

“Love Is What Love Does” — Stories of Representation and Belonging in *Hair Love*, by Matthew A. Cherry / “O amor é o que o amor faz” — histórias de representatividade e pertencimento em *Amor de cabelo*, de Matthew A. Cherry

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ABSTRACT

This text reflects on the representativeness of the kinky hair (or afro-textured hair) as an element of racial belonging in children’s literature, based on the book *Hair Love*, by the African American director, producer, and writer Matthew A. Cherry. To do so, it investigates how the illustrations by Vashti Harrison, also an African American, align with the text to express a vision of black individuals and of their family without usual stereotypes. Drawing on bell hooks’ notion of love, this analysis undertakes a reading that runs through both thematic and structural aspects of the narrative, hypothesizing that the book, without making direct allusions, serves as a counter-discourse to the racism that originated during slavery, the effects of which can still be felt today. From a theoretical perspective, in addition to hooks, this reading is grounded on a conceptual framework guided by the studies of Eliane Debus, Grada Kilomba and Nilma Lina Gomes.

KEYWORDS: Children’s literature; Kinky hair; Black authorship; Illustration

RESUMO

Este texto reflete sobre a representatividade do cabelo crespo como elemento de pertencimento racial na literatura infantil, ancorando-se no livro Amor de cabelo, do diretor, produtor e escritor negro norte-americano Matthew A. Cherry. Para tanto, investiga como as imagens da ilustradora Vashti Harrison, também uma norte-americana negra, comungam com o texto para expressarem uma visão da pessoa negra e de seu núcleo familiar sem os estereótipos usuais. Cotejando a noção de amor de bell hooks, esta análise empreende uma leitura que vagueia tanto pelos aspectos temáticos como estruturais da narrativa, tendo como hipótese de que o livro, sem fazer alusão direta, é um contradiscurso ao racismo que se origina no período da escravidão, cujos efeitos podem ser sentidos até hoje. Do ponto de vista teórico, além de hooks, fundamenta esta leitura uma rede conceitual norteadada pelos estudos de Eliane Debus, Grada Kilomba e Nilma Lina Gomes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura infantil; Cabelo crespo; Autoria negra; Ilustração

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My hair is so kinky,
I wear an afro and I wear curls. Sometimes,
my father caresses it and his hand gets
stuck, it looks like it's tangled.
But it's not. It's an invitation to
curlycuddle. *Curlycuddle*
is a slower caress on my
head, on my curls.

Lázaro Ramos (emphasis in original)¹

“Hair to take the gloom away”

bell hooks

Hair and Black Body

Scenes of violence are often replicated. In *Hair Politics*, chapter of *Memories of the Plantation: Episodes of Everyday Racism* (2010),² Grada Kilomba states that black people's hair is perceived by white people as a “repulsive sign” that triggers the most adverse reactions; from the gesture of touching to feel its texture to the point of asking how it is washed, there is a kind of morbid curiosity, of estrangement, which results in embarrassment and atrocities that invade the black body. And why are these scenes being repeated non-stop? According to Kilomba, the answer lies in history; it is a legacy of the slave-owning past:

More than skin color, hair became the most potent mark of servitude during the enslavement period. Once Africans were enslaved, skin color was tolerated by the white master, but not hair, which became a symbol of ‘primitivity’, disorder, inferiority and un-civilization (Kilomba, 2010, p. 73, emphasis in original).³

To what extent is the *vision* of the slave ship, with its enslaved men and women who had their hair cut before or shortly after the ship docked, reproduced in the body-memory of the black person as part of the process of racial segregation? That is a question

¹ In Portuguese: “Meu cabelo é bem crespinho, / uso *black* e uso cachos. Às vezes, / meu pai faz um carinho e a mão fica / presa, parecendo um embaraço. / Mas não é. É um convite pra / fazer um denguidacho. / *Denguidacho* é um carinho mais demorado / na cabeça, nos meus cachos.”

² KILOMBA, Grada. *Hair Politics*. In: *Memories of the Plantation: Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Münster, Germany: Unrast Verlag, 2010. pp. 69–76.

³ For reference, see footnote 2.

that also concerns the ways in which art and literature display images that end up shaping our views of both the past and the present.

The writer and journalist Bianca Santana, in *Quando me descobri negra* [When I Discovered My Blackness] (2023), in the chapter “*O racismo nosso de cada dia escancarado no meu cabelo*” [Our Daily Racism of Exposed in My Hair], recounts the difficulty she had, for many years, in “build[ing] the confidence to let my hair loose, as afro hair” (2023, p. 34).⁴ That is not just one difficulty among others. It is related to the history of slavery, evoked by Kilomba, and its repercussions to this day. The desire for segregation always imposes a position of lesser value on the black body, associating it with narratives of subordination. Hair, in this context, is considered as the untamable part; it has therefore been continually manipulated. In the entry Hair and black identity from the *Dicionário escolar afro-brasileiro* [Afro-Brazilian School Dictionary], Nei Lopes explains that “the kinky hair of Africans and their descendants is the main defining element of their origin. That is why, in Brazil and in the Americas, attempts to escape from such mark, due to the imposition of the white standard of beauty, have almost always used expedients such as shaving or straightening the hair” (2015, p. 36).⁵

That is why in some countries, confronted with racist, sexist and male chauvinist discourses, policies of (self-)affirmation of the blackness have revolved around hair. The images of women and men, with their thick, kinky (or afro-textured) hair,⁶ from the American Black Power movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, are perhaps the most powerful in underpinning the counter-discourse of various black movements which, from then on, acted to change mentalities. In the text *Straightening Our Hair*, American activist and writer bell hooks states the following: “It was at this time that the natural hairdo, the ‘afro,’ became fashionable as a sign of cultural resistance to racist oppression and as a celebration of blackness” (1989, p. 1).⁷ Loose hair, growing “upwards,” therefore denotes a rebellion whose strength comes from the fact that it is *incorporated* into a discourse of

⁴ In Portuguese: “ganha[r] confiança em soltar o cabelo, bem armado.”

⁵ In Portuguese: “o cabelo crespo de africanos e descendentes é o principal elemento definidor de sua origem. Por isso, no Brasil e nas Américas, nas tentativas de fugir a essa marca, por imposição do padrão branco de beleza, quase sempre se empregaram expedientes como o de raspar ou alisar os cabelos.”

⁶ “*Encarapinhados*” is the term used by Nei Lopes in the entry for Hair and black identity, from the *Dicionário Escolar Afro-brasileiro* (2015, p. 36).

⁷ HOOKS, bell. *Straightening Our Hair*. In: *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. New York: South End Press, 1989. Available at: <https://professormarianthelibrarian.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/straightening-our-hair-by-bell-hooks.pdf>. Access on: May 10, 2024.

racial awareness, demarcating the identitarian character of belonging to a social and cultural group.

The release of the natural hairdo, however, is not the only way of doing politics with hair. Kilomba states that “Dreadlocks, Rasta, Afro-hair and African hairstyles convey a political message of racial empowerment and a protest against racial oppression. They are politicized and shape black women’s positions concerning ‘race,’ gender and beauty” (2010, p. 73).⁸ A whole visual history, for example, is told through the different hairstyles that are part of the culture of the African continent, distinguishing ethnicities, social classes, places. Women literally carry on their heads an ancient practice that remains alive. According to Nilma Lino Gomes, based on the studies by Sylvia A. Boone on the *Mende* culture, from Sierra Leone, “[...] a big head and lots of hair were qualities that African women wanted to have. [...] It [the hair] had to be clean, tidy and styled in a particular way, usually a specific braid design, according to the tradition of each ethnic group” (2003, p. 82).⁹

Also according to the author of the book *Sem perder a raiz: corpo e cabelo como símbolos da identidade negra* [Without Losing the Roots: Body and Hair As Symbols of Black Identity] (2020), in the text “*Trajéorias escolares, corpo negro e cabelo crespo: reprodução de estereótipos ou ressignificação cultural?*” [School Trajectories, Black Body and Kinky Hair: Reproduction of Stereotypes or Cultural Re-Signification?], “[the] body shows different aesthetic standards and perceptions of the world. Body paint, hairstyles and make-up, within specific cultural groups, acquire different meanings for those who adopt them and different meanings from one culture to another” (2002, p. 42).¹⁰ Although nowadays the origin of many of these practices has been lost, the traces of their affiliation with black culture are unquestionable, so much so that they trigger debates about cultural appropriation every time white people appropriate these symbols.

All of these aspects are and are not in the book *Hair Love* (2019), by the black American director, producer and writer Matthew A. Cherry. By telling the story of a day

⁸ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁹ In Portuguese: “[...] uma cabeça grande e com muito cabelo eram qualidades que as mulheres africanas queriam ter. [...] Ele [o cabelo] deveria ser limpo, asseado e penteado com um determinado estilo, geralmente um desenho específico de trança, conforme a tradição de cada grupo étnico.”

¹⁰ In Portuguese: “[o] corpo evidencia diferentes padrões estéticos e percepções de mundo. Pinturas corporais, penteados, maquiagem adquirem, dentro de grupos culturais específicos, sentidos distintos para quem os adota e significados diferenciados de uma cultura para outra.”

in the life of a girl who wants to style her kinky hair for a special occasion, without dealing with the antagonisms that surround this hair on a discursive level, the author subverts any sign of negativity. The lack of problematization in the representation of the black child is here a mark of an insurgency against the racism that part of a community of young readers has to confront on a daily basis. It is impressive how such complex issues are displaced by the absence of ostensive criticism, which ultimately *prevents* didacticism, but not reflection. Before we see how this happens, we will look into some of the postulates that shape and reshape the hair of black people in children's literature.

1 Hair and Black Body in Children's Literature (with a Bit of the School)

One of the reasons why the images of *Hair Love* are so simple is because they are still unusual. It is more common for the visible world to confine black people to the condition of being flogged, branded with irons or mutilated. The representation of a given culture as a *coisa de negro* [black stuff] is sometimes at the service of the visual pleasure through the exotic — images of men in *capoeira dance*, of women dressed as *baianas*, of black braided hair are common examples. The subversive nature of the black body is made invisible in order to support racist discourses that place the color of the skin and the shape of the nose and of the mouth and the type of hair of black people as different. And it is a “difference,” as Kilomba argues when addressing the topic of hair, “[...] used as a mark for intrusion” (2010, p. 70).¹¹

That is why the relationship with the body among black people, especially with the hair, results in complex experiences, ranging from the rejection of the natural hair to the acceptance and consequent understanding that the celebration of the body is also “[...] a liberatory struggle that frees mind and heart” (hooks, 1989, p. 5).¹² For bell hooks, such rite of passage was directly associated with her relationship with her hair: “True liberation of my hair came when I stopped trying to control it in any state and just accepted it as it is. It has been only in recent years that I have ceased to worry about what other people would say about my hair” (1989, p. 5).¹³ From a fictional perspective, hooks materializes

¹¹ For reference, see footnote 2.

¹² For reference, see footnote 7.

¹³ For reference, see footnote 7.

this condition by publishing the book *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999).¹⁴ The verbal and the visual texts work as an invitation to re-signify kinky hair, and “[...] it also allows us to look at our ancestry, because when we think of kinky hair as queenly hair, it is impossible not to remember the great African queens and their relationship with hair as a symbol of power and belonging” (Carvalho, 2019, p. 564).¹⁵

In a 1978 text entitled “Preconceito de cor: diversas formas, um mesmo objetivo” [Skin-Color Prejudice: Different Forms, Same Goal], Kabengele Munanga states that discrimination was constructed by white people for the benefit of the legitimation of their supremacy (1978, p. 146). In order to assert their superiority, the image of the other was deconstructed — in this case, that of the black person. On the other hand, in an attempt to break away from the condition of inferiority to which they have been subjected, black people “[...] project their salvation onto an ideology of whiteness” (Munanga, 1978, p. 146).¹⁶ An example of such ideology is mentioned by the Brazilian-Congolese anthropologist and professor:

Black women continue to wear wigs and to straighten their hair to look like white women, who are the standards for human beauty. In countries where public authorities have succeeded in banning the wig, cosmetic creams and straightening combs, specially made for black women’s hair, persist here and there (Munanga, 1978, p. 149).¹⁷

Such consequence of colonialism, which Munanga called “alienation,” is one of the perversities of racism, or, as Stuart Hall put it when he called himself a “black Jamaican man,” it was a way of making us “[...] experience *ourselves* as ‘Other’” (1990, p. 225, emphasis in original),¹⁸ and, for him, in extreme cases, “this inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms” (1990, p. 226).¹⁹

¹⁴ HOOKS, bell. *Happy to Be Nappy*. Illustrations Chris Raschka. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 1999.

¹⁵ In Portuguese: “como também nos possibilita olhar para a ancestralidade, pois, ao pensarmos em cabelo crespo de rainha, impossível não lembrarmos das grandes rainhas africanas e suas relações com o cabelo como símbolo de poder e pertencimento.”

¹⁶ In Portuguese: “[...] projeta sua salvação numa ideologia de branqueamento.”

¹⁷ In Portuguese: “A mulher negra continua a usar peruca e alisar o cabelo para se parecer com a branca, que é o ponto de referência de beleza humana. Em países onde a autoridade pública conseguiu banir a peruca, resiste de cá e de lá o creme cosmético e o pente de alisar, especialmente fabricados para os cabelos das mulheres negras.”

¹⁸ HALL, Stuart. Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In: RUTHERFORD, J. (ed.). *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London, United Kingdom: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. pp. 222–237.

¹⁹ For reference, see footnote 19.

The expropriation of black people's history, spread under the sign of the violence of slavery, begins early, in childhood. In the book *Quem tem medo do feminismo negro?* [Who is Afraid of Black Feminism?] (2018), Djamila Ribeiro writes: “[...] every day I had to listen to jokes involving my hair and the color of my skin. [...] When the figure of an enslaved woman appeared in the text book, I knew there would be comments like ‘look at Djamila’s mother’” (Ribeiro, 2018, pp. 7–8).²⁰ Gomes also draws attention to the reiteration of stereotypes directed at black children within the school space:

At school, there is also the requirement to ‘fix your hair,’ which is nothing new for black families. But such requirement often comes to these families with a very different meaning as compared to that given by mothers when looking after their sons and daughters. At times, the care given by these mothers is unable to prevent black children from being the target of jokes and derogatory nicknames within the school environment, even when their hair is well-groomed and combed (Gomes, 2002, p. 45, emphasis in original).²¹

The reiteration of such hijacking of black beauty is also present in literature books for children. For a long time, black characters were not seen in children's literature and, when they did appear, they were represented in a negative way, portrayed in a vulnerable condition. Either they were homeless children who suffered all kinds of deprivation, inducing pity; or they were the representation of servile docility, playing a role of subservience; or they were characters who mirrored the maxim of prejudice by being portrayed as blacks with a white soul (Debus, 2017, p. 30).

These aggressions were part of the process of construction of the invisibility of the black subject. In what is known as classic children's literature, made up mainly of Nordic fairy tales, princesses have skin as white as snow, and princes are blond, blue-eyed boys. In animations, too, we find the same problem. It was not until 2009 that the Walt Disney Studios created a story with a black princess, although this still reinforced stereotypes of the white imaginary regarding black people. In any case, Tiana, a character

²⁰ In Portuguese: “[...] todo dia eu tinha que ouvir piadas envolvendo meu cabelo e a cor da minha pele. [...] Quando aparecia a figura de uma mulher escravizada na cartilha ou no livro, sabia que viriam comentários como ‘olha a mãe da Djamila aí.’”

²¹ In Portuguese: “Na escola também se encontra a exigência de ‘arrumar o cabelo’, o que não é novidade para a família negra. Mas essa exigência, muitas vezes, chega até essa família com um sentido muito diferente daquele atribuído pelas mães ao cuidarem dos seus filhos e filhas. Em alguns momentos, o cuidado dessas mães não consegue evitar que, mesmo apresentando-se bem penteada e arrumada, a criança negra deixe de ser alvo das piadas e apelidos pejorativos no ambiente escolar.”

from *The Princess and the Frog*, had a remarkable African-American representation, and the film was acclaimed by the critics and by the public. In 2023, Disney released a live-action version of *The Little Mermaid*, with Ariel as a black princess. And once again, instead of telling stories linked to black, Afro-diasporic culture, they chose to *embody* blackness in whiteness.

However, as far as children's literature is concerned, in various countries, and that is the case of Brazil and of the United States (USA), there have been substantial changes, despite the intense debate that questions from the validity to the complexity of such literature. That is because, on the one hand, there is the adult in the production process and, on the other, the child as the recipient, which can result in the voice of latter being silenced. There are also discussions about the concept, the aesthetic-literary value, the articulation (or the lack of it) between verbal and visual languages, as well as questions about the role of reading mediators and the publishing market.

Even the definition of children's literature is complex. Peter Hunt, in a text published in *Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature*, highlights the following:

To define children's literature may seem to be marking out a territory. It is, but only in so far as the subject needs some delimitation if it is to be manageable. Yet, despite the flux of childhood, the children's book can be defined in terms of the implied reader. It will be clear, from a careful reading, who a book is designed for: whether it is for the developing child, or whether it is aiming somewhere over the child's head (Hunt, 1996, pp. 16–17).²²

Still according to Hunt (1996),²³ a significant portion of literary critics tend to analyze this literature as being *inferior* precisely because of its target audience. An important contributing factor is that, in its origins, didactic, pedagogical and moralizing aspects of children's literature overshadowed the literary aspect, treating the aesthetic realm as secondary. On the other hand, another group of literary criticism — and this segment includes specialists in the field as well as authors and the illustrators — has taken a step forward with the aim of analyzing children's literature based on the specificities of both verbal and visual languages, of the conception of the graphic design, reconciling the

²² HUNT, Peter. Defining Children's Literature. In: EGOFF, Sheila *et al.* (eds.). *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*. Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press, 1996. pp. 3–17.

²³ For reference, see footnote 23.

thematic perspective with the different ways of expression that make up the writers' language.

According to Eliane Debus, "children's and young adults' literature, as a cultural production that focuses on language, obey aesthetically literary criteria" (2017, p. 28).²⁴ That does not always translate into the ways of reading, which continue to place more emphasis on the didactic aspects. Debus states that the "literary text shares with readers, regardless of their age, values of a social, cultural, historical and/or ideological nature, because it is a product of culture and it is integrated into a communicative process" (2017, p. 29),²⁵ but it does so indirectly, establishing negotiations with the multiple meanings of the fictional fabric. Celso Sisto, writer and illustrator of children's and young adult books, when dealing with this topic, alludes to the concept of a "deviant place" (2005, p. 12),²⁶ which is an "open territory" (2005, p. 121),²⁷ because it concerns the poetic, "[...] the way in which the work relates to reality,"²⁸ how it addresses the reader and how a given text relates to other texts (2005, p. 121).

It is common ground, in these reflections, that children's literature combines the aesthetic and the thematic realms, despite the tendency, in readings, to favor the latter; as in the other arts, it participates in the circumscription of reality in its fictional field. According to Sisto, "[i]n other words, textual elements refer to literariness (what is the literary of the text?), to intention (who is speaking in the work?), to representation (what is the work talking about?), to reception (who is the work talking to?)" (Sisto, 2005, p. 121).²⁹

The role of illustration is not a minor aspect in this debate, as analyzing a children's literature book also involves looking carefully at the layout of the images; whether there is an approximation, complementarity, symbiosis or conflict between verbal text and visual text. According to Cristina Biazetto, an illustrator and writer of

²⁴ In Portuguese: "literatura infantil e juvenil, como produção cultural que tem seu foco na linguagem, obedece a critérios esteticamente literários."

²⁵ In Portuguese: "[o] texto literário partilha com os leitores, independente da idade, valores de natureza social, cultural, histórica e/ou ideológica por ser uma realização da cultura e estar integrado num processo comunicativo."

²⁶ In Portuguese: "lugar desviante."

²⁷ In Portuguese: "território aberto."

²⁸ In Portuguese: "[...] ao modo como a obra se relaciona com a realidade."

²⁹ In Portuguese: "[d]ito de outra forma, os elementos textuais se referem à literariedade (o que é o literário do texto?), à intenção (quem fala na obra?), à representação (sobre o que a obra fala?), à recepção (para quem a obra fala?)."

books for children, “[the] illustration does not only refer to spaces in the text: it reflects a universe and a particular way of seeing by the illustrator, who leaves a mark of his or her knowledge and experience on the work” (2008, p. 75).³⁰ As for reception, the maxim of the renowned Brazilian author and illustrator Rui de Oliveira applies: “I believe that one of the primary functions of illustration is to create the child’s affective and happy memory” (2008, p. 44).³¹

In the midst of these disputes, the publication of books written by black male and female authors has increased the presence of black children as protagonists, in works that deal with issues such as the empowerment of their culture and the recognition of their ancestry. There has also been a repositioning of real characters who had been banished from the official records of History.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, books that constitute “new cultural practices,” to use Hall’s famous expression (1990, p. 222),³² appeared on the publishing market. Instead of rescuing an identity, these books excavate it, in an incessant movement of elaborating new identities. In this movement take part, among many other titles, books such as *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999),³³ by bell hooks, *Sulwe* (2019),³⁴ by Lupita Nyong’o, and *Hair Love* (2019),³⁵ by Matthew A. Cherry, all by North American authors; *Chico Juba* (2011), by Gustavo Gaivota, *O cabelo de Lelê* [Lelê’s Hair] (2012), by Valéria Belém, and *O Black Power de Akim* [Akim’s Black Power] (2020), by Kiusam de Oliveira, by Brazilian authors. These books have in common the fact that the protagonists are black children whose narratives affirm their racial identity in the way they wear their hair. Notwithstanding the specificities of each narrative, there is a motto that unites them, namely discussions about kinky hair, to the point of humanizing it, as happens in *Hair Love*.

³⁰ In Portuguese: “[a] ilustração não referencia somente espaços do texto: ela reflete um universo e um modo de ver particular do ilustrador, que imprime em seu trabalho o seu conhecimento e sua experiência.”

³¹ In Portuguese: “Acredito que uma das funções primordiais da ilustração é criar a memória afetiva e feliz da criança.”

³² For reference, see footnote 19.

³³ For reference, see footnote 15.

³⁴ NYONG’O, Lupita. *Sulwe*. Illustrations Vashti Harrison. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2019.

³⁵ For reference, see footnote 11.

2 The Book *Hair Love* (Along with a Few Others)

Hair Love is the debut novel by American writer Matthew A. Cherry, best known in the art scene as a film director, producer and editor. The book was published in May 2019 in the USA and soon afterwards was released as an animated short film.³⁶ Directed by Cherry and Bruce W. Smith, it won an Oscar for Best Animated Short Film in 2020. *Hair Love* tells the story of Zuri, a little black girl who has hair with a *mind of its own* and is helped by her father to deal with it on a special occasion. The illustration immediately emphasizes that it is not a question of expressing unease about her hair, not even in an allusive way. Zuri's confidence, firmness and joy come from the protection represented first by her father and then by her mother. Not surprisingly, everything takes place in a house, where contrasting colors coexist with pastel shades, indicating both strength and harmony.

The story told in the animation has more facts than the one in the book, but some aspects bring them closer together, namely the representation of the black family, the bond between father and daughter and the protagonism of Zuri's kinky hair. In the case of the book, one of Cherry's best decisions was to give Zuri a voice. There is an intradiegetic narrator who tells the story in the first person. This perspective, unlike third-person narration, creates, according to Cuti in the book *Literatura negro-brasileira* [Afro-Brazilian Literature] (2010), "an illusion of a testimonial account,"³⁷ which, by emphasizing verisimilitude, generates empathy. For the author, "[t]his way, Afro-Brazilian literature appears to readers as a unique opportunity for reflection on their personal beliefs and fantasies" (2010, p. 87)³⁸ — not only reflection, but also breaking through the silencing imposed on black people. This structural feature of the book becomes even more representative if we consider that first-person narratives are less common in children's literature. In fact, such narratives began to appear with the advent of the recognition of childhood as a different phase from adult life. If children's social

³⁶ Produced by Sony Pictures Animation, the animated short film *Hair Love* lasts 6 minutes and 47 seconds and premiered on August 14, 2019, in the USA. The film was uploaded to *YouTube* and, at the time of its release, it had over 19 million views. *Hair Love* is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNw8V_Fkw28. Access on: Oct. 18, 2023.

³⁷ In Portuguese: "uma ilusão de testemunho."

³⁸ In Portuguese: "[d]essa maneira, a literatura negro-brasileira surge para os leitores como uma singular oportunidade de reflexão relativa às suas convicções e fantasias pessoais."

image is altered, that means that they can also have their “place of speech” — we are briefly alluding here to the expression that is also the title of Djamila Ribeiro’s book (2019) —, even if this “place of speech” is mediated by the voice of the adult who conceives what is said, fictionally, through the voice of the child.

The identification created by first-person narration extends to what is said by the narrator and protagonist, which, in the fantasy play typical of reading at this age, tends to become a reference for the child: “My name is Zuri, and I have hair that has a mind of its own. It kinks, coils, and curls every which way” (Cherry, 2019, pp. 6–7).³⁹ Referring the proper name at the very beginning is not just any indicator; it is already a sign of recognition of the protagonism, which will be reinforced throughout the story. In the story, the “a mind of its own” of the hair will always be conditioned to the will of its owner, whose expressions of discontent every time the hairstyles do not turn out as expected are the keynote of the plot. According to the *Dicionário de nomes próprios* [Dictionary of Proper Names] (online), the name “[...] Zuri originates from the Swahili language, one of the official languages of some African countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.”⁴⁰ Such name therefore carries the heritage of the ancestors’ history. Zuri also “means beautiful girl.” The combination of the meanings of ancestry and beauty runs through the narrative in the various hairstyles presented, in such a way that each one is representative of a collective memory of belonging.

The story told by Zuri takes place on a day in her life that is both ordinary and special, and the end of the narrative will explain why that is so. Every movement of the narrator, from the moment she wakes up to the moment of a long-awaited reunion, revolve around her desire for a different hairstyle. And the father takes part in this saga, as he is the one who looks after his daughter in the absence of the female figure who, for the most part of the narrative, is a presumed absent. According to Stephanie Borges, in a review published in the magazine *Quatro Cinco Um* [Four Five One], the intention, based on an interview that Cherry gave to *The New York Times*, was to show “[...] the image of a black father who takes part in raising his daughter” (2020, online).⁴¹ Most of the time, that is

³⁹ For reference, see footnote 11.

⁴⁰ In Portuguese: “[...] Zuri tem origem a partir da língua suaíli, uma das línguas oficiais de alguns países africanos como o Quênia, a Tanzânia e a Uganda.” Available at: <https://www.dicionariodenomespropios.com.br/zuri/>. Access on: Oct. 23, 2023.

⁴¹ In Portuguese: “[...] a imagem de um pai negro que participa da criação da filha.”

not the way society views these fathers; on the contrary, the established images of the black man — encompassed in the figures of the scoundrel, the thug, the seducer, the drug dealer, the unskilled worker etc. — have usurped the figure of the father, perceived as the one who abandons.

Father and daughter occupy most of the cover of the book, visually indicating that the story is about them; more than that, the story is about what unites them, i.e. love. By the way, this aspect is rather unusual in children's literature, considering that it is more common for books to address the relationship between mother and daughter. An example is the book *Sulwe* (2019).⁴² by the actress and film producer Lupita Nyong'o. In the narrative, Sulwe, a girl who “was born the color of midnight” (Nyong'o, 2019, p. 7),⁴³ is having a crisis because “[s]he looked like nothing like her family” (Nyong'o, 2019, p. 7).⁴⁴ According to the girl, “Mama was the color of dawn, Baba the color of dusk,” and Mich, her sister, “was the color of high noon” (Nyong'o, 2019, pp. 8–9).⁴⁵ It is to her mother that Sulwe expresses the pain of not looking like the people in her family. The girl's process of self-acceptance is intertwined with the loving relationship she shares with her mother. At some point in the story, her mother says to her: “Brightness is not in your skin, my love. Brightness is just who you are. As for beauty [...] [y]ou are beautiful. But you can't rely on what you look like to make you feel beautiful, my sweet. Real beauty comes from your mind and your heart” (Nyong'o, 2019, p. 19).⁴⁶ These words trigger in the daughter the desire for self-discovery to the extent of her realizing that “[s]he belonged out in the world! Dark and beautiful, bright and strong” (Nyong'o, 2019, p. 42).⁴⁷

A Brazilian children's literature book that also addresses a mother's care for her daughter is *Nina Bonita: A Story*, by Ana Maria Machado (1996).⁴⁸ Published in 1986, the book is considered a classic, having been one of the pioneers in featuring a black girl as the protagonist. Nowadays, almost 40 years after its publication, some scholars have pointed out problems, starting with the use of words such as “*pretinha*,” “little black girl”

⁴² For reference, see footnote 35.

⁴³ For reference, see footnote 35.

⁴⁴ For reference, see footnote 35.

⁴⁵ For reference, see footnote 35.

⁴⁶ For reference, see footnote 35.

⁴⁷ For reference, see footnote 35.

⁴⁸ MACHADO, Ana Maria. *Nina Bonita: A Story*. Translation Elena Iribarren. Illustrations Rosana Faria. San Diego, California: Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 1996.

in Portuguese, and “mulatta,”⁴⁹ and the fact that the rabbit, characterized as “black” in the verbal language, is depicted as brown in the illustrations of the Brazilian edition.⁵⁰ However, we emphasize the fact that this is a book that presents the loving relationship between mother and daughter. The verbal text ensures that when the narrator says that the “[...] mother loved to comb her [daughter’s] hair and would sometimes make tiny braids tied with colored ribbons” (Machado, 1996, p. 9).⁵¹

The illustrations by Claudius Ceccon for the Brazilian edition of *Nina Bonita* have their own syntax and semantics and expand the image of care, love and affection. By braiding her daughter’s hair, the mother is reaffirming a typical gesture within her culture and, from an early age, showing the daughter the importance of valuing her ethnic-racial traits and, consequently, her history. More than that, an affective ambience is created by the way in which verbal text and visual text are placed on the page, almost touching each other. “Many times, the text is immersed in the images, in a unique spatial combination, so that reading it happens simultaneously with reading the image. They are complementary languages that dialogue not only with each other, but also with the reader, simultaneously” (Fittipaldi, 2008, p. 117).⁵² *Sulwe, Nina Bonita: A Story and Hair Love* are part of this proposal put forward by Cica Fittipaldi.

On the cover of *Hair Love*, unconditional love is conveyed through the exchange of glances between Zuri and her father. The fact that the girl is on her father’s shoulders says a lot about them overcoming adversities together. It is as if he were saying: “I’ll carry you through every moment of your life.” In other words, the choices made by illustrator Vashti Harrison materialize the love mentioned in the title. And this is important because the first contact we have with a book is usually through its cover. In *Children’s Book Covers: Great Book Jacket and Cover Design*,⁵³ author Alan Powers (2003) traces the course of book covers becoming an essential part of the main body of the book, anticipating the pleasures of reading.

⁴⁹ This word is omitted in the American English translation.

⁵⁰ That does not happen in the American edition, in which there is a black rabbit.

⁵¹ For reference, see footnote 49.

⁵² In Portuguese: “Muitas vezes, o texto está imerso nas imagens, numa combinação espacial única, de forma que sua leitura acontece simultaneamente à leitura da imagem. São linguagens complementares que dialogam não só, entre si, como também com o leitor, simultaneamente.”

⁵³ POWERS, Alan. *Children’s Book Covers: Great Book Jacket and Cover Design*. London, United Kingdom: Mitchell Beazley, 2003.

Sophie Van der Linden, in *Para ler o livro ilustrado* [To Read the Illustrated Book] (2011), also emphasizes this characteristic, drawing attention to the fact that the reading pact is established right from the start; from the cover, one can anticipate the style of the illustration, foresee the type of discourse and even the genre. It is as if important moments in the story were already inscribed there by means of a “visual prolepsis.” For example, the image of the girl and her father, placed in the foreground, is an invitation to think about the adventure (or adventures) that will be experienced by both of two. And whatever it is, the gentle atmosphere created by the pastel color palette, which occupies the other part of the cover and runs throughout the book, heralds lightness, playfulness and a dream-like quality.

The title of the book, especially in its translation into Portuguese (*Amor de cabelo*), also builds an atmosphere of affection. In English, the title *Hair Love* means “love for hair.” If the title had been translated into Portuguese in more literal terms, the image would be reduced to a common expression, which would also impoverish the expression in English. *Hair Love* evokes to the memory of hair care, whose meaning, among other possibilities, is “taking care of the hair.” And such care is certainly what little Zuri conveys. Besides, the translation of *Hair Love* as *Amor de cabelo* adds another meaning to the title. In Portuguese, the use of the preposition “de” [of] instead of “para” [for] produces a twist, a deviation, in the grammar, causing strangeness, a common literary feature. In “*amor de cabelo*,” the term “*cabelo*” [hair] functions as the agent of the action and the expression “*de cabelo*” as an adnominal adjunct. Something similar occurs in the expression “*amor de mãe*” (mother’s love), in which “*mãe*” is the agent/subject of the action. However, “*mãe*” is an animated being, i.e., it has a life of its own. *A priori*, “hair” has no life, but in some parts of the story Zuri refers to it as if it did. Due to the expressive force of these linguistic devices, hair comes to life. The main role, therefore, is not only Zuri’s, but also her hair’s. This way of looking at the text goes against the grain, as it is an invitation to deconstruct racist stereotypes attributed to kinky hair. In this case, when Zuri’s hair is empowered, it also elevates the girl’s subjectivity, as expressed in the following passages: “With funky braids and beads, I am a princess,” “And when my hair is in two puffs, I am above the clouds like a superhero” (Cherry, 2019, pp. 9–10).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ For reference, see footnote 11.

If Zuri's hair is empowered, or enchanted, as it is typical in the realm of children's literary, the metaphors "I love that my hair lets me be me" and "My hair is Mommy, Daddy, and me" (Cherry, 2019, pp. 8, 34),⁵⁵ respectively, at the beginning and at end of the story, celebrate their belonging and self-identification and, at the same time, intensify the bonds of love within this family. The topic of love, so present in this narrative, is, therefore, an affirmative policy of black identity, of a *certain* identity forged in opposition to the one usually attributed to this community. From our point of view, it is not merely about adhering to a common *topos* in children's literature, whose body of works often have the care of the child as a *leitmotif*. It is a counter-discourse that challenges the constitution of patriarchy as a family model responsible for the male domination to which women and children are subjected. bell hooks (2000)⁵⁶ highlights the importance of understanding how this family structure is an impediment to love; and breaking it would introduce other ways of understanding how love (or its absence) affects us and our notion of community.

Being comfortable in one's own skin, here, is approached as a task that encompasses the whole family, in the face of adversity. Taking care of the hair, as explicitly shown in the animation and alluded to in the book, was the mother's task, whose absence could limit the possibilities of beautifying the hair, if there were not a strongly constituted identity that inspires the experiments carried out with the father's help. However, it does not end here. The end of the narrative reinforces the symbolic nature of hair care that unites the family, as the mother returns home after medical treatment, as someone who needs to be embraced. The yellow scarf on her head indicates, just through visual language, that she was away for a chemotherapy treatment and, as a result, her hair would have fallen out. In this interpretation, the metaphor "My hair is Mommy, Daddy, and me. It's hair love!" (Cherry, 2019, p. 34)⁵⁷ takes on more expressive contours, as it reinforces that the family is united again by love and, from the point of view of the magical universe, by the strength and power of Zuri's hair, which her mother lacks.

By metaphorically extending itself to the mother's body, in the end, the hair creates a magical atmosphere, already foreseen at the beginning — "My hair even does

⁵⁵ For reference, see footnote 11.

⁵⁶ HOOKS, bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. New York: William Morrow, 2000.

⁵⁷ For reference, see footnote 11.

magic tricks” (Cherry, 2019, p. 12)⁵⁸ —, and, at the same time, cathartic. In this “make-believe” universe, Zuri’s relationship with her hair suggests a rite of passage. In the plot of fairy tales, there are always obstacles to be overcome so that the heroine and/or hero are awarded some prize and, finally, live happily ever after. Tales such as *Cinderella* (Perrault, 2009),⁵⁹ *Sleeping Beauty* (Perrault, 2009)⁶⁰ and *Little Red Riding Hood* (Perrault, 2009)⁶¹ have in common female characters who are rewarded after overcoming obstacles imposed by antagonists or by destiny. Likewise, the rite of passage in the most diverse cultures is a celebration of some change that has occurred and may also be related to a process of self-acceptance.

In the book *Bintou’s Braids* (2001),⁶² by French-Senegalese writer Sylviane A. Diouf, the rite of passage is related to the age of the girls and manifests itself in the way their hair is arranged. As in *Hair Love*, the child character also has her own voice and introduces herself as such: “My name is Bintou and I want braids. My hair is short and fuzzy. My hair is plain and silly. All I have is four little tufts on my head” (Diouf, 2001, p. 8).⁶³ According to what Bintou says, in her culture, braids are not appropriate for girls who are her age. It is mandatory to be mature to have the hair braided, because, according to her grandmother, there was a time when a girl became very vain and selfish because she wore braids. Mothers then began to prohibit braids at that age. In this case, the braid is related to a rite of passage, that is, it indicates that the girl has grown up and is ready to face life. Subverting the logic that a happy ending for Bintou would be to reward her with the long-awaited braids, empowerment occurs through listening to an older person, based on the affectionate relationship between the protagonist and her grandmother Soukeye. The rite of passage, in this case, takes place not through the replacement of the little tufts by braids, but through the way the girl sees herself based on the wisdom she gains from her grandmother’s advice. Therefore, at the end of the narrative, the discourse changes:

⁵⁸ For reference, see footnote 11.

⁵⁹ PERRAULT, Charles. *The Complete Fairy Tales*. Translation, introduction and notes Christopher Betts. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁶⁰ For reference, see footnote 60.

⁶¹ For reference, see footnote 60.

⁶² Diouf, Sylviane A. *Bintou’s Braids*. Illustrations Shane Evans. San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books, 2001.

⁶³ For reference, see footnote 63.

“I am Bintou. My hair is black and shiny. My hair is soft and pretty. I am the girl with birds in her hair. The sun follows me and I’m happy” (Diouf, 2001, p. 29).⁶⁴

However, Zuri’s rite of passage is different from Bintou’s, although both are linked to the way the girls relate to their hair. While for Bintou it comes from the desire to grow, for Zuri it means the reaffirmation of “loving blackness,” to use an expression by hooks (1992, p. 6),⁶⁵ expressed in the fabric of family relationships in which care for oneself and for others is the keynote. According to Stephanie Borges, in the text “*Cabelos com vida própria*” [Hair with a Mind of Its Own], “[...] it is a gesture that can be interpreted from the joy of the reunion and from the desire to please, from an attempt to demonstrate that she and her father took good care of each other while it was just the two of them” (2020, online).⁶⁶

It is a saga for Zuri and her father to have her hair styled the way she wants. Firstly, because, as she says at the beginning of the story, her hair “has a mind of its own” (Cherry, 2019, pp. 6–7),⁶⁷ so she needs its *collaboration*. Besides, it soon becomes clear that it was not her father who took care of her hairstyles. That was her mother’s job. In this case, symbolically, making the hair look beautiful is, for both father and daughter, a learning process, not in the sense of self-acceptance, but rather of self-care and care work carried out by the person who, generally, does not do so, given that such obligation is culturally attributed to mothers.

It is in such context that Zuri’s father commits himself to taking part in the great adventure so that the girl looks beautiful. And being beautiful, in Zuri’s eyes, means having her hair adorned in the form of an “funky puff buns” and wearing a “superhero cape” (Cherry, 2019, p. 29).⁶⁸ Although, at first, her father believes that the task would “be a piece of cake” (Cherry, 2019, pp. 18–19),⁶⁹ the afro mohawk demands a lot from him. In the animation, the difficulties are emphasized by the metaphor of the boxing ring. Zuri’s father is a boxer, and his opponent is her own hair, which, personified, takes on the form of a beast, in a scene that causes fear.

⁶⁴ For reference, see footnote 63.

⁶⁵ HOOKS, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1992.

⁶⁶ In Portuguese: “[...] é um gesto que pode ser lido a partir da alegria do reencontro e do desejo de agradar, de uma tentativa de demonstrar que ela e o pai cuidaram bem um do outro enquanto estavam só os dois.”

⁶⁷ For reference, see footnote 11.

⁶⁸ For reference, see footnote 11.

⁶⁹ For reference, see footnote 11.

In addition to the images of the kinky hair, quite voluminous, reproduced several times, in the following order, the hair appears with funky braids with beads, with two puffs, curly, with three puffs, with braids, again with two puffs, in an afro, with a red hat on the head and, finally, with funky puff buns. The various hairstyles, styled by the father, despite being representative, do not make the girl happy because there is a reference to be executed from the beginning, hence the tutorial on the tablet to help the father. Happiness is wearing a hairstyle that is of an ancestral heritage, an affirmation of belonging. In Zuri's own words:

Daddy combed,
parted, oiled, and twisted.
He nailed it!
Funky puff buns!
Pretty, pretty, and so much fun.
Rocky approved, too! (Cherry, 2019, pp. 28–29).⁷⁰

The father gives Zuri six different types of hairstyles, including the funky puff buns. At the beginning of the narrative, the girl feels like a princess when she has “funky braids with beads” (Cherry, 2019, p. 8);⁷¹ Zuri's father is portrayed in the illustrations with locs. These hairstyles are two great references of cultural resistance. The diversity of kinky hair types is loaded with meanings. Each way of styling it not only communicates care, because what emerges is the history that underlies these strands of hair, their patterns as an identity marker.

The funky puff buns chosen by Zuri carry both traces of the history of the indigenous people, since the mohawk hairstyle itself originated among Native American peoples who did not allow themselves to be controlled by the white man, and of the history of the African peoples who adapted it for their own culture. As a symbol of struggle and resistance of a people, when chosen by Zuri for a very special day in her life, it tells the story of her resilience, both for what she has already been through and for what is yet to come.

In contrast to the presence of kinky hair, there is its legitimized absence on the mother's head, as she temporarily lost it. Such loss can be read from the perspective of

⁷⁰ For reference, see footnote 11.

⁷¹ For reference, see footnote 11.

the erasure of some of her identity traits, now not due to the actions of a racist society, but as a result of an illness. Be that as it may, losing the hair is also losing part of one's story and power, symbolically restored by the daughter who, without straying from her individuality ("I love that my hair lets me be me"), commits herself to sharing ("My hair is Mommy, Daddy, and me").

After reaffirming (yes, reaffirming, because, in the Brazilian edition, it is already stated in the title of the book that the hair is "fit for a queen")⁷² the qualities of the hair — ("smells clean and sweet," "soft as cotton, flowers petal billowy soft" (hooks, 1999, pp. 3–4)⁷³ —, the narrator of the book *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999), by bell hooks, says the following: "Hair to take the gloom away" (hooks, 1999, p. 18),⁷⁴ which highlights, and that is why we chose such passage as the epigraph of this work, the relationship of power and transformation that has been portrayed in children's books. The same power is also present in the other epigraph, extracted from *Caderno sem rimas da Maria* [Maria's Rhymeless Notebook] (2021), by Lázaro Ramos. In the voice of the little girl and lyrical subject, the curls take on freedom. Here, too, the gesture of care comes from the father, whose hand gets stuck in the afro to do the "*denguidacho*" (*curlycuddle*), a slower caress, unique to this hairstyle.

The mobilization of the senses, provided by the books mentioned before and by others that fall within this interpretive framework, is guided by the expressiveness of the text and its illustrations. In *Hair Love*, the author and the illustrator highlighted the characters' representativeness through various signs. Regarding the verbal expression, the sentences are short and the periods, predominantly in the direct order, are typical of a child's discourse. There are also traces of orality ("Just like that," "It'll be a piece of cake," "The first style was a big *NO WAY*," "Ouch") and the presence of onomatopoeias ("Shh," "CRACK," "Ta-da," "CLICK"). Moreover, as typical in children's literature, adjectives run throughout the text ("beautiful," "proud," "excited," "large," "small," "worn-out," "special," "perfect," "pretty"). The playful features of the verbal text are also present in the choice of figures of speech, which involves metaphors ("I am a princess," "I love that my hair lets me be me," "My hair is Mommy, Daddy, and me"), comparisons

⁷² In the Brazilian edition, the title *Happy to Be Nappy* is translated as *Meu Crespo de Rainha* — *My Kinky Hair Fit for a Queen*, in a free translation.

⁷³ For reference, see footnote 15.

⁷⁴ For reference, see footnote 15.

(“like a superhero”), antithesis (“From large to small it went”) and personification (“My hair even does magic tricks”).

The dynamism of the language comes from brief phrasal constructions, which rely on orality and onomatopoeias. Almost all adjectives belong to the semantic field of positivity, and the verbal play comes from figures of speech. From this perspective, Cherry’s choices make the words, in themselves, an ode to beauty.

Hair Love stands out for its simplicity as far as the verbal language is concerned and for its positivity in the semantic field, with illustrations complementing these characteristics. Characterized as a digital illustration in which digital brushes are used to create sensorial textures, it bears close resemblance to the visual images present in the animated short film, *Hair Love*. For this reason, the playful tone, which can be noted in the exaggeration of how Zuri’s hair is portrayed and in the humor present in the scene in which the elastic hair band escapes from Zuri’s hair and hits her father’s eye, recalls the hyperbolic and dynamic universe of the animation.

The mobilization of the image is directly related to the gaze of the observer. According to writer and illustrator Cristina Biazetto, “[t]he act of seeing is much more than a physiological function of our eyes; it involves a dynamic process characteristic of human consciousness” (2008, p. 75).⁷⁵ Still according to this scholar,

[p]erceiving an image is a complex act, once the process depends on both attributes intrinsic to the image (intensity, size, contrast, novelty, repetition and movement), and on factors extrinsic to it and related to the reader (attention, expectation, experience and memory) (Biazetto, 2008, p. 76).⁷⁶

In the illustrations of *Hair Love*, color, “one of the fundamental parts of the structure of an image” (Biazetto, 2008, p. 77),⁷⁷ is the visual element that combines the signs of the most classic children’s literature as well as those of this new literature of an identitarian inclination. The predominance of pastel shades instead of more saturated colors, with shades marked by lightness rather than intensity, seems to draw, in a subtle

⁷⁵ In Portuguese: “[o] ato de ver é muito mais do que uma função fisiológica do nosso olho; envolve um processo dinâmico e característico da consciência humana.”

⁷⁶ In Portuguese: “[é] complexo o ato de perceber uma imagem, pois o processo depende tanto de atributos intrínsecos a ela (intensidade, tamanho, contraste, novidade, repetição e movimento), quanto de fatores extrínsecos a ela e pertinentes ao leitor (atenção, expectativa, experiência e memória).”

⁷⁷ In Portuguese: “uma das partes fundamentais da estrutura de uma imagem.”

way, the changes that the children's literary field is undergoing, incorporating elements from both languages. There is no rupture with the association of the pink color with girls, but neither is it baby pink, with its common symbolism of delicacy, which would be a contradiction, as Zuri's personality is strong and determined. In most of the images, violet pink predominates, closer to hot pink, present on the pages without images as well as combined with the colors red, orange, green — the pan-African colors, symbolizing the union of the peoples of the African continent.

Even when a color that tends towards saturation appears, such as red (observable, for example, in the hat that the father puts on Zuri), the faded visual appeal produces a break in the previously mentioned reference. Lilac and pink, recurring in the color circle, evoke Zuri's fantasy world and, therefore, they also speak of her subjectivity. The pink color is linked to emotions and affections, while lilac is associated with introspection and fear, both referencing the magical universe of fairy tales.

On the other hand, the illustrations emphasize and supplement the description of the hair in verbal language. The warm earthy tone for the girl's and her parents' skin color reveals in its splendor the blackness of the family, blending with other colors in the ambience of the house, as a sign that it is a home, in the sense given by hooks — “that place of mind and heart, where we recover ourselves in love” (1992, p. 20),⁷⁸ so essential for black lives. As it is a faded earthy tone, harmony is created between the palette of the color wheel and, by extension, it re-elaborates the warm tones often used to represent the environments and landscapes of black people.

The expression “love is as love does” is also by hooks, from the book *All About Love: New Visions* (2000, p. 14),⁷⁹ in a perfect summary of its meaning. Anyone who has read this book and *Hair Love* will not be surprised by the connection here established. Using very different languages, the two books conceive love in the same way; as ethics for life which encompasses the meanings of care.

⁷⁸ For reference, see footnote 66.

⁷⁹ For reference, see footnote 57.

The “*Surprisinglyness*”⁸⁰ of Fractious Themes

We could say that *Hair Love* is a book for *all childhoods*, in a pun on the expression *all ages*. When dealing with Zuri’s particular dilemma, Matthew A. Cherry and Vashti Harrison present, through words and images, the importance of beauty, whether transfigured in a beautiful hairstyle, or materialized in the form of care and love, for oneself and for others. Gestures like this enable children’s literature to promote self-esteem, appreciation for diversity, and, as Bartolomeu Campos de Queirós highlights, “*surprisinglyness* of everyday life” (2008, p. 173).⁸¹

Currently, many authors, when writing for *childhoods*, deal with so-called “fracturing themes,” that is, issues considered sensitive to children, such as illness, death, mourning, suicide, racism, prejudice, among others. Artists who undertake elaborate work, in which aesthetic quality is present, approach these themes around well-constructed characters, moving away from stereotypes, and present “[...] possibilities of interpretation between the lines, in the voids of story” (Sisto, 2008, p. 133).⁸² That is a way of allowing the child to enter the text, as well as awakening “[...] the childhood that lives in every adult” (Queirós, 2008, p. 171).⁸³

The way in which Cherry and Harrison, in the book, and Cherry and Smith, in the animated short film, weave, so to speak, the *threads* of *Hair Love* resulted in artistic objects composed of multiple layers. We sought to identify, especially in the book, these layers in which the representation of kinky hair, when thematized in art under the sign of beautification, functions as a cathartic act. In other words, beauty has healing power, and hair can “take the gloom away” (hooks, 1999, p. 18).⁸⁴ Considering that Matthew A. Cherry, Vashti Harrison and Nina Rizzi, respectively, the author, the illustrator and the translator of the Brazilian edition, are black individuals, the book demarcates ethnic-racial belonging by reverberating this protagonism in the literary creation process. Therefore, it legitimizes the presence of narratives that create conditions for the life and living of black people to be re-signified.

⁸⁰ In Portuguese: “surpreendências” [neologism].

⁸¹ In Portuguese: “surpreendências do cotidiano.”

⁸² In Portuguese: “[...] possibilidades de interpretações nas entrelinhas, nos vazios da história.”

⁸³ In Portuguese: “[...] a infância que mora em todo adulto.”

⁸⁴ For reference, see footnote 15.

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Statement of Author’s Contribution

The authors declare themselves responsible for entirely writing the article, considering the following specificities: Milena Magalhães wrote the article, with meticulous critical review and editing work; Rosana Nunes Alencar was responsible for the conception of the project, for the research on the theoretical framework that supported the discussions, and also for the writing of the article. The authors are responsible for compliance with the journal’s standards and for the approval of the final version to be published.

Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso* [*Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies*] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review I

The article is very well-written and well-founded. The subject is socially relevant and urgent, and the text moves the reader. APPROVED

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Review II

The topic discussed in the paper is of the utmost social and academic relevance, as it excels in analyzing the art produced by the African diaspora and how it is connected to our ancestry. The article presents triangulations of works by black artists who are important to our generation, perhaps to many people, and how these works have a profound impact not only on black identity issues, but also on the intellectual and aesthetic legacy that they leave us. The article is well-constructed and presents a well-defined and discussed theme with a robust theoretical framework. The theoretical foundation largely supports the arguments put forward by the author, but there are moments (very few) in the text when more analytical paragraphs could be used to support them. This does not detract from the merit and depth of the discussion presented, but it would give the target audience more food for thought. There are two observations about spelling and font and one that I consider most important, which is about the term “dreadlock.” The Anglophone black community already rejects such word, which is a racist expression. The opinion is for approval, leaving it up to the author to accept the suggestions. APPROVED

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