



Programa de
Pós-graduação
em Educação (PPGE) | UNIVERSIDADE
FEDERAL DE ALAGOAS

ISSN - 2175-6600

Vol.17 | Número 39 | 2025

Submetido em: 19/09/2025

Aceito em: 05/12/2025

Publicado em: 19/12/2025

Black childhoods: “while one eye cries, the other watches the time”: Discussion circle with Conceição Evaristo

Infâncias negras: “enquanto um olho chora, o outro espia o tempo¹”: Roda de conversa com Conceição Evaristo

Infancias negras: “mientras un ojo llora, el otro espía el tiempo”: Rueda de conversación con Conceição Evaristo

Conceição Evaristo²

Cecília Maria Izidoro Pinto³

Fátima Lima⁴

Abraão de Oliveira Santos⁵

Jonê Carla Baião⁶

Luiza Oliveira⁷



<https://doi.org/10.28998/2175-6600.2025v17n39pe20400>

Abstract: Between words and shared memories, Conceição Evaristo and the *Escrevivência* Collective, composed of Black researchers, engage in a dialogue about Black childhoods, *escrevivência*, and ancestry. From the author's literary work and memories, reflections arise on pain, affection, racism, and inequalities that cross Black childhoods. At the same time, invention, care, orality, and resistance emerge as forces that affirm dignity, identity, and a collective future.

Keywords: Black childhoods. Escrevivência. Ancestry. Care. Resistance.

¹EVARISTO, Conceição. Ayoluwa, a alegria de nosso povo. In: EVARISTO, Conceição. *Olhos d'água*. Rio de Janeiro: Pallas: Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, 2016a. p. 111-114.

²Fluminense Federal University (*Universidade Federal Fluminense*). Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/9653059262448203>
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2069-7138>. Contact: contatoconceicaoevaristo@gmail.com

³Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (*Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*) - Campus Macaé. Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/6862054872351702> Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2433-2811>. Contact: cecilia.izidoro@gmail.com

⁴Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (*Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*). Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/1737594557449404> Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9449-2514>. Contact: fatimalima4@gmail.com

⁵Fluminense Federal University (*Universidade Federal Fluminense*). Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/2523009327795934>
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7741-3020>

⁶State University of Rio de Janeiro (*Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*). Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/1731117448608917>, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2885-5628> Contact: jonebaiao@gmail.com

⁷Fluminense Federal University (*Universidade Federal Fluminense*). Lattes <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3295799847648304>.
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2264-1258>. Contact: luizaoliveira@id.uff.br



Resumo: Entre palavras e memórias partilhadas, Conceição Evaristo e o Coletivo *Escrevivência*, formado por pesquisadores/as negros/as, dialogam sobre infâncias negras, escrevivência e ancestralidade. A partir da obra literária e das memórias da autora, emergem reflexões sobre dor, afeto, racismo e desigualdades que atravessam as infâncias negras. Ao mesmo tempo, evidenciam-se invenção, cuidado, oralidade e resistência como forças que afirmam dignidade, identidade e um futuro coletivo.

Palavras-chave: Infâncias negras. Escrevivência. Ancestralidade. Cuidado. Resistência.

Resumen: Entre palabras y memorias compartidas, Conceição Evaristo y el Colectivo *Escrevivência*, formado por investigadores/as negros/as, dialogan sobre infancias negras, *escrevivência* y ancestralidad. A partir de la obra literaria y de las memorias de la autora, surgen reflexiones sobre dolor, afecto, racismo y desigualdades que atraviesan las infancias negras. Al mismo tiempo, se evidencian la invención, el cuidado, la oralidad y la resistencia como fuerzas que afirman la dignidad, la identidad y un futuro colectivo.

Palabras clave: Infancias negras. Escrevivência. Ancestralidad. Cuidado. Resistencia.

ANTECHAMBER

Largo da Prainha, in Rio de Janeiro, pulses alive in Heitor dos Prazeres' Little Africa⁸. Territory of arrivals and departures, of meetings and resistances that traverse a time that refuses to age. Just a few steps away is the *Casa Escrevivência*⁹ rises as a place of memory, creation, and sharing, preserving and sowing stories that arise from Black life and that through it become word in verse and prose. It was in this setting, filled with a time that folds and spirals upon itself, that we met that afternoon.

The heat heightened our anxiety for the meeting. Each step that brought us closer carried the humid air rising from the stone ground, still wet from the summer rain. And those stones, bathed in ancestral memories and imprints of a yesterday that also becomes today, let small cascades flow along their rounded edges, descending through the streets until they accumulated on the steps at our feet. There, gathered, we were: Cecília Izidoro, nurse; Fátima Lima, anthropologist, both teachers at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (*Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro - UFRJ*); Jonê Baião, linguist and teacher at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (*Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro - UERJ*); and Luiza Oliveira, psychologist and teacher at the Fluminense Federal University (*Universidade Federal Fluminense - UFF*), together and sheltered from the rain by the balcony of the yellow

⁸Small Africa is the name given by Heitor dos Prazeres in the early decades of the 20th century to a region in the center of Rio de Janeiro that extended from the port area to Praça Onze, including areas such as Morro da Providência and Campo de Santana. The name sought to portray and celebrate the strong Afro-African presence in the territory, characterized by the population size and the density of African and Afro-Brazilian cultural practices. It has been marked by a strong African presence since the period of slavery and became home to both enslaved and freed people, becoming a territory of social and cultural resistance (Santos, 2022).

⁹*Casa Escrevivência* is a project conceived by the writer Conceição Evaristo, a cultural space inaugurated in 2023, located in the Saúde neighborhood, in Pequena África, to house her literary and artistic collection, and it functions as a local research library on Black literature.

townhouse. In front of us, we saw, descending at a calm pace and protected by a large colorful umbrella, our dear Conceição Evaristo, accompanied by Abrahão Santos, psychologist and teacher at UFF. We remained silent, not an empty silence, but one of pure complicity. It was a suspended moment, a scene we wanted to keep forever: The measured descent of Conceição, the colorful hat sheltering her under Abrahão's attentive gesture, and the water around, flowing down the stones like small waterfalls.

Ore Yèyé o! Eyeo Oxum¹⁰, Mother Oxum, we are your children made of water and gold.

The smell of rain hit the heated stone, the sun dared to play with its drops, and everything complemented the luminous presence of Conceição Evaristo. We stayed there, admiring and waiting for the moment of our meeting, like children preparing for a party. The rest of that day was made of meetings, smiles, more knowing glances, promises, and projects. Sitting at a bar table, we nibbled on something, sipped on something else, in the rhythm of a good and hopeful conversation; in it, past, present, and future intertwine, nurturing memories and dreams, a spiraling time, as Leda Maria Martins (2021) reminds us. If history does not deceive us, that place was an old Zungu house (*Casa Zungu*)¹¹, where Black people gathered to devise ways to survive and resist the hardships of slavery.

This thought passed through us as we climbed the narrow wooden stairs of the bar, happy to be part of this collective gesture. We realized that “*escrevivência*” was our zungu, nourishing our soul with the promise of continuity, in the act of resistance, and in the motivation of the encounter that was yesterday and now, sitting at the table with Conceição Evaristo. “*Escrevivência*” presented itself there as a wager: On life, on memory, and on the collective power of our stories. This time must be preserved like water among the stones. The five of us: Luiza Oliveira, Jonê Baião, Cecília Izidoro, Fátima Lima, and Abrahão Santos, dared to meet for a sharing session with Conceição Evaristo to reflect on Black childhoods. This period of Black life, often marked by inequalities and violence, also calls for invention, memory, and creative capacities. These childhoods leap across the lines of her work; we encounter them in the pages of *Ponciá Vicêncio* (Evaristo, 2017e), in the stories of *Olhos d'água* (Evaristo, 2016e), in the textures of *Becos da memória* (Evaristo, 2017a). Our own

¹⁰“Ore yèyé o eyeo Oxum” is a greeting to the Yoruba orixá Oxum, of fresh waters, love, beauty, motherhood, and fertility. The greeting can be understood as “Let us call upon the mother's benevolence.” According to the ethnologist Pierre Verger, it is a request for the orixá to bring her grace and blessings (Santos, 2012).

¹¹The term zungu refers to quilombo houses, spaces of black sociability and resistance in colonial Rio de Janeiro, especially in the port area, places where gatherings, drumming sessions, and the trade of food prepared mainly by enslaved or freed African women took place, preserving and transmitting Afro-Brazilian knowledge and flavors (Ramos, 2022).



childhood write-lives as well. The ones we come across in our work, in care, in teaching, and in coexistence that reveal entire worlds to us. It was there that the collective write-life was born!

After a period of intense work with Conceição Evaristo, the distance prevented us from being side by side, but technology opened up space with her. We then met in a virtual room, driven by the desire to learn, to listen, to dialogue. It was not just an interview (as we already suspected it would not be). It was a series of questions that emerged cautiously and carefully. All in a raw state to be polished by Conceição Evaristo. How do black childhoods traverse her work? What threads intertwine, between novels and short stories, these childhoods in her writings? For you, Conceição, do children have memory?

It was the “*escrevivência*” that sustained and guided this moment. Never could the concept have been more collective. The fear of distance gradually faded. Honestly, deep down, we knew that our questions carried with them our stories of Black childhood. And she, wise and generous, answered while holding her face with her hands, staring at the screen almost as if coming to meet us, and she seemed at the same time a girl, a woman, a teacher, a mother, and always the guardian of the memories of so many Black lives. This “*meeting-escrevivência*” revealed to us its infinite possibilities of being a method, care, and collective experience. It showed us that, even through screens, it is possible to sow life, courage, and the sharing of good stories. As Conceição Evaristo reminds us, literature can go beyond science in the task of explaining and exemplifying life, and that is exactly what we experienced: literature becoming a path of understanding, memory, and the future of Black childhoods.

We hope that the reader, just as we experienced, will live through all the emotion of sharing with this *yalodê* (as characterized by Jurema Werneck)¹² the feeling we had in this meeting-interview-writing session, something that will never escape our memories. Just like the rainwaters rushing swiftly and cunningly over the stones of the Pequena África hill. In this way, the original scene transformed us into Ayoluwa and Fátima Lima, with Afro-diasporic precision, suggesting the title of our discussion circle from the passage “but Ayoluwa, joy of our people, and her mother, Bamidele, the hope, continue to ferment our daily bread. And when pain comes to touch us, while one eye cries, the other spies [...]” (Evaristo, 2016a, p. 114).

¹²According to Jurema Werneck (2010), at the beginning of the 20th century in Bahia, the term “*ialodê*” was used as an attribute of an important “*ialorixá*”, known as “*Mãe Senhora*”. Today, the Brazilian Black women’s movement uses it to name organizations and attributes of leadership and representation, highlighting the capacity of Black women to act in the struggle for political participation.

Erê Oni kissed!

Escrevivência Collective: Conceição, from what we know of your works and interventions, perhaps this is the first time you will speak and publish about Black childhoods. Do you recall anything in this regard, an article, an interview, in short?

Conceição Evaristo: Really, I have never had any conversation or study that considered childhood in my texts. Since they are questions or reflections based on the characters, I think I run the risk of being too tied to the character, which is good for those who have read the text, but not for those who haven't, because I might be making comments or observations that people are unaware of. But if we consider that the characters in the text are representative of children, notably poor and Black children, then childhood is always also conflictual. It is always questioning. It is not a fulfilled childhood. I think a childhood that is so hurt, so complicated, so without a place, like the adults themselves, does not appear as a praise of childhood.

Escrevivência Collective: Even though this childhood is conflicted as you describe, it is noticeable, throughout her works, the presence of children and Black childhoods coming from a timeless, spiral dimension that moves between pain, vigilance as an act of care, and a certain hope, so to speak. This is evident in her short stories, novels, and poems. In "Poemas da Recordação e Outros Movimentos" (2017d), we find the beautiful poem "Vozes-mulheres" which, among many other verses, says: "In my daughter's voice, the resonance will be heard" (Evaristo, 2017f, p. 25). In the poem "A noite não adormece nos olhos das mulheres," amid the eyes of females and women: "The night does not fall asleep in the eyes of women, open vaginas retain and expel life from which Ainás, Nzingas, Ngambeles, and other moon-girls drive away from them and us our chalices of tears" (Evaristo, 2017c, pp. 26-27). Also included is the painful yet beautiful poem "Estrelas desérticas," which tells us:

And then, almost happy, the great ones sing their victories: While these boys dance, desert stars, while they dance, their feet trample the indigo earth of joy. And all the corpses of the past and even those of the present join in the forgotten celebration. And of their future, desert stars, we take care of ourselves: bring more bass drums, more bass drums, more tombs... (Evaristo, 2017b, p. 54-55).

From this spiral and plural movement, how would you express the presence of Black childhoods in your reflections and works?

Conceição Evaristo: I believe that there is no way to aim for a literary text from reality, from the condition of being a Black woman, without bringing that childhood. My entire life experience is marked even by the fact that I was a teacher from first to fourth grade. My entire professional career put me in front of children. Education puts us in front of children. That is to say, education is a way to reflect on childhood.

Escrevivência Collective: I was just going to add to this issue a discussion about a plural childhood, about childhoods. Because when we think about Zaíta¹³ (Evaristo, 2016f) and when we think of “*Canção para ninar menino grande*,” the boy Fio Jasmim (Evaristo, 2022)¹⁴. When we hear Fio Jasmim talking about his childhood, it's in one way, Zaíta in another, and so many others that you bring up. So, I think it's interesting not to rigidly confine this childhood to a single perspective. It exists in different spaces, different constructions of what family is, of what the relationship with the mother is like, and even the presence or absence of fatherhood. So, I think it's important to highlight that we speak of childhoods and not of a single childhood.

Conceição Evaristo: Uh-uh!

Escrevivência Collective: If we think about childhoods in the way they are usually presented. I always approach childhood in your work with a meaning that is found in African philosophies, in Black ways of life, which - how can I put it? - weave our lives, which is ancestry and time, not a linear time, you know? There is a way of constructing life that goes through this stitching together of childhoods. So, for us, it made perfect sense when you said that it is not a construction of a sense of childhood in your work. We are all, in academia, caught up in various notions of childhood that do not reach Black lives. For us, it made a lot of sense. Psychology is one of the places that organizes various concepts of childhood, isn't it?

¹³Character from the story “*Zaíta esqueceu de guardar os brinquedos*” (Evaristo, 2016e).

¹⁴Fio Jasmim, the protagonist of the soap opera “*Canção para ninar menino grande*,” is a train engineer's assistant married to Pérola, who lives amid travels and romantic conquests in every city (Evaristo, 2022).

Conceição Evaristo: If we were to listen to Maria Nova¹⁵ (Evaristo, 2017a), if I were to listen “Di lixão” (Evaristo, 2016b)¹⁶, if we were to listen to the girl with watery eyes, they would be different children, very different. Their life experiences would be different. Now, what stands out? Or if we were to listen to Fio Jasmim and the reminiscences he brings from childhood, what stands out? I think there is a common mark: they are Black children and they are poor children who also come from another experience, experiencing education in a different way. I think these are other concepts, other educational practices.

Escrevivência Collective: Certainly. Earlier, Conceição, you told us that “there is no way you can intend a literary text from reality, from the condition of being a Black woman, without bringing in that childhood.” So we would like to know a little more about the relationship between Black childhoods and Black women, who are the backbone of your work, and their relationship with racial and reproductive justice?

Conceição Evaristo: I think that, in the case of this experience, also as a Black woman situated in a space of poverty, I belong to a generation in which women had many children. Black women, poor women had many children. And what I think these children represented: they came not only from the impossibility and ignorance, for example, of birth control practices. It wasn't just that. Sometimes, in my contact with the school, there on the São Carlos hill, especially where I worked the longest, I don't know if, at that moment, the fact that women had so many children wasn't also a mechanism of resistance. It's like... without having a premeditated speech, but I don't know, for example, if since that time women were already losing their children either to the police, to poverty, or to war among themselves as well. So, wouldn't it be a kind of, I don't know, prevention, thinking that these children or that the community would have to survive in any way? And having children couldn't be a way of conservation? And then I would even say, in blunt language, conservation of the species. I don't know if you understand?

Escrevivência Collective: Conceição, we are following your reasoning and we very much agree with what you are saying, when you make that connection with the survival of the

¹⁵Maria Nova is the central character of “Becos da memória” (Evaristo, 2017). A black girl, orphaned of her father and raised by her mother and the community, she symbolizes a childhood marked by poverty, violence, and racism, but also filled with imagination and sensitivity.

¹⁶Character from the eponymous tale, he is a boy who lives on the streets, without family emotional bonds (Evaristo, 2016e).



community, when you make that connection with a kind of “what’s left for us, right?” At a certain point, what’s left for us seems to be to survive. So, in this case, you, by bringing in the women, are also bringing in a bit of this, the resistance. What’s left for us at a certain point is this almost physical, almost biological resistance, isn’t it? That is of a very impressive power, very painful indeed.

Conceição Evaristo: So, in this sense, when white, wealthy, middle-class women construct the discourse of “I own my body,” “I am the one who decides about pregnancy,” I always find myself wondering if you can think about the child independently of motherhood, because thinking about the child also involves thinking about the conditions in which this child, the conditions in which the woman giving birth to these children, or the conditions in which these children were born. What condition were these children born in? And then, in this discourse of birth control, which I think is a bit dangerous or doesn’t make sense, perhaps for Black and poor women, this discourse of abortion liberation - where does this discourse come from? Because a middle-class woman, when she has a very vehement but coherent discourse with her living conditions, when she advocates being the owner of her own body, when she states that motherhood is a choice for her, then having this child is also a choice. I keep thinking about whether women from lower-class backgrounds, when they express their opinions or when they want to have an abortion, are not simply thinking about a material difficulty - it’s one more child for me to raise, one more mouth to educate. I don’t know if these women are making this discourse of “this body is mine! I am in charge, I decide whether I will carry this pregnancy to term,” because perhaps for these poor women there is no choice. Either I take some kind of herbal tea, or I insert something into myself, or I have this abortion one way or another. I don’t know if behind this there is the discourse that “this body is mine,” that motherhood is a choice just as abortion is a choice. And then if we consider all of this, it is also another perspective from which to think about the child. I think it is also another perspective for us to consider how and under what conditions this child will live.

Escrevivência Collective: In this movement, her book “*Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*” (Evaristo, 2023) comes to mind, a singular and striking book. In this work, we glide through the stories of thirteen women. What draws our attention in this work is the role these women assume as protagonists of their own pains and lives and how they can share violent and painful stories with the narrator from another perspective. But it also draws our attention that “*Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*” were and are “*Insubmissas lágrimas de crianças*,”



whether through the daughters and sons of the characters, as exemplified by the girl Seni in “*Shirley Paixão*”¹⁷, whether in the meeting between the child protagonist and her daughter - the child Isaltina Campo Belo and her daughter Valquíria¹⁸ -, whether in the stolen girl, in the stolen childhood of Maria Imaculada da Conceição¹⁹. Finally, we felt a bit of that sensation rereading “*Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*” and we ask you, Conceição: can we think that “*Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*” can also be the insubmissive tears of Black girls and boys?

Conceição Evaristo: [...] What I would say is that what contaminates, or the situation in which Black women, in which these Black houses, these Black families, the situation they are in, the children do not come out unscathed from this situation. I think there is a very heavy burden on them. If I look back at “*Zaíta esqueceu de guardar os brinquedos*,” it is a childhood in which the girl is, in a way, innocent before the world. So much so that she goes out and becomes a victim of a shooting, she goes out to play and becomes a victim of a shooting. When you think of “*Di Lixão*,” it is also the boy who is already on the street. He is embittered by a situation of having no living conditions. And then, if you go back to “*Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*”, that girl who is kidnapped... What consequence does this person experience? I don't know if you remember that she doesn't want to have a family, she doesn't want to have children. I think all these children live in adverse situations. That's why I go back to this. These are childhoods in which one cannot sing an ode or give praise. I think they represent childhoods where the loss of innocence in the face of the world happens very early. These are childhoods that are also living on a thin line between being able to be, being able to grow, and life-threatening situations. Either because of poverty or because the parents are unable to take responsibility, which is the case of “*Di Lixão*,” who even has resentment towards her mother. So these are childhoods truly lived even while playing. If you go to “*Olhos d'Água*,” there is a childhood, and you realize that there are girls who are full of affection but also full of poverty. When the girl from “*Olhos d'Água*”

¹⁷The short story “*Shirley Paixão*” tells the story of Shirley's family, a mother of five daughters, including Seni, who seemingly lived as an ordinary family until Seni's behavior started to draw attention at school. The narrative reveals Seni's abuse by her father, showing the impact of the violence on the family's life and explaining the silence and pain experienced by the girl.

¹⁸The story narrates the journey of Isaltina, who from childhood feels out of place in her family, facing difficulties in living her gender identity. Throughout her life, she works as a nurse and experiences sexual abuse that results in pregnancy, and she lovingly raises her daughter Valquíria.

¹⁹Maria do Rosário Imaculada dos Santos, still a child, was kidnapped by a couple while playing with her siblings in front of her house. Her older brother was left in the middle of the road, but she was taken away and began living with strangers, far from her family. She grew up in other people's homes, treated only as a “girl.”

understands that her mother, when doing all those games, was trying to distract from hunger, and the 8-year-old girl says: "I was very young, but I understood this." So, even when there is a situation of affection, it is a childhood that lives on this line of vulnerability, one way or another.

Escrevivência Collective: So, are the tears of women and children also insubmissive?

Conceição Evaristo: Ah, yes, they are! They are unruly because, despite everything, these children survive. Despite everything, these children grow up. Despite everything, they defy everything that would prevent them from being. And then I want to return to "*Becos da memória*" and the character Maria Nova. She, still very much a girl, discovers what she wants to be. So, there is also this childhood that is lived in dreams, in desire. I don't know if you remember that in "*Becos da memória*" there is a boy who is a friend of Maria Nova. He doesn't like school; he drops out because it has nothing to offer. And Maria Nova only likes school at snack time.

Escrevivência Collective: That opens up another debate, right? What does the school do with these childhoods, how does the school embrace a childhood so lacking in everything?

Conceição Evaristo: That's it, that's it, that's it.

Escrevivência Collective: And so many other needs that the school cannot meet; it's not just about food, it's much more.

Conceição Evaristo: It's because, if it is a school, it is an educational system that does not recognize the child in their dignity, this school can offer everything, right? And then I want to go back to "*Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres*," when there is that girl, that character who later will become a dancer or will dance ballet, she also does not receive that support at school, that recognition of her own aptitude for dance. And Fio Jasmim admires his father. It is also a childhood, a childhood, a youth in which he is raised within a sexist perspective in which he ends up being much more influenced by his father than by his mother. I think there is also this [idea of] how this Black man exercises fatherhood.

Escrevivência Collective: In the absence?

Conceição Evaristo: It's interesting because sometimes it's his absence, but that absence is noticeable. Even this distant father... It's something I observed during the years I taught, and it caught my attention a lot. If you take an 8 or 9-year-old child on the hill of São Carlos²⁰, which was where I worked at the time, and it takes an 8, 9-year-old child from the South Zone, notably a rich girl, a rich child, a child who does not go through any financial difficulty. Guys, even the face expression of these children is different. If you look closely at the boys in the South Zone or in these gated communities - I'm thinking now about the extreme - they have a childish look that a poorer child doesn't have. I think maybe the poor child, I think he has a loss of innocence. And when I'm talking about innocence, of course I'm not having sex or anything, no, you know? But I think she may have a perception. I don't know if I'm exaggerating.

Escrevivência Collective: of subsistence.

Conceição Evaristo: It is perhaps about survival, perhaps about danger. And it is not the danger of life, no! It is the danger of not living.

Escrevivência Collective: And this pain runs through the lives of mothers, of grandmothers. It is a historical pain. It is historical, it also belongs to the community, to the environment where one lives; this only exacerbates it. So it is also a rebellious tear of these children. It will manifest through silence, through the body, through the gaze. And what a pity that the curriculum claims to be universal, and then we think of a school and a BNCC curriculum (National Common Curricular Base) as if it would work in such a way that an 8-year-old child, in the second or third year of schooling, would have to look at writing, for example, in the same way, or at mathematics in the same way, right?

Conceição Evaristo: Yes.

²⁰The Morro de São Carlos, considered one of the oldest slums in Rio de Janeiro, was settled starting in the early 20th century, following the subdivision of the lands of the former Santos Rodrigues family farm, near the mangrove of what is now Praça Onze. Originally called Morro de Santos Rodrigues, due to the chapel located where the Capela de Santo Antônio de Pádua now stands, it became known by the name of Rua São Carlos, which runs through the community along its length. In the early 20th century, it became a center of citizen of the city of Rio de Janeiro bohemian life, where the city's first samba school, *Deixa Falar*, was founded by Ismael Silva (Morro [...], 2025).

Escrevivência Collective: For example, it is not a simple gesture of a child calling the teacher “aunt.” The child who calls the teacher “aunt” is a Black child, and she is reprimanded as if it were an inappropriate gesture, an illegal gesture, an indecent gesture. It cannot be tolerated. The school cannot tolerate it, right? The teacher is informed that this practice is abusive. This is a Black child.

Conceição Evaristo: Vanda Ferreira,²¹ a long time ago, someone raised the issue that the “auntie” figure that appears in schools was not implemented by the middle class. Vanda believes that this “auntie” originates in the communities, in the habit of children and young people calling older women “auntie.” And then this spreads to the middle class, to the point that when a child, for example a Black child, also arrives at a school and has to identify with the teacher and call the teacher “auntie,” it feels a bit strange. And the teacher also doesn’t feel, how should I put it? She doesn’t feel comfortable. So, perhaps the everyday practices of poorer communities or communities influenced by African cultures, these everyday forms of address, end up also clashing when they arrive at school, you see? I remember once, it’s no longer about childhood, I was in Minas Gerais, so, indigenous students there at UFMG - Federal University of Minas Gerais (*Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais*), at that moment, they said the following: “It’s all right, we come here to the university to learn the knowledge of the whites, but to what extent will our knowledge also be incorporated into the curriculum, to what extent will our knowledge be naturalized as epistemology within academic curriculum?” So, Vanda precisely raised this point. This “aunt” may have arrived at school through the practices of communities marked by Afro-Brazilian cultures calling the elders “aunt.” I also agree with that.

Escrevivência Collective: We see within the *terreiros* and African traditions, in language as a whole, in the meaning of ancestry, and in a hierarchical family organizational structure led by the elder, the role of the elder as the one who cares. So it becomes almost obvious that a child would call someone “aunt.” It is an intrinsic aspect of one of the cultures, like Angola, right? Anyway. So, of course, this is going to be present in schools in a significant way, because children have been taught this, an element that we are discussing about childhood, communities, and our right to ancestry. I think this places us, at this very specific

²¹Vanda Maria de Souza Ferreira has been a reference in the black movements of Rio de Janeiro for over 50 years and received the Chiquinha Gonzaga Medal from the City Council, by the initiative of councilwoman Thais Ferreira (PSOL). An activist since the 1980s, she worked alongside Brizola and Abdias do Nascimento, coordinated the Zumbi dos Palmares Project of the Rio de Janeiro Municipal Education Department, worked in the prison system, and held various public positions.

moment, in a kind of obligation or condition to publish this, because it is an obstacle within the school, this tendency of schools to erase or suppress childhood. I think we need to combat that. There are battles over curriculum, etc. It would be interesting if we could publish this, bringing this other dynamic from this word “aunt.” So, here the ancestry is retained, here the power of the community is retained, right?

Conceição Evaristo: Yeah, it's interesting.

Escrevivência Collective: How white knowledge was producing the child, the childhood at home, and the childhood on the street. No, childhood only has that name if it belongs to the home; street childhood is the abandoned minor, it is always the one on the outside... it is always seen from a social, economic perspective, right?

Conceição Evaristo: The abandoned minor.

Escrevivência Collective: This debate expands the field of reflection, and we question how Black childhoods are represented throughout the work “*Olhos d’água*.” The constant presence of racial violence on the bodies and subjectivities of Black girls and boys weaves several stories with painful threads, even from the very womb, as in “Ana Davenga”²². It is impossible not to be moved by the stories of the girl Zaíta and “Di lixão” and not be tormented by the boy Lumbiá: “The sign! The car! Lumbiá! Kid! Child! Erê, Baby Jesus. Crushed, battered, broken! Baby God, Lumbiá is dead!” (Evaristo, 2016d, p. 86). Not always did “We agree not to die” (Evaristo, 2016c) favor life. However, in the last story of “*Olhos d’água*,” “Ayoluwa, the joy of our people,” we are restored to a sense of hope, and the story ends with the following sentence: “[...] while one eye cries, the other watches the time [...]” (Evaristo, 2016a, p. 114)²³. Conceição Evaristo, how do you see the relationship of a necro-childhood that crosses the lives of some characters, stitched together by the threads that give birth to new lives?

²²Ana Davenga, the character from the eponymous short story in “*Olhos d’água*” (2016), by Conceição Evaristo, is a Black woman from the periphery, whose identity merges with that of her partner involved in a crime, from whom she adopts the name. Pregnant with Davenga's child, Ana's life is marked by police brutality.

²³The short story “*A gente combinamos de não morrer*” narrates the violent daily life of a slum, seen through the eyes of Dorvi, his wife Bica, and Dona Esterlinda, Bica's mother. The narrative alternates their voices to show different perspectives on Dorvi's life, who has a survival pact with his friends.



Conceição Evaristo: When we talk about a necro-childhood that starts from the womb, I think we can go back to Natalina: how many children did Natalina have? I don't know if you remember this story from “*Olhos d'água*,” she is a surrogate, then she gives the child to someone, I don't know to whom, then the only child Natalina acknowledges is precisely the one who is a victim of rape. And also Ana Davenga's pregnancy, which she cannot carry to term. So we think that necro-childhood also goes against what I was saying before: To what extent can a poor black woman decide to have a child? What are the obstacles? It's not the discourse that this body is mine, I do whatever I want with it. It is probably not that. So, I think it is also worth considering, when we think about childhood, we should also think about the material conditions in which this childhood or this pregnancy of a Black woman will take place. And then, when we go back again and talk about ancestry, there it is, it is the country where education will only recognize practices deriving from white wisdom. We can also go far when Sueli Carneiro talks about epistemicide²⁴. We can also think about how the Black child is a victim, and how they are seen - what is the imagery around this Black child? At the end of the story, they are seen as a street kid. So, a Black child has the dignity of both Christ and Baby Jesus. That's why I make these mixes; I think it helps us reflect on what Brazilian society's view is of a Black child and of a poor child. How, with what imagery, is the Black boy perceived? Is the Black boy always a street kid? Is he always dangerous? This necropolitics happens from the impossibility of a Black woman choosing whether she wants to have one child or ten children, and also exists in the imagery conceived for these children. Is supporting a childhood enabling that boy to learn to play the drum? So bring me more drums, more drums.

Escrevivência Collective: Incredible. When reading your novels and short story collections, such as “*Ponciá (Vicêncio)*” and “*Olhos d'água*,” we consider that you depict, in the relationship between mother and daughter, a certain type of existential intimacy. You reveal a mother who sees her daughter beyond the psychological and subjective dimension. This is evident when Ponciá recounts what happened in the cornfield, and the mother orders the plantation to be cut down, and then the secret permeates the writing of the story. In “*Olhos d'água*,” you make explicit the process of care, teaching, and closeness between mother and daughter, affirming the intergenerational existence of the working Black mother, for example, in the passage where the daughter combs her mother's hair. In these two

²⁴According to Sueli Carneiro (2023), epistemicide is a process of destroying the knowledge, cultures, and rationalities of Black populations, especially in the Brazilian context.

literary situations, childhood appears as an agent of the world, creative, capable of activating secrets, mysteries, and enchantments that constitute the world. Conceição, does this reflection hold? Does your writing convey this type of occurrence? I would like you to talk about that childhood that intervenes, that takes action and is capable not only of participating and being aware of its surroundings, of the values at play, but also of creating meaning and bringing values to the world.

Conceição Evaristo: I agree. And also, drawing from African cultures, it is said that the elderly are respected for being the person who brings experience and has stories and memories to share. It is the opposite of the death of the narrator, as noted by Walter Benjamin. At the same time that the elderly are revered, so are children. Because I would say that children enhance the life of the elderly and strengthen the life of the community. I believe this is not only in the sense that the child is the future, but in the sense that the child is the present. The child is what, in a way, also allows the individual and the community to cling to life. Imagine a community, and this is also present in the last story of “Ayoluwa, alegria do nosso povoado”²⁵, the non-birth of the child, everything was failing, right? Everything was failing, everything was ending. Including the midwives, those who had the gift of bringing the child into the world, they became useless. So, a society that has no children, or a society that does not take care of its childhood, or that takes care of this childhood in a wrong or incomplete way, that society dwindles. This dwindling is not something that only happens in the future, no. It's not because in ten years we will no longer have the world, it's because we are not experiencing life now. So, in this sense, Ayoluwa is born to empower the present, to empower the now. And the tale ends like this: “[...] she came not as a promise of salvation, but she also did not come to die on the cross” (Evaristo, 2016a, p. 114). So I am, without a shadow of a doubt, dialoguing with Christianity, in which salvation comes through suffering. No, salvation does not need to come through suffering. In this dialogue, in “Olhos d’água,” in the short story itself “Olhos d’água,” this meaning or this decoding of the world is established, which adults often cannot do, but children are able to decipher. Back in “Ponciá Vicêncio,” when she sees that tall, empty woman in the middle of the cornfield, the mother knows what the girl is seeing. And what does the mother do? She cuts down the cornfield so that the girl no longer sees it and no longer encounters this mystery. And Ponciá regrets that she never saw the woman again, because the cornfield

²⁵The story is actually called “Aylowua, a alegria do nosso povo.”

was gone. The mystery nourished Ponciá and disturbed the mother. So, perhaps children have this ability to place themselves in the world and to help us place ourselves in the world. I say this a lot based on the experience I have with Ainá. Yesterday I was reading something that I found interesting. At this moment, I am talking about a physical motherhood, truly. I didn't know that the circulation of blood through the umbilical cord, between the mother and the child in the mother's womb, leaves marks both from the mother on the child and from the child on the mother. Even years and years after the child is born, traces of the child's blood still circulate in the mother's blood. I didn't know this. So, given this possibility, we can move beyond this physical motherhood. It's even good that we move beyond this physical motherhood in order to think about the child, to think about the young person: Just as society marks the young person, the young person also leaves a mark on society. So much so that we have a youth that constantly questions this society. And she questions, many times, not even by simply asking about presence, when we see that it is not enough, when the educational system is not enough. It is a questioning that the youth themselves and the children themselves make based on the condition of existence. So, I think that childhood (and youth as well) is always demanding while at the same time proposing a need for change. I think that youth in itself and the child in itself indicate that things are in place, they are not in place. Childhood is as if it were a consciousness.

Escrevivência Collective: Speaking of mothers, a scene written by you, in which your mother, Dona Joana, on rainy days, would draw the sun, shows us how we learn from the elders a gesture that is updated daily by the younger ones, as you tell us when recounting the scene: "It was a solemn gesture, which always happened accompanied by the knowing glance and posture of my daughters, my sisters and I, all of us still girls" (Evaristo, 2020, p. 49). It is very common to think of ancestry as the encounter with the elders, but in this memory of your mother's encounter with you and your sisters as young girls, there is an importance of the younger ones in mediating lived experiences. Wanderson Flor do Nascimento (2020) says that ancestry is rooted in old age, but it welcomes and resides in childhood. This impacts us greatly not only in this scene but throughout her work - the sense of childhood that she affirms - because modern society invented the child as a being lacking something, a being lacking life experience. In Conceição Evaristo's work, are the children infused with memory?

Conceição Evaristo: There is a poem, it's a pity that it is by a man. We have nothing against men, not at all. But I avoid using epigraphs by men; I try to use more epigraphs by women.

However, there is a very beautiful text by Edmilson de Almeida Pereira, who is a poet from Minas Gerais. He will say that children created memory before they grew hair (Pereira, 2003)²⁶. So, I think this is a very specific experience. I had an experience of a lot of talking, a lot of thinking with my mother, with my aunt, and it was almost like an exchange of experiences as well. I also experience this a lot with Ainá. A way for children to position themselves in life without being passive in front of us. I think this possibility of exchange, not just exchange but real intervention, I think it also comes a lot from the fact that children from poor communities, very early on, take on roles within the household. I will always go back to my childhood, okay? And it is also, in a way, how I build my characters. I remember that my older sister, Maria Inês, who took care of me. I couldn't even say “mother,” I would confuse my older sister with my mother. I think that's it. And then we also grow up taking care, taking care of the house, taking care of younger siblings. So, the child is not a passive being. When they don't take care of the house, they are obliged to go out on the street to beg. They have the obligation to go there, to go out on the street to get something, to steal. They have the obligation to go out to gather things. And this is “Lumbiá,” who went out selling candy, sweets... What he wanted to sell was flowers. It is this active participation of children within the family. And this places the child very early as an active agent within a family, within a society. Then, if we go back to education, how many children stop studying because they barely finish the fourth grade and have to work. So it is not only the eldest, who is a source of life, who is a source of teaching, but the youngest too. The youngest is also an active protagonist, and this also allows their life experiences to be shared. I think this allows the eldest to stop and listen to the youngest as well. And, returning once again to education, of how many children do we hear these stories, they are the ones who will teach the older ones to read. I remember when I was a young girl, there was Mabral²⁷. I talked so much with my mother and my stepfather that he enrolled in Mabral, but he didn't finish it. So what is this? I think it's about taking the child out of this role of passivity, or also considering ancestry as a path, like a two-way path, isn't it? Without a doubt, the elder provides experience, but it can also be an exchange. If we think of this child also as someone who is even responsible for contributing materially at home, bringing in little money that nobody knows how (they manage to earn), this child also teaches. The life of this child also offers reflection; it also

²⁶Curiangu: “Silence came in / lightning. / The bones turned / to the world. / The family emerged in the / crimson forest. / They are small of hands / small, adults before their time. / The boys created / memory / before growing hair” (Pereira, 2003, p. 53).

²⁷Brazilian Literacy Movement (*Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização - Mabral*): A program of the Brazilian government during the military regime period, established by decree no. 62,455, of March 22nd, 1968. It lasted until 1985.

brings reflection to the community, to the elder. How many times do we see this: The younger influencing the older, even making the older change their thinking, right? Now, this is only possible if we think of ancestry as a dynamic time. Not just what is left behind; here we turn to Leda Maria Martins (2021) precisely to think about this spiral of time.

Escrevivência Collective: You have stated that the word, before being written, was heard. How have orality and listening to the elders shaped your way of writing, especially when dealing with childhoods? In your work, everyday life is interwoven with proverbs, prayers, and popular sayings. How do these elements help to construct a Black childhood marked by an ancestral tradition, but also by reinventions in the present?

Conceição Evaristo: Well, I don't know if this still happens today with Black families. It's very much what I learned, I would even say I learned in my childhood, in my youth, in my family. A thought with a phrase is a saying. That shaped me, this way of being in the world carefully and trying to be respectful of what surrounds me and believing that it's possible to navigate amidst all difficulties. All of this came from home, in a very natural way, in a natural speech. You would recount a fact, my mother, sometimes without commenting on the fact, would provide the response, and it would be a saying. So, what do I mean? This education is experienced according to the flow of life, according to the events. It is an education, at least for me, much more formative. Much more formative than school education.

At school, without a shadow of a doubt, the school has reading, and all of this it instilled in me, not correcting what I received at home, what I received from the practice of relationships with the elders, from the relationship with my mother, with my aunts, who gave me care to be at school and to be in certain places and to know what would be useful, what belonged to me or not, what is... So, first and foremost, it was this education, this contact with the elders, this exchange with the elders, that prepared me for the world, much more than having gone to school, much more than everything I learned outside of home. I think that what I learned at home, what I learned from the elders, from this exchange, was beneficial to me in the sense of also making me critical, a criticism regarding other spaces that I frequented. The first place a child normally attends is school, because it is unlikely that this child will go to a club, unlikely that they will go to a theater, unlikely that they will even leave the physical environment of the place they are from, where they live. I remember when I worked in Morro de São Carlos - look, Morro de São Carlos is over there. Many children had never even gone down to the subway. I think that today things may have changed, but there are many children, for example, who live in Nova Iguaçu, who have never come to the city center, or



who may even live right there in Ramos and have never come to the center. So school ends up being the first place that this child attends beyond their family environment. And it is this family environment that will prepare the child against the impacts that other environments may present. So, I reaffirm that it is a family experience, a community experience, a collectivized experience of the slum. I'm not saying that we didn't argue, that's not what I'm saying. For example, in the slum, when it was time to get water, there was an elderly lady who lived very close to the tap. She would take it and put it in a tin container. Carolina (Maria de Jesus) also lived this experience. It was a matter of the tin, and in line, in front of everyone. It was the comments at home that allowed me to understand that it was not fair. This woman needed water as much as any of us, but she was abusive, you know? She was selfish. So, it's one way. It was these experiences, first within the family, with the elders, that prepared me and threw me into the world.

Escrevivência Collective: Sometimes we catch ourselves, many times, repeating, don't we? This repetition comes automatically. It is a mark of orality that is in memory, that is in repetition, that is in daily practice. Soft water, hard stone, it strikes so much that it eventually pierces. Because you don't see this in your work, not in school, not in formalized knowledge. It comes from a tradition, from oralization, from an orality that enters the soul, as the poet used to say, right? In your work, Conceição, how do you see this thing about proverbs, about tradition, this very crossing of orality?

Conceição Evaristo: Actually, there is an aesthetic project. I don't do this innocently. There is an aesthetic project that I want to pursue, which is bringing orality into literature, into my writing. I want this to be the aesthetic mark in my text.

Escrevivência Collective: But there is another side to this issue that I have here, which is hip-hop, the profusion, the speed. It's not just what they do, the arrangement of these verses, but also memorizing a huge amount. This is a contrast of today. Youth, in black skin, will always seek a way to be distinct, and they succeed. And it's not just because they use it, you know? If you take some raps.

Conceição Evaristo: Yes, I agree. I think it's in these places where there is a practice, an oral practice, where these sayings are revisited in another way, but these are still the niches where everything survives, right?



Escrevivência Collective: Perfect, Conceição. What an stimulating round of conversation. As we move toward closing, let's broaden the discussion by bringing up an issue that spans the field of health care, the field of health education, and a process of medicalization of childhood that schools have been facing. In the tale “*Lia Gabriel*” (Evaristo, 2023),²⁸ We perceive the intensity of pain and loneliness when she says: “I have lived very much alone [...]” (Evaristo, 2023, p. 95) and reflects on the devastating impact of her son's diagnosis, the “[...] threat that loomed not only over Máximo, but over all of us [...]” (Evaristo, 2023, p. 96). We see the body that bleeds, that protects, that teaches, that repairs, that works and nurtures. A body marked by pain, but also by the power to sustain what science rejects. It is the care that is born at the limit, between trauma and affection, and that cannot be described in clinical records or formal prescriptions. Therefore, it is urgent to think about health, especially mental health, when care is still practiced within a Cartesian, white, and hygienist logic that does not recognize racism as a contributor to illness. This medicine that does not listen, does not see, that divides and labels people, bodies, and subjectivities. But I believe that there is a possible place of fissure: Nursing. A profession mostly composed of Black women, nursing carries a long tradition of ancestral, relational, and collective care. But only if it moves from the margins to the center of care. It is by thinking about us, Black women in nursing, and the idea that among us there is body, condition, and experience that connect us with women like *Lia Gabriel*, that I propose the following questions to you, Conceição Evaristo, because as you teach, “to write about what one has lived is also an act of healing and denunciation.” Conceição, in the short story *Lia Gabriel* (Evaristo, 2023), Black childhood is marked by pain, the memory of violence, and the silence that bleeds in abandonment. How do you think about health care when it comes to the bodies of Black children, often seen as a threat even before being heard? How do you see the possibility of a care practice that embraces narrative, memory, the body, and listening as therapeutic elements?

Conceição Evaristo: Right, *Lia Gabriel* is that story where the woman gets beaten in front of her child, isn't it? Just to make a parenthesis, this story is based on a real situation, something that happened with a friend of mine from Belo Horizonte. Today she, already an elderly lady, still lives with Alzheimer's, so all these memories, I think, she wouldn't even be able to read this story; if she could read it, she would recognize herself. But going back to

²⁸The short story “*Lia Gabriel*” talks about a Black woman facing domestic violence and other forms of oppression, as well as showing her struggle for fair treatment of her son diagnosed with schizophrenia.

the question, lately we've also been hearing a lot about humanized medicine, which considers the person in their entirety. When it comes to black populations, we know very well what it's like when you arrive at a clinic, when you take a child, and how the reception is, and the way it is handled in hospitals. I had some experiences with Ainá, and it is much easier to access the nurse or the nursing assistant than to access the doctor. When the doctor arrives at the consultation, that's it, it's over. It is the team that directly takes care of the child, that creates a bond and is there guiding other paths, showing what does not need to be done and what is most important, and even the doctor's negligence. So, I think the nurse takes care, and is always in that situation where, on one hand, she has to value or make the patient believe in what the doctor says, but on the other hand, she also wants to create a bond with the patient. I think that this intermediate position, held by healthcare personnel, is fundamental when considering humanized medicine; perhaps humanized medicine is already being practiced there. So, those who perhaps need to demonstrate the possibility of humanized medicine are the ones who have direct contact with the patient. I believe that the more people or healthcare professionals are aware of issues like racism and understand how racism can make people sick... maybe the first place to invest would be precisely in the intermediate professionals - would that be equivalent to mid-level staff, right? - Because, I don't know... the doctor, I'm not saying that doctors aren't necessary, but I believe that medical training, in this sense of humanized medicine, will always be more theoretical. And the training of those who provide care, really... it's interesting when you think about it, because Black women already have that experience.

There is a text by a French person (now I forgot his name...). He says exactly this, that black women or women from lower social classes have learned to take care of other people's bodies, they are always taking care of someone else's body, in the kitchen cooking, washing clothes, or providing care in the hospital. Therefore, I think it is a professional category that already has this experience of taking care of other people's bodies. And if they have this experience of taking care of other people's bodies and also have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of the issues that affect Brazilian society, I think the work can be even more rewarding. I believe they can also realize that the sick body is not only the body in the hospital. The sick body is Brazilian society, it is the doctor who is there, it is the director, it is the other people who are there without the slightest competence.

WHEN LEAVING, KEEP THE DOOR OPEN...

You can't end a conversation with Conceição Evaristo. She keeps guiding us with her words like a river that overflows, flows, refreshes, and gives us the feeling that it cannot be



contained in words alone. Conceição, when talking about Black childhoods, took us to a place of our own childhoods. Each question brought back memories, ancestry manifested in the mother-daughter relationship in her stories. In her sweet, attentive, golden-yellow speech. Children and the marks that racism imprints far too early on their bodies appeared in the form of stories, new routes, and possibilities of living in the world. Telling stories is her art, the literature of Black life, and in it, her own childhoods are included.

We realize that thinking about Black childhoods is not just about looking at a past marked by pain and exclusion, but above all about recognizing in them a force of invention, beauty, and the future. It was at that moment that we understood that we were experiencing “escrevivência” not just as a concept or a line of thought, but as a collective experience: In dialogue, in learning, in the recognition of our stories intertwined with hers (Conceição Evaristo's).

Like Oxum, lady of sweet waters and motherhood, Conceição offers us care, warmth, and beauty. Her word is a water mirror that flows and makes us reflect on our stories. She teaches us that loving is also an act of resistance. Oxum manifests in her gentle, firm, and generous speech and reminds us that love is also a way of existing, of protecting, of insisting on life.

And, at this table laid by her with abundance and care, we bet on the possibility of narrating to exist, writing to not forget, telling so that our children can see themselves and be proud. Thus, we keep this meeting as one keeps water between the stones - free, for we know that each word shared there continues to flow within us, nourishing new questions, new gestures, and new possibilities of existing in the world.

Conceição Evaristo: Everything survives! “While one eye cries, the other spies.”

Thank you, Conceição Evaristo!

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