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Abstract

Conceição Evaristo as she is known in the literary world is an Afro-Brazilian author who has published widely both in Brazil and abroad. Her works range from poetry to essays. Born in 1946 in a favela in Belo Horizonte, the author is nowadays one of the most prominent names in the Afro-Brazilian literary world. Depicting the 'escrevivência' as she names it, that is, writing the experience of the marginalised and oppressed, Conceição Evaristo has captivated readers with her deceptively simple character and stories.

CLAUDIA MARIA FERNANDES CORRÊA AND IRINEIA LINA CESARIO¹

An Afro-Brazilian Griot: An Interview with Conceição Evaristo

Conceição Evaristo as she is known in the literary world is an Afro-Brazilian author who has published widely both in Brazil and abroad. Her works range from poetry to essays. Born in 1946 in a favela in Belo Horizonte, the author is nowadays one of the most prominent names in the Afro-Brazilian literary world. Depicting the 'escrivivência' as she names it, that is, writing the experience of the marginalised and oppressed, Conceição Evaristo has captivated readers with her deceptively simple character and stories.



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CLAUDIA CORRÊA & IRINEIA CESARIO: *You are a prestigious author both in Brazil and abroad. You have recently been to Senegal where your works have been well received. Do you believe this signals a wider opening for the Afro-Brazilian female authors?*

CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO: First of all, it is necessary to place this prestige in-between many quotation marks. Undoubtedly, I have been gaining visibility. However it is minimal in relation to other Brazilian authors. Researchers of very specific areas know my writing. The visibility I have today is restricted to a particular circle of researchers who bravely, shed light upon authors who are outside the canon. Researchers from several fields such as African Literatures in Portuguese Language, of literary texts written by Afro-Brazilians and African-Americans alike, as well as authors from the Caribbean, and all those who are devoted to analysing literature, gender, ethnicity, and people committed to the Black Movement. This is the very beginning where my writings start to reach a broader spectrum and launch a wider criticism. Nevertheless,

the path to be traced is still long. But I do acknowledge that there has surely been an opening for female Afro-Brazilian writers.

CC & IC: *What is your opinion on the increasing interest in your writings, as attested by the rising number of theses and dissertations about your books?*

CE: I strongly believe that the research in the literary field is a quest for new voices, texts that are differentiated from the Brazilian corpus. The search is for an authorship that affirms its racial, gender and social class belonging, but [one] that aims at surpassing such conditions, focusing on the characters' humane dramas. As I see it, many of the texts I create perform such a task. For instance, *Ponciá Vicêncio*² suffers from a pain that hurts for anyone; it is every human being's pain: loneliness. Ana Davenga and Davenga, characters from a namesake short story, have a neediness that cannot be explained alone by the fact that they are underprivileged people from the favelas. Others such as Maria and her former partner, an outcast; Maria-Nova, Bondade, Ditinha, Uncle Totó, a whole range of characters that are present in the short stories and the novels I have written. But they are beyond poverty. They embody the unexplainable, the perplexity of life. I do believe that the tone of the stories, and the effort, the work I draw myself to, have seduced the readers.

CC & IC: *Could we say that your newest book, Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos opens up a dialog with the official history by rewriting it?*

CE: Perhaps some of the poems, such as 'Vozes-mulheres', 'Meu Rosário', 'Filhos na rua', 'Meu corpo igual', 'Malungos', 'brother', 'irmãos', 'Todas as manhãs', 'Os bravos e os serenos herdarão a terra'³, in this matter are the most vehement.

CC & IC: *How do you perceive the increasing interest in the African Studies and the Afro-Brazilian history in Brazil? Do you regard it as a sort of redemption for the centuries of slavery?*

CE: Not really Redemption. There are situations that can never be redeemed. We must understand that redemption won't favour the ones who hold power. On the contrary, it will disturb an existing order. I will quote a line from one of my works, *Becos da Memória*, if I am not mistaken it goes something like this: 'the one who moves the rock is the one suffocating beneath it'. What I mean is that our efforts to affirm the existence of an Afro-Brazilian literature, as well as the efforts of Afro-Brazilian writers to write, publish, and circulate their texts have been intense.

The compulsory subject, Afro-Brazilian History and Culture, that is studied from the primary school until the high school levels has certainly brought visibility to aspects lesser known concerning both African and Afro-Brazilian cultures and as a counterpart, bibliographical material on these subjects is required. The editorial market (by economic interest, primarily) has been investing in works that tackle the issue.

In this sense, I do want to emphasise that Law 10639⁴ has been amended as to include the teaching of indigenous cultures. This law was not born from top to bottom as many people may tend to think. And neither has the quota system. For those who may not be familiar with the demands of the Brazilian Blacks throughout history, maybe it would be a good opportunity to get acquainted with some of the claims of the Teatro Experimental do negro⁵ (Black People's Experimental Theater) that goes back to 1945, under the direction of Abdias Nascimento.

CC & IC: *How do you assess the current Afro-Brazilian literary production?*

CE: I do not assess it. I would only state that there are texts which seduce and others do not do so.

CC & IC: *Concerning Black women's situation in Brazil: has it developed?*

CE: Yes, in spite of everything. Increasingly, we are imposing our voices and conquering other spaces. However, our representativeness is still minimal when the presence of white women in places of decision is considered. If such places lack the presence of women, when it comes to the presence of Black women, this absence is most strongly felt. Black ministers, black judges, black deans, heads of departments in academic institutions, and the CEO's in large companies are only a few. And no need to get out of our field of expertise, of our surroundings. In the undergrad and postgraduate courses, how many black professors are there? I do want to point out that we want, we are entitled to the right, we need and we are seeking for much more. Our path has no turning back. We are walking towards occupying places in political parties, in the ministries, in the academies, in the multiple fields of knowledge, in the media, in sports, in the most varied forms of art. Beyond our individual recognition, our personal victories need and must relate in one way or another to the black collectivity, especially for black women.

CC & IC: *Regarding your literary tastes, how have they had an impact on your writing?*

CE: I begin with Lima Barreto. I admire his courage for showing the open wound, creating characters and plots that denounce the existing racism in Brazil. I also like his writing due to his proclaiming the desire to write the history of the Brazilian blacks as in his work *Diário Intimo*. Cruz e Souza is also another one, the poet who suffered prejudice from the Brazilian society of his time. From Luiz Gama, the Orfeu de Carapinha, that ridiculed Brazilian slave society, which even though it had mixed races, still wanted to go through a whitening process. According to Solano Trindade, the modernist author, that is not registered in the Brazilian modernist historiography. Maria Firmina dos Reis, the first abolitionist writer, who outlined African enslaved characters infusing them with a dignity of their own, not complying with the representation that was given to the Africans and their descendants at the time she was producing her work. As for the contemporary, I highlight my appreciation for many. Adão Ventura, one of the first black poets I knew. Still talking about mineiros' writers, Edimilson Pereira, Ricardo Aleixo, and Waldemar Euzébio. I greatly enjoy the poetry of Ana Cruz, Miriam Alves, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Lia Vieira, among others and also the short stories. Geni Guimarães and her books, *Leite de Peito* and *Cor da Ternura*, lead me to my sisterhood in writing. From *Cadernos Negros*, also a great moment for learning: Carlos Assunção, Oliveira Silveira, Cuti, Marcio Barbosa, Paulo Colina, Jamu Minka. The only book of poems by Nei Lopes, *Incursões sobre a pele*, is also fascinating. From the ones who started publishing recently, Alan da Rosa, the poems and the play *Filomena da Cabula* and his texts for children. I am delighted with Sacolinha's scathing and also Ana Maria Gonçalves, and her *Defeito de cor*; and also Cidinha da Silva's texts. Nonetheless, my deference, particularly speaking for transforming trash into something writeable and also for her writing in the midst of hunger (an aspect which few apprehend since the writer is read as someone who only spoke about her material lack) is for Carolina Maria de Jesus.⁶ From the canon I have read a lot and I can affirm that my reading background passed by Machado de Assis, Jorge Amado, José Lins do Rego, Graciliano Ramos, Guimarães Rosa, José Mauro Vasconcelos, Oto Lara Resende, Mário Palmério and other Brazilians and foreign authors. I revel in the mineira writer Adélia Prado, as well as the mineiro Autran Dourado. In the late '70s, with Professor Simone Caputo Gomes, who was teaching in Rio de Janeiro at the time, I discovered the African Literatures in Portuguese Language. Concerning the influence that such tastes have left in my writing I may not be able to say. Only critics and readers can evaluate that.

CC & IC: *Your novel Ponciá Vicêncio was made compulsory reading for some entrance exams. Has this changed your responsibility as a writer?*

CE: I don't know. I think I hadn't conceived a responsibility for the author. A writer cannot do anything alone. The writer attends to his/her writing, with his/her words, literature, books but is secluded from the world, and cannot do much. I believe that the writer has the same power as a doctor, a teacher, a geographer, or an historian if he is embedded in a greater group struggle, rather than as an individual acting alone. Although I do acknowledge that literature has the power to provoke emotions, it can touch people's feelings. Owing to that, Maria Nova, a character from the novel *Becos da Memória*, while listening, reading and experiencing so many histories also experiences several feelings and makes her discoveries which I relate to the act of writing. As I see it, writing can be a kind of vengeance, at times I think about that. I don't know if it is vengeance, maybe a challenge, a way to hurt the imposed silence, or rather, perform a gesture of stubborn hope. Yet I like to state that writing is for me the dance-chant movement that my body does not perform; it is the password by which I access the world. And I add to that the *escrevivência*⁷ of Black women cannot be read as stories that lullaby those from the Master's house; on the contrary, these are stories made to bother them in their unjust sleep.

The fact that *Ponciá Vicêncio* has been made into compulsory reading for the entrance test did not change my attitude as a writer, but instead has awarded me a certificate for something I have previously posed, concerning the main character. Ponciá's loneliness touches the reader. Those were emotional moments, when students from both private and public schools reported the feelings evoked by reading the book. I only told them my wish. I hoped that they would not stop at the feelings aroused by the book, but that instead that they would try to change those feelings into concrete acts of responsibilities towards the others, at any future position they would choose. After reading the book, one of the students from one of the best private schools in Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais, reported the following comment to a teacher of his. He told him that he had never paid attention to the distance that separates his bedroom, located at the prime portions of the house, and the maid's bedroom, located at the service area. And so many others came to me to say that the reading reminded them of stories told by their mothers, aunts, grandmothers... As for the former ones I had nothing to say: they were in the quest for a better life.

CC & IC: *Your narratives are marked by elements from the African tradition. How do you place them at your works?*

CE: Gladly I return to the remains of all I have heard in my childhood. Stories originated from African cultures, especially the Bantu root. I was not surrounded by books in my childhood, but rather was surrounded by words. And how many stories have I heard... Today I take advantage of these elements in a conscious form, particularly language. I am aware of the expressions used by my mother and by other people from my family. It is a pedagogy of orality. My whole family clan continues in Minas Gerais. The mineiro jargon, marked by a series of Bantu words, is still very much alive in my ears. One of the most remarkable experiences of my childhood which I appropriated in the construction of the novel *Ponciá Vicêncio* was the meaning of the image of the rainbow and the risk of the celestial snake for children. I grew up listening since I was little girl that anyone who would pass under the rainbow would be turned into a boy. My sisters, along with me, kept this fear during all our childhood. Recently I have learned that my brothers, younger than us, lived this imaginary also. If they passed under the celestial snake they would be changed into girls. The text opens and closes with the image of a rainbow in the sky. One day, seven years after I had written that story on a late afternoon, I caught a glimpse of a rainbow grooming the sky. The childhood memory came back followed by the image of Oxumaré, the orisha represented by the rainbow snake, a Nagô divinity that is both male and female at the same time. Never before had the coloured arch seemed so beautiful. At that moment, looking at the sky, I unveiled the foundation of an imaginary lived throughout my childhood. An imaginary that had been constructed from traces, remains of elements of an African culture my mother naturally transmitted to us. My family comes from a Catholic tradition. It was necessary that I found out *Candomblé*, in Rio de Janeiro, to learn the sense of a mythic narrative that was kept even in a broken, mutilated, form under the folds of another religious tradition, the Catholic. I was overwhelmed by a huge emotion. We lost the origins of the myth, but something strong from the Black African tradition abided in us. *Ponciá Vicêncio* was already done. It was possible, as I saw it, to enlarge the representation of the myth. And in Nei Lopes' *Dicionário Banto do Brasil* I found the entry *Angorô*, an entity that belonged to the *Candomblé* grounds of Bantu lineage and that is the counterpart of Oxumarê, in the Nagô *Candomblé* grounds. And the word rainbow is substituted by the Bantu term at the end of the novel.

CC & IC: *We are aware that in general terms Brazilian literature presents Black female characters as sensuous and dangerous. How do you compose the Black female as the protagonists of their own stories in a country in which male values are still overwhelming patriarchal?*

CE: It's simple. When I am writing, I do not think about these difficulties. I know they exist, but I do not create a discourse based on these data. I am so sure of the role of black women as the matrix of life in every way, that despite the suffering and death that plague the characters I create, there are those who live there. The saga of Maria Vicêncio and Vicêncio Ponciá is one of pain, death and life. And so is that of Natalina. There is a recovery of life after the rape. Querência, Duzu's granddaughter, is an exemplary character similar to Mary-Nova. Grandma Rita, Maria Velha, Ma Joana and even Ditinha are women who eternally reinvent themselves. In silence, the protagonists of 'Beijo na Face' try to overcome the everyday violence. Similarly to the mother, the narrator of 'Olhos d'água', has her eyes contaminated by Oshun's water. There, the three women — the narrator, her mother and her daughter, in a bond, transmit strength and wisdom — repeating the sense of the matrilineal heritage as in the poem 'Vozes Mulheres'. In 'Ayoluwa, a alegria do nosso povoado', the woman is the redeemer, not by death, not by the cross, but by birth, through life. My 'escrevivência' is born and crafted by what we are, by what Black women are. And then I have fertilising elements to serve as padding for my fiction. My Black women are others.

NOTES

- ¹ This interview was conducted by Claudia Maria Fernandes Corrêa and Irineia Lina Cesario, and coordinated by Lynn Mário trindade Menezes de Souza and Simone Caputo Gomes from the University of São Paulo, Brazil.
- ² In 2007 this novel was published in translation as *Poncia Vicencio* (trans. Paloma Martinez-Cruz).
- ³ All of these poems were published in different editions of *Cadernos Negros* and also in Evaristo's recent collection of poems entitled *Poemas das Recordação e Outros Movimentos*.
- ⁴ Law 10639 was passed in 2003; it made the subject of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture compulsory study from primary to the high school levels.
- ⁵ The Teatro Experimental do Negro (Black People's Experimental Theater) was founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1944 and its aim was to work towards Black people's advancement through education, culture and arts.
- ⁶ Carolina Maria de Jesus, *Child of the Dark*.
- ⁷ The term 'escrevivência', which could be translated as 'writing the experience', is a term used by Conceição Evaristo to characterise her writing.

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