

**COUNTER-DISCURSIVE RESISTANCE THROUGH THE POETIC
RECREATION OF
UM RIO SEM FIM BY VERENILDE S. PEREIRA**

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Abstract: The debut novel of Afro-Indigenous Brazilian writer Verenilde S. Pereira stands as a landmark in anti-colonial and contemporary Brazilian literature. Originally self-published as part of a master's thesis, it went largely unnoticed for nearly twenty-five years before gaining recognition through critical and editorial attention. This paper reads the novel from aesthetic, political, and historical perspectives, arguing that this novel must be understood in relation to the social and economic structures that contributed to its silencing. Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's reflections on history, Conceição Evaristo's concept of *escrevivência*, and Latin American theories of testimony, the analysis foregrounds Pereira's novel as both a powerful poetic creation and a counter-discursive intervention. Attention is given to the protagonist Maria Assunção Augusta, whose narrative embodies storytelling as resistance and reconfiguration of subjectivity. Ultimately, the paper reads *Um rio sem fim* as a pioneering Afro-Indigenous intervention that challenges the paradigms of the Brazilian literary canon.

Keywords: Verenilde S. Pereira, Brazilian literature, literary theory and history, peripheral literatures, counter-discourse, decolonizing the arts

Resumo: O romance de estreia da escritora afro-indígena brasileira Verenilde S. Pereira constitui um marco na literatura contemporânea brasileira. Publicado originalmente de forma independente como parte de uma dissertação de mestrado, seguiu despercebido por quase vinte e cinco anos, até alcançar reconhecimento crítico e editorial. Este artigo lê o romance a partir de perspectivas estética, política e histórica, argumentando que ele deve ser compreendido em relação às estruturas sociais e econômicas que levaram a seu silenciamento. Com base nas reflexões de Michel-Rolph Trouillot sobre a história, no conceito de *escrevivência* de Conceição Evaristo e nas teorias latino-americanas do testemunho, a análise evidencia o romance de Pereira como poderosa criação poética e contradiscursiva. Destaca-se

a protagonista Maria Assunção Augusta, cuja narrativa encarna resistência e reconfiguração da subjetividade. Por fim, o artigo lê *Um rio sem fim* como uma intervenção pioneira a desafiar os paradigmas do cânone literário brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: Verenilde S. Pereira, literatura brasileira, teoria e história literária, literaturas periféricas, contradiscurso, literatura decolonial

Introduction

It took a quarter of a century for *Um rio sem fim*, the debut novel by Brazilian writer Verenilde S. Pereira, to ultimately achieve recognition and reach a wider readership. Written as part of a master's thesis at the School of Communication at the University of Brasília, its first edition—funded entirely by the author—was published in September 1998 by a small publishing house in the capital city of Brazil.¹ For twenty-four years, the novel remained largely unnoticed by the Brazilian publishing market, literary critics, and the press. It was only in May 2022, when the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* published the article “Verenilde: Pioneira da Literatura Afro-Indígena”² (Simon de Moraes C7), that readers could finally become aware of the book.³ A few months later, the writer would sign a contract with Alfaguara, an imprint of Companhia das Letras, Brazil's largest publishing house, to reissue her first and only novel to date, with a planned release in 2024.⁴ However, despite the long period during which it remained unknown within the literary field itself, *Um rio sem fim* constitutes a powerful literary phenomenon, a landmark in both anti-colonial literature in Brazil and contemporary Brazilian literature as a whole.

1. The bottom of the river

While entirely aligned with the rejection of the notion of literature as an act of imposing form on the matter of lived experience (Deleuze 1), we draw on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's reflections on the impossibility of fully understanding the value of a historical product without considering both the

¹ Thesaurus Editora.

² “Verenilde: Pioneer of Afro-Indigenous Literature”. / All translations are the author's unless otherwise specified.

³ Due to the editorial guidelines of the newspaper in question, the researcher Rodrigo Simon de Moraes is credited in the article as Rodrigo Simon, omitting his second surname, “Moraes.”

⁴ The release of *Um rio sem fim* by Alfaguara was scheduled for the first semester of 2024, therefore after the completion of this article. Accordingly, the analysis presented in this article relies exclusively on the first edition of the novel.

context of its production and consumption. "How literally can we take the statement that there is no life beyond the text?" (145), inquires Trouillot, evoking Jacques Derrida's (1967) seminal statement "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte,—“there is nothing outside the text [there is no outside-text],” as translated by Spivak—, to shed light on the limits of historical interpretation and the relationship between text and reality, thus challenging the inclination of some theorists to treat the text as the sole source of meaning while neglecting the historical and social contexts of its production and consumption. In light of this, our analysis will not merely examine the formal aspects of *Um rio sem fim*, but will also critically engage with the social, economic, and political conditions that delayed the recognition of the Afro-Indigenous Brazilian writer's novel within the Brazilian literary field for nearly three decades.

To this end, our examination draws on the concept of “Escrevivência,” as articulated by Conceição Evaristo, a writing form that, addressing racism, inequality, and social exclusion while remaining firmly grounded in personal and collective contexts, is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of Black individuals, particularly Black women, sharply countering colonial practices in Brazil: “A history grounded in the narratives of enslaved Black women who were compelled to recount their stories to the ‘casa-grande,’ while *escrevivência* follows a counter-narrative trajectory that challenges this image of the past” (“A escrevivência serve”).⁵ From its perspective as “interwoven experiences aligned with a meticulous construction of knowledge and formal aspects, including the careful handling of language in the crafting of a literary discourse” (Silva 120), the concept offers a fertile framework for analyzing the literature of Verenilde S. Pereira.

Finally, Trouillot's and Evaristo's perspectives are enriched when examined alongside the concept of literary testimony within the Latin American tradition (Garcia, Seligmann-Silva, Ginzburg). Pointed as a cutting-edge mode of literary creation, in opposition to the canonical tradition (Garcia 12), this construct links the discourse on writing to reflections on social exclusion, interrogating critical paradigms that enforce rigid separations between literature and history. From this standpoint, the biographical dimensions of the author, including Pereira's intellectual journey as a journalist, activist, and researcher, transcend mere documentation, offering critical insight into the compositional elements of her novel. Moreover, the conditions surrounding the production of her book within the academic environment and the Brazilian publishing market illuminate the colonialist influences that shaped the reality endured by marginalized majority groups in Brazil, and therefore call for

⁵ *Casa-grande*: the residence of the enslavers, as opposed to the *senzala*, where the enslaved individuals were confined.

contemplation of our collective social responsibility toward the past (Hatley).⁶ While the aim here is not to treat *Um rio sem fim* as merely an account of personal experiences, this article rejects the conservative perspective that attributes complete autonomy to the aesthetic realm in relation to historical and social issues, emphasizing instead that these issues are not only related to the aesthetic but are constitutive of works of art themselves (Adorno 16). Thus, treated with the appropriate mediations, which do not reduce *Um rio sem fim* to an attempt to reconfigure an objective reality, the biographical aspects of its author, along with the conditions of its production and dissemination, are deeply significant for understanding Pereira's novel.

Regarding the theoretical foundations articulated by Pereira in crafting her novel as a counter-narrative within academic contexts, they are here examined through the lens of decolonial studies, particularly from the transdisciplinary approach proposed by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and from the emergence of a “minority discourse” as a framework to subvert dominant paradigms and challenge prevailing power structures, as elaborated by Sylvia Wynter.

2. Verenilde S. Pereira: An Afro-Indigenous Author

Born to a Black mother and an Indigenous father of the Sateré-Mawé people, Verenilde S. Pereira was born in Manaus, the capital of Amazonia, in 1956.⁷ As a child in an impoverished family, she was exposed to the dynamics of interethnic conflicts among many Indigenous peoples who, expelled from the forest, faced marginalization in cities across Northern Brazil—a recurring yet frequently overlooked phenomenon. As remarked in an interview, still very early in life, she demonstrated exceptional talent for writing, an aptitude that earned her a scholarship to attend a well-regarded—and consequently expensive—school in her hometown.

Of Indigenous and Black origin, and considering the context of the time, I was obviously inserted, like thousands of other people, in the sign of failure, of “less of a person,” of the “incomplete

⁶ More on the concept of minoritized majority, see Richard Santos, *Maioria minorizada: um dispositivo analítico de racialidade*. Rio de Janeiro, Telha, 2020.

⁷ According to accounts from the Sateré-Mawé elders, their ancestors inhabited, in ancient times, the vast territory between the Madeira and Tapajós rivers. Today, the Sateré-Mawé mainly inhabit the region of the middle Amazon River, in the Andirá-Marau Indigenous Land, on the border of the Amazonas and Pará states. A small group can also be found in the Coatá-Laranjal Indigenous Land, of the Munduruku ethnic group. In urban areas, there are Sateré-Mawé living in the cities of Barreirinha, Parintins, Maués, Nova Olinda do Norte, and Manaus, all in the state of Amazonas. The first name, Sateré, means “fire caterpillar,” referring to the most important clan among those that make up this society, traditionally indicating the succession line of political leaders. The second name, Mawé, means “intelligent and curious parrot” and is not a clan designation. The Sateré-Mawé language belongs to the Tupi language family. Cf. http://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Sateré_Mawé for additional information. Accessed 10 Jan. 2025.

subject.” Still, in a trajectory where defeats, victories, failures, and achievements are present, I found in writing support and protection against the storms, as one of the drives of life. In short, I am a person who also believes that language is capable of withstanding the extremes of the world. (Ferreira)

The strong educational foundation she acquired during her formative years would later make it possible for her to gain admission to the journalism program at the Federal University of Amazonas—an exceptionally rare opportunity for someone of her socio-economic and ethnic background during the 1960s and 1970s in Brazil. Soon after college, Pereira merged her academic and political activism with journalism at *Porantim*, the first Brazilian newspaper exclusively dedicated to Indigenous news. Finally, in the early 1980s, the writer joined OPAN (Operação Anchieta), an initiative founded by lay missionaries dedicated to land demarcation and Indigenous cultural preservation.

Recognized by the author as foundational to her literature (Ferreira), the intersections of journalism and activism would later lead her to the most dangerous moment of her life. In June 1986, Pereira traveled to the region of São Gabriel da Cachoeira in northern Amazonas to investigate reports of illegal miners invading Indigenous lands. Seen as a threat by the invaders, the local power brokers—politicians and mining operators—convinced a judge to order her arrest. Imprisoned for four days, the writer understood that staying in the region would put her life at risk. Upon her release, Álvaro Tukano, one of Brazil’s leading Indigenous leaders, came to her aid. To escape safely, they had to traverse the forest for nine hours before she managed to secure a flight to Brasília, where she would go on to write *Um rio sem fim*.

3. An Insurgent Literature

In 1991, Verenilde S. Pereira was admitted to the master’s program at the School of Communication at the University of Brasília. Two years later, she returned to her hometown, from which she had been forced to flee due to death threats. In Manaus, the writer was tasked with conducting field research for her dissertation. Her initial goal was to study images of the Waimiri-Atroari Indigenous group produced by the Amazonian press beginning in the 1960s, when large economic projects were introduced in the region, profoundly impacting the group’s way of life along the left bank of the Lower Rio Negro, between northern Amazonas and southern Roraima.⁸ However,

⁸ Initiated during her master’s degree, the research on the representation of the Waimiri-Atroari in the media of the state of Amazonas was resumed four years later, during her doctoral studies at the same School of Communication at the

a walk through Manaus's central area would change the author's plans. She found herself standing before a house where, twenty years earlier, a young Indigenous child had lived—a teenager who spent her days collecting candy wrappers and matchboxes from the city streets. Seeking information about her fate, Pereira learned of her death. From the security guard of the company now occupying the property, she heard the phrase that would redefine the course of her research: it would be very “silly” to think about someone who had “run off.” “Dead is dead,” said the dismissive interlocutor. At that moment, the writer resolved to reorient her research toward a new purpose: “to reflect on the experience of an Indigenous child who collected discarded packages, took her own life at seventeen, and now lingers as a fragmented memory on a street where no one seems aware this ever occurred” (“Uma etno-experiência” 160).

Building upon Rita Segato's thought, which argues that traditional anthropological interpretative practices often lead researchers to sacrifice part of the truth of the individuals portrayed in ethnographic accounts, overlooking or censoring evidence that reveals the intimate space where transcendent human experiences occur (Segato qtd. in “Uma etno-experiência” 172), Pereira considered that the vocabulary of Western science could not adequately convey the emotions of individuals from a “cosmogonically distinct culture.” It was then that the writer felt compelled to present, in place of formal research data and authorial debates, a counter-discourse articulated through poetic recreation within the domain of academic production, which, she believed, would allow her to resist the limitations of conventional discursive frameworks (“Uma etno-experiência” 157): “Theoretical fidelity should not condition us to mere passersby who look at it and culturally dehumanize it. Perhaps it is necessary to shatter the chained and stagnant imagination within a rigid and conservative order.” (Pereira, “Uma etno-experiência” 170)

The writer's theoretical elaboration enables us to read her academic and literary endeavors as an act of decolonial resistance that emerges through a transdisciplinary approach, when taking into consideration the perspective of Nelson Maldonado-Torres, who, drawing on the emergence of Ethnic Studies within American universities during the 1960s, highlights the manner in which this intellectual work sought to construct new methodological and discursive categories to challenge and transcend the traditional boundaries of knowledge, particularly emphasizing the critical appropriation of multiple disciplines and methods in both innovative and creative ways. According to the Puerto

University of Brasília. Under the supervision of anthropologist Rita Segato, the dissertation “A representação dos Waimiri-Atoari na mídia impressa manauara” was defended and approved in May 2013.

Rican philosopher, due to their maintenance of an ontological hierarchy that positions the “anthropos” (white European man) as the universal model of humanity, relegating the racialized “Other” to the realm of non-being, the modern European sciences, with their traditional disciplines and methods—whose model guides academic practice in Brazilian universities, with no exception to the university that Pereira attended—are incapable of critically and emancipatorily addressing issues of race and colonialism. Therefore, given such a prevailing structure, the decolonization of knowledge necessitates the creation of new epistemologies, methodologies, and practices that enable the overcoming of this hierarchy and the affirmation of the “Other” as a subject of knowledge, just as the practice that Pereira brought to the center of her research—not without resistance within her department at the University of Brasília.

In addition to that, Pereira’s theoretical approach also allows the establishment of a conceptual linkages between *Um rio sem fim* and the theoretical frameworks proposed by Sylvia Wynter, in which the Cuban-Jamaican intellectual advocates for the development of “minority discourse” as a means of subverting the dominant discourse construct in order to effectively challenge prevailing power structures, emphasizing that this discourse must transcend mere contestation of these hierarchies and instead focus on the analysis of the discursive mechanisms that produce and perpetuate them. Drawing on the “figure of Man” as a discursive order, which emerged in nineteenth-century Europe to define the white, rational, heterosexual, and property-owning man as the standard of humanity, thus becoming the foundation of modernity/coloniality and relegating the racialized “Other,” Wynter argues that the decolonization of knowledge requires the deconstruction of this model and the creation of new ways of thinking about humanity in a more inclusive and just manner (208-09), as Pereira does in both her master’s thesis and novel.

4. In the Course of *Um rio sem fim*

Through the voice of an unnamed narrator—merging the roles of investigative journalist and ethnographer—*Um rio sem fim* narrates the profound effects of a religious mission in the fictional São Joaquim da Cachoeira, located in the northern region of the state of Amazonas. This Catholic mission, which imposed Portuguese language and Christian beliefs on the Indigenous population, led to the disintegration of local traditions and ways of life. Moreover, the mission orchestrated the relocation of young girls from the region to Manaus, where they were forced into domestic servitude for affluent families.

While centered in the geographical and temporal transit between the Alto Rio Negro region and the largest city in Brazil's Northern region during the 1980s and 1990s, the novel extends its perspective to encompass an entire historical arc, spanning from the period following the economic decline in the Amazon, caused by the collapse of the rubber boom, to the so-called modern era, when large economic conglomerates began to penetrate the region (Pereira, "Uma etno-experiência" 169), bringing forth characters such as the complex Catholic bishop Dom Matias Lana, the foremost representative of colonialist power who, through religion, seeks to instill ideals of civilization and modernity in the Indigenous community; Laura Dimas, an elderly Indigenous matriarch who never manages to learn Portuguese, symbolizing the persistence of local traditions while simultaneously serving as an obstacle to 'modernity'; Lauriano Navarro, an old shaman torn between the oppression and protection of the religious; Antônio Sávio, an indigenous man seduced by the Christian way of life, the first employee of the Catholic mission in São Joaquim da Cachoeira; the four young women sent to Manaus: Maria Rita, Maria Índia, Rosa Maria, an Indigenous woman driven to the tragic limits of "acculturation," and Maria Assunção Augusta, the Afro-Indigenous character who, abandoned by her parents, was raised by the Catholic mission.

Ensuring that the architecture of language serves the ideal alignment between point of view and object (Fischer B11), *Um rio sem fim* presents a masterful act of literary creation, culminating in a potent opening for Indigenous and Afro-descendant voices. Among its many layers of meaning, the novel foregrounds storytelling as an indispensable tool for resisting colonialism and reimagining subjectivity, particularly by allowing Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous people to reclaim the position of narrators. As previously noted, this aligns with Wynter's reflections on the transformative potential of minority discourse, which enables a move beyond the ontology of the "figure of Man," a construct shaped by the globally dominant Western-European bourgeoisie that normalizes a specific model of being (White Western European bourgeoisie). At the same time, Indigenous people are projected as lacking bourgeois rationality and metaphysical being, and Black people are cast as the Negative Signifier of a so-called "primal" human existence, wholly subjected to "natural necessity" (221-2). In a similar vein, this also resonates with Aníbal Quijano's reflections that point to the foundation of European colonialism in the Americas as rooted in the social classification of the world's population around the concept of race, leading to a radical separation between reason/subject and body, the former being the sole entity capable of housing rational knowledge, while the latter was relegated to the position of object of knowledge. Evidently, this new duality highlighted by Quijano not only influenced the structures of racial domination but also the dynamics of sexual domination, thereby

shaping the position of women—particularly those of the races deemed inferior by the colonial perspective, namely Black and Indigenous women (555). Therefore, it is no coincidence that in *Um rio sem fim*, the body of a young Indigenous and Afro-descendant woman emerges as the one mobilized in response to the domination enacted by a religious figure of a European bishop, since through its narrative structure and thematic focus, the novel challenges these reductive ontological frameworks, embodying a profound act of resistance and cultural redefinition. Furthermore, it is not without reason that one of the opening scenes of *Um rio sem fim* depicts the cathartic reaction of the Indigenous people of São Joaquim da Cachoeira upon their encounter with the colonialist cultural production. Outraged by the way they have been and continue to be portrayed by Western institutions of science and culture, the Indigenous people set fire to books in one of the most powerful scenes in contemporary Brazilian literature.

The intention of some authors was to unveil their souls, although one of them had prophesied the risks they could face from the ingratitude and slander of the malicious or the irresponsible. There are books that remain like this, untouched by the characters who trample their pages, which is why authors' prophecies about their works continue only as prophecies. Until the characters seek themselves in their lines or in the silences and find no intimacy with their distortions. And then, untamed by the author, they raise flames with their pages, immense flames like the ones I saw by the river, when a resurrected shaman, with legs blackened by the ink of jenipapo, was shouting in the middle of the night that lies were disappearing—may these twigs and this brandy here, this one I'm about to throw, burn the eye of this liar, may he never again say what I never was, as I do not wish to be, as this woman here, look, as this woman is not. (Pereira, *Um rio* 7)

The scene points to the need for a radical epistemological rupture in the face of the historical dynamic that, for centuries, has monopolized the narrative about the Indigenous people and local communities of the Amazon. Thus, to escape the perpetual motion in which the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon have their pluricultural and mythical universe invaded, destroyed, and dismantled by catechesis and violence—which led the natives to form “the theater of colonialism since their first subjugation” (Souza 153)—a sophisticated narrator comes into play, capable of articulating the mosaic of characters who “suddenly appear, meet, lose track of one another, and engage in dialogue across different times” (Pereira, *Um rio* 162).

Although the specific aspects of her prior relationship with the local community are not evident, some of her characteristics are clear: a blend of reporter and ethnographer, she is returning to a reality she knows empirically, ready to collect and report the stories of the local community and

give voice to “those who knew most about” the devastating effects that colonialist domination brought to the region (Pereira, *Um rio* 13). Therefore, it is not without reason that, in the *Apresentação* to the first edition of *Um rio sem fim*, José Gabriel Trindade draws attention to the narrator’s “camera gaze.”

But the book is not a journalistic account or an ethnographic record. Rather, *Um rio sem fim* is an act of poetic recreation within the genre of the novel, or, drawing on the terms of Joy Harjo (Muscogee Creek Nation) and Gloria Bird (Spokane Tribe of Washington State), it is a reinvention of the language of the enemy in light of the recognition that “the ‘enemy’ sought to control the language of real life, manipulating how native people perceived themselves in relation to the world” (24). Thus, in order to lend “broader meanings to voices that are irredeemably lost and that scientific categories are sometimes incapable of rescuing” (Pereira, “Uma etno-experiência” 162), the character of Maria Assunção Augusta emerges. She is a young Afro-Indigenous woman who uses the power of storytelling as a way “to extract from within herself the affections that oppress her” (Pereira, *Um rio* 74) and, above all, as an instrument of resistance against horror and abandonment—a weapon powerful enough to bring about the symbolic death of Dom Matias Lana, the Catholic bishop.

The driving force behind the quest undertaken by the narrator, Maria Assunção Augusta, is portrayed in the novel as shrouded in uncertainty, to the extent that even the narrator questions her existence. As a result of Dom Matias Lana’s efforts to erase any trace that could confirm her past presence in the religious mission, this ambiguity becomes a powerful instrument, enabling the character to move fluidly through the gradations of fantasy in the novel and ensuring that the act of storytelling is not diminished in the face of “real” events. In the young Afro-Indigenous woman who “fed on the immeasurable world contained in the most diminutive and trivial things and who swallowed the consistent flavor of ephemeral and restless beings” (Pereira, *Um rio* 25), reality and imagination intertwine to simultaneously reveal both the mechanisms of domination and the acts of resistance.

Sometimes, sitting alone in the middle of the canoe with the crate of catechisms that I insisted on taking care of, I would open my legs, open my mouth and fingers, and let the wind enter me (...) That day, Dom Matias ordered him to stop the canoe at the first turn where there was a quiet stream (...). The bishop spoke with the nuns, and after that, I continued the journey alongside Sister Maria José; the wind swirled around me, but she insisted that I pull down my dress. The wind enticed me, and she shouted

that I should press my arms and legs together, refusing to give in when I complained of cramps or the sultry heat because, she asked, how was it possible to feel hot with all that wind? (Pereira, *Um rio* 55-56)

To ensure that discourse and action hold equal weight within its narrative framework is a foundational concept in *Um rio sem fim*. Thus, as significant as the act of resistance itself is the nuanced transformation that unfolds within the dramatic arc of the novel, gradually transferring the narrative perspective from the main narrator to the Afro-Indigenous heroine. A careful examination of the narrative's structure reveals a progression that begins with Maria Assunção Augusta being 'narrated,' then transitions, through a delicate yet deliberate movement, to her finally assuming the narrative voice. By the end of the novel, this evolution will culminate in Maria Assunção Augusta taking on the authority to recount to Dom Matias the events involving Rosa Maria. In this way, contrary to the books cast into the flames by the Indigenous peoples of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, literature would no longer remain untouched by its characters.

As is evident in her engagement with Hannah Arendt's reflections on speech and action as "modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua men" (Arendt 176), *Um rio sem fim* must be understood as an aesthetic manifestation of the author's theoretical commitment to the relationship between action and discourse as fundamental to the constitution of humanity. However, this stance does not reduce the narrative to a naïve attempt to anchor the literary phenomenon to the real world and its beings. Remaining true to its counter-discursive vocation, the narrator vigilantly resists attempts to stabilize, through literature, Arendt's "paradoxical plurality of unique beings" (Arendt 176).

I, who note everything down and who photographed her incessantly during the brief moments I spent with her, and when she could no longer recall such details, I, who recorded her voice as plausible documentation of rational demands, confess that, in attempting to narrate her, as I do now, her image disintegrates before me; it becomes impossible to reconstruct her beyond the perfection of her untouchable braids. In attempting this composition, the sound of fragmentation overpowers that of solidity, and with each attempt, everything shatters once more. I distinctly remember that she had never stopped believing in showers of rose petals. I thought that would save her forever. (Pereira, *Um rio* 49)

In mid-1992, shortly before the characters of *Um rio sem fim* began to take shape, the writer Carlos Fuentes posed a question to students at the Complutense University in the small town of San

Lorenzo de El Escorial, Spain: “What can the novel say that cannot be said in any other way?” (13). Meanwhile, thousands of kilometers away, Verenilde Pereira was reflecting on similar questions: “What can literature still manage to convey, what resources must it create, or whether it must return to realms that lie both before and beyond the word?”⁹ Thirty years later, this question continues to underpin Pereira’s writing practice. Nearly a century after Adorno associated the crisis of the novel with the crisis of experience, *Um rio sem fim* presents a strikingly similar impasse. Yet, it ultimately unveils a potential path forward—one made possible by embracing the power of storytelling emanating from the forest peoples and their experiences, which are now finding their rightful place within Brazilian literature.

5. Counter-Discourses

Verenilde S. Pereira’s theoretical constructions underpin the narrative of *Um rio sem fim*, positioning the novel as a precursor to a reality that was only subtly emerging within Brazil’s cultural and literary landscape at the time of its creation. Its counter-discursive action resonates deeply within the work itself, unveiling transformations within its formal structure that put into question and subvert the very concept of the literary canon in Brazil. While contemporary Brazilian writers who foreground their Indigenous and Afro-descendant identities may now contemplate the possibility of having their works published by major publishing houses, consequently expanding the reach of their creative endeavors, in the late 1990s, when *Um rio sem fim* was first published, such an opportunity was largely unattainable for the majority of authors who did not conform to the historically dominant profile of the Brazilian literary field—overwhelmingly shaped by white, predominantly male writers. Books by Indigenous and Afro-descendant authors circulate today with an unprecedented reach in Brazil. Thirty years ago, only the first steps of a journey—still fraught with obstacles but now considerably clearer and more robust—were being taken.

The first individual book authored by a Brazilian Indigenous writer, *Oré Awé Roiru’a Ma: Todas as vezes que dizemos adeus* by Kaká Werá Jecupé, was published as recently as the latter half of the 1990s. Three years later, the release of *Cidade de Deus* by Paulo Lins marked a turning point: for the first time in half a century since the acclaimed success of *Quarto de despejo* by Carolina Maria de Jesus, a novel by a Black writer received enthusiastic praise from a prominent figure in Brazilian literary criticism, with Roberto Schwarz hailing *Cidade de Deus* as “an extraordinary artistic adventure.”

⁹ Interview with Verenilde S. Pereira, conducted by the author, March 25, 2022.

As symbolic milestones, the works of Jecupé and Lins paved the way for subsequent publications, such as *Histórias de índio* by Daniel Munduruku and *Capão Pecado* by Ferréz, which, like *Cidade de Deus*, was authored by a Black Brazilian writer whose literary output extends beyond Afro-descendant literature to encompass the sphere of peripheral literature. From that point onward, a steadily growing sequence of publications by authors who bring their Indigenous or Afro-descendant ethnic heritages to the forefront can be observed in the country. Nevertheless, despite the reciprocal reinforcing effect that bolsters the publication of works by both Black and Indigenous writers, these two literary traditions have evolved concurrently without notable convergence.

Verenilde Pereira stands as the first writer to foreground a dual identity—both Indigenous and Afro-descendant—and *Um rio sem fim* as the first novel to bring such an identity to the forefront of a literary work in Brazil. For comparison, two notable earlier examples warrant mention: in João Ubaldo Ribeiro's *Viva o povo brasileiro*, Capiroba is, in fact, “the son of an Indigenous woman and a fugitive Black man who was taken in by the village” (25). However, unlike *Um rio sem fim*, Ribeiro's work features the character only marginally, amidst a vast mosaic of other characters. Similarly, in Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*, while some interpretations suggest the protagonist embodies the ethnic groups that shaped Brazil, the Indigenous hero is described as “jet black” not due to Afro-descendant heritage but because he was born “into the Tapanhumas, a native Amazonian tribe with a Carib name yet unusually dark skin” (Sá 36). Only more recently has Itamar Vieira Júnior also claimed a dual Indigenous and Afro-descendant identity, incorporating it into his second novel, *Salvar o Fogo*, which portrays a community of Afro-Indigenous individuals.

Conclusion

Um rio sem fim, by the Afro-Indigenous Brazilian writer Verenilde S. Pereira, stands as an essential landmark not only within what can be considered the new Indigenous literary expressions—a movement that finally became a reality within the Brazilian literary field, a century and a half after the formation of Brazilian literature in the terms proposed by Antonio Candido (2000)—but also in the broader landscape of contemporary literature in the country. Written as part of a master's thesis at the University of Brasília, the novel navigates the interstices of academic discourse, seeking an epistemological rupture achieved through an act of poetic recreation. From this decidedly non-trivial position, both at the time of its writing and today, it brings forth its counter-discursive voice, challenging the Brazilian canon, colonialist actions and ideologies, and the very status of literature itself.

Published by a small press, entirely borne by the author herself, the book remained largely unknown within the literary field for 24 years, until an article in a major Brazilian newspaper brought its existence to light. Its reissue by a prominent publishing house coincides with a period of greater plurality in the Brazilian publishing market, reflecting the political strengthening of movements advocating for more social, economic, and regional equality, as well as environmental protection in Brazil. This evolving landscape has gradually—though still far from adequately—created space for cultural expressions by Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities to finally reach a broader readership.

The novel intricately explores storytelling as a pivotal mechanism for resisting colonial oppression and reconfiguring subjectivity, particularly by empowering Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous individuals as agents of their own narratives. It underscores the necessity of an epistemological break with the historical patterns that have monopolized representations of Amazonian communities. To counteract the systemic erasure of their pluralistic and mythological worlds, the narrative introduces a complex Afro-Indigenous character who wields storytelling both as a means of confronting personal traumas and as a tool for resisting the violence and abandonment inflicted by colonial forces. The novel's structure further highlights this transformation, gradually shifting the narrative focus from the narrator to the Afro-Indigenous character herself, marking her transition from being a subject of narration to becoming the voice of her own story. Among the precursors of a new reality in the Brazilian literary realm, Verenilde S. Pereira is the first writer to bring her Afro-Indigenous identity to the forefront, as *Um rio sem fim* is the first Brazilian novel to center the encounter of Amazonian ethnicities, a theme that, combined with the sophisticated literary craftsmanship, not only gives rise to a powerful opening for the counter-discursive voices of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in the region, but also stands as one of the most beautiful works in the history of Brazilian literature.

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