AFRICAN DIASPORIC CONNECTIONS IN THE AMERICAS: TONI MORRISON IN BRAZIL

CONEXIONES AFRODIASPÓRICAS EN LAS AMÉRICAS: TONI MORRISON EN BRASIL

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Abstract

Admired throughout the world, Toni Morrison's powerful voice resounds in special ways in Brazil, where she conducted part of her research for *Beloved* –a novel she considered an interrogation about the legacy of slavery in countries like Brazil and the USA. Initially labeled «politically correct» by Brazilian media, her works have finally achieved great visibility in the twenty-first century thanks to translations, a wide readership and increasing academic attention. In fact, Afro-Brazilian women writers, literary critics, historians, and cultural workers have reached unprecedented recognition in recent decades, along with a belated embrace of Morrison and other Black authors. This essay relies on Black feminist, diasporic and decolonial thinking to investigate how Morrison's writing connects with the ongoing process of racial awareness and empowerment in Brazil, as well as with the writer Conceição Evaristo.

Keywords: Diasporic connections; black feminism; racial empowerment; Brazilian reception to Toni Morrison; Conceição Evaristo.

Resumen

Admirada mundialmente, la poderosa voz de Toni Morrison resuena en Brasil, donde desarrolló parte de su investigación para escribir *Beloved*, novela que definió como una indagación sobre el legado de la esclavitud en países como Brasil y Estados Unidos. Inicialmente etiquetadas como «políticamente correctas» por la prensa brasileña, sus obras han alcanzado gran visibilidad en el siglo XXI gracias a traducciones, un gran número de lectores y lectoras y una creciente atención académica. De hecho, escritoras, críticas literarias, historiadoras y profesionales culturales afro-brasileñas han logrado notoriedad sin precedentes en las últimas décadas, junto al reconocimiento tardío a Morrison y otros autores y autoras afroamericanas. Este ensayo se basa en el pensamiento feminista negro, diaspórico y decolonial para investigar cómo la escritura de Morrison está vinculada no solo con el proceso hacia la conciencia racial y el empoderamiento en Brasil, sino también con la autora Conceição Evaristo.

Palabras clave: conexiones diaspóricas; feminismo negro; empoderamiento racial; recepción brasileña de Toni Morrison; Conceição Evaristo.

1. INTRODUCTION: «I WAS LOOKING FOR THIS PLACE» (*BELOVED,* P. 65)

In times noted by political and social disruption, brutal violence and persisting inequality, as the last decade has been, it seems remarkable that some exciting, simultaneous developments have been taking place in Brazil: an intense activity in Black music, literature and history associated with a special interest in Black feminism and in the African diasporic connections in the Americas. Focusing on the two countries outside of Africa that have the largest populations with some African origin, Brazil and the United States[1], my intention is to investigate Toni Morrison's participation in the ongoing process of racial awareness and empowerment in the Southern nation. She has recently gained unprecedented visibility in the company of local Black writers, particularly the most influential woman writer at present, Conceição Evaristo.

Morrison visited Brazil a few times in her lifetime, usually combining work-related appointments with brief informal meetings and city tours. She

1. They are also the two most populous countries in the Americas, with the U.S. coming first.

was in two former capitals of the country (Salvador and Rio de Janeiro) and one important colonial town (Ouro Preto, state of Minas Gerais), all of them rich in Black history and culture (Morrison, 2014). While doing research for her writing of *Beloved* in the 1980s, Morrison looked for historical objects from colonial times («handcraft things slaves had made» and also «chains or restraining devices» used for punishment). Frustrated with the scarce resources available in her country, she was pleasantly surprised when she crossed borders and went to Brazil. As she said, «they've kept *everything*»[2], and she got «a lot of help down there» (Morrison, 1987a, p. 75). The outcome of her long, careful research would reinforce the historical and literary connections between the two countries. About her Pulitzer prize-winning novel *Beloved*, Morrison (2007b) declared that the story offers «an interrogation about what exists as a legacy of slavery in countries that have been through it, like Brazil and the United States»[3]. Their historical past and the living present provide a strong common bond even if «the African culture has taken different paths in the two countries», she remarked.

Toni Morrison also visited the city of São Paulo, capital of the homonymous southeastern state, an economic hub known for its coffee plantations, industries (Estanislau, 2019), cultural activities, and institutions like the Museu Afro Brasil, which the U.S. anthropologist Sheila Walker has considered the world's best collection about the African diaspora (Dias, 2019)[4]. Morrison was at the 1990 São Paulo Biennial Book Fair: two of her novels had been translated and published in 1987 and 1989, *Pérola Negra* [*Tar Baby*] and *Amada* [*Beloved*], respectively. She was interested in meeting with local Black writers and that was a memorable occasion, according to Oswaldo de Camargo, who led the local *paulista* group[5]. While eating *feijoada* and drinking *caipirinhas* at a popular downtown restaurant, she had

2. Emphasis in the original.
3. All the quotations from sources originally in Portuguese have been translated by the author.
4. Walker also visited the states of Bahia and Minas, commented on their «strong Africanity», and considered Salvador «the capital of African culture in the Americas» (as cited in Dias, 2019).
5. Born in 1936 and still active, Camargo (2019) is considered «the dean of Black Brazilian literature».

the opportunity to hear about their work, life in general, and the persistence of racism (Estanislau, 2019)[6]. Camargo felt that Morrison was deeply interested in what they did and wrote about, and she was pleased to know about the ongoing reactions against racism[7]. In all, the place she liked best in those visits was the northeastern city of Salvador, considered by statistics and observers the most «African» city in the country[8]. According to Nélida Piñon[9], a well-known fiction writer and her long-time Brazilian friend, Morrison realized that if she had to move to another country, she «wouldn't choose any European nation», she'd come to Brazil. These were her main reasons: «As a Black woman, I'd feel at home. As an American woman, I'd have wide geographical spaces to explore» (in «Lirismo», 1993, p. 103). On another occasion, Morrison (1998b) declared that she was «happier in Brazil than in any other country she had ever visited».

She was back in 2006 to become the most popular among guest writers at FLIP (*Festa Literária Internacional de Paraty*), a prestigious annual literary event in the town of Paraty, Rio de Janeiro state. On a full first page interview, Morrison (2007b, p. 1) answered several questions about her work, her views on race, and similarities between her country and Brazil in relation to the slave past. She regarded Brazil as a vibrant, «immense, very diverse, and totally irrational country», and praised «its large population of African origin and a strong Black culture, a culture that one can feel with incredible

6. Among others, the group also included the writers Paulo Colina (1950-1999), Abílio Ferreira, Arnaldo Xavier (1948-2004) and Cuti Silva, members of the literary organization *Quilombhoje*, founded in 1980. The name joins the words *quilombo* (maroon settlement in anti-slavery resistance) + *hoje* (today). Under Cuti's leadership *Cadernos Negros* started in 1978, a pioneering Afro-Brazilian journal hosting Black poetry and fiction until today.
7. The year is probably 1990, when Morrison came for the Book Fair and spoke at the *Folha de São Paulo* Auditorium («Lirismo», 1993), though Camargo recalls 1993 (Estanislau, 2019). Since Camargo (2019) believes that her trip to São Paulo was connected to some literary event, 1990 seems correct.
8. Official records by IBGE (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*) show that about 8 in every 10 people living in Salvador in 2017 declared their color either black [*preta*] or brown/mixed [*parda*]. The sum of the two reveals 82% of the city population as Negro/a or Afro Brazilian (Avena, 2018).
9. Piñon is one of the few women elected for the Brazilian Academy of Letters. She met Morrison (still working as an editor) and hosted her in Brazil in 1990.

force in the literature, music and dance». Years later, Morrison (2014) again declared her fascination with the landscapes, the people and the culture[10].

These first paragraphs bring in scenes that show the kind and generous Toni Morrison reaching out to Brazil, sharing her thoughts, impressions and hopes, always concerned with the history of Black people, their rights and their power[11]. She did not ignore the serious Brazilian problems, many of which were similar in her country: «the disparity in income distribution, the extreme poverty, crime and violence». Morrison (1998b) saw beggars in the streets, most of them black, but she would not abandon her optimism about Brazil. In her perception, even when they were poor, Black people seemed to keep «a truly enviable disposition for living».

What about the Brazilian side of those encounters? What was the field of Afro-Brazilian women's literature like? And how have Brazilians responded to Morrison's words, in the past and today? What echoes of her voice are still heard? This paper is an attempt to approach those questions, setting the discussion within the crisscrossing fields of Afro-diasporic, Black feminist, inter-American and decolonial studies. Some pioneering works were published in the United States in the 1990s examining black women's literature on a diasporic, hemispheric basis (Spillers, 1991; Davies, 1994 & 1995; Coser, 1995). A couple of years earlier in Brazil, the anthropologist, academic and activist Lélia Gonzalez (1988/2011) argued in favor of an Afro-Latin-American feminism, pointing to the multiple, combined forms of oppression suffered by «*amefricana*» and «*amerindia*» women in the hemisphere[12]. The Brazilian historian, poet and activist Beatriz Nascimento (1942-1995) was

10. Her views recall Glissant's emphasis on the open, impressive, impetuous landscape of the Americas, full of «eruption, perhaps much reality and much unreality», where the distinctively «American» Caribbean Sea is not only passage, «but also a sea of encounters and implications» (2005, 13-14, 17).
11. Several Black women writers have focused on Brazil in remarkable literary pieces, but they are yet to receive from the country the attention they deserve: Gayl Jones, Ntozake Shange, Paule Marshall, and also Edwidge Danticat and Ladee Hubbard, from a younger generation.
12. One of the founders of MNU (*Movimento Negro Unificado*), Gonzalez (1935-1994) was a pioneering leader in political, feminist and racial (or interracial) organizations. Her neologisms appropriate «American» for the continent, joining ethnicities in «*americana + africana*» and «*americana + índia*».

also drawn to the «connecting links in a fragmented history», as she says in her 1989 poem «I am Atlantic» (Ratts, 2006, p. 73). A push towards thinking beyond the nation came with the wider usage of the term «diaspora», related both to the forced African migrations to America in colonial times and to the several, continuing diasporas in the recent past. In the year 2000, Stuart Hall was the keynote speaker at the Comparative Literature Association Congress in Bahia and had several of his texts translated and published in Brazil (Hall, 2001 and 2003). Around that time, translations of works by Gilroy (2001), Mignolo (2003), Glissant (2005) and others expanded the academic focus on diaspora, coloniality, diversity, cultural and racial mixture, with Caribbean and Latino/a migration issues bringing new dynamics and challenges to the cultural and sociopolitical arenas.

Black women writers and critics have also arrived on the Brazilian scene, slowly but surely, in spite of the delay. Angela Davis's landmark work *Women, Race & Class* (1981) was finally translated and published in 2016. She has been in Brazil several times; in 2014, for instance, she was in Brasilia to take part in the *Festival Latinidades: Griôs da Diáspora Negra*, and in 2017 in Salvador for the *International Afro-Latina, Afro-Caribbean, and African Diaspora Women's Day* (celebrated on July 25 on the whole hemisphere). Davis's book and her talks have drawn crowds of young black feminist women, stimulating their conscience and pride and also opening the way for other authors and wider expansions. While Toni Morrison was an editor at Random House, she managed to break Angela Davis's resistance to write her autobiography by suggesting that she should approach it not as a «heroic individual» tale, but as a history of the Black Movement, a book successfully published in 1974. For young Davis it «was quite an amazing experience […] to have her as a mentor». Morrison posed questions and made suggestions that helped Davis produce visual images and construct an attractive narrative. She also learned from Morrison's own drive, discipline and focus– she managed to write *The Bluest Eye* in the few spare moments she had at the time, dealing with a demanding job and raising two kids on her own. They remained good friends forever, and Angela Davis could testify to the lasting impact of Toni Morrison on «our notion of freedom». According to Morrison, «one cannot be free without freeing someone. Freedom is to free someone else». That is her greatest message (Davis & Morrison, 2014). My feeling is that, several

decades later, however unknowingly, Davis helped free some more people, paving the way for the many new translations and the enthusiastic response that Morrison's works would have in twenty-first century Brazil.

2. EARLY RECEPTION: «THE ENTIRE COUNTRY WAS HOSTILE» (*THE BLUEST EYE*, P. 160)

When Morrison published her first novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981), other publications by Black women writers were also gaining media visibility and critical respect in the United States. Black male poets and novelists had been awarded the best reviews and prizes up till then, but a new literary boom led by women was being announced, largely stimulated by ideas and demands coming from the Black Power and the Women's Rights movements, as well as the widespread push for freedom resonating everywhere since the 1960s. *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, edited by Mari Evans (1984), was the first anthology about those new writers and included fifteen names that already had national recognition (such as Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones and Paule Marshall, besides Morrison), although some others were absent, for a number of reasons (like Margaret Walker, Ntozake Shange and Gloria Naylor). To a large extent, those representative writers were coming out of good university campuses and many were already lecturing and teaching. On the publishing side, even if the industry still seemed discouraging to Black women, writers and literary scholars seemed to find ways and get their work out to the public. The road to acceptance and success was never easy, though, even for the great Toni Morrison; she had work turned down and suffered negative, offensive and spiteful criticism in her own country (Peterson, 1993).

That sounds very familiar for Afro-Brazilian writers who have faced harsh times getting their work published and respected. Nevertheless, the social, political, economic and cultural situation in Brazil from the 1960s to the 80s had specific characteristics that must be considered when we try to look at cultures and writers in dialogue. In the early 60s the political scene was deeply divided between right and left, appeals for women's rights clashing against the Catholic rejection of divorce and abortion, and dreams

of social equality barred by the fears of communism. To make a long story short: on April 1st, 1964, under the excuse of imminent communist threat, a military *coup* established a dictatorship that lasted until 1985. A sequence of two marshalls and three generals presided over a nation without elections or popular vote; they detained, exiled, arrested, tortured, and killed many people, whose bodies often «disappeared». A series of authoritarian decrees was announced along those years, and the harshest one came in response to a large anti-government demonstration in 1968, with 100.000 people occupying the streets of Rio de Janeiro. The Fifth Institutional Act gave dictatorial powers to the president and he suspended the constitution: Congress and state legislatures were dissolved, meetings forbidden; agents infiltrated in public universities, checking on professors, students and course syllabi; censorship was imposed on newspapers, radio and TV stations, film and recording companies. The CIA collaborated with the Brazilian military to guarantee the success of the 1964 *coup d'état*, providing continued support in the following years.

In spite of the so-called «economic miracle» promised in those decades, the country kept or even deepened its long-lasting colonial structure, showing wide gaps between whites and the historically discriminated groups (the indigenous and black population), in terms of income, education, and political power. Besides, in its call for national unity and pride, the military emphasized the hegemonic belief in «racial democracy», and punished those who showed any form of criticism or resistance. In the music sector, for example, the famous singers Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil were imprisoned and exiled; in the 1970 International Song Festival in Rio, the Black singer Toni Tornado was questioned by the Army Information Service because he supposedly «imported the symbolic black power gesture» of the raised fist, which was also seen as a communist symbol (as cited in Jardim, 2021)[13]. The universities (already struggling under limited resources

13. That archival information will appear in *Dançando na mira da ditadura: Bailes soul e violência contra a população negra nos anos 1970* by historian Lucas Pedretti (Jardim, 2021). That is a dissertation selected for publication in 2017 by Arquivo Nacional, a respected cultural agency that has been dismantled by ideological control and the dismissal of capable officers after Bolsonaro's election in 2018 (Bezerra, 2022). The publication of Pedretti's and two other research works focusing on the military

and poor libraries) were controlled, sometimes shut down; many professors were questioned, detained, arrested or exiled. The humanities and social sciences were considered especially dangerous for their socialist/communist «indoctrinations»: the great educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was among the first to be sent to exile.

Racism, racial inequality and the poor favelas were not supposed to be talked about. Having exactly that focus, *Quarto de Despejo* (1960) by Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914-1977) was a remarkable success translated into several languages[14], but after 1964 the pioneer writer was gradually pushed away from view and practically forgotten until mid-1990s (Tenório, 2021a). Harsh economic, social, racial and gender barriers also prevented the expansion of literature by Black women. Conceição Evaristo is an example: inspired as a child by family readings of chapters of Carolina de Jesus's book, she began writing early but had her first poem published in *Cadernos Negros* only in 1990, at the age of 44. It has called my attention that the pictures and accounts of Toni Morrison's visit in 1990 include no Black Brazilian women writers. In 1992, when Carole Boyce Davies (1994) started a project on «Afro-Brazilian Women's Writing» (p. 5), she could not find their works in bookstores or libraries; she was actually offered titles by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker[15], but Afro-Brazilian women writers seemed non-existent. Critical anti-racist, feminist and political work developed by strong pioneer intellectual activists like Sueli Carneiro, Lélia Gonzalez and Beatriz Nascimento was similarly underestimated or unseen (Caldwell, 2000).

With the full support of the United States government, the Brazilian military and their right-wing supporters defended «one country, one language, one people» without racial, class or gender «disturbances». The return to civilian rule in 1985 did not automatically give the green light to racial and

dictatorship is being withheld, but their titles remain listed on the federal government site (gov.br). Prepared for publication in 2021, they are supposed to be released «soon» (https://www.gov.br/arquivonacional/pt-br/servicos/publicacoes/lancamentos).

14. In English, for instance, it was titled *Child of the Dark* (1962).
15. Walker's *The Color Purple* received an early, careful edition in Brazil, with translation by Peg Bodelson, Betúlia Machado and Maria José Silveira (*A cor púrpura*, Marco Zero, 1982).

gender issues. Far from that – and partially due to generalized suspicion of CIA interference – even among activists on the political left, university professors and respected writers, there was a widespread mistrust of the women's liberation movement and of the literature produced by African American women. It was considered apolitical or merely «politically correct», without «universal» literary value, including Toni Morrison's, even after her 1993 Nobel Prize (Chiaretti, 1993; Perrone-Moysés, 1998). Nélida Piñon paid homage to the epic quality of Morrison's works, noting that her name had been among the favorites for the prize, but for writer João Ubaldo Ribeiro, also a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, it came as a big surprise. He just said: «Morrison is committed to the black race, and maybe the Swedish Academy wants to raise the value of minority writers» («Afro-americana…», 1993). Near the end of the 20th century, some Brazilian media still hoped that «Black American literature» would become just «literature» – in other words, would get rid of ethnic, anti-colonial and anti-white ideas in order to «embrace universal themes» (Santos, 1998).

Besides the traces of sexism, racism, Eurocentrism and canon devotion that surface in such reactions, the quality of Morrison's work in translation in the 1980s and 1990s was quite discouraging: the first novels published in Brazil received small, unappealing editions[16]. Five of her novels arrived late, but at least they were available in Portuguese before the turn of the century: *Pérola Negra* [*Tar Baby*] in 1987; *A canção de Solomon* [*Song of Solomon*] in 1988; *Amada* [*Beloved*], in 1989 and 1993 (a Círculo do Livro edition); and *Jazz*, 1992, all translated by Evelyn Kay Massaro and published by Best Seller. They have been out of print for a long time. In 1998 *Paraíso* [*Paradise*] was published by a more powerful press, Companhia das Letras. Only in 2003 Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), received its first translation in Brazil by Manoel P. Ferreira – *O olho mais azul,* also published by Companhia das Letras. Similar delays and long invisibility also occurred with the translation of critical theoretical works written by Black feminists,

16. Morrison was very critical of her own country's limited attention to translation. In a 2005 interview to *O Estado de S. Paulo*, she admitted she had read few Brazilian authors because «the indifference of North-American editors in translating foreign books is notorious». The increased number of translations, she continued, would bring «some relief to our impenetrable stupidity» («Escritora…», 2019).

especially when compared to their reception in England, the United States, or Canada. The first to appear in a Brazilian feminist journal was bell hooks's article «Intelectuais negras» published in *Revista Estudos Feministas* in 1995 (Caldwell, 2000). A couple of decades into a new century, Toni Morrison, as well as other Black writers and cultural thinkers from Brazil and the United States, are finally reaching a wider range of readers and receiving some of the attention and honors that they deserve.

3. 21ST CENTURY BRAZIL: «A TRANQUIL REPUBLIC?» (*BELOVED*, P. 260)

Recent Census statistics have shown that Afro-Brazilians, that is, people who recognize their color as either black [*preta*] or brown [*parda*], comprise 55.8% of the total population of the country (PNAD/IBGE 2019), while 14.7% in the United States are self-declared either «Black Alone» or «Black with another race» (U.S. Census, 2019). Observers underline the gradual increase in the number of Brazilians who are officially declaring their color *preta* or *parda* and leading to a decreasing number of whites in the country[17]. The tendency has been largely associated with the earlier promotion of affirmative actions in education now resulting in greater racial awareness. Proposed in Congress since 1988, the determination that all elementary school curriculums should include the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture would finally become a federal law in 2003 (#10.639). As Patricia Merlo demonstrates in her Foreword to Campos et al. (2021), most teachers needed to be qualified for the task. Many books were published, courses and workshops given on African History and Africans in Brazil, as well as on the national and state influence of Afro-Brazilians in political, economic, social and cultural levels. In fact, all disciplines and stages of education were affected by that law. The universities, for instance, have gradually offered new disciplines and graduate courses, leading to more research projects and dissertations on race-related issues often associated with class and gender, developments

17. In Brazil, black [*preto* or *preta*] is a skin color that enters the Census, while *negro* or *negra* is a political racial statement, a sign of pride in African ancestry, a term adopted by *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU, founded in 1978) and kept until today, comprising a variety of color shades.

that have found their way into Internet sites, organized groups, live discussions, and so forth[18].

During the two mandates of President Lula da Silva (2003-2011), several measures were taken to make college education and degrees more accessible to the poor. In a unified national system, student grades in *Enem – Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* [National Middle School Exam] have become a valuable alternative to enter the public university[19], and also to get scholarships from private Brazilian institutions or top universities abroad. New public university campi were founded in several parts of the country, making access more democratic. Another landmark was the adoption of racial quotas in public institutions from 2004 on. In 2012, sanctioned by President Dilma Rousseff, the Social Quotas Law (#12.711) guaranteed 50% of the openings in federal institutes and universities divided among low-income, black, brown and indigenous students who come out of public secondary schools (in percentages according to their state population). The visibly larger number of black undergraduate and graduate students, researchers and professors on university campi has been a tremendous gain, but also a cause for racist reactions. For instance, «a look that expresses the question 'What are you doing here?'» to a black woman working in academic spaces «where she was not expected» (Bento, 2021).

Racism and violence also remain strong in the United States, as the George Floyd case in May 2020 proved to the world. The diasporic, feminist poetry of Ntozake Shange in *A Daughter's Geography* goes on reminding us that we «cannot speak/ the same language/ yet we fight the same old men» (1983, p. 22). There is a long way to go in the struggle against structural racism and the deathly, unpunished violence against black men, women and children in Brazil. The murder of Marielle Franco on March

18. Good, long-lasting sites are *Portal Geledés* (https://www.geledes.org.br/) and *Literafro– Portal da literatura afro-brasileira* (http://www.letras.ufmg.br/literafro/). More recent sites and groups include *Revista Afirmativa* (https://revistaafirmativa.com.br/), *Rede de Historiadoras Negras e Historiadores Negros* (@historiadorxsnegrxs); Rede de Pesquisador@s das Literaturas de autoria Negra e Afro-Brasileira (https://www.facebook.com/groups/399112080273121), among others.
19. Before then, the only way to enter public universities (considered the best in the country) was to be very well prepared and to pass the difficult exams that comprised the «Vestibular», a barrier to students from poor communities.

14, 2018– with noone charged as the mastermind of the crime, even after four years– has become a paradigmatic case, but there have been thousands of anonymous, common people killed by the police or *milicias*. Statistics show that 75,4% of those killed in police interventions around the country during 2017-2018 were black («Violência contra…», 2019). But occupying more and more spaces of power, black women and men have been speaking out, singing, writing, publishing, organizing, and becoming visible in the last decades in Brazil. Compared to the 1990s, they have shown an impressive output of books, articles, lectures, interviews, participation in lives, talks and debates[20]. Their books and presentations can be seen in bookstores and sites, and several writers have reached enough recognition to come as guests of honor to important events like *Festa Literária Internacional de Paraty,* in Rio (FLIP) and *Festa Literaria Internacional de Cachoeira*, in Bahia (FLICA). Black Brazilian writers have been translated and awarded in Brazil and abroad; their writing, especially by women, is finally receiving its long overdue recognition[21].

Simultaneous editorial attention has been given to established names in Black women's literature from the States, the Caribbean and Africa, but still unpublished in Brazil. With a 90-year delay, *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen was translated and published as *Identidade* [*Identity*] by HarperCollins Brazil in 2020 (Cruz, 2021). Examples of other Black women writers in recent translations are Jamaica Kincaid (*A autobiografia da minha mãe*, 2020) and Buchi

20. Besides the popularity of funk/rap artists, poetry slammers are a related phenomenon that even entered the 2019 Official Program at Festa Literária Internacional de Paraty/FLIP («FLIP confirma…»).

21. Already translated into several languages, Conceição Evaristo, now 75, was awarded the Jabuti Literature Prize (2015), the Literature Prize from the Minas Gerais State Government (2017), and was elected the Jabuti *Literary Personality of the Year* (2019). Djamila Ribeiro, 41, a feminist political philosopher and journalist, received the Jabuti Human Sciences Prize for her *Pequeno manual antirracista* (2019c), and was among the BBC 100 inspiring and influential women of 2019. *Torto Arado* (2018) by Itamar Vieira Junior, 42, a male geographer from Bahia, won the 2018 Leya Prize in Portugal (for unpublished novel manuscript in the Portuguese language), besides the Brazilian Jabuti Best Novel Prize and the Oceanos (literature in the Portuguese language), both in 2019. In 2021, Jeferson Tenório, 45, received the Jabuti prize for his novel *O avesso da pele*. Many years before, Ana Maria Gonçalves, 52, received the Casa de las Américas Prize (Cuba, 2007) for her novel *Um defeito de cor* (2006).

Emecheta, with four titles in 2017-2020, including *As alegrias da maternidade* (2017), a Book-Club indication made by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie. Adichie, in turn, had seven titles published in Brazil from 2008 to 2021, including *Sejamos todos feministas* (2015). Very well received by Brazilian women scholars, students and activists, bell hooks had many books translated in the last decade, from *Ensinando a transgredir* (2013 and 2017) to thirteen mostly new titles brought out to the public since 2019 by Elefante, an independent press. Her well-known «*E eu não sou uma mulher?*»: *Mulheres negras e feminismo* [«*Ain't I a Woman?*»] (2019) shed light on the famous question spoken by the pioneer Black activist Sojourner Truth, a former slave, and directed to the audience at a Women's Rights convention in 1851. In Brazil, Truth was also translated in 2019 (by Nandyala Press) and 2020 (by Imã). After a very long delay, five books by the admired feminist writer and activist Audre Lorde (1934-1992) were finally introduced to Brazil by independent presses in 2019-2020, and *Zami: uma nova grafia do meu nome – uma biomitografia* was out in 2021. Personally involved with academic, political and social issues in Brazil, Angela Davis has finally had several titles translated by Boitempo, besides *Mulheres, raça e classe* (2016) and the autobiography Morrison had advised her to write. Other important works of critical/theoretical nature have received long overdue translations, like Patricia Hill Collins's landmark *Pensamento feminista negro* [*Black Feminist Thought*] (2019). Interviews and articles by Collins, Davis, and hooks have also appeared in Brazilian periodicals, academic journals, and edited books.

4. THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE: «I TALK TO YOU» (*THE BLUEST EYE*, P. 153)

In this new century, attractive editions of eleven of Toni Morrison's works, both fiction and non-fiction for adults and children, have been published in Brazil by Companhia das Letras, a high quality press founded in 1986. Penguin/Random House bought 45% of the company in 2012 and raised its participation to 70% in 2018, guaranteeing for the group the largest market share among book companies in Brazil (Companhia das Letras, 2018). It called my atention that Random House, where Morrison worked as an editor and publisher for nineteen years (Gray, 2021), is the same company that

now deals with her works in Brazil and, probably, in many other parts of the world. Careful translations of almost all of Morrison's books have been put out by Companhia das Letras/Random House Group; *Amada* [*Beloved*], for instance, had a new edition (2007a). Particularly elaborate volumes came out in attractive Book-Club boxes– *O olho mais azul* in 2019 and *Sula* in 2021 –, each title chosen by a Black Brazilian writer especially invited as «Curator of the Month», like the feminist philosopher/journalist Djamila Ribeiro, whose choice was *O olho mais azul,* and the poet and fiction writer Conceição Evaristo, who picked *Sula*. A beautiful woman whose birth name means «beauty» in Swahili, Djamila Ribeiro (2019a) was deeply touched by the tragic violence brought about by hegemonic standards of beauty, which can not only destroy a girl's self-esteem, but also rob her of her very humanity. Toni Morrison became her inspiration since she was introduced to *The Bluest Eye*. The fact that she was only 13 years old when Morrison won the Nobel Prize was significant as a reminder that she could resist and fight against imposed Eurocentric values, and that Black people, with their stories, cultures and histories, must be recognized and respected. Addressing her invitation to Brazilian readers in general, Ribeiro assured them that Morrison's novel is not meant «for Black people only». It is a universal tale that deals with «human complexity» and talks about «love, hope, conflicts, losses», she says, so «anybody can identify with it». When Toni Morrison died, Djamila Ribeiro (2019b) compared her to «a great beacon for boats in troubled seas» that had left us with «a legacy of light».

Considering the late translations and delayed media attention given to Morrison's work, it is remarkable that so many contemporary Brazilian writers have acknowledged her influence on their own works and on their lives. *Amada* [*Beloved*], «one of the great novels of the 20th century» in Itamar Vieira Junior's opinion, is among the four literary works (and the only foreign one) that influenced the writing of his acclaimed novel *Torto Arado* (Vieira Jr., 2021a). He remarked that he had been deeply touched by Morrison's message: «if you have thought of a story and you haven't found it, then go and write that book, that story» (Vieira Jr. 2021b). The silences in Brazilian literature about the beliefs, talents, struggles and oppressions in the lives and history of Black people in Bahia inspired Itamar to create that novel.

Jeferson Tenório, another fiction writer of the new generation, has been very successful with his third novel, *O avesso da pele* (2020). It tells the story of an idealist literature teacher, Henrique, who hopes to bring great literature to the tired pupils in his night class at a poor public school. After Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* they would have Kafka, Cervantes, James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf and, of course, Toni Morrison. In a recent interview (2021a) Tenório cited authors that should be read by psychoanalysts, psychologists, and actually everyone, for a better understanding of the destructive effects of racism: Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, Djamila Ribeiro and James Baldwin[22]. Under the title «Seja um leitor antirracista» [Be an anti-racist reader], Tenório (2021b) argues that reading books by Black writers is a way to start fighting against racism, and Morrison's *O olho mais azul* [*The Bluest Eye*] is a good choice to lead you on that track.

That novel was also fundamental for the creative, mixed-race writer Jarid Arraes, 31, to better understand racism, colorism, and to find her place in the world, as she explains:

> In *O olho mais azul*, by Toni Morrison, I found complex and painful questionings of the harm caused by racism on a person's racial identity and self-esteem. I've identified in Toni's words an immense ability to approach the nuances of colorism but, above all, a very significant political strength that had great importance for my own self-understanding.[23] (Arraes, 2018)

Within the Brazilian social and cultural context, and considering the time gap that we have observed so far, Conceição Evaristo seems to be the writer who comes closer today to Morrison's role and literary status in the United States during the 1980s. Many would agree with Constância Lima Duarte, Professor of Brazilian Literature at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), that the openly Black literature created by Evaristo, «at the same time a social and political project, testimony and fiction, has been definitely inscribed in the national literature» (Duarte, 2010). A closer look at

22. James Baldwin has kept his literary prestige in Brazil, with four books published by Companhia das Letras in 2018-2020.
23. It is usual in Brazil to address or refer to people (even famous ones) by their first names, so Jarid says «Toni».

Conceição Evaristo's response to Toni Morrison can help us explore transversal connections between their views and approaches.

5. EVARISTO AND MORRISON: «BOTH REMEMBERED GONE THINGS» (*SULA*, P. 174)

In a recent interview by college students, Conceição Evaristo (2021b) was asked to recommend a film, a play, a book, or anything she would like. Her recommendation was that everyone read *Sula* and all of Toni Morrison's works, including the theoretical essays. Evaristo's thoughts on the Afrodiasporic conditions and histories that bring together transnational, diasporic literatures seem to dialogue with Édouard Glissant's and Carole Boyce Davies's concepts. Evoking Glissant (2005), she observes the transversality in history and in afrodiasporic relations, the similarity in the beauty and the traumas of the various national literatures. Inspired by her own Caribbean background, a research project she developed in Brazil, and decolonization theory coming from Africa, Davies (1996, pp. 207-208) regards the African diaspora as a transnational relation among dispersed Africans, without impositions of identical expectations, cultures or histories. Her emphasis is on «the notion of re-creation or reelaboration» of diasporic cultures, although she recognizes the importance of the historical connections based on slavery and colonialism. Davies argues that «Afro-diasporic culture is not a recall of a romanticized or essentialized Africa but a series of transformations and reinterpretations of African-based cultures on an international level». The contact with Caribbean theories and Black women's writing from several American countries has strengthened Conceição Evaristo's sense of her own diasporic location and links. She has observed, for instance, that Afro-Brazilian history has more in common with Afro-American or Afro-Cuban history, that is, the histories of the diaspora, than with the hegemonic history of her own country. In terms of fictional characters, she has remarked on the commonalities between the Black girls Pecola (in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye),* Geni (in *A cor da ternura*, by Geni Guimarães), and the girl in *Cartas al cielo*, by Teresa Cárdenas, all three deeply affected and disturbed by white racism, inferiority and loneliness (Evaristo, 2021b).

Many are the important themes that also bridge the literary works of Morrison and Evaristo. Toni Morrison developed the now famous concept of «rememory» as a major basis for her novels, and both writers deal with the traumas of a painful past, slavery, racism, the abused bodies of Black women and men, their tears and despair. On the other hand, both of them highlight ancestral ties, the family memories that bring inspiration and strength to «get up, stand up for your right», as Bob Marley (1973) commanded in song. Memory and ancestry make you the agent, the subject of your own history; for Morrison, «the presence of an ancestor» is a prerequisite in Black literature, not necessarily family, but some «timeless people» who will bring wisdom. A writer should presume a «we» in the narrative, so that the village, the community, should be there. It makes no sense to indulge «in some private, closed exercise» of imagination; «the best art is political», and she wanted her writing «unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time» (Morrison, 1984, pp. 343-345).

Morrison's ideas about literature seem to reverberate in Evaristo's concept of «*escrevivência*», created in 1994 to describe her own writing in the combination of the words «*escrever*» [to write] and «*vivência*» [lived experience]. Evaristo believes that the idea of «*escrevivência*» integrates the «I» who writes with the readers and the community, since the Black text cannot be limited to individual control: it tells «a personal experience» that is necessarily amplified by collective concerns. In her words, «'*escrevivência*' should not be taken as Narciso's mirror», in which one gets lost in self-contemplation. For her and for Morrison, therefore, there is a «writing of us» in diasporic literature; one recognizes the other while the mirrors expand perceptions and reiterate the *bantu* cultural principle «I am because you are» (Evaristo, 2021b)[24]. When Morrison affirmed that literature should indeed be political, and Evaristo defended that the woman writer should put herself, her life, family and history in her narrative, both knew that they were breaking critical dogmas. Evaristo argues that the act of writing signifies the author's «self-inscription

24. «In Bantu language, *ubuntu* expresses the conscience of the relation […] between individual and community, I am because you are», which inspired Mandela, the idea being that without «renouncing yourself» you cannot «promote the self-knowledge, confidence and resilience […] that will lead to empathy for others» (Laborinho, 2019).

in the world», something that acquires «a sense of insubordination» for the Black women writers who have been marginalized for so long (Evaristo, 2005). Both Morrison and Evaristo have stood up firmly, bravely, sometimes lyrically and magically, to affirm their voices as Black women and the rights of Black people, while denouncing inequality and exploitation. In a way, they have endorsed each other's trajectories and, from their specific locations, they have claimed space and opportunity for other Black women writers. Known as remarkable storytellers and inspired by the oral traditions of their cultures, both have been called «*griots*» of modern times. Contrary to the critics who once spotted serious problems in Morrison's first novel, Evaristo (2021a) believes that «even if it were Morrison's only book, the distressing beauty of *The Bluest Eye* would justify her Nobel Prize». She has long felt that the quality of «poetic brutalism» attributed to her own work by Eduardo de Assis Duarte actually belongs to Toni Morrison[25]. In her story «Regina Anastácia»[26] (Evaristo, 2011), the first person narrator inserts Evaristo's own recollections of regal, powerful women that convey a natural and profound nobility: the «*Mães de Santo*», venerated priestesses in Afro-Brazilian religious rituals; notable Black Brazilian women singers and artists; her mother and one teacher, all honored by name. Toni Morrison is also among those queens, closing the list with Nina Simone and some African transatlantic sisters. Evaristo (2021a) only wished she had met and talked to Morrison– they only exchanged brief glances at the FLIP 2016, a literary event where Morrison was the guest of honor.

6. FINAL REMARKS: «WE HAVE ARRIVED» (EVARISTO, 2017)

We have experienced difficult times in Brazil, in the United States and in the world, seeing actions and conflicts that have exacerbated injustice and social difference on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion and nationality. In the last years, cases of extreme violence against Blacks have multiplied in the Americas. In Brazil, ironically, stories of racial and gender violence run side by side with beautiful Black faces and bodies

25. Among his several critical works, Eduardo de Assis Duarte edited an important 4-volume anthology on Afro-Brazilian Literature (2011 and 2014).
26. *Regina* is Latin for *rainha*/queen.

stamped on «high» fashion magazine covers. Nevertheless, as Conceição Evaristo has pointed out, we have reached a time when society has become more outspoken about racism, a positive development after a long, traditional emphasis on «racial democracy». On the other hand, she argues that this is also «a dark phase in which unabashed racists have come out of the closet, feeling entitled to say whatever they want». For all those reasons, Evaristo (2017) thinks it is important to speak out, recognize and pay honor to the good literature produced by Black Brazilian authors since the 19th century. Although subaltern voices have been constantly mediated by those in power, she believes that yes, the subaltern can speak, and she is confident enough to affirm: «Our voice reverberates and contaminates. […] We have arrived. There is no going back».

The new bright lights on Toni Morrison's work accompany the cultural effervescence and the visibility reached by Afro-Brazilian writers – particularly women – in the first decades of the 21st century. The demand for the recognition of forgotten writers along with the publication of a variety of new names and titles has occurred hand in hand with new translations of foreign authors and careful editorial attention paid to established writers. The perceived absence of Black women writers in previous decades could have discouraged and blocked the way for talented young women like Jarid Arraes, but at nineteen she discovered *Cadernos Negros*, Conceição Evaristo and, soon afterwards, Toni Morrison. They were «my first references. The first references for many people», declares Arraes (2020). During the last decades in Brazil, national and foreign Black authors, both women and men, have reached media visibility as well as positive public and critical reception. Writing a recognizably Black literature in their themes, characters and references, while also creating works that are imaginatively and poetically Black in language and form, Toni Morrison and Conceição Evaristo have highlighted gender and have influenced younger writers to trust their own voices and go on expanding and diversifying the literatures of the diaspora.

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