively black, and that made me feel at ease to work with the issues of identity I had set myself up to doing... Here, depending my relationship with the interlocutor, I have always been considered and treated as *morena*, *moreninha*, *mulata*, *mestiça*, *parda*, sometimes even as white... At that moment, those words made all the sense to me: *welcome* and *sista*... I and them, also Mahalia, Oprah, the supermarket cashier, the immigration officer, the state secretary, we were

all *sistas*. My two new sisters were singing while I prayed, softly, *Thanks, Lord! Now I feel who I am!*]

Gonçalves' satisfaction from being recognized in her Afro-diasporic body by others in the diaspora highlights a crucial element of identity articulations – their social and historical contexts. As an Afro-Brazilian, Gonçalves' story tells us that her “being a black woman in the world” is inscribed in very particular, relational, and transnational re-significations of “self”, “other”, and community.

In another story of misnaming and misinterpretations, Elisa Lucinda's poem “Mulata-Exportação” [“*Mulata-Export*”] (2005) illustrates how the poetic subject, a green-eyed *mulata*, responds to the sexual objectification of her body expressed by the unwelcomed sexual advances of a male figure identified in the poem simply as a “white male intellectual”. The opening lines of the poem recounts this man's attempt to seduce the *mulata*. He deploys a discourse that highlights what I would name “the *mulata* attributes of the Brazilian imaginary”: her attributes are the ones associated with consumption - gastronomic, cultural, or sexual. As elements of the iconography of *mestiçagem*, these elements are enumerated from the perspective of the one who cannibalistically craves the exotic and the erotic of the “other” (Queiroz Jr., 1975). Towards the end of the poem-narrative, Lucinda's *mulata* raises a voice of protest and denounces the fallacy of the ideology of “*mestiçagem*” – one that glorifies the *mulata* body while transforming her into an object “for export”:

Olha aqui, meu senhor:

Eu me lembro da senzala

e tu te lembras da Casa-Grande

e vamos juntos escrever sinceramente outra história

...

Porque deixar de ser racista, meu amor,

não é comer uma mulata!

[Look, sir:/ I remember the slave quarters/ and you remember the Big House/ and let's sincerely write together another story.../ Because stop being a racist, darling, is not fucking a mulata!]

The figure of the *mulata* in Brazil is in and of itself a controversial one: always engendered, often sexualized, this figure is not white, but it does not occupy an ordinary position as a *negra*. The *mulata* carries a desirable image and status, at times revered, as long as her corporality and “otherness” serve to satisfy the white/heterosexual male gaze; as a dark-skinned female depiction – placed in some kind of racial limbo as *mestiça* – the *mulata* is also the element of social disorder and immorality. She has been incorporated as commodity in contemporary manifestations of the TV entertainment business – from the “globeleza” to the 2014 TV show *O Sexo e as Negras*<sup>20</sup>. The patriarchal doxa inherited from Brazilian colonial times re-inscribes black women within contemporary forms of cultural representation which seek to legitimize a collective experience of what bell hooks describes as “nasty unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other” (hooks 1992, 22). However, the complexities of such an icon of Brazilian culture are not limited to an understanding of the commodification and spectacularization of the *mulata*. In many Afro-Brazilian communities, particularly the ones in which *samba* and *Candomblé*

have been sources of identification, political participation and survival, becoming a professional *mulata* (one of the most important dancers in a “samba school”) is also associated with processes of empowerment for black women within their own communities.

The making of “others” on the basis of racial, gender and sexual differences, both sophisticated and unrefined stereotypes produces forms of representations that follow power dynamics structured by binaries such as inferiority-superiority, normal-deviant, desired-repulsive. In her discussion of the paradigm of difference and its implications for everyday social relationships mediated through ethnic-racial, sexual, gender and class issues, Colombian sociologist Aurora Vergara Figueroa proposes the concept of *cueros vaciados* in order to think about how stereotyping is part of a process according to which otherized bodies are first “emptied out” from the contents they carry with themselves in social relations mediated by unbalanced power dynamics. As “emptied bodies”, Figueroa explains, otherized individuals are solely seen on the basis of preconceived ideas about them – the source of prejudice (Figueroa 2014, 345). Therefore, as an emptied vessel, the black female body has been historically manipulated to satisfy larger economic and political projects – colonialism, imperialism, global capitalism. The silencing of black female bodies is at the center of such projects as a key strategy for their effectiveness.

Re-considering Hartman’s discussion of the silence of the black Venus and the (im)possibilities of the archives, my interest in framing the poli(poe)tics of embodiment has to do with another kind of longing: I want to turn to a time and space where the witness does not fail the story because she is herself the storyteller. What happens to the black female body - both as signifier and signified – when it projects its own image into a re-

imagined world of poetic possibilities? What can we hear, see, feel when that body speaks for herself? What are the tactile sensations that self-articulation evokes? How would desire, love, hope be expressed in such poetic discourses? How do contemporary black women's writings re-invent a language that subverts the long-established patterns and molds according to which black women's sexualities are represented and perceived? How do they re-write black women's bodies into new historical perspectives? To which extent do their aesthetic projects question long-established national narratives of racial harmony and color blindness? And, finally, in which ways does their artist production create diasporic dialogues, as well as cultural and political articulations?

Again, Conceição Evaristo highlights the significance of literature as a privileged space for the symbolic production and reproduction of meanings, particularly when considering the question of difference in the interior of language (Evaristo 2005, 52). In her analysis of the Brazilian literary canon, Evaristo presents a long list of illustrations of "distorted images of black women" in the colonial literature of Gregório de Matos, the Naturalist Aluísio de Azevêdo, and Romantic novelists José de Alencar and Bernardo Guimarães. Despite this extensive list of stereotypical images of black women in Brazilian literature, Evaristo's article also emphasizes the existence of a different literary discourse which, for the most part, constructed in the margins of the official canon:

Assenhoreando-se "da pena", objeto representativo do poder falocêntrico branco, as escritoras negras buscam inscrever no corpus literário brasileiro imagens de uma *auto-representação*. Criam, então, uma literatura em que o *corpo-mulher-negra* deixa de ser o corpo do "outro" como objeto a ser descrito, para se impor como *sujeito-mulher-negra* que se descreve, a partir

de uma subjetividade própria experimentada como mulher negra na sociedade brasileira (Evaristo 2005, 54).

[Taking over the “pen”, an object that represents the phallogentric power, black women writers attempt to inscribe images of a *self-representation* within the Brazilian literary corpus. Thus, they create a literature in which the *black-woman-body* is no longer the body of the “other”, an object to be described; instead, this body imposes herself as *subject-black-woman* who describes her own subjectivity experienced as a black woman in the Brazilian society.]

Incorporating Evaristo’s considerations into the diasporic perspective informing this study - the aesthetic project of self-representation - as well as the strategies built to articulate and negotiate that literary terrain of self-representation within structures of power, constitute two of the pillars of the poli(po)etics of embodiment. As “sisters outsiders” in the diaspora, Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves crafted trajectories that allowed them to occupy multiple subject positions in their activism, intellectual work, and poetics. For the following chapters, I created an itinerary in order to examine more closely how their trajectories intersect or diverge across the historical diasporic spectrum of their creations. This itinerary highlights both convergences and divergences in these writers’ trajectories, illuminating particular historical pathways in their poli(po)etics of embodiment, the boundary crossings of their identity politics and “self” (re)creations, the erotic and liberatory force of their poetics.

## CHAPTER 2

### ARRANGING THE CLOTHESPINS I: AUDRE LORDE AND THE MAKING OF A “SISTER OUTSIDER” IN THE U.S.

*Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am a woman, because I am black, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours?*

(Audre Lorde)

The epigraph above, extracted from a 1977 speech, and later published in *Sister Outsider* (1984) under the title “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, unapologetically asserts the multiple contested identities of Audre Lorde, which framed much of her public and private discourse. The fact that Lorde consistently self-defined as a “black woman warrior poet” (sometimes adding the words “lesbian”, “mother, and “teacher”, and “cancer survivor” to the sequence) is a personal stance of articulating the many parts of her identity, linking all of them to a broader African diasporic foreground. It is also a political stance to affirm that these many layers are absolutely inseparable from her sense of wholeness, her politics, and her poetics. In several of Lorde’s interviews, speeches, and essays, she emphasized the multi-faceted self as a double-strategic move: it places her own “self” in a dialogic relationship with those located in different positions of power; and, it frees an ostracized, stigmatized, silenced, multiple “self” from the margins to the center of her intellectual and artistic work.



In this chapter, I follow Lorde's path as she moved against the clothespins of her multiple and intersectional "selves" as an artist and intellectual. My study of her trajectory focuses on the ways the "warrior poet" navigated the various political and artistic spaces throughout her life, embodying an identity politics that was at times controversial, at times confrontational – and always an expression of the poet's envisioning of a collective and truly inclusive liberation. Her passion fueled her work as it fueled her personal life. Ultimately, her passion fueled her survival against oppression and against cancer, enabling her to become one of the most prolific black writers in the U.S. in the late twentieth century. Thus, the political movement of interest in the first half of this chapter in relationship to Lorde is the Black Power/Arts Movement of the 1960-70s and beyond. The chapter concludes with Lorde's journey toward a heightened understanding of self through finding vestiges of her "self" in communion with women, black and white, in the Caribbean, West Africa, and in Europe.

Lorde's essays, interviews - as well as her papers at the Women's Research & Resource Center at Spelman College – form the basis for my discussion on some of the key elements of her political vision: her conceptualization of difference; the fundamentals of her intersectional perspective over oppression; and her black feminist diasporic framework. Throughout this chapter, I briefly highlight how Lorde's poetry reflects ~~these~~ elements of her vision, anticipating comparative themes with Miriam Alves' poetics in the last chapter: the re-creation, the transformation, and the liberation of the black female body. In the center of Lorde's poli(poe)tics is the notion of poetry as "illumination" – a source of light over "those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized"; and the notion of the poet – the "Black Mother within each one of us" - as the visionary who dares to use

language to charter that “revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom” (Lorde 2007, 36 – 38).

The assertiveness with which Lorde declared in the epigraph, “I... am doing my work,” highlights her sense of urgency and commitment to break the silences about the ways in which oppression becomes ingrained within the very movements designed to combat its system. The question that follows that assertion – “...are you doing yours?” – represents Lorde’s call for action, alliance, transformation, and for an examination of “not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it” (Lorde 1984, 45). The urgency in Lorde’s demand for breaking silence and taking action is also reflected in her work of poetry. The poem “A Litany of Survival”, for instance, becomes a prayer – as litanies are supposed to be - for those “standing upon the constant edges of decisions/ crucial and alone/ ... imprinted with fear”. The poem becomes also an invocation to resistance when “the heavy-footed hoped to silence us”; and, finally, a reminder that “it is better to speak/ remembering/ we were never meant to survive” (Lorde 200, 255-6).

### **Within and Without the Circle: Working Across Differences**

#### **In/Out of the Black Arts/Power Movement**

Lorde’s confrontational style and her out-spoken attitude became a distinguishing mark of her persona. However, in her attempt to work across differences and to build alliances with other intellectuals and activists across the globe, particularly women of color, Lorde made great use of private correspondence with other women intellectuals to

address her concerns and to forge a conversation about the specific issues that, for her, affected the ways in which a true liberation movement should take place across and beyond national boundaries. Audre Lorde's vast correspondence collection housed in the archives of the Audre Lorde Papers at the Women's Research & Resource Center at Spelman College<sup>21</sup> reveals that she avidly and frequently engaged in discussions with well-known black women intellectuals of the time such as June Jordan, Gloria Joseph, Barbara Smith, and Cheryl Clarke. Lorde's correspondence with several other women intellectuals and her several drafts of essays – most of which have never been published – reveals the level of intellectual work the warrior poet developed in relation to larger global issues throughout almost four decades: from late 1960s to early 1990s. The archives also show how Lorde strategizes to build coalitions, urging to break the silences around sexism and homophobia among those who were part of what she called, with a hint of sarcastic irony, “the black establishment writers”. In a letter to Gloria Joseph on January 11, 1978, Lorde reflects upon the beginning of her career as a writer in the 1960s and declares:

The fact that I lived in the Village and slept with women (both common knowledge) AND wasn't bothered by either of these facts, or didn't consider them shameful, earned me a position of pariah among the black establishment writers. And that pre-dated my finding my genuine poetic voice (SL, ALC, Box 2).

Despite that “position of pariah”, Lorde persisted for inclusionary voice and visibility in the black literary movement of the 1960s in New York, carving out her status as a “sister outsider”. Her career, as much as her “outsiderness”, is consolidated in the 1970s after the publication of her first two poetry anthologies *The First Cities* (1968) by Poets Press, and

*Cables to Rage* (1970) by Broadside Press, a pioneering Black Arts publishing company of leading U.S. black writers, run by Dudley Randall at the time<sup>22</sup>. Randall then becomes one of the few black publishers who Lorde recognized as an ally for her literary project. Despite his patronage, in an interview with Adrienne Rich in 1979, Lorde told the story of how her piece entitled “Love Poem”, in the 1973 anthology *From a Land Where Other People Live*, was vetoed by Broadside Press for being explicitly about a relationship between two women lovers (Hall 2004, 60 - 62). Following that story, in the same interview, Lorde expressed how she felt about the ways in which homophobia played out in the black community:

I was always feeling my back against the wall, because as bad as it is now, the idea of open lesbianism in the black community – I mean, we’ve moved miles in a very short time...But in the early seventies it was totally horrible (Hall 2004, 61).

Within this context, it is important to keep in mind what kind of ideology Lorde was positioning herself against. The 1970s is a period in which black cultural nationalism is a strong ideology in the arts and politics of the black movement in the US - an ideology that defined gays and lesbians as deviant and outside of the black community. In her examination of the Black Power movement era, Cheryl Clarke criticizes the inability of the “black male intellectuals and politicians” of that era to expand their analytical and revolutionary framework. The “failure to transform” on the part of the Black Power intelligentsia resides, according to Clarke, in a failure to examine their own political vision and the ways that vision may support the “designs” of “the custodians of white male privilege” they want to defy (Clarke 1983,197). On the background of claims for black

liberation, the Black Power (male) intellectuals, Clarke highlights, exhibit in their discourse and praxis “the homophobia of the patriarchal slavemasters” (198).

Clarke’s critique of the Black Power movement points to its “male-oriented” and “black nationalist, separatist” ideological framework that firmly holds on to - instead of defying – “the value of heterosexual and male superiority” (198). Clarke is not dismissive of the changes the Black Power era ~~has~~ brought into the black community and the empowerment it ~~has~~ promoted for black people in the U.S., particularly regarding self-determination and the visibility of black culture in the national landscape. However, she highlights the “irony” underlying the movement’s ideological stand: on one hand, it was able to promote and lead the transformation of “consciousness of an entire generation of black people”; and on another hand, it failed “miserably in understanding the sexual politics of the movement and of black people across the board” (199). Clarke, then, concludes:

That the black community is homophobic and rabidly heterosexual is a reflection of the black movement’s failure to “transform” its proponents with regard to the boundless potential of human sexuality. And this failure has prevented critical collaboration with politically motivated black lesbians and gay men. Time and again homophobia sabotages coalitions, divides would-be comrades, and retards the mental restructuring, essential to revolution, which black people need so desperately (200).

It is worth highlighting here that the understanding of the Black Power movement (and the Black Arts as its cultural expression) as irrevocably and hopelessly masculinist and homophobic, as a whole, does not represent a conclusive analysis in the current

scholarship. As an example, James Smethurst's study on the Black Arts of the 1960s and 1970s points to "a more complicated, and conflicted" dynamics in regards to the gender and sexual politics within the movement (Smethurst 2005, 78). Although recognizing that misogyny and masculinism were "significant presences in the movement, both individually and institutionally", Smethurst's dialectic perspective of the Black Arts and Black Power suggests that the positions of "those who fought against sexism in the movement" – particularly the black women in the movement, such as Toni Cade Bambara and Barbara Sizemore – "...were so powerful that they carried the day at the end" (80). The reasons that led to this "win", Smethurst explains, related to under-examined elements such as the significant amount of women writers publishing and featuring their work in the several of the key anthologies of the time; the leading roles of black women in several chapters and branches of the movement all over the country; the influential and highly respected work of some (open or semi-open) black gays and black lesbians among writers and publishers, such as Hoyt Fuller and James Baldwin; as well as the later opposition to male supremacy by formerly-known sexist and homophobic figures such as Amiri Baraka, Maulana Karenga, and Haki Madhubuti (Smethurst 2005, 78-79).

Given the wide spread effects and the multiple local and regional expressions of the Black Arts/Black Power movement, as Smethurst so extensively documents, any caricatured version of their impact will render those movements a limiting, if not distorted, analysis. Black women intellectuals and artists such as Eleanor Traylor, Jayne Cortez, and Toni Cade Bambara consistently raised the issue of male supremacy, vocally critiquing gender relations at a time when other women in many other spaces would not – or could not (Smethurst 2005, 89). However, while misogyny and homophobia were not an

exclusive phenomenon of the Black Arts/Black Power movement, it is also important to note that the masculinist views in the movement during the 1960s and 1970s did contribute to define notions of blackness, art, community, as well as the theoretical pillars of the black aesthetics at the time. In that sense, the sexist and the homophobic framework of the earlier stages of the Black Arts/Black Power movement kept on the margins the type of radical subject-positioning Audre Lorde embraced and advocated for in both her art and her politics. And it was from a marginal and radical position that black women like Lorde continued the efforts to contest the masculinist, sexist, and homophobic discourses and practices inside and outside the movement.

To explain that radical work from the margins, Cheryl Clarke's more recent study uses the trope of "Mecca" to map out and trace the contributions of black women poets such as Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, June Jordan, and Sonia Sanchez – among others - to the development of black feminism (particularly black lesbian feminism). The struggle for a radical subject-positioning by black women engaged with the Black Arts/Black Power movement resulted in important intersectional and transnational analysis of systems of oppression manifested in publications that caused a stir in black intellectual circles, such as Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) and Angela Davis' "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves", first published in *The Black Scholar* in 1971. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) also illustrates the result of black women organizing that is auto-defined as feminist, lesbian, and revolutionary, based on the idea of coalition-building and a commitment to "a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice" (Hull *et al* 1982, 22).

According to Clarke, black women writers of the 1960s and 1970s were responding to “the persistence with male dominance and the obsession with heterosexuality and its conventions”, either writing from within the Black Arts/Black Power, the feminist and lesbian movements of that era, or against them (Clarke 2005, 167-8). For Clarke, the position chosen by several black women writers was, indeed, a dialectic one: from within the circle – as “sisters” and allies; and as “outsiders”, widening “the lenses of their poetry beyond the strictly domestic racial perspective”, as well as adopting “adopting feminist/womanist perspectives, though blackness remains a powerful store of knowledge and creativity” (Clarke 2005, 168).

It is within and against this ideological background described by Cheryl Clarke that Lorde relentlessly positioned herself as a black-woman-lesbian-warrior-poet. From that intersectional position, Lorde theorized about difference and sexual politics, speaking of their relationship with women’s struggle for survival and liberation. In another portion to her letter to Gloria Joseph, Lorde talked about the mechanisms of invisibility and isolation of black women writers during the black literary movement of the 1960s:

The frightful isolation of black women who wrote anything else but ‘trendy’ black poems in the 60s is and will be always a source of pain to me. It is not that the poems were not being written, but that they were not being printed nor read (SL, ALC, Box 2).

The context of the late 1970s Lorde outlined in that letter corresponds to her persistent concern about the sexist and homophobic practices within the circle of black writers and within the black movement, a concern she tirelessly addressed in many of her essays as well. In “Learning from the 60s” - a 1982 talk delivered at the Malcolm X Weekend at



Harvard University and later published in *Sister Outsider* - Lorde strategically placed some of her multiple identities within the intellectual and militant legacy of Malcolm X. The “sister outsider” pushed forward into expanding Malcolm X’s ideas and ideals for a reassessment of “the societal conditions under which alliances and coalitions must indeed occur” (Lorde 2007, 135). It is clear that Lorde anticipates some of the critiques offered by Cheryl Clarke in regard to the black movement’s “failure to transform” due to its homophobic positions: she draws attention of the black intellectual community to the urgency to “discuss those scars of oppression which lead us to war against ourselves in each other rather than against enemies” (Lorde 2007, 135). Yet, Lorde began her critique from the same starting point of Malcolm X who, indeed, motivated so many other Black Power and Black Arts intellectuals, activists, and artists.

Lorde’s analysis of the 1960s black liberation movement does not dismiss the crucial contributions those “vital years” made to the existence of black communities, as well as the possibilities the movement opened up for disenfranchised groups. However, her spherical analysis pushes the boundaries of the dominant ideology informing the movement in order to deconstruct its “monolithic solutions to racism, to sexism, and to homophobia” (Lorde 2007, 136). Ultimately, Lorde defied the ideological limitations of the Black Power movement and its inability to develop a compelling and effective work across differences, which in her words translates into the reluctance “to tolerate any diversion from what was externally defined as Blackness” (Lorde 2007, 136).

In her poem “Between Ourselves” (first published in *The Black Unicorn* in 1978), Lorde talks about those challenges and limitations within the circles “full of black faces/ that would destroy me for any difference”. As the poetic subject describes the change

between being discriminated “for any difference” within the circle and a past experience marked by the exceptional presence of “one or two black faces” and her desperate need “for contact and reassurance or a sign/ I was not alone”, she succumbs into confusion and a lost sense of belonging: “where shall my eyes look?/ Once it was easy to know my people” (Lorde 1997, 323). Drawing from elements of the Yoruba cosmology connected to creation and destruction – in invocations of Eshu, Orishala, and Shopona, the poem highlights “our own borrowed visions” and “lances of narrow blackness” should not become the obstacles for learning to work together across differences, particularly because “we each wear many changes/ inside our skin” (Lorde 1997, 324).

In highlighting the question of difference and the need to build coalitions, Lorde’s affirmation of her positionality became a key element in her analytical framework of the complex imbrications of sexism, racism, and homophobia, within an intersectional approach to understand systems of oppression. From this framework, the warrior poet developed a nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the artistic and political movements of her time: her critical lens caused catalytic reactions against the identity politics she embodied; but it also contributed to generate a series of feminist transformations, some of which had very much to do with the ways black feminist thought came to understand and conceptualize black sexual politics. The following excerpt from “Learning from the 60s” illustrates Lorde’s fiery analysis of the homophobia within the black community:

Over and over again in the 60s I was asked to justify my existence and my work, because I was a woman, because I was a lesbian, because I was not a separatist, because some piece of me was not acceptable. Not because of my work but because of my identity. I had to learn to hold on to all the parts

of me that served me, in spite of the pressure to express only one to the exclusion of all others...The move to render the presence of lesbians and gay men invisible in the intricate fabric of the Black experience and survival is a move which contributes to fragmentation and weakness in the Black community (Lorde 2007,143).

As a “sister outsider” – both in solidarity with the liberation struggle and critical of some of its political/ideological routes – Audre Lorde defied monolithic and simplistic ways of categorizing her work or herself as an artist. Her positionality as a multi-layered artist was, thus, strategically situated to dismantle fixed notions of black literature, while uncovering the political stakes underlining those fixed notions. And that double-facet of her work and activism is the basis of her poli(poe)tics of embodiment because it embraces a multiplicity of ways to perform and embody the “self” from a political and poetic standpoint. As a black lesbian writer, activist, and intellectual figure of the 1960s, participating in the Civil Rights, anti-racism, and feminist movements, Audre Lorde embraced at once the many lives and identities which, in different ways, caused friction in the movements she participated. In her essay “My Words Will Be There”, published for the first time in 1983, Lorde declared:

My critics have always wanted to cast me in a particular light. People do. It’s easier to deal with a poet, certainly a Black woman poet, when you categorize her, narrow her so that she can fulfill your expectations. But I have always felt that I cannot be categorized. That has been both my weakness and my strength. It has been my weakness because my independence has cost me a lot of support. But, you see, it has also been my strength because it has given me the power to go on (160 – 161).

Intimated above, Lorde's approach to difference does not point to the ability of collapsing divergent elements of identities into pseudo-unified categories, erasing specificities that give rise to other differences (national, historical, cultural). Rather, her theoretical framework questions the ways in which structures of power operate in order to impose fixed categories, reinforcing hierarchies of oppression. In her iconic speech/essay "There is No Hierarchy of Oppression", Lorde highlighted that aspect of her framework:

I simply do not believe that one aspect of myself can possibly profit from the oppression of any other part of my identity. I know that my people cannot possibly profit from the oppression of any other group which seeks the right to peaceful existence... Within the lesbian community I am black, and within the Black community I am lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black (Byrd *at al* 2009, 219 - 220).

In that sense, Lorde also anticipates what Judith Butler argues later in *Bodies That Matter*: that it is important to avoid viewing racism, sexism, and homophobia as "parallel and analogical relations", and, instead, recognize "the ways in which these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their articulation" (Butler 1993, 18). The idea implies that, as "vectors of power", different kinds of oppression (namely, sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, etc) are not only positioned in an intersectional relationship with each other; but that oppressive systems are sustained by strategically making use of each other in order to maintain dominance and power. In that sense, Lorde extended the

notion of the intersectional nature of different systems of oppression to suggest that the strategic use (or the replication) of hierarchies of oppression helps maintain the status quo of different power dynamics. That is to say that the election of race and racism as the central issues in the liberation struggle as an ideological paradigm that dismisses other “vectors of power”, enables and sustains a mechanism of oppression operating on the basis of the deployment of other vectors.

Lorde’s poem “Who Said It Was Simple” is a good illustration of how different vectors of power are imbricated in the social fabric of the 1960s. Published in the 1973 anthology *From the Land Where Other People Live*, the poem depicts a scene at the Nedick’s, a popular fast-food chain originated in New York City in the 1920s: <sup>sitting</sup>, a group of women “rally before they march/ discussing the problematic girls/ they hire to make them free”; an “almost white” counterman ignores a “waiting brother” to serve the women first. By unveiling layers of racial, gender, and sexual difference within a context of social interactions, Lorde’s poetic subject witnesses the complexities of political agendas – such as the one of the 1960s feminism: in that context, “the ladies neither notice nor reject/ the slighter pleasures of their slavery” because they (the white “ladies”) can march for women’s liberation, while they benefit from racial hierarchies that allow them to be served by “colored people” in domestic and private spaces. The contradictions of that era’s ideologies for liberation (both racial and sexual) – with which Lorde allied herself and struggled with – are summoned in the last lines of the poem:

But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see causes in colour

as well as sex

and sit here wondering

which me will survive

all these liberations.

Audre Lorde's analytical framework of difference confronts some of the positions and discourses within all the movements and groups she engaged with. Lorde is constantly calling for a critical re-elaboration of what and how the "black issues" are determined by the black movement, at the same time she is pushing the boundaries of what is at stake for the gay and lesbian movement of that era. Lorde often uses her speeches as a platform on which "the hard questions must be asked", as she says, "not for altruism. For self-preservation – survival" (Byrd *et al* 2009, 215). When awarded the Bill Whitehead Memorial Award for Life Achievement in 1990 by the Publishing Triangle group – an award that honors Whitehead's work as editor of gay and lesbian writers in the 1980s, Lorde takes the opportunity to deliver a stirring speech that is both an acknowledgement of the honor given to her work and a defiance of what she defines as "a continuing invisibility of Lesbian and Gay writers of Color":

I believe the Bill Whitehead Memorial Award is being given to me in good faith. Therefore, I accept the recognition which comes with this award, but I will not accept any money from the Triangle Group. If this group wishes to truly honor my work, built upon creative use of differences for all our survivals, then I charge you, as a group, in some way to include and further expose the work of new Lesbian and Gay writers of Color within the coming

year, and to report on what has been done at next year's award ceremony (Byrd *et al* 2009, 223).

In addressing the complicated ways in which vectors of power intersect and are deployed to sustain mechanisms of oppression, Lorde offers a framework from which to build a deeper and more critical understanding of difference and at least two of its ideological uses. On one hand, Lorde exposes the use of difference as a tool to single out particular oppressed groups; to fix and homogenize identities, masking, at the same time, the ways in which other forms of oppression take place in the dynamics and discourses of those groups. This applies, for instance, to her ferocious criticism of the deeply ingrained homophobia and sexism in the black movement of her era, as well as the racist practices in the feminist and gay and lesbian movements. On another hand, the warrior poet strategically uses her positionality to claim difference as a site for collisions, radical transformation, survival, and full liberation for all oppressed peoples. In an interview to Jill Clark published in *GAY Community News* in 1981, Lorde summarizes this potential use of difference as a liberation tool when asked about the subject of difference in the new body of feminist theory by black feminists:

It's absolutely essential that it become a new body of feminist theory... It is not our differences which separate us, it is the distortions which have been created around the uses of difference...I'm not interested in becoming you or you becoming me. I'm not even interested in tolerating our differences. I'm interested in *using* them – creatively, actively. We have never been given the tools to use difference, we have been given only three ways of relating to difference: destroy it, become it, ignore it. None of those have

ever been productive. The only difference we've been allowed to deal with is the difference between male and female. Can you imagine some of that energy directed to "How do we deal with the distortions of race? the differences of class? the differences of age?" (SL, ALC, Box 48).

It is also from her own intersectional positioning, drawing from her approach to the subject of difference, that Audre Lorde builds an analytical framework profoundly committed to examining the diasporic dimensions of oppression and liberation. Growing up in Harlem, to Caribbean parents – Linda Gertrude Belmar Lorde (from Carriacou) and Frederick Byron Lorde (from Barbados), the young Lorde is raised with a sense that "home was somewhere else", as she explains in the documentary *A Litany of Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* by Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson (1995):

We were always told, when we were growing up, that home was somewhere else. No matter how bad it got here, this was not our home... And somewhere there was this magical place; and if we really did right, some day we would go back to.

Also, in *Zami*, Lorde poetically describes this mythical and distant place she knew from her mother's stories, whose elements of an imagined memory she tried to incorporate to the Harlem experiences of her immediate reality:

Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother's mouth. She breathed exuded hummed the fruit smell of Noel's Hill morning fresh and noon hot, and I spun visions of sapadilla [sic] and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness rank with nightmare sweat (Lorde 1993, 13).



This sense of distant connection with an unknown - yet familiar - Caribbean, nurtured in the early age of Lorde's life, is imprint in her poetry both as a feeling of displacement and as a desire to belong and be part of something greater. In between universes, holding on to multiple selves, Lorde sought to explore the meanings of the African diaspora starting from her own family history.

### **“In the Hands of Afrekete”: Lorde’s Diasporic Vision**

In her biography of Lorde, Alexis De Veaux explains that the poet's sense of “feeling out of place”, accompanied her since her upbringing in Harlem. In “her desire to reify an imagined home”, Lorde learned the stories told by her Grenadian mother about the Caribbean food, the sea, and the other Caribbean women in the family (De Veaux 2004, 16 -17).

In 1934, the year Lorde is born, Harlem had also become home to masses of black immigrants from U.S. southern states, West Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. Described by the 1939 *New York City Guide* as “a poor’s man land” where “half a million persons are crowded into its three square miles – the largest single slum in New York” (253), Harlem was the home of communities of multiple ethnicities, social customs, languages, and shifting cultural identities informed by an interracial environment of solidarity and conflict (Cruse 2005, 13 - 14). Although a native of Harlem, Lorde grows up with constant reminders and a deepening perception of how her parents’ Caribbean immigrant histories impacted the ways she navigated that world.

In her last poetry anthology, *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* (1993), Lorde expresses the awareness of the struggles and idealization of a prosperous return “home” embedded in the immigrant stories surrounding her. For instance, in the poem “Inheritance-His” (Lorde 2000, 434 - 437), clearly constructed upon biographical elements of her father’s history, Lorde’s poetic subject declares:

My mother's Grenville tales

spin through early summer evenings.

But you refused to speak of home

of stepping proud Black and penniless

into this land where only white men

ruled by money.

...

Does an image of return

wealthy and triumphant

warm your chilblained fingers

as you count coins in the Manhattan snow

or is it only Linda

who dreams of home?

The combination of the feeling of displacement and a profound desire to belong follows Lorde’s first experiences with racism at school, and, as a teenager, her first experimentations with her lesbian sexuality (De Veaux 2004, 24 – 30). It is only in the early 1970s that Lorde’s work presents an important shift in which she “stepped from

writing love poems and referring to love without a face into really dealing with my love for women in my work, in my poetry” (*A Litany of Survival*, documentary film).

However, Audre Lorde’s perceptions and definitions of blackness are confronted and deeply re-defined when she experiences life outside the U.S. and encounters other communities of Afro-descendant peoples that offered her new understandings of what it means to be black within different historical configurations of racial relations and formation. As a start, her trip to Mexico in 1954 - she was twenty years-old and gladly away from Senator Joseph McCarthy’s U.S.A. – provided Lorde with an experience of “being surrounded by people of color” outside the U.S. borders: an experience she defined later, in 1978, in an interview to Karla M. Hammond, as “an incredible high... It was probably the first time in my life that I had been surrounded with the kind of beauty I had in my head...” (Hall 2004, 40 - 41). That experience in Mexico also awakened in Lorde a deeper realization of her sexuality as a lesbian, of her aesthetics and of a heightened level of maturity in her personal life:

I know I came back from Mexico very different, and much of it had to do with what I learned from Eudora [Garrett] and the ways I loved her, but more than that, it was a kind of releasing of my work, a real releasing of myself, a connection. I think probably also that I’d passed a very crucial adolescent point (Hall 2004, 49).

Throughout her life, Audre Lorde, like many black radical contemporaries, becomes profoundly concerned with how oppression is entwined with the history of colonialism, globally. That concern helped Lorde to deepen her consciousness about how communities of Afro-descendants, of women of color, of gays and lesbians, are connected both through

their “common enemy with so many different faces”, as well as their potential for allyship and resistance (SCL, ADL, Box 15).

Lorde’s experience in connecting with her parents’ Caribbean origins gave her a concrete sense of how the history and the culture of black people are part of a diasporic contingent: in 1973, she first visits Barbados, her father’s homeland; and in 1978, she visits Grenada and sees, for the first time, what she could only imagine based on her mother’s stories. Lorde returned to Grenada later, committing herself to denounce, in a firsthand account, the atrocities caused by the U.S. invasion in 1982, which she records in a draft for one of her papers later published as “Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report” in *Sister Outsider*:

There is no compensation for the destruction and requisition of homes, businesses, none for the devastation dealt by Corsair missiles and mortars and bombs. And all of this is being accepted, as it slowly leaks out, by an american public [sic] which has been softened by racism as wood is softened by dry rot. Americans have become accustomed to the dehumanization of Black and other colored peoples. This occupation is a warning not only to Central America countries but to the millions of colored peoples of this country as to what we can expect in response to any effort toward self-definition (SL, ALC, Box 23).

The reality Lorde observes in the Caribbean – the beauty of its nature and culture, as well as the brutal exploitation of its resources and the oppression of its people – is quickly associated with what she had experienced in her trip to Africa in 1974, when she had the opportunity to visit Togo, Ghana, and Dahomey (renamed the People’s Republic of Benin

in 1975) (De Veaux 2004, 142). It is indeed during her explorations in these African places that Lorde gains a more profound sense of Africa as part of a “home” she had been searching for, as well as a deeper understanding of the history of slavery and the realization of “the unity of the male and female energies in African thought, if not practice” (De Veaux 2004, 147). More importantly, Lorde’s experiences in both Africa and the Caribbean in the 1970s awakens in her an acute perception of the diasporic dimensions and connections of different peoples of African descent around the world, something she talks about in an interview to Louise Chawla in 1984:

I went to Africa before I went to the islands [Carriacou, Grenada, and Barbados], and the resonances are incredible. The things that are so familiar. The thing that runs through it is the very African relationship between family members, between mothers and daughters, between the youngest daughter and the father (Hall 2004, 125).

These “incredible resonances” Lorde contemplated in these different spaces in the African diaspora is translated into her poli(poe)tics at least in three different ways. First, based on her observations, experiences and an actual study of aspects of the ancient African cosmologies and mythologies (particularly the Dahomean and the Yoruba ones), Lorde brings into her poetry cultural, spiritual, and social elements of the African diaspora - also visible in the ways she started presenting herself in public by wearing African head wraps, dashiki shirt and a gele (De Veaux 2004, 151-52). Her concise volume of poetry *Between Ourselves* (published in 1976) represents Lorde’s explicit attempt to introduce an African-based spirituality that was certainly transforming her work, later consolidated and highly elaborated in *The Black Unicorn* (1978); and in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982),

her self-declared biomythography. In regard to these two latter works, Lorde acknowledges her intentionality to create a body of work that directly reflected that kind of consciousness:

Not only that everything is made of spirit, but there is a connection before even there is life. I felt this very strongly in Africa. And it resounded. It hit something deep inside of me. The whole book *The Black Unicorn* comes out of that consciousness. I had just gone to Africa, and when I came back I studied a great deal, and it illuminated so much... There are things that rang true for me, which I would otherwise never have put together. So one of the things that I wanted to do in *Zami* was underline the connections between Africa, the African Caribbean, and the Africans in America (Hall 2004, 125).

At a certain extent, Lorde's understanding of an African diasporic ancestry that connects African-descendant peoples across continents may lead to a revision of her earlier resistance to the black nationalist discourse of the 1960s and 1970s as a kind of re-imagined woman-centered nationalist notion of blackness. Within that notion, myth-making becomes a key element in re-designing and re-imagining a woman-centered notion of blackness. In her biomythography, for instance, besides crafting a literary genre in the interstices of biography, history, and myth, Lorde also creates an identity as a black lesbian poet – *Zami* – whose development is based on the intimate relationships she develops with the women in her life: her sisters, her mother, her women friends and lovers, and finally, Afrekete, the last woman-lover Lorde mentions in the book. The development of Lorde/*Zami* as a black lesbian artist gravitates towards women-centered relationships<sup>23</sup> with an element of eroticism – though not necessarily sexual - which is also a key source

for her creative affirmation and strength, as Lorde herself points out in her essay “The Uses of the Erotic”:

The erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before. But this erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively European-American male tradition. I know it was not available to me when I was trying to adapt my consciousness to this mode of living and sensation. (Lorde 2007, 59)

This notion of a woman-centered eroticism as a source of power and creativity is interconnected with the second aspect underlying Lorde’s poli(poe)tics in relation to its diasporic dimensions: her search for a female-centered ancestral lineage. From her upbringing surrounded by the figures of powerful Caribbean women from her mother’s stories to the actual black women she observes and meet during her trips to both Africa and Caribbean, Lorde is constantly fascinated by the different ways in which black women in the diaspora survive within the structures of power, sharing spaces in a type of “living connectedness” that she can not experience in the U.S. (Hall 2004, 176 -7). During her trip to Africa, for instance, Lorde learns more about the Yoruba and Dahomean deities (or orishas) and becomes particularly interested in the significance of Seboulisa (the mother goddess of all for the Dahomey); Oshumare or Da Ayido Hwedo (the rainbow-serpent representing the union of female and male energies); Yemanja (the goddess of the seas of the Yoruba); Oshun (or Osún), the Yoruba goddess associated with the fresh, sweet waters,

and a mother figure associated with female sensuality and sexuality; and Mawu-Lisa, the highest goddess of the Fon, also combining female and male aspects. It is throughout this learning, Alexis De Veaux highlights, that Lorde “found what she believed was the religion of her foremothers and her spiritual connection to them” (151).

Moreover, Lorde’s use of the synthesis of Yoruba and Dahomean spiritual knowledge in her poli(poe)tics indicates an acknowledgement of “the spiritual practices of African captives throughout the African diaspora” (De Veaux 2004, 151). In the late 1970s, Lorde elaborates her own version of “African reblended” – to use Robert F. Thompson’s term (1983, 176) – transforming the name of Ewe-Fon sea goddess Avrekete into “Afrekete”, and then signing a great portion of her correspondence: “In the hands of Afrekete”. In *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde alludes to “Afrekete” as the trickster figure also known as Eshu (or Elegba), the deity whose power is to deliver and interpret the messages between humans and the others orishas and among orishas (Lorde 1978, 119-20). It is important to highlight that Eshu (or Mawu-Lisa in the Fon tradition) combines elements of masculinity and femininity, a particularly important aspect in Lorde’s poli(poe)tics because it is represented in more fluid gender notions (Ogundipe 2012, 75). In the same way Eshu holds a non-heteronormative and non-binary representation, the deity’s power (and mischievousness) resides in the ways language is used creatively and as a tool for translation. In that sense, Lorde invokes Eshu – traditionally, a more phallogocentric figure - in the incarnation of Afrekete — an overtly female manifestation of the trickster - as a (re)enactment of its multivocality, unpredictability, gender polysemy, and abundant eroticism in her poetic work. As Kara Provost highlights:



Lorde found resonance in the fluid gender orientation and free engagement in unconventional, even taboo, sexual practices that these trickster figures enact. In *Zami*, as well as in a number of earlier and later poems, Lorde repeatedly returns to the power of the trickster's heterogeneous identity and ability to communicate, connect, and survive despite (and because of) difference (Provost 1995, 47).

In the poetry anthology *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986), the poem “Call” becomes an icon of Lorde’s spiritual, cultural, and political sense of “membership in a community of struggle which stretches from ancient to modern times”, as Gloria T. Hull points out in an essay published online in *The Modern American Poetry* (2001). The poem announces the coming of Aido Hwendo, “The Rainbow Serpent; also a representation of all ancient divinities who must be worshipped but whose names and faces have been lost in time”, a note to the poem tells us (Lorde 2000, 419). By invoking all the sisters “lost to the false hush of sorrow” – Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Assata Shakur, Yaa Asantewa, “my mother”, Winnie Mandela, Thandt Modise – as well as the ancestral guides, “my given fire-tongued” – Oya, Seboulisa, Mawu, Afrekete, Lorde casts a prophetic vision that encompasses the past, present, and future of black women’s work of solidarity, survival, and empowerment across the diaspora:

On worn kitchen stools and tables  
we are piercing our weapons together  
scraps of different histories  
do not let us shatter  
any altar

...  
your daughters are named  
and conceiving  
Mother loosen my tongue  
or adorn me  
with a lighter burden  
Aido Hwedo is coming.  
Aido Hwedo is coming.  
Aido Hwedo is coming.

The announcement of Aido Hwedo's arrival is, then, preceded by a call to honor black women's lost histories of nameless victims to oppression. Lorde's poetic prophecy calls us, indeed, to rewrite those aporias of discourse that allow oppression to be repeated in different contexts across the globe.

Lorde's use of a diasporic cosmological and spiritual component does not function only as aesthetic material; it also represents a source for a political framework for theorizing about difference and the construction of coalitions in a global perspective. The desire to "underline the connections" among continents affected and involved in the African diasporic phenomenon also means to build alliances among diasporic movements in the struggle against racism, sexism, homophobia, and, ultimately, imperialism – especially those movements driven by Afro-descendant women across the globe. Interviewed by literary critic Claudia Tate, she comments about the body of U.S. Afro-American literature as a definite part of the African tradition, which understands human

life in a “kind of correspondence with the rest of the world as a whole” in which “living becomes an experience, rather than a problem” (Hall 2004, 96).

Lorde’s work with the collective Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, co-founded with Barbara Smith in 1980, is primarily committed to “producing and distributing the work of Third World women of all racial and cultural heritages, sexual preferences and classes”, as she explains to an interview to Shelly Savren and Cheryl Robinson in 1982 (Hall 2004, 79). It becomes, thus, a strategic plan to create a publishing channel to women of color, who, historically, never had control over their own creative and/or intellectual production. Among the group’s publications, there are some of the groundbreaking works on issues related to the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, which transformed the theoretical framework on these matters in the 1980s, such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), and Lorde’s *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities* (1986).

Lorde’s diasporic vision and experiences crosses the Atlantic and reaches the European continent in 1984, when she accepts an invitation by German feminist scholar and activist Dagmar Schultz to come to the Free University of Berlin as a visiting scholar. As it is recalled by Schultz in an interview to *PrideIndex*, upon her arrival in Berlin to teach a poetry workshop for German women writers, Lorde asked Schultz: “Where are the Black Germans?”, marking, then, the beginnings of “a political movement and awareness building journey that lasted until the end of her life” (Shultz 2012). During her subsequent visits to Germany between 1984 and 1992, Lorde built significant intellectual, artistic, and

personal relationships with Afro-German writers and intellectuals, such as May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye and Ika Hügel-Marshall.

It is also in Germany, specifically Berlin, that Lorde sought homeopathic alternatives to surgery for the second occurrence of cancer in her life – this time in the liver (she had mastectomy for breast cancer in 1978). Despite the intense emotional experience with cancer as it progressively aggravated and debilitated her physical strength, Lorde learned to face her cancer with the same attitude she confronted racism, sexism, and homophobia, as she declares in *A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer* (first published in 1988): “it is another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph” (Byrd et al 2009, 81). In the midst of this process, the three months Lorde spent in Berlin ~~in~~ during her first visit – she visits Germany yearly between 1984 and 1992 - opened up a new route for exploration of the potential diasporic connections among women of African descent in a place such as Germany, as she acknowledged in *A Burst of Light*:

Who are they, the German women of the diaspora? Where do our paths intersect as women of color – beyond the details of our particular oppressions, although certainly not outside the reference of those details? And where do our paths diverge? Most important, what can we learn from our connected differences? (Byrd et al 2009, 87).

The Berlin experience of building alliances with Afro-German women writers, of witnessing “their blossoming sense of identity”, deepened Lorde’s understanding of black women’s diasporic belonging and networking across borders, as they share their differences and their particular experiences with oppression, “a growing force of

international change, in concert with other Afro-Europeans, Afro-Asians, Afro-Americans” (Byrd et al 2009, 88). It is from that understanding that Lorde elaborates on her thoughts about what she calls “the hyphenated people of the diaspora”, whose future she envisions to be of “an increasingly united front from which the world has not yet heard”, as she declares in the foreword to the English edition of the 1986 book *Farbe Bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* – translated in 1991 as *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (Byrd et al 2009, 170).

In a draft of an essay entitled “The Dream of Europe”, Lorde made critical remarks about the invisibility of Afro-Europeans writers from the discussions on literature. She also sketched a dense critique of Europe as a colonizing continent that has historically established a negative relationship with peoples of color around the world for whom, instead of being responsible for civilizing the world, “it’s is more like Europe enslaved the world”. Finally, Lorde claimed that the full recognition of European people of color is key for any change in the continent towards the use of difference as a creative tool: “I believe it is the hyphenated people of Europe who represent a last chance for Europe to learn how to deal with difference creatively, rather than pretending it does not exist, or destroying it” (SL, AL, Box 17).

Lorde’s poem “East Berlin”, published in *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* (1992), reflects the images of the intense manifestations of racist violence in Germany (“Afro-German woman stomped to death/ by skinheads in Alexanderplatz”); the connecting histories of that violence in Europe and the U.S. (“a new siege along Unter den Linden/ with Paris accents New York hustle/ many tattered visions intersecting”); and the potential for transformation in a changing Germany of the second half of 1980s in

anticipation of the fall of the Wall (“Hand-held the candles wink/ in Berlin’s scant November light/ hitting the Wall at 30 miles an hour”).

As Dagmar Schultz highlights that Lorde’s blatant honesty and unique ways to frame her work as an intellectual and artist caused an initial shock among the German with whom women she worked ~~with~~. Lorde’s approach to feelings and emotions as a source of knowledge; her explorations of the notion of the erotic as a source of (self) empowerment; as well as the ways in which she combines spirituality, art, and politics were all unfamiliar territory by women who were not used to the possibility to address those issues openly in a country so dramatically affected by the divides imposed by the Cold War (Shultz 2016, 164). . However, the challenges offered by Lorde’s approach and insistence that the silences be broken transformed the ways in which German women – in particular, Afro-German women – related to each other as a collective:

Again and again she would ask white German women about their relations to and with Black women, migrated and Jewish women. The more frequently she came to Germany – from 1984 to 1992 each year except in 1985, the more intensively did she concern herself with political developments and the conflicts between white and Black women as well as the difficulties that Black women, immigrants and Jewish women had among themselves... Especially important was Audre Lorde’s presence for the birth and development of an Afro-German movement. Her view that voices of those silenced, invisible or met with indifference should be heard encouraged Afro-German women to write the book *Farbe Bekennen. Afrodeutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (the English

translation was published under the title *Showing Our Colors. Afro-German Women Speak Out* (Shultz 2016, 163).

During the Berlin years, Schultz was granted permission by Lorde to document her experiences in video, which resulted in the 2012 documentary film *Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992*<sup>24</sup>. Schultz' documentary stands as a living record of the later part of Lorde's life – the ways she chose to live with cancer and the work and collaborations she developed in Berlin as an expansion of her black feminist diasporic vision. What is particularly striking in the narrative of Schultz' film is the ways it documents Lorde's fierce, assertive, and honest address to the German white feminists in her workshops. The film shows that one of Lorde's main concerns was to bring awareness about the ways in which white supremacy was fundamentally part of how feminists in Berlin (and in Europe at large) were building the movement, perpetuating long-established systems of racial oppression. In one segment of the film, Lorde, speaking specifically to the white women in the room, ~~and~~ says:

Racism in Germany, in Switzerland, in Europe must become an issue for white feminists because it is part of your lives - it affects your lives in every way - and the fact that you are not people of color does not make you safe from the effects of it... The white women's movement must accept antiracism and work against anti-semitism as central to the women's movement or it will die. Racism is a problem of the racist; racism is a white problem. We suffer from it, but the corrosive effects of racism are in the people who practice it (Shultz 2012).

From this segment, it is clear that Lorde kept her usual confrontational style when addressing the ways in which oppression is reproduced within the movements she was also helping to build. However, more than a calling out to those acting according to their privilege and positions of power, Lorde's approach could be more precisely configured as a calling in for a profound reflection about personal, local, and global politics when developing strategies for activist action – in this case, diasporic feminist action. Besides naming racism within the German white feminist movement, Lorde also would reiterate her vision of empowerment for Afro-German women, collective action and coalition building. For the group of feminist activists in Berlin, white and black women, she said: “We share an earth and we need each other, but we are not each other, we are different. I can know and respect your differences; you must know and respect mine. That is the only way we can work together” (Shultz *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*)<sup>25</sup>.

Certainly, the mid-1980s marks a significant shift in the ways Audre Lorde designs her poli(poe)tics: the deepening of her diasporic consciousness directs her emphasis on the U.S. imperialist impact on the “hyphenated peoples” of the world, as well as her critique over monolithic (and U.S.-centered) understandings of what it means to be part of a black community from a global perspective. In her Commencement Address at Oberlin College in 1989, Lorde makes a powerful call for an expanded vision of oppression beyond and across borders:

I urge you to remember, while we battle the many faces of racism in our daily lives as African Americans, that we are part of an international community of people of Color, and people of the African diaspora around the world are looking to us and asking, how are we using the power we



have? Or are we allowing our power to be used against them, our brothers and sisters in struggle for their liberation? (Byrd et al. 2009, 217).

From that level of consciousness, Audre Lorde advocated against several world issues, including the apartheid system in South Africa; the U.S. military invasion and occupation of Grenada in 1983; the economic and cultural exploitative practices by the U.S. imperialist forces in the Caribbean; both the anti-Semitic discrimination imposed on Jewish people, as well as Zionism as a colonialist and racist project that led to the denial of rights, dispossession and expulsion of the indigenous population of Palestine<sup>26</sup>.

The recognition of Lorde's work in creating collisions across differences is reflected in the 1990 Boston conference "I Am Your Sister – Forging Global Connections Across Difference", in which more than two thousand people of various ethnic backgrounds from South Africa to Europe to the Caribbean took the opportunity to show what Audre Lorde and her artistic and political work had set in motion. Just two years before her death in St. Croix (to where she moved in 1987), the conference celebrated Audre Lorde and her work in a way that seems to be the most appropriate, even to Lorde herself: "The greatest honor to Audre and to the political struggles she has helped to shape is to engage with her work", as stated in the conference mission statement (SL, ALC, Box 52). Above all, the conference represented a collective effort of multiple organizations in creating a space to put forward one of the main aspects of Lorde's vision, and, possibly, the most important aspect of her legacy: "the transformation of silence into language and action" by forging global connections across differences.

The legacy of Audre Lorde – her passion, her prolific intellectual and artistic work, and her political trajectory – has continuously been both celebrated and revisited by a

global community of artists and scholars, unveiling the longstanding reverberations of her many battles. In a recent article to *The Feminist Wire*, Black Arts poet and activist Kalamu ya Salaam reflects upon the warrior poet's exchanges during the Black Arts era and recognizes:

When identity politics led so many others to abandon building cross-boundary friendships and alliances, Ms. Lorde would print shout outs, engage in correspondence and conversations with an array of others. She secured her hinterlands by opening her borders. She taught us that border crossings and frequent exchanges were not a betrayal of our interiors but rather free flowing back and forth was the only way to ensure that our essence was able to remain both sweet and tender, rather than curdle over time and become sour and inflexible beneath the mundane bludgeoning of daily struggles. (Salaam 2014, n.p.)

This chapter testifies to the brilliant, far-reaching, and original contributions Audre Lorde made to black feminist thought. As a sister outsider, she developed a framework that brought together theory and praxis to the advancement of black studies, feminism and queer studies, pushing the boundaries of U.S.-centered discourses on black women's experiences. Moving across the clothespins of sexism, racism, and homophobia in the U.S. and beyond, Lorde's trajectory unravels a poli(po)e(tics) of embodiment that highlights the diasporic connections of black women's fight for empowerment and liberation in a fabric of solidarity and honor of their many histories and desires.

## CHAPTER 3

### ARRANGING THE CLOTHESPINS II: MIRIAM ALVES AND THE MAKING OF A “SISTER OUTSIDER” IN BRAZIL

*... em se tratando de negras e negros, a palavra “coletivo” nos retrata como massa amorfa sem face definida, sem vozes definidas, sem sentimentos próprios. A nossa ação coletiva como escritoras negras tem uma ação que em si busca redefinir olhares, redefinir julgamentos e ações de toda uma sociedade, não só sobre a nossa escrita, como também para o outro coletivo. O coletivo de mulheres negras anônimas<sup>27</sup>.*

(Miriam Alves)

In August of 2011, Miriam Alves published, in her blog “Miriam Alves, Escritora Afro-Brasileira”, the article “Vozes nos Tambores: Homenagem às Escritoras Afro-Brasileiras”, from which the quote above was taken. The article – whose title can be translated as “Voices from the Drums: Homage to the Afro-Brazilian Women Writers” - makes reference to the *XIV Seminário Nacional e V Seminário Internacional Mulher e Literatura*, held in Brasília in August of 2011. As one of the most prominent international academic conferences on women’s literature, its fourteenth edition paid homage to the collective of Afro-Brazilian women writers. Some of those writers - such as Miriam Alves, Conceição Evaristo, Ana Maria Gonçalves, Geni Guimarães, Lia Vieira, Cristiane Sobral, and Esmeralda Ribeiro - actually served as panelists, leading discussions on the Afro-Brazilian literary tradition. As for the decision to pay homage to a collective representation

of Afro-Brazilian women writers, the organizing committee of the conference published the following statement:

A nova edição do Seminário propõe um gesto mais amplo, ao homenagear não figuras individuais, mas o coletivo de escritoras brasileiras de descendência africana, tomadas enquanto símbolo do resgate de uma escrita duplamente segregada: em termos de gênero e de etnicidade.<sup>28</sup>

[The new edition of this Conference proposes a wider gesture, paying homage not to individual figures, but to a collective of Brazilian writers of African descent, taken as a symbol to reclaim a literary tradition in double segregation: the one in terms of gender and the one in terms of ethnicity.]

Although there has been a celebrative atmosphere regarding these warrior writers and the accomplishments they have achieved in the past fifteen years in the national as well as the international context, Alves's article translates into words what she herself performed on stage at the conference opening ceremony in 2011: a critique of the fact that, even when a gesture of recognition and acknowledgement of Afro-Brazilian women's literature is finally embraced by such a relevant organization, this gesture is directed to an anonymous collective.

On the opening night at the 2011 edition of the conference, the representatives of the honored collective of Afro-Brazilian women writers, present at the event, were, then, invited to the stage to receive a public praise. At that moment, with seven Afro-Brazilian writers lined up on the stage, Miriam Alves walked to the microphone and voiced her frustration and disappointment at the anonymization of the bodies present on (and absent from) that stage. Alves, then, proceeds by calling out the names of each one of the seven

writers present in the auditorium, including names of writers who could not be present at the ceremony, as well as those in the ancestral literary lineage, such as Maria Firmino dos Reis and Carolina Maria de Jesus. At every name being called out, Miriam Alves would invite the audience to shout “Axé!”, in the traditional Afro-Brazilian style of call-and-response. Alves’ protest-performance was received by a mix of caution, reflection, and enthusiasm – it certainly re-directed and re-framed the conversations taking place at the conference panels following the opening ceremony.

Alves’s critique – on and off the stage - highlights the complicated use of a collective (as opposed to the homage paid to individual women writers in previous editions) as a reflection of the historical silences, anonymity, and invisibility to which Afro-Brazilian writers have been submitted. Therefore, while Alves celebrates and dances to these literary “vozes tambores” (“drumming voices”), she emphasizes the important role each one of these voices has played in composing what has become the Afro-Brazilian literary tradition. Invoking the “Axé” (“the power in every being”), in Afro-Brazilian cosmology, Alves’ gesture evokes the presence and creative energy of a long literary tradition built by black women in Brazil.

In this chapter, my purpose is to unravel Alves’ artistic and intellectual trajectory as one of the most prominent, vocal, and prolific Afro-Brazilian writers of contemporary times. Her trajectory connects us to the hidden historical paths of Afro-Brazilian literary and intellectual work and the struggles to make them visible. I follow the threads that interlace Alves’ career with the history of one of the most influential black literary movements of our present time: the “Quilombhoje” group of black writers, founded in 1980 in the city of São Paulo, and its annual literary publication *Cadernos Negros*. I discuss

Alves' changing positioning in relation to the group's ideological framework and the author's ability to foster new collaborations which contributed to the expansion of contemporary Afro-Brazilian women's literary production beyond national boundaries. As another sister outsider in the Diaspora, Alves' trajectory is also marked by a movement "within and without the circle": her subsequent engagement with a more critical perspective over the sexist and homophobic practices within the literary circles of black writers opens the possibility of tracing a continuum of radical black feminist framework within a diasporic context. Moving against clothespins, Alves has crafted the direction of her own clothesline and her voice is inserted in the discussion to follow through a number of interviews – including an unpublished personal interview I recorded in December of 2012 – as well as glimpses of her poetry, published in several issues of *Cadernos Negros* and her solo anthologies. My hope is to identify some of the clothespins that have held Alves' trajectory as an intellectual and as an artist; to understand her movement against those clothespins; and to prepare the ground where the poli(poe)tics of both Alves and Lorde will be in close dialogue in the following chapter.

### **Picking up the Pieces of Poetry:**

#### **Miriam Alves and the Quilombhoje Movement**

The awareness and critical positioning that explains why Lorde is a "sister outsider" is very similarly experienced by Miriam Alves, at least in three interwoven layers. First, Miriam Alves represents one of the voices of contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature challenging the dominant narrative that reinforces the fallacious idea of a Brazilian national

unity without racial fractures and fissures. Miriam Alves positions herself and her work in defiance of the Brazilian myth of racial democracy. Secondly, Alves' poli(poe)tics of embodiment denounces how the complex systems of racial oppression in Brazil are constructed at the expense of the historical sexual, economic, and cultural exploitation of women of African descent in that Southern region of the New World. A third aspect of Miriam Alves' aesthetic and political projects relates to the consolidation of the Brazilian black movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. While the vital years of her writing career are grounded within the militancy of that era, Alves also develops a critical perspective over the replicated heteropatriarchal dynamics and paradigms within the discourses and praxis of the black movements in Brazil.

Born in 1952 in the city of São Paulo, Miriam Alves tells her own story about her encounter with creative writing in her childhood, and later on, as a young college student in social work, trying to find her own voice through writing:

Sou uma mulher negra escritora, não por escolha, mas porque não deu para parar. Antes eu escrevia e jogava num canto, como um desafogo. Depois eu comecei a retomar aquilo que escrevia. Era um prazer lúdico, uma coisa minha própria. Quando eu comecei a organizar e reescrever eu tinha 4 ou 5 caderninhos. Resolvi organizar meu primeiro livro. Tive aquela ilusão de poeta, só porque eu escrevia alguém iria publicar. Procurei amigos e outros poetas e as respostas não foram positivas (Alves 1995, 970).

[I am a black woman writer, not by choice, but because I could not resist it. I used to write and put it aside, it was like a relief. Later on, I started to

review what I had written. It was a ludic pleasure. When I started to organize and re-write my work, I had 4 or 5 little notebooks. I decided then to organize my first book. I had a poet's illusion: just because I was writing, someone would read it. I sought friends and other poets, but the response was not positive.]

In 1980, Miriam Alves met a group of Afro-Brazilian writers, based in São Paulo, who started to organized as a literary movement to promote the visibility and circulation of contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature. The name of the group, Quilombhoje, combines the words “Quilombo” (the maroon communities in Brazil) and “hoje” (today) in order to express its political commitment to resist the historical silencing and invisibility still imposed on contemporary cultural articulations by Afro-Brazilians. The group - initially composed by Cuti (Luiz Silva), Abelardo Rodrigues, Jamu Minka, Mácio Barbosa, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Sônia Fátima, Oswaldo de Camargo, Paulo Colina, among others<sup>29</sup> - managed to cover the costs for the publication of the first volume of *Cadernos Negros* (“Black Notebooks”) in 1978.

In the format of mimeographed booklet in its first versions, *Cadernos Negros* became, then, the main vehicle of circulation of contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature. The issues of *Cadernos Negros* have included poems and short fiction by writers from different parts of the country, in addition to essays on aspects of Afro-Brazilian literature and culture. Despite the unrelenting financial difficulties imposed on the group's functionality and its challenging internal dynamics, Quilombhoje represented one of the few spaces in the country where black women writers had a chance to discuss and craft their work in dialogue with other black writers. The first publication of *Cadernos Negros*



was debuted in synchronicity with global nationalist movements in the struggle for freedom and racial justice. On the African continent, several nations were engaged in the process of independence from the Portuguese colonial regime; and in the U.S., the Black Power movement was developing several community-led actions throughout the country. Literary critic Maria Nazareth Soares Fonseca explains that Quilombhoje writers were invested in re-defining the very notion of an “Afro-” or “black” Brazilian literature, interrogating the mechanisms that regulated the production, circulation, and reception of their texts (Fonseca 2006, 16).

The writers involved in the Quilombhoje group were also activists in the black movement and the anti-racist struggles of the 1970s and 1980s – in particular, the “Movimento Negro Unificado” (MNU) whose motivating principle was to unite all black militant organizations in Brazil<sup>30</sup>. The political engagement of that movement resonated with Miriam Alves’ perspective over her own writing. Therefore, as one of the its first female members, joining Quilombhoje played a significant role in Alves’ writing career as she became involved in the project of re-thinking what it means to write literature; what it means to re-discover and acknowledge the Afro-Brazilian literary tradition; and what it means to write as a black Brazilian woman. In an interview to Charles H. Rowell, Alves spoke to the importance of her involvement with the group:

Estava pensando em desistir quando no lançamento do poeta Cuti...  
encontrei um grupo. Entre eles estavam Oswaldo de Camargo, Cuti,  
Abelardo, Paulo Colina e outros. Eu nunca tinha visto uma atividade  
cultural de escritores daquele porte em que a maioria era de negros. Depois  
me reuni com eles, entrei para o Quilombhoje. Estando com eles consegui

elaborar uma reflexão intelectual, em relação ao meu posicionamento político como mulher, negra, poeta, escritora. O nosso dia a dia, os preconceitos, a discriminação, a nossa vida de negros, e a nossa literatura, refletíamos sobre isso. Saí do isolamento, meu gueto da solidão. (Alves 1995, 970 – 71).

[I was considering giving up when during the launching of a book by poet Cuti... I found a group. Among its members, I met Oswaldo de Camargo, Cuti, Abelardo, Paulo Colina, among others. I had never seen a cultural activity by top-quality writers in which the majority was black. Afterwards, I went to their meetings and became a member of Quilombhoje. Being among them I was able to elaborate an intellectual reflection in relation to my political positioning as a black woman, poet, writer. Our daily life, the prejudice, the discrimination, our life as black people, and our literature, we all reflected upon it. I broke out isolation, my ghetto of solitude.]

Considering the notion of poli(poe)tics of embodiment as a framework, it is crucial to highlight in which ways Miriam Alves aligned herself with the literary activism of Quilombhoje and what kinds of ideology the movement defied and supported. As discussed in the introduction to this study, the ideology of “mestiçagem” in Brazil removes from the social debate the fact that the country is founded on the racist premises of a colonial project that embraces the genocide of indigenous communities; the enslavement of Africans and their Brazilian descendants; and the sexual exploitation of both indigenous and African descendant women’s bodies. The ideology of “mestiçagem” – commonly deployed all over Latin America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - uses the skin color criterion as a

tool for social mobility through miscegenation and is deemed nonracist and socially democratic. However, as Elisa Larkin Nascimento points out, “this theory obscures the true racial bias of color criterion” and ignores the fact that Afro-Brazilians of different color categories occupy the most miserable levels of impoverishment in Latin America (Nascimento 1980, 201).

Nascimento, thus, explains the ideological construct the activism of Brazilian black movement of the late 1970s proposed to confront. By joining that activism, Miriam Alves becomes part of a long tradition of Afro-Brazilian political and cultural resistance to the hegemonic paradigms and discourses that promote the invisibility of the African literary heritage – both as an instrument of rebellion and as artistic material. In her 2010 book *BrasilAfro Autorrevelado: Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea*, Alves discusses the expansion of Afro-Brazilian literature in the 1970s and 1980s as part of a transnational context that includes the liberation of the African colonies in the 1960s and 1970s, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and the repercussions of the Black Power and Black Arts movements in the U.S. (Alves 2010, 50). Alves’ analysis of the historical connections of various fronts of the black liberation struggle throughout the Americas and South Africa, as well as the cultural projects of resistance developed in that historical background, gives evidence to the fact that the African diasporic aesthetics is not forged in an historical vacuum. Moreover, while bringing to center of her own analysis the diasporic dimension of Afro-descendant cultural articulations, Alves places her poli(po)etics within that broader context as part of a tradition of black women’s writings developed across the diaspora.

The literary activism of Quilombhoje was also committed to opening spaces in which the Afro-Brazilian literary production was not only being read, but also discussed.

In its fifth year of publication of *Cadernos Negros*, for instance, the Quilombhoje collective participated in the debates of the “Noite da Literatura Afro-Brasileira” (“Afro-Brazilian Literary Night”), promoted by the “III Encontro de Cultura Negra das Américas” at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica – PUC, in São Paulo. As a result of that participation, the collective published in 1985 a special issue entitled *Reflexões (Reflections)*, featuring essays of various Afro-Brazilian writers and intellectuals on the routes and challenges of Afro-Brazilian literature – a landmark in the recent Afro-Brazilian literary criticism. Miriam Alves’ essay “Axé Ogum”, included in that volume, defines the production of a contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature as a form of “aquilombação cultural” (or a cultural expression of the “quilombos”), inserted within a historical and cultural movement of resistance to the hegemonic nature of white/Eurocentric aesthetics (Alves 1985, 58-59). “Axé Ogum” – a salutation to the Candomblé Orisha “Ogum”, the deity who presides over creativity, politics, and war – is, thus, used in Alves’ essay to signify a combative and defiant positioning of the emergent literary “aquilombação” of those writers engaged in the project of *Cadernos Negros*. Alves’ poem “MNU” published in *Cadernos Negros* in 1998 depicts the struggles of the black movement and the notion of “aquilombação” in the demands for reparations:

Eu sei:

Surgiu um grito na multidão

um estalo seco de revolta

Surgiu outro

outro

e  
outros  
aos poucos, amotinamos exigências  
querendo o resgate  
sobre nossa forçada  
miséria secular.

[I know:/ A cry emerged in the crowd/ a dry blast of revolt/ Another cry  
emerged/ another/ and/ others/ gradually, we accumulate demands/ we  
demand ransom/ for our forced/ secular misery.]

It is important to note that the poetry by Quilombhoje writers, as well as the subsequent collection of literary pieces in *Cadernos Negros* during the first two decades of its publication, are clearly marked by a tone of protest or, as literary critic Nazareth Fonseca points out, “uma intenção declaradamente militante e combativa” [“an unambiguous militant and combative intent”] (Fonseca 2010, 56). From that perspective, it is possible to say that the literary movement created by Quilombhoje (and materialized in the publication of *Cadernos Negros*) was aligned with the Black Arts Movement both as an aesthetic and a political project. Although there are significant regional, national, and historical differences between these two literary movements, they were both informed – at least initially - by a black nationalist ideology according to which the Afro-descendant connection became a tool of identification and affirmation of a historically oppressed collective. In that regard, as highlighted by Cheryl Sterling, these movements “set out to confront white racism with the ontological fact of blackness, and in the process generate a

black identity, specific to their political positionings” (Sterling 2007, 47). For instance, in the preface to the third volume of *Cadernos Negros* in 1980, writer Clóvis Moura emphasizes the emblematic characteristic of many of the poems in the anthology in embracing elements of the African oral tradition to voice the political struggles of the black population and a resurgent creative power – all of which indicates what Moura calls “renascimento negro” [a “black re-birth”] (Moura 1980, 9).

Within that context, Alves started publishing her poetry in *Cadernos Negros* in 1982, and her initial production embraces the journal’s mission established in its very first issue of November 25, 1978: the one to resist the denial of a black subjectivity; to defy the serialization process of black individuals; and, finally, to challenge the imposition of aesthetic paradigms exclusively aligned with Eurocentric standards, delineated within the history of slavery and its subsequent representations (Alves 2002, 225). Therefore, the reclamation of a black subjectivity and agency, within a reconfiguration of the “ontological fact of blackness”, as pointed out by Sterling, represents the main framework used by Quilombhoje (and *Cadernos Negros*) to oppose the discourses of “mestiçagem” and re-signify the black subject in the intersection of aesthetics and politics in Brazil. The dialogue Alves’ intellectual and poetic work established with the Quilombhoje framework is key to understanding how the author insisted on deepening the notion of black subjectivity by bringing to the core of the debate a black female stance and poetic voice. Alves’ desire to articulate the specificities of black female subjectivity and identity became the terrain from which she sought collaborations and solo initiatives that enabled that articulation.

The writer’s first solo publication, *Momentos de Busca* (1983), represents her first attempt to “dust off the poems I used to file away in notebooks since I was twelve years-

old, not knowing what to do with them” and her “need to come into existence through the words that flow on the page” (Alves Facebook.com, 2013, translation is mine). As described in a note in the São Paulo newspaper *Folha da Tarde* (Picture 1), Alves’ poems “manifestam a estranheza do indivíduo perante o mundo, onde a interioridade e a exterioridade entrelaçam-se aos questionamentos” [they “manifest the estrangement by the individual facing the world, where the interior and exterior universes are intertwined in that quest”] (*Folha da Tarde* 1983, translation is mine). On the occasion of her book launch, Alves combines drumming and dance to accompany the declamation of her poetry (Picture 2) – a performative strategy that has consistently marked her appearances in events all over the world<sup>31</sup>.



Picture 1: Newspaper clipping from *Folha da Tarde* (São Paulo, October 6, 1983).



Picture 2: Newspaper clipping from *O Estado de São Paulo* (October 14, 1983).

If, on one hand, Alves' first poetry anthology is marked by an “intimist”<sup>32</sup> tone with which the poetic subject is – as the title suggests – immersed in a journey of self-reflection, searching for answers to existential questions; on the other hand, these questions are intrinsically connected to a larger context that does not provide a place for this black female poetic subject to exist in plenitude. In this sense, *Momentos de Busca* reveals Alves' profound wrestling with a sexist, racist, and homophobic world that denies the existence and the legitimacy of her own voice, and invalidates every attempt of self-affirmation and self-determination. As writer Abelardo Rodrigues highlights in the preface to the book:

*Momentos de Busca* também é mergulho em nosso espelho da identidade. Em vários poemas Miriam se indaga, se procura e não se encontra, porque a imagem vista não é a real, a verdadeira; é aquela distorcida pelo mundo que a oprime reprimindo sua interioridade, sua procura do ser (Alves 1983,



9).

[*Momentos de Busca* is also a dive into our identity mirror. In several poems, Miriam wonders, searches for herself and can not find what she is looking for, because the image she sees is not the real one, the true one; it is the one distorted by the world that oppresses her, repressing her interiority, her own search for self.]

In that sense, *Momentos de Busca* represents a remarkably brave step towards the self-defining of a black woman's poetic voice unveiling deeply intimate experiences that are informed by the intricate relationship among different systems of oppression. *Momentos de Busca* becomes, thus, an evidence of the famous feminist slogan "the personal is political". Within a context where the very existence of an Afro-Brazilian literary tradition is denied, Alves boldly voices the profound inquietude of a "self" that struggles to find a sense of belonging and recognition. This self-searching journey marks a desire to find the true self; a desire for an image that portrays clearly and rightfully the subject self, liberating it from the conventions and social impositions of everyday life. This yearning for liberation is illustrated by the poem "Estranho Indagar" ["Strange Quest"]:

O que procuro?

Não sei

O que oculto?

- Não sei

...

O que encontro escovando dentes

limpando as unhas

usando os sanitários  
com expressão idiotizada?

[What am I searching for?/ I don't know/ What am I hiding?/ - I don't know/  
...What do I find brushing my teeth/ cleaning my nails/ using the toilet/ with  
an idiotic expression?]

Other solo publications by Miriam Alves include *Estrelas no Dedo* (1985), another self-published poetry anthology; *Mulher Mat(r)iz* (2011), a collection of short fiction; and her most recent work and first novel *Bará, Na Trilha do Vento* (2015). Alves' second solo poetry anthology gathered newly and previously published writings and gives evidence to the poet's aesthetic refinement and her continuous political engagement. As poet Jamu Minka observes in his preface to the book, Alves' poetry in *Estrelas no Dedo* explores the African ancestral connections with spirituality and history, bringing to her artistry elements of the Afro-Brazilian religion "Candomblé" and references to Afro-Brazilian historical moments: a movement that both echoes the "wounds of the past" and re-imagines a future of possibilities that break with the trope of an "unescapable fatality" (Alves 1985, 8-10). In recent years, Miriam Alves has been increasingly engaged in social media, maximizing the wider reach of this virtual space to give visibility to her own work and to a broad scope of issues related to black and women's cultural production<sup>33</sup>.

Alves' active participation in the Quilombhoje group in the 1980s was followed by a number of artistic and intellectual collaborations with other Afro-Brazilian writers. In 1987, Miriam Alves collaborated, for instance, with Afro-Brazilian poets Arnaldo Xavier and Cuti to create the play *Terramara*, in which they narrate the conflicts and struggles of

a black family and their relationship with “Candomblé”, addressing issues of racial and religious discrimination in Brazil. Alves’ work is also part of some of the most important anthologies of contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature published during the 1980s, such as *Axé- Antologia da Poesia Negra Contemporânea* (1982), edited by Afro-Brazilian writer Paulo Colina; *A Razão da Chama - Antologia de Poetas Negros Brasileiros* (1986), an anthology of Afro-Brazilian poetry edited by Oswaldo de Camargo; and *O Negro Escrito: Apontamentos Sobre a Presença do Negro na Literatura Brasileira* (1987), a collection of critical essays on Afro-Brazilian literature, also edited by Camargo.

Xavier, Cuti and Miriam Alves also collaborate in putting together *Criação Crioula, Nu Elefante Branco* (1987) - an important critical anthology on the status of Afro-Brazilian literary production in the late twentieth century. The importance of this anthology relies on the fact that it is the result of the “I Encontro Nacional de Poetas e Ficcionalistas Negros” [“I National Conference of Black Poets and Fiction Writers”], held at the Faculdade do Ipiranga in the city of São Paulo between September 6 and 8 of 1985. The conference represented a landmark for generating a series of discussions among writers and intellectuals about the present and future of Afro-Brazilian literature, including the historical absence of an editorial market dedicated to Afro-Brazilian literary production. In the anthology, Alves developed a critic of the labels normally applied by bookstores and publishers in order to categorize the literary production by Afro-Brazilians. Alves’ critic in *Criação Crioula* highlights the power dynamics within the intersections of production and publication in Brazil, revealing the long-established imposed silencing of Afro-Brazilian literary voices – an experience she herself was so familiar with:

Ressalto nesta produção (*Criação Crioula*) o ato político... Falo do ato político que praticamos, escrevendo-nos em nossa visão de mundo... Nos tempos não tão idos assim, todos nós brasileiros criadores de artes éramos obrigados a esconder nossa criação na gaveta e nos tornarmos artistas gaveteiros... Mais tarde, desengavetou-se na forma de livrinhos mimeografados, distribuídos nos botecos da vida, onde a esquerda tramava a revolução cultural. Aí nossos livrinhos foram recusados várias vezes (a esquerda nos olhava com seus olhos canhestros) (Alves 1987, 84).

[I highlight the political act in this production (*Criação Crioula*)... I talk about the political action we take when we write ourselves according to our own world view... Not so long ago, all of us Brazilian art creators used to be forced to hide our production in drawers, and we became, then, boxlike artists... Later, this production started to reveal itself in the format of little mimeographed booklets, distributed around in bars where the leftists planned the cultural revolution. Then, our little booklets were rejected multiple times (the left looked at us from the corner of their eyes)].

Within the larger critic of the restraints for the publication of Afro-Brazilian literature, Alves also hints here how the political action she describes is received with resistance even by the so-called leftist intellectual groups at the time. Florentina da Silva Souza's study *Afrodescendência em Cadernos Negros e Jornal MNU* (2005) helps contextualize that tension, explaining that the counter-narrative of these "black stories" had the purpose of interfering with the structures of the political and cultural powers. Within a pedagogical framework that reclaimed the historical protagonism of black Brazilians, the

mimeographed words of *Cadernos Negros* embraced the promise of transformative possibilities the black identity politics of self-affirmation held at the time (Souza 2005, 110-111).

In the 1988 publication of *Cadernos* (v.11), Alves offered two illustrations of how that political commitment to re-position the historical agency of black subjects is reflected in her poetry. Her poems “Revanche” (“Revenge”) and “Uma Estória” (“A Story”) highlight the rebellions of captives against those responsible to secure their enslavement (“Enforquei feitores/ chicoteei capitães do mato/ ...retalhei sinhozinhos”; “I hung overseers/ I whipped slave hunters/ ...I chopped white masters); and the omission of these recurrent acts of resistance and rebellion from the official historical records (“Não há registro na história/ Rebelião/ Nós sabemos das vitórias”; “There’s no record in history/ Rebellion/ We know the victories”). Both poems depict historical moments in which the tables were turned and enslaved blacks organized in massive uprisings against the oppression imposed on them. The incidence of slave uprisings is now known to have increased in the late eighteenth century as a result of the territorial expansion of agriculture, the consequent intensification of the slave traffic, and the development of movements for independence with liberal agendas such as the abolitionist one (Reis 1996, 22).

Alves’ prolific and active participation in discussions, conferences, and publications committed to re-think the routes of Afro-Brazilian literature in the 1980s also propelled her to forge international collaborations with a number of intellectuals and artists. In 1995, Alves co-edited the bilingual anthology *Enfim...Nós/Finally...Us: Escritoras Negras Brasileiras Contemporâneas/ Contemporary Black Brazilian Women Writers*, with Carolyn Richardson Durham. The story behind that publication illustrates, on and of itself,

the obstacles imposed on Brazilian black women's intellectual production. Alexandra Perisic tells the story of how Durham, a U.S. African American scholar - doing research on the portrayals of Afro-Brazilian women in literature at the time – traveled to São Paulo in 1990 and met Miriam Alves: by the time the scholar and the writer met, “Alves had been compiling an anthology of black women writers that, because of a lack of funds, she was unable to complete” (Perisic 2012, 265). In her essay “‘E Agora Falamos Nós’: Literatura Feminina Afro-Brasileira”, Moema Parente Augel adds to this story the fact that Alves struggled for almost a decade to try to find financial support and an interested publisher in Brazil for her project, originally entitled *E Agora Falamos Nós* [*And Now We Speak*], featuring the original works by black women writers in Portuguese (Augel n.d., n.p.).

*Enfim... Nós/Finally... Us* gathered the writings of seventeen poets, many of whom were participating in the Quilombhoje movement, such as Esmeralda Ribeiro, Sônia Fátima da Conceição, and Conceição Evaristo. The collection of poems deals with a great variety of topics, including representations of the black female body, issues related to the Brazilian myth of racial democracy, the intricate connections between racism and sexism, and the search for identity. As a project that re-envisioning a transnational African diasporic consciousness, Alves saw the publication as a “poetic action” of rebellion against the commodification and objectification of black women in Brazil, as she expresses in the introduction of the book:

*Enfim... Nós* expõe, sem falsos pudores, intimidades nuas e de sentimentos aguçados em curvas ágeis, lânguidas e sensuais. Revolta-se na ação poética, retomando para si a propriedade do corpo, passando a ser sujeito do desejo e prazer, descoisificando-se. A escrita feminina negra com esta atitude,

avilta a noção corrente da passividade da mulher negra, chamada de mulata, que é sempre retratada como objeto de prazer, numa prostituição constante e sem outras perspectivas (Alves and Durham 1995, 13).

[*Finally... Us* exposes naked intimacies and sharp sentiments with agile, languid, and sensual curves, without false modesty. It rebels with its poetic action, reclaiming the ownership of the body, going on to being the subject of desire and pleasure, de-objectifying itself. Black women's writing with this attitude rejects the common notion of the Black woman's passivity, of the so-called "mulata" who always is pictured as the object of pleasure in constant prostitution and without any other perspectives] (Alves and Durham 1995, 25).

Alves' words in the introduction of *Finally... Us* reconfigure the idea of "passivity" attached to how black women are portrayed in several instances of Brazilian literature: from the iconic Jorge de Lima's "Nêga Fulô" to the "morenas" of Jorge Amados' novels, black women are often represented as figures who accept the place determined for them – and that determination is based on how her body may serve others (Queiroz Júnior 1975, 123)<sup>34</sup>. As Alves affirms in a more recent article, black women's writings "bring to the surface their own voices; their own faces, (re)interpreted according to their own emotions; in order to keep a record and self-representation on the territory of Literature" (Alves 2010, 186, translation is mine).

In that sense, what seems to be a common thread in Alves's work – both as an artist and intellectual – is the attempt to expose how much black women have spoken incessantly without being heard, despite the mechanisms designed to silence their voices and control

their bodies. As warriors – to use one of Audre Lorde’s tropes here – black women writers hold a long tradition of knowledge and artistic production, even operating from silence into resistance. Again, in Lorde’s words, “the transformation of silence into language and action” (Lorde 2007, 40) – a process Alves has experienced the moment she decided (or dared!) to take her writings out of the drawers.

In her introduction to the first volume of *Moving Beyond Boundaries: International Dimensions of Black Women Writers* (co-edited with Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in 1995), Carole Boyce Davies affirms that “it is not only the condition of silence and voicelessness that seems the most pressing at this historical moment but the function of *hearing* or *listening* on the part of those who wield oppressive power” (Davies and Ogundipe-Leslie 1995, 3). Working with the need to foreground black women’s voices in institutions and academic spaces across boundaries, Davies and Ogundipe-Leslie organize a collection of writings by Afro-descendant women from various locations in the African and Diaspora contexts. Miriam Alves features among other black women writers in the volume such as Sonia Sanchez, Nancy Morejón, Mayra Santos Febres, and Jewelle L. Gomez. Alves collaborates with seven poems and shares the Afro-Brazilian women’s literary realm with Esmeralda Ribeiro, Sônia Fátima da Conceição, Lia Vieira, Conceição Evaristo, and Rosali da Cruz Nascimento – whose works have been published by *Cadernos Negros*.

Alves’ poem “Pedaços de Mulher” [“Pieces of a Woman”], one of the pieces included in *Moving Beyond Boundaries*, is emblematic of black women’s struggles against the lasting “taste of absence”. As highlighted in the introduction to this study, the poetic construction of “Pedaços de Mulher” represents also an anthem of resistance to the



mechanisms of invisibility of black women's subjectivities and, as highlighted by Davies, the historical inability to hear their voices:

Mulher - retalhos

a carne das costas secando

no fundo do quintal

presa no estendal do seu esquecimento

Mulher – revolta

Agito-me contra os prendedores

que seguram-me firme neste varal

[Woman- - shards of flesh/ drying / in the back yard / a prisoner in the house  
of amnesia/ Woman – revolt/ I move against the clothespins/ that hold me  
on this clothesline]

Alves' poetic language in "Pedacos de Mulher" highlights the power to resist and revolt against an oppressive system that wants to hold the poetic subject prisoner "on this clothesline". The construction of poem – the repetition of the word "mulher" in broken lines, hyphenated and then combined with defining nouns "retalhos" and "revolta" - functions like a puzzle in which the pieces of a woman are put back together to rebuild an identity based on ones' own reclamation of the integral and inseparable parts of her whole self. It is a continuous action of revolt and critical inquiry that has led Miriam Alves to different routes as she developed her career and her intellectual work within and without the circle of the Quilombhoje movement.

## **Towards a “Fleshy Poetics” of the Erotic: Speaking the Unspeakable**

Without a doubt, Miriam Alves’ trajectory as a Quilombhoje member and as a collaborator in several other projects within and beyond national borders testifies to her commitment to break with the anonymity of black women’s artistic and intellectual production, as highlighted in the beginning of this chapter. Quilombhoje’s aesthetic mission to uncover black self-representation and subjectivity as a form of opposition against the discourses of racial democracy in Brazil became a key element in the ways Alves developed her aesthetic project to give prominence to black women’s experiences, perspectives, sexualities and particular struggles against racism and sexism within the national and local contexts. Although acknowledging the contribution of the Quilombhoje group as a turning point in her literary career – a space where she defines her own intellectual and poetic voice, Miriam Alves is fiercely critical of the sexist dynamics present in Afro-Brazilian literary circles. In the same interview, Alves declares:

Naquele momento eu estava num grupo que escrevia e tinha uma bandeira de luta: estar fazendo uma literatura negra. Uma literatura negra que se colocava contra as discriminações raciais. Depois mudou ... Foi quando eu percebi que a forma e os temas enfocados pelas mulheres escritoras negras tinham algo mais próximo do fêmeal, do feminino. Quando se tentava conversar sobre isso com os escritores, o assunto virava piada, brincadeira. Eu analisava as piadinhas desta forma: o branco, quando não me leva a sério, brinca com a coisa mais séria que eu tenho, eu mesma; o companheiro

negro, quando não me leva a sério, como mulher escritora, brinca com algo ainda mais sério: meu ser (971).

[At that moment I was in a group that wrote and had one battle flag: to produce black literature. The kind of black literature that confronted racial discrimination. Afterwards, everything changed... That was when I perceived that the form and themes focused by black women writers in the group were more closely connected with a female-centered perspective. When we tried to talk about this with the male writers, the subject became a mockery, a joke. I used to analyze that mockery as the following: when white people don't take me seriously, they are joking with the most serious thing I have, myself; when a black comrade doesn't take me seriously, as a woman writer, he is joking with an even more serious matter: my own being.]

Thus, it is very early in the process of engaging with the Quilombhoje group that Alves put herself (and her writing) in a position of critically examining the ideological routes and contours that literary activism was taking. In that sense, Alves became, such as Lorde does, a “sister outsider”: on one hand, a “sister” who understands and supports the struggle to opening up a space of visibility to contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature, with a commitment to critically analyze and denounce issues of racial discrimination in the country; on another hand, an “outsider” critic of the ways in which long-established patriarchal molds are replicated in the dynamics of the movement, reproducing barriers for black women writers to give voice to their unique aesthetics and political stakes. Within this context, Alves’ framework is aligned to Lorde’s as they both pay attention to the

intersectional nature of oppression, highlighting the need to deconstruct the systems that sustain multiple forms of oppression. As Alves highlights in the interview to Rowell:

Em geral a tendência da escritora negra é se engajar na luta do homem, chamada de geral. A especificidade de ser mulher escritora que aflora nos trabalhos, passa, então, despercebida. Mesmo assim, as mulheres estão escrevendo, as mulheres estão falando, só que não conseguem que esta fala seja respeitada como uma expressão específica. Esse preconceito sexista é muito sério (971).

[Generally, the tendency is that the black woman writer engages in the male struggle, considered universal. The specificity of being a woman writer, which blossoms in her writings, goes unnoticed. Even then, women are writing, women are speaking up, although they are not able to have their voices respected as a unique expression. This sexist prejudice is very serious.]

In the book *BrasilAfro Autorrevelado*, Alves dedicates a section to discuss black women's militant roles in the black literary movement, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. In that discussion, Alves offers a refreshing analysis of the active role black women played in the militancy of the black movement since the 1930s with the foundation of the "Frente Negra Brasileira" ["Brazilian Black Front"], an organization composed by black intellectuals and activists responsible for significant victories in the struggle against racial discrimination in government institutions in Brazil<sup>35</sup>. Alves' critique highlights the invisibility of black women as active political and historical subjects in most narratives of the history of the Brazilian black movement, in which prevails the contributions by black male figures such

as Arlindo Veiga dos Santos, José Correa Leite, Jaime de Aguiar, and Abdias do Nascimento.<sup>36</sup>

As a militant of the 1980s black movement in Brazil and involved in the foundation of the “Movimento Negro Unificado” (MNU) in 1978, Miriam Alves used her first-hand experience to critique the ways in which the organization followed patriarchal standards to determine the roles women should play in the organization: the one of “assistant” or “secretary” and/or the one of cleaning and organizing the physical space of the MNU headquarters. As Alves points out, although engaged in the progressive thought of racial equality, the black movement organizations were trapped in formulaic sexist and patriarchal notions of what kinds of roles women should be playing in that context (Alves 2010, 63-64).

In a personal interview, Miriam Alves explores the issues related to the literary production by black women writers within the Quilombhoje group, in its formative years. Alves explains that the group meetings included moments in which the all members would share their writings and receive critical feedback from their peers, which, for Alves, served as an invaluable training for her career, because “it taught me how to listen to criticism... to be open to listen to what other people had to say about my writings and, then, participate in a critical discussion about it” (Alves, *Personal Interview*, Dec. 2012). However, within that structure, Alves also explains that first she witnessed a different treatment in the ways with which the writings by the women in the group would be criticized as a “too fleshy”, “too raw”, and, therefore, they would not have a “literary value”. The writer also tells about a later shift in the internal dynamics when the men writers would present their writings filled with stereotypical representations of women as “objects, or the weaker sex, or hyper-

sexualized figures”. Alves narrates that the black women (Esmeralda Ribeiro, Sônia Fátima da Conceição, and others) in Quilombhoje started to confront those stereotypes, insisting on critical ways to re-think the normalized tropes used to represent women in literature (Alves, *Personal Interview*, Dec. 2012).

It is also during that time, Alves remarks, that black women take a more defiant positioning in relation to the pervasive sexist dynamics in the black movement and start to organize “within and outside the circle”; in dialogue with the debates in the feminist movement in Brazil; raising questions about their participation and activism in the militancy of those movements and the roles assigned to women of African descent in the society at large (Alves 2010, 65 -66). The network of black women organizing around issues of sexism, racism, and classism expanded and reached out to other groups such as “Grupo Negricia – Poesia e Arte de Crioulo”, founded in 1982 in the city of Rio de Janeiro, also dedicated to give visibility to the cultural and artistic production by Afro-Brazilians (Alves, *Personal Interview*, Dec. 2012).

The early 1980s is indeed a moment of effervescence for the black women’s organizing in Brazil<sup>37</sup>. A significant number of black women intellectuals started to confront the black movement – and its male-centered discourses; as well as the feminist movement – and its white middle-class perspective - with questions that addressed the particular struggles of Afro-Brazilian women, most of whom occupied the lowest class statuses in the country and, thus, faced the most precarious ways of living. Within this context, the voices of Lélia Gonzalez, Dulce Maria Pereira Cardoso, Maria Beatriz Nascimento, Luiza Bairros, and Tereza Santos – among others – are pioneers in articulating an analysis of oppression in the Brazilian society considering the plight of black women as

the central axis from which to understand the profound implications of the social inequalities and injustices interwoven in the nation's history.

In 1981, for instance, Lélia Gonzalez, co-founder of the MNU, and a militant in the feminist movement, published one of the pioneering articles of that era about the lowest socio-economic status of black women in Brazil. Gonzalez's article critiques the failure of the feminist movement to address the racial question for having "profound historical roots in the white middle-class" and denounces the triple oppression Brazilian black women faced in all sectors of the socioeconomic structure (Gonzalez 1981, 8-9; translation is mine).

Within this historical background, Miriam Alves' vision of her political location as a writer, intellectual, and activist is shaped by the notion of the intersectional nature of oppression so organically present in the experiences of Afro-descendant women. As pointed out by a number of U.S. black women intellectuals and activists of the 1970s and 1980s, and then so strikingly stated in "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (first published in 1974), understanding the historical processes that shape the lives of black women demands the "development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Hull et al 1982, 13).

Nearly a decade later, Afro-Brazilian women intellectuals also develop that kind of analysis and create organizations that particularly address issues related to black women's experiences in Brazil. Some of the most pressing issues at the time for black women intellectuals were the deconstruction of the myth of racial democracy, not only denouncing the veiled ways in which racism operates in Brazil, but also pointing out the fallacy underlying the very creation of that myth by exposing the systematic ways in which black

women's bodies have been violated in order to make "mestiçagem" a social reality in the country. This denunciation is followed by an urge to build a critical analysis of the situation of black women in Brazil from an intersectional perspective of gender, race and class. Afro-Brazilian contemporary intellectual Sueli Carneiro summarizes that denunciation as the following:

No Brasil e na América Latina, a violação colonial perpetrada pelos senhores brancos contra as mulheres negras e indígenas e a miscigenação daí resultante está na origem de todas as construções de nossa identidade nacional, estruturando o decantado mito da democracia racial latino-americana, que no Brasil chegou até as últimas conseqüências. Essa violência sexual colonial é, também, o "cimento" de todas as hierarquias de gênero e raça presentes em nossas sociedades... As mulheres negras tiveram uma experiência histórica diferenciada que o discurso clássico sobre a opressão da mulher não tem reconhecido, assim como não tem dado conta da diferença qualitativa que o efeito da opressão sofrida teve e ainda tem na identidade feminina das mulheres negras (Carneiro, "Enegrecendo o Feminismo no Brasil", n. pag.).

[In Brazil and in Latin America, the colonial violation perpetrated by white slave masters against black and indigenous women, and the miscegenation produced by this violation, are on the basis of all constructions of our national identity, structuring the celebrated myth of a Latin-American racial democracy, which, in Brazil, has been fully into play. This colonial sexual violence also serves as the "cement" for all the gender and racial hierarchies



present in our societies... Black women [in Brazil] have had a very distinct historical experience which the classic discourse about women's oppression has not acknowledged; nor has it been able to address the qualitative difference that this kind of oppression has imposed on the identity of black women.]

This critical analysis brought by Afro-Brazilian women in the 1980s and 1990s defied, on one hand, the notion of what it means to be a woman by “blackening”, to use Carneiro’s term (“enegrecer”), the white middle-class feminist perspective on gender issues in Brazil; and, on another hand, it also defied the male-dominated discourse in the black movement by engendering the analysis of Brazilian racial relations and racial perceptions. Although that intersectional perspective represents a groundbreaking work of bringing together the categories of race, gender, and class into the analysis of the “triple exploitation” of Afro-Brazilian women, as anthropologist Dulce Pereira Cardoso highlights (1983, n. p.), it has not yet expanded the discussion by confronting the heteronormative discourses on the sexuality of Afro-Brazilians in general, and Afro-Brazilian women in particular. The task of dismantling hegemonic discourses undertaken by black feminist thought throughout the African diaspora, as highlighted by Avtar Brah (1996, 117 - 120), is still in need of expansion and re-elaboration: the axis of black female sexuality in non-heteronormative expressions of desire and eroticism has been kept, for the most part, a terrain of secrecy in the black feminist analysis of different ways of black womanhood throughout the history of the diaspora.

The poetry by Miriam Alves is inundated by the desire to articulate unspoken truths of black women subjects whose lives speak to multitude of experiences, including those

related to eroticism and sexuality. As marked subjects, Afro-Brazilian women carry in their bodies a series of identifiers – none of which necessarily refer to her name. According to the iconography of “mestiçagem”, terms such as “mulata”, “preta”, “morena”, “crioula”, “nêga”, “princesa de ébano” describe “a locus of confounded identities”, as pointed out by Hortense Spillers, that reflect series of embedded signifiers (racial, class, sexual, and even regional) within “the national treasure of rhetoric wealth” (Spillers 1987, 65). Expanding and crossing the boundaries of a national grammar for black Brazilian women identities through language becomes a common thread in Alves’ poetry, as illustrated by “Averbalizar” [“Verbalization”], a poem published in volume 11 of *Cadernos Negros* (1988):

Respirar fundo

soltar asfixia

liberar segredos

sangrar palavras

com a mão do afago

sangrar palavras

(mesmo que não queiram)

[“Take a deep breath/ stop asphyxia/ liberate secrets/ bleed words/ with a caressing hand/ bleed words/ (even if they don’t want to)]

The list of verbs in Alves’ poem offers the idea of a ritualistic preparation to “liberate secrets” as an act of resistance – taking a deep breath before facing the struggle also seems to conjure a practice of mindfulness and self-awareness. In that act of resistance, “bleeding

words” represents a necessary step into finding one’s own voice in the midst of imposed silences; one’s own articulation in the midst of manipulation; one’s own terms in the midst of external control. Thus, it is through a conscious act of speaking the unspeakable – which does not deny the “caressing hand” of self-care – that Alves’ poem envisions opportunities for defying silenced desires, for empowerment, and for healing in the path towards liberating one’s own true-self.

The categorizations of otherness black Brazilian women are inscribed in – from the passivity of a “mãe preta” to the commodification of a “mulata” – highlight the historical narratives of domination and exploitation of black female bodies as national tropes. They also indicate the asphyxia of black women’s own definitions of themselves, as Alves’ poem reveals, in a way that they violate – besides the physical and emotional harm - the right of those bodies to express themselves with agency. The re-creation of language – or the act of “verbalization” - represents, in this instance of black feminist re-envisioning in both Alves’ and Lorde’s legacies, “strategies for differently located black women to shape interventions that embody their separate and common interests and perspectives” (Hammonds 1999, 102).

In that regard, the voices of Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves break the silences that permeate the cultural and national contexts from which these writers emerge. However, Lorde and Alves articulate their voices within historically and socially different contexts in which the mechanisms of silence – in particular the silencing of non-heteronormative sexualities – operate in distinct ways. Although Lorde faces discrimination and isolation for becoming an outspoken lesbian, she belongs to a context in which the gay and lesbian liberation movement is emerging with more radicalism in several parts of the U.S. in the

late 1960s and early 1970s, giving more visibility to some of the defiant attitudes and discourses Lorde herself embraces both in her politics and poetics (DeVeaux's 2004, 111-13). In Brazil, the era of the military regime brings a violent repression of progressive political organizing that defies the national structures of power. It is also during the military regime that elitist ultra-conservative collisions between political parties and segments of the Catholic Church find space and support to reinforce normative notions of family and hierarchies of gender roles in the society at large in order to protect the country against what was considered "a communist threat"<sup>38</sup>. In the late 1970s, when the process of "abertura" (re-democratization) starts, the social movements in Brazil strive to find viable ways to articulate their struggle and demands, fighting against a racist, sexist and homophobic thinking, ingrained in the social structures.

Within this context, Miriam Alves articulates her non-heteronormative voice in very specific ways. In 1985, Alves created the pseudonym of "Zula Gibi", used to sign some her writings published in *Cadernos Negros*. As Cristian de Souza Sales shows in her research, Zula Gibi gives voice to the protagonism of queer black female characters and their sexual desires (Sales 2011, n. pag). In that process, Zula Gibi becomes Alves' queer persona whose voice defies normalized and hegemonic standards of black female sexuality and sexual expressions. The strategic construction of Zula Gibi reveals, thus, an additional layer in the poli(po)e(tics) of Miriam Alves: at the same time author and character, Gibi performs a symbolic embodiment of a queer black female poetic subject whose very existence is a taboo; whose voice is silenced; whose presence disturbs the norm. Whereas Gibi does not exist in concrete ways, her persona signifies the presence of black, women, queer, poetic voices, who are denied visibility in the official Brazilian canon.

The poetic discourse performed in the works signed by Zula Gibi is invested in exploring non-heteronormative ways of connection among black female subjects, including – but not limited to – homoerotic relationships, which for Alves is, indeed, a way to be true to one of the principles guiding her own writing as a black woman: to speak from one’s own positioning as a black writer in Brazil; to write the black experience in all its perspectives and nuances (Alves 1999, 7).

In the preface for Alves’ short-fiction anthology *Mulher Mat(r)iz* (2011), Moema Parente Augel highlights how the title is so appropriately used to direct the reader to the possibility of multiple interpretations, meanings, and circumstances - in the word “matiz” (“shade”); and, at the same time, re-direct the reader’s attention to the notion of origin – in the work “matriz” (“matix”) - associated with “mulher” (Augel in Alves 2011, 13). Considering the thematic of black women’s sexuality and eroticism in the anthology, Augel refers to the fact that Alves’ literary texts transgresses the phallogentric, hetero-patriarchal family model when they focus on the possibilities of homoerotic relationships in black women’s lives in her short fiction. However, according to Augel, the writer do not offer such stories to confront the public opinion, nor as a provocation; but because her characters enjoy, above all, “uma liberdade interior, livres do peso da culpa” [“an interior sense of freedom, liberated from the weight of blame”] (Augel in Alves 2011, 16).

Whether such “provocation” is intentional or not, Alves’ transgression in breaking with a long-established taboo – inside and outside of the black communities – represents a performative black female embodiment that deconstruct the Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heteronormativity”, so strongly ingrained in Latin America contexts. As David William Foster argues, this “compulsory heteronormativity” is normally

accompanied by a history of homophobic violence and repression in several parts of Latin American, causing what Foster discusses as “a homoerotic diaspora” affecting individuals who extensively suffer from “marginalization and internal exile” on the bases of their non-heteronormative sexual identity (Foster 2002, 164-5). In that sense, Miriam Alves’ homoerotic literature do not hold the attributes Foster enlist for his analysis of texts in the “homoerotic diaspora”, since Alves neither flights her Latin American context in order to produce her homoerotic literature, nor do her black queer subjects/characters. On the contrary, the intensity of Alves’ transgressive work could be associated precisely with the fact that she dares to construct a homoerotic literary discourse within the complications and repressions of the national boundaries. In that sense, Alves’ forging of Zula Gibi in the context of the 1980s was a strategic textual tool for transgression also because it allows for a re-imagined national context where the erotic desire constitutes a choice, performed both by the black women in the texts, as well as the black woman writing the texts. As a textual strategy, Zula Gibi also becomes the personification of the figure of the trickster: she twists language to create new symbolic pathways; she moves against and beyond the pre-determined boundaries of sexual desire; she dares to speak in the face of silence.

As Augel points out, Alves’ poetic voices ostentatiously display a profound sense of freedom to explore multiple erotic connections. When writing as Zula Gibi, Alves’ poetic voices also express a deep sense of integrity that involves both the self and the desired other. Gibi’s poem “Amiga Amante” (“*Lover Friend*”, *Cadernos 25* 2002), for instance, illustrates how the erotic desire is capable of restoring the human capacity for connection as erotic equals:

Querida que um rastro de luz se fizesse agora

E nos levasse ao espaço de nós duas

...

...e na encruzilhada desta via láctea

nos encontrasse plenas

nas procuras realizadas

Um suspiro um sorriso a paz a certeza o amor

de igual para igual

[I wish a ray of light shone on us now/ And took us to the shared space in  
ourselves/... and at the crossroads of this milky way/ it found us fulfilled/  
in our quest/ A whisper a smile peace certainty love/ from equal to equal]

While Zula Gibi signs the greatest portion of Alves' literary production that addresses the theme of homoeroticism in short-fiction and in poetry, the discussion Alves promotes on black women's sexuality is not restricted to the literary realm. An illustration of the strategic forging of Zula Gibi can be found in the critical anthology on queer studies in Brazil, *A Escrita de Adé: Perspectivas Teóricas dos Estudos Gays e Lesbic@s No Brasil* (Santos and Garcia 2002) in which Alves publishes an interview with Zula Gibi, entitled "Diálogo de Poeta" ("Dialogue Between Poets"). In that dialogue, Alves and Gibi engage in a discussion about Afro-Brazilian literature, literary aesthetics, identity and sexual politics. The poets address issues about racism, sexism and homophobia in Brazil and the ways in which these issues affect their literary creation and careers. With no mention of the fact that Zula Gibi and Miriam Alves are, in fact, the same person, Alves crafts a strategy to devise a dialogue about a taboo discussion, which she defines by comparing it with "um mergulho debaixo de um temporal" ["a dive under a stormy weather"] (Alves

2002, 158)<sup>39</sup>. By forging that dialogue, Alves cunningly addresses the urgency to fully unveil the universe of women's sexuality; the need to confront the reactionary attitude of literary producers in relation to a culture that is essentially homophobic, such as the Brazilian one; and the need to break the silence in the Afro-Brazilian community (Alves 2002, 158 -9).

In an interview to the online magazine *Geni* in 2013, Miriam Alves gives details of the impact Zula Gibi and her writings provoked when she started publishing in *Cadernos Negros*. She reveals that the small group of Afro-Brazilian writers who ran the journal at the time and those who participated in the Quilombhoje group knew about Alves' creation of Gibi and that the secrecy about it started to "cause problems" (Menegatti, Mohallem, Visnadi 2013, 3-4). According to Alves, the fact that Gibi's writings focused on the question of homoeroticism within the black community was the root of the discomfort among the writers, a situation that escalated into more aggressive attacks and an internal pressure against Zula Gibi's presence in the journal:

Existe uma pressão, são poucas que não morrem na praia. Desse movimento todo [outras escritoras do Quilombhoje], as que estão na ativa lá do começo somos eu e a Esmeralda [Ribeiro]. Nem todas falavam de erotismo ou homoerotismo. Já era difícil falar do que a gente chamava das questões específicas do ser mulher, aí entrar com o erotismo pela versão feminina é complicado, hein! (Menegatti, Mohallem, Visnadi 2013, 4).

[There is a pressure, there are many who swim, swim, and die on the beach. Among all of us (other women writers in the Quilombhoje group), the ones who are still publishing since the beginning are myself and Esmeralda



*(Ribeiro)*. Not all of them talk about eroticism or homoeroticism. Even in the beginning it was hard to talk about what we called the specific issues of being a woman, let alone adding the theme of eroticism from a female perspective is complicated!]

If, on one hand, Zula Gibi represents the vehicle through which Alves gives voice to black women's homoeroticism; on the other hand, the forge of Gibi is also revelatory of the very fear and the silences the author wants to confront. It is a fear to openly expose black women's non-normative sexualities, as well as queer manifestations of the self, all of which oppressed within the very communities where they strive to survive. Ultimately, the silences around non-normative sexualities in the black community become the evidence of the "fear of the ex-comrade", to use Audre Lorde's words: the fear to be ostracized as a traitor to the race, because of the insistence that "black lesbianism is a threat to black nationhood, consorting with the enemy, basically unblack" (SL, ALC, Box 23). As Lorde discusses further, homophobia and heterosexism in the black community represents a "refusal to recognize the constructive power inherent in difference" (SL, ALC, Box 23) because it destabilizes the patriarchal mechanisms of control and power that dictates gender and sexual roles and determines who and what is to be considered "deviant" and/or "outsider".

Within this context, Zula Gibi's voice becomes Alves' strategy of struggle (and survival), adding another perspective over her literary production and politics in connection with the one of Audre Lorde. Ultimately, it reveals the different strategies women of color elaborate to navigate across the complex configurations of oppression in the diaspora. Additionally, the use of pseudonyms by women writers has been one of the recourses to

give them access to publication in the first place. In a diversity of contexts where conditions of time, place, marital status, nationality, gender, race, class, and/or sexual identities do not conform to the dominant standards or laws, women writers across borders have used this strategy when writing from different positions of cultural exclusion<sup>40</sup>.

In 2005, as an activist and organizer, Miriam Alves participated and coordinated the São Paulo group “Umas&Outras”<sup>41</sup>, which is dedicated to create a space for black lesbian women to address the particular issues that oppress them in a racist and homophobic society, and to promote public events to discuss those issues. Besides opening that space and contributing to break the isolation and invisibility most Brazilian black lesbians face, the purpose of “Umas&Outras”, as stated in their mission statement online, is to initiate a discussion on the “fragmentation of the black lesbian identity”, addressing the reasons why questions about sexual diversity are not properly addressed within the black movement, the same way questions about racism are overlooked within the lesbian and gay movement. Miriam Alves’ leadership in “Umas&Outras” demonstrates her engagement with the politics of building cross-boundaries alliances and breaking the silences about black women’s sexualities.

Through political engagement and a poetics of liberation, Alves create a platform that supports the idea of a multi-layered subjectivity and identity according to which “black” is not an exclusionary or exclusive aspect of self. Their poli(po)e(tics) enables the body – in her multiple layers, fragments, compositions – to engage with all the parts within; to integrate them in an ever-changing whole; to manifest her differences within and outside pre-established paradigms of (self)expression; moving against the clothespins of mechanisms of erasure and manipulation.

In the next section of this study, I attempt to re-arrange these clothespins that hold the poli(poe)tics of both Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves on the clothesline of their trajectory as complex and daring “sisters outsiders”. By creating a platform where Lorde’s and Alves’ voices meet, within the legacies by other black women warrior artists, these two sisters collude to re-create and re-imagine a place where human beings all inhabit in our vulnerability and strength – beyond all, in our true liberated selves.

## CHAPTER 4

### RE-ARRANGING THE CLOTHESPINS: SISTERS COLLUDED IN THE DIASPORA - RE-AFFIRMATION, TRANSFORMATION, LIBERATION

*Mergulho em você  
avolumo prazeres solitários  
broto emoções explícitas  
em lugares bem guardados<sup>42</sup>*

(Miriam Alves)

*The sun is watery warm  
our voices  
seem too loud for this small yard  
too tentative for women  
so in love*

(Audre Lorde)

The encounter between Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves has never happened *de facto*. This chapter represents a symbolic crossing of their intellectual paths, their diasporic positionalities, and their poli(poe)tics of embodiment. At the crossroads, a revelation of inner spaces of black women in these “well-hidden places”, inundated by the loudness of their desires, hopes, fears, pleasures, pain, histories, and love. Through their poetry, Lorde and Alves (re)envision the black female body the same way artisans craft textiles by weaving the threads – the parts of the whole. Read with and against each other, Lorde’s and Alves’ poetic text(ile)s compose an offering at the diasporic crossroads – an *ipadê* of the Orisha Eshu in Candomblé practices<sup>43</sup>. As an offering to Eshu – the Orisha who knows all the languages, the greatest messenger and translator - the poetic relationships I intend to trace between Lorde’s and Alves’ works honor the multiple possibilities of their (re)imaginings of the black female body – in the commonalities and differences of their particular contexts.

At the crossroads, this chapter contemplates three pathways through which the thematic analysis of Lorde's and Alves' poetry is organized. The first part, entitled "Re-Creating the Self, Re-Inscribing the Body", focuses on how Lorde and Alves design poetic discourses that take us into a poetic inward journey for the reclamation of the black female self (or selves), re-inscribing the fragmented, pained, violated body into a re-imagined sign of multiple and liberated expressions of black female subjectivities. The title of the second part of this chapter - "Liberating the Erotic Power, Transforming the Body" - indicates the direction the re-creation of the poetic self can take. As part of their poli(poe)tics of embodiment, Lorde and Alves craft aesthetic projects that re-position and re-signify the erotic as a source of transformative power – a notion defined by Lorde herself in the essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider*. Supported by that notion, Lorde's and Alves' poetics also projects a liberated (re)envisioning of the black female body (and self) in restored communal relationships. The third direction at the "crossroads" takes us to "Re-telling History, Re-locating the Body". This final section pays attention to how Lorde's and Alves' poli(poe)tics takes ownership of historical narratives, events, and figures to rewrite the black female body as historical agent. As their poetry perform a re-telling of history, Lorde and Alves confront narratives of violence and resistance, relying on a dialogic/interactive relationship between the poetic voice and the reader and catalyzing processes of consciousness transformation.

As at any crossroads, the analytical pathways I contemplate here are inevitably interwoven. My attempt in paying attention to the curves that delineate each path serves as a methodological tool to critically examine the significance of some of the diasporic connections Lorde's and Alves' poli(poe)tics may offer toward a clearer understanding of black diasporic women's experiences and the re-negotiations of their identities.

## PART I

### Re-Creating the Self, Re-Inscribing the Body

Resistance has always shaped the lives of black women across the diasporas. Resisting enslavement, resisting the violation of their bodies, resisting imposed silences: the acts of resistance by black women have been performed in the intimacy of their lives and in the public spheres. The book by Jaqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (2009), is filled with examples of those acts of resistance by black women as “enslaved workers (to 1865), and as citizens, wage-earners, migrants, and family members” (Jones 2009, xv). What Jones’ book does not provide is a better understanding of those acts of resistance performed in a more introspective fashion, within and beyond the framework of labor: those moments of inward search for dignity, humanity, self-respect and respect for beloved ones; those intimate moments of resistance but also of other capacities – vulnerability, fear, ambition, desire. As Kevin Quashie defines it, those would be moments of quiet, in which the notion of quiet “is a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life”:

An aesthetic of quiet is not incompatible with black culture, but to notice and understand it requires a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way (Quashie 2012, 6).

That is a notion I would like to bring close to the ways we read Audre Lorde’s and Miriam Alves’ poetic re-creation of the “self” embodied, re-imagined, and reclaimed as nuances of black female subjectivity. In acknowledging a fragmented self – sometimes represented in an image of a dismembered body or a body into pieces– Lorde and Alves invite us to constantly turn inwards

and outwards, as if they are trying to build a bridge that had been burned before. Only this time they are trying to build that bridge themselves, re-directing us to see from their own poetic perspective what is interior, expressed in what the exterior might become.

In “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (in *Sister Outsider*), Audre Lorde characterizes the exploration of the inner capabilities in women’s life as a practice of scrutiny, a way by which “we pursue our magic and make it realized”, shedding light upon the circumstances of our lives and upon the transformations we hope to create. And that is, according to Lorde, when poetry becomes a source of “illumination” for women: “It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (Lorde 2007, 36 – 37). Therefore, connecting the capabilities of the interior - as sources of creativity and power – with the responses and ideas that will lead to liberation seems to be a necessary combination for the kind of poetry Lorde talked about – or, “poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play” (Lorde 2007, 37).

The quest for this interior world is what I refer to as the search for self and the desire for liberation in the poetry of Lorde and Alves. In this quest, as the poetic subject embarks on a journey of self-creation, she also enacts a reclamation of the materiality of her-self – the black female body. In Alves’ *Momentos de Busca*, for instance, that theme is a common thread, weaving the fabric of several poems in the anthology, such as “Pés Atados, Corpo Alado”, “Cristo Atormentado”, “Depreendendo”, “Passos ao Mar”, and “Trapos e Nudez”. In these poems, Alves’s poetic voice articulates the internal and external struggles for autonomy, self-affirmation, and self-definition within a context that restricts every movement in that direction. Within that struggle, what seems to be important is that the desire for liberation becomes the key element to re-imagine the body as a transformed materialization of self. Faced with the oppression and imposed limitations to the

exercise of freedom, Alves' poetic subject creates a kind of embodiment that allows the physical and the subjective self to achieve a state of freedom through the poetic use of language. This is why Alves' poetic constructions often depict processes of mutation of the body through a shift in the state of consciousness when the body is in confinement, either socially or morally.

In the poem "Pés Atados, Corpo Alado" ["Tied Feet, Winged Body"], for instance, Alves outlines an inescapable sense of imprisonment of the self and the impossibility of exercising freedom and mobility. The oxymoron embedded in the title of the poem highlights an existential battle against social conditions that dictates what is to be considered normal or acceptable. The poetic subject is directed by the desire to be "truly and wholly" free "dos parâmetros/ das normas/ das regras/ das normalidades dos seres anormais/ sem vida/ sem nome" ["from the parameters/ from the norms/ from the rules/ from the normalities of abnormal beings/ with no life/ with no name"] (Alves 1983, 19). It is in fact, that burning desire for liberation that prompts an internal shift as the poetic subject reveals/ discovers the mind is the only element of her being that has not been imprisoned: "Posso pensar?/ Posso pensar!/ deixaram livre minha cabeça/ minha mente/ estou solto estou livre" ["May I think?/ I can think!/ They let my head free/ my mind/ I am loose I am free"] (Alves 1983, 18). The liberation of the mind depicted in this poem indicates how consciousness can powerfully promote the liberation of the imprisoned body – an idea that has circulated in the writings by black authors throughout centuries<sup>44</sup>. In multiple slave narratives of the nineteenth century for instance, in which the enslaved, restrained body finds its way to freedom primarily through the realization that his/her mind is the only site that can be kept away from restraints, since their bodies are kept in bondage and used as means of (re)production and profit-making in the economic system of slavery<sup>45</sup>.

William M. Etter (2010) highlights this philosophical, cultural, and political perspective as



a legacy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment era. Based on a discussion of Ronald Judy's *(Dis)Forming the American Canon* (1993), Etter points out that since the black body was synonymous of enslavement and the white body represented the power of reason, considered as "rational", the so-called European "writing culture", learning to read and write – particularly in a narrative form of expression, such as the autobiographies - becomes a very important achievement for black individuals to have their full humanity recognized by the prevailing cultural and socio-political structures: "The rational being that is narrated is an intellectualized entity, an entity that reflects knowledge attained, and thus an entity that has achieved an enlightened – one is tempted to say self-reliant – figure" (Etter 2010, 114). Therefore, the connection to the body in slave narratives often represents a connection with the sufferings imposed by enslavement. For instance, when Harriet Jacobs narrates details about her confinement, the longer she stays in hiding, the more her body becomes salient as flesh that feels pain and degenerates.

It is important to notice, however, that the notion of freedom through the mind is re-inscribed in Alves' poem as the power of creativity. Because the mind finds a new liberated state of consciousness - "conhecendo espaço novos/... livrando-se dos muros" ["visiting new spaces/ ... destroying walls"] - it becomes now possible to re-create the body in a re-configured, transformed embodiment of the self as "poderosas asas saem do meu corpo" ["powerful wings/ emerge from my body"]. At this shifting moment, the poetic subject is depicted as a "pássaro alado/ humano alado/... flutuando no prazer/ solto livre" ["flying bird/ winged human/ ... floating on pleasure/ uncaged free"], a re-created being who is now able to experience an imagined, desired freedom. Therefore, in Alves' poetry, mind and body are not separate constituents in the quest for freedom, because the re-imagined body becomes the vehicle through which the subject flies, gets to know new spaces, and, ultimately, liberates herself from all the social regulatory mechanisms used to

control and determine the boundaries of one's life.

Miriam Alves' poetry – as well as a great part of the Afro-Brazilian poetry of the late 1970s and 1980s – is heavily marked by a discourse that affirms a black identity; a discourse that reconstructs or deconstructs imposed “truths” about blackness or black womanhood. As literary critic Zilá Bernd explains, this poetic discourse does not configure the notion of separation or negation from the national identity, although it is inscribed within the thematic of recreating a different world. According to Bernd, the affirmation of a black identity becomes possible – at least at an initial phase in contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature – when the black poetic subject “recovers the notion of a shared historical situation” and the “confrontation of his/her condition as black” (Bernd 1988, 87). The Afro- Brazilian poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, as Bernd highlights, confronts the imposition of white standards and values, while asserting a sense of national belonging.

In that regard, Bernd's consideration presents a crucial limitation to the analysis of contemporary Afro-Brazilian aesthetics in general, and contemporary Afro-Brazilian women's literature in particular. Bernd does not account for the ways in which the Afro-Brazilian aesthetics has historically inserted itself as a discourse for transformation – rather than adaptation or integration to the pre-established sense of national identity. The creative energy dispensed by the black poetic “I” in Alves' work, for instance, is forged through a shifting state of consciousness, unveiling the systematic marginalization and disenfranchisement of blacks in historical situations. In that sense, Alves' poetics points towards a reconfiguration of self as a black subject, as well as a new understanding of the “official” national narrative that negates parts of that black subjectivity.

Therefore, the black poetic voice enunciates the desire to break with notions of a national identity that undermines, rejects, or erases blackness – even when those notions are embedded in

a certain idea of “Brazilianess”. That type of enunciation is illustrated in Alves’ “Trapos e Nudez” [“Rags and Nudity”], where she talks about the awakening of a black female identity, embodied in an act of (self) revelation. The imagery used in the poem represents the ultimate symbol of corporeal exposition: nudity. Confronted by the fact that the “useless rags” that cover her body “foram perdidos entre os espaços” [“got lost in-between spaces”], the poetic subject surrenders to a complex experience of self-discovery. If nudity, at this moment of surrender, represents the most vulnerable condition for the body - uncovered, unprotected, exposed – it also signifies a moment of shame, at least initially: “E ao estatelar-me no chão/ na poça desta vida/ envergonhei-me da minha nudez/ procurei os velhos trapos de roupas/ não encontrei” [“And as I hit the ground/ into the puddle of life/ I felt ashamed of my nudity/ I looked for the old rags of clothing/ But I couldn’t find them] (Alves 1983, 50). Although that coverage of the body is partial, it carries the social function of maintaining the body at the edge of the boundaries of morality and decency. The “rags” give the body a partial license to exist, placing it at the margins of the social network: the black body is not fully protected, accepted or recognized, but it is kept under social control. Ultimately, it is the exposure of blackness in the naked body that delineates the revelation of identity as a multidirectional relationship between the “I” and the “world”:

O frio percorria as minhas entranhas  
minha negritude inteira amostra  
pelos  
pele  
chocando o mundo  
o mundo chocando-me

[The cold ran into my guts/ my blackness was entirely uncovered/ hair/ skin/  
shocking the world/ the world shocking me]

The poem continues describing a state of confusion, doubt, and questioning that characterizes the ambivalences of a quest for self-affirmation in a world that rejects the “uncovered blackness”. As Moema Parente Augel highlights, Alves’ poetry is marked by the hesitations and anguish of a poetic subject who is always struggling with a distorted self-image in an aesthetic construction filled with interrogation marks, ellipsis, hyphens, and different kinds of syntactical displacements to emphasize that constant struggle (Augel 2007, 27).

A parallel with the functionality of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil seems to be appropriate in this context. In “Trapos e Nudez”, Alves creates an imagery that describes the ideology according to which blackness is supposedly assimilated and reconciled, while obscuring real forms of discrimination. The inability of self-recognition in the mirror (“I couldn’t see my eyes”) – described in the first stanza of the poem – echoes the ways in which the Afro-Brazilian population is submitted to social oppression and control and does not benefit from full recognition of our cultural and historical value. Differently from other poems in the anthology, Alves’ “Trapos e Nudez” constructs an image of the black female body – with the linguistic “feminine” gender mark in Portuguese (“estava desnuda”) – in a position of complete exposure: a process of (self) revelation in which the “strange decomposing figure” reflected in the mirror also marks a moment of astonishing disclosure of her identity as a black woman.

The notion of surrender, therefore, is re-signified here, because it does not imply to agree to forgo to the power of another, but to one’s own power to (re)define oneself on one’s own terms. Resisting the “useless rags” and letting them go becomes, in this context, an act of surrender to the subject’s own truth – her own process of self-identification, self-valorization, and self-recovery.

The vulnerability with which Alves portrays the black female subject in this epiphany – a mix of rejection, shame, liberation, surrender, recovery, resistance, and anguish– speaks to the struggle for self-affirmation, self-acceptance, and self-definition represented in the writings by a number of Afro-descendant women across the Americas. In the literary tradition of the African Diaspora by women, identity politics is interwoven with the transformations and struggles experienced by the very bodies on which identity is imprinted. In a quick glance at the U.S. African American and Afro-Brazilian traditions, it is possible to enumerate the following:

- 1) in her autobiography (1861), Harriet Jacobs finds herself as “a piece of merchandise” at the age of six in late nineteenth century (Gates, Jr. 2012, 445);
- 2) Harriet Wilson’s Frado in *Our Nig* (1859) laments her existence as an objectified being - “No one cares for me only to get my work... and then it is, You lazy nigger, lazy nigger – all because I am black!” (*Project Gutenberg*, n. p., Web);
- 3) the pioneering novel *Úrsula* (1859) by Maria Firmina dos Reis uses her perspective as a black woman to talk about institution of slavery in Brazil, according to which the enslaved body becomes “human merchandise” (Reis 2004, 117);
- 4) Carolina Maria de Jesus’ *Quarto de Despejo* (*Child of the Dark*, published in Brazil in 1960) exposes in raw flesh the daily struggles of a poor black mother who resiliently defies her fate: “... I fought against the real slavery – hunger!” (Jesus 2003, 34);
- 5) Toni Morrison’s Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) goes insane for not being able to accept her own blackness and for being socially rejected and violated for that same reason;
- 6) Conceição Evaristo’s *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003), in which the protagonist’s painful journey of recovery of a lost family connection (and self-redemption) is embodied in a frequent, yet fractured, re-staging of traumatic experiences of racial, class, and gender oppression.

Many of Audre Lorde's essays in *Sister Outsider* seem to reflect that same notion of vulnerability as a tool to access power and strength – often related to the uses of creative work. In “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, Lorde addresses the fact that black women in the U.S. have always had to struggle with the ambivalences of being highly visible – as their bodies become commodities - and being rendered invisible “through the depersonalization of racism” (Lorde 2007, 42). In making a call for black women to fight for their visibility in spaces where they are kept marginalized and silenced, Lorde is aware of the ways in which that visibility means exposure and vulnerability - how that becomes also a source of fear. Just like Alves' poetic subject in “Trapos e Nudez” re-claims exposure as self-acceptance and finds strength, Lorde highlights that re-claiming blackness and breaking the silence about oppression represents the kind of visibility “which makes us most vulnerable”, but it is also “the source of our greatest strength” (Lorde 2007, 42). Lorde uses that same idea in a conversation with Adrienne Rich about the vulnerable position she puts herself in when coming out as a lesbian in the black community or when addressing how black men and women in the U.S. have shared vulnerabilities and different experiences when facing racism (Lorde 2004, 62).

Lorde's poetic body of work is also devoted to explore that diasporic common thread: the pain and triumph embodied by black female subjects in the struggles for self-naming and self-definition. As Kara Provost points out, Lorde's work is particularly shaped by the notion of multivocality of the trickster tradition<sup>46</sup>, which offers the writer linguistic and artistic tools to navigate the challenges of inhabiting non-conforming, ever-changing, multiple identities:

Invoking trickster strategies aids Audre Lorde - and, ideally, her readers - in surviving and struggling against the devaluation and fear of “difference”. While she never denies the difficulty involved in this struggle, at best her work helps transform

difference(s) from solely points of pain into sources of power as well (Provost 1995, 57).

If, on one hand, the use of “trickster strategies” prompts Lorde to use language in ways that challenge and transgress both textual and identity norms, as Provost claims; on another hand, it also reveals how the writer cannily constructs a framework from which her poetic voice is able to articulate both the power and the pain of identity dislocations. For instance, the poem “Outside”, published in Lorde’s seventh poetry anthology, *The Black Unicorn* (1978), illustrates Lorde’s creation of a black female poetic voice that expresses the anguish of growing up “in genuine confusion/ between grass and weeds and flowers/ and what colored meant” (Lorde 1997, 279). Here, as the title of the poem suggests, the poetic subject embodies a fragmented self whose image does not fit in any pre-assigned frame. This displacement is also expressed in the ways the black female body is “otherized” and, then, singularized as different:

who do you think me to be  
that you are terrified of becoming  
or what do you see in my face  
you have not already discarded  
in your mirror  
what face do you see in my eyes  
that you will someday  
come to  
acknowledge your own?

Lorde’s use of the mirror to establish a paradigm of difference between the two parties in the poem (the poetic “I” and “you”) exposes the extent to which the projection of the black female image is

not only distorted, but also rejected. The inability of acknowledging the black female image - or the fear of “becoming” that perceived image - illustrates what critic Maria del Guadalupe Davidson defines as the “fundamental blindness with regard to black women” that plagues the white imagination. Drawing from Patricia H. Collins’ analysis of “controlling images” to explain the status of black women in the white imagination, Davidson argues that the “construction of black female identity, like that of black male identity, is the product of a one-way street in which the white imagination uncritically creates and identifies a problem of its own making” (Davidson 2010, 194). In that sense, more than the mirror or the image itself, it is the eye of the beholder the complicating factor.

If resisting the imposition of distorted or blurred images implies, as Davidson advocates, the re-imagining and the vocalizing of “the radical plurality of the black female experience” (Davidson 2010, 194), Lorde’s poetic subject seems to embrace the notion of the outsider as a strategy that enables self-naming and self-definition. Despite of growing up in a “genuine confusion” generated by racial stereotypes, according to which “all things natural are strange”, the poetic subject recognizes her own difference, her blackness, as the “marrow meaning meat” of her “bones confusion”. Marked by a questionable blackness of a mixed-race heritage (“mother bright and a father brown”), the outsider in Lorde’s poem adopts a position of vulnerability as the very strategy to build one’s own sense of self from a deep desire for self-recognition, self-acceptance, and self-love: “...the pieces I stumble and fall over/ I still record as proof/ that I am beautiful/...I am blessed within my selves/ who are come to make our shattered faces/whole” (Lorde 1997, 280).

From this position of vulnerability, from a voluntary exposure of the tender parts of the self, Lorde’s poetry is constantly reclaiming that space as a location of self-empowerment where fragmentations and dislocations are actually part of the whole, materialized in the very existence



of the body. The poetic black female subject in “A Woman Speaks” - “Moon marked and touched by sun” – dialogues with the one in “From the House of Yemanjá” where the affirmation “I am the sun and moon and forever hungry” reverberates that sense of fragmentation that leads to integrity and unity. Here, the poetic dialogue staged by Lorde in *The Black Unicorn* enhances the notion of wholeness through acknowledging the multiple parts of a self: the sun and the moon as light and shadow; as masculine and feminine; as heat and cold; as consciousness and unconsciousness; and all the continuous cycles of transformation and transitions related to their symbolic meanings (Cirlot 1990, 217-19; 317 -19).

As an on-going search for plenitude, freedom, and completeness, the turn to a deep appreciation of one’s interior divisions becomes the very itinerary of that search - “where day and night shall meet/ and not be/ one” (“From the House of Yemanjá”); the search enables the possibility of self-recognition and self-affirmation – “I have been woman/ for a long time.../ I am/ woman/ and not white” (“A Woman Speaks”). The intertextual relation between those two poems emphasizes the conjunction of all the elements of embodied body politics and spirituality, as well as the affirmation of a non-white womanhood and an Afro-diasporic sense of ancestry. The invocation of Yemanjá – the Yoruba Orisha of the ocean waters and the motherly protective figure – in one poem is associated with the lineage of Dahomean sisters in the other poem, establishing both an intertextual connection and a deeper sense of belonging and continuity for the poetic subjects.

It is important to notice that the idea of vulnerability in these literary works by black women across the diaspora embraces the complexities and contradictions black women embody. When discussing the poetry of Lucille Clifton, Ajuan Maria Mance demonstrates how contemporary black women poets have developed a representational repertoire in which black women’s identities

are inscribed within a “paradigm of simultaneity”, transgressing the boundaries of discourse that have limited or prevented black women’s visibility (Mance 2001, 125). Within this “paradigm of simultaneity”, contemporary black women writers, Mance argues, have created an aesthetic representation of the black body that explores the multiple ways in which womanhood and blackness, alongside with other pre-established imposed contradictory qualities, converge in their writings, bending and taunting “the conventions of the mainstream, not wholly eliminating or exploding traditional identity categories but alleviating them, so that other possibilities may come into view” (135).

In that sense, Alves’s and Lorde’s poetry take a step into exploring these other possibilities, defying the conventions, challenging the separation of qualities in predefined categorizations for blackness and womanhood. That is not to say that the answers for Alves’ quest in “Trapos e Nudez” or Lorde’s “Outside” are within reach, easily accessible. As one can read in “Trapos e Nudez”, words fall “into a gap/ without eco”; and in “Outside”, the poetic subject declares “I am lustful now for my own name”. In that sense, the journey of building the self - the “power of making”, as Mance describes it – is, in and of itself, an act of resistance. In other poems in the *Momentos de Busca*, for instance, Alves’ poetic voice raises questions about the ways in which the black female body is trapped, fragmented, limited, and manipulated, while yearning for being whole, for embracing all that is possible, for being truly free. The poem “Fusão” [“Fusion”] illustrates that desire and longing for merging all the parts – supposedly contradictory and mutually exclusionary - as a unit that allows and embraces contradictions and dualities: a “chemical process” of “corporeal formation” where nothing is fixed or pre-defined; where “yes” and “no” belong to the black subject’s repertoire of agency and autonomy; and reality becomes an on-going recovery and transformation of the self:

Quero agarrar o sim e o não

existentes em mim

...

Quero flexioná-los

num processo químico

...

Quero eternizar

nessa prática

a inconstante e incerta

realidade do talvez

[I want to snatch the yes and the no/ that live in me/ ... I want to fuse them/ in a chemical process/ ... I want to eternalize/ in this practice/ the inconstant and uncertain/ reality of a maybe]

The “fusion” of contradictions in one’s self speaks to “the radical plurality of the black female experience” - brought to this discussion by Davidson (2010). However, from a diasporic perspective, the idea of plurality also points to an understanding that the experiences of black women and the construction of identities are multiple, distinct, and – not rarely – contradictory and ambivalent. In that sense, Alves’ poetic subject in “Fusão” also dialogues with the one in Lorde’s “Outside” in terms of being labeled as ambiguous or occupying a space of indefinite categories, including the ones that are ambivalently racialized: being called “a yellow snot” or placed “between the canyons”, as Lorde’s poem expresses. As Keith Leonard points out, in regards to *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde’s ability to bring together the ambivalences, contradictions and

multiplicities of selfhood, in connection with a sense of African diasporic belonging – starting from the use of the deviant figure of the “relentless”, “greedy” black unicorn – illustrates one of the pillars of the poli(poe)tics of embodiment:

Lorde’s genius in this volume, then, is in locating her ideal of affirming lyric multiplicity in a diasporic context in order to gather to her lyric practice the tensions in the claims to continuities of cultural heritage that must confront and cannot resolve the readily apparent historical ruptures (Leonard 2012, 767).

Similarly, in many of Miriam Alves’ poems in *Momentos de Busca*, the poetic subject consistently vocalizes the yearning for embracing the “reality of a *maybe*”; all the fragments of a “decomposing figure” (as in “Trapos e Nudez”); a “vulnerable interior/ visible to all the eyes” (as in “Vidraças Quebradas”); and a state of continuous change of a “floating soul/ without geographic/ geometric/ lines” (as in “Imaginando o Mundo”). Also, in the same anthology, Alves often uses references to nudity and to a transformed/transmutable body to talk about radical and transgressive forms of self-discovery, self-naming, and self-affirmation. For instance, in the poems “Estranho Indagar”, “Pés Atados, Corpo Alado”, “Trapos e Nudez”, and “Fusão”, a “clear shadow”, a winged/flying-body, a nude “decomposing figure”, and a chemically transformed body – respectively - stand as mythic symbols of transgression and mutation<sup>47</sup>. As Mance explains, by incorporating images and language associated with a mythic or magical/supernatural processes in the paradigm of simultaneity, Alves’ poetry invokes a transgression of “the physical and discursive boundaries that have limited black women’s visibility”, disrupting “those established relationships between subject and setting that have maintained womanhood as a white middle-class identity category” (Mance, 125).

The transgressive character in Miriam Alves’ poetry also evolves into a more pronounced

black female voice, intrinsically interwoven with the construction of an aesthetic project of reclamation of black female body in its multiple forms. Since the late 1980s, in the volumes of *Cadernos Negros*, Alves has consistently published poems that give prominent evidence of a black female subject who, by affirming herself, creates new paradigms for the celebration of the black female body. While *Cadernos Negros*, as a publication, is intentionally marked by signifiers of “negrura” (or blackness) - displaying, for instance, dark-skinned bodies in the volume covers<sup>48</sup>, Alves’ poetic subject is often a figure without normalized phenotypical characterizations of “negrura” (hair texture, nose, lips, and darker skin tones, so typically associated with being “negro/a” in Brazil). Rather, by assuming a positioning of black poetic voice, in channeling an Afro-Brazilian aesthetics, Alves’ poetry opens up multiple pathways for the articulation of black female subjectivities.

The categorizations of Brazilian black women – from the passivity of the “mãe preta”, to the commodification of the “mulata”, to the hypersexualization of the “morena” – highlight the historical narratives of domination and exploitation of black female bodies as national tropes. They also indicate the asphyxia of black women’s own definitions of themselves; they violate the right of those bodies to express themselves with agency. Alves’ poli(poe)tics creates the possibility for the evocation of “negrura” and “negritude” in all of its tones and textures.

In the poem “Fêmea Toca” (a pun in words that could be translated as both “Female Hole” and “Female Touch”), published in the 1990 volume of *Cadernos Negros*, Alves uses the imagery of a new-born female being involved in rituals of survival that are connected with notions of resistance, continuity, and ancestry: “Aguardar o sangue placenta/ escorrer jorro convulso/ avermelhando a existência/ fêmea recém-parida faz” [“To await the placental blood/ pouring a convulsive gush/ turning existence red/ a newborn female does”]. In the same volume of *Cadernos*,

Alves' "Objetando" ["Objecting"] reveals another play on words both to denounce the ways in which women's bodies have been historically objectified, and to voice her dissent, objecting to that manipulation: "Objeto/ passagem coisificada na disputa/ para consumação carnívora" ["Object/ passage made flesh in the dispute/ for carnivorous consumption"]. Neither of these poems bring an explicit linguistic mark of race for the representation of the "new-born female" or this woman "in battle". As pointed out by Emmanulle K. F. Oliveira in her study of contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature (2008, 185), this linguistic choice leads to an interpretation of the character of womanhood as a distinct condition within systems of patriarchal oppression, but with no particular poetic reference to the specificities of black women's positionality.

However, I argue, this perspective tends to restrict the larger scope of the production by black women artists who have consistently carved out a political and aesthetic space for the liberation of black female bodies and voices, as it is the case with Miriam Alves. Such an interpretation seems to dismiss the historical relevance of that literary tradition and reinforce the Western notion of "woman" as inherently exclusionary of women of color. Therefore, it is important to push the boundaries of long established conceptualizations and critical frameworks, expanding the possible readings of literary texts by contemporary black women writers. Contrary to this hegemonic notion of womanhood, Alves' offers the possibility of contemplating this woman-object(ing), "passage made flesh in the dispute", as she embodies and confronts the ancestral history of domination and exploitation of black female bodies.

Although this strategic positioning by Alves may represent the creation of alternative routes for Afro-Brazilian self-affirmation, the poet constantly brings to her writings issues associated with the role colorism plays in the larger Brazilian society, where light skin is generally associated with social mobility. In more recent publications, Miriam Alves has created an aesthetics that explicitly

addresses the issues of stereotypical images of black women’s bodies, rebuilding a poetic lexicon of symbols of (self) empowerment and self-affirmation associated with phenotypical features typically considered of African descent. On her Facebook page, Alves often displays her poems as an assemblage that combines words and images, particularly photographs of her own authorship. In several of her poems available on Facebook (either on her personal account or the other two dedicated to “Escritora Miriam Alves” and “Zula Gibi”), Alves uses images of black bodies (in most cases, her own) to construct a poetics that invokes and celebrates the beauty of the African ancestry in elaborate illustrations of the poli(poe)tics of embodiment. In “Armado” (“Armed”, March 2014), for instance, Alves builds on the hair as metaphor for self-affirmation and self-definition according to which the natural “bushy” hair is re-signified as a “weapon” to fight racism:



Picture 3: “Armado”, photo-poem by Miriam Alves.

[My hair is a weapon,/ a weapon against racist fools/ foolish racists/ It arms itself against the dictatorship of aesthetics/ Armed, it defies the hot iron/ that straightens and flattens/ My hair pointing to the sky/ is a weapon yes of affirmation/ My hair is Black is Power/ My hair?/ A weapon gifted to me by the Orishas]

Once again, the play with the adjective “armado” - which, in Portuguese, refers both to “bulky” hair and “armed” as in “carrying a weapon” – denotes an African mark (hair) used as an instrument to fight against the historical degradation of black bodies. The natural hair as a weapon – “pointing to the sky” – also performs a counter-narrative to the attempts to erase those marks of “negrura” in the Afro-descendant body: it defies the “dictatorship of aesthetics” that imposes the flattened, straight hair as standard of beauty – a reality in the daily lives of so many black Brazilians<sup>49</sup>. Therefore, the “cabelo armado” (“bulky hair”), emphasized by Alves’ image of her own natural hair, becomes the “arm” used to deconstruct Western white standards of beauty, to re-claim power, and to re-affirm an Afro-Brazilian identity. In this context, “cabelo armado” represents the trope of a diasporic sense of belonging, connection, and resistance (“My hair is Black is Power”) among Afro-descendants: it celebrates an ancient spiritual capital, blessed by the Orishas from the Yoruba tradition – a manifestation of the African ancestry throughout the diasporic space in the Americas.

In reclaiming ancestral belonging, personal aesthetics, and transformative power, Alves’ poetic constructions dialogues with what Audre Lorde defines as “the transformation of silence into language and action”, as discussed earlier in this section. For Lorde, that process of transformation is intrinsically related to the acknowledgement and uses of those inner sources of energy, power, and creativity women of color are taught (or conditioned) to dismiss or fear. This



basic principle – “the basic and radical alterations of those assumptions underlining our lives” (Lorde 2007, 127) – is a fundamental pillar in Lorde’s theorizing the politics of collective action and allyship among women of color. It is by scrutinizing and identifying those sources of power (anger, the erotic, poetry, and difference), used in the “service of our vision and our future”, that Lorde’s re-imagined change and liberation (Lorde 2007, 128). The poem “Call” (*Our Dead Behind Us*, 1986) is probably the most striking illustration Lorde’s vision as a poetic construction in which the black female “self” is re-claimed within a collective project for liberation. The process of making that liberated future possible is written throughout several generations of history:

On worn kitchen stools and tables  
we are piercing our weapons together  
scraps of different histories  
do not let us shatter  
any altar  
...  
Aido Hwendo is coming.

The intimate, communal, and familiar space of “worn kitchen stools and tables” becomes the stage of a radical re-creation of “selves” and a revolutionary co-creation of a desired reality. Reconsidering Quashie’s notion of quiet, the inner life of kitchens – as a space of togetherness, closeness, nourishment, creativity, and transformation – is the site where agency and resistance goes hand in hand with the full beautiful ambivalence and vulnerability of the inner lives of black women in this poem. And how to build and keep an altar if not through agency and vulnerability?

Lorde’s “Call” functions as a prayer, an invocation of the spiritual presence of the “holy ghost woman”, the Rainbow Serpent goddess of the Dahomean creation myth - Aido Hwedo:

“Mother loosen my tongue/ or adorn me/ with a lighter burden”. As “a representation of all ancient divinities who must be worshipped but whose names and faces have been forgotten” (Lorde 2000, 419), Aido Hwedo conjures up the names of other black women, “fire-tongued” ancestors, “lost to the false hush of sorrow/ to hardness and hatches and childbirth” – Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Oya, Seboulisa, Afrekete, Assata Shakur, Yaa Asantewa, Winnie Mandela, “my mother”. Such as in Alves’ “Armado”, the poem is an invocation/convocation of ancestral power, historical memory, and spiritual wealth in order to fashion the desired transformations “beyond our vision”. Lorde’s poem/prayer calls for the urgent task of alliance and resistance of a diasporic constellation of black women warriors, fostering their power to continue their work: “the transformation of silence into language and action”; “one iron silence broken”; “...learning by heart/ what has never been taught”.

In re-claiming the inner capabilities of self, by search for those moments of inward scrutiny, and by re-configuring the materiality of the black female body within a legacy of African ancestral wealth, Lorde’s and Alves’ poli(poe)tics of embodiment also contribute to re-design a vocabulary of resistance and survival according to which black bodies are not exclusively seen as labor (exploited, manipulated, violated). Although both Lorde’s and Alves’ poetics draws from the history of enslavement in the Americas to build on themes of resistance, survival, and identity, their aesthetic projects provide possibilities for the re-creation of a sense of self, for multiple ways to perform blackness and womanhood, for the celebration of what makes us different and one – our humanness. Here, they proclaim the re-creation of themselves side by side:

and we each wear many changes  
inside of our skin.  
Armed with scars  
healed  
in many different colors  
I look in my own faces  
(“Between Ourselves”, Audre Lorde)

Minha cara pintada é esta  
Com a qual saio às ruas  
todos os dias  
dia após dia  
uma luta constante  
pela minha dignidade.  
(“Cara Pintada”, Miriam Alves)<sup>50</sup>

## PART II

### **Liberating the Erotic Power, Transforming the Body**

The silences, taboos, and misperceptions surrounding black women's sexual identities and their forms of expression is a historical phenomenon both in the U.S. and in Brazil. Barbara Omolade's essay "Hearts of Darkness" explains that the sexual history of the U.S. – particularly in reference to black women's bodies - started with colonization when European conquerors met African women, and the conquered turned into captives and sexual property: from that moment of conquest, Omolade explains, African sexuality was viewed by the European man as "evidence of the absence of any sexual codes of behavior, an idea that both fascinated and repelled him" (1995, 362 - 363). As Omolade explores further in her essay, these misperceptions speak both to the ideological control over black female bodies, as well as to the economic hegemony that has historically regulated the production of the material wealth generated from and by these bodies.

It is because of the historical associations between deviant sexuality and blackness (among other types of racialized marks of difference) that black women's bodies – particularly their named sexual behavior - have been attached to ideas of dysfunctionality – even though those are the bodies used to sustain the means of profit in New World economies (Morgan 2004, 13 - 15). Black women intellectuals in the U.S. such as Omolade, Barbara Smith, Paula Giddings, bell hooks, Hortense Spillers, and Patricia Collins – among others – have extensively discussed the iconography of black female bodies engraved into what Collins coined as "controlling images" – the Mammy, the Sapphire, the Jezebel – all of which carrying monolithic sexual associations within contexts of domination.

In the so-called paradise of racial democracy, Brazilian black women's sexuality gains

different contours within the discourses of “mestiçagem” and the establishment of its whitening ideology. Within this context, black women’s bodies are seen from multi-layered contradictory perspectives: in the absence of legal racial segregation, black women’s bodies are manipulated and controlled by a patriarchal and racist ideology that also creates sexualized signifiers for (and according to) different shades of blackness. Those sexualized signifiers reinforce and perpetuate the idea that black women’s sexuality and eroticism do not belong to their own bodies, but to a system that regulates the use of their bodies. As Elisa Larkin Nascimento points out:

A miscigenação como fruto do abuso sexual de mulheres subjugadas pouco transmite sobre compreensão mútua entre seres humanos, mas expressa de forma eloquente o controle violento das mulheres. O gênio da ideologia brasileira foi fazer dessa violência o cerne de um discurso auto-elogioso em que a elite “branca” se purga de qualquer responsabilidade ou culpa da violência inerente ao racismo e ao patriarcalismo (Nascimento 2003, 134).

[Miscegenation as the result of the sexual abuse of subjugated women little speaks to mutual understanding among human beings, but it eloquently expresses the violent control of women. The genius of the Brazilian ideology was to make of that violence the core of a self-congratulatory discourse according to which the “white” elite purges itself of any responsibility or guilt of the violence inherent to racism and patriarchy.]

As an emblem of national unity, Brazilian “mestiçagem” is born out of the historical violation of women’s bodies – black and indigenous. The iconography of “mestiçagem” produces the images of *mulatas*, *morenas*, *pardas*, *cafuças* according to a sexual practice and sexual representation characterized by what Osmundo de Araújo Pinho calls “uma miscigenação predatória” [“a

predatory miscegenation”]: it is a sexual practice inscribed within a context of inequalities and asymmetries (Pinho 2004, 100). As literary representation, these iconographies permeate the entire Brazilian canon, from Gregório de Matos to Jorge Amado, gifting us with characters such as Isaura, the “almost white” romantic enslaved woman in Bernardo Guimarães’ novel; Rita Baiana in Aluísio de Azevedo’s naturalist narrative *O Cortiço*; and the clove-and-cinnamon- looking Gabriela of Amado’s classic modernist novel – all national symbols of racial and sexual hierarchies.

These socio-cultural contexts of regulation of black women’s bodies in the diaspora give high significance to Audre Lorde’s reclamation of the erotic as an inner source of power within a black feminist standpoint. Her essay “The Uses of the Erotic” becomes, within this context, an important theorizing tool that helps re-define the ontological and epistemological meanings of black women’s erotic power not only on the context of the U.S., but also across the American diaspora. Lorde’s appreciation of that particular intimate part of the self - historically, privately, and publically misused and abused - aims at bringing to light the erotic as “a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough” (Lorde 2007, 54). It is precisely because Lorde re-configures the erotic as part of women’s inner life – a “well” dug into the depth of one’s interiority – available to be explored on one’s own terms, at the service of one’s own liberation, that Lorde’s theoretical framework becomes revolutionary: for Lorde, the erotic is “the energy to pursue genuine change within our world”; it is the “nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (Lorde 2007, 56). Within that framework, the erotic is as political as it is spiritual; it is a resource for self-empowerment and a resource for collective organizing and learning.

Farah Jasmine Griffin points to the essentialist overtones that Lorde’s essay might imply,

but I agree with her that Lorde's pioneering perspective that connects the erotic as resistance and power with a spiritual source of renewal offers an important tool for the reclamation of the erotic in the face of "a historical legacy that deems black women 'over-sexed'" (Griffin 1996, 526). However, for Griffin, unless that historical legacy and the ways in which the black female body has been constructed are confronted, "it is almost impossible to construct an alternative that seeks to claim the erotic and its potential for resistance" (Ibid.). As discussed in the previous section, both Lorde and Alves revisit the violence imposed on the black female body – a violence that causes the fragmentation of that body and the self. What I suggest is that Lorde and Alves bring that historical legacy of the pained black female body into their poetics as a discourse and practice of resistance, because the body is already re-inscribed within a re-imagined, re-configured, and re-claimed embodiment.

In transforming the black female body and liberating the erotic as a source of power and knowledge, Lorde's and Alves' poli(poe)tics perform an action of re-definition of what eroticism can be and how it can be used at one's own service and profit, as well as for the benefit of the transformation of the world around us. Or as Lorde explains: "...allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense" (Lorde 2017, 58).

Alves' first solo poetry anthology anticipates an erotic discourse which she elaborates and expands in later works. For example, in "Despudor" ["Shamelessness"] and "Bolindo Sexualmente" ["Touching Sexually"], the poetic subject dives into a sensual journey, engaging all the senses in a sensual quest for plenitude and liberation. In "Despudor", Alves starts by announcing, in the title, the rupture with monolithic notions of "decency" that imposes and normalizes standards of socially accepted morality and respectability. The black female subject

describes, through erotic images in each one of the eleven stanzas, her sexual involvement with a black man (“meu nego”)<sup>51</sup> in which her liberated body is completely open to experience “a hot and carnal love/ SHAMELESSLY”. Alves subverts the normalization of a patriarchal hierarchy in a heterosexual relationship by highlighting the agency with which the black female subject engages in that experience, assuming a position of control of her own body, directed by her own desire:

Aguarrei as vestes  
deitei em seu regaço  
...  
Nos meus ouvidos  
respiração entrecortada  
o encontro a confirmação  
você em mim.

[I grabbed my clothes/ I lay on his lap/ ... In my ears/ a broken breath/ the encounter  
the confirmation/ you in me.]

The sexual encounter depicted in “Despudor” becomes an experience that promotes self-affirmation, liberation, and empowerment: instead of being the historical object of confinement, the black female body here is open and willing to explore the possibilities of sexual fulfillment with another. In “Bolindo Sexualmente”, Alves portrays a black female subject who is open to the same kind of sexual explorations, but this time she engages in a homoerotic fantasy that “shakes the window of consciousness/ without possession”, enticing a hidden desire:

Às vezes nas horas mortas  
sorratamente



deita na minha cama  
marca sua presença  
manchando o lençol  
e sai vaidosa  
incólume  
rebolando as volumosas ancas  
e os meus olhos gulosos  
voluptuosos  
contemplam  
as mãos querem tocar  
os arrendodamentos das formas

[Sometimes in the dead hour/ surreptitiously/ she lies on my bed/ marks her  
presence/ staining the sheets/ then she leaves vain/ unscarred/ swaying her  
voluminous haunches/ and my greedy eyes/voluptuously/ contemplate/ the hands  
want to touch/ the curves of her line]

The setting Alves constructs for both poems represents the private space of the subject's bedroom: a space of deep intimacy and prompt to unbridled sexual explorations. While "Despudor" tells about a concrete encounter of sexual exploration that leads to an actual moment of sexual fulfilment for the poetic subject; the poem "Bulindo Sexualmente" describes a homoerotic experience at the level of sexual fantasy whose evidence remains as "stains": "...lembranças deixadas nos lençóis da mente" [...as memories/left behind/in the linen of the mind". The term "bulindo", from the verb "bulir" (to entice or tease; to touch or tamper), also indicates that the

poetic subject's desire is provoked by an experience that is fantasized, rather than concrete. The surreptitious visit of the woman with "voluminous haunches" at the "dead hour" – the time of deepest sleep, sometimes associated with a time of greatest incidence of supernatural influences<sup>52</sup> - suggests she is some sort of welcoming ghostly presence that comes and goes – untouchable, unreachable, but deeply (and sensually) felt. The indulgence of that imagined sensual reality ("an implicit thought") signals a profound internal shift, despite its immateriality: a personal awakening, leading to a powerful sense of possibility that shakes "the window of consciousness".

Therefore, what seems to be liberating in this instance of intense eroticism does not relate to the materialization of the sexual intercourse – as it is in "Despudor" – but the power to (re)imagine, (re)direct, and (re)configure one's desire within oneself. The fact that this power of a (re)imagined reality is represented, in the poem, as a homoerotic experience between two women gives evidence to Miriam Alves' early literary transgressions, particularly in the context of the 1980s black movement when the question of sexuality and homoeroticism was not an item in the political agenda<sup>53</sup>, as Alves herself highlights in several interviews. Within this context, when Alves liberates the black female erotic desire in the text, she also liberates the textuality of her poetry by opening up the paths for expressions and representations outside of the patriarchal heteronormative container.

Audre Lorde's deliberate portrayal of eroticism - a woman-centered eroticism to be more precise - expands the notion of community building and partnership. Sensuality and sexual desire are included in that notion, but these are not exclusive elements of the ways women build alliances with one another in Lorde's poli(poe)tics. In *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde's vision of the erotic as transformative power is imprinted in several poetic constructions that depict scenarios of profound bonds among women in female manifestations of spiritual and political strength. In the poem

“Woman”, for instance, the female body becomes the imagined and desired sanctuary where material and immaterial needs can be met: “...where I plant crops/ in your body/ an endless harvest”. The specificity where this “house like a haven” can be built – “a place between your breasts” – connects with notions such as shelter, nurture, and care, all of which may relate to the idea of motherhood or a female protective figure. But the precious haven of this dreamed place of safety also harbors a beautiful, rich and profound erotic image. The cultivated body of the “woman” becomes the fertile land from which gemstones are harvested (“where the commonest rock/ is moonstone and ebony opal”), nourishing the poetic subject with pleasure and total satisfaction: “giving milk to all of my hungers/ and your night comes down upon me/ like a nurturing rain”.

In fact, in the anthology *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde seems to insist on images related to planting, gardening, and cultivating the land as they refer to cycles, seasons, and changes in the quality of relationships with different female figures. It is possible to notice that occurrence in the poem “In Margaret’s Garden” where the passing of time is mirrored by how the poetic subject witnesses the transformations in Margaret’s inner life – her garden. The kind of complicity and intimacy that enables the poetic subject to see and feel her “sister” throughout three cycles – blooming, in solitude, and in grief - are sustained by the use of the erotic as a resource “firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde 2007, 53). That is the reason why the poetic subject declares to her sister at the end of the poem: “I felt you wanting/ to mourn/ the innocence of beginnings/ ... I feel your sadness/ deep in the center of me”. The poem, thus, becomes a declaration of a witness in full recognition of her sister’s most private struggles. Such as one does when walking around someone else’s garden, noticing every blooming or dying flower; every pathway towards renewal: a poetic embrace of another’s inner life; the patience in

cultivating friendship; the ground where mutual understanding may grow.

When writing as Zula Gibi, Miriam Alves assumes a homoerotic poetic voice in that celebrates desire and sensuality as a possibility to profoundly engage with another in an authentic, fulfilling way as equals. Just like in Lorde's "In Margaret's Garden" and "Woman", the erotic in Zula Gibi's poetry is often inscribed within the notion of profound complicity and intimacy with another, facilitating and restoring a relational quality that prioritizes both vulnerability and equity. Gibi's poem "Amiga Amante" ["Lover Friend"], published in *Cadernos Negros 25* (2000), illustrates that desire for connection:

Queria que um rastro de luz se fizesse agora

E nos levasse ao espaço de nós duas

...

e na encruzilhada desta via láctea

nos encontrasse plenas

nas procuras realizadas

Um suspiro um sorriso a paz a certeza

o amor

de igual para igual

[I wish a ray of light shone on us now/ And took us to the shared space in ourselves/... and at the crossroads of this milky way/ it found us fulfilled/ in our quest/ A whisper a smile peace certainty/ love/ from equal to equal]

The erotic relationship depicted here breaks with any concept that confines desire within ideas of

uncontrolled, destructive, pervasive, immoral, or perverted sexuality – as it is the case when considering how black female sexuality has been historically seen. Gibi’s poetic voice speaks of the liberation of what is deepest, strongest, and richest within herself and her “lover friend”: it is a relationship grounded in a desire for an ethical connection that honors boundaries and respects intimacy (o “ espaço de nós duas”); that brings mutual fulfillment and profound sense of self-realization (“nos encontrasse plenas/ nas procuras realizadas”); that creates a foundation for equity within the most intimate form of human connection (“o amor/ de igual para igual”). Alves’ poetic construction echoes the notion of deeply rooted bonds, similarly to the scenario depicted in Lorde’s “Woman”, in a desired, imagined, fantasized reality.

The same way “Bolindo Sexualmente” implies the possibility of experience rather than its materialization, the lover-friend connection between two women in “Amiga Amante” (the linguistic gender mark is clear throughout the poem) is expressed as a wish, a hope, or a vision that still awaits to become concrete. It is a poetic discourse in the subjunctive, denoting a desire that is yet to be fulfilled: “... aquele abraço que nunca demos/ ... imagens que não vimos/ ...trazendo ao coração ação que não dizemos/ ... a saudade se tornasse menor que nossos braços” [“... the embrace we’ve never had/ ... imagens we’ve never seen/ ... bringing to the heart the action we’ve never taken/ ... this longing would be bridged by our arms”]. This poetics of the subjunctive makes me wonder if these syntactic and semantic choices reveal the social complications and restraints surrounding the realization of a homoerotic relationship in a dramatically homophobic reality – such as the one surrounding Alves and the one surrounding Lorde’s in the 1970s and 1980s.

In these poetic constructions, the potentiality of materialization is at the center of the erotic desire, but its fulfillment is the projection of a utopia, of an ideal – or maybe a project-in-progress

for a liberating and decolonial experience of the erotic. Following what Saidiya Hartman considers as “advancing series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities)”, Lorde’s and Alves’ poli(poe)tics opens up new, re-imagined venues of (im)possibilities where the erotic becomes a resource for exploring full dimensions of the black female body – even when the concrete historical archives keep it captive, manipulated, fragmented, and exploited (Hartman 2008, 11). Therefore, Lorde’s and Alves’ subjunctive poetics transgresses the temporality and the confinements of history – past and present – by projecting and nurturing a deep desire to embody a liberated erotic force for the black female subjects of their poetry.

Although this subjunctive discourse that permeates Lorde’s and Alves’ poetics represents an important aesthetic element for the envisioning of erotic, the sisters outsiders also navigate throughout different kinds of poetic-grammatical moods. Zula Gibi’s “Escondido na Noite” (“Hidden in the Night”, *Cadernos 25* 2002) depicts a moment in the present, characterized by details of a sexual interaction in which the poetic subject and her lover surrender to their desire to give each other pleasure.

Gosto:

De niná-la em desejos

Olhar pelas frestas

Extasiada

...

Sentir o instinto escorrer na baba crua do desejo e

Percorrer os vãos entreabertos

Oferecidos na pontas dos dedos.

[I like:/ To cuddle her in desires/ To look through the openings/ In ecstasy/ ... To feel the instinct running off the dribble of desire and/ To wander through the half-open spaces/ Offered to the tip of my fingers.]

This surrender into “a cuddle of desires” prompts the lovers for a consensual and mutual exploration of sexual pleasures (“Olhar pelas frestas/... Percorrer os vãos entreabertos”), in a powerful exchange that liberates the erotic force. The liberation this sexual encounter promotes becomes the materialization of an experience of freedom according to which the poetic subject finds the space to be whole and fulfilled. It is important to notice, though, that this space of freedom is insulated by the secrecy the title of the poem suggests. The concretization of this intense erotic exchange is only possible in the hidden spaces of the night: the expression in Portuguese does not only imply a space of intimacy, but also a way of transgressing established boundaries. By choosing this title, Aves’/Gibi’s poetic construction once more denotes the challenges of experiencing a homoerotic relationship free from social constraints and regulations. But it also implies the impossibility of the publicness of that materialization. Ultimately, the poem testifies to a transgression of homophobic and patriarchal social boundaries in order to create the environment for a truly free exploration of the erotic force.

The secrecy, the hidden spaces, and concealed conditions in which the representations of women-centered eroticism are so remarkably present in the works of Miriam Alves (and Zula Gibi)<sup>54</sup> reflect what anthropologist Luiz Mott discusses in his study of racial and homoerotic relations in colonial Brazil: the history of homosexual relationships in Brazil is marked by a need to keep those criminal acts – as they were considered by the Portuguese royal court – in the underground, clandestine, and discrete, even among people who belong to different racial and class

hierarchies, since the punishment for such crimes could range from severe torture to a death sentence (Mott 1992, 181-183). According to Mott, the Brazilian history of sexuality has an enormous impact in the ways homophobic thinking has been perpetrated in society, as well as the ways in which homoerotic relationships are experienced and kept “in the closet” in contemporary times, even in the face of significant social and political transformations (Mott 1992, 185).

The open discourse performed by Lorde, as a self-identified black lesbian warrior poet, delineates more flexible boundaries of secrecy in her poetry in the context of the U.S. of the 1970s and 1980s. If the early 1990s is considered by Cathy J. Cohen as a moment when the political articulation of queer activists “recognizes and encourages the fluidity and movement of people’s sexual lives”, and the period when, in queer politics, “sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change” (Cohen 2005, 23), Audre Lorde’s pioneering theorizing of the erotic as transformative power figures as one of the foundational aspects of the political articulations of that era. In her poetry, pieces such as “Love Poem” – published in the anthology *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974) – gives voice to a poetic subject who understands the potential of change enhanced by the vulnerability of love, through the experience of an erotic encounter that liberates: “And I knew when I entered her I was/ high wind in her forests hollow/ fingers whispering sound/ honey flowed”.

The potentiality of change through the meeting of vulnerable selves in Lorde’s later poetry is also expressed by a desire of an encounter with another. This encounter – inscribed in a poetics of the subjunctive, as seen in Miriam Alves’ works - bear the possibility of revealing or recomposing the self. The poem “Recreation” (*The Black Unicorn*) is iconic in expressing the poetic subject’s crafting of herself in relationship with another: “Coming together/ is easier to work/ after our bodies/meet”. This recreation of self involves the complicity of an erotic exchange



that is comparable to the crafting of writing: in this imagery, the bodies meet just like “paper and pen” in a cyclical re-designing of each other’s figure and each other’s reality. Once more, Lorde’s pedagogy of feeling seems to guide a full exploration of the erotic as a vehicle of self and mutual knowledge:

Touching you I catch midnight  
as moon fires set in my throat  
I love you flesh into blossom  
I made you  
and take you made  
into me.

Lorde’s imagery invokes Miriam Alves’ notion of a “fleshy poetics” according to which the explorations of raw feelings and vulnerabilities within a context of reciprocity relates to the use of the erotic force that “rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge”, as advocated by Lorde (2007, 53). In her second solo publication, *Estrelas no Dedo* (1985), Alves’ poem “Revolta de Desejos” (“Revolt of Desires”) can be read as a manifesto against conventionality and in defense of multiple expressions of the erotic. The “revolt” announced by the poetic voice represents more than an individual yearn for breaking with pre-determined expressions of “conventional/ warmth/ called Love”. This annunciation proclaims a communal, revolutionary, and subversive manifestation of desires embodied by a collective “we” who dares to want, hope, and crave, beyond the norms:

Nossos desejos  
inconformam-se todos  
abrem as pernas

fecham antigas  
trincheiras  
estimulando novos passos  
no ritmo do  
desconhecido

[Our desires/ subvert it all/ open legs/ close old/ trenches/ stimulating new steps/ in  
the rhythm of/ the unknown]

By embracing this sense of collectivity, Alves' poetic subject disrupts the isolation, the discrimination, and the silences that surround black women's sexuality and the expressions of the erotic on one's own terms. By shifting from an individualized voice to a shared yearning, the poetic subject amplifies the notion of revolt which becomes materialized in a collective body, as well as in multiple desires (the word is always used in the plural form), in order to demonstrate the contextual, the positional, and the relational dynamics of sexuality and the claims to identity based on sexuality. Thus, the erotic becomes a larger, multi-dimensional, and multi-purposeful collective power that closes "old trenches" and opens up new directions, inaugurating new impulses, "stimulating new steps" towards a path of exploration, of self and communal discoveries. "Revolt of Desires" announces a revolutionary movement that propagates "gritos de LIVRE" ("cries of FREEDOM") as the poetic subject's unity with another represents a liberatory action of exorcism of "medos antigos" ["ancient fears"].

If, as Lorde claims, the uses of the erotic by women is a liberating force of (self) knowledge and (self) discovery, by which we become "less willing to accept powerlessness" (58), Miriam Alves' aesthetics offers the conditions for that kind of scrutiny, exploration, and empowerment.

Other poems also illustrate the reclamation of black women's erotic power and the need to subvert imposed silences, such as "Enigma" (*Estrelas no Dedo*), "Íntimo Véu" ("Intimate Veil", *Cadernos* 9 1986), "Averbalizar" ("Verbalization", *Cadernos* 11 1988), "Fêmea Toca" ("Female Hole", *Cadernos* 13 1990), "Neve e Seiva" ("Snow and Sap", *Cadernos* 21 1998), and "Reboliço" ("Fuss", *Cadernos* 29, 2006).

Within Lorde's notion of the erotic as creative and transformative energy – illustrated by her poems "Love Poem", "Woman", and "Recreation" - Miriam Alves also constructs an aesthetics of reinvention in which the poetic subject is engaged in a constant process of reintegration of her body and desires; breaking with old paradigms; breaking the silence of a veiled secret; and giving rise to new articulations of pleasure and desire that dismantle pre-established structures of sexual oppression. The poem "Casa Solteira" ["Solitary House"] illustrates Alves' aesthetics of reinvention: "the brick walls of the waiting room" in this solitary house, where "old dreams fall silent", help compose the depiction of the barriers, stereotypes, and silences imposed as obstacles for black women to access their inner source of power. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, this set of structural obstacles contribute to sustain a social system "that manipulates and exposes the bodies of Black women in hypersexualized ways, but does so in order to regulate sexuality and manufacture ideologies and notions of racial difference" (Collins 2005, 37). In "Casa Solteira", the poetic subject uses the erotic force to project new visions, new directions, new desires, destabilizing conditioning and monolithic structures that hinder the explorations and use of that erotic force as a renewable source of (self) empowerment. Reclaimed by the black female poetic voice, the erotic energy has, thus, the potential of exploding those brick walls to give rise to the possibility of redefinition of ideas about sexuality and sexual practices in a movement towards liberation:

Os velhos sonhos calam-se

Grita um novo delírio

renovando anseios

Os jovens prazeres

frenéticos

...

ameaçam explodir os tijolos

da sala de espera.

[The old dreams fall silent/ A fresh craze screams/ Renewing cravings/ Young frenetic pleasures/...threaten to explode the brick walls/ of the waiting room.]

In fact, the silences surrounding black women's eroticism and sexual lives stitches the historical narratives of black womanhood across the diaspora in the Americas in one way or another. Once again, Barbara Omolade's discussion demonstrates that the pernicious racist patriarchy affecting black female sexuality created, during and after slavery in the U.S., a conservative and harsh attitude among the older black women toward younger black female women and the extension of taboos against all sexual expressions. For black women of the nineteenth century, living a conservative and contained sexual life, "characterized by modesty and discretion", configured as an affirmation and a way of resistance to the history of sexual abuse and exploitation of the black bodies (Omolade 1995, 370- 371). Paula Giddings' essay "The Last Taboo" corroborates Omolade's analysis by using as an example the 1916 movement by the National Association of Colored Women to support suffrage, education, and community development. That widespread

campaign, Giddings explains, also served as a platform for black women to challenge the long-established discourses of degrading images of black womanhood: by portraying themselves as undeniably respectful, highly moral Christian individuals, black women affiliated with that movement adopted a Victorian standard of morality, keeping in secrecy the private aspects of their lives. Within that context, the sexual lives of black women became not only an inappropriate topic of discussion, but it also carried a threat to the whole black community – the threat of collective exposure and vilification (Giddings 1995, 420 – 421).

This historical perspective shows why breaking the silence around sexual and sexuality issues in the black community is, as Giddings puts it, on the core of a “modern transformative discourse” ((Ibid. 427). That is the reason why works such as Tricia Rose’s oral history volume *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* (2003) and Angela Davis’ s study *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (2011) represent a significant contribution to unveil black women’s social, moral, and sexual values outside the constraints imposed by the culture of respectability.

In this sense, Lorde’s phrase “Your silence will not protect you” from her essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” became emblematic of Lorde’s liberatory framework and the need for women of color to break the silences perpetuated by oppressive systems. Lorde’s poetry is inundated by imagery that evokes this urgency: the “fired-tongued” sisters in “Aido Hwedo Is Coming”, who are invoked to break “one iron silence”; the unrelenting self-affirming declarations in “A Woman Speaks”; the prayer in “A Litany for Survival”, whose invocations end with a reminder that “it is better to speak/ remembering/ we were never meant to survive”; the encounter with spiritual guides of the Yoruba pantheon in “Dahomey”, whose gifts include the sharpening of “the knives of my tongue”, enabling the poetic subject to speak

“whatever language is needed”. Facing the potential incidence of breast cancer, “becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality”, Lorde’s essay highlights the importance of looking at life with “a harsh and urgent clarity”; of facing life’s inescapable predicament that “death is the final silence”; of transforming the “face of our fears” into words of truth through our renewed “commitment to language and to the power of language” (Lorde 2007, 43 – 44).

Lorde’s poem “Echoes” (*Our Dead Behind Us*) is probably one of the most striking illustrations of that commitment to language and its transformative power as it relates to the use of the erotic as creative energy and growth. Like an echo, the empathy established between the poetic subject and her lover is represented by a reverberation of both the sound of their voices and the quality of their silences, in a dynamic that imply a deep sense of mutual understanding and recognition of each other’s pain: “There is a timbre of voice/ that comes from not being heard/ and knowing you are not being/ heard noticed only/ by others not heard/ for the same reason”. The depth of this connection – erotic and spiritual – fills the poetic subject’s existence with sensations of pleasure that entice creativity and liberates herself from false pretenses:

The flavor of midnight fruit    tongue  
calling your body through dark light  
piercing the allure of safety  
ripping the glitter of silence  
around you  
      dazzle me with color  
and perhaps I won’t notice  
till after you’re gone  
your hot grain smell tattooed

into each new poem     resonant

Within the action of breaking silences, Lorde's perspective also implies the willingness to listen to other stories and voices in full recognition of the differences they hold in their experiences, repelling what Lorde calls "the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us" (Lorde 2007, 44). Likewise, reclaiming black women's erotic power conjures up a reconfiguration of community dynamics. The resonance of voices in Lorde's "Echoes", for instance, signify the poetic subject's attempts to unravel the silences – "in that fine space/ between desire and always/ the grave stillness/ before choice" - her own truths as they affect a much larger dimension of her life: "As my tongue unravels/ in what pitch/ will the scream hang unsung/ or shiver like lace.../ which dreams heal    which/ dream can kill". As Lorde points out, "the erotic is often feared", because, once released, it can "give us the energy to pursue genuine changes within our world" (2007, 59).

Therefore, recognizing the power of the erotic represents, within this perspective, the potentiality of change in the ways community is organized and experienced by those who participate in community life. What kind of community change would Alves' poli(poe)tics embrace in the multiple expressions of the erotic she articulates in her poetry? The poem "Interrogatório" ("Interrogation", *Cadernos 29*, 2006) brings about different ways of approaching that question. Miriam Alves creates a textual provocation characterized by the use of aporia that evokes a series of questioning about isolation, community, shared struggles and liberation:

Quando o silêncio for uma confissão de amor  
quem estará do meu lado?  
Quem?  
Deixará de interrogar-me princípios, fé e crenças  
e me desejar assim mulher plena e prenhe  
de um desejo feminino  
feminil  
verdadeiro?

Quem sorrirá para os meus lábios antes  
do calor de um beijo  
e abraçará meu corpo  
úmido  
pleno?

Quem?

[When silence becomes a love confession/ who's going to be by my side?/ Who?/  
Who's going to give up questioning my principles, faith and beliefs/ and to desire  
the woman I am – replete and pregnant/ with a female/ feminine/ truthful desire? /  
Who's going to smile to my lips before/ the warmth of a kiss/ and to embrace my  
body/ humid/ abundant?/ Who?]

The multiple layers in this “interrogation” reveals, on one hand, the social, cultural, and moral pressures imposed on the poetic subject who struggles to experience a true state of wholeness and “truthful desire”. On another hand, the repeated questioning “Who?” echoes the poetic subject’s



yearning for shared experiences of liberation, of community building, and mutual support: a space where black women's sexuality can be accepted, welcomed, celebrated, and free; a shared space of mutual recognition and mutual empowerment. The "timbre of voice" of those unheard in Lorde's "Echoes" resound in the persistence of Alves' questioning as a diasporic continuity in black women's desire to forge a space where the liberation of the erotic force – re-discovered by the self in full recognition of another's humanness - has the potential to promote healing and liberation of an entire community.

### **PART III**

#### **Re-Telling History, Re-Locating the Black Female Body**

The black body is historical. The ways in which it is viewed and represented (both by self and by others) have to do with the ways it has been historically constructed within a variety of racial discourses. Hortense Spiller's famous essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) begins with a personal remark in which Spillers recognizes:

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar", "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother", "Aunty", "Granny", God's "Holy Fool", a "Miss Ebony First", or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented (Spillers 1987, 65).

Spiller's naming of the stereotypes that make her a "marked woman" highlight how black women are inscribed in national narratives that trivialize, objectify, pathologize, and exoticize their bodies. Spiller's article focuses on an analysis of ideas of family structure and their relationship with the entangled formations of race and gender in the U.S. But her the beginning of her essay offers a series of thoughts on the epistemological weight of naming according to which black women are described with "overdetermined nominative properties" – all of which are constructed historically and still present in the collective imaginary of today (Ibid. 65). Therefore, in order to "speak a truer word concerning myself", Spillers argues, she must "must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made in excess over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there

await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness” (Ibid. 65).

Through their poli(poe)tics of embodiment, I argue, Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves are also invested in stripping down the layers of a historically constructed epistemology defining black women. Within this project of self-inventiveness, reclaiming the historical positionality of the black female body in the poetry of Lorde and Alves seems to be a central and necessary action, as it is for Spillers, in order to re-establish a sense of truth. However, besides and beyond defining themselves on their own terms, the poetic subject in Lorde’s and Alves’ literary works examined here engages in a process of stripping down layers of historical distortions in order to reveal both the violence against the black female body and the agency those bodies performed throughout history. Re-situated within history – past and present – these poetic bodies in Lorde’s and Alves’ works also unveil different, nuanced, and multifaceted possibilities to read the historical narratives the writers refer to.

Miriam Alves’ poetry, for instance, constantly revisits historical narratives that informs hegemonic notions of national identity in Brazil. One of these notions, grounded on the myth of racial democracy, creates the idea that the Afro-Brazilian population has been successfully integrated within the national social fabric throughout history as a consequence of many centuries of racial mixing. While this integration may find some level of resonance at the cultural level, the ideology of “mestiçagem” fabricated the assumption that the nation benefits from an exceptional social context free from racial conflicts and discrimination. Although “mestiçagem” has been ideologically used as a political discourse since the nineteenth-century, modern populist governments have benefited from its dissemination, as Campos de Sousa and Nascimento explain further:

Brazil’s self-image was that of a country where citizens of all colors lived in

harmony and equally benefited from opportunities for social mobility. The typical Brazilian has been since then proudly characterized by a mixed-race man/woman of brown skin (“moreno/a”). Although the nationalist and authoritarian administration of President Getúlio Vargas (1930–1954) forcefully disseminated these ideas of Brazil, using them to promote national integration and attract the support of the lower classes to his state-led modernization project, this regime did not create such ideas. The task of identifying the nation’s “essence”, i.e., Brazil’s distinctive cultural traits had been carried on by generations of intellectuals since the country’s independence from Portugal in 1822 (2008, 130).

The identification of the nation’s “essence” has historically promoted a national sense of gratification for being part of a uniquely modern society. However, the ideology of “mestiçagem” also promoted the erasure of the Afro-Brazilian historical protagonism and intellectual legacy. A great portion of the political and cultural struggle by sectors of the black movement in Brazil in the modern era has been dedicated to the recover and recognition of that protagonism in several areas of society. In addition to Beatriz Nascimento’s ideas about *diasporic transmigration* and the re-configurations of contemporary *quilombos*, Abdias do Nascimento also conceptualized “quilombismo” as an alternative socio-cultural proposal for the political mobilization of the Afro-descendant communities in the Americas, based on the legacy of the democratic and multi-ethnic socio-economical organization of the *quilombos* during slavery in Brazil<sup>55</sup>. These theoretical understandings align with the ones developed by other Afro-Brazilian intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Lélia Gonzalez, Hamilton Cardoso and Eduardo Oliveira, who were also involved in re-construct alternative narratives of Afro-Brazilian history.

Within this context, the aesthetic project elaborated by Alves and other *Quilombhoje*

writers includes the telling of that African and Afro-Brazilian historical protagonism as an act of re-claiming history and re-affirming a legacy of struggle, resistance, creativity, and history-making bodies, as Miriam Alves states in her introductory note to the 1988 poetry edition of *Cadernos*:

Não dá pra negar a existência de uma literatura negra. Não dá para negar que escrevemos e pensamos no que escrevemos... Cria-se Quilombos, lembrando Palmares, para discutir estas questões fundamentais para a vivência da nossa literatura... Quilombo a princípio é o local em que a democracia para a liberdade é exercida com resistência e criatividade (*Cadernos* 11 1988, 14).

[It is impossible to deny the existence of a black literature. It is impossible to deny that we write and we think about what we write... We create “Quilombos”, re-staging Palmares, to discuss these fundamental issues to our literary legacy... “Quilombo” is, as a principle, the location where democracy leading to freedom is experienced with resistance and creativity.]

Therefore, this poetics proposes to re-visit the conditions of enslavement – which in Brazil lasted the longest in the entire American continent – as a “rememory”, in the ways conceived by Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: “a picture floating around out there” that survives time and space and persists like an indelible stain (Morrison 2007, 36). However, differently from Morrison’s Sethe, who is haunted by the atrocities of slavery (embodied by *Beloved*), Alves’ *quilombola* poetics re-visits this past in order to re-design a different future for the pained body; to re-instate its dignity and humanity; to inspire the democracy and freedom. Alves’ poem “Carregadores” [“Laborers”] in *Estrelas no Dedo* (1985) illustrate this movement between rememory and the re-make of history:

Carregamos nos ombros  
feito fardo

a luta, a dor de um passado.

...

Carregamos nos ombros

feito carga

o ferro da marca do feitor

Carregamos na mão

feito lança

as esperanças do que virá

[We carry on the shoulders/ like a burden/ the struggle, the sorrow of our past/ ...

We carry on the shoulders/ like loads/ the mark of iron from the overseer/ We carry  
in our hands/ like a spear/ the hopes of what is to come]

Here, the poetic subject, embracing a collective voice throughout the entire poem, directs the reader's attention to the black body positioned, in the first two stanzas, as the bearer of centuries of physical, mental, and economic exploitation: the juxtaposition delineated by the nouns "ombros", "fardo", "dor", "carga", and "ferro" compose with the verb "carregar" ["carry"] a series of images that evoke the crushing weight of oppression, domination, and violence of enslavement ("a dor de um passado"/ "the sorrow of a past"). However, in the final stanza, the poetic subject surprises the reader by offering a contrasting juxtaposition: this time, instead of shoulders – a symbol of exploited labor and support - the hand is the body part in action and, in a position of agency - demanding, guiding, facilitating – the future of different possibilities yet to come; this time, instead of the burden of a painful past and loads of harm, the black body carries a spear of

hope. Alves' poetic subject re-configures the black body as a laborer of many past survivals moving towards liberated tomorrows.

It is important to notice in Alves' "Carregadores" that the act of carrying the history of slavery on the shoulders – an embodied history – represents a significant disruption to the notion of racial democracy in Brazil. By carrying the historical marks of enslavement in the body, the poetic subject voices a perspective that debunks the proclaimed harmony among races through "mestiçagem", and imprints the element of racial oppression as part constitutive of the nation's racial formation within the historical continuum. The poetic voice, therefore, shifts the hegemonic historical narrative in at least three ways: 1) by speaking from a position of a descendant of enslaved Africans; 2) by highlighting the lasting consequences of that oppression, so commonly denied in the Brazilian context; and 3) by moving from victimization to empowerment.

This ideological de-racialization, manipulated by a purportedly scientific analysis designed to prove the Brazilian cultural homogeneity, is what Elisa Larkin Nascimento calls "sortilégio da cor" (or "the sorcery of color" as the author translated later in the English publication of her study): a doctrine that contradicts reality by denying the racial content of hierarchies that are, in fact, based on white supremacy (Nascimento 2007, 18). One of the constitutive aspects of the ideological maneuver described by Nascimento is to conceal the Afro-Brazilian historical protagonism, the reason why the struggles to rebuild a collective sense of black identity on the part of the social, cultural and intellectual movements of the twentieth century is to walk in the opposite direction.

Miriam Alves' poetics illustrates that commitment to recover the historical black subject in the poem "Mahin Amanhã" ["Mahin Tomorrow"] (*Cadernos Negros* 1998). The poem restages one of the most emblematic slave uprisings during the colonial era in Brazil, the "Malê" Revolt<sup>56</sup>. Alves recreates the historical moment in which the enslaved Yoruba Muslim Africans, identified

in colonial Province of Bahia as the “Nagô”, made preparations for “the most serious rebellion” of the nineteenth century, taking over the streets of Salvador on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1835 (Reis & Mamigonian 2005, 93). In the poem, Alves uses the legendary figure of Luiza Mahin, known as a freed Nagô woman, whose work as a “quitandeira” (a woman who sells greengrocery on a stand) in the streets of Salvador would have enabled her to secretly deliver messages in Arabic in order to organize and plan the uprising. In its first lines, the poem reproduces the climate of secrecy and conspiracy involving the revolt, emphasized by the alliteration of sibilant phonemes that simulates and intensifies the whispering of the plans for the insurrection:

Ouve-se nos cantos a conspiração

vozes baixas sussurram frases precisas

escorre nos becos a lâmina das adagas

Multidão tropeça nas pedras

Revolta

há revoada de pássaros

sussurro, sussurro:

“é amanhã, é amanhã.

Mahin falou, é amanhã”.

[In every corner, the rustle of conspiracy/ Low voices whispering precise words/ in the alleys, the scraping sounds of sharp daggers/ The crowd stumbles on stones/ Revolt/ the soaring flight of birds/ whisper, whisper:/ “it’s tomorrow, it’s tomorrow./ Mahin said so, it’s tomorrow”.]

Reis affirms that there is no historical documentation that provides evidence for the participation



of a Nagô woman called Luiza Mahin in the revolt of 1835, neither for her African royal lineage, as alleged by another historian, Arthur Ramos, (Reis 2003, 301-304). Despite that historical speculation, Mahin's reputation as a nineteenth century black woman revolutionary became well-known through her son, the Afro-Brazilian poet, lawyer, and essayist, Luiz Gama, one of the most important figures of the abolitionist movement in the country (Campos 2011, 129). Gama's 1880 letter to fellow poet Lúcio de Mendonça describes his mother as the following:

Sou filho de uma negra, africana livre, da Costa Mina (Nagô de Nação), de nome Luiza Mahin, pagã, que sempre recusou o batismo e a doutrina cristã... era quitandeira, muito laboriosa, e mais de uma vez, na Bahia, foi presa como suspeita de envolver-se em planos de insurreições de escravos... (Campos 2011, 131).

[I am the natural son of a black woman, a freed African, from Costa da Mina (from the Nagô Nation), called Luiza Mahin, pagan, who relentlessly rejected the Christian baptism and doctrine... she was a "quitandeira", hardworking woman, and more than once, arrested as a suspect for getting involved in the slave insurrections in Bahia...]

Based on this legendary, disputably historical figure, Alves' poem brings to the center of the narrative of the 1835 Malê Revolt, the powerful, brave, and decisive role of Luiza Mahin as a key character in the uprising. In the poetic scenario, Mahin strategizes the tactics of the rebellion and coordinates its the steps by delivering messages to all groups of blacks in colonial Bahia. The poetic storyteller, as a griot, anticipates the revolt by announcing the collective actions orchestrated by Mahin: "Arma-se a grande derrubada branca/ a luta é tramada na língua dos Orixás/ "é aminhã, Luiza Mahin falô"/ sussurram/ Malês/ bantus/ geges/ nagôs" ["The great white defeat has been planned/ the battle is plotted in the language of the Orishas/ "it's Mahin, it's tomorrow"/ saying in a whisper/ the Malê/ the bantu/ the gege/ the nagô/ "it's Mahin, it's tomorrow"].

Here, the historical accuracy of Luiza Mahin's participation in the revolt becomes less important than the portrayal of the agency of the enslaved Africans in this uprising. All the nations of different ethnic groups mentioned in the poem (Malê, Bantu, Gege, and Nagô), involved in the uprising lead by the Malê, configured the African population in Salvador of the mid-nineteenth century. Alves' poetic narrative brings them together in the struggle for freedom, strengthened by a shared ancestral connection of the Orisha tradition, and lead by a black warrior woman, Luiza Mahin. As Dawn Duke points out in her analysis of Alves' poem, "the deliberate linguistic fusing of her name 'Mahin', with 'amanhã', symbolizes the way she becomes inseparable from the very process of resistance itself" (2008, 143). By force of poetry, Alves passes on the oral legacy and offers an iconic depiction of black female achievement, fearlessness, and a source of inspiration for resistance that carries a sense of continuity into the present. The strength and power underlying Alves' depiction of Mahin are not exclusively confined to a physical dimension of the black woman fighter. This poetic depiction also represents wisdom, clarity, and vision – aspects brought to the center of a national historical narrative embodied by an emblematic black female figure.

In her poetry, Audre Lorde constantly uses symbols of the western African cosmologies in order to invoke a notion of ancestry and a larger historical and spiritual tradition in which she inscribes the poetic voice. In poems such as "Inheritance - His" and "Legacy - Hers", where it is possible to trace many biographical references of Lorde's father and mother, the poetic subject locates herself within this larger historical tradition with an affirmation of her African diasporic heritage: "I owe you my Dahomean jaw.../ and the darkness that we share" ("Inheritance-His"); and "how we tried to connect.../ one bright Black woman/ to another bred for endurance/ for battle" ("Legacy - Hers"). Alexis De Veaux observes that, having taught herself African history, Lorde "felt her ancestors originated on the continent's west coast, the focal point of the Atlantic

slave trade” (De Veaux 2004, 142). De Vaux tells us how Lorde was impacted by her first contact with the Africa she imagined and nurtured as her ancestral home, particularly her connection with the people and the environment of Accra, Ghana, in 1974, which Lorde seemed to relate to her previous experiences visiting the Caribbean and living with her West Indian parents:

The smell of Accra, its food, the proud, erect bearing of women carrying their wares on their heads, all reminded her of Barbados... while dining in Kumasi, the rock cake dessert drew her back to the memory of Newton’s – a West Indian bakery in Harlem where her mother bought rock buns sweetened with the taste of Grenada (De Veaux 2003, 144).

This connection with/between West Africa and the Caribbean seems to represent a strong creative motive in Lorde’s literary production, as well as in her nonfiction work. Lorde’s evolving diasporic sense of self as poet and powerful speaker becomes a critical element in the way the warrior writer critically perceives both the connections and differences in the African diasporic world. Her subsequent visits to the parts of the diasporic geography outside of the U.S. she felt most connected with – the Caribbean and Africa – and built and deepened Lorde’s understanding of the historical developments of the colonial projects established in those regions, as well as the neoliberal globalization processes they create that diaspora within patterns of exploitation and violence. As Alexis Pauline Gumps demonstrates in her essay on Lorde’s critical poetics of the diaspora, several of the writer’s works function as generators of a “Lordeian diasporic reading practice” (Gumps 2015, 164). Lorde’s little-known piece “Of Generators and Survival - Hugo Letter” (1991) and her essays “Notes from a Trip to Russia”, “Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report” – both in *Sister Outsider* - and “Apartheid U.S.A” (first published in pamphlet form in 1985) are some of the most iconic examples of Lorde’s critic of the U.S. imperialist and militarized interventions in leading,

promoting and sustaining what Naomi Klein termed “disaster capitalism” later in 2007.

Lorde’s poem “Sisters in Arms” (*Our Dead Behind Us*, 1986) is filled with images of brutalized bodies of dead or dying “Black children massacred at Sebokeng” by the white police of South Africa. The parallels between the poem and Lorde’s “Apartheid U.S.A” are numerous: the graphic descriptions of the blood shed upon the South African region, as well as the police brutality against people of color across the U.S.; the invisibility mechanisms that keep those atrocities from receiving global attention; the complacency and cynicism of profit-driven economies, such as the U.S. one; and a call for awareness-building and diasporic solidarity. Her essay was addressed to the U.S. African-Americans engaged in the liberation struggle, who she provokes by asking “Do you even know which companies your money supports that do business in South Africa?” (Byrd 2009, 66). In the second stanza, the poem talks about that kind of oblivion that characterizes the articulations between power and privilege:

I reach for the taste of today  
the *New York Times* finally mentions your country  
a half-page story  
of the first white south african killed in the “unrest”  
Not of Black children massacred at Sebokeng

The crude depiction of the slaughter of the youth and children of Sebokeng and Soweto is part of Lorde’s poetic strategy to give visibility to the kinds of atrocities her U.S. African American audience has the privilege to be oblivious about. Through this encounter of two sisters in arms (“we were two Black women touching our flame”), the poetic subject becomes aware of both her connection to and separation from the reality of oppression in another country. In a beautifully crafted scene of goodbye, as the South African sister departs back to her country to join the fight

for liberation, the poetic subject invokes the figure of Mmanthatisi, the early nineteenth-century warrior queen of the Tlokwa people of southern Africa, who leaves everything behind to fight for her people<sup>57</sup>: “Mmanthatisi turns away from the cloth.../ dresses again for war/ knowing the men will follow”. The invocation of South African warrior queen functions as a similar strategy to the one Miriam Alves uses when invoking the other warrior-queen Luiza Mahin: it reclaims resistance as a black female embodied image of historical significance and acknowledges the South African legacy of female warriorhood in the diasporic geography. Through the interaction between sisters from different contexts, the poetic subject expands her political and historical perspective about what diasporic solidarity really means, echoing what Lorde stated in her essay:

... we all need to examine without sentimentality or stereotype what the injection of Africanness into the sociopolitical consciousness of the world could mean. We need to join our differences and articulate our particular strengths in the service of our mutual survivals, and against the desperate backlash which attempts to keep that Africanness from altering the very bases of current world power and privilege (Byrd 2009, 72).

Lorde’s sense of a diasporic belonging and political responsibility as an activist, artist and intellectual – particularly as someone coming from the U.S., a place she defined as “the mouth of the dragon” or “the capitalist dragon” in several of her essays - permeated the ways in which she engaged and built relationships with places and people in the diasporic geography. The U.S. military invasion of Grenada in 1983 had a devastating effect on Lorde - an event she made sure to assess first-hand in her second visit to the island:

The first time I came to Grenada I came seeking “home”, for this was my mother’s birthplace and she had always defined it so for me... The second time I came to

Grenada I came in mourning and fear that this land which I was learning had been savaged, invaded, its people maneuvered into saying thank you to their invaders. I knew the lies and distortions of secrecy surrounding the invasion of Grenada by the United States on October 25, 1983; the rationalizations which collapse under the weight of facts; the facts that are readily available, even now, from the back pages of the *New York Times* (Lorde 2007, 176 – 177).

Lorde's poem "Equal Opportunity" (in *Our Dead Behind Us*) illustrates the poet's critique of the cynicism of U.S. foreign policies and defense strategies implemented to support their invasion of the island. The poem juxtaposes two images of striking contrast in a tone of sarcasm and irony: on one hand, the poem describes "The American deputy assistant secretary of defense/ for Equal Opportunity/ and safety" as a "home girl" in "moss-green military tailoring" who praises the government for its "very good record/ of equal opportunity for our women"; on the other hand, the poem depicts the terror experienced by local characters – Imelda, "young black in tattered headcloth", her baby child "pressing against her knees", the baby's father "buried without his legs", and Granny Lou – whose houses are invaded and searched by "nervous green men" with "their grenades and sweaty helmets.../ with an M-16 rifle held ready". The images clash in their contrasting ideologies – one of capitalist exploitation and violent military tactics; the other of terror and survival by frightened, coerced black Grenadians. In the essay "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report", Lorde's striking poetic imagery finds resonance in the sophistication of her diasporic reading of history when she develops a transatlantic analysis of systems of oppression across diasporic spaces:

The racism that coats the U.S. government lies about Grenada is the same racism that blinded american eyes to the Black faces of 131 Haitians washed up on shore

in Miami, drowned fleeing the Duvalier regime. It is the same racism that keeps american eyes turned aside from the corrosive apartheid eating like acid into the face of White South Africa and the Reagan government which shares her bed under the guise of “constructive engagement” (Lorde 2007, 180).

Even when referring to the “most powerful country in the world”, Lorde does not use capitalization of its name and that is not to underestimate its power, but possibly to register the possibility to resist its domination – a strategy she uses in several essays. Lorde’s “diasporic reading practice” – to use Gump’s term - is multifocal and pushes the reader to see far and beyond the surfaces of events; it is designed to provoke discomfort with acts of daily violence often normalized, justified, or invisibilized; it takes the reader across and beyond national borders – and back again to local and private spaces. So much of Lorde’s poetry addresses local, national, and international incidents, usually piercing past and present events together, in order to reveal their inter-connection and expand the notion of a historical continuum; it unravels the ways in which oppression operates, but also the ways in which resistance becomes re-configured.

Lorde’s poem “Diaspora” (also published in *Our Dead Behind Us*) majestically chronicles the effects and powerful connotations of contemporary diasporas imposed by war, poverty, and violent government regimes and policies. The first verse describes the setting with an image of entrapment, situating the reader in a country dominated by repression and fear from where there are “no exit visas”, its borders patrolled by soldiers that look like “a wire of ants walking the horizon”. As the title suggests, the diasporic reality of this place locates the reader *either* in Johannesburg, Alabama, the Palestine-Lebanon-Syria or Texas-Mexico borders. In any of these places, “a dark girl flees the cattle prods/ skin hanging from her shredded nails”, resisting repression and struggling to be free. Lorde’s dark girl is afraid but resourceful: a dark woman from

some many diasporas, she keeps on moving towards survival, ready to fight if necessary – “grenades held dry in a calabash/ leaving” - as so many diasporic warrior-women had done, from Mmanthasi to Luiza Mahin; from the Dahomean warriors to Harriet Tubman; from Dandara to Yaa Ansantewa<sup>58</sup>. Lorde’s poetry – such as Alves’ – recovers the historical protagonism of black women throughout the diaspora and their legacy of bravery, resistance, strategic intelligence, political leadership and resilience.

That poetic strategy of historical recovery also explains why both Lorde and Alves populate their poetic constructions with figures of the Yoruba cosmology. Poems such as “Cavalgo nos Raios de Iansã” [“I Ride on Oya’s Lightning”], “(N)ave(g)ar” [“Sail”, a play with the words sailing and air], and “Translúcida” [“Translucent”] – all published by Alves as photo-poetic assembles on her Facebook page – are aesthetically inscribed within a language and imagery that refers to the attributes of the Orishas Oya (or *Iansã* in Candomblé), the warrior-goddess of the tempest, and Ogun, another warrior deity associated with iron and steel tools made for combat. Lorde’s aesthetics is particularly engaged with some figures and elements of the Dahomean and Yoruba tradition in in the anthology *The Black Unicorn*, whose publication follows the writer’s visits to parts of Africa and the Caribbean and her increasing interest in the African diasporic traditions. Many of Lorde’s poems, such as “From the House of Yemanjá”, “Dahomey”, “125<sup>th</sup> Street and Abomey”, “The Women of the Dan Dance with Swords in Their Hands to Mark the Time When They Were Warriors”, and “Between Ourselves”, re-create myths using references and metaphors related to the Yoruba deity of the oceans, Yemanjá, and her son’s, Eshu and Shango – respectively, the trickster-messenger and the deity of the thunder, war and politics; Seboulisa, a goddess of Abomey, creator of the world; as well as Orishala, the Yoruba deity who gives shapes and forms to humans before birth.



All of these African myths belong to ancient cosmological traditions that not only explain the origin and nature of the universe and its elements, but they also hold ethical systems and principles that have sustained the spiritual and physical survival of African peoples and their descendants across the diaspora. Therefore, when Lorde and Alves incorporate the elements of African cosmologies in their poetics, there are also re-claiming and recovering the sense of belonging and ancestry, as well as the principles that inform the connections between the spiritual and material world within a historical perspective. Their poli(poe)tics also offer strategies of embodying ancestral notions of black female empowerment, self-sustainability, and independency.

The intellectual, educator, and dancer Inaicyrá Falcão dos Santos incorporates elements of the Yoruba-Nagô Candomblé into her aesthetic approach applied to dance, art and education, entitled “Body and Ancestrality”. In her article, Falcão dos Santos highlights how the artistic work is enriched and transformed by the embodied experience of ancestry, which becomes, ultimately an interpretative and creative tool (Falcão dos Santos 2015, 81 – 82). These processes of “embodied ancestry” are particularly relevant to understand the poli(poe)tics of embodiment by Audre Lorde and Miriam Alves, since they both had firsthand knowledge and experiences with the African traditions they use to shape their artistic creations and performances. In terms of aesthetics, in the poems I cited earlier, the reader will be exposed to elements of African oral traditions such as structures of call-and-response, rhythmic patterns, repetitions, and a powerful imagery. In combination with regards to their poetic performances, both Lorde and Alves use visual, corporeal, and vocal aspects of deliverance based on these elements of African orality and storytelling.

In reclaiming, recovering, and reconstructing the historical protagonism of black diasporic

bodies, Lorde and Alves also propose a reflection upon the re-configurations of oppression and resistance in the present time. They often offer poems about contemporary cases of violence against black bodies in urban scenarios. Alves' poems "Sumidouro Brasil" ["Abductor Brazil"] and "Cruzes" ["Crosses"] – published as photo-poems on her Facebook page – are assembled with images of a pool of blood and a red background filled with crosses, respectively, to depict two cases of police brutality in which two unarmed black males were executed during police raids in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. In "Sumidouro Brasil", the poetic subject agonizes over the irrational wave of violence responsible for the contemporary extermination of black young males, such was the case of Amarildo de Souza's disappearance by the military police in Rocinha, one of Rios's *favela*<sup>59</sup> :

Hoje percebi na minha insônia

secular

que carrego muitas perguntas

sem resposta

Perguntas que não querem se calar

...

Na Alvorada alvoroça vozes

como um coral cibernético

a perguntar

Onde está o Amarildo?

[Today in my secular insomnia/ I realized/ I have many questions/ without answers/

Questions that refuse to remain silent.../ In the Dawn voices rise up/ as a cybernetic

chorus/ asking/ Where is Amarildo?"]

In a similar way, Lorde's poems "The Same Death Over and Over or Lullabies Are for Children" and "A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children & Power" – both in *The Black Unicorn* – chronicle "the small deaths in the gutter/ that are unmaking us all", a reference to Clifford Gover, a 10-year-old black boy shot down by a white cop in the South Jamaica section of Queens, New York, in 1973. Lorde's and Alves' poetics can be seen as social critiques of institutionalized forms of racism, responsible for the systematic elimination of black diasporic bodies. Their poetry forces the reader to think about how these systems are interconnected and how they sustain each other.

However, these poetic depictions of urban contemporary violence open windows into diasporic forms of black resistance: they refuse to limit the boundaries of their portrayal within the tragedies and horrors to which black bodies are submitted to. Instead, the poetic subject echoes the voices of protest, anguish, and revolt of the restless population who rise up their voices in a "cybernetic chorus" of defiance. In this sense, Lorde's and Alves' poli(poe)tics are situated in the historical continuum of contemporary black resistance movements such as "Black Lives Matter" in the U.S. (created in 2012) and "Reaja ou Será Morto" in Brazil (initiated in 2005): these are social movements that were born from civil society, as a result of non-institutional articulation of marginalized black youth in urban scenarios. As indicated in Alves' verse, the cybernetic strategy of contemporary movements of resistance, such as the aforementioned ones, includes the widespread use of social media to expose the systematic abuse of power by law enforcement agencies to violently and selectively eliminate black bodies<sup>60</sup>.

The narratives of violence against black bodies portrayed in the Alves and Lorde's poetics seem to find a cyclical route into the everyday lives of marginalized black populations across the diaspora. Therefore, the poetic representations of these historical cycles of oppression in the poetry of Lorde and Alves are crucial to challenge what Kristie Dotson describes as "practices of

silencing” in testimonial enactments of epistemic violence, in which cases the speaker is either discredited as a knower or she is coerced to “smother” her testimonial because the audience can easily find it unintelligible (Dotson 2011, 243 - 244). As Miriam Alves’ poetry pushes the boundaries of the literary sphere and takes on the commitment to reconstruct history, the poem “História” (“History”), available on the author’s Facebook page (May 5, 2014), directly addresses the politics of historical narration, particularly the processes of making invisible the history of the enslavement of black bodies in Brazil:



Picture 4: “História”, photo-poem by Miriam Alves.

[I have a history/ the vendors of human flesh and ideas/ do not want to hear it/ It is a history of human markets right there/ 3 centuries ago/ at history-city square/ A history of struggle and resistance./ The marketers of my flesh call it/ rotten/ the cultural mercenaries call it/ aggression.]

The composition of the poem assembled with a picture of what one could call a *favela*, possibly located in any Brazilian urban scenario, makes a strong statement about the continuity of both the history of survival of the black population and their history of oppression and marginalization. The overlapping effect of the history Alves depicts in this composition emphasizes both the “struggle”

signification of blackness as cultural and political identity, to a reclamation of the erotic power as source of transformation of that self, to the relocation of black bodies as agents or witnesses of the historical Afro-diasporic struggles for liberation. The characterizations of black women's bodies in Lorde's and Alves's works are not static: they are shaped by and struggle with rigid creative standards for the black aesthetics of their era; they embody vulnerable, yet combative voices; they expose inner worlds that are filled by contradictories and a lost sense of belonging, embedded in the complicated discourses of U.S. racial essentialisms and Brazilian "mestiçagem"; they reveal the silences and pain of oppressed erotic desires; they open the "Pandora box" of hidden, repressed, questions about the relationship between community and nation-building vis-à-vis the patriarchal, racist and homophobic ideologies ingrained in both the U.S. and the Brazilian society.

Lorde's and Alves' poli(po)e(tics) of embodiment do not provide the reader ready-to-apply scripts. They unravel multiple layers of the Afro-diasporic identity politics which, in a chronological spectrum of their own body of work, give evidence of a "changing same"<sup>61</sup>: The poetry of Alves and Lorde reflect and dialogue with the continuities and disruptions traced in the literary traditions by women of African descent in the diaspora in the Americas. The paths their poli(po)e(tics) of embodiment open up invite us all – readers – to keep exploring the polysemy of black women's subjectivities – an invitation I will discuss in the conclusive chapter that follows.

## CONCLUSION:

### CONNECTING THE CLOTHESLINES OR THE PROMISE OF AN ENCOUNTER

*And I dream of our coming together  
encircled driven  
not only by love  
but by lust for a working tomorrow  
the flights of this journey  
mapless uncertain  
and necessary as water.*

(Audre Lorde)

*Saber da chama  
...  
fazendo ardente  
uma gota de palavra  
pendurada no canto da boca  
prometendo encontro  
na encruzilhada do amanhã<sup>62</sup>.*

(Miriam Alves)

My considerations in the previous chapters ultimately go back to the invitation that lies in the poli(poe)tics of Lorde and Alves – and of their ancestors, black women artists in the diaspora: an invitation to explore the multiple and the truth of being – all the complexities, ambiguities, and promises in-between. This is not an invitation to dwell in liminality, as a postmodern “hybrid” space of cultural meaning production, where articulations of belonging are understood as “the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” (Bhabha 2005, 3). Despite its contributions to an understanding of culture and identity as processes in constant transformation and negotiation, the postmodern notion of identity fluidity – in and of itself – fails to address the material conditions that shape the bodies of those articulating identity from the margins of hegemonic discourses. The postmodern notion of identity fluidity helps us to keep eyes and minds open to the possibilities of subjectivity articulation, but it proves itself limited in

addressing the objective contexts in which these articulations are forged – the existing conditions that promote or impede the survival and thrive of black bodies and black intellectual creativity.

As this study demonstrated, Lorde’s and Alves’ poli(poe)tics of embodiment is informed by those material conditions that affect the socialization, livelihood and survival of black women – locally and globally. In that sense, black women artists in the diaspora could chant with Donna Kate Rushin in “The Bridge Poem”: “I’m sick of seeing and touching/ Both sides of things/ Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983, xxi). The bridge typified in the beginning of Rushin’s poem stands as a symbol of the burden carried by Afro-diasporic women whose bodies are inscribed within multiple intersections of systems of oppression.

The “bridge story” articulated in Rushin’s poem has been told by other Afro-diasporic women voices that describe the ways in which their bodies are marked, misnamed, misheard, mistaken, displaced, emptied, replaced: Sojourner Truth (in her 1851 speech); Hortense Spillers (1987); Carol E. Davidson (2010); Conceição Evaristo (in *Ponciá Vicêncio*); Toni Morrison (in *Beloved*); Ana Maria Gonçalves (2011); Elisa Lucinda (in her poem “Mulata-Exportação”) – these are some of the Afro-diasporic women who have written about stories of naming-manipulation in fiction, poetry, and texts of cultural theory. In every story offered, there is an invitation to listen; in every invitation, there is the potential of an encounter – a possibility of connection, a “coming together” “at the crossroads”.

The invitation offered by Lorde’s and Alves’ poli(poe)tics should not be taken as a quest for a pure state of black womanhood, imagined as a recipe to be followed; or an attempt to (re)create nation and determine the guidelines of belonging. Their poli(poe)tics indicates that diasporic black women’s bodies are too intersectional to become the central-element in projections of national identification: the ruptures of their flesh; the fragmentation of self; the historical ties



with slavery and colonialism; the unrelenting and undeniable matter of their non-conformity do not translate the (pseudo) unifying discourses of identity (“mestiçagem”, colorblindness, hybridity). This unifying effort, also performed within the fabrication of national discourses (centralized on whiteness, heteronormativity, and largely middle-class maleness) has been threatened by all the traces of black women’s abnormality and exceptionalism. The only space where Afro-diasporic female corporality can be used to reinforce unifying discourses of national identity is the site of difference (Guy-Sheftall 1990; Morgan 2002; Carneiro 1994; Gonzalez 1981; Lorde, 2007).

The calling performed by Lorde’s and Alves’ poli(poe)tics resonates in the final verses of Rushin’s poem: “I must be the bridge to nowhere/ But my true self/ And then/ I will be useful” (Ib idem). And in that self-affirming statement, there is the possibility of the multiple Afro-diasporic “true selves”: as an agent of her own makings, she crosses her own bridges; she mediates her own self/selves. From this position of agency, being black woman holds the liberatory promise of multiplicity within and without – together in an encounter. The essentiality of the “I” – the black female self - is neither a recipe, nor a denial of an intrinsic trace; it is an articulation only possible within the tension (the potential of a bridge) between “me” and “not me”, as Kevin E. Quashie affirms: “... this phrasal assertion and denial of essence, a particularization that disavows anything other than wild fluidity and which still upholds the centeredness and surety of this me, Black and female and selfish” (Quashie 2004, 174). As Lorde and Alves shows in their poetry and in their trajectories as artists/intellectuals/activists, to embody the truth of that bridge is to occupy a place that is simultaneously of great vulnerability, as it is of remarkable power: to move against clothespins is an expression of both pain and liberation.

Within the context of diasporic black feminist cultural articulations, the poli(poe)tics of embodiment is a manifestation of memory in the corporality of text and author. This study discussed and demonstrated that black women artists and intellectuals, such as Lorde and Alves, have produced a *body* of work that testifies to their historical experiences both as individuals and as a collective. This textual-corporeal presence in black women's epistemological and ontological production unravels the different paradigms that shape their thought within historical contexts, but inevitably guided by a transformative impulse. This impelling force for change is at the core of what Lorde has reframed as the erotic force as a source of creative energy and deepest knowledge. By considering the erotic as a inner and shared "source of power" for black women - outside of long-established discourses that characterize black women's sexualities either as deviant or as taboo – Lorde has paved the way towards the idea of self-configurations of desire which she has used in her poetic representations of black female bodies. Alves' erotic "fleshy" poetics also reclaims that source of energy in her creations of black women's quest for decolonial and liberated love.

In that sense, the reclamation of the black female body in the poli(poe)tics of embodiment by Lorde and Alves is not only a corrective gesture in regards to the ways history has treated the black female body as "the damned and notorious device of someone else's constructions" (Dickerson 2001, 196). This reclamation also insists on a reconfiguration of the very concept of identity; it emphasizes the intersectionality of the black female body as both the constituent of bounded selfhoods and limitations of those boundaries, showing that the idiom of difference of a potential "us" is relational rather than absolute – and the "self" exceeds the demarcation of assigned labels. Audre Lorde's sophisticated theorizing of difference has underlined this

conceptualization of identity articulations, fundamental for my analysis of the poli(poe)tics of embodiment in diasporic black women's writings.

Situating individual and collective identities within a relational position also contributes to understand the historical, geographical, and cultural specificities of black female subjectivities across the diaspora. As this study has discussed, these relationships can not be read as univocal, symmetric or uncomplicated because within processes of *diasporic transmigration* – to use Beatriz Nascimento's concept – black women's subjectivities are negotiated and articulated within structures of power, cultural ruptures, and historical discontinuities. In their reconfigurations of poetic *quilombos*, Lorde and Alves offer a re-reading of history as an ancestral legacy of black women's protagonism. They rearrange the clothespins of hegemonic narratives of the black female body as the “damned other”, restoring a historical record of agency, autonomy, resilience, and resistance. Alves' poetics confronts and disrupts the discourses of racial democracy in Brazil by reaffirming the history and legacies of slavery in the nation's foundation, and its effects in creating racist and patriarchal systems of discrimination. The poetry of Audre Lorde engages in a “diasporic reading practice” (Gumps 2015, 164) that unravels and expands black women's sense of diasporic belonging and ancestry. By relocating the black female body within a constellation of representative figures of black women's power; by invoking the presence of the pantheon of African-originated deities, Lorde and Alves reveal, in fact, an ancestral patrimony of black women warriors rendered with wounds, insight, healing power, and a profound sense of community.

However, examining the historical commonalities of the symbolic *quilombos* in the diaspora, as stated by Nascimento, presents limitations and challenges. My analyses of the literary territory created by Lorde and Alves does not claim any notion of definitiveness. As discussed in the first chapter, black women's literary representations of a black female self – personal and

collective – articulated within specific historical contexts impose the renewed predicament of *escrivência* and *rememory*. As such, the black female body as poetic sign performs multi-layered codes of meaning and grammars of aesthetic complexity that can not be matched by a final word. The open-ended nature of diasporic black women’s artistry – and the multiplicity of identity articulations embedded in their work – is possibly the true liberatory aspect of their aesthetic projects. The analytical framework offered by the poli(poe)tics of embodiment highlights those points of convergence and divergence in the ways to approach transnational study of diasporic black women’s cultural production. The potentiality of encounters, continuities, and commonalities in diasporic poli(poe)tics is as relevant as the differences that make each articulation unique to particular geographies, histories, and societies. The poli(poe)tics of embodiment proposes an examination of black women’s intellectual creativity within the specificities of their socio-historical contexts and trajectories.

In Brazil, I can name writers such as Maria Firmino dos Reis, Conceição Evaristo, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Elisa Lucinda, Alzira Rufino, Geni Guimarães, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Cristiane Sobral, Lia Vieira, Ana Maria Gonçalves. In the U.S., I see Toni Morrison, Lucille Clifton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Pat Parker, June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker. And others in different diasporic geographies, such as Dionne Brand, Jamaica Kincaid, Victoria Santa Cruz. Their influence in my understanding of black women’s artistic capacity to create *quilombos* of words across the diaspora also holds the promise to expand the boundaries of this work in investigations of other manifestations of cultural production.

The expansion of this project points to an examination of contemporary black diasporic literature and visual culture such as the multimedia work by Kara Walker, Nona Faustino, Carrie

Mae Weems, Rosana Paulino, and Yasmin Tayná. Reflecting upon Ajuan Maria Mance's notion of "paradigm of simultaneity" in the aesthetic representation of the black female body, my future research aims at investigating how these black women artists explore performative expressions of womanhood, blackness, and sexuality, alongside with other pre-established contradictory qualities, bending and taunting "the conventions of the mainstream" (Mance 2001). How do these performative acts invoke historical narratives of the black female body as abject? To which extent does this invocation promote the spectacularization of the grotesque? How do these ways of performing blackness channel or re-invent power and identity? In what ways do these contemporary representations problematize the politics of respectability? How can we understand the shifting legacy of performativity in black (diasporic) art within different historical contexts? To what extent do these contemporary representations defy the idea/ideals of nation and national identity?

In moving towards the impossible task of closure, I want to reflect upon the potentiality of desire – as lust and flame – captured in fragments of poetry, used in the epigraph to this (in)conclusive chapter. What is the potential of a "working tomorrow" in the poli(poe)tics of Lorde and Alves? How does it affect the material conditions of survival and healing of black female bodies in the diaspora? Reconsidering the "capabilities of the subjunctive" (Hartman 2008), what is the promise of this encounter? For me, as I observe the continuum of history throughout the development of this study, the force of the subjunctive in Lorde's and Alves' poli(poe)tics have become even more latent and urgent.

The global transformations in multiple cultural, economic, and political landscapes - displayed in the hyper-visible networks of cyberspace – denounce on-going forms of systemic violence inflicted on black bodies across the diaspora. In very particular ways, the assaulted bodies

of black women and black queer/trans people seem to integrate habitual narratives of unchecked violence. Campaigns such as “Say Her Name”<sup>63</sup> in the U.S. documents stories of black women who have been killed by police, shining a spotlight on forms of police brutality often experienced disproportionately by cis-women and trans-women of color. Following her work on the intersections of race, gender, and the law, Kimberlé Crenshaw is one of the black women scholars who contribute in the campaign’s attempt to include black women’s experiences in social movements, media narratives, and policy demands around systemic forms of violence as a critical tool to effectively combatting racialized state violence afflicting black communities and other communities of color in the U.S. The document *Mapa da Violência 2015: Homicídio de Mulheres no Brasil*, elaborated by FLACSO (Faculdade Latino-Americana de Ciências Sociais - Brazil), shows that, in the past ten years, the homicide rate for black women in Brazil has presented a 54% increase (Waiselfisz 2015, 30). According to the data collected by Transgender Europe’s Trans Murder Monitoring project, there have been nine hundred reported murders of transgender people in Brazil between January 2008 and September 2016 – the staggering majority of victims were black trans-women.

The concrete reality of increasing violence against black women across the diaspora, leading to the actual extermination of their bodies, represents a crucial aspect in black women’s poetics because the materiality of the body is at the core of their subjectivities – the body is the vessel of despair and desire; pain and repair; oppression and liberation. As an illustration, the material conditions that either guarantee or hinder the survival of black female bodies is the central theme of many of Lorde’s and Alves’ poems, such as the ones used in the epigraph to this conclusive chapter. The narratives of silencing and othering – the clothespins holding black women’s shards of flesh – have historically been confronted by the long-lasting work of Black

Venuses who speak: “...fazendo ardente/ uma gota de palavra/ pendurada no canto da boca” [“... turning into a burning/ drop of word/ clinging to the corner of the mouth”]. As Alves’ poem suggests, the articulations of the black female subject are originated from a place of knowing (“saber da chama”), manifested in the conscious gesture of forging words that burn – like a flame. Alves’ imagery connects with Lorde’s conceptualizing of the erotic as the source of power and knowledge: “... the sensual - those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared” (Lorde 2007, 57). That burning knowledge becomes the reservoir of black women’s empowerment, survival, and creativity.

Moving towards the possibility of the encounter – “coming together”; “at the crossroads of tomorrow” - the warrior-poets are calling – an invitation – to take the risk of this uncertain journey whose destination is a promise, a dream, fueled by the two most intimate of human engagements – love and lust. Can you hear them? Regardless of your ability to listen to their voices, they have been present all along screaming, whispering, singing – vulnerable and strong - moving against clothespins.

## NOTES

1 Miriam Alves's poem "Pedacos de Mulher" was first published in 1985 in her second solo anthology *Estrelas no Dedo* [*Stars in the Finger*]. Ten years later, the poem featured in volume 18 of *Callaloo* - an issue dedicated to contemporary Afro- Brazilian Literature. The U.S.-based journal included works by many members of *Quilombhoje*, the black literary group from São Paulo, funded in 1980. Alves' poem was, then, translated into English as "Pieces of a Woman" by Carolyn Richardson Durham, Reetika Vazirani, and Chi Lam. Here, I quote their translation for the verses used in the epigraph to this introduction: "Woman/ I am this woman/ luffing like confetti/ in your hand/ Woman - shards of flesh/ drying in the back yard/ a prisoner in the house of amnesia/ Woman – revolt/ I move against the clothespins/ that hold me on this clothesline" (*Callaloo* 18. 4: 1995, 801). I make reference to this version in English in subsequent chapters of this study. All poems and photo-poems by Miriam Alves, including materials from the writer's personal archives, Facebook page and blog, as well as the personal interviews granted by her are used and cited in this dissertation with permission from the author.

2 As pointed out by Earl Fitz in his article "Internationalizing the Literature of the Portuguese-Speaking World", there was a "breakthrough of Spanish American and Brazilian literature" in the U.S. academy in the late 1960s, one that followed the "establishment of Latin American literature as a viable area of academic specialization (439 - 40). Although that phenomenon occurred as a consequence of the emergence of new nations in Africa, Asia, and Oceania, which compelled the Western world to adapt to different political and cultural realities after World War II, Fitz sees that



“Brazilian literature continue to be ignored or relegated to an afterthought, even by established scholars of ‘Latin American’ literature” (440). A quick survey of major departments of Comparative Literature in the U.S. academy would proof Fitz’s argument accurate – not to mention a more limited sample of departments of English and Afro-American/ Africana studies. However, when Brazilian literature is rarely central to comparative studies with US literature, it is possible to see the recurrent presence of major canonical texts (particularly those translated and published in English), such as those by Machado de Assis, Jorge Amado, and Mário de Andrade, just to mention three of the most prominent male writers of the Brazilian literary canon. Among the female Brazilian writers, Clarice Lispector, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Ana Maria Machado, and Adélia Prado feature as the most recurrent names. In both the U.S. and the Brazilian academy, little has been done in terms of substantial comparative research of those works not yet translated into English, and, for that reason, the present study has the intention to serve the purpose of bridging that gap.

3 Published in 1892, Anna Julia H. Cooper’s first book *A Voice from the South: By a Woman from the South* is a landmark for what is called today in the US “black feminism”. In the book, Cooper advocates for civil rights and women’s rights, in particular the write to vote, positioning herself as a US African American woman. The central vision of the book is connected to self-determination through education and social uplift for African American women and that the advancement of African American women would improve the general standing of the entire African American community. Cooper affirms: “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’” (*A Voice from*

*the South* 1990, 279). I am inspired by Cooper's daring positioning in voicing herself as a woman and a black woman from the South, bringing into her voice a very particular and pioneering perspective over race and racism in the U.S.

4 Although not yet extensively documented, there seem to be indications of actual meetings and other types of exchanges between Afro-Brazilian writers for the Quilombhoje collective and U.S. Afro-American writers previously affiliated with the Black Arts Movement. Cheryl Sterling makes reference to one of those meetings in Salvador (Bahia) in 2000 where Sonia Sanchez was invited to a meeting of poets or, in Sterling's words, "a moment to encounter an inspirational source" (Sterling 2007, 45). Miriam Alves also provided, from her personal archives, photographs that registered encounters in Brazil involving Quilombhoje writers and U.S. Afro-American writers and activists, such as Toni Morrison and Angela Davis, during the 1980s and 1990s.

5 Considered as a modern phenomenon in the study of the connections between African cultural elements in the Americas, it is possible to think about iconic figures in cultural anthropology such as Melville Heskovits, Franklin Frazier, Gilberto Freyre; more recently, there are works by Paul Gilroy, Michael Gomez, James Sweet, Robert Thompson, Molefi Ketu Asante. To mention a few whose work focuses on the roles of Afro-descendant women, I list Carole Boyce Davis, Darlene Clark Hine, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. The concept of and the perspectives over the African diaspora in the Americas are multiple and, not rarely, conflicting. By acknowledging the legacy of the scholarly work developed across disciplines, I am humbled by the amplitude and depth of the field. Within its limits and limitations, my research attempts to contribute to the field as far as comparative literature is concerned.

6 Romero Jorge Rodríguez - currently the Ambassador and General Director for the Ethnic-Racial Unity of the Ministry of Foreigner Relations in Uruguay - published his article “Entramos Negros; Salimos Afrodescendientes” as an evaluation of the results of the “III Cumbre Mundial Contra Racismo”, which took place in Chile in 2001. The document – available in Spanish online at *Revista Futuros* n.5, v. 2, 2004 (<http://www.revistafuturos.info>) – classifies the meeting as the most relevant action in the history of the Afro-descendant peoples of the Americas in terms of the political results it projected in relation to the abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the understanding of how racism operates in the Latin American societies. The document gives evidence to the contemporary notion of the political, ideological, and cultural articulation of the African diaspora in the Americas. The III Cumbre becomes, then, a marker of the understanding of the hyphenated term of “Afro-descendant” as a historical and regional phenomenon that characterizes different ways of identifying with the African heritage. The term has been challenged by some Afro-Brazilian artists and intellectuals, including Cuti (Luiz Silva), founding member of the Quilombhoje literary group, for being deflective in addressing the type of “epidemics” and “phenotypical” racism (and colorism, I would add) ingrained in Brazilian society. In a interview to Eduardo de Assis Duarte and Maria Nazareth S. Fonseca, Cuti advocates for the use of “literatura negro-brasileira” [“black-brazilian literature”], highlighting that the change in terminology (the use of the term “Afro-Brazilian) undermines the history of black struggle under the banner of “Negritude” and does not account for the daily battles of those who face discrimination on the basis of their “phenotypical features of African descent” (Duarte and Fonseca 2011, 59).

7 Lorde’s poetry anthologies have been gathered in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (2000).

It is from that collection that I selected the poems analyzed here.

8 Given the particular colonial project developed in Brazil, the term *mestiço(a)* starts to be deployed in the early nineteenth century both as a mark of mixed-race identity and as a mark of a racially privileged group. As the project of *branqueamento* (whitening) gained momentum and became a political, social and economic practice enforced by the elites in power, the ideology of *mestiçagem* established and deepened parameters of white dominance in social hierarchies. Considering that the terms *mestiçagem* and *mestiço(a)* (or “mestizaje” and “mestizo(a)”, in Spanish) represent a historical phenomenon in Latin America, I am choosing to use these terms throughout this study to maintain its historical specificity. For further reading on the topic see Edward Telles’s *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (2004); Peter Wade’s *Race and Sex in Latin America* (2009); and Kabengele Munanga’s *Rediscutindo a Mestiçagem no Brasil: Identidade Nacional Versus Identidade Negra* (1999).

9 Abdias do Nascimento lays out a reflection of historical consequences of the so-called racial democracy to the lives of the black population in Brazil, using, maybe for the first time, the term “genocide” applied to that context. What Nascimento defines as “the process of a masked racism” is characterized by the sexual exploitation of the enslaved woman, and, at her expense, the idea and ideal of a “raça mestiça” is created in a process of whitening (and purportedly erasure) of the black population (Abdias 1978, 69 - 75). Under the umbrella of *mestiçagem*, several racial categories have been created in Brazil in order to identify the *mestiço* population, following a complex combination of elements of racial identification, skin color, region, and social status (see Thomas Skidmore, 1993; Lilia M. Schwarcz, 1999; Edward Telles, 2004). Although the discourses of *mestiçagem* have promoted fragmentation in terms of a unified articulation of “blackness” or black culture in Brazil, the whitening process has never subverted racism in the country, and

resistance (cultural and political) to the manipulation of the ideology of racial democracy by the elites has always been part of the history of Afro-Brazilians, as pointed out by number of intellectuals such as Abdias do Nascimento (*O Negro Revoltado*, 1968; *O Genocídio do Negro Brasileiro*, 1978); Octavio Ianni (*Raças e Classes Sociais no Brasil*, 1966; *Escravidão e Racismo*, 1978); Kabegle Munanga (*Rediscutindo a mestiçagem no Brasil*, 1999; *O Negro na Sociedade Brasileira: Resistência, Participação, Contribuição*, 2004); Elisa Larkin Nascimento (*O Sortilégio da Cor: Identidade, Raça e Gênero no Brasil*, 2003); Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (*O Espetáculo das Raças: Cientistas, Instituições e a Questão Racial no Brasil, 1870-1930*, 1993; *Nem Preto, Nem Branco - Muito pelo Contrário: Cor e Raça na Sociabilidade Brasileira*, 2013).

10 As Eduardo de Assis Duarte highlights, *Úrsula* is not only the inaugural novel of the abolitionist literary era in Brazil in the late nineteenth century (credit initially given to Joaquim Manuel de Macedo's 1869 novel *Vítimas Algozes*); Dos Reis' *Úrsula* is also the first Afro-Brazilian novel (see Duarte, "Maria Firmina dos Reis e os Primórdios da Ficção Brasileira", *Portal Literafro*, Web, n.p.). dos Reis' positionality represents a pioneering move in the Brazilian literary tradition: as an Afro-Brazilian writer, at a time in which slavery was still a legal institution in Brazil, "Firmina dos Reis' literary worth therefore rests in manifestations of identity and perspective of the oppressed", as Dawn Duke points out (see Duke, *Literary Passion, Ideological Commitment: Toward a Legacy of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian Women Writers*, 2008, 60). *Úrsula* is absent from the most authoritative literary anthologies, published by renowned critics such as Silvio Romero, José Veríssimo, Afrânio Coutinho, Antonio Candido, Nelson Werneck Sodré, Alfredo Bosi, among others. The current recognition of dos Reis' crucial role and place in the tradition of Brazilian literature in general, and in the Afro-Brazilian literary tradition in particular, relies on the

archaeological work of pioneering Brazilian scholars in the areas of gender and Afro-Brazilian studies, such as Maria Lúcia de Barros Mott, Luiza Lobo, Zahidé L. Muzart, Eduardo de Assis Duarte, Schuma Schumacher, Érico Vital Brazil; Nei Lopes, among others (see article “Na contramão: A Narrativa Abolicionista de Maria Firmina dos Reis” by Cristina Ferreira Pinto-Bailey, *Portal Liteafro*, Web, n.p.).

11 For further reading on the development of academic spaces dedicated to Afro-Brazilian Studies and the context for the 2003 Federal Law 10.639, see *De Preto a Afro-Descendente : Trajetos de Pesquisa Sobre o Negro, Cultura Negra e Relações Étnico-Raciais no Brasil*, edited by Lucia Maria de Assunção Barbosa, Petronilha Beatriz Gonçalves e Silva, and Valter Roberto Silvério (2003); *História da Educação do Negro e Outras Histórias*, edited by Jeruse Romão (2005); *Superando o Racismo na Escola*, edited by Kabengele Munanga (2005); *Tempos de Lutas: As Ações Afirmativas no Contexto Brasileiro*, by Nilma Lino Gomes (2006).

12 In his essay “Por um Conceito de Literatura Afro-Brasileira” (2011), Eduardo de Assis Duarte maps out the multiple ways in which this concept has taken shape in the Brazilian scholarship of the twentieth century. That context is particularly connected with the 1980s when Afro-Brazilian writers of Quilombhoje assume a more combative discourse against racism, publishing a literary production aligned with the tone of protest and militancy of the Black Movement, as demonstrated by Florentina da Silva Sousa (*Afro-descendência em Cadernos Negros e Jornal do MNU*, 2005). Apart from conceptual debates, Duarte proposes the identification of at least five elements that characterize the Afro-Brazilian literary production: an Afro-Brazilian thematic repertoire; the Afro-Brazilian authorial voice; linguistic constructions marked by an “Afro-Brazilianess” in tone,

rhythm, syntax or semantics; a project of “discursive transitivity” aimed at its targeted audience; and, most importantly, a point-of-view culturally and ideologically identified with the Afro-descendant universe (Duarte 2011, 385 -399).

13 The poem by Afro-Peruvian poet Victoria Santa Cruz became representative of the black cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s in Peru, led by black artists such as Santa Cruz and her brother Nicomedes Santa Cruz Gamarra. The performance by the poet along with a group of dancers, singers, and musicians can be accessed online at <http://www.geledes.org.br/me-gritaron-negra-a-poeta-victoria-santa-cruz>.

14 “A Carne” was composed by Seu Jorge, Marcelo Yuca, and Ulisses Cappelletti. It was first recorded by Elza Soares in her 2002 album *Do Cóiix Até o Pescoço* [“From the Coccyx to the Neck”].

15 This essay by Conceição Evaristo is only available in Portuguese. The English translation that follows is mine. As I insert quotes from other texts only available in Portuguese, I will offer my own version in English between brackets (“[ ]”), always following the original version.

16 *Ponciá Vicêncio*, published in 2003, is Conceição Evaristo’s first novel. It was translated into English in 2007 by Paloma Martinez-Cruz. For the purpose of this discussion, I make references to the text published in English.

17 The Brazilian modernism of the 1920s and 1930s is remarkably characterized by the

development of the notion of a national identity that incorporates manifestations of native Brazilian and Afro-descendant cultural expressions as symbols of a racially democratic *mestiça* culture. Besides Gilberto Freyre, other artists and intellectuals are key figures in crafting the contours of that understanding, such as Mário de Andrade, Oswaldo de Andrade, Raul Bopp, and Luís da Câmara Cascudo. For further reading on that particular historical and intellectual development, see Lilia Moritz Schwarcz's *O Espetáculo das Raças* (1993).

18 For further reading on Beatriz Nascimento's considerations about *quilombos*, see Alex Ratts' 2007 "*Eu Sou Atlântica*": *Sobre a Trajetória de Vida de Beatriz Nascimento*. For a recent historical research on the Quilombos dos Palmares, see Glenn Alan Cheney's *Quilombo dos Palmares: Brazil's Lost Nation of Fugitive Slaves* (2014).

20 I offer here these two illustrations of cultural commodification of the figure of the Brazilian *mulata*. The TV channel *Globo* – the most influential one in Brazil – annually institutes and publicizes a Carnival *mulata* dancer called "Globeleza": her naked body is covered only by a paint that highlights her *mulata* corporeal attributes; voiceless, she poses and dances to the cameras/views as a symbol of the Brazilian carnival. The 2014 TV show *O Sexo e as Negras*, idealized by equally popular white actor and playwright Miguel Falabella, depicts the daily life of four black women friends who live in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro, in a purportedly adaptation of the HBO show *Sex and the City*. In her article for the Huffington Post, Nsenga Burton reported that the show was "being criticized by black women in Brazil for the title and the hyper sexualized representation of black women in the series" (Burton 2015, n.p.). Indeed, the show provoked a series of public and cyber protests by different groups of black Brazilian artists, intellectuals, educators, and activists,



including Afro-Brazilian writers Ana Maria Gonçalves, Jarrid Arraes, Miriam Alves and Elisa Lucinda.

21 Audre Lorde's most precious gift to Spelman College and the future generations of scholars "was her decision to give her personal papers and other artifacts to the Spelman Archives, a component of the Women's Center" – that is how Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy Sheftall describe Lorde's gesture before her death in their article "Audre Lorde and Spelman College", published on *The Feminist Wire* (February 27, 2014). Betsch and Sheftall's article testifies to Lorde's influence to a moment which they define as "feminist transformations" at the College: from being the target of homophobic attacks in her first visit to the College in 1976 to the celebration of her legacy on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Center, Lorde's relationship with Spelman represents a snapshot of the transformations that occurred both within the academic circles and within Lorde herself throughout the course of three decades. The full account of that history can be found online at <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/02/audre-lorde-selman-college>.

22 For an in-depth study on the development of Black Arts institutions, including the key independent African American publishing venues – whose heart was located in the Midwest and San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960s – see James Smethurst's *Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005) and Julius Thompson's *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, And The Black Arts Movement In Detroit, 1960-1995*.

23 Barbara DiBernard offers an insightful analysis of the development of the artist in Lorde's *Zami* in her article "Zami: A Portrait of an Artist as a Black Lesbian" (1991). Looking at Lorde's

biomythography as a particular kind of female *Künstlerroman* (the novel of development of the artist), DiBernard suggests that “In *Zami* we find an alternative model of female development as well as a new image of the poet and of female creativity. The image of the poet as black lesbian encompasses continuity with a familial and herstorical past, community, strength, woman-bonding, rootedness in the world, and an ethic of care and responsibility” (DiBernard 1991, 196).

24 The story of how Schultz came to make a film about Audre Lorde is narrated in the director’s statement published on the official website for the film <http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com>.

25 In that sense, the notion of working across differences – and the discomfort that kind of work may cause among different groups – is consistent with what Lorde has sustained throughout her life with various degrees of confrontation. At a certain extent, Lorde’s framework anticipates some of the points raised by contemporary activists such as Asam Ahmed who notes a current tendency for a public performance of a “call-out culture” that “can enable a particularly armchair and academic brand of activism: one in which the act of calling out is seen as an end in itself” (2015). In the article, Ahmed – just like Lorde – does not abandon the idea of calling people out in activist work, but he does seem to be concerned about the ways in which that has been done as an end in itself without promoting the types of coalitions movements need to build in order to be able to work together – across differences.

26 These are some of the international issues Audre Lorde insistently addressed in her speeches, essays, and in her correspondence with other intellectuals and artists. In *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings by Audre Lorde* (2009), the essay “Apartheid U.S.A.” illustrates how

she gives a global perspective over the connections between racist systems in both the U.S. and South Africa, and the role of the U.S. divestment policy and corporations in promoting and financing the South African apartheid; in *Sister Outsider*, she publishes “Grenada: An Interim Report”, denouncing the atrocities caused by the U.S. military invasion and occupation of Grenada in 1983. Besides that, in 1982, on the occasion of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Lorde engages in a public debate with June Jordan and her response to Adrienne Rich’s essay on the subject of Israel and Zionism, published in *Off Our Backs*. Jordan’s “On Israel and Lebanon: A Response to Adrienne Rich to One Black Woman” (published in *Womanews*) is, then, opposed by the statement “Black Women/Jewish Women: Openings for Dialogue”, signed by Lorde and other women intellectuals such as Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Smith, and Tania Abdulahad (SL, ALC, Box 3).

27 I offer here a translation of this quote: “... considering the black population, the word collective portrays us as an amorphous mass without a defined face, without defined voices, without our particular feelings. Our collective action as black women writers have the purpose of re-defining gazes; re-defining judgments and practices of an entire society, not only about our writing, but also for the other collective - the collective of anonymous black women” (Alves “Vozes nos Tambores: Homenagem às Escritoras Afro – Brasileiras” 2011).

28 This statement was published in the program of the *XIV Seminário Nacional e V Seminário Internacional Mulher e Literatura* and on the conference website, available at [http://www.telunb.com.br/mulhereliteratura/?page\\_id=869](http://www.telunb.com.br/mulhereliteratura/?page_id=869) (Accessed on January 25, 2016).

29 For a comprehensive historical account of the Quilombhoje group and the rise of *Cadernos Negros*, see Carlindo Fausto Antônio’s doctoral dissertation *Cadernos Negros: Esboço de Análise*

(Universidade Estadual de Campinas, SP: 2005) and Nazareth Soares Fonseca's article "Cadernos Negros: Sobre A História da Coleção" (*Afro-Hispanic Review*, 29, n. 2: 2010).

30 The history of the Movimento Negro Unificado – officially founded in 1978 – is interwoven with the larger history of social movements in Brazil. It speaks both to the long tradition of black organizations fighting for racial, political, and economic justice, and to the modern history of the 1960s and 1970s when several organizations are struggling for civil liberties against the military regime. For a more detailed historical analysis of the MNU, see Michael Hanchard's *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1945-1988* (1998); the article by Marcia Contins and Luis Carlos Ribeiro de Sant'ana, "O Movimento Negro e a Questão da Ação Afirmativa" (*Revista Estudos Feministas*, v. 4, 1996); and Amauri Mendes Pereira's *Trajétoria e Perspectivas do Movimento Negro Brasileiro* (2008).

31 Although only recently acknowledged by a few Brazilian scholars (Salgueiro 2011; Sales 2011), Miriam Alves' performatic poetry readings and declamations have been a mark of her participation in events, conferences, lectures, and classes wherever she goes, including Brazil and the United States. Since her insertion as a poet in *Quilombhoje* in the 1980s, she has shared that performance style with other black writers in the movement where they would include, besides their poetry, call and response songs and forms of interaction with the audience, Candomblé chants, and Afro-Brazilian drumming, highlighting the intrinsic component of their poetry – the black, Afro-Brazilian tradition – and the affirmation of black Brazilian identity. In that regard, a parallel could be made with the performance aspect of the poetry readings by many black writers of the Black Arts Movement in the U.S., such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, A. B.

Spellman and others – just to cite some of the movement’s initiators in the East Coast, inaugurating “a model of popular avant-garde” by “using the ‘new thing’ jazz or *free jazz* of the late 1950s and the 1960s”, as describe in Smethurst (2005), as well as other elements connected with both U.S. Afro-American and African culture. A writer from that generation, Audre Lorde also embraced elements of performance in her public appearances, in particular in regards to her West African style of attire, as well as the uses of her voice for different poetic utterances which might have been inspired by her contact with the Yoruba tradition and its various kinds of oral poetry performed in different occasions, as discussed by Okepwho (1992). Although this study does not focus on the performatic layer of these writers’ work, it is important to mention that ways they choose to deliver their own literary production is embedded in the political stand they take as black women writers and becomes, thus, part of their *poli(poe)tics of embodiment*. A few videos of Alves’ recent public poetic performances are available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBSDW5eOJds> (at the University of Texas at Austin, 2009); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efWinKPqijU> (at the 1st Conference of Brazilian Women Writers in New York City, sponsored by the Brazilian Endowment for the Arts, 2009); [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJP\\_WQ\\_N5iQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJP_WQ_N5iQ) (at the book launch for *Mulher Mat(r)iz*, in Salvador, Bahia, broadcasted by the local community Web TV of the Grupo Alerta Pernambués, 2013).

32 The term “intimism” in Brazilian literature (or “literatura intimista”) refers to a literary genre or style commonly associated with several writers of the twentieth century (or modernists) whose introspective focus and perspective was directed towards a journey into the depths of consciousness, both in poetry and fiction. Canonic writers within this genre include Cecília

Meireles, Clarice Lispector, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Although Miriam Alves's *Momentos de Busca* comes out by the end of the century, it clearly shows how strongly the intimist style of a previous generation shapes her poetics, also giving evidence of the dialogue she is establishing with a more canonic literary tradition in Brazil.

33 Miriam Alves currently runs a weblog ([escritoramiriamalves.blogspot.com.br](http://escritoramiriamalves.blogspot.com.br)) and a Facebook page (“Escritora Miriam Alves”) where she shares stories about her writing career; publishes articles, essays, and some of her poetry; publicizes events she is invited to participate; and often offers thought-provoking commentaries about contemporary events and news, usually delivered in an ironic and sarcastic tone that is peculiar to her style.

34 Besides Teófilo de Queiroz Júnior's early work on the representation of the “mulata” in Brazilian literature, I also suggest another early study on the topic: David Brookshaw's *Raça e Cor na Literatura Brasileira* (1983). Beyond the large number of works cited in the end of this study, my Master's thesis *Uma Escrita Em Dupla Face: A Mulher Negra em Ponciá Vicêncio, de Conceição Evaristo* (2003) and my recent essay “Beyond the Flesh: Contemporary Representations of the Black Female Body in Afro-Brazilian Literature”, published in the special issue *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* (2016), offer an in-depth discussion on the representations of black women in the history of Brazilian literature.

35 During the twentieth century, preceding the foundation of the “Frente Negra Brasileira” (FNB) in 1931, Brazil holds a legacy of black organizing and militancy with an active black press in the 1920s, mostly in São Paulo, with *O Menelick* (1915); *A Rua* (1916); *O Alfinete* (1918); *A*

*Liberdade* (1919); *A Sentinela* (1920); *O Getulino* and the *Clarim d' Alvorada* (1924). As an organization with thousands of members and associates, the demands of the FNB are responsible for the hiring of black people in the São Paulo Police Force, for instance. The FNB becomes a political party in 1936, but it is dissolved one year later with the regime of Getúlio Vargas, who issues a decree declaring all political parties illegal. See *Tirando a Máscara: Ensaio Sobre o Racismo no Brasil*, edited by Antônio Sérgio A. Guimarães and Lynn Huntley (2000); *A Utopia Brasileira e os Movimentos Negros* by Antonio Risério (2007).

36 For a detailed discussion and analysis of black women's intellectual and militant participation in the history of the black movement in Brazil and the construction of a black feminist agenda, see Eliane Borges da Silva's article "Tecendo o Fio, Aparando as Arestas: O Movimento de Mulheres Negras e a Construção do Pensamento Negro Feminista" (2000), published for the 2000 Conference "O Desafio da Diferença" in Salvador, Bahia, available online at the conference proceedings website <http://www.desafio.ufba.br/gt6-003.html>; also the article "Movimento de Mulheres Negras e a Luta pela Afirmação dos Direitos Humanos no Brasil" by Rayssa Andrade Carvalho and Solange Pereira Rocha (*Cadernos Imbondeiro*, 2:1. 2012), available online at <http://periodicos.ufpb.br/ojs/index.php/ci/article/view/14252/8826>.

37 In her 2009 study "As ONGs de Mulheres Negras no Brasil", Sônia Beatriz dos Santos offers an analysis of the NGOs of black women in Brazil, with particular focus on the era of its effervescence between 1980s and 1990s as a consequence of the articulated work at the *Reunião de Mulheres Negras Aquatume* – Reunima, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, in 1978. Santos offers a panoramic mapping of the NGOs of black women in different regions of the country and their

foundational year (in *Sociedade e Culura*, 12, 2: 2009. 275-288. *Geledés*. Web. 16 May 2014). During the 1980s and 1990s, some of the most prominent black women's organizations are founded in the country, such as Nzinga – Grupo de Mulheres Negras (Rio de Janeiro, 1982); Grupo de Mulheres Negras Mãe Andresa (1986, Maranhão); Geledés – Instituto da Mulher Negra (São Paulo, 1988); ACMUN – Associação Cultural de Mulheres Negras (Rio Grande do Sul, 1989); Criola (Rio de Janeiro, 1992); Fala Preta! (Rio de Janeiro, 1997); and Malunga – Grupo de Mulheres Negras (Goiânia, 1999) – just to name a few.

38 An illustration of the ultra-conservative movement in Brazil during the military regime is the series of marches organized by upper-middle class elite groups (including right-wing women's associations such as the “União Cívica Feminina”) and more traditional sectors of the Catholic Church. These series of marches – known as Marcha da Família com Deus pela Liberdade (Family March with God for Freedom) - started in Rio de Janeiro, right after President João Goulart announced his politically progressive plan of reforms for his government. The marches reached other capital cities after the military overthrew Goulart and imposed a military coup on March 31, 1964.

39 In 2013, Miriam Alves creates Zula Gibi's own Facebook page in which she publishes some of her writings and interacts with readers. On the website, Alves reveals that Zula Gibi is, in fact, her “heteronym”. See <https://www.facebook.com/ZulaGibi>.

40 For a deeper discussion of women's literary production and the narrative voice as a place of social authority, see Susan Sniader Lanser's *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative*



*Voice* (1992).

41 In her Master's thesis (2011), Cristian Souza de Sales refers to Alves' participation in the group "Umas&Outras" and the writer's role as the coordinator of the collective in 2005. Although the group seems to be now inactive, my Internet research led to a Google Groups webpage in which I could find the collective's mission statement and some of the events and programming promoted by "Umas&Outras" between 2004 in which Miriam Alves is mentioned. The webpages I accessed in July of 2014 for this study are the following: <https://br.groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/mulheres-a/conversations/messages/555> (for the mission statement); and <https://br.groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/mulheres-a/conversations/topics/180>.

42 My translation of Alves' verses in "Enigma": "I dive into you/ I cultivate solitary pleasures/ I grow raw emotions/ in well-kept places".

43 In Candomblé (in the *nagô* tradition), the ritual of *ipadê* (or *padê*), normally performed in the beginning of ceremonies, is designed to honor the Orisha Eshu – the messenger that opens and clears pathways, mediating the communication between human beings and all the other Orishas. Roger Bastide explains that the *ipadê* consists of a prayer in honor of the dead or the ancestors in Candomblé (2001, 34).

44 The Afro-American literary tradition in the U.S. is strongly influenced by the philosophical tradition of dualism. This influence has been expressed over time through different tropes that illustrate or conceptualize the paradoxes within a fragmented diasporic being, such as the Afro-

descendant one. As James Smethurst points out, Du Bois' nineteenth century notion of double consciousness “has remained a powerful trope available to a wide range of artists and intellectuals both inside and outside of the United States down to the present” (2007, 377). That tradition has also influenced the ways Afro-Brazilian artists and intellectuals articulate ideas about the fragmented Afro-descendant self within a context uniquely marked by the “ideologia do branqueamento” (“whitening” ideology) and discourses of racial harmony. In that regard, the ground-breaking study of Neuza Santos Souza highlights how black Brazilians develop a sense of self engaging in processes of identification inevitably connected with “the experience of being black in a white society. Of a dominant white class and ideology. Of a white aesthetics and behavior” (1983, 17).

45 In Brazil, there are no records of publication of slave narratives as a genre. Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua’s narrative, published in English in 1854 in the U.S., is the only autobiography by a former enslaved African that narrates experiences in slavery in Brazil. Baquaqua’s autobiography is now being translated to Portuguese by Brazilian historian Bruno Veras. For more on the translation project, see Leonardo Vieira’s article “Historiadores traduzem única autobiografia escrita por ex-escravo que viveu no Brasil” (*Jornal O Globo*, Nov. 27, 2014, Web). For a comparative study of Baquaqua’s and Olaudah Equiano’s narratives, see Nielson Rosa Bezerra’s essay “Escravidão, Biografias e a Memória dos Excluídos” (*Revista Espaço Acadêmico* 126, Nov. 2011, Web).

46 Provost revisits a number of studies on the use of the trickster tradition in U.S. black literature, including those by Anne Louise Keating and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.. Provost’s argues that Lorde

borrowed selectively from the trickster tradition, focusing on aspects she finds most relevant, including choosing to identify with a lesser-known, overtly female manifestation of the trickster, Afrekete, as a supplement to the phallic figure of Eshu/Elegba in the Yoruba (1995, 46-47).

47 Although myths can be conventionally understood as a politically conservative narrative form to establish a sense of absolute truths that help define human morality (as argued by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, 1953) or to serve as teaching aids to establish models of behavior (as discussed in Mircea Eliade's 1998 *Myth and Reality*), I refer to the concept to imply a more dynamic function for the use of myth: as a means to both conserve and liberate, approve or restrict. In the particular instance of both Alves' and Lorde's poetry, the myth-making often associates the black female body with supernatural or magical features, revealing cultural and intellectual traditions, as well as silenced stories, while maintaining an alternative, non-mainstream, non-hegemonic, political stance. Myth-making in Lorde and Alves (as it is the case in other writings by black women) represents the re-creation of language that gives room to an imaginative transformation of reality designed, as Adrienne Rich points out, "to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment" (1972, 23). For more on myth-making in black women's literature see the essays "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction" by Cynthia A. Davis (1982) and "Making 'Our Shattered Faces Whole': The Black Goddess and Audre Lorde's Revision of Patriarchal Myth" by AnnLouise Keating (1992).

48 There are a few discussions on the aesthetics of the covers and back covers of *Cadernos Negros*. Although this is not the focus of my research, it is worth mentioning that the design for each issue represents in and of itself an important element used by the journal in affirming an Afro-

Brazilian tradition and identity. For further study, see Fernanda Rodrigues de Figueiredo's MA dissertation "A Mulher Negra nos Cadernos Negros: Autoria e Representações" (2009) and Florentina da Silva Souza's book *Afro-descendência em Cadernos Negros e Jornal do MNU* (2005).

49 Two recent incidents involving cases of racial discrimination in relation to black women's natural hair in Brazil are illustrated by the student of Medicine Suzane Pereira da Silva, from the city of São Paulo, at an event promoted by the Federal Government in Brasília, celebrating the advancements in affirmative action policies in public higher education on April 12, 2016. Suzane narrates how she suffered a backlash from colleagues who questioned how she would be able to enter a hospital with "that hair". In March of 2016, another incident happened in the city of Campina Grande, in the state of Paraíba, where another student, Márcia Lima had her photo rejected for the public transportation card registration because of her "Black Power" hair – a reference to a natural Afro hair. Suzane Pereira da Silva's talk is available online at <https://www.facebook.com/DilmaRousseff/videos/1102219093165014/?pnref=story>; and Márcia Lima's story is featured on a clip of a TV talk show at <http://gshow.globo.com/TV-Cabo-Branco/noticia/2016/03/encontro-discute-polemica-envolvendo-cabelo-black-power-de-estudante-na-paraiba.html>.

50 Audre Lorde's poem "Between Ourselves" was first published in her homonymous anthology in 1976, and in *The Black Unicorn*, in 1978. Miriam Alves' poem "Cara Pintada" ["Colored Face"] was made available on the author's Facebook page in June 2013. I offer the following translation to the cited verses of Alves' poem: "My painted face is this/ the one I take out on the streets/ every

day/ day after day/ an everlasting struggle/ for my dignity”.

51 The term “nego” (or “nêgo”) in Brazil may have at least two different meanings. It may be used as a racist slur in certain contexts, but it is often used as a term of endearment in certain regions such as Bahia, particularly when it involves close relationships among people. The term “nego” within the erotic and sensual context of the poem carries a tone of affection and intimacy.

52 Besides being considered the time when people are normally deepest in their sleep, the “dead hour” has been used in Gothic literature to imply a time in the middle of the night during which the spirits of the dead are manifested and supernatural phenomena are more likely to be experienced, as it is the case with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*; Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*; Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Raven*; as well as contemporary Gothic literature writers such as Anne Rice. For more on the topic, see David Punter’s 2012 *A New Companion to The Gothic*.

53 Looking at the Brazilian public arena of the social movements of late 1970s and early 1980s, James N. Green illustrates some of the ideological tensions between the black and the gay movements. Green offers a historical perspective on how more conservative sectors of the gay and lesbian organizations at the time, particularly in São Paulo, developed resistance to strategic allyship with other sectors of the left and labor movements (the organized feminist movement and the Movimento Negro Unificado, for instance), claiming that “the left was homophobic and wanted only to manipulate the gay movement for its own political agenda and that the gay movement was too weak to work with the labor movement, which was also homophobic and hostile to any

alliance” (Green 1994, 53). Green also highlights that, despite the MNU’s acceptance to ally with sectors of the gay movement “Somos” towards the participation in the 1980 May Day March in the midst of a massive strike wave in greater São Paulo, the MNU did not take any initiatives to develop continuing and mutual allyship with the gay movement (52).

54 Once more, I would like to highlight the fictional writing by Miriam Alves/ Zula Gibi as important material for the representation of the erotic, particularly the homoeroticism or queer relationships. Although my study focuses on her poetry, Alves’/Gigi’s short-fiction production is a rich terrain where some of my considerations could also be explored. A few studies have been developed in that regard: Camila Sodr  de Oliveira Dias presents a discussion on the literary representation of black lesbian identities, focusing on the narratives by Alves/ Gibi in “Identidades L sbicas Afro-Brasileiras nas Narrativas de Miriam Alves e Zula Gibi” (2014).

55 Founder of the *Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN)*, a pioneering theater group formed only by black actors and actresses, in S o Paulo, from 1944 to 1961, Abdias do Nascimento had already been developing a significant intellectual work on Afro-Brazilian culture and history. His conceptualization of “quilombismo” comes from this body of work and more detailed developed in his book *O Quilombismo* (2002).

56 Jo o Jos  Reis and Beatriz Gallotti Mamigonian’s chapter on the Yoruba diaspora in Brazil offers a well-documented and nuanced historical account of the Nag  and Mina African identities in colonial Bahia and Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century. The authors explain the dominant presence of the Nag -identified rebels in the movement for freedom from slavery that culminated

in the uprising known as the Malê Revolt: “The majority of Muslims in 1835, including their most important leaders, were Yoruba. Enslaved and freed Hausas, a group particularly devoted to Islam, were also involved but very modestly. The near monopoly of the movement by the Nagôs is shown in numerous evidence. The rebels were known as *Malês* and the insurrection a *Malê* revolt, terms derived from the Yoruba *Imale* for Muslim. With one exception, of the half dozen Muslim conspiratorial groups identified by the police, five were formed exclusively by Nagôs... The 73 percent Nagô slaves and freedmen among those arrested vastly overrepresented the 30 percent of Nagôs in the African community of Salvador. In the meantime, the Hausas accounted for 10.5 percent of those arrested and 9.4 percent of the Africans in the city” (2005, 94).

57 For further reading on the role and popularity of Mmanthatsi and her reign in the nineteenth century, see Peter Becker’s “A Comparative Study of Strategy in Bantu Tribal Warfare During the 19th Century” (*Military History Journal* 1: 3, 1968), available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol013pb.html> (Access on May 30, 2016).

58 Dandara is now known as a black warrior who partnered with Zumbi dos Palmares in building and leading the maroon community of *Quilombo dos Palmares* in the state of Alagoas during 1655 and 1695. Such as Luiza Mahin, Dandara’s historical record is imprecise and filled with gaps, but her legacy as a warrior-leader persists and her symbolism has been reclaimed by contemporary black women’s movement in the struggle against racism and sexism in Brazil. Yaa Asantewaa was appointed queen mother of Ejisu in the Ashanti Empire - now part of modern-day Ghana - in late nineteenth century. In 1900, she led the Ashanti rebellion known as the War of the Golden Stool, also known as the Yaa Asantewaa war, against British colonialism. For further readings on

Dandara, see: *Palmares - A Guerra dos Escravos* by Décio Freitas (1982) and the article by Dandara Tinoco, published in *O Globo* (Nov. 15, 2014), available at <http://oglobo.globo.com/sociedade/historia/descrita-como-heroina-dandara-mulher-de-zumbi-tem-biografia-cercada-de-incertezas-14567996#ixzz3J9uY> (access on May 30, 2016). For further readings on Yaa Asantewaa, see: *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr (2005).

59 Alves' poems "Sumidouro Brasil" and "Cruzes" give clear linguistic clues to contemporary atrocities in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. More specifically, the former poem makes reference to the case of the 43-year-old Amarildo Souza, a resident of one of Rio's largest *favelas*, Rocinha, who was taken by police officers in July 2013 on his way to the neighborhood market, during one of the "pacifying" raids by the city's military police to investigate drug-trafficking activities in the area. Souza never returned home and his disappearance led to a series of protests in which the community used the question "Where is Amarildo?" in banners and T-shirts, demanding a response from the government authorities. Twelve officers involved in Souza's disappearance were later charged and sentenced with torture and murder. The case was covered by international news, including the BBC. Souza's case figures as one in thousands of other "disappearances" of black bodies during police actions in the *favelas*. In 2014, UNESCO published a research showing that, among the 56 thousand murders in Brazil during 2012, 30.000 were of males between 15 and 29 years-old – from this total, 77% were blacks. Also in 2014, Amnesty International Brazil, based on this data, launched the national campaign "Jovem Negro Vivo" ["Black Youth Alive"] in order to mobilize society and break with the indifference regarding the extermination of the Afro-Brazilian population. For further reading, see: the BBC news article on Amarildo de Souza's case



at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-24362311>; and the campaign by the Amnesty International Brazil at <https://anistia.org.br/campanhas/jovemnegrovivo>.

60 For detailed information about the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., see: <http://blacklivesmatter.com> and *Black Lives Matter* (2016), edited by Duchess Harris and Sue Bradford Edwards. For further reading on the Brazilian movement “Reaja ou Será Mortx”, see: <http://reajanasruas.blogspot.com> and *Políticas Públicas no Território das Juventudes* (2006), edited by Jailson de Souza e Silva, Jorge Luiz Barbosa, and Ana Inês Sousa.

61 I borrow this term and its underlying premise from Leroi Jones’ (aka Amiri Baraka) essay “The Changing Same (R & B and New Black Music)” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (1971, 112-25). Jones traces the continuities in the black musical tradition, which he argues has its roots in African religion and spirit worship. His argument is that, even as it has changed, in both vocal and instrumental forms, black music has remained the same, continuing ancient African patterns and impulses, and then transplanted in the U.S. I use and expand his premise to argue that, analogously, it is possible to observe continuities in black women’s literary production throughout the diaspora in the Americas, even as the traditions in which this production is inscribed changes.

62 The fragments in this epigraph come from two poems: Audre Lorde’s “On My Way Out I passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge”, published in *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986); and Miriam Alves’ “Saber da Chama” [“Learn about the Flame”], published in *Estrelas no Dedo* (1985), whose translation I offer as follows: “Learn about the flame... turning into a burning/ drop of word/ clinging to the corner of the mouth/ in the promise of an encounter/ at the crossroads of tomorrow”.

63 “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women” was originally issued as a report on cases of police brutality against black women in the U.S., particularly the suspicious circumstances and nebulous investigations surrounding the death of Sandra Bland in her jail cell in Waller County, Texas, on July 13, 2015. The report represents a collaborative effort by the African American Policy Forum, the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia Law School, also relying on the contributions by black women scholars and activists, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea Ritchie. The report also emphasizes the large number of black queer women among those targeted in acts of violence by sectors of law enforcement in the U.S. Further reading: <http://www.aapf.org/sayhernamereport>.

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