Maréia and the Emergence of the Ancestral Novel

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Miriam Alves's novel *Maréia* (2019) as a case of innovative literary form. In doing so, it underscores how the novel emerges as a new mode of rendering contemporary Black experience and thought. From the sociopolitical standpoint of a Black woman novelist whose epistemology differs considerably from artistic conventions because of her cultural and feminist perspectives, Alves advances the genre in terms of content and style and creates a prototype version of the ancestral novel. By centralizing the lyricism of African heritage and its multidimensional symbolism in parallel with the representation of white backgrounds, Alves achieves a fictional narrative that speaks to the sociopolitical legacies that have been bequeathed to the Brazilian society.

Keywords: Contemporary Brazilian novel, Black women novelists, ancestral novel, African heritage

> There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. (Morrison 343)

By the time Toni Morrison was the first Black woman novelist to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, the concept of Black literature as a literary tradition rooted in the experience of enslaved Africans and their descendants was consolidated thanks to groundbreaking scholarship.[1] Less than a decade before, Morrison was part of a group of fifteen prominent Black women writers in the

[1] I refer to the seminal work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988, 1989) and the reception of his theory of African American literary criticism based on African systems of thought and expression. In Brazilian academia, Eduardo de Assis Duarte, one of the most influential theorists of Black creative writing in Brazil, has admitted that Afro-Brazilian literature is "um conceito em construção" (*Literatura* 29).

United States who had their views on their writing published in an anthological volume edited by Mari Evans (1984), author of *I Am a Black Woman* (1970). In her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison considered that black literature has "something very special and very identifiable" about its style, which derives from an epistemological acceptance of the supernatural and the real world (342). Through this form of knowing the cosmos, she underscored the centrality of a timeless ancestor to Black literature. When it comes to the novel, the timelessness of ancestral wisdom mirrors a political commitment to the collective resonances of the text: "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything" (Morrison 344). By incorporating stylistic, cultural, and political elements into the novel, Morrison revealed the plasticity of a genre that Black people use as another device to make their traditions new once again.

There is a semantic aspect in the understanding of what constitutes a novel that Portuguese speakers may overlook due to their pragmatic adoption of the word *romance* to name the genre. It may sound obvious to an English-speaking audience that a novel introduces something new and original, as its contemporary semantics conveys the idea of novelty. In Portuguese, however, the term *novela*, derived from Latin *novellus*, restricts its meaning to a short novel, which has historical connections to the Italian *novella* and the Spanish *novela*, both terms denoting prose narratives that are not long, such as short stories and tales. Pragmatically, the connotation of soap opera attached to *novela* prevails, particularly in Brazil, where the televisual genre is popular. In its literary sense, the Portuguese *romance* connotes exclusively a prose narrative genre, without the possibility of expressing something that has not existed before. In addition, Portuguese speakers also use *romance* to mean a love-like relationship or fantasy, which is quite similar to its English homonym. As its name in the Anglophone literary tradition implies, novelty and originality are central to the emergence of the novel as a cultural mode of expressing what is new and unique in the individual experience. Ian Watt wrote that the novel is "the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; and it is therefore well named" (13). The obvious implication, as he grasped it, is that the genre places emphasis on the individual genius and its capacity to generate artistic innovation. Much work has been undertaken on the history of the novel from realist styles to modernist experimentation in its commitment to the individual truth.

When such innovative genius pertains to Afro-Brazilian writers, the necessary critical appraisals of their creative achievements seem to be incomplete due to a lack of visibility in Brazilian studies, as demonstrated by scholarship at the intersection between literature, race, and social issues.[2] That invisibility of Black literature in mainstream criticism has been disrupted by emerging scholars whose investigation offers fresh looks into unexplored Black literary corpora. While fewer theoretical and critical energies are directed to the innovation produced by Black novelists in Brazil across academia—except for Machado de Assis whose racial background was neglected until recently[3]—in terms of Afro-Brazilian women novelists, Fernanda Rodrigues de Miranda's *Silêncios prescritos:estudo de romances de autoras negras brasileiras (1859-2006)* makes a strong contribution to literary studies by demonstrating how Black women make use of the medium of the novel to reinterpret their historical contexts.[4] Miranda's study of eight Black women novelists in Brazil expounds on their literary tradition, denounces the processes of silencing their voices, and reports their imaginative conception of time and meaning.

The focus of this article is slightly adjusted, as it investigates the innovative form that the novel takes in the literary production by a contemporary Afro-Brazilian female author. Specifically, it explores the literary innovation introduced by Miriam Alves's 2019 novel *Maréia* and how the novelist's fiction rises as a new narrative mode of expression. Alves produces literature from the sociopolitical standpoint of a Black woman whose epistemology differs considerably from artistic conventions in light of her cultural and feminist perspectives. On Black women's writing, Alves states:

> A produção textual das mulheres negras é relevante pois põe a descoberto muitos aspectos de nossa vivência e condição que não estão presentes nas definições dominantes de realidades e das pesquisas históricas. Partindo de outro olhar, debatendo-se contra as amarras da linguagem, as mordaças ideológicas e

[2] See Afolabi, Salgueiro, and Miranda's works for examples of such scholarship.
[3] One of the most important works exploring Machado de Assis's Blackness and its relevance for the interpretation of his writings is Duarte's *Machado de Assis afrodescendente* (2020).
[4] Miranda's work derives from her doctoral dissertation *Corpo de romances de autoras negras brasileiras (1859-2006): posse da história e colonialidade nacional confrontada*, which she defended at the Universidade de São Paulo in 2019. In 2020, her dissertation won the award Prêmio Capes de Teses, which recognized it as Brazil's best dissertation in the field of linguistics and literature in 2019.

> as imposições históricas, propicia uma reflexão revelando a face de um Brasilafro feminino. (*BrasilAfro* 67)

Despite the marginalized status of her writing, Alves conceives it as an imaginative space she utilizes to criticize her contradictory historical context. Her texts propose an alternative version of reality that sheds light on the forms of subjectivity intersected with race and gender. The allusive and witty image of *um Brasilafro feminino* exhibits the contours of her literary project to perfection. That is to say, she and her peers innovate creatively when they manifest what is hidden in the racist structures of their society. Nana Wilson-Tagoe captures the relation between feminism and novelty in her study of African women novelists, whose literary representation of feminine realities "has been the greatest spur to feminist interrogation and innovation in the novel" (188).

For Miranda, the novel is a "campo altamente fértil para a escrita de mulheres negras," as the genre allows the authors to explore the dynamics of "os conflitos, os dissensus e disputas dos indivíduos frente à ordem social" (*Maria Firmina dos Reis em Diálogo* 276) As a strategic mode of thinking and expression, the genre is appealing to writers who reconsider and reappraise history and subjectivity. Such is the case of the foremother of the Afro-Brazilian women's literary imagination, Maria Firmina dos Reis, who wrote *Úrsula*, an abolitionist novel published in 1859. Miranda asserts Firmina's authority on the novel genre:

> Em um contexto histórico onde as ideias abolicionistas estavam circulando, Maria Firmina dos Reis instaura um signo novo no mundo de significações da razão colonial – o negro enquanto *sujeito* de uma experiência histórica anterior à escravização, com vínculos afetivos, pertencimentos territoriais e ética de existência coletiva. (*Maria Firmina dos Reis em Diálogo* 277)

As a novelist, Reis introduced innovative strategies to signify historical narratives and attend to new issues that result from the complex interplay between black existence, slavery legacies, and African heritage. Significantly, her fictional gesture shifted the perspective on the interpretation of reality from those who have the power to speak to those who are not allowed to speak. When *Úrsula* depicted Túlio, a Black gentleman whose "sangue africano fervia-lhe nas veias," it gave rise to a novel paradigm of creative writing that

locates the literary discourse within the racial and sociopolitical context (Reis 101). Accordingly, Miranda includes Alves in the tradition of a small group of Afro-Brazilian women novelists established by Reis.

As a new discursive paradigm, Black women's novels echo what Carole Boyce Davies characterizes as "the politics of location," which "is about positionality in geographic, historical, social, economic, educational terms" and entails "relationality and the ways in which one is able to access, mediate or reposition oneself, or pass into other spaces given certain other circumstances" (153). Black women novelists relocate themselves as subjects while they mold the genre into their artistic needs and worldviews.

Family Legacies and the Circle of Life

Alves was an experienced writer whose poetry, short stories, and criticism had already earned her recognition as one of the pioneers of contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature when *Maréia*, her second novel, was released in 2019.[5] She reaches a mature stage of her writing career with *Maréia*, a novel that offers a multidimensional view of the complex history of colonialism and its impacts on white and Black families in Brazil. In so doing, it makes cognitive, linguistic, and analytical demands upon the reader and does not shy away from reconsidering the brutal realities of racism through the lens of a Black woman's literary text.

Legacy is the keyword to understand the complicated plot of two groups of characters, namely, the Euro-descendants Menezes de Albuquerques and the African-descendants Nunes Santos. The narrative traces the roots of both families to the historical roles that their ancestors played as colonizers and colonized subjects, respectively. Such parallelism appears in a bifurcated story whose first eight chapters are divided into two sets of narrative voices, contexts, and tropes, representing the dynamics of family relations in the groups at the top and the bottom of the Brazilian social pyramid.

[5] Miriam Aparecida Alves is probably one of the most internationally known Afro-Brazilian authors. Her work has appeared in several anthologies and critical volumes. In 1995, Alves coedited a bilingual poetry anthology with Carolyn Richards Durham titled *Enfim . . . nós: escritoras negras brasileiras contemporâneas/Finally . . . Us: Contemporary Black Brazilian Women Writers*, which has been cited and studied as an important work for literary scholars interested in the topic. However, such international recognition contrasts with the lack of attention and visibility that her stature as a writer often receives in Brazil. As Maria Aparecida Andrade Salgueiro notes, Afro-Brazilian women writers such as Alves "feel more recognized abroad than in Brazil" (Salgueiro 15).

For example, chapter one, entitled *Herdeiro*, referring to a male inheritor, and chapter two, entitled *Herdeira*, referring to a female inheritor, recount the respective genealogies of Alfredo, a white man, and Maréia, a Black woman. One of the Albuquerques had enslaved more than fifty Africans, gave them as a gift to the emperor, and, as a result, received the noble title of Conde de Algares. The narrator ironically informs us that the white man boasted about his nobility even though Algares meant a "***guarita de malfeitores***," a criminals' lair (Alves, *Maréia* 18). Antônio Melo Freire, in turn, had fled to Brazil after having usurped the property of Portuguese noblemen. The patriarch's wife, Maria Francisca Fernandes de Castro, had been forced to leave Portugal at the age of eighteen after her father received a dowry. She led a miserable life as a victim of her husband's sexual and physical violence.

According to Maréia's grandmother Maria Dorotéia, or Vó Déia, her family descends from Takatifu, the twin brother of Atsu. These African twins were considered divine presents when they were born. Their parents, Zunduri and Ekom, went to the mountains after their wedding and then at a full moon night had their first encounter. Eventually, Zunduri became pregnant with twins. A portrait also shows Maréia's ancestor Ibiácy do Pífano, who created his own musical instrument out of bamboo and composed songs. His legacy and more than two hundred and forty compositions by another musically-inclined ancestor, Father José Maurício, encouraged Maréia to pursue a career in classical music.

There is an overt contrast between the white family's legacy of deception and violence and the Black family's legacy of enchantment and love. In both cases, the ancestral characters preface their children's existence with their symbolic significance for their social and power relations. Central to the representation of synchronized moments in the past and present is the descriptive talent of the novelist in depicting black and white people's discursive and social practices. In the last seven chapters, the personal and collective histories gradually converge at the intersection between the destructive consequences of the white family's burden of lies and the regenerative potential of African heritage.

Alves interleaves the fifteen chapters with epigraphs signed by fictional characters and writers, including white poets Gregório de Matos, Fernando Pessoa, and Charles Baudelaire, and a Black woman named Jovina Souza. In these thought-provoking paratexts, Alves invites the reader to cross the thresholds of imagination and reality by thinking through the profound implications of the narration. For example, the first chapter's epigraph reads, "A herança de cada um é o que lhe destina. Será o caminho?" (Alves, *Maréia*

13). Both the statement and the question give us access to the compelling argument implicit in *Maréia* about the need to read life as a circle of interrelated experiences.

Ancestry, Memory, and Language

There is a philosophical tone that befits the reflective moments of the main characters, particularly when they deal with their positions in the dynamics of power relations. Through aphorisms, these characters articulate interpretative versions of what is sociologically represented as truth. In its irony of deconstructing the validity of official historical records, the novel provides the reader with different perspectives on the verisimilitude of history. It is telling that the white patriarch Dom Alfonso affirms, "Ocultar fatos é necessário para dominarmos as verdades. As verdades são o que falamos, não os fatos. Fatos? . . . não importam" (Alves, *Maréia* 43). For a powerful white man, truth is the discursive representation of power. Not only does the novel represent historical truth as a narrative controlled by those who hold power, but it also portrays the ancestral survival of African relics as a resource of symbolic power that historically exists. In the words of the Black matriarch Vó Déia, the politics of symbolic power matters because of its spiritual truth: "Aquilo que nos pertence continua sendo nosso, mesmo não estando em nosso poder" (Alves, *Maréia* 56). Allegorically, there are two different forms of diegesis, that is, one that controls the truth, and another one that owns it.

The redemptive symbolism of heritage is evident in an African medallion with a blue gem, an artifact that had been stolen by the Menezes de Albuquerque's forefathers. While the Black family lost the physical possession of the object, they have managed to retain the ancestral ownership of the medallion through the rituals of memory that allow them to perform traditions orally and corporeally. Those who had usurped the medallion and their descendants ended up facing deadly consequences until the jewel returned to the neck of its legitimate inheritor, that is, Maréia.

As the protagonist, Maréia bears a name that combines *Mar* (Sea) and *Areia* (Sand), which expresses her ancestral connection with coastal regions and water in Africa and Brazil. She is a cellist and composer whose musical talent is inherited from Ibiácy do Pífano, who played the fife (a small flute), and her distant relative Father José Maurício, a priest and classical composer of African descent, who served as the royal conductor at the court of Dom João VI. In addition to this ancestral legacy—as the novel enlightens its reader—she learned the most valuable lesson from her grandmother: "a música

conversa com todas as coisas, com todas as artes, em tudo tem música" (Alves, *Maréia* 28). Furthermore, Maréia keeps the alliteration of her grandfather's name Marcílio, a navy sergeant who credits his maritime skills to his Cabinda ancestry. Most importantly, Maréia's family lives by the sea, where her grandmother contemplates Guanabara Bay in a time warp, and her grandfather tells stories of enslaved Africans and how they collectively devised strategies to win freedom and find solace. Maréia's ancestral legacy also includes the devotion to the queen of the sea, *a senhora do mar*, probably Yemoja, the motherly Yoruba goddess associated with saltwater in the African diaspora.

Alves employs the symbolism of water when describing Maréia's orchestra Encanto das Águas, which the protagonist conducts in partnership with Anaya and Odara, the Black twin sisters whose last name is Omi, that is, water in the Yoruba language. The real sense of kinship that Maréia and her family feel with the two musicians suggests that the motif of twinship has great significance for African cultural heritage. According to her grandmother's account, Maréia is descended from Takatifu, the twin brother of Atsu. Both twins can be read as a trope of the twin orisha Ibeji, a Yoruba allegory of regeneration and the birth of a new life. In a time warp where she hears voices whispering the truth from the bottom of the ocean, Maréia's grandmother Dorotéia sees the sacred twin brothers as the ones who have the power to awake the Great Crocodile, *nla ooni*, in order to protect the existence of Africans and their offspring.

In light of this ancestral "memória atemporal," the novel embraces the African paradigm of circularity of time when it breaks through the linear barriers of past, present, and future (Alves, *Maréia* 93). Thus, the narrative voice infers Maréia's successful partnership with the twin sisters from an "ingerência, inexplicável, de um poder ancestral" (Alves, *Maréia* 77). What makes the powerful interference of ancestry possible is precisely the recognition of the gnosis that an African concept of time conveys. That is to say, the spiritual act of narrating the past revives the knowledge of what seemed to have been lost. The interrelation of circular time and memory is mimetically represented in the musical recreation of the movements of seawater, a trope that manifests rebirth in Black historical experiences through the hands of Black women. As Lélia Gonzalez points out, Black women's history of resilience and fight against intersectional forms of oppression derives from "memória cultural ancestral" (268). The creative expressions of this Black memory go beyond the linearly-limited time of the narrative.

In *Maréia*, Alves establishes the Yoruba aesthetic and philosophical principle of ancestry as the foundation for the novel. In so doing, she advances

the genre in terms of content and style and creates a prototype version of what I call the ancestral novel. By centralizing the lyricism of African heritage and its multidimensional symbolism in parallel with representation of white backgrounds, Alves achieves a fictional narrative that speaks to the sociopolitical legacies that have been bequeathed to Brazilian society. Specifically, the rendition of an orchestra formed by only Black women musicians performing an adaptation of Father José Maurício's musical piece challenges the persistence of race, class, and gender discrimination throughout history. For Beatriz Nascimento, Black women are the main victims of "herança escravocrata" because they "vem ocupando os mesmos espaços e papéis que lhe foram atribuídos desde a escravidão" and the "resíduos do escravagismo se superpõem os mecanismos atuais de manutenção de privilégios por parte do grupo dominante" (261). If the disruption to intersectional discriminatory systems is caused by Black women's music and performance, it manifests itself in a novel that presents anti-essentialist critiques of race and gender by means of the remarkable trope of African ancestry and the politics of literary expression.

It is one of the virtues of Alves's fiction that it uses language in different ways, particularly in its depictions of discursive practices. When describing what a Portuguese husband tells his wife after violent sexual intercourse, for example, the prose applies the second person singular: "Vais me dar um filho" (Alves, *Maréia* 22). The European Portuguese style is employed in the revelatory diary that displays the origin of the Menezes de Albuquerques' patrimony, as we can see in the preference for enclisis, the employment of an infinitive form instead of a gerund, and the word choices such as *miúdos* for kids, for instance. In the linguistic environment of the Black family, there are African lexical items such as the Bantu-derived words *quituteiras*, *zungu*, *angu*, *cabindas*, *monjolos*, *benguelas*, *cocurutos*, *bamboleio*, and *zonzas*. Additionally, the reader finds two paratextual glossaries at the end of the book with almost one hundred concise definitions of the Yoruba words and syntagmata that appear in the story.

Therefore, the novel manifests Alves's mastery of an Africanized Portuguese in a creative variety of what Gonzalez called "*Pretoguês*" (Black Portuguese), which stands for the strong influence of African languages in Brazil (Gonzalez 128). Moreover, the fictional narrative evinces a skillful and ironic pastiche of the dominant discourse. Alves deploys these tactics of style to elicit new modes of expression and thinking that attend to the legitimate position of a subject who exercises her power to narrate alternative versions of history. To the point, the double-voiced novel carries what one might

comprehend as a rationale for its strategic language uses: "É necessário ser ligeiro, saber gingar, saber remar contra a maré . . . . Tem coisa que a gente bate de frente até conseguir, tem outras que esquivamos, damos um voleio, para alcançar o objetivo" (Alves, *Maréia* 152). So appropriate is this quotation to demonstrate how Alves has carved out a literary career for herself that we could consider it a metalanguage, a language about itself. By focusing on ancestry, memory, and language vis-à-vis the political effects of meaning, Alves turns the novel into an ancestral art form that expresses what might be healing in the Black interpretative experience of history.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Maréia* emerges as an innovative work that adapts the novel to the complexity of Afro-Diasporic experiences. While the novel is understood as a genre committed to affirming the originality of individual experiences, it is grounded in the writers' ability to historicize these experiences in a narrative that captures something of the ways men and women interpret their existence in the world. Black women novels' interpretation of history involves past and present, suffering and healing, the known and the new. From an innovative perspective that bridges the gap between a person's existence and its interconnections with their community, Miriam Alves taps into a rich vein of ancestral history in her novel.

The emergence of the ancestral novel corresponds with an African-derived concept of time that differs from the understanding of history as a sequence of events which are reconstructed and recreated in historical novels. In her study of Afro-Brazilian women novelists, Miranda argues that their novels tend to "interpelar a História, tomando-a como um paradigma aberto, que abarca novas possibilidades," adding, "Porém, não são romances históricos propriamente ditos, porque o passado e o presente são envoltos nas narrativas em uma espiral de continuidades" (Miranda, *Corpo* 34) While I completely concur with what Miranda says about black women's novels and the concept of time embedded in these creative works, I add that a spiral temporality is an ancestral move towards continuous transformation, hence my definition of ancestral novel.[6] My comment is informed by the African concept of spiral time in Bantu traditions in Brazil, as it is explored by Leda Maria Martins, who

[6] Miranda considers the African concept of spirality, as her term "plantation spiral" (*espiral-plantação*) shows, but she conceives the relation between fiction and history in three categories, namely, citation (*citação*), digression (*digressão*), and recodification (*recodificação*) (*Silêncios*, 324–5).

asserts, "Nascimento, maturação e morte tornam-se, pois, eventos naturais, necessários na dinâmica mutacional e regenerativa de todos os ciclos vitais e existenciais. Nas espirais do tempo, tudo vai e tudo volta" (79). What is most important is not the linear sequence of facts and events but the interrelations between lived experiences and how the subjects make sense out of their identities.

It therefore seems appropriate to propose the term ancestral novel to identify the written narratives that avail of African ancestry as an imaginative and interpretative paradigm of transformation. *Maréia* provides a space for African-derived cultural iterations because it is positioned to the spiral of time that reopens the potentiality for new and transformed discursive forms based on personal and collective histories. In the curves of time, where life opens the possibilities for creating something new, the ancestral novel underscores individuals' capacity to re-establish connection with their cultural heritage. Ancestry produces an aesthetics and ethics of living memory, which indicates the timeless presence of ancestors—a sign of wisdom, in accordance with Morrison's words in the epigraph.

The analyses of *Maréia* in this article suggest that characters, action, and plot alike are determined by ancestry. So well-articulated is the topic in the novel that its narrative is woven by ancestral links and their poetic resonance. In an oneiric state, Maréia plays the cello and flute, and dances, while at the same time contemplating sacred images and eventually listening to her grandmother and grandfather singing the following verses in a duet:

> Na circular do tempo,
> o passado não volta,
> o passado traz de volta
> o que parecia perdido.
> A onda rolou na praia
> e voltou correndo ao mar.
> Não foi. Não foi,
> circula no tempo,
> a maré, a maré.
> A maré é mar,
> circula o tempo,
> leva e me traz.
> A maré é mar,
> voltará. Voltará.
> O tempo é mar

> circula no tempo.
> Memória é mar.
> O tempo é. (Alves, *Maréia* 79)

As a sign of life, the sea brings back what matters in an experience of African spiritual transformation, that is, the memory of the continuous existence of black people and their performative art of survival.

Finally, in the ancestral novel, we have the circularity of new beginnings, which guarantees the continuation of traditions. Maréia's "enredo onírico," as Alves puts it, resonates with her grandmother's "viagens oníricas" on which the matriarch experiences an epiphany with the help of "quatro 'Eu's'" (75, 153). These selves suspend the restrictions of time and space so that the matriarch can know the meaning of her ancestral history. The continuum of such knowledge represents the possibility of life being regenerated despite the torments and contingencies of oppression.

In unearthing their ancestral roots within themselves, Black subjects find a sense of existence that rises above nature, and so it can never be destroyed. Thus, it is in the novelty of Black existence that we find a sample of what the novel genre is when it operates as an instrument of historical, political, and social transformation. By emerging as a new mode of rendering contemporary Black experience and thought, the ancestral novel turns into a strategic art of knowing and transforming the world.

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