

EXISTENCE THROUGH RESISTANCE: MEL DUARTE AND AFRO-BRAZILIAN
POETRY AS IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

by

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(Under the Direction of Cecília Rodrigues)

ABSTRACT

In Brazil, the concept of racial democracy has consequently erased and ignored both Afro-Brazilian identity and literature; the existence of both is debated, and within a “racial democracy” discourse, the use of these labels implies an element of “resistance.” For Afro-Brazilian women writers who face multiple antagonisms of racism and sexism, the level of “invisibilization” only continues. Within Afro-Brazilian literature, poetry has lent itself to be a constructor of identity and a space of resistance, creating what this work argues is an “existence” through “resistance.” This is reflected in the work of contemporary poet Mel Duarte, a slammer and author of *Negra Nua Crua* (2016). This research aims to analyze Duarte’s works, using selected poems from her book and performances, to argue that like Afro-Brazilian poets before her, Duarte continues to incorporate elements of resistance in order to construct her existence as a black Brazilian woman.

INDEX WORDS: Afro-Brazilian literature, Afro-Brazilian women, poetry, Mel Duarte, slam, sarau, *Negra Nua Crua*, racial democracy

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DEDICATION

This space is dedicated to the fearless black Brazilian women who are continuing to fight with their voice, whether through words, poetry, song, or performance. A special dedication goes to former politician, feminist, and activist Marielle Franco (1979-2018), who continues to resist even after the end of her existence.

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This work could not have been possible without the care, attention, and support of my friends and family inside and outside of academia; I thank my parents, who raised me into believing I could do anything not despite being a woman, but because I was one. I thank my friends, too numerous to count, who supported me in both big and small ways, and pushed me to succeed within my academic career. I thank my fiancé, Storm and Gypsy, for supporting me during many late nights spent writing.

Within this research, I could not have succeeded without the three members of my committee, Cecília Rodrigues, Robert Henry Moser, and Lesley Feracho, who each took time out of their lives to help me succeed academically before and during this thesis. I especially thank Cecília Rodrigues for helping me find my own voice, both on and off paper, and continuing to motivate me to write on things that matter.

Here I want to acknowledge the relevance of Mel Duarte's work. While this work was obviously not written with a white student from Georgia in mind and I am humbly aware that I am appropriating, to some extent, her work for my academic benefit, it is my intention to also recognize the tremendous effort she puts into her various projects while she is still relevant, albeit a "new" published writer. In an interview, she stated that as a child that she thought that if she wanted to be recognized as a poet, she would have to be dead before anyone studied her. With this work, I hope to encourage others to not only look at works in the past, but to also listen to what people are writing and saying now. Mel Duarte is, without question, one of these voices that should be listened to.

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INTRODUCTION

I want to speak about us, because time has always left us behind the curtains...

--Esmeralda Ribeiro

*I have a history
the peddlers of human cargo and ideas
don't want to hear.
A history of those sold over there
three centuries ago
at the square of histori-city.
History of struggle and resistance*

-- Oswaldo de Camargo

Afro-Brazilian existence has for centuries been linked to the question of resistance; in the era of slavery, the Afro-Brazilian martial art of capoeira allowed slaves to resist and protect their existence from the violence of their white masters, and *quilombos* served as places of refuge for runaway slaves, and to this day function as important guardians of Afro-Brazilian heritage and survival. Today, the need for resistance is arguably linked to what can be referred to as a “racial democracy,” or the myth that Brazil was somehow exempt from racism due to centuries of miscegenation, which has functioned as an agent of making Afro-Brazilian identity invisible. The need to resist has been greater for Afro-Brazilian women, who through racism and sexism face “invisibilização”¹ both within and outside of an Afro-Brazilian context. Literature, especially poetry, has offered itself as a viable way of creating existence through resistance for Afro-Brazilian writers, but especially women. In a Brazilian context, where society had previously (and still, in some respect), proposes the existence of a racial democracy, this research proposes that Afro-Brazilian identity is one constructed of resistance from multiple antagonisms,

¹ A word that can be translated as “invisibilization,” or the process of making someone or something invisible. See Stephanie Nolen, “Brazil’s Colour Bind: How One of the World’s Most Diverse Countries Is Just Starting to Talk about Race.”

such as racial democracy and racism, using literature (but especially poetry) being one of these avenues. Afro-Brazilian female poets then “resist” in order to “exist” not only racial democracy, but also racism, sexism, and other antagonisms that threaten their “existence,” as observed in the poetry of Mel Duarte in both her book *Negra Nua Crua* (2016) and in her slams.

Mel Duarte is a 29-year-old poet, slammer, and *produtora cultural* and is a relatively new name in Afro-Brazilian poetry that has arrived “out of the margins,” so to speak. Besides being a poet and a slammer, she is involved in numerous projects that involve the spoken word, including literary *saraus* and slams, and she maintains a *Youtube* channel of more than 13,000 followers. She is the author of both *Fragmentos Dispersos* (2013) and *Negra Nua Crua* (2017), both of which have been independently published. But as this work will observe, Mel Duarte is just one of many names who make up what can be considered an “Afro-Brazilian” body of literature.

Before continuing, it is important here to establish a definition of “resistance.” Resistance, while a broad term, is used in this context in the following ways: resistance against the dominant discourse, and identity resistance. The relationship is explained between the two as “renewed existence through resistance;” although existence refers to a reclaimed identity to suggest an active process of achieving it, rather than a passive “existence.” The reader finds that Afro-Brazilian people, through rejecting the racial democracy myth, are exhibiting what Anne Trethewey calls “any behavior or discourse...that countered or disrupted the dominant bureaucratic discourse (288). On the other hand, resistance can also be identity-based (Hollander 537) through not only political or social conditions, but also expectations attributed to the identity (what could be called stereotypes or erasure). In the context of this paper then, Afro-Brazilians also resist by claiming an identity that has either been denied to them and replaced

with terms such as “mulato” or “moreno,” as well as rejecting an identity that is attributed with stereotypes.

In order to contextualize the themes of “resistance” in Afro-Brazilian literature, the introduction will first define what is understood as racial democracy as well as implications that the theory has had on racial identity in Brazil. This will be followed by a definition of what is considered “Afro-Brazilian literature” by critics, as well as a demonstration of a need for Afro-Brazilian women poets within the movement. The introduction will then conclude with examples of Afro-Brazilian women who have created a renewed “existence” through resistance in their poetry.

FIGURE 1



Figure 1: A photo of Mel Duarte. Source: <https://www.melduarteoesia.com.br/>

In the first chapter, this work will analyze how poetry permits existence through embodiment, pulling examples from Duarte’s poems in *Negra Nua Crua*, and examine how Duarte is able to resist within the stanzas and establish her renewed existence. In the second chapter, the work will analyze how spoken poetry, especially spaces of community such as slams

and *saraus*, have historically offered resistance and existence for marginalized voices, and how they continue to do so for Duarte, using examples of embodiment seen in her performances. In the conclusion, this work will offer an “ekphrastic” interpretation of specific lines of Duarte’s poetry with my own personal artwork.

When observing Brazil and its literature, one can notice an interesting paradox; although Brazil has a population where more than 50% of the population is black², Afro-Brazilian literature is still regarded as “marginalized” within Brazil. The existence of a “black” literature in Brazil seems even more puzzling when one considers that for decades, Brazilians themselves as well as countries outside of Brazil labeled the country as a “racial democracy,” where racism was non-existent, and Brazilians themselves had gone through so many centuries of racial mixing that to be Brazilian signified to be “mestiço” or “moreno.” Here then, it is important to ask: If every Brazilian is “mixed,” what then, is Afro-Brazilian literature, and why is a distinction needed? Is it possible there is marginalization within this marginalized group, such as for black female Brazilian writers? Is literature able to offer a space for identity construction when a society does not permit the existence of said identity? Are there genres within this literary movement that are more permissive of a construction of identity, such as poetry? And then, the final question remained: What does poetry permit for the Afro-Brazilian female poet, in terms of identity and resistance?

The answers to these questions can found in establishing the following: Afro-Brazilian existence has historically been threatened, long after the end of slavery, through a discourse called “racial democracy,” that subtly diminishes black Brazilian identity and voice. Literature,

² According to the 2010 census in Brazil, 50.7% of Brazilians identified as black or mixed race, compared to 47.7% of those who identified as white. For more information see Phillips, “Brazil Census Shows African-Brazilians in the Majority for the First Time.” (2011)

then, has offered itself as a way to construct identity that has been denied; in creating an Afro-Brazilian literature, one can see resistance in the following ways: through resisting incorporating the label of solely “Brazilian” literature, which does not address or differentiate the experience of being black in Brazil, and through creating narratives in a literary realm that has traditionally erased, stereotyped, or treating Afro-Brazilians as “the other,” rather than a principal character or narrator. The creation of an Afro-Brazilian literature did not come without its own faults however; within Afro-Brazilian literature, a severe lack of female representation and voice is apparent. While Afro-Brazilian literature has produced many notable examples of different genres, such as Conceição Evaristo’s novel *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003), Cristiane Sobral’s *O Tapete Voador* (2016), a collection of short stories or her play *Uma boneca no lixo* (1998), its contribution of poetry by Afro-Brazilian women writers cannot be ignored, and its potential in creating a space for existence through resistance through poetry by contemporary poet Mel Duarte is the purpose of this project.

The link between resistance and existence in Afro-Brazilian identity and literature is one that needs to be discussed further. One could argue that an Afro-Brazilian existence is, in of itself, an act of resistance; black Brazilians are not only resisting a racial democracy paradigm that denies them from claiming an Afro-Brazilian identity but are also affectively resisting multiple factors that work to erase their existence. Poverty, police brutality, lack of upward mobility and literacy are just some of a few major factors that threaten Afro-Brazilian existence; their act of existing is a defiance to the many antagonisms that threaten them. But the relationship should not end here; after all, to survive without a voice or a claim to citizenship is not truly “living.” Therefore, one should examine what it means to “exist” as an Afro-Brazilian

in a racial democracy, and why this identity can only be formed through a conscious act of resistance.

Racial Democracy: A Definition and its Impact on Racial Identity

In order to explain the need for resistance in contemporary Afro-Brazilian writing, it is worth mentioning the definition, as well as the origin, of racial democracy, as well as its impact on identity and literature. A racial democracy can be defined as a racial system devoid of any legal or institutional barrier to racial equality and to some extent a racial system devoid of any manifestation of prejudice or discrimination (Domingues 116). The concept has been credited to the most renowned Brazilian sociologist Gilbert Freyre, whose most famous work is *Casa-grande & senzala*³ (1933). Shortly before writing the book, Freyre had visited the southern region of the United States during segregation and became shocked by the legal institutions of racism imposed at that time. Jim Crow laws, segregated bathrooms and water fountains were unheard of in Brazil, despite Brazil being the last country to abolish slavery and having a similar history of colonization like other colonized nations in the Americas, such as the United States and other countries in Latin America. Attempting to explain the differences in racial relationships, Freyre summarized that Brazil had gone through a higher level of “racial mixing” or “miscegenation” due to the Portuguese colonizers being more “compassionate,” as well as amicable relationships between white slave masters and black slave women. In turn, Brazil was on its way to becoming a “racial democracy,” as centuries later Brazilians were the result of the mixing of the races. Jeffrey D. Needell cites an example of Freyre’s argument (Freyre 348-349) in his article, “Race, Gender, and Modernity in the Origins of Gilberto Freyre's Oeuvre” (68):

³ Published in English as *The Masters and the Slaves* in 1946.

The strength, or, better, the potential of Brazilian culture seems to us to reside wholly in the wealth of its balanced antagonisms ... Not that in Brazilians subsist, as in the Anglo American, two antagonistic halves, black and white; that of the ex-master and ex-slave. In no way. We are two, fraternal halves ... that come mutually enriched by diverse values and experiences when we complete one another in one whole. (68)

While racial democracy was propagated in Brazil, Brazilians themselves were not the only ones who supported this theory; an interpretation of Brazil as a country of “racial mixing” was also imposed upon from outside the country.⁴ In the early 1950’s for example, George Reid Andrews notes that the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) commissioned research teams to different parts of Brazil in order to encounter a “promising alternative to racism” and uncover how the Brazilian racial democracy “functioned in practice” (490). Unsurprisingly, the research showed “high racial disparity” within cities surveyed (such as Rio and São Paulo), and ultimately the team concluded that not even Brazil could be exempt from racism, and its citizens were far from achieving the so-called racial democracy (490).

Although this was just one example of how racial democracy has been disproved as a reality and shown to be a myth, its impact on Brazilian thought and identity continues until today. Andrews notes that for years, this ideology was a basis in everything from public proclamations, schools, universities, and national media in Brazil (488), as well as part of the “unquestionable” hegemony in the official, intellectual, and academic discourse (490). If

⁴ According to Voigt, “Freyre’s benevolent interpretation of Portuguese colonialism was warmly received by a dictatorial regime anxious to hold on to its last remaining colonies (p. 16). In summary, Freyre’s theory of the Portuguese’s “more humane form of imperialism” would later become a theory known as *lustrropicalismo* and would be applied to other former Portuguese colonies outside of Brazil. See Lisa Voigt (2009).

Freyre's paradigm was part of Brazilian thought, as Andrews notes, one must consider then what sorts of implications racial democracy would have on the perception of Brazilian self-identity, especially in a racial context. In the same article, Andrews points out that one of the ideology's less obvious internal contradictions was colorism in Brazil: racial democracy had a clear preference for racially mixed mulattoes over people of completely African ancestry (489). To compliment Andrews' article, Andrea Perisic argues in "Beyond Discontent: National and Diasporic Imaginings in Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Women's Writing," that:

Brazil was on its way to becoming a metaracial society, one in which 'instead of sociological preoccupation with minute characterizations of multiracial intermediates or nuanced types, between white and black, white and red, etc.', the tendency will be, for the majority of the population, 'to be described, and to consider themselves almost without discrimination, as *morenos*.' "Moreno," according to Freyre, was beginning to replace "Negro" and "mulatto," terms too often considered synonyms of slave. This argument was for a long time at the forefront of Brazilian political discourse, glorifying racial intermixing as the foundation of a racial democracy and the *mestizo* as the embodiment of Brazilian citizenship. (272)

If the "moreno" in Brazil was glorified as the embodiment of Brazilian citizenship as Perisic argues, then this would undoubtedly influence black Brazilians' political mobilization and making intentional social changes to address issues they face. As an example, Andrews notes that a shortcoming of racial democracy was the lack of "upward mobility" for non-whites in Brazil, who faced discrimination in education and jobs (489). Another example is in Brazil's attempt to implement affirmative action measures (such as the models in the United States),

which have been met with much controversy.⁵ In the article “Brazil's Colour Bind: How One of the World's Most Diverse Countries Is Just Starting to Talk about Race,” Stephanie Nolen’s interview with a white Brazilian sociologist Demétrio Magnoli reveals much about Brazilians notions of race and policy; Magnoli stated that measures like affirmative action and quotas threaten (in his opinion), “the mixed identity created in the beginning of the 20th century and that’s an important thing because if you see yourself like a mixed person, you don’t have racial politics” (Nolen). Racial democracy then has become internalized in Brazilian society and created unnecessary barriers of claiming identity or advocating for social change. In the same interview, Nolen interviewed Marcelo Paixão, an Afro-Brazilian professor of economics at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, who states that racial democracy, “...was ‘invisibilization,’ the discourse was that we don’t have race in Brazil, so you don’t have race problems in Brazil, and you don’t need to discuss the inequality” (“Brazil’s Colour Bind”). Racial democracy then, became a convenient excuse to dismiss racial problems, and created a hesitant atmosphere in discussing it.

In addition to silencing racial issues in Brazil, racial democracy has been cited by scholar Alexander Marx, in his article “A construção da raça no Brasil: Comparações históricas e implicações políticas” as one of the major antagonisms for black Brazilians. He states that, racial democracy, although more of a myth than a reality, still had a significant impact in Brazilian society. The image of tolerance and social mobility only encouraged the “quietude” of black Brazilians, leaving them at what he calls the “base” of the social pyramid. He concludes that racial democracy was the “maior inimigo” of black mobilization in Brazil, as this myth discouraged any political mobility that threatened its validity (161- 164).

⁵ Quotas, called “cotas” in Brazil, began to be implemented in the early 2000’s, with the Universidade de Brasília as the first one to utilize quotas based on race in 2004. See Érica Caetano (*Online*).

To complete the argument that racial democracy has not only confused notions of racial identity, encouraged “quietude” of race issues, and silenced black Brazilians’ voices and identities, this work concludes with an interview from *El País* with Djamila Ribeiro, a contemporary Brazilian black feminist and philosopher. While Ribeiro acknowledges that a lack of legal institutions of racism in Brazil has encouraged the validity of this myth, she is not convinced that this excludes Brazil from having serious discussions about racism. She notes that institutional racism is subtle in Brazil, but still present. She argues:

Porque o Brasil é um país de maioria negra, mas a gente não debate racismo de forma efetiva. E acho que é muito por conta desse mito da democracia racial que foi criado no Brasil. De acreditar que aqui não existia racismo. De que racismo é o que existia nos Estados Unidos ou na África do Sul, porque lá estava na Constituição, enquanto que aqui no Brasil não tinha isso...Mas não reconhecendo que aqui você tem o racismo institucional. Eu sempre dou o exemplo da USP [Universidade de São Paulo], que acho um clássico: se você chega lá e vê qual a cor das pessoas que estão limpando e qual a cor das pessoas que estão dando aula? Então existe uma segregação no Brasil muito marcada, mas o que nos falta é discutir de maneira mais efetiva, porque a gente foi criado num mito de harmonia das raças, de que a gente se dá bem, de que estamos num país miscigenado. Não dizendo que parte dessa miscigenação foi fruto do estupro de mulheres negras, das mulheres indígenas... Onde querem louvar muito as pontes que existem, mas não quer falar dos muros que nos separam. E isso está muito por conta dessa dificuldade de ver o Brasil como um país racista. (Novaes)

In a racial democracy society where black identity, voice, and mobilization is negated, erased, and dismissed, identifying as a black Brazilian is to take on an “existence” through the act of “resistance,” as this identity is actively resisting silence and discourse of Brazilians being a nation of “morenos.” To support this argument, this work will refer to Kabengele Munanga, renowned Brazilian anthropologist. Munanga has stated that historically, reclaiming the black identity in Brazil had a connotation of being excluded and forgotten, therefore, through reclaiming this identity, one was to be resistant to a discourse that had tried to erase it (“Negritude afro-brasileira” 112). He also notes that black Brazilian identity “se opõe a uma outra identidade unificadora proposta pela ideologia dominante, ou seja, a identidade mestiça, que além de buscar a unidade nacional visa também a legitimação da chamada democracia racial brasileira e a conservação do status quo (“Uma abordagem conceitual” 15). He continues:

Do ponto de vista histórico, é necessário no plano da busca da identidade afro-brasileira, não apenas enfatizar a questão das raízes, mas sob o processo histórico no qual se desenvolveu a resistência afro-brasileira. Uma história penosa e pesada para ser carregada e ser aprofundada, mas também, uma história em construção, difícil a dominar, ainda pouco interrogada por diversas razões. Visto deste ponto de vista, a busca da identidade parece um caminho para entrar na história, para coexistir, para unir-se e construir junto com os outros. Há de considerar também que, se a noção de identidade é inseparável da noção de unidade, ela implica também a diversidade. Mesmo respeitando esta última, poder-se-ia reter como traço fundamental próprio a todos os negros (pouco importa a classe social) a situação de excluídos em que se encontram a nível nacional. Isto é, a identidade

do mundo negro se inscreve no real sob a forma de “exclusão.” Ser negro é ser excluído. (“Negritude afro-brasileira” 112-113)

Afro-Brazilian Literature Defined in a “Racial Democracy”

While this work has already established how the myth of racial democracy has created an environment where “existing” as a black Brazilian has a connotation of “resistance,” this section will now focus on its effect on the literature produced by self-identified Afro-Brazilian writers. As these black Brazilian writers need to actively treat this question of identity in their work, this in turn follows a theme of renewed (or reclaimed) existence through resistance to the literary canon that actively tries to erase it. As, ironically, the existence of this literature is questioned itself, not in production but as a classification in academia (Assis Duarte, “Literatura afro-brasileira” 11), this section will utilize the definitions of Afro-Brazilian literature by critics of the movement and observe how writers have sought to reclaim identity through writing.

First, it is worth addressing what is defined as Afro-Brazilian literature, in the context of a so-called “racial paradise.” Zilá Bernd, a specialist in Afro-Brazilian literature, notes in her book *Poesia negra brasileira: antologia* (1992) that what distinguishes black Brazilian literature from other Brazilian works is its expression of the “common experience” of being oppressed as a result of being black. She continues her argument:

A literatura negra brasileira que é negra porque exprime a experiência comum de opressão e de preconceitos sofridos por um grupo, situa-se neste mesmo espaço.

A emergência de um sujeito enunciator que assume sua condição negra no tecido poético revoga o uso tradicional onde o negro era o *outro*, era *objeto* (conteúdo, tema) e não sujeito. (14)

She claims as well that the concept of black literature, in the Brazilian context, is associated with a “black” perspective; of seeing and feeling the world, transmitted through intentional lexical signifiers (such as vocabulary or names that are mentioned), and often attempting to rescue a forgotten “black memory” (*Poesia negra brasileira* 13), or in the words of Munanga, an effort to reclaim identity in order to enter into a history that excluded it (“Negritude afro-brasileira” 113).

In addition, Bernd claims that Afro-Brazilian literature must deconstruct former representations of “o negro” in literature, including a level of “invisibilização” and negative stereotypes. According to professor David Brookshaw in *Raça e cor na literatura brasileira* (1983), commented on the “invisibilização” of black characters in Brazilian literature, stating that

A figura do negro na literatura brasileira anterior a 1850, portanto anterior à abolição do tráfico de escravos, praticamente não existe. Isto é surpreendente se considerarmos o papel diário desempenhado pelos escravos em muitas atividades. Já foi dito que a total ausência de escravos na literatura é um indício de que o escritor brasileiro não considerava o escravo de modo nenhum um ser humano, e não há dúvida de que há algo de verdade nisto. (26)

Brookshaw points out that after the 1850’s, Brazil entered into the “Romanticism” period shortly after gaining its independence, and shortly after began to search for a Brazilian national identity through literature, which was an identity that continued to erase the black presence in Brazil. He cites the prominent author of this period José de Alencar, author of *O guaraní* (1857), who had left out the presence of a black figure in the story until nearly the end of the book,

To compliment with Bernd’s definition of Afro-Brazilian literature, Eduardo de Assis Duarte, another specialist and critic within the Afro-Brazilian literary world, offers a theory that

Afro-Brazilian literature incorporates five distinct factors (“Literatura afro-brasileira” 12). These five factors include: 1. Thematic; “o negro é o tema principal da literatura negra,” 2. Authorship; “uma escrita proveniente de autor afro-brasileiro” 3. Point of view; “não basta ser afro-descendente...[é] necessário a assunção de uma perspectiva e, mesmo, de uma visão de mundo...desse importante segmento da população,” 4. Language; “...marcada pela expressão de ritmos e significados novos e, mesmo, de um vocabulário pertencentes às práticas linguísticas oriundas de África e inseridas no processo transculturado em curso no Brasil” and 5. Public; “A formação de um público específico, marcado pela diferença cultural e pelo anseio de afirmação identitária compõe a faceta utópica do projeto literário afro-brasileiro” (12, 20). In summary, as black Brazilians could not rely on literature nor society to give them a voice, it was crucial then for this group of writers to validate their own voice and experience within their writing, with the writing source coming from their own experience. Assis Duarte and Zilá Bernd establish that this is the necessary distinction between Afro-Brazilian works and “other” Brazilian works.

Using this proposed theory by Bernd and Assis Duarte, the reader would find then that Afro-Brazilian works, including works of black Brazilian women, have been a part of Brazilian literary history since the 19th century, with the work of *Úrsula* (1859) by abolitionist Maria Firmina dos Reis as an example. The novel is considered part of this movement as Reis was a free black woman who used her writing as a space to treat the experience of Afro-Brazilians at the time (in slavery), as well as give valorization to black characters and black voices (“Literatura afro-brasileira: um conceito em construção” 11). Unsurprisingly, in the pre-abolition period of Brazil, Reis experienced her own period of “invisibilização;” modern day readers aware of the work of Reis is a miracle in of itself, as at the time she had published her work

anonymously as “uma maranhese,” and the original manuscript remained hidden and forgotten until the 1970’s (Lombardi, “Úrsula”).⁶

Major production of Afro-Brazilian works did not gain institutional visibility until the late 1970’s to early 1980’s. This is supported in the introduction of the bilingual anthology of female Afro-Brazilians, *Enfim...Nós; Finally...Us : Escritoras Negras Brasileiras Contemporâneas* (1995), that states, “negros escrevendo não é novidade no panorama da literatura nacional” but what distinguished the works in the 1970’s to the 1980’s was their “investindo de forma rebeladora” (5-6). Assis Duarte argues that this change in mobilization was due to several notable changes in a societal and institutional level, such as the formation of such as *Dia da Consciência Negra*⁷ and Lei 10.639 in 2003⁸, and notably, the writing group *Quilombhoje*, who formed in 1978, who periodically produces publications of black Brazilians in *Cadernos Negros* (“Por um conceito de literatura afro-brasileira” 20).

A Need for Intersectionality: Afro-Brazilian Female Poets

It is worth noting here that even within this body of marginalized literature, a further level of marginalization occurred of black women’s voices. While *Cadernos Negros* is notably the largest on-going publication of black Brazilians works, Esmeralda Ribeiro and Márcia Barbosa, Afro-Brazilian women poets and contributors for this project, have admitted themselves that, “às vezes a presença de poemas ou contos de apenas duas mulheres, em uma experiência coletiva, é como uma gota no oceano” (*Cadernos Negros* 29). An explanation for this silencing can be found in the argument of Maria Consuelo Cunha Campos in her article “Gênero,” who

⁶ Horácio de Almeida found the book in a secondhand shop and later re-released the second edition of the book. See Maria Firmina dos Reis (1975).

⁷ “Day of black consciousness” that is celebrated every November 20th in Brazil. November 20th is thought to be the day of Zumbi’s death and is sometimes regarded as “Zumbi day.”

⁸ A law that mandates the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in schools (Duke 38).

states that black Brazilian women face the unique “double challenge represented by a simultaneously racist and sexist society” (117). This further “invisibilização” of black female writers is not exclusive to Brazil. Ribeiro establishes that a significant “lack” of black women’s writing is not indicative of few women writing, but more so of a lack attention, visibility, and opportunities to become well-known (21).

The existence of black Brazilian women as characters, protagonists, or narrators in literature is few in comparison to the rest of Brazil’s literature; Regina Dalcastagnè, a female Brazilian literature researcher and critic, notes in her research article, “Imagens da mulher na narrativa brasileira” that while female Brazilian writers only composed about 30% of the published novels, there was only one black female narrator detected within a 15 year span.⁹ Dalcastagnè explains that the visibility of women in literature is a reflection of their situation in society, where they have less access to their own “voz” (128). Another aspect of this *invisibilização* is that the black woman, “é retratada como a antimusa da sociedade brasileira, porque não se adequa ao modelo estético. A literatura, assim como a história, produz um apagamento dessas mulheres, ocultando os sentidos de uma matriz africana na sociedade brasileira (Gonçalves 52).

Here it is worth mentioning Ribeiro’s *O que é lugar de fala?* (2017) establish how these women are continually silenced and considered “the other.” Ribeiro quotes the analysis of Portuguese artist and activist Grada Kilomba and notes, “a mulher negra só pode ser o *Outro* e nunca si mesma” (39). Her argument is that black women, in blunt terms, are not “allowed” to have authorship of their own identity, as their identity is constructed as being not a black woman but being “neither” white “nor” male (38-39). Within this book, Ribeiro cites various feminist

⁹ Between the years of 1990 and 2004.

theorists and explains that black women, in a white patriarchal society, have been excluded from having a “lugar de fala,” or a space to speak. With this exclusion of a voice, black women are discouraged from occupying certain “spaces” in society (including marginalized literature), to represent themselves, or speak up against the forces that silence them. Ribeiro notes that they have not been able to completely rely on feminist movements either, as women (mainly white) have excluded their voices. To develop this argument further, a “lugar de fala,” however, also pertains to what can be considered a “feminist standpoint;” in short, while white women could advocate on behalf of black women, they will never have the “lugar de fala” of black women, or be able to represent them. Therefore, it is crucial to include spaces for these black feminine voices to express their “lugar de fala,” as they are the best ones to speak on issues they personally face, both within and outside of literature.

If racial democracy has been cited as being responsible for the silencing of black voices and identity, the same has been true for black Brazilian women to a greater extent. Racial democracy has not permitted black women to enter in spaces, or to have a “lugar de fala,” in order to represent themselves or to “exist.” Carolyn Richardson Durham argues in her article “The Beat of a Different Drum: Resistance in Contemporary Poetry by African-Brazilian Women” that the act of writing for these women is, in of itself, a rebellious act, as 85% of these women do not have access to more than four years of schooling (Durham 21). She continues below:

Black women who write are often perceived as unrepresentative of the masses, which explains the tendency to disregard their works and the attitudes they reflect. Furthermore, when the ideas that these writers espouse not only refute the “myth of racial democracy” but also advocate social consciousness and political action,

their works are invalidated as acceptable discourse and marginalized from the mainstream. (21)

Durham notes that literature, especially for this marginalized group of writers, has been fundamental for constructing a space for them to exist and resist. She cites, for example, the argument of Sônia Fatima Conceição, who claims that “literature is a tool with which to explore liberating strategies critical to the survival and empowerment of African-Brazilian [women]” (22).

Poetry: Black Brazilian Women Existence Through Resistance

To trace a panorama of women poets using poetry to “resist” through “existing,” this work cites the poet Miriam Alves, a member of *Quilombhoje* from 1980 to 1989, and the primary organizer for the anthology of Afro-Brazilian women’s poetry, *Enfim...Nós*. She writes in the poem, “Palavras:” “Faço poemas. Na verdade procuro palavras para um poema...Procuro-as, procure-as para alimentar-me no seu sangue e sentir-me gente, vou encontrar suas veias rasgadas tingido o asfalto após um atropelamento criminoso” (170-171). The reader sees here then that poetry allows a way of “sustaining” her existence, as well as finding affirmation in her Afro-Brazilian identity, and that Alves is able to transform experience, such as racial violence, into poetic fuel that allows her to continue to resist antagonisms through having a space for her voice to “exist.”

Within this same anthology, one can also discover that Alzira Rufino’s poetry allows her to be unapologetically black and affectively resist the racial democracy discourse. Within poetry, she has access to a voice denied to her, and is in a position where she can demand for her identity, while at the same time, asserting it, “without commas or pauses.” She says in “Resgate:”

Sou negra ponto final
devolve-me a identidade
rasgue minha certidão
sou negra sem reticências
sem vírgulas e sem ausências
não quero mais meio-termo
sou negra balacobaco
sou negra noite cansaço
sou negra ponto final (34)

Conceição Evaristo, theorist of Afro-Brazilian literature and a contributor to the movement herself, establishes in her book of poetry *Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos* (2008) that it was from her mother that she learned to “care” for her poetry; it was from her mother that she inherited a care for “fixing” things and asserting her life (or existence). Through this lesson, Evaristo was able to transfer these characteristics from her mother into care for her poetry, and the realization that poetry would aid her in enabling the assertion of her identity and as a resolution for the question of Afro-Brazilian identity. She states below in “De Mãe:”

O cuidado de minha poesia
aprendi foi de mãe,
mulher de pôr reparo nas coisas,
e de assuntar a vida. (32)

The reader can still see themes of asserting blackness in poetry and using poetry as space for “resisting” discourse through “existing” as a black woman within the work of Cristiane Sobral. In her book, *Não vou mais lavar os pratos* (2010), she asserts that her identity negates the myth of racial democracy, as well as her experiences that she faced as a black woman in Brazil. She is able to achieve this using her own personal experience as a black woman as “evidence,” and in using the tool of embodiment, she is able to “resist” racism and racial democracy through destroying privilege and hypocrisy, allowing her to reclaim her “existence” as a “negra.” She states in “Fratricídio:”

Separe todos os matizes da negritude brasileira
Desintegre todas as identidades
Ficaremos com um nada aguado
O mestiço não é nem o sim nem o não, é o talvez
Mentira!
Pergunte ao porteiro do prédio
Interrogue o policial
Eles não terão dúvida em apontar a consistência da minha melanina

Sou negra
Meus dentes brancos trituram qualquer privilégio retinto
Meu sangue negro corrói a hipocrisia parda
Mela o mito da democracia racial
Corre maratonas libertárias negrófilas
Rasga as entranhas e reluz
Das cinzas à fênix... (72)

The themes that appear in Mel Duarte's poetry then are only a continuation of this narrative of resistance, and her identity as a black Brazilian woman is part of a renewed existence that thrives because of resistance. Like Alves, Duarte establishes that through writing poetry with a "caneta," she will never lack "alimento;" poetry then allows her to sustain her existence (10). Like Evaristo, Duarte recognizes the power that poetry has in her identity. She states: "Sou poeta e das rimas faço meu sustento/ Me apresento:/ -Mel / Negra, nua, crua de sentimento" (10). In a similar fashion to both Rufino and Sobral, Mel uses her body to be rebellious and resistant to discourse. In "Líderes" she declares, "Mulher sim, / Negra sou, / Punhos serrados até o fim / Meu tempo é agora. / A ditadura na rua está solta, / E é preciso brigar por uma nova aurora!" (23).

CHAPTER ONE

Existence Through Resistance as Seen in The Poetry of Mel Duarte

Racial democracy has denied the existence of Afro-Brazilian identity and voice. Literature has offered itself as a way of resisting antagonisms and stereotypes in society, and therefore, a way to “exist.” As Zilá Bernd has noted within her book, *Introdução à literatura negra* (1988), through literature, “os negros estão querendo *criar* a si mesmos e que uma das etapas deste processo seria justamente a de particularizar sua escritura, dando-lhe feição própria (21). Within this movement, however, the reader has observed that the need is far greater for black Brazilian women, who are further marginalized as they face the “double challenge” of racism and sexism. While works by Afro-Brazilian women have appeared since the 19th century, resistance and struggle continue to appear in contemporary works. This chapter will defend how poetry is instrumental in the creation of identity and permits a space for existence and resistance, and then introduce Mel Duarte and her works, analyzing how she continues to exist through resisting within selections of her book *Negra Nua Crua*.

The connection between identity and this body of literature is crucial, as Bernd states, because one of the primary objectives and characteristics of Afro-Brazilian literature is to validate and elevate the black Brazilian identity. As Bernd notes, black literature is a literature whose consistency is “dada pelo surgimento de um *eu* enunciator que se quer negro” (22). Evaristo states in her article, “Literatura negra: uma voz quilombola na literatura brasileira” that for the black Brazilian writer, literature can function as a metaphorical *quilombo*. *Quilombos* or maroon settlements were historically composed of a community of runaway slaves (Duke 38), but today are known as communities existing in Brazil of these runaway slave descendants. She

compares this body of literature then as a space of refuge, to run to, to exist, almost as if it was a concrete space, a *quilombo*. As *quilombos* were an essential part of preserving culture in the African diaspora in Brazil, Evaristo suggests that a reading of this literature should have this in mind: “Ao propormos uma leitura em torno da Literatura negra, julgamos necessária mesmo que ligeira, uma reflexão sobre a transposição e a continuidade das culturas africanas em solo brasileiro” (“Literatura negra: uma voz quilombola na literatura brasileira” 1).

Poetry as Afro-Brazilian Identity Construction and Resistance

Evaristo argues that poetry offered another level of preservation/ existence for Afro-Brazilian writers, such as what Ribeiro defines as “lugar de fala” (64). As an example, Bernd in *Poesia negra brasileira: antologia*, states “a emergência de um sujeito enunciador que assume sua condição negra no tecido poético revoga o uso tradicional onde o negro era o outro, era objeto (conteúdo, tema) e não sujeito” (14). To dialogue with the statement of Bernd, Evaristo affirms that, “Viver a poesia em tais circunstâncias, de certa forma, é assegurar o direito à fala, pois pela criação poética pode-se ocupar um lugar vazio apresentando uma contrafala ao discurso oficial, ao discurso do poder” (“Literatura negra: uma voz quilombola” 3). In summary, poetry allows Afro-Brazilian poets a place to exist and have their own voice, allowing them to maintain their existence through resisting. Poetry as a genre was also permissive of incorporating rhythm, chanting, and songs, permitting more preservation of self and resisting the dominant discourse that tried to eliminate these cultural elements. Evaristo continues:

Tendo sido o corpo negro, durante séculos, violado em sua integridade física, interditado em seu espaço individual e social pelo sistema escravocrata do passado e, hoje ainda por políticas segregacionistas existentes em todos, se não em quase todos, os países em que a diáspora africana se acha presente, coube aos

descendentes de africanos, espalhados pelo mundo, inventar formas de resistência. Vemos, pois, a literatura buscar modos de enunciação positivos na descrição desse corpo. A identidade vai ser afirmada em cantos de louvor e orgulho étnicos, chocando-se com o olhar negativo e com a estereotipia lançados ao mundo e às coisas negras. (Literatura negra: uma poética 18)

Using the *quilombo* metaphor of Evaristo again, *quilombos*, as areas of preservation, were also areas of resistance; as the discourse at the time of their conception supported the existence of slavery and the oppression of blacks, this space, then, became a space of existence through resistance. Here, Afro-Brazilians could exist as “eu” rather than “o *Outro*.” In a similar fashion then, Afro-Brazilian poetry, above other genres, permits a space for the existence of identity and the resistance of antagonisms by allowing the poet to express their experience. In the same vein, the scholar Álvaro Hattnher states in his article, “A poesia negra na literatura afro-brasileira: Exercícios de definição e algumas possibilidades de investigação”:

A linguagem torna-se um meio que, ao mesmo tempo, estabelece e transforma essa experiência. Dessa forma, podemos afirmar que a literatura negra é, invariavelmente, a experiência negra transcrita. Tal experiência representa a base comum para a expressão imaginativa dos escritores negros, desenvolvendo-se não só em tom de exaltação da especificidade identitária como forma de inclusão histórico-social, mas também por meio do diapasão da denúncia e da resistência ao racismo. (80)

While it is important to touch upon the themes that are available in poetry for the Afro-Brazilian poet, such as repetition, rhythm, a space of existence through resistance, it should be mentioned that poetry also allows a space in a physical sense for one to express their “lugar de

fala,” in addition to a literary space found in the poem itself. As the introduction has already established with Durham’s and Ribeiro’s argument about the *invisibilização* of black writing, especially black women’s writing, in Brazil, poetry provides Afro-Brazilian writers a way to tell an audience their experience; while other modes of literary expression, such as novels, would require access to an editor and a publisher, with poetry one only needs a creative mind and an audience. Poetry becomes a more accessible form of literary access in that it is financial cheaper (many poets in Brazil self-publish or donate on behalf of others publication costs), and is more democratic (there is more representation within this genre of black Brazilian voices; as Dalcastagnè pointed out, published literature is not always representative of the population). Hattnher comments more on this relationship:

Pelo fato de constituir a maior parte da produção literária afro-brasileira, a poesia negra tem sido também seu gênero mais estudado. No caso brasileiro, a grande concentração de expressões literárias dentro do gênero poético está diretamente associada às formas de produção e divulgação das obras, geralmente edições do autor, vendidas em bares, portas de teatro e outros espaços públicos (mas raramente em livrarias). (81)

In short, while Afro-Brazilian literature has been instrumental in forming a national identity and consciousness in a society that perpetuates the myth of racial democracy, it should not be considered a coincidence, as Hattnher has pointed out, that the poetry within this movement has been “the most studied” out of other genres, in that it is the most accessible. Here, however, it is also important to note what poetry offers *internally* to its’ creators. Bernd for instance argues in *Literatura e identidade* that “a poesia que se inspira na tomada de consciência da negritude (...) está duplamente vinculada à questão da identidade: ela se origina da

consciência de sua perda e se desenvolveu na busca de sua reconstrução” (16). In short, poetry by Afro-Brazilian writers emerges from its need and search for identity and provides the reconstruction of a lost existence. In a complementary fashion, Stefani Silva points out that poetry is an “important precursor” to black Brazilian identity:

Grandes cânones de nossa literatura que foram custosamente legitimados como negros, hoje são recolocados literariamente como percussores da construção da identidade negra em nosso país. Apesar de seguirem o padrão homogêneo exigido em suas épocas em busca de uma aceitação que todos eram obrigados a passar, fossem eles brancos ou não, de forma elíptica, porém exemplar, pode-se validar a colaboração destes escritores para as novas tendências poéticas, especialmente para a afro-brasileira. (22)

Up to this point, the chapter has justified poetry as fundamental in the Afro-Brazilian literary cannon in constructing identity. Before this work analyzes the work of Duarte, it is worth mentioning several interpretations of analyzing/interpreting poetry as a genre and black Brazilian women’s poetry specifically. To start, this chapter cites professor and literary analyst Massaud Moisés in his book, *A Análise Literária* (2007, 4th Edition). He proposes that in analyzing a poem, the reader can infer the reality, constructed by the poet, through the poem itself. To read a poem then, is to view the world of the poet.

A análise de um texto poético deve basear-se em sua essência, não em sua forma [...] Expliquemo-nos: se a característica específica da poesia reside antes na visão própria que oferece da realidade que no fato de ser expressa em versos, sua análise há de implicar, sobretudo e em última instância, essa concepção do mundo. (41)

While Moisés was not speaking explicitly about Afro-Brazilian poetry, this work has found that his theory of the poem reflects the poets “concepção do mundo,” as proposed by poetry critics within Afro-Brazilian poetry. For instance, his argument is complimentary to what Evaristo, proposed in her article, “Literatura Negra” in that for the black Brazilian poet, “a palavra poética é um modo de narração do mundo” (2). To be applied specifically to Afro-Brazilian poetry, Evaristo continues to argue that poetry allows those who have been colonized to be “resistant” against a history that previously erased their identity, history, and memory. She affirms:

Para determinados povos, principalmente aqueles que foram colonizados, a poesia torna-se um dos lugares de criação, de manutenção e de difusão de memória, de identidade. Torna-se um lugar de transgressão ao apresentar fatos e interpretações novas a uma história que antes só trazia a marca, o selo do colonizador. (2)

Within her own body of work as well as other black Brazilians’, Evaristo has proposed that black Brazilian’s writing is what she has coined as “escrevivência,” or a combination of the words “write” (escrever) and “experience” (vivência) in Portuguese. “Escrevivência,” Evaristo argues, explains the relationship between an Afro-Brazilian’s writer and their work; while this concept was originally applied to her novels, this may be applied to poetry as well, as similar themes of black experience can be found in multiple genres. In an interview with *Nexo*, Evaristo articulated:

[A escrevivência] seria escrever a escrita dessa vivência de mulher negra na sociedade brasileira. Eu acho muito difícil a subjetividade de qualquer escritor ou escritora não contaminar a sua escrita. De certa forma, todos fazem uma

escrevivência, a partir da escolha temática, do vocabulário que se usa, do enredo a partir de suas vivências e opções. A minha escrevivência e a escrevivência de autoria de mulheres negras se dá contaminada pela nossa condição de mulher negra na sociedade brasileira. (Lima “Conceição Evaristo”)

As Munanga pointed out, to claim an Afro-Brazilian identity is to claim one of resistance, to claim something that history has tried to hide (“Negritude afro-brasileira” 112). While this work has established how poetry allows a creation of identity, or existence, here the work cites the literary critic Alfredo Bosi in how poetry allows resistance. Bosi argues that poetry, above all else, allows someone to not only be critical of society, but also to transform the poet as “resistant” against the dominant discourse, given that the language is contrasting to the “dominant” discourse. He states:

A forma mais evidente é a poesia de crítica social, de ataque, de sátira. Mas não é a única. Às vezes o poeta entra muito dentro de si mesmo e sua forte carga subjetiva involuntariamente se opõe àquilo que é a prosa do mundo, a prosa ideológica. Não que ele faça uma proposta formal de ataque à sociedade, mas a sua linguagem é tão estranha e tão diferenciada em relação àquilo que é a linguagem ideologizada, ou a do senso comum, que ela se transforma em resistência. (Hebmüller, Paulo, and Daniel Garcia 9)

In summary, an “existence” (understood as an identity, collective or individual), is possible for black writers through resistance of discourse within poetry. This section will now analyze how Duarte, a contemporary poet, continues the fight to “exist” through “resisting” in *Negra Nua Crua*.

Mel Duarte

Mel Duarte was introduced to poetry at the age of 8 and creating it ever since (“Sobre a poeta”). At the age of 18, she participated in a *sarau* on the outskirts, where she discovered that poetry could function as “uma válvula de escape...como se tivesse aberto um universo paralelo” for her (“Não Desiste Negra!”). Later, she was part of a traveling poetry group called, “Poetas Ambulantes,” who had the objective of sharing poetry in public spaces. Reflecting on her start with poetry, Duarte states in a “Live Talks” video that one day, after studying poets in school, she came to the conclusion that perhaps if she wanted to be recognized as a poet, she would have to already be dead, concluding that poetry was a “dead people thing.” She asked herself, “será que existem pessoas que hoje escrevem? Será que existem mulheres que escrevem? Será que existem mulheres negras?” (“LiveTalks”). It was through this question that Duarte began to challenge the intersection of racism and sexism that black Brazilian women face and would help her notice the lack of participation of women, especially black women, in these poetic manifestations that were aimed to help those who need representation in the first place. For instance, when Duarte began competing in slams, she noticed that even though poetry was considered a “woman’s thing” (“LiveTalks”), there were few women participating in the actual slam battles. This observation led her and several other women to found *Slam da Minas- SP* in 2016, a slam event that is exclusively for women poets, which will be discussed more in the next chapter.

At the age of 24, Duarte independently published her first book *Fragmentos Dispersos* (2013) which is available to be read for free online in order to give people more access.¹⁰ Although this is not the primary book of analysis, it is worth making important comments about

¹⁰ Available at www.issuu.com/melduarte poesia/docs/fragmentos_dispersos

Duarte's work in general in order to establish connections with her second book, *Negra Nua Crua*. The book itself is composed of drawings by various artists, and on the cover, Duarte claims that the content of the book, "é um pequeno registro de palavras, nada mais do que meus pedaços, fragmentos dispersos" (3); here the reader can already see that her identity is complex and fragmented, which is expected for an Afro-Brazilian female identity in a racist and sexist society with the additional complication of racial democracy. The book itself is composed of 11 poems altogether, with the shortest poems being "Da aproximação" (9) and "Sobre o sofrer" (13), composed of just three lines, and the longest poem being the last one, "Benigno Signo" (16-17), the final two pages of the book. Each poem is complimented with a drawing by a different artist, as well as the artist's contact information; while the work itself is in Mel Duarte's name, the reader can see that she gives visibility to artists who might otherwise not have it; in this way, the book of poetry itself becomes a place to have a "lugar de fala" and a place to exist is made possible by resisting being made invisible.

Many of the poems deal with an unknown love interest, such as "Da aproximação" and "Desconcerto" (8). The final poem "Benigno Signo," while mentioning this same mysterious person, is unique in that Duarte appears to establish her existence as a black woman, while at the same time expressing disenchantment with love. With this poem, the reader is prefaced with artwork by Rafael Siqueira, composed of a standing naked black woman, face in horror and back arched as if she was in pain, and her heart appearing to leave her chest. The veins of her heart go into the eyes, ears, and mouth of a man, who appears to be taking from her, but offering nothing in return. The two figures seem to be in a marginalized space, with the shadows of a telephone wire and two birds appearing in the background. Although this poem, like others in the book, is treating a more romantic theme, this picture is an example of the argument in this work that Mel

Duarte, as a black Brazilian poet, will have certain experiences that are reflected in her poems, due to her experience as a black woman, reflected in her “lugar de fala,” and her “concepção do mundo.” With her unknown love interest, she reaffirms the existence of an Afro-Brazilian identity, even in contemporary times, adding to her narrative of her romantic relationship. She states:

Tua mãe, posso sentir é África,
Teus sons me elevam, de forma Rítmica
Assumo, a troca é energética.
De fato eu e você - Encontro cármico. (17)

Negra Nua Crua

Much like her first book *Negra Nua Crua* was published independently in the year 2017 by the editor Ijumaa. Duarte notes the significance of Ijumaa in the “Live Talks” video, stating that they only publish work by black writers, both men and women. The book itself is composed of 36 poems, each divided into three sections based on the three words of the title. Many of these poems were original works in *poesia falada* performances, including “Verdade seja dita,” “Menina Melanina,” and “Negra Nua Crua,” (Balbino 323), which were then published in the book to give fans more access. The themes that link these poems together include resisting racism, violence against women, and taking pride in a black female identity. As a newer contemporary work that has arrived “out of the margins,” so to speak, it is of course understandable that little, if anything, has been written about this book in the academic sense. At the time of writing, two “credible” (that is, academic) sources were located mentioning Duarte herself ¹¹, while only one literary review treated the book *Negra Nua Crua*. The latter is a review from the website “Literafro portal,” part of the Faculty of literature at the Universidade Federal

¹¹ See Jéssica Balbino’s unpublished thesis, “Pelos Margens: Vozes Femininas Na Literatura Periférica” (2016), which includes an interview with Mel Duarte.

de Minas Gerais that concentrates on Afro-Brazilian literature, theory and critique. In the literary review “Preta Nua Crua: A voz que ecoa nas poesias de Mel Duarte,” the scholar Lorena Barbosa suggests that *Negra Nua Crua* portrays “de forma arrebatadora, as vivências, inquietações, dores e experiências da mulher negra contemporânea sob a sua própria ótica.” Barbosa defends that Duarte, through her book, “generaliza a condição do sujeito feminino negro e expõe em versos o que cerca esse ser por vezes estereotipado ao longo da literatura brasileira, mas que vem ganhando voz – e representatividade nas escritas atuais.”

The three sections of this book can be divided based on theme. In the section entitled “Negra”, the reader sees poems such as “Negra Nua Crua”, “Menina Melanina”, “Não Desiste!” and “É treta preta”, to name a few. The theme that connects these works is Duarte’s address to black women, and her active construction in an identity through resistance. This is apparent in these sections of the poem “Ampulheta” (16-17), where Duarte continues to resist the dominant discourse imposed upon her and other black women and call for others to reclaim their existence (history, memory, culture) through resistance to discourse:

O tempo passa, o tempo passa
E nunca nos ensinam a gostar da nossa raça
O tempo passa, o tempo passa
Eles dizem que o racismo já acabou e você abraça?
[. . .]
O tempo passa, o tempo passa
E nunca nos ensinam a gostar da nossa raça
O tempo passa, o tempo passa
Cansei desse silêncio, resolvi tirar a mordaça
[. . .]
O tempo passa, o tempo passa
Enquanto a sociedade impõe as suas castas
O tempo passa, o tempo passa
Conheça a sua história, tenha orgulho da sua raça.

Here, the reader sees as time as “passed,” black identity is still a concept that needs to be accepted deliberately, as the dominant discourse, Duarte points out, “never teaches” black

Brazilians to “like their race”. “Eles” here is referring to members of society that participate and contribute to the dominant discourse that erases black identity through dismissive remarks such as “racism has ended.” But Duarte does not just hold white Brazilians accountable; the reader sees that she is referring to “você”, meaning a fellow black Brazilian (supported by the earlier mention of the word “nossa”, meaning “ours”). Duarte brings in the element of embodiment to represent the “silencing” or “invisibilization” of black Brazilians; she has become tired both mentally and physically of the silence, and through her body, she is able to break the physical and metaphorical silence with the line, “I decided to take off the gag.” It is through embodiment that Duarte calls upon the audience to “know” their history and take pride in their race, and it is through resisting a silencing discourse that Duarte can claim her renewed existence as a black woman. Barbosa also comments on Duarte’s use of the body within her poetry:

Na primeira, “Negra,” a autora perpassa pelas questões raciais, sociais e de gênero que cercam a mulher negra do século XXI. Falando de preconceito, solidão e maternidade, Mel Duarte reafirma a negritude numa voz que ecoa e traz para os seus poemas uma visão diferenciada sobre o sujeito de quem se fala. Este, por sua vez, será uma pessoa que enfrenta dramas cotidianos, ama o seu cabelo, as suas raízes negras e a sua luta. (“Preta Nua Crua”)

The reader can also see how Duarte uses the black body as resistance in several stanzas of her poem “Menina Melanina” (11). She states:

Preta:
Mulher bonita é que vai à luta!
Quem tem opinião própria e não se assusta
Quando a milésima pessoa aponta para o seu cabelo e ri dizendo que
“Ele está em pé”
E a ignorância dessa coitada não a permite ver...
Em pé, armado,

[...]
Pra mim é imponência
Porque cabelo de negro não é só resistente
É resistência.

Here, the reader sees that Duarte is engaging with a black female audience and giving validation to their struggle, using the word “Preta.” The reader also sees the important element of embodiment within poetry. David William Foster states the use of the body within poetry can signify the following: “ideological issues associated with classifying bodies in terms of sex, race, or other metonymic features,” “the uses of the body, whether instrumentally (e.g., as the site of political statement, as in public protest, or as the site of political repression...)” and “the politicization of the body as a metonym for social issues...” (320). With the stanza above, for instance, the reader can observe that Duarte uses her body as a political statement with the mention of the word hair as “resistant” and “resistance.” Her hair exists because it resists Eurocentric beauty standards and makes a political statement “para quem, de forma histórica, teve a sua estética desvalorizada pelos padrões sociais” (Barbosa). The black body as resistant is further exemplified in several stanzas of “Negra Nua Crua” (10):

Eu não preciso tirar a roupa pra mostrar que sou atraente
Minha postura e ideia é que fazem atrair tanta gente.
Da minha boca disparam palavras
Verdades, viveres
E através dela trago coisas que fazem fluir a mente...
[. . .]
A carta de alforria há tempos foi assinada
Mas ainda vejo o negro como obra de mão barata,
A mulher negra sendo chamada de mulata
E minha fé todo tempo sendo testada.
Eu exijo respeito, novo velho senhor de engenho
Ser considerada “a carne mais barata do mercado”
EU NÃO ACEITO!
Trago calos em minhas mãos sim, pelo trabalho que
desempenho
E enquanto a caneta for minha enxada não me faltará
alimento.

Minhas curvas mais bonitas
Desfilam através de devaneios
E minha fala hoje é bruta pra fincar dentro do peito.
Sou poeta e das rimas faço meu sustento.
Me apresento:
- Mel
Negra, nua, crua de sentimento.

In the first stanza, the reader sees the first example of resistance: a charged discourse against sexism. Rather than allow her body, her sense of self, to be subjugated and consumed as a sexual object, Duarte's declarations have two functions: First, she is combating "a estética desvalorizada pelos padrões sociais" (Barbosa); in other words, the patriarchal institution that deems her as only worthy as much as her body can offer. Second, this chapter argues, the reader observes a reclamation of a sense of self, or "existing through resisting." Through reclaiming her body as her own and having her own sense of self-worth defined in not what others find attractive about herself but what Duarte herself claims is (her "postura," or her "attitude," the way she carries herself), Duarte is, therefore, resisting stereotypes and expectations through her existence in herself. She gives credibility to her own voice, defining it as "truth," citing her experience, and therefore existence, as contradictory, or "resistant" to the canon that is imposed on black women. In the claim of her voice as "truth," she is also engaging the reader (or as will be noted in the following chapter, the listener), to challenge the discourse about black women. If Duarte's voice is "truth," then how must one interpret the other constructions of black women? This section serves the function, as outlined by Ribeiro in *O que é lugar de fala?*, the, "decolonization of the mind" through validating the voices of marginalized black women (14-15).

Within the third stanza of "Negra Nua Crua," the reader can see Duarte's impatience; she is citing a history that keeps repeating itself, and further evidence of Brazil being far from a so-called "racial democracy" or, at the very least, free of prejudice against black people. She cites

the black body as still receiving consequences of hard labor, and the black female identity as being denied its “negritude”¹² through the identity of mulatta; as the introduction has noted, racial democracy had a clear preference for “mixed” identity rather than one composed of mostly, if not entirely, of African heritage, therefore denying a black existence, as well as others in reclaiming it. This argument is supported by Barbara Santana, in her article, “Quem é mulher negra no Brasil? Colorismo e o mito da democracia racial,” who says, “O mito da democracia racial branqueava negras e negros miscigenados. É importante, ao falarmos sobre colorismo, não cometermos o mesmo erro.” In this same article, she cites the well-known Brazilian politician and intellectual Lélia Gonzalez, who comments more on the struggle for black women to claim *negritude*. Santana cites: “a gente nasce preta, mulata, parda, marrom, roxinha etc. Mas tornar-se mulher negra é uma conquista.” It is here that this work again relies on the argument of existence through resistance; through fighting for a black identity, Duarte is resisting the constrictive “blanket statement” label of “mulatta” and advocating for the validation of the black woman existence.

This sentiment of historical resentment is continued into the next stanza; the reader sees here that even in the 21st century, the black body is still considered “the cheapest meat on the market.” While slavery has been abolished and Brazilian society has entered a new century, the reader sees that the role has not, in fact, changed that much. Through her declaration, “EU NÃO ACEITO!” she is using her own voice, her constructed “lugar de fala,” in other words, her own existence, to resist in this space. To compliment the argument of poetry offering a “constructed” space for voice and identity construction, this work wants to focus especially on the lines, “Trago

¹² Negritude is defined here, according to Munanga, as the affirmation of black culture, morals, physical characteristics and intellectualism, and the belief that they are the subject of a history that was negated and in need of recuperation (1990 p. 111). It is a proud affirmation of “blackness” or “black identity,” in whatever context is appropriate.

calos em minhas mãos sim, / pelo trabalho que desempenho / E enquanto a caneta for minha enxada não me faltará alimento.” With these statements, we see that her body possesses callouses, but ones that she has inflected upon herself, not from a forced labor. Duarte is now embodying the “construction” that occurs through poetry, describing her pen as her metaphorical hoe. The poem then, sustains her, both in a physical sense (as referenced to by the verb “alimento”) but also in a sense of self; Duarte can continue to resist through existing, given that she has access to poetry. This is reinforced in the last stanza when Duarte declares, “Sou poeta e das rimas faço meu sustento.” Poetry, therefore, is a means of existing.

In the final stanza, the reader sees resemblance in the first stanza in that it is combative of stereotypes of the black female body, as well as what could be considered the final stage of identity construction in this poem; she delivers her final blow, declaring her truth is like a weapon that can pierce in other’s chests. The reader can note more examples of “embodied” experiences, of Duarte being conscious of her hips being a part of someone’s fantasy.¹³ With the final stage of identity construction, we see Duarte “presenting” herself to the audience, using the words “Negra, Nua, Crua.” In existing through these three adjectives, Duarte is resisting multiple hegemonies of racism, sexism, and racial democracy, through validating her existence through poetry.

“Nua” is marked by eroticism and discovery of the female body; here Duarte “trata-se de desejos, sensações e prazeres, mas sempre tendo como foco principal a personagem negra que se intercala entre ficção e realidade” (Barbosa). The reader can see a Duarte’s sexuality imposed in a way that is unapologetic and confident. In “Lua Cheia”, for example, the black female body is

¹³ In the following chapter, this work will explore how Duarte uses her physical body in her performance to emphasize this stanza as well as others in the poem.

portrayed as the subject of the poem, rather than through the eye of the beholder, or treated as the *Other*: “[...] de tanto desejo, essa carne negra / não nega aconchego, não impõe regras / e quando me reconheço em suas letras / perco as palavras / mais uma noite de lua cheia, o consolo que sobra a sua falta” (Duarte 31). But this is not to suggest that Duarte is accepting of sexual stereotypes or being treated as the sexualized “other.” Rather, this is an example of her claiming her sexual existence through resisting a narration of sexual taboo imposed upon women, above all, on black women, as sexually immoral and corrupt. To contextualize the stereotypes that black women must confront in their bodies (that are reflected in Duarte’s poetry), Cristian Sales states:

São configurações construídas por escritores não negros, em sua maioria, expressam situações em que a malícia, a imoralidade, a permissividade são apresentadas como características inerentes ao comportamento moral da mulher negra, aparecendo no imaginário brasileiro como um corpo à disposição, pronto para consumo pela dominação masculina: um corpo possuidor de uma sexualidade voraz e pervertida, tratado como um corpo-produto e corpo-objeto. (Sales 22-36).

In “Feiticeiro” (36), Duarte describes a sexual encounter between her and another black male. Here, Duarte is resisting the discourse that treats her only as a sexual object without identity, and she takes pride in her experience. She feels secure between the arms and legs of her lover, as she is comfortable with herself in a physical sense. Here, she constructs a space where she can exist within her sexual identity that was not imposed upon her.

Manhã apontou, o sol sorriu na janela
Me senti segura entre teus braços e pernas

Esses olhos cor de mata e essa pele canela
Me trazem lembrança, inspiram criar novos temas
Num instante calo. Cravo unha e confissão.
Espasmos! Ganho tanto perco a visão.
Liberto, teu sexo me cabe, complementa
Imersa, minhas mãos em teus cachos enquanto a
cintura você ajeita
Encaixo, dessa vez foi mais fácil, seu falo me alimenta
É raro, pegada preta forte que sustenta.

In the final section, “Crua,” the themes are much more combative, against “preconceitos e conservadorismos sociais” in Brazil (Barbosa). In the first poem of the section, “Verdade seja dita” (54-55), Duarte utilizes “emancipation discourse” (Barbosa) in order to liberate the female figure and defend it. This is apparent within the lines: “[...] Seu discurso machista machuca / e a cada palavra falha / corta minhas iguais como navalha /NINGUÉM MERECE SER ESTUPRADA!” (Duarte 55). Within other works of this section, Duarte establishes herself with the same black women who helped build Brazil as a colonist nation, who were raped in order to build the population, and continue to “exist” in her reclaimed identity in a sexist, racist society. She can exist as a black woman as she has fought for it through resistance within the narrative of Brazil, the same that has silenced her as a marginalized woman. Duarte continues:

Filhos dessa pátria,
Mãe gentil?
Enquanto ainda existirem Bolsonaros
Eu continuo afirmando:
Sou filha da luta, da puta
A mesma que aduba esse solo fértil
A mesma que te pariu!

In this stanza of “Verdade seja dita” (55), Duarte rejects the idea that she is a passive woman who “gives birth” to the nation in a passive mother role, refusing the label as “mãe gentil.” If she must be labelled as a mother, then, she demands respect as a woman in a world where “Bolsonaros” continue to exist.

The reader can conclude up to this point then, that if poetry is instrumental in forming identity, or an “existence” for Afro-Brazilians, the case is much more so for women. We see in the poems of Duarte that the struggle has continued until the 21st century and will likely continue to do so. But, as this work has established, poetry has offered itself as a temporary solution. As Bolsi states “a concepção de poesia apenas como expressão da subjetividade, sem dúvida uma visão básica que está na maioria dos autores de estética, poderia ser pensada também como uma forma de resistência à ideologia dominante” (Hebmüller, Paulo, and Daniel Garcia 8). In this next chapter, the work will address how poetry that is live continues to add elements of embodied existence through physical resistance.

CHAPTER TWO

Existence Through Resistance as Seen in *Poesia Falada*

With the first chapter, this work analyzed how elements of resisting through establishing identity, or “existing,” are seen in selected written poems of Duarte’s book, *Negra Nua Crua*. This chapter will analyze the same themes of existence through resistance within the poet’s spoken poetry, reflecting on her experience within the space of *saraus* and poetry slams. In order to better contextualize the significance of these spaces, a brief introduction of the similarities and differences between *saraus* and slams will be introduced. Following this, the chapter will utilize theory that will comment on how these spaces, in their very nature, foster evidence of resistance and allow what Ribeiro notes is a “lugar de fala”. Next, the work will comment on how Duarte has interacted within these spaces, and with her own words, will comment how poetry in a spoken form has affected her life both professionally and personally. Finally, like the previous chapter, this work will apply an analysis of several of her spoken word poetry, including those that appear in her book, such as “Negra Nua Crua” and “Não Desiste!” and comment on additional elements of resistance that spoken poetry offers.

Duarte, whether in interviews or in talks, states that her first encounter with poetry occurred in her childhood at the impressionable age of 8. In a similar fashion, at 18 years old Duarte had her first experience within the realm of *saraus*. Her passion for the literary *saraus* naturally grew and becoming more comfortable with her work and presenting in front of an

audience, she would enter the realm of poetry slams. Her drive and creativity would aid her in winning the *sarau* at the International Literary Festival of Paraty (or FLIP) in 2016. In this same year, Duarte would also participate in the Literary Festival of the Peripheries, (or FLUPP) in Rio de Janeiro¹⁴. Given that both *saraus* and slams have impacted the life and career of Duarte, this work will comment on several similarities and differences between the two, a question that Duarte herself has addressed in several of her interviews.

Saraus and Slams: Spaces of Resistance

Although both literary spaces have great potential in giving exposition to marginalized poets, it is important to comment on some of the primary differences between *saraus* and slams, which on the surface can seem mutually exclusive. *Saraus* can be defined as, in the words of Fransuelen Geremias Silva et. al, reunions of people that have some sort of bond with art and culture in an informal fashion (“*Saraus contemporâneos*” 150). The words “informal fashion” are key here and give the audience a hint of a stark contrast between *saraus* and poetry slams. Slams, on the other hand, can be defined as a “battle of words” or *batalha das letras*, according to the article, “Slam” é voz de identidade e resistência dos poetas contemporâneos.” Another primary difference between the two literary spaces is the content that is presented; in slams, poetry is exclusively presented, while *saraus* lend themselves to be more flexible. In *saraus*, it is common to see various forms of art, such as recitations of poetry, art, music, or even a presentation of ideas. To help distinguish between the many formats of *saraus*, some will use the title, “*sarau literário*” to establish a *sarau* composed of literary works. A final difference can be found in their respective “ages”; according to Lucía Tennina, reunions of friends within an artistic context,

¹⁴ She was the first woman to win this competition. For more information see Juca Guimarães (2016).

what could be considered the first *saraus* existed in Europe and America since the 19th century, while most of the most well-known *saraus* began to appear in Brazil in the beginning of the 20th century (11). On the other hand, slams are relatively “newer” in comparison, both in a Brazilian and American context; poetry slams claim heritage to the city of Chicago in the 1980’s, as an extension of hip-hop culture that emerged during that time. It would take another 20 years before slams would make their way into Brazil (Lima “O Que São Slams”).

As noted earlier, *saraus* are relatively a much more comfortable, collaborative environment, while slams are considerably more competitive. With this element of competitiveness, slams are organized with rules for the participants. In an interview with the online Brazilian journal *Nexo*, Jéssica Balbino, writer and researcher in the field of marginal literature and hip hop, as well as the secretary for Duarte, noted:

Os *slams* são campeonatos de poesia. Normalmente, os participantes têm até três minutos para apresentarem sua performance - uma poesia de autoria própria, sem adereços ou acompanhamento musical. O texto pode ser escrito previamente, mas também pode haver improvisação. Não há regras sobre o formato da poesia.

(Lima)

Balbino also notes that the slams have a jury who is chosen at the time of the slam, and this jury gives a score based on a scale of 1-10, the highest number being the winner. In an interview with *Programa Nação TVE RS* (Mel Duarte “Entrevista Mel Duarte”), Duarte has noted that another primary difference between the *saraus* and slams is in the themes present in poetry for *saraus* would not necessarily “win” in a slam; although she asserts that slam is a “braço” of *saraus*, she comments that, “você sabe que são certos tipos de textos que... as pessoas vão acabar assimilando mais fácil.” She cites, for example, that slams often confront stronger themes,

approaching topics such as violence, racism, sexism and other antagonisms. She claims she does not know why, for instance, that a person cannot bring a work that is more “romantic,” or “mais leve,” but she is hopeful that maybe in the future this will change (Mel Duarte “Entrevista Mel Duarte”).

A shared characteristic of *saraus* and slams is found in their social influence and their function in society; both have been created as spaces of expression, of confrontation of social issues, and as this work would argue, for existence through resistance. Silva, for instance, argues that the importance of *saraus* lies in their ability to allow participants to reflect, to share ideas, and to organize a social space in order to construct a “critical” view of the world around them (151). Balbino also argues that the *saraus* are common in the *periférias*, in bars and common areas such as libraries, community centers or squares, and bring together not the high of society but the poorest and “reúnem não a alta da sociedade, mas a população mais pobre e carente” (31). Dr. Carlos Cortez Minchillo, professor of Brazilian Literature at Dartmouth College, notes that *saraus* and slams, in fact, are much more similar than they are different. He notes:

Saraus e *slams* coincidem naquilo que têm de mais básico: ambos reúnem apresentadores e espectadores num evento de portas abertas (muitas vezes, literalmente, a céu aberto), com a finalidade primeira de elocução e apreciação ao vivo do texto literário, em especial a poesia. Ainda que os estilos e qualidade das *performances* variem muito, esses eventos põem em relevo o que está sendo dito e o modo como está sendo circunstancialmente apresentado: mais que um fenômeno de oralidade, em que se ressaltam qualidades propriamente acústicas e rítmicas, trata-se de um acontecimento em que a fala e a escuta estão permeadas pela gestualidade, linguagem facial, indumentária, peculiaridades do ambiente em

que ocorrem e pela conexão emocional estabelecida entre artista e público ao longo da *performance* (Zumthor, 1997). (137)

In her article titled, ““Slam” é voz de identidade e resistência,” editor of the University of São Paulo’s journal Margareth Artur argues that slams allow a space in which poets, especially in the *periférias*, can critically approach themes such as racism, violence, drugs, among others, “despertando a plateia para a reflexão, tomada de consciência e atitude política em relação a esses temas.” Cynthia Agra de Brito Neves in her article, “Slams -Letramentos Literários De Reexistência Ao/No Mundo Contemporâneo” proposes that slam poetry should be considered within a broader literary context, as this offers opportunities to participants to engage in literature that were not there before. Rather than criticize slams for not following a traditional literary mold, Neves proposes that slammers do not fail to “valorizar a cultura letrada escolar, mas principalmente a reinventam, a reformulam, a redizem, imprimindo nela sua identidade social e cultural.” She continues to draw a connection between poetry, resistance and existence, concluding “...é preciso resistir para existir. *Poesia é reexistência*”¹⁵ (110).

Reflecting on existence through resistance, *saraus* and slams offer participants a way to enter the world of literature, breaking the “narrative” that denied them space before. While visibility and representation are of course important, such as Ribeiro’s comments on “lugar de fala” in previous chapters, these spaces also allow a symbiotic relationship of existence through resistance by allowing participants to self-sustain themselves, providing possible sources of income in a way that is not exploitative and permits personal forms of identity expression. Balbino comments that while these spaces are modest, they still create a form of a niche market,

¹⁵ A word originally proposed by Ana Lúcia Silva Souza in her book *Letramentos de reexistência: poesia, grafite, música, dança: hip-hop* (2011). It is a combination of the words, “re” and “existence”

or through anthology projects, participants in *saraus* find a way to have a “lugar de fala.” She notes:

Nota-se que a consolidação dos saraus é marcada também pelo lançamento de antologias. É importante destacar que as obras são produtos de autopublicação, custeadas com recursos próprios ou beneficiadas por meio de editais municipais, estaduais ou por meio de parcerias com a iniciativa privada, contudo, em sua maioria, são tiragens modestas – mas que criaram, ao longo dos anos, um mercado editorial paralelo e um vetor de carreira - e com distribuição feita diretamente pelos autores (as), de mão em mão, de sarau em sarau, com pouco ou nenhum destaque na mídia especializada ou em grandes livrarias. (55)

Minchillo makes a similar comment on the importance of these spaces as a place for exposure and publication. He notes that while the publication of a book for a poet is considered an “ultimate triumph,” that there is no “desconexão ou antagonismo entre a poesia ao vivo e o registro impresso” (140). This apparently harmonious relationship that respects the works of these poets both in written and oral format allows this space for collaborations. Minchillo cites the organizer Alessandro Buzo of the book, *Poetas do sarau Suburbano* (2015), who argues that the *sarau* Suburbano Convicto is perhaps the best example of this relationship; Buzo notes that “o Sarau Suburbano acaba se a livraria fechar,” and that their greatest pride is in fact when the poets and writers visit the bookstore (who hosts this *sarau*) and sees their own book on the shelf (Buzo 10- 11).

Minchillo also comments on this relationship between the written and spoken word. He states that this relationship exists due to other avenues of exposure available on the internet, such

as blogs, *Youtube*¹⁶, e-books, and other forms of social media. He also comments that this allows the poets to form a sort of community, only increasing this sense of existing through the act of resisting as a collective unity. Munchillo states:

A conexão dos saraus e *slams* com a escrita também se verifica nos meios eletrônicos. Assim como os rolezinhos e as recentes manifestações sociais de rua, os eventos literários parecem ganhar impulso, em grande medida, por meio das mídias sociais. *Blogs* e páginas no Facebook conferem-lhes visibilidade e como que uma sobrevida, reforçando os laços comunitários entre os frequentadores (que se tornam “amigos” no Facebook, por exemplo) e disponibilizando muitas vezes vídeos, de modo a formar, mesmo que de maneira incompleta, dispersa e aleatória, um arquivo de *performances* que, de outra maneira, facilmente se perderiam. (140-141)

Embodiment in *Poesia Falada*

In summary, although the content, the time of creation, and the nature of the *saraus* and the *slams* are different, their function of approaching and discussing social problems and offering a space to express and create identity by breaking the social narrative is clear. As Balbino states in her thesis, “é a partir daí [os saraus e os *slams*] que o cidadão periférico reforça seu papel de protagonista e deixa de ser apenas espectador da própria história. Deixa de ser ouvinte e passa a ser narrador. Deixa de ser personagem e passa a ser o escritor... Este lugar de fala torna-se necessário...” (50-51).

¹⁶ After all, it was through *Youtube* that the author, an American graduate student from Athens, Georgia, learned about Mel Duarte, a poet from São Paulo, Brazil.

As this chapter has now established what connects and characterizes *saraus* and slams, this section will now address how spoken poetry differentiates itself from the written form and allows another level of “existence through resistance” that is not necessarily available in the latter. As the introduction and first chapter of this thesis has already addressed, literature, but especially poetry, is fundamental and a useful tool for not only creating identity and resistance, but this is especially the case for black Brazilian women who have been globally and historically denied a “lugar de fala.” As this work has also established, the reader can discover the identity of the writer so long as they address certain themes of identity, such as addressing a “collective experience” (Bernd *Literatura e identidade nacional*, 16) or consider factors such as the language, audience and content (Assis Duarte “Literatura afro-brasileira: um conceito em construção,” 11). But without this intentional literary devices or vocabulary, the identity of the writer, such as their racial identity and/or gender identity, could be unknown from the reader.

With performed poetry, the identity of the poet is not as anonymous. Lilian Lemos Menegaro in her article “Corpos poéticos, corpos políticos: a poesia performatizada nos *slams*,” notes that a great portion of the slammers “são negros e mulheres, que em sua maioria declaram ser moradores de bairros periféricos” (1). With spoken poetry, the identity of the poet is more apparent, as well as the “voice,” intention, and interpretation of the poem itself thanks to the element of embodiment. Susan B. A. Sommers- Willet has commented in her book, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2010) that,

Inhabiting the space where the “I” of the page translates quite seamlessly to the “I” of the stage, the author comes to embody declarations about personal experience in performance. This is true even in the case of persona poetry and

poetry written in the second or third person, for the act of live performance still hinges on the author's body and its visible markers. The author's physical presence ensures that certain aspects of his or her identity are rendered visible as they are performed in and through the body, particularly race and gender but extending to class, sexuality, and even regionality. (69-70)

While written poetry allows existence through resistance in the physical space of a published work, thanks to a relationship between the work and the reader, the spoken poem allows existence in two different planes; through the established "existence" of the identity in the poem, and the physical existence of the poet performing.

Something that is worth noting here, however, is that *saraus* and slams, while having intentions of creating resistance for the marginalized, are not without their own faults. As this work has discussed in the introduction, even within the realm of "marginalized" literature, one can still find levels of (if not unintentional) levels of further marginalization within these literary realms. While in published poetry, it can be difficult to find works by a single Afro-Brazilian contemporary poet, there is also the result of a relatively lower lack of representation by women in "poesia falada" spaces. Duarte herself, who is one of the founders of Slam das Minas in São Paulo, noted that the start of their project began with an observation of few women participating in *saraus* and slams. Duarte notes an important irony, "a galera fala que a poesia é coisa de mulher, mas quando cê [sic] vai pro *sarau*, em qualquer outro lugar, sempre tem mais homem falando" (Mel Duarte).

***Poesia Falada* as Resistance for Black Women Poets**

In a society where black women are often asked, if not expected, to erase or diminish their black identity, whether it is through the adoption of “white-sounding” names, altering their natural hair or using bleach to try to lighten their skin, these spaces for poetry allow these women poets to perform as they are, in an understanding, empathetic, and diverse space. A poem that address the black identity through their hair can be more impactful when the poet, with their natural hair, is present, embodying the poem itself. Menenargo comments more on the corporality of spoken poetry and says:

O corpo é o meio através do qual a performance se materializa, ele é, portanto, parte do poema. Para os competidores das batalhas de poesia falada, o ser *slammer* vai além do ser poeta justamente porque a performance exige a presença corpórea do autor para que o poema se efetive. O corpo é poético porque faz parte da composição do poema, configurando uma estética própria dessa produção literária que acontece na retomada do espaço público. É também político porque poetas/*slammers* mulheres, brancas e negras, e homens negros, majoritariamente moradores de periferia, assumem um protagonismo outrora negado a eles, que constituem grupos historicamente oprimidos e subjugados.

As ações de opressão ocorrem basicamente a partir do controle e da submissão dos corpos, pois estes são o meio através do qual os sujeitos se colocam no mundo. Nos *slams*, pessoas marginalizadas socialmente, por diferentes fatores e marcas que constituem sua subjetividade, passaram a conceber a produção cultural como meio de subversão e deslocamentos que possibilitam enfrentar as diferentes formas de disciplinarização violenta sobre seus corpos. Participar das batalhas tornou-se uma forma de romper o silêncio usando o corpo

como meio de expressão e renúncia às imposições que visam o controle e a domesticação, principalmente no caso das mulheres. A poesia está na performance, que só acontece com o uso do corpo e da voz, ou seja, esses sujeitos potencializam o seu dizer através de uma ação poética comprometida em reivindicar uma revisão da história, saindo dos espaços periféricos e tomando o centro. (2)

In the same way that African slaves in Brazil resisted their slave masters using capoeira, the martial art disguised as a dance, poets from the peripheries, such as Menenargo comments, use their bodies as reclamation against institutional violence and discrimination. The site of the racial violence transforms into the site of reclamation, of healing, of protest. Menenargo also comments on how this is particularly evident with black slammers:

Quando um *slammer* negro enuncia seu poema em uma batalha e este apresenta como tema o racismo, seu corpo passa a fazer parte da elaboração desse poema/performance, estará implicado na construção do texto e agindo na produção de sentido. O corpo do autor se coloca não só como suporte para a projeção do texto, mas como elemento que faz parte da construção desse texto e do processo de significação. A estrutura corporal apresenta-se, portanto, como elemento semiótico, considerando de forma imprescindível à voz e à palavra que emanam dela. (3)

To compliment with the theory presented by Menenargo, this chapter turns to how using the body as performance has also been fundamental for women in poetry. Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, renowned Brazilian feminist theorist, comments in her book *Explosão Feminista: arte, cultura, política e universidade* (2018) more on this relationship between feminism and

performance. In the section written by Duda Kuhnert titled, “Nas Artes: performers são, antes de tudo, complicadores culturais,” Kuhnert comments that performance allows the body to be used as a principal platform of expression, or “como uma alternative à ordem simbólica do discurso, identificada como impermeável para a autorrepresentação feminina” (75). She comments that the female body, similar in how Menenargo comments as the source of racial violence, is also the source of sexual violence and sexual objectification for many women as well. In using the body as part of a performance, theoretically, the female poet can “exibe agressivamente os muitos sentidos que ganhou enquanto principal objeto de submissão e abuso masculinos” (76).

Embodiment as Seen by Mel Duarte

With this theory of Menegaro in mind, this chapter will now analyze moments of corporality in some of the performed works by Duarte. In the *Youtube* video “Não desiste, negra, não desiste! | Mel Duarte | TEDxSaoPauloSalon,” Duarte stands in front of an audience at an independently organized *TED* talk in São Paulo. After reflecting on her life and experiences that have been intertwined with poetry, she tells a story of how she had participated in a feminist event called “Diversas” and had met with other black women and their children on a beaten dirt floor. She tells the moment that her poem was born, when these women with “marvelous stories” had confessed how many times they had thought of giving up. She left with the feeling of “needing to hear their stories,” and wrote the poem, “Não Desiste.” She then casts her eyes to the floor, cuing to the audience that the story is over, and the poetry is about to be performed.

Within seconds, Duarte commands, “Não desiste negra, não desiste.” She follows this line with, “Ainda que tentem lhe calar / por mais que queiram esconder,” she curls her body, appearing smaller, embodying the feeling of being verbally silenced by white supremacy, embodying what Menegaro describes as, “uma forma de romper o silêncio usando o corpo como

meio de expressão e renúncia às imposições que visam o controle e a domesticação” (2). She tells the “negra” audience that one of their reasons for not giving up is the Yoruba blood running through their veins; “corre em tuas veias força ioruba axé,” which she follows with the line, “pra possa posseguir.” While performing these lines, Duarte raises her hands along her body in an upward motion, suggestion not only a characteristic that is “elevating,” but also suggesting that this Yoruba blood is not something stagnant; like her hand movement, it is something that is continuous, living, an inherited internal force that resides within her and every black woman. With the use of the subjunctive, “possa,” or “to be able to” followed by the verb “posseguir,” “to pursue,” Duarte is once again telling black women that their inheritance from Yoruba is not something they should blame for receiving prejudice; rather, it is the most powerful, ancestral guiding force that they possess, and where it leads them will not be wrong.

FIGURE 2



Figure 2: Mel Duarte performing the lines, “ainda que tentem lhe calar.” Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfDvjbsCFmM>

This collective voice is again reinforced later with the line, “Eu vejo que nós, negras meninas”; in this case she is pressing her hand to her chest, further symbolizing a collective “we” instead of “I.” She continues, “Temos olhos de estrelas / que por vezes se permitem constelar”;

to embody the sensation of stars forming constellations, she closes her hand around her eye and opens it, suggesting an array of stars, or perhaps dreams, that are permitted to exist. She cites the problem as “they,” referring to white-patriarchal society, “...desde sempre nos tiraram a nobreza / Duvidaram das nossas ciências,” while furrowing her brow, her hand facing up an open, suggesting a look of exasperation; history is continuing to repeat itself, and she and other black women are infuriated.

Duarte later states, “É preciso lembrar da nossa raiz,” she stands firmly on the ground, transforming her body into a metaphorical tree. Her arm reaches down, and her hands flex rigid, signifying roots, signifying a heritage that is strong and can withstand the elements. She reinforces this metaphor of strength with the line, “semente negra de força matríz.” At this point her body is still rigid, unmoving, but the hand has closed into a fist. It is not elevated however, her strength in existing is still permitting her to resist with the lines, “...que brota em riste! / Mãos calejadas, corpos marcados sim / mas de quem ainda resiste.” With the word “mãos,” Duarte looks at her own; her hands that she possesses, her hands that have slaved, she has inherited along with her “roots,” as well as her “marked body,” but through it all, Duarte is still here. She is continuing to resist because her ancestors have resisted. Likewise, as this work is trying to show, through reclaiming her heritage that makes her “exist,” Duarte continues to resist as a black woman. Her voice is elevated through these lines, her voice will not be silenced so long as she exists.

FIGURE 3



Figure 3: Mel Duarte while performing the lines, “É preciso lembrar da nossa raíz.” Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfDvjbsCFmM>

The theory of Menegaro that performed poetry allows, “esses sujeitos potencializam o seu dizer através de uma ação poética comprometida em reivindicar uma revisão da história” (2) is clear in the stanza that follows:

Por mais que tentem te oprimir
E acredite, eles não vão parar tão cedo
Quanto mais se omitir
Menos sobre a sua história estará escrevendo!

Duarte calls for the women that inspired her poem to continue to resist; they will not be permitted to exist in their stories otherwise. It is the responsibility of Duarte and other marginalized women to continue to resist through the creation of their existence, whether it is through poetry or through having a “lugar de fala.” Within the final stanza, Duarte declares:

E por isso que eu digo:
Que não desisto
Que não desisto
Que não desisto

Through repetition, Duarte establishes this stanza as a chant, or a rallying cry of resistance. Repetition of this line also creates a layer of emphasis in the importance of this statement. In this section, she raises her left hand in a closed fist. This closed fist is a strong symbol of resistance for oppressed groups, but especially a symbol of black power. Through existing as black women in their bodies and embodied experiences, Duarte, and other Afro-Brazilian women, can continue to resist.

FIGURE 4



Figure 4: Mel Duarte stating, “Que não desisto.” Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfDvjbsCFmM>

In the video title, “Mel Duarte | Live Talks,” Duarte stands in front of an audience and begins with her poem, “Negra Nua Crua,” a poem that, in comparison with “Não Desiste!” perhaps carries more elements of rejection. With the line, “Minha postura e ideia é que fazem atrair tanta gente,” she points at her hips, but does not touch them. This can signify that it is not her body that makes her sexy, but it is her ideas and the way she carries herself that makes her attractive; through not touching it, she is not creating herself as a sex symbol, but rather rejecting

this pose. Later in the poem, during the line “ser chamada a carne mais barata/ EU NÃO ACEITO!” Duarte embodies the “loudness” of the capitalized words in her poem. She elevates her voice, holds her right hand in front of her, motions it across her body to signify “no.”

Her element of rejection continues with the lines, “minhas curvas mais bonitas / desfilam através de devaneios / E minha fala hoje é bruta pra fincar dentro do peito.” With the lines “curvas bonitas,” she runs her hands across her body, satirically commenting on the sexualization of her body. She is aware that her body is fantasized, but she rejects this image of herself and establishes her own. She declares that now, “hoje,” her word is strong enough to stab in the chest of someone; she says this while pointing at her own chest. She will destroy the lustful image that resides in the colonizers heart, using her voice to construct her own image powerful enough to destroy it. Through her fight to existence, she can resist this image projected onto her. She “reintroduces” her identity to the crowd: “Mel/ Negra, nua, crua de sentimento.”

Through this chapter, the work has displayed that although poetry in of itself creates elements of existence for poets, and therefore resistance for their creators, adding the level of embodiment to the poem creates another layer of resistance and existence through the element of embodiment, that allows the poet to be a part of their poem and create healing through the site of sexism and racism. Through analyzing two poems of Duarte that were previously introduced in the first chapter, the reader can see how added elements of embodiment only compliment and elevate the poem, with body language at certain lines of the poem.

CONCLUSION

As the reader has seen, although the struggle for reclaiming and “existing” as an Afro-Brazilian woman has continued until the contemporary work of Duarte, there are optimistic signs that indicate this is changing. As the reader had noted in the introduction, Brazil’s new census revealed that black and mixed Brazilians made up more than half of the population, but as Stephanie Nolen notes in “Brazil's Colour Bind: How One of the World's Most Diverse Countries Is Just Starting to Talk about Race.”, this is not necessarily indicating an increase in birth rate, but rather a cultural acceptance for black identity. She states below:

And then, in 2010, came a change that startled demographers. For the first time since the slavery era, there were more black and mixed-race Brazilians than white ones. The census enumerates adults, so the birth rate doesn’t explain the change – and in any case, that rate is nearly equal across races. Something else is going on, says Sergei Soares, who heads the national Institute for Applied Economic Research. It’s a shift in self-identification. “You could say that what’s happening

is not that Brazil is becoming a nation of blacks, but that it is admitting it is one,” says Mr. Soares, who is white. There has been a black movement here since before the end of slavery, but it has never been influential. With the end of two decades of military dictatorship in 1985, however, there began to be new space for debate about rights. (Nolen “Brazil’s Colour Bind)

As Brazilians, and the rest of the world, are becoming more conscious of Brazil’s racial identity and composition, it is crucial, now more than ever, to listen to the voices who have been combatting these systems of silence. As Ribeiro has stated, it is important for everyone, Afro-Brazilian or not, to listen to voices who have been denied a “lugar de fala” and to “decolonize the mind,” so to speak. While it is easy to analyze poetry that has been well-received, studied, and analyzed, as the author of this work learned so humbly, it is important to be mindful that as scholars, listeners, and thinkers to not contribute to this same silencing through giving preference or space to others’ voices or experiences. The same is especially true when one considers how these voices may make the audience feel uncomfortable or challenges previously held beliefs that one has had. In listening to the work of Mel Duarte, one cannot leave without reconsidering that Brazil as a nation is still not exempt from racism, and that society is continuously imposing myths and stereotypes of black women.

This is precisely why I chose to work with this poet. Throughout my personal journey in academia, between Machado de Assis and Clarice Lispector, I began to ask myself, as Duarte did, “but who is writing right now?”. In my own experience within academia, there is a danger in treating the “Other” as if it were something in the past, and not relevant today. While works such as of Miriam Alves and Conceição Evaristo are crucial in understanding Afro-Brazilian women’s poetry as a movement, only considering their voices as representative of the whole can have the

dangerous implication that this body of poetry was of the past, and that black Brazilian women are not continuing to write or perform poetry today. This thesis, then, has been an attempt to give necessary, and late, credit to women who are writing today, before they are gone, and to not reinforce, as Mel Duarte stated, the idea that poetry is a thing of “dead people.”

As analyzing this poetry has confronted unintentional “colonized thoughts” within myself, this section would like to present, in addition to a conclusion, an “ekphrastic” interpretation of selected sections of Duarte’s work. Outside of academia, I am also an artist, and I have noticed that while my professional work has researched (arguably a fraction) of black Brazilian’s contemporary work, within my personal life, I have not always been as flexible in leaving my comfort zone. As Duarte’s work has treated not only the *invisibilização* of black women, many poems also treat the concept of black women’s hair, since within multiple cultures it is considered “bad hair,” and these women feel compelled to further erase their identity through adopting Euro-centric beauty standards. Within the artist world, there is a hesitation in approaching black hair as many consider it, as Duarte says, “resistente.” But as Duarte also notes, it is “resistência.” In continuing to portray Duarte as a “resistant” woman who is unapologetic about her identity, the next several pages contain drawings by the author herself who was inspired to give space to this hair in a two-dimensional plane. If this thesis has accomplished anything, it is hopefully making the reader aware that it is necessary to give a “lugar de fala” for voices, and to reconsider personal ideals that contrast their voices.

Ekphrastic analysis can be understood as a dialogue between mediums, one written (such as a poem) and one physical (such as a photograph, a drawing, a sculpture). Valentine Cunningham states that while the potential objects for ekphrasis is vast, what is more important is to consider how the two works exist to “validate” each other (57). While the order of creation

matters little (the drawing or the poem), what is important in observing ekphrasis is how the works communicate with each other. It is my hope, through my ekphrastic analysis of these powerful lines of poetry, that I have only reinforced the strength of the black female identity that was fought for.

FIGURE 5



Figure 5: Ekphrastic interpretation of lines from “Menina Melanina” (11). Original artwork by Anna Adair.

FIGURE 6

“Não desiste!” (15)

“É você, mulher negra! Cujo tratamento de
majestade é digna
Livre, que arma seus crespos contra o
sistema,
Livre para andar na rua sem sofrer
violência
E que se preciso for levanta arma,
mas antes,
luta com poema.”



Figure 6: Ekphrastic interpretation of selected lines from “Não Desiste!” (15). Pictured here is a rendition of Mel Duarte herself. Original artwork by Anna Adair.

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