

CROSSROADS BETWEEN AMERICAN AUTHORS: ESHU, OGUN AND OSHUNMARE IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY* AND CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO'S *PONCIÁ VICENCIO*

Danielle de Luna e Silva^{1*}

¹Universidade Federal da Paraíba, João Pessoa, PB, Brasil

Renan Cabral Paulino^{2**}

²Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil

Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the findings of an investigation which comparatively studied *A Mercy* (2008), written by the North-American author, Toni Morrison and *Ponciá Vicencio* (2006), written by the Brazilian contemporary writer Conceição Evaristo, in order to list elements related to the presence of Orishas in the narratives. At the end of the study, we noticed that there is, in both novels, evidence that are convergent to characteristics of Oshunmare, Ogun and Eshu. This latter was approached as an element that enabled the comparative reading of Afro-Brazilian and African-American Literatures from the perspective of the crossroads pedagogy.

Keywords: *A Mercy*; Ponciá Vicencio; Ogun; Oshunmare; Eshu

* Professor at the Department of Modern and Foreign Languages (DLEM) at Universidade Federal da Paraíba, where she teaches Literatures in English. She holds a Master's Degree in Literature and Social Practices (UnB) and a Ph.D. in Letters (Literature and Culture) from Universidade Federal da Paraíba. Her research interests include literatures written by women and contemporary literatures of the African Diaspora. E-mail: danilunas@yahoo.com.br. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6906-4246>.

** Master's Degree student at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, in the area of Literature Studies, with a focus on Post-Colonialism and Identities. Email: renan.paulino@ufrgs.br. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8340-8367>.



Where the story begins

Laroyê

A long time ago, in Yoruba lands, a messenger named Eshu, used to travel from village to village to listen to the misfortunes of people and of the Orishas. His mission was to collect a vast number of stories about the daily life of people in order to find responses for those who were seeking it; that is, cure for diseases, personal issues, and so on. By the end of his journey, Eshu collected countless stories (Silva 2018) over the *Aiê*, the human world, and organized those narratives to deliver them to Orunmilá, an important priest/oracle, so that he could interpret the mysteries of humankind, aiming to bring the solution to the problems encountered (Prandi 2001; Verger 2018).

According to Stefania Capone (2018), Eshu is the most human of Orishas, because he can be seen as a balance between good and evil, characteristics related to the flaws of the mortals. In addition, the researcher also states that Eshu, specifically, is very complex, since it is his chaotic ways of acting that teaches lessons to be learned and which are incorporated into people's lives; for at the same time that he creates chaos, he provides ways to overcome the challenges. Furthermore, many examples that can illustrate this statement can be found in *Mitologia dos Orixás* (2001), Reginaldo Prandi's collection of stories about the Orishas deities.

Even though Eshu creates chaotic situations, he himself can find the solution for them or can teach one how to do it by themselves. From this perspective, although the misunderstandings made up by Eshu could be easily avoided, these intriguing paths constructed by the Orisha are not meaningless, they are meant to promote awareness. Additionally, Prandi posits that "Eshu's schemes are many. Eshu can do against, Eshu can do in favor. Eshu does what he does, it is what it is"¹ (23). In this sense, there is no explanation for what the master of destiny can do or for the reasons behind his acts.

Moreover, the dubious messenger finds in the crossroads his sacred place. This is the site where people worship him and deposit their offerings and gifts before asking their wishes to the Orum. Hence, crossroads are the point of intersection of two paths, reiterating the idea that this message-bearer Orisha is also an element of connection between separate roads.

In *Pedagogia das Encruzilhadas* (2019), Rufino defines Eshu as a crossroad himself. He adds that the Orisha is the beginning, once he was created before his own mother, but it is also the way, and the end. Besides, "Eshu organizes, disorganizes, does the feint, slashes, opens, does and embodies paths, presents himself in multiple ways for us to brood over stories that were once told to us"² (34). In this way, Eshu is the storyteller that narrates and allows others to narrate the stories ripped and disrupted by the colonization. Eshu's path is never a single one, because it is his plurality that makes possible the many different possibilities to read the world as one can understand from the following quote:

Eshu, translated, multiplied and ressignified in this part of the Atlantic, is the sphere that represents the blows applied and the transgression necessary for coloniality. It not only symbolizes, it is, in short, a principle and power of decolonization. By penetrating the cultural practices of the African diaspora complex, it keeps vitalized the countless knowledge that diversify the social experiences of the world and the possibilities for its reinvention. It is Eshu who undermines the limits of the Western machinery, it is he who intends the rapture of souls haunted by sin (38).³

As a result of the Black Diaspora, African Cosmology started to be an element found in different studies and literary productions in Brazil and in The United States. According to González (2019), this linkage is only possible because of the idea of Amefricanity, which represents the union of the Americas, departing from the African traces brought to the New World with the Diaspora. It is also important to mention that the scholar also recognizes the importance of the indigenous contributions when coining the term. In this paper, we analyze two literary texts written by two Amefrican authors, Toni Morrison, from the U.S, and Conceição Evaristo, from Brazil, to identify traces of African Cosmology and Philosophy in their writings. We especially focus on Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) and Evaristo's *Ponciá Vicencio* (2006), but we recognize that there are many other female artists who portray Orishas in their literary works, such as Livia Natália, Cristiane Sobral, Cidinha da Silva (Rodrigues 2021), and Mãe Stella de Oxóssi.

It is important to mention that Pereira (2014) also ran a comparative study regarding these two narratives. However, the focus of the researcher was to highlight the historical facts presented in the novels to promote critical awareness about such themes in the present. On the other hand, this article aims to focus on the cosmogonical features of these books, by the lenses of the crossroad pedagogy. This idea of crossed paths, as stated by Leda Maria Martins (2001), combines, in its intersection point, the interpretation of multiples and plural discourses. In this sense, as we look at them through Eshu's pedagogy, we can find many links between *A Mercy* and *Ponciá Vicencio*. Because "the crossroad is the chosen path, it is irreducible, there is something there that does not know defeat in the face of colonial efforts, be it the ones of now or the ones of the past"⁴ (39).

Eshu: diasporic crossroads between time and space

Eshu can be considered as the connection between worlds. He is the one who can access the sacred lands of Orun, which is commonly known as heaven. In this sense, the Orishas are powerful forces that are responsible for some specific characteristics of nature, for example, in a simplistic way, Ogun can be contacted when someone needs strength, Oshunmare can be required when someone has the wish to ascend socially, and so on. However, to contact these Orishas, one needs to give offerings to Eshu, thus Eshu can create the bridge between the one who asks and the one who provides. In this account, Eshu is needed as the Orisha responsible for the alleviation of one's misfortune, which makes Eshu extremely important. Eventually, in case one avoids remembering the messenger in their

offerings, or donating a gift that Eshu despises, the messenger can become mischievous and responsible for not delivering their request, causing a rupture to the appeal. Considering this scheme, Eshu, if well treated by requesters, can be seen as being a bridge, a solid passage that connects two places. In this sense, we propose that Eshu is also a metaphor in the construction of this paper: By contributing to our comparison, Eshu is connecting The United States and Brazil, Toni Morrison and Conceição Evaristo, uniting Yoruba Cosmology and gender studies, bringing together past, present, and future, and thus reinforcing the idea that Eshu is a crossroad (Prandi; Verger; Rufino). In addition to that, as we bring Gonzalez's concept of Amefricanity, which relies on the African aspects that contributed to the creation of many cultural practices in the Americas, we believe that Amefricanity is also a crossroad.

Furthermore, according to the perception of time in Yoruba cosmology, the conception of timeline is not linear, but it has a format that can be associated with a spiral (Martins; Rufino) for time is a continuous repetition. In this case, what happened in the past, happens in the present, and it will happen again in the future. According to this notion of time, the stories collected by Eshu and given to Orunmilá were narratives not only told, but also stories yet to be (re)told, as the future is a repetition of the past. In this scenario, Eshu's narratives were based on real stories, but as time is a flow of repetitive actions, predictions can be made in the future based on what happened previously in a remote time.

Moreover, after the Middle Passage,⁵ traces of African Cosmologies can be found in the Americas. In Brazil, the Candomblé is a religion that mixes elements of African Cosmology, more specifically Yoruba-Bantu, and aspects of Christianity as a means to resist the prejudice and the violence the enslaved suffered for expressing their faith. Based on that, to worship their deities, many enslaved people had to replace the imagery of their Orishas for Christian saints. However, there is, nowadays, a movement among Candomblé practitioners which puts aside the Afro-Catholic Syncretism, claiming the Africanity of the religion and its independence from Catholicism, as it is stated by Prandi (2003) in the following passage:

[...]Finally [the movement] returned [to its] black origins to transform also candomblé in religion for all, initiating a process of Africanization and desyncretization to achieve their autonomy in relation to Catholicism. For this, certainly, the recognition of the culture of the orixás by society in general represents a step and its dissemination through popular music, television soap operas and literature, among other forms of artistic expression, is still a very expressive medium (27).⁶

In Cuba, one can find the Santería, which is like Brazilian Candomblé, but they differ mainly in their cult performances, and also in how these deities are represented in the New World. Later on, in the United States, as enslaved people from Cuba were taken to the Northern territory, the African cosmogony started to be spread there, conquering new lands (Verger).

Afro-Brazilian literature is centered on evidencing black people's culture and perspective into literary art (Duarte 2008). Corroborating to this idea, Rodrigues (2021) states that black women writers in this country express black people's identity and depict African ancestry by using Eshu in their poetics. By doing that, these authors also acknowledge African cosmologies in their writing, and their "multivalent expressions" (312). They do that to combat racism and to evoke "different ways of understanding the complex dimensions of Black identities" (313). Besides, in his paper, Rodrigues addresses his thesis only to Afro-Brazilian authors, but as we are dealing with the concept of Amefricanity in this article, we extend his affirmation to Amefrican writers, including Morrison herself.

Figueroa-Vásquez (2020) contends that Afro-Atlantic cultural productions are peripheralized. By saying that, she criticizes the fact that much of a variety of experiences is being ignored by the critique, and due to that, much knowledge is being lost as one can see from the quote below:

peripheralized literatures allows us to glimpse often-ignored sets of knowledges and experiences, and offers a radical remapping of diasporic Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone cultural productions. [she] conjure[s] a "periphery" here to highlight the ways in which both Afro-Latinx and Afro-Hispanic literature and cultural productions remain at the edges, or the periphery, of already marginalized texts and experiences (5).

For the context of the current article, we name "periphery" the literature produced by black female authors. We argue that these textual productions are put into the margins by coloniality and patriarchy, therefore one must consider the lenses in which these artists see and portray the world. These marginalized perspectives connect the African continent and the Afro-descendants in the Americas. Consequently, while studying *A Mercy* and *Ponciá Vicencio* from a cross-cultural perspective, we intend to foreground and discuss the role of these black writers in dealing with the decolonization of literature.

According to Figueroa-Vásquez "Diaspora is a literary contact zone" (4). Luiz Rufino, on the other hand, imagines it as a "phenomenon of shattering and reconstruction"(121).⁷ We understand the African diaspora as a flowing, timeless, and evermoving spiral connecting African descendants throughout continents and centuries. Their cultural and literary expressions serve as means of interrelation and contact, establishing multiple and parallel crossroads. This crossroad, as Rufino adds "is marked by tragedy but resignified by the necessity of reinvention"⁸ (100). Thus, in the next section, we discuss Conceição Evaristo's *Ponciá Vicencio*, seeking to identify references to an African presence.

Oshunmare: the rainbow that connects

Conceição Evaristo is one of the most recognized Afro-Brazilian authors of contemporaneity. A vast number of academic publications related to her writings deal with issues associated with coloniality and racism, among other themes. The

author appeared in the Brazilian literary scenario in 2003, when she published *Ponciá Vicencio*, however, she had started to publish in the influential black literary journal *Cadernos negros* as early as the 1990s. Conceição Evaristo transits between different literary genres: she writes poems, short stories, novels, but also non-fiction. In a racist country, her fiction and critical texts aim to highlight the Afro-Brazilian experiences through memory.

Evaristo's *Ponciá Vicencio* was first published in 2003 and translated to English in 2006. The narrative, set a couple of years after the slavery abolition in Brazil, narrates the life of the family Vicencio, named after the owner of the plantation in which the great grandparents of Ponciá served as former slaves. The book focuses primarily on Ponciá Vicencio's life, a girl that does not fit in, and has to deal with the stigma of her grandfather's madness. Also, the narrative voice focus changes between Luandi, the brother of Ponciá, Maria Vicencio, the mother of the main character, and a character named as the partner of Ponciá.

When discussing Afro-Brazilian literature, Eduardo de Assis Duarte (2008) and Conceição Evaristo (2009) affirm the importance of enhancing the culture of the black people, which includes their faith and beliefs. In *Ponciá Vicencio*, there is a vast number of elements that can be tangential to the Orisha Oshunmare, which will be evidenced during the development of this section.

According to Pierre Verger (2018), Oshunmare is a Dahomean Orisha that has his powers connected to the rain; his strength holds the water from falling down, and as a result, a rainbow appears in the sky, that is why he is strong and rich. The Orisha also represents mobility and activity, for he is the lord of everything that has an elongated shape, such as the umbilical cord, the rainbow, and the snakes. Additionally, he is the symbol of permanence, represented by a serpent involving the earth and biting its own tail, so the earth does not fall apart. Moreover, Oshunmare creates a connection between the Orun and the Aiê, the land of the gods and of mortals, throughout the rainbow, which links the earth and the sky. Moreover, this Orisha appears as having both genders, male and female, which are represented by the colors blue and red of the rainbow.

In *Ponciá Vicencio*, the feelings of death and loss were very present in the daily life of Ponciá, since her grandmother was assassinated by her grandfather: "One night his despair got the best of him. Grandpa Vicencio murdered his wife and then tried to take his own life. Armed with the same sickle that he had used on his wife, he severed his own hand. They stopped him and kept him from going through with it. He was mad, crying and laughing at the same time" (45-46). In an act of rage, Ponciá's grandfather changed the feelings of his entire family, for his act of madness took the life of a beloved one.

After killing his beloved wife, Grandpa Vicencio tried to kill himself because of the misfortunes of living as a slave, but against his will, he was impeded of attempting against his own life. Because of these tragic occurrences, he became known for his madness and was hated by his own son. Ponciá's father had to deal with this situation for his entire life, and could never forgive his once-beloved father for what had happened, and "One day the thought arose that he could try

to kill him [Grandpa Vicencio]" (13), but he could not. One day, Ponciá's father died of a heart attack working in the fields of the Vicencio Family.

After the death of her father, Ponciá, afraid and tired of having that hard life, decided to follow a different path:

Tired of the insane struggle, devoid of glory, in which everyone slaved just so they could wake up each day even poorer than the last while others grew wealthy the whole day long, she believed that she might design a different path, invent a new life. Hoping to meet this new future, Ponciá decided to leave by train the very next day since the machine would take such a long time to return to the town again. She didn't even have time to say good-bye to her brother. And now, lying there with her eyes wide open, penetrating the nothing, she asked herself if it had been worth to leave her land. What had happened to the vivid dreams of a better life? They weren't just dreams, they were truths! Truths that had been emptied the moment she lost contact with her people (25).

Ponciá took the train and traveled from the village where she had lived during her childhood with her family to the city, without anyone to nurture and to take care of her during the trip or after that. She moved with the intent to earn money and return to help her mother, who was a clay artist like herself, and her brother, who worked for the white families, as did their father and their grandfather before that. As Ponciá departed, she "tried to console her mother by saying that someday she would return for her and her brother as well. Together they would all be happy" (28). Later in the narrative, her brother, Luandi, also moves to the city with the same eagerness of getting rich and returning home to take out his family from that situation: "Why have I come to the city? The question was asked again. To look for my sister, to make some money, and to grow very rich." (65). The wish to move and earn money to help the family is a hope shared by the siblings, and is one of the characteristics of Oshunmare.

As the cult of Oshunmare was brought to the New World, in Brazil, people dedicated to this god associated his imagery with Saint Bartolomeu. Also, the devotees to Oshunmare want to be rich, empowered, and successful, as we can perceive by the wishes of Ponciá and Luandi. Besides, the umbilical cord is also one of the symbols associated with the image of Oshunmare. Verger affirms that one of the rituals regarding the organic piece is to bury it next to a palm tree with the aim of providing the newborn with fortune and health, but also with a connection to the place they came from. In the narrative, Maria Vicencio, in a soliloquy, says that her daughter and son will return home because "in the womb of the earth, vestiges of their own wombs had also been placed" (106). Consequently, by her belief in that ritual, she was sure that one day her children would return to that same place they had departed from.

Furthermore, when analyzing the voyage to the city itself and how Ponciá and Luandi traveled, one can also find traces linked to the Rainbow Orisha. For example, the imagery of the train that enables the voyage of the characters evokes an elongated form and provides a way to go and to return, meaning mobility,

another characteristic correlated to the Orisha Oshunmare. This train goes from the village to the city, but also makes the way back with Ponciá; she goes to the city, returns home, and then goes back to the city again: “When after many years of work Ponciá Vicencio managed to buy a little room on the periphery of the city, she went back to the village. The train was the same, with the same difficulties and discomforts.” (42). Hence, the whole family travels through the train, beginning with Ponciá, the first to leave home, and the first to return, and later on, Luandi, who goes and returns, as did Ponciá, and when the time comes, Maria Vicencio, who leaves everything she has behind, to find her children. They all leave and come back to once they were before, performing a movement similar to the one of a snake eating its own tail.

Ponciá’s stream of consciousness, as she leaves her body on earth and departs to a different dimension, reveals that the protagonist has a sort of strength that is not only her own, but the collective strength rooted on the black past:

On the first few occasions in which Ponciá Vicencio had felt the emptiness inside her head, she had been puzzled when she came to. What happened? How long had she been in that state? She tried to remember the events but she could not piece together how things had come to pass. She only knew that from one moment to the next, it had been as if a hole had opened of its own accord, forming a great fissure both inside and outside of her, a void which confused her. And yet she continued just the same, aware of her surroundings. She saw life and the way in which others transformed themselves. She observed the way movements of others expressed completion, but she was lost, she was unable to know herself. In the beginning, when the void threatened to overtake her, she was racked with fear. Now she liked the absence, covered herself with it, with unknowing herself, becoming a distant figure to herself (39).

Another of the attributes related to Oshunmare is the idea of permanence, represented by a snake impeding the earth to fall apart, such as the tenacity that maintains Ponciá “grounded” and protected and these moments of absence. In this sense, Ponciá’s strength can be interpreted as another element of the deity in the narrative. A strength that guides her through a journey that entails moving from the countryside to the city and that reveals the continuity of the oppressive forces of coloniality⁹ (Maldonado-Torres 2007): “she too had come to the city with a heart that believed in possibility and where had that got her? A shack on the hill. Running about constantly to tend the mistress’ homes. Some second hand clothes and food scraps provided as compensation for the salary that was never enough (81)”. Similarly, her brother comes to realize that his job as a soldier put him in a position of subservience and weakness, not of power as he once believed.

As a vital force, Oshunmare marks not only movement and continuity but also the passing of time. In one of her visits home, Ponciá sees a snake “slithered slowly across the hearth (53)”. Later on in the narrative, Maria Vicêncio claims that “on more than one occasion [...] had discovered the empty skin of a snake, and she would cut away the foliage outside. When she cleared the growth she

was driving away her doubts about venturing into the city. She had to take the train and find her children to bring them back to land (116)". The shedding of the snake's skin also parallels Luandi's and Ponciá's new perspectives and hopes, since both are willing to reconnect and recreate the "before-now-after-beyond"(131). Oshunmare also establishes this shift in tone and perspective when represented as a rainbow. If, at first, the rainbow was something that Ponciá was afraid of trespassing for she feared that her gender would bend and she could be turned into a man, in the last page of the narrative, it represents the strength of family love: "In the iris-hued sky, the enormous, multicolored Angorô cascaded slowly down while Ponciá Vicencio, link and heir to a memory newly uncovered by her relations, would never be lost; would be kept in the waters of the river." (132).

Nevertheless, Oshunmare is not the only Orisha that can be found in Evaristo's novel. As observed earlier, the presence of Eshu is always required when one talks about a specific Orisha. In *Ponciá Vicencio*, the crossroad is the point where one can find Eshu's characteristics, but in the narrative, the crossroads are presented with different connotations. For example, the train station is a place where the characters meet; Luandi and Soldado Nestor, Maria Vicencio and Soldado Nestor, and also the place that connected mother and son, as well as Luandi and Ponciá, later in the narrative. In this sense, the train station is a place of connection, that is, a crossroad, Eshu's sanctuary. Also, we argue that Ponciá is a crossroads herself. As the crossroad present in its axis the crossing of paths, of times, of narratives, of life and death, and so on, and Ponciá is a character that transits between here and there, between village and town, between the now and then, between present, past and future, she is the point of intersection. This idea can be corroborated by the passage: "She walked [Ponciá] as though to reconcile one time with another, kept taking hold of it all, the past-present-still-to-come." (132). She is also the element that separates the family, when she decides to move to town, but reconnects them at the end of the narrative, when her brother and mother decide to return to the village, moved by the necessity to calm her, by taking Ponciá to the waters of the river, as described below

Maria Vicêncio, now with her eye opened wide, contemplated her daughter. The girl was still beautiful, but her suffering face wore the features of a grown woman. For a few moments, other faces - not only that of Grandpa Vicêncio - visited Ponciá's countenance. Her mother knew them all, even the ones that arrived from another space and time. There was daughter one-and-many. Maria Vicêncio was glad. The time to conduct her daughter back home to the river's edge was ripening. Ponciá would go back to the place of the waters where her life force, her sustenance, lived (129).

By this quote, the narrator presents Ponciá as a multiplicity that is contained in one body. Not only is she the memory of her Grandpa Vicêncio, but she is the memory of others. She is a memory herself; one that mends times and ancestry. Ponciá Vicencio is a crossroads. Her body alone is a vessel where past, present and beyond intersect simultaneously, as she becomes heiress to Grandpa Vicêncio:

One day, as her mother stood holding her near the wood fire while gazing into the flame's fervent dance beneath the pan, she felt her daughter slip softly from her arms. She watched as Ponciá forced herself down her chest and then stood up and began to walk. The surprise was not so much from the fact that the child had suddenly begun to walk, but rather in the way she had done it. She walked with one of the arms hidden behind her back, and had her little hand closed into a fist as though it were cut off. It had been nearly a year since Grandpa Vicencio had died. Everyone was asking why she walked that way (5).

When she grows old and becomes an artisan working with clay, Ponciá produces a short little man, curved, and with a cut-off hand, exactly like her grandfather. Accompanied by this vivid and tangible representation of the past, Ponciá challenges and disrupts eurocentric ideals about time as linear. Attempting to reconcile "one time with another" (132), Ponciá performs real and imaginary act of creating. Therefore embodying the creative and disruptive forces of Eshu.

The blacksmith Orisha: forging new perspectives

According to Christian (1993) and, later, to Jennings (2008), many critics of Morrison's novels, when analyzing the African religious cosmologies present in her work, view these cultural traces as mere superstition or myths. Nevertheless, this research is concerned with examining Morrison's writings from the perspective of those who acknowledge the presence of African cosmological features in her books. To provide a wider understanding of her writing, it is important to consider and put in evidence the "cosmology in which black people looked at the world" (Morrison 1984, 61). Therefore, we postulate that there is "another way[s] of knowing things" (61), a path provided by an African philosophical approach to understanding life, the pedagogy of Eshu's crossroads.

One of Morrison's aesthetic goals is to highlight traces of African religions and cultural practices that survived the Atlantic slave trade in the western world. Also, even though many cultural traces were suppressed during colonization, many others remained alive in the African descendants' consciousness. In fact, in her writing, Toni Morrison presents not just African cosmological or religious artifacts, but she emphasizes the "philosophical-psychological linkages" (4) between African-American people and their ancestors (Jennings).

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* portrays the United States before the slavery laws were billed, around 1670 and 1690 (Morrison 2008, interview). In the narrative, Morrison travels back to the seventeenth century to present us with the story of how slavery was institutionalized in the U.S, focusing on Native Americans, on the European immigrants that first came to the colonies, and on Africans and their descendants. The novel centers on the story of the Vaark family, their rise and fall. As she writes about the construction of the country, Morrison uses the characters to discuss elements of U.S. history. For example, Jacob Vaark, the plantation owner, was the son of a man from the Netherlands and "his mother was a girl with no consequence" (34). He inherited some land in the New World

from a distant relative, and, because of that, he had to move from Europe to claim his inheritance. Other characters populate the novel: Rebekka Vaark, Jacob's beloved wife from England; Lina, an enslaved-native-American, who worked for the family prior to the arrival of Sorrow, a black girl given to Jacob to settle a debt. Additionally, Florens was the last acquisition of Jacobs Vaark plantation. She was an enslaved girl that was believed to be rejected by her own mother, a former slave. Not only does the historical context of the book refer to the construction of the country, a nation built on enslaved people and immigrants, but there is a symbolism within the characters themselves, for they are either enslaved, native, mixed or immigrants, and one can postulate that they were all orphans.

The narrative is portrayed mostly in the farm, narrating the daily life of the characters and their personal stories, until they arrive in that piece of land that belonged to the Vaarks. This story is also about Florens' search for the love of her life and her eagerness to find freedom, but most importantly, to find a sense of self-worth, because she always thought that her mother did not want her and gave her away to Jacob, choosing her little brother over her. However, she could only find those wishes with the help of the blacksmith, the one that provided her with a new path.

Even though the blacksmith is a complex and mysterious character, the narrative does not specifically focus on his personal story. Instead, he is described and presented by the perspective that the other characters have about him. He first appears in the book because Jacob Vaark wanted to build fancy fences and a gate to his new mansion. However, this character, named after his profession, elicits different readings from different characters. For example, to Lina, the blacksmith meant trouble, but for Rebekka, he was an anchor that was holding the family together (97). Hence, for Florens, he was the one who owned her, for she was deeply in love with him (126). Last, for Sorrow, he meant salvation, because when she was sick, he treated her by using her own blood.

Furthermore, LaVinia Jennings, in her book entitled *Toni Morrison and The Idea of Africa* affirms that one of Morrison's goals, when writing prose, is to highlight African religion and traditions in her narratives. As a result, in *A Mercy*, the blacksmith has the ability to cure, as he cured Sorrow and, later on, Rebekka, from smallpox, and, because of that, he could be considered a specialist, someone who has ways to cure diseases, handle herbs, and treat misfortunes. Moreover, because he is a blacksmith, who deals with iron and forge, this character also has linkages to Ogun, the warrior Orisha.

Pierre Verger portrays Ogun as one of the oldest Yoruba deities. He has a strong connection with metals and with professionals who are crafters, such as carpenters, sculptors, and hunters. He represents war, iron, and blacksmiths, for he was one himself. Besides, Ogun is also defined as violent and intolerant; he is known for being the most respected and feared Orisha.

According to Prandi, Ogun was the one who provided people with the knowledge of using the iron as a tool:

When all the other orixás had failed, Ogun took his iron machete, went to the forest and cleaned the ground. The orishas, admired, asked Ogun what material the machete was made of. Ogun replied that it was iron, a secret received from Orunmilá. The orishas envied Ogun for the benefits that iron brought, not only to agriculture, but also to hunting and even war. For a long time the orixás harassed Ogun to know the secret of iron, but he kept the secret to himself. The orixás then decided to offer him the kingdom in exchange for him to teach them everything about that sturdy metal. Ogun accepted the proposal. Humans also came to Ogun to ask him for the knowledge of the iron. And Ogun gave them the knowledge of the forge, until the day when every hunter and every warrior had their own iron spear. But, even though Ogun accepted the command of the orishas, first of all he was a hunter. On one occasion, he went out hunting and spent many days out in a difficult season. When he came back from the woods, he was dirty and ragged. The orishas did not like to see their leader in that state. They despised him and decided to remove him from the kingdom. Ogun was disappointed with the orixás, because when they needed him for the secret of the forge, they made him king and now they said it was not worthy to rule them. So Ogun bathed, dressed in frayed palm leaves, picked up his weapons and left. In a distant place called Irê, he built a house under the acoco tree and remained there. The humans who received the secret of iron from Ogun have not forgotten it. Every December, they celebrate the Iudê-Ogun party. Hunters, warriors, blacksmiths and many others make sacrifices in memory of Ogun. Ogun is the lord of iron forever (86-88).¹⁰

According to the myth, the ability to forge held by Ogun is put in evidence. The narration also suggests that humans still celebrate the gift given by this god. In this sense, one can understand that, according to the Yoruba cosmology, the professions and crafts related to the iron have a strong connection to the Orisha. In the book, as Jacob Vaark wanted to have a fancier house, because his fortune had increased, he decided to hire a blacksmith to build fancy gates and the fences of the new building. Consequently, in the plot, the blacksmith built an “sinister gate that the smithy took two months to make. Two copper snakes met at the top” (48). Conjured by Jacob Vaark, the blacksmith performs his task. Ironically, Vaark dies before he has a chance to inhabit his new home.

Ogun is also known for being the god of warriors and of iron. His syncretism is associated with Saint George and Saint Anthony of Padua. In Cuba, he is represented as Saint John Baptist and as Saint Peter. Additionally, the personality of Ogun is connected to violence, and incapability of mercifulness. The blacksmith in Morrison’s novel also presents these characteristics pertaining to Ogun:

Seeing him still and limp on the floor with that trickle of red from his mouth your face breaks down. You knock me away shouting what are you doing? shouting where is your ruth? With such tenderness you lift him, the boy. When you see the angle of his arm you cry out. The boy opens his eyes then faints once more when you twist it back into its proper place. Yes, there is blood. A little. But you are not there when it comes, so how do you know I am the reason? Why do you knock me away without certainty of what is true? You see the boy down and believe bad about me without

question. You are correct but why no question of it? I am first to get the knocking away. The back of your hand strikes my face. I fall and curl up on the floor. Tight (125).

The passage presents a violent father worried about his kid. In this sense, the blacksmith, full of anger, harms Florens for she hurts Malaik, the boy he adopted. However, Reginaldo Prandi affirms that the deity is not a “bloodthirsty”¹¹ (Prandi 2021, 23); he is the one that shows new opportunities and provides the necessary strength one needs to surpass their difficulties. After the physical aggression, Florens and the blacksmith get verbal

You [The blacksmith] say you will hire someone to take me to her [Rebekka]. Away from you. Each word that follows cuts. Why are you killing me I ask you. - I want you to go. Let me explain. - No. - Now. - Why? - Why? - Because you are a slave. - What? - You heard me. - Sir makes me that. - I don't mean him. - Then who? - You. - What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me. - No. You have become one. - How? - Your head is empty and your body is wild. - I am adoring you. And a slave to that too. You alone own me. - Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. You could have killed this child. - No. Wait. You put me in misery. - You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind. You shout the word—mind, mind, mind—over and over and then you laugh, saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice. On my knees I reach for you. Crawl to you. You step back saying get away from me. I have shock. - Are you meaning I am nothing to you? That I have no consequence in your world? My face absent in blue water you find only to crush it? Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand (126).

In this passage, violence becomes psychological, for he lectured her with strong and painful words, causing her pain and agony. Nevertheless, as implied by Prandi, this kind of violence provoked by Ogun and feared by the Manichean thought of good and evil, can be considered a way of teaching, of showing a new path by destroying another. That is, this attitude toward Florens was a means used by the blacksmith to keep her away from this love she was nurturing for him. As a result, she could find her own freedom, her self-love and her progress, because Ogun is capable of changing perspectives, and showing new ways of doing things. It is after this altercation that Florens becomes “wilderness [...] Unforgiven. Unforgiving. [...] Free (161).”

Furthermore, in the same way Ogun knows the shortcuts of destiny (Prandi) and enables path changes, Eshu is known for enabling path connections, as discussed earlier. We argue that the Vaark family's home is a place where people connect their paths or find their directions, as in a similar manner to the train station in *Ponciá Vicencio*. Both places in both narratives conjure Eshu. The Orisha's presence shatters and reconstructs, creating chaos and new paths simultaneously. For example, the messenger Orisha connects different places because he is a crossroad, which means that he also connects Orun and Aiê, heaven and earth. Thus, in *A Mercy* when Jacob Vaark returns

in spirit to his farm to see the house he could not see completed while alive, one can ascertain a connection between the spiritual and the material world, which can be related to Eshu:

Jacob Vaark climbed out of his grave to visit his beautiful house. "As well he should," said Willard. "I sure would," answered Scully. It was still the grandest house in the whole region and why not spend eternity there? When they first noticed the shadow, Scully, not sure it was truly Vaark, thought they should creep closer. Willard, on the other hand, knowledgeable about spirits, warned him of the consequences of disturbing the risen dead. Night after night they watched, until they convinced themselves that no one other than Jacob Vaark would spend haunting time there: it had no previous tenants and the Mistress forbade anyone to enter. Both men respected, if they did not understand, her reasoning (127).

Additionally, as Eshu is a storyteller that also provides the ways one needs to narrate their own story, we posit that the messenger Orisha is the one who provides the strength for Florens to write her own narrative in the walls of the mansion, as she states in the following quote:

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamplight is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops? Dreaming will not come again. Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn (140).

Florens addresses the words written to the blacksmith with a nail (138) to tell him her side of the narrative. By writing Florens disrupts coloniality, for she is the one who is the narrator and author of her personal story. In this sense, the character is going against the silence once imposed on the enslaved. The process of telling her story adds physical marks to the Big House, resignifying it through creative transgression. Therefore, the mansion never inhabited serves as a site for her story to be passed on as well as an intersection between the world of the dead and of the living. Consequently, the Vaark's mansion in *A Mercy* represents a crossroad much in the same way the train station in *Ponciá Vicencio* does. There, Eshu makes himself present.

Where the paths meet

We sought to demonstrate that there are intersectional points between *Ponciá Vicencio* and *A Mercy*. Even though they were written in two different contexts and describe two different historical backgrounds - *A Mercy* takes place in seventeenth-century United States, prior to the racialized slavery laws, and

Ponciá Vicencio is set in Brazil after the abolition of slavery, in the nineteenth century - they highlight elements of the African cosmology, philosophy and beliefs brought to the Americas with the slave trade. Furthermore, in these two narratives written by two different Amefrican authors, Toni Morrison and Conceição Evaristo, the presence of Orishas deities and elements that represent their essence are found in both novels.

In other words, in the Brazilian piece *Ponciá Vicencio*, Oshunmare makes his presence in rainbows, snakes, umbilical cords, and the train, within the fluidity of the story, and with the strength that avoids Ponciá from losing completely sight of reality. On the other hand, in the North-American novel, Ogun appears in the persona of a character named the blacksmith, for he is the Orisha of those who work with iron and the forge. Additionally, Ogun's characteristics, such as being violent, but careful with the beloved ones, and provider of new perspectives, are also represented in this character.

The existence of the third Orisha, Eshu, is an element present in both novels. In *Ponciá Vicencio*, Eshu's presence is expressed by the multiple meetings and separations faced by the Vicencio family, and also by Ponciá herself, once she is a receptacle of memories and ancestry. Yet in *A Mercy*, Eshu is found in the lessons to be learnt and written by Florens, once she was forced to be freed from her love for the blacksmith, a rupture that caused her pain, suffering and growth. Additionally, as the Orisha connects life and death, spirits and humans, Eshu is also embodied within the spirits of Jacob Vaark and Grandpa Vicencio, because they are still connected to the material world. The first returns to dwell in his mansion, the latter reverberates in his granddaughter's body.

Finally, we argue that Eshu is not only representing the connection between those two plots, but also between Brazil and The United States and between Toni Morrison and Conceição Evaristo. Furthermore, by considering Eshu's pedagogy in this work, that is, the understanding that the crossroad is the chosen way to attach the African continent to the Afro-Atlantic, one confirms that what is constructed in the Americas is an embroidery of violence and resistance that survived the slave trade and has been resignified. Therefore, Morrison's and Evaristo's narratives are representatives of the cultural production of the Afro-Atlantic, its Diaspora and crossroads. As other Afro-Diasporic writers, their literary texts are creative, disruptive, and immersed in endless and timeless spirals of intersections.

Notes

1. São muitas as tramoias de Exu. Exu pode fazer contra, Exu pode fazer a favor. Exu faz o que faz, é o que é (It is important to mention that all the translations in this article were made by the authors).
2. Exu organiza, desorganiza, faz a finta, esculhamba, abre, faz e encarna caminhos, se mostra de forma múltipla para que cismemos das histórias que nos foram contadas.
3. Exu, trasladado, multiplicado e resignificado nas bandas de cá do Atlântico, é a esfera que representa os golpes aplicados à transgressão necessária à colonialidade.

Não só simboliza, como é, em suma, um princípio e potência de decolonização. Penetrando nas práticas culturais do complexo da diáspora africana, mantém vitalizado os inúmeros saberes que diversificam as experiências sociais do mundo e as possibilidades de reinvenção do mesmo. É Exu que esculhamba os limites da maquinaria ocidental, é ele que tenciona o arrebatamento das almas assombradas pelo pecado.

4. A encruzilhada é o caminho eleito, é irredutível, há algo lá que não conhece derrota diante dos esforços coloniais, sejam os de agora ou os de outrora.
5. According to Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience, The Middle Passage, was the forced voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World.
6. [...]Finalmente retomou origens negras para transformar também o candomblé em religião para todos, iniciando um processo de africanização e dessincretização para alcançar sua autonomia em relação ao catolicismo. Para isso, certamente, o reconhecimento da cultura dos orixás pela sociedade em geral representa um passo importante e sua divulgação através da música popular, das novelas de televisão e da literatura, entre outras formas de manifestação artística, não deixa de ser um meio muito expressivo (PRANDI, 2003, p. 27).
7. “A diáspora africana é, ao mesmo tempo, um fenômeno de despedaçamento de reconstrução” (121).
8. “A diáspora africana [...] acontecimento marcado pela tragédia, mas ressignificado pela necessidade de invenção.” (100)
9. refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations.
10. Quando todos os outros orixás tinham fracassado, Ogum pegou seu facão, de ferro, foi até a mata e limpou o terreno. Os orixás, admirados, perguntaram a Ogum de que material era feito tão resistente facão. Ogum respondeu que era o ferro, um segredo recebido de Orunmilá. Os orixás invejavam Ogum pelos benefícios que o ferro trazia, não só à agricultura, como à caça e até mesmo à guerra. Por muito tempo os orixás importunaram Ogum para saber do segredo do ferro, mas ele mantinha o segredo só para si. Os orixás decidiram então oferecer-lhe o reinado em troca de que ele lhes ensinasse tudo sobre aquele metal tão resistente. Ogum aceitou a proposta. Os humanos também vieram a Ogum pedir-lhe o conhecimento do ferro. E Ogum lhes deu o conhecimento da forja, até o dia em que todo caçador e todo guerreiro tiveram sua lança de ferro. Mas, apesar de Ogum ter aceitado o comando dos orixás, antes de mais nada ele era um caçador. Certa ocasião, saiu para caçar e passou muitos dias fora numa difícil temporada. Quando voltou da mata, estava sujo e maltrapilho. Os orixás não gostaram de ver seu líder naquele estado. Eles o desprezaram e decidiram destituí-lo do reinado. Ogum se decepcionou com os orixás, pois, quando precisaram dele para o segredo da forja, eles o fizeram rei e agora diziam que não era digno de governá-los. Então Ogum banhou-se, vestiu-se com folhas de palmeira desfiadas, pegou suas armas e partiu. Num lugar distante chamado Irê, construiu uma casa embaixo da árvore de acô e lá permaneceu. Os humanos que receberam de Ogum o segredo do ferro não o esqueceram. Todo mês de dezembro, celebram a festa de Iudê-Ogum. Caçadores, guerreiros, ferreiros e muitos outros fazem sacrifícios em memória de Ogum. Ogum é o senhor do ferro para sempre.
11. sanguinário

References

- Capone, Stefania. *A busca da África no candomblé: tradição e poder no Brasil*, 2.ed., Pallas, 2018, Rio de Janeiro.
- Christian, Barbara. "Fixing Methodologies: Beloved". *Cultural Critique*, no 24, 1993, pp. 05-15, University of Minnesota Press, JSTOR. Jul 05/ 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354127?origin=crossref>.
- Duarte, Eduardo de Assis. "Literatura afro-brasileira: um conceito em construção." *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea*, no. 31, 2008, pp. 11-23, CORE. Jul 05/2020. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/231171186.pdf>.
- Evaristo, Conceição. "Literatura Negra: Uma poética De Nossa Afro-Brasilidade". *Scripta*, vol. 13, no 25, Dec de 2009, pp. 17-31, <http://periodicos.pucminas.br/index.php/scripta/article/view/4365>.
- Evaristo, Conceição. *Ponciá Vicencio*. Translated by Paloma Martinez-Cruz. 1.ed. Host Publications, 2006.
- Figueroa-Vásquez, Yomaira. *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature*. 1.ed. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020.
- González, Lélia. "A categoria político-cultural da Amefricanidade". Holanda, Heloisa Buarque de. *Pensamento Feminista Brasileiro: formação e contexto*. Bazar do Tempo, 2019, Rio de Janeiro.
- Jennings, La Vinia Delois. 1.ed. *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, New York.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept." *Cultural Studies* (London, England), vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2007, pp. 240–270.
- Martins, Leda M. "A oralitura da memória". Fonseca, Maria Nazareth S. *Brasil Afro-Brasileiro*. Autêntica, 2001, Belo Horizonte.
- Morrison, Toni. MORRISON, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers*. Anchor Doubleday, 1984, New York.
- Morrison, Toni. *A mercy*. Knopf, 2008, New York.
- Pereira, S. S. "O negro em diáspora: um fazer histórico". *Revista Crioula*, no 13, Jul. 2014, doi:10.11606/issn.1981-7169.crioula.2013.64229.
- Prandi, Reginaldo. 1.ed. *Mitologia dos orixás*. Companhia das Letras, 2001, São Paulo.
- Prandi, Reginaldo. 1.ed. "Ogum". Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2021. Press.
- Prandi, Reginaldo. "As religiões afro-brasileiras e seus seguidores". In: *Civitas*, Porto Alegre, vol. 3, no. 1, Jun. 2003, pp. 15-33.
- Rodrigues, Felipe Fanuel Xavier. "The Politics of African Heritage in Black Brazilian Women's Literature." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 49, 2021, pp. 297-315. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/wsq.2021.0043.
- Rufino, Luiz. *Pedagogia das Encruzilhadas*. 1.ed. Mórula, 2019, Rio de Janeiro.
- Silva, Pedro Henrique Souza da. "Èsù Èmi: Representações do orixá na literatura afro-brasileira." *Literafro*, 2018. Jul. 2020. <http://www.letras.ufmg.br/literafro/ensaistas/29-critica-de-autores-feminios/589-esu-emi-representacoes-do-orixana-literatura-afro-brasileira-pedro-henrique-souza-da-silva>.
- Verger, Pierre Fatumbi. *Orixás*. 1.ed. Solisluna Design Editora, 2018.

Recebido em: 01/12/2021

Aceito em: 11/04/2022