

Black Masculinities in *Rei Negro* [Black King], by Henrique Coelho Neto / Masculinidades negras em *Rei Negro*, de Henrique Coelho Neto

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ABSTRACT

This article retrieves the analysis of black masculinities in Brazilian literature, particularly in *Rei Negro* [Black King], by Henrique Coelho Neto. The historical novel is addressed as documentary content, in the perspective of Discourse Analysis, as it reevaluates black masculinities in Brazil by evoking the main character as a king, in contrast to the usual position of black men in History and in Literature. The results question social standings defined by hypersexuality and deconstruct narratives that overcome fiction, affecting daily practices.

KEYWORDS: Black History; Racism; Interdisciplinarity

RESUMO

O artigo retoma a análise das masculinidades negras na história da literatura brasileira, especificamente no livro *Rei Negro*, de Henrique Coelho Neto. Desse modo, acessa o romance histórico como material documental, tratado na perspectiva da Análise do Discurso, pois, ao evocar a personagem central como rei, em oposição ao comumente atribuído aos homens negros, tanto na história quanto na literatura, o romance redimensiona masculinidades negras no Brasil. Os resultados problematizam lugares sociais definidos pela hipersexualidade e desconstrói narrativas que extrapolam a ficção e atingem práticas do cotidiano.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: História dos Negros; Racismo; Interdisciplinaridade

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Initial Remarks

Black people constitute one of the main themes in Brazilian historiography. Nevertheless, by conceiving them as “naturally slaves,” the social world forged imagery, oral and textual narratives, historically assumed as truths, which, even today, generate unfavorable realities towards the black male diasporic experience. Due to the negative appreciation of the ancestry and singularities of black people, social meanings emerge, indicating discredited spaces for black masculinities, invariably centered on unruly, aggressive and condemnatory sexuality; as also allow us to consider researchers who occupy their locus of enunciation (Almeida, 2019; Domingues, 2019; Fanon, 2020; Florentino, 1995; Nkosi, 2014; Restier; Souza, 2019).

The contemporary discussion about racial and gender relations encourages the resumption of the texts related to the deconstruction of narratives attributed to enslaved black men in the history of Brazilian literature. Therefore, this article aims to revisit the fictional construction of the black masculine in the novel *Rei Negro* [Black King], whose first edition dates back to 1914, a few years after abolition, proclaimed in 1888, a period of social tension between black and white people. Written by Henrique Maximiliano Coelho Neto (1864-1934), an abolitionist interested in the social causes of his time, this regionalist historical novel reflects his political position by bringing up masculinities. Developing male characters who antagonize each other, the author redirects plots usually referred to black men, re-signifying black men gender within the idealization of a republican Brazilian nation, to this extent, forged as white (Carvalho, 2017; Coelho Neto, 1966; Lara, 1988; Skidmore, 1976).

The excessively elaborate writing, the amount of formalisms and the sophistication of the language tie up the novel. Some authors affirm that the concern with form motivated severe reviews of Coelho Neto’s work, especially by modernists (Bosi, 1979). Vocabulary archaisms overflow the novel with erudition and traps that make the reading an arduous exercise, difficult to understand, however, it repositions black men in a social universe in which black masculinities are diagnosed as subaltern, deviant, unhealthy (Corrêa, 2001; Mota, 2003). Thus, by projecting Macambira as a protagonist, ordering him as king, a leader, an honest man with decision-making power, even though at the end of the novel he murders his antagonist, the son of “his owner,” the author

establishes, on the contrary, the domination of white masculinities, as the black man performs a role of moral superiority and intellectual capacity, with awareness of the oppressive servile system, fundamentally, with regard to the position assumed as *Rei Negro*.

The main character is described as “son of Munza” – a black man revered by the white men and feared among black men, for being heir to an African monarchical ancestry, member of a royal lineage, a nobleman; a reality barely discussed in the context of the novel writing and with an approach recently recovered by Brazilian historiography (Mello & Souza, 2002). From the plot emerges a man carved in superiority, as ‘prince of his race,’ a distinction constantly remembered by Balbina – a black female character identified as *mandingueira* [an old witch], an alleged expert in feminine ancestral wisdom of the art of healing, comprehensive of the healing of the soul; the only friend who constantly reminds him of the glories of his ancestors in Africa (Coelho Neto, 1996).

Despite his royal ancestry, Macambira remains tied to slavery, but in a different way from the others. Trusted man of farmer Manuel Gandra, the owner of *Fazenda Cachoeira* [Waterfall Farm], where tragedies, violence and all sorts of oppression unfold, the main character oscillates from black king to slave. In charge of purchase and sale transactions, in several situations he is equivalent to “his master” in managing the business, which denotes his power and authority in relation to other slaves and, at the same time, his power of political negotiation in relation to white men – this is diametrically opposed to what is crystallized in the history of Brazilian literature, as evidenced by Gregory Rabassa (1966).

As a reflection of an era, the novel allows the dismantling of symbols, concepts and memories attributed to black men in Brazil. Authors consulted state that the presence of black people in the Brazilian literature prior to the so-called *Geração de 30* [30’s Generation] is minimal, and when mentioned, they are linked to exacerbated and hostile sensuality or to the depraved, diabolical and sadistic nature, resulting from a fantasized hypersexuality based on stereotypes related to exaggerated and animalistic virility, even as stigmas of degeneration. From this universe comes up the pervert, the pedophile, the sexual criminal; lurid and affectionless that outline erotic, sensual, unhealthy figures considered vile by ideal, normal and healthy white moralities by doctors and lawyers above all (Ferla, 2009; Mota, 2003; Souza Campos, 2003).

As historiography allows to state, the ways of sociability established in the post-abolition era execrated black people based on “habitual segregations” (Chalhoub, 1986), even among black people who were recognized as kings (Silva, 1997). Coelho Neto’s novel allows to retrieve the diversity of the black men by symptomatically introducing a black man as protagonist in the context of an enslaver and manorial society, in the emergence of the Republic. His work contributes to dismantling historical, social and literary spaces relating to black men; by repositioning what was commonly accepted, by announcing the dangers of singular stories, the novel shows how gender and race permeate the construction of black diasporic masculinities in Brazil.

Enslaved *Rei Negro*: Black Masculinities in Conflict

Antonio Celso Ferreira predicates that literature is a “*fonte fecunda*” [fertile source] (2017, p. 61), because it enables the historian to distinguish the existing dimensions between real and fictional as a reflection of a period. Henrique Maximiliano Coelho Neto was born in Caxias, state of Maranhão, in 1864, son of the Portuguese Antônio da Fonseca Coelho and the indigenous Brazilian Ana Silvestre Coelho. At the age of 6, his family moved to the city of Rio de Janeiro, where he studied at *Colégio Pedro II* [Pedro 2nd High School], followed by the School of Medicine, a course that he abandoned in 1883 in order to enroll the School of Law, in the city of São Paulo. After less than a year, he moved to the School of Law of Recife, in Pernambuco, where he completed his first academic year, then returned to São Paulo, at which time he became involved in the abolitionist movements.

His biography points out his resistant stance and constant changes as both obstacles to completing the Law Course and as motivations to expand his commitment to the abolitionist cause during the advent of Republicanism. In 1885, upon returning to Rio de Janeiro, he met dedicated writers such as Olavo Bilac (1865-1918), Luis Murat (1861-1929) and José do Patrocínio (1853-1905) – the latter a black man – with whom he shared impressions about Brazilian social life. During this period, he began writing literary texts and worked as a contributor to local newspapers such as *Gazeta da Tarde* [Afternoon Gazette] And *A Cidade do Rio* [The City of Rio]. In 1890, he married Maria Gabriela Brandão, with whom he had 14 children (Bosi, 1979).

Still on his personal history, in 1891, one year after getting married, Coelho Neto was appointed Secretary of Government of the State of Rio de Janeiro, also serving as Director of State Affairs. In 1909 he was elected Congressman, being re-elected in 1917. Previously, in 1892 he taught History of Art at the *Escola Nacional de Belas Artes* [National School of Fine Arts], and Literature at *Colégio Pedro II*, where he studied. In 1910, he was appointed Director of the Chairs of History of Theater and Dramatic Literature at the *Escola de Arte Dramática do Rio de Janeiro* [Drama School of Rio de Janeiro]. Furthermore, the novelist occupies chair number two at the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* [Brazilian Academy of Letters], which he helped to create (Bosi, 1979; Brookshaw, 1983).

Even with a prominent social status, due to the strong criticism imposed on him by modernist writers, such as Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954) e Lima Barreto (1881-1922), the black journalist and writer Coelho Neto fell into oblivion. Although recognized as one of the most read authors in Brazil, the acclaimed prince of Brazilian prose writers experienced extremes, from praise to contempt; at that point he wrote *Rei Negro* (Bosi, 1979). In this work, he reevaluates the black male, specially by conferring the antagonist – a white man – the stigmas of degeneracy, outlining him as a deviant being, one of the characteristic anomalies diagnosed by forensic Medicine and Psychiatry as typical of the sexual criminal, the abnormal, the monstrous – an imaginary that certainly affected black men as the main targets of theories of racial degeneration in Brazil (Souza Campos, 2003).

Historiography attests that in the first decades of the 20th century, when the novel was written, bio-typological differences ascribed to black people social standings permeated by “natural lusts,” as they were “ugly,” “dirty,” “inferior” (Ferla, 2009; Motta, 2003). The results of this process have impacted literary writing, however, in the novel *Macambira* does not find himself in the position of physical suffering and symbolic violence imposed on black people, nor does he appear as a hypersexualized or humiliated and infantilized man, nor as a black person who succumbs to the horrors of slavery or resists the system through accommodation. On the contrary, the protagonist lives under the protection of “his master,” who admires him like a son. *Macambira* is his trusted man and the manager of his business, despite Julinho, his real son, a character who appears in the plot as a sadist, violent, rapist, pedophile– as black people were normally treated by

Law and Medicine at the turn of the 19th century to the 20th, when they were naturally considered criminals, abnormal and sick.

Although the feeling based on the segregating and mutilating repulsion of black people guided daily life in Brazil at the time, in the novel, the disfigured reality of the black people diagnosed as natural-born criminals does not apply to the black man Macambira, but to Julinho, the white man. The monarchical origin of the *Rei Negro* commands respect among both the white and black population, as he is a leader, protector, but also “*capitão do mato*” [Bush Captain], a man who captured “runaway slaves,” whose personality is shaped by contrasting values in relation to the other black men on the farm, notably, when he prevents the dissemination of sexual abuse committed by white and black men against the black women, who were raped and abused daily, in a reality that transcends the fiction and marks the origin of the history of black women in Brazil, as said by Bebel Nepomuceno (2012).

The literary narrative thickens when the antagonist character is featured as a white, perverse, sexually disordered man, a soulless figure, who harbors feelings of antipathy and hatred for Macambira. In the plot, Julinho demonstrates aversion to the fact that the enslaved black king stands at his own father’s side when it comes to decision-making on the farm, notably regarding the protection of black people against the unfair physical punishments constantly applied to them for pleasure, satisfaction and delight, which was supported by his mother, figuratively portrayed as heartless, cruel and evil.

The plot breaks with another dominant narratives by involving black masculinities in a complexity of feelings, electing them as diverse, complex, distinct and, above all, presenting the antagonist as someone devoid of emotion, “degenerate,” hypersexualized. The novel exposes conflicts that reinforce the social standing of black masculinities, as they open up the possibility of diverse and plural male black existences, which in turn allow for dimensioning discourses based on white morality that forge black identity as inhuman, violent and sexually disordered. Clinically and legally diagnosed as the result of deviations, addictions, heredity, the degeneration addressed by the novel is directed at the white man – a character who assumes the stand of perversion and sickness, therefore the novel redirects social standings where white and black people used to be in the broader social universe (Souza Campos, 2003).

The discourse analysis or the examination of the literary content shows that the meanings can change or be transformed, but the essence remains the same. Although they could contribute to reinventing everyday life or reevaluating realities assumed as naturalized truths, their impacts constitute fields of dispute, conflicts and intolerance whether in the past or present. As reiterated, the narrative presents the main character as a fair, honest, protective man, whose role throughout the plot makes him indispensable to the organization of life in the farm, as his “owner” makes every effort to keep him managing the business. Therefore, the desired marriage with Lúcia, mentioned as “*mulata*” [mulatta], “*mucama*” [female slave dedicated to take care of owner’s home] the most beautiful woman in that slavery and with whom Macambira falls in love – is anticipated.

The buzz surrounding the marriage with the enslaved black king’s chosen woman provoke envy and hatred in Manuel Gandra’s son. The antagonist character, upon learning the news, rapes and impregnates Lúcia, Macambira’s fiancée, a few days before the wedding, as revenge, to target his father’s favorite man and the interceptor of his abusive sexual adventures with black women, whom Macambira protects much more as a king than a “slave.” Fearing that her child will be born with a white skin that reveals the rape, Lúcia remains silent and hides the pregnancy.

The *mucama*, described as an “almost white” woman, suffers horribly during the pregnancy and dies in labor, conceiving a “white child.” Manuel Gandra, aware of what happened, order the woman’s body to be buried and the newborn baby hidden. By the irony of fate, Macambira finds his wife about to die at Balbina’s house. At the ranch of the old *mandingueira* and midwife, he discovers the rape and the moral pain experienced by his beloved, ashamed and dying, but aware of the uselessness of reporting the occurred. The foundling is handed over to Balbina, who was supposed to take the baby to a church “as usual,” but a storm prevents her from carrying out the order and she hides the newborn on her place. With this passage, the novelist makes his work timeless, open and full of meanings (Coelho Neto, 1996).

Pain and death weave the novel and reflect the tragic experience of slavery lived by black women and men over the centuries. The drama evokes pain turned into fury; Macambira goes into exile in the forest and only returns to the farm when the author brings Julinho, the evildoer, back into the narrative. Ashamed and outraged in his nobility,

the protagonist decides to buy his manumission, but, convinced to remain on the farm, at the very last moment, “remembering the histories of the kingdom of Munza,” “the brave fighting warriors,” “the height of strength and glory of his people” and “feeling the power provided by his visions of the past,”¹ Macambira murders Julinho (Coelho Neto, 1996). As a political act or a custom of the time, Macambira fulfills his duty by honoring his name and status as *Rei Negro*, as well as the African masculine tradition in diaspora.

The dramatic plot reveals in Macambira complex and oscillating masculinities, delimited between the black king and the black slave. The black king one addresses his non-condition of a fulfilled man, “*capitão do mato* [slave driver],” “trusted black man,” “feared person,” “in charge.”² The second, shows the “black slave” that does not work in the bush, nor does he live in the slave quarters or in the mansion, but who has his own house, built on a “high hill,” surrounded by an orange grove. Both masculinities invoke conflict, on the one hand, it goes back to noble ancestry or the “austerity of manners, the taciturn and haughty atmosphere”³ (Coelho Neto, 1966, p. 40) and, on the other, to the black man subjected to white domination.

In this sense, it is possible to observe the implicit indication of a historicity that contributes to remodeling the history of black masculinities; that is, the dismantling of uncontested narratives attributed to black men considered solely for their insubordination, brute force, overvalued sexuality (Fanon, 2020). The novel points out that Macambira swings between a man of repressed sexuality, focused on his work, with an almost dogmatic austerity, who disapproves of the ways in which other black men behave on the farm, who cares about the lineage of his race and the preservation of the memory of their ancestors – thus expressing noble feelings of protection and maintenance of black African traditions, but also a feeling of obedience.

The author outlines the character differentiating Macambira from other black people, establishing differences between the behavior of the common black people and that of the enslaved black king, distancing him from eugenic interpretations that organized Brazilian society during the first decades of the 20th century. Hence, he keeps him away from the illnesses imposed on black people: “Supportive of black people, always and in

¹ In Portuguese: “lembrar-se das histórias do reino de Munza”; “dos bravos guerreiros lutadores”; “do auge da força e da glória de seu povo”; “sentindo a energia que provinha de suas visões do passado.”

² In Portuguese: “capitão-do-mato”; “negro de confiança”; “pessoa temida”; “mandante.”

³ In Portuguese: “austeridade das maneiras, o ar taciturno e altivo.”

everything for them, he just did not suffer the filth of lust. He revolted against the cursed rage that bestialized them, vituperating, with frenzied hatred, when he was caught in contuberances or concupiscent conspiracies” (Coelho Neto, 1966, p. 47),⁴ an aspect that marks Macambira’s nobility, setting him apart from the others, black or not.

Despite the austerity towards others, Macambira is still fair. He protected them as much as he could, largely due to Balbina, a character linked to his African ancestry, his homeland, the Reino de Munza” [Kingdom of Munza], “long lost”; a woman who appears in the plot as the intersection between the slave man with his noble ancestry, as the king of a brave nation, which accentuates his pride. Balbina is the wise woman who support him in moments of loneliness and difficulties through which his sovereignty raises even more, what can be seen while the author works on the image of the main character:

[...] sad, concentrated, as soon as he finished his service, receiving orders from the master, he slowly retired to his solitary hut, patronized like the mountain, in a green orange grove, and there he received praise and homage from the people of his race, and Balbina who, every night, stepping lightly on the leaves, sneaky like a jaguar, crossed the woods to see him and talk about the lost homeland, the dead kings and the vengeful gods (Coelho Neto, 1966, p. 43).⁵

Macambira dreams of his ancestral roots and the dignity stolen from his fellow men; he wishes to maintain the warrior nation he represents against the moral degradation of men and women of his race, a disappointing circumstance for him. The author addresses Macambira’s sexuality when referring to the frequency with which women harass him: “The *cabrocha* waited for him undaunted, with flaming eyes, her nose wrinkled, sniffing, in anger, panting [...]. When she saw him close, she attacked, with her hands like claws, threatening to attack him. Before, however, a slap knocked her off balance” (Coelho Neto, 1966, p. 48).⁶ Those words show an intention of animalization.

⁴ In Portuguese: “Solidário com a gente negra, sempre e em tudo por ela, só não lhe sofria as imundices da luxúria. Revoltava-se contra a raivação danada que a bestializava, vituperando, com ódio frenético, quando apanhava em contubérnios ou conchavos concupiscentes.”

⁵ In Portuguese: “[...] triste, concentrado, mal terminava o serviço, recebendo as ordens do senhor, recolhia vagarosamente à sua cabana solitária, apadrinhada como o monte, num verde laranjal e ali recebia preito e homenagem da gente da sua raça, e Balbina que, todas as noites, pisando, de leve, as folhas, sorradeira como a onça, atravessava os matos, ia vê-lo, falar-lhe da pátria perdida, dos reis mortos e dos deuses vingativos.”

⁶ In Portuguese: “A cabrocha esperou-o impávida, d’olhos chamejantes, o nariz franzido, fungando, de raiva, aos sorvos [...] Quando o viu perto lançou-se d’investidas, com as mãos em garras, ameaçando agatafunhá-lo. Antes, porém, que lhe chegasse uma bofetada que desequilibrou-a.”

The austerity of his nobility prevents him from participating in actions and behaviors that are unlike his royal-ancestral status that sets him apart. However, his intimacy with Manuel Gandra, a white man, “slave master,” distinguishes him from other slaves and, for this reason, every time a black man was punished, Macambira was blamed, because as the *Rei Negro* he was supposed to protect them. The conflicts related to black masculinities pervades the main character of the novel, the differences between the protective black king and the obedient black slave arise in Macambira.

Macambira’s fluctuating masculinity is shaped by direct interaction with Balbina, who preserves the *Rei Negro*’s ancestry and space. Nevertheless, his journey is intersected by Manuel Gandra, who demands his obedience while at the same time granting him the status of manager and the power to control his wealth production. Such ambiguity formats his manipulated masculinity, hesitating between the black king and the black slave. Violence can be evidenced in the duality of his condition, of the succumbed black man and the orphan representative of the destroyed kingdom, revealing Macambira’s personality as conflicting, as he is simultaneously king and “slave.”

Distraught, his feelings interact respectively to turn him into a cluster of emotions. Significantly, Macambira continues to be the black king, but the essentialization of violence that has existed since the colonial period inflicts stigmas in the male black population throughout the post-emancipation time. The legacy of slavery configures a mark that penetrates the deepest layers of society as the main characteristic of the systematic domination of black bodies, almost never imagined as kings, queens, members of the monarchical traditions, diplomatic leaders of great kingdoms, protectors with distinct cultural inheritances (Mello & Souza, 2002).

Attempts to dismantle African traditions in the diaspora have perpetuated a specific type of racism that allows the concealment of mechanisms that maintain it as structural by blaming the current victims of this process, considered to be devoid of critical revolutionary consciousness (Almeida, 2019). This type of interpretation has formed, in Brazil, explanatory sociological paradigms for the backwardness of Brazilian society. For this current of thought, the servile system removed the capacity for criticism and resistance from enslaved black men and women, and they were therefore considered lacking the ethos required for the new lifestyle based on salaried labor, as argued by Florestan Fernandes (1978).

The history of men “[...] is not only made of achievements and heroic acts, but also of suffering, pain and humiliation that condemn them to suffer in silence” (Del Priore; Amantino, 2013, p. 10).⁷ For black men, this reality becomes exacerbated in terms of complexity, perpetuated in the post-abolition period. As Jurandir Freire Costa reinforces, in Brazil, “[...] the strong, sexually and morally regulated body was clinically identified with the white body and to this end, the figure of the ‘slave’ was ordinarily used as an example of physical and moral corruption.”⁸ For the author, the awareness on race and racism happened at a peculiar moment, what he considers a “[...] plan for the formation of class and race consciousness necessary for the progress of the National Estate” (1999, p. 208),⁹ that is, of Brazil as a country of white people.

Thus, the plasticity of the concept and the dimension of political constructions forged for the male gender allows to capture the “[...] way in which men position themselves through discursive practices” (Connel; Messerschmidt, 2013, p. 257).¹⁰ The values imprinted by the concepts of patriarchalism, paternalism, virility, hypersexuality, power, among others that outline the idea of “macho” and “male superiority,” deepen in the devaluation of black men and mark their masculinities mediated by a perverse process of self-denial and reproduction of historically forged bodies, minds and behaviors, counterproductive from the perspective of ancestries, social and gender standings that cross the African universe in diaspora (Restier; Souza, 2019).

Macambira differs from the stereotypes attributed to black men. The author reveals the different masculinities, the existing diversity of spaces occupied by black man and refutes static and reifying conceptions that forge black men in Brazil as insubordinate, inferior, childish, violent and vulgar, ideas that manufacture permanent tensions and reproduce harmful meanings related to black men, treated as aesthetically grotesque, socially deviant, naturally criminal (Domingues, 2019; Mota, 2003; Souza Campos, 2003). By building a character that differs from the stereotyped black men, precisely in

⁷ In Portuguese: “não é só feita de conquistas e atos heroicos, mas também de sofrimentos, dores e humilhações que os condenam a sofrer calados.”

⁸ In Portuguese: “o corpo forte, sexual e moralmente regrado, foi medicamente identificado ao corpo branco e para isso utilizou-se, ordinariamente, da figura do ‘escravo’ como exemplo de corrupção física e moral.”

⁹ In Portuguese: “plano de formação da consciência de classe e raça necessária ao progresso do Estado nacional.”

¹⁰ In Portuguese: “forma como os homens se posicionam através de práticas discursivas”

the emergence of the Republic, Coelho Neto reevaluates their social standings in the broader social life. Although, for David Brookshaw:

If Coelho Neto intended to picture a “Noble Savage” with a true tribal background, then he failed miserably, because the murder of the farmer’s son by Macambira is not the result of honorable revenge, but rather the mundane jealousy of one of the *mulatas* on the property, further proof of the author’s inability to escape a slavery mentality, in his view of black people as incapable of any action based on a genuine revolutionary feeling (Brookshaw, 1983, p. 67).¹¹

The approach of black men in Brazilian literature is linked to the “negative force of slavery” or to the “slave mentality” that disables them, with black people being described as deprived of critical awareness, ignorant and alienated from the slavery reality. However, without intending to make black masculinities immune to jealousy or disqualifying them as “demon slave[s], turned into beast[s] by slavery itself” (Proença Filho, 2004, p. 165),¹² the analysis considers that the sign of noble ancestry and the condition of the keeper of the traditions of the “kingdom of Munza” as *Rei Negro* are important dimensions, in which the murder of the antagonist, the farmer’s son, assumes new perspectives, not as an honorable revenge, nor as a mundane action provoked by common feelings, but as a political act and masculine practice at the time.

According to Marina de Mello e Souza (2002), African societies constituted vast kingdoms in which heads of families, surrounded by their dependents and households, integrated the core of the social organization of the traditional ancestral life throughout the African territory. Men and women were subordinate to the village chief who, in turn, provided protection, but also punished, even with death, those who were insubordinate. This author allows to consider that the organization of African social life, formed by several kingdoms, comprised of different ethnicities, gravitates around male leadership, the symbolic place occupied by men in African history, as revealed by Jose Eduardo Agualusa (2015), as even the Queen Nzinga demands to be called king.

¹¹ In Portuguese: “Se Coelho Neto pretendeu retratar um ‘Selvagem Nobre’ com um verdadeiro passado tribal, então falhou miseravelmente, porque o assassinato do filho do fazendeiro por Macambira não é fruto de vingança honrada, e sim ciúme mundano de uma das mulatas da propriedade, mais uma prova da inabilidade do autor em fugir a uma mentalidade escravocrata, em sua visão do negro como incapaz de qualquer ação baseada em genuíno sentimento revolucionário.”

¹² In Portuguese: “escravo demônio, tornado fera por conta da própria escravidão.”

Julinho's murder confers new meaning to Macambira's leadership. Anchored in traditions of ancestry, of African male nobility, that is, of maintaining honor, not as a betrayed man, but as a *Rei Negro*, son of a monarchical lineage, "prince of his people," the social standing occupied by the protagonist deconstruct the "demon slave," the "noble savage," the "stupid black man." Even approached in the broader male universe, as highlighted by Denise Bernuzzi de Sant'anna (2013, p. 249), "the defense of honor was a strong experience among men [...], the defloration of girls, including minors, could be avenged by their parents and siblings to punish those who dishonored a name, a family and a tradition."¹³

The historical novel allows the resumption of the analysis of black masculinities in the deconstruction of singular narratives, as the characters who antagonize each other deconstruct the diagnostic related to the male black. As Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Junior (2007, p. 63) pondered, "the distinction between fact and fiction, which separated historiographical from literary discourse, was transcended [...] by making explicit the aspect of the fabrication of the significant itself."¹⁴ In this way, the novel allows to retrace the rupture of standards imposed on black men by revealing different spaces in which their masculinities are inserted, notably in relation to ancestral African practices, but, fundamentally, by attributing stigmas of degeneration to white man, and thus, remaking the past with the disarticulation of the meanings attributed to black people in Brazil by Medicine and Law.

Final Remarks

Multiplicities, complexities and different hierarchical levels among men emerge from the novel. With regard to black masculinities, considered submasculinities in relation to white masculinities, the dynamic between reality and fiction, by creating symbols, concepts and memories, overcomes barriers in literature and allows access to perversities that violate black man. Macambira is an additional point of reflection on this historical-

¹³ In Portuguese: "A defesa da honra era uma experiência forte entre os homens [...], defloramentos de moças, incluindo menores de idade, podiam ser vingados por seus pais e irmãos para punir aqueles que desonravam um nome, uma família e uma tradição."

¹⁴ In Portuguese: "A distinção entre o fato e a ficção, que separou o discurso historiográfico do discurso literário, foi transcendida [...] ao tornar explícito o caráter da fabricação do próprio significante."

fictional process, opposing what is still used today as natural, true, especially in the context in which the novel is written, the emergence of the Republic.

Rei Negro allows the deconstruction of commonly accepted stories by breaching structural racist interpretations, therefore mistaken in relation to black men, historically treated through social and cultural marginality as subalterns, inferiors, sick, as a mechanism for constructing ideas that whiten the Brazilian population and as a disarticulation of diverse blackness, which imposes the harmful construction of black people as slaves. The analysis of black masculinities in *Rei Negro* reconstructs the history of black men in Brazil, as it dismantles the existing imposition around a singular and anomic masculinity.

The thematic exploration of the narrative appears as one of the hermeneutic possibilities for approaching the aesthetic phenomenon. Bakhtin understands the act of artistic creation through the intertwining between content, form and interaction with contextual and universal culture. If for a long time literature was dedicated to looking only at the specificities of an era, ignoring their effective intersections in the field of culture and the context of a time, the complexity of the literary phenomenon points to the need to expand this conception, by intertwining critical reading, discursive intentionality and production context. Even so, further expansions are relevant, as closing literature in its modus operandi or in its historical-cultural context can be reckless and limiting, since the great works of literature carry a depth of meaning that, often, transcends their moment, this is what allows them to live in the great time. The historical novel integrates the past with the present, however, but also reveals the capacity for expansion of this present in any direction.

In “Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff,” Bakhtin states that “everything that belongs only to the present dies along with it” (1986, p. 4),¹⁵ emphasizing that the literary work surrenders itself entirely to great time, the past and the future, since the artistic language is unsaturable, enhancing recreations and co-creations. While the author is historically a prisoner of a time, the work, delivered to its readers, can carry the possibilities of their liberation.

¹⁵ BAKHTIN, Mikhail. Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff. In: BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee and Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp. 01-09.

In line with Bakhtinian thought, in order to support dialogic criticism, the historian, the literary critic, the researcher in Human Sciences are responsible for considering the existence of an uncapturable truth in its entirety in literary discourse, being able to give interpretations, in the way of exercising their freedom.

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Received March 23, 2024

Accepted March 06, 2025

Statement of Author’s Contribution

The authors declare that they all contributed equally to the following aspects: 1. Conception and development or analysis and interpretation of data; 2. Article writing or relevant critical review of the intellectual content; 3. Final approval of the version to be published; 4. Responsibility for all aspects of the work, guaranteed the accuracy and integrity of all parts of the work, considering their roles in the UNISA Masters Human Sciences Program and the research groups in which they are engaged.

Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso [*Bakhtiniana*. Journal of Discourse Studies] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review I

Well-written work that originally discusses the theme of black masculinities focused on the work of Henrique Coelho Neto, which is still little studied. I would only suggest to revise the use of the term “slave,” considering whether it could be more appropriate to use “enslaved.” APPROVED

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Reviewed on July 19, 2024.

Review II

Firstly, it is very positive that the authors of the article could reasonably criticize, already in the Initial Remarks, the archaic and erudite language used in the novel. Generally, there is a tendency to get carried away by sentimental attachments to the writer's work. The discussion presented in the article has originality as its main feature, as it deals with a novel that distances itself from the stereotypical approach of black masculinity prevalent in the second decade of the 20th century, precisely in 1914. The choice of a work that subverts racist literary standards, constructing the black person not as a hypersexualized, perverted and bad-nature being, but as a correct and valuable person is a great contribution to current texts, a political-literary transversality. The novel deserves to be highlighted because it reverses roles, portraying the white antagonist as perverted, amoral, rapist, sadist. This deconstruction is developed with a relevant and accurate theoretical framework and succeeds by discussing the plurality and complexity of black masculinity in the novel, the conflict between the black king and the black slave, which also contributes to the humanization of the protagonist, who appears ambiguous. This masculine ambiguity is reinforced in the article when quoting Jurandir Freire Costa, a theorist whose work delves into this issue. However, there is a certain contradiction in the novel that is not addressed in the article: the act of violence committed by the protagonist when he slaps the black woman who harasses him. The authors could have discussed this passage in the novel, due to the fact that, in the novel, violence is considered something common, justifiable. If the character's masculinity is truly complex, perhaps he should have reflected that in his performance. Likewise, regarding the murder of the antagonist by the protagonist, which could be approached by the authors of the article as a reproduction of white patriarchy, as it is anchored by the defense of honor. Bell Hooks (2015) would be an excellent theoretical reference for this discussion. Finally, the article lacks some quotes of excerpts from the novel, to support the authors' arguments. These aspects, however, do not compromise the quality and especially the originality of the article, which is necessary in the field of black masculinities, in current writing.

APPROVED

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Reviewed on July 29, 2024.

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