

**The Childhoods of Bitita and Juan Francisco Manzano:
Autobiography as Critical Fabulation in Black Authorship / *As
infâncias de Bitita e Juan Francisco Manzano: autobiografia como
fabulação crítica na autoria negra***

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to understand the effects of the colonial-slave system on perceptions of childhood by analyzing two autobiographical texts. The first presents Juan Francisco Manzano who narrated his memories as a boy enslaved in Cuba in the early nineteenth century, in *The Autobiography of Slave* (1840). In the second, we follow Bitita in *Bitita's Diary: The Childhood Memoirs of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (1982), by Carolina Maria de Jesus, whose narrative reveals how colonialism structured Brazilian society in the post-abolition period. By marking two distinct historical moments, we seek to glimpse how the literary genre of autobiography allows the affirmation of Black authorship beyond a single denunciatory bias, accompanying possible negotiations that build unique ways of making literature. We thus understand the movements of critical fabulation present in these texts as practices of freedom and construction of identity.

KEYWORDS: Autobiography; Childhood; Race; Freedom; Fabulation

RESUMO

O artigo busca compreender os efeitos do sistema colonial-escravista nas percepções de infância a partir da análise de duas obras autobiográficas. A primeira apresenta Juan Francisco Manzano narrando suas memórias enquanto menino escravizado na Cuba do início do século XIX, em A autobiografia do poeta escravo (1840). Na segunda, acompanhamos Bitita em Diário de Bitita (1982), de Carolina Maria de Jesus, cuja narrativa visibiliza os caminhos pelos quais o colonialismo foi estruturando a sociedade brasileira no pós-abolição. Ao marcar dois momentos históricos distintos, procuramos vislumbrar os caminhos pelos quais o gênero literário da autobiografia permite a afirmação da autoria negra para além de um único viés denunciativo, acompanhando as negociações possíveis nesse sentido que edificam modos singulares de se fazer literatura. Entendemos então os movimentos de fabulação crítica presentes nas obras como práticas de liberdade e construção de identidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Autobiografia; Infância; Raça; Liberdade; Fabulação

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Introduction

Etymologically, autobiography means the writing or recording of one's own life. The word comes from the Greek words *autós*, which means self, *bíos*, life, and *gráphein*, which can refer to writing, drawing or other forms of recording. This literary genre derives from the concept of biography that arose in modern times with the emergence of the modern subject. Despite their Greek origin, neither of the terms, biography or autobiography, appear in the classics. Autobiography was first seen in English between the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century (Santos, Torga, 2020),¹ coincidentally in the same period in which the first autobiographies of enslavement were published. Although, as Foucault (2000) mentioned in his reflections² on the writing of the self, use of the term does not date back to classical antiquity, the sense of self-reporting had appeared in first and second century correspondence.

Confessions (1764-1770), by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, inaugurated the modern form of the autobiographical genre, defined by Lejeune as “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Lejeune, 1989, p. 120).³ This conceptualization raises four elements: the form of language; the subject matter; the situation and position of the author, which reveal their identity and coincides with that of the narrator; and the temporal perspective, which is inclined towards facts in the past. In this article, the effects of the colonial-slavery system on perceptions of childhood are presented through the analysis of two autobiographical works. The first features Juan Francisco Manzano narrating his memories as a slave boy in early nineteenth century Cuba, in *The Autobiography of a Slave* (1996 [1840]).⁴ In the second, we follow Bitita in *Bitita's Diary: the Childhood Memoirs of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (1998 [1982]),⁵ by

¹ SANTOS, Yuri Andrei Batista; TORGA, Vânia Lúcia Menezes. Autobiography and (Re-)Signification. *Bakhtiniana*, São Paulo, 15 (2): 125-151, April/June 2020.

² FOUCAULT, Michel, Rabinow, P. & Hurley, R. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. London: Penguin, 2000.

³ LEJEUNE, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Translated by Katherine Leary, edited by Paul John Eakin. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

⁴ MANZANO, Juan Francisco. *The Autobiography of a Slave*. Translated by Evelyn Picon Garfield - Bilingual Ed. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1996.

⁵ JESUS, Carolina Maria de. *Bitita's Diary: The Childhood Memoirs of Carolina Maria de Jesus*. Edited by Robert M. Levine, translated by Emanuelle Oliveira and Beth Joan Vinkler. New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998.

Carolina Maria de Jesus, whose narrative reveals how colonialism structured Brazilian society in the post-abolition period.

The autobiographies of enslaved people published between 1770 and 1890, predominantly in English in the United States and England, meet the criteria defined by Lejeune, as they are prose narratives that describe the experiences of enslavement in the past, weaving an individual story whose author is also the protagonist. These last two characteristics, the construction of an individual identity and the inscription of authorship, however, become more complex when we contextualize the colonial logic of subjugation and lack of freedom. Affirming the name of the person who writes places pressure on and reveals the possible negotiations, especially with the abolitionist societies, which financed, published and attested to the veracity of the facts. Another point in this regard was the change of name due to social ascension, literacy and/or religious conversion, which legitimized the freedom achieved. In addition, even though they begin by recounting individual journeys, the aim of sensitizing the reading public to join the abolitionist cause blurs the boundaries of this perspective. The denunciatory tone points to a collective idea of the experiences narrated.

Oliveira (2022) highlights three periods of publication of these autobiographies, of which there were more than 200 over the years. The periodization is based on the forms and contents dealt with. 1) The first period is between 1770 and 1820 themes of religious redemption predominate, describing the Christian conversions and salvation of the souls of the authors, with a metaphor established between spiritual passage and the passage across the Atlantic Ocean. 2) The second runs from 1820 to 1860, a period of greater flow, with around 80 published, with the writing linked especially to the abolitionist struggle, describing life in captivity, family separations, work, violence and escapes. 3) The third and final period was from the end of the American Civil War, in 1865 onwards, when the work sought to respond to the need for national unification, thematizing freedom and personal progress for social insertion, making visible the obstacles of a racially hierarchical society. The two stories we will examine, written by Juan Francisco Manzano and Carolina Maria de Jesus, escape this organization, as they don't appear in the global North, but tell of the particular paths that the colonial process took in their territories. Even so, the characteristics highlighted are close to the narratives in these works, in terms of both style and the subjects they address.

Oliveira (2022) highlights the near absence of references to autobiographical works in historiographical research on enslavement, including that of important authors such as Eric Williams and W.E.B. Du Bois in the United States, and Gilberto Freyre and Florestan Fernandes in Brazil. Most of the studies that have used autobiographies as sources belong to the field of literature, in works such as Frances Smith Foster's (1979) on women's writings. This fact attests to the historiography of enslavement as a political battleground. In this sense, perhaps autobiographies were a less reliable or even unknown source for theoretical-methodological research in the fields of history and sociology. Therefore, writing about oneself, whether in autobiographies or other literary exercises, can be read as too close to its object of study, and therefore more subjective.

Kilomba (2019),⁶ however, writes about modern science's pillars of universality, neutrality and objectivity, which are constituted and consolidated in the experiences of colonialism. "Science is, in this sense, not a simple apolitical study of truth, but the reproduction of racial power relations that define what counts as true and in whom to believe" (Kilomba, 2019, p. 27).⁷ Specifically considering the history of enslavement and colonialism, scientific discourse produces a center of the world - Europe - and a subject of exploitative and dominating action over this world - the white European man. Universalization occurs in return for the transformation of colonized people and territories into foreigners. Othering was a concept studied by Toni Morrison in her analysis of Black representations in American fictional literature. She examines how works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852), by Harriet Beecher Stowe, served to entertain a white slavocrat audience, romanticizing enslavement. It was necessary to create this racialized Other in order to define a secure self: "The necessity of rendering the slave a foreign species appears to be a desperate attempt to confirm one's own self as normal" (Morrison, 2017, p. 54).⁸ There is an effort to control these representations by creating racist stereotypes. The white subject is also produced in this way, since his humanity is only guaranteed by appeasing the tensions that reveal him as the tormentor of the Black person's suffering: "The danger of sympathizing with the

⁶ KILOMBA, Grada. (2019) *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Fifth edition. UNRAST-Verlag, Munster, 2019.

⁷ For reference, see footnote 7.

⁸ MORRISON, Toni & COATES, Ta-Nehisi. (2017) *The Origin of Others*. Harvard University Press, 2017.

stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger. To lose one's racialized rank is to lose one's own valued and enshrined difference" (Morrison, 2017, p. 54).⁹

The production of knowledge from the periphery, from the place of the Other for science, has led Black intellectuals to value the naming of the self and its places of speech and writing, in the creation of new discourses and languages, which can be read as lyrical and theoretical by classical academicism. Collins (2002)¹⁰ says that the method of relying on the narration of lived experiences to build new epistemes is also a strategy to avoid being captured as an object of science. For this reason, Black American intellectuals use "music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" (Collins, 2002, p. 252).¹¹ We highlight that the use of autobiographies and literature in this article is not intended to serve as an illustration for theory, but as a producer of knowledge itself. After all, if these autobiographies became an important reference matrix for the political foundation of abolitionist discourses, why do they not have as much historical or scientific value in the post-abolition period?

We chose to examine Juan Francisco Manzano's autobiography because it is the only one known from Latin America and because this type of writing from colonial Brazil was not known until that time. There is the autobiography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, born in Zoogoo around 1830, who recounts his experience on the Middle Passage - the crossing of the Atlantic - until he arrived in Pernambuco, Brazil. Baquaqua fled to New York, where he met abolitionists and moved to Haiti, converting to Christianity. He wrote in Canada in 1854, after attending college in the USA. However, his work doesn't exactly describe Brazilian enslavement. It is important to note that the absence of autobiographies from this period in Brazil doesn't mean that there wasn't a deep relationship between the Black population of the time and the written word, but rather that Blacks were tightly confined by the slave-owning elites.

Oliveira (2022) recognizes that the spread of reading and writing in Brazil and other countries of Portuguese and Spanish colonization, based on Catholic Christianity, took place differently than it did in the Protestant United States, due to the differences in

⁹ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹⁰ COLLINS, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. 10th anniversary ed. London: Routledge, 2002.

¹¹ For reference, see footnote 11.

religious beliefs. The historical development of the Protestant tradition encouraged the mastery of writing and especially reading to establish a relationship with the Holy Book, while in Catholicism, the examination of conscience - which had been found in writings about the self as a practice of care in monastic notes on spiritual life in the correspondence of the intellectual elite of Roman Antiquity (Foucault, 2000)¹² - is guided in confession by priestly authority. Even so, this did not prevent writing from being a political instrument in the practice of freedom in Brazil and other countries of colonial Latin America, as in the case of Juan Francisco Manzano.

The Autobiography of a Slave, by the Cuban Juan Francisco Manzano, was published in English in 1840, sponsored by the British abolitionist Richard Robert Madden. Considered one of the founders of Cuban literature, Manzano was born into slavery in 1797 in the province of Matanzas, in an elite slave society based on sugar cane plantations. The new generation of aristocrats, eager to modernize in the 1830s, sought to disassociate themselves from slavery. One of its representatives was Nicolás de Prado Ameno, son of the Marquesa de Prado Ameno, Manzano's supposed *senhora* or owner. This young man was a member of the literary society that commissioned the work of the poet, Manzano, who was still enslaved at the time. His writing was a tense undertaking, inhabiting the space between negotiation and resistance, with Manzano having to write about his experiences in captivity to denounce enslavement to those who were members of the very family that enslaved him: "this fine line between negotiation and resistance was not an intellectual debate a posteriori, but a matter of life and death to be faced today: it was a razor's edge on which he had to walk, balance, dance" (Castro in Manzano, 2015, p. 17).¹³ For Manzano, it was a question of freedom, since the concession of freedom to a poet seemed to depend on publication, as evidenced by the freedom granted by the literary society that commissioned and financed his autobiography. He wrote it in 1835, and his text was "corrected" by Anselmo Suárez e Romero, a member of that literary society, in 1839, and published the following year in an English translation. These processes of interference in the author's writing allow us to reflect on the limits of authorship in autobiographies of enslavement and access to the reading public - the "to

¹² For reference, see footnote 2.

¹³ In Portuguese: "essa linha tênue entre negociação e resistência não era um debate intelectual a posteriori, mas uma questão de vida ou morte a ser encarada hoje: era uma navalha em cima da qual ele precisava andar, se equilibrar, dançar."

whom” the text was addressed - since its complete publication in Cuba, in Spanish, took place only a century later, in 1937.

The second autobiographical work highlighted in this study was published in 1982, curiously also from a translation of the Portuguese original. Carolina Maria de Jesus, author of *Bitita's Diary*, had been visited at her farm in Parelheiros in 1976 by French journalist Maryvonne Lapouge and Brazilian journalist Clélia Pisa, who interviewed her for the publication of *Brasileiras, voix, écrits du Brésil* (1977). Carolina took the opportunity to give them two notebooks containing the work so that it would be published. Carolina is the author of the best-seller *Child of the Dark* (2003 [1960]),¹⁴ which has been translated into 13 languages, reaching more than 40 countries and sold more than 10,000 copies in one week, with 8 editions in the year of its release. After that, she also published *Casa de alvenaria: diário de uma ex-favelada* [Brick House: Diary of an Ex Slum Dweller] (1961), but had problems with journalist Audálio Dantas, her publisher at the time, and published the following books with her own funding, under the guidance of poet Eduardo de Oliveira. *Pedaços da Fome* [Pieces of Hunger], which would be called “Felizarda,” and *Provérbios* [Proverbs], both from 1963, marked the author's attempt at greater freedom in her career choices, but ended up not being as successful as the previous ones. In these negotiations with Eduardo, there was also *Reminiscências* [Reminiscences], a text that was considered ready and of which the author was very proud. It wasn't published at the time, but it was included in the notebooks given to the journalists and which became the *Journal de Bitita* [Bitita's Journal], released in France in 1982 by *Métailié* in the *Témoignages* collection and later in Brazil, translated, in 1986. Carolina never saw what she considered to be her life's work, as she died on February 14, 1977.

Bitita's Diary tells the story of the girl Bitita, from the age of 4 to 20, in the interior of Minas Gerais and São Paulo states (1918 to 1936), weaving unique existential meanings through her questioning of the context she inhabits. For this reason, the experiences recounted in the book can be read as important documentations of post-abolition Brazil, especially with regard to labor relationships and access to land, housing and literacy. The autobiography, although called a diary in the title, resembles the

¹⁴ JESUS, Carolina Maria de. *Child of the Dark*. Translated by David St. Clair. New York: Penguin Group, 2003.

characteristics pointed out by Lejeune (1989),¹⁵ since it is a retrospective movement that positions Carolina as the author and protagonist, although the affirmation of her childhood nickname - Bitita - instead of her own name, produces the effect of circumscribing the movement of time. She is in dialogue with Manzano's autobiography, as she also seeks to respond to movements for national unification, by exposing the racist prohibitions that impeded the social inclusion and freedom of Black people. It therefore shares the denunciatory characteristic of autobiographies of enslavement, although it does not restrict itself to this or even aim to do so, as does Manzano's text. This point, however, is affirmed in Clélia Piza's preface to the first French edition. Piza, a journalist, says that it is one of the author's best works, and is not really a "diary" but a frank and open account of her life suffered in extreme poverty (Farias, 2018). We see in readings by abolitionists, critics or journalists that validate this work and autobiographies of enslavement a need to limit the denunciative bias that seems to weaken their poetic qualities, which are in fact their exercises in critical fabulation, in the understanding conceptualized by Hartman (2021).¹⁶

Hartman (2021) builds her research method on these problematics in the archives that described Black lives held hostage by enslavement or the institutions that perpetuate a racist outlook, such as academia or social welfare services in the United States in the early twentieth century. Her dedication to historicizing the radical imagination and insurgent practices of young Black women collides with the authority and limits established by the archives, which reveal who can be a historical agent. She then seeks a counter-narrative that claims this agency, employing an intimate mode of writing, in a style that unifies her voice with that of the characters she investigates, causing the vision, language and rhythms of rebellion to shape the text. It is a reconstruction "from nowhere, from the nowhere of the ghetto and the nowhere of utopia" (Hartman, 2021, p. 23).¹⁷ The possibilities for authorship combine with the autonomy of placing the fragmented voices of the crushed past of Black history and its gaps to organize an intimate chronicle, which, in the author's case, privileges the period from 1890 to 1935, which was decisive for the formation of Black American identity. Bitita and Manzano's stories are sharply critical

¹⁵ For reference, see footnote 3.

¹⁶ HARTMAN, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*. Paperback edition, 2021.

¹⁷ For reference, see footnote 17.

of their realities, producing non-hegemonic narratives about Black identity and practices of freedom. In this context, we will analyze how these stories are diminished through a denunciatory bias, reflect on the negotiations of authorship, and examine the effects of the choice to represent childhood.

1 Autobiography as Denunciation

Manzano (1996 [1840]) begins his narrative by highlighting the close relationship of his mother, María del Pilar Manzano, with Doña Beatriz de Jústiz, the Marquesa Jústiz de Santa Ana, who had offered education suitable “for their class and station in society” (Manzano, 1996, p. 45)¹⁸ to pretty Black girls between the ages of 10 and 11. He tells of the family composition of the lady who had adopted him “as a form of entertainment” (p. 47),¹⁹ as his mother owed this to the Marquesa for having been educated by her. Manzano describes a good relationship with the marquesa, who treated him like a “boy” [menino] because of his lighter skin, distinguishing him from the other enslaved children, whom she referred to as “brats” [moleques]. After her death, Manzano’s parents stayed at the El Molino farm, while he went to Havana, the capital, where he received instruction in tailoring. He was away from his parents for around five years, in the company of his godmother Doña Joaquina, returning at the age of 12 to the presence of the Marquesa de Prado Ameno, his supposed new *sinhá*, that is mistress or owner. His suffering then began and the little freedom he thought he had disappeared: “I am passing by some anecdotes that would verify the instability of my fortune” (Manzano, 1996, p. 57).²⁰ He states that “the true story of my life does not begin until 1809, when destiny began to unleash itself against me with all its fury” (Manzano, 1996, p. 57). This seems to be the part that interests the literary society that financed his writing. The attribution of truth responds to this interest.

Manzano begins to describe the punishments he suffered under the orders of the Marquesa de Prado Ameno. For any misdeed he was flogged and locked up for a whole day in a charcoal pit in the ground, and anyone who gave him water was punished. The

¹⁸ For reference, see footnote 4.

¹⁹ For reference, see footnote 4.

²⁰ For reference, see footnote 4.

boy was afraid of the dark, which reminded him of ghost stories, so he cried out for mercy and was flogged and locked up again. His most common supposed offenses were not answering the first time he was called or forgetting a word of a message he had to give someone. His daily penalty: repeated punches in the nose, making him wince any time he was called. An emblematic episode occurred when he was walking through the garden with the marquesa, just like her “little lapdog” (Manzano, 1996, p. 61),²¹ and picked a geranium leaf. Distracted by the verses he always had in his memory, he didn’t get rid of the plant and when he returned home he tore it to pieces as he was lost in thought. The woman noticed the smell, grabbed his hands and ordered his nose to be broken for such an audacious act. He was then placed on the stocks. The administrator Don Lucas Rodríguez ordered the foreman to tie the boy up, put his feet in a board and flog him with a bundle of fifty sticks.

Manzano constructs a difference in his experience as a child also based on the designations boy and brat. While the former refers to a life of greater freedom and affection with the Marquesa Jústiz de Santa Ana, the latter refers to the gaze that the Marquesa de Prado Ameno turns on him. He recognizes his raciality by defining himself as mulatto and, because of this, his father didn’t allow him to play with “black children from the plantation” (Manzano, 1996, p. 133).²² The Marquesa Jústiz de Santa Ana also didn’t allow him to hear mass outside the house “because I would play with and distract the other [black] children” (Manzano, 1996, p. 49). The adults defined the places he could occupy and how much affection he should receive based on the perception of his raciality, linked to attempts to whiten him. The othering revealed in the writing is suggested by the perception of himself as a “brat,” once the fantasy of being welcomed by the white family was over. “Moleque” [brat]²³ refers to a foreign child, and also corresponds to the male gender. In both the Quimbundo [Kimbundu] *luleke* and Quicongo [Kikongo] *muléeke* languages the term means child, although in the former it has gender specificity and can be translated as boy or younger brother (Lopes, 2012). Our criticism of reading the texts as a denunciation is because the narration of racist episodes seems to satisfy a certain

²¹ For reference, see footnote 4.

²² For reference, see footnote 4.

²³ The translated bilingual version uses the term “*negrito*” in Spanish to differentiate Manzano from the other Black children. In the Brazilian version, translated by Alex Castro (see the “References”), the term used is “*moleque*” - so we are discussing the theory using this notion, based on the Brazilian reality.

public that seeks to recognize subjectivity while still reinforcing, to some extent, the place of the Other.

Bitita's writing also shows her suffering in the face of racist interdictions. She describes post-abolition society as a "theater of hardships." The narrative is constituted through a rupture, as Manzano experienced with the change of marquesas. In *Bitita's Diary*, the girl begins by telling us about her family, with an emphasis on her grandfather Benedito, the African Socrates, who was described as such by his friends because of his recognized intellectuality, even though he was illiterate. Benedito José da Silva had been enslaved and adopted the surname of his former supposed master. Descended from the Bantu Fiote people in the province of Cabinda, Angola, he bought a plot of land in the Chafariz neighborhood in Sacramento, Minas Gerais, where he had Maria Carolina, Bitita's mother, who was born at the time of the *Lei do Ventre Livre* [Free Womb Law] (1871). Bitita's hardships begin when she had to leave her town to work on a farmers' land and then as a maid in the homes of white families. Before that, when she was harassed by Humbertinho, a white boy who was the son of a judge, who threw limes at her and squeezed the breasts of poor girls, she saw her mother arrested for no reason while she was washing clothes. She couldn't complain or she would be whipped with a piece of rubber. Bitita reasoned that her mother was arrested because of her color. This is how Carolina constructs her text in reflective movements, interweaving the perceptions of herself as a girl in the face of memories with social criticism.

Bitita had to abandon her studies at the *Colégio Allan Kardec* [Allan Kardec Secondary School] in her early years to accompany her mother to work on a farm owned by Olímpio Rodrigues, the *Fazenda Lajeado* [Lajeado Farm] in Uberaba, Minas Gerais. The farmer's wife, Maria Cândida, asked to meet the girl and then for her to leave the fields to work as a maid in the house: "When it was my turn, the farmer's wife examined me closely with her gaze. As if I were for sale, saying that I was a clever little black girl" (Jesus, 1998, p. 99).²⁴ The mistress promised her dresses and medicine to smooth her hair and taper her nose. Like Manzano, Bitita believed the fantasy of affection, which was also conditional on her whitening. After six months of hard work, she had not received a single dress and, worse, no pay. She decided to stop nurturing affection for her boss, as she

²⁴ For reference, see footnote 5.

simultaneously accepted her blackness: “I looked at my black hands, caressed my flat nose and my straw hair, and decided to remain as I was born” (Jesus, 1998, p. 100).

Bitita’s narrative reveals the close connection between the slave system and the new social organization in the post-abolition period. Working on farms perpetuated the logic of exploitation and the relationships continued to support the racial hierarchy. The girl’s hardships stemmed from this recognition, added to the fact that she had a disease in her legs that never healed because she could not find care. When she sought asylum in a religious hostel in Uberaba for treatment, she was asked to wash the clothes of the people staying there: “I couldn’t go to the hospital because I had to wash the clothes. In order to go to the hospital, I had to stand in line to receive a voucher” (Jesus, 1998, p. 112).²⁵ She was always captured by a dehumanizing gaze, now characterized by the assumption that she should always serve as a housemaid. Even so, the relationship that was established did not respect her labor power and she constantly did not receive what her employers owed her. For this reason, she was unable to achieve any stability: “I felt like I was a *circulating coin* [...] It’s horrible to be here today, there tomorrow [...] I felt as if I were a piece of trash. A weak currency, without value” (Jesus, 1998, p. 141, emphasis added). The feeling of not belonging anywhere harks back to the original separation of enslavement.

Both Cota - María Carolina - and María del Pilar, despite responding to the dynamics of labor relations that sought to keep them subjugated, escape and contest, when defending their son or daughter. When María saw Manzano wounded next to the foreman, she wanted to know what had happened and begged him not to continue. She was also attacked: “I felt this blow in my heart” (Manzano, 1996, p. 71).²⁶ The boy stood in front of her to protect her from the lashes and the two of them were placed side by side on the stocks, in front of her brothers Florencio and Fernando, aged 12 and 5. It was the first time that the woman, enslaved and not required to work because she was “esteemed” (ibidem, 45), had been sacrificed. Had she ceased to be a good mother by ceasing to be the Black mother, the nanny for the whites? Cota, for her part, also stood in front of the police to protect her daughter Bitita, who was unjustly imprisoned, accused of witchcraft for standing outside her house reading a book that the police assumed was that of São

²⁵ For reference, see footnote 5.

²⁶ For reference, see footnote 4.

Cipriano [Saint Ciprian]. Both mother and daughter were arrested and forced to weed the front of the jail for over a week, between long periods of fasting. They were questioned about a spell, the vocabulary Bitita used, and the fact that she traveled alone. This last accusation refers to one of the main reasons for detaining Black women in prisons and psychiatric institutions in the early twentieth century (Bento, 2014). When Cota tried to defend her daughter against the accusations, she was physically and verbally attacked, and her arm was broken. After five days without food, they were released on payment of 20,000-réis. The accounts, although they describe the racist violence suffered, point to a claim for agency in the characters' reaction to this violence.

What the hegemonic narratives reveal is the continuity of colonial efforts to erase opportunities for Black authors to attain agency and autonomy over their own subjectivity. The writings about the self in the autobiographies of enslavement respond to a direct call from abolitionist societies and the texts are addressed to a literate white public. It thus makes sense that the denunciatory content of the autobiographies is predominant. However, Manzano's and Bitita's stories pay attention to details that go beyond racist experiences, notably symbolized by the fact that each affirmed they were poets. The targeting of the writings to the audience highlighted, seeking adherence to the abolitionist cause, relies on this appeal as a tool for raising awareness. Not by chance, the medallion that represented the campaign of the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, created by Josiah Wedgwood in 1787, features a Black man on his knees in a suppliant position, with chains on his hands and legs, and the inscription: "Am I not a man and a brother?" (Oliveira, 2022).²⁷ The image became a symbol of the abolitionist struggle in the late eighteenth century and was questioned by Frederick Douglass in 1845 as a dangerous prerogative, capable of inciting greater violence (Hartman, 2007).²⁸

Compassion as a strategy for validating Black experiences makes autobiographical texts hostage to a single reading. Perhaps this is why Carolina's poetry seems invisible to Clélia Piza's eyes. Hartman reminds us: "The enslaved knew that freedom had to be taken [...] The kind of freedom that could be given to you could just as easily be taken back" (Hartman, 2007, p. 169).²⁹ Manzano and Bitita's autobiographies

²⁷ In Portuguese: "Não sou eu um homem e um irmão?"

²⁸ HARTMAN, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

²⁹ For reference, see footnote 27.

fulfill this promise that perpetuates over time and brings to the present the demands of enslaved people, their political claims and more audacious fantasies, such as being a poet, for example. “To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?” (Hartman, 2007, p. 170).

2 The Tightrope of Black Authorship

The autobiographies studied allow us to glimpse a space for critical fabulation beyond colonial narratives. The authorships are circumscribed by the time and context of each publication - for example, Carolina makes her positions more apparent in her text - but the authorships are also circumscribed by the public to which they are addressed, she was responding to a publishing market that wanted her work to attain the same lucrative reach as *Child of the Dark* (2003 [1960]),³⁰ which read as an intimate account of life in the Canindé slum. Juan Francisco, on the other hand, sought to be a voice in the abolitionist struggle. Each text was financed, published and validated by white people interested in their denunciatory content: for Manzano, the literary society of which Dom Nicolás, the Marquesa de Prado Ameno's son, was a member; and the journalist and editor Audálio Dantas for Carolina.

Generally speaking, autobiographies of enslavement had the issue of truthfulness as a fundamental element not only to strengthen their recognition as documents, but also for achieving their goal of arousing support for the abolitionist struggle. The concept of absolute and perfect truth was essential for the Christian abolitionist movement, which was recognized for the strength of its writings and campaigns, as Josiah Wedgwood's medallion shows. The idea was that the Christian reading public would be sensitized by the recognition of Black people as their fellow human beings, in accordance with biblical teachings. Therefore, the authors' affirmation of their faith was their main tool for validation with this audience. Literary critics, who have dedicated the most time to these works, usually question the veracity of the facts described, affirming their fictionalization. Hence, they were more highly regarded as literary than historical works. Olaudah Equiano's autobiography - *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or*

³⁰ JESUS, Carolina Maria de. *Child of the Dark*. Translated from the Portuguese by David St. Clair. With and Afterword by Rober M. Levine. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Gustavus Vassa, the African (1789) - who was well known in England for his circulation in lectures and conferences in the late eighteenth century, was questioned in this regard by the literary critic Vicent Carretta, who questioned his account of the land of the Ibo, described as his birthplace. The historian Marcus Rediker assured that it was authentic, arguing that even if Equiano had been born in South Carolina, as Carretta claimed, he would have been the guardian of the oral history of the Ibo, collected in his contact with other African people, being faithful to an original experience (Oliveira, 2022).

This problem of veracity arises because the authority of the narrating voice is important to the reader. In a context of racist subjugation, made explicit by the past of enslavement, how can authority be sustained in Black authorship? It is curious to note that the title of most autobiographies bear the name of the person who wrote it, and sometimes more than one name, highlighting the new form of registering someone who converted to Christianity. It's as if there was a need to dissociate the author from the character-protagonist, moving away from this fundamental characteristic of autobiography, since the titles refer to the person who wrote them in the third person. Moreover, prefaces were written by white men and women who had to vouch for the authenticity of the narratives, such as David Wilson, editor of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853). Wilson, who had greater social credibility than Solomon, declared himself immune to the affective content of the work and could therefore guarantee the truth of the text. This was further reiterated by the presence of engravings and illustrations, reinforcing the visual materiality of the situations.

In the case of *The Autobiography of a Slave*, it is the literary society of the Cuban elite, represented by Nicolás do Prado Ameno, who declares the veracity of the story. His social prestige is already apparent in his class, in his title of Dom, son of the Marquesa, and in his whiteness. Manzano, who was given the task of writing while still enslaved by that family, constructs a text in which he reveals the suffering inflicted on him, especially under the orders of the Marquesa, but he also includes manorial figures in benevolent positions, such as the Marquesa de Jústiz de Santa Ana and Nicolás himself. When the story takes a turn, in which he ceases to be a "boy" and begins to be punished for his mistakes, the author highlights the mercy of Don Nicolás and his brothers, who offer him water and bread through a crack in the dungeon where he was left. Manzano described

him as a protector, “Don Nicolás, who loved me, not as a slave, but as a son, notwithstanding his young age” (Manzano, 1996, p. 103).³¹

After a long punishment for being unjustly accused of stealing a chicken, the boy was working on the El Molino farm softening and stacking dried sugarcane bagasse when an accident killed Andrés, his workmate. For this reason, Manzano’s brother got his supposed *sinhozinho* [young master] Pancho, son of the Marquesa of Prado Ameno, later Dom Francisco de Cárdenas y Manzano, to intercede for him, as his life was at serious risk. From there, his emotional state began to change, his sadness dissipated, Manzano began to receive medical care and learned to read. Moments of reprieve from suffering, in the company of the Marquesa’s children, are interspersed with the constant return to his condition of subjugation to her. Even so, the author ends his writing by softening her image: “When my mistress’s temper mellowed towards me, I unconsciously relinquished a certain hardened heart that I had acquired since the last time she condemned me to chains and hard labor” (Manzano, 1996, p. 126).³² He goes so far as to say that he loved her like a mother, perceiving himself once again as free, even though he was not. It’s interesting how this understanding of freedom linked to good treatment seems to reinforce the idea of emancipation granted, present in many abolitionist readings. Even though the reconciliation with the Marquesa was short-lived, it is noteworthy that this parenthesis was opened in the storyline. Manzano’s real freedom still depended on those who financed his work. Unlike most autobiographies of enslavement, Manzano’s authorship is negotiated within the strict limits of his condition as a slave. How can we ensure not only the veracity of the facts, but also the freedom to write?

Carolina Maria de Jesus’ literary history is often linked to the journalist Audálio Dantas, who was the editor of her major publication *Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada* (1960) [*Child of the Dark*]. In the narration of her story in *Bitita’s Diary*, which culminates in her moving to São Paulo to live in the Canindé favela, the dimension that the purpose of writing acquires in her life, as an emancipatory reference, is explicit. She migrates in search of better working conditions, but also to fulfill her destiny, which was mapped out when, as a baby, she was diagnosed as having *poetic thoughts* by doctor Eurípides Barsanulfo. The doctor observed that until she reached the age of 21 Bitita

³¹ For reference, see footnote 4.

³² For reference, see footnote 4.

would live “as if I [she] were dreaming” and that she would have a tumultuous life: “She is going to love everything that’s beautiful! Your daughter is a poet; poor Sacramento, from your breast comes a poet” (Jesus, 1998, p. 51).³³ As predicted, at the age of 22 she arrived in the urban center, where she began to write every day, taking her texts, mainly poetry, to the newspapers of her time to be published.

The official narrative about the publication of the author’s best-seller still rests on her supposed “discovery” by journalist Audálio Dantas, although current reissues of *Casa de alvenaria* (1961), curated by writer Conceição Evaristo and Vera Eunice, Carolina’s daughter, are contesting this authenticating role. Tom Farias (2018), the author’s biographer, gives another version of the meeting between the journalist and the writer, which took place during a visit Dantas made to the favela to report on the misuse of swings installed by the city. When she heard about the visit, Carolina went to protest next to the toys, shouting: “Leave it as it is, I’ll put you all in my book!” (Farias, 2018, p. 187).³⁴ She was carrying her notebooks with her and, as soon as she caught the man’s attention, she was able to show them to him and tell him her story, which was published in the 1958 article. Before that, as soon as she arrived in São Paulo in 1940, Carolina appeared in an article by Willy Aureli for *Folha de São Paulo* and, in 1942, in the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *A noite* [The Night], in which she spoke about her career as a writer, revealing her desire to publish *Clíris*, a book of poems, and the difficulties of being respected because she was Black. These statements are labeled “racial recalcitrance” by the newspaper and she is pejoratively called a “Black poet,” in quotation marks. The criticism of the poems is not limited to their quality: “Are they good? Are they bad? It doesn’t matter. They are sincere and spontaneous” (Farias, 2019, p. 125).³⁵ This is an attestation of the veracity of an artistic piece of writing. It seems that the authenticating function of the white subject in relation to a Black person’s writing should also ensure its subjective or creative depletion, as identified in Carolina’s creative capacity.

Returning to Audálio, his article was published on May 9, 1958, under the title “O drama da favela escrito por uma favelada” [The Drama of the Favela Written by a Resident], in the newspaper *Folha da Noite* [Night Paper], containing three photographs of Carolina, taken by Gil Passareli: one in bed reading, another walking in Canindé, and

³³ For reference, see footnote 5.

³⁴ In Portuguese: “Deixa estar que vou botar vocês todos no meu livro!”

³⁵ In Portuguese: “São bons? São maus? Não importa. São sinceros e espontâneos.”

one with her three young children. As well as being a slum dweller, the journalist describes the writer as someone who picks through garbage to recycle paper, and a victim of hunger, but someone who manages to see beyond the mud floors and zinc rooves of the favela. According to Dantas, there was no one better than the Black woman Carolina to write stories that were so Black (Farias, 2018). The journalist took possession of her 35 notebooks and promised to publish them. On August 19, 1960, the book was released by the Francisco Alves publishing house, edited by Lelio Castro Andrade and with a preface by Audálio Dantas. Despite its widespread publication, the work described by the newspaper *Diário Popular* as a “true human document” was boycotted by consecrated Brazilian writers (Farias, 2018, p. 221).³⁶

In the preface first published in the 1993 edition of *Quarto de despejo* [Child of the Dark], entitled “A atualidade do mundo de Carolina” [the actuality of Carolina’s world], Audálio tells about their meeting and his role as editor of the text found in the “*cadernos encardidos*” [soiled notebooks]. He claims that no reporter or writer could have written that story, since Carolina had an insider’s view of the favela. He also talks about the changes he made to the original text and about the success and literary relevance of the work, citing important references such as Rachel de Queiroz and Manuel Bandeira. The latter corroborated the authenticity of the book, which, according to the journalist, was questioned by critics who said it was a “*golpe publicitário*” [publicity stunt]. Dantas quotes Bandeira’s article, which said that “nobody could invent that language, that way of saying things with *extraordinary creative force*, but typical of those who only made it halfway through primary education” (Bandeira in Jesus, 2014 [1960], p. 4).³⁷ Audálio concludes by reflecting on the passage of time and changes in the city. Canindé no longer exists but has multiplied into countless other favelas. He says that the “forceful topicality [of the book] is dramatically demonstrated by rioting youth who invaded the beaches of the south zone of Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The ‘rooms of garbage,’ multiplied, they are overflowing” (Bandeira in Jesus, 2014, p. 4).³⁸ Both the preface and the 1958 news article

³⁶ In Portuguese: “verdadeiro documento humano.”

³⁷ In Portuguese: “ninguém poderia inventar aquela linguagem, aquele dizer as coisas com extraordinária força criativa mas típico de quem ficou a meio caminho da instrução primária” – Preface for the Brazilian version of *Child of the Dark* [*Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada*], from 1993 and 2014.

³⁸ In Portuguese: “contundente atualidade [do livro] é dramaticamente demonstrada pelos arrastões que invadiram em 92 as praias da zona sul do Rio de Janeiro. Os quartos de despejo, multiplicados, estão transbordando.”

put the journalist in the position of validating not only the veracity, but also the literary relevance of the work. The authenticity was no longer questioned in terms of content, but by distrust of the Black woman's intellectual capacity to organize the written form. Curiously, legitimizing authorship doesn't seem to ensure artistic value. Declaring her importance for what is factual about poverty and hunger, risks erasing her creative merit. Therefore, Bandeira confirms the truth of authorship through the creative force represented more by the limitations of her literacy than by her stylistic choices.

In the autobiographies of enslavement, in addition to prefaces to guarantee authenticity, the role of author of the texts was not in fact occupied solely by those who wrote or narrated the story. Some of them were co-authored because they were transcriptions of oral narratives or because they were corrected by editors, which Oliveira calls "technical treatment" (2022, p. 89).³⁹ This is also evident in the multiple translations carried out to reach a specific market. In the autobiographies of enslavement, most of which were from the United States and England, English was privileged. For this reason, *The autobiography of a Slave* was initially published in this language, after a translation by Richard Madden, derived from the version "treated" by Suárez y Romero. What we have today is a "retranslation" from English to Spanish, after all the editorial interference. Therefore, authorship initiates by fulfilling more of a social than artistic function. And this is determined by those in authority in these societies or by the countries that dominate the means of production and publication internationally. The denunciatory content of the works reflects this view that, as much as a work may support an emancipatory ideal, it reaffirms the dynamics of the concession of freedom by those who occupy the centers of power. However, even with so many interventions, there are other possible readings and interpretations, protected by the critical fabulative gesture of their authors.

Lejeune (1989)⁴⁰ does not consider the possibilities of fictionalization to be a foreign element to autobiographies, emphasizing that the search for truth within the discourses, rather than the factual truth itself, is not illusory. He affirms that the genre is inscribed in three fields: that of historical knowledge, due to the desire to know the truth; the field of action, due to the promise of offering it to those who read; and that of artistic creation. Along these lines Alex Castro, who translated Manzano's text into Portuguese

³⁹ In Portuguese: "tratamento técnico."

⁴⁰ For reference, see footnote 3.

for the publisher Hedra, continued to conceptualize an exercise in *transcreation*. The autobiography is available for consultation at the *Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba José Martí* [Cuba's National Library José Martí] in two versions: one with impeccable handwriting, without erasures and in cultured Spanish, the other with less neat handwriting, full of syntactic idiosyncrasies, little punctuation and few paragraphs, possibly corresponding to Juan Francisco Manzano's original (Oliveira, 2022). The transcreation is based on this, the understanding of the Brazilian translator that the impurity of the text reveals the creation process, which is invisible to critics like the historian Ureña, who saw corrections as liberation. Moreover, Castro reminds us that "errors in spelling, grammar and syntax inspire our respect: they are not mistakes, but marks of slavery as concrete and as real as the strokes of a whip on his flesh" (Castro *in* Manzano, 2015, p. 18).⁴¹ To fix them would be to corroborate the erasure of enslavement that sustains societies structured by racism in the forgetting and re-enactment of colonial trauma. Transcreation is committed to fidelity to the original, maintaining the rhythm and organizational form. This required literary creativity and fictional intervention to bring forth a *fictional Lusophone Manzano* who could bring the reader closer to the colonial context of the early nineteenth century.

Among the countless criticisms of *Child of the Dark*⁴² was that she was more of a slum dweller than a writer. This indicates that the effort to authenticate her work is not based on content, but on form. Unlike autobiographies of enslavement, Carolina's authorship depended on a white co-author who could assure her intellectual capacity. The public's gaze shifts from distrust of the faith and moral values of the Black person, who wouldn't lie about what had happened to her, to doubt about her competence to say what had happened to her. The public that read Carolina was not the same as that which consumed the autobiographies of enslavement and should have sympathy. She goes beyond these limits. There is no sympathy. There is still no single way to fight racism. It still hadn't been recognized as a structural part of our society. While the emphasis on the enslaved position in the autobiographies represented an opportunity for escape, the designation as a *favelada* [slum dweller] on the book cover tended to limit her to this position. In the autobiographies of enslavement, what was at stake in authorship was not its creative force, although this was always present. In contemporary times, this is exactly

⁴¹ In Portuguese: "erros de ortografia, gramática e sintaxe nos inspiram respeito: não são erros, mas sim marcas tão concretas e tão reais da escravidão quanto os lanhos de chicote em sua carne."

⁴² For reference, see footnote 15.

what constitutes the new difficult negotiation with white intermediaries, be they publishers, publicists, journalists or critics.

Audálio's strategy was to defend Carolina by conceding her these corrections, showing her the best way forward, even if it meant reducing her autonomy and invalidating her desire for other types of publication, such as poetry, novels or proverbs. Her literary strength seemed restricted to the autobiographical genre precisely because it spoke "from within." The journalist then adjusted the text to avoid excessive repetition, selecting more significant passages, while correcting punctuation and the spelling of some words (Dantas in Jesus, 2014). As Castro (in Manzano, 2015) comments about transcreation, erasing what is read as an error also erases not only history, the context that deprives Black and poor people of access to schooling, for example, but also the writer's creative choices. Along these lines, the curators - who are Black - of the new editions of *Casa de alvenaria* opted to keep the orthographic and grammatical characteristics of the original text. "When we chose to keep this language, we were also thinking of showing how the Portuguese language has changed over time," says Vera Eunice, in an interview with *Elle* magazine: "Even with little schooling, my mother was a very cultured woman. When she scolded us, at times she used such erudite terms that we didn't understand" (Lima, 2021).⁴³ She displaces the common meaning of cultured, understanding that the forms of language are always alive and in constant negotiation with movements to erase and preserve oral traditionalisms, such as *pretuguese* [Portuguese spoken by Blacks]. Gonzales (2019), analyzing African influence in other countries on the American continent, uses cultural similarities to identify marks left, with *pretuguese* being a modification that occurred in the Portuguese language of the colonizing country due to this influence. She compares it to the changes that also occurred in the English, Spanish and French of the Caribbean regions, defining the term as "the mark of the Africanization of the Portuguese spoken in Brazil [...] The tonal and rhythmic character of the African

⁴³ In Portuguese: "Quando optamos por manter essa linguagem, foi pensando também em mostrar como a língua portuguesa foi sendo modificada ao longo do tempo. Mesmo com pouco estudo, minha mãe era uma mulher muito culta. Até quando dava bronca, ela às vezes usava termos tão eruditos que a gente não entendia."

languages brought to the New World, in addition to the absence of certain consonants (such as l and r, for example)” (Gonzales, 2019, p. 342).⁴⁴

Negotiations in co-authorship, while guaranteeing publications, also present the danger of homogenizing works. Lejeune (1989) says that autobiographies require a kind of contract between author and reader, which he calls the autobiographical pact. The relationship is established by the identity of the name, that is, the coincidence of author, narrator and character, affirmed in the text and on the book cover, together with an “autobiographical space,” which in fact gives the pact its historical solidity. “If the autobiography is a first book, its author is thus unknown, even if he relates his own story in the book. He lacks, in the eyes of the reader, that sign of reality which is the previous production of *other texts* (nonautobiographical)” (Lejeune, 1989, p. 12).⁴⁵ Most autobiographies of enslavement were their author’s only work, with the exception of Frederick Douglass, who published three works. This also speaks to their social credibility, as in the case of Equiano, who circulated in the centers of power of the intelligentsia of his time. It is the group of autobiographies themselves, which are close in content, that guarantees them space, regardless of names. A tradition of writing was created, to which many Black authors are heirs, and constituted what would be called African-American literature (Oliveira, 2022). The danger of homogenization arises precisely because of the obstacles of the publishing market, which does not allow authorship to sustain itself by creating its own space. Negotiations for authorship, which involve co-authorship and the authenticity granted, are maintained as long as the racist structures that prevent Black people from accessing positions of power in society are maintained.

Carolina seemed to be trying to build her autobiographical space by making her name have enough authority to guarantee her authenticity and validation as a writer. Manzano didn’t have the same luck or opportunities, as he was hostage to another time, although one not so different from Bitita’s. It is also worth noting that they both used another name in the titles of their autobiographies: slave-poet and Bitita. This seems to inform the gaps found in the creative exercise. The characterization of the character-

⁴⁴ In Portuguese: “a marca da africanização do português falado no Brasil [...] O caráter tonal e rítmico das línguas africanas trazidas para o Novo Mundo, além da ausência de certas consoantes (como o l e o r, por exemplo).”

⁴⁵ For reference, see footnote 3.

narrator/author triad with the childhood nickname or as a poet-who-is-not-free reveals the obstacles we sought to follow in this section, regarding the affirmation of the autonomy of writing.

Some Considerations

The issue that arises for the autobiographies of enslavement, which lack the credibility of the “autobiographical space,” is that the texts need to establish its own humanity through authorship. The name doesn’t guarantee identity; it is the description of racist events that seems to build a collective sense of it in society, by balancing a negotiation between objectified public image and self-definition. In this sense, identity is a chorus that solidifies a piece of literature as Black. It is the trajectories, not the names, that give it body, since the author’s name must still be part of this social consensus. However, it is precisely this dispute for space in the gaps of a retrospective journey, whose destination is the colonial past or that before colonization, replete with erasures and trauma, that indicates the inventive possibilities that blur the linear causal perspectives of a fixed, immobile, homogeneous self.

In the works highlighted here, we tried to reveal the movements that the child characters made in this direction to affirm other perspectives for their own stories, in which they could be authors. And this was done from this position in childhood. Bitita recounts her process of writing the poem “*O colono e o fazendeiro*” [The Farmhand and the Farmer), identifying her motivation for doing so: “*It was because of suffering a lot on the farms that I wrote a poem: ‘The Farmhand and the Farmer.’*” [...] The poor, having no means of living in the city, could only live in the country to be exploited” (Jesus, 1998 [1982], p. 104, emphasis added).⁴⁶ The girl reveals a perception of herself as part of the group of rural workers to which her mother and stepfather belong, indicating the feeling that unites them - “My step-father was sad, all the farmhands were sad” (Jesus, 1998, p. 104) – and the cause of it, which was the subject of her poetry. Her poetic suffering does not speak from an individualized place and does not mark her as different from the others because she is a child. Bitita names the causes of the emotion that permeates her and thus

⁴⁶ For reference, see footnote 5.

denounces the effects of the perpetuation of the colonial slave system on the worker-farmer relationship, finally announcing the political purpose of her writing: “I kept looking and thinking, *‘this is an injustice’*” (Jesus, 1998, p. 104; emphasis added).

In Manzano (1996), the effects of the colonial-slavery system are not visible in the description he made in his writing exercises. On the contrary, his meanings for poetry seem to speak of a place to escape this violence, and he doesn’t thematize it as a “boy.” In his autobiography, the relationship between enslavement and his perceptions of childhood occurs when he describes his time spent with fellow adult workers and receiving punishments: “At dawn, the latter or the former would do a job [of administering lashes] on me, and not as if I were a child” (Manzano, 1998, p. 69).⁴⁷ Unlike Bitita, he perceives being a child as a marker of distinction from the group of other enslaved people, claiming the possibility of this experience while at the same time circumscribing non-separation as a characteristic of the oppressive system in which he lives. Childhood then emerges as an observation of the process of colonialism’s othering, denouncing the lack of respect for the capacities corresponding to their age.

The I-Bitita produced by Carolina Maria de Jesus is woven from a non-place, made foreign by farmers, bosses and teachers. The same is true of Manzano’s slave-poet self. His writings recede into the void, passing through tragic racist episodes, detaching themselves from the images of control that would then fix him in the subjugated Other. When Bitita decides to be free, this moment in her text coincides not only with the purposeful linearity of her destiny-poetess, but also with her emancipation from the place of housekeeper-employee. There was a mistrust of her, inherited from enslavement, that she, as a domestic maid, would steal from her employers. Bitita adjusts herself, denying this suspicious look, remembering her grandfather’s advice: “I don’t have kleptomaniac tendencies, so I am yet going to be happy. *I didn’t come into the world through the living room. I came in through the backyard.* I would succeed because I was *different [outra, the other, in the Portuguese version]*” (Jesus, 1998, p. 149; emphasis added).⁴⁸ By assuming the position as foreigner, she could fabulate. This is what we wanted to do in this study: to show how the autobiographies of Bitita and Manzano reveal that the writing

⁴⁷ For reference, see footnote 4.

⁴⁸ For reference, see footnote 5.

of the self by Black authors establishes a creative displacement that is similar to what Saidiya Hartman conceptualizes as *critical fabulation*.

Separated by about a hundred years, Bitita and Manzano each discover a path to autonomy, at the end of their narratives, by leaving - fleeing - from the place where they are to search of freedom. Manzano decides to flee, guided by the same companion who takes pity on his hardships and says to him that if he tells the court of the captain general in Havana about the violence, he could end up free. Bitita also received advice from another Black person, a cook at the institution where she worked, about better living conditions in São Paulo's urban center. She understood the existence of an identification that would raise her profile in life: that of a good maid. She began working as a maid, not because she was unaware of the position's underlying invisibility and exploitation, but because it offered the opportunity for an income that would allow her to be happy: "How good it is to see our desires fulfilled! That dress had the effect of a magical spell on my subconscious. It was like a restorative tonic for my feminine pride" (Jesus, 1998, p. 150).⁴⁹ She started going to dances, movies and spending money on herself. São Paulo is a place where dreams come true, such as being a poet, and that's what she seeks as soon as she arrives.

What these autobiographies conclude is not in the conclusion. What we have attempted here is to make explicit the triangulation of freedom-territory-writing in the creation of an autobiographical space that could sustain its own credibility through literary construction itself, rather than through social prestige, given that this is very difficult to attain in a society structured by racism, heir to enslavement. The writing is part of current movements for accountability and reparations for enslavement, such as the speech by the president of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, who admitted, for the first time in history, the country's responsibility for crimes against enslaved people in the Brazilian colony during the colonial period (Côrtes, 2024). His pronouncement also dialogs with the re-establishment of Brazil's Ministry of Racial Equality and Minister Anielle Franco's forceful action in guiding the fight against racism through historical reparations for enslavement, on visits to Portugal and at the UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent.

⁴⁹ For reference, see footnote 5.

What we propose is a different reading of the processes of self-definition through artistic creation within these texts. By declaring themselves poets, Bitita and Manzano escape the objectification present when reading their experiences solely as experiences of racism. Their autobiographies weave the chorus of Black authorship when they set out to write from a particularized place, stitching together their experiences of suffering in the face of racist episodes with experiences that are translated into poetry to reach a non-hegemonic reading community. They welcome the Black reading public, making their writing a body-territory for the reverberation of many other stories.

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Statement of Author’s Contribution

We declare that both authors of the article “The childhoods of Bitita and Juan Francisco Manzano: autobiography as critical fabulation in Black authorship” contributed fully to all stages of the work, namely: 1) conception of the study, analysis and interpretation of the works; 2) writing the article and critical review of the bibliography used; 3) final approval of the Portuguese and English versions to be published; and 4) responsibility for all aspects of the work to guarantee the accuracy and integrity of any part of the work.

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.

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Review I

This study is very well written, clear and interesting. It articulates well the two texts proposed as corpus, even though they are separated by about a century and have distinct characteristics within the autobiography genre. The study has merit and relevance and I am in favor of publishing it. I only ask for the addition of two missing commas (Page 4 - “obras como A cabana do Pai Tomás (1852), de Harriet Beecher Stowe(.) serviam” [“works such as The Cabin of Father Thomas (1852), by Harriet Beecher Stowe (,) served”] and on Page 7 “Pedacos da Fome, que se chamaria “Felizarda”, e Provérbios, ambos de 1963, marcaram...” [“Pieces of Hunger, which would be called “Happy,” and Proverbs, both from 1963, marked...”]. In the item “Some considerations,” I suggest that there should be a better way to explain the element of symbolic reterritorialization, the relationship is established by comparing these forms in the authors and how this occurs from the terreiros (thinking of the Orún and the Ayé in the body that becomes territory. It seems to me that time is spent on the theme of this form in African religions, although it is not a theme in either of the two works. I think this comparison could be better explained. APPROVED WITH RESTRICTIONS [Revised]

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Reviewed on June 13, 2024.

Review II

The proposed article meets the requirements of the genre, with emphasis on fluidity, clarity, correctness, coherence, suitability to what is proposed and explained in the formulation of the objective. The study demonstrates knowledge of references related to the topic and is an important contribution to the area of knowledge.

1-The childhoods of Bitita and Juan Francisco Manzano: autobiography as a critical fabulation of the self in Black authorship - I ask: critical fabrication of the self or just critical fabrication, can I understand that by “comprehending the effects of the colonial-slavery system on perceptions of childhood” the authors make, from the narration of their imagined stories, a denunciation of the colonial-slavery system?

2-I understand that the various theoretical strands on autobiography, the biographical pact and the biographical space corroborate the reflections developed in this article by affirming that the “literary genre of autobiography allows the affirmation of Black authorship beyond a single denunciatory bias, accompanying possible negotiations that build unique ways of making literature.”

Thus, I would like to say that the studies on autobiography in Juan Francisco Manzano and Bitita, by Carolina Maria de Jesus, instigate reflections that broaden the scope of autobiographical studies, indicating that the works in question shed light on how to think about and investigate autobiographies as a critical fabrication of Black authorship as denunciation, as a movement of practicing freedom and constructing identities, marking visible places alongside other works considered “readable,” sellable, entering the media

spaces, despite the presence of various intermediaries, almost always white, as indicated in the article on page 19 and reproduced below:

“In the autobiographies of enslavement, what was at stake in authorship was not its creative force, although this was always present. In contemporary times, this is exactly what constitutes the new difficult negotiation with white intermediaries, be they publishers, publicists, journalists or critics.”

3-Based on the above, even if we consider the limited space of the magazine, I believe it would be interesting to give greater relevance to autobiography as a denunciation, bringing excerpts from the works to make the affirmations explicit and prove the thesis proposed and the objective: to understand the effects of the colonial-slavery system on perceptions of childhood based on the analysis of two autobiographical works - where can we see what is affirmed?

Thus, if the authors consider the observations made to be pertinent, wouldn't it be interesting to reduce the reviews of scholars on the subject, focusing on the most important ones to support the thesis defended in the article and then explore the excerpts, illustrating what is being investigated? APPROVED WITH SUGGESTIONS [Revised]

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Reviewed on June 29, 2024.

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