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### **TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World**

#### **Title**

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#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/56z7s9ns>

#### **Journal**

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 7(3)

#### **ISSN**

2154-1353

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#### **Publication Date**

2017

#### **DOI**

10.5070/T473037318

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# Black Womanhood as Performance of “Home” in the Poetry of Alzira Rufino and Georgina Herrera

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## Abstract

While crafting their art, poets Alzira Rufino and Georgina Herrera articulate an alternative, creative space of expression in terms of black women demands for self-definition, and for reclaiming one’s own identity(-ies) and history(-ies). Within this study, black womanhood as identity construction is regarded as an evolving process, therefore I argue that while crafting their poetry Rufino and Herrera create performatic spaces of belonging and introduce us to an aesthetic marked by the concept of “home”. For these poets, I suggest that the symbolic representations of home in their poetry function as a mobile habitat, characterized by being (performance) and becoming (movement). Home, then, is not located ‘here’ or ‘there’, it becomes a third space at times contentious. Through the analysis of a selection of their poetry, I aim to identify and analyze these alternative symbolic mobile sites from where Rufino and Herrera’s discourses emerge in terms of the construction of racial and gendered imagery as well as representations of community and sisterhood. Besides connecting to their immediate communities – Brazil and Cuba – Rufino’s and Herrera’s work expands its reach to a wider construction of sisterhood that crosses the Atlantic. Finally, the interdisciplinary methodological approach used in this study engages the application of feminist literary criticism and theory, post-colonial paradigms, and criticism related to border studies and border politics, as well as literary texts. The chosen methodology enables a critical reading of the selected poetry that embraces a broader and more inclusive perspective.

## Key words

Georgina Herrera, Alzira Rufino, poetry, black womanhood, identity performance, home, feminisms, black diaspora, notions of belonging

Poetry proclaims and asserts female aesthetic worth. The value of poetic writing that emphasizes human strength, beauty, glorious and outstanding actions, and combativeness in women is important because of the way it establishes intertextuality between poetry and social context. . . . Rather than spoken of or spoken to, she now stands at the center from which everything else emanates and takes shape. It is a new responsibility that implies strengthening.

Dawn Duke

Afro-Latin American poets Georgina Herrera (Cuba, 1936-) and Alzira Rufino (Brazil, 1949) are two accomplished writers whose voices have left a mark in the production and studies of contemporary Latin American Literature. Herrera’s poetry marks her place of importance among

other Afro-Caribbean voices while evidencing her strong Afro-Cuban roots. Her work displays the influence of stories told by the elderly black women from her community, and the indelible marks of racism and poverty she experienced while growing up in Jovellanos, in the province of Matanzas, Cuba (Rubiera Castillo 25-26). Despite her status as a poet of the post-revolution, her poetry lacks the ideological rhetoric of her peers. Aware of her singularity, she reaffirms her original commitment to the Cuban Revolution and offers a critical observation stating that she “can’t write poetry on request” (DeCosta-Willis 147). Furthermore, she does not perceive herself as an activist, but is quick to recognize the influence of black intellectuals in her work: “I was not involved in that [ the Black cultural movement in Cuba ], but they were my people. I too am Black. They were the people I talked to, to whom I had all kinds of relationships” (DeCosta Willis 149). Critics have praised Herrera’s poetry for her “clarity and precision in language, concision in thought and image, and a fluid, lyrical style that is deceptively simple” (DeCosta Willis 138). Nonetheless, my interest in Herrera’s poetry rests on the creation of performative spaces of belonging through her self-affirmation as a black Cuban woman and, by extension, a subject of the African Diaspora.

Comparatively speaking, Alzira Rufino’s political activism makes itself visible in her work as an activist, a poet, an essayist, a fiction writer, and as the editor of EPARREI—a magazine about Afro-Brazilian Art and Culture. Her work as founder of the Casa de Cultura da Mulher Negra (House of Culture of the Afro-Brazilian Woman) is considered “a reference in the area of assistance to victims of domestic violence, providing psychological and judicial support” and “a reference in the fight against racism” (“Alzira Rufino”). Rufino’s poetry reflects upon the problems and possibilities of being a black woman living in poverty, earning a deserved place in *Cadernos Negros*—a literary magazine that promotes the cultural and political views of the Movimento Negro Brasileiro (Afro-Brazilian Movement). Rufino’s writings and activism denounce social injustices while empowering women by raising their class, race, and gender consciousness through the recovery of Afro-Brazilian culture in her literary as well as her social work. This is a thematic thread that permeates the lives of many Afro-Brazilian women authors such as Conceição Evaristo, Miriam Alves, and Esmeralda Ribeiro.

The poems examined in this study are from the anthologies *Gritos* (2003) by Georgina Herrera and *Eu, mulher negra, resisto!* (1988) by Alzira Rufino respectively. The selected poems allow for an expansion of the authors’ scope as they are inclusive of diverse representations of black womanhood(s). By establishing an imagined sisterhood community that goes beyond the geography of Cuba and Brazil, one that encompasses the broader Caribbean and Latin American regions, the authors embrace the diverse intricacies of what it means to be a woman in the context of the African

Diaspora. These are recurring features in the poetry of other women of Afro-descent in Cuba and Brazil such as Nancy Morejón, Excilia Saldaña, Conceição Evaristo, Miriam Alves, and several others.<sup>1</sup> Herrera and Rufino's experiences, along with their consequent reactions to strained racial relations in their respective countries, somewhat explain the engagement of unique poetic strategies to challenge past and contemporary issues of race, gender, nation, migration, and oppression.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of their unique experiences, both poets construct an alternative, creative space of expression in terms of black women's demands for self-definition, and for reclaiming one's own identity(-ies) and history(-ies).

In this study I argue that, while crafting their poetry, Rufino and Herrera create performatic spaces of belonging and introduce an aesthetic marked by the concept of "home." For these poets, I suggest that the symbolic representations of home in their poetry function as "a mobile, symbolic habitat, a performative way of life and of doing things in which one makes one's home while in movement" (Morley 47). Home, then, is not located 'here' or 'there'; it becomes a third space, at times contentious. Homi Bhabha suggests an "in-between space" that ". . . provide[s] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (2). As a mobile site and an in-between space, home, as a construction of selfhood, is also a site of resistance and belonging where external definitions of the self are rejected and/or reappropriated.

A pattern emerges among many authors, critics, and activists that indicates the importance of the homeplace for black women as a site of resistance, liberation, and creativity. Bell hooks, in her famous essay "Homeplace (a site of resistance)," states that:

Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and our hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (384)

Furthermore, African American writer Alice Walker acknowledges a creative space of resistance within the homeplace, which arises from a context of racial oppression. Her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" is a tribute to the artistic talents of the Afro-descendant woman and a recognition of their "love of beauty and . . . respect for strength" (322) that is revealed in their creative work. Afro-descendant intellectual women extensively privilege the homeplace with all its tensions as a space for self-definition; nevertheless, I argue for a broader definition of home as a creative space of resistance that is performatic, fluid, mobile, and inclusive. Despite its intrinsic connections to the idea of a

concrete homeplace, the symbolic spaces of home that Herrera and Rufino construct through their poetry rewrite and expand notions of black womanhood.

The importance of inscribing a place of one's own is also emphasized by Carole Boyce Davies who affirms that "the rewriting of home becomes a critical link in the articulation of identity. It is a play of resistance to domination which identifies where we come from, but also locates home in its many transgressive and disjunctive experiences" (115). In the context of reclaiming self-definitions of black womanhood, the poetry of Herrera and Rufino introduces us to this complex, multilayered space of home, which is at once fluid, tangible, and performatic, a contentious space that embodies moving, being, and becoming. In this study, I aim to identify and analyze these alternative symbolic mobile sites from where Rufino and Herrera's discourses emerge in terms of the construction of racial and gendered imagery, as well as representations of community and sisterhood. Those spaces, therefore, that I call home will be queried as part of a process of identity construction, grounded on notions of belonging that expand into a wider sisterhood of support that crosses the Atlantic.

To contextualize their artistic production, it is important to register that Herrera and Rufino's poetic voices emerge from a space illuminated by the poets' personal, social, and political life experiences. Their poetry reflects what García Canclini has pointed out as "the strong preoccupation of [Latin American] writers and artists with the internal conflicts of their societies and with the obstacles they face in communicating with their audiences" (*Hybrid Cultures* 46). Additionally, their voices depict lives at the margins of society's fabric, lives constrained by their conditions as women, black and poor, thus signifying a struggle against institutionalized practices of exclusion. It is from these fertile grounds that Herrera and Rufino's poetic aesthetics will emerge as a space of fusion or hybridization<sup>3</sup> for diverse rhetoric strategies in order to communicate their messages. By exposing the tools utilized by these accomplished black women writers, I aim at identifying the locus of enunciation of their poetic voice: a performatic, fluid space characterized by notions of belonging, and their use of symbolic representations of home as a mobile site of resistance and identity (re-) construction within their writing.

The exercise of writing reigns as one of the most powerful tools associated with identity (re-) construction. In *Linking the Americas* (2005), Lesley Feracho stresses that:

For the marginalized in particular, the process of self-definition includes a search for tools of empowerment. Among the tools at their disposal, writing serves as a means of reconstructing an identity in which women are subjects navigating sociocultural and economic forces that objectify them. (Feracho 1-2)

Writing is regarded as a site of empowerment and agency, especially for the disenfranchised. It is also a site from where alternative ways of thinking and knowing have the potential to emerge and evolve, contesting previous ones. Feracho argues that one must consider how this space is negotiated when we talk about black women who are either excluded or have “restricted access to instruments of empowerment” (1), as writing may also act as an instrument of oppression. The poetry of Herrera and Rufino addresses this issue by denouncing exclusionary practices, while proposing alternative strategies and spaces for identity construction based on notions of self-definition and belonging.

Regarding matters of writing and self-definition, Carole Boyce Davies expands the discussion about issues that may arise when one attempts to re-name one’s own experience:

The terms we use to name ourselves . . . carry their strings of echoes and inscriptions. Each represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation. Each therefore must be used provisionally; each must be subject to new analyses, new questions and new understandings if we are to unlock some of the narrow terms of the discourses in which we are inscribed. In other words, at each arrival at a definition, we begin a new analysis, a new departure, a new interrogation of meaning, new contradictions. (5)

The concept of identity as a multilayered practice of continuously “being” and “becoming,” performing and evolving, ties the theoretical background adopted in this study. This concept is also expressed in Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”. In this essay, Hall addresses issues of representation of cultural identity regarding the Afro-Diasporic subject in Caribbean cinema. He argues that to prevent a static, monolithic view on cultural identity, it is important to recognize the many points of similarity, [and that] there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather— since history has intervened— ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side— the ruptures and discontinuities. . . . (225).

Herrera and Rufino’s poetry show a commitment to self-empowering, asserting, and celebrating black womanhood, in its multiplicity and conditional nature, through their poetry. Moreover, they speak as women of African heritage, positioned in spaces that share a colonial past marked by the violence of slavery and a present characterized by exclusionary practices of black citizenship. While fostering diverse notions of black womanhood, Herrera and Rufino’s poetry defies imposed external definitions of “being” a black woman.

This defiance becomes explicit through a combination of formal (poetry as a genre) and structural (linguistic, thematic) choices displayed in their poetry. Words perform a role while being on the page: they signify at the cognitive level, as well as at a concrete level defined by the space they occupy on the page and within the poem. Furthermore, the poems display an array of positive role models from their local communities, in addition to the imagined community of the Black Diaspora. Herrera and Rufino thus acknowledge the continuity and ruptures between past, present, and future in terms of the representations of community, sisterhood and, ultimately, home. Within their poems, they attempt to self-define, as well as redefine their experiences of black womanhood. The poets reflect a symbiosis of an African past translated into a Latin American present with a performatic, but nevertheless concrete, defiance demonstrated by their poetic aesthetics. This ‘hybridization’ (or fusion) creates a unique “in-between” space of knowing, where identity is reconstructed and home is located— a fluid space that allows for self-recognition, a performative space at once marked by struggle and belonging.

Karla F. C. Holloway has studied those in-between spaces of identity construction in black women’s writings through the processes of recursive structures in language and literature, and their intimate connection with black women’s spiritual configurations of language. She affirms that “there is a textual place where language and voice are reconstructed by black women writers as categories of cultural and gendered essence” (11). I envision those textual spaces as mobile, as spaces of ‘being and becoming’ in terms of culture and gender identities. Furthermore, Holloway proposes three frames to facilitate a deeper understanding of black women’s texts: revision, (re)membrance, and recursion that, she argues, “organize the relationship between meaning, voice and community” (13). These strategies allow for a culturally and gendered analysis of Herrera and Rufino’s poetry as performatic spaces of belonging, which I call home.

It is within this space of home that Herrera’s anthology *Gritos* (2003) presents us with a loud outcry (‘gritos’), a performance that involves body and voice, and signifies the call for attention to an important message that is being transmitted. Furthermore, her poetry conveys a strong sense of black woman pride through a poetic voice that emphasizes the connection between the past (the ancestors) and the present (the poet). “Continuity” and “Legacy” (recursion and remembrance), characterize and define black womanhood within some of Herrera’s poems, such as “Retrato de Victoria” (4):

Qué bisabuela mía esa Victoria,  
cimarroneándose y en bocabajos  
se pasó la vida.

Dicen

que me parezco a ella.

This autobiographical poem shows an attempt at reintroducing a historically positioned subject—a black enslaved woman—reclaiming her identity in terms of colonial resistance. Moreover, this retelling (or revision) of history bleeds into the present in the figure of the granddaughter, who still faces issues of gender/racial oppression. The generational bond, grandmother-granddaughter, is privileged here in a representation of historical continuity. Carol Beane affirms that “the grandmother and granddaughter relationship is an especially privileged one in the writing of many African American, Chicana, Latina, Asian American, and Native American women” (165-166). Beane further suggests that by centering their texts in the homeplace, black women writers have been able to explore the complexities of family relationships; moreover, “the kitchen table” has been historically a space where black women affirm self and culture while organizing subtle schemes of resistance (165-166). This performatic space of belonging, which becomes mobile through time and history, is filled with concrete and abstract notions of home, if we depart from an Afrocentric analysis.

In “Retrato de Victoria” ‘Portrait of Victoria’, the subversive image of the great-grandmother, a *cimarrona* or runaway (enslaved) woman, is reflected—better yet, reproduced like a photograph (retrato)—as a metaphorical reference to the poetic voice itself. Through a display of pride about her African matriarchal lineage, the poetic voice empowers itself as a contemporary black woman. The connection between past and present is made between the two generations of empowered black women and expressed in the last verses: “Dicen / que me parezco a ella” ‘People say / that I am like her’ (4, 5). Furthermore, the ambiguity of the title “Retrato de Victoria” allows for a double interpretation. First, the poetic voice embraces its shared traits with her great-grandmother. Second, her great-grandmother’s legacy is one of ‘Victory’ (“Victoria”). (As a black woman who survived the savagery of slavery, her great-grandmother was able to transmit her strength for survival to three generations.). The use of *cimarrón* as a verb in the progressive tense enables the transformation of the grandmother’s figure from a static “noun” into an active “verb”—the idea of continuity indicating the process through which her grandmother becomes the Subject of her own experiences and she, the great-granddaughter, becomes the heir of her strength. Through her writing, Herrera creates a mobile space of belonging that transcends time and history, reclaiming notions of black womanhood through performatic representations of home. This space that I call home is clearly identified in Herrera’s poem through personal, communal, and spiritual experiences that create a sense of belonging through time and space.



Redefining black-women experiences and creating new notions of self and belonging are also important themes developed through focused poetic devices in Herrera's "Primera vez ante un retrato" 'First time in front of a portrait' (20-21) where the poetic voice reclaims its own denied heritage: "Esta que miro / soy yo, mil años antes o más; / reclamo este derecho." "This whom I see / it's me, a thousand years ago or more; / I claim this right' (6-8). The poetic voice takes ownership of the facial features of an ancestral clay figure found in the ancient Yoruba city of Ifé. This city is associated with the mythical origins of the Yoruba nation, thus the related experience of "recognizing oneself" as described by the poetic voice in verses 3-4 and 38-39. One by one, the poetic voice redefines her facial features as representations of beauty and love contradicting stereotypical definitions of beauty built upon (white) social standards.

Finally, their eyes meet in an epiphany:  
 Ojos tremendos  
 en los que apaga y aviva sus fuegos la tristeza.  
 Soy yo. Espejo o renacida.  
 Soy. (36-39)

It is through visual contact, a symbolic gesture of recognition, that the poetic voice becomes one with this ancient mask of mythical proportions and is able to recognize and redefine herself as being born again. The mask becomes a portal taking the poetic voice on a journey to an ancestral, mythical time. Implicitly, centuries of memories emerge and are reflected within the text allowing for the bridging and remembrance of black communities across time and space. This Afrocentric rhetorical strategy marks a rupture with traditional Western ways of knowing by emphasizing timeless communal and spiritual reconnections that inform this space of self-knowledge. Here, home is an inclusive, mobile, and fertile ground of self-knowledge (being) that is constructed (movement) through a non-linear sense of time. Thus, memory functions as a historic and emotional connection between past and present that creates a sense of community and belonging.

Following the same line of generational and historical re-connection, we find the poems "Canto de amor y respeto para Doña Ana de Souza" 'Song of love and respect for Doña Ana de Souza' (10-12), and 'Elogio para las negras viejas de antes' 'Praise for the old Negro women from the past' (13-14). The first poem, "Canto de Amor . . .", praises the African queen of Ndongo (Angola), Anna Nzinga, leader of a powerful resistance movement against the Portuguese slave trade:

En fin, Señora Santa  
 y reina de las riberas del río Kuanza;

madre

de los principios y la unidad. . . (1-4)

Again, the historical reconnection with the past brings about a history of resistance to the colonial system as well as an affirmation of gender and race through the figure of Doña Ana/Queen Nzinga. The juxtaposition of words such as *Señora*, *Santa*, *reina*, and *madre* ('Lady', 'Holy', 'queen' and 'mother') evokes the sacred respect devoted to Doña Ana/Queen Nzinga as a controversial figure of power and racial resistance. In the following stanza, Herrera attempts to address the figure of Ana/Nzinga holistically, reconciling contradictory elements:

Usted, Doña Ana,  
con ese nombre occidental, tomado  
por estrategia, usado  
sólo en documentos.

Madre Yinga Mbandi para su pueblo.

Vencida a veces, nunca prisionera, . . . (34-39)

The concrete duality of Doña Ana/Queen Nzinga is explained poetically as a strategy of survival and resistance. Nzinga's contentious, hybrid representation exemplifies the struggle for self-definition. She embodies a hybrid space at once associated with a colonial past and an assertive community of resistance. The colonial figure with a Christian name becomes a performance to the outside world, a symbolic mask that this historic black woman puts on in order to negotiate the freedom of her people. The conflation of roles expressed by the descriptive words (sometimes at odds) of 'mother', 'saint', 'lady', 'warrior' and 'queen' reflects the multifaceted representations of Nzinga's black womanhood, embracing contradictory roles while resisting colonial dominance. The performance of Doña Ana/Queen Nzinga, though apparently contradictory, reveals the complexity of cultural and gendered roles. It attests that contentious narratives also emerge from a space of home with its tensions and ruptures in the rewriting of one's identity.

The poetic voice self-identifies with Nzinga's image as one of a role-model of assertiveness, empowerment and resistance: "Yinga, / señora, agua limpia donde quiero / verme reflejada." 'Yinga, / lady, clear water where I want / to see myself reflected' (46-48). In the final two verses, Doña Ana/Queen Nzinga becomes a mythic figure of transatlantic racial and gendered reconnection, located on an unidentified space: "Pero su tumba es todo el territorio de Angola, / sin más flores, ni lápidas ni señalamiento" 'But her grave is all of Angola's territory, / without flowers, nor tombstones or identification' (54-55). Angola is also converted within this poem into a synonym of home, the

performance of a transatlantic community, as it becomes one with the image of Queen Nzinga/Doña Ana “madre de los principios y la unidad” ‘mother of origins and unity’ (3-4). The circularity of the poem is then established by identifying Queen Nzinga as beginning and end, unity and continuum, in the reflection image of a contemporary poetic voice.

The idea of reconnecting to Africa through an ancestral figure of power (with or without blood ties) is also present in Herrera’s poem “Elogio para las negras viejas de antes” ‘Praise for the old Negro women from the past’ (13-14). Using as a reference the ancient oral tradition of story-telling, Herrera sets the stage to question the lack of contemporary black women practicing the skills of listening to, and sharing stories with, each other, while she tells stories about the “negras viejas”, performing their role throughout the poem:

Ellas, las negras viejas, contaban  
lo que antes  
había llegado a sus oídos.  
Pero nosotras, las que ahora  
debíamos ser ellas,  
fuimos contestonas  
no supimos oír  
.....  
aprendimos a preguntarlo todo,  
y al final estamos sin respuestas. . . . (5-11, 16-17)

There is a rupture in the equilibrium established by the acts of listening and telling that the poetic voice sees as damaging for the modern black woman. While an inclusive story is told (“nosotras”; ‘we, black women’) regarding issues facing black women as a community, this poem may also be read as a direct confrontation with a white, middle-class, feminist agenda that often fails to consider race/ethnicity as another layer of the gendered power struggle. By closing their ears to these issues, contemporary black women fail to make their voices heard: “Permanecemos silenciosas, / parecemos tristes cotorras mudas.” ‘We remain silent / we seem like sad silent parrots’ (21-23). This loss of connectivity ends up with a sense of “absence” or “homelessness” counterbalanced by the need to redefine one’s identity. In opposition to the poem “Retrato de Victoria” where representations of timeless relationships are displayed, the symbolism present in this poem refer us to broken kinships— the old Negro women belong in the past, as the title informs us. This rupture with the African oral tradition, although filled with nostalgia, may be also perceived as a call to action, to

reconnect, to resist and redefine one's own space of knowing oneself. By creating an absence of poetic performative notions of community and sisterhood, the poetic voice raises an outcry (*gritos*) that sends across her message; it opens a safe space where healing may begin through remembrance.

Herrera's poetry expands notions of sisterhood, and reaches beyond local communities in order to provide a more inclusive notion of black womanhood. The bridge built between Africa and the Americas, here represented by Brazil and Cuba is, at times, one of nostalgia for the "Old Continent." Africa is here perceived as a mythic place of origin and return but, mostly, as a place of remembering. This Afrocentric view of an African Diaspora community returning to its origins—the "immortal tribe," the Great Mother continent of Africa—with all its sacred and mythical resonances is present in the poem "África" (6-7) by Georgina Herrera:

Todo sitio al que me dirijo  
a ti me lleva:  
Mi sed, mis hijos,  
la tibia oleada que al amor me arrastra  
tienen que ver contigo [ . . . ] (18-19)

Again, a memory of longing and absence is portrayed by the poetic voice and is sustained by the idea of eternal return. "Africa" resides within the poetic voice's tangible world: Africa is the poetic voice, and the poetic voice reflects Africa. Such thoughts continue as the poetic voice self-identifies with Africa in body politics: "Este rostro, hecho / de tus raíces, vuélvese / espejo para que en él te veas. . . ." "This face, made / of your roots, becomes / a mirror so you can see yourself . . ." (10-12). By becoming one, the reverence and respect shown to Africa as mother reflects back to the poetic voice who, at the end of the poem and in an inversion of roles, cares for the Great Mother:

Puedes  
cerrar tranquila en el descan[s]o  
los ojos, tenderte en paz.  
Te cuido. (28-31)

The poetic voice personifies Africa within a gendered imagery, that of a female, a mother. While the strategy of personification and female gender attribution to portions of land is not uncommon in poetry, here the poetic voice inverts those positions identifying herself with Africa and, consequently, the woman-centered role of motherhood. However, the notion of mothering within Herrera's poem does not follow the stereotype of the black mammy, the one who subserviently cares for the white family while feeding a system of social inequalities. Positioning the poetic voice as Mother Africa

implies the responsibility of nurturing the offspring represented by the scattered communities of the Black Diaspora, a constant presence in Georgina Herrera's poems in terms of assertiveness and reunion of an imagined community. Again we encounter the notion of bringing together events and peoples in flashes of memory that resemble pieces of a quilt or puzzle in need of reconnection. This act of remembrance and cultural sustainability ensures that "Africa," along with her memories, traditions, cultures, ethos and heritages has not been washed away by the Transatlantic currents. According to the poetic voice, they remain intact in the Americas, especially in Cuba. Through Herrera's poetry, home-spaces of belonging emerge across time and continental borders. Those spaces are deeply inscribed by a plurality of notions of black womanhood, ever-changing and embraced by a poetic aesthetics founded on cultural and gendered symbolic representations of home.

Alzira Rufino's poems from her anthology, *Eu, mulher negra, resisto* (1988), are also evidence of the use of cultural and gendered images. Her poetry strives to construct a space of healing and resistance. Regarding black woman's self-definition, Rufino's poem "Resisto" 'I Resist' (14) focuses on the gendered/racialized poetic voice in order to question and dismantle stereotypical models of black womanhood:

RESISTO

de onde vem este medo?

sou

sem mistério existo

busco gestos

de parecer

atando os feitos

que me contam

grito

de onde vem

esta vergonha

sobre mim?

Eu, mulher, negra,

RESISTO.

The poem is framed by the word “RESISTO” ‘I RESIST’ in capital letters. Thus, the poetic voice conveys meaning through semantic as well as visual strategies. The word “resist” states that the poetic voice does not accept external definitions imposed upon her. Furthermore, the use of uppercase letters in words, such as “Eu”, and “RESISTO”, visually represents a powerful, loud, cry of liberation: a declaration of resistance to social (and grammatical) norms and a manifesto of political and ideological insurrection against institutionalized racial profiling.

The poetic voice is here asserted as a source of self-knowledge. If we analyze the poem closely, the opening verse “de onde vem este medo?” ‘from where does this fear come?’ interrogates external influences of oppressive nature. It emphatically states that the locus of the poetic voice’s fear, which now resides within, has its impetus from outside. The poetic voice refuses to accept fear as an intrinsic part of her “self,” hence attributing it to an external gaze. Questioning this estranged feeling is what generates the powerful single statement and reply in the second verse: “sou” ‘I am.’ The ontological affirmation and epistemological self-confidence that comes from within does not require clarification. The poetic voice celebrates who she is according to her own definition, as opposed to what she is told. She exists as a result of the knowledge of who and what she is within a self-constructed gender and racial paradigm. She questions the veracity of statements that make her feel afraid and ashamed because those “statements” are at odds with her internal experiences of being a black woman, as she vehemently fights their influences in shaping her racial and gendered identity.

Additionally, she does not open up to exterior questioning of her being. The third verse, which reads “sem mistério existo” ‘without mystery I exist’ is a deliberate attempt to prevent the exoticizing of her “self” by others who may try to define her voice. Nonetheless, there is a recognition of the exposure of her “self” to an external gaze, which is voiced as a “search for signs of judgment” (4,5). The poetic voice attempts to understand the lack of synchronicity between what she is, and what she is told about herself: a classical bout between ontology and epistemology. As a result, she “screams” (8) thus breaking her silence and calling herself into existence. Her screaming also shatters the chain of lies people tell her about her “self” that causes her to feel ashamed. There is a need to make herself heard loud and clear. Hence the poetic voice expresses her frustration regarding external definitions of her “self” by asking questions about those alienated feelings of fear and shame and their origins (1, 9-11). By questioning the source of such feelings, she ensures that the reader understands that they have no part in her self-definition.. Home is rewritten from within; as a space of belonging, it is inscribed through the perspective of a cultural and gendered poetic voice.



## ponto final

Assertiveness and pride characterize a poetic voice who makes no apologies about re-establishing her own identity. The first verse, “sou negra                      ponto final” ‘i’m a black woman period’, attests to the recognition that there is no need to justify or to excuse the fact that she is a black woman—her decision is irrevocable, it is not open for discussion. Additionally, we are confronted by a strongly racialized/gendered poetic voice. There is a clear recognition of the power of the written word and its regulatory system for communicating. Thus, one sees a conflict between the words on the page and the conventional structure of language. This struggle mirrors the poetic voice’s rejection of socially imposed norms that try to “regulate” her behavior, her feelings, her image, and her poem, an attempt to externally define her being. Therefore, the poetic voice reclaims the space on the page as her own.

Additionally, the white space between the statement “i’m a black woman” and the abrupt interruption expressed by the word “period” raises the question of what it means to be a strong black woman. On one hand, it may be read poetically as a binary construction to the word “black” against the whiteness of the page. Consequently, the blank space becomes the emptiness of an externally defined gendered identity. On the other hand, though the poetic voice tries to avoid any pre-conceptions about her self-identity, the blank space opens up to dialogues. This space may thus be filled with a diversity of voices that self-identify as black and as woman in a variety of ways—home is this inclusive space of being and becoming. The apparently aggressive statement “period” is contradicted and softened by the silence represented by the blank space within the verse: a silence that invites conversation and refuses to categorize monolithically the multiple facets of black womanhood. This undefined space, where ways of knowing are sought and where knowledge is produced, may be comparable to a “third margin of the river”<sup>24</sup> or the “in-between space” to which Bhaba refers. It is also a fluid space where symbolic, performatic notions of home and belonging are (re)created.

Moreover, the fact that Rufino defies the conventional structure of language in her poems indicates that the poetic voice allows her to be free from imposed conventional rules and restrictions. The same may be said about the irregular positioning of words on the page. In poems such as “RESISTO” and “resgate,” where the main theme regards self-definitions of black womanhood, the words are irregularly set against the page. These words become a symbolic representation of identity reconstruction while flowing freely from restrictive conventions, showing a refusal to be pinpointed as a fixed, immobile, objectified construction. Rufino’s focus on the linguistic features of her poetry confirms and defies what scholars Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have recognized,



that language works as “the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (7). Thus, the rejection of linguistic conventions lays the groundwork to reaffirm and reconstruct one’s identity by reclaiming the power of naming one’s own experiences.

It is also important to note that the use of anaphora in Rufino’s poem, “resgate”, serves the purpose of reasserting the poetic voice’s self-definition through constantly repeating “sou negra.” In practical/social terms, this poem may also be perceived as a clear response to the pervasive racism existent in Brazil. Due to a negative stereotyping of peoples of African descent, there is a great resistance to self-identify as Black or Negro among certain groups who favor a variety of descriptive words like “moreno” (originally, a white person with dark hair), “pardo” (brown), “mulato” (mulatto), etc. (Guimarães 107; Carvalho 332-33). Within these terms of open attack towards the institutionalized, hidden, and denied racism in Brazil, Rufino establishes her subversive poetic voice: an open combativeness that is not clearly present in the poetry of the Afro-Cuban Georgina Herrera. As noted, Herrera’s poetic aesthetics is characterized by a voice that, through the use of mythical, ancestral re-connections, suggests the same powerful revisionary message without denoting a sense of aggressiveness. Herrera’s strategies involve a symbiotic sense of transatlantic historical connections with current performances of black womanhood that promote notions of community and belonging.

Alzira Rufino similarly articulates the vital significance of self-definition in regards to black woman’s experiences utilizing imagery of powerful transatlantic connections to portray fierce and resilient representations of black womanhood. This is evinced in the poems “Luiza Mahin” (17) and “Winnie” (21). “Luiza Mahin” refers to a black woman who became a powerful resistance figure in the historic imaginary of Afro-Brazilian people. To date, her precise role in the “Rebellion of Malês”, a Muslim slave rebellion in the state of Bahia, Brazil,<sup>5</sup> has yet to be documented. Despite this lack of official historic documentation, Mahin represents a black woman “freedom fighter and revolutionary figure whose achievements go back in time and whose memory lives on essentially by word of mouth” (Duke 141). This woman-centered approach is revealed in Rufino’s poem “Winnie,” in which she pays homage to Winnie Mandela, former wife of activist and former South Africa’s president Nelson Mandela. Winnie, a prominent and very controversial South African figure, is the former head of the African National Congress Women’s League; she is well-known as an active participant in the resistance movement against the country’s apartheid regime (Gillis 651-53).

Both of Rufino's poems, "Luiza Mahin" and "Winnie," focus on the role of black women as warriors against two systems of oppression towards black people, slavery, and the apartheid in South Africa:

Luiza de gêge<sup>6</sup>  
mulher em luta  
todo dia toda noite  
em espadas ("Luiza" 5-8)

In contrast to Herrera's focus on women's socially assigned roles (the "mother", the "lady," the "saint") Rufino emphasizes representations of fierce warriors in the daily struggle against racial oppression. Nevertheless, Herrera's strategy of using representations of traditional women's roles in a patriarchal society should not be taken as an attempt at maintaining women's oppressed status: her poetics displays the contrast between the beauty of the chosen word and the strength and resilience of the black women portrayed in, for example, "Retrato de Victoria" and "Canto de amor y respeto para Doña Ana de Souza".

Like the imagery encountered in "Luiza Mahin," representations of "aggressiveness" and of the "warrior woman" are also found in Rufino's "Winnie". The alliterations produced by the "r" sound in words such as "garra", "porque", "resiste", "cancer" resemble the growling sounds of a physical attack. The anger is instinctive and visceral. Moreover, the words themselves ("garra", "resiste", "cancer", "mata", "luta" and "maltrata") indicate a situation of conflict and struggle at the personal, social, or political levels:

Winnie, não perca a garra  
porque Mandela resiste  
Winnie, se o cancer mata  
mais que a luta não maltrata (1-4)

The transatlantic reconnection is made through female figures of past and present struggles: Luiza Mahin during the colonial period and the contemporary Winnie Mandela. Rufino and Herrera look to establish a continuum between past and present struggles; both exercise within their poetry a revision of history, relocating black women from an objectified position to one of subjects of their own experiences, thus bringing them home. As initially asserted, through their unique poetic voices, Rufino and Herrera seek to create spaces of home through self-definitions of black womanhood and notions of belonging, particularly with regards to issues of gender and race. By reaching back to Africa through images of past and present representations of strong black women, the works of Rufino and

Herrera expand and reach beyond their local communities as they provide an inclusive construction of sisterhood. This symbolic space, where new ways of (self) knowledge are founded, represents a multidimensional concept of home that reaches across time and space thereby re-creating non-Western historical and spiritual notions of belonging.

Rufino expresses the desire of returning to Africa in “telúrica” ‘telluric’ (28): “talvez, quem sabe, talvez / eu volte prá terra roxa / coberta de matagais” ‘maybe, who knows, maybe / I’ll return to the purple soil / covered by the meadows’ (1-3). This return to the sacred land implies an ancestral memory of the Diaspora, the longing for eternal reunion emphasized in the last four verses:

talvez, quem sabe, talvez  
eu volte pro barro em molde  
eu volte prá terra negra  
África tribo imortal (4-7)

As a malleable substance, the poetic space of home redefines self, refashions identity, reshapes experiences by returning to Africa, a place of spiritual remembrance. The poetic voice longs for a place of rebirth, of Genesis. Furthermore, the expression “Black soil” adds multiple layers of meaning. There is an explicit reference to fertile grounds and a more subtle reference to a place of belonging where the adjective “negra” is expanded to embrace the sons and daughters of Africa. Furthermore, Rufino makes use of the “empty space” between the words “Africa” and “immortal tribe” as a pause, a silence that implies reverence. Moreover, it shows hesitation in assigning it a singular meaning/definition that may become static, objectified.

Africa and the Americas are reconnected in an imagined community through various ways within the poetry of Georgina Herrera and Alzira Rufino. Both poets emphasize the active role of female ancestors and historical figures as spiritual guides in the tradition of African religious practices. Thus, Herrera and Rufino appropriate aspects of African cultural traditions as a means of race and gender identity reconstruction. Karla F. C. Holloway argues that mythologies are self-reflexive in black women’s texts and that “their history is the history of orature—the primal mythic source” (99). By celebrating the deeds and intrinsic characteristics of (ancestral) female protagonists within their poetry, Herrera and Rufino therefore bring to light a gendered and cultural bound history that shifts the position of black women from margin to center, at once reclaiming and refashioning this space as home.

While crafting their art, black poets Herrera and Rufino create unique spaces of being and becoming (home) grounded on spiritual, historical, and communal experiences that promote notions

of inclusiveness and belonging. Those spaces, though at times representative of struggle and contradictions, allow for the reclaiming and reconstruction of black womanhood as an identity created from within, contextualized in the celebration of black women's achievements, and denouncing their oppression. At the center of Herrera and Rufino's poetry is the female subject, an agent of social transformation resisting external attempts at objectification and redefining their own experiences under a woman-centered perspective. In her analysis of Afro-Latin American women poets, Dawn Duke precisely describes the importance of having a (poetic) voice centered on the black woman world view: it establishes an intrinsic connection between the poetic discourse and the social context in which we locate the poetic voice (139). Herrera and Rufino's poetry consequently becomes a safe, inclusive space used to center the plight of Afro-descendant Brazilian and Cuban women, two racially, culturally dynamic nations.

Through the remembrance of black communities scattered in the Diaspora, both poets create a symbolic space where notions of identity, with respect to black womanhood, emerge from and are at the center of their poetic discourse. Positioning their voices on ancestral communal social practices and contexts, while connecting those with contemporary issues, they create a sense of timelessness and continuity, a place of belonging, that is, a symbolic, mobile, and performative representation of home. In other words, black womanhood as identity construction encompasses "being" and "becoming"; it acknowledges the influences of a shared historical past while interrogating, as well as asserting, diverse contemporary self-definitions of "blackness" and "womanhood."

These notions of identity, which are inclusive and assertive of a Diasporic history, allow for representations of community that extend beyond territorial borders and establish deep intertextual connections between Africa and the Americas. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that Herrera and Rufino's art defies a utopian representation of "home." Their poetry is a site of struggle and resistance as pertains to the socio-historic treatment of Afro-descendants in Brazil and Cuba. At the center of this plight, we hear the voices of those black women who are celebrated for their agency in the fight for social justice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Oliveira (2008) and Duke (2008).

<sup>2</sup> For more information regarding racial relations in Cuba see *Race in Cuba: Essays on the Revolution and Racial Inequality* by Esteban Morales Dominguez (2013). For a comprehensive study on race relations in Brazil see Edward E. Telles' *Race in another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Here, I borrow from Canclini's definition of hybridization as the "procesos socio-culturales en los que estructuras o prácticas discretas, que existían en forma separada, se combinan para generar nuevas estructuras, objetos y prácticas" (14). For a full discussion of the term, see Canclini (2005).

<sup>4</sup> This concept is a reference to Guimarães Rosa's short story "A terceira margem do rio".

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive study of the "Rebellion of Malês" (1835), see João José dos Reis in *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: the Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*. Although not mentioned in Reis' study, Luiza Mahin is believed to be one of the pivotal leaders of this rebellion (Schwarz-Bart 55; Duke 142).

<sup>6</sup> The Gegê people (Ewe Nation) are one of many African ethnic groups from which Brazil obtained its slaves during the colonial period. For a discussion on the meanings of "Nation" in the Afro- Brazilian religious traditions, see Wafer (5-6).

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