



**(RE) TEACHING BRAZILIAN LITERATURE: AN AFRODESCENDENT PERSPECTIVE**

***(RE)ENSINANDO LITERATURA BRASILEIRA: UMA PERSPECTIVA AFRODESCENDENTE***

***(RE) ENSEÑAR LITERATURA BRASILEÑA: UNA PERSPECTIVA AFRODESCENDENTE***

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**ABSTRACT:** The current revival of discussions around racial issues introduces the need to revise the canon to make it more inclusive and also the need to re-read it from a perspective that takes into account the role of Afro-descendants as authors and literary characters in Brazilian literature and culture. The classroom immediately takes on importance as a space for the opening of possibilities for discussions. I present a list of some pedagogical strategies to address this issue. Navigating suggestions for the elaboration of the course program and the practice of discussion in the classroom, I offer here bibliography recommendations and materials related to a pilot survey of Brazilian literature and culture university course in which non-canonical texts are introduced and canonical texts are addressed through discussions of racial issues.

**KEYWORDS:** Race. Canon. Brazilian literature.

**RESUMO:** Com o atual avivamento das discussões em torno de questões raciais e da necessidade tanto de rever o cânon para torná-lo mais inclusivo quanto também de se relê-lo a partir de uma perspectiva que leve em consideração o papel de afrodescendentes na literatura e na cultura brasileira em seu papel de autores e autoras e personagens literárias, a sala de aula cobra importância imediatamente como espaço de inauguração de possibilidades de discussões. Neste trabalho, portanto, apresento um roteiro de algumas estratégias pedagógicas para abordar tal questão. Passando pela elaboração do programa de curso até a prática de discussão em sala de aula, ofereço aqui sugestões de bibliografia, materiais relacionados a um curso universitário piloto de panorama da literatura e da cultura brasileira em que textos não canônicos são introduzidos e textos canônicos são abordados por meio de discussões relativas a questões raciais.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Raça. Canon. Literatura brasileira.

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**RESUMEN:** *Con el resurgimiento actual de las discusiones sobre temas raciales y la necesidad tanto de revisar el canon para hacerlo más inclusivo como de releerlo desde una perspectiva que tenga en cuenta el papel de los afrodescendientes en la literatura y en la cultura brasileña en su papel de autores y personajes literarios, el aula adquiere de inmediato importancia como espacio de apertura de posibilidades de discusión. En este trabajo, por tanto, presento algunas estrategias pedagógicas para abordar este tema. Pasando por la elaboración del programa del curso y la práctica de la discusión en el aula, ofrezco aquí sugerencias bibliográficas, materiales relacionados con un curso universitario piloto en el panorama de la literatura y la cultura brasileña en el que se introducen textos no canónicos y textos canónicos abordados a través de discusiones sobre cuestiones raciales.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Raza. Canon. Literatura brasileña.*

## Introduction

It is not uncommon nowadays to come across testimonies, in the most varied formats and media, from students and teachers highlighting — in the classes attended during their academic training — the non-existent discussion about a) texts by Afro-descendant authors; b) racial issues in the texts; and c) Afro-descendant characters in Brazilian literature in general. This is explained by the confluence of many factors that permeate the history of Brazilian literature, of the social formation of Brazil after the abolition of slavery in a context of “[...] a flagrant downgrading of Afro-descendants” (DUARTE, 2007, p. 242) (Our translation) that still extends its tentacles today, and the consequent process of symbolic whitening that gradually replaced the failed process of physical whitening implemented in the post-abolition period (MUUNANGA, 2004, p. 137).

In this article, I expose - through brief suggestions for re-readings of some central works in Brazilian literary historiography and also of more contemporary works for which there is still no rich critical fortune - possibilities of readings that bring both the racial issue and the Afro-descendant characters to the center of the debate and, beyond the obvious, highlight the historically erased importance of both the role of Afro-descendants in Brazilian culture and society and of such procedure in the process of (re)construction of meanings concerning Brazilian culture and society.

This is not about presenting an exclusive reading of Afro-descendant authors, but a reading of representative works from different periods from an Afro-descendant perspective. I selected only 8 works and/or authors to represent the scope of a panoramic course. They are: Machado de Assis; O Quinze, by Rachel de Queiroz; Menino de Engenho, by José Lins do Rêgo; Vidas Secas, by Graciliano Ramos; Racionais MC's rap; Maria Firmina dos Reis;





Elizandra Souza; and Jorge Nascimento. The fact that they are not included in the exhibitions below does not mean that names such as Lima Barreto, Castro Alves, Augusto dos Anjos, Cruz e Souza, among many others, cannot be part of the list. The ideas presented here can serve as a starting point for re-reading their works as well.

### **Machado de Assis**

In the last two decades, the Afro-descendant facet of Machado de Assis has stood out in Brazilian and international criticism. Author who for almost the entire 20th century had his image and work associated with a white world (DUARTE, 2007), the Bruxo do Cosme Velho has been the object of studies that explore both his racial identification and the presence of Afro-descendant characters and discussions about slavery in his texts; therefore, the topic can now be incorporated into the set of traditional approaches to the work of the greatest Brazilian author.

In addition to discussing the evidence pointed out by Duarte (2007), that Machado was never absent from the racial issue and slavery through the reading of selected novels and chronicles, an excellent strategy to conduct discussions on the racial issue in Machado of Assis in the classroom is to use the short story “Recitativo”, by Toni Morrison, as a starting point, because, as the author herself states, “[...] The only short story I have ever written, ‘Recitativo’ was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial”. The story features two characters, one white and one black, but it is impossible to distinguish who is who, because Morrison works with stereotypes, positive and negative, associated with one or another race in the social and historical context in which the plot of the story develops. In the case of Machado de Assis, following the logic of Vital (2012), one can question the commonplace fact that all the characters, for which Machado did not offer a physical description, are read as if they were white and one can then make readings of several of his works considering the racial issue, as demonstrated by Dutra (2018, 2020) in the case of “Missa do Galo”, “Teoria do Medallhão” and “Noite de Almirante”.

The character Cândido Neves, from “Pai contra mãe”, for example, has been the object of categorical statements regarding his “race”. Duarte (2007), Vital (2012) and other researchers claim that he is white, while Flynn *et al.* (2013) question this statement and Rocha (2016) argues that there are enough elements to conclude that Candinho is not white. All



attempts to define their “race”, however, are based on stereotypes and half-truths, so to speak. Those who claim that Candinho is not white point to his condition of “captain of the bush”, without such information being given in the account, as the narrator never uses this title to refer to him; moreover, not all the people who were dedicated to capturing runaway slaves in urban areas were black or mestizo (LARA, 1988). Those who claim that he is white do so through readings, often a priori, that highlight his supposed congenital malice as a white man who oppresses black women. It is not yet possible to state Candinho's race with the elements given in the text; therefore, Machado's tale parallels Morrison's and takes on even greater importance on the issue of the author's worldview.

In conjunction with readings of the main novels and their descriptions of the (decadent) slave society, mainly *Memorial de Aires*, in several other texts, this strategy of racial ambiguity of the characters can be used. In addition to the aforementioned short stories, one can add to the list “Um homem célebre”, “Conto de escola” and several other short stories and chronicles, always keeping in mind that this is not a course on Machado de Assis and, therefore, his unique work cannot be approached at this time. The most important thing is to demonstrate to the student group that the idea that only white characters play a leading role in Machado's work is not based on Machado's text, as this is a construction of a society that wants to be white and, therefore, denies its Afro-descendant share. The current critical fortune on the racial issue in Machado de Assis encompasses at least two dozen academic texts and it is up to those who decide to implement this approach to select the texts most suited to the target students.

### **Menino de engenho**

A classic of Brazilian literature and mandatory reading, the novel by José Lins do Rêgo, recently re-released by Editora Global, is usually read, as Rocha (2020) reiterates in a recent interview with Podcast Página 5, as an introspection of the memory of the boy Carlinhos during the of early experiences of sexual initiation against the background, according to Athayde (1973, [n. p.], book flap), “[...] a typical social problem of ours, the agony of a caste, the end of rural patriarchy, the collapse of a world”. Furthermore, a *proustian*<sup>2</sup> taste marks the narrative and sets it apart from other works of its time, so Menino de Engenho fits “[...] in the idea of a remembrance of an affective memory, of an interiority of

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<sup>2</sup> It is customary to attribute to the work of the French writer Marcel Proust a character of subjective introspection of the narrator.



a *Proustian* reconstruction of a reality that until then was only seen as an external reality” (ROCHA, 2020). Next, the aforementioned author summarizes the way in which the work is usually approached, remembering that what is narrated — brutally, it is true — are “[...] the delicious stories of Carlinhos at his grandfather’s mill” (ROCK, 2020). It is worth mentioning, however, that, in order to instill the adjective *delicious* in these stories, one must identify with the protagonist and not with the targets of his attacks, especially if we remember this passage: “— Nobody can leave the girls at home with Seu Carlinhos [...] João Rouco gave me a career because of his small son, who wanted to take it” (RÊGO, 1973, p. 118) (Our translation). Immediately after the narrator says that “[...] he ran the fields like a dog in heat, rubbing [his] lubricity everywhere” (RÊGO, 1973, p. 118), we have two important descriptions: one, the that in addition to attacking girls, “Seu Carlinhos”, as he himself tells us, tries to “catch”<sup>3</sup> João Rouco's young son.

In times like the present, to think that there is something tasty in these adventures, if not for the protagonist himself, would be anachronistic, unless there is an identification with him, an identification that is in fact instilled in Brazilian society in general. As it may not be obvious, it is worth noting that João Rouco's son is an Afro-descendant child; in Rêgo's book, years after the abolition of slavery, the practices of sexual violence resulting from the demoralization<sup>4</sup> of people of African descent targeting black male and female bodies — recently studied and published in a book by Aidoo (2018)<sup>5</sup> — they are reiterated and naturalized through “delicious adventures” into the 20th century, as recorded in *Menino de Engenho*.

Rocha (2020) makes an important distinction between boy and kid — explicitly described: “On the street<sup>6</sup> the guys found their friends: the kids” (RÊGO, 1973, p. 55) —, to emphasize that the inequality that is exposed in the work still exists today, and alludes to the real difference between boy and kid; in spite of the last term having lost its original meaning, the racial question is present; although the characters live in the post-abolition period, the slave state *in fact* governs relations. Furthermore, references to the slave quarters and the big house are scattered throughout the novel; its very structure mimics this relationship. The social inequality that still prevails (ROCHA, 2020) and that has its origin in the

<sup>3</sup> Its strategic textual position makes such a statement claim its meaning, masterfully, by the way, veiled through the euphemistic “take” and the covertly sloppy way in which the sentence is said to distract less attentive readers.

<sup>4</sup> Understood in the terms expounded by James Baldwin: “The effect, on a person, of being deprived of his sense of human value” (BALDWIN, 2015). Video transcript, at 4min34s, whose Reference is at the end of this text.

<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, chapter two: “Illegible Violence: The Rape and Sexual Abuse of Male” Slaves” (AIDOO, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> As the narrator himself explains, “street” in this context meant slave quarters (RÊGO, 1973, p. 54).



implementation and maintenance of the slave code to this day is part of this almost confession narrated in a *Proustian* style, which seems to seek a plea bargain to escape the maximum penalty; that's why *Menino de Engenho* is and should continue to be required reading. There are several moments in which the practices arising from slavery are described as commonplace in the work. In chapter 18, we have one of them: “My grandfather ordered the cabra to be put in the trunk” (RÊGO, 1973, p. 42). It may be that the use, nowadays, of the word “cabra”<sup>7</sup> in a broader sense distorts the actual action being described, as the word was one of the pejorative terms used to refer to the so-called “mulattos”. In chapter 22 we read that

There was still the slave quarters from the captivity times [...]. My grandfather's black women, even after abolition, were all on the plantation [...]. My grandfather continued to feed and clothe them. And they work for free, with the same joy as slavery. Their two daughters and granddaughters succeeded them in servitude, with the same love for the big house and the same passivity of good domestic animals. (RÊGO, 1973, p. 55) (Our translation).

It would be superfluous to highlight the animalization of women, because what should draw attention is the genitive (black women of my grandfather) in post-slavery and the verb “dar”, which prepare the narrative terrain for the dissimulated(?) of well-being<sup>8</sup> state of the characters that brings an unsuspecting reader to the narrator's side in his assessment.<sup>9</sup> This scene echoes in *Memorial de Aires* when, through indirect speech, the narrator informs us that Fidélia believes that the now freed would remain in Santa Pia as a matter of affection with the heiress; however, in the Machadian text this possibility is posed and, at the same time, questioned, since at a given moment the freedmen begin to leave the farm.

These two, among many other examples, are sufficient to support that Rêgo's book, despite the general idea that it deals with, according to Tristão Athayde (1973, [n. p.] book flap), “[...] , the agony of the mills, the growing domination of industries, in short of the dehumanization of the economy”, can also be read as a *Proustian* treatise on the existence of a de facto state of slavery that seems to be the only immutable element in this “collapse of a world” (1973, [n. p.] book flap) to which Tristão Athayde alludes. Even so, in general in

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the use of the term “cabra” in the novel *O mulatto* by Aluizio de Azevedo, originally published in 1881.

<sup>8</sup> This passage echoes another, from *Memorial de Aires*, in which an alleged state of well-being is affirmed by the daughter of the former slave owner. See also Baldwin (2015), in video at 25:35, whose Reference is at the end of this text: they deluded themselves that I was happy... all that singing and dancing... al that teeth... they thought I was happy... they knew that if they'd been in my place they wouldn't been happy...”

<sup>9</sup> This interpretation is based on the fact that the boy Carlinhos cannot have a memory of the times of slavery and, therefore, either he repeats a speech or the author does it (albeit in an ironic tone).



Brazilian literature classes, what is discussed are the narrative innovations of the book and these “delicious” adventures of a boy initiated early in the various sexualities.





## O Quinze

*O Quinze* “[...] it is an action masterfully carried out on two planes [...] it is through what she [Conceição] feels that the rich and the poor come together” (MONTEIRO, 1993, [n. p.], book flap); thus, we have here a sample of how the novel has been read in a key of interpretation based on the division of social classes. There are, obviously, other approaches that determine the central position of the female character not only as a protagonist, but as a metonymy of the “[...] position of women in modern society” (COUTINHO, 1970, p. 219) (Our translation), a position that, for Montenegro (1938) and Ellison (1954), it is inequality, which would ultimately be the central theme of Rachel de Queiroz's work. This is confirmed in the words of Courteau (1985, p. 124), for whom the author of *O Quinze* “reveals her view of the condition of woman through the various stages of feminine problematic inherent in the seemingly common heroine stereotypes”.<sup>10</sup>

In general, criticism also tends to “elevate” Queiroz's work to the position of universal; for Hulet (1975, p. 320), the State of Ceará is portrayed “[...] as a point of departure from local to the universal”. Each in its own way, these approaches contribute to the construction of a wide range of interpretations of the work of Rachel de Queiroz and, despite disagreeing at times, they all have in common the absence of a discussion of the racial identification of those who are rich and of who is poor in the novel in question.

A delicate topic in Brazilian society, the class struggle has, historically, had pre-eminence as a problem to be solved; this stance is probably due to the myth of racial democracy which, despite having been demystified in the academic sphere, continues regulating relationships in the daily life of Brazilian society. It may be that the tacit acceptance of racial democracy for so long has influenced readings of the novel *O Quinze*, in which the boundaries between the wealthy and the poor are explicitly established: the latter, for the most part, “cabras”; those, white in their entirety. As with the word “moleque”, keeping the proportions, the term “cabra”, a pejorative epithet used to refer to mulattos, lost its original meaning; it seems that readers of *O Quinze* did not bother to recover the meaning with which the word is used in the novel. Such carelessness, associated with the myth of racial democracy, paves the way for readings that ignore the racial issue in the book, despite the numerous episodes that illustrate it.

To outline this importance, however, two examples suffice. One of them is in the passage of the dissolution of the almost courtship of the — sweet and charitable for the poor

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— protagonist with Vicente; the other is in the narrator's words when Dona Inácia returns, seated in her little chair, to the rural property. For Courteau (1985, p. 126),

on learning of Vicente's alleged infidelity, Conceição decides to terminate their relationship following a close examination of its nature. Conceição doesn't bother to find out if the allegation of Vicente's infidelity is really true. She moves quickly beyond the level of personal hurt and jealousy to realize that infidelity is merely a symptom of the ills of Northeastern marriage

Therefore, Courteau (1985) overlooks the fact that one of the things that bother Conceição is the first thing that — when “[...] lying in bed, with the light off” (QUEIROZ, 1993, p. 78) — drives his thoughts to reach the conclusion alluded to by the aforementioned researcher, that is, the fact that the alleged infidelity takes place with a “cabra”, as the narrator of the novel in question says: “involved with cabras... no it was about (sic) [...] And on top of that, he didn't even care to deny it [...]” (QUEIROZ, 1993, p. 78). This is an obviously racist comment that the narrator, who scrutinizes the character's mind, does not shy away from uttering.

The second example I use, to even take up the idea of the narrator's position, is the episode of the return, at the end of the drought period. On this occasion, the narrative voice, which investigates the protagonist's thoughts and brings them to the readers in the form of a racist comment, finally takes a position given the events narrated at the end of the book: “Dona Inácia wept bitterly, with the same desperate affliction of someone who finds the body of someone very dear, who died during **our** absence” (QUEIROZ, 1993, p. 145, emphasis added) (Our translation). It is clear that this diegetic voice is part of a “we”, which are those who return to their property, sitting in a chair at the end of the dry season, and a “we” that echoes Athayde's (1973) perspective of this “our” that does not include people of African descent. In Rachel de Queiroz's novel, all the characters suffer from the drought, obviously, but those who suffer the most are the “cabras”, who have less value than the “cabra” Chico Bento immolated, of whose remains only you can serve your family the half-raw and totally soiled intestines of the dry land.

### ***Vidas secas* by Graciliano Ramos**

In the second chapter of *Vidas secas*, Fabiano, already seated after the “Mudança”, exclaims: “Fabiano, you are a man [...]” (RAMOS, 1963, p. 20) (Our translation) only to be reproached by the narrator:

come to think of it, he wasn't a man: he was just a cabra busy guarding other people's things. Red, burnt, he had blue eyes, a beard and red hair, but as he lived in someone else's land, he took care of other people's animals, he discovered himself, shrank in the presence of white people and thought he was a cabra" (RAMOS, 1963, p. p. 20-21) (Our translation).

In the previous chapter, the same narrator, in the future tense, almost unintentionally informs us that *sinhá Vitória*, despite the “*sinhá*”, is a “*cabocla*”, since, with the harbinger of rain, the cloud that darkened the hill brought along with prosperity, “[...] the red clothes of *sinhá Vitória* would provoke the envy of the other *caboclas*” (RAMOS, 1963, p. 15) (Our translation). An interracial couple is presented in the work from the first pages, because *Fabiano*, despite considering himself a *cabra*, is a white person.

Bosi (1992, p. 51), either reads literally the passage in which the character *Fabiano* is described or already incorporates the current (and generic) meaning of “*cabra*”, when he states that “[...] the figure of *Fabiano*, the *cabra* from *Vidas secas*, is not a literary myth invented by *Graciliano Ramos*”. There is also the possibility that Bosi is suggesting that *Graciliano Ramos* was already exposing this linguistic process (in its beginnings in social dynamics) that transforms the insults of the slavery era into commonplace words that, despite retaining rancidity of their original meaning, today serve to designate a group of people or specific characteristics, as if *Graciliano Ramos* was witnessing this social fissure that transforms the meaning of words (and vice versa), as Bosi hits the mark when he says that the “figure” of the “*cabra*” (understood as a category or social function) is not, in fact, a literary myth product of the creative imagination of the author from *Alagoas*.

Unlike *O Quinze*, in *Vidas secas* a white man who finds himself in an unfavorable social position suffers the effects of drought in a condition analogous to that of *Rachel de Queiroz's* “*cabras*”. It is also worth remembering that there is still the “yellow” soldier that affects the main character and that, ultimately, as the scene in which the two find themselves alone attests, represents institutionalized power and forced submission to it. The fact that *Fabiano* recognizes himself as a “*cabra*” due to his social position of “keeping other people's things” (RAMOS, 1963, p. 20) perhaps suggests that the big question in *Graciliano Ramos* is the possibility, so defended even today by a huge part of society, that in Brazil poverty equals people, regardless of their phenotypic traits, but let us not forget that soon after *Fabiano* corrects himself by “murmuring” that he is “an animal”. As the narrator points out, this, for the character “[...] was a source of pride”, because an animal is “[...] capable of overcoming difficulties” (RAMOS, 1963, p. 21), which suggests the probability of an animal being



superior to a cabra in Fabiano's hierarchy. In any case, the racial identification of the characters is given explicitly, so the racial issue is present as centrally as the language and the discussion about the “[...] critical view of social relations” (BOSI, 1975, p. 435).

## Úrsula

Among articles, dissertations and theses, some turned into books, the contemporary criticism of Maria Firmina dos Reis had as its first task to resurrect this author whose work was relegated to the grave of oblivion for many years. Both the fact that she wrote at a time when male control was much more explicit and the aggravating case of belonging to one of the least favored ethnic groups at the time are usually accepted, without question, as reasons why her work and figure have been buried. The work itself, its content and its possible impact are not considered, as if the erasure of Maria Firmina dos Reis was a natural consequence of a historical process resulting from the social configuration of the 19th century. In other words, there seems to have been a naturalization of this fact. To proceed with the exhumation of this corpse, scholars were concerned to prove that Maria Firmina dos Reis, in addition to being the first Brazilian novelist, would also have been the first to deal with the situation of Africans and their descendants in a more forceful way in the novel. *Úrsula* and in the short story “A Escrava”. The novel was described as follows at the time of its release: “The appearance of the novel *Úrsula* in Brazilian literature was an event celebrated by all journalism, and by our men of letters, not as an indulgence, **but as a tribute paid to a work of merit.**” (THE REAL MARMOT 05/13/1861, emphasis added).

As is well known, immediate recognition was not enough to prevent the novel from disappearing until 1975, reappearing in 1988 and, once again, reappearing in 2004 through reprints; there is still at least one more current edition, from 2018, plus a recent English translation to be released, probably in 2021.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, differently from what Nascimento (2009, p. 65) argues, “[...] it is not appropriate to critically pamphlet women or black people as historical or literary characters, nor the claim that Maria Firmina dos Reis has been excluded from the Histórias da Literatura Brasileira”, as important as incorporating the work of Maria Firmina dos Reis into the curriculum, is to debate the causes that led to its disappearance in the 20th century, because such an exercise can help to elucidate the development of social relations in Brazil.

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<sup>11</sup> Translated by Cristina Pinto-Bailey.





Starting from the current real possibility of unearthing female literary production in the 19th century, Schmidt (2005) inscribes the work of Maria Firmina dos Reis in the reassessment of the presence and erasure of Brazilian female writers in the 19th century, which, since the 1980s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if it proceeds. And this is because nowadays it is possible to question the entire model of literary analysis engendered in colonial Brazil and developed and consolidated in the 20th century.

However, the importance of this fact is implicit in the same article by Schmidt (2005), since the recognition of *Úrsula's* authorship and its validation as part of the literary system was not carried out either when the novel was published or in the following decades; in other words: the same was not added to the canon. Since literature played a fundamental role in the abolitionist cause, it may have had an impact on the ideological apparatus that maintained the slave system in force until 1888 (SCHIMDT, 2005). Schmidt (2008, p. 133) also reminds us that the “[...] issue of nineteenth-century female authorship is [...] a matter of social/cultural memory relevant to the discussion of belonging or nationality, for this constitutes a touchstone for the revision and reinterpretation of the past”. And, in addition,

Authorial decisions on narrative issues such as plot sequences, characterizations, history and narration incorporate constitutive values of the social and cultural fabric, so they are decisions that involve an aesthetic and ethical dimension, thus presupposing a responsibility in relation to saying/doing. (SCHIMDT, 2008, p. 136) (Our translation).

And it is for not paying attention to this fact that Nascimento (2009, p, 65) believes that “[...] whether due to one or another negligence, the aesthetic beauty and ideological refinement of the novel were not properly studied by critics”. What seems to escape the researcher there is the fact that there is no negligence concerning the treatment given to the literary production of women from the 19th century to the 20th century, much less in the case of an Afro-descendant author. Nascimento (2009, p. 65) recognizes that “[...] the fact that it deserved a certain receptivity at the time did not fortify the author's name and, mainly, the poetic realization of her work, throughout the evolution of Brazilian and foreign literary criticism”. However, this is not the result of negligence. What has always been is a project of silencing that systematically bury this production in mass graves and that prevents it from being unearthed through various mechanisms within academic discourses. Therefore, it is important not only to include the work of Maria Firmina dos Reis in the curricula, and not only to read her work as if she had only come to the fore in this interest that Afro-Brazilian literature has been awakening, but teachers and professors have to address and debate the



reasons for their work — which dealt with the issue of Afro-descendants in a different way from their contemporaries — after having been successful in their time having been buried in a social and historical context of denial and attempts to erase the slave-holding past, since it seems that it would have been very difficult to whiten her work and effigy as they did with Machado de Assis.

### **Racionais MC's**

The academic interest in rap has already generated considerable critical fortune in the most diverse disciplines; As a rule, approaches tend to relegate to the background the fact that rap is an Afro-descendant expression that is part of the issue of Afro-descendants<sup>12</sup>. An approach that rescues the issues inherent to race in Racionais MC's rap is already necessary. An excellent way to do this is to compare his work with that of American groups, especially the NWA, an exercise that is not a common practice for Brazilian critics. The rap of the NWA and Racionais MC's, as Dutra (2019) showed, offers several artistic solutions specific to rap. What I refer to as artistic solutions are elements of his work that, in the case of Racionais, despite apparently successful attempts, cannot be subjected to standards and tools alien to their universe, if in fact what is intended is a deeper analysis of this production.

I only discuss two aspects: the poetic construction that is based on the specific language of rap; and black aesthetics. For Bradley (2009, p. xiii), rappers “[...] refresh the language by fashioning patterned and heightened variations of everyday speech”. This implies saying that the linguistic basis of verse in rap is the poet's everyday language; it can be admitted that many of the resources of traditional poetry are not explored while others are invented. The clearest example is the absence of the hyperbato that abounds and floods traditional poetry as a rhythmic basis and a fundamental element in the construction of rhymes. Such a resource is scarce in American raps and, in the case of Racionais MC's, it is noticed that less and less was used in the process of building their artistic identity. When the members of the group referred, in an interview, to their first raps, stating that they seemed to speak or want to speak “beautifully” as teachers, perhaps they were, albeit unconsciously, alluding to the strange use of hyperbate that they used at times.

Let's see an excerpt from the rap “What lie will I believe”<sup>13</sup>: “Wow, what a boring guy,/Fifteen to eleven I didn't even get very far/And the men blurred./Turned over the

<sup>12</sup> This section is based on 3 articles by Dutra listed in the References.

<sup>13</sup> In Portuguese: “Qual mentira vou acreditar”.

benches, wrinkled my white cap/ he soiled my Santos jersey”<sup>14</sup>(RACIONAIS MC’s, 1997, track 9) (Our translation). When one listens to these verses, one notices that the word “que” is pronounced “qui”; This resource used in conjunction with the definite article “os” as the only plural mark in the sentence, massively used in everyday speech in Brazil, establishes the plural mark that is no longer pronounced in subsequent words and creates both the rhythmic and metric basis of the words. verses, which, if read or transcribed according to grammatical norms, lose their poetic character. Rose (1994, p. 83) stated that

For many cultural critics, once a black cultural practice takes a prominent place inside the commodity system, it is no longer considered a black practice—it is instead a “popular” practice whose black cultural priorities and distinctively black approaches are either taken for granted as a “point of origin,” an isolated “technique,” or rendered invisible”

This process is already happening with the work of Racionais MC’s. In the case of Brazil, this is probably due to the fact that “[...] within the context of social democracy, overt racial conflict, legal separatism, and identity politics are readily viewed as ‘un-Brazilian,’ and socioeconomic class remains the most common (and accepted) way to interpret inequality” (ROTH-GORDON, 2009, p. 70). So, “[...] while the press and public have lauded rappers’ attention to socioeconomic inequality and conditions of daily life in Brazil’s social and geographic periphery, there has been overwhelming disdain for their direct discussion of Brazilian racism” (ROTH-GORDON, 2009, p. 70). To briefly demonstrate the character of manifestation of a black aesthetic, I turn to the rap “Magic formula of peace”. In it, we have about ten minutes of a narrative about what it is like to live as a black person in the city of São Paulo. In the background, a “uh uh uh uh” is heard, which is repeated as if preparing the listeners for what is perhaps one of the most “beautiful” and significant scenes in rap. The graveyard scene: “For half an hour, I looked one by one/and what did all the ladies have in common?/The humble clothes/the dark skin/the face beaten down by hard life,/laying flowers on the grave”<sup>15</sup> (RACIONAIS MC’s, 1997, track 11).

The scene is only “beautiful” due to artistic creation. The assonance of the phoneme /u/ and its prolongation and pronouncement concerning the other phonemes (it is worth remembering that in an unstressed position the letter “o” is pronounced with the sound of [u]), which echo with the “uh uh uh” background, gives the scene a melancholy tone. Furthermore,

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<sup>14</sup>“Pô, que cara chato ó,/Quinze pras onze eu nem fui muito longe/E os homem embaçou./Revirou os banco, amassou meu boné branco/ ele Sujou minha camisa do Santos”

<sup>15</sup> In Portuguese: “durante uma meia hora, olhei um por um/e o que todas as senhoras tinham em comum?/A roupa humilde/a pele escura/o rosto abatido pela vida dura,/colocando flores sobre a sepultura”



the passage deals with, perhaps, the most painful material and symbolic inheritance of slavery, because it is individual, but, due to the exponential number of occurrences, it becomes collective. The tone of these verses fits perfectly with the situation we find ourselves in: black women, gathered at the cemetery on All Souls' Day to visit the graves of their dead children.

In “Fórmula mágica da paz”, there are no white characters; therefore, rap also refers to the practice of self-destruction as a group: “We keep killing each other brother, why? Don't look at me like that, I'm just like you, rest your trigger, rest your trigger, get on the trickery train, man, it's the track” (RACIONAIS MC's, 1997, track 11). This is another of the legacies of slavery, which consists of the self-annihilation of the Afro-descendant population in the context of societies dominated by whites. However, despite all this, the ritual of burying the dead and paying homage to them, an intrinsically human and humanizing practice, is ultimately what is discussed in the passage. It is also obvious that there are flowers, which echoes the conclusion reached by the rapper: real trickery is living.

### **Elizandra Souza**

There are already some works published on the work of Elizandra Souza, an author born in São Paulo, both in Portuguese and in English. As some of his poems have already been translated into English, this can make it easier to conduct classes for a student audience that is not fluent in Portuguese. Elizandra Souza is the author of a literature that leads us to

to read Brazilian literature and periphery from another perspective: a black, feminist, young, urban perspective, connected with the technological innovations of modern life, related to local action and global thinking based on Afro-diasporic references, in line with the Black feminist theories and Latin American decolonial thought (CASTRO, 2016, p. 52) (Our translation).

A fan and avowed member of the Hip-Hop movement, an intrinsic part of her aesthetic project, Elizandra Souza brings a dialogue with this field of knowledge that provides rewarding discussions in the classroom, since university youth are well attuned to the Hip Hop movement and to rap, albeit as a form of music for quick consumption, which immediately creates a point of contact. However, the work of Elizandra Souza goes far beyond this dialogue: it proposes “[...] dynamics of gender, race, class, urban spatiality and generation, within the context of black feminist theories” (CASTRO, 2016, p. 53) (Our translation). This material is not only adequate, but indispensable for a course on



contemporary Brazilian literature. By way of sampling, let's see excerpts from the poem “Legítima defesa”, from the book *Águas da Cabaça*:

I'm just warning you, the score will change...  
I can already see the testicles of men on the poles,  
who don't know how to behave...

I'm just warning you, the score will change...  
Tomorrow's headline will have a woman,  
head high saying:  
- I killed! And I don't regret it! (SOUZA, 2012, p. 48) (Our translation).

Readers unaware and unfamiliar with the “*Signifyin' Mode*”<sup>16</sup> may have a negative experience of these verses if they are given a very literal reading, however, the poem “[...] engages the hard topic of domestic violence”, because it has the “[...] *Signifyin' Mode*” as a basis; That “figure of the double-voiced”, especially when Elizandra Souza herself recites the poem, it has to be discussed and explained to the students so that the reading of the poem can reach its full potential. Despite the fact that poets from the periphery have been working and publishing for some years, as well as *Cadernos Negros*, which has been published uninterruptedly for over 40 years, “[...] the authors, their contributions and their victories are still relatively unknown”; as Smith (2015) says, “[...] it is time to pull these contributors out of the margins of our literary analyses”; it is past time for us, professors, to bring these authors to the center of our classrooms and thus provide our students with the opportunity to get to know their productions.

### **Jorge Nascimento**

Nascimento gathered in a book “escritos” published in the *Metro* newspaper for a period of 4 years; to this set of texts, he called *Visagens*. Born in Rio de Janeiro and a professor for almost 30 years at the Federal University of Espírito Santo, Nascimento, who “[...] was once the poet Jorge Makumba in his undergraduate days at UFRJ (GHIL, 2018, p. 17), attempted to “[...] expand the motivating facts beyond their dated or localized representation” (NASCIMENTO, 2018, p. 14); therefore, despite doing so without “literary pretensions” (NASCIMENTO, 2018, p. 13), he managed to create a book with unique literary

<sup>16</sup> “Signifyin(g) is not the only theory appropriate to the texts of our tradition. But it is one that I would like to think of as arising from the black tradition itself... it is the figure of the double voice, summarized by the representation of Esu in the sculpture as having two mouths”. (Signifyin(g) is not the only theory appropriate to the texts of our tradition. But it is one that I would like to think arises from the black tradition itself ... Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced, epitomized by Esu's depiction in sculpture as possessing two mouths” (GATES JUNIOR, 1983, p. xxiv-xxv) (Our translation).





results — because “[...] in the 'ghettos, favelas, slave quarters and slave ships’” (GHIL, 2018 p. 17), this is the “[...] path along which his sagacious chronicler's gaze travels, revealing the everyday barbarism against blacks, pardos, and the 'almost whites, almost blacks because they are so poor’” (GHIL, 2018 p. 17) — in 53 chronicles that make, in fact, “[...] from the gaze of this black man... a synthesis of our colonial heritage, revamped in an urban scenario of the 21st century’” (GHIL, 2018, p. 18).

As the texts deal with the most varied themes, the possibilities of use in the classroom are numerous; as Jorge Nascimento himself points out, such activity is already a reality that, however, must be not only expanded, but taken to university courses, after all “[...] the hope remains that these writings that become here (again) publics are radiators of possibilities of readings of the world that are not doctrinaire and that allow the (still) free exercise of thought’” (NASCIMENTO, 2018, p. 15).

In addition to obviously being able to use his texts to encourage discussions, there are also other possibilities; I mention only 3 of them: Nascimento's chronicles can be read in the light of Cidinha da Silva's (2019), #stop killing us!; in the light of Machado de Assis' texts that discuss the condition of people of African descent, especially “Machado, as Histórias e os Escravagismos” (p. 50), among others; and still in contrast with the production of rap and poets from the periphery, “Fiquemos na Atividade” (p. 34), among others in which, like this chronicle, presents “[...] young people subverting the official languages that always excluded or belittled. In its strong colors and warlike metaphors that seek to subvert the rules of power games’” (NASCIMENTO, 2018, p. 34), it is immediately possible to make a connection with the poem “Legítima Defesa”, by Elizandra Souza, in addition to the fact that dialogue can be established with Baldwin's (2019) statement that Afro-descendant authors deal with a language that is the enemy.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

I have not intended to exhaust the possibilities at this point, because, as I have shown, they are virtually infinite. However, this attentive look at racial issues, once the rancidity of racial democracy has actually been expelled, can be extended to virtually all canonical literature. Who will not remember the couple of “blacks” who welcomed Augusto Matraga after the almost lethal beating he suffered? What about the other Afro-Brazilian characters in *Sagarana*? From the boy Guirigó do *Grande Sertão: veredas*?, from the “mulatinho” Lalino

<sup>17</sup> Baldwin's words can be heard from the 42nd second of the video listed in the references.





Salãthiel? What about the “mulatto” protagonist who passes for the white author of *Bufo and Spallanzani*? From the maid's room in *A Paixão Segundo G.H.*? With regard to Afro-descendant authors, the literary portal *literafro*<sup>18</sup> is an excellent and indispensable catalog, both of names and of academic bibliography, to be consulted.

In contemporary literature, we already have prominent names such as Conceição Evaristo, Cristiane Sobral, Cidinha da Silva, Livia Natália, and, despite being able to generate some difficulty in accessing the material, the *Cadernos Negros* series is there to represent the literature made by afrodescendants. It is also worth noting that when approaching Brazilian literature from the 1990s onwards, it is important to take into account the finding of the study by Dalcastagnè (2005) on the configuration of both characters and authorship in novels by renowned publishers in Brazil and what this might mean for the erasure of Afro-descendants in contemporary literature.

We saw that it is perfectly possible to balance the courses and include texts by people of African descent. However, it is not enough just to include the texts of Afro-Brazilian authors; we have to discuss them in a specific context. In the case of authors of the most immediate present, such as Elizandra Souza and Jorge Nascimento, for whom there is not yet a broad critical fortune, we have the possibility that they kindly accept invitations to participate in our classes, especially in these times of remote teaching. Thus, our students end up having this unique opportunity to not only get to know the works, but also to establish a dialogue with the authors. It is not just a matter of promoting visibility for Afro-descendants, but of providing students with contact with these very important works, which can be lost or buried. At the end of courses in which I used this approach and these texts briefly mentioned here, not infrequently I came across testimonials from students who were “enchanted”, stating that this reading of these texts changed something in their perceptions about literature, culture and Brazilian society and their worlds in general. The impact of contact with this literature is indeed important and immeasurable, and therefore urgent.

<sup>18</sup> Available: <http://www.letras.ufmg.br/literafro/>. Access: Jan. 10, 2020.



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