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"Bahia Houses" at the Crossroad between the Past and the Present – *Um defeito de cor* (*A color defect*) by Ana Maria Gonçalves

Abstract

"Bahia Houses" are houses built in Brazilian style in several cities on the west coast of Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their architects were "freed" Brazilian slaves who came back to Africa, where they experienced an upward mobility, they never were able to develop in Brazil. The Brazilian novelist Ana Maria Gonçalves wrote a voluminous novel *O defeito do cor* (2015 [2006]) on this phenomenon, focusing on her main character, Kehinde/Luisa, born in Africa, brought as a slave to Brazil and then a returnee. She lived in three European colonies: Portuguese, French, and English. The author portrays different stages in her life, from being a domestic slave to becoming a very successful commercial woman as a designer and architect of Bahia houses, whose spaces reflect power relations in different local settings in European countries overseas.

A book entitled *Unheard Words*, published in 1986, contains essays on and interviews with female authors in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. Mineke Schipper, a professor of comparative literatures, writes in her foreword that she considers this book to be an introduction to a "subject of which much more could be said" and continues by stating that, to her knowledge,

> there are no English or French works which deal with the subject on an 'intercontinental' scale, and it is rare to find publications on women and literature outside Europe which cover even one country, region or culture. (Schipper 1986: 7)

Thirty-five years later, in the area of "global" studies", much more is now being said about this subject, and Schipper's effort seems pioneering at time in which many (although not enough) texts by and on women writing in- and outside Europe have and are being produced. In the meantime, the five authors interviewed in *Unheard Words* have become quite famous: Miriam Tlali (South Africa), Etel Adnan (Libanon/France), Astrid Roemer (Suriname/The Netherlands), Nabaneeta Deb-Sen (India), and Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay/Spain). They write in English, French, Dutch, Bengali, and Spanish respectively.

Today, female authors belong ever more to the classics in world literatures. The concept of "Afrodescendant" female authors emerged in Europe some decades after the African American writers in the USA had characterized themselves as such, with Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Literature Prize 1993, as the most famous example. In the southern part of the Americas, "afrodescendiente" has even become a qualification implying a reaction against discrimination and marginalization from the public space. Nevertheless, the criticism voiced in discussions on this African American identification have not primarily concentrate on the "postmigratory" diasporic experience; another topic has been prioritized, the memory of slavery. This is a substantial difference to migrant writing in Romance-speaking Europe, where that emphasis does not figure as a prime concern.

To give an example of Afrodescendant women writing in the Romance-speaking Americas, I will concentrate on a most outspoken female author in this respect, Ana Maria Gonçalves, a Brazilian writer from Minas Gerais. She has written a standard work in Brazilian-Portuguese literature, *Um defeito de cor* (*A color defect*; 2015 [2006]), a novel already in its seventeenth edition despite its 951 pages. The book tells the story of an African woman in the nineteenth century. She is captured as a young girl on the West-African coast, enslaved and sent to Brazil, where she lives through different stages of slavery: as a domestic slave living in the *senzala pequena* (housing for domestic slaves) on the sugar plantation, as a slave in the whale-oil factory living in the *senzala grande* (housing for field and other working slaves), as a marketing seller and then a shop keeper in the city, manumitted and developing her own business before deciding to return to Africa. On that continent, she becomes a successful decorator specializing in “Bahia Houses” and, at the end of her life, she goes back to Brazil to see her “lost” son.

The special feature of this novel consists of the main character living on both continents, not just as a traveling visitor but as a migrant who has to earn her living. This transatlantic migration, consequently, implies the concept of “oceanic modernity”, which brings circumstances on different continents together to analyze the logistics of the narrative (Phaf-Rheinberger 2014). To investigate this concept of oceanic modernity further, I have implemented a comparative approach to African and Latin American literatures in the Spanish and Portuguese languages with a focus on the memory of slavery.

The term “modernity” has been much discussed in cultural studies on Latin America, with Enrique Dussel and Mabel Moraña (2008) as two outstanding scholars. Both claim that a single modernity does not exist; there are, rather, multiple cultural interpretations. Enrique Dussel, an Argentinian philosopher living in Mexico, breaks down the idea that modernity emerged in European Romanticism to characterize the most advanced urban cultures. Instead, he argues that the blind spot in European philosophy is not seeing that modernity arrived on all continents with European expansion (Dussel 2010). Mabel Moraña, a literary critic born in Uruguay, addresses these diverse counter discourses, characterizing them as religious, mestizo, peripheral or marginal modernities. They reveal the effects of “coloniality at large”, of the perpetuation of colonial mentalities also after independence.

The concept of modernity relates to social dynamics in urban societies without explicitly taking into account the transoceanic connections of these “modern” conglomerations. Yet, they are connected with those water roads, instrumental for the migration of people, ideas, politics, sciences, cultures, religion and commodities between the continents. The transatlantic slave trade and the memory of slavery are crucial bindings that relate cultural studies of Latin America to Africa and vice versa.

Research on slavery in Latin America, especially in Cuba and Brazil, started at the end of the nineteenth century and extended to the other countries throughout the twentieth century. The word slavery and looking African (= Black) is often used as an equivalent for “labor”. The

Peruvian singer Susana Baca, the “Soul of Black Peru”, expresses this paradigmatically in the song “María Landó”, about a woman who “just works/just works/work for someone else”, not even noticing the difference between day and night (Baca 2001: song 7).[1] Baca was the first to interpret this song on “slave work”, the lyrics of which were composed by the Peruvian poet César Calvo in 1967 and set to music by Chabuca Granda, *the* singer of “creole” music in the Andean world.

In my analysis of selected literary works by contemporary African and Latin American authors, oceanic modernity becomes linked to contemporary situations in which migrants to Europe work under circumstances that resemble the slavery conditions in the past (Phaf-Rheinberger 2017). This relationship between historical slavery and “modern slavery”, therefore, is at the base of my analysis of *Um defeito de cor*, which recounts the life cycle of the main character Kehinde, an African-born woman, and her attachment to the transatlantic water roads when she is on her way to establishing herself and making herself a home with her family in Brazil and then in Africa.

The Story of Kehinde

Um defeito de cor is conceived as a letter in the first-person singular, which Kehinde is writing to her son in Brazil. As a child, his Portuguese father sold him as a slave, after which Kehinde lost his tracks. The reader learns that she is writing this letter after receiving the message that her son is alive. She wants him to know every significant detail of her life and constantly interrupts the chronology of her arguments with comments, which makes her story even more personal.

Kehinde was born in Savalu, not far from Ouidah in today’s Benin, and brought from there as a slave girl to Pernambuco. She first works on the Island of Itaparica, then in the cities of Salvador da Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, before deciding to go back to Ouidah and later to Lagos, still the biggest city in Nigeria. This combination of being “captured” in Africa, being a “slave” and a “free” woman in Brazil, and then a

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[1] Original versión: “siempre trabaja/siempre trabaja/trabajo ajeno” (Baca 2001: song 7).

"returnee"[2] in Africa is exceptional and we have no other examples in the literature of the Portuguese language, or even in other languages, of such a main character in the nineteenth century.

Gonçalves' letter-novel is a special case because, in general, there is little information about Black women writing in Latin America at that time. In the USA, knowledge of the existence of such texts is only thanks to the Schomburg Library project on Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, coordinated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The organizers of the project found and/or re-published many unknown manuscripts by authors such as Nancy Prince, Suzie King Taylor, Bethany Veney, Louisa Piquet, Elisabeth Keckley, Matty Johnson, Lucy A. Delaney, Kate Drumgoold, Annie L. Burton, not to speak of the most famous North American slave woman writer, Phillis Wheatley, among others. However, none of these authors spoke of returning to Africa, notwithstanding the founding of the state Liberia by the USA in 1847, long before Marcus Garvey organized the "back to Africa" movement and the UNIA.[3]

Gonçalves' novel succeeds in bringing together many historical facts and cultural knowledge about Brazil, Benin and Nigeria from a Black female perspective. When Kehinde reaches the Ilha dos Frades near the Bahian coast, all her family members are dead. The author emphasizes her curiosity, when arriving in the "New World", admiring these new landscapes and, especially, the city: "The direction in which I saw, at a distance, some constructions shining in the sunlight, wedged between the mountains, a city that seemed much bigger than Ouidah and Savalu together" (Gonçalves 2015 [2006]: 63).[4] In Salvador da Bahia, Kehinde is sold on the slave market and embarks on a boat to the island of Itaparica. From this point onwards, she is really in Brazil because now "we" (nos) are the "Blacks" (pretos; ibid.: 73), very different from the "whites", who are well-dressed and carried on shoulders in a carriage. They do not speak African languages or worship African religions, and they consider the Portuguese language and Christianity obligatory for the slaves.

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[2] Returnees are Afrodescendant Brazilians who "return" to the West Coast of Africa in the nineteenth century. In Lagos and Benin that are called *agudás*, in Togo *amarôs*, and in Ghana *tabom*.

[3] UNIA, Universal Negro Improvement Association, 1914-c. 1927.

[4] Original versión: "A direção na qual eu vi, ao longe, algumas construções brilhando à luz do sol, equilibrando-se sobre montanhas, uma cidade que parecia ser muito maior que Uidá e Savalu juntas" (in: Gonçalves 2015 [2006]: 63).

Having the task of being playmate of the white girl in the Big House, besides other duties of cleaning and helping out in the kitchen, Kehinde learns to read and write. Tragic events cross her path, instructing her that a slave girl is not the owner of her own life and body: violation, murder, corporal punishment, violence, isolation, oppression, cruelty, bad treatment in general. At the same time, however, the book does not limit itself to mourning the situation. Lively discussions among the slaves about their circumstances, religious habits and the people in their environment unfold a broad cultural panorama of Brazilian slave society. Without access to official instruction, slaves try to get some education. Kehinde befriends Fatumbi, the house teacher of the white girl, and she maintains this contact after moving to Salvador.

In that city, she becomes a maid in a house of English owners, where she observes how to make cookies and puddings and learns the language. With these capacities, later on, she is quite successful as a marketing woman, setting up her own business as far as her slave condition permits. Because of her Hausa friends, such as Fatumbi, who are Muslims and well-educated, she experiences first-hand the Malê-revolt (Reis 1996) against all whites in 1835 and gets into trouble because of the consequent xenophobia against Africans. As a result of that situation, she moves to Rio de Janeiro, always in search of her son.

Kehinde’s strong African-creole background helps her in her personal and business life. Being an African herself, she does not idealize Africa. In a discussion with Fatumbi, Kehinde asks him pertinent questions about slavery in Africa, and he answers with examples from the Mandingas and the Congo kingdom. However, when she asks him about having heard him talking about slaves who had slaves themselves, he suddenly changes the topic of conversation.

The author describes many situations in such great detail that her book seems a novel of customs (Spanish genre of the nineteenth century), including proverbs, language expressions and religions that refer to Kehinde’s native continent. In the bibliography at the end of the book (2015 [2006]: 949-951), Gonçalves mentions António Olinto, who wrote *A casa da água* (1975; *Water House* 1985) about a Brazilian returnee family in Lagos. She equally refers to João Ubaldo Ribeiro’s bestseller *Viva o povo brasileiro* (1984; *An Invencible Memory* 1989), in which slave work in the Bahia region (Recôncavo) plays an important role. Without a doubt, these books must have been relevant for Gonçalves, and she even copies a scene of violation from Ribeiro’s book inserting some modifications (Phaf-Rheinberger 2017: 57).

Notwithstanding, the style of her “letter” equals more the tone of the diary *Quarto de despejo* (1960; *Child of the Dark* 2003), written by Carolina Maria de Jesus, about the daily life of a Black woman in a favela of São Paulo in the 1950s. The diary reproduces Carolina’s daytime rhythm, determined by having enough income to feed and dress her three children, and also reveals her self-determination and critical views on society, albeit without any reference to Africa. This lack of reference to Africa is the opposite in Gonçalves’ manuscript, with her precise descriptions of Kehinde’s Yoruba/Vodou background. Gonçalves seems to describe the process of “religious decolonization”, as do Arjun Appadurai’s (1981) claims regarding the management of the Hindu temples under colonial rule in southern India. By comparison, the religious decolonization process is different in Brazil, officially a Christian country, where Kehinde has to hide her religious orientation and her objects of veneration. To describe this situation so explicitly implies breaking with tabooed issues and Gonçalves demonstrates the presence of many religious traditions and customs. Her Kehinde finds stability in her *orishas*, the small religious pieces she always carries with her. African religions, alongside Catholic, Protestant and Muslim worldviews, are parts of Gonçalves’ nineteenth-century Brazil as well as in Africa.

Back in Africa

The last two chapters of *Um defeito de cor* take place in Ouidah and Lagos. The voyage of 26 days from Salvador to Ouidah, leaving on 27 October and arriving on 22 November 1847, is the contrary from the journey in the opposite direction as a slave some decades earlier. Kehinde now travels comfortably on a cargo-vessel, *The Sunset*, being master of her own destiny. She does not expect big things and, indeed, "I did not like what I saw at all" (Gonçalves 2015 [2006]: 731).[5] This transatlantic journey is incredibly instructive. From discussions with people on board, she learns about business in Africa, especially about the slave trade, from which African and English merchants equally profit. This learning is the real "new" issue before arriving in Africa and prepares Kehinde for her subsequent metamorphosis.

After disembarking in Ouidah, she reconnects with people she had known before. Besides, she is pregnant by her future husband, John Stuart, a "dark mulatto" (mulato escuro; ibid.: 735) born in Sierra Leone, involved in the trade routes of the English with Brazil and doing business with different settlements on the West-African coast. Kehinde meets him on *The Sunset,* and he tells her that, in Africa, you need to have the support of an influential person, who receives a certain percentage of your selling, to protect your business. This protector, in Ouidah, is Chachá (Francisco Félix de Souza, 1754-1849), a historical personality, a returnee and "blood brother" of the King of Dahomey. Gonçalves describes Kehinde's indirect involvement in the slave trade because of trading with arms, although she (and John) know well that these arms are used in wars for obtaining as many captives as possible to be sold as slaves.

When Kehinde arrives in Ouidah, the French and Portuguese involvement in the transatlantic trade is more or less balanced and depends on the benevolence of the king of Dahomey, who has absolute control in this part of the region. In the meantime, while earning good money with the arms trade, Kehinde makes contacts with the "Brazilian community" and discovers that, like herself, they are nostalgic for everything identifying with Brazil. Therefore, she starts her business of Brazilian products and, then, decorations for houses until setting up her specialization of "Bahia Houses" (Casas da Bahia). After Chachá's death and that of her husband John, the growing French influence in Ouidah makes her decide to move to Lagos (African name Eko): Unlike the British colony, the French dismiss the capacities of the Brazilian community. The high demand for her specialization in Nigeria means that Kehinde becomes a well-to-do woman whose children study in France.

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[5] Original versión: "não gostei nada do que vi" (in: Gonçalves 2015 [2006]: 731).

The "Brazilians" find themselves much more civilized than the Africans, who are repeatedly addressed as "savages", a term Kehinde never uses when in Brazil. Obviously, being from Brazil confers someone with a different status than that of the uneducated African population, with whom Kehinde has little regular contacts. This change of mentality towards a colonial vocabulary is the consequence of being successful and belonging to the highest circles, in which the "Brazilians" are considered as "whites" notwithstanding the "color defect", which hardly plays a role in Kehinde's private life in Lagos. Her metamorphosis is emphasized by her change of name. Kehinde was proud of her African name in Brazil never using her Christian name Luísa. But now, she uses exactly this name in Africa, adding Luísa Andrade da Silva and thus aiming to appear even more Brazilian. John tells her that many influential people of African descent in Africa do the same: they have a "hidden" African name and use a more Christian one in everyday life.

Especially in the Christian religions, Kehinde perceives the permeability of the "color defect": She observes the presence of black and "mulatto" priests in the English Protestant church and white and exceptionally "mulatto" priests, who count as whites of the French and Portuguese Catholics. Personal contacts and religion decide upon success: they are a source of information about every detail important for trade. The "letter" also describes the Muslim returnees in Porto Novo, the port city at the south coast of Benin. It is a point of attraction for Muslim-returnees, who are successful in delivering slaves to Chachá through establishing themselves on local points of the caravan routes along which they transport the slaves from the interior to the coast (Gonçalves 2015 [2006]: 871-874).

Bahia Houses

Gonçalves has repeatedly confirmed that she has never been in Africa herself and, therefore, her novel is the result of historical and literary research (sources mentioned in her bibliography). She is also familiar with Black Brazilian traditions, being an Afro-Brazilian woman herself. Her nineteenth-century woman is very different from the first-person narratives in the Schomburg project mentioned before. Its coordinator, Henry Louis Gates Jr., introduces every one of the 40 volumes with his "Foreword In her Own Write" (1988: VII-XII) and starts telling the story of Phillis Wheatley, the author of a first volume of poetry written by a Black woman in Boston and published in London in 1773. A two-paragraph phrase introducing the book states that this "young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa" is the real author of these verses. Gates emphasizes the pioneering role of Black women authors for the African American literary tradition; they even dominate the final decade of the nineteenth century, from 1890 to 1910, "The Black Woman's Era". Most of these works, as Gates states, were forgotten and out of print, which made this series necessary to grasp the significant contribution of Black female authors.

In contrast to the years in which Carolina Maria de Jesús published her work, writings of Afro-Brazilian women are prolific in Brazil today. Gonçalves is not looking for forgotten Black women authors; she does not mention one female Afro-Brazilian author in her bibliography, only Maria Graham, a white English author of travel books in the nineteenth century, and three contemporary female Brazilian academics, historians and anthropologists. Notwithstanding, her book is entirely written from the Black-woman perspective modifying the trope "Mama Africa" – the nickname of the famous singer Miriam Makeba in the anticolonial movement. Gonçalves' "mother" in Africa is not presented as a model-mother, as she repeatedly says about herself, and she does not identify with the continent but rather with her longing for Brazil, not least for finding her son. The official abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888 only indirectly plays a role for her. She observes that this is very much celebrated by the Brazilian returnees in Lagos, the city in which she was living that year. The English governor even sends ships to Brazil to bring the ex-slaves back to their mother continent, but without much success.

Gonçalves does not seem to have a problem with what Henry Louis Gates Jr. entitled as "ending the Slavery Blame-Game" (2010), the taboo on addressing the role of Africans themselves in the transatlantic trade: "slavery was a business, highly organized and lucrative for European buyers and African sellers alike". Gates also states that the

"Middle Passage […] was sometimes a two-way street" and that, under those circumstances, "it is difficult to claim that Africans were ignorant or innocent".

The documentation Gonçalves mentions in her bibliography sustains this issue: African chiefs, kings and returnees, among other people, participated, directly or indirectly, in the slave trade. In this way, the author carefully unmasks the entanglements of transatlantic commerce. The social dynamics of this global trade in the context of the memory of slavery are portrayed differently in Brazil and in colonial Africa. In Brazil, the white elite is at the top and the Black slaves are the working class, making everybody try to look as "white" as possible. In Africa, this top is divided into different groups, the African kings and their court, the "white" Portuguese, French, and English and the Brazilian returnees, who consider themselves to be white and constitute a separate group.

This difference is emphasized by Kehinde's business with "Bahia Houses", expressing the "longing for home", a trope recurrent in Caribbean literature, present in the work of many – also female – authors from this region, prototypically characterized by permanent migrations (Olwig 1999, Thompson 2015). In a recent publication *To Be at Home. House, Work, and Self in the Modern World* (2018), Andreas Eckert writes that "houses and homes [are set] in a broad historical perspective as the crossroads between the self, work, and the world" and that "power structures are inscribed in space, and space reflects social organization and defines the people in it" (2018: XIII).

This position of the self at the crossroad of power structures at the West-African coast is symbolically expressed through these "Bahia Houses", constructed by Luísa/Kehinde in African cities. They "open" up to the world, give protection and stability, and, in this case, modernity is not seen in Europe but in Brazil. The houses are designed along the model of the houses of the former owners in Salvador, with whose descendants Kehinde becomes friends while having an intensive correspondence. She writes that the "Brazilians" desire city houses that are, as much as possible, like the ones in Brazil because they judge the houses of the Africans as poor, ugly and old. For their part, the Africans say that the "Brazilians" are traitors and have sold themselves to the whites, whereas the Brazilians characterize the Africans as "savages, brutes, underdeveloped, and pagans" (Gonçalves 2015 [2006]: 756).[6] This difference is repeatedly emphasized, for instance, when Luísa/Kehinde writes that her new house in Ouidah looks like the house of her former Mistress in Salvador da Bahia:

> The big room was divided in three spaces separated by screens and by beautiful clay vases for flowers […] Such vases made a big impression, because in Africa you were not used to cultivate flowers and much less to have them in the house, as an ornament. That was our custom, of the Brazilians, and we loved to have them in our well-cultivated garden plots which, for themselves, already showed that there lived a patrician. (Ibid.: 851)[7]

Again, the distance between the different groups seems to be less rigid in religion. The Catholic cathedral in Lagos, in the construction of which Luísa/Kehinde participates, attracts a lot of Africans to conversion and, in this way, they become closer to the Brazilians than ever before. Religious spaces play quite an important role in the urban environments with their temples, churches, mosques, and cathedral and also in the homes (altars in a special room) and outside, in the surroundings of sacred trees.

In short, at a time when the former sugar plantation owners in northeast Brazil were becoming impoverished from a lack of slave workers, as portrayed in *Dom Casmurro* (1899) by the Brazilian author Machado de Assis, the Brazilian community in Lagos (and Ouidah) has achieved a high standard of living. The quality of life for this "Brazilian" elite is much better than in their land of birth, in which the former "top" level lives with "nostalgia for slavery" in their big, now almost empty houses, even when reconstructed in the "old" style (Chalhoub 2018: 143-147). In those houses, they miss their "self" of the past, a self, surrounded by slave servants and family members. In contrast, the "self" in Bahia houses in Lagos is not nostalgic for slavery and has problems with Brazil, even after the official abolition. Returnees and travelers voice their negative experiences in this respect in a country in which the "color defect" continues identifying them with the former status of being a slave. At this "crossroad" between two worlds, Bahia houses on the west coast of Africa function as the expression of "Black" modernity, being more advanced than most Africans in Africa or the African-descendants and impoverished "whites" in Brazil. Nevertheless, in both cases, none of them are part of the official power structure in their respective societies. In Brazil, "the color defect" continues posing huge problems, and this might explain Gonçalves letting the Kehinde's life end on the boat close to the coast in the Atlantic Ocean, because returning to Brazil might have been the start of a completely different story.

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[6] Original versión: "selvagens, brutos, atrasados e pagãos" (Gonçalves 2015 [2006]: 756).

[7] Original versión: "a sala era dividida em tres ambientes separados por biombos e por lindos vasos de barro para flores […] Tais vasos fizeram muito efeito, porque em África não era usual cultivar flores e muito menos tê-las dentro de casa, para enfeite. Era um costume nosso, dos brasileiros, e gostávamos de ter em nossos terrenos jardins bem-cuidados que, por si, já mostravam que alli morava um patrício" (Gonçalves 2015 [2006]: 851).

The Relevance of the "Color Defect"

Gonçalves' voluminous "letter" is a huge success in Brazil, as mentioned before. The author is an important public voice in debates on racism and African descent, and she maintains a blog for expressing her opinions.[8] Her book is much less read in other Portuguese-speaking countries, such as those in Africa, and not yet translated into any other language. When Gonçalves read from her work at the International Literature Festival in Berlin in 2013, the audience reacted enthusiastically to her presentation. However, it seems, that no publishing house wants to take the financial risk of translating this 951-pages manuscript for a non-Portuguese-speaking readership.

Gonçalves wrote and published *Um defeito de cor* during the tenure of the Lula-government,[9] when much attention was being paid to reorganizing education on the history of African descent in Brazil and on African history. For the first time in Brazilian history, the traumas of discrimination were being taken seriously and important works were being published, which fueled Gonçalves' historical meta-fiction. In this essay, I have shown how her book addresses many issues relevant to migration and the post-migratory context in general. It describes the changes of personality that come with migratory moves, such as the double-naming often identified with Jewish citizens in Christian societies (Mendes-Flor 1999), problems with languages, religion and education, complicated family ties and lack of political representation. For Kehinde's life in Brazil, the memory of slavery is tantamount, and she considers the ocean as a connecting space, "Yemaya's water, symbol of life and death" (Phaf-Rheinberger 2017: 64). Water roads in general accompany her life and give it an immediate link to transatlantic dynamics, the consequences of which are still felt as "coloniality at large", as also stated in the writings of other Black (female) contemporary authors in Brazil and elsewhere. Gonçalves' letter/monologue intends to make this change of mentality understandable. She establishes a dialogue with the reader on the self-perception of a Black female migrant and her transcultural experiences at different stages of being a (forced) migrant on her way to a better life.

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[8] Blog: anamariagoncalves.blogspot.com.
[9] Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was the president of Brazil from 2003 to 2010.

The characteristics of this ambiguous social upwards movement show many similarities with nowadays "modern slavery", a legal concept since the Modern Slavery Act in the United Kingdom in 2015. As Andreas Eckert writes, "Space is a central object of rule" and it "places often very local histories into a global framework" (2018: XV). The effects of "trafficking people" over the waters is a rewarding business, then and now. In this sense, Gonçalves' cautious and accurate reconstruction of Bahia Houses as the ultimate sign of "Black modernity" in Africa, albeit addressing the nineteenth century, becomes very much a contemporary event.

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