

TRACING BACK TRAUMA

the legacy of slavery in contemporary afro-brazilian literature by women

Abstract Although there are many, mostly male, contemporary writers in Brazil whose narratives of urban violence and social inequality implicitly reflect the impact and legacy of slavery on contemporary society, it is interesting that this shameful period, and shockingly brutal events which seem to prove wrong the myths of gentle colonization and harmonious racial democracy, should be chosen as subject matter by four women writers. While very different novels, Adriana Lisboa's *Os Fios da Memória* [*The Threads of Memory*] (1999), Conceição Evaristo's *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003), Ana Maria Gonçalves's *Um Defeito de Cor* [*A Defect in Colour*] (2011) and Tatiana Salem Levy's *Paraíso* [*Paradise*] (2014) all deal frankly with the horrors of slavery and its aftermaths from the point of view of the most vulnerable member of colonial society: the enslaved African woman. This article analyses the ways in which these writers claim justice for their characters and remind readers that those excluded from official histories had names, faces and voices.

Keywords Brazil; slavery; race; women's writing; slave women; genealogy; trauma; history; Adriana Lisboa; Conceição Evaristo; Ana Maria Gonçalves; Tatiana Salem Levy

During excavations at sites in central Rio de Janeiro, to develop the area in preparation for the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, archaeologists unearthed the remains of the Valongo Wharf, where more than 600,000 African slaves entered Brazil.¹ The clash between these tangible reminders of the country's shameful past and its reinvention as the host of mega-events can be seen as a physical manifestation of the efforts to deny racism, prejudice and inequality in a country where over half the population is of African descent. Contemporary Brazilian literature tends to focus on the present too, although four recent novels, all by women, have tackled painful truths about the country's past with great energy, laying bare the roots of family trees and bringing together traumatic histories and uncomfortable realities.

In her study of personal and cultural memory *Family Secrets*, Annette Kuhn declares that "Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves."² For writers from minority groups, who are often erased from official histories, this looking backwards and coming to terms with traumatic events in the past, even the distant past, is a necessary process in enabling them to reconfigure their identity in the present and move forward into the future with understanding and confidence. In this article I want to examine the way in which four contemporary Brazilian women writers have used genealogies to trace back traumatic problems for Brazilian women in the present to pre-abolition times: Adriana Lisboa's *Os Fios da Memória* [*The Threads of Memory*] (1999), Conceição Evaristo's *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003), Ana Maria Gonçalves's *Um Defeito de Cor* [*A Defect in Colour*] (2006) and

Tatiana Salem Levy's *Paraíso* [*Paradise*] (2014).³ Lisboa and Levy identify as white, and Evaristo and Gonçalves as Afro-Brazilian. By creating a transgenerational or palimpsest⁴ narrative structure in which a family tree is initiated by a nineteenth-century ancestor and ends with the narrator or protagonist in the present (late twentieth/early twenty-first century), the authors show how the individual members of their families are caught up in their nation's chequered history, in some cases becoming representative of particular periods.⁵ Furthermore, they offer a counter-hegemonic version of "History" by foregrounding the voices of individuals marginalized by the mainstream: women, and, in particular, black women. Most importantly, the youngest members of the families, living in the present, are "forced to adopt a bitemporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery," manifesting clearly how "the institutions that first created the social meanings of blackness and whiteness continue to exert influence on the contemporary significance of those categories."⁶

By the very fact of asserting themselves as authors in a literary tradition that has excluded them and a society that has discriminated against them, these women can be seen to be making a political statement.⁷ In the words of Chandra Talpade Mohanty:

If the everyday world is not transparent and its relations of rule, its organizations and institutional frameworks, work to obscure and make invisible inherent hierarchies of power [...], it becomes imperative that we rethink, remember and utilize our lived relations as a basis of knowledge. Writing [...] is one site for the production of this knowledge and this consciousness.⁸

Following on from this notion, it is also useful to think of such strategies being used by specific groups of women to raise consciousness of cultural heritage as a way of bolstering self-esteem in the present. According to Dawn Duke, in her study of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian women poets:

Literature connects with the woman-centred notion of female historical worth by glorifying historical initiative and confirming a contemporary awareness and appreciation of the cultural specificities of women of African ancestry in the Americas [...] Other forms of motivation include an inner pride in African heritage and outstanding female icons of the distant and recent past [...] Drawing attention to great female achievement is a strategic ideological move that facilitates the reversal of historical silencing and social hierarchical exclusion even as it simultaneously confirms the deep roots of female accomplishments today.⁹

The achievements of some of the female characters in these novels may not appear to be as glorious as those of others, but there is no doubt that the narratives do recognize women's heroic behaviour, sacrifices and subversive forms of resistance in a society in which they were the most powerless and vulnerable members.¹⁰ People of all races were socialized to believe in a strict racial hierarchy which attributed the greatest power to white men. Through violent control, negative incentives, terrorization and constant humiliation enslaved black people were forcibly migrated, disempowered, dehumanized and de-gendered.¹¹ Woman-centred narratives, female narrators and maternal genealogies therefore function to counteract the myths and

stereotypes about black (and white) women, and the psychological damage to identity engendered by slavery and lasting long after it was legally abolished.

four novels and an introduction

Before analysing the themes that these novels share, I will briefly introduce each one.

Os Fios da Memória was Adriana Lisboa's first novel, published in 1999. She has since become one of Brazil's most fêted contemporary writers, with six novels and several prizes under her belt.¹² Her debut novel narrates the story of the appropriately named Brasil family, which includes African, European and indigenous members, in the voice of the youngest member, Beatriz (whose generation identifies as white). Beatriz employs a verbose, ironic, digressive style that owes much to the narrators created by nineteenth-century master Machado de Assis. From self-imposed isolation in the house she has inherited from her aunt and uncle, she reconstructs her family tree with the use of diaries written by her great-great-aunt Antônia (born 1885). Of the four, this is closest to the magical realist sagas of the Latin American boom period, for it incorporates strange events that could be considered supernatural (a man who sleeps for three months, a spontaneous pregnancy, disappearing characters, characters with eccentric habits that could be called madness).

Conceição Evaristo's work deals clearly with the lives of black women in contemporary Brazil, particularly their family and love relationships.¹³ *Ponciá Vicêncio*, her first published novel, tells the story of a girl growing to womanhood haunted by the accumulated suffering of her family and other Afro-descendants trying to survive in a society that considers them second-class citizens. Told in the third person, the narrative's frequent use of free indirect style provides access to several characters' thoughts: Ponciá, her brother Luandi and their mother Maria. Three generations of Ponciá's family are portrayed: each reacting in a different way to their abuse by the white Vicêncio landowning family from whom everyone on the plantation takes their surname. Ponciá, and later Luandi, moves to the city in search of a better standard of life, but soon discovers that the opportunities for an Afro-Brazilian woman, even a literate one, are few and far between. The characters come to realize the importance to their identity of the family unit, home and community, and do all they can to reunite.

In 2002 Ana Maria Gonçalves gave up her job in advertising in São Paulo, and moved to the north-eastern city of Salvador (through which the majority of slaves were imported into Brazil), where she researched and then wrote *Um Defeito de Cor*. Published in 2006 the novel won the Cuban "Casa de las Américas" prize for a work of Brazilian literature the following year. It is the fictionalized autobiography of Kehinde (aka Luísa Gama, aka Luísa Mahin), born in Benin in 1810, sold into slavery and sent to Brazil. She eventually buys her freedom, tries several lucrative business ventures, discovers all she can about different African religious practices and participates in a number of revolts. The search for her lost son (sold by his father to pay off gambling debts) takes her to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, but when the trail goes cold she returns to West Africa and once again prospers due to her business acumen, although she refuses to trade slaves. The novel ends as she is completing a final transatlantic voyage to Brazil to finally be reunited with her son. References make it clear that Kehinde is based on a real historical figure, whose son, Luiz Gama, was a mixed-race lawyer, journalist and poet who played a prominent role in the abolitionist struggle.

Tatiana Salem Levy's third novel, *Paraíso*, was published in 2014. In a newspaper interview she explained that she wrote it in part because "O Brasil tem dificuldade em escrever a própria história" [Brazil has trouble writing its own history].¹⁴ Ana, the protagonist, takes refuge in the country house of a friend, ostensibly to write a novel, but also to keep occupied before she takes a test which will confirm whether or not she has contracted AIDS after a one-night stand.¹⁵ Believing the legend that the female line in her family has been cursed, she hopes that writing a novel in the voice of the murdered slave woman who uttered the malediction will help to lift the spell. Ana's memories of moments of violence against her and her female family members (from a car crash to grooming by a paedophile) are interwoven with stories of domestic violence in the present, and of the struggles of her own narrator Júlia's foremothers to find love and peace during different eras in Brazil's history: the colonial era, the dictatorship, exile.¹⁶

There are many differences between these four novels, not least the disparity in length: the shortest, *Ponciá*, has 132 pages and *Defeito* 950. Each came out with different publishers, ranging from the prestigious and prolific Record (established in the 1940s) to newly founded Foz (2012), and Mazzá (1981), which exclusively publishes works by and about Afro-Brazilians.

However, these novels have much in common, their themes intertwining. They all place an emphasis on recovering the past in order to enable healing from trauma in the present. With the exception of *Defeito*, which narrates the seven decades of one woman's life in chronological order, with a few digressions and observations, they use a fragmentary structure, rebounding back and forth in time for a number of reasons: to mimic the way memory works, through triggers leading the mind backwards; to withhold family secrets and create suspense; to encourage the reader to compare events distant in time and draw conclusions about historical and social development, or the lack of it. All four are concerned with gender and race issues, as well as claiming justice, rather than threatening revenge, and making sure that those whose lives were erased or forgotten by official historians are given faces, voices and names.

Most interestingly, perhaps because such material is less expected in works by female authors, these novels do not shy away from horrific episodes of violence against women in Brazil's history, nor from reproducing them graphically.¹⁷ They highlight the ways in which slaves were reduced to disposable property for the use and abuse of their owners, their bodies no longer their own. Family histories unfold against the background of Brazilian history from the nineteenth century onwards: the most relevant references being to the laws which saw the abolition of slavery granted in slow and gradual steps, and significant historical events.¹⁸ Over the seven decades chronicled in *Defeito*, the most historically significant event is the failed Malê Revolt of 1835, organized by a group of Muslim slaves, intended to free all the slaves in the north-eastern state of Bahia.¹⁹ *Ponciá* references the laws leading up to abolition with great bitterness, since it concludes that a form of slavery and a racist mentality still exist in Brazil. Since it is a parody of historical discourse, *Fios* rushes through and mentions nationally important dates only in passing, including: the arrival in Brazil of the Portuguese Court (fleeing from Napoleon) in 1808, the proclamation of the Republic in 1889, the impeachment of Fernando Collor in 1992. Lisboa's novel punctures the pomposity of official history by warning the reader:

Se esperais por grandes feitos, leitor, abandonai-me. Refrescai-vos com biografias de gente ilustre e famosa, porque Manoel Brasil foi um homem absolutamente comum, desses que vêm e vão como formigas operárias. (90)

[If you are expecting great feats, reader, abandon me. Refresh yourself with the biographies of illustrious and famous people, because Manoel Brasil was a completely ordinary man, of the kind who come and go like worker ants.]

Brazilian novels set on *fazendas* (plantations) in the colonial era, depicting households and working farms, are no longer fashionable, nor politically necessary, in the way that abolitionist literature was. The typical slave-owning household is usually depicted in Brazilian literature as a patriarchal institution in which a white male controlled the white womenfolk, who produced legitimate heirs, and the black workforce, who were at his mercy: “Total domination by one group [the masters] over the other [the slaves] in a spirit of isolation from the wider world of urban life, had unleashed possibilities of perversion which had sedimented in the subconscious of many Brazilians.”²⁰ Enslaved black women characters are objectified, sexualized and silenced:

Disempowered even when central to events in the novel, she serves to complement literary action that emphasizes European cultural values and the prestigious life style of the dominant white class. She remains valuable only in so far as she remains powerless and upholds the status quo as the lowest, most afflicted creature. Victim of a literary silencing, she suffers from being totally absorbed into the slave masses, a situation that is evident in most writers of abolitionist prose and poetry.²¹

This is made explicit in *Fios*:

a escrava Joaquina era somente um número, somente um par de pernas e um par de braços para a lavoura cafeeira [...], uma entre os dois milhões de escravos que ajudavam a povoar a vastidão do Brasil. (47)

[the slave Joaquina was just a number, just a pair of legs and a pair of arms to work on the coffee plantation [...], one among the two million slaves who helped populate the vastness of Brazil.]

It is interesting, then, that this shameful period, and shockingly brutal events that seem to prove wrong the myths of gentle colonization and harmonious racial democracy, should be chosen as subject matter by four women writers. I cannot think of any contemporary Brazilian male writer who deals so frankly with slavery over the same period (1999–2014), although there are many whose narratives of urban violence and social inequality implicitly reflect the impact and legacy of slavery on contemporary society.²²

ancestors and origins

All four novels feature at least one black female ancestor whose influence on their most recent descendant is significant.²³ In *Fios* and *Paraíso* she is a tragic figure, crucial to the plot, as I will explore shortly, but firstly I will consider the hugely important role of the wise African-born ancestors in *Ponciá* and *Defeito*. Dawn Duke states that

Older women have tremendous status and gain substantial prominence as the revered bearers of the Yoruba legacy in the Americas. They are stately figures indelibly associated with the legacy of African spirituality and a deep-rooted historical wisdom passed on to them as the natural inheritors of ancient traditions and customs from the old continent.²⁴

They provide a link to the past and to the country of origin, through language, religion and cultural heritage (stories, songs, recipes, herbal remedies). They are a strong female role model and figure of trust, in a world where blacks were so vulnerable. In *Ponciá*, the village elder Nêngua Kaínda is a wise-woman and a healer, who sees and knows all. She still speaks her native language. Her advanced age signifies knowledge and commands respect and all three protagonists of the novel ask for her advice and her blessings. She is a *guia* (guide),²⁵ instrumental in the family's eventual reunion, yet her life force ebbs away during the course of the narrative, as if her job is done. The effects of age on her body are always described in contrast to her perceptive gaze, which is very much alive:

O som de sua boca era quase inaudível, enquanto seu olhar penetrante vazava todo e qualquer corpo que se apresentava diante dela. (95)

[The sound from her mouth was almost inaudible, whereas her penetrating gaze emptied each and every body that appeared before her.]

Continuava ereta, apesar da idade, como uma palmeira seca. A pele do rosto, das mãos, do pescoço e dos pés descalças era enrugada como a de um maracujá maduro. Tinha o olhar vivo, enxergador de tudo. (59–60)

[Her bearing was still erect, despite her age, like a dry palm tree. The skin on her face, her hands, her neck and her bare feet was wrinkled like that of a ripe passion fruit. Her gaze was alive, noticing everything.]

In *Defeito*, Kehinde's mother and twin sister, but more often her grandmother Dúrójaiyé, return to her in dreams as *eguns* (spirits or souls of the dead), predicting imminent danger or joy and even, if we are to believe in the powers of African religion, acting from beyond the grave to protect her.²⁶ Kehinde finds mother substitutes wherever she goes, gravitating towards communities of women. Her grandmother was a respected priestess within the *Vodun* religion, her name known to others dispersed around Brazil by the slave trade, creating a network of allies who come to Kehinde's rescue in moments of need.²⁷

Since each of these novels is purportedly historical, they all present an original couple from whose union the other characters are descended. All but one of these couples are composed of a white European man and a black African woman forced to submit to his lust; bringing together the most and least powerful members of society.²⁸ In all the novels but *Fios* there is a particularly traumatic moment of violence at the beginning of the narrative, followed by further acts of abuse. These atrocities make it clear to the reader that the texts are going to confront the full horrors of slavery and, as Toni Morrison puts it, "rip that veil drawn over [what most slave narratives avoid as] 'proceedings too terrible to relate'": rape, mutilation, and physical and mental torture.²⁹ This graphic material serves to open the readers' eyes to a

brutality often hidden or glossed over in historical accounts, opening the door onto a shameful period of Brazilian history.

In all the texts but *Ponciá* the mixed-race child born from the union between enslaved black woman and white Portuguese man becomes the next branch on the family tree. This formulation echoes the “foundational fictions” written by nineteenth-century novelists in order to neutralize the violent first encounters between European settlers and indigenous women.³⁰ Tracing her origins well before her own conception, Beatriz Brasil claims, in *Fios*:

Acredito que comecei efetivamente a existir quando uma negra natural de Angola foi metida, junto com outros quase trezentos cativos, dentro do navio *Arsênia*, no ano de 1828. (20)

[I believe that in actual fact I began to exist when a black woman born in Angola was put, along with almost three hundred other captives, into the ship *Arsênia*, in the year 1828.]

Since all the information about the Angolan woman is second hand (told to the slave’s daughter, who passed the information down the family line), it is potentially even more disturbing than it first appears: “Era possível que a escrava Joaquina não tivesse mais de quinze anos de vida e que fosse virgem [Joaquina the slave could well have been no older than fifteen and still a virgin]” (48).³¹ This quasi-accusation that Baron Eustáquio Miranda (and other slave-owners) was a child rapist is meant to outrage the reader on Joaquina’s behalf, making the figure herself appear even more helpless. Nor does Beatriz ever discover her ancestor’s real name, because the baron calls his dark-skinned concubine after the milk-white prostitute who initiated him into the pleasures of the flesh, in his youth.

The narrator imagines Joaquina’s body in lyrical terms, linking her closely to the natural world:

Calhou, por sorte ou azar, de ser mercadoria boa, jovem e forte e além disso muito bonita, túrgida como um broto de planta, incisiva como o sol dos trópicos, a pele brilhante como fruta fresca. (24)

[It so happened, through good luck or bad, that she was a good piece of merchandise, young and strong, and also very pretty, plump like a bud, direct like the sun in the tropics, her skin shining like fresh fruit.]

The metaphors emphasize her ripeness, vitality and youth, which should not be constrained, but will soon be stolen from her. Since resistance would lead to certain death, the only way she can protest against her situation (“tão poucas opções tinha [so few options were available to her]” (83)) is to refuse to speak:

A escrava Joaquina perdeu a conta dos anos em que viveu presa de um silêncio cortante e impotente. Talvez não tenham sido muitos, mas foram suficientes para cauterizar as raízes de qualquer esperança disposta a brotar. (57)

[Joaquina the slave lost count of the years she lived enclosed in a silence that was acute and impotent. They were not many, perhaps, but enough to cauterize the roots of any hope that may have tried to grow.]³²

This nameless, voiceless, powerless woman dies in childbirth, and plays no further role in the novel, but her plight is recorded for the readers' pity, and as a point of contrast with the lives and rights of her descendants. As the novel is a parody of official history, the disappearance of the black ancestor is par for the course.

In *Paraíso*, a sense of justice, as well as a shared fear of imminent tragedy and death, drives Ana, the narrator, to imagine the life of her great-great-great-grandmother, another nameless African woman transported to Brazil. In this novel, however, there is more information provided about the slave's life before she was captured, sold and exported, in particular the fact that she was a princess and a Gelede sorceress in the kingdom of Ketu (Benin), making her enslavement even more tragic because of her loss of status.³³ In her own anxious state, Ana starts to believe that the slave woman is haunting her, to the extent that she feels that her ancestor is demanding that her story is finally told. This quasi-possession is reminiscent of the spirit possession common in some Afro-Brazilian religions, as well as a strategy which functions to give the slave-sorceress a voice that stretches across the centuries. A Faustian pact is agreed, in her mind, between the two women: if Ana tells the true story of how her foremother died, the latter's curse will be revoked and Ana will, unlike the four generations of women who have gone before her, be able to find happiness in love. Ana makes it clear who is in ultimate control, however, advising the slave-sorceress "escrevo a sua história, mas à minha maneira [I'll write your story, but I'll do it my way]" (144).

The circumstances of the nameless slave's death are outlined in the text as part of Ana's blueprint, before they are narrated in her own voice, indicated visually by the use of a smaller font.³⁴ The subsequent fragments of the slave's narrative give a much more fleshed-out backstory than traditional historical accounts: her family set-up, her apprenticeship with the Gelede sorceresses, her unlucky capture, the transatlantic crossing. Little, though, is told of her daily life on the coffee plantation in Vassouras (in the state of Rio de Janeiro). The plantation owner initially forces her to have sex with him, but, after the birth of her son, treats her kindly, and she admits to feeling a certain amount of affection towards him.³⁵

This relationship with a slave woman enrages his wife, Mariana, whose jealousy takes a gruesome turn. Not only does she command that her rival be buried alive in front of her, but, when she discovers that the slave woman's dying scream was a Gelede curse, she is disinterred, still alive, and her tongue cut out. Although buried for good after that, her tongue outlives her, and her words have an impact felt for centuries to follow. This symbolic piece of flesh represents the slave's legacy: the words screamed in her native language performing a curse. The severed tongue is then used in a soup which Mariana arranges to be served to her husband upon his return to the *fazenda*, to show him, and the other slaves, the violent lengths she will go to in order to prevent his adultery. In symbolic terms, this slave's body is fragmented, but her words live on. Indeed, she gains access to expression, explanation and self-justification (even if Ana becomes her "mouthpiece") in the course of the novel.

In Levy's novel, the white woman is the villain of the piece in this traumatic episode from which the main plot originates. The plantation owner's wife, like the "angel in the house" of Victorian literature, is generally an ineffectual character in North American novels about plantation life.³⁶ As a character, she functions as a

contrast to the enslaved black women: a self-sacrificing wife and mother, representing innocence and virtue, the slave seen as sexually incontinent and a breeder incapable of maternal instincts.³⁷ However, in Brazil, the literary figure of the *Sinhá* (a contraction of *Senhora*: “Mis’ess”) was known for her

sadistic behavior [...] towards their black companions in childhood and towards the [...] house-servants in later life, which [Gilberto] Freyre attributes to the stifling nature of the white female’s existence within the four walls of the “casa-grande” (the planter’s mansion).³⁸

In three of the novels under analysis here, perhaps because they are authored by women, the plantation owner’s wife plays a much more active role.

The authors of *Fios*, *Paraíso* and *Defeito* all portray the wives and daughters of plantation owners as more complex than conventional representations. The wives have to deal with their husbands’ constant infidelities and the number of illegitimate children they manage to sire. Their duty is to manage domestic matters and, principally, produce heirs.³⁹ The daughters suffer the same fate as their mothers: being married off for business purposes. Like Dona Mariana (*Paraíso*), *Sinhá* Ana Felipa, who rules the household where Kehinde first works (*Defeito*), is bitter, jealous and sadistic, both of them taking out their own frustrations on vulnerable slave women who cannot react. Baroness Maria Miranda (*Fios*) is a much more sympathetic, rather pitiful figure, supplementing a loveless marriage with an interest in music and musicians, and treating her slaves kindly and respectfully. Ana Felipa is the most brutal of these *Sinhá* characters, on one occasion viciously gauging out the eyes of Verenciana, a slave pregnant with her husband *Senhor* José Carlos’s child.⁴⁰ She then arranges for the eyes to be served up to her husband for dinner, signalling to him that she knows about his infidelity and reminding him of his conjugal duties towards her.⁴¹ This torture of women by other women is extremely painful to read about, seldom written about, and yet diverts attention from the real issue: the injustice of slavery and the dehumanization it breeds in both slave and mistress. In other words, although there is no excuse for her brutality, mitigating circumstances are shown which explain Ana Felipa’s behaviour: fury at her husband’s serial adultery with slave women and her inability to conceive a child.

Although *Defeito* includes the harshest portrait of a *Sinhá*, it also presents a firm, if unexpected, friendship between the daughter of the house, *Sinhazinha* (Miss) Maria Clara, and Kehinde, who is originally bought by the plantation owner to be her playmate. Kehinde is at first overwhelmed by Maria Clara’s doll-like pale blue eyes and blonde hair, then there is a certain rivalry between them, but they develop a true friendship and help each other in later life; indeed, Kehinde names her daughter after her friend.

In *Fios* and *Paraíso*, then, the black female ancestor dies tragically but begins the family line, their child conceived through violence. In *Ponciá* and *Defeito*, though, there are much more positive portrayals of foremothers who provide love, support and blessings even beyond the grave. In all four novels there are hard-hitting episodes of sexual violence and humiliation, which bring home the brutality of the slave experience, should the reader not be aware of its true horrors.⁴²

names and nothings

The third line of *Defeito* asserts “O meu nome é Kehinde porque sou uma ibêji e nasci por ultimo [My name is Kehinde because I’m a twin, the one born second]” (19). The character is in part defined by this Yoruba name, for when her twin sister dies she loses a part of herself that she is constantly trying to find, in friends, lovers, her children. She knows that she must keep this name so that she will be recognized by the spirits, so she refuses to be baptized with a Portuguese Christian name. Nonetheless, in order to be purchased legally (and thus have a chance of survival), a name is needed for the accounts book and she chooses Luísa:

Para os brancos fiquei sendo Luísa, Luísa Gama, mas sempre me considereei Kehinde [...] Mesmo quando adotei o nome de Luísa por ser conveniente, era como Kehinde que eu me apresentava ao sagrado e ao secreto. (73)

[To the whites I became known as Luísa, Luísa Gama, but I’ve always considered myself Kehinde [...] Even when I adopted the name Luísa because it was convenient, it was as Kehinde that I made myself known in sacred, secret situations.]

She gives her children Yoruba and Portuguese Christian names so they can benefit from their multicultural heritage. Her surname is imposed on her and all the slaves owned by *Senhor* Gama. This was practical as a way of branding of a slave-owner’s merchandise, but a cruelly paternalistic practice since the owner usurped parents’ passing on names; another sign of the dehumanization of slaves through denying them a genealogical positioning beyond that of the slave “family” and severing links between true family members.

The association of name and identity becomes a serious issue in *Ponciá*, combining with many forms of resentment towards the white plantation-owning Vicêncio family.⁴³ When she calls to her reflection in the river, Ponciá felt

como se estivesse chamando outra pessoa. Não ouvia o seu nome responder dentro de si. Inventava outros [...] Ela, inominada, tremendo de medo, temia a brincadeira, mas insistia. A cabeça rodava no vazio, ela vazia se sentia sem nome. Sentia-se ninguém. (16)

[as though she was calling someone else. She couldn’t hear her name reply inside her. She invented others [...] Nameless, trembling with fear, the game scared her, but she kept going. Her head spun in the emptiness, feeling empty herself it was as if she had no name. She felt she was no one.]

This emptying out of Ponciá’s sense of self represents the prejudice and oppression imposed on Afro-Brazilian women until they believe themselves to be worthless. Overwhelmed by the centuries-old forces of prejudice that block her development and progress, through constant humiliation and negation, she tells her husband not to call her Ponciá Vicêncio again: instead, he should call her “nada [nothing]” (17).⁴⁴

Ponciá’s name, because it seems to her so divorced from her own sense of self, actually starts to hurt her. When she writes it down:

era tão doloroso quando grafava o acento. Era como se estivesse lançando sobre si mesma uma lâmina afiada a torturar-lhe o corpo. (27)

[it was so painful when she wrote on the accent. It was as if she was thrusting a sharp blade at herself and torturing her own body.]

It turns out that this pain and torture are linked to her false ancestry, which she rejects:

sabia que o sobrenome dela tinha vindo desde antes do avô do seu avô [...] O pai, a mãe, todos continuavam Vicêncio. Na assinatura dela, a reminiscência do poderio do senhor, de um tal coronel Vicêncio. O tempo passou deixando a marca daqueles que se fizeram donos das terras e dos homens [...] Ponciá Vicêncio era para ela um nome que não tinha dono. (27)

[she knew that her surname had come from before her grandfather's grandfather [...] Her father, her mother, they were all still Vicêncios. In her own signature was the reminder of the power of the master, a certain "Colonel" Vicêncio.⁴⁵ Time passed leaving the mark of those who had appointed themselves owners of the land and the men [...] Ponciá Vicêncio was to her a name with no master.]

Nevertheless, the name appears on almost every page of the book, taunting her and constantly reminding her (and the reader) that she is a divided self.

As I have already mentioned, the narrators of *Fios* and *Defeito* do not know the real names of their ancestors, whose namelessness emphasizes their dislocation from their African roots. It could also reflect their extreme distance from their descendants not only in time and space but also culturally, since neither Beatriz nor Ana identify as Afro-descendants in any way and, after generations of miscegenation, their skin is more white than black.

Kehinde is undoubtedly the most vocal female slave protagonist in these four novels. The whole narrative, bar the short prologue by author Ana Maria Gonçalves, chronicles the life and opinions of a slave woman in her own words. The book itself, 950 pages long, with a distinctive matt gold cover, is an impressive testament to the life story of an individual, valuable particularly because of the surprising lack of slave narratives in existence in Brazil.

Many of the documents relating to slavery held or produced by the Ministry of the Treasury, across the country, were burned in 1890 following the orders of Minister and Secretary of State for Business and Finance Rui Barbosa. The consensus among historians is that this act of wilful destruction was carried out in order to prevent any claims for payment of indemnities not only to former slaves but also to former slave-owners. There was also, it is believed, an urge "to 'cremate' the idea of humans as objects on fiscal balance sheets, even when the indemnities proposed were nominal and symbolic."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, since personal documents (such as letters or diaries) are extremely scarce, scholars have made recourse to religious and legal documents transcribing the words of slaves in order to reconstruct details of their lives.⁴⁷

Robert Krueger contends that the reasons for this comparative paucity "must at the very least take into account such factors as the illiterate nature of Luso-Brazilian Catholicism, Brazil's pre-industrial stage of development, a late and bourgeois abolitionist movement, and the racist suppression of the slavocratic culture."⁴⁸ Exceptions are the papers, journalism and poetry of mixed-race abolitionist lawyer Luis Gama⁴⁹ (1860s–80s) and Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua's *Biography* (1854).⁵⁰ This is in complete contrast to the United States, where large numbers of documents

and testimonies have been preserved, dating from before abolition to statements collected in the mid-twentieth century.⁵¹ As Toni Morrison puts it: “no slave society in the history of the world wrote more – or more thoughtfully – about its own enslavement.”⁵²

In a 1987 speech later published as “The Site of Memory,” Morrison reflects on the content of slave narratives, which she reads as having particular missions: firstly as the story of an individual life, that at the same time represents the race, and secondly to prove that slaves were human beings (their literacy acting as proof to that end), and that readers should support abolition. The political motives behind their publication, she argues, constrained the authors somewhat, because they could not afford to offend their readers; something that she, as a twentieth- (and twenty-first) century writer whose work faces historical and contemporary racism head on, feels the need to do:

The narratives are instructive, moral and obviously representative. Some of them are patterned after the sentimental novel that was in vogue at the time. But whatever the level of eloquence or the form, popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience. Whenever there was an unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something “excessive,” one finds the writer taking refuge in the literary conventions of the day. But most importantly – at least for me – *there was no mention of their interior life*. For me [...] the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.”⁵³ (Emphasis mine)

The four Brazilian writers discussed in the present essay make a point of foregrounding slaves’ interior lives, and are not afraid to dwell on sordid, violent, scatological or “excessive” incidents. Ana Maria Gonçalves’s novel is an extreme example, not just because it narrates a whole life story, but because it is almost completely composed of the purported author’s “interior life,” opinions, thought processes, motivations and desires. Late in the novel Kehinde explains that her thoroughness has a motive: since she doubts she will ever see her son again, it is a cautionary tale providing all the advice, warnings, recommendations drawn from her own experience that he could ever need:

tento me lembrar de cada detalhe importante da minha vida, para responder a todas as dúvidas que você pode nem saber que tem. (662)

[I’m trying to remember every important detail of my life story, to answer all the questions you might not even know you want to ask.]

Above all, it is a relieving of her conscience, for having lost him and not done more to find him: it is “meu pedido de desculpas [my request for forgiveness],” and “um grande mea-culpa [a great *mea culpa*]” (954).

genealogy and generations

The four novels being studied create clear family trees originating with the slave ancestor and progressing through the generations.⁵⁴ This format enables the reader to

observe one family line in relief against the backdrop of official, national history, but also the ways in which that backdrop of historical circumstance impacts upon the characters, as well as the effects on them of genetic traits, and destiny, or serendipity.

Kehinde's curiosity and close observance of others leads her to describe in great detail the minutiae of everyday life, some chapters reading more like historical, anthropological and even theological research. There is no doubt that readers will learn something about 1800s Brazil that they did not know, and this consciousness raising and dispelling of myths is an important motive driving the text. Unlike the stereotype of the submissive, trapped, promiscuous, pitiful slave woman, Kehinde is strong, self-aware, proud, upwardly (and geographically) mobile and extremely enterprising. Her voice is strong and assertive: she immediately recognizes injustice and questions the status quo which relegates her to beast and chattel. As omniscient narrator of her life story she looks forward and back, nostalgic for what she has lost, but optimistic for future successes and reunions. The author realizes that sentences like "I should have paid more attention" will have repercussions later in the text. Also noteworthy in Kehinde's narrative is her determination to report information correctly and faithfully, for example when she combines data she has learned from different sources at different times in order to draw conclusions or make a point retrospectively.

Her motivation is also to share the knowledge she has accumulated, whether wanting to pass on advice and warnings to her son, describe the impressive architecture and size of (São) Salvador to friends back in Ouidah or conspire with plotting rebels. Kehinde always feels the support of her ancestors and benefits from becoming part of the anti-establishment networks pulsing beneath the surface of the slavocratic society. Her survival instinct is strong and even though she sometimes makes hasty decisions resulting in tragedy (the worst leading to the loss of her son), she experiences great joy in her life too.

In *Ponciá*, the "terrible proceedings" involve Ponciá's male forebears. Her grandfather, Vô Vicêncio, suffering under the weight of the constant and unrelenting degradations of slavery, is driven mad by his owner's shameless sale of his children, despite the Law of the Free Womb making such an act illegal. In despair, Vô Vicêncio kills his wife and chops off his own hand with a sickle. This act of self-mutilation, with the tool he uses to work the cane fields, has symbolic meaning. It is at once a form of castration, in anger at his impotence against the powerful white landowner, making him, as a result, useless as a labourer, but also alludes to his despair at the complete lack of control he has over the fate of his offspring, his descendants (50).⁵⁵

Although he achieves a form of happiness with his own family, Ponciá's father, who is never named, and rarely speaks, succumbs to his repressed anger and sense of injustice. When he was a child, despite being forced to obey the *sinhô-moço* (young massa), he was able to express his feelings openly and emphatically: "revelava as suas tristezas com imensas lágrimas, assim como gritava alto os seus risos [he revealed his sorrows with copious tears, just as he laughed his happiness out loud]" (29). For self-preservation, he gradually learned to control his emotions: "Entretanto, foi crescendo e aprendendo a disfarçar o que lá dentro vinha [In the meantime, he grew up and learned to disguise what came from within]" (ibid.). His death, which takes place while he is working in the landowner's fields, is presented as a kind of surrender:

foi se curvando, se curvando ao ritmo da música, mas não colheu o fruto da terra, apenas à terra se deu. (29–30)

[he bent further forward, further, to the rhythm of the music, but he did not reap the fruit of the land, he simply gave himself to the land.]

It is the shock of her father's death, and the fact he "left" without saying goodbye, which felt like a betrayal, that prompts Ponciá to reject life in the country, where nothing ever changed, and seek her fortune in the big city:

Estava cansada de tudo ali [...] Cansada da luta insana, sem glória, a que todos se entregavam para amanhecer cada dia mais pobres, enquanto alguns conseguiam enriquecer-se a todo o dia. Ela acreditava que poderia traçar outros caminhos, inventar uma vida nova. (32)

[She was tired of everything there [...] Tired of the insane struggle, without reward, to which everyone surrendered themselves, waking up poorer every day, whereas some people managed to get richer over the course of each day. She believed she could follow other paths, invent a new life.]

However, in the city, all attempts to build a better life and fulfil her potential are thwarted when she realizes that there are no possibilities there for a black woman except menial jobs or prostitution. "A vida escrava continuava até os dias de hoje [Slavery continued even today]" (83), and she too is a slave in all but name: "Escrava de uma condição de vida que se repetia [Slave to a condition of life that kept repeating itself]" (84).

Ana also determines to break the cycle that holds her trapped in misery, although hers is not as all-encompassing as Ponciá's. The source of her misfortune is traced back to the novel's primal scene, *Sinhá* Mariana's brutal punishment of the slave-sorceress, who retaliates with a curse on her female descendants:

Ana acreditava que a violência da sua antepassada era o motor que explicava a fúria da sacerdotisa. De nada adiantaria repetir a história e continuar falando do mesmo lugar. Queria que a literatura salvasse não apenas a si e às mulheres da sua família, mas também àquela princesa que tivera a vida interrompida pelo capricho de uma senhora rica e mal-amada. (20–21)

[Ana believed that the violence of her foremother was the motivating factor which explained the sorceress's fury. There was no point in repeating the story and continuing to speak from the same place. She wanted literature to save not only herself and the women in her own family, but also that princess whose life had been interrupted on the impulse of a rich lady, unlucky in love.]

In the course of Levy's novel, Ana revisits traumatic moments from her own past which, rather than being seen as effects of the curse, are instead blamed on the inequalities of a patriarchal society that so often leaves women vulnerable to the violence of men. She reveals family secrets, grieves for loved ones, punishes (with words) men who have hurt women, and keeps back one secret to prevent the novel having a conventional happy ending. Relationships between the sexes are reconciled in Ana's narrative, when the fourth generation, Lúcia, confides to her daughter Julia (representing Ana) that the curse can be reinterpreted. Instead, the message seems to be that happiness is within one's own grasp: "Julia lhe prometeu, em silêncio, que não

seria infeliz. Já não era [Julia promised her silently that she would not be unhappy. She wasn't any more]" (166). Love and happiness are uncoupled from the notion of a long-lasting heterosexual relationship and recast as a woman's freedom, independence and power to influence her own fate. *Paraíso* advocates resistance against patriarchy and the strengthening of bonds between women. At the same time as it realigns Ana's thinking about male–female relationships, it also brings race into the equation: in Ana's narrative, she/Julia is the descendant of both the evil white *Sinhá* and the murdered black slave-sorceress.

legacy and literacy

Family novels involve not only the passing on of names and stories but can also describe the bequeathing of money, heirlooms, property and land, not to mention traits and behaviour. Since slaves had no belongings and no rights over their children, they could not pass on any tangible goods, but they could do their best to ensure their children learned about their African heritage by oral means. Oral transmission of stories and lessons remains important, but access to literacy provides access to power. Reading, writing and teaching become significant symbols in the four novels.

Ponciá refers frequently to Grandpa Vicêncio's mysterious "herança" (legacy), which turns out not to be in the form of goods but another form of curse. Grandpa Vicêncio passes on to his son, and then his granddaughter, the psychological and emotional effects of living through slavery: constant abuse and dehumanizing treatment, erasing confidence and self-awareness. Ponciá becomes more and more depressed, described with metaphors of emptiness and hollowness, as she seems to be increasingly possessed by the spirit of her grandfather, mumbling like him and imitating his walk. From active, joyful, hardworking, optimistic girl she becomes a lethargic, depressed woman, absorbing, it seems, his impotence and uselessness. Her mental and correspondent physical suffering is a constant reminder to other characters, and to the reader, of the suffering her people have undergone but, in the end, it does act also as an encouragement to her brother to join with others and persist in the fight for equal rights.

If the male line bequeaths Ponciá a legacy of pain, the female line brings her healing and a sense of heritage. Nêgua Kaínda, the village elder, passes down songs, stories and healing potions, as well as wise words of advice when they are needed. Ponciá's mother Maria teaches her the craft of pottery, which can enable her to earn an independent living as a skilful artisan. Their clay artefacts, made for domestic use, also appear in the text on display in an exhibition of Folk Art. The label on the display case records the "Autor" (author/potter) who made each piece, as well as the "Proprietário" (owner), showing how they are now merchandise absorbed into a capitalist economy: what was a kitchen utensil intended for use is now an art work. The pots are evocative of home, but can also be seen as "trabalhos que contavam partes de uma história. A história dos negros talvez [works that told different parts of a story. The history of the blacks, maybe]" (130). Like the families dispersed by slavery, too, the Vicêncios dream of being reunited.

Ponciá's story also raises the question of the role of literacy and education in transforming Afro-Brazilian lives. Her grandfather loses his faculties of speech, communicating only in a mixture of laughter and tears. Her father learned the alphabet with his young master, but no more. Her mother's distinctive pots are a form of self-expression. Ponciá discovers that her own literacy cannot help her improve her

life in the city, although handwritten notes with addresses on do help to reunite her family. Nonetheless, in the last pages of the novel, her brother Luandi's realization of the importance of education and knowledge, the next step, becomes clear:

não bastava saber ler e assinar o nome. Da leitura era preciso tirar outra sabedoria. Era preciso autorizar o texto da própria vida, assim como era preciso ajudar a construir a história dos seus. E que era preciso continuar decifrando nos vestígios do tempo os sentidos de tudo que ficara para trás. E perceber que, por baixo da assinatura do próprio punho, outras letras e marcas havia. (131)

[it wasn't enough to know how to read and sign his name. He had to extract another kind of knowledge from reading. He had to be the author of the text of his own life, just as he had to help to construct the history of his people. And he had to continue deciphering in the traces left through time the meanings of everything that had been left behind. And realise that there were other letters and marks beneath the signature written by his own hand.]

Luandi recognizes the palimpsest of history. The potential for empowerment travels down the generations from the grandfather's stump to Luandi's determination to engage with, respect and learn from his people's history, using his fist to write, not fight. Although there are no outright accusations of racism in this novel, none are needed. It clearly presents the limits imposed on Afro-Brazilians and the discrimination they face. But it does not advocate violent revolt. Instead it emphasizes the importance of family, home and community, a strong sense of identity and tradition that can be combined in peaceful but determined resistance against oppression.

Kehinde goes through *Defeito* accumulating skills and knowledge, from the recipe for cookies at the origin of her first business venture, to mastering several languages and forms of worship, to the fact that the whole narrative is actually a letter.⁵⁶ By the end of the novel, she is able to send her daughter to the Sorbonne, where she gains a university degree from a European university representing the apex of education, returning to Lagos to be a teacher.

In a way, these four works comply with Law 10.639 passed by the Brazilian government in January 2003 to ensure that Afro-Brazilian history and culture is taught in schools.⁵⁷ The African ancestors in *Fios* and *Paraíso* are silenced, but the narrators are determined to tell their stories and enable them to speak at last. The very existence of *Ponciá*, a novel published by an Afro-Brazilian woman, can be seen as a triumph and a political act in response to the *sinhô-moço*'s question, after realizing that blacks (in this case Ponciá's father) can learn to read: "Mas o que o negro ia fazer com o saber do branco? [What would a black do with the white man's knowledge?]" (15).

At least slave literacy was not illegal in Brazil, as it was for some time in the United States.⁵⁸ In the last few years, debates on access to higher education finally led to the passing of Law 12.711 in 2012 reserving 50 per cent of university places at federal institutions for students from low-income families and/or state schools. Places must also be set aside for students of African or indigenous Brazilian descent, in proportion to their numbers in the local state.⁵⁹ It will take some time to see the effects of this law, and the law introducing material about Afro-Brazilian history and culture into the school curriculum.

conclusion: my history, my voice

Paraíso is told in fragments that cross three time frames, intertwining Ana's present with her past and her memories of the women in her family, and the slave's narrative (written in a smaller font to distinguish it from the body of the text). In Ana's novel, the unnamed slave-sorceress continues to describe the lives of her descendants from beyond the grave and into the twentieth century. It is suggested that she is in some kind of limbo, waiting to see her curse inflicted upon five generations of women:

Hoje faz 147 anos que assisto à repetitiva infelicidade da família Albuquerque Junqueira. Em breve, Julia, a última descendente da sinhá, vai descobrir o segredo escondido pela mãe e, finalmente, poderei retornar ao Ayé e me entregar aos prazeres. (24)

[I've been observing the repeated unhappiness of the Albuquerque Junqueira family for 147 years, now. Soon Julia, the last descendant of the *Sinhá*, will discover the secret her mother is keeping and, at last, I will be able to return to the Eternal Heaven and surrender myself to its pleasures.

Secrets emerge in the course of Ana's novel, which lead her to reflect on her life. The biggest bombshell is that the legitimate, white daughter of the baron and baroness falls in love with the illegitimate, mixed-race son of the baron and the slave-sorceress – her half-brother. Like the family tree in *Fios*, this one is made up of legitimate and illegitimate children, the product of miscegenation between descendants of Africans and Europeans, and even an indigenous Brazilian, replicating the multiracial, multicultural nature of Brazilian society. Rather than illegitimacy or mixed-race parentage being seen as shameful and needing to be hidden or forgotten, however, these novels embrace them. In *Fios*, the mysterious Antônia has black skin and emerald-green eyes; her brother's liaison with an indigenous girl produces the next link in the generational chain leading to Beatriz.

Fios, the story of the Brasil family, appears to be an alternative history of Brazil, in which most of the members are “comum” (ordinary), but also includes plenty who do not reproduce (through choice, sexual preference, infertility) and some who actually disappear. The family tree, then, shows a family that incorporates spouses/partners, who help it multiply, but then it shrinks. The successive tiers of the family cannot really be said to have evolved, or become more successful, however, and, with Beatriz, it reaches a kind of stasis. Independently wealthy, she chooses to remain in her aunt's library, writing the family's story with the aid of her great-great-aunt's diaries, occasionally visited by her boyfriend, but with no intention of having children, nor following a paid profession. The family seems to have reached a standstill, which, if the novel is an allusion to national history, does not bode well. In fact, this novel represents more of a metafictional exercise and a parody of conventional historical discourse than a political statement.

What do we learn from the representation of enslaved women in these novels? *Fios* tells the story of a multicultural Brazil through the generations of one family which ends rather inconclusively at an impasse (literally, in an enclosed garden at the end of a cul-de-sac). There is some sense of development over the years: whereas the slave known as Joaquina was forcefully removed from her homeland, Beatriz is an independent heiress, with a room of her own, where she writes her family's story.

Joaquina's only form of protest is silence, but the sorceress in *Paraíso* takes revenge on her mistress and murderer in the only way she can, by asserting her existence and her background: using her native language and supernatural skills to curse the *Sinhá* and her female offspring. If the novel Ana is writing is indeed the story of her own family, and the sorceress her own ancestor, this suggests the contradictory conclusion that the sorceress cursed her own descendants, but also that maybe Ana has inherited some of her powers. The anger of the enslaved at the injustices and violations they have endured is channelled by Ana, someone at a crossroads between life and death, although someone who, had she not made a mistake, would be living a comfortable life as a writer and independent woman.

In Conceição Evaristo's novel, successive generations of the Vicêncio family make small gains (each generation is more literate, more optimistic about the future) but by the end Ponciá realizes that she is still the victim of a racist, sexist society: she concludes that slavery lives on, well past abolition. It falls to her brother Luandi to reunite his family and community and make a stand against injustice.

Defeito is a masterpiece of assertiveness: a huge, gold brick of a book based on facts and historical research. Based on one remarkable woman's life, it dispels myths and tells history from a highly individual point of view. Kehinde forms family units, only for them to separate, making reunion of the different members the quest that pushes her forward. In the preface to the novel, the author describes it as “fruto da serendipidade [the result of serendipity]” and “a consequência de uma outra história [the consequence of another story]” (9), linking the text inextricably to events which took place in her own life. Despite the disclaimer of ambiguity (“pode não ser [it might not be]”), Ana Maria Gonçalves's words emphasize the vital importance of engaging with the facts of slavery in Brazil in order to understand its devastating impact on all those who experienced it, and the knock-on effects on their descendants:

Esta pode não ser uma simples história, pode não ser a história de uma anônima, mas sim de uma escrava muito especial, alguém de cuja existência não se tem confirmação [...] Especula-se que ela pode ser apenas uma lenda, inventada pela necessidade que os escravos tinham de acreditar em heróis, ou, no caso, em heroínas, que apareciam para salvá-los da condição desumana em que viviam. (16)

This might not be a simple story, it might not be the story of an anonymous woman, but actually that of a very special slave, someone whose existence still has not been confirmed [...] There is speculation that she may have been just a legend, invented out of slaves' need to believe in heroes or, in this case, heroines, who came along to save them from the inhuman condition in which they lived.

This quotation encapsulates the issues I have tried to highlight above in analysing four remarkable novels which trace back trauma: women's history, visibility, individuality, legacy and heroism.

disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 Nicolas Bourcier, “Brazil Comes to Terms with its Slave Trading Past,” *Guardian Weekly* 23 Oct. 2012, available

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/23/brazil-struggle-ethnic-racial-identity>> (accessed 5 Sept. 2016). The remains have been integrated into an African Culture and Heritage Route around Rio.

2 Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* [1995] (London: Verso, 2002) 2.

3 For ease of reference, I shall refer to the first three novels in abbreviated form as: *Fios*, *Ponciá* and *Defeito*. Note: all translations from Portuguese are my own.

4 “Palimpsest narratives,” in the words of Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, are texts that

ask questions about cultural and family secrets, explore the idea of a memory repetitively haunted by a historical event [in this case, slavery], and meditate on what the past means, can mean, should mean, for a present [...] subject tortured by a recollection of the past in an ahistorical society. (*Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill and London: U of South Carolina P, 2001) 5)

Rushdy is looking particularly at 1970s African American fiction from the United States. Although there are many differences between both the histories of slavery and the literary histories of the United States and Brazil, there are also many overlaps; therefore I will use some critical theories about African American literature and writing by African American women in my analysis of Brazilian women’s writing, taking care to explain any Brazilian specificities.

5 Rushdy argues that what palimpsest narratives insistently suggest “is that the family secret of an individual family is symptomatic of the family secret of the nation – slavery itself” (ibid. 10).

6 Ibid. 5, 27.

7 According to a research project conducted by the University of Brasília between 2003 and 2005, which analysed all the novels (258) published by Brazil’s three largest publishing houses between 1990 and 2004, 23.8 per cent of the authors were women, 37.8 per cent of the characters were female, and only 7.9 per cent of characters were Afro-Brazilian, 5.8 per cent protagonists and 2.7 per cent narrators. And there were only three Afro-Brazilian female protagonists and one Afro-Brazilian female narrator. See Regina Dalcastagnè, “A personagem do romance brasileiro contemporâneo, 1990–2004,” *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea* 26 (2005): 13–71, 45, 46; Regina Dalcastagnè, “Quando o preconceito se faz silêncio: relações raciais na literatura brasileira contemporânea,” *Gragoatá* 24 (2008): 203–19.

8 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana UP, 1991) 34–35.

9 Dawn Duke, *Literary Passion, Ideological Commitment: Toward a Legacy of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian Women Writers* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2008) 17.

10 Leila Lehnen notes that the story of Kehinde, the protagonist of *Defeito*, is “composed of many smaller acts of bravery, rather than grand gestures – though these are also present” (“Growing Up to Human Rights: The *Bildungsroman* and the Discourse of Human Rights in *Um Defeito de Cor*” in *Literature and Ethics in Contemporary Brazil*, eds. Vinícius de Carvalho and Nicola Gavioli (London: Routledge, in press))

11 See Herbert S. Klein and Francisco Vidal Luna, *Slavery in Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010) 121; bell hooks, “Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience” in *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* [1982] (London: Pluto, 1990) chapter 1.

12 <<http://www.adrianalisboa.com>>. The homepage of the author’s website includes a quotation by the Nobel Prize winning Portuguese author José Saramago that “Adriana Lisboa é uma autora para o presente e para o futuro [Adriana Lisboa is an author for the present and the future].”

13 <<http://nossaescrivencia.blogspot.co.uk>>. The publication of *Ponciá Vicêncio* was part funded by the author herself and despite being on several university syllabi, part of the Vestibular (university entrance exam), and translated into English (by Paloma Martínez-Cruz (Austin: Host, 2007)) and French (by Paula Anacaona (Paris: Anacaona, 2015)), it is poorly distributed in Brazil and very difficult to find in bookshops there.

14 José Riço Direitinho, interview with Tatiana Salem Levy, “O Brasil tem dificuldade em escrever a própria história [Brazil finds it hard to write its own history],” *Público* online 7 May 2016, available <<https://www.publico.pt/culturaipsilon/noticia/o-brasil-tem-dificuldade-em-escrever-a-propria-historia-1730288>> (accessed 9 Aug. 2016).

15 Since her race is not mentioned (and that of some other characters is), the reader assumes that Ana and her family are white because of the lifestyle that is described, as well as physiological features. However, her racial heritage becomes more complicated as the novel progresses, perhaps in order to make a comment about the mixed-race past of those who identify as white – in other words, many Brazilians.

16 See Paula Queiroz Dutra, “O paraíso não é aqui: a violência contra a mulher em Tatiana Salem Levy,” *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea* 48 (2016): 209–28.

17 In 1989 Deborah McDowell noted that whereas the majority of slave narratives in the United States were authored by black men, black women had written most of the contemporary novels about slavery. The same appears to be the case in twenty-first-

century Brazil. See “Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom – *Dessa Rose*” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, eds. Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 144–63, 150.

18 In 1850 the Maritime Slave Trade was abolished in Brazil. In 1871, the Rio Branco Law (also known as the Law of the Free Womb) was passed, freeing all children born to slave women. In 1885 the government passed the Saraiva-Cotegipe Law (also known as the Sexagenarian Law), which freed all slaves over the age of sixty and created a state-administered Manumissions Fund. Finally, in 1888, abolition was proclaimed with the passing of the “Golden Law.”

19 It was in this state that the Portuguese fleet first touched Brazilian soil, in 1500. The first settlement was built there shortly after, and Salvador, the state capital, became the port through which the greatest numbers of slaves were imported into the country. Today it is seen as the state where Afro-Brazilian culture is most visible.

20 David Brookshaw, *Race and Color in Brazilian Literature* (Metuchen and London: Scarecrow, 1986) 122.

21 Duke, *Literary Passion* 19.

22 For example, Luiz Ruffato, Paulo Lins, Ferréz, Marcelino Freire, and Fernando Molica.

23 In *Defeito* I consider the author, Ana Maria Gonçalves, who signs the introduction of the novel, to be the spiritual, if not biological, descendant of Kehinde. Over the course of the text there are several female elders (living and dead) who influence Kehinde herself, but the impact of her narrative (no matter whether it is true or fiction) on the author and readers is just as important.

24 Duke, *Literary Passion* 18.

25 In Afro-Brazilian religions, *guia* also refers to the spirits who visit mediums in order to do good works, such as give advice.

26 The night after Kehinde is brutally raped by her owner, she dreams of her grandmother weaving a carpet featuring the symbol of a snake biting its tail. The next day, in the sub-chapter entitled “Vinganças” [Revenge], a poisonous serpent hiding in his bed bites *Senhor* Gama’s genitals, which become infected, leading to a humiliating, malodorous and painful death.

27 Voodoo is still practised in Benin where it was acknowledged as a national religion in 1989 and is now followed by 17 per cent of the population. See “Benin Voodoo Festival,” *The Guardian* online 15 June 2012, available <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2012/jun/15/benin-voodoo-festival-in-pictures>> Accessed 9 August 2016

28 The originary couple in *Ponciá Vicêncio* are both slaves, referred to as Vó and Vô (Grandma and Grandpa) Vicêncio. We learn nothing about their forebears.

29 Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory” in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. and introduction Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2008) 65–80, 70.

30 See Doris Sommer’s well-known study *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991).

31 The narrator almost always refers to her ancestor as “a escrava Joaquina [Joaquina the slave],” perhaps in allusion to the well-known abolitionist novel *A Escrava Isaura* (1875) by Bernardo Guimarães, later made into an internationally successful soap opera in 1976, about the fortunes of a beautiful and virtuous slave so pale she can pass for white, trying to escape the lecherous clutches of her owner.

32 There is not even a chapter named after her in the novel, although chapter 2 is entitled “Eustáquio Miranda,” after the Baron. This could be a conscious effort to replicate in subversive mimicry the lack of attention paid to the history of slavery from the female slave’s point of view.

33 In the Yoruba belief system, Gelede was a secret religious sect which involved the worship of mother goddesses.

34 Literacy was “a way of assuming and proving the ‘humanity’ that the Constitution denied [North American slaves]. That is why [slave] narratives carry the subtitle ‘written by himself,’ or ‘herself’” (Morrison, “Site of Memory” 68).

35 This is sensitive territory. The extent to which master–slave sexual relationships were consensual is almost impossible to confirm. In *Fios*, *Defeito* and *Paraíso* there are a majority of slave women characters who submit rather than struggle but others who manage to benefit from their masters desire for them.

36 There are, of course, exceptions, in novels such as Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) and Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986).

37 See hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman* chapter 1; Venetria Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women’s Fiction* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2000) chapter 2.

38 Brookshaw, *Race and Color* 122.

39 Maria Miranda (*Fios*) does give the baron a son and heir but, perhaps to subvert traditional history, his story goes untold, and the narrative follows the adventures of his illegitimate daughter instead. Mariana (*Paraíso*) has two daughters. Ana Felipa (*Defeito*) suffers a series of miscarriages and stillbirths caused, it is suggested, by herbs put in her food by the slave women.

40 In a combination of jealousy, fury and grief, having recently miscarried herself, the mistress explains that it is a very sad affair when a mother cannot see her own child, and that Verenciana is going to find out what that feels like (*Defeito* 106–07).

41 Ana Felipa gets her comeuppance: the kitchen slaves put herbs in her food to make her sterile (*Defeito* 114), then, years later, she is publicly humiliated when Kehinde arranges for her mistress to be discovered in bed with a male slave, by a priest.

42 *Defeito* begins with a horrific scene in which Kehinde and her sister and grandmother witness the gang rape of their mother by a group of warriors from a different tribe, and the murders of their mother and brother by the same men who force the five-year-old girls to perform sex acts on them. This shocking opening has recently been translated into English by Eric M.B. Becker as “Fateful Hour” and published in “Women Writing Brazil,” *Glossolalia* 2 (2016): 41–51. Ten years later, Kehinde is raped by her owner, and her lover raped and castrated before her eyes, in yet another example of the terrorization of slaves and exercise of power over their bodies and minds. *Ponciá* also opens with a distressing scene, but in this case between men. Ponciá’s unnamed father is forced to be his young master’s companion and follow his every command. The spoilt white boy rides him like a horse, and, in a form of violation, urinates in the black boy’s mouth: “Sinhô-moço ria, ria. Ele chorava e não sabia o que mais lhe salgava, se o gosto da urina ou se o sabor de suas lágrimas [Young Massa laughed and laughed. He cried and he didn’t know what was saltier, the tang of the urine or the taste of his tears]” (14).

43 Evaristo admitted in an interview in 2007 that she chooses her characters’ names almost instinctively:

Sim, eu não sei por exemplo, de onde veio o nome Ponciá. O nome Nêgua foi intuitivo, sonoro [...] Gosto também de inventar nomes. Fico procurando aqueles que me lembram a sonoridade das línguas africanas, como Ponciá, Nêgua e Luandi. O prazer que o som da palavra me dá, me ajuda na escolha dos nomes. (101)

[Yes, I don’t know, for example, where the name Ponciá came from. The name Nêgua I chose intuitively for its musicality [...] I also like inventing names. I try to find ones that remind me of the music of African languages, like Ponciá, Nêgua and Luandi. The pleasure the word gives me helps me choose the names.] (Interview with Aline Alves Arruda included as an Appendix (101–04) in her Master’s dissertation “*Ponciá Vicêncio*, de Conceição Evaristo: um *Bildungsroman* feminino e negro,” presented to the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in 2007, available <http://www.bibliotecadigital.ufmg.br/dspace/bitstream/handle/1843/ECAP-76RF2H/aline_alves_arruda_texto.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed 30 Aug. 2016))

44 Her despair echoes that of the colonized, as described by Albert Memmi:

He has been torn away from his past and cut off from his future, his traditions are dying and he loses the hope of acquiring a new culture. He has neither language, nor flag, nor technical knowledge, nor national or international existence, nor rights, nor duties. He possesses nothing, is no longer anything and no longer hopes for anything. (In *The Colonizer and the Colonized* [1957], trans. Howard Greenfeld (London: Earthscan, 2003) 172)

45 The term “coronel” (colonel) came to be used generically to refer to landowners and men of power.

46 Amy Chazkel, “History Out of the Ashes: Remembering Brazilian Slavery After Rui Barbosa’s Burning of the Documents” in *From the Ashes of History: Loss and Recovery of Archives and Libraries in Modern Latin America*, eds. Carlos Aguirre and Javier Villa-Flores (e-publication: A Contracorriente, 2015) n. pag.

47 See Jane Marie Collins, “Intimacy and Inequality: Manumission and Miscegenation in Nineteenth-Century Bahia (1830–1888),” Ph.D. thesis submitted to University of Nottingham (2010), available http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/11801/1/JMC_THESIS_APRIL_2010.pdf Accessed 9 AUG 2016. See also Robert Krueger, “Brazilian Slaves Represented in their Own Words,” *Slavery and Abolition* 23.2 (2010): 169–86; Sandra Lauderdale Graham, *Caetana Says No: Women’s Stories from a Brazilian Slave Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

48 Krueger, “Brazilian Slaves” 172.

49 The reader is encouraged to think that Luis Gama is the lost son to whom Kehinde’s narrative is addressed. A remarkable figure, he managed to achieve free status through legal means, having discovered he had been enslaved illegally.

50 Born in West Africa, Baquaqua worked as a slave in Brazil and Haiti, and travelled to Canada, the United States, where his narrative was dictated and published, and the United Kingdom, where he appears to have settled. I have not been able to consult Francisco Marques’s *Ilê Aiê: Um Diário Imaginário* (Belo Horizonte: Formato, 1994), the fictional diary of an Angolan slave transported to Brazil, covering the years 1845–1938. It is categorized as children’s/young adult fiction, like much of the writing by Afro-Brazilians (e.g., recent editions of *Quarto de Despejo* [*The Junk Room*], published in English translation as *Child of the Dark* (1962), the diary of rubbish picker Carolina Maria de Jesus, which was a bestseller in 1960) and indigenous authors (like Daniel Munduruku, for example).

51 Some 6,000 accounts survive, according to Krueger, in comparison to 170 slave narratives in Brazil.

52 Morrison, “Site of Memory” 69.

53 Ibid. 69–70.

54 There is a family tree at the beginning of *Fios* to aid the reader in working out the relationships of the characters to one another.

55 Ponciá’s “legacy” from her grandfather means in practice that she inherits many of his traits and could be the reason none of her seven pregnancies produces a healthy child. His act of murderous mercy, attempting to save his wife and children from

further suffering, is somewhat reminiscent of Sethe's behaviour in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, inspired by a true story.

56 By the end of the novel, Kehinde is elderly and blind, so she dictates, rather than actually writes, the letter herself.

57 The Law decrees that the curriculum must include

o estudo da História da África e dos Africanos, a luta dos negros no Brasil, a cultura negra brasileira e o negro na formação da sociedade nacional, resgatando a contribuição do povo negro nas áreas social, econômica e política pertinentes à História do Brasil.

[study of the history of Africa and the Africans, the blacks' struggle in Brazil, black Brazilian culture and the role of blacks in the formation of Brazilian society, thus rescuing the contribution of the black peoples towards the areas of society, economics and politics relevant to Brazilian history.]
(http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/2003/L10.639.htm> 24 Aug. 2016)

58 No law in Brazil made slave literacy illegal or threatened punishment for others – whites or blacks – who taught slaves to read or write, and so far I have found no instance of violent retribution against any Brazilian slave for knowing how to read or write. (Sandra Lauderdale Graham, "Writing from the Margins: Brazilian Slaves and Written Culture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49.3 (2007): 611–36, 615)

59 The law was passed by President Dilma Rousseff on 29 August 2012. See http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2011-2014/2012/lei/112711.htm (accessed 24 Aug. 2016). See also H.J., "Affirmative Action in Brazil: Slavery's Legacy," *The Economist* (online) 26 Apr. 2013, available <http://www.economist.com/blogs/americasview/2013/04/affirmative-action-brazil> (accessed 24 Aug. 2016).

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