

BLACK, WOMAN, POOR: THE MANY IDENTITIES OF CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO

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Espera-se que a mulher negra seja capaz de desempenhar determinadas funções, como cozinhar muito bem, dançar, cantar, mas não escrever. às vezes me perguntam: ‘você canta?’. E eu digo: ‘não canto nem danço’
Conceição Evaristo

The epigraph above shows us that, in the 21st century, the construction of an Afro-Brazilian female identity is a key question to be addressed when studying Brazilian society. It shows us the “lack of recognition, respect, and value accorded to Afro-Brazilian women” (Caldwell 1). Even in the expression “mulher negra” (black woman)—so prevalent in the spoken language—the adjective “black” carries the implicit meaning of dirty, melancholic, doomed, and so on. Equity principles are not part of Afro-Brazilian women daily lives. During slavery, black women in Brazil were seen as an object that could be bought and sold, as sexual objects, those who nourishes the children of their owners/masters, but could be beaten any time by them. After Abolition in 1888, national identity projects did not include Afro-Brazilian women; consequently, they remained at the social margins. However, it was necessary to “integrate” blacks into the national discourse, and by so doing, Afro-Brazilian identity has been frequently manipulated, subordinated, and stereotyped. Today Brazilian black women are still condemned to underpaid jobs and, despite the fact that many have obtained university degrees, the market rejects them because of “appearance,” rendering blackness undesirable in the Brazilian collective unconscious. Thus, even though Afro-Brazilians are many, they remain invisible. And yet rejecting this invisibility, they rise and construct their identities.

What identity is and, above all, how it is defined? Kabengele Munanga (2006), based on Craig Calhoun’s theory, proposes that “a identidade é um processo de construção de sentidos” (19) [identity is a process of constructing meanings] from different sources, and “um mesmo indivíduo, um mesmo ator coletivo pode possuir muitas identidades” [a person or a group can possess various identities] (Munanga 19). Munanga also notes that Calhoun considers the power relation within the social construction of identity and distinguishes three types of identity originated in different ways.

The first type, the “legitimizing identity”, is elaborated by society’s dominant institutions, with the purpose of understanding and rationalizing its domination on social agents: “A identidade

legitimadora cria uma sociedade civil, isto é, um conjunto de organizações e instituições, uma série de autores sociais estruturados e organizados, reproduzindo, até quando é conflitual, a identidade que racionaliza as fontes de dominação estrutural.” [the legitimizing identity creates a civil society, that is, a group of organizations and institutions, a series of structured and organized social agents that reproduces, even when it conflicts, the identity that rationalizes the sources of structural domination] (Munanga 21).

The second, the “resistance identity”, is produced by social actors who find themselves in inferior or devaluated positions in society. As a mechanism of resistance and survival, they resist the principles that rule society. It usually leads to the formation of communities. It “elabora configurações de resistência coletiva contra uma opressão que, sem isso, seria insuportável” [elaborates collective resistance configurations against oppression without which this oppression would be unbearable] (21).

Finally, the third type of identity is the “identity-project,” where identity is built based upon the cultural material at the agents’ disposition. This form of identity construction “produz o desejo de ser um indivíduo, de criar uma história pessoal, de dar sentido a um conjunto de experiências da vida individual” [produces the desire to be an individual, to create a personal history, to give sense to a number of experiences of private life] (21). Identity is, therefore, constructed and reconstructed with the purpose of defining one’s position in society and, consequently, changing society’s structure.

Munanga also proposes that “essa pluralidade de identidades pode engendrar tensões e contradições, tanto na imagem que o indivíduo tem de si como na sua ação no seio da sociedade [this plurality of identities can generate tensions and contradictions, either in the image that the person has of him/herself or in his/her behavior in society]” (19). It is “pela tomada de consciência das diferenças, e não pelas diferenças em si, que se constrói a identidade” [due to the conscience of differences, and not because of the differences *per se*, that identity is constructed] (20).

In this article I will to examine how the Afro-Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo constructs her race and gender identities; in other words, how she rises from invisibility to transform her marginalization into empowerment. I will focus my analysis on poems from an unpublished collection entitled *Recordar é preciso* [Remembering is Necessary], as this volume is the only anthology of poems compiled by this noteworthy Afro-Brazilian writer. Maria da Conceição Evaristo Brito, or Conceição Evaristo, as she is known in the literary milieu, was born in Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais, a state located in the Southeastern part of Brazil. She grew up in the shanty town “Pindura Saia” and lived there until 1971, when she moved to Rio de Janeiro, where she presently lives. Poet, novelist, and short story writer, she has contributed with poetry and short stories to several issues of *Cadernos Negros*,

an annual publication dedicated to Afro-Brazilian literature. *Ponciá Vicêncio*, her first novel was published in 2003, and was later translated into English. In June 2006, she published her second novel, *Becos da Memória*.

As Conceição underscores,

A palavra poética é um modo de narração do mundo. Não só de narração, mas talvez, antes de tudo, de revelação do utópico desejo de construir um outro mundo. Pela poesia, inscreve-se, então, o que o mundo poderia ser. E, ao almejar um mundo outro, a poesia manifesta um descontentamento com a ordem previamente estabelecida. (*Atabaque Virtual*) [Poetry is a way to narrate the world. More than that, it is above all a revelation, a utopic desire to build another world. Through poetry, the world that could be is narrated. And, by longing for a new world, poetry manifests dissatisfaction with the pre-established order.]

Her poetry is thus narration and revelation, but above all a way to challenge the *status quo*. Conceição Evaristo's works examine complex social issues, such as life in the shanty towns, prejudice, and exclusion; however, she also writes of love, hope, and fraternal ties. Through a female's perspective, Conceição undergoes a constant personal search and crafts different strategies to fight against prejudice, oppression, and social injustice. For Conceição Evaristo, writing is a powerful—and empowering—act of resistance. Through her work, she takes one step further in the struggle for social and political recognition, as it is through her writing that she re-constructs and negotiates her several identities—gender, race, and class—a poor black woman, but no longer voiceless.

In her book *Literatura e Identidade Nacional* [Literature and National Identity], Zilá Bernd affirms that the discourses of discriminated groups “funcionam como o elemento que vem preencher os vazios da memória coletiva e fornecer os pontos de ancoramento do sentimento de identidade, essencial ao ato de auto-afirmação das comunidades ameaçadas pelo rolo compressor da assimilação” [function as the element that fulfills the empty spaces of collective memory and provide the anchoring points of identity belonging so essential to the act self-affirmation of communities threatened by the crushing power of assimilation] (13). Maria Nazareth Soares Fonseca also ratifies empowerment through writing, when she states that “as vozes marginalizadas, ao serem reproduzidas pelo traço da escrita, provocam intensos ruídos na transmissão oficial dos fatos ou na forma como o social é construído” [the marginalized voices, as they fabricate through the act of writing, they provoke intense disturbance in the official version of facts or in the way the social world is constructed] (11). Soares Fonseca also reminds us that, by

rewriting history, the voiceless bring to the scene the repressed, and new personal stories replace the great official historic accounts (12).

As personal as political, Conceição Evaristo's poetry refuses passivity, constructing a new gender and racial order that questions the social position of African-Brazilians, especially women. In "Eu-mulher" [I-woman], the poetic voice recognizes the importance of being a woman: she is the strength that moves the world, the one who generates life. In this female universe, images of blood and seed help to create life. Nonetheless, she is aware that the world is still masculine: life is inaugurated in a "low voice," as the world is not prepared for her, for what she has to say. Also, images of silence and unspoken words convey that the female voice is still silenced. Her desires are vague, her hopes, barely insinuated:

Eu-mulher em rios vermelhos
 inauguro a vida.
 em baixa voz
 violento os tímpanos do mundo.
 [I-woman in red rivers
 inaugurate life.
 in a low voice
 violate the tympanum of the world].

The same motif appears in "A noite não adormece nos olhos das mulheres" [Night never falls in the eyes of women]: the poem pictures the image of women as those who generate life, those who resist patiently through time. The poetic voice grants women the responsibility to preserve memory and the need to resist oppression, also reminding black women that resistance is a major characteristic of the peoples of the Diaspora. And yet resistance occurs in a different way: patiently. Patience is, therefore, a powerful weapon that will bring freedom.

Another important aspect to be observed is what Zilá Bernd names the "nova ordem simbólica" [new symbolic order], that is, turning positive every aspect that might have had a negative connotation. Therefore, the poem functions as a space where stereotyped symbols are deconstructed. In "A noite não adormece nos olhos das mulheres," the "noite" [night], usually associated with darkness and fear, is thus transformed into a source of power. Women will never "be in the dark," they will no longer be afraid:

A noite não adormece
 nos olhos das mulheres
 a lua fêmea, semelhante nossa,
 em vigília atenta vigia

a nossa memória.

A noite não adormecerá
Jamais nos olhos das fêmeas
pois do nosso sangue-mulher
de nosso líquido lembradiço
em cada gota que jorra
um fio invisível e tônico
pacientemente cose a rede
de nossa milenar resistência.
[Night never falls
in the eyes of women
the female moon, similar to us
in alert vigilance watches
our memory.

Night will never fall
in the eyes of women
because from our blood-woman
from our remembering liquids
in each drop that pours
an invisible and tonic thread
patiently sews the net
of our millennial resistance].

As in the previous poem, the poetic voice affirms female identity, rendering women as powerful social agents.

Another constant aspect to be observed in Afro-Brazilian poetry in general is revision of history and “a tentativa de preencher os espaços vazios deixados pela historiografia tradicional” [the attempt to fulfill the empty spaces left by traditional historiography] (Bernd, *Introdução* 80). In her study of Afro-Brazilian literature, Prisca Agustoni de Almeida Pereira proposes that “é fundamental pensarmos o processo da escravidão e seus desdobramentos como paradigma de uma herança cultural cujas marcas estão inscritas nos diferentes âmbitos que dizem respeito à cultura brasileira” [it is fundamental to think

the slavery process and its consequences as paradigms of a cultural heritage whose marks are inscribed at different aspects that relate to Brazilian culture] (121). Recovering signs of slavery, and yet transforming into positive several negative elements of slavery, Conceição Evaristo delineates the history of Afro-Brazilians. In “Todas as manhãs” [Every Morning] one can note elements memory, history, dreams, and hope:

Todas as manhãs junto ao nascente dia
 ouço minha voz banzo,
 âncora dos navios de nossa memória.
 E acredito, acredito sim
 que os nossos sonhos protegidos
 pelos lençóis da noite
 ao se abrirem um a um
 no varal de um novo tempo
 escorrem as nossas lágrimas
 fertilizando toda a terra
 onde negras sementes resistem
 remanhecendo esperanças entre nós.
 [Every morning at dawn
 I hear my sad-longing voice,
 The anchor of ships of our memory.
 And I believe, yes I believe
 that our dreams protected
 by the sheets of night
 upon opening one by one
 in the line of a new time
 our tears will drop
 fertilizing all the land
 where black seeds resist
 re-birthing hopes among us].

In this poem, one notes constant themes in Evaristo’s poetry: the preservation of memory, the need to resist, the reversion of symbols, and, most important, the hope of Afro-Brazilian population.

Furthermore, the powerful poem “Vozes-Mulheres” [“Voices-Women”] rewrites history through personal perspective: the story of her family is recovered. And yet, personal becomes collective, as her story symbolizes the history of Afro-Brazilian women in general. The poem begins with the image of her great grandmother, a child brought as a slave to the New World. Her cries for her lost childhood are heard in the hold of the ship:

A voz de minha bisavó ecoou
criança
nos porões do navio.
Ecoou lamentos
de uma infância perdida.
[The voice of my great-grandmother echoed
child
in the holds of the ship.
Echoed cries
of a lost childhood].

Her grandmother, an obedient slave whose voice only knew the word “yes:”

A voz de minha avó
ecoou obediência
aos brancos-donos de tudo.
[The voice of my grandmother
echoed obedience
to the whites-owners of everything].

Like many Afro-Brazilian women, her mother was only allowed to hold second-class jobs, working as cooks, servants, maids; women who exist only to take care of the Master’s physical needs. But this invisible woman, after a day of hard work, goes back to the shanty town, the only place she can afford to live. The *favela* for Conceição Evaristo is Brazil’s contemporary *senzala*, the slave-quarters; a place of suffering, of poverty, nonetheless, also a place of resistance. Therefore, the image of her mother brings the first signs of resistance, but still the mother’s voice is very low:

A voz de minha mãe
ecoou baixinho revolta
no fundo das cozinhas alheias
debaixo das trouxas

roupagem suja dos brancos
pelo caminho empoeirado
rumo à favela.
[The voice of my mother
echoed revolt in a very low tone
in the back of somebody else's kitchens
under the bundle
dirty clothes of the Whites
in the dusty way
to the shantytown].

Her voice is still troubled by society's economic and social injustices. Images of blood and hunger depict the violence suffered by the Afro-Brazilian population:

A minha voz ainda
ecoa versos perplexos
com rimas de sangue
e fome.
[My voice still
echoes astonished verses
with rhymes of blood
and hunger].

But it is through her daughter—symbol of past, present, and future, the one who carries within herself the history of all Afro-Brazilian women—that the sounds of freedom will be heard. This generation and the generations yet to come will demand better life conditions for Afro-Brazilian women:

A voz de minha filha
recorre 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 fará ouvir a ressonância
o eco da vida-liberdade.
[The voice of my daughter
retraces all of our voices
it gathers in itself
the mute silenced voices
choked in the throats.
The voice of my daughter
retraces in itself
the word and the act.
Yesterday – today – now.
In the voice of my daughter
the echo of life-freedom
will be heard].

Resistance is, therefore, a key-concept for Conceição Evaristo. In “Meu corpo igual” [My body the same] female empowerment emerges through the image of the woman warrior, the one who is in control of her body and her needs. In search for pleasure, and yet denouncing women exclusion, she celebrates her femininity, while fostering the struggle:

Na escuridão da noite
meu corpo igual
fere perigos
adivinha recados
assobios e tantãs.

Na escuridão igual
meu corpo noite
abre vulcânico
a pele étnica
que me reveste.

Na escuridão da noite
meu corpo igual
bóia, lágrimas, oceânico
crivando buscas
cravando sonhos
aquilombando esperanças
na escuridão da noite.
[In the darkness of the night
my body the same
wounds dangers
guesses messages
whistles and drums.

In the same darkness
my body night
opens volcanic
the ethnic skin
that covers me.

In the darkness of the night
my body the same
floats, tears, oceanic
screening searches
plunging dreams
marooning hopes
in the darkness of night].

This female voice communicates her dreams, her desires through whistles and drums, as runaway slaves once did from the *quilombos*. The reference to the communities of runaway slaves relates to slavery, but the fight is also personal, it finds place within herself.

In “Canto 1” [Song 1], the poetic voice also refuses to comply with Afro-Brazilian’s marginalized position. At the same time, the poem condemns the violence that has plagued Brazil, especially the shanty towns, where the majority of the Afro-Brazilian population lives. Blacks seem to be the most

common target of the “balas perdidas” [lost bullets]; in other words, bullets that run in no direction, the results of shootings between police and drug dealers; these bullets accidentally kill innocent people, caught in the middle of an urban war. The poem underlines the need to protest instead of suffering in silence, and the poetic voice, no longer silenced, cries for freedom. As mentioned previously, for Conceição Evaristo the shanty towns are contemporary representations of the *senzala* [slave quarters]. And in “Canto 1,” as in many of her other poems, they surface as places of resistance. In the verse “mudez é a nudez” [muteness is nudeness], the “naked” word finally shows itself, no longer hiding pain and revolt:

O silêncio mordido
rebel e revela
nossos ais
e são tantos os gritos
que a alva cidade,
de seu imerecido sono,
desperta em pesadelo.

E pedimos
que as balas perdidas
percam o rumo
e não façam do corpo nosso,
de nossos filhos, o alvo.

O silêncio mordido,
antes o pão triturado
de nossos desejos,
avoluma, avoluma
e a massa ganha por inteiro
o espaço antes comedido
pela ordem.

E não há mais
quem morda a nossa língua
o nosso verbo solto
conjugou antes

o tempo de todas as dores.

E o silêncio escapou
ferindo a ordenança
e hoje o inverso
da mudez é a nudez
do nosso gritante verso
que se quer livre.
[The beaten silence
rebels and reveals
our ais
and so many are the cries
that the clear city,
of its undeserved sleep,
awakens up in nightmares.

And we ask
that the lost bullets
lose their way
and do not make of our body
and the body of our children, the target.

The beaten cry,
previously the grinded bread
of our wishes,
grows, grows
and the masses gain
the space before controlled
by order.

And there is no one
who bites our tongue
our free verb
conjugated before
the tense of all pains.

And the silence escaped
wounding the order
and today the contrary
of muteness is nakedness
of our gigantic verse
that wants itself free].

In conclusion, the concept of black feminine writing is an ongoing issue. The media, the academia, and even certain black communities still resist discussing it. Race is still a taboo, even in the 21st century. Writing is, therefore, an act of resistance; and literature gains ground as an important part of the social-political debate, a “weapon” to be used against marginalization. In her examination of women writers, Trinh Minh-ha notes that “as a focal point of cultural consciousness and social change, writing weaves into language the complex relations of a subject caught between the problems of race and gender and the practice of literature as the very place where social alienation is thwarted differently according to each specific context” (6). Still, to bell hooks blackness challenges the way society operates, “transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad” (4). Conceição Evaristo’s poetry helps to subvert stereotypes of Afro-Brazilian women while constructing effective strategies of resistance. No longer voiceless, the poet opens a dialogue with society, trying to ascertain and understand essential facets of her own existence: black, woman, poor, and Brazilian.

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