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Black Multiconsciousness and Decolonial Ecoethics in *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), a Spiritualistic Novel by Alice Walker

Multiconsciência negra e ecoética decolonial em Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart *(2004), um romance espiritualista de Alice Walker*

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Abstract: This article offers a reading of Alice Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), focusing on the spiritual discoveries of the novel's protagonist, who comes into contact with Indigenous knowledge systems throughout her journeys. It examines how communion with nature is articulated with spirituality and the demand for resistance and transformation, proposing the concept of Decolonial Eco-Ethics as a critical framework to help explain Walker's novel. Through this process of enlightenment, the protagonist develops new reflections at a deeper level and expands her self-understanding, which I term Black Multiconsciousness. Based on these analyses, the article concludes that *Now Is the Time...* (2004) can be effectively read through a decolonial approach (Maldonado-Torres (2020), Grosfoguel (2020), and Bernardino-Costa (2020)), combined with Afro-Amerindian epistemologies, such as that of Ailton Krenak (2022), equally employed as an analytical support in the article.

Keywords: Black Multiconsciousness; Decolonial Ecoethics; Afro-Amerindian knowledge systems.

Resumo: Este artigo oferece uma leitura de *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), de Alice Walker, com foco nas descobertas espirituais da protagonista, que entra em contato com saberes indígenas em suas jornadas. Examina-se como comunhão com a natureza se articula com espiritualidade e demanda por resistência e transformação, propondo-se o conceito de Ecoética

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Decolonial como estrutura crítica para auxiliar na compreensão do romance. Por meio desse processo de iluminação, a protagonista desenvolve reflexões em um nível mais profundo, expandindo sua autocompreensão, o que denomino Multiconsciência Negra. Com base na análise, o artigo conclui que *Now Is the Time...* (2004) pode ser lido de forma eficaz por meio de uma abordagem decolonial (Maldonado-Torres (2020), Grosfoguel (2020) e Bernardino-Costa (2020)), combinada com epistemologias afro-ameríndias, como a de Ailton Krenak (2022), igualmente empregada como suporte analítico no artigo.

Palavras-chave: Multiconsciência Negra; Ecoética Decolonial; saberes afro-ameríndios.

Introduction

In this issue of *Aletria*, as researchers are invited to reflect on the ways in which literature deals with spiritualities, a contribution on Alice Walker's fiction seems indispensable. The author has demonstrated a concern with spirituality as a theme since the widely acclaimed *The Color Purple* (1983),[1] her first major literary achievement, which earned her the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in the United States. In *The Color Purple*, the seeds of Walker's interest in spirituality can be seen, for example, in Miss Celie, the protagonist, who writes letters to God –the form of the novel itself is epistolary– and eventually begins to question His image and existence. Celie begins to reject a notion of a God who is white and male, in conversations with her friend, sometimes lover, Shug.

It can be noted that spirituality as a theme in the context of *The Color Purple* is more circumscribed to Christianity in the South of the United States, part of Miss Celie's enormously oppressive surroundings, during the early 20th Century. Throughout Walker's career, her approach to spirituality expands significantly, to the point of the publishing of *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, in 2004.

This is a lesser-known Walker novel that certainly deserves more scholarly attention. In terms of spirituality, *Now Is the Time...* (2004) encompasses Eastern references, such as Buddhism, as well as Native-Americans beliefs, and mainly South-American shamanism. It is precisely the broadening of references to different spiritualities in Walker's work that draws my attention and prompts this research. Thus, this article focuses on exploring some relevant

[1] Although Alice Walker is a writer, poet and essayist who needs no introduction, some of the readers might want to know that she wrote seven novels, four collections of short stories, five children's books, ten volumes of essays, and nine of poetry, as listed in her official website. Walker is, certainly, one of the most celebrated and prolific American writers.

aspects of the spiritual journeys of Kate, the protagonist of *Now Is the Time…* (2004), with the theoretical support of Decolonial Thought and Ailton Krenak's (2022) Indigenous philosophy. As the investigation progresses, the article proposes the notions of Decolonial Eco-Ethics and Black Multiconsciousness as critical frameworks to help explain Walker's novel.

The novel

Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart (2004) is a 302-page work, structured in short chapters that alternate between the separate journeys of Kate Talkingtree and her lover Yolo, until they return home, and their narratives become one. This article focuses primarily on the chapters that describe Kate's explorations, which depict her understanding of life as a profound spiritual journey that evolves through the connections she forms –connections that readers, in turn, appropriate in the course of reading.

Kate is a well-published writer who has always been on the move. Besides intense traveling, reading and writing, she has been through a variety of personal experiences, such as marrying some men and a woman and raising kids. But now, at 57 years-old, she feels the need to delve deeper into the meaning of life and self-knowledge. In the chapter "Change," this turning point is explained by two events. Kate first realizes a transformation in her own body: "She had felt it begin to shift beneath her feet. Or above her feet, because the change had started in her knees. In her fifty-seventh year they had, both of them, mysteriously, out of the blue, begun to creek" (Walker, 2004, p. 14). Debilitated knees carry particular symbolic weight here, as they threaten a woman like Kate, whose life has been defined by constant movement.

Her knees, however, are not the only sign of change. Kate is also spiritually restless, having had dismantled her personal, ecumenic altar:

> The candles, plentiful and varied, honoring deities from the Virgen de Guadalupe to Che, Jesus to her friend Sarah Jane, who'd been shot to death by death squads in Honduras, rested now in a large box beside the door. Her imposing poster of the language and regal Quan Yin was rolled up and secured with a blue string, her classical Buddha who had begun to look like Ram Dass on acid she had draped with a purple cloth (Walker, 2004, p. 14).

Notably, the heterogeneity of the images on Kate's altar is unconventional, suggesting a form of devotion free of traditional religious boundaries. The dismantling of this altar, marked by the removal of the spiritual references she has gathered throughout her life, signals a crisis in her beliefs, as well as a deeper questioning of her own existence.

With her environment mirroring "a dissolution she felt growing inside herself" (Walker, 2004, p. 17), Kate decides to leave her partner to embark on a journey that begins on the Colorado River, taking a turn towards the past and flowing inexorably towards her inner-self. While Yolo begins his own parallel journey in Hawaii, Kate continues encountering many individuals, such as the shaman Armando Juárez, at a retreat in South America. There, she engages in ritualistic events that rekindle memories of family conflicts and marital disarray, ultimately arriving at a place of greater understanding of her personal issues. Thus, in both

journeys, Kate accesses striking spiritual dimensions that transform profoundly how she sees herself and the world.

The novel's reception

Shortly after reading the novel, I found both laudatory and pejorative reviews for a book that I had enjoyed and even adopted in one of my classes at university. For critic Deborah Plant (2018), *Now Is the Time…* (2004) is a recommendable book for certain reasons. Among them, its urgency in proclaiming the importance of living in the present moment: "Now is the only time we have, and if our heart is not open, we are walking around insensitive, mindless, disconnected and very likely unconsciously perpetrating harm in some form or fashion". Plant (2018) believes that Walker's novel calls on readers to reflect in order to free themselves from limitations, advocating for a reconnection with the true self, which would occur in a process of complete fusion with the planet: "I would recommend it to everyone who is ready for freedom and joy".

Nicole Moses (2004), from January Magazine, states that *Now Is the Time…* (2004) constitutes an intense commentary on human spirituality and on the consequences of our neglect of this side of ourselves. For Moses, the novel is an invitation for readers to pay attention to the understanding of the planet as "Mother Earth and her healing power". In the reviewer's opinion, healing is the central theme of the novel, which unfolds in other themes such as the human condition, wisdom, and despair.

Among the negative reviews that caught my eye there was one by Diana Evans (2004), on the British *Independent*. Evans (2004) categorized the tone of the novel as "almost evangelical", a kind of sermon. For the journalist, the narrative is not engaging due to the passages that narrate "bodily cleansing" processes resulting from the protagonist's experiences with *Ayahuasca*. The references to nature, according to the reviewer, are exaggerated, and themes approached in the novel, such as slavery, for Evans, are unbelievably called "outdated".

Despite her critiques, Evans acknowledges some positive aspects of the novel. She thinks the story is indeed "rich in shamanic consciousness, native Indian custom and bouts of meditation," which in some ways contradicts her criticism of the passages about nature. She also recognizes that the novel is effective in conveying the message that the world is indeed in trouble and "a reassessment and realignment of the self might be the way forward". In this sense, Evans believes that Walker's message remains relevant, rooted in a Black female perspective, although readers may need to have patience to "endure a few more shamans" to access what Walker tells us.

Perhaps the most prominent example of negative reception is the non-signed review published in the "Books of the Times" column of the American newspaper *The New York Times*, on April 20, 2004. The text typifies *Now Is the Time…* (2004) as a "remarkably awful" compendium of "inanities". This word is repeated throughout the review to qualify aspects of the novel that *The NYT* deliberates as empty, unimportant, or useless. Through fragments taken out of context, this review pejoratively claims that the narrative contains "New Age inanities", "feminist inanities", and "hippie inanities."

This review is not only pejorative concerning the book's themes. It considers the writing poor and simplistic and, with regards to the plot, asserts that the protagonist's searches

are for "some elusive peace of mind". In addition, it disrespectfully categorizes the sacred indigenous brew *Ayahuasca* as a "hallucinogenic drug". With irony, *The NYT* judges Kate's travels as simply selfish initiatives: "After all, who has time for things like family, when there are pressing demands on one's time, like looking for personal empowerment?" By invoking the notion of family as a normative parameter, this stance reveals a conservative point of view that implicitly confines women to the roles of mother, wife, and housewife, within the domestic limits, with no right to mobility.

Like any literary work made public, *Now is the Time...* (2004) is indeed subjected to all types of criticism. However, I wondered, what premises would underlie such negative comments as those mentioned above? From what enunciative *locus* would the discomfort with certain aspects of the novel come, especially the rejection to references to non-Western knowledge found in the novel? To address these questions, I draw on selected strategies from Decolonial Thought and Afro-Amerindian knowledge systems, which inform the concepts of Decolonial Eco-Ethics and Black Multiconsciousness.

On Decolonial Thought

As a broad field, Decolonial Thought requires frameworks for this brief discussion. It is a consensus to state that Decolonial thinkers depart from the principle of challenging the ongoing impact of coloniality on the planet, attempting to mitigate or to end its remaining effects.[2] This premise continues to underpin Decolonial research worldwide, as seen in the collection *Decolonialidade e pensamento afrodiaspórico* (2020), a more recent contribution edited by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Joaze Bernardino-Costa (2020).

One specific issue within Decolonial Thought addressed by these authors refers to whose voices must be heard in order to enable a critical dismantling and an epistemic reorientation necessary for decolonization. Maldonado-Torres, Grosfoguel, and Bernardino-Costa (2020) emphasize that resistance to coloniality of knowledge has been taking place through actions and events of political and epistemic resistance, usually led by Black and Indigenous protagonists. That is why Maldonado-Torres, Grosfoguel, and Bernardino-Costa (2020) assert that it is necessary to "bring to the forefront the political struggle of Black women, *quilombolas*, various Black movements of the *povo de santo*,[3] youth from the periphery, Black aesthetics and art, as well as a huge number of activists and intellectuals" (Maldonado-Torres; Grosfoguel; Bernardino-Costa, 2020, p. 10).[4] In this article, bringing Alice Walker's fiction "to the forefront" makes evident the connection between Decolonial Thought and her literary universe, widely recognized as the artistic work of a Black female writer historically committed to the struggles and emancipation of Black women, her protagonists, in narratives that problematize social structures that oppress them.

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[2] Among the leading thinkers who develop this principle at the foundation of Decolonial Thought are, Walter Mignolo (2003, 2018), Aníbal Quijano (2005), María Lugones (2023), and Frantz Fanon (1979, 1983).

[3] Povo de santo (people of saint) are the practitioners of religions of African origin in Brazil and other countries.

[4] "...trazer para o primeiro plano a luta política das mulheres negras, dos quilombolas, dos diversos movimentos negros, do povo de santo, dos jovens da periferia, da estética e arte negra, bem como de uma enormidade de ativistas e intelectuais".

Another noticeable connection between Walker's fiction and Decolonial Thought is the interest in race. Decolonial thinkers delve into the question of race as a "structuring dimension of the modern colonial world system" (Maldonado-Torres; Grosfoguel; Bernardino-Costa, 2020, p. 11) obviously having racism at its core, understood as "an organizing principle for those who can formulate legitimate scientific knowledge and those who cannot" (Maldonado-Torres; Grosfoguel; Bernardino-Costa 2020, p. 11).[5] Maldonado-Torres, Grosfoguel and Bernardino-Costa's take on racism is embedded in the critique to Eurocentrism, which historically excludes other knowledge systems, such as Afro-Amerindian ones" (Maldonado-Torres, 2017, p. 145), which is what this author calls epistemic disqualification. Historically, this has created a global notion of an abstract European universalism that "decisively marks not only the production of knowledge, but also other areas of life: economics, politics, aesthetics, subjectivity, relationship with nature" (Maldonado-Torres; Grosfoguel; Bernardino-Costa, 2020, p. 12).[6] Against the notion of abstract universalism, the "decolonial project assumes the need for body-geopolitical affirmation for the production of knowledge" (Maldonado-Torres; Grosfoguel; Bernardino-Costa, 2020, p. 13).[7] This means an engagement in change and transformation that Maldonado-Torres chooses to name Decolonial Turn.

Decolonial Turn, as the author puts it, means to distance oneself from the imperatives and norms imposed upon us, colonized individuals, meant to keep us apart from our own selves. It starts as a contestation, Maldonado-Torres explains, that can be epistemic, aesthetic and/or activist. Colonized individuals become aware of their own reality and its possibilities within the contemporary circumstances of modernity/coloniality that dehumanize us. As a consequence of awareness, Decolonial Turn takes the shape of actions that are going to be called Decolonial Attitude.

As discussed above, focusing on Black aesthetics and art, rejecting Eurocentrism by learning and adopting Afro-Amerindian knowledge systems, on the way to a Decolonial Turn, all configure key theoretical proposals in Decolonial Thought. But they also must be understood as parameters for a research methodology, as Martyn Denscombe (2024) puts it. One relevant consideration in his article is how Indigenous worldviews as legitimate knowledge systems must constitute research methods for Decolonial researchers. Because Indigenous perspectives do not fit conventional Western research methods, Denscombe (2024) continues, the required alternative research paradigms are centered on Indigenous values, perspectives, and lived experiences (Denscombe, 2024, p. 238). I argue that, in the realm of this research, bringing Ailton Krenak's philosophy, mainly his thoughts on rivers, accomplishes Denscombe's proposal for a non-hegemonic decolonial research paradigm.

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[5] "...um princípio organizador daqueles que podem formular um conhecimento científico legítimo e daqueles que não o podem".

[6] "...que marca decisivamente não somente a produção do conhecimento, mas também outros âmbitos da vida: economia, política, estética, subjetividade, relação com a natureza".

[7] "...o projeto decolonial assume a necessidade de afirmação corpo-geopolítica para a produção do conhecimento".

Krenak Indigenous Knowledge

One among the many Afro-Amerindian forms of knowledge is that of the Krenak people, brought to wider attention by the renowned Brazilian Indigenous leader, writer, environmentalist, and thinker Ailton Krenak through his books and lectures. Within the framework of this research, his work serves as a means of resisting epistemic disqualification (Maldonado-Torres, 2017, p. 145) by foregrounding a non-Eurocentric system of knowledge as a central analytical approach.

Since Walker's protagonist in *Now is the Time…* (2004) is a Black woman in a profound spiritual connection with rivers, Krenak's *Futuro ancestral* (2022) offers highly relevant insights for understanding the novel. This is a short book in which the author brings some of his powerful Indigenous ancestral wisdom. Krenak discusses education, the legacies of colonialism, our present destructive way of life or necrocapitalism (Krenak, 2022, p. 57), and mainly advocates for a change in the way we face the natural world. Emphasizing this latter one, his first chapter "Greeting to the rivers" is a special match to this research.

Krenak provides a philosophical approach to rivers that understands them as "present ancestors" that speak to us. From his non-Western, Indigenous perspective, he begins by reminding readers that civilizations have historically flourished near rivers, the classic example being the Egyptians on the banks of the Nile River. Despite this fact, the author states: "We have always been close to water, but it seems that we have learned very little from the language of the rivers" (Krenak, 2022, p. 13, own translation).[8] With such statement, Krenak directly confronts the dominant capitalist view of rivers as commodities to be exploited to exhaustion for profit, conceived solely as resources to serve human needs rather than as living beings endowed with agency, rights, and significance independent of human use.

A especial reflection is dedicated to the *Doce* River, called Watu by the Krenak people (Krenak, 2022, p. 13), located in my home state, Minas Gerais, Brazil. For the Krenaks, the Watu is the grandfather-river. In other words, this river is a present ancestor, and speaks to the Krenak people in many ways:

> At night, its waters run fast and noisy, their whisper descending over the stones and forming rapids that make music, and at that hour, the stone and the water involve us in such a wonderful way that they allow us to conjugate the "us": us-river, us-mountains, us-earth (Krenak, 2022, p. 14, own translation).[9]

In their wisdom, the Krenak feel the Watu as a singing river that enables a total fusion with surrounding elements. That includes humans, who are allowed to merge into a single "us-river" being (Krenak, 2022, p. 14). Beyond this, the Krenak people define themselves as fused to the waters. Ailton Krenak himself is, in his own words, someone "surrounded all the time by the sound of the waters" (Krenak, 2022, p. 19), whose spirits cut through valleys and bring stories and wonders. And this understanding is not unique to the Krenak, he argues. Most Indigenous

[8] "Sempre estivemos perto da água, mas parece que aprendemos muito pouco com a fala dos rios".

[9] "À noite, suas águas correm velozes e rumorosas, o sussurro delas desce pelas pedras e forma corredeiras que fazem música e, nessa hora, a pedra e a água nos implicam de maneira tão maravilhosa que nos permitem conjugar o nós: nós-rio, nós-montanhas, nós-terra".

peoples feel the same way, such as the Ashaninka from the Amazon Rainforest, mentioned by the author, whose villages float on the Moa River in the Amazon Rainforest.

Elaborating on the Ashaninka example, Krenak ponders that most people "don't imagine that there is a part of humanity that finds in the waters the completeness of its existence, its culture, its economy, and its experience of belonging" (Krenak, 2022, p. 18, own translation).[10] Such unawareness helps explain humanity's disregard for the preservation of fresh waters. Concluding this chapter of his book, Krenak urges us "to listen to the voice of the rivers, for they speak. Let us be water, in matter and spirit, in our movement and ability to change course, or we will be lost" (Krenak, 2022, p. 27, own translation).[11]

The Krenak's Indigenous knowledge on the "us-river" is part of an ecological ethics that opens a new dialogue between Decolonial Thought and the novel *Now Is the Time…* (2004), from which the idea of Decolonial Ecoethics emerges to refer to how decolonial principles are combined with Afro-Amerindian ecological ethics, especially that of Krenak, helping us view the structures of colonialist exploitative power in relation to the ways in which they shaped the exploitation of the environment and the oppression of Indigenous peoples. Decolonial Ecoethics also challenges anthropocentric, Western, and capitalist perspectives, as it emphasizes Afro-Amerindian knowledge systems that explicitly reiterate the need to restore and preserve ecological balance.

Black Authorship

Alongside the works of Maldonado-Torres (2020), Grosfoguel (2020), Bernardino-Costa (2020), and Krenak (2022), the research that originated this article identified the need to articulate Decolonial Thought with Literary Studies. This articulation draws on the recent contribution *Literaturas, africanidades & descolonização* (2024), by Felipe Fanuel Xavier Rodrigues, Luiz Henrique Silva de Oliveira, and Paulo Dutra. These authors highlight the relevance of the literatures that give prominence to voices and subjects from African and African-diasporic traditions. Such writings inscribe through literature the Black identities and post-colonial themes that address experiences historically and predominantly faced by people of African descent. In fact, African and African-diasporic writers develop a "writing [that] opposes textual and interpretative practices that essentialized their bodies and treated them as objects" (Rodrigues; Dutra; Oliveira, 2024, p. 9).[12] In this perspective, the authors reiterate that writing is a process of decolonization "in which subjects who are heirs to the colonial malaise 'recreate' themselves as human beings, thus breaking with conformity to the logic of a world in which racial discrimination persists" (Rodrigues; Oliveira; Dutra, 2024, p. 9, own translation).[13]

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[10] "…não imagina que tem uma parte da humanidade que encontra nas águas a completude de sua existência, de sua cultura, de sua economia e experiência de pertencer".

[11] "…escutar a voz dos rios, pois eles falam. Sejamos água, em matéria e espírito, em nossa movência e capacidade de mudar de rumo, ou estaremos perdidos".

[12] "…escrita [que] contrapõe práticas textuais e interpretativas que essencializaram seus corpos e os trataram como objetos".

[13] "…em que sujeitos legatários do mal-estar colonial "recriam" a si mesmos como seres humanos, rompendo, portanto, com a conformidade à lógica de um mundo em que a discriminação racial perdura".

In the same book, the essay "Literatura e identidades afrodiaspóricas", by Felipe Fanuel Rodrigues (2024), is also in conversation with Decolonial Thought and Black authorship, helping with the aims of the present article. Rodrigues's essay has a specific focus on Black women's poetry, such as the one of Rita Dove, but by discussing it, the author provides relevant insights into the specificities of Black voices that pertain to other artistic forms of literary expression. For example, the individuality of the Black person, which Rodrigues highlights in the critically analyzed poems, reflects a whole set of voices that demonstrate the historical relevance of everyday African-American experience as an integral part of American history (Rodrigues, 2024, p. 63). In line with Walker's novel, the focus of this article, Rodrigues foregrounds the relevance of recognizing and invoking African ancestry, which results in the "recovery of knowledge lost as a result of the historical effects of the enslavement of people of African origin" (Rodrigues, 2024, p. 64).[14]

Further on, Rodrigues delves into the debate about the power and strength behind the persistence of hope in Black diaspora that does not succumb to despair, displacement, and death. One of its consequences is the rewriting and re-signification of Africa as a "powerful element in the formation of identities" (Rodrigues, 2024, p. 67).[15] Rodrigues's conclusions on the Black women poets, in addition, center on the statement on how they,

> ...vocalize their experiences as agents who challenge the various forms of epistemic, physical, and psychological violence to which African-American and African-Brazilian women have been historically subjected to. Through their literary productions, writers of African origin confront the limits imposed on their subjectivity and use literature as a weapon of cultural struggle and affirmation of identity (Rodrigues, 2024, p. 72, own translation).[16]

Rodrigues, through his reflection, prompts us to consider other Black women writers, such as Alice Walker who, similarly to the poets he analyzed, is a creative voice whose art also challenges the forms of violence typified by the author: epistemic, physical, and psychological. Therefore, part of the goals of this investigation is to ascertain how *Now is the Time...* (2004) constitutes a literary work of cultural struggle and affirmation of identity, in accordance with Rodrigues' words (2024), insofar as it gives voice to Black subjectivities, especially the female subjectivity, overcoming the limits imposed by abstract Western-centric cultural universalism.

River Run

In the exercise of discussing Black female subjectivities in *Now is the Time...* (2004), one of the key matters I identify is how the need to restore and preserve ecological balance relates to the

[14] "recuperação de um saber perdido em decorrência dos efeitos históricos da escravização de pessoas de origem africana".

[15] "poderoso elemento na formação de identidades".

[16] "...vocalizam suas experiências como agentes que desafiam as várias formas de violência epistêmica, física e psíquica às quais as mulheres afro-americanas e afro-brasileiras são historicamente submetidas. Através de suas produções literárias, as escritoras de origem africana enfrentam os limites impostos à sua subjetividade e lançam mão da literatura como armamento de luta cultural e afirmação de identidade".

protagonist's search for herself. That is, ecological balance is not apart from humans, not just a matter of self-regulating ecosystems in which animals and nonliving environments coexist harmoniously, maintaining biodiversity through interdependencies. It includes Kate's own thoughts as a Black woman and how she decides to go on trips to be immersed in natural environments. In her first journey, with a group of women, they are on a boat going down the iconic Colorado River, with its sculptured walls on the sides, forming the famous Grand Canyon: "As the boat pitched and plunged down the river she felt herself slipping into the surrealness of a life lived now in a tiny bobbing space, very narrow, within the steep reddish canyon walls. Rushing madly, irresistibly onward, no stopping it" (Walker, 2004, p. 31).

Nonstop navigation in such a small boat demands total focus and teamwork. The women have no time for contemplation. The reduced space on the boat suggests the smallness of personal matters, as water speed and constant rowing teaches them to focus solely on survival, a metaphor for how life proceeds incessantly, turning free will into an illusion. The sense of inevitability of life is intensified by the mesmerizing roaring of the waters: "The savage rushing of the river seemed to be inside her head, inside her body" (Walker, 2004, p. 32), becoming "...an internal roar as of the sound of a massive accumulation of words, spoken all at once, but collected over a lifetime, now trying to leave her body. As they rose to her lips, [...] she leaned over a patch of yellow grass near her elbow and threw up" (Walker, 2004, p. 32).

The cathartic experience is the result of the fusion of the *river roar* with Kate's *internal roar*; vomiting –which annoyed the critic mentioned in the introduction of this article– actually has an effect beyond physical purging, constituting an experience of spiritual liberation that expels regrets, anger, fears, sadness and unresolved issues.

By merging herself with the river, Kate expands self-perception in a healing experience. This process aligns with Krenak's perspective (2022), as she listens to the river's voice and, in that moment, becomes part of it. Besides perceiving more of her own self, becoming one with the river teaches Kate how rivers can be wise interlocutors. We can state she benefits from the "us-river" notion, elaborated by Krenak, to explain an indigenous ecological view in which we are one single being, as already known by many ethnic groups in the American continent. In addition, this human-nature fusion, which is one of Kate's great discoveries in the novel, relates to what I call Decolonial Ecoethics.

Much Beyond Being an American

Kate Talkintree's second journey, to the Rainforest in South America, is more intense. She is there to join a group in a spiritual retreat led by the shaman Armando Juárez. The exuberant natural environment preserved seems to have a stronger effect on Kate and the other participants. In contrast to a predominant Western mindset, Kate comes to understand the Rainforest as a Being made up of other Beings. It "was the loudest thing she'd ever heard. [...] Every Being was chatting, talking, whistling, singing. *Singing*. Lots of that. And everything was in motion. If she listened closely she could distinguish slithering, sliding, jumping, hopping, ambling, crawling, flying" (Walker, 2004, p. 78).

Perceiving the Rainforest's sounds and movements accurately is just one of the outcomes of the rituals conducted by the shaman. Armando gives to the participants doses of the indigenous, sacred and ancient plant brew known as *Yagé*, *Ayahuasca*, or simply Grandmother.

Ayahuasca[17] is an entheogen capable of expanding perceptions and inducing an altered state of consciousness. The word literally means "inner manifestation of the divine". Entheogen, it should be noted, stands in contrast to the term "hallucinogen", used to make derogatory references in biased definitions for Ayahuasca. To be open to such an unconventional experience, involving drinking an Indigenous plant brew in a ritual for the purposes of spiritual enlightenment is, I argue, aligned with the notion of a Decolonial Turn (Maldonado Torres, 2020), that is, Kate is going beyond a Western notion of spirituality that was given to her, as well as to most colonized individuals.

When Kate takes *Ayahuasca*, her consciousness is expanded; she becomes aware, for example, that she is just a human animal on an equal footing with the other animals, all being disposable in a world that, while not safe for nonhuman animals, is also unsafe for the human ones (Walker, 2004, p. 91). Such finding is part of an Indigenous ecological ethics that transcends Kate's previous views of the world; these are much based on Western knowledges implemented by colonialism, that see the natural world and the planet as a whole as resources to be exploited to exhaustion, characterizing our present destructive way of life, necrocapitalism, as argued by Krenak (2022, p. 57). Being aware of all this means to resist and to get over what Decolonial thinkers understand as coloniality of knowledge (Maldonado-Torres; Grosfoguel; Bernardino-Costa, 2020).

In another transcendental experience, Kate gets in touch with an ancestor, an invisible presence that had haunted her all her life. The spiritual meeting takes place in a "lucid dream", an experience well-known by *Ayahuasca*'s practitioners. One of its relevant outcomes is how lucid dreams can solve unresolved issues between people living in the present time and their ancestors. The narrator explains how,

> She was still plagued by those ancestors of hers who'd lived and died miserably. They wanted her to rectify their wrongs, she felt. There were weeks when they seemed to visit her every night. For instance, there was the man with no teeth. A bloody mouth. He'd appeared to her in dreams but even more in wakeful visions (Walker, 2004, p. 128).

The ancestor with no teeth is Remus. As *Ayahuasca* enhances the transcendental experience of contact with ancestors, Kate has the chance to talk to him to find out that he is, above all, "someone with a story to tell" (Walker, 2004, p. 136) and how this is really important to him. This brings back the relevance of one of the principles of Decolonial Thought highlighted in the previous section, regarding the voices that must be heard for the reorientation of a decolonized critical thought. Remus is a former enslaved person, historically deprived of

[17] Any preliminary online search indicates that *Ayahuasca* has been the subject of systematic investigation in numerous university-based scientific centers, across varied fields, such as anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, pharmacology, and religious studies, since the 19th Century. For instance, a search on jstor.org yields 1711 articles, book chapters, research reports, and others. Curiously, the oldest one, by Alfred Simson, was published in 1878 in *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. These academic contents originate from research institutions in countries in South and North America, as well as in other regions of the world. Collectively, they approach studies that examine Ayahuasca's chemical composition, neurobiological effects, therapeutic potential, and cultural contexts of use, often in collaboration with Indigenous communities and religious groups—such as *Santo Daime* and *União Vegetal*, both based in Brazil—that have traditionally employed the brew.

the right to tell his own story. Now, through Kate's transcendental experience, he can finally be the protagonist of his own story and narrate it himself.

During his life as an enslaved person, Remus tells, he was handsome, with perfect teeth, which attracted the attention of the slave mistress and provoked the wrath of her husband, who pulled out his teeth: "One by one, with the pliers they used for horses, without anesthesia. As she [Kate] said this, she felt physically sick, her whole body went into shock, like a plant being pulled up by the roots" (Walker, 2004, p. 131). Kate is absorbing the horrific pains felt by her ancestor, subjected to violences and oppressions under slavery. But as they both continue to interact in Kate's dream, a type of spiritual healing takes place. In a cornfield, a traumatic site for the ancestor, his teeth are symbolically restored with corn kernels that stick to his gums when Remus eats them, at Kate's request. He then sees himself reflected in her eyes, regaining his smile and some peace. After their conversation, the dream ends and Kate realizes she is back in her bed.

The debate here is not on the controversy surrounding the authenticity of lucid dreams in *Ayahuasca* rituals, but rather the healing effects the experience has for Kate. Deep, enduring traumas rooted in slavery pertain not only to the ancestor, but persist through generations, reaching Kate herself. In addition, Remus's "narrative within the narrative" operates as a narrative device that has a strong impact on the readers. Skillfully framed by Walker, the depiction of Remus's suffering produces strong emotional responses that invite reflection and a possible reconsideration of the readers' own perspectives.

Besides giving access to ancestors, it is meaningful how *Ayahuasca* is perceived in Amerindian knowledge as an ancestor herself. For the locals, she is a grandmother, a non-human type of ancestor that speaks her wisdom with her own voice to those who drink from her. Interestingly, this implies that there can be kinship among humans and natural substances, from a South American Indigenous perspective, which indicates an expanded Indigenous notion of what family and ancestry mean, a notion in which non-human beings are included. And, as a wise ancestor, *Ayahuasca* has something to teach humans: "Abandon any notion that anything you humans do will ultimately destroy me. [...] What you are destroying is your own happiness. Your comfort, which I put so much playful effort into creating. Your peace of mind. Your joy" (Walker, 2004, p. 110).

Ayahuasca's wisdom above exposes the widespread, anthropocentric fallacy of us humans destroying or saving the planet –erroneously understood as a separate entity in the first place– when self-extinction is actually what is at stake. In addition, it is remarkable how *Ayahuasca*'s wisdom is literally offered to us. As readers, we turn pages to find chapters written in first person, in which a speaking plant brew addresses us directly. By giving *Ayahuasca* a voice with the power to narrate, Walker equates nature's protagonism with that of human beings, ascribing to it the same relevance. So reading *Now is the time...* (2004) is to experience a balance of perspectives, human and non-human, which breaks with the anthropocentric stance of human self-superiority and objectification of everything non-human.

The most meaningful of all the experiences, though, takes place after some days in the retreat, when Kate has an outstanding revelation. As part of the daily ritual, she drinks the *Ayahuasca* and waits, as it is usually done. She is now more used to the discomfort caused by waves of nausea that typically appear in the first hours after participants have it. This time, however, Kate feels that it is actually *Ayahuasca* that waits for her just to enlighten her about what she has been searching diligently –who she is:

> I am an American, Kate thought. Indigenous to the Americas. Nowhere else could I, this so-called Black person –African, European, Indio– exist. Only here. In Africa there would have been no Europeans, no Native Americans. In Europe, no Africans and no Indians. Only here; *only here*, she said (Walker, 2004, p. 77).

From this passage, we understand that Kate finds out how she occupies a very unique place in the world. Such a special locus of enunciation makes Walker's protagonist a literary representation of the "subjects who are heirs to the colonial malaise," who "recreate themselves as human beings," as Rodrigues, Oliveira, and Dutra (2024, p. 9) have stated. *Ayahuasca* reveals different layers that build Kate's identity. First, as an American, Kate is going to reflect on what it means to be born in the United States. On one hand, there is belonging, stability and friendship in her American life. On the other, there is exclusion, marginalization, and historical erasure. But Kate realizes she is much more than what her national identity implies; she is a multiracial individual, with massive ancestry in three different continents, with diverse ethnic backgrounds and super rich histories of blending and cultural diversity. As she repeats to herself, "only here", Kate becomes certain that the blending that delineates her identity could only exist in the American continent, in which miscegenation has been more intense. Above all, Kate highlights that her type of Blackness, that comes from Africa but is mixed with European and Indigenous ancestries, is the most special of all features of her identity.

From this moment on, Kate gains insights into a more profound understanding of life, which help with the individual quests she poses when she turns 57 years-old. Kate's acquired self-awareness is, as seen, diasporic, transcontinental, multiracial. Moreover, her spiritual search, as well as the answers she obtains from Indigenous wisdom, can be read as exercises of a personal Decolonial Turn. Revisiting this concept from Maldonado-Torres (2020), previously mentioned in this article, it begins as a contestation that rejects coloniality of knowledge through the acquisition and the adoption of other types of knowledge, once marginalized, such as Afro-Amerindian ones.

Black Multiconsciousness and Decolonial Ecoethics

Kate's tremendous spiritual findings prompts me to elaborate and propose the notion of "Black Multiconsciousness",[18] not as a claim of conceptual originality, but aiming at defining and describing with more precision a Black woman's experience, richly fictionalized by Alice Walker. Black Multiconsciousness is everywhere in *Now is the Time*... (2004), but I perceive its climax in Kate's most epiphanic moment, mentioned in the previous section, when she realizes herself as Black, American, African, European and Indio. This passage illustrates Black Multiconsciousness as spiritual awakening, as Kate is able to unite blending elements of new pluralities as layers of her own self, and the more-than special perspectives that an African-American person like her acquire throughout life.

[18] I came up with this idea inspired by Alice Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), but it also comes from the perspective of my itinerary of readings that includes, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois (1982), Frantz Fanon (1979, 1983), Lélia Gonzalez (1988), Stuart Hall (1999), and Paul Gilroy (2001), just to mention some of the Black thinkers from whom I have had the chance to learn.

In addition, Black Multiconsciousness is unequivocally in agreement with Decolonial Thought, as it responds to historical racism, embodies Afro-Amerindian epistemic resistance to the colonization of knowledge, and discloses exploitation disguised as progress that speeds nature's destruction on a global scale. Black Multiconsciousness, I argue, is also in tune with the premises of Decolonial Thought because it implies a rupture with the single-minded thinking inherited from colonialism. As seen in *Now Is the Time* … (2004), Kate Talkintree's Black Multiconsciousness provides her with tools to reinterpret colonial structures of power, knowledge, and being, and emphasizes the appreciation of Afro-Amerindian knowledge systems and their spiritualities.

In this regard, it is worthy to add that it is not just the protagonist's profile that converses with Decolonial Thought. The entire novel, I assert, can be understood as an act of decolonial resistance that opposes a Western-centric worldview. Applying Maldonado-Torres's terminology to Walker's book, it can be described as the result of an aesthetic decolonial turn embodied in a decolonial attitude (Maldonado-Torres, 2020, p. 48). That includes the novel's approach to non-Western, unconventional spiritualities because the so-called aesthetic decolonial turn, Maldonado-Torres states, "is also linked to the decoloniality of spirituality" (Maldonado-Torres, 2020, p. 48). The author quotes Anzaldúa (2007) to explain how Indigenous peoples usually understand the religious, social, and aesthetic purposes of art as interconnected.

Furthermore, I argue that the novel's decolonial character is in sheer consonance with Rodrigues's (2024) understanding of Black literary writings as works of cultural struggle and affirmation of identity. Throughout the narrative, the experiences of Walker's characters promote rich philosophical reflections on ecological ethics and decoloniality in a type of "Decolonial Ecoethics", as demonstrated with the support of Ailton Krenak. By this I mean that environmental ethics are key to decolonial turn as it brings Indigenous perspectives as contributions to a meaningful critique of the exploitative structures of colonial origin, contemporarily sustained by capitalism. In conclusion, Decolonial Ecoethics challenges anthropocentric, Western-centric, and capitalist perspectives, emphasizing the Afro-Amerindian knowledge systems to restore ecological balance: in the face of the threat to life posed by destructive capitalism, hope for the future resides in Afro-Amerindian knowledge systems.

Conclusion

All things considered, let us return, as a final point, to the reviews for *Now is the time*… (2004), published in the *Independent* and *The New York Times*, mentioned in the beginning of this article, and to my central question on why they could not grasp the meanings of Alice Walker's novel. They caught my attention because of the tone of their critiques. As I have already considered, this is not a matter of disregarding them because they were negative, but of identifying what led them to apply that tone. One of the perceptions is how both equally attack aspects of the novel that give voice to non-Western knowledge systems, described through the protagonist's experiences, and investigated in this article. By discrediting them, these reviews disclose Western-centric viewpoints, products of the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2005), used to ridiculing and disdaining Afro-Amerindian knowledge systems. This

conservative and prejudiced mindset was dismantled by the decolonial reading brought in the present article.

Among other factors, the harshest critiques, especially the one from *The New York Times*, lacked the sensitivity to understand, for instance, how *Now is the Time…* (2004) reflects existential questions of its own time. Back at the turn of the millennium, millions of people were seeking alternative lifestyles that might oppose a capitalist socioeconomic model, increasingly perceived as destructive to life on the planet. Today, twenty-two years later, perhaps those critics would hold a different opinion of the book, given the worldwide intensification of climate change.

Another possible explanation for the critical stance adopted by the two reviewers mentioned may lie in the constant antagonism that Walker has always faced for her activism. Walker's artistic production, as well as her public statements in interviews and essays, have frequently been marked by a sustained critique of American liberal capitalism, which makes me suspect the ideological criteria with which the book was judged. With regard to the derogatory remarks found in *The New York Times* review, it is sufficient to recall the newspaper's editorial orientation as a representative institution of the American mainstream media, sponsored by, and therefore subservient to, economic power, usually a defender of irresponsible liberal capitalism. From this *locus* of enunciation, the review shows not only a form of colonialist arrogance, grounded in presumed cultural superiority, but also the influence of economic interests that are intolerant of even minimal gestures of contestation, and would never endorse stories that encourage spiritual transformation, such as *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004).

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