
THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY FROM MARGIN TO CENTER IN YAA GYASI'S *HOMEGOING* AND ELIANA ALVES CRUZ'S *ÁGUA DE BARRELA*

A RECONSTRUÇÃO DA HISTÓRIA DA MARGEM AO CENTRO EM O CAMINHO DE CASA DE YAA GYASI'S E ÁGUA DE BARRELA DE ELIANA ALVES CRUZ



Dossiê

Literaturas africanas e afrodiaspó-
ricas: escritas emancipatórias

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v. 32, n. 61, maio, 2023
Brasília, DF
ISSN 1982-9701



Fluxo da Submissão

Submetido em: 16/09/2022

Aprovado em: 16/03/2023

Distribuído sob



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Resumo/Abstract

Palavras-chave/Keywords

Although immigrant literature scholarship emphasizes generational conflicts, little has been done to intersect questions of race, gender, and migration, which is pivotal to expand our comprehension of postcolonial studies. Whereas some taboo topics, such as the Africans' involvement in the slave trade and the myth of racial democracy in Brazil, have been seldom investigated in postcolonial and diaspora studies, novels such as Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Eliana Alves Cruz's *Água de Barrela* reshape obfuscated and silenced parts of history. These novels depict generational traumas that pass on family members while simultaneously showing how resistance has always been part of black people's daily lives, primarily through storytelling. This article argues that through the act of remembering, uncovering, (re)claiming, and sharing these stories, characters can strengthen bonds with each other and create the basis for historical revision.

Family bonds, motherhood, migration, postcoloniality, historical revision

Embora estudos sobre literatura imigrante enfatizem os conflitos geracionais, pouco tem sido feito para interseccionar questões de raça, gênero e migração, fator essencial para expandir a nossa compreensão dos estudos pós-coloniais. Enquanto alguns temas considerados tabu, como o envolvimento de pessoas africanas no tráfico de escravos e o mito da democracia racial no Brasil, têm sido raramente investigados em estudos pós-coloniais e de diáspora, romances como *O Caminho de Casa* de Yaa Gyasi e o *Água de Barrela* de Eliana Alves Cruz reformulam partes ofuscadas e silenciadas da história. Esses romances retratam traumas geracionais transmitidos por membros da família ao mesmo tempo que mostram como a resistência sempre fez parte da vida cotidiana da população negra, principalmente através da narração de histórias. Este artigo argumenta que através do ato de recordar, desvendar, (re)reivindicar e partilhar estas histórias, os personagens podem fortalecer os laços uns com os outros e criar a base para uma revisão histórica.

laços de família, maternidade, migração, pós-colonialidade, revisão histórica

Black women writers have long written against official historical narratives that exclude them. In black women's writings, such as Harriet Jacobs's and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's, it is possible to highlight the importance of storytelling and memory in constructing black diasporic identities. It is through the collection of fragments of forgotten stories that Eliana Alves Cruz and Yaa Gyasi seek to rediscover what has been lost—a vital part of their formation as black women and writers. They highlight voices and stories commonly overlooked and omitted from dominant discourses by retelling and rewriting history. I argue that Cruz and Gyasi established the grounds for historical revision through their efforts to remember, share, and reclaim stories long forgotten. Their characters—Marcus and Marjorie in *Homegoing* and Eliana herself in *Água de Barrela*—use writing to maintain and strengthen their bonds and re-construct their black diasporic identities, transforming the text into a site of double resistance.

In rewriting history, black families defy the cycle of oppression that has affected them for generations. As Michel Foucault and Edward Said have suggested, one of the most effective structures of colonial oppression is the relationship between knowledge and power. Consequently, mainstream historical narratives create the impression that black people have not played any role in the creation of our world, which negatively affects their self-esteem and identity construction. To reclaim history, it is first necessary to remember and accept the past, and such an act “is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 63). In line with Bhabha's view, resignifying the past is crucial to revealing colonial violence and healing collective memory (63). Nevertheless, remembering and resignifying the past is not enough to break long-standing colonial systems. Resistance and transformation through the act of writing bring marginalized voices to the center. To reclaim histories long ignored and regarded as

taboo both in Brazil and Ghana, Eliana Alves Cruz and Yaa Gyasi engage in anthropological and fictional processes, focusing narratives that denounce slavery, demystify the Brazilian myth of racial democracy, debate the issue of miscegenation, highlight Africans' involvement in the slave trade, among other taboo topics that help rewrite history through marginalized lenses. Therefore, Cruz's *Água de Barrela* and Gyasi's *Homegoing* perform a double resistance—while the novels can be interpreted as acts of decolonization and resistance, sharing and transmitting memories and history, especially among women, is a way to resist the colonial oppression imposed by the dominant white group. In addition, storytelling allows women of different generations to form a bond that is essential for constructing their identities.

Among the contemporary novels, also called neo-slave narratives, that examine slavery, criticize it, and reclaim shadowed voices are Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*. “Fiction and Slavery's Archive: Memory, Agency, and Finding Home” by Lisa Ze Winters posits *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead as examples of this new genre (WINTERS, 2018, p. 338). She claims African diasporic writers have always tried to tell stories that contradict conventional narratives (WINTERS, 2018, p. 338). A similar line of argument can be found in Kalenda Eaton's article “Diasporic Dialogues: The role of gender, language, and revision in the neo-slave narrative,” which states that neo-slave narratives assist in historical revisions and give voice and recognition to black authors. Although both works cited above consider Gyasi's *Homegoing* to be part of this new genre, black Brazilian women authors are left out of these discussions, despite the fact they've been writing neo-slavery narratives for over a decade. An example is Ana Maria Gonçalves' *Um Defeito de Cor* from 2006, which tells the story of Kehinde, an elderly woman who travels from Africa to Brazil in the 19th century with the purpose of finding her son. Neither black nor postcolonial scholars pay enough attention to black Brazilian literature, with few exceptions, such as Paulo Lins' *City of God* and

Carolina Maria de Jesus' *Child of the Dark*. In this article, I highlight how black Brazilian writers have participated in the neo-slave narrative trend by comparing Cruz's and Gyasi's novels in relation to their emphasis on rewriting history and disclosing taboo topics often erased from traditional discourses on slavery. Such perspective serves to underscore the similarities between these two black Atlantic literary novels and expand black and postcolonial diasporic studies.

While TV News in the U.S. displays states banning the teaching of Critical Race Theory in K-12 classes, the media in Brazil denounce *terreiros* burnings and Indigenous land invasions, we can start grasping the necessity of historical revisions and reparation programs. In a recent interview, Cruz states that “black consciousness [is] the consciousness of where we came from, at what moment we are, and where we want to go. The consciousness that tells us we need to change the axis of our Eurocentered thinking” (CRUZ, 2020). In other words, Cruz considers that the worst thing that could have ever happened to Brazilians as a society is the erasure of part of its history and the emphasis and promotion of everything that is European (CRUZ, 2020). Historical narratives have an impact on everyone—white, brown, black people alike. As Fanon has suggested, lacking the knowledge of one's history and origin has left deep psychological wounds in black diasporic people, with many wearing the colonizer's mask. When Gyasi and Cruz propose this dislocation, they open the possibility for a new version of history in which black people have a voice. This is not so different from the Bajan women's speech in Marshall's “Poets in the Kitchen” or Walker's recuperation of black women's creativity in “In Search of our Mothers' Gardens.” Only by remembering and preserving collective memory through storytelling can authors begin to question traditional historical narratives and revindicate revisions that include marginal voices and stories. The question remains, to what extent can novels like *Homegoing* and *Água de Barrela* help promote historical revision? That is what this article sets out to

explore. Particularly, it discloses Gyasi's and Cruz's backgrounds and unveils their novels' similarities, arguing that they use narrative fragments to reconstruct a historical perspective on black families in the diaspora. Afterward, I demonstrate how their characters have similar coping mechanisms to deal with displacement, relying on research and writing to construct their diasporic identities and make sense of their pasts. Therefore, throughout this article, I put into evidence how Cruz, Gyasi, and their characters can recreate or strengthen their bonds with their families and their lands through remembering, sharing, and reclaiming their stories. Moreover, this act of recovering the past is what ultimately helps both authors and their characters to re-historicize their narratives and instigate historical revisions interested in the construction of black diasporic identities.

History as a Source of Truths and Untruths: Cruz and Gyasi's Historical Revisions.

Neo-slave narratives intersect history, memory, and trauma, attempting to reconstruct history by using memory as a source for understanding the past. According to Lisa Ze Winters, black women's voices are prominent in this type of literary production (WINTERS, 2018, p. 338). This happens because women are often central in the reproduction of stories in the black diaspora. *Homegoing* and *Água de Barrela* confirm this assumption since both authors give more prominence to diasporic black women voices and use collective memory of chattel slavery and migration to show generational traumas and reinforce the importance of historical revision in their narratives. I argue that Gyasi and Cruz are concerned with historical revision by how their novels are organized, focusing on different family members, their research processes to acquire information for their books, and the way they disclose taboo topics in Ghana and Brazil.

Homegoing and *Água de Barrela* start with a family tree, whose branches connect one person to another, much like stories and memory connect them. Focusing on female

authorship, the authors highlight the importance of female characters in healing through storytelling and collective memory. The stories progress similarly, with each chapter or section describing different family members' lives, along with important historical events, such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (*Homegoing*), Brazil's independence (*Água de Barrela*), among many others. Gyasi's *Homegoing*, on the one hand, follows a matriarchal family with Maame at the top of the family tree. Maame is raped and gives birth to Effia, Marjorie's ancestor. After that, Maame runs away, marries Big Man Asare, and gives birth to Esi, Marcus' ancestor. These half-sisters symbolize two sides of Ghana's history—Effia's side, which profited from the slave trade, and Esi's, which suffered enslavement in the U.S.

In contrast, Cruz's *Água de Barrela* shows Firmino and Gowon's parents at the top of the family tree. The novel is based on Cruz's family story, and she starts her telling with the kidnapping of Akin (Firmino's name before the kidnapping), his brother Gowon, who dies before the passage, and Gowon's fiancé, Ewa/Helena, who was pregnant. Although Ewa/Helena dies shortly after childbirth, her daughter, Anolina, is Cruz's ancestor. The story is mainly told through the perspective of Anolina and her daughter and granddaughter, Martha and Damiana, respectively, and it focuses on the female family members' struggles, while most males are away in wars or absent by choice. This makes *Água de Barrela* centered on female authorship as much as Gyasi's *Homegoing*.

Gyasi and Cruz also went through similar processes to acquire information to compose their novels. Because of the unavailability of their family's stories, both authors must recollect the pieces, using both fictional and biographical elements, and reimagine the narratives of the colonial period in Ghana and Brazil. Born in Ghana, Yaa Gyasi moved to the United States as an infant. With a writing grant from Stanford University, Gyasi travels to Ghana, visits the dungeons herself, and starts what might be categorized—at least to some degree—as anthropological research,

which helps her understand and recreate this silenced past. As she mentions in an interview with Olga Segura, Gyasi is struck by the information she is presented to in her trip to Ghana. In her understanding, “that kind of experience, you shouldn't really have to take a trip to Ghana, to a castle. I wondered why I hadn't heard more about it or read more about it. But then when I finally did start researching more deeply, I noticed a kind of absence in a lot of the books that I was reading” (GYASI, 2016). Gyasi distinguishes this issue, as she references the taboo of Ghanian's involvement in the slave trade through the character of Effia, whose family is part of the slave trade business along with the Europeans.

Much like Gyasi, who went to Ghana and saw the dungeons for herself, Eliana Alvez Cruz, while writing *Água de Barrela*, travels to Cachoeira (in the state of Bahia) to see what is left of the Engenho Natividade (the plantation where her family lived and worked—first enslaved, then in the share-cropping system). Cruz was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she works as a journalist. In her debut novel, *Água de Barrela*, she relies on her family accounts, the things her relatives tell her, and the things they do not remember or communicate. Her story starts with Akin/Firmino's family's forced immigration from Mozambique to Brazil and recounts the struggles of eight generations until Eliana herself was born. Cruz intersects tellings from her schizophrenic aunt, grandparents, and other relatives with academic research done exclusively for this book. In a process that can be compared to completing a puzzle, Cruz delivers a novel that is a picture of Brazil (especially the state of Bahia) from slavery to contemporary times, as well as a family portrait. The need to make sense of the past is what moves Cruz to make the (literal) trip back to Cachoeira. In her account, she states,

In the same land rises, majestic and beautiful in the calm landscape, the cashew tree that sprouts from inside the *terreiros* where Anacleto performed, where my old grandparents must have been many times. It is impossible not to think of the concept that says that the material

ends, but the spirit is eternalized.
(CRUZ, 2018, p. 304-05)*

Cruz's trip to Engenho Natividade shows the power of heritage and the importance of knowing and remembering the past. On a similar note, Gyasi also feels this power as she stands in the dungeons and imagine what her people went through (GYASI, 2016). These authors' journey to the past—both literally by being in the physical location and abstractly by writing a novel—exemplifies how what happened in the past is part of the spirit, even after the flesh is gone. At the same time, these two experiences have three significant effects—they express the importance of rewriting history to include non-central narratives, an individual act of restoration of the past connected to a personal and group political identity construction, and how memory and storytelling is a form of resistance against racism and colonialism. Despite these silences, it is a wrong assumption to understand these histories as separated. In fact, Ghana's history of the slave trade is the “outside” history of the “inside” American history, as much as Cruz's family history is the “outside” history of the “inside” Brazilian history.

Homegoing and *Água de Barrela* take history “as a source of truths and untruths; history as a source of inspiration as well as anxiety [in which] writing memory serves as a supplement to history” (CLARKE, 2018, p. 50, 54). In other words, mainstream historical narratives are deficient; they require a supplement. I use historical narratives instead of history to emphasize that history is not fixed but a perspective, given the multifaceted realities a single historical event can have. For centuries, we have lived with the erasing and forgetting of colonized voices in a system that favors a Euro-centered narrative that for a long time has been taught as if it is sufficient, or simply the “truth.” When Gyasi and Cruz propose this dislocation, this alternative way of understanding and reading the past, they rely on stories that evoke a collective memory of blackness and colonized subjectivity.

Furthermore, according to Layla Gandhi, “the emergence of anti-colonial and ‘independent’ nation-States after colonialism is frequently accompanied by a desire to forget the colonial past. This ‘will-to-forget’ takes a number of historical forms, and is impelled by a variety of cultural and political motivations” (GANDHI, 2019, p. 4). In other words, nation-states strived to construct a culture and identity that might unify the new state, preserving some systems of oppression of the colonial past. Attempting to break with this silence, Gyasi makes her characters deal with their guilt for their families' involvement in the slave trade—for instance, with the character of James. Meanwhile, on a similar note, Cruz exposes the myth of racial democracy in Brazil, primarily through the character of Anolina.

While most literary criticism on *Homegoing* deals with questions of memory, home, and identity, critics such as Okudzeto have noticed how Gyasi breaks with “the taboo surrounding the discussion of the slave trade... [in which] many prominent families that hold powerful positions stem from a lineage that can be traced back to slave traders” (OKUDZETO, 2012, p. 356). Gyasi discusses the issue through the characters of Effia and Esi, half-sisters from their mother's side, who end up in opposite positions—whereas Effia “marries” an English slaver, Esi is captured, enslaved, and taken by force to the United States. Pregnant after a rape, Esi's descendants suffer from slavery in the South and later segregation and poverty. The trauma of displacement in the novel is caused both by slavery in America and European colonialism in Ghana.

We can see *Homegoing*'s critical stance about the slave trade in Ghana through the character of James. Effia's grandson, James, feels disconnected from his family because he does not want to participate in the slave trade business. He feels a necessity to reconnect to Ghana and find a place he can call “home.” Much like his grandmother, James does not feel he belongs to the village where his people are kept and later sent away to the U.S. as slaves. James wants “to be [his] own nation” (GYASI, 2016, p. 107). Ultimately, this is what he does. James breaks with the evilness in his family—

that is, their involvement in the slave trade—and travels to meet Akosua, an enslave his parents would never endorse. Years later, he tells his daughter, “Every season I feel lucky to have this land, to do this honorable work, not the shameful work of my family” (GYASI, 2016, p. 153). James gives his life meaning by re-establishing a bond with the land and rupturing with his legacy in the slave trade.

At the same time, Cruz's *Água de Barrela* breaks with the myth of racial democracy in Brazil, a concept coined by the highly praised Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, in his *Casa Grande e Senzala*. According to Freyre, the “big house” and the “slave quarters” have a massive influence upon one another and together form the Brazilian society, primarily due to miscegenation. The book's main purpose is to refute the notion that Brazilians are “inferior” due to miscegenation, a widespread idea at the time of its publication. Nevertheless, Freyre ignores the racist systems present in Brazilian society, as well as how raping black women's body in plantations was connected to miscegenation. In spite of these controversies, Freyre's work became influential and determined the racial relations discourse in Brazil for a long time. In fact, “the myth of Brazil as a ‘racial democracy’ continues to sustain discourses that deny the existence of a race factor related to social and economic inequalities in the country” (SANTOS and SOETERIK, 2016, p. 33). Moreover, according to Lélia Gonzalez, a Brazilian black activist and writer, Brazil's veiled racism is expressly maintained by this so-called racial democracy myth (GONZALEZ, 1988, p. 72-74). In Cruz's narrative, we can notice the very deconstruction of the racial democracy myth, showing how Brazilian's segregation worked—never truly sanctioned by the law but practiced socially and institutionally. In the novel, Cruz illustrates that the separation between the “big house” and “slave quarters” has remained unchanged since colonial times until today.

Água de Barrela has received very little critical attention. However, Maria Cristina Batalha has acknowledged how the book unveils and resists the myth of racial

democracy—even though this critical work only points out major themes of the novel without engaging with them or providing a reading of Cruz's work within a black diasporic postcolonial framework. Nonetheless, Cruz's unveiling of the myth can be noticed in many instances in the narrative, starting with the title of the novel *Água de Barrela* (Water of Barrela). “Barrela” refers to the mixture of water and fireplace wood ash used to bleach clothing (BATALHA, 2020, p. 250). Such occupation refers to the women of the Cruz family, who were brought in to work in Brazilian plantations and survived by washing clothes for the white dominant class, from slavery to contemporary times. The title of the novel, therefore, denounces the cyclical legacy of slavery and colonialism in Brazil, where the majority of the black population remains in serving positions.

Furthermore, Cruz demonstrates how black women were assaulted by the plantation owners through Anolina's character, disclosing how miscegenation happened in the plantations;

At each encounter, Firmino noticed that Anolina was taller and her body was beginning to change. He worried about his niece. He knew what happened to the black girls as soon as they started to “show a body.” The baron's son was growing up, he was a little younger, and she could well be his first “human toy.” In a way, she was already part of his amusement because, among her many tasks in the house, one was to play with little Francisco, who wasn't embarrassed to bite her, slap her, and reproduce with her what he saw in the treatment of his parents, grandparents and uncles to the black. (CRUZ, 2018, p. 87)**

Anolina is expected to continue serving the white ruling family while enduring sexual abuse, like all the other women in her family. Anolina is forced to be the woman with whom Francisco will have his first sexual experience. As her uncle predicts, Francisco grows a bit older, and Anolina is taken to a particular room in a detached house around the plantation solely to be abused by him. The

other women wash and oil Anolina's body amongst tears, remembering they had been forced to do the same with other white males on the plantation (CRUZ, 2018, p. 89-90). As a result, Anolina's daughter Martha has an unknown father—since she could have been a daughter of Francisco or another man with whom Anolina had a relationship, described in the novel as mixed-raced. When the issue of paternity irritates Firmino, who did not like the idea of his niece having the blood of the slave owner, Dasdô (Anolina's surrogate mother) ends the discussion saying the baby is Anolina's only, for she would be the one to breastfeed the child, raise her, and make all the sacrifices to keep the baby alive (CRUZ, 2018, p. 104). Dasdô's speech emphasizes the devastation slavery brings to black families, while both the title of the novel and Anolina's story highlight the cyclical system of oppression, reveal the tensions in racial relations, and break with the myth of racial democracy in Brazil.

By the organization of their novels, their writing processes, and the themes they bring into discussion, Gyasi and Cruz show their interest in rewriting history by emphasizing its multifaceted trait. Although the structure of *Água de Barrela* is not as fragmented as *Homegoing*, it still shows multiple perspectives and stories, from Eliana's ancestors and the Tosta's, the white family who owns the plantation where most of the story happens. By the end of the book, when Cruz becomes a character in her book (referred here as Eliana), she describes the process of creating the book as "tiny pieces of life"*** (CRUZ, 2018, p. 305). In a way, *Homegoing* does something similar, and Gyasi directly addresses why her story is multifaceted through Yaw's character. Effia's descendent and Marjorie's father, Yaw, teaches a lesson on history when he asks his students if they knew how he got his scar. The kids have many theories, "you were lit by fire... they say your mother was fighting evil spirits..." (GYASI, 2016, p. 226). Yaw asks them, "whose story is correct?" (GYASI, 2016, p. 226). As no one answers, he says, "We cannot know which story is correct because we

were not there" (GYASI, 2016, p. 226). In Yaw's words,

This is the problem of history. We cannot know that which we were not there to see and hear and experience for ourselves. We must rely upon the words of others. Those who were there in the olden days, they told stories to the children so that the children would know, so that the children could tell stories to their children. And so on, and so on. But now we come upon the problem of conflicting stories... Whose story do we believe? (GYASI, 2016, p. 226)

Yaw's metaphor about history's perspectives illustrates both Gyasi's and Cruz's use of individual stories to re-signify the mainstream narrative of history. Since black stories have been removed from history, in a deliberate racist process of erasing black people's participation in constructing the world as we know it, their individual stories went unheard, disregarded in traditional education. Through these stories, Gyasi and Cruz force readers to redirect their eyes to an ignored perspective of history.

Memory and the Construction of Black Diasporic Identities

Homegoing and *Água de Barrela* offer personal, private stories of a family dealing with slavery and its aftermath while exploring an idea of a black diasporic identity that is part of a collectiveness. Since Paul Gilroy has suggested that the black Atlantic could be interpreted as "one single, complex unit of analysis" (GILROY, 1993, p. 15), much has been said about the challenges of doing that without essentializing the black experience in the diaspora. I stand with Stuart Hall's notion that "identities are never completed, never finished... they are always, as subjectivity itself... in process" (Hall, 2019, p. 69). In this way, identities are formed from splitting, ambivalence, in the encounter with the other, for "the notion that identity has to do with people who look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same, is nonsense. As a process, as a narrative, as a discourse, it is always told

from the position of the Other” (Hall, 2019, p. 70). From recognizing this position of difference, a black identity is a political stance formed because of a racist society. Therefore, the idea of blackness that is intrinsic to people born in black diasporas across the globe is imaginary, for it supposes an essence that diminishes individual choices and desires and the differences between cultural backgrounds. Instead, what is perceived in *Homegoing* and *Água de Barrela* is the construction of a black diasporic identity that is political, formed from the contact with racism. Because of that, characters have different reactions towards racism—some prefer to invest in their children’s education while others believe they should be as far away from white people as possible. Regardless, black diasporic identities come into play whenever characters deal with racism, and some of these characters—mainly Marcus and Marjorie (*Homegoing*) and Eliana (*Água de Barrela*)—use writing to express their hybridity—in Bhabha’s sense of the word, which consists of a crisis in any measure of conceptualization, a tension in recognition based on binaries (BHABHA, 1994, p. 4). In other words, some of these characters are all still looking for a *home*.

As mentioned previously, Cruz becomes a character in her novel by the final pages, where she details how she has written most of the book. However, other characters in her novel also struggle with their hybrid identities, and I will take a few paragraphs to talk about them. Firstly, I highlight Firmino’s character, who undoubtedly expresses double consciousness and/or displacement in the novel. As Du Bois affirms, double consciousness characterizes as “... this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DU BOIS, 1969, p. 3). This may also be connected to Stuart Hall’s notion that “racism expresses itself through displacement, through denial, through the capacity to say two contradictory things at the same time, the surface imagery speaking of an unspeakable content, the repressed content of a culture” (HALL, 2019, p. 15). As Firmino

verbalizes by the end of his life in *Água de Barrela*, “I’m not from here, but I’m not from there either”***** (CRUZ, 2018, p. 176). Firmino is kidnapped from Mozambique as an adolescent, and he spends his adult life fighting back against the system to obtain his freedom. Still, when he has the opportunity to go back to Africa, he does not do it. He believes that the place he wishes to go back to does not exist anymore. Therefore, he accepts his hybridity and continues living between two cultures until his tragic death in a bombing.

A more complicated example of displacement in *Água de Barrela* is Dodó, one of Cruz’s ancestors who becomes a maid in a wealthy white family household. As mentioned before, Cruz’s family story is intrinsically connected with the wealthy Tosta family’s. They maintain a close relationship, which begins when Cruz’s ancestors were enslaved and remains as generations pass by, particularly regarding labor. For instance, one of Cruz’s relatives, Dodó, becomes a maid in the Tosta’s household in conditions that resemble slavery, in return for a favor that allows Dodó’s sister to become an elementary teacher. Patricia Hill Collins refers to this phenomenon as “outsider within” (COLLINS, 1986, p. 14). In her book, Collins argues that black women gain an “insider’s perspective” while they work and are a “part” of white families. At the same time, they understand themselves are not being “part” of that family; therefore, they are “outsiders.” In Collin’s perspective, black female intellectuals have suffered from the same marginalization; they are “outsiders within.”

In *Homegoing*, Marjorie and Marcus—as much as Eliana—use writing to make sense of their stories and diasporic identities. Much like Firmino—as well as Gyasi and Cruz themselves—these characters experience displacement, and they can be perceived as hybrid subjects. As I emphasize in the following paragraphs, the erasure of a historical perspective that includes black people and the lack of connection among people and places in the life of a handful of characters enhance the search for a home (a motherland) that is never found. This acute search seems to be related to

searching for an identity that is as fixed and stable as the very idea of home. Instead, Gyasi's and Cruz's characters must cope with their hybridity and displacement, and they do that by uncovering their pasts, accepting it as part of their heritage, and understanding that there is no fixed *home* for them. Perhaps these characters find some stability in hybridity, but they nonetheless remain displaced.

When we consider Marjorie and Marcus in *Homegoing*, we identify the same need to see and physically be where it all began, just as Cruz and Gyasi express in their biographies. Marjorie and Marcus are in the different descent lines of the family. Whereas Marjorie is Effia's descendant, acquainted with the stories of her family, which is deeply marked by the history of colonialism in Ghana. As a descendant of the Esi's family line, Marcus was impacted by slavery and racism in America. Marjorie's story focuses on her adaptation to the U.S., where she was born. She keeps a close relationship with her grandmother and with Ghana. Marjorie loves her grandmother's big bungalow by the beach and often wonders why her parents even left the country. Nonetheless, she considers herself part of Ghana; her umbilical cord is buried in the beach's shores near her grandmother's house. Moreover, she wears the necklace which belonged to her ancestors—all the way back to Effia; the necklace her father had told her "was a part of their family history" (GYASI, 2016, p. 267). However, Marjorie still feels like an outsider both in Ghana and in the U.S. To express her feelings about Ghana, she states, "I mostly feel like I don't belong there. As soon as I step off the airplane, people can tell that I'm like them, but different too. They can smell it on me... the way I don't fit here or there" (GYASI, 2016, p. 278). Marjorie is in an in-between space; her identity is both Ghanaian and American, but people do not consider her either. She feels like she is part of Ghana—even though Ghanaian people might not think so. At the same time, Marjorie must struggle to find her place in the U.S. During her adaptation in U.S. schools, she learns through other black girls that she sounded like a white girl, that they "were not the same kind

of black ... That indeed she was the wrong kind" (GYASI, 2016, p. 268). Her blackness, therefore, becomes a political identity, while socially, Marjorie resists a monocultural identification.

Marjorie constructs a black political identity that allows her to speak from both locations, Ghanaian and American. She beautifully shows her fluid and political identity through her poetry. Her writing helps her come to terms with her blackness and reconnect to her grandmother and her ancestors, as she goes, "Split the Castle open, / find me, find you. / We, two, felt sand, / wind, air." (GYASI, 2016, p. 282). Akin to what Gyasi and Cruz achieve in their novels, Marjorie combines both family stories in the first part of the poem. The second part of the poem starts with a statement that highlights Marjorie's fluid identity, "We, two, black / Me, you" /... the waters seem different / but are the same" (GYASI, 2016, p. 282). Marjorie emphasizes a collectiveness that transposes historical facts and cultures and encompasses a political and social black identity.

Marcus, on the other hand, a black American man, experiences what was already classified as Du Bois's double consciousness (DU BOIS, 1969, p. 3) or Hall's sense of displacement. Since Marjorie has a more tangible connection to her family and their past in Ghana because of her grandmother, she seems more at ease with her hybrid identity. Marcus comes from the part of the family which cannot trace its roots back to Ghana. On the other hand, he grew up with the weight of slavery, segregation, and racism on his shoulder. Like many black Americans and black Brazilians, Marcus' story is based on a central narrative that tells him his family history started in the U.S. plantations, and what happened before this has no importance. His is a broken family picture that he tries to recreate by sinking deep into an overwhelming Ph.D. dissertation. Marcus feels his family and story are split; often, he "... would imagine a different room... He would imagine so hard that at times he thought he could see them. Sometimes in a hut in Africa ... a crowd watching a young woman carrying a bucket on

her head; sometimes in a cramped apartment with too many kids, or a small, failing farm, around a burning tree” (GYASI, 2016, p. 290). The sense of loss is latent in Marcus's experience; he knows his life story is missing pieces. Although Marcus's family has never left the U.S. after enslavement, Marcus still feels that his identity is split because the very process of identity formation happens due to racism. Marcus' black political identity comes forth in the text when he uses his Ph.D. writing to understand more of who he is and from where he has come.

Conclusion: Writing is Resistance.

It is impossible not to make the parallel between Cruz, Gyasi, as well as between the characters Marjorie and Marcus, because they have similar ways to cope with their split narratives—they go into writing, perhaps as Derrida would argue, as a supplement to speech and memory. Marjorie writes poems and studies African American and African literature; Marcus is pursuing a Ph.D. in sociology with a focus on African American history—very similar to Cruz's actual research to recover small pieces of her family's life. For Cruz, the act of writing the story is similar to the act of remembering itself. In her own words, “History went on and is still going through all of us, ordinary people, who carry tiny pieces of life in their hands”***** (CRUZ, 2018, p. 305). When Eliana asks her great-grandmother to tell the story, she tells it bit by bit, in pieces of life, that later on are compiled by the narrator to reconstruct the story; as her great-grandmother says, “It was my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother who told me everything... Me? I was only a girl. Just a girl.”***** (CRUZ, 2018, p. 305). This suggests that the story began long ago, and it is, as Trinh Minh-Ha claims, “older than my body, my mother's, my grandmother's. As old as me, Old Spontaneous me, the world. For years we have been passing it on, so that our daughters and granddaughters may continue to pass it on” (TRINH, 1989, p. 1). Uncovering these personal narratives is what makes both these novels so important today,

mainly because we have been living in a world that is trying very hard to suppress marginalized voices.

Since the last decade, many countries, Brazil and the U.S. included, have been experiencing the growth of conservative politics and the decrease of actions to promote reparation for black communities. Attempts to promote anti-racist education are usually met with much opposition. An example is Project 1619, whose purpose is to regard this year—when the first ship with enslaved and kidnapped Africans arrived in the US—as the birth of the US nation, centralizing this narrative in the study of North America's history (RILEY, 2020, p. 36). Similar political moves contemplating the school curriculum have been made in Brazil. In 2003, Law 10.639 was sanctioned, making the study of African and Afro-Brazilian history, culture, and literature compulsory in school curricula. Although “Law 10.639 currently serves as a legal support to strengthen existing anti-racist education practices,” Brazilians still experience “many difficulties and serious—political, academic as well as pedagogical—challenges involved in effectively implementing it” (SANTOS and SOETERIK, 2016, p. 41). Ever since the last elections in Brazil, the advances with the implementation of the Law 10.369 of 2003 were put in jeopardy, since the new government's policy for education discourages teaching practices they considered ideological, such as discussions of race, racism, as well as gender identity, among other topics. Not often the school curriculum itself is in the debate, and perhaps, for this reason, it becomes the target of much opposition. Therefore, any resignification of educational practices—whatever minor or major, like Project 1619 or the Law 10.639—is bound to raise many repercussions. Another example is the recent-approved bill that bans the teaching of critical race theory in K-12 classrooms in states like Texas. Actions like these only confirm the revolutionary character of anti-racist education and the infinite attempts to suppress it.

Silence and denial of history have caused deep wounds in black American and black Brazilian family relations, another act of

violence against black identities. The necessity of recovering the past to heal traumas ingrained in social relations leads Gyasi, Cruz and their characters on a journey of self- and collective discovery. Uncovering narratives long ignored while demystifying and exposing taboo topics is pivotal for the formation of political identities, and Gyasi's and Cruz's novels highlight the importance of social change. These authors do not claim a center in their stories; instead, they direct the reader's eyes to the margin and recreate history from this location. Their craft is similar, as they go collecting "pedaços miúdos da vida" (tiny pieces of life) (CRUZ, 2018, p. 305), that mingle long-standing systems of oppression with the everyday resistance of black people's lives, beautifully portrayed in black women's writing tradition. By putting these two works in conversation with each other, I underscore the necessity of cross-cultural readings, which englobe more than the English-speaking world. Gyasi and Cruz's crafts exemplify the richness of black cultures and how much still there is to rediscover about them. After all, this has always been one of the major concerns of black women's writing traditions across the Atlantic—the reconstruction of history through remembering stories silenced in mainstream discourses.

As Alice Walker described her grandmothers, "they dreamed dreams that no one knew—not even themselves, in any coherent fashion—and saw visions no one could understand... They forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay" (WALKER, 1994, p. 402). Although Walker talks about the artistic spirit in these women who would die without having their voices heard, her search relates to Paule Marshall's kitchen poets, Trinh Minh-Ha's old stories of the world, and so many others. The strength of black heritage that goes back to Africa is present in novels such as *Homegoing* and *Água de Barrela*. The importance of novels like these is precisely in how they allow us the possibility of a historical revision through the eyes of postcolonial subjects, in a dislocation from the center to the margin that contributes

to the emergence of a non-imperialist literary culture—one that is free from the "peculiar Western style of thinking" about the other (GANDHI, 2019, p.68). These works should be identified within "a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing" (DAVIES, 1994, p.3). The fact that Carole Boyce Davies recognized this particular characteristic of black women writers over thirty years ago confirms why, respectively, in 2016 and 2018, two novels share many cross-cultural diasporic perspectives, despite all their differences. Their conceptions derive from the necessity of highlighting and recovering a repressed past, reconstructing a black diasporic identity as a political stance, and promote actual historical revisions for more inclusive educational practices.

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Traduções

* Na mesma terra ergue-se, majestoso e lindo na paisagem calma, o pé de cajá que brota de dentro do terreiro em que atuou Anacleto, por onde devem ter passado muitas vezes as minhas velhas avós. É impossível não pensar no conceito que diz que a matéria se acaba, mas o que é do espírito se eterniza (CRUZ, 2018, p. 304-05).

** A cada encontro, Firmino reparava que Anolina estava mais alta e que seu corpo começava a mudar. Preocupou-se com a sobrinha. Sabia o que acontecia às negrinhas assim que começavam a "botar corpo". O filho do barão estava crescendo, ele era pouca coisa mais novo e ela bem poderia ser seu primeiro "brinquedo humano". De certa forma, ela já era parte de seu divertimento, pois entre suas muitas tarefas na casa, uma era a de brincar com o pequeno Francisco, que não se constrangia em mordê-la, esbofeteá-la, e reproduzir com ela o que via no tratamento dos pais, avós e tios aos negros. (CRUZ, 2018, p. 87)

*** pedaços miúdos de vida (CRUZ, 2018, p. 305).

**** Eu não sou daqui, mas também não sou mais de lá (CRUZ, 2018, p. 176).

***** A história continuou e está prosseguindo através de todos nós, pessoas comuns, mas que têm em suas mãos pedaços miúdos da vida (CRUZ, 2018, p. 305).

*****Quem me contou tudo foi minha mãe, minha avó, minha bisavó... Eu? Eu era apenas uma menina. Só uma menina... (CRUZ, 2018, p. 305).

COMO CITAR

RIBEIRO COSTA, A. C. The Reconstruction of History from Margin to Center in *Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing* and Eliana Alves Cruz's *Água de Barrela*. *Revista Cerrados*, 32(61), p. 135–147. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.26512/cerrados.v32i61.45872>