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***Escrevivência* by Conceição Evaristo**
A Literary Reconfiguration of Conviviality

Fernando Nina



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Escrevivência by Conceição Evaristo: A Literary Reconfiguration of Conviviality

Fernando Nina

Abstract

This essay examines Conceição Evaristo's concept of *escrevivência* – writing grounded in Black lived experience – as a literary practice that reimagines how we live together in unequal societies. Evaristo's work transforms memory, rhythm, and silence into forms of knowledge and connection, revealing the bonds that sustain community. Her poetics turns language into a space of encounter and reciprocity, where readers are invited to feel, listen, and be moved. Through *escrevivência*, literature becomes a way to reclaim voice, recover shared humanity, and imagine more just and caring forms of coexistence beyond the limits imposed by social inequality.

Keywords: Conceição Evaristo | *escrevivência* | conviviality

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1. Introduction: Culture, Literature and Conviviality

Culture is, and here I follow Emilian Ortega, for Bolívar Echeverría: 1) a way of dealing with the world that primarily solves the problem of the way of producing life; 2) a commitment to which the subjects of a community are bound in order to produce anew the strategy or form of life, giving them an identity as co-authors of this form; 3) a constant and living exercise or “use” of this form and this commitment, which at the same time is always open to practice, opening up new situations, questioning and changing them (Echeverría 2006: 21).¹ The culture of a community would thus be a dimension that permeates all spheres of human social and individual existence in its multiple levels, something like an elementary and profound level of life formation structured as a set of strategies of “treating” life or the world, an elementary level of semiosis and codification of social and individual life, so to speak, from which the specific functions and forms that we usually recognize as “culture” and especially as “art” later emerge (Echeverría 2013: 181).²

Modifying Echeverría’s definition somewhat, one could also argue that literature is therefore a particular form of “dialectical cultivation of the uniqueness of a form of being human in a given historical situation” (Echeverría 2013: 178, author’s translation), or as he calls it, the “*cultivo crítico de la identidad*”, the critical cultivation of identity.

This definition allows us to understand every cultural phenomenon comprehensively and critically as directly belonging to and connected with the totality of a mode of production and reproduction of human life. Understood in this way, culture must necessarily penetrate the core of the continuous formation processes of sociality, precisely where it transforms, becomes another and at the same time remains the same.

A literary theory from Latin America is a writing of the Other and with the Other, which is not a writing about the Other. In these reflections on Conceição Evaristo’s short stories, this poetical theory with the Other follows the paradigm of a guarding gaze (*hütendes Schauen*) of the Other: it is mindfulness in a perspective that guards its otherness, that does not expose it but stops to take the present Other into its gaze, to linger with it with the gaze, with the guarding gaze. The literary poetology of this author, which focuses on the relational and disseminating character of theory, can offer a suitable approach to this complex intertwined space.

I think that literature is not done with ideas, but with words. The ability of literature:

1 I am grateful for the inspiring discussions and for the theoretical insights during my senior fellowship at Mecila with my colleague and friend Emilian Ortega.

2 Translations are provided throughout the text for the reader’s convenience; some nuances may be lost.

to generate and transform polylogical forms of knowledge about living together” has not only to do with the insight that “living is no longer conceived in terms of a binary distinction between fiction and reality, but is rather understood as a complex and open concept, in which the preexisting, that is, the repertoires inherited through history and ‘the invented’ (therefore ‘fictional’) find themselves linked with the lived (and which is to be lived) (Costa 2019: 18).

The central question to understand literature and its nexus to the question of conviviality is: what sustains words? I would like to propose that the term conviviality, when thought with the premise of its “inseparable nexus between conviviality and inequality” entangles a concept of modernity which corresponds to a modernity that disguised the understanding of modernity as radical revolution in human cultural history in which, following Bolívar Echeverría:

each of the archaic forms of identity and each of the cultures is led to doubt more strongly its own validity, its justification within the cosmos. Modernity brings with it the need for each of them to seek, in other identities, certain possibilities, versions or strategies of affirmation of the human, capable of making up for certain of their own devices that are beginning to fail (Echeverría 2006: 205).

The fabulous challenge that modernity brings with it is to raise new forms of the human that are not tied, as the archaic forms were, to an episode of hominization limited by the threat of annihilation posed by nature and man, in such a way that modernity thus understood is the really existing modernity but which in the history of culture has never managed to unleash this potential of its own. It is a promise of abundance and emancipation, which nevertheless chooses the capitalist path, which needs to reproduce human life as threatened, as condemned to scarcity and repression. The accumulation of capital can only take place if nature is scarce and therefore the capitalist order invents absolute scarcity. It is within this order that the discussion about conviviality and inequity is also found. My claim is that what we have to do is to remove this discussion from this order, because the order where conviviality and equality can really exist is the order in which the promises of really existing modernity can be unleashed, and not within the order of capitalist modernity, which is one of the forms chosen to fulfil the civilizing promise of humanity. I want to make the relevance of literature for the credibility of imagined futures of social cohesion that strengthens the stability of communities and resilience of a society plausible by presenting an analysis of Brazilian author Conceição Evaristo’s poetical and metaphorical language.

Conceição Evaristo was born in 1946 in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, as the second daughter of Joana Josefina Evaristo, a washerwoman who raised nine children amid many difficulties. Her mother had no schooling but collected notebooks she found on

the streets and filled them with her writings on life, thoughts, and poems. Her mother was certainly a profound influence on Conceição. She often says that because of her mother's habit, she grew up surrounded by words, even if she didn't grow up surrounded by books. She earned a master's degree in Brazilian literature from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and a doctorate in comparative literature from the Fluminense Federal University. Conceição began publishing in 1990, when six of her poems were included in the series *Cadernos Negros*, by the group Quilombhoje, and several publications followed, novels and short stories.

Conceição Evaristo's work is rooted in *escrevivência*, the act of writing from lived Black experience. Her novels *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003) and *Becos da memória* (2006) explore memory, identity, and inequality through fragmented, poetical storytelling. In her short-story collections – *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres* (2011), *Olhos d'água* (2014), and *Histórias de leves enganos e parecenças* (2016) – she amplifies the resilience of marginalized women and communities. Her poetry volume *Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos* (2008) weaves ancestral memory and collective testimony. Across all genres, Evaristo transforms silence into power, affirming Afro-Brazilian presence in literature. Evaristo emphasizes that *escrevivência* was born deeply marked by her experience as a Black woman in Brazilian society. *Escrevivência* is therefore writing that is born out of the experiences and daily life, the memories, the life experience of the author herself and her people. When developing on the concept of *escrevivência*, Evaristo affirms that “our *escrevivência* cannot be read as stories to ‘lull those in the big house to sleep,’ [*ninar os da casa-grande*] but rather to disturb them in their unjust slumber” (Evaristo 2007: 18).

For Conceição Evaristo, writing is like navigating the waters of memory and facing the currents of mystery, the unprovable, the imprecise. To remember is not to relive, says Conceição Evaristo, it is to redo, reconstruct, rethink, with today's images and ideas, the experiences of the past. If history is conceived from an ethnocentric and Eurocentric point of view and is intended to create oblivion, *escrevivência* is intended to support memory.

The central question to understand literature and its nexus to the question of conviviality is: what sustains words? What makes the bond (*vínculo*) between two humans are the *alicerces* (foundations) of presence that can never be generalized. It is from these *alicerces* that one connects to the other and that the bond is established or not. That is where connection is interwoven. The difference between a literary composition and mental constructions is that the sounds, the rhythm, but also the silence, which is always a rhythmized silence and a single silence, like the one that unites the child in the mother's womb with the world, are the precursors of literature and music and the subtract of bonding in general. The sounds, the gestures of the body are material, the

vibrations emitted by the body are physical. They are palpable and visible. It is a material that carries language and is, at the same time, its condition. The bond stems from an experience, but when we are making a construction referring to a map that is in our head, we recognize elements of an experience in the absence of which we would have no idea of the transference of these experiences. When an event (*Erlebnis*) through the act of reading can be transmitted as an experience (*Erfahrung*), it is because of the selection of abstract entities based on a composition that will make us grasp meaning.

Conceição Evaristo said in a public conference in Rio once:

I write in places that don't belong to me [...], orality has gestures, has looks, has rhythm. There's no sound of a voice, a quick glance to the other side in writing, the question is how to translate this into writing, maybe short sentences... things that are understood (Manouche 2024).

For Echeverría, modernity is a form of civilization that promises a radically new beginning for the history of mankind and yet betrays this promise (Echeverría 2006: 204). This contradiction is realized as a constitutive ambivalence between its potential and its real existing form. For Echeverría, the constant conflict between these two levels, “utopia” or “realism”, determines the deep dynamic of modernity (Echeverría 2006: 205). Modernity is thus that civilization which, starting from a constructive principle that recreates the entire living world, dialectically totalizes the event of the constant revolution of technical productive forces. In other words, the structure of all spheres of life is constantly reconfigured as a struggle between domination and resistance. The technical productive forces have the possibility – whereby their realization always lies in the hands of humans – to free them from forced labour and to allow them to enter a reconciled metabolism with nature. Reconciled means that man does not subordinate himself to nature but does not exploit it either. Despite this potential, however, this universal historical possibility has only been realized in one specific historical form: in the capitalist economy. Modern civilization has thus been realized as the totalization of the capitalist mode of reproduction. In the meantime, this totalization has become global, whereby its characteristic destructive consequences can be felt all over the world. A fundamental aspect for analysing this betrayal of the promise of modernity, i.e. of itself, which results from internal contradictions, is the question of culture, because it allows us to think the whole and not just partial aspects as the other social and human sciences do, because culture is the aspect that is all-encompassing.

I believe that the question of conviviality and its inseparable nexus with inequality inside the four levels proposed by Sérgio Costa (material, power, environmental, and epistemological) must be seen as “relational categories” (Costa 2019: 28) that are entangled inside this capitalist modernity. I also believe this is only one selection of

modernity and not modernity in its existing form. Inside this promise of modernity for humanity, “real existing conviviality” would mean a form of reciprocity.

The experience of living in reciprocity, “living-with” as a relationship between subjects in a determined historic situation but also as a particular form in which the *Mitsein* is presented as an individual experience. In existing modernity there would not be an understanding of *Mitsein*, of living with, that is absorbed by a societal experience, instead, the existing form of conviviality as reciprocity would not confront *Mitsein* (and societal reciprocity) and the individual experience. Perhaps it would be useful to connect the concept of reciprocity with that of *Mitsein*. I want to show how Conceição Evaristo’s concept of *escrevivência* must be understood as a *Denkfigur*, a sophisticated set of metaphors and more than that, an entire metaphorology that can be understood as a tool to study the “process of constitution and transformation of conviviality over time” (Costa 2019: 29) by unveiling its profound *alicerce* that is to be found in the bonds that she de-covers. It is through the bondings that the characters of her short stories reveal that the profound fundament of existing modernity can be envisioned. I would like to link these “*vínculos inéditos*”, these unprecedented bondings, also with Walter Benjamin’s idea of *Berührungssinn*, a sense of touching, which I believe is what she accomplishes and what leads to a very deep understanding through literature. That is to say: through literature we recover the *Berührungssinn* that reconnects us with the other and our capacity to let us be touched by it (“*rühren*” *durch ihn*). Only in this way we can establish reciprocity again, i.e. *gegenseitigen Sinn für Rührung und Berührung*, a mutual sense of being moved and touched that is at the core of the civilizational promise of modernity.

Coloniality lead to apartheid thinking. Community is then not reciprocal; that is where conviviality comes into stake. Conviviality thinks of community as always intertwined with inequality. I think conviviality must be thought of with coloniality as a deficient reciprocity where modernity’s promise of abundance and emancipation is confused with capitalism. And since capitalism needs to reproduce human life as menaced, as condemned to scarcity (*escassez*) and to repression (Echeverría 2006: 206), in conviviality this betrayed promise of modernity is still on its fundamentals. My claim is that we speak about conviviality because the horizon of reciprocity is veiled under this unfulfilled civilizational promise of modernity. This also leads to a reduced and distortional treatment of the cultural phenomena and to a misreading of what is at stake when we get into contact with cultural expressions, such as literature.

If there is one thing that characterizes Evaristo’s poetology, it is that the conceptual explanations she offers always expand the moral and political imagination. Evaristo’s fictions proposes literature as a poetscape, a poetical landscape where everyone can put under disposal their own fears, their own histories and convert it into experiences

through the act of listening, which means reading, hearing, feeling her accounts. This is how her poetic justice is achieved:

In the essence of the term [*escrevivência*], not as a spelling or as a sound, but as a generating meaning, as a chain of meanings on which the term is grounded and begins its dynamic. The foundational image of the term is the figure of the Black Mother, the one who lived her condition as an enslaved person within the *casa-grande* [the slaveholder's house]. This woman's enslaved labour consisted of the forced task of caring for the offspring of the colonizing family [...]. And there came a moment when this enslaved body – restrained in its desires, in its freedom to remain silent or to speak out – had to be in a state of obedience to perform yet another duty: to 'tell stories to put the children of the *casa-grande* to sleep'. And the Black Mother would go to the children's quarters to tell stories, sing, and lull the future masters and mistresses [...]. It was in this enduring gesture of reclaiming that image, which lies deep in my memory and history, that I found the driving force to conceive, think, speak, desire, and expand the semantics of the term. *Escrevivência*, in its initial conception, manifests as an act of writing by Black women, as an action that aims to blur, undo an image of the past in which the body-voice of enslaved Black women had its expressive power also under the control of slaveholders – men, women, and even children. And if yesterday not even the voice belonged to enslaved women, today the letter, the writing, belongs to us as well. It belongs to us because we appropriate these graphic signs, the value of writing, without forgetting the strength of the orality of our ancestors. A power of voice, of creation, of ingenuity that the *casa-grande* knew how to enslave for the delight of its children (Evaristo in Duarte and Nunes 2020: 29–30).³

3 “Na essência do termo [*escrevivência*], não como grafia ou como som, mas, como sentido gerador, como uma cadeia de sentidos na qual o termo se fundamenta e inicia a sua dinâmica. A imagem fundante do termo é a figura da Mãe Preta, aquela que vivia a sua condição de escravizada dentro da *casa-grande*. Essa mulher tinha como trabalho escravo a função forçada de cuidar da prole da família colonizadora [...]. E havia o momento em que esse corpo escravizado, cerceado em suas vontades, em sua liberdade de calar, silenciar ou gritar, devia estar em estado de obediência para cumprir mais uma tarefa, a de ‘contar histórias para adormecer os da *casa-grande*’. E a Mãe Preta se encaminhava para os aposentos das crianças para contar histórias, cantar, ninar os futuros senhores e senhoras [...]. Foi nesse gesto perene de resgate dessa imagem, que subjaz no fundo de minha memória e história, que encontrei a força motriz para conceber, pensar, falar e desejar e ampliar a semântica do termo. *Escrevivência*, em sua concepção inicial, se realiza como um ato de escrita das mulheres negras, como uma ação que pretende borrar, desfazer uma imagem do passado, em que o corpo-voz de mulheres negras escravizadas tinha sua potência de emissão também sob o controle dos escravocratas, homens, mulheres e até crianças. E se ontem nem a voz pertencia às mulheres escravizadas, hoje a letra, a escrita, nos pertencem também. Pertencem, pois nos apropriamos desses signos gráficos, do valor da escrita, sem esquecer a pujança da oralidade de nossas e de nossos ancestrais. Potência de voz, de criação, de engenhosidade que a *casa-grande* soube escravizar para o deleite de seus filhos”.

2. Mythology and the Affective Fundament of Literature

With the epic and the drama, ancient Greek civilization developed a symbolic form with a long-term effect that continues up to the present day: literature. With the drama, this form showed its power in the public space of the polis to the highest degree (Poppenberg 2013). Greek drama put the histories of individual families on the stage. Since the families in question are those of the rulers, these family-dramas are at the same time also political dramas. Exactly here we can mark a decisive difference with Conceição Evaristo's literary configurations: the characters in question here are not rulers, they are everyday people living in the poorest places of Brazilian society that can be traced back to the 1970s till today.

For this reason, both for Greek mythology as well as for Evaristo's *Becos da memória* – which can be seen as the mythological foundation of her literature – the dramatically represented stories of the families, the myths of the tragedies, are also elements of the political constitution of society. The myths function to articulate the order of both the private and domestic sphere and the public and political sphere – above all because violence is elementary and constitutive in both domains. In the myths, the violence of the family is configured with the violence of the community. Violence governs the relations within families and between families. These agonistic relations form a nexus of violence which is the origin of the community formed around such family bonds or, in the case of Evaristo, also convivial bonds of the community, the *favela*, the *vecindade*. The *becos* (alleys) represent this origin of the community which in the case of the *becos* also attains multiple affects: happiness, sadness, desperation, hope, empathy and a sense of belonging that is difficult to define and to grasp without her stories. That is why she postulates this sideways, these paths of memory where multiple exits, multiple visions, utopias, dreams, but also disgraces are possible. The *becos* are the spatial materialization of all these affects that shape conviviality; without affects there is no conviviality and without literature there is no possibility to reflect upon and to materialize experience; this means that literature is the symbolic configuration agent of affects and therefore also one of the fundamental elements of conviviality.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the mythical articulation of oikos and polis, familial and social order in the medium of pathos. The drama politicizes and socializes the economy of individual feeling (Poppenberg 2013). Similarly, we can see that in Evaristo's writing, the drives and affects of the individual are configured by the myths with a view to the element of Êsù that governs the community, because it is the “*agenciador de todo processo de semiose*” (agent of the entire process of semiosis) (Martins 2021:

53).⁴ The elementary political significance of the mythopoetic narratives of Conceição Evaristo is to be located at this point. They give the community and its political order a constitution for the affects, and in this way, they shape the affect-structure of the political (Poppenberg 2013). They represent social relations such as they exist at a given moment and provide them with a symbolic expression: as such, they have a performative aspect, in that they also create and shape this existing order.

The myths are a configuration of the economy of the affects: they give an expression to feelings, but they also shape and form them. They furnish the elements of a political pathology, making possible a description and a study of the general state of the feelings. The *becos da memória* (memory alleys) function in Evaristo by recreating the common ethos and the Black collective act as strategies for replacing and reorganizing the fractures of knowledge. Like in the celebrations of Yoruba goddesses, as Martins asserts:

It thus becomes possible to read, between the lines of the fable's enunciation, the pendular gesture: one sings in favour of the divinity and celebrates Black majesties, and simultaneously sings and dances against the arrest of Freedom and against oppression – whether slavery in the past or the demands of the present (Martins 2021: 124).

The mechanisms of how literature works show the way in which literature is important for conviviality. In the case of Conceição Evaristo, through three different mobile metaphors – figures of thought (*Denkfiguren*) – imaginaries that are generated to enable a new conviviality: three forms of what we will call *denkende Metaphern*, thinking metaphors, instead of Artemis or Dionysus she displays Iemanjá and Oxum, two different mythologies. In a strikingly lucid essay about the year 1492 and the dispute about the words “new world”, “discovery”, and “devastation”, Jamaican thinker Sylvia Wynter postulates that each human order bases itself on a specific notion of order (Peat and Briggs 1987), and she distinguishes between two different figurative symbolic systems that encountered in that historical moment (Wynter 1995). One of the most significant differences Wynter points out is the difference in a specific etico-conductorly order of the feudal Christianity and pre-Renaissance Europe which also defined the specific form of approximation towards the other. On the one hand the Europeans who arrived with two fundamental notions coming first, from the ancient order: the idea that one progressed from the earth at the lowest point of the structure to higher levels of perfection. And second, from the feudal order, which mapped its own hierarchy of spiritual degrees of perfection onto the physical universe; a criterion of

4 “Èsù is what presents and establishes the ontology of time in the Yoruba cosmogony, for he is, in himself, ontology itself – a time that simultaneously bends forward and backward, which, as Sodr  teaches us, is his own ‘setting and rising’” (Martins 2021: 53).

perfection arose from an ontological division between the clergy as the bearers of the new “life” of the spirit, effected through baptism and lay men and women as the bearers of post-Adamic legacy of the original sin, who therefore perpetuated the “fallen” and “degraded” life of “natural man”:

Such life was constantly in the need of the ‘redemptive process’ presided over by the category of the clergy, who were also the orthodox guardians of a mainstream order of knowledge of which theology was the master discipline and the “queen of sciences” (Wynter 1995: 22).

I believe the two paradigms that Sylvia Wynter points here out, sin and redemption, had an immense impact on the whole colonization and enslavement process. Especially in Evaristo’s literature, there is a reconfiguration of these two paradigms through the poetical reconfiguration of her three master metaphors: the paths, the water and the first names. Nevertheless, sin and penance, sin and redemption remain fundamental in our modern lives, the living drama or the vital nucleus of them change of course in every epoch but their origin lies in this fundamental transformation of subjectivity thought out from a dramatic self-revelation through the concepts of sin/guilt and penance/redemption. I believe they needed of course always a symbolic expression, *publicatio sui*, the Christian had to make his deeds public, to show himself as a sinner. This is a dramatic manifestation of the renunciation to oneself. Since Black enslaved people were not even seen as having personhood, the formula that Christian confession inaugurated for the self: *ego non sum ego*, that means self-sacrifice, does not apply to them, more the formula *non cogito sum non ego*, not thinking thus not having personhood. It would be highly important to understand what this paradigmatic ontological presupposition means for enslaved Black subjectivity.

Thus my point is here still to show that the paradigms of sin and redemption played a fundamental role in the development of symbolic forms, that, like Evaristo’s *escrevivência* can be interpreted as a counter-writing, or better a symbolic reconfiguration towards this paradigmatic prejudice that is fundamental for structural racism, present in Western and in transculturalized poscolonial societies like Brazil.

Conviviality turns into reciprocity through images, translating events into experiences that can be shared. Conviviality exists in literature only where affects are present and shaped. Culture is here understood as a moment of openness: true conviviality, reciprocity only occurs in this cultural moment. The *Denkfiguren* of Conceição Evaristo, her thinking metaphors (*denkende Metaphern*) allow this cultural moment of openness to be consolidated, to be imagined, to be incorporated through participation in the experience of others. It is as if these metaphors are bringing into play some psychic zones that have never been used until now to get in touch with others or with oneself,

the *escrevivência* is primarily the listening that brings the voices into contact with what makes these voices speak. The *escrevivência* activates therefore also the *lugar de escuta do outro* (a space to listen to the other) in its readers. I believe that contact, as the basic fundament of existence and in general everything that belongs to the bond we are seeking with the other, participates in a knowledge that is inherent to the human species. Thinking metaphors go beyond that physical substance and activate what circulates beyond the silence, they are therefore the possibility of being of the *escrevivência*.

As scholar Fernanda Rodrigues de Miranda states for Evaristo's novel *Ponciá Vicêncio*, but it can also be argued to apply to her short stories:

Escrevivência emerges as a conceptual device that organizes the meanings of the work, which means that fiction formulates its own theory [...]. It synthesizes the concept as an enunciative platform at the ready, announcing itself as a counter-memory to colonialism in the face of the *casa-grande* — a metonym for the colonial signs still operative in the logic of our time, shaping the right to speak (for some) and the power to impose silence (on others) (Miranda 2019: 17).

I would therefore like to propose the metaphor of the *becos de memória* (memory alleys) as the result of an active and critical engagement with Afrodiasporic history and its actualization for today's social conditions. The *becos de memória* do not only refer to the past, they envision also future outcomes, because people need to rely on imagined futures that come to them in the form of literary narratives that make them more resilient. Evaristo gains credibility of such imagined futures because the narrated imaginations use specific metaphors that affect in a credible and attachable way not only readers from the Afrodiasporic Brazilian community but everybody who reads her stories. Nevertheless, in the chapter on the text of the same name, it is understood as follows: "The real alleyways of the favela serve as a metaphor for the emotional alleyways of its residents" (Evaristo 2006: 179).⁵ The focus is on the problem of "defavelization", the "spatial gentrification", the "agony of geographic displacement", but also the "intimate displacement of subjects" (Evaristo 2006: 162). Credibility and affective attachment as well as the willingness to act emerges from the exposure to these thinking metaphors she displays and from the fact that the exposure to one story does not contradict the exposure to a story that affects us all, as a community.

The *becos* are small paths, nooks and crannies, shortcuts, turn-offs, deviant formations that permeate the space in a non-heterogeneous way, these bends, these inscrutable memories, which are not covered by official written history, but from the

5 "[O]s becos reais da favela servem de metáfora para os becos emocionais de seus moradores".

oral, and therefore even more poetic memory of experience. The image of the *becos* also resembles the contorted, twisted forms that memory always has, especially for Afrodiasporic descendants but not only for them. It is these thinking metaphors, like those of the *becos da memória*, which Conceição Evaristo presents to us as an “a view from within” (Evaristo 2006: 173).

3. *Becos da memória* (2006)

Becos da memória is Conceição Evaristo’s first book, written between 1986 and 1988, before she appeared in the subsequently famous publication *Cadernos Negros* in 1990 (Amaro et al. 2024: 69). The text remained unpublished for two decades due to a frustrated publication process from 1988 until finally being published in 2006 following Evaristo’s success with *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003). *Becos da memória* is the *Urtext* of Evaristo’s literature. It condenses all her theory of literature and her concept of *escrevivência*. *Escrevivência* aims at a displacement (*Verschiebung*), at a shift of the western mythology, but at the same time does not want to reveal the full potential of its forms of experience, that means, through the mythical reappropriation of Yoruba myths it realizes a negative valorization of the occidental mythical reservoir but on the other hand is preserving and saving the myth’s capacity to turn into literature and to serve as a symbolic agent of configuration of affects, that can turn events into experiences (*Erfahrungen*).

Evaristo’s *becos* are not only spatial and time memory, but they are also material memory. In addition to language, they project specifically a body to what will become a textual body, finally a mythopoetic narrative. At the beginning of the narration the leg injury, which the child’s narrative voice is remembering, through which it becomes an image that constructs through language this thinking in configurations, and also a dialectical image. By highlighting an individual injury of the character Sinhô-moço, she is displaying a dialectical pictorial power on the one hand, and at the same time conferring it with its genuine form. The individual injury is also a collective injury. In this way, Evaristo constructs her *corpo-pensamento*, her body-knowledge or embodied knowledge (Martins 2021: 162): “The wound of her people had been bleeding for a long time. Today blurred into yesterday, but tomorrow would have to be different” (Evaristo 2006: 60).⁶

The *becos* are the poetic landscapes that Conceição Evaristo reconfigures to generate the mythic spaces, reconstruct the childhood experience and materialistic physiognomy of an entire age, and inside the *becos* are the poetical goals assigned to them:

⁶ “A ferida dos seus estava sangrando havia muito tempo. O dia de hoje se confundia com o dia de ontem, mas o amanhã teria que ser diferente”.

Everyone knew the favela was not paradise, but no one wanted to leave. Work was nearby there, the survival of everyone. What would we do in places so far away, to which we were being forced to go? (Evaristo 2006: 71)⁷

Maria Nova, the girl's narrative voice, assists the "defavelization", the act of "vacating the alley" (Evaristo 2006: 81), but she perceives how everybody gets around with each other. Maria-Velha for example has a kind way of looking at old Tio Totó: "She embraced him with her eyes and with desire alone" (Evaristo 2006: 75). The meaningfulness of the images she remembers gain importance since they also are a depiction of social relations:

Dora's shack was right on the corner of an alley that split into three alleys, which in turn led to other little streets. Passing by Dora's door was an obligatory route for almost everyone. She was very well known. She was also one of the prayer women, the official rosary leaders. She had a loud and melodious voice. A melodious body as well (Evaristo 2006: 91).⁸

Every single *beco* is associated to a different person, the *becos* are paths but they are also the spaces where these people lived, loved, mourned, suffered, enjoyed, they are living spaces that resonate with all their material elements, with their divisions, with their furniture but also with the bodies of the people who lived inside. The material dimension of the *beco* turns through the narrative voice of Maria Nova into an experience, into a thinking image, into a continuous memory. The mythological figurative character of one world of things only emerges in its decomposition by the next stage, by the "defavelization" that is occurring. That is why also every *beco* is associated with the name of the person that lived there, a technique Evaristo will go on to develop further in her storybooks. Whether the named has perished or not, for Evaristo names are always a domain of mythical meaning on a par with images she reconfigures. When she states that Dora's body was also "melodious", for Evaristo her movements "function as morphemes building words, words that build phrases, phrases that built texts, which makes the body surface, literally, text, and the subject, sign, interpreter and interpretant, simultaneously" (Martins 2021: 126):

What could be heard from outside, coming from inside Dora's shack, were whispers—pleasurable moans of love. Anyone passing by late at night, and pausing, could hear it all. There were solitary men who, passing by, pressed

7 "Todos sabiam que a favela não era o paraíso, mas ninguém queria sair. Ali perto estava o trabalho, a sobrevivência de todos. O que faríamos em lugares tão distantes para onde estávamos sendo obrigados a ir?"

8 "Seu barracão [de Dora] era bem na esquina de um beco que se bifurcava em três becos que originavam outras ruelas. Passar na porta de Dora era um caminho obrigatório para quase todos. Ela era muito conhecida. Era também uma das rezadeiras, das tiradeiras oficiais de terço. Tinha uma voz alta e melodiosa. O corpo melodioso também".

their bodies and ears against the walls. And there, under the moon and the stars, in the solitary practice of self-pleasure, carried along by Dora's moans in the arms of her man, they slid along the wall of the shack, almost dying of pleasure (Evaristo 2006: 91).⁹

Pleasure and pain are embodied in the *becos*, they materialized inside the alley and inside the homes that are synecdochically bound with the *beco*. The *beco* is an extension but also a depth, soundscape and bodyscape, tactile-scape; together, the *becos* form a poetscape. We have to insist here in this fundamental dimension: the *beco* is the corporeal memory of the women and men that lived in the favela that does not exist anymore. As Leda Maria Martins asserts: "Within the realm of oralities, the body is a portal that simultaneously inscribes and interprets, signifies and is signified, being projected as both container and content, as place, environment, and vehicle of memory" (Martins 2021: 130–131). She sees it as a place of transference, a mirror that contains the gaze of the observer and the object of gaze, mutually reflecting on each other.

The *becos* arise as the experiences the narrative voice of Maria Nova has reconfigured into her poetescapes. In the *beco* of Filó Gazogênia the reader becomes part of the moment when the old woman dies in a careful and poetic way. Her last small movements, her last thoughts, her last tastes and gestures are texture that becomes text-scape, her body is a landscape of her affects, of her dreams, of her feelings, it is a body-scape and a soundscape, which turns into a poetical landscape, a fluid poetscape:

He lifted the water in small sips to the woman's mouth. [...] She could no longer swallow the last sip, holding it in her mouth, keeping it there, tasting the flavour of earth, the taste that seeped into the water stored in a clay vessel.

With kindness in the final act of the ritual, he slowly lowered Filó Gazogênia's head. Silence was in everything and everyone. The nearest neighbours, seeing the window and the door thrown so wide open, began to arrive. Filó Gazogênia no longer perceived anything. She was crossing the last threshold. Her face

9 "O que se ouvia cá de fora, vindo de dentro do barraco de Dora, era sussurro, gemidos prazerosos de amor. Quem ali passasse altas horas da noite, e parasse, ouvia tudo. Havia homens solitários que, passando, colavam o corpo e os ouvidos nas paredes. E ali mesmo sob a lua e as estrelas, na prática solitária do autocarinho, embalados pelos gemidos de Dora nos braços do homem seu, resvalavam-se pela parede do barraco quase morrendo de prazer".

softened despite the pain. On her lips, perhaps, a faint smile (Evaristo 2006: 109).¹⁰

Tio Tatão speaks to Maria Nova and lets her know that listening is the condition of the possibility of the thinking forms, the thinking metaphors she will be constructing in her literature. The invitation to see the other through images is preceded by an invitation to listen, to feel, to smell – the sensorial dimensions and the affective grounding will become a *Denkfigur*, a symbolic figure of thought, a thinking metaphor, but they are all preceded by the invitation to listen to the other: “The acoustic, sonorous image is placed, in importance, alongside the visual, for the invitation to see is preceded by the invitation to listen” (Martins 2021: 142):

Girl, the world, life, everything is right there! Our people have managed almost nothing. All those who died without fulfilment, all the enslaved Black people of yesterday, the supposedly free of today, are set free in the life of each one of us who manages to live, who manages to become fulfilled.

Your life, girl, cannot be only your own. Many will be liberated, will find fulfilment through you. The moans are always present. *One must keep ears, eyes, and heart open* (Evaristo 2006: 111, emphasis added).¹¹

The *becos* invite us to open not only our eyes but all our senses, all our capacity to listen to the other. It is as if we hear the images, the metaphors this mythopoetic landscape evokes. It is the entry into a cosmic universe of senses, of sounds, of body parts, which connect these singular images with a supraindividual context, which has to be interpreted primarily as historical-philosophical. The water metaphorology and the personal names that are displayed in *Becos da memória* are the mythical elements of the Black community Evaristo is remembering, and we want to postulate the meta-myth from which all her stories come from. The *becos da memória* provide the paradigm for the order of the favela (community and conviviality) and the political inside. The images that emerge here will be repeatedly taken up and reformulated in her other books, they are constantly renewing themselves: yesterday, then and now. Its general meaning extends beyond the community of the favela in Belo Horizonte, as it has

10 “Levou a água aos pequenos goles à boca da mulher. [...] O último gole ela já não aguentou engolir, retendo-o na boca, guardando, sentindo o gosto de terra, sabor impregnado na água guardada em vasilha de barro. Bondade no último gesto do ritual, baixou lentamente a cabeça de Filó Gazogênia. O silêncio estava em tudo e em todos. Os vizinhos mais próximos, vendo a Janela e a porta tão escancaradamente abertas, chegavam. Filó Gazogênia não percebia mais nada. Atravessava a última porta. O rosto suavizou apesar da dor. Nos lábios, talvez um ligeiro sorriso”.

11 “Menina, o mundo, a vida, tudo está aí! Nossa gente não tem conseguido quase nada. Todos aqueles que morreram sem se realizar, todos os negros escravizados de ontem, os supostamente livres de hoje, se libertam na vida de cada um de nós, que consegue viver, que consegue se realizar. A sua vida, menina, não pode ser só sua. Muitos vão se libertar, vão se realizar por meio de você. Os gemidos estão sempre presentes. É preciso ter os ouvidos, os olhos e o coração abertos”.

formed patterns for Afro-Brazilian history today, the general meaning is a historical one, the *becos*-myths have become part of the Afro-Latin American and Brazilian symbolic system. The *becos* form the intellectual place of memory by shaping and organizing these elementary conflicts narratively. These figurative processes are analogical, as Leda Martins states about the Yoruba cantos which inform also the cultural cosmos of Evaristo: “Listening to images is our entry into the cosmic universe where sounds, musicalities, dancing movements, gestures, and scents have colours—and also *sculpt and reveal landscapes*” (Martins 2021: 149, emphasis added). The narrative voice of child Maria Nova appears to melt with the remembering narrative voice, which is collecting (remembering and annotating) posteriorly all these stories: “It’s impossible for everything to end like this, the girl thought. Life. Somehow, I have to – I don’t know how – make a new life for everyone” (Evaristo 2006: 136).¹² At school Maria Nova hesitates to comment on her history teachers lessons about “*libertação dos escravos*” (emancipation of the slaves) and she only tells her the next time she would have a lot to comment this topic: “It would take the whole class, and she wasn’t sure if that was really what the teacher wanted” (Evaristo 2006: 140).¹³ The girl is getting all the *becos* together in front of the reader, all the narrative lines come together, and she envisions her future as a narrator of all these lives:

There were many stories, born from another History that carried various events linked together, consequent, even if often distant in time and space. She thought of Uncle Totó. Was this what the teacher called a free man? She thought of Maria-Velha, of her grandfather’s story, she thought of her own grandfather, Luisão da Serra, the madman. She thought of Nega Tuína, of Filó Gazogênia, of Ditinha. [...] She thought of the children in the favela: few, very few; you could count on your fingers those who made it to the fourth grade. And among all of them, only she was in the second year of middle school, even so outside the usual age range – two years older than her classmates. And she was still on the verge of stopping her studies, the moment she would have to leave the favela. [...]

It was a very big story! A living story, born from the people of today, of the now. It was different from reading that text. She sat down, and for the first time, a thought came to her: maybe one day she would write this story? Maybe she

12 “É impossível que tudo acabe assim, pensou a menina. Vida. É preciso, não sei como, arrumar uma nova vida para todos”.

13 “Tomaria a aula toda e não sabia se era bem isso que a professora queria.”

would put on paper what was written and recorded in her body, her soul, her mind (Evaristo 2006: 150).¹⁴

Philosopher Leda Martins states about Afro-Brazilian oral traditions that inside the bodies and the voices, there is an episteme (Martins 2021: 150). Time is a spiral, it moves forward and backwards, like the *becos da memória*, the memory paths, the remembered and remembering spaces, the lives inside and outside the *becos*, the images that sing, that speak, that embody the suffering, that reveal, that produce the “*alethéa*”, of the not forgetting, the unhidden. The *becos* are an invitation to a sensorial, guarding hearing, guarding seeing (*hütendes Schauen*).

Maria Nova tells us that Cidinha-Cidoca, a gentle insane woman who had previously been highly desired, and had stopped talking after seeing how the favela is being destroyed and abandonment went inevitable, suddenly spoke: “She said she was going to die. ‘Die how, why, and of what?’ they asked her. The young woman replied that she was going to die from not living. And to everyone, she simply confirmed her madness. To die from not living” (Evaristo 2006: 157).¹⁵ And so she died, her body was the only body found in the Buracão and nobody could explain it. Her body turned into *corpo-pensamento*, body-knowledge. Because not only her former desired body and later insane expressions became knowledge, also her sentence “*morrer de não viver*”(to die from not living), Maria Nova turns into experience. The phrase used by Cidinha-Cidoca is an anticipation of the reconfigured lemanjá-myth that Evaristo will go on to develop in her later story “Olhos d’água” and also used in her story “A gente combinamos de não morrer”, from the same collection of stories:

“To die from not living” – Cidinha-Cidoca’s threat hovered for a few moments in Maria-Nova’s mind. She began by undoing the thousand braids of her hair, as one would undo that deadly thought. [...] Maria-Nova looked at herself in the shard of mirror. She felt beautiful and sad like her mother. She stroked her own face. No – she would never let life slip by in such a misshapen way. She had to believe. [...] She would no longer think about Cidinha-Cidoca’s threat.

14 “Eram muitas as histórias, nascidas de uma outra História que trazia vários fatos emcadeados, consequentes, apesar de muitas vezes distantes no tempo e no espaço. Pensou em Tio Totó. Isto era o que a professora chamava de homem livre? Pensou em Maria-Velha, na história do avô dela, pensou no próprio avô, o louco do Luisão da Serra. Pensou em Nega Tuína, em Filó Gazogênia, em Ditinha. [...] Pensou nas crianças da favela: poucas, pouquíssimas, podia-se contar nos dedos as que chegavam à quarta série primária. E entre todos, só ela estava ali numa segunda série ginásial, mesmo assim fora da faixa etária, era mais velha dois anos que seus colegas. E ainda estava em via de parar de estudar, a partir do momento em que tivesse que mudar da favela. [...] Era uma história muito grande! Uma história viva que nascia das pessoas do hoje, do agora. Era diferente de ler aquele texto. Assentou-se e, pela primeira vez, veio-lhe um pensamento: quem sabe escreveria esta história um dia? Quem sabe passaria para o papel o que estava escrito e gravado no seu corpo, na sua alma, na sua mente”.

15 “Ela dizia que ia morrer. Morrer como, por quê, e de quê, perguntaram para ela. A moça respondia que ia morrer de não viver. E para todos, ela apenas confirmava a loucura. Morrer de não viver”.

She needed to live. “To live from living”. Life could not be spent on misery and destitution (Evaristo 2006: 160).¹⁶

The sentence becomes gesture. Maria Nova looks in the mirror, she is opening her braids while dismantling the phrase, the movement of her open hair unravels the pain, the suffering and reconfigures it into a positive purpose, and it is the generation of a *corpo-pensamento*, the condition of the possibility for her thinking metaphors. The gesture is *poiesis* in body movement, embodied *poiesis* (Martins 2021: 209). She wants to live, live and tell, narrate about the life of the others. It was necessary to live.

One day, she already knew now what her tool would be: writing. One day, she would narrate, make resound, release the voices, the murmurs, the silences, the muffled cry that existed, that belonged to each and to all. One day, Maria-Nova would write the speech of her people (Evaristo 2006: 177).¹⁷

The favela dismantles and also friendship dismantles, her friend Bondade also must go away from her due to the *desfavelamento*. It is as if everything disintegrated inside her. “An empty hole, greater than the one she was gazing at in that moment, was inside her” (Evaristo 2006: 178).¹⁸ This index of visuality makes up the writings on her body, which as an inscription constitutes an image, a material cultural sign. A “hieroglyphic body” (Martins 2021: 209), in which the gestures, the affects are contained, gestures that become poetry, gestures that are time in rhyme with affects, with feelings. The last image she detects is inscribed in the body, in the chest of Vó Rita, it is an image that she will develop later in “*Olhos d’água*”, it is the transparency of the water, it is the “luminous black” of her skin that reconfigures and can be read as a thinking metaphor against racism and the stereotypical framing of the skin colour of the Afro-Brazilian population. Through this metaphor and through this encoded symbolism, the narrative voice achieves to grasp the mythical form of meaning as a symbol, the correlation of guilt and sin will be added later, when she reconfigures this image through the lemanjá-myth. It is the transparent heart that later will become “*Olhos d’água*”. When she describes Vó Rita as the mother of all men, this image becomes the foundational myth of all her writing:

16 “Morrer de não viver a ameaça de Cidinha-Cidoca pairou por alguns instantes na cabeça de Maria-Nova. Ela começou por desmanchar às mil tranças de seu cabelo como se desmancha aquele mortífero pensamento. [...] Maria nova olhou-se no pedaço de espelho. Sentiu-se bonita e triste como a mãe. Fez um carinho no próprio rosto. Não, ela jamais deixaria a vida passar daquela forma tão disforme. Era preciso crer. [...] Não pensaria mais na ameaça de Cidinha-Cidoca. Era preciso viver. ‘Viver do viver’. A vida não podia se gastar em miséria e na miséria”.

17 “Um dia, agora ela já sabia qual seria a sua ferramenta, a escrita. Um dia, ela haveria de narrar, de fazer soar, de soltar as vozes, os murmúrios, os silêncios, o grito abafado que existia, que era de cada um e de todos. Maria-Nova um dia escreveria a fala de seu povo”.

18 “Um buraco vazio, maior do que aquele que ela contemplava naquele momento, estava dentro de si”.

Big, heavy, awkward. She opened her blouse and, through the glossy black transparency of her skin, one could see inside a huge heart. And with each beat of Grandma Rita's heart, men were born. All men: Black, white, blue, yellow, pink, colourless... From Grandma Rita's great, enormous heart was born all of humanity. (Evaristo 2006: 184).¹⁹

4. *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres* (2011): Histories of *Escrevivência*

One of the purposes of Conceição Evaristo's literature is embedding her form-historical, careful and tender view of Afro-Brazilian women and their destinies into a historical-philosophical horizon that shows inequalities as a construction of structural historical circumstances that continue to affect these communities in the present. Evaristo grasps the mythical form of meaning as a symbol and thinks of the symbol as essentially connected with the language of names. That is why the thirteen stories in her recompilation published in 2011 with the title *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres* will all be named with a particular woman's name. When you follow her metaphorology displayed in *Becos da memória*, we could say, we follow the river of memories and the task to write down, that Maria Nova became entangled with as her own task.

If we follow the thinking metaphors since *Becos*, we arrive at the story about Mary Benedita, a woman who tells her way through education and difficulties until she discovers her passion for watercolour painting. She offers from the beginning to the narrative collectors voice her *corpo/história*, her embodied story. It is clear that her body "embodies" her story. Tia Aurora helps the girl, she takes her to concerts, supports her education. One day she remembers a scene that can be read as the materialization of the *Berührungssinn*, the sense of feeling touched by something, which Benjamin connects with the auratic dimension of art, but that here can be read as a dimension that gives meaning only through the senses before it becomes words. Feeling real or genuine is a sensation, a feeling that unfolds, it is the unfolding of the body memory of centuries that can still be conceived in the present. Among other things, these metaphoric unfoldings make you want to live:

Aunt Aurora played the violin, and I, with my eyes closed, was carried away by the rapture the music gave me, when suddenly I noticed a different sound. I opened my eyes—the musician was crying, sobbing... She and the violin together. One day, I shall return to this image in a painting... But how to paint the

19 "Grandona, gorda, desajeitada. Abriu a blusa e através do negro luzidio e transparente de sua pele, via-se lá dentro um coração enorme. E a cada batida do coração de Vó Rita nasciam os homens. Todos os homens: negros, brancos, azuis, amarelos, cor-de-rosa, descoloridos... Do coração enorme, grande de Vó Rita, nascia a humanidade inteira".

concreteness of a woman's solitude? How to paint the concreteness of human solitude? (Evaristo 2011: 77).²⁰

Corporality is important in this story. The narrative voice tells about how she starts painting in New York, "my sister", she starts, *sororidade*, sisterhood is established with the narrative voice collector of stories. She explains her own painting technique and at the same time she is relating with the narrative voice in a metaphoric sisterhood. Narrative reciprocity, *Mitsein*, togetherness, is established:

And yet, there is a painting that is born wholly from me, and the dye as well. I paint and stain as with my own body. An immense tactile pleasure. I use my fingers and my body, renouncing the brush. I stain in blood. I cut myself. I make myself my raw material. Pigment from my face, from my hands, and from my innermost blood. From the most intimate blood, menstrual blood. I gather from myself. I embroider the canvas with my womb-blood (Evaristo 2011: 80).²¹

Contamination does not discriminate, it intensifies, it enhances understanding, it is the condition of possibility to understand the other. The body turns the instrument for painting-writing, her blood is the ink, the razoring of her skin a symbolic act of the pain, the suffering. The skin is revalued also as a raw material, that means, though the art-activity, body-activity, body-art, she alludes to the cutting, to injuries, to the death of millions of enslaved persons, who were valued only as raw material, at disposal and wasted by slavery. *Rosto, mãos e sangue*. Her face, her hands and her blood. To revalue herself through her body-art is giving the body a reconfigured dimension of her skin, of her corporality. Her body becomes the uterus of the creations she is generating, at the same time of the story we are reading. Probably every poetic *Augenblick*, like the one we are reading here, every *Augenblick* of a life (*Augenblick* would be different than a moment, the *Augenblick* would include a recognition, *Erkenntnis* and *Erfahrung*, while the moment is just an event) is like the tone of a melody, like the brushstroke of a painting, whose fullness of meaning and effect depends on the colours, on the tones that preceded it. They depend in this case in the brushstrokes and tones of all the histories that preceded them as Afro-Brazilian women.

20 "Tia Aurora tocava o violino, eu de olhos fechados, tal era o enlevo que a música me causava, quando, de repente percebi um som diferente. Abria os olhos, a musicista chorava, soluçava... Ela e o violino. Um dia, hei de retomar essa imagem em uma pintura... Mas como pintar a concretude da solidão de uma mulher? Como pintar a concretude da soledad humana?"

21 "Entretanto, há uma pintura que nasce de mim inteira, a tintura também. Pinto e tinjo como meu próprio corpo. Um prazer tátil imenso. Uso os dedos e o corpo, abdicando do pincel. Tinjo em sangue. Navalho-me. Valho-me como matéria prima. Tinta do meu rosto, das minhas mãos e do meu íntimo sangue. Do mais íntimo sangue, o menstrual. Colho de mim. Bordo com meu sangue-útero a tela".

5. *Olhos d'água* (2014): The Politics of *Escrevivência*

I would like to address the analysis of the metaphors that Conceição Evaristo is presenting in her work and to describe and show how this counter-convivial metaphorology presents an alternative hermeneutics of the self, understood through her concept of *escrevivência* always as “*a escrita de nós, a condição de um sujeito coletivo*”, a poet-reality understood as a writing/poetry of us, the condition of a collective subject. The poetic embodiment as symbolic, metaphorical reconfiguration produces not only a different imaginative knowledge and reterritorialization of memory, but it also reinserts the perspective of Black women as subjects of history through their different individual histories that form at the same time the collective subject.

This is where the idea of *escrevivência* becomes highly relevant. For Evaristo's narrator does not speak for her protagonist in absentia, she rather tells the story after having encountered her protagonist, for example, as we have seen in *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*. Her account exists a posteriori, her storytelling is empirical. Her poetics of invented reality and factual invention reveal themselves as a sociocultural project of writing the emancipation, freedom, and dignity that the women of her stories have been denied in their lives. *Escrevivência* consists in writing about individual experiences as stories emblematic of collectively shared sociocultural truths, and as such it intends to not only study and hand down said experiences, but to prepare new *vivências* (life experiences) – in better *vidas* (lives). Evaristo's writing is activist storytelling, a literary discourse striving to change women's sociocultural reality – it is “poet-reality”, if you will. “Between the event and the narration of the fact, something is lost, and therefore something is added” (Evaristo 2011: 7).²² Writing cannot do total justice to its object of reference, and as such embracing its essential difference from what it denotes permits to the writer to add something in return. Evaristo supplements her writing with her narration – her comments, the text's structure, irony and especially her metaphors, all of which redeem her heroines – in order to prepare a better reality than the one represented in her stories: “By recording these stories, I continue in the deliberate act of tracing an *escrevivência*” (Evaristo 2011: 7).²³ As Alyne Barbosa Lima and Cintia Camargo Vianna precisely state: “The conception of *escrevivência* coined by Conceição Evaristo goes beyond the limits of national culture, placing her literature and the meanings that emanate from it within a diasporic dimension” (Barbosa Lima and Vianna 2020: 3). It is from the Afrodiasporic experience, from the memories that this experience generated in the lives and the bodies of Africans and *afrodescendentes* dispersed all over the American world (the *amefricanidade* of Lélia González) that the voice/voices of the figure-narrator of “*Olhos d'água*” will be shaped.

22 “Entre o acontecimento e a narração do fato, alguma coisa se perde e por isso se acrescenta”.

23 “Ao registrar estas histórias, continuo no premeditado ato de traçar uma *escrevivência*”.

6. “Olhos d’água”: Medialities of *Escrevivência*

The short story “Olhos d’água” is about a female narrative voice who tries to remember the colour of her mother’s eyes and cannot. This torments the narrator, and she begins to remember various episodes from her childhood, and her experiences with her mother, which would become the “writings” of the narrative voice. At the end of the story, the narrator returns home to her hometown, meets her mother and among the tears of the reunion recognizes the colour of her mother’s eyes.

One of the memories I would like to comment on has to do with fear, materiality, and resilience and on how we can interpret this loss of memory and the meaning of this persistent question about the colour of the mother’s eyes. There is a connection between the materiality of the house, the rain and the mother’s eyes which is important to consider.

I still remember my mother’s fear on days of heavy rain. On top of the bed, clinging to us, she sheltered us in her embrace. With her eyes flooded with tears, she mumbled prayers to Saint Barbara, afraid that our fragile shack would collapse on us. And I don’t know if it was my mother’s weeping-lament, or the sound of the rain... I only know that it all gave me the feeling that our house was swaying in the wind. In those moments, my mother’s eyes blended with the eyes of nature. It rained, she wept! She wept, it rained! And so, why was it that I could not remember the colour of her eyes? (Evaristo 2014: 17).²⁴

The moment when the narrator recovers her memory is also significant. This is a very important passage in the story where she recognizes, remembers and manages to describe precisely the colour of her mother’s eyes. I think you can try to understand this quote by asking: what is the significance of the colour of her mother’s eyes that the narrator recognizes? And furthermore, how does it relate to the concept of coloniality?

And when, after long days of travel to reach my land, I was able to gaze ecstatically into my mother’s eyes, do you know what I saw? Do you know what I saw? I saw only tears and tears. But she was smiling happily. But there were so many tears that I wondered if my mother had eyes or rivers flowing down her face. And only then did I understand. My mother was serenely carrying flowing

24 “Lembro-me ainda do temor de minha mãe nos dias de fortes chuvas. Em cima da cama, agarrada a nós, ela nos protegia com seu abraço. E com os olhos alagados de pranto balbuciava rezas a Santa Bárbara, temendo que o nosso frágil barraco desabasse sobre nós. E eu não sei se o lamento-pranto de minha mãe, se o barulho da chuva... Sei que tudo me causava a sensação de que a nossa casa balançava ao vento. Nesses momentos os olhos de minha mãe se confundiam com os olhos da natureza. Chovia, chorava! Chorava, chovia! Então, porque eu não conseguia lembrar a cor dos olhos dela?”.

water. That's why tears and tears adorned her face. The colour of my mother's eyes was the colour of water (Evaristo 2014: 18–19).²⁵

But how does this story relate to the coloniality of power? Evaristo manages to bring together all the dimensions of writing in a story like “Olhos d'água”. By showing one character's story, she conveys the entire history of Black women in Brazil, which began with slavery. It is, therefore, a revindication of the past, through a poetic form, where the resistance of Black people, especially women, is shown in the way they manage to survive amid these social conditions. When the narrator manages to remember and understand the colour of her mother's eyes, the story evokes the whole history of work, suffering and resistance. The transparency of the eyes becomes an absolute image that undoes coloniality and destroys the thought of a cultural, mental inferiority of Black people in relation to other human groups.

“Olhos d'água” represent eyes without colour, they are de-racialized eyes, and they also carry within them the poetic energy of language. On the other hand, as a thinking metaphor, the colour of the mother's eyes, which are transparent, manages to deconstruct both the coloniality of power and the structure of prejudice in readers' minds.

There is of course a dimension that is the most important here, and that is, the relation with a new, reconfigured mythology that Conceição Evaristo is evoking here. The construction of the main metaphor *olhos d'água*²⁶ is connected with the Yorubá Nagô tradition this narrative voice evokes, and it this identification, as Barbosa Lima and Camargo Vianna precisely state, “which will give the [“Olhos d'água”] story a centrality in the African experience” (Barbosa Lima and Vianna 2020: 5). It is not the stillness and serenity of the water, of the sea, which pacifies the viewer through the eye, the happiness of his eye, before a metaphorical sea of existence has become still. The metaphor is a projection, a reconfigured anthropomorphic symbolic form of nature in the service of the collective subject(s) that reflects on it. This procedure implies the reinterpretation of the historical narrative and the creation of a story with new symbols and myths that will ultimately respond to another form of collective self-reflection.

25 “E quando, após longos dias de viagem para chegar à minha terra, pude contemplar extasiada os olhos de minha mãe, sabem o que vi? Sabem o que vi? Vi só lágrimas e lágrimas. Entretanto, ela sorria feliz. Mas, eram tantas lágrimas, que eu me perguntei se minha mãe tinha olhos ou rios caudalosos sobre a face. E só então compreendi. Minha mãe trazia, serenamente em si, águas correntezas. Por isso, prantos e prantos a enfeitar o seu rosto. A cor dos olhos de minha mãe era cor de olhos d'água. Águas de Mamãe Oxum! Rios calmos, mas profundos e enganosos para quem contempla a vida apenas pela superfície”.

26 *Olhos d'água* in Portuguese carries a double meaning: it can refer both to “tear-filled eyes” and to “springs” or natural water sources.

One of the most celebrated entities in Brazil, Iemanjá, is the mirror of the world, the mother reflecting all differences and protects the head, the *ori*, which accompanied the formation of the individual. Iemanjá is the deity, the one who breeds and who unites the subject with the community. With this uterine image, the relationship with the mirror in “Olhos d’água” can be read as a critique of the self-production that seems dominant in the myth of Narcissus, through the self-vision that leads to death, to unlock the reflective vastness of collective presence production, by means of prenatal care and the recognition of otherness. Evaristo referred to this in a talk she gave to my students in Heidelberg, unfortunately only online, but her presence was nevertheless charismatic and inspiring. She stated, that both the Oxum and Iemanjá myths built up a different mythology than the Narcissus myth where the Black body does not enter, since it was never seen as a model of beauty, nor inside a heroic tale, and especially not a writing of the self.

Narcissus’ mirror doesn’t fit our face, nor our Black bodies, indigenous bodies, bodies that are different from the body that was the prototype of the European body, these bodies that have always been misunderstood or denied their beauty. To contemplate the mirror of Narcissus for Black people, a body that is not white, that is not considered beautiful, the mirror of Narcissus does not cover our face, on the contrary it expels our face (Evaristo 2023).

She affirms that there are two African and Afro-Brazilian mythical mirrors wherein the Black aesthetic can fit. The mirror of Oxum and that of Iemanjá, both myths that do not allow the subject to drown in their own image. The first one would reveal to Black people “*a nossa divindade, potencia e beleza*”, their divinity, power, and beauty. But it is the mirror of Oxum that Evaristo also evokes, as “*armas de guerra*”, a weapon of war, the Oxum myth shows not only a goddess that observes herself, but she sees through the mirror also the enemies behind her, she develops a sense of care for her community, the danger that is menacing her community (Evaristo 2023). For Conceição Evaristo it is also a metaphoric weapon which shows the relation with the Afro-Brazilian community and the constant dangers that surround them. The dance in which the mirror is held by Oxum symbolizes not only the different aesthetic possibilities of symbolic reconfiguration but shows also that the divinity is in a “*situação de luta*”, in a situation of struggle. The second is one of the most celebrated entities in Brazil, Iemanjá, who comes from the Egbá, the Yoruba nation of the Ifé and Ibada region in Africa, represents the mirror of the world, the mother who reflects all differences and protects the head: the *ori*, which is intimately related with the formation of the individual. According to Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara, Iemanjá (or Yemoja) is the deity of sweet and salty waters (Omari-Tunkara 2005). Her main temple was in Abeokuta, in the Ibara district, where she emerged as the deity of the river Ogum. We are dealing here with

two mirrors with the power of abundance instead of absence. The search for a mirror whose reflectivity is not limpid, like the still waters of a Greek lake, but which brings the quality of vastness present in the image of the sea, which interconnects the immediate context with what is strange, foreign, with the Other. The presence of images of water and the mirror through the narcissistic mirror can be read as moments that denounce the loss of contact with the self and with otherness, as moments of imprisonment and madness. Artist Lenine Salvador (2017) who has performed, studied and danced some of the Yoruba rituals states: “When I was confronted with this reading of the images of the mirror and the waters, I realized that the dance experience and the offering to Iemanjá had nothing to do with these qualities of imprisonment or madness” (Salvador 2016: 4312).

Not only the undulating, waving movement of the narration with its constant repetitions evokes the sea and all the havoc, death, hope and memories, which are the subtext of the metaphor of “Olhos d’água”, but also this form of understanding collective subjectivity allows the narrator to escape the paradigm of Christian sin/guilt and penance/redemption. The *olhos d’água* metaphor is also a mirror, but one that reflects a poetry/writing of a collective subject, *a escrita de nós, a condição de um sujeito coletivo*, the condition of a collective subject. *Olhos d’água* is the mobile metaphor that can also reconfigure the paradigmatic sin/redemption matrix in which the Christianity has also put women, since through biblical Eva the misogynist sin enters but also through the body of Maria the redemptive solution, Jesus. Since the body of Black women is kept outside this two functions, as Evaristo states for the Brazilian literature, where the Black women are represented only as *babás* or *mãe pretas*, nannies or “Black mothers”, who can feed and care the sons of the *fazendeiros*, the slave owners, but never give birth themselves, are not represented as mothers, since this is the condition of the possibility for her writing; Evaristo intelligently decides to opt for a narrative in which the condition of the possibility (*Bedingung der Möglichkeit*) for her *escrevivência* is outside this sin/redemption paradigm in which Christianity has put women. So, the metaphors she displays undermine this and seek to search for *ancestralidade*, ancestry, for other mythical grounding texts that were asleep or that were unconsciously hidden. They appear at the moment where the female narrator asks herself: *De que cor eram os olhos de minha mãe?* [What colour were my mother’s eyes?]

The essence of the metaphors of *escrevivência* are their condition as the unbound (*das Ungebundene*); this shift resides in the paradigmatic abandonment of the hermeneutics of the self that Christianity shaped through the sin/redemption matrix. This shift is the condition of the possibility of the symbolic as an articulated reality and the formation of meaning. The revalorization of the African myth is the agent of reconfiguration that brings about the transformation of Oxum and Iemanjá’s imaginary

order into the symbolic order, of the particular into the collective, that regulates the private into the political. The thinking metaphor of “Olhos d’água” embodies, performs, restores, expresses and at the same time produces a knowledge, which is graphed in the memories of the gestures of ancestors and strips the guilt from the mythos, generates a mythos without guilt.

This is constitutive because the consideration of the other will, of the communitarian will, is elementary and constitutive for them. The truth behind these *escrevivências*, the truth of literature, is not referential, but figurative. It is against the background of the historiographical account that literature acquires its special profile. The narrative is a truly ethical tale, but not in a judgmental or instructive sense, rather in the analytical sense of ethics, which describes structures of affect and the resulting patterns of behaviour.

These mythical-ritual functional units of *escrevivência* are used as a cultural dispositive and structure the metaphors of the *escrevivência* as convivial metaphors and serve to make people capable of acting again in the face of the experience of being in history, in order to respond to contingency and their own finiteness with the transcending power of a work endowed with value.

I would like to end with the short story “Grota funda”. It tells the journey of Alípio de Sá, a man with more eloquence than many lawyers, as the narrative voice tells, that after entering a deep grot, the abyss of an enormous cavern, ends up using only five words to describe what he saw at the bottom of the grot. What started with the *becos da memória* ends with the mythical deep grot, the mythical abyss that isn’t described but that contains all the conditions of possibilities of existence. It is the Ur-Grund of the experiences that Evaristo has been telling about in all her short stories and books. One of the legends told about the abyss has to do with a priest, who committed suicide due to an impossible love, also about a father who murdered his son after his wife died during the childbirth and also of two women who could not live out their lesbian affection for each other. Perhaps the element of water, the basic operator in our lives, has its own way of inhabiting us. All the abysses that are the ground of our lives function in the same way. Conviviality is only possible because of these deep grots we carry with us, individually and collectively. Paths (*becos*), water, and proper names are not only a spiritual force for humanity, they are not only the thinking metaphors of *escrevivência* that reconfigured a whole mythological Yoruba ancestry into present day and present living of Black women living in impoverished and precarious way in Brazil but they also are especially water and the names as metaphor for human lives, a “natural” resource to be consumed, wasted, saved, treated, “potable”, exploitable, marketable and “electrifiable” in the case of water and extractable in *becos* as a metaphor for land.

To think of the community beyond the commodity and the extractable is also to allocate these levels of constitution of the social being. The economic (productive, in the transformative capacities of human being), the social gregarious level (distributed, related and depending reciprocally, needing each other) and the political level (in which the individuals circulate freely interrelating). All these three levels that Marx distinguished already as being constitutive of society are contained on a fourth level: the cultural level.

At the core of the concept *escrevivência* lies the elaboration of a poetics of writing that takes as its point of departure the positionality of Black women within the social and symbolic order. This practice does not merely recount biographical experiences but rather constructs a mode of enunciation that inscribes the subjectivity of Black women into literary discourse, foregrounding their capacity to narrate the world from perspectives historically marginalized or silenced. Such writing, in this sense, is inseparable from the life-worlds of Black women; it is generated through their embodied existence and epistemic location. From this axis, a series of conceptual inflections unfolds: the insistence on the humanization of Black subjects against dehumanizing discourses; the collective dimension of characterization, in which the “I” is always embedded within a communal “we”; the demand for representativity as an act of literary and political presence, and the affirmation of narrative plurality as a counterpoint to hegemonic singularities. These dimensions come into sharpest relief in the interpretive engagement we demonstrated with *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*, where the textual fabric makes visible the insurgent power of Black women’s voices. It is in this context that the notion of conviviality acquires critical resonance – not as mere coexistence, but as an ethics of reciprocity and relationality that destabilizes the hierarchies of dominant cultural discourse. To read Evaristo’s work, then, is not only to trace the contours of a distinctive aesthetic project but to recognize a humanizing telos that positions literature as a site of decolonial praxis. It is precisely within this horizon that her commitment to Black authorship – above all, to the legitimization of Black women’s enunciative authority – can be understood as a sustained challenge to the exclusions of the national literary canon and as an affirmation of alternative epistemologies of being, knowing, and narrating.

“Culture is a total consuming moment that consumes or completes what is society” (Veraza 1997: 39), writes Jorge Veraza. He then goes on to state, “the content of freedom is produced in culture by way of the distribution of diverse meanings, while the form of freedom is produced politically” (Veraza 1997: 40). Political circulation gives rise to a diversity of perspectives of grasping and understanding the world which, by interrelating with each other, are reciprocally consumed and distributively codified in advance by cultural production, like literature. That means, the social form

of wealth derives from social connection, from social and cultural relation, since its field of operation is the use value for others. The social form of wealth derives from the cultural relation or connection which is the fundament of *escrevivência*. The movement of *escrevivência* opens itself up towards reciprocity. The social form of wealth lies in the value-form of literature, of “consuming” it, but there is literature, like *escrevivência*, that has a social use-value that forgets or erases its character of being use-value in which its useful character, although it continues to do so, remains hidden under its social form, under its form of generating a society of reciprocity beyond conviviality. The literature that is conceived under the mercantile, extractive linguistic code that is objectified, deformed by the world of merchandise and by the form of expression of these does not have access to other forms of human expression and propagates ideologically that there is no other way of reproducing life (Veraza 1997). The essential aspect of the linguistic code (which is the fundament of literature) is revealed through *escrevivência* by the way in which it is a form of human expression in general as a generic form and not a mercantile one. Literary configurations are reconfigurations of mythological affect structures and bear witness by this the essential aspect of humanity and conviviality, which lies in language as human expression, as a generic form and subvert the mercantile deformation. Conviviality can only be found there: in literary language that conceives subjectivities with structures of affects that are shaped and unbound and beyond mercantile objectifications. Let us end with the words of the great poem of Conceição Evaristo, “Da calma e do silêncio”. In the first verse we see the bodily, material condition of language, which can be chewed, touched, heard, loved, like the thinking metaphors of proper names. In the second verse the thinking metaphors of the water are implicit since the eyes lost themselves in the waters of the iris and infinitude like the horizon at the sea. In the third verse the subject is not leaving the *beco*, the small paths, it recovers humanity in the submerged and subversive language of poetry:

When I bite
into the word,
please,
don't rush me.
I want to chew,
to tear with my teeth
the skin, the bones, the marrow
of the verb,
so I may versify
the core of things.

When my gaze
loses itself in nothingness,
please,
don't awaken me.
I want to hold,
within my iris,
the slightest shadow,
the faintest movement.

When my feet
slow their pace,
please,
don't compel me.
Why walk?
Let me remain,
let me be still,
in apparent inertia.
Not every wanderer
treads roads—
there are submerged worlds
that only the silence
of poetry can enter.²⁷

(Evaristo 2008: 21)

²⁷ “Quando eu morder a palavra por favor, não me apressem, quero mascar, rasgar entre os dentes, a pele, os ossos, o tutano do verbo, para assim versejar o âmago das coisas. / Quando meu olhar se perder no nada, por favor, não me despertem, quero reter, no dentro da íris, a menor sombra, do ínfimo movimento. / Quando meus pés abrandarem na marcha, por favor, não me forcem. Caminhar para quê? Deixem-me quedar, deixem-me quieta, na aparente inércia. Nem todo viandante anda estradas, há mundos submersos, que sou o silêncio da poesia penetra”.

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