

AFRO-ANCESTRALIDADE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF URBAN MEMORY IN CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO'S *BECOS DA MEMÓRIA*

Leonora S. Paula

Michigan State University

Abstract: In this article, I argue that Conceição Evaristo's novel *Becos da Memória* invites us to rethink the role of memory-making in projects of urban development. I discuss how the use of overlapping narratives about the lives of the characters and the life of an unnamed *favela* brings forward Evaristo's political project of *escrevivência*, which entails a black feminist practice very much informed by Afro-descendants practice of *ancestralidade*. More specifically, I look at how the multiple experiences of the residents of the *favela* in the process of being removed, narrated from the perspective of a young black woman, provide a key space for the inclusion of often untold histories in broader discourses of urban memory. By writing the lives of the community members into existence and writing the *favela* into the discursive space of the city, Evaristo writes against exclusionary, anti-black urban memory.

Keywords: Urban memory; Black feminism; *Ancestralidade*; Afro-Brazilian literature.

Resumo: Neste artigo discuto algumas formas pelas quais o romance *Becos da Memória*, de Conceição Evaristo, nos convida a reavaliar o papel de estratégias de construção da memória em projetos de desenvolvimento urbano. Proponho que o uso de múltiplas narrativas sobre as vidas das personagens e a vida da favela ficcional põe em evidência o projeto político denominado *escrevivência*, criado por Evaristo. Tal projeto se firma em uma prática feminista negra marcada por uma forte relação com a ideia de ancestralidade. Mais especificamente, demonstro como as

experiências dos residentes de uma favela em processo de remoção, narradas pela perspectiva de uma jovem negra, se tornam espaços de inclusão de histórias silenciadas pelos discursos de construção de memória urbana.

Palavras-chave: Memória urbana; Feminismo negro; Ancestralidade; Literatura Afro-brasileira.

Historically, the main ways of thinking about urban memory involve projects of preservation, conservation and restoration of heritage, broadly speaking. These projects, which tend to take place in museums, archives, special collections, monuments, and historical sites, serve the function of memorializing and registering past achievements presumably deserving of recognition. Heritage preservation and celebration are, therefore, fundamental steps in the process of local spatial identity formation. As Giselle Beiguelman has argued, urban memory is in essence collective memory as it is shared by city users in how they relate to space and also time (2019). With that in mind, we can say that memory-making is an always changing process that reflects city life in all its multiplicities. Yet, compared to cities' social dynamism, narratives about urban memory have a rather narrow breadth. This means that the process of urban memory-making relies on selective memory as its main mechanism of production, often excluding marginalized knowledge from its plans, and creating what Bieguelman calls memories of amnesia (2019). In other words, the types of memories and the perspectives from which they are told are often representations of dominant narratives of triumph, such as nation-building projects, reflected for instance in monument placing and street naming conventions. Thus, a careful analysis about urban memory-making should necessarily take into account what kinds of memories are registered, from what positions, and which ones are excluded.

The work of Afro-Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo (1946) attentively tends to the inclusion of often excluded forms of knowledge in urban memory-making as most of her writings make space for a variety of experiences lived by marginalized communities. In this article, I argue that in the novel *Becos da Memória* (2006), Evaristo performs the work of an urban historian of sorts whose main task is to record the untold histories of the urban excluded in broader discourses of urban memory. I examine how the intersection of black feminism, *escrevivência*, and *ancestralidade* invites us to rethink the role of memory-making and creates spaces for new narratives about the urban experience.

The novel explores the multiple trajectories of the residents of an unnamed Brazilian *favela* in the process of being removed, sometime during the 1980s. The plot is built around the experiences of Maria-Nova, a young black woman resident of the *favela* and acute observer of its life. Described as a curious and thoughtful thirteen-year-old, Maria-Nova has access to a variety of spaces in the community as she helps her mother and other local women in the laundry service that they provide to the neighboring rich, drawing water from public taps located in different points in the *favela*. Besides the protagonist, other characters, all of them Afro-descendants, help shape the narrative: Maria-Velha, Vó Rita, Mãe Joana, Filó Gazogênia, Tio Totó and Bondade, all add various storylines to the text as they serve as the main source of the local and ancestral history that is orally passed on to the protagonist. Maria-Nova, the bearer of a new story, as her name suggests, goes on a journey that ends with her commitment to write about the lives and struggles of the members of the community in the process of disappearing. Meanwhile, the woman witnesses the experiences of Afro-descendants, especially Black Brazilian women, against oppressive social practices aimed at places such as the *favela* community she calls home. Maria-Nova goes through a process of identity formation, which takes place in a time and space shaped by a slavocratic patriarchy perpetuated in contemporary social practices.

The use of conflating narratives about and around Maria-Nova and her community functions as a register of ancestral memories which brings forward Evaristo's political project of *escrevivência*. Grounded in black feminist tradition and informed by profound ancestral connections, *escrevivência* entails a writing practice that assumes the presence of traces of the author as a political subject. Understood as multiple, the author as political subject accesses her own lived experiences as well as those of her surroundings to craft her text. Conceição Evaristo, argues Dejáir Dionísio, “traz em seu projeto literário traços de sua ancestralidade, sendo o labor criativo entrecortado por experiência e vivência cultural” (26). Affirming the collective by means of the individual and reclaiming Afro-Brazilian histories, memories, and ancestral practices, *escrevivência* is the product and production of a black woman's voice that also finds expression in the lives and work of other black women. As Evaristo explains in the novel's foreword, “busco a voz, a fala de quem conta,

para se misturar a minha. Assim nasceu a narrativa de *Becos da memória*. Primeiro foi o verbo de minha mãe...A voz de minha mãe a me trazer lembranças de nossa vivência” (5).

For Jurema Werneck, black feminism entails not only the struggle for the emancipation of black women, but also the positive reinforcement of the role of black women as agents of social transformation and the recognition that “as lutas das mulheres negras por equidade se desenvolveu ao longo dos séculos e devemos reconhecer que têm sido parte fundamental dos amplos segmentos que constroem cotidianamente o Brasil como nação” (3). Against systems of domination that conflate patriarchy, racism, colonialism and capitalism, black women’s liberating actions occur at different levels and require ingenious forms of representation that have the ability to express vastly heterogeneous demands. In Werneck’s words,

Nos resta a tarefa inconclusa, ou pouco valorizada, de buscar a voz própria. Refiro-me à busca de outras formas possíveis ou desejáveis de expressão e representação do que fomos, do que poderíamos ter sido, do que desejamos ser, antes e além do eurocentrismo e suas pressões simbolizadas pelo racismo heterossexista, sua dominação econômica e seus ataques no plano simbólico. Ainda que nos reconheçamos múltiplas, mutantes, inconclusas. (84)

As though predicting Werneck’s call for a self-determined voice and system of representation, *escrevivência* offers an epistemic contribution that creates spaces for (re)imagining Afro-descendants knowledge, history and memory.

The literary production of Afro-Brazilian women in the last two decades has, according to Zilá Bernd, clear and unique characteristics:

A principal característica do fazer poético das autoras mulheres da literatura afro-brasileira atual é a de rastrear os “guardados da memória”, como chama a poeta Ana Cruz, por meio dos traços, dos fragmentos deixados pela herança de suas antepassadas. A segunda característica dessa literatura é o que poderíamos chamar de “enraizamento dinâmico ou relacional”, ou seja, a construção identitária baseada na procura das origens, que não negligencia os rastros deixados pela palavra materna e projeta-se no respeito à alteridade e no reconhecimento da diversidade da nação brasileira. Como terceira característica dessa poética negra no feminino, elencaríamos a tendência ao resgate da memória transatlântica. (31)¹

¹ For Bernd, Ana Maria Gonçalves and Conceição Evaristo are the leading voices in the current process of consolidation of women authored Afro-Brazilian prose. As Bernd claims, “essas vozes, quase ausentes do panorama da literatura afro-brasileira, não apenas tornam-se audíveis como adquirem grande força expressiva por apresentarem fragmentos da história do negro nas Américas a partir do ponto de vista da mulher. Grande parte dessa produção feminina se expressa por meio da poesia, sendo raras as que praticam as formas do romance, constituindo-se em exceção Conceição Evaristo e Ana Maria Gonçalves, cujas obras vêm consolidar a literatura afro como vertente fértil da literatura brasileira” (29).

The same features cited by Bernd are found in Conceição Evaristo's work, particularly in *Becos da Memória*. The novel prioritizes representations of identity formation grounded on ancestral knowledge, it also highlights self-determined processes of memory-making and affirms the centrality of a gendered diasporic ethos. Ana Rita Santiago also observes that, to understand Afro-Brazilian women's contemporary literature, it is necessary to recognize the use of a distinct repertoire of discursive practices that is grounded on the writers' intersecting experiences:

Conhecer suas escrituras...significa reconhecê-las como sintaxes literárias, de aquilombamentos e ressignificações imaginárias e ficcionais, do vivido e do porvir, individual e coletivo, de ancestralidades, histórias e identidades negro-femininas, caminhos, sonhos, desejos, mas também desassossegos, dores e sofrimentos. (13)

This fictional resignification of spaces and experiences, along with representations of past, present and future histories of Afro-descendants, appears prominently in *Becos da Memória*. The novel captures the fundamental principles of Evaristo's practice of *escrevivência* and lays out the critical role black feminism anchored in *ancestralidade* plays in the current production of literature authored by Afro-Brazilian women.

Ancestralidade as a mode of creating and transmitting knowledge is essential to Evaristo's work. The labor of *escrevivência* reaffirms ancestral knowledge and practices once obfuscated by coloniality and situates Afro-Brazilian memory as a fundamental engine in the project of re-imagining the place occupied by Afro-descendants in Brazilian society. Beyond "the reconstruction of the past to recover 'tradition'" (45), drawing from *ancestralidade* means understanding "the past as a living entity and presence" (54), notes Alexandre Emboaba da Costa. An expression of lived experience and critical history, for Costa,

Ancestralidade involves the oral and expressive practices and collective spaces that generate knowledge, history, memory, and forms of sociality. It is directly linked to the institutions and practices oriented toward self-determination and cultural continuity that Afro-descendants have (re)created throughout the Americas within contexts of enslavement, racial discrimination, and unequal citizenship. (64)

Mobilized by black women as a mode of agency, *ancestralidade* plays an important role in the process of affirmation of black women as agents of transformation seeing that black women's struggle for emancipation and empowerment is, in Lélia Gonzalez words,

“uma história feita de resistências e de lutas, em que essa mulher tem sido protagonista graças à dinâmica de uma memória cultural ancestral” (364).

Black women’s relationship to *ancestralidade* in various dimensions is central to the *Becos da Memória*. By and large, the novel asserts the recognition of black women’s long history of social protagonism in Brazil. From the oral narratives passed down to Maria-Nova by the elders to the spatial knowledge gathered by the washerwomen in the community, Evaristo creates multiple narrative lines that emphasize the centrality of non-hegemonic knowledges and informal practices. This entails recognizing the protagonism of black women in a society known for extreme sexism and misogyny. In the novel, the women working in the laundry service, often raising children by themselves and caring for the elder with no assistance, play a central role in the local economy even though the systemic exploitation they face does not allow for changes in their living conditions,

Filó Gazogênia sempre trabalhou. Quando estava boa de saúde, a filha saía para trabalhar e a velha ficava tomando conta da neta e ainda lavava roupa para fora. Ficava sempre perto de Maria-Velha e de Mãe Joana. As tinas das três moravam constantemente na torneira. Havia lavadeiras que nem levavam as tinas para a casa, porque voltariam no outro dia, voltavam sempre. (110)

The emphasis on the constant use of the washbasin, the main work tool of the washerwomen (who always came back), demonstrates the significance of the laundry service as the main economic activity of a community led by women. Significantly, experiences with gendered forms of violence such as domestic and sexual violence are also portrayed in the text. But less than perpetuating the representation of the black female body as disposable and black women’s lives as expendable, Evaristo engages in a direct criticism of the historical and social conditions that allow for a system of gender violence, racial discrimination, and social inequality to continue. That is to say, the locus of enunciation from which the characters speak brings to the forefront a critique of “the legacy of a slavocratic patriarchy and how it unfolds and expresses itself in gender-, class-, and race-based forms of inequality and violence” (Schmidt 78). What is more, the fact that the narrative highlights the individual and collective experiences of the women in the community underlines the centrality of their position not only as income earners and caregivers but as knowledge producers and memory keepers. In performing their labor as washerwomen, they build spatial knowledge wherever they go and make use of a repertoire

of skills crucial for the survival, however vulnerable, of their community, much like the labor of enslaved African washerwomen in colonial times. Thus, the work performed by the washerwomen in the *favela* of *Becos da Memória* must be recognized as an extension of forms community organizing with origins in slavery. As Lélia Gonzalez notes, “foi dentro da comunidade escravizada que se desenvolveram formas político-culturais de resistência que hoje nos permitem continuar uma luta plurisecular de libertação” (316). Evaristo preserves Gonzalez’ emancipatory considerations and affirms Black womanhood and their long legacy of social protagonism as opposed to subjecting them to a patronizing gaze.

Another dimension of black women’s relationship to *ancestralidade* is represented in the use of a cross-generational voice. Even though the protagonist of *Becos da Memória* is the one that conducts the narrative line, the representation of a plural self as a textual device challenges the structure of a self-centered narrative: “Homens, mulheres, crianças que se amontoaram dentro de mim, como amontoados eram os barracos de minha favela” (17). Rather than a storyline centered on the linear experiences of the main character, Evaristo’s novel draws up a multilayered structure where the formation of the self is never single. This is so because, for Maria-Nova, her prime and most valuable resource are the stories and memories, actual as well as ancestral, gathered but also shared by the members of her community: “Tio Totó contava sempre alguma [história], Maria-Velha também. A tia contava as dela e as da irmã Joana; contudo, à medida que Maria-Nova crescia, ela ia intuindo, ia lendo as histórias nos olhos, na expressão linda e triste da mãe” (53). A curious and intuitive listener, Maria-Nova recognizes in the stories a source of immense knowledge and understands the necessity not only to retain but also to transmit it before it all disappears, like the disappearing houses and alleyways of the *favela*: “Um sentimento estranho agitava o peito de Maria-Nova. Um dia, não se sabia como, ela haveria de contar tudo aquilo ali. Contar as histórias dela e dos outros. Por isso ela ouvia tudo tão atentamente. Não perdia nada” (31). Maria-Nova records while also remembering (“recordando”) not only her current experiences but also the memories of her friends and family, the living and the dead. The narrative voice in the novel is never that of a single individual. This is because, as stated by Mirian Cristina dos Santos, “constantemente, as

personagens...participam direta e indiretamente, do processo de composição da narrativa, ao fornecerem vislumbres de passados rasurados” (77). Other than episodic excerpts, the memories of others come together as a synthesis of many lives, establishing the foundation upon which the texts are built, both Maria-Nova’s present narration as well the future text she will write.

Certainly at play here is an Afro-Brazilian value system that positions the collective over the individual, in which, according to Leda Martins, “o coletivo superpõe-se ao particular, como operador de formações de resistência social e cultural que reativam, restauram e reterritorializam...um saber alter, encarnado na memória do corpo e da voz” (Martins 2003:73). Recurrent in Evaristo’s work, the concept of the multiple self is used to highlight cross-generational experiences that simultaneously rely on memories to move back in time and as a way to look into the future. Her well-known poem “Vozes-mulheres” (2008) articulates such ethos:

A voz da minha bisavó ecoou
Criança
nos porões do navio.
Ecoou lamentos
de uma infância perdida.
A voz de minha avó
ecoou obediência
aos brancos-donos de tudo.

A voz de minha mãe
ecoou baixinho revolta
no fundo das cozinhas alheias
debaixo das trouxas
roupagens sujas dos brancos
pelo caminho empoeirado
rumo à favela.

A minha voz ainda
ecoava versos perplexos
com rimas de sangue
e
fome.

A voz de minha filha
recolhe todas as nossas vozes
recolhe em si
as vozes mudas caladas engasgadas nas gargantas.

A voz de minha filha
recolhe em si

a fala e o ato
O ontem – o hoje – o agora.
Na voz de minha filha
se faz ouvir a ressonância
O eco da vida-liberdade. (10-11)

The multigenerational voices in the poem, *bisavó, avó e mãe*, echo memories of bondage, servitude and resentment and transmit experiences that, while marked by oppression, locate in the Middle Passage the source of resistance that resonates in the present. The daughter's voice gathers the collective memories of her ancestors and carries them into the future of her bloodline. Unequivocally gendered, the quest for liberation is attained in the present as the muted voices, once released, resonate into action. As Emmanuelle Oliveira has commented, "the laments in the first stanza, the obedience and unspoken revolt of the second and third stanzas, and the perplexity in the fourth stanza all convey a growing scale of events that leads to the final life of liberty...As black women reconstruct past and present, therefore, they also forge the future" (2008: 172). Conscious of the turbulent and transformative cross-generational and well as transnational journeys, "Vozes-mulheres" evokes Audre Lorde's reflection on the necessity of poetry for black women's liberation. Lorde states: "The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom" (38). Echoing Lorde's call, the poetic voice in "Vozes-mulheres" much like the protagonist in *Becos da Memória* carries the Black mother(s) voices and gives meaning to a vast archive of liberating knowledge.

Armed with ancestral knowledge and chosen as the village's future storyteller, Maria-Nova occupies the space of a *griote* in formation. Maria-Nova is the future – as her name indicates – because Maria-Velha and the past, ancestral knowledge that she (and others) represents inhabits the girl. Maria-Nova gathers the memories orally passed down to her by the community elders and commits to the task of becoming the record keeper and narrator, thus preventing the disappearance of a multitude of life experiences that, if not for her, would never appear in history: "Maria-Velha e Tio Totó ficavam trocando histórias, permutando as pedras no coração. Maria-Nova, ali quietinha, sentada no

caixotinho, vinha crescendo e escutando tudo” (30). Of great importance to West African traditional societies, *griots* served as a historical archive of a people, playing the role of historians, storytellers, musicians, and poets. Their main task was to “manter a continuidade da tradição oral, a fonte de saberes e ensinamentos que possibilita a integração de homens e mulheres, adultos e crianças no espaço, no tempo e nas tradições” (Melo 2009:149). To this effect, *Becos da Memória* traces Maria-Nova’s process of becoming an archive of the narratives of her people and a spokesperson for her ancestors. Significantly, it is Tio Tatão, a community elder, who solemnly confers on Maria-Nova the task of becoming a liberating agent for her friends and family:

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 livre 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. (111)

In the eyes of her community, Maria-Nova represents a means for liberation, her own and others’. She is a plural self, situated not only in the present but also in the past and in the future. As she goes through the process of listening to and learning the stories shared by the other characters, she calls attention to the moments in which the act of sharing, a brief but powerful liberating act, takes place. Be it in the public laundry taps, in the social gatherings or in the multiple farewells she partakes in, these ordinary moments reveal the intimate bonds between her and the community members. The moments highlight the daily experiences of the residents of the *favela* as significant social practices and the telling of stories affirms those practices as constitutive of the community’s social relations in which Maria-Nova is immersed. An expression of *escrevivência*, the collective narrative in the novel affirms the self as multiple and in constant formation while bringing into focus Afro-Brazilian histories and memories expressed by way of a black woman’s voice. An emancipatory system of representation, *escrevivência* expands a repertoire of what Werneck calls “ações de posicionamento cultural,” which, desenvolvidas pelas mulheres negras, tiveram e têm como base a atualização seletiva de elementos da tradição afro-brasileira e de diferentes modelos que conferiram à mulher negra o poder de liderança e de agenciamentos” (84).

Another significant dimension of black women relationship to *ancestralidade* is the representation of displacement. “Maria-Nova andava pelos terrenos recentemente desocupados com poeira-tristeza-lágrimas nos olhos. No local one estavam os barracos dos que tinham ido pela manhã, agora só restava um grande vazio. Era como um corpo que aos poucos fosse perdendo os pedaços” (87). Through Maria-Nova’s reflections and recordings one becomes aware of a practice of memory-making in which the experience of displacement is central. Displacement, as Evaristo invites us to ponder, evokes multiple meanings. It speaks to the physical removal of the families from the *favela* at the same time that it alludes to the erasure of their existence from the geography and history of the city. It also makes reference to the experiences of displacement created by the transatlantic slave trade and the ensuing generational traumas. Significantly, Maria-Nova’s relationship with memories is entangled with the emotional state known as *banzo*².

Maria-Nova, talvez, tivesse o banzo no peito. Saudades de um tempo, de um lugar, de uma vida que ela nunca vivera. Entretanto o que doía mesmo em Maria-Nova era ver que tudo se repetia, um pouco diferente, mas no fundo, a miséria era a mesma. O seu povo, os oprimidos, os miseráveis; em todas as histórias, quase nunca eram os vencedores, e sim, quase sempre os vencidos. A ferida do lado de cá sempre ardia, doía e sangrava muito. (63)

Defined as the longing for one’s culture and motherland which is caused by the forced removal and other experiences of violence inflicted on African peoples, the feeling of *banzo* Maria-Nova carries with her is part of a repertoire of diasporic expressions of knowledge: “Ela sabia, porém, que aquela dor toda não era só sua” (76). The very act of narration guided by an embodied expression of a long-lasting wound represents a form of resistance against the process of forgetting similar to the ones imposed on enslaved peoples across the diaspora. As Amanda Ferreira describes, “narrar as memórias, o “banzo”, a dor, as lutas dos antepassados é um movimento de resistência ... contra o apagamento, contra o desmemoriamiento” (14). In the case of Maria-Nova, part of the legacy she inherited from her ancestors was an intense post-Middle Passage melancholia – “a ferida do lado de cá” – that is intensified by yet another brutal removal, that of her community. But along with a

² *Novo Dicionário Banto do Brasil* defines it as following: banzo: nostalgia mortal que acometia negros africanos escravizados no Brasil// adj. triste, abatido, pensativo. Do quicongo *mbanzu*, saudade, paixão, mágoa. (Lopes, 2012).

deep sorrow, Maria-Nova carries within herself a clear sense of purpose that empowers and motivates her to take on the future project of writing their stories: “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” (177). The dual meaning of the expression “fala de seu povo,” which alludes to the residents of the *favela* and at the same time refers to her Afro-descendant community, conveys a clear dimension of Evaristo’s project of *escrevivência*. In an attitude of collective preservation and of self-determination, Maria-Nova grounds her identity as a young black woman who, in the words of Beatriz Nascimento, “assume uma postura crítica intermediando sua própria história e seu ethos” (129).

Lying at the intersection of *ancestralidade*, gender and racial identity, and knowledge production, *escrevivência* contributes to the diasporic project known as *afrografia*. Leda Martins describes *afrografia* as part of a creative process that seeks to keep ancestral knowledges and practices alive in the diaspora:

A África, em toda a sua diversidade, imprime seus arabescos e estilos sobre os apagamentos incompletos resultantes das diásporas, inscrevendo-se palimpsestos que, por inúmeros processos de cognição, asserção e metamorfose, formal e conceitual, transcriam e performam sua presença nas Américas. As artes e os construtos culturais matizados pelos saberes africanos ostensivamente nos revelam engenhosos e árduos meios de sobrevivência desses vestígios. (2002:70)

Therefore, in the same way we can trace *banzo* back to the slave trade era, we can trace a wide variety of forms of knowledge that exist to resist the erasure of its origins. As noted, Evaristo’s writing contributes to a political project that intends to promote Afro-descendant cultural identity that is foundational and multigenerational.

Lastly, the novel highlights how black women’s production of spatial knowledge is linked to ancestral practices. The architecture of *Becos da Memória*, crafted as a meta-narrative, is fragmented, nonlinear and winding; it reflects the geography of the fictional *favela* and it is based on fragments of memories of its many residents. Evaristo’s meta-fiction invites the reader to reflect on the intrinsic relationship between the space of the narrator and the space of the narration and points out the necessity to expand the readers’ understanding of storytelling as an individual as well as a collective practice rooted in Afro-descendant knowledge. According to Simone de Jesus Santos, “os metatextos e os intertextos que nos fornecem ressignificações da literatura e da história são alguns dos

aspectos da produção literária afrobrasileira em tempos recentes e que querem deslocar a marginalização por eles(as) ainda vivenciada...e enegrecer os modos de saber” (2015: 216). As demonstrated in Evaristo’s text, the black body is the place where memory comes to life and the narrow passages and alleyways of the *favela* give it a spatial dimension. The fragments that compose the narrative of *Becos da Memória* function as glimpses of stories and windows into collective histories of marginalized Afro-Brazilians, conveying a powerful mnemonic experience.

At its core, the novel represents an unidentified *favela* located in an unknown city³ whose non-specificity does not imply impersonality but, rather, offers a critique of a shared history of spatial displacement. That is, rather than regarding location as incidental, the text tells us that *favela* removals are nonselective as they follow extensive and widespread urban cleansing programs that are often paired with the exacerbation of the conditions of marginalization. More significantly, however, the reference to an undetermined city indicates a shift in the center/periphery dynamics where the focus turns to the margins as geography and as experience. In other words, the precise location of the city and its position in relation to recognized forms of identification such as regional and national geographies is a secondary element. The priority lies in writing the lives of the characters into the space of representation, thus asserting that their existence is inscribed and centered in the process of the city’s memory-making. The fact that all characters, residents of that community, are given names and their memories are recorded tells us a lot about what needs to be known. Regina Dalcastagnè argues that “em *Becos da Memória*, Evaristo lida com a disputa pela manutenção de um lugar na cidade – afinal, o retorno já não existe como opção. E a favela...não é entendida como um lugar à parte, mas como um espaço possível da cidade, um espaço que, ao ser destruído, apaga a história daqueles que viveram e sofreram ali” (296). In other words, the *favela* may be a space that lacks planning but that does not preclude the formation of organized communities with stories, memories and narrative technologies, such as oral history and writing as mechanisms of preservation. On that

³ It is known that Evaristo herself grew up in the Pindura Saia community, a *favela* in Belo Horizonte that went through a process of removal in the 1970s. While it is possible to assume that the fictional *favela* is a representation of the actual place, in the novel itself the *favela* is never named, and its precise location is left unknown.

account, Evaristo's writing breaks with the idea of spaces of memory and of memory-making spaces as determined by whiteness and western knowledge. The fragments that compose the narrative, "fios e fiapos aleatórios e esparsos de recordações e lembranças," escape a carefully crafted blueprint of urban history and proposes other modes of recording history (Santiago 2018:13). To narrate the unfathomable experiences that result from the process of removal, a narrative aesthetic other than a linear, orderly one is needed. As such, Evaristo's writing practice is continuously shaped by the lived and inherited, thus scattered, experiences of the *favela* residents. In Maria Nazareth Soares' words, fragmentation is the language of

um espaço social que não conhece as grandes avenidas, as ruas abertas em obediência a um plano arquitetônico. O recurso narrativo compõe, de certa forma, uma estética que se acentua com os elos que se vão formando à revelia de uma linha mestra, tal como os barracos que nascem procurando ocupar os parques espaços ainda não habitados. Não é o plano, a planta-baixa, que define o processo narrativo privilegiado. É a necessidade de resgatar as histórias que as lembranças vão recompondo, muitas vezes associando pedaços de umas ao que sobra de outras. (2010:26)

Fundamentally, to center the indefinite space of the *favela* as a site of various forms of spatial knowledge has meaningful implications for literature and culture in terms of the survival of Afro-descendant identity and as well as for a (re)construction of a discourse of urban memory, since the *favela* is now written into, and as part of, a narrative about the city.

The practice of *escrevivência* makes clear how Evaristo's writing not only intervenes in the process of imagining the unnamed fictional city but, more significantly, challenges what types of knowledge are reproduced in narratives about actual cities and the societies that occupy these spaces. A response to, in Leda Martins' words, "uma história de muitas exclusões, hiatos, silêncios e lacunas nos discursos hegemônicos," the literary production of contemporary Afro-Brazilian writers, including Evaristo, represents "vias e veredas engenhosas pelas quais a voz e a grafia afro-brasileiras insistentemente inscrevem a memória desse saber e dessa experiência, estética e ontológica, nos repertórios da cultura e da literatura" (1999: 57). Following Martins' suggestion, the works produced by Afro-Brazilian writers have the power to inscribe Afro-descendants' knowledge and experience onto narratives of the urban experience. Therefore, the writing of a space like a *favela* into

existence, one that goes beyond simplistic narratives of violence and dispossession, is an integral aspect of a political culture that seeks to transform evasive practices of Afro-descendant urban memory-making into more meaningful representations of black life.

Becos da Memória concludes with Maria-Nova narrating her impressions of the final moments of the community as the last residents leave: “Um terreno que antes era reconhecível até de olhos fechados, de um momento para outro perdera todas as suas características. Perdera todo o tortuoso relevo. Os becos de onde saltavam tantas vidas desapareceram como se nunca houvessem existido” (179). At that moment Maria-Nova renews her commitment to writing the stories of the lives that populated the space she so intimately knew. She becomes the village’s *griote*. Assuming her role as memory-story-teller, Maria-Nova evokes Evaristo’s own role as memory-maker:

o que a minha memória escreveu em mim e sobre mim, mesmo que toda a paisagem externa tenha sofrido uma profunda transformação, as lembranças, mesmo que esfiapadas, sobrevivem. E na tentativa de recompor esse tecido esgarçado ao longo do tempo, escrevo. Escrevo sabendo que estou perseguindo uma sombra, um vestígio talvez. E como a memória é também vítima do esquecimento, invento, invento. (4:2009)

Evaristo’s account about her writing process tells us that stories, both oral and written, similar to museums, sites, archives, and monuments, directly participate in urban memory building projects. Whereas through narratives of recollection or accounts of contemporary life, literature registers and create individual and collective experiences and makes public a variety of perspectives that reflect the city as a space of multiplicity. As such, stories can broaden the types of knowledge to be accessed as a repertoire of experiences represented in the urban memory of a certain city.

Ultimately, in her labor of inscribing Afro-descendant memory into the history of the unnamed city, Conceição Evaristo writes against exclusionary, anti-black urban memory discourse. Through her writing, readers are told that *favela* removal projects are a central part of urban renewal plans that serve the mission to “materialize whiteness in the city” (Perry 2013:43) in the same way that the selective construction of urban memory denies Afro-Brazilians their voice. Even though the community in *Becos da Memória* is eventually removed from the place it originally occupied, writing the residents’ lives functions as form of record, a non-official but nonetheless legitimate record of the community that once existed there. The novel tells us about a fictional city imagined as a

space where agency is lived and produced in the margins; as Evaristo states, “hoje as favelas produzem outras narrativas, provocam outros testemunhos e inspiram outras ficções” (13). In short, Evaristo’s commitment to a black feminist politics of self-collective-determination, rooted in Afro-descendants’ practice of *ancestralidade*, shapes her project of creating narratives about the presence and histories of Afro-descendant communities in cities across Brazil.

WORKS CITED

- BEIGUELMAN, Giselle. *Memória da amnésia: políticas do esquecimento*. São Paulo: Edições Sesc, 2019.
- BERND, Zilé. Em busca dos rastros perdidos da memória ancestral: um estudo de *Um defeito de cor*, de Ana Maria Gonçalves. *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea*, Brasília, n. 40, 2012. p 29-42.
- DALCASTAGNÈ, Regina. Para não ser trapo no mundo: as mulheres negras e a cidade na narrativa brasileira contemporânea. *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea*, Brasília, n. 44, 2014. p 289-302.
- DIONÍSIO, Dejour. *Ancestralidade Bantu na Literatura Afro-Brasileira*: Reflexões sobre o romance “Ponciá Vicêncio”, de Conceição Evaristo. Belo Horizonte: Nandyala, 2013.
- EVARISTO, Conceição. Conceição Evaristo por Conceição Evaristo. *LiterAfro*, 2009. <http://www.lettras.ufmg.br/literafro/autoras/188-conceicao-evaristo>. Accessed January 2020.
- EVARISTO, Conceição. “Vozes-Mulheres.” In: _____. *Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos*. Rio de Janeiro: Malê, 2017.
- EVARISTO, Conceição. *Becos da Memória*. Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2017.
- FERREIRA, Amanda C. Recordar é preciso: Considerações sobre a figura do griot e a importância de suas narrativas na formação da memória coletiva afro-brasileira.” *Em Tese*, Belo Horizonte, 18.2, 2012. p 141-155.
- FONSECA, Maria Nazareth S. O mar ondulado da memória em Conceição Evaristo. *Via Atlântica*, São Paulo, n. 18, 2010. p 15-27.
- GONZALEZ, Lélia. Por um feminismo afrolatinoamericano. In: _____. *Primavera para as rosas negras: Lélia Gonzalez em primeira pessoa*. São Paulo: Diáspora Africana, 2018.
- GONZALEZ, Lélia. A importância da organização da mulher negra no processo de transformação social. I: _____. *Primavera para as rosas negras: Lélia Gonzalez em primeira pessoa*. São Paulo: Diáspora Africana, 2018.
- LOPES, Nei. *Novo dicionário Banto do Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2012.
- LORDE, Audre. Poetry is not a Luxury. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007.
- MARTINS, Leda. Performances do tempo espiralar. In: _____. *Performance, exílio, fronteiras: errâncias territoriais e textuais*. Belo Horizonte: 2002.
- MARTINS, Leda. A fina lâmina da palavra. *O Eixo e a Roda: Revista de Literatura Brasileira*, Belo Horizonte, v. 15, 2007. p 55-84.
- MARTINS, Leda. Performances da oralitura: corpo, lugar da memória. *Letras*, Santa Maria, v. 25, 2003. p 55-71.

- MELO, Marilene Carlos do. A figura do griot e a relação entre memória e narrativa. In: _____. *Griots: culturas africanas linguagem, memória, imaginário*. Natal: Lucgraf, 2009. p 148-156.
- OLIVEIRA, Emanuelle. *Writing Identity: The Politics of Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Literature*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008.
- PERRY, Keisha-Khan Y. *Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- RATTS, Alex. A mulher negra e o amor. In: _____. *Eu Sou Atlântica: sobre a trajetória de vida de Beatriz Nascimento*. São Paulo: Imprensa Oficial, 2006.
- SANTIAGO, Ana Rita. (Re)existências e o devir revolucionário na literatura negro-feminina. *Fólio*, Vitória da Conquista, 10.2, 2018. p 11-33.
- SANTOS, Mirian C. *Intelectuais Negras: Prosa Negro-Brasileira Contemporânea*. Rio de Janeiro: Malê, 2018.
- SANTOS, Simone de Jesus. Para enegrecer os modos de saber: tecendo identidades em metatextos e intertextos de escritores(as) negros(as) do Brasil. *Revista de Crítica Literária Latinoamericana*, Lima, 41.81, 2015. p 205-218.
- SCHMIDT, Simone Pereira. Cravo Canela Bala e Favela: Luso-Afro-Brazilian Feminist Postcolonialities. *Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2014, p. 78-94.
- WERNECK, Jurema. Nossos passos vêm de longe: Movimento de mulheres negras e estratégias políticas contra o Sexismo e o Racismo. In: _____. *Mulheres Negras: Um olhar sobre as lutas sociais e as políticas públicas no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Criola, 2010.

Leonora Souza Paula received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California San Diego. She specializes in twentieth and twenty first century Brazilian Literature and Culture. Her research and teaching interests include Afro-Brazilian Literature, Latin American Literature and Culture, Critical Geographies, Urban Art, and Social Movements. Her current research examines the role of Afro-descendants, Black women, and spatially segregated artists and authors in transforming representations of urban life in twenty-first century Brazil. Her publications include articles and book chapters about Contemporary Brazilian Literature, Afro-Brazilian Women Literature, Urban Art in Brazil and Argentina, and Social Movements in Latin America. Leonora has given lectures at Harvard University, The University of Texas-Austin and the University of California Berkeley. Leonora is the founding co-director of the RCAH Sister Circle Mentoring Program at Michigan State University.

Artigo recebido em 26/07/2020.

Aprovado em 30/07/2020.