THE COLOUR OF THE OTHER IN THE MODERN PORTUGUESE YOUTH NOVEL: A READING OF THE BOOKS *UMA QUESTÃO DE COR*, BY ANA SALDANHA AND *BAUNILHA E CHOCOLATE*, BY ANA MEIRELES

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The word *cor* (colour), applied in the Portuguese lánguage to globally designate all the various components of the colour spectrum, and also the terms referred to by each of these components, today presents metaphorical or metonymical extensions of its original meanings, having acquired different semantic contents that are to a great extent culturally constructed and determined.

In this paper, I limit myself to the Portuguese case since, although the same phenomenon undoubtedly takes place in other languages, the present metaphorical or metonymical meanings certainly vary from culture to culture.

One of the most paradigmatic cases relates to the meanings acquired by the words *cor* (colour), *preto/negro* (black/negro), and, in opposition, the word *branco* (white) within the framework of Portuguese colonial and postcolonial discourses. Based on the analysis of two Portuguese youth novels, *Uma Questão de Cor*[1], 2010, by Ana Saldanha and *Baunilha e Chocolate*[2], 2001, by Ana Meireles, I reflect here on how these terms–and the concepts they relate to–, represent and simultaneously contribute towards the construction of an *otherness,* based on the matter of (skin) colour.

In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005), the term *otherness* is defined as "the quality of being different or strange" and in the Free

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[1] *A Question of Colour* (my translation)
[2] *Vanilla and Chocolate* (my translation)

Merriam Webster Dictionary as "the quality or state of being other or different". Correspondingly, both definitions connect *otherness* with the notions of 'different' and 'other'. Thus, *otherness*, as "a fundamental category of human thought" (Beauvoir, 1949: 4), cannot be explained and understood without taking *the other* into account, a category "as primordial as consciousness", as the duality of the Self and the Other already existing "in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies" (Beauvoir, 1949: 4).

As a result of Beauvoir's ideas about women's position in society as being the other of men (based on Hegel's master-slave theoretical dialectic), the concept of *the other* becomes a fundamental issue of study in several fields of knowledge, including sociology, philosophy, postcolonial studies, among others, and especially those associated with *identity* and *difference*. As Chris Barker (2004: 139) states:

> "The notion of the Other is closely linked to those of identity and difference in that identity is understood to be defined by its difference from the Other. I am male because I am not female, I am heterosexual because I am not homosexual, I am white because I am not black and so forth. Such binaries of difference involve a relationship of power, of inclusion and exclusion, in that one of the pair is empowered with a positive identity and the other side of the equation becomes the subordinated Other."

In spite of some different dimensions to *difference* existing, such as gender, sexuality, class and disability (Hall, 2007: 225), and in spite of the ambivalence which characterizes *it*, as "it can be both positive and negative" (Hall 2007: 238), I restrict myself in this paper to the *racial difference*, as I am dealing here only with representations of a black *other*, firstly in the Portuguese language itself and then in the two selected youth novels.

Beginning with the aforementioned terms—*cor*, *preto*, *negro* and *branco*—, regarded as polysemic lexical items[3], I would like to highlight

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[3] The semantic analysis of the selected lexical items is carried out only in a synchronic perspective, based on some of their meanings collected from the Portuguese dictionary *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*, 2013 (Porto Editora), without taking into account their evolution over time.

I also would like to underline that these items, as polysemous categories, "exhibit a number of more or less discrete, though related meanings, clustering in family resemblance categories" (Taylor, 1995: 122). In this sense, we can say that they have an internal semantic structure, where a central meaning (called 'prototypical' by some cognitive linguistics) and semantic extensions of this central meaning are identifiable. As Dirven & Verspoor state (1998: 46): "Among the

some of their meanings, presented in the following table, deemed relevant to a better understanding of the theme addressed by this chapter.

Table 1. Meanings of the words _cor_ (colour), _preto_ (black), _negro_ (negro) and _branco_ (white)

Selected terms	Grammatical category	Central meaning	Some extensions of meaning
Cor (colour)	_noun_	impression that the light diffused or transmitted by bodies produces in the organ of vision.	natural colour of the human skin; appearance [figurative]; character [figurative].
Preto (black)	_adjective_	said of the total absence of colour, the absorption of all bright radiations.	dark; gloomy; (person) who belongs to the black race [pejorative].
	noun	the opposite or more distant colour from the white, such as jet black.	mourning; person who belongs to the black race [pejorative].
Negro (negro)	_adjective_	characterized by the absence of colour, because of receiving light and not reflecting it.	dark; dirty; gloomy; ominous; funereal.
	noun	total absence of colour, because of the absorption of all light radiation.	black; person who belongs to the generic group characterized by displaying very darkly pigmented skin.

various senses of words, some are always more central or **prototypical** and other senses range over a continuum from less central to peripheral" and they add: "All the senses of a word are linked to each other in a **radial network** and based on cognitive processes such as **metonymy, methapor, generalization and specialization.**" (bold by the authors).

As already stated, in table 1 I present only the central (prototypical) meaning of the words selected and some extensions of meaning considered relevant for the theme of the present chapter.

		which has the colour of lime, snow or milk.	pale; candid; innocent.
Branco (white)	*adjective*		
	noun	the colour of the lime, snow or milk.	someone of the Caucasian race; someone of this colour.

Starting with the word *cor* (colour), it is interesting to note that, in the Portuguese language, we apply the expression *person of colour* to designate a *person who does not belong to the white race*. This is a lexical form with a neutral content commonly deployed by people seeking to avoid the words *preto* or *negro* because of the pejorative meanings these have acquired over time. However, odd as though it may seem, according to this usage, black people are the only persons to deemed to have a colour and as if all other human beings are bereft of colour.

As to the words *preto* and *negro*, they have acquired, beyond their original meaning related to an objective phenomenon–the colour of some objects in the physical world–, negative and/or pejorative meanings, resulting from the power relations established by Portuguese people with black people ever since their first encounter. This, in fact, took place right at the beginning of centuries of colonization, marked by slavery, exploitation and discrimination against black people by Portuguese whites[4] and the foundations for the construction of a black *other* grounded on fixed stereotypes and prejudices. This also explains why, in opposition, some extensions of the meaning of the word *branco* started getting connoted with positive aspects and virtues, such as innocence and purity.

According to Ryszard Kapuściński (2008: 22),

"The image of the Other that Europeans had when they set out to conquer the planet was of a naked savage, a cannibal and pagan, whose humiliation and oppression is the sacred right and duty of the European – who is white and Christian".

In the Portuguese language, there are also some idiomatic expressions in which the words *preto*, *escuro* or *negro* are applied with a negative

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[4] As stated earlier, I limit myself to the Portuguese case, although a deep study of Portuguese colonialism cannot be dissociated from the colonialism practiced by other European countries, all of them with significant consequences in their languages and cultures (and in European culture as a whole).

meaning and others in which the word *white* becomes imbued with positive content as set out in the following table:

Table 2. Examples of Portuguese idiomatic expressions with the words *preto* (black), *negro* (negro) and *branco* (white)

Idiomatic expressions	Literal translation	Conveyed meaning
A coisa está preta	the thing is black	it is a very bad situation
Negócios escuros	black businesses	illegal businesses
Um dia negro	a black day	a day when something very sad or upsetting happens
Ver o future negro	to see a black future	to face a hopeless future
Ter a alma negra	to have a black soul	to be a very bad person
Ter a alma branca	to have a white soul	To be a very good person
Branquear dinheiro	to whiten money	To launder money.

In conclusion, the words *preto* and *negro*, as well as many of the expressions they make up, have over time acquired specific semantic contents holding a negative and/or pejorative value in opposition to the positive meanings attributed to the word *branco*, a phenomenon only explainable by reference to the discourses articulated around the skin colours of the peoples involved: those with black skin, savages without religion, civilization, culture, humanity; and those with white skin, European, cultured, civilized, Christians, owners of a continent and aiming to possess the entire world.

However, as Stuart Hall and other constructivists have advocated, there are no final, fixed or true meanings; individuals in society apply meaning and, for such reason, we must not confuse "the *material* world, where things and people exist, and the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate." (Stuart Hall, 2007: 25). Furthermore, according to this same author:

"it is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others." (*ibid*).

Thus, within a culture, meaning does not solely depend on words, but often on

"larger units of analysis – narratives, statements, groups of images, whole discourses which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority" (Hall, 2007: 42).

In this sense, meaning is also determined and constructed by the dominant discourses in each time and place with such discourses including all the discursive practices characterizing in the Foucauldian sense the way of thinking about a certain topic in a given historical place. For this reason, the study of particular texts or practices matters less than analysis of the discursive formations from which these texts derive (Stuart Hall, 2007).

Starting out from my reflection on the words *cor*, *preto*, *negro* and *branco* (*colour*, *black*, *negro*, *white*), highlighting their basic meanings and some of their metaphorical/metonymic extensions, as well as the role played by discourse and discursive formations in the construction of meaning, we need to gauge to what extent the negative and/or pejorative usages of these words reflect and contribute to the construction of a racist and discriminatory conception of a black *other* within the Portuguese colonial and postcolonial discourses and practices.

For this purpose, I have chosen two Portuguese youth novels as objects of analysis, *Uma Questão de Cor*[5], 2010, by Ana Saldanha, and *Baunilha e Chocolate*[6], 2001, by Ana Meireles and both written in our postcolonial period and addressing the issue of racism in contemporary Portuguese society. From this perspective, analysing the title of both novels proves relevant: the first, *Uma Questão de Cor*, a metaphorical expression referring to the issue of racism, and the second, *Baunilha e Chocolate*, metonymically connoting the skin colour of white and black people.

The construction of a black *other* within Portuguese colonial discourses

In Portugal, a colonial country subjected to a dictatorial regime for over four decades and that lasted until April 1974 and engaged in colonial wars during the latter years of this period, the dominant discourses and practices in all spheres of power during that era were predominantly

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[5] *A Question of Colour* (my translation)

[6] *Vanilla and Chocolate* (my translation)

discriminatory and racist towards black people. However, racism was also present in many white Portuguese mentalities, with consequent repercussions in the language and thus explaining the *pejorative* meaning the words *preto* and *negro* acquired when applied to a black skinned person. As one example, I would quote an excerpt from the recently published book *O Retorno*[7] (2012), by Dulce Maria Cardoso, which quite accurately conveys how colonized black people were perceived by Portuguese whites during colonialism:

> "o problema é que eles não têm cabeça, eles são os pretos, os que conhecemos e os que não conhecemos. Os pretos. A não ser que se queira explicar o que são, aí é o preto, o preto é preguiçoso, gostam de estar ao sol como lagartos, o preto é arrogante, se caminham de cabeça baixa é só para não olharem para nós, o preto é burro, não entendem o que se lhes diz, o preto é abusador, se lhe damos a mão querem logo o braço, o preto é ingrato, por muito que lhe façamos nunca estão contentes, podia-se estar horas a falar do preto mas os brancos não gostam de perder tempo com isso, basta dizer, é preto e já se sabe do que a casa gasta." (Cardoso, 2012: 25).

> "The problem is that they do not have heads, they are blacks, those we know and those we don't know. The blacks. Unless you want to explain what they are, then it is black. The black is lazy, they enjoy lying in the sun like lizards. The black is arrogant, if they walk with their heads down, it is just because they don't want to look at us. The black is dumb, they don't understand what we say to them. The black is an intruder, if we give them a hand they immediately want your arm. The black is ungrateful, no matter how much we do for them, they are never happy. We could spend hours talking about the black, but the whites don't like wasting time on this, it's enough to say, it is black and we all know what we are talking about" (my translation).

Postcolonial discourse in contemporary Portuguese youth literature

After the April 1974 revolution, which brought an end to dictatorship and led to the independence of the colonies, Portuguese society has been changing across many different levels throughout the last few decades. In the global world we today live in, "a world fundamentally characterized by

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[7] In spite of not belonging to the category of youth literature, I have decided to present here an excerpt from this book as it portrays, in a very raw and direct fashion, the dominant images of black people in one former Portuguese colony, Angola.

objects in motion [which] include ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques" Appadurai (2001: 5), with increasing advances in high technologies for information and communication, which keep us permanently connected to *others* on a global scale, multiculturalism today represents one of the most striking aspects of Portuguese society.

All these factors have contributed to altering the political, institutional and social discourses and practices related to the *other*–an *otherness* that has come to include, nowadays, not only the ex-colonized, but also immigrants coming from all over the world–; however, that does not mean that racism has completely disappeared from some white people's mentalities and discourses.

In this context, children and youth literature, emerging as a cultural practice whose functions include providing entertainment and the development of reading habits in young readers, but also and mainly their socialization, play an important role in the development of an intercultural dialogue among young people from different cultures. In fact, as Emer O'Sullivan has claimed (2005: 13):

"Belonging firmly within the 'domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience' (Stephens, 1992: 8), it [children's literature] is a body of literature into which the dominant social, cultural and educational norms are inscribed."

Taking this into account, I have chosen to analyze two Portuguese youth novels, whose theme is that of racism among young people in Portuguese schools. First of all, it must be said that within Portuguese children and youth literature, there is a significant number of books for children approaching this subject, but very few for youth.

Another striking aspect is that, if we consider "school" as a microcosm tending to reflect the multiculturalism of our society and reproducing the discourses and practices characterizing relations among individuals living here, in the two above mentioned books–*Uma Questão de Cor* and *Baunilha e Chocolate*–only white and black students are represented, with the black being the victims of intolerant and discriminatory attitudes. This may be explained by the fact that people from the former African colonies still constitute the main set of ethno-cultural groups in Portugal: in 2006, people arriving from PALOP [8] countries represented 34.1% of all foreigners officially residing in the country (Felix Neto, 2010: 26).

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[8] Acronym used to designate Official Portuguese Language African Countries.

In the book, *Uma Questão de Cor*, the main character is a fourteen-year-old white girl, named Nina, whose uncle had lived in Mozambique and married a black woman from South Africa. They came to Portugal and Nina's black cousin started attending her school. The racist reactions of some schoolmates did not take long in coming: they called him "tostadinho" (toasted), "escurinho" (darkie) and Vítor, Nina's best friend, commented on the black boy's name, Daniel, in the following way: "I thought it [his name] would be just something like Quintundo or Jimbindi. In Africa there are only these really preposterous type names"[9] (Saldanha, 2010: 57).

The book also includes the description of a situation on the bus, where an old woman asserts, so loudly that all the other passengers could hear her: "they [the blacks] should go to their homeland (...)"; and looking at the woman sitting next to her, she goes on:

> "I don't have anything against them, but what are they doing here? Have you seen that "pretalhada"[10] in the news all demonstrating? They want money, they must all go to their own countries (...)". (Saldanha, 2010: 59).

Daniel, Nina's black cousin, never reacts to these provocations. However, he is unkind whether to his black mother when she speaks Portuguese incorrectly, or even to those who try to have good relationships with him. This makes Nina sometimes feel sad or even angry, but her grandfather explains to her:

> "Without being aware, you think that being negro or mulatto is a disadvantage; and that, for that reason, Daniel should be very grateful to you for being on his side. The worst is that Danny maybe also feels his race as an issue. This is one of the worst consequences of racism, self-contempt" (Saldanha, 2010: 74).

In the other youth novel, *Baunilha e Chocolate*, we have a heroine, an Angolan black girl, named Jasmim, ironically the name of a white flower. About her name she says:

> "I've got a white dress because jasmines are white, aren't they? (...) White isn't a fragile colour, as we can think at first sight. White is a strong colour that nobody dares to tread on." (...) But everyone treads on me. After all, I

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[9] The quotations of the two Portuguese youth novels were translated into English, in order to facilitate the reading of the present paper.

[10] Pejorative word for saying *all those black people.*

am a black jasmine. I was born in a poor land, in Africa" (Meireles, 2001: 10).

Her parents had come to Portugal looking for a better life, but things did not work out well: her mother died and her father started drinking too much, became violent and was put in prison, although Jasmim did not know why. The thirteen-year-old girl was sent to an institution for adolescents and began attending a public school, where she had to deal with her white schoolmates. There, she meets Ana, who becomes her friend and gives her a diary on her birthday.

This also explains why the novel is written in diary form, within which the heroine dialogues and describes her emotions, her memories, sorrows and fears. And Jasmim's greatest fear, she confesses to her diary, is to become visible; for that reason, she wears her "shield of invisibility", even knowing that such a feat "would be almost impossible for a girl of the colour of bitter chocolate" (Meireles, 2001: 12). This invisibility is so important to her that she even claims: "My survival depends often on keeping myself invisible" (Meireles, 2001: 18, 19). However, her methods of invisibility do not work as expected and provocative attitudes towards her soon emerge among her classmates. "Blacks are very clever or very stupid people. You there, so silent, what are you really?",–one white boy loudly demanded of her (Meireles, 2001: 12). Furthermore, one day, on entering the classroom, she realized someone had written in big letters on the board: "We don't want the blacks! The black must return to Africa!" (Meireles, 2001: 106).

Jasmim also complains about her teachers, who do not understand her, who want her to speak Portuguese well and understand things and subjects she has never heard about. At first, she behaves really badly; she does not study and aggressively responds to everyone around her.

However, in time, things start improving. The school librarian becomes her best friend; she protects Jasmim, helps her, gives her good advice and even invites her to spend weekends with her. A white boy falls in love with Jasmim, and Ana, her first friend at school, always remains on her side.

It can be said that both novels, even though not choosing to present an overtly happy ending, leave the reader with the impression that, in the future, things will likely get better for both characters who are victims of racism: Daniel and Jasmim.

Conclusion

It may be claimed that, in the two youth novels discussed, written in the Portuguese postcolonial period, the issue of racism between white and black people is addressed from a European perspective tending to "stress not so much the definitive end of colonialism as, and specially, a different way of reading the present and the past"[11] (Manuela Ribeiro Sanches, 2005: 8).

In the novel *Vanilla and Chocolate*, the main character is a black girl, who is portrayed as a victim of racism at school and speaks in the first person about her feelings and fears, demanding from the real author of the book that she *dresses* her heroine's black skin, that she inhabits a place and time where she does not belong and which she does not know from the inside. This may help explain some contradictions in the book, particularly 'the perfect Portuguese' used by Jasmim in her diary, the same diary where she complains a lot about her difficulties speaking or writing this language.

In the novel *A Question of Colour*, the heroine is a white girl who describes, in the first person and as an observer, the discriminatory attitudes towards her cousin and the reasons she finds it so difficult for her to understand the way he reacts to them. This makes the approach easier for the real author of the book, who does not need to dwell so deeply on the feelings and thoughts of the discriminated black boy, Daniel.

However, I should add that the real authors of both novels, by giving voice to the singularity and particularities of two young black characters, Daniel and Jasmim, try to locate themselves far from a view on racism that is still prevalent in contemporary Portuguese society, a view marked by discriminatory attitudes towards black people, by a discourse in which the words *black* and *negro* very often still acquire extremely negative connotations.

As recent examples of Portuguese modern youth literature, a cultural practice whose main function incorporates the socialization of its young readers, both youth novels thematize an issue that affects the social and cultural structures of our society: the difficulties young people experience in constructing multicultural identities and in breaking down stereotypes and prejudices against seemingly foreign cultures. Indeed, as Félix Neto has stated in his book *Portugal Intercultural: Aculturação e Adaptação de jovens de Origem Imigrante* (2010), adolescence is a period in life when questions raised by the issue of immigration acquire great importance,

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[11] My translation.

because the young are simultaneously trying to adapt to a new culture and to all those changes characteristic of adolescent development (Félix Neto, 2010:9).

However, we cannot forget that the group of immigrants living in Portugal today is not only composed by black people, but by people coming from all over the world; in 2002, the statistical data already demonstrated the existence in Portuguese schools of more than 120 different nationalities with 80 languages spoken by students at home (J. António Gomes, Ana Margarida Ramos and Sara Reis Silva, 2009: 18). In this context, Portuguese youth literature should be concerned with portraying the full multicultural dimension of our schools in particular, and of our society in general, thus playing an important role in the construction of an intercultural dialogue among young people, a dialogue *in many colours and not only in black and white*. In fact, as Tzvetan Todorov underlines,

> "In today's and tomorrow's world, encounters between people and communities belonging to different cultures are destined to become more and more frequent; the participants alone can prevent them turning into conflicts" (Todorov, 2010: 11).

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