

## **Abelardo Rodrigues and Ricardo Aleixo: The Black Enunciation in Afro-Brazilian Literature**

*The starting point of a discourse analytical approach to the complex phenomenon of racism is to realize that racism, as both social practice and ideology, manifests itself discursively. On the hand, racist opinions and beliefs are produced and reproduced by means of discourse; discriminatory exclusionary practices are prepared, promulgated and legitimated through discourse. On the other hand, discourse serves to criticize, delegitimize and argue against racist opinions and practices, that is, to pursue antiracist strategies.*

Teun Van Dijk, 1993

It is commonplace to talk about the influence of African heritage in the formation of the Brazilian culture and history. However, the active contribution of many african and africans descendents has suffered from a lack of visibility, sometimes modified by distorted images created by white perspectives. In the literature field, for instance, the black presence used to be portrayed only through a stereotyped characters<sup>2</sup> which were stigmatized with negative attributes. That is the same impression Leda Maria Martins has faced in her research about the black presence in theatre. According to her, *“until the 1940s, with rare exceptions, the figuration of blacks on the Brazilian stage assumed three predominant models: the submissive black, a type of tamed dog who was docile and passive; the pernicious and/or criminal element; and the black caricature,*

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<sup>2</sup> See Bastide, Roger *“Estereótipos de negros através da literatura brasileira”*. In: *Estudos afro-brasileiros* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1973); Brookshaw, David. *Race and Color in The Brazilian Literature* (N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Metuchen, 1986)

*whose ridiculous and grotesque behavior motivated, and still motivates , laughter from the audience.”*<sup>3</sup>

Struggling against such images and at the same time building another point of view about their history, the black writers, men and women<sup>4</sup>, has been highlighting an alternative discourse and drawing another portion of the Brazilian history in their writings.

In that sense, this work aims at identifying the process of thematic and figurative valorization in the construction of literary narratives produced by enunciators who create Afro-Brazilian poetics. That poetics is formed by different literary propositions that are developed in distinct styles. One of those styles is articulated in 28 editions of *Cadernos Negros* (Black Notebooks) published by the Quilombhoje Movement in Sao Paulo, who the poet Abelardo Rodrigues is one of the members. Another style is portrayed by Ricardo Aleixo, a poet from Minas Gerais, whose option is to write apart from the nomination “Afro-Brazilian literature” even though his poems project many issues about black identity.

The tension between both discourses represents an interesting challenge for the debate about black diaspora in Brazil. Also, the current work seek to coincide with the law 10.636/03 offering, according to semiotics paradigms, another perspective to research the contribution of Black people in Brazilian society. The named law strongly

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<sup>3</sup> Martins, Leda Maria. *A Ritual Chareography: the Orishas’ Steps in Sortilégio* (Callaloo,1995)

<sup>4</sup> See CAMARGO, Oswaldo. *O Negro Escrito* (São Paulo: Secretaria de Estado da Cultura/Imprensa Oficial, 1987); MOTT, Maria Lúcia de Barros. *Escritoras negras resgatando a nossa história*.

Papéis Avulsos no. 13 – Centro Interdisciplinar de Estudos Contemporâneos/Escola de Comunicação/Universidade do Rio de Janeiro, 1989).

recommends and monitors the institutions of the educational system and the teaching of the African and Afro-Brazilian culture, literature and history.

### **Introducing Rodrigues and Aleixo**

Abelardo Rodrigues is one of the poets who co-founded, in São Paulo, the black literary movement named *Quilombhoje Literatura*, which is responsible for publishing annually an anthology of poems and short-stories known as *Cadernos Negros* (Black Notebooks).<sup>5</sup> He was born in a suburb in Sao Paulo, in 1952, and he has published one individual book (*Memória da noite*. Sao José dos Campos: Ed. do Autor, 1978 (poemas), but most of his work (poems and short-stories) can be found in the collective anthologies organized either by or for poets involved in the already mentioned literary movement.

In the current work, he represents a writing style of the black enunciation in Brazilian literature, which means, among other elements, to move from the position of object to that of subject of the discourse. To achieve such a goal, he and other poets as well, who are organized around *Cadernos Negros*, have chose the option to continue talking as a collective voice not only against racism, but also using literature to promote another angle of the silenced history. In his work, it has found a voice as saying “I am black”, and “I am part of the African diaspora and that needs to be brought to the surface

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<sup>5</sup> Although *Cadernos Negros* started being published under the *Quilombhoje Literatura* in the 1980s, they were founded by a group of black writers in 1978; the reader can find further information about its history in: ALVES, Míriam. (2002) *Cadernos Negros (número 1): estado de alerta em fogo cruzado*. In: In: FONSECA, Maria Nazareth Soares (org). *Brasil afro-brasileiro*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica; ANTÔNIO, Carlindo Fausto. (2005) *Cadernos Negros: esboço de análise*. Tese doutorado em Teoria Literária) Instituto de Estudos da Linguagem/Unicamp; Figueiredo, Maria do Carmos and Fonseca, Maria Nazareth Soares. *Poéticas afro-brasileiras*. (Belo Horizonte: Mazza/PucMG, 2002).

in Brazilian society”. Such elements are presented as in the visible enunciated as in the enunciation, according to the A. J. Greimas semiotics paradigms.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the complex discussion about black identity and their own literary and aesthetic perspective admits other styles of writing, such as the one articulated by the poet Ricardo Aleixo. He was born in the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, in 1960. He is poet, songwriter, multimedia performer, editor and cultural activist.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Rodrigues, his works are not usually linked to any group. I said usually because sometimes he makes partnerships with others poets around the country to struggle for better conditions for the poetry field, for instance, with the movement called *Literatura Urgente*,<sup>8</sup> by which he got together with poets linked to the movement known as “*Literatura de Invenção*”.

Although most of his life is dedicated to the struggle against racism and to promote racial diversity (he has been the coordinator of the Festival Internacional de Arte Negra – FAN, in Belo Horizonte/MG). His books always bring some elements of the African heritage, such as signs of candomblé’s influence, he does not call himself a black poet, neither does he states that what he does can be considered a typical African-Brazilian poetry. In his statements, he does poetry; that is all. He does not get used to being a representative speaker of black people in his writings; he works individually more than as part of a collective. In every book he portrays a huge knowledge of international literature, and he is always talking about poets who have influenced him,

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<sup>6</sup> GREIMAS, AJ, RASTIER, F. *Sobre ensaios semióticos*. Petrópolis: vozes, 1975; Fiorin, José Luiz. *As astúcias da enunciação: as categorias de pessoa, espaço e tempo*. São Paulo: Ática, 2002; BARROS, Diana Luz Pessoa de. *Teoria do Discurso: fundamentos semióticos*. São Paulo: Humanitas, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Aleixo is founder of a multimedia company which works with what he calls “Poetics of the Voice”; further information about him can be found in his weblog: <http://jaguadarte.net>

<sup>8</sup> Further information about both *Literatura Urgente* and *Literatura de Invenção*, see: [www.literatura-urgente.com.br](http://www.literatura-urgente.com.br); [www.forumliteraturaminas.zip.net](http://www.forumliteraturaminas.zip.net).

most of whom are French one, but also some Americans, Africans and Brazilians, such as those from the *Concrete Poetry Movement*. He has a strong concern about the aesthetic and he is very carefully to link words, the sounds and images that come from them. Such deep concern about aesthetics drives him to criticize the work of poets labeled as African-Brazilian poets as if they were excessively focused on the themes of their works and less worried about the literary perspective of the poems. However, such European influence and his deep concentration on its aesthetic paradigms is one of the characteristics which poets from *Cadernos Negros* try to avoid, since they consider it an impositive imposed aesthetic, which does not represent the cultural diversity of the world.<sup>9</sup>

### **Two different ways to claim for a new approach**

Although both Aleixo and Rodrigues have been working in opposite directions regarding method, it is impossible to ignore that both represent African-Brazilian voices speaking for themselves, about themselves and about several aspects of their perspectives in Brazil society, and also as part of the dynamic African diaspora experience. However, in according with semiotics paradigms, the self-nomination is important but it cannot prevail over what is pointed out in the text, once the text has the elements which indicate the ethos of its articulator. In line with such semiotics approach, this work does not follow the strict opinion of the authors, when they say “I am this”; “I am that”, and so on.

Instead of following exclusively those statements, this work seeks to apprehend how both

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<sup>9</sup> Such perspective is emphasized in every anthologie of *Cadernos Negros*, but it is possible to find further information about that in: QUILOMBHOJE. *Reflexões sobre literatura afro-brasileira*. Published by Conselho de Participação e desenvolvimento da comunidade negra do Estado de São Paulo, 1985.

draw their personal struggle and how they emphasize the aspirations of black people in Brazil. My assumption is that even though both follow different approaches, what they are pursuing are vastly related.

To follow this supposition, I chose one poem by Abelardo Rodrigues (an element of literary semiotics), and the image that Ricardo Aleixo has used as the cover of his book and one of the elements in his exhibition as well; which is categorized as plastic semiotics. I expect to accentuate the convergence of voices between the poem and the image. First, I will introduce the image of the *Scriptura Continua*,<sup>10</sup> by Ricardo Aleixo. Afterward, I will draw attention to the poem *Zumbi*, by Abelardo Rodrigues.

### **Image (anexo)**

In semiotics, the meaning is brought to light by the relationship between at least two elements with a small portion of meaning. There are several of them, such as *life* versus *death*, *light* versus *dark*, *culture* versus *nature*, and so on. Therefore, the basic semantic category indicated in the image is *freedom* versus *oppression*, and it is oriented by some positive and some negative values depending on which one is more and less emphasized.

Following this reasoning and observing the details from the visual expression, it notices that there is a change from negative domination to positive freedom, which is underlined according to the imprisoned globe to the keyboard keys of a typewriter in a sort of string, or rope. The globe is immobilized, fixed into the body of that machine, though the keyboard keys stress the idea of freedom once they stimulate the movement of

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<sup>10</sup> Scriptura Continua is an Ricardo Aleixo object, which picture was taken by Cuia Guimarães.

going and coming from and to the globe, without any person being around to manipulate it. But everything is a sign effect.

Also, at a glance someone might believe that the globe shapes an accurate image once it appears to be in its standard position, nevertheless it is only an intriguing effect of reality. In fact, it is in the opposite position, which it seems to invite the audience to rethink the symbolism of world's geography, such as the powerful countries and those with less power, some of which are in the northern portion of the world. If there is power and privileges in northern areas such as North America, Europe and northern Africa, which is usually highly-euphoric. In regarding Brazil such assertiveness does not apply once one of the poorest regions of the country is located exactly in the north and north-eastern region, unlike the south and the southeast that accumulate a huge amount of wealth. It seems that proximity to the Equator results in a loss of prestige.

Another intriguing point indicated in the image is its circle shape. It is commonsense to attribute the cyclical symbolism to the semantic category of *ending* versus *beginning*. It reminds a pregnant phase, when the gestational belly means the possibility of the birth of another life, a new life is coming soon. Such postulation is associated with the title of the book itself and the idea that it portrays, Máquina Zero (Zero Machine). Either in saloons or in barbershops, that sort of machine is likely used to erase a huge amount of hair, to cut off as much hair as much possible. Its function is exactly to make sure that the old hair is going to be removed, so another hair, a new one is going to be coming soon. The majority of the customers desires to change their appearance.

If such an element is taken as a metaphor, it is possible to say that a new change has been claimed. Thus, when the author of the enunciation brings to light such an image, he is inviting the audience not only to rebuild the history, to highlight what has been silenced or what has not had high-status, but specially he is inviting the audience to change the position of the world so that has been invisible can become prominent, exalted, for instance, the African continent. Because the globe is in its upturned position, the keyboard is touching exactly the southern part of the continent, which supports the idea of how crucial it is to create another discourse about Africa and, particularly, to underscore the history and culture of African participation in Brazilian society. Now, let us comprehend how the poet Abelardo Rodrigues points out his purpose.

### **ZUMBI**

As palavras estão como cercas  
em nossos braços  
Precisamos delas.  
Não de ouro,  
mas da Noite  
do silêncio no grito  
em mão feito lança  
na voz feito barco  
no barco feito nós  
no nós feito eu.  
No feto

Sim,

20 de novembro  
é uma canção  
guerreira.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> RODRIGUES, Abelardo. Zumbi, in: Cadernos Negros – os melhores poemas – São Paulo: Quilombhoje, 1998.

The poem reiterates the direction of upright with shorter verses. The first verse is the only one that it is extended horizontally; the others are in a vertical orientation. An examination of the vocabulary demonstrates the presence of the same semantic category as in the Aleixo's figure: *freedom* versus *opression*. As it is known, the author of the enunciation organizes the discursive strategies according to the game of images that he believes that come from the audience, also those images he thinks the audience has about him. As a result, he chooses certain argumentatives procedures and not others. In the poem, the three first verses underline how important are the words linked to the idea of freedom and oppression.

*As palavras estão como cercas / Em nossos braços / Precisamos delas*

At a glance, there is an apparent contradiction: once the words represent something that imprisonment why should someone need them? Such ambiguity does not hold itself and it is far from being a disphoric element. It is the opposite, which means that the words represent a sort of instrument that can imprisonment on the one hand; and on the other hand they contribute in the struggle for the freedom. In other words, the poem considers the domain of the word (spoken or written, it does not matter) a important tool in the affirmation of the freedom, a basic element to build the foundation of the new society. This new society is conquered after a ample struggle which elements "grito", "lança", "barco" demonstrates a body that is available to fight to achieve the goals. "Grito" emphasizes a presence of a loud voice in opposition to weak voices. The word "feto" predicts the birth of something new, a new life, a new perspective, the beginning of a new history. By the end, the verse "20 de novembro" is related to the title "Zumbi",

November 20<sup>th</sup> is the Nacional Day of Black Consciousness, in Brazil, to honor the leader of Quilombo de Palmares, named as Zumbi dos Palmares. That is the key of the poem, which is dedicated to honor a Zumbi as well. According to the history, the quilombo of Palmares dated from 1606 or earlier; it was *“an organized settlement to which blacks escaped enslavement and white assimilation in colonial Brazil. (...) As a symbol of freedom, Palmares, unlike the others quilombos, was not only a refuge for slaved Africans; it was also a free society for other marginalized peoples of Brazil, including Amerindians and poor whites. (...) Palmares prevailed as a Black Republic for almost one hundred years. (...) In November 1965 Palmares was destroyed. Zumbi, the war minister, was wounded, captured alive, and decapitated by bandeirantes from São Paulo.”*<sup>12</sup>

To show that it is possible to build a society in which people from different racial heritage can live peacefully, according to the experience in Palmares, the black movement in Brazil struggles to keep the Zumbi's ideal alive. The settlement of such a date to honor the leader is also an opposition of the date celebrated in May 13<sup>th</sup>, when government considers that the slavery was officially ended. In disagreement with such celebration, and to pursue another portion of the history that the official facts do not cover, the black movement provides many activities around that date aiming to bring to the surface an invisible or sometimes stereotyped history of the African descendants in Brazilian society.

Thus, although both Ricardo Aleixo and Abelardo Rodrigues follow different strategies of enunciation in their literary work, in truth they both are claiming for the birth of a new perspective, in which highlights what has been put under the carpet for so long.

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<sup>12</sup> Callaloo Magazine, 1995.