Language Should Not Keep Us Apart! Reflections towards a Black Transnational Praxis of Translation

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LANGUAGE SHOULD NOT KEEP US APART!
Reflections towards a Black Transnational Praxis of Translation

by Geri Augusto

Imploro-te Exu
Plantares na minha boca
O teu axé verbal
Restituindo-me a língua
Que era minha
E ma roubaram . . .
Laroiê!

—Abdias do Nascimento, “Padê do Exu Libertador”
Buffalo, New York, 1981

There is no world of thought which is not a world of language, and
one sees of the world only what is provided for by language.
—Walter Benjamin, “Translation – For and Against”

I want to begin this paper by going back to the genesis of a few ideas, ideas prompted,
in the first instance, by a visit that Professors Conceição Evaristo and Eduardo de Assis
Duarte paid to Brown University almost exactly a year ago, and the conversations that
ensued.¹ Those ideas fell into my mind and took up company with some others which
had been there longer, and were prompted by black transnational lives—my own and
that of others who inspired me—and the need to think more deeply about what it means
not just to write theoretically about diaspora, but rather also to practice diaspora.² Or as
I think of it more and more, to live diaspora, in all its contradictions and crossings with
other ways to live and be and think. In a manner of speaking, such lives are a translation,
sometimes a productive one—but not always. I will try to demonstrate how reading Profes-
sor Evaristo’s work opens up possibilities for thinking about, and exploring, the idea of
a black transnational praxis of translation. In a sense, I am thinking about how Pan African
decolonial liberation and human rights struggles, and my participation in some of them
over decades, engendered and influenced my experience as an interpreter. But because
I am what someone once called a “community feminist,” and also I believe in the eman-
cipatory projects of other peoples and provocative notions no matter their provenance,
other concepts have also shaped how I think about and cross language borders in work
and personal life. So my reflections are not limited to the distinctive political activity and
body of ideas called Pan Africanism. More went into the pot, as my grandmother would say.
In this text I want to tease out some of the ways in which the historical experiences and the creative expressiveness which mark diasporan lives conjure up companion ideas and expressions, and hence may fruitfully bring particular inflections and enriched meanings to translation and interpretation. To do so, I will give a certain reading of Conceição Evaristo’s work, in particular Becos da Memória—but I warn you that it won’t be the close reading of literary scholars, or professional translators of poetry and fiction, because I am neither! Rather, my discussion will make more apparent the thought processes of a once-upon-a-time interpreter who comes out of a certain black radical and feminist tradition, when faced with the linguistic joys and conundrums that Evaristo’s work invokes. We might think of this as following Walter Benjamin’s injunction to add the practice of commentary to translation, if we want it to work well, and not just be a technical exercise to try to produce a duplicate (“Task”). I will along the way make some provisional assertions, not conclusions—provisional because I am still thinking deeply, while here in Brazil, about all this. I need to listen and observe a lot more, and converse more with some other black folks whose paths to translation and interpretation have been somewhat parallel to mine. We aren’t that many, as you will understand from some of the things I will shortly relate.

In brief, I want to suggest four points, not necessarily with any linearity or didactic explicitness. The arguments come from the spaces I inhabit and the crossroads at which life has placed me, of course, but that by no means implies that they are limited to people who look like me, or even to the languages of Portuguese and English. Rather, they might also serve as a springboard to wider discussions about translation, and about constructing and crossing that bridge between less-widely read Brazilian literature and the global readership it should have. First, I want to suggest that translation, or at least the brand I and others have practiced and that I now want to reflect upon, is an ontological act. Second, that a feeling for certain realities of diaspora—slavery, racism in its multiple facets and manifestations, the triple load of many black women, and struggle against all these—is important for translation of African and diasporic literatures. Third, that the enduring, if continuously reconfigured, importance of orality and visuality in the speech, liturgical practices, writing, and other expressive and performative acts of Africans and Afro-descendent peoples make those dimensions critical resources for translation and interpretation. And finally, since racism has worked so hard to make us all think that, for black people in the Americas, crossing language borders is something inherently impossible, or else an extraordinary and surprising fluke, supposedly due to our innate intellectual inferiority and relative lack of opportunities for travel, I want to assert that translating can be a radical, transgressive black practice, with multiple reverberations.

I will incorporate here initially some of the comments I made a year ago when moderating the panel on The Literary Voice in Black Brazilian Politics, in the Africana Studies Department at Brown University, since that is where the conversation started.

Translation, Counter-Symbolic Expression, and Ontological Beings

I read with deep joy Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres, Prof. Evaristo’s recent collection of stories. Each woman, and her story, was evocative—I could conjure them up physi-
callingly, how they talked, how they walked, how they must have looked at the Narrator, as she collected their stories. They were strong. They were beautiful. They were cruel. They were kind. And you, the reader, had to think about which of these traits was foremost in any given person. They were sexual beings and determined dreamers. Their very names roll around on the tongue, creating intrigue and provoking thoughts... Líbia Moira, Natalina Soledade...

As Stuart Hall would say, we are related, in the African Diaspora, as much through our differences as through our similarities. So I could not help thinking: if I were to teach the soon-to-come (or at least so I hope) English version that I would entitle *Defiant Women's Tears*, I would want to do it side-by-side with Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and Brenda Marie Osbey's poem, in *All Saints*, "Faubourg Study No. 3: The Seven Sisters of New Orleans." And maybe have Nina Simone's "Four Women" playing in the background. I think all these could be read, listened to, and appreciated, fully together, challenging us with their differences and provoking us with their similarities. And then we could really explore Prof. Evaristo's notion of *escrevivencia*, which I want to give an English rendition, pulling a little from Jamaican nation-language, as *livature*, that notion of a particular relation between writing and living.

In an influential essay on "The Politics of Translation," the postcolonial theorist and feminist translator Gayatri Spivak argued that "the person who is translating must have a tough sense of the specific terrain of the original," and she added that "If you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the person who wrote it" (qtd. in Venuti 322). Well, Professor Evaristo liked my translation of her concept. Let me pause here to interject what I did not add at the time: Rastafari have been one of the most important constructors of what the poet and cultural theorist Kamau Brathwaite calls "nation-languages" in the English-speaking Caribbean. All of these diasporic constructions are full of creative counter-symbolism. The Jamaican linguistic scholar Velma Pollard notes that the language Rastas speak, *dread-talk*, is now widely used in Caribbean literature—not to mention in Brazilian conscious rap and reggae. It has become, as the Jamaican cultural theorist and historian Rex Nettleford once put it, an element of the "New World culturesphere" (Pollard 3). But more to my point here, those counter-symbolic expressions and counter stories, those other phonics, common throughout black communities in the Americas, have also furnished us with something more. Andre Lefevere argues that translating, or mediating between "at least two code systems," involves an activity not merely about "fidelity" but rather a double move: translating both the textual and the conceptual, both of which are the "result of a socialization process" (75–76). I think what Lefevere is in part saying here is that the translator may also compose, or at least provide an accessible rendition of, ontological beings—things and realities—for the reader, depending on her own socialization. If this is true, then black counter-speech and orature are also an epistemological tool, a way to construct or reconfigure objects of knowledge—ontological entities and beings. That makes them a potentially rich resource in translation.

Let me be a bit more precise. Translators have found what one scholar calls "culturally marked" words to be particularly problematic (Santoyo 14). They often have to settle, it is said, for a definition, rather than a good equivalent. But diasporic cultures and histories, I think, can sometimes provide just the right way out of the dilemma. *Livity* is what Pollard classifies as a "Category IV" dread talk word, a "new item." I found it the perfect bridge
to a translation of Evaristo’s *escrivivencia* as livity literature: *livature*. To take another example: how else would I have found the nicely apt translation of *negros de ideias avançadas*, the truculent description that a Portuguese state secret police agent in colonial-era Lisbon gave of the young students Agostinho Neto, Mario de Andrade, Marcelino dos Santos, and others already sharpening their resistance to colonial racism and exploitation?10 “Uppity negroes” was how white policemen in the US South described black women and men protesting Jim Crow . . . and so “uppity negroes” became my translation of *negros de ideias avançadas*. It is a category many of us understand!

**Accidental Interpreters and “Language in actu”**

The first literature that I read in the Portuguese language was MPLA literacy manuals in the movement’s rear-base camp in Dar es Salaam, followed by the first few volumes of Angolan short novels and poetry that the new Union of Angolan Writers had begun in the mid-1970s to put out. But the qualitative leap for me was Jorge Amado. For months in a family member’s home in Luanda, I read through all three volumes of *Os Subterrâneos da Liberdade* [Freedom’s Undergrounds], dictionary in hand, until my third son was born.11 You can imagine the Portuguese it taught me, and the ideas about Brazil that it gave to someone who had never been there. My quiet reading time was alternated by frequent visits to some of my Angolan relatives-by-marriage, who lived in the famous *musseque* of Sambizanga. I did not know it at the time, but those “remembered alleys” were to come back to me—the red dust dissolving in puddles during rainy season, the sociality of the community standpipe, the easy sharing of tasty food, good luck and sorrows, the birthing of resistance to exploitation—as one of the prisms for my understanding of Evaristo’s unnamed *favela* in *Becos da Memória*. It did not need a name for me. The experience of an African American woman living in Luanda made this vibrant, beautiful-ugly12 space an ontological entity I could see, feel, smell, and translate in my mind’s eye. It gave me that “tough sense of the terrain,” to which Spivak referred.

In the long, hard war decades of the 1980s and 1990s in Angola, I went on to become an “accidental interpreter” of Portuguese to English, when the needs for this skill were grave and multiple, but competent bilingual interpreters who were native speakers of English were scarce. It was, in the felicitous term of Homi Bhaba, translation of “language *in actu,*” rather than *in situ*. As I progressed from translating documents to interpreting meetings with varying levels of intensity but always about things that mattered, and finally to simultaneous interpretation, I entered into those small enclosed bubbles called “booths.” There I met often with the surprised, confused gratitude of European speakers who came round to the interpreters’ area after international meetings in Luanda, in Brussels and Lisbon, and throughout Southern Africa, to express their appreciation for a job well-done—only to meet with a black face.13 “How on earth do you do it?” a South African engineer once blurted out to me at a meeting in Namibia, just after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison. “Well, I listen to one language, it passes through my brain, and the other comes out of my mouth . . . just like the other interpreters,” I told him.
It would be a few more years before I would find myself in Pretoria, interviewing former apartheid education officials who would tell me, with utmost seriousness, in explanation of the bare trickle of black South Africans into certain fields of study: “You blacks in the USA are not like our blacks here. They can’t master English. Or maths.” This was uttered in the country where I was subsequently often embarrassed by the easy prowess of seven-year-old black children who understood many languages already—the mother tongue and father tongue at home, say isiZulu and seTswana, the tsotsi-taal from “bad boys” on the corner, and whatever other languages the actors in the soap operas on South African broadcasting stations were speaking. Still language constitutes a barrier for many of these children, as they struggle to translate the rich linguistics of home cultures into the sometimes dry English of the textbook, and some of their teachers struggle to overcome their own training under apartheid-era “bantu education,” when they were obliged to study in Afrikaans only.

But that is another language story, much like some of the topsy-turvy explanations I have been hearing lately about why there are not more Afro-Brazilian students sent to the United States for graduate study opportunities. Or the surprise that still greets the multiple-language speaking African American from New Orleans or Chicago or Washington, DC. It seems that we are doing something that we are not supposed to be able to do, at least in the United States, South Africa, or Brazil. “Translation is not a neutral site in the Americas,” one critical scholar of translation studies has declared, and I agree (Genzler 3). Our thinking about translation, whether as public actors or scholars, cannot ignore this imbrication of race, opportunity, and languages. We should not ignore the impact of colonial slavery, Jim Crow, apartheid, or scientific racism-inflected theories of learning and knowledge on how translation is practiced or studied, or what gets selected for translation. We have to talk about it, and transgress those artificial borders, in publication, in the classroom . . . and at international book fairs. Language should not keep us apart!

Sound-Images, Linguistic Charge, Walking Orality

I want to say more, at this point, about the role of visuality and orality in how I am trying to think through the practice of translation. Here I will refer primarily to some pertinent ideas from novelist and social critic John Edgar Wideman. Wideman turns our attention very deliberately to something humanities scholars often seem to take for granted, if not ignore: the tremendous creative feat that was the acquisition of imposed languages, and the forging of new ones, the renaming of a world and its attributes and features, the very reinvention of existence by the just-landed black captives in the Americas. Those first expressions of the new were oral, and that has been one of our legacies to ourselves, and to the world. Wideman explores, in particular, the varieties of speech which have emerged from the different worlds of blacks and whites in the United States. For speech acts, Wideman argues, “key provides the tone, manner or spirit of the words spoken.” The key may be “serious or mocking, painstaking or perfunctory,” depending on signals verbal and physical, which also comprise the speech act. These subtle, often almost imperceptible (to the outsider) cues are what allow for “density of meaning” in the utterances of a speech
community or group. In written works, these keys allow the writer to address multiple, diverse audiences. This is achieved, Wideman asserts, “by appealing to pools of knowledge only segments of his readers share with him.” “Rather than being an instrument of power in the hands of the enemy,” Wideman says of Negro dialect in the fiction of some of the best early African American writers, “it is turned against the oppressor” and permits the “point of view of the slave” to be understood. The stories of the former slaves, and the values embodied in them, Wideman insists, reveal the fundamental “inner sense of purpose and worth, the integrity and resiliency” which enabled black people to survive slavery in America (66–69). I think Evaristo relays something of this same “integrity and resilience” of the favelad@s, who are living in a late-twentieth-century senzala/favela.

Wideman makes much of particular elements of African American orature such as verbal interplay, verbal overtones, spontaneity of performance, the audience itself, the setting, and nonverbal effects. The audience has a critical role in African American orature, chiefly creative participation and responsiveness, including “echoing and amening,” as Wideman puts it. Wideman expounds the concept of the “sound image,” or “Words that sound like the thing they describe” (66–69). Such onomatopoeic phrases may be voiced or performed. Objects may be personified in these narratives—they do, talk, see, hear, change position. The narrator in an oral performance may move back and forth between aural and visual effects, creating a language that Afro-Brazilian cultural historian and playwright Prof. Leda Maria Martins suggests “comes into pulsing being in the conjugation of the sound of drums, singing and dancing which interact in the articulation of speech and voice” (56). I would argue that, in Becos da Memória, many of these notions are intensely present. Anyone attempting to translate the novel might do well to have sound images as well as objects which come alive in the mind. Just think, for example, of that big, devouring, expanding hole . . . the Buracão.

The translator of French classic literature, Edith Grossman, provides another useful perspective on orality, from the standpoint of practice, when she writes of “struggling to discover the linguistic charge, the structural rhythms, the subtle implications, the complexities of meaning and suggestion in vocabulary and phrasing, and the ambient, cultural inferences and conclusions these tonalities allow us to extrapolate” (8–9). That linguistic charge sometimes has to have a walk, a style, a way of appearing and being in space. How to do this for African diasporic cultures, when one is distant from them?

One European film translator offers a vivid picture of this conundrum. Drawing on her own experience translating African American English into German, Robin Queen argues that the transferability of sociolinguistic variation is important to issues related to cross-cultural communication, as well as to linguistic creativity. She notes that in translating films, “if the character being dubbed is young, male and tied to the street cultures of the urban inner city, then the work is dubbed using a form of German that has links to the urban youth cultures of north-central Germany” (515). I found this wrestling with social location and class, but swerving around race, to be fascinating and thought-provoking, especially since major German cities have had for some time their own populations of African (and Turkish) immigrants. It pushed me to think more carefully about some of my past interpreting experiences, one of which I would like to share here.

I recall particularly being in the booth in Luanda, sometime in the early 1980s, paired with a young Portuguese colleague, a member of the Portuguese Communist Party and a
brilliantly able interpreter of Portuguese to English. (He told me that he was one of twins, and that both he and his brother were interpreters.) Our task was to interpret at an MPLA Youth Congress for the international delegates, many from what were then known as “the socialist countries.” English was the lingua franca for all. Midway through my colleague’s turn, he switched off his microphone and said, “Comrade Geri, you have to take this. I can’t understand what some of the provincial delegates are saying.” I turned my own microphone on swiftly, and looked down into the audience as the next young Angolan speaker positioned himself in the auditorium aisle, in a characteristic stance, and began to reel off the problems his province was facing. Knowing the Portuguese of Coimbra and the English of London, or even the vocabulary of Marxism-Leninism, was not enough to interpret this Angolan speaker. His intervention was filled with gestures, cadences, and words which I had learned from the streets and social occasions of Luanda, but also recognized from other parts of Africa and from the diaspora, though not necessarily in the same words: *caudonga*ia, maka, milongo, o esquemático, and of course, “ai, cooperante!”

I have just recently begun to seek out how scholars of Brazilian translation have also been thinking through questions of orality and visuality. One such translation theorist, Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira, revisits the ideas of Haroldo de Campos and other Brazilian thinkers (notably Oswald de Andrade, in his influential “Manifesto Anthropófago” of the 1920s) around the metaphor of *anthropofagia*. On this account, it is “a sign of the polyphonic identity of Brazil . . . a way of conceiving spiritual force as inseparable from matter,” of combining another’s recognized and appreciated strength with one’s own (96). Intriguing as this notion is, it seems to me to leave out the majority of Brazil, contemplating only Portuguese and Tupi (and the latter in terms with which I am not sure that thinkers from contemporary indigenous communities in the country would agree), and its focus is very much on translation of European texts, and a Brazil-Europe nexus, despite the premise of refuting Eurocentrism. Still I think we can find productive her argument that the translation of creative texts is “an operation in which it is not only the meaning that is translated but the sign itself in all its corporeality—sound properties, visual imagetics, all that makes up the iconicity of the aesthetic sign” (Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira 104, emphasis added). Perhaps the search for ways to theorize translation in Brazil might productively be widened to encompass the vast, living, creative legacy of orality in the religions, music, and everyday walk and talk of Afro-Brazilian communities—those expressions, as Cutí puts it, capable of “translating certain feelings, certain attitudes towards life, that the Portuguese language does not have” (732). But that is not for me to say, at a stage where I am still learning.

**The Uneasy Translatability of Gender and Race**

I do not mean to suggest, I must stress at this point, that there is something essential to black translators that suits them automatically for translating black literatures, or women to translating women. I found instructive and thought-provoking Alexandra Perisic’s recent discussion of the translation processes and outcomes, and the notion of a “politics of transfiguration” in the bilingual anthology of Afro-Brazilian women’s writings, *Finally Us*, co-edited by the Afro-Brazilian poet and literary critic, and Conceição Evaristo’s col-
league in Quilombohoje, Miriam Alves. Noting that *Finally Us* “rethinks gender not as a subset of race and colonial history but as a site from which the relation between the national and the transnational is imagined,” Perisic recounts that the book also brought “into play the question of translation and translatability” (282). Alves, she discloses, had somewhat conflicted feelings about the outcome. That *axé* which the poet communicated through her work simply got lost, at some points, in translation. Highly nuanced, polyvalent words such as *resgate*, *cigana*, and even *negra* became slippery slopes, it would seem, for the translation of *Finally Us*. I can sympathize here with both the frustrated writer and the translator, whose task of translating gendered race and racialized gender is, as they say in Jamaica, *nuh’ easy*. But I would also agree with Perisic’s argument that “the only way to think race and gender in a transnational context is to precisely attempt to write the untranslatable in translation” (282).

**Ancestors and the Trance**

There is another aspect of the practice of interpretation, as I have experienced it, which I do not yet know how to adequately express. It is simply this: when communication is a matter of life-and-death, or of opening paths where they are really needed among us humans, of moving concepts from one side to another, and back, with extreme care (bending more towards the other Latin meaning of trans-late), this interpreter literally goes into a *trance*. This is the only word I can find to describe it—divested of individual self, insensitive to anything else in the physical environment but the two sides who need to understand each other, a rhythm of almost instantaneous, simultaneous thinking along with the speakers, becoming the voice they have in common, a human medium of communication. I think this dimension of the practice comes from a logic that some of us have yet to grasp, and others—who work on a different plane, and with a different kind of revelatory knowledge—may understand very well. Suffice it to say that, just before and after this work, I thank the Ancestors. Perhaps if I were Brazilian, I might invoke an orixá.

I will use the rest of this paper to demonstrate how I would approach translating *Becos da Memória*. No, not a translation—but rather *thinking through* and *with* such a translation, in the very act of practice. I will use some audio-visual images and quotes from the book, translating them into English as we go, to better materialize some of the points I have been trying to make, in six “moments” or examples. I feel comfortable with this somewhat unorthodox approach, since Evaristo has urged us to attempt to theorize more by using “our own cultural products.” Then I will end with a modest proposal, though I have a hunch that it may be one that Prof. Eduardo Duarte and the *galera* of Literafro have already voiced.
Becos da Memória—Some Images and Sounds Evoked for the Would-Be Translator

First moment— Maria-Nova, the unforgettable girl-child:


She liked to learn, but not to go to school. She was afraid and ashamed of everything, of her classmates, of the teachers. So, sidetracking, she turned fear and shame into courage. She had one advantage over her classmates: she read a lot. She read and compared things. She compared everything, and always came to some point.

In my mind’s eye, I see generations of black women and girls, struggling to learn, even when school is unfriendly, hostile, or deficient. And I imagine Maria-Nova, narrating forward into her own future, like the little girl not-yet-born who narrates Julie Dash’s groundbreaking, lyrical film, “Daughters of the Dust.”

Black children struggling to read on the street, 1867. From the cover of Harper’s Weekly Vol. XI, No. 543. Provided courtesy HarpWeek.
Second moment—Negro Alírio, determined, indomitable, a leader with a soft heart but determined head:

For him, reading stood for understanding the world. He believed that, once a person knew how to read what was written and what wasn’t, he was taking a very important step for his liberation. Yes, life was demanding! You needed to set off on a path, you needed to get going—that was what he always repeated. And he was right there, along with all the others. Always alert. There was room inside him for everything. The strength to think, to create, to change, to struggle, to build . . .

In my mind, I picture Negro Alírio like the best of the liberation movement leaders in Africa, and the work done to create, against all odds, schools in the liberated zones of Guinea-Bissau, and Angola and Mozambique at the time. And thinking about how to transmit Negro Alírio’s view of creating under the most arduous of conditions, I suddenly recall Agostinho Neto’s poem, and the image of him writing in prisons and in the bush:

Create create
create in mind create in muscle create in nerve
create in man create in masses
create
create with dry eyes

create create
bursts of laughter over the derision of the palmatoria
courage in the tips of the planters boots
strength in the splintering of battered-in doors
firmness in the red blood of insecurity
create
create with dry eyes
create create

peace over children’s weeping
peace over sweat
over the tears of contract labour

create create
create freedom in the slave stars
manacles of love on the paganized paths of love
festive sounds over the swinging bodies on the simulated gallows
Create
create love with dry eyes.
(Neto 69)

Third moment—Tio Totó and his precious Congado regalia, indispensable to his other self as “chefe do Congo”:

A caixa de Congada de Tio Totó pendurada no caibro do telhado dava a sensação de ruído. Ela deveria ser devolvida ao chefe do Congo. Ele, porém, morrera uns meses antes. Tio Totó, que seria então o novo chefe, estava também a despedir-se de todos e da vida. . . . A “Coroa de Rei” que ele usava nas festas de Congada brilhava pelo efeito do Kaol sobre a cômoda de madeira. Era bom brincar de rei. Ele vestia roupas vistosas, bonitas. Todas as festas acabavam sempre na capelinha que os participantes do Congo haviam construído em honra de Nossa Senhora do Rosário. (Evaristo, Becos da Memória 244)

Tio Totó’s Congado box hanging from a hook in the ceiling gave the sensation of sound. The box should have been given back to the Chief of the Congo. But he had passed away a few months ago. Tio Totó, who would have become the new chief, was also saying farewell to everyone, and to life . . . The “King’s Crown” that he used in the Congado festival sat shining with Kaol polish on the wooden dresser. It was nice to play the king. He wore showy, beautiful regalia. All the festivals always ended up in the small chapel that the participants from Congo had built in honor of Our Lady of the Rosary . . .

Here I see and hear at once a flood of visual and aural images of another ritual of dance with re-crowned African kings and queens and “caboclos” of a sort, beautifully danced by the descendants of slaves . . . in New Orleans, the city built on their labor, manual and creative, and where disaster inflected with racism has made the tradition of Carnival/Mardi Gras difficult for its real, largely working-class back progenitors to carry on . . . but they do.

Fourth moment—And back to Maria-Nova: “Maria-Nova um dia escreveria a fala de seu povo” (247) ‘One day, Maria-Nova would write the speech of her people.’ The very Brazilian-Portuguese, polyvalent expression “fala” lends itself to many understandings of palaver in the African sense, and so I hesitate between speech and words as the right translation. But then I remember one of my favorite films by the Guinea-Bissau film-maker Flora Gomes, and its meaning in the creole language of that country: voice. nha fala is “my voice,” and that is what Flora laughingly calls me when I interpret for him. For Evaristo’s favela, Maria-Nova—or is it the author herself?—will become Nha Fala.

Fifth moment—The many passages in Becos da Memoria where expressions for determined, decisive walking, for courageous movement forward, are uttered, or just forcefully thought, by one or the other of the residents of the favela: “A vida parecia uma brincadeira de mau gosto. Um esconde-esconde de um tesouro invisível, mas era preciso tocar para frente . . .
“Life seemed to be a joke in poor taste. A game of hide-and-seek for some invisible treasure, but it was necessary to keep on moving ahead...” And that imagined path is often paved with sound: “O vozeirão de Vó Rita marcava e embalava o nosso caminhar” (240) ‘Granny Rita’s big voice traced the path, and caressed us as we walked.’ I had no doubts: the best expression in English of this notion of walking, of a black path arduously followed, was in song, the songs of the US Southern Freedom Struggle (some call it the Civil Rights Movement), and one of the best interpreters of that is my sister from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee-SNCC, Dr. Bernice Reagon, the musicologist/songtalker/historian/freedom singer who tells us that Movement protesters “sang to announce their presence” as they walked in the face of violence. One such well-known “traditional” song sung by the SNCC Freedom Singers, who later evolved into the group Sweet Honey in the Rock, goes like this:

> Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me ’round,  
> Turn me round, turn me ’round.  
> Ain’t gonna let nobody, turn me ’round.  
> I’m gonna keep on a-walkin’; keep on a-talkin’,  
> Walkin’ into Freedom Land

Sixth moment—The *favela* itself, an ontological entity created by slavery and race-based exploitation, but also recreated ingeniously every day by its mostly-black inhabitants: There are too many scenes in *Becos da Memória* to translate here in this respect, so I will just invoke images from the *musseques* of Luanda, such as Sambizanga and Bairro Operário, which always appeared in my mind, alongside those of the *favela* which is its own vivid character in the book. Actually for me these neighborhoods are at once image/sound/feel, a very distinctive built environment, a “tough terrain” of enjoyment and sorrow, solidarity and violence, where people are the only real infrastructure, and oppositional freedom struggles, old and new, are born and nurtured against all odds.

Bairro Operario in Luanda. Photograph by Geri Augusto © 2012.
Final Thoughts

From the 1960s to the 1980s, many of us in Africa and the diaspora found a new window onto writings that we otherwise might never have encountered: the Heinemann African Writers Series. The late Chinua Achebe was the trailblazer in this decades-long enterprise, with his *Things Fall Apart*, introducing African writing and cultures on their own terms to the rest of the world—or at least those who read English. In many cases, that meant translating—over time, *paulatinamente*, as you say in that lovely Portuguese expression—works from French, Portuguese, or Arabic. I want to end this presentation by suggesting, with all due humility, that it may be high time for an Afro-Brazilian Writers Series—selecting, translating, and publishing in an accessible format the best of that wealth of Afro-Brazilian literature which the rest of the world deserves, and needs, to know. Even better might be to pair that with a program-in-reverse: systematic selection, translation into Portuguese, and publishing of the best of African and diasporic literature written in English and French.

Having learned that one of the purposes of the web portal Literafro, supported by the Federal University of Minas Gerais-UFMG, is to “overcome the historical erasure of Afro-descendence in our [Brazilian] literature,” I wonder if this is something the collective already has in mind? (literafro). If such a series is in the works, or comes about, I would like to think that there would be an especially important role for the particular ideas, practice, and perspective of black transnational translation—not because it is black, but because it can be generative and beautiful and effective.

Language should not keep us apart!

NOTES

1. This text is an expanded version of an invited talk given on October 25, 2013, at the Faculty of Letters, Federal University of Minas Gerais-UFMG, in Belo Horizonte, at the launch of a new edition of Conceição Evaristo’s *Becos da Memória*. The talk was published in the original Portuguese in November 2013 at <http://www.letras.ufmg.br/literafro/data1/artigos/geri.pdf>. All translations from Portuguese to English here are the author’s.

2. Brent Edwards’s elegant formulation, in his *The Practice of Diaspora*. Here I am also influenced by a notion of diaspora expounded by Robin Kelley and Tiffany Patterson, who suggest that it is both process and condition, situated within global race and gender hierarchies.

3. Among the best-known and most influential theories of black literary criticism is, of course, that of Henry Louis Gates, elaborated in his masterpiece on black figurative language use and literary interpretation, *The Signifying Monkey*. My intention here is different, as I wish to reflect from the space of two imbricated practices—language interpretation and black transnationalism.

4. Of course the actual history of Afro-descendants’ engagement with literature and translation gives the lie to any notions of an innate black “foreign language” handicap. To take just Northern examples, we might consider the Paris-based Nardal sisters, Afro-Martinican intellectuals meticulously discussed for their contribution to the idea of negritude in Edwards; or the importance of translating French (Leon Damas, Jacques Romain) and Spanish (Féderico Garcia Lorca) to the poetry and social consciousness of Langston Hughes, as well as the “translational friendships” which marked the great African American poet’s life. For more on Hughes and translation, see Scott.


7. I coined this term at the time of Prof. Evaristo’s visit to Brown in 2012; as far as I know, it did not exist before.
8. As Brathwaite puts it in *History of the Voice*, where he further elaborates this ground-breaking concept: “We have also what is called *nation language*, which is the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in” (5–6).

9. The Online Urban Dictionary—why not?—defines *livity* thusly: “from the Rastafari / patois translation of Life & Freedom. A lifestyle, a way of living.” Popular definitions in Jamaica put it as the energy or life force flowing through all things (axé, one might translate it).

10. The term is used in one of the reports contained in an archive of PIDE colonial documents recently published in Luanda by the Agostinho Neto Foundation. For a compelling historical contextualization of the concept of “uppity negroes,” see the early 1960s document “Mississippi: Subversion of the Right to Vote,” archived by the site Civil Rights Movement Veterans at <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/msrv64.pdf/> . The document is strangely redolent of 2013, with its registering of the threats to imperiled black citizenship and the shooting down of unarmed black men with impunity.

11. For an elucidating discussion of Amado’s *Cousin Sanzala*: *Os despojos tempos, Agonia da noite and* A luz no tunnel, see Eduardo Duarte’s 1996 definitive volume.

12. The expression is taken from Sarah Nuttall’s edited volume with this title.

13. My primary “day job” in Angola was as a project economist and technical editor for the Southern African Development Conference-SADC’s Energy Sector Technical Unit in Luanda, but my “night job” and many extraordinary days and weekends became interpretation. The distinction should be noted between translation (written documents and writings) and interpretation (in the moment of speech, whether consecutive or simultaneous). Mostly I did the latter, for more than a decade.

14. As is well-known, one of the impulses for the rebellion in Soweto and other black townships in the 1970s was the education policies encapsulated in “bantu education,” wherein the questions of language and by inference translation were key. The Dutch-derived language of the white minority in power (but also of millions of mixed-race South Africans) was imposed as the language of instruction for black South Africans, and in schools trans-regional African languages were “fossilized,” all to help attain the objective of educating blacks for a permanently inferior place in the South African economy. Today Afrikaans is being resignified, among others, by cultural workers and young blacks in the Western Cape.

15. For commentary on the dearth of Afro-Brazilian authors at the 2013 globally important Frankfurt Book Fair, see “140 tons de marrom e os ‘critérios técnicos’ da escolha de autores brasileiros, etc.” by blogger Rafaela Vipper, posted on October 6, 2013, at <http://correionago.ning.com/profiles/blogs/140-tons-de-marrom-e-os-crit-rios-t-cnicos-da-escolha-de-autores>. For a countervailing view, suggesting that the selection of a single black author from majority-black Brazil was a matter of literary criteria only, see <http://revistacult.uol.com.br/home/2013/10/“o-criterio-e-literario-e-a-literatura-inclui-questoes-sociais-e-nao-a-questiao-da-origem-do-autor”/>. Both accessed November 13, 2013.

16. In the after-discussion for the talk on which this article expands, one participant eloquently argued for more work on this notion in the Brazilian case, with its rich reconfiguration and reinvention, under duress, of differing African cultures resulting in new religions and a host of unique cultural expressions, as well as a foundational contribution to Brazilian language—a feat which scholarly emphasis on European/African hybridization and creolization in the Americas may in a sense elide. I am grateful to Anthony Bogues for reminding me that a similar argument was made by Sylvia Wynter in her notion of *indigenization* in the Caribbean.

17. The meaning-shifting of *sanzala or sanzala* from Angola (in kI-Mbundu, a village), to slavocratic Brazil (slave quarters) is a transition and translation story which must occlude a whole set of brutal encounters and constrained communications. When and where did the slave-owners first adopt the term from their bondspersons—on the Angolan coast, or in Brazil?

18. This latter was the title of a popular song in Luanda at the time, a biting critique of money-making, privilege-seeking expatriates from many quarters. Hence the use of the phrase by conference delegates was indeed “linguistically charged” and involved “verbal interplay.”

19. Quilombohoje, of course, is the Afro-Brazilian literary movement of collective resistance and creativity, which has for three decades produced the periodical *Cadernos Negros*.

20. I attempt no multivalent translation here of these words, but simply provide very rough univalents: rescue, redeem (resgate), gypsy, roma (cigana), Black woman, Negro woman (negra). African American literary theorist and philologist R. A. Judy and I have maintained for years a dialogue around the paradoxes and usefulness of that word, that distinctive ontological being, the Negro. It is a discussion that begs for a diasporic platform on translation and meanings.

21. In a private conversation, she also confided to Eduardo Duarte and me that she finds herself torn between the irresistible call to write creatively and the urgent need for more Afro-Brazilian theoriza-
tation of literature. This is the broader context, I believe, of her concern for finding a different set of intellectual resources to complement those of mainstream literary criticism.


24. A veritable explosion of Afro-Brazilian scholarship too prolific to cite here is mining the rich centuries-old cultural histories of the congadeiros and their kingdoms (reinos), among which is Leda Maria Martins’s pathbreaking work on what she calls “texts in movement” in the black reinos of Minas Gerais. The congados, Martins argues, “perennially reinscribe African letters on the Brazilian textual palimpsest” (41). For a vivid “lay” description of the congados that Evaristo would have witnessed in her Belo Horizonte childhood, see the website Favela e isso aí at <http://www.favelaeissoai.com.br/noticias.php?cod=81>, accessed November 13, 2013, which mentions, among others which coursed through the city’s favelas danced by “guards,” the group from the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary Appeared [Guarda de Congado Nossa Senhora do Rosário Aparecida], which adopted the sub-title “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

25. “Caboclo” is another polysemic, slippery Brazilian term, to which the univalent definition “Indian” can hardly do justice. See Carvalho and Carvalho for one of the best treatments of the contexts and history of the terms “Indian” and “Caboclo” in Brazil, suggestive as well for thinking about how to interpret the meanings of “Indian” in African American carnivals in New Orleans and parts of the Caribbean.

26. A recent sound image would be that of Big Chief Lambreaux from the HBO television series “Treme” seen and heard here <http://youtu.be/eu4gZs9C1i0> accessed May 6, 2014.

27. Sound-images from Gomes’s serious musical comedy can be found at the official trailer <http://youtu.be/KCh1u5LH9dA> accessed May 6, 2014.

28. For more on Dr. Reagon’s ideas and work, see her website at <http://www.bernicejohnsonreagon.com/>.


31. The expression is borrowed from an incisive, provocative article by AbdulMaliq Simone on Johan-

32. There was as well a more limited, later Heinemann Caribbean Writers Series, but I am unsure of its impact in comparison with the African one.

33. A fundamental sign-post towards this course of action was the publication, more than a decade ago, of a special issue of the journal Callaloo on the theme of Afro-Brazilian Literature, edited by Durham, Martins, and Peres.

WORKS CITED


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