

Interfacial Archetypes in Afro-Brazilian Cultural Studies: The Pan-African Consciousness of Márcio Barbosa, Paulo Colina, and Salgado Maranhão

by

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Abstract

This article explores the works of writers who are innovative and traditional at the same time with a keen eye on the “universal” to reach towards humanism via Paulo Colina, Salgado Maranhão, and Márcio Barbosa. Hence, their comparative commonality within the trope of “interfacial archetypes” is conceived since all these cultural producers choose the urban setting for their imaginative works even when their subject matter transcends a fixed setting and includes a traditional or rural setting. The choice between the urban and the rural is a false option for the exigency of modernity and postmodernity demands that even the “rural” become subject to the critique of “primitivism” and “exoticism” that is usually associated with subaltern and indigenous societies. The very urban nature of slavery in Brazil especially in the geo-economics and politics of Coffee in São Paulo, Sugarcane in the Northeast, and Gold in Minas Gerais, ensured the post-emancipation location of African descendants in the urban areas. Even with the effects of labor migration from “arid” to “greener” pastures, such as from the Northeast to the South, did not have a significant economic reconfiguration or betterment of life as these “migrant populations” were contained within a space that is now known as *favela* [Slum]— a space that may be seen as both private and public. Within this shifting space and location, African cultures and religions survived in Brazil to the extent that the relics take on their own identity with universal ethos—hence the interfacial connections between the ancestral, the urban, and the human condition. This essay was originally part of the book, *Afro-Brazilians: Cultural Production in a Racial Democracy* (2009) which partly explains the 1987-2003 references, the period wherein Afro-Brazilian cultural production was at its best due to the centennial celebration of the abolition of slavery (1888) in Brazil in 1988 that allowed Afro-Brazilian artistic and cultural production to flourish.

Introduction

In the Brazilian context, “post-modernism” betrays what Linda Huntcheon calls a phenomenon that can be best defined as “totally complicitous or totally critical, either seriously compromised or polemically oppositional.”¹ The sense of irony and critical distance that postmodernism has invited has also brought about many mixed responses to its contradictory positions which may be summed up by the opposition between utopia and dystopia relative to the unfulfilled hopes and dreams articulated in the post-abolition era. In this essay, I explore the works of writers who are innovative and traditional at the same time with a keen eye on the “universal” to reach for humanism via the works of Paulo Colina, Salgado Maranhão, and Márcio Barbosa. That all these cultural producers choose the urban setting for their imaginative works is inevitable. The choice between the urban and the rural is a false option for the exigency of modernity and postmodernity demands that even the “rural” become subject to the critique of “primitivism” and “exoticism” that is usually associated with subaltern and indigenous societies. The very urban nature of slavery in Brazil especially in the geo-economics and politics of Coffee in São Paulo, Sugarcane in the Northeast, and Gold in Minas Gerais, ensured the post-emancipation location of African descendants in the urban areas. Even with the effects of labor migration from “arid” to “greener” pastures, such as from the Northeast to the South, did not have a significant economic reconfiguration or betterment of life as these “migrant populations” were contained within a space that is now known as *favela* [Slum]— a space that may be seen as both private and public. Within this shifting space and location, African cultures and religions survived in Brazil to the extent that the relics take on their own identity with universal ethos—hence the connections between the ancestral, the urban, and the human condition.

In her own discussion of “marginal poetry,”² poetry produced in the 1970s in the wake of military dictatorship and what she calls a “new aesthetics of rigor” associated with the new poetry of 1990s, Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda defines “marginal” as an ambiguous expression which “oscillated between an inexhaustible series of meanings: marginal to the canon, marginal to the editorial market, marginal to the political life of the country.” Although this assessment captures the challenges of members of the group of Quilombhoje and other individual Afro-Brazilian cultural producers, the poetic explosion of that generation, “traumatized by the limitations imposed upon its social experience (...) and the repressive mechanisms developed during the period of military dictatorship in the country,” was not limited in aesthetic quality due to its obvious posture of transgression against canonical standards of literary historiography. Rather, what that generation brought to the fore was a kind of politics of inclusion—women and Blacks refusing to remain silent and be silenced by the mechanism of the dictatorship of politics, market, and “elite” culture. It is remarkable that of many individuals and groups, from the “affirmation of identity” groups, “Brazil of the landless,” “gay outing,” “digital reproduction,” “spoken poetry,” among others, only Elisa Lucinda is perceived by the miscegenated or white establishment as representing “poetry as show business” in a business that has equally marginalized significant poetic and cultural producers who have continued to produce since the seventies to date, such as Miriam Alves, Cuti, and Márcio Barbosa.

The case for the place of marginal poetry seems defeated if Hollanda's argument is that this poetry is less concerned with aesthetic rigor but simply with finding strategies of placing itself within the "small space" available for artistic creation and political statement. Even then, Elisa Lucinda does not represent the totality of afflicted and imaginative Afro-Brazilian cultural producers who toil to make a difference in the quality of life of the suffering masses. Elisa Lucinda projects a winning attitude as a secure female and persistent Brazilian poetic voice who needs not proclaim her Blackness and "victimhood" in order to be recognized within a whitened establishment such as Brazil. Contrary to the "oppressed" self-image and attempt to recuperate the assaulted Black body over many centuries as in the works of Miriam Alves, Conceição Evaristo, Esmeralda Ribeiro, and Sônia Fátima da Conceição among others, Lucinda does not set out to combat what Zillah Einseinstein calls "patriarchal capitalism"³ which specializes in racial, sexual, and class oppression. Rather, she states that "we need to have an attitude of Afro-Brazilians who take charge of their destiny and who have a secure political posture."⁴ While Lucinda speaks for some Brazilians who claim that "race" or "color" has nothing to do with success, she is definitely at odds with many Afro-Brazilians who feel she had a privileged background and is only reaching out to middle-class Brazilians not the masses. A bi-racial with green eyes, Lucinda's blend of poetry with theatrical performance is rare indeed—she captures the audience (black or white) with the same love for words, the passion to perform their message, and a certain natural bonding with her audience. According to her, she learnt to "speak from the heart" very early when her mother, Divalda Campos Gomes, took her to poetry lessons with her teacher, Maria Helena Salles de Miranda. For Lucinda, the influence of the teacher who introduced her to the poetry of Fernando Pessoa, Adélia Prado, and Cecília Meireles, was fundamental. Lucinda's success lies in her productivity and her penchant for racial non-alignment or hybridity. With confidence, she prophesies her own reign and recognition when at the end of her own preface to *O Semelhante* [The Similar One], she states: "red carpets are just around the corner."

Yet, Colina, Barbosa, and Maranhão, whose cultural production is analyzed in this essay, do not fit neatly into the fragmenting terminology of postmodernity. The experiences captured by these voices do not begin and start with a specific date in mind—in essence, they are temporal experiences which cannot be time-specific. Even when situated in the historic contexts of slavery, abolition, post-abolition, and post-dictatorship, there is a sense in which the basic values and struggles of Afro-Brazilians did not change. As Ismael Xavier notes, "the early 1960s promised the redemption of the oppressed. The coup of 1964 inverted the game of power, or rather, revealed the foregoing illusions, generating a new juncture where Brazilian modernization did not fulfill the expectations of the leftist nationalism. (...) It showed also that in combating such modernization, which excluded and still excludes most of the population, moral justice was not enough" (*Allegories of Underdevelopment* 261). Xavier's notion of the "redemption of the oppressed" captures the yearnings of Afro-Brazilians, a dream that remains deferred whether it is in the modernist or post-modernist frame of reference. In Brazil, the "modernist" idea is dated as a historical literary current of 1922 while "post-modernist" will be events subsequent to that.

Although Lima Barreto and Machado de Assis wrote in the nineteenth century, there are some concerns in their work that are both modernist and post-modernist even in their racial, philosophical, and existentialist dimensions. The emergence of Machado de Assis in the turn of the 19th century was marred by racist ideologies that made his assertion of his African ancestry or bi-racial identity problematic. Thus, at best, as the greatest Brazilian writer of all times and member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, the odds against him were immense in terms of privileges and the implication of openly declaring his ancestry. Unlike the United States where the dynamics of race relations were more distinct as in the “one blood rule” principle that considered anyone with Black blood as “black,” the case of Brazil is much nuanced since Brazil preached and continued to claim mythical “racial democracy” or the notion that all races are living in a harmonious paradise. In sharp comparison⁵ to Machado de Assis, Lima Barreto, who is visibly Black, his life trajectory, work, and critical fortune, has a whole different tale to tell about race relations. On the one hand, Assis is the acclaimed great man of Brazilian literature; on the other hand, Barreto considers himself as a “cursed” writer. In contrast to Assis who was duly employed, Barreto was consistently unemployed, drunk, was placed in an asylum, and often critiqued the incompetence of the government as well as the negative stereotyping of Blacks and the poor.

In the Kingdom of the Strange

In their own rights, Paulo Colina and Márcio Barbosa occupy leadership positions within the Black movement, as one initiated perhaps the first anthology of contemporary Afro-Brazilian poetry in 1982, *Axé: Antologia Contemporânea da Poesia Negra Brasileira*⁶ (which contrasts the ethnocentrism evident in Roger Bastide’s “A Poesia Afro-Brasileira”⁷), and the other currently co-edits the now famous *Cadernos Negros*, a series that was also launched in 1982. For Colina to have conceived of the necessity to give visibility to Afro-Brazilian voices that early in the era of new agitations for racial equality – agitations which did not gain momentum until the mid-seventies - is an achievement that Oswaldo de Camargo’s *O Negro Escrito*, a similar effort published in 1987 by an older generation, cannot deny. Barbosa’s incursion into the Black magazines of the 1930s as published by the *Frente Negra Brasileira*, a cultural and political group that made history in the 1930s by promoting Afro-Brazilian cultural and political values well before the birth of the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (Unified Black Movement), also documents a significant epoch in the life and times of Afro-Brazilians which is worthy of celebration. Aside from their interests in taking on leadership positions in the propagation of Black life and literature, both cultural producers also have similar creative impulses as they experiment successfully with both poetry and prose—excelling in both through individual works such as Paulo Colina’s *Plano de Vôo* and Barbosa’s *Paixões Crioulas*. It has indeed been predicted by a respectable Afro-Brazilian critic, Arnaldo Xavier that “Barbosa will someday write a detective-type novel in the future, that is where his talent and imaginative niche lie.” In Colina and Barbosa’s works, the magical combines with the ideological to render cogent and constructive voices of freedom as in their choice of characters who are faced with decision making in moments when being a *malandro* (hustler) is as viable as being ethical and patriotic.

Paulo Colina's world is defined by the marginalized, the dwellers of the periphery, the dispossessed, the disenchanting, and the disgruntled, those who feel "persecuted" by the long arm of police brutality, voices captured in a realist mode and in the very language of the characters as they dramatize their shocking oppressive condition to the evasive eyes of the privileged and the angered soul of the subjugated. The three texts under consideration here, *A Noite Não Pedir Licença* [Night Does not Ask for Permission], *Todo o Fogo da Luta* [All the Fire of Struggle], *Plano de Vôo* [The Flight's Schedule] resonate the protest tradition against social inequalities, dehumanization, and metaphysical pain. As Clóvis Moura attests, "Colina feels in his veins not just the dramas of the city but also those metaphysical dramas which over the passage of human life have inspired great interrogations in poets, such as great love tragedies and great acoustics of protest."⁸ It is noteworthy that these dramas are centered on the marginal figure in his short stories, while in his poetry, the poet assumes the poetic "I" of the marginal by sensibility. On the whole, Colina's imaginative world revolves around the burden of Black identity which forces him to wander through many corners of the society trying to find a suitable place to identify with and call his own. Instead, and in his loneliness, he is at best, a roaming bohemian in search of meaning of life and his identity. Claudio Willer suggests that as an escape from the vague solitude that motivates his wanderings, "through a transfigured urban landscape, a setting in which he questions himself about his identity,"⁹ Colina revels in contradictory erotic impulses as manifest in subsequent analysis which defines him as a rebel within himself and against the society that he fails to comprehend except through imaginative interrogations and reflections.

A Noite Não Pedir Licença, Colina's first poetic collection, redefines protest in its metaphoric engagement with Blackness and oppression. Instead of a wholesale generalization of marginality and its origins, Colina suggests a territory of "frontiers" as captured in the poem, "Fronteiras" from which the collection takes its title, "night does not ask for permission." Night, like an unforeseen guest, arrives at a door and forces its way into a location without any need for justification or ceremonies. As a result, the poetic figure must be constantly on guard for so many possibilities of oppression: from racism to loneliness, from alienation to the cruel kiss of the woman loved. Colina seems to want to transcend the ethnic through inventiveness, a "modernity" robed in contemplations and philosophical meditations that are translatable into an overall "plural sensibility" that takes equally into consideration the pleasures and cruelties of technological advancement and gigantic industrial citadels embodied in the real and metaphoric city of São Paulo. Unlike the *pelourinhos* of life where the enslaved were examined chained down to trees or poles in Salvador-Bahia, now the "modern" Afro-Brazilian is chained to the office and to several temptations to be corrupt in the name of social and economic survival. Every poem in *A Noite Não Pedir Licença* reflects on the human condition and compelling universal truths as if deliberately avoiding limitations and operating within the liminal space of nation and individuality. This concern for the collective totality is betrayed in "Corpo a Corpo" [Body Against Body] where the poetic voice sees less of race during nocturnal intimacies but a neutralization of "primitive stigmas" to the extent that every act is a "repertoire of sambas and blues."

In this sense, love-making translates a magical moment that has the potential to unify the races and bring about a true union, hence the poetic voice's questioning of his identity and marginality in relation to love: "ser marginal todavia / só interessa à paixão / bastaria ao poema apenas / a côr da minha pele?" (41) [Could bring marginal / only appeal to passion / should it suffice for the poem / to concern itself with just my skin color?]. In minimizing the skin color, the poem does not excuse racism but it problematizes it by appealing to transcendence and tolerance.

In a similar appeal to ambivalence and hybridity, Colina chooses a national theme such as Carnival to theorize on colorlessness and the allegory of fantasy as a viable escape from social oppression. "Carnaval" dramatizes the intergenerational atmosphere of the Ash-Wednesday ritual-plague over many years by appealing to its spirit of hope and renewal:

Precisamos,	We need to,
sim,	yes,
pendurar atrás da porta	hang behind the door
esta fantasia transada	this fantasy forged
de paciência	with patience
que escora com alegorias	flowing with allegories
os nossos abrigos febris	our feverish dwellings
até fevereiro do próximo ano. (30)	Until next year february.

In this subtle critique of Carnival, Colina exposes the contradictions of celebration and happiness coupled with the yearly rituals of expectations, fulfillment, exploitation, and disillusionment. At the same time, the poet warns the reader not to be fooled by the apparent graciousness of poetry but to look beyond the surface and realize as in "Forja"[Loom] that despite the appearance of poetic tenderness and ambiguity, "the poem continues as a *Quilombo* / at heart" (35), that is, even when poetry domesticates pain, melancholy, and anguish, it never does succeed in "eradicating" the embedded impulses of revulsion and resistance captured for example in the irony of "hanging behind the door" for an entire year, the ephemeral pleasures that Carnival seems to bring to everyone. Also, the freedom to enjoy and produce poetry is a consolation that the act of poeticizing itself constitutes a zone of liberation and empowerment.

A *Noite* may be read then against the backdrop of an illusory perception of a lack of struggle, yet the entire collection is a book of resistant struggles coded in such echoes as the search for "possible alternatives" ("Video Game"), the agony of sleeping in an "empty bed" ("Mosaico"), the contradictions of destiny as if playing "Russian roulette" ("Balanço"), the disillusioned and sleepwalking nature of the destiny of most Afro-Brazilians ("Sina" [Destiny], and ultimately, the confession that life in the city is a permanent cycle of struggle as in "Batalhando" [Struggling]:

“junto com as tormentas retorno sempre à casa para traçar entre o silêncio do labirinto que sou planos de força que burlem as expedições de caça plantadas em campana a cada esquina da cidade” (57) [Burdened with torments, I return home to realize within the silence of the labyrinth that I am part of the vital plans which frustrate the hunting expeditions set up in every corner of the city]. This consoling consciousness of struggle also articulates a defiant-stoic posture which seems to reassure the poet that he is part of the solution to social oppression. Perhaps the most effective enactment of protest lies in “SP Blues” [São Paulo Blues] as the poetic voices uses seemingly trivial wanderings through the city to map the catalogue of absurdities as in the “collective solitude” of the city in a bar, the “hell of doubts” during an eternal journey of intimate exchanges, the betrayals and embraces of life like playing the lottery, the love bird with a broken wing, encounters and promises of reencounters, and the legacy of the official history of slavery and harmonious racial relations. These varied images of inadequacies and oppressive conditionalities capture the struggles of the reflective bohemian in search of a resolution for his troubled soul.

Published in 1989, two years after *A Noite Não Pede Licença*, *Todo o Fogo da Luta* marks a definite shift from the individual-meditative persona-figure of the previous text to a more assertive poet, conscious not only of his identity but also of the collective nature of his racial burden. Consequently, *Todo o Fogo da Luta* identifies with children, workers, rural dwellers, and South Africa’s struggle against Apartheid—a pan-African consciousness that also extends the cosmivision of this shifting bohemian modernist. Unlike *A Noite*, where the poet interrogates the relevance of skin color in one of his rare moments of poetic delirium in “Corpo a Corpo”: “should the poem be burdened / just with my skin color?” (41), most of the poems in *Todo o Fogo* while still somewhat reticent, directly evoke the dilemma of Blackness while extending it to the universal condition. As Juan Gelman’s verse, used as one of the epigraphs to the collection reveals, “narrating our obscurity / we see life clearly” (7), Colina recapitulates the marginality trope, complementing it with a consciousness of the racial question. The title poem, “Todo o Fogo da Luta” [all the fire of struggle], captures the multiplicity of the struggle and the necessity of solidarity as the poet-persona confesses that “essa vida não é minha” [this life is not mine alone] and comes to the determination that from the “valley of the shadow of life” he must rise as an “apprentice of unity” (80). The poet-persona in “Negrícia” [Blackness], calls for the need to love one’s skin color for it is a permanent “cup” (dialoguing parallelistically and associatively with “corpo” [body] in Portuguese) which can only be filled up with love and not hate. As a result, racial consciousness is likened to a desirable figurative quenching of one’s thirst. Along these radical lines of a call to consciousness and action are situated three poems whose unity lies in the evocation of the Black condition as a form of provocation towards social change: “Carne de Minha Carne,” “Nação,” and “Perspectiva.”

In “Carne de Minha Carne” [Skin of My Skin], the voice is presented as endangered, censored, and free at the same time. On the one hand, by constantly smiling, laughing off serious prejudices and insults as a way of domesticating the bottled-up anger, the voice becomes silenced, “free of slush” yet “stuck with iron” (32). On the other hand, the skin color becomes invisible by the very complex pretext of the mouth to say “all is well” when indeed, “all is chaotic.”

Ultimately, the “skin of my skin” forces the poet to negotiate between harsh words, pleasant articulations, or total silence. It is a familiar dilemma of normalized silencing in a political context. As a strategy of subversion and survival, the poet in “Nação” [Nation] sees only resistance as the ultimate instrument of empowerment. By singing “our songs,” turning our black faces “against the sun,” and performing our colorful martial arts of Capoeira, Afro-Brazilians project themselves as a “black wave” (43) which is undaunted by the ramifications of marginality. Aside from these reflective and analytical poems, a third poem adopts a descriptive approach, leaving the readers to draw their own conclusions as in “Perspectiva” [Perspective] where a homeless Black man and his simple effects are creatively crafted to appeal to our feelings:

<p>Ali, calcado contra a parede da catedral da Sé, homem negro. Ao seu lado descansam de mão, un saco de aniagem ocupado pela metade e um pequeno embrulho de pano: (pouco para uma vida) todos os seus pertences, talvez (53)</p>	<p>Over there, crushed against the wall of Sé Cathedral, The black man. On his side, resting on his hand, a sackcloth torn in the middle and a light cloth wrapper. (very little for a whole life) his lifelong belongings, perhaps.</p>
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It is not so much the poverty and depravation but the overwhelming disparity when one considers the size and commercial nature of the Sé location, the symbolic lack of relevance of the church image captured in the Sé Cathedral itself, and the haplessness of the marginal and alienated figure. Within this context, the man in the poem is a total outcast, a suffering embodiment of marginality and dispossession evoked for the purposes of expressing protest and indignation.

Published in 1984, and the first poetic collection by Colina beyond the acclaimed anthology (*Axé*), *Plano de Vôo* translates in three movements (“Viveiro” [Nursery], “Do Tempo das Sombras” [On the Time of Shadows], and “Plano de Vôo” [Flight Plan]) autobiographical mementos as if trying to recapture old memories which are renewed by the exigencies of counter-memories. In this search of the poet-persona for the self once lost to the image of the nursery, of infancy and unknowing, the self that starts to discover its potentialities even in the obscurities of “shadows” and self-doubts, and risk-taking explorations, and finally, a sense of elation and epiphanic self-revelation about the possibilities of flight, of rising into the clouds and skies of life, defying them, and ultimately discovering himself as the embodiment of the “pássaro louco” [crazy bird] who refuses to be imprisoned by the limitations of space, time, and desires.

Echoing the “rites of passage” narratives of the “Literacy and Ascent” genre, or what Robert Stepto in *From Behind the Veil* calls “narrative properties of the ascension ritual” (128) which led to the emergence of the “archetypal Bigger Thomas” in *Native Son*, a novel nourished by his own past experiences. If Richard Wright successfully depicts the “Afro-American articulate hero who has learned to read the “baffling signs” of an oppressive, biracial social structure” (131), Colina is far from being that “articulate hero,” he is, at best, dangling between self-discovery and ascension, he must rise first in his struggle-laden “flight” toward articulation and confidence. In the Afro-Brazilian context, the “ascension” through literacy is a good point of departure to rectify a systematic damage—of the body, soul, and mind over five hundred years. *Plano de Vôo* translates exactly a counter-hegemonic plan of action in order to heal from melancholy, pain, loneliness, agony, a sense of alienation, and a permanent sense of being at odds with the rest of the world—issues that are germane to the imaginative world of Colina yet “domesticated” with the subtleties of poetic language.

In the first movement of *Plano de Vôo*, the poet-persona describes the innocence of the figure he calls “coração emparedado” [walled-in soul], this entity is isolated even within a passionate relationship where each individual is ironically struggling to survive (“Questão de Sobrevivência” [Matter of Survival]) instead of working together for a common good. In spite of this frustration that can only be consoled by staring at a woman in a bar while drinking away the inner mysteries and the lack of confidence to articulate any notion of interest or desire to this woman (“Uma Mulher, Um bar” [A Woman, A Bar], in the second movement, the poet is stoic in his declaration of flight, a feeling of freedom and determination reinforced with a dose of revolutionary optimism and self-encouragement: “Daqui, não há limites. / Nem para a noite! / Minhas asas / só precisam de fibras / um pouco mais fortes” (15) [Henceforth, no more limitations. / Not even for the night! My feathers / only need fibres / that are much stronger] (Vôo [Flight]). This prophetic impulse finds a concretization zone in “Pequena Balada Insurgente” [Little Insurgent Ballad] where the poet-persona interrogates the veiled realities of racial relations through telenovelas (soap operas), samba and soccer, yet the reality is that these children calling each other “brothers” are so different and will grow up as such in differentiated and unequal opportunities. In domesticating his “hate” and bitterness in the face of the myth of racial democracy, the poet-persona, in the third movement, feels like an alien in his own country given the tiredness coming from “all the futile motives / which propell me into combat” (51) and ultimately, resigns himself to what he calls “the centennial dream of another *Quilombo*.”

As a poet with the refinement and precision of Adão Ventura, the populism of Manuel Bandeira, and the sarcasm of Murilo Mendes, Colina defies any facile categorization. He confirms Linda Huntcheon’s notion of the problematic “post-modern,” the figure who is either “seriously compromised or polemically oppositional” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 201). Colina compromises on the level of poetic language while oppositional on the denial of racism even if he does not elaborate on the contradictions long enough. The trope of flight is informative for Colina’s cosmopolitan and urban discourse—one anchored on the exigencies of modernity as well as the contradictory oppositionality against it.

On the one hand, the idea of the bird can now be replaced with that of the supersonic (Concord) jet which ironically, flew its last flight in 2003 due to issues of cost of maintenance and overall economic efficiency. A sad aside is the passage to the beyond of Paulo Colina in 1998, but as he prophetically stated in “Confesso” [Confession], a poem dedicated to “Chaos,” despite the daily struggles and the necessity to fly which has become a “routine of the body,” the poet declares in a consoling tone to Brazil: “I however nurture the hope that at the end of it all / My name remains engraved at least / in your memory” (*Plano de Vôo* 48). True to this prophetic message of reconciliation, Colina’s works constitute a compelling inscription in the memory of all interested in the poetics of postmodernity and its ancestral connections in the Afro-Brazilian context.

In 2000 and 2001, two significant anthologies¹⁰ were published by Editora Objetiva on the best works in the twentieth century Brazilian short story and poetic tradition. This was a very challenging undertaking spearheaded by able critic Italo Moriconi. In each anthology, an Afro-Brazilian represents the “tribe.” In the selection of the best one hundred short stories, Márcio Barbosa’s “Viver Outra Vez” is included. Likewise, Adão Ventura’s “Negro Forro” (*A Cor da Pele*) is included in the poetic selection. This is a fundamental achievement for both Afro-Brazilians especially at a time when a debate is on-going about the introduction of the “quota system” in the Brazil of the new millennium—a euphemism for Affirmative Action policies that were fought for and gradually implemented in the United States in the 60s. Yet, it must be understood that the inclusion of these cultural producers in what may be considered a “canonical” breakthrough is not as a result of any multicultural or multiracial representativeness but that of meritocratic victory that has been long overdue since the era of Castro Alves, Machado de Assis¹¹, and Lima Barreto, among many deserving talents produced by the Afro-Brazilian community. It is against this background that Márcio Barbosa must be understood as one of the many voices of literary sophistication and cultural vanguardism deserving of recognition. At a time when fragmentation and divisiveness have eaten into the fabric of solidarity and momentum typical of any social movement such as the Unified Black Movement (MNU), to have continued to maintain the production of *Cadernos Negros* since 1982, an annual series of poetry and short story, currently co-edited with Esmeralda Ribeiro, even when many doubting Thomases-critics are waiting to see the “last” issue, is indeed a gratifying stance on the part of these co-editors. As editor, writer, cultural ambassador, and hybrid ideologue-critic, Márcio Barbosa represents one of the few voices in Afro-Brazilian intellectual history which is able to negotiate with the mainstream establishment without compromising their ideological positions in a significant manner. The task of the producer is to ensure that the product reaches the market while that of the marketer is to ensure that it yields some profit. Interestingly, the *Quilombhoje* movement which Márcio Barbosa and Esmeralda Ribeiro direct has had to function as producer, marketer, and distributor and oftentimes, critics without the benefit of cost-benefit analysis since until now, the group is still operating as an ideological source that invests in order to remain producing. In the 22nd issue published in 1999, I stated in my own invited blurb that: “*Cadernos Negros* produces, therefore it exists” as an insight into the potential of its extinction if it stops sacrificing, investing, and producing at all costs.

Márcio Barbosa's imaginative, critical, cultural, and psycho-social world includes the production of a number of short stories and poems published mostly in *Cadernos Negros* over the years, *Paixões Crioulas*, *Frente Negra Brasileira*, and *Gostando Mais de Nós Mesmos*. In addition to contributing consistently to the *Cadernos Negros*, he also writes occasional pieces for the *Raça* magazine such as the one on Solano Trindade, a befitting homage to a poet who has not received his due critical appraisal that puts him on a comparative level as the North American poet, Langston Hughes. As one of the representative voices of the Quilombhoje group and of contemporary Afro-Brazilian writing in general, Márcio Barbosa brings a new dynamic to the visibility of Afro-Brazilian letters through an effort to "stretch" the poetic and short story that have become the hallmark of most writers in recent years. Until recently, perhaps thirteen years after Barbosa's timely "narrative" and with the exception of Paulo Lins's *Cidade de Deus* [City of God] or dramatic works written by Abdias do Nascimento, Sônia Coutinho, Zora Seljan (spouse of Antônio Olinto) among others, most Afro-Brazilian texts have been characterized by the short narrative form. The late Arnaldo Xavier was correct in his assessment of Barbosa when he states during an interview in São Paulo that "Márcio Barbosa is a rare species among us. He does have the potential to write a detective novel one day." When the entire corpus of Barbosa is examined, "Quando o Malandro Vacila" [When the Crook Hesitates] and *Paixões Crioulas* [Black Passions] stand out as exemplary texts in their existential contemplation of the dynamics of Blackness and its problematics in the racial complex of Brazil.

Using as epigraph the subverted Biblical allusion in Bezerra da Silva's music, "Malandro não dorme nem cochila" [The hustler neither sleeps nor slumbers], Barbosa revisits in "Quando o malandro vacila," the disparity of the legendary Brazilian figure when contextualized within Afro-Brazilian reality. The "crookedness" of body, mind, and soul reflects a necessary game of survival as the "malandro" figure negotiates his ways into impossible domains through gimmicks and wits. It is an anomaly for the hustler to hesitate for any hesitation may mean the game is over for him or her or it may mean prudence in the face of uncertainties and the necessity to re-plot the strategy. Full of intrigues, suspense, nightmares, doubts, and risks, the narrative captures the drama of William, his beloved Kizzy, and the imaginary Mãezinha (otherwise known as "the white woman of the ghetto") in a journey motif that oscillates between life and death, freedom and bondage, fantasy and reality, as well as the feeling of living in the twilight realm of heaven and earth. Violence and violation intermingle with passionate desires and the imperative of death in order to challenge life itself through regeneration. The various magical moments of being accosted with a 38-calibre or a 22-calibre to his face, of being pursued by Police patrol vans, the psychological torture of imagining a possible arrest and detention, of being framed by the Police in order to end up in prison, and the overall torment of a loafing life voided by any possibility of dream, conspire to be a self-fulfilling prophecy as each event, in reality, happens after it has been contemplated through a nightmare or dream.

Divided into three parts (“Of How He Nearly Lost the Black Woman,” “Destiny,” and “The Return”), the narrative echoes some of the stories of Amos Tutuola as alluded to in the text itself, a certain inexplicable fascination with the macabre and the bizarre, the phantasmagorical and the supernatural—all with the intention to critique the Afro-Brazilian condition without doing so directly. When William, the protagonist, suddenly ends up in prison after many occasions of contemplating such a possibility, he quickly finds a look-alike by the name Rui Barbosa, a historically named figure known to have burnt the records of the slave trade and thus the origins of the enslaved. Not only did William recognize himself in Rui Barbosa, but he also recognized other friends, some of whom were wrongfully accused and sentenced:

Muitos de seus amigos haviam estado ali. Alguns haviam saído, outros jamais. Morreram lá dentro. Dentre estes havia os que nunca tinham cometido qualquer espécie de crime. Os tiras simplesmente não haviam gostado da cara deles porque eram pretos. Quem conseguia sair era visto com respeito pelo resto da malandragem. William conhecera alguns. Traficantes. Brancos, na sua maioria, que possuíam dinheiro suficiente para pagar pela liberdade. (*Cadernos Negros: Melhores Contos* 121-122)

Many of his friends have been there. Some were released, others never. They died inside. Among these were those who never committed any crime. The jury simply did not like their faces because they were Blacks. Whoever succeeded in getting released was respected by the rest of the crooks. William knew some of them. Drug dealers. Whites, who mostly, had sufficient funds to buy their own freedom.

Through a crafty narrative technique, Barbosa transforms the experience of William into a caustic critique of the collective Afro-Brazilian condition with respect to incarceration and police brutality. The racial dimension of the critique must also not be missed—for while some Blacks are arrested and incarcerated for crimes they did not commit, some whites who actually committed crimes such as drug-trafficking have enough money and influence to avoid punishment.

As an individual, William is indeed a double personality by nature and by necessity as a “malandro” figure. Due to the struggle between the two personalities, one that has convictions, hopes, and dreams, and the other, aggressive, with killer instincts if need be, and full of a sense of worthlessness and death, William is compelled to submit to the “virtues” and codes of a hustler. His entire world trajectory is marked by survival instincts, to assume the role and identity of a classical hustler. In situating William within a physical prison, Barbosa reopens the Cruzesouzian allegory of the “four walls,” in his seminal narrative, “O Emparedado” [The Walled-In] in the sense that Afro-Brazilians feel a sense of perpetual incarceration, a physiological bondage that affects the psychological.

Williams's physical presence in prison and the spiritual reflections that such an enclosure allows; in the dialogue between William and the imaginary ghost figure appears to him, and he finally realizes his helplessness and anger through a rhetorical question posed by the ghost: "You, a black man, asking for justice in this country?" It is as if the ghost sums up the doubts for William that there cannot be any justice for Afro-Brazilians even in a country that preaches without practicing "racial democracy." By the end of the narrative, William comes to terms with his own very weakness—the tendency to hesitate. Cured of this tendency in the arms of Kizzy who has been missing him for the three days during which he was in a sonambulative state, he learns the ultimate lesson that the hustler must not hesitate. A complex narrative with love as pretext, "Quando o malandro vacila" dissects the mind of the Afro-Brazilian faced with the dynamics of racism, social marginality, and alienation.

Similar to the identity dynamics and politics in "Quando o malandro vacila," Barbosa's *Paixões Crioulas* exposes the complex relations between individuals and group dynamics within the specificity of the MNU, the *Movimento Negro Unificado*, from its foundation in the seventies through its present consolidation and challenges. *Paixões Crioulas* fulfills multiple functions: it attests not only to the effort of young Afro-Brazilian writers to attempt a longer narrative as opposed to the more familiar short story, it also confirms that the issues of racial discrimination have permanent resonances and implications for the conscious writer regardless of the time of writing. Published in 1987, perhaps in anticipation of the centennial celebration of the abolition of slavery in Brazil, the text, written over a period of two years, recounts the experiences of Kiluanji who shares the militant ideals of the Black movement only to be disillusioned about the discrepancy between the theoretic objectives and practical solutions to problems in the community. Through this ritualistic process or rites of passage that takes the protagonist on a spiritual journey from a non-conscious entity, to a conscious militant, and then becoming self-critical in the face of contradictions. Faced with unemployment, a weak individual who typically gives up at the minimal sign of frustration, he comes to terms with his own limitations. Having tried a number of professions: from selling statutes which become powder by the end of the day of sale to giving up his dream of becoming a commercial inspector due to his disagreement with the authorities that hawkers needed to pay for commercial stalls or stores in order to sell their merchandise. As the cover blurb teases and problematizes, "Ainda as sombras o perseguiriam! Que solução haveria? Onde o ser humano completa-se, enquanto negro? Num Grupo? E como resolve-se o Grupo? Os caminhos do bem e do mal se confundem" [The shadows continue to persecute him! What would be the solution? Where does the human being fulfill himself as a black man? In a group? And how does the group come to terms within itself? Confusing are the paths of good and bad]. These are questions that *Paixões Crioulas* sets out to answer. Whether the text successfully answers these questions is another point of discussion. What it does achieve is the raising of awareness among group members and individuals who are struggling to grasp their function in a divisive social organization which is weakened by power struggles.

In essence, Barbosa revisits the age-old “divide and conquer” tactics that do not allow social entities to fulfill their objectives due to internal divisions. Set in an imaginary place, *Paixões Crioulas* raises fundamental questions of group dynamics in relation to the individual as well as the primacy and resilience of African culture via the various *Orixá* myths in Brazil. Barbosa wonders if someday Brazil will embrace her African culture and heritage. In this mix of politics of culture and cultural politics, and while not laying out specific recipes for change, Barbosa offers an ideological prism from which to critique Black organizations in general:

Nesta obra eu proponho a questionar por exemplo a relação de poder, dentro dos grupos. Isso acontece na análise das causas da dissolução do próprio grupo. A luta pelo poder vai levando as pessoas a uma transformação tão profunda a ponto de chegarem, num momento a não se importar mais com as razões que as levaram a iniciarem a luta. Já não brigam contra um inimigo comum, mas umas contra as outras.¹²

In this work, I propose to question for instance, the power relations within groups. This is exemplified in the analysis of the reasons for the dissolution of the group itself. Power struggle gradually transforms people to such a profound extent that they reach a point where they are no longer concerned with the reasons that brought them together to the struggle in the first place. They no longer struggle with a common enemy but against one another.

Barbosa can be termed a pragmatist in formation. In addition to creative works that have addressed issues of struggle and group dynamics, he has also recuperated a generation of unsung activists of the 1930s in *Frente Negra Brasileira* such as Aristides Barbosa, Francisco Lucrécio, José Correia Leite, Marcello Orlando Ribeiro, and Placidino Damaceno Motta. *Gostando Mais de Nós Mesmos* completes the cycle of community activism since it establishes Barbosa as a cultural politician and cultural producer who is more concerned about building bridges between intellectual producers and the Afro-Brazilian community.

A Winning Attitude: The New Afro-Brazilian Image

Salgado Maranhão and Elisa Lucinda demonstrate that Afro-Brazilians need to move beyond the frustrations and conditionings of the society that treats them as unequal and insignificant in relation to the rest of the population, and alternatively, begin to project a “new” image of success, control, and peace even in the midst of negativity and social upheaval. Instead of the pessimism embraced by the generation of the forerunners of Afro-Modernity such as Abdias Nascimento, Eduardo Oliveira, Joel Rufino dos Santos, and the younger generation such as Aline França, Cuti, Éle Semog, Adão Ventura, and Marcos Dias, Maranhão and Lucinda, two confident cultural producers, retain a deep-seated optimism about the future as they project dignity, love, and hope without focusing on issues of racism (“minoritized majority”¹³), violence, and the degenerative nature of power.

In so doing, they capture the audience that is not otherwise sympathetic to the seemingly more “angered” voices who speak openly against racial discrimination. Such disparate attitudes suggest that Afro-Brazilians are compelled to “negotiate” with the dominant elite in order to be heard, a subtle euphemism for self-imposed censorship and co-optation. As Miriam Alves points out during a recent interview, comparing Maranhão and Lucinda is like comparing apples and oranges for one still maintains his rootedness with community while the other simply performs to the satisfaction of a given audience without any collective consciousness or commitment. As Alves bluntly puts it, “a literatura afro-contemporânea é coletiva e militante de fato que Elisa Lucinda não entra. Falando honestamente, ela é mais oportunista do que artista do povo”¹⁴ [Contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature is collective and militant in such a way that Elisa Lucinda is not. In all honesty, she is more of an opportunist than a people’s artist]. In this “convenient,” complacent, and ambivalent arrangement, Maranhão’s *Mural de Ventos* was honored with the coveted Jabuti Prize while Lucinda’s *O Semelhante* and *Eu Te Amo e Suas Estréias* have not only been re-issued in pocket-book formats but have been accompanied with recorded CDs—with performances “sold out” nationally. While I am not suggesting that they do not deserve the recognition, I am at least making the observation that they belong to a “bourgeois” class of audience and that is significant for an appreciation of co-optation. The most recent accomplishment for Lucinda, aside from being a familiar name in the tabloids, such as *Raça* and *Jornal da Tarde*—among others, she is currently a prominent actress in a new series of *novela* [soap opera] in Brazil, entitled *Mulheres Apaixonadas* [Passionate Women] which was presented on *Rede Globo*, the national television network, for eight months. All this to say that “success” in the Brazilian context comes with a price that may mean rejecting one’s cultural values and embracing the “co-opted” ones as a means of survival and recognition. Whatever their strategies of survival mean for them individually, Maranhão and Lucinda are accomplished cultural producers in their own right and must be celebrated even if their politics resonate individualism in opposition to the collective good. It is one thing to be able to project an image of success; it is another for that image to be transformative among many Afro-Brazilians who lack access to the basic opportunities that can bring about change and advancement in their lives.

My meeting with Maranhão in the summer of 1999 in Rio de Janeiro was both solemn and fraternal. By his demeanor, he was very secure and did not exhibit some of the lamentational qualities common with other cultural producers such as the difficulty of publication, the daily struggles of survival, poverty, and discrimination at different levels of existence. Instead, Maranhão presented himself as an accomplished professional, a proud writer, and a very humble individual who was more interested in my research than in his own ego. Although he suggested that I be selective in the writers I include in my project, he meant it as a way of focusing than a desire not to be associated with writers who had not been acclaimed. I came out of our interview sessions and a buffet lunch raising the question, in my innermost being, why every writer could not be so privileged: a professional job, national acclaim, and a “neutral” style that does not offend the majority. Although he is also an engineer by profession, he contrasts with Éle Semog and José Carlos Limeira whose “success” in their present occupations despite their engineering backgrounds, does not alleviate their feeling of oppression and subjugation as well as that of their fellow suffering compatriots.

A native of Maranhão who has resided in Rio de Janeiro since 1973, Salgado Maranhão transforms the written word into an economic weapon of lyricism and musicality. His is not a “populist” art although he has some ideological consciousness. Rather, his engagement with the written word is more of an end in itself. The right word, the conciseness of ideas, and the experimentation with form through repetition and visual manipulation—indicate a conscious flow of the artistic subconscious. His publications include *Punhos da Serpente* (1989), *Palavra* (1995), *Beijo da Fera* (1996), and *Mural de Ventos*. In addition, he has collaborated in many anthologies as well as recordings especially with Paulinho da Viola, Ivan Lins, Nei Matogrosso, Elba Ramalho and Zizi Possi, among others. Among the many texts where his poems have been anthologized, *Ebulição da Escrivatura* (1978) and *Os Arcos e a Lira* (1998) are significant and representative. In *Ebulição da Escrivatura*, a number of poems tackle the permanent concerns of Maranhão as he struggles with the social and the artistic in an inseparable tango. From general complaints about grammar and conjugation of verbs to more personal problems in the search of the “mot juste,” the frustrated artist composes a series of poems entitled “Problemas Pessoais” [Personal Problems] which in fact are “social problems” as the poetic voice gradually swallows up “os licores do seu próprio veneno” [the liquor of his very own venom] or navigates the entire “urbantropolis” of Rio de Janeiro, carrying the “saco cheio de sair pela traseira da vida” [bag full of the trash of life] (47).

The entire section assigned to the poet carries a curious title, “Acordel,” as if creating a neologism translatable as “against Cordel,” that is the “unpopular” way of singing about popular problems. And this title betrays the spirit of the rest of the poems as many poems which appear to benarrating personal issues are in fact exposing socio-political concerns. The opening poem, “coração permanente” [Permanent Heart] exemplifies this pattern—for the heart of the poet is like a sword which oscillates between sadness and joy. In this poem, the poetic voice ridicules social issues such as high cost of living, pollution, lack of potable water, and overall sense of misery which makes it difficult for many to dream: “há muita poeira no ar que se cheira / e a água que se bebe nem sempre é potável, / tudo está tão raro / tudo está tão caro / como o feijão da alegria” [there is so much dirt odor in the air / and drinking water is not always clean / everything is scarce / everything is expensive / like the beans of happiness] (35). In the consciousness of “working against Cordel,” “Acordel” presents curious formulaic patterns which deconstruct Cordelist poetry. Instead of the usual lyrical, rhythmic, and measured pattern, the poem seems prosaic but its poetry relies more on internal order than the visual. At the end of each of the eight “stanzas,” a message of “ambição do patrão” [ambition of the boss] is alternately contrasted with “agressão do patrão” [aggression of the boss] as if to emphasize the negative qualities of businesses which take advantage of the workers for the sake of profit and do not necessarily care about their well-being. Likewise, the product is contrasted with the employee as if to suggest that the product is more important than the producer from the viewpoint of the business. This significant deconstruction implies that a “post-modernist” cultural producer such as Maranhão can produce poetry without being traditional, subverting the old in order to produce a new order.

Overall, the search for form, the varied experimentation, and the critique of social malaise and frustration of the mind and spirit, all combine into a musical and proverbial piece, “Saturação” [Saturation] where the poetic voice suggests that life is full of mysteries and the only way to survive is not to limit oneself to a particular formula: “se você tem medo / você morre louco / se tem coragem / você morre cedo” (36) [if you are afraid / you die insane / if courageous / you die too soon].

A more recent anthology, *Os Arcos e a Lira* captures the new tendencies of Maranhão in terms of a deeper refining engagement with form. In its visual fragmentation and thematic cohesiveness, the opening poem, “Deslimites 10” [Without limits 10] submits to the imperative of freedom and harmony, where blues become “urublues” (echoing “urubu” or black vulture blues) and the poetic voice self-defines poetically and stoically:

eu sou o que mataram
e não morreu,
 o que dança sobre os cactos
 e a pedra bruta
 - eu sou a luta.
o que há sido entregue aos urubus
e de blues
 em
 blues
endominga as quartas-feiras.

i am he whom they killed
and never died,
 he who dances on cactuses
 and the stone flowers
 - i am the struggle.
he who was given to the black vultures
and from blues
 to
 blues
turns wednesdays into sundays.
 - i am the light
under the dirt.

Through the use of stylistic juxtapositions, a heroic motif pervades the composition of this poem as the poetic voice enumerates “feats” that qualify for heroic honor and deeds. From defying death, to defying nature, and ultimately, defying even the symbols of destruction such as the vulture, the poetic voice announces itself as immortal. The ideological implications are multiple: to be the “struggle” or the “light” signifies that there is a struggle and there is an air of darkness. As the light, the poetic voice assumes leadership qualities, providing guidance, and assuring victory as if alluding to the Zumbi dos Palmares figure. Despite his tendency towards individuality, the collective consciousness remains constant for a poet whose defining trait may be said to be the varied architecture and nuances of the word. In the final analysis, the appearance of a “winning attitude” in Maranhão may be an external pretext for the inner poetic world of the poet betrays anguish and frustrations like any other Afro-Brazilian.

Notes

¹ See Linda Huntcheon, “Political DoubleTalk,” *A Poetics of Posmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 201.

² See Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, “Two Poetics, Two Moments,” *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* 4 (2004): 245-254.

³ Cited in Luiza Lobo, “Corpo Negro: A Auto-Imagem Agredida,” *Crítica Sem Juízo* (Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1993), 239.

⁴ See Rita Homero, “Elisa Lucinda Abre o Verso,” *Raça* 2.10 (1997): 46-49.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the contrast between Machado de Assis and Lima Barreto, see Renata R. Mautner Wasserman, “Race, Nation, Representation: Machado de Assis and Lima Barreto,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45.2 (2008): 84-106.

⁶ This anthology brings together fourteen of the best Afro-Brazilian poets who have gone on to be acclaimed such as Abelardo Rodrigues, Adão Ventura, Arnaldo Xavier, Cuti, Éle Semog, Geni Guimarães, José Alberto, José Carlos Limeira, Maria da Paixão, Miriam Alves, Oliveira Silveira, Oswaldo de Camargo, Paulo Colina himself, and Ruth Souza. It is a befitting tribute to contemporary Afro-Brazilian poetry—one that challenges the myopic vision of Roger Bastide.

⁷ See “A Poesia Afro-Brasileira” in *Estudos Afro-Brasileiros* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1983, 3-110). Roger Bastide claims that “white” writers discovered Afro-Brazilian culture and writers as if to suggest as Zilá Bernd has argued that they were considered “objects” as opposed to subjects of their own experiences. Colina’s efforts in this regard are commendable and pioneering.

⁸ See Clóvis Moura’s “Foreword” to Paulo Colina’s *Plano de Vôo* (São Paulo: Roswitha Kempf, 1984), 7-8.

⁹ See Claudio Willer, “Prefácio,” *Plano de Vôo*, 9.

¹⁰ See Italo Moriconi, ed., *Os Cem Melhores Contos Brasileiros* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2000) and *Os Cem Melhores Poemas* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2001).

¹¹ Regardless of how Machado de Assis defines himself in “privileged” and “co-opted” terms—, biracial or “white” – he still carries with him the emblem of blackness in his physical features and racial identity.

¹² Cited in the book launching column of *Diário Popular*, São Paulo. December 12, 1987.

¹³ This is the terminology deployed by Eduardo Oliveira during an interview with the poet and activist in São Paulo-Brazil, in the summer of 2000.

¹⁴ Miriam Alves gave the phone interview to this critic. December 26, 2003.

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