Conceição Evaristo

Stops: Brazil

(1946-)

Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo was born on November 29, 1946, in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. She currently resides in Rio de Janeiro, where she has lived since 1973 when she migrated to the capital city in search of a secondary school that would accept girls. In July 2023, she founded the *Casa Escrevivência*, a cultural centre which has already become a reference for the dissemination and promotion of Afro-diasporic culture. Her academic journey has always focused on education and research; she studied teaching in secondary school, graduated in Literature from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, obtained a Master's degree in Brazilian Literature at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, and completed a doctorate in Comparative Literature at the Federal Fluminense University. In addition to being sought after for lectures on gender and ethnicity issues, Evaristo has also contributed to academic essay publications in Germany, England, and the United States.

Her debut in the literary scene was in 1990 with the poetry anthology *Cadernos Negros* [Black Notebooks] number 13. In 2003, she published the novel *Ponciá Vicêncio* which has been translated into English, Spanish and Italian. In 2006, she released *Becos da memória* [*Memory's Alleys*], in 2008, she launched her first poetic anthology, *Poemas de recordação e outros movimentos* [*Poems of recollection and other movements*], and in 2011, a collection of short stories entitled *Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres* [*Unsubmissive women's tears*]. Her 2015 short stories *Olhos d'água*, [*Watered Eyes*] was granted the third place in the Jabuti Award 2015. In 2018, she published her novel, *Canção para ninar menino grande* [*Lullabies for big children*].

The poetic trait is a distinctive characteristic of the author, who has a lyrical and socially engaged style, a narrative of protest and in constant dialogue with the diasporic elements present in Brazilian culture. The concise language, marked by the density with which Evaristo narrates the short chapters of her novels or stories, strengthens the poetic images in a movement that goes from the particular to the general. She uses repetitions and neologisms to broaden meanings, to repair memory, in a constant search for resistance and to denounce the marginalisation of Afro-Brazilians. The concern for alterity is at the foundation of a narrative where the feminine voice is latent. Silenced or unheard women reflect in the body of the text the fractures suffered throughout the country's history, sometimes in resistance, sometimes in resignation. Among her bibliography, two texts stand out in which the theme of the diaspora is effectively present: the poem "Vozes mulheres" ["Women voices"] (2008: 10), and the novel *Ponciá Vicêncio*, published in 2003.

The emblematic poem "Women voices" evokes moments that go back to another perspective of subalternised women, different from the stereotypes created either by historicism or by a slave-holding society. The opening verses transport us to the time of slavery and invoke the slave ship, a symbol of the suffering and resistance of the African Black people. The poem invokes the great-grandmother, whose voice still echoes softly in the holds of the slave ship to denounce the violence imposed on the trafficked people, embodied in the image of the child, whose childhood was stolen when taken from their land. The voice that echoes softly, invoked in the first verse, persists throughout the six stanzas, and strengthens as the narrative unfolds. Thus, great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and daughter are represented in the poem as the body of the Black woman who resists time and the injustices imposed by a slave and racist society.

It is no coincidence that the poem has become a landmark in Afro-Brazilian literature; the verses woven by the author present the perspective of "escrevivência," an important concept in Brazilian diasporic studies used by the author herself in her critical texts. The term refers to a type of literary writing capable of poetically translating the experience of Afro-Brazilian identity, from the African diaspora to the present day. In this sense, the text addresses two

important aspects of this culture: ancestry and resistance. The possessive pronoun “[minha]” (mine, in its feminine form) present throughout the poem reinforces the idea of belonging to an ancestral culture and connects the two ends of this trajectory. On the one hand, the African great-grandmother, the slave ship, the past as a wound, and on the other hand, the great-granddaughter, the literate present, the diasporic memory, and freedom.

The image of the slave ship is a recurring allegory in Afro-descendant abolitionist literature, used as a historical landmark in the encounter of cultures shaping Brazilian culture. The collective subjectivity evoked, here referred to as “escrevivência, is evidently associated with the Afro-descendant memory subjugated to the vices of the slavery process during the colonial period and is often described by poets and fiction writers to invoke the past and the violence to which the enslaved were subjected, symbolised by the ship. It is within this framework that the reader can perceive the growing awareness of the Black people, marked by the words “lamento” (lament), “obediência” (obedience), and “revolta” (revolt).

Another text that also reverberates the echoes of diasporic culture is the novel *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003). The plot of the novel traces the journey of a Black woman from a small town populated by former slaves to her misfortunes in a large city. The protagonist is born in Vila Vicêncio, which, within inland Brazil, houses a population descended from enslaved individuals. Her father and brother work on the farm for the Vicêncio family, owners of the land but also of the surname of its inhabitants. Narrated in the third person, the story follows the reminiscences of the central character in a fragmented manner and, through flashbacks, reconstructs the childhood of the artisan girl who, alongside her mother and grandmother, crafted clay sculptures. The protagonist, who lends her name to the book, experiences the hardships of urban life and, far from her mother and brother, discovers the connection with ancestry and memory as an escape route from the abyss that separates people in large cities.

The work engages with decolonial criticism, following the perspective of Catherine Walsh (2017), by finding means of valuing collective memory, redefining diasporic culture, and

introducing new ways of thinking, problematising the colonialist logic that persists.

This aspect can be noted as the narrator describes Ponciá's journey and her experience in the big city in a way similar to the experience of the transatlantic crossing by African peoples, as Mahommah Baquaqua's biography recounts. Evaristo's novel also contributes to a better understanding of what critical Afro-descendant studies consider a metaphorical diaspora. The term, significant in contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature, as described by Nei Lopes in the Enciclopédia Brasileira da Diáspora Africana [Brazilian Encyclopaedia of the African Diaspora], "it is also used to designate, by extension, the descendants of Africans in the Americas and Europe and the rich cultural heritage they have built" (2004: 236).

Afro-Brazilian authors confirm this new thinking about the Black diaspora and incorporate marks of this collective memory into their literature, with the slave ship being one such mark. The slave ship becomes a symbol of mediating the suffering of the African people or an object of reflection on the diaspora, as seen when Evaristo describes the journey of her protagonist to the capital in search of better conditions. Upon losing her father, Ponciá decides to migrate to the big city. The arduous train journey resembles testimonial narratives of the transatlantic crossing from the colonial period, but the belief that she could have a more comfortable life propels her forward. The days of suffering extend to her arrival in the city centre. Without references or money, the protagonist spends a night sleeping at the church door, and only a few days later does she secure a job as a domestic worker. Contrary to her expectations, the suffering persists, and working conditions analogous to slavery push Ponciá further away from the dream of having a better life, of having her mother and brother join her in the big city.

The concise and densely meaningful language can be read as poetic brutalism, according to the critic Eduardo de Assis (2021, Portal Literafro). By blending scenes of violence and emotion, raw realism and tenderness, in addition to impacting the reader, it reveals the intellectual's commitment and identification with what she calls "escrevivência" (2005: 208-210), thus portraying the experience of the Afro-descendant community and valuing it in

its various aspects.

From the perspective of diasporic studies, Evaristo's works reveal the movement of seeking, present in the author's own life. Journeys as a possibility for knowledge are a recurring theme in universal literature, but what is perceived in these Afro-Brazilian-authored journeys is broader, as it is connected to the search for belonging as well. According to the researcher Aline Arruda (2007: 46), Ponciá's journey is not configured as an adventure because she needs to leave her place of origin in search of better living conditions; however, this movement triggers a need to encounter her own origins, going back to the idea that one must look back if unsure of where to go. Therefore, when feeling lost in the big city, Ponciá understands that her search is not solely based on financial issues but also on the quest for the strength of her ancestry. Away from home, the character longs for elements that composed her life experience and identity, such as the clay she moulded with her mother, for example, and her hands bleed due to the distance created between her and her family.

It is also away from home that Ponciá shouts her name and surname, trying to find an echo of identification in vain. She feels that her madness rescues the memory of her grandfather, who, in Vila Vicêncio, still a slave, in a moment of insanity and tremendous indignation against the ongoing slavery, kills his wife and mutilates himself by cutting off his own arm. It is this truncated arm that Ponciá imitates from a young age. It is also this grandfather's nonconformity that she carries, and life outside the countryside does not provide her with answers. Repeating the name Vicêncio is recognising how much the memory of slavery still lingers in the people; they carry the mark of exploitation in their surname, and Ponciá carries her grandfather's revolt in her body. In her misadventures, Ponciá discovers that her place is with her ancestry, with her grandmother, her grandfather, the waters of Oxum, and the duality of Oxumaré, an orisha representing the feminine and masculine. By moving away from Vila Vicêncio, the protagonist understands that it is necessary to break free from the shackles of slavery, deviate from the possessive relationship with the owners of the village, and reestablish ties with her origin. Thus, the return to her land now symbolises, as well, a return to her roots and a connection with African culture, a diasporic heritage.

Quotations

Women Voices

The voice of my great-grandmother
echoed as a child
inside the ship's bowels.
Echoing moans
of a lost childhood.

The voice of my grandmother
echoed obedience
to the white-owners of everything.

The voice of my mother
whispered echoes of revolt
in the very end of the other's kitchens
under the trusses
of whites' dirty linen
along the dusty road
towards the slum

My voice still
echoes perplexing verses
in rhymes of blood
and
hunger.

The voice of my daughter
uniting all our voices
gathers within itself

the dumb silenced voices
choking in our throats.
The voice of my daughter gathers within itself
speech and action.
Yesterday – today – now.
In my daughter's voice
the resonance will be heard
the echo of freedom-life.
(*Poems of recollection and other movement* translation in https://muse.jhu.edu/article/631821: 85)

When Ponciá Vicêncio decided to leave the village where she was born, the decision came strong and sudden. She was tired of everything there. Tired of working with clay with her mother, of coming and going to the fields of the white people and returning empty-handed. Tired of seeing the land of the black people covered with plantations, tended to by women and children, as the men spent their lives working on the landlords' lands, and then most of the harvest was handed over to the landlords. Tired of the insane, inglorious struggle that everyone engaged in to wake up each day poorer, while some managed to get richer every day. She believed she could chart different paths, invent a new life. Advancing into the future, Ponciá left on the train the next day, as the machine wouldn't return to the village so soon. She didn't even have time to say goodbye to her brother. And now, lying there with her eyes wide open, staring into nothingness, she wondered if it was worth leaving her country. What had happened to the once certain dreams of a better life? They weren't just dreams; they were certainties! Certainties that had been emptied the moment she lost contact with her own. And now, like the living dead, she lived. (*Ponciá Vicêncio*: 32-33)

The inspired heart of Ponciá dictated future successes for the girl's life. Belief was the only asset she had brought to face a journey that lasted three days and three nights. Despite the discomfort, hunger, the fubá that ran out on the first day, the scarce coffee stored in a small bottle, the pieces of molasses she only licked without even sucking, so they would last until

the end of the journey, she carried hope as her ticket. She would indeed shape her destiny. (*idem*: 35).

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