Psychotherapy and Politics International

2024, VOL. 22, NO. 2, 1–8
https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v22i2.06

Online ISSN: 1556-9195 Journal homepage: https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/psychotherapy-politics-international

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

African diaspora, interlanguages, and the unconscious

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Ana Maria Gonçalves' novel *Um Defeito de Cor* (*A Colour Defect*), published in 2006; a fiction intertwined with history, memory, languages, and cultures of black Africans brought to Brazil, and describing mainly Salvador in the mid-19th century, developed within the gaps of the limited historical records of enslaved people. It analyses the subjective experiences of the protagonist, Kehinde, as she navigates multiple languages and cultures. It explores the unconscious impacts of exposure to a plurality of languages, informed by Lélia Gonzalez's concept of 'Pretoguês', which highlights the influence of African languages on Portuguese.

KEYWORDS: African diaspora; interlanguages; identity; unconscious

Ana Maria Gonçalves' book *Um Defeito de Cor* (*A Colour Defect*), published in 2006, was written based on the gaps found in the biography of Luiz Gama. It is a fiction intertwined with history, memory, languages, and cultures of black Africans brought to Brazil, describing mainly Salvador in the mid-19th century.

In an interview on the show *Roda Viva*, the author describes her work as being of the order of 'escrevivência' or 'oraliture', given the scarcity of records on the history of enslaved people in Brazil. Such a history can only be told through vestiges.

Given the richness of content emerging from the encounter with the book, various possibilities for commentary opened up during the reading. We could have made the book dialogue with Gilroy's (2001) perspective, which deconstructs ideas of racial purity and national identities rooted on land by considering the Black Atlantic and the languages that became itinerant therein, which gave rise to more fluid and less fixed cultures (Gilroy, 2001).

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We could have read it with Bhabha, who highlights hybrid, trans-local, and intercultural identification processes, given that Ana Maria Gonçalves describes 18th century Salvador with a population, languages, and cultures in constant dialogue with one another.

We could have linked the book with the issue of the identity of the enslaved individuals returned to the African continent (Cunha, 1985) since it narrates the story of a child kidnapped in Africa, enslaved in Brazil, only to return to the continent of origin and assume a differentiated status due to the use of Brazilian techniques and customs taken back to Africa.

However, it was decided to focus on the subjective effects of the character's exposure to diverse languages and cultures.

In the book, we witness the main character, Kehinde, undergoing processes of identification and vacillation of identifications—sometimes in the register of idealisation and sometimes in the register of abjection—as she experiences transformative encounters with otherness and the languages she hears, learns, and speaks.

It is interesting to follow her in constructing a coherence for the words that mark her and for the memories carved from traumatic events, from experiences with the familiar and the strange, from the intercultural and plurilingual context of the African diaspora.

Thus, from Kehinde's trajectory, we seek to raise questions about possible incidences in the unconscious due to exposure to a plurality of languages that constitute the subject. We emphasise that we could only formulate such a question based on the notion of 'Pretoguês', coined by Lélia Gonzalez to refer to the influence of African-origin languages on Portuguese (Gonzalez, 1984). ('Pretoguês' is a play on the words 'preto' [black] and 'português' [Portuguese].)

PLURIAFRICA, MULTILANGUAGES, AND *PRETOGUÊS*

Africa, as a plural continent with a diversity of tribes, ethnicities, and languages, is portrayed in *Um Defeito de Cor* as the starting point of Kehinde's story.

As far as Kehinde remembers, her story begins in Savalu, where she experiences a traumatic encounter with sex and death when warriors of King Adandozan invade her home.

In this scene, the warriors, recognising symbols of Dan on the grandmother's carpet and the wall, associated the family with Agotimé, one of the queens of Dahomey, accused of witchcraft and sold as a slave. For this reason, they violate Kehinde, her sister, and their mother. Also, they brutally murder her mother and her brother, motivated by political and divine rivalries stimulated by the symbols of Dan.

The encounter with the warriors is an encounter with the most radical otherness. It connects the following elements: differences in languages, culture, and religiosity, besides sex and death (figures of the real in a relationship of *extimacy* with language).

These elements reemerge throughout the narrative in different situations, permeated by violence and the issue of race, determining subjective mutations of the character.

The next day after the attack, the grandmother, accompanied by her granddaughters, leaves the family house and heads to Ouidah on the coast in search of an unfathomable destiny. On the road, they encounter people wearing unfamiliar clothes, haircuts, tribe marks, and paintings. In Ouidah, Kehinde meets people from different parts of Africa, speakers of other languages, people wearing hats with feathers, traders, and white settlers in the city. She encounters new objects, such as tables and chairs, copied from abroad. All this gives her the impression of being born in another era, in a different place.

The initial passage of the book is vital to dissolve any idea of a unified Africa. Before being captured and sent to Brazil, Kehinde had already encountered the unfamiliar, other races, other religions, and other languages than those of her family nucleus. Kidnapped in Ouidah, the two sisters are followed by their grandmother. Imprisoned and enslaved, they make the crossing not only of the Atlantic but also of the horror of traveling in inhumane conditions.

On the ship, several languages were spoken, and often, communication was made through gestures, as some people did not understand each other. On board were Europeans, Jejes, Fons, Hausas, Igbos, Fulanis, Mais, Popos, Tapas, Ashantis, and Egbas.

Alufas, who greeted others with a ‘salamaleco’ (a corruption of the Arabic Salam Alaykum), were heading to Mecca for prayer time. There, Kehinde learned that God could be called by several names: Ala, Olorun, God, or Zambi.

In Brazil, after being purchased by Mr. José Carlos, Kehinde was forbidden to speak in her native language, black language, and was forced to communicate in Portuguese. Later, she learned to write with Fantubi, the tutor of the young lady Maria Clara, whom Kehinde was obliged to accompany, even in her classes. Fantubi was a *muçumirim*, an Islamised African, who secretly taught Kehinde the art of reading and writing. Literacy in Portuguese allowed her to leave the realm of orality and access the register of writing, enabling various subjective and relational experiences.

At one point in the narrative, Kehinde was given to English masters with whom she learned the English language and the preparation of cookies, skills she later used to secure her freedom and in her romantic encounter with the man with whom she generated her only offspring. At another point in the story, Kehinde had contact with the French language when she settled in São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro.

With the summary of part of the book *Um Defeito de Cor*, we hope to have exposed the heterogeneity and richness of languages and cultures through which Kehinde transited, sometimes coercively, but also guided by her interests.

It is interesting to note that some words are presented in the writer's narrative without translation due to the impossibility of finding an accurate meaning in Portuguese. The author keeps them in their original form and adds footnotes for clarification.

Languages are systematic sets of signifiers. They embody culture, values, beliefs, practices, and structure relationships with reality and otherness. They are not static or fixed but continuous processes of construction, as humans penetrate and are penetrated by them. They are inseparable from the speaking beings and accompany them in all their acts. They are networks of connections between subjects and between the subject and the Other. The relationship between language, culture, otherness, and the unconscious is intrinsic, involving a continuous back-and-forth between words and things, between words and meanings, between signifiers that refer to other signifiers, and also between signifiers and the real.

The contact between the Portuguese and African languages not only occurred during the slave trade but for at least five centuries (from the 15th century to the mid-20th century). If the seeds of African languages brought to Brazil germinated quickly in the exchanges made by the character, it was because there were already favourable conditions for such. Linguistic and cultural exchanges between Ouidah and Portugal were made long before Kehinde arrived in Brazil (Fiorin & Petter, 2014).

The fact is that the traffic of people practiced by the Portuguese influenced some African languages and modified the linguistic status of others. The relationship between the cycles of slave importation and economic reasons determined a series of linguistic adaptations to the spaces and events and determined a fluid and changeable character of the languages spoken in the Black Atlantic (Fiorin & Petter, 2014).

This type of trade determined the creation of more and more permanent, fixed, and organised places of embarkation and slave depots with the aim of completing the ships' cargoes. One of these places was the fort described by Kehinde in Ouidah, where people captured in many places in Africa arrived speaking diverse languages and giving various versions about the destiny that awaited them. It can be said that this particular organisation of the slave trade created favourable conditions to the emergence of a transitional and renewable linguistic situation for the enslaved (Fiorin & Petter, 2014).

Kehinde experienced a forced and prolonged concentration of speakers of different languages, which, uprooted from their niche, underwent various morphological, phonological, semantic, and dialogical modifications and ruptures. She experienced a code-switching in which the Portuguese language served as a reference pole. Along her journey, she encountered forms analogous yet not identical to the heritage transmitted by her

grandmother in the use of speech and in the cults of African origin. This is because, in the *terreiros* of Salvador, different African oral traditions and ritualised speech coexist in songs, narratives, tales, and proverbs, already mixed with Portuguese.

It could be argued that the signifier and signified of words were modified in the unfolding of Kehinde's story, as they no longer described reality as in her language of origin.

At times, there were no referents for specific words from her native language in the new realities. In addition, objects, sensations, affects, and different notions received new denominations. However, it is not just a matter of taking the perspective of correspondence between words and things but rather the perspective of the unconscious, where signifiers combine according to the laws of metaphor and metonymy.

That is, it is a matter of asking if we find the effects of learning these different languages and cultures in the register of interpretations of the unconscious itself. We consider that the formations of the unconscious are linguistically structured interpretations of the subject's drive experiences linked to the otherness; consequently, the variation of languages must have effects on the structuring of the unconscious or on the signifier chain on dreams, symptoms, and slips.

Furthermore, we question whether there may have been changes in the relations between signifiers and signifiers, signifiers and signified, and signifiers and *object a*, in the formations of the unconscious of this subject.

Kehinde, throughout the book, narrates several dreams. In the narratives, it is possible to verify the incidence of signifiers of new languages learned in the diachrony and synchrony of the unconscious signifier chain, producing the advent of new meanings, interpretations, and new denominations of the real.

CONCLUSION

To advance in the elaboration of responses to these questions, we should revisit the definitions of language, speech, and language in Lacan's (1953/1966) text 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis'.

In the mentioned text, Lacan defines language (*langue*) as the set of signifiers, language as the singular use that a subject makes of language (Langue), and speech—which is inserted in a field ordered and limited by language—as what the subject addresses to the Other, demanding recognition.

While Lacan draws inspiration from Saussure (1916/2006) to define language, his definition of speech is impregnated with Hegel's (1807/1998) thought. Yet, for Lacan, when speaking, the subject addresses the Other with the intention of signification. Thus, we see

here a presentation of the dialectic of meaning, which evidently is no longer precisely Hegelian.

Thus, we wonder how the plurality of languages and the subject's relationships with otherness, that is, with the Other, affect language, speech, and the organisation of the structure of the unconscious of a subject, in our case, of the character Kehinde.

We remember here a scene of the sale of slaves in the market of Salvador narrated in the book, in which Kehinde sought to understand the desire of the white masters to be able to express what would make her a desirable purchase object. We also recall the situation in which the character, having her first meal in the kitchen of Mr. José Carlos, is surprised by the prohibition of speaking her language and faces several objects and codes of conduct unknown to her and which she cannot name. We also highlight the moment when Kehinde is offered to the young lady as a toy and, assaulted by muteness, tries to guess what to say and how to act.

There are also occasions when Kehinde does not face desire but the enjoyment of the Other, in situations such as when she is thrown onto the slave ship, when her master rapes her, or when she witnesses her lover being tortured by the same master to be subsequently castrated.

These are all situations in which Kehinde is confronted not with desire but with the sadistic enjoyment of the Other, which refers back to the sadistic enjoyment of King Adandozan's warriors, reducing her to a place of pure anguish.

In all these moments, Kehinde does not know how to situate herself. The desire of the Other appears as an enigma, and enjoyment appears in its opacity and resistance to being translated into symbolic order.

Concluding the work indicating that the reading of *Um Defeito de Cor*, given the circumstances above—the overlapping otherness, the imposed plurality of languages, codes, and linguistic references, the impossibility of using the native language, the violent imposition of learning the language of the Other, of interpreting his desire, of naming his enjoyment (as well as her own)—situates the subject in a peculiar position.

There is something specific when Kehinde seeks to relocate her desire in the face of the enjoyment or desire of the colonisers from the language she does not know. The question 'Che vuoi?' or 'What do you want?' sought by Lacan in Goethe's *Faust*, posed to every neurotic subject, assumes another weight and measure for the enslaved kidnapped and brought to São Salvador da Bahia. There is something beyond the structuring question posed to the neurotic here. The violence that permeates the question, the accentuation of the experience with otherness due to a lack of understanding of social codes and spoken language plunges the subject into a situation of even greater helplessness.

Regarding the subject's responses to the Other, including the interpretations of the unconscious there is also something specific. If, for Lacan, the dream and any formation of the unconscious have the structure of a sentence, of a *rebus*, we can consider that in this case we face a plurilingual subject that composes plurilingual sentences.

If the unconscious is the discourse of the Other—structured eccentrically to the subject—the status of this Other presents an extremely radical alterity being structured from a multiplicity of languages often renew.

Finally, it would be interesting to verify in the clinic with subjects of the black diaspora to what extent Lacanian linguistics is powerful enough to shed light on their experiences of the unconscious or, conversely, to see if the experiences of the unconscious of these diasporic subjects can make us look at this issue with another eye.

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