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Gender and Resistance: Afro-Brazilian Women's Anti-Naming as Recovery From Trauma in Conceição Evaristo' "Eu-Mulher" and Ponciá Vicencio

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African ancestors came to the New World “without a last name.” When Fernando Ortiz compares enslavement to the process of abstraction of sugar cane, he underlines the contrast between sugar and its “refined” Cuban counterpart, tobacco, which earns a name through its harvesting. In the above quote, the early to mid-twentieth century anthropologist compares the nameless sugar to a slave, thus stating that a slave comes into the world without a name. Although it is usually admitted that Ortiz is one of the prominent pioneers on the Afro-Cuban studies, yet he writes the slave experience as a parenthetical comparison. In general, Fernando Ortiz reminds us of a mistake too often made in the field. The crucial threshold crossed by individuals of African descent in the Americas—the Middle Passage and social death—should not be a parenthetical reference to Latin American or Afro-Hispanic studies. This is where African Diaspora begins. This moment is crucial to understand naming moments in African Diaspora literature and culture. Forced to immigrate to the New World, individuals in their majority from West and Central Africa lost their names in the Middle Passage. Those who survived met social death as they set foot on the Western shores, and to this day, this trauma shapes Black identity formation. The loss of name marks African Diaspora literature and informs African Diaspora strategies to heal from trauma. 

In a context of continued slavery and sexist rhetoric, how do women of the African descent undo the ritual of social death through literary discourse? In *Slavery and Social Death*, Michael Patterson outlines the social phenomenon of slavery throughout history enacted onto slaves in any slavery-based economy (Patterson 42). He coins the term “social death” to denote the ritual of enslavement. Part of social death consists of eliminating an individual’s name, branding a symbol onto her skin and labeling her with a monetary value based on her physical state. Based on his claim, I pose the following questions: how do the Afro-Brazilian women identify themselves when the process of being named is a reminder of colonial economy’s oppression? What happens in Afro-
Brazilian texts when women characters that were once in bondage claim a name of their own? What do their names teach us about post-slavery and post-colonial identity formation? And does each narrative reveal shortcomings in trauma studies?

With the term “naming,” I refer to self-introduction, being baptized, hearing your name called out, earning a nickname, etc. Naming signifies identity formation, whether in literature, other cultural artifacts, or in real life. In the Afro-Brazilian texts featured in this article, each “naming” moment reveals tension between Afro-Brazilian women and the written text. The female characters resist colonial domination through naming and anti-naming. By discussing each text, I contribute to an ongoing discussion about discursive power, epistemological violence, and forms of resistance to Western, canonical and patriarchal literary discourse via black female Brazilian authorship and spirituality.

In Colonialism and Race in the Luso-Hispanic Literature, Afro-Hispanic scholar Jerome Branche outlines the history of naming and race in Latin American literature, and explains the process of colonization as a discursive process (Branche 82). Naming the land in Spanish rather than preserving the original indigenous places, naming saints as Christian to cover over indigenous deities,¹ but also naming individuals, such acts of naming generated a form of epistemological violence enforcing colonial discursive power. The discursive naming also affects bodies, spirits and cultures. Those without the power to name—the enslaved and the colonized—were subject to this panoptical gaze.

As they reveal a resistance to written discourse, the naming moments in each text below offer strategies to cope with traumas of slavery, social death and epistemological violence. Each naming scene suggests healing with a return to the foundational African Diaspora experience, and brings attention specifically to non-Western healing strategies.

How can Afro-Brazilians overcome traumas of slavery when oppression resonates in their name? In the poem “Eu-Mulher” (I-Woman) and the novel Poncião Vicencio, both by Conceição Evaristo, characters wrestle with their names. Each text by the Afro-Brazilian writer and educator living in Rio de Janeiro presents characters attempting to shape emancipated identities. Excerpted from an anniversary compilation volume of Quilombhoje,¹ Conceição Evaristo’s poem “Eu-Mulher” recalls a historical awareness shared by many Afro-Brazilians that slavery has yet to be abolished in Brazil. The protagonist of the poem is a mammy—a domestic slave who nursed white children.

“Eu-Mulher” deals with accepting her body once objectified as a mammy, and claiming a name that counters the inherited signifier of submission. Rather than critique submission, the poetic voice values her reproductive organs and an

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anonymous name. Does her anonymity prescribe a return prior to social death, or does she find resolve in the return to the gates of social death, the original trauma when she lost her name?¹

To make a case with Ponciá Vicencio, I will compare the novel with a key naming scene in Carolina Maria de Jesus’ *Bitita’s Diary*. Carolina Maria de Jesus’ journals open doors into her life, thoughts and struggles as a slums dweller, mother, and marginalized writer. Both texts complicate the act of claiming a name. Carolina goes through a significant change of attitude towards her baptismal name. She suddenly prefers her nickname—truer to her identity than her Christian name. Rather than empowerment, Ponciá’s name recalls pain and alienation. At the same time, her name serves as a bridge to her grandfather’s spirit. What does the resistance against literacy and names entail in each text? Do they advocate a return to pre-discursive experience, pre-literacy discourse, or to the threshold of social death? How could a literary text promote pre-literary or pre-text experiences?

Afro-Brazilian writer and social worker Miriam Alves was once a member of the Quilombojho São Paolo Black writers collective. She notes the limited potential of literature (Duke, “Alzira Rufino and Miriam Alves” 275).

Conceição Evaristo sees the gates and pushes them open. By not promoting written names in naming scenes, or not following a traditional Western narrative in relationship to names, her texts exercise agency in the very form of text and therapy. They use structures that do not conform to the demands of “the talking cure.” This avoidance suggests that the experience of slavery demands another type of work that does not begin from the standpoint of Western analysis. In *Dark Continents*, Khanna explains that psychoanalysis played a central role in 19th century global strategies of fashioning nationhood. The discipline’s concepts, though they must not be rejected as Khanna also defends in *Dark Continents*, must be used critically, and with the awareness that the very symbolic power of psychoanalytic theory depended on the subjection of the primitive, the subaltern, the other.¹ Terms such as melancholia, trauma, psychosis, apply to postcolonial subjects with difficulty because those terms supported colonial enterprises, in discursive, political, economic and symbolic realms.

In response to psychoanalytic theory’s limitations, spirituality, communality, trance and tribal belonging are just a few of the components that African diasporic texts propose in order to overcome and to fashion inherited traumas and fashion a self-assured identity.¹ While speaking against canonical literature that leaves women of African descent in the margins, the texts of focus in this article allow me to contribute to trauma studies on literature with experiences from women of African descent and with Africana-influenced trauma theory.

Carolina Maria de Jesus and Conceição Evaristo reveal the intricacies of coping with post-slavery and post-trauma identity formation. In an effort to contribute

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to existing decolonial trauma studies in literature, this study bridges Afro-
Brazilian literary studies with Afro-centered trauma theory.

One of the problems with applying psychoanalytic theory to non-Western texts
is that in the West one values unified subjects, individualism and coherent
identities, and marginalizes experiences that are fragmented or nonlinear, or
that cannot be named. For example, Julia Baracat’s article “Carolina e seu ideal
de eu,” though thorough and relevant, solely relies on psychoanalytic theory
and concludes that Carolina Maria de Jesus’ superego allows her to claim
justice mostly for herself. In my opinion, such a model based on the self as
individual does not apply to texts that deal with an inherited trauma of slavery
and triple marginalization. The Yoruba concept of person encompasses four
parts: the physical body (ara); the soul (emi); before one is born, one chooses
an inner head or divinity (ori, more potent than destiny, this is an individual’s
potential to advance in the material world); and individual effort (esè,
individual struggle and strife, adopts some or all of the potential of the ori)
(Martin 210). The following analysis chooses to refer to this concept of
personhood over the psychoanalytic frameworks of the ego.

Ivette Wilson’s article foregrounds my study on Ponciá Vicencio as she
demonstrates the narrative’s language as “a counter-narrative of difference” that
resists colonial discourse and imperial dominance, told in a language that
recognizes pre-colonial ancestry and Afro-Brazilian women’s realities (56). In
“Resisting Silence/Silence as Resistance; (Re)Affirming Brazil’s African
Heritage in Conceição Evaristo’s Ponciá Vicencio,” Wilson investigates the
power of “living language” in post-colonial narratives of resistance and the
subversion of “naming History” in Ponciá Vicencio. Taking a slight turn away
from her proposal, I will explore the function of naming the self and the
subversion thereof in Ponciá Vicencio and “Eu-Mulher” by Conceição Evaristo.
Wilson’s argument defends that Conceição Evaristo adopts an Afrocentric
tradition as she includes characters of African descent that own their own
experience, and because she supports African reality within her narrative voice
(60). I will defend that the text asks to be analyzed with a framework centered
on the African Diaspora. While Wilson focuses on revisionist history, memory
and identity, I will focus on healing collective trauma, gender and race, and
identity. Conceição Evaristo’s voice privileges a worldview centered on
healing, which echoes African Diasporic knowledge and ways of healing.
In “Pan African Metaphysical Epistemology: a Pentagonal Introduction,”
Denise Martin presents that practices of healing the trauma of slavery are
common in African diaspora rituals, like the Quimbois healing baths (Martin
221). Martin also instructs the Afro-centered interpretation of (anti-)naming and
healing. As the living embody souls that are reborn, the naming ritual is a
process of recognition, or remembering a soul, that involves the community:
“The task of the community is to assist in the soul’s remembering accomplished

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through the naming of the person, and rituals designed to help the person remember" (Martin 219). A marked difference from branding, dissociated naming, the religious ritual of remembrance explains a resistance to names, literacy and Christianity. The characters lack their own ritual of naming that remembers the soul and reconnects communal trauma to their body, which would in turn contribute to healing inherited traumas of slavery. The process of naming heals when it makes use of all of the components of African diasporic self. These texts demonstrate that point.

Between an African ritual and the limits of psychoanalysis, an Afro-centered lens of Afro-Brazilian texts claims its own therapeutically critical melancholia. Critical melancholia functions as an affective experience of coloniality that makes apparent the decenteredness of psychoanalytical paradigms (Khanna v). A character that experiences “critical melancholia” embodies the necessity of looking further than Western psychoanalysis. Conceição Evaristo’s women characters cope with coloniality’s affects, or more specifically, the transgenerational trauma of slavery. Their frustration towards their names can be seen as a manifestation of critical melancholia that demands a decolonial story telling of inherited traumas. They also make apparent the need to shift psychoanalytic paradigms towards an afro-centered paradigm.

The name of the collective Quilombhoje, to which Conceição Evaristo contributed, brings together the title of a community established by formerly enslaved Afro-Brazilians, a “quilombo,” and the word today, “hoje”—to make up “today’s Afro-Brazilian community”—Quilombhoje. The movement of founding an independent community that one finds in “quilombo” easily relates to the early 1970s Collective’s mission—to establish a publishing collective independent of the Brazilian canon and the cultural market’s stronghold. Quilombhoje is one of today’s many Afro-Brazilian decolonial movements, making Afro-Brazilians visible as writers, activists, and multi-dimensional subjects of contemporary literature.

Emanuella Oliveira’s extensive study on Quilombhoje writers, The Politics of Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Literature, speaks to the polemic between the political components and the aesthetic import of Quilombhoje. The literary collective founded in 1980 in São Paulo remained concerned with contributing to the canon in order to become an influential part of the Brazilian literary world. At the same time, they faced criticism from literary critics who did not see the contributions from their social realist narrative or overtly political poetry. Aside from responding to a canon that marginalized and stereotyped Afro-Brazilians, Quilombhoje writers remained driven to affirm their own literary voice. In this context, Conceição Evaristo arrives at the end of a long tradition of Afro-Brazilian authors, from Cruz e Sousa to Miriam Alves, the first woman to join Quilombhoje. She brings the same intentions to find a voice both political and an aesthetic that fits her experience and concerns as an Afro-
Brazilian woman. Oliveira’s study does not focus on Evaristo, but her work provides unprecedented research on the Afro-Brazilian symbolic field and the marginalization of gender within it. I add to her study a focus on trauma and healing in this exceptional literature, and the important contribution of a material or corporal aesthetic proposed by Afro-Brazilian women writers. Afro-Brazilian women’s part of Quilombhoje do “more than instruct views of Afro-Brazilian womanhood,” (Afolabi 118) they chart a new path in contemporary literature, a path of respect and dignity that counters the Brazilian canon and places their lives, preoccupations and their bodies at the center of literary narratives. Late twentieth century works such as the Afro-Brazilian anthology entitled Women righting: Afro-Brazilian Women’s Short Fiction/Mulheres escre-vendo, underline the mission of Quilombhoje women such as founding member Esmeralda Ribeiro, longstanding members Miriam Alves and Conceição Evaristo. Their literature witnesses traumas and defends individuals. In the introduction to Emfim ... Nós/Finally... Us, Alves declares that Brazilian literature has always “left us [Black Brazilian women] behind the curtains, camouflaging us generally in domestic work” (Alves, Emfim... Nós/Finally... Us 23). The anthology title performs a serious play on the words “righting,” and writing, writing and witnessing. “Escre-vendo” splits the gerund “escrevendo (writing)” to fuse the stem “escrev-” (“writ-”) with the gerung “vendo” (seeing). Writing becomes an act of seeing and witnessing. Secondly, the short stories in this anthology portray traumatic scenes—rape, abortion, racial discrimination—to provide a story-telling that surfaces personally and nationally repressed experiences. Writing acts as a political right and a strategy to “right” the wrong—to write over the limited representations of Black Brazilian women; to write against past epistemological violence; and to cope with personal traumas. Write, witness, and right.

Like Miriam Alves, Esmeralda Ribeiro defines her text as a space to right and to witness. Her poem “Fato” (Fact) portrays the facts of the current Brazilian situation:

They abolished slavery as an institution
But Not as a condition. (Finally ... Us 87)

The lay out of the poem recalls the Brazilian “poema concreto” while it underlines the contrasting realities in Brazil—though abolished, slavery remains real.

In a stifling literary world and with antecedents of slavery, it becomes logical to express ambivalence towards language in general, and towards names in particular. This ambivalence illustrates the complexity of African Diaspora literature by women. We have difficulty making use of a language that does not fully represent us, but at the same time, we take on the responsibility to
represent ourselves. Roland Walter argues that the desire to rewrite history and to articulate a collective identity implies tension between the Western discourse and African American women’s discourse in Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (55). In Afro-Brazilian literature, the ambivalence towards language and naming mirrors tensions felt by women of African descent in Brazil. The ambivalence symbolizes obstacles that exist in contemporary slavery in Brazil, where they must write against, witness, and right the portrayals of Black Brazilian women, not just on the level of literary discourse, but within deeper parts of the self, body, spirit and the community.

Conceição Evaristo’s poem “Eu-Mulher” deals with accepting her body once objectified as a mammy. In this poem, Evaristo places her womb and vagina at the center of the poem to undo discursive representations of the mammy’s body. She defends the power of her reproductive organs under an anonymous name, “I-Woman.”

With a hyphen in its title, “Eu-Mulher” establishes that this woman’s identity is inherently bound to her gender. The first verse alludes to her body’s nourishing virtue that was another’s property for so long: “Uma gota de leite/ me escorre entre os seios. (A milk drop/ runs between my breasts)” (v.1-2). The image of the milk drops freely running down her breasts suggests non-ownership, or self-ownership. Her freedom concretizes with a verse that claims a strict contrast from breeding for a slave owner as she inaugurates life: “inauguro a vida.” (v. 9)

Binding the identity to a gendered body, the poetic voice’s fertility also relates to the image of blood, which could stand as a symbol of extreme violence, suffering, struggle, and beating, but instead it reflects an embellishment, an adornment: “Uma mancha de sangue/ me enfeita entre as pernas. (A blood stain/ adorns my legs)” (v. 2-3). The same blood is alluded to with a “red rivers” image that contributes to her ritual of inaugurating life: “Eu-mulher em rios vermelhos/ inauguro a vida. (I-woman in red rivers/ I inaugurate life)” (41). A woman’s menstruation inaugurates life, and at the same time her menstrual cycle is an adornment; the cycle reminds her of her powerful maternity and identity, which she claims as her own.

The womb is a site of empowerment that lends her voice a new strength that attacks the world’s eardrums, softly (v.10-11). Empowerment thus implies a female matrix at the center, with the starting point for growth being the womb as the “força matriz.” (central force v.17) The empowerment also activates with a transcendence through time, being alive through past, present and future: “Antevesjo. / Antecipo. / Antes-vivo/ Antes—agora—o que há de vir.” (I foresee. / I anticipate. / I fore-live. / Before—now—what has yet to come) (v.12-15) The dashes point to transcendence.

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The poem ends on a positive and hopeful note, looking towards the future with the image of the seed recurrent in this volume of poems: “Eu-mulher/ abrigo da semente/ moto-continuo/ do mundo.” (I-woman/ a coat for the seeds/ a continuous motor/ for the world) (v.41). With this ending, in a poem entirely dedicated to the female force, the poetic voice clearly declares her agency as a Black woman. She acts as a motor for the world as she houses its seeds. Each component of the poem deals with the poetic voice’s acquiring a name while affirming sexuality as part of her identity as I-Woman, but why the anonymity? Is she a woman before she is an individual? In an effort to step away from a Western perspective of the ego, I do not interpret the anonymity as a step away from individuality or lack of ego. This presents a step towards identifying with the African diaspora. I-Woman enounces a declaration to acquire selfhood prior to and counter to the signifier imposed onto her, and to acquire personhood not as a specific individual, but as a woman. She voices this not for one person, not for herself, but with a community of millions who lost their names, gender and sexuality through “social death” on the slavership. In order to reclaim her body and identity, does her anonymity prescribe a return prior to social death, or does she find resolve in the return to the gates of social death, at the very moment when she lost her name? Conceição Evaristo’s poem calls for a return to social death’s threshold. The poetic voice reclaims a collective body and identity that were no longer theirs, after they lost their name, yet before they were branded and turned into breeding commodities. Returning to this threshold, before claiming a name, she claims that she is “I-woman.” To a certain extent, she favors the loss of name and finds comfort in her anonymity. This is a strategy to recognize trauma in order to grow from it, a strategy to articulate one’s identity. Identify with that very moment when your ancestors set foot off of the slavership and articulate your identity from there, not by covering over that trauma with an African name prior to that, or an American name past that, but to own the transgenerational scars.

As the poetic voice heals from the transgenerational scars, the intertextuality with Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” becomes relevant to grasp the poem’s relevance to fashioning an identity of race and gender in naming and post-slavery shock. Sojourner Truth did not ask “ain’t I Sojourner Truth?” but rather, “ain’t I a woman?” Comparable to Evaristo’s images of milk, blood, womb and vagina, Sojourner Truth’s speech inscribed her body before affirming her name. She showed her breasts to prove a basic yet overlooked point to her audience, that she, too, was a woman, regardless of what they had decided to label her, regardless of her labor. This was also a crucial point to argue for her emancipation. She associated her identity with physical achievements and scars, demonstrating how her race and gender equaled Black women’s strength: “Look at me! Look at my arm! ... I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain’t I a
woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain’t I a woman?” (qtd. in hooks “Ain’t I A Woman?” 160) Sojourner Truth’s argument affirmed her strength to equal “as much as any man’s.” Yet ending her sentences with “ain’t I a woman,” she underlines her gender identity over her physical abilities. She performs this in order to undo her body’s image that was read as animal-like or manly, as a body that only served to “plow and bear the lash.” However, she did not emphasize her name in her identity. She underlined the importance in recognizing her sexual identity and her equality of strength.

Conceição Evaristo’s poem answers Sojourner Truth’s call to undo the ritual of social death by underlining the power of women. Her text returns to a point that is pre-signifier, pre-naming, a point of liberation from literary discourse and the canon’s signifiers of Black mammies. This poem relates the identity of any Black Brazilian woman to just being a woman, rather than a victimized, silenced or objectified body that carries a branded name. The poetic voice claims that her objectified, un-gendered identity is actually the identity of a woman, an “I-woman” with a womb that possesses a central force (“força matriz”). “I-Woman” teaches us to form our identity from the transgenerational wounds, and accept the fragments of that identity. The dash in I-Woman links her identity to her sexuality, and at the same time, it links the identity with fragmentation, and teaches us to identify from the transgenerational scars.

To study post-slavery naming in Poncïa Vicencio, a naming scene in Carolina Maria de Jesus’ Bítita’s Diary will be relevant for comparison. Maria de Jesus was an influential figure for Afro-Brazilian writers, and Evaristo’s novel reveals parallels between Carolina’s diaries and the protagonist. Although the texts are different genres (journal and novel), each author’s approach to naming and literacy formulates an insightful commentary on coping with the transgenerational trauma of slavery and identity formation in Black Brazilian women. The first describes a complex process of self-identification and owning a sense of self in relation to naming and literacy; in the latter it pains to carry a last name. Being literate provides no relief.

Carolina De Jesus’ Bítita’s Diary underlines a significant moment of identification after her teacher reminds her of her baptismal name. Carolina prefers to go by her nickname, arguably closer to her identity than her Christian name: “ ‘I don’t want this name, I’m going to exchange it for another.’ (...) Later, I noticed that I (...) felt greater happiness. . . . I noticed that those who know how to read have a better chance of understanding” (Bítita’s Diary 91-93). In “Metaphor of Home in the Diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus” where Leslie Feracho underlines the relationship between a complete name and the potential to arrive at adulthood in this scene,¹ I establish a connection between the baptismal name and fragmentation. The causal relation between the professor naming her and Carolina’s self-affirmation, along with the Feracho’s...
emphasis on the professor’s influence (“as a result of the professor’s continued attention”) takes away from de Jesus’ agency. Literacy and education happen with the help of the professor, but mostly stem from Carolina. Carolina responds to her teacher with a fervent desire to learn. The consciousness that comes along with literacy lends her a feeling of gratification and a stronger sense of self. Yet the scene of naming blurs the cause-effect relationship between literacy and empowerment. Carolina finds empowerment through writing, reading, learning, and the social benefits this brings, in contrast with accepting her baptismal name. She affirms her agency when she defies her teacher’s use of her given name. When she insists to exchange her baptismal name “for another,” she decides to invent a new sense of self, to affirm an identity aside from her written and religiously scripted identity.  

In Conceição Evaristo’s novel *Poncia Vicencio*, which presents intertextualities with Carolina’s diaries, both reactions against literacy and her baptismal name occur. Firstly, Poncia’s story presents a case of frustration associated with a name’s colonial connotation: “Time went by and the girl grew, but she never grew accustomed to her own name” (19). In several instances, she calls her name as one would call a lost loved one to bring him or her back. This recurring oral repetition in Evaristo’s novel alludes to African diaspora traditions of call and response, without the response—a disconnect with an African past due to social death. Poncia calls her name in the mirror, as if to call her soul back to her body. The echo and repetition of this naming act, as it leads to either entrancing or a lull in the character development, sets up a case against naming.

Poncia feels an affective distance from writing her name, which begins early in her childhood: “Poncia Vicencio! Poncia Vicencio! She felt like she was calling out to someone else. She never heard a reply to her name from within. She tried others (…) but none of these seemed like her either. (…) Her head rolled in the void, she felt empty without a name” (10). Outloud, her name feels empty, appropriated by someone else, like an “echo”—distancing and disowning (“she set herself to copy her name and repeat it in an attempt to locate her own self, to hear herself in its echo” 19; “One evening she spent the whole night in front of the mirror calling to herself. She called and called and didn’t answer” 10). Poncia’s name echoes in her mind, but does not fix to her identity, it does not allow her to “locate herself.” What about her written name—as it becomes associated with literacy, does it imply empowerment?  

On the contrary, Poncia attempts to undo social death by dissociating from a name associated with colonial economy, her master’s name and a first name that reminded her of the crack of the whip. Poncia’s name also suggests her perception of literacy as an antonym to emancipation.  

Rather than empowerment and resolution, Poncia’s written name connotes pain and alienation. Writing her name designates violence and pain with words such
as: “self-flagellation, painful, torturing, sharp blade, pierced”—acts of violence that form a part of life in bondage. As Ponciá applies this violent accent onto her name, she feels the same whip her ancestors would get from a slave owner (or would be ordered to give herself by a colonizing priest?) The image of “a sharp blade that pierced her body” inserts another reference to branding during slavery, with a connotation of self-inflicted violence using a blade or self-flagellation. Thirdly, the “self-flagellation” stands both as a critique of Catholicism—there is no resolution in this ritual—and as an allusion to the crack of the whip—there is no relief in the burden of inherited trauma. Finally, the act of writing also warns of internal colonization. Ponciá Vicencio is tied down to an oppressive figure that she is hardly able to dissociate from her own identity. How can one overcome the self-loathing and hate that one imposes on herself and on her past, when one realizes what her name represents? Every time she writes her name, Ponciá does not empower her self; carrying the Colonel’s last name, she reiterates or renews a plantation owner’s power.

Ponciá Vicencio’s painful writing unveils multiple interpretations, all pointing to a coping process as complex as what Brazil has to offer for racial emancipation. Warnings against Catholic religion and internal colonization clearly point to the lack of opportunities for emancipation in Brazil, and more specifically in a case of personal/trans generational trauma. Is the self-inflicted violence a manifestation of the shame to inherit or the shame of slavery? Or is it a way to cope with the anger to have inherited and still live in a nation of inequality? How does one deal with inherited trauma that resonates in her name, in her nation?

The critical melancholy and her cultural heritage promote a coping strategy: a strong will to return to a time previous to social death. Find a voice with a sense of self previous to the act of naming, previous to discourse itself. And it is when her body becomes a bridge between her physical self and her family’s truth, symbolized by GrandPa Vicencio’s spirit, that her name serves a communicative function, the void from feeling anonymous related to her grandfather’s identity and suffering. She calls her name, then gets the urge to laugh and cry which implies the embodiment of her grandfather’s madness. He always laughed a laugh that was a mix of laughter and cries, never fully recovering from killing his wife and child in a desperate act to resist enslavement. A flashback follows, which ends with her husband walking in and finding her saying “something that he couldn’t understand,” as if she were in a trance: “The woman seemed dim-witted. She spent hours and hours there silently looking out and seeing nothing. She spoke little and when she spoke, it was usually to say something that he couldn’t understand” (10). Is the trance part of the coping strategy, a resolution, or a lull in character development?

A trance occurs in another instance, when she rejects her name in a trance, embodying her grandfather:
One evening she spent the whole night in front of the mirror calling to her. She called and called and didn’t answer. In the morning she seemed more upset than ever before. She asked the man [her husband] not to call her Ponciá Vicencio anymore. Fearfully, he asked her what should she be called. Looking deeply and frantically into his eyes, she told him that he should call her nothing. (10)

She would rather have no name than one with the trace of a whip and a master’s name. The anonymity “The man” points to dissociation from her husband. Her trance frightens him as she embodies her GrandPa Vicencio, a spirit who firmly rejects the slave order and the Colonel that drove him mad. Ponciá’s naming thus alludes to a complete separation of scripted self and body. Calling her name puts her in a trance, makes her leave her body, and embody her grandfather’s rejection of any personal connection to the slave order’s violence, pain, and alienation. At the same time, Ponciá’s entranced call and (lack of) response demonstrates the value in losing herself in order to reconnect with her grandfather’s identity and to channel the inherited trauma in order to recover from it.

Ivette Wilson and I arrive at similar conclusions—neither written or spoken words serve a healing function for Ponciá. In “Resisting Silence/Silence as Resistance,” Wilson concludes that memory and silence are the subversive elements and tools of resistance to madness. However, Wilson keeps healing as a parenthetical element (“the subversive (and healing) elements” 68), and finds that subversion equals resistance to madness. In my opinion, madness is part of the healing process for Ponciá, and along with memory and silence, the body serves a centrally healing function for her to articulate a decolonial identity, and for the text to present a decolonial narrative. I propose to end with what Miriam Alves aptly called the square or histori-city (“História,” Momentos de Busca)—the square where the first slaves were sold and lost their names. Let us respond to a call to found an epistemology specific to Afro-Brazilian and African American women. The Afro-Brazilian women’s texts that present materiality, orality and healing from trauma paint an unfinished image of a better future, an African diasporic Weltenschauung, by making meaning out of the Diasporic experience and using this experiential meaning to articulate a coping strategy such as anti-naming and corporeal writing. A better future begins in histori-city. It implies remembering transgenerational traumas and healing. The importance to return to foundational diasporic experiences with another form of writing relates to the Quilombohoje project of historical recovery, to rewrite a nation that includes the silenced black women’s bodies and associates them with pride.

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