

Black women's voices in Brazilian poetry

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Brazilian Black history can also be written through literature. Black people choose several forms to aesthetically express subjective dimensions and their concrete community life experiences, whether in terms of health, social behavior, or even expectations of new, good living ways. Black artists have explored these forms from chronicle to novel, traversing short stories and other narrative forms for centuries in the country and crossing several literary currents. Of all the ways in which Brazilian Literature has been present in the history of Black arts, poetry holds a special place.

From the great classics of the colonial period to contemporary poets, Black poetry has gained its path in Brazil. There is no lack of distinguished names such as Domingos Caldas Barbosa, Gonçalves Dias, Machado de Assis, Cruz e Souza, and Luiz Gama. We should note even the mistaken enclosure with which the critics portrayed Black poets. Many, for example, attributed to poet Cruz e Souza an obsession with the white color to the detriment of the Black world. However, criticism has been showing the complex facets of the greatest Brazilian symbolist writer for some decades, especially regarding blackness. Fragments of the “*Afra*” poem show the artist’s poetic routes (free translation from Portuguese):

You rise from the mysteries of Lust
Afra, tempted by the green apples
Amid magnetic sylphs and gnomes
Wonders of the purple passion.

A long list of Black authors who dedicated themselves to poetry emerged from the 20th century to the early years of the 21st century. To name a few: Mario Andrade, Lino Guedes, Carlos Assumpção, Oswald de Camargo, Solano Trindade, Oliveira Silveira, Ricardo Aleixo, Edmilson de Almeida Pereira, and Luiz Silva (Cuti).

In this Black poetry list that does not fit these short review pages, readers must ask themselves: where are Black women in Brazilian poetry? Or rather, where are the Black female poets in our Literature? These disturbing questions find answers in the academic study of Heleine Fernandes de Souza¹, in her recently released book *A Poesia Negra-feminina* (The Female Black Poetry). The author is a poet and a researcher

at the Black Studies Laboratory of the Advanced Program of Contemporary Culture at UFRJ.

In a vast field, still unexplored profoundly and detailed by the Brazilian academy, resides a robust list of Black artists who produce poetry. While I cannot manage to list them all here, I should mention, even partially, some of these names: Miriam Alves, Conceição Evaristo, Elisa Lucinda, Maria Nilda de Carvalho Mota (Dinha), Esmeralda Ribeiro, Tatiana Nascimento, Beatriz Nascimento, Mel Duarte, Livia Natália, Mel Adún, and Cristiane Sobral.

This poorly explored universe, even made invisible by academia and literary criticism, is fertile ground for the investigation of Heleine Fernandes de Souza, who takes on the challenge of investigating the field of Black women’s poetic production and selecting which of them would form part of her analytical scrutiny. This author seeks to move from the Brazilian center south to other parts of the country precisely to compose a diverse corpus of Black female Literature, whether in regional or generational terms.

In the book opening, we find the picture of the three women who will be central interlocutors of Heleine Souza’s analysis: Conceição Evaristo, Livia Natália, and Tatiana Nascimento. The fact that their pictures appear at the beginning of the book indicates the author’s intention to present the photographs as a way of (re)cognizing Black artists as poets and not as things. These are, therefore, portraits of Black people as artists, a mark that the researcher will imprint on her analyses of the selected works.

Of these artists, Heleine Souza explores expertise, ancestral knowledge of the body and mental health care, critical awareness of women’s bodies, their relationship with motherhood, elderly and child care, and self-care. These themes are frequent in Black female poetry, as is the concern with the relationship between culture and nature, involving the environment and its riches for good living, which is shown to be strong in the symbols mobilized from Afro-Brazilian cosmovisions and African matrices. Self-care practices, ranging from observing the body, as in the case of menstruation, pregnancy, and the postpartum period, are recurrent themes in her works. Intergenerational affective bonds, learning and ancestral wisdom as ways of valuing traditions and strengthening family and community ties, and interpersonal solidarity, due to social, historical, economic, and health conditions, provide Black female poetry with a unique feature, since they trigger the production of knowledge in public health by putting gender and race cleavages and their impacts to the fore, also vis-à-vis social inequalities.

This artistic production also sheds light on forms of survival and values, which are strengthened in



social life and fundamental for overcoming social problems that challenge Brazilian public health.

The book is divided into three parts: Heleine Souza performs her theoretical discussion, enunciates her research problem, the methodology used, and the concepts she will adopt in the analysis. The first two parts contain relevant discussions concerning the issue of epistemicide. In contrast, the author presents poetry as a form of existence, and the rich debate on Afrodiasporic aesthetics gains momentum. In the second part, we see the problem of Brazilian Black Literature emerging with more luminosity, the confrontation with canonical criticism, and the presentation of a history of Black agencies in defense of this Literature, in particular the *Quilomboje* literary movement, in the national scene for over four decades. In this part, which comprises almost the middle of the book, there is already an enunciation of the center of the thesis debate, namely, Black-female poetry. Finally, the icing on the cake is found in the third part: the analysis of the poetic matter.

Of the artists' trajectories, it is interesting to highlight the popular origin of the three, along with their multiple artistic affiliations. Tatiana Nascimento is a poet and singer producing videos and performances. Livia Natália is from Salvador, Bahia, and is a professor at UFBA. Thus, like the two cited authors, Conceição Evaristo is presented as an author from Minas Gerais based in Rio de Janeiro, whose vast bibliography already places her in a different role. In common, they are also doctors who graduated and post-graduated in Literature at important Brazilian universities. Their trajectories are nested in a deep bond and investment in producing Black Literature inside and outside the academy.

In analyzing the selected poems, the themes that cross the corpus studied stand out, such as the Afro-centered poetics and the diasporic dimension in all three. Themes such as ancestry, memory, the mind-body relationship, love, collective health, violence, racism, and African-based religions, are moved through a myriad of symbols that give concreteness to the images created by them, such as open vaginas in the poem "The night does not fall asleep in the eyes of women", by Conceição Evaristo (2017), or the curly (straightened) hair, as in the poem "Where is the mirror?", by Livia Natália

(2015), or as the subtleties of the writings about crying and regretting in the poem "Baobá", by Tatiana Nascimento (2018). Mothers, daughters, (great)grandmothers, female orixás, friends, and many others are interlocutors, agents of narratives, and memory portraits. In short, the material for this Black female poetry; that is, its sense of being in the world.

Heleine Fernandes de Souza's book is a rich contribution to Brazilian Literature for showing the deficiencies identified in national literary criticism and because she performs a fine reading of this Black female poetry. However, the work on screen far transcends contributing to Literature, making use of Literature to enrich knowledge in public health. The book reviewed here, in the wake of the two volumes of *Literature and Public Health*^{2,3} that contain literary writings on health issues, shows that race, gender, sexuality, class, generation, and territory, among other dynamic markers of difference, make people sick and kill Black women daily, but these women persist and insist on living.

The authors, insubmissive poets, promote writing skills through poetry, as Evaristo⁴ mentions. Finally, Heleine's book contributes to the field of collective health by bringing Black women's voices who are not always heard. No wonder the book was on the list of finalists for the 2021 Jabuti Award. Undoubtedly, A Black-female poetry echoes the insurgent poetics that put aloud and clearly "the silent/choked voices in the throats" of the "Voices -Women" of the Literature of this country.

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