

## **BRAIDING STORIES, SINGING MEMORIES: NARRATIVES AND DISPLACEMENTS OF A REFUGEE WOMAN**

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### Abstract

*Using ethnography and a research methodology developed for this research project, this article sets out to describe the trajectories of a female refugee and the relationship she has established with her new city of residence. Ruth was born in Angola, but grew up in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She is 35 years old and has lived in Rio de Janeiro since 2014. She has three children and works as an actress and singer. She reconnects to her roots and reinvents herself in the new territory through spending time with Congolese women in a market in Madureira and in an evangelical church in Brás de Pina. The methodology, using photos, drawings and objects, reveals the experiences of a Black refugee woman in the city where she has come to live. The article intends to reflect on the way these women have reinvented themselves based on the place of the frontier and how they have given different meanings to their identities in their new place.*

### Keywords

*Female Refugee; Identity Narratives; Culture; Territorialities; Research Methodology.*

## TRANÇAR HISTÓRIAS, CANTAR MEMÓRIAS: NARRATIVAS E DESLOCAMENTOS DE UMA MULHER EM SITUAÇÃO DE REFÚGIO

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### Resumo

*Por meio de uma etnografia e de uma metodologia desenvolvida para esta pesquisa, busco narrar a trajetória de uma mulher em situação de refúgio e a relação que ela estabelece com a nova cidade de morada. Ruth nasceu em Angola, mas cresceu na República Democrática do Congo (RDC). Tem 35 anos, mora no Rio de Janeiro desde 2014, é mãe de três filhos e trabalha como cantora e atriz. É no convívio com congolesas numa galeria em Madureira e numa igreja evangélica em Brás de Pina, bairro onde mora, que ela se reconecta a suas raízes e se reinventa no novo território. A metodologia proposta, usando fotos, desenhos e objetos, revela as experiências de uma mulher negra refugiada na cidade onde foi viver. Este artigo tem o objetivo, portanto, de refletir sobre o modo como mulheres em condição de refúgio se reinventam a partir do lugar de fronteira e como práticas sociais forjam identidades, territórios, espacialidades.*

### Palavras-chave

*Mulheres Refugiadas; Narrativas Identitárias; Cultura; Territorialidades; Metodologia de Pesquisa.*

# BRAIDING STORIES, SINGING MEMORIES: NARRATIVES AND DISPLACEMENTS OF A REFUGEE WOMAN<sup>1</sup>

Júlia Motta

## Introduction

I first became aware of the work of the Angolan actress and singer Ruth Victor Mariana, aged 35, in November of 2018, when I saw her acting in a play. On one of my visits to Cáritas/RJ, I had the opportunity of being introduced to her and I took her telephone number. After attempting to arrange meetings on four occasions, all which Ruth was obliged to call off, for several different reasons – ranging from needing to deal with the Federal Police to personal problems – I suggested that we should meet informally, and not for the purposes of an interview. Ruth liked the idea and the following day, invited me to go with her to the braiding salon where she would have her hair done, a monthly routine that she would never miss. I accepted right away. And thus, there then followed more than two years of research, based on difference, since my “place of speech” is that of a middle-class white woman. By listening attentively, my aim with this work is therefore to try and collaborate in order to resonate the voices of women living in refugee situations.

The methodology used in the research was participant observation. The semi-structured interviews yielded little and, with that, I developed a methodology to complement the ethnography, which I named “*Na makanisi na nga: my memories*”<sup>2</sup>. I proposed five tools to Ruth: i) to take five photos of her choice; i) to talk about five

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1. This article is the deployment of the author’s master’s thesis *Levo o chão de onde vim: narrativas de mulheres em situação de refúgio no Rio de Janeiro* [I carry the ground from where I came: narratives of refugee women in Rio de Janeiro], under the supervision of Dr. Adriana Facina, presented at the Postgraduate Program in Culture and Territorialities at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (PPCULT/UFF), in August 2020.

2. The expression *na makanisi na nga* is written in Lingala, one of the official languages of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and means “my memories”. The methodology proposal was created to access memories through artistic elements such as photographs, drawings, the use of objects and literature.

themes from the photos; iii) to use personal items to create a story and then explain the meaning of each; iv) to read a children's book together about a Congolese refugee girl in Rio de Janeiro and draw a picture of her; v) to write two letters: one to Ruth in the future, and another describing what may never be left out of her memory box.

It was me who suggested the order of the tools for “*Na makanisi na nga: my memories*”. The proposal was for Ruth to feel more comfortable in approaching themes that I considered important for the research. I started from a more general theme: understanding her relationship with the city where she lives and her perceptions about the culture and identity of the new country. For this, the resource used was photography. Subsequently, bringing me closer to her trajectory, selecting objects from Angola or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) became a bridge to her memories. Following on, with the memories of the place where she had come from, reading a book inspired by the experience of a refugee family served as a trigger for the drawings and for the projection letters of future dreams. In this article, I present just a few of the tools.

Literature by Black authors from different African countries which portrays diaspora was also used as a methodology throughout the dissertation research. For this article, only the work of the Rwandan writer Scholastique Mukasonga was used. In *A mulher de pés descalços* [The Barefoot Woman] (2017), the author narrates the experience of her family – which belonged to the Tutsi ethnic minority – living in a refugee camp in Rwanda, due to the persecution of members of the Hutu ethnic group. In 1994, the writer lost dozens of family members murdered during the genocide of 800,000 Rwandans.

Choosing literature as a resource is in line with one of the points raised by Conceição Evaristo (1996) with regard to Black literature and “*escrivivências*” [written narratives from the perspective of Black people]: the idea of the African diaspora as a traumatic event, which requires a re-existence, a relocation of this body, a re-signification, a reterritorialization.

The first survival exercise undertaken by the Africans deported to Brazil, as well as the entire diaspora, was perhaps to try and recompose the African cultural fabric that became unraveled along the pathways, collecting fragments, traces, vestiges, following footprints in an attempt to stitch back together, to compose a culture of exile reforming its identity as a naked emigrant. (EVARISTO, 2010, p. 1)<sup>3</sup>

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3. This and all non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the author.

For the theoretical foundation, I propose to reflect on issues of gender and frontier with Gloria Anzaldúa and in-between places with Homi Bhabha. I reflect on the concept of intersectionality with Carla Akotirene. I conduct a dialogue on the issue of blackness in Grada Kilomba and Frantz Fanon. I also propose a reinterpretation of the native *inzu* category based on the book *A mulher de pés descalços*, by the Rwandan, Scholastique Mukasonga, relating it to Beatriz Nascimento and Conceição Evaristo's idea of *quilombo*<sup>4</sup>, as well as to Milton Santos' concept of territory. Finally, I reflect on being a refugee in the city with Gabriela Leandro Pereira and Gabriela Matos.

### 1. The crossing

Ruth was born in Angola, in June 1986. An only child and, while still a baby, lived her first experience of forced exile. When war returned to her country<sup>5</sup>, her family were forced to flee quickly. They went to Kisangani, a province in DRC<sup>6</sup>, where, a few years later, they had to face yet another war. Ruth was fifteen at the time.

Her only uncle – her mother's brother – died in the war. Ruth became parted from her mother, who went to Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC. After six months, through an agency, her mother was able to send Ruth money so that she could go to join her. Part of the trip was undertaken by boat and the rest by plane. She took a cousin with her.

When the two arrived at the agreed location, there were around fifteen small boats moored to make the crossing. It was a complicated trip, which lasted a month and a half. The soldiers responsible for the journey by land and sea raped many girls and women. When arriving at the agreed location, the plane had already departed. They then decided to walk the rest of the way and hid in a forest in the DRC for five months, eating fruit and fish.

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4. The name given to the communities of Black slaves who managed escape from enslavement. These communities have a common historical trajectory of enslavement and collective resistance to the historical oppression they have suffered, with a particular community way of life and a specific sense of territorial belonging.

5. The Angolan Civil War lasted for nearly three decades, with brief periods of peace. It began when the country became independent from Portugal in 1975 and ended in 2002. PACHECO, F. *Política e cidadania: o estado da democracia. Caminhos para a cidadania e para a construção da democracia em Angola: obstáculos e avanços*. VII Congresso Luso-afro-brasileiro de Ciências Sociais, 2004, Coimbra. *Anais [...]*. Coimbra, Centro de Estudos Sociais, Faculdade de Economia, Universidade de Coimbra, 2004. Tema: A questão social no novo milênio. Available at: <https://www.ces.uc.pt/lab2004/pdfs/fpacheco.pdf>. Viewed on: July 31, 2020.

6. The Democratic Republic of Congo faced two civil wars, between 1996 and 2003. Kabengele Munanga, a Congolese anthropologist and professor at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP), has produced work on the subject.

Ruth narrates that, while walking through the forest, passing through several villages, people gave them food because she sang to them. Music has been present in her life since she was a child. It is in her blood. Ruth believes that it is through music that she is able to reconnect with her roots, to feel, in fact, at home.

Music is my life. When I'm singing, I mean even when I'm worried, even when crying, it's only when I'm in front of a microphone or out there singing, that I forget everything. It's automatic. I forget everything. I think being able to sing is a God-given gift. I love music. Wherever music speaks – that's where I am. If I go to a party, I enjoy the music. It could be someone else's music, it fills me with joy. For me, music is my home, my beach. Where do I feel calm, confident? In front of the microphone! Happy! I always transmit joy when I'm singing because that's what I like. (Ruth, Downtown, February 2019)<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1. Ruth's routes and displacements until arriving in Brazil

Source: Reproduced from Google (2020) with the routes applied by the author.

When they finally reached the Congolese capital, the war there was already over, but their mother had returned to Angola. Ruth then resumed her studies. She was able to finish high school in three years and entered university to study

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7. Throughout this article, I have chosen to keep the exact transcription of the speeches of the research interlocutor. Thus, I have tried to respect the ways of speaking in a hybrid, borderline language, which does not correspond to a correct or incorrect language, but rather to living language practices. In these transcripts, the place where the interlocutor expressed herself is always indicated, as well as the month and year.

Business Administration. However, her mother could no longer afford to keep her in the DRC, and Ruth had to return to Angola. There she was forced to give up her dream of studying to get married, at the age of nineteen. She had two children, and in 2014, eight months pregnant with the third child, she came to Brazil (Figure 1).

## 2. The art of doing, the art of recounting

We arranged to meet at 8:30 am, in front of the BRT Station close to Madureira Market, in the North Zone of Rio. From there, we went to the braiding salon at the market. Her appointment was set for 9:30 am and by the time we got to the market, most of the stalls were closed.

We entered one, which must have measured around four square meters, and which I thought, at that moment, was where she was going to have her hair done. There was just a small cupboard, a mirror, and a few stacked plastic stools and chairs. The floor was covered with a rug. One of the girls pulled up a chair and sat me down outside the stall. She and Ruth sat inside and started talking in a language that, until that moment, I had never heard before. During a break in the conversation of the two women, I asked Ruth which language they were speaking, and she told me it was Lingala.

In the DRC, the official language is French, but is considered the language of the colonizers. There are four other national languages: Lingala, Swahili, Kicongo, Tshiluba – and many others that add up to more than three hundred across the country. Speaking Lingala represents a way of life, creates a connection between them and enables them to communicate realities, feelings and values that are important for the Congolese community in Rio de Janeiro. As Gloria Anzaldúa (2009, p. 312) indicated: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity-I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.”<sup>8</sup>

Seated on a chair facing the mirror in the braiding salon at Madureira, Ruth pulled a tall wooden stool toward her. From inside her backpack she pulled out another smaller backpack, probably belonging to one of her children, since it had a superhero stamped all over it. From inside the smaller backpack, she began to pull out a tangle of slightly wavy, almost straight wisps of hair. Without my asking, she explained that it was real hair, and that that day she was going to put it on in order to have a straighter hairstyle with a fringe. The previous month she said she had had curly hair and that sometimes she also has braids.

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8. N.B. - For direct citations, the English version was used of ANZALDÚA G. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books. 1987, p.59.

Ruth picked up a plastic comb with fine teeth, pulled the scarf off her head, and began combing out her hair. After untangling her hair, she proceeded to comb the various tufts of hair she was going to have fixed. Gradually, other women arrived and opened their small braiding salons. All of them Congolese. All with very well arranged hairstyles, amid braids and wigs hanging from the walls. They performed the same ritual: pulling back the curtains that covered the spaces, most of them just a cloth held up with pegs, they swept the area and placed the benches and chairs side by side next to the mirror.

In this space, only Congolese women entered. Here was clearly their environment. They talked, laughed, sang, showed each other pictures on their cell phones of hair and hairstyles. Mothers arrived with small children, breastfed them, tied them onto their backs and went out to work. Those who were not having their hair done stood at the main door handing out flyers to attract new customers.

Ruth has a strong relationship with hair, a mark of Black identity, and being in this environment causes her to journey through her memories. Grada Kilomba (2019), in *Memórias da plantação* [Memories of the plantation], discusses how, historically, the hair of Black people has become devalorized, becoming a stigma of blackness, and used to justify the subordination of African women.

More than skin color, hair became the most visible stigma of Blackness during the enslavement period [...]. African hair was then classified as “bad hair”. [...] In this context, hair became the most important instrument of political consciousness among Africans and African Diasporic people. [...] They are politicized and shape Black women’s positions concerning ‘race’, gender and beauty. (KILOMBA, 2019, p. 127)<sup>9</sup>

Kilomba highlights how natural hair has become a strong identity icon, a symbol of belonging. She mentions how the hairstyle of one of her research interlocutors may be viewed as a political statement of racial consciousness through which she redefines dominant standards of beauty (KILOMBA, 2019, p. 127). The interdisciplinary writer and artist dialogues with Frantz Fanon (2008), who indicates the importance of taking possession of one’s own blackness.

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down

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9. N.B. - For direct citations, the English version was used of KILOMBA, G. *Plantation Memories – Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Toronto: Between the Lines. 2021, pp. 74-75. Kindle Edition.



by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else: “Sho’ good eatin’.” (FANON, 2008, p. 105-106)<sup>10</sup>

Tina was doing Ruth’s hair. The two conversed in Lingala. Sometimes Ruth would stop and say something to me. Other times, it was Tina who explained something. We included a conversation in Portuguese in which Ruth said she had advised a Brazilian friend to leave her husband because he no longer wanted to live with his mother-in-law. She asked me what I thought of the advice, but first explained: for us, the mother is the most important person in the family.

The question led me to the book *A mulher de pés descalços*. In it, Mukasonga (2017) explains why, for her mother, the construction of the *inzu* was fundamental for survival. Her mother would say that “[...] in the *inzu*, it’s not your eyes that guide you, it’s your heart.”<sup>11</sup> *Inzu* is a word in Kinyarwanda, one of the languages in Rwanda, which the author (2017) insisted on keeping in the original, since in French the translation carries pejorative meanings, such as shanty, shack, hovel.

Not long after we were moved to Gitagata, Stefania decided it was time to build an *inzu* behind the Tripolo house. An *inzu*: the kind of house that was as vital to her as a water to a fish, as oxygen to a human being. Not because she’d come to accept her fate as an exile – she never resigned herself to that – but because she knew it was only in the ancestral dwelling-place that she’d find the strength and courage she’d need to face our misfortunes, to replenish the energy she unstintingly expended to save her children from a death that an incomprehensible fate had planned out for them.<sup>12</sup>

The half-moon-shaped *inzu* was in the backyard, where Stefania lived her life as a woman and the mother of a family. It was there that she cooked, cultivated medicinal plants, where her daughters were bathed, where she received her friends, and where ancestral cults were also performed. More than this, the *inzu* is the very abode of the ancestors. “But of course, Stefania had no hope of building the massive enclosure I’ve just described. [...] It was as if, thanks to her house, Stefania had regained the status and powers that Rwandan tradition ascribes to a mother.” (MUKASONGA, 2017).<sup>13</sup>

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10. N.B. - For direct citations, the English version was used of FANON, F. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Grove Press, Inc. 1967, p.130. (Translated by Charles Lam Markmann).

11. N.B. - For direct citations, the English version was used of MUKASONGA, S. *The Barefoot Woman*. Paris: Steerforth Press. 2018, p.32. (Translated by Jordan Stump). Kindle Edition.

12. N.B. - For direct citations, the English version was used of MUKASONGA, S. (2018, p. 30)

13. N.B. - For direct citations, the English version was used of MUKASONGA, S. (2018, pp. 33 and 36).

For me, I was standing before an urban *inzu*, in a market in the heart of Rio's North Zone. It is here, in this place, that these Congolese refugee women find their space to make their exchanges in forced exile, just like Stefania. It is there where they feel at ease, where they do not have to adapt to the language of others, and where, for a while, they can forget that they are foreigners, and leave the margins. The *inzu* in Madureira is an in-between place (BHABHA, 1998) where they can move away from the border, the frontier, and walk towards the center of their lives and towards living in a community. It would be the place of the *mestiza* that Anzaldúa (2005, p. 704) described, where one learns to live with ambiguities and to have a plural personality.

Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off all together as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.<sup>14</sup>

That market in the middle of Madureira became resignified. A place was created there of affection, memory and identity construction. A space for meetings and reencounters. The practices of these immigrants, the uses, the experiences, have reconfigured this territory. These Congolese women have experienced a process of deterritorialization from their country of origin and in this space, have found a place of reterritorialization in the new country, considering the dimension of the symbolic, of discursive production, of language practices.

According to the geographer Milton Santos, migrants need to find meaning in the new place they gone to live, since their memories are not there, in that space. Santos emphasizes that “the strength of this movement comes from the fact that, while memory is collective, forgetting and the consequent (re)discovery are individual, differentiated, enriching interpersonal relationships, communicative actions” (SANTOS, 2006, p. 224). For this author from the Brazilian state of Bahia,

The new environment operates as a kind of detonator. Its relationship with the new resident is dialectically manifested as new territoriality and new culture, which interfere reciprocally, changing territoriality and culture in parallel; and changing man. When this synthesis is perceived, the alienation process gives way to a process of integration and understanding, and the individual recovers the part of his being that seemed to be lost. (SANTOS, 2006, p. 223)

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14. N.B. - For direct citations, the English version was used of ANZALDÚA, G (1987, p. 79).

Seeing Tina's ease with needles, I asked if she sewed too and she said no, although her hands slipped easily between three large needles through Ruth's hair. She said she had learned to make braids from her mother when she was very young, to which Ruth added: "You need to see her daughter. Every day her hair is more beautiful than the last" (Ruth, Madureira, January 2019).

### 2.1 Inzu and becoming quilombolized

In *Literatura negra: uma poética de nossa afro-brasilidade*, [Black Literature: the poetics of our Afro-Brazilianness] (1996), Conceição Evaristo indicates that writing – writing about experiences (*escrivivências*) through the memory of the skin – is to welcome the Black body through the poetry of words, in which writing about the body denounces racism and, on the other hand, reverberates with ethnic pride. She states (1996, p. 86):

The black body, has, for centuries, been violated in its physical integrity, its individual and social space interdicted by the system of slavery from the past and still today by segregation policies that exist in all, or if not, almost all countries where the African diaspora may be found, it has therefore been up to the descendants of African peoples, spread around the world, to invent forms of resistance.

Evaristo (2010) suggests, through a metaphor-concept, that Black literature is also a place of resistance. She associates Black literature with a form of quilombo, and based on this it is possible to open a dialogue with the narrative of Mukasonga.

The black body will receive manumission by the poetry of words that seeks to imprint and create other reminders of the scars from the whip lashes or of the initials of the colonists-owners of a slave body. The literary word as a rubric-ornament appears as an assumption of the Black body. And like keloids – tribal symbolizers – still present on some of the faces – African or as lines scratched on the shoulders of many Afro-Brazilians – indicators of craftsmanship in *Orixás* – Black texts update signs-memories that inscribe the Black body in a specific culture. (EVARISTO, 2010, p. 3)

For Evaristo, the quilombo is as much a space of insurgency of the enslaved who escaped as it is a type of territorial organization with practices of negritude. She indicates how, in the movements of reterritorialization, Africans encounter in the cult of tradition the possibility of living a *continuum*, despite a different historical space and time. It is within this space of "political-mythical-religious territory" that the symbolic heritage of the Africans and their descendants will find its place of transmission and preservation.

Thus, a parallel may be suggested to the Congolese *inzu* in Madureira, in which the braiding women come together not only to work, but also to retrieve memories and traditions, such as speaking in Lingala. This gives rise to the idea of an urban quilombo, a concept coined by Beatriz Nascimento (2006).

Quilombo became synonymous with Black people, Black behavior and hope for a better society. It became the interior and exterior seat of all forms of cultural resistance. Everything, from attitude to association, would be quilombo, as long as it sought greater appreciation of Black heritage. [...] During its trajectory, the quilombo has served as a symbol that encompasses connotations of ethnic and political resistance. As an institution, it has the unique characteristics of its African model. As a political practice, it preaches ideals of liberal emancipation which, at any moment of crisis in Brazilian nationality, corrects distortions imposed by the dominant powers. (NASCIMENTO apud RATTS, 2006, p. 124)

For Nascimento, the quilombo is not just a territory of survival or cultural resistance. It is a project for a nation, led by Blacks, but including other subalternized sectors. It is about extrapolating the idea of a territory of freedom regarding the flight of the enslaved, but is also a search for a time/space of peace:

It is important to see that, today, the quilombo no longer brings us the geographic territory, but the territory at the level of symbology. [...] We have rights to territory, to land. Tell me over and over again in my story that I have the right to the space I occupy in the nation. [...] I have the right to the space I occupy within this system, within this nation, within this geographic niche. (NASCIMENTO apud RATTS, 2006, p. 59)

The Congolese *inzu* is a space of connection and ancestry among those women. While they braid their hair, they talk, they remember stories that they tell their children, they build new memories. It was after twelve noon when Tina finished braiding Ruth's hair, who still took a few minutes to put on her makeup before we left. We said goodbye and, when it was time to leave, Tina called me and gave me a hug. I felt a vote of confidence from this foreigner in the midst of the Congolese *inzu*, in the middle of Rio de Janeiro.

### 3. On ways of being, of seeing, of (about) living

To consider Ruth's experience – a Black female refugee – in Rio de Janeiro, it is necessary to reflect upon the concept of intersectionality. Carla Akotirene (2018, p. 14) stated that:

Intersectionality aims to give theoretical-methodological instrumentality to the structural inseparability of racism, capitalism and cisheteropatriarchy – producers of identity avenues in which Black women are repeatedly affected by the crossing and overlapping of gender, race and class, modern colonial apparatuses.

When Ruth arrived in Rio, she went to live, not by chance, in Brás de Pina, in the North Zone, with her three children, now thirteen, eleven and six years old. This is where most Congolese refugees live in Rio de Janeiro. Like the mothers in *A mulher de pés descalços* (2017), Congolese refugee women seek to raise their children in a community, with rituals and practices that are closer to the culture of their country. They set out to form an affective network, which is not always possible, since they suffer from solitude, through the daily struggle to establish themselves in their new place of residence and by the search for work.

Among all the miseries of deportation and exile, the inability to care for their children as they were used to doing, as they'd always seen their mothers do, was not the least of the women's torments. Those salutary *umubirizi* leaves were obviously nowhere to be found in the dusty Nyamatan schoolyard, and the dry bush of the Bugesera offered only unfamiliar plants whose virtues and dangers they knew nothing about. (MUKASONGA, 2017)<sup>15</sup>

Beatriz Nascimento, when talking about Black corporeality, discusses the way in which the experience of exile implies experiencing a loss of image. In the diaspora and transmigration (from the slave quarters to the quilombo, from the countryside to the city, from the Northeast to the Southeast), there is a search to restore identity, which involves the relationship between the Black body and space. And this body is the main document of these crossings.

Between lights and sound, I only find my body, to you. Old companion from the illusions of hunting the beast. Body suddenly imprisoned by the fate of men outside. Body/map of a distant country that seeks other frontiers, which limit the conquest of myself. Mythical Quilombo that makes me content of the shadow of words. Unrecoverable contours my hands try to reach. (NASCIMENTO apud RATTS, 2006, p. 68)

As Ratts (2006) mentioned, for Nascimento the body is like a territory of power relations and racialization; identity as recognition and as a possibility of recreation,

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15. N.B. - For direct citations, the English version was used of MUKASONGA, S. (2018, p. 62).

including Black thought; linkages between reason and emotion. “Black individuals, with their bodies in (con)sensitized relationships, traverse in trans-migrational Black territories fragmented by diaspora. They recognize themselves in these discontinuous spaces and, at times, are correlated” (RATTS, 2006, p. 69).

*Transmigration* was the time used by Nascimento to address the mobility of Blacks between Africa and America or, within Brazil, between rural and urban, between the Northeast and the Southeast. “Oh infinite peace, to be able to make connecting links in a fragmented history. Africa and America and again Europe and Africa. Angola. Jagas. And the people of Benin where my mother came from. I am Atlantic” (NASCIMENTO apud RATTS, 2006, p. 73).

Madureira, where the market is located where Ruth braids her hair, and Brás de Pina, where she lives, are both in the North Zone of Rio. They are peripheral neighborhoods with a high populational concentration, stigmatized by violence and far from the Center and the South Zone, places that concentrate higher incomes, investments, infrastructure works and leisure.

The architect and urban planner, Gabriela Matos (VIDAS NEGRAS, 2021), observes how urban policy in Brazil reproduces the colonial logic in which the downtown area is the *casa-grande* (the slave owner’s mansion) and the periphery, the slave quarters. In an approximation with Nascimento, it is possible to suggest that, when this body of a Black refugee woman arrives in Rio, living on the periphery is the possibility offered. It is in Brás de Pina that Ruth meets her peers, who have also crossed the Atlantic in forced migrations, and where they form a diasporic community.

Racism is used as a technology of exclusion. We know where racism brutally affects the suburbs, and because of the negligence of both the State and police violence. Thus, all the privilege that we find in some areas of the city and all the problems that we find in others, the lack of urban infrastructure and everything else, is due to racism. We need to attribute this to racism in Brazil. Because after all, we are a country that was built on slave labor. (VIDAS NEGRAS, 2021)

The researcher Gabriela Leandro Pereira demonstrates how there is a specific body that guides the individual experience in the city, based on an analysis of the narratives of Carolina Maria de Jesus, and the displacements she had to make in order to arrive in São Paulo. “This body that affects and is affected by various crossings, configures territories whose limits and permeabilities are defined, almost always, by other subjects and another corporeality, distinct (and even opposite) to her black woman’s body” (PEREIRA, 2015, p 3).

It is in this daily dealing that Carolina weaves her way of relating to the space of the city, beyond the favela, and even within it. When moving to the living room, the writer brings with her the traces of all her previous displacements, even though she has no such intention. Her corporeality denounces her belonging to ungrateful, unappreciated or unwanted territories by the occupants of the living room. Her presence, again, thus formulates improbable approximations. (PEREIRA, 2015, p. 56)

In this open dialogue between Nascimento, Evaristo, Matos and Pereira, the concept of intersectionality cannot be overlooked, which “allows us to see the collision of structures, the simultaneous interaction of avenues of identity” (AKOTIRENE, 2018, p. 16). Ruth’s experience is affected by how her diasporic Black woman’s body has become reterritorialized.

It was a sunny Sunday with very blue skies in the autumn of Rio de Janeiro. Ruth asked me to arrive in Brás de Pina at 8:00 am, because the service she had invited me to attend started at 9:00 am sharp and she did not like to be late. We agreed to meet outside the train station. We then went to her house, where her three children were waiting for her. The two eldest, Mazi and Kito, were born in Luanda, and the youngest, Akin, in Rio.

The house had been rented with furniture. It had a living room, two bedrooms, a bathroom and a spacious kitchen. The owner does not live in Rio de Janeiro, but whenever she comes to Rio, she sleeps there, as was the case. Not one object in the house belongs to Ruth, nor reminds her of Angola or the DRC. She says that her Congolese friends always joke that she has become a Brazilian, because she no longer evens cooks African food.

We were late leaving, but even so, before entering the church, Ruth asked Mazi to take her picture. Every day she posts collections of different photos on social networks. Clothing is another fundamental aspect for her, an identity mark, which carries her ancestry and reminds her of her mother and her place of origin. In “*Na makanisi na nga: my memories*”, I asked Ruth to bring some personal items brought from Angola. She took an African cloth garment and a gold ring.

You said to bring something from Africa, the first thing is my clothes. That’s my authenticity. It’s me. I have lots of clothes, I have lots of shoes, sometimes I buy them, I get given. If I want to take things now to go away, I want to go to France now, I can leave everything, but these ones I won’t. I will never leave them. Because they are rare, it shows what I am: African. Here, if I put on a normal pair of pants, a normal skirt, for many people it would only be when I speak, that the person says: “Are you from another country?”. Yes. Then the person says: “Where are you from?”. But when I’m like this, you only have

to look at me, and you'd guess I was from any country in Africa, I get it. I don't care. Oh, you can call me Senegalese? I am! Pure African. And that's that. And that's not just me. All the Africans. Wherever we go, wherever we walk, our fabrics don't fool anyone. [...] I think I'm beautiful when I put a turban on my head. I have many ways of wrapping it. [...] So, for me, it reminds me of my mother, everything that is mine. These are my memories that I carry with me. (Ruth, Downtown, February 2019)

In the blue house, with an iron gate on Suruí Street, in Brás de Pina, there is an evangelical church founded by a Congolese. In the large hall, with peeling walls, a clean white floor, white plastic and iron chairs with red padding are placed side by side. Up at the front, a large stage, one step high, is covered in red carpet. On the wall behind the stage, red curtains grace the room and sway in the wind caused by the ceiling fans.

The congregation was mostly made up of women and children, almost all of them Congolese, and all well dressed in African clothing. The hall gradually filled up, and different preachers took it in turns to speak. A Brazilian preacher spoke in Portuguese and his sermon was translated into Lingala. The service lasted more than three hours, and when it was over, the band continued playing a little longer, while the children – who spent most of the service sitting next to their mothers – ran around the hall. When she finished singing, Ruth came down from the stage and made a point of greeting everyone who was present. The women gathered around one of the congregation who had been on vacation in Angola and had just arrived back. A baby of about six months was passed from lap to lap as they talked. I recognized some of them from the *inzu* in Madureira, where they had gathered to braid their hair.

#### 4. A look over the city

I asked Ruth to take five pictures for “Na makanisi na nga: my memories”. There were three rules: portray i) a place, ii) a person and iii) an object. My intention was to understand how Ruth sees Rio de Janeiro, and how she relates to the neighborhood where she lives and her community. I had been accompanying her for a few months in rehearsals and presentations of *Terremoto Clandestino* [Clandestine Earthquake], a musical group made up of refugees and immigrants of different nationalities. Ruth is one of the singers. Although we had spent time together, I knew very little about her way of being in the city. I had not specified an exact time for her to make these records. After a month, she wrote to me saying that we could meet for me to see her photos.



We arranged to talk after one of the group's rehearsals, in the film screening room in the Maison de France library, in downtown Rio. I left it to Ruth to decide on the order of the photos and to say whatever she wanted about them. My first question for each image presented was: "What is your feeling in relation to this photo?". The main themes that emerged were dreams (home), fears (sea), roots (family and music), current condition (being a foreigner) and the future (an older person).

The theme of first photo that Ruth showed me was the home and housing (Figure 2). The structure of the walls and roofs is one of the layers that represent the house. But she went further. It is in the home where memories are kept, where ways of being in the world are hidden. At home, refugees have their sense of belonging, of fixing their trajectory.



Figure 2. View of Brás de Pina from Ruth's house

Source: Ruth's personal collection (2019).

It was the first time that Ruth brought the theme of the home into our conversations. One of her biggest dreams is to have her own home, so that she could stop paying rent, and it would have to be a big house, in order to receive family and friends. With regard to the photo itself, she commented, with a nostalgic tone, that seeing this group of houses every day from her balcony awakened the idea that her mother could live in one of them, that community life, such as in Angola or in the DRC, so dear to her, could be hidden among the alleyways and lanes of Brás de Pina. Indirectly, the theme of solitude, felt by refugees – especially Black women – appeared there. In the image, the view that was part of their daily life is full of symbolism and the absence of those who had stayed behind, those who could not leave.

This photo brings some memories of my family. You're sitting there, you're looking, like, there at the end, my mother may live around there. It's the view from my house every day. This is my street. There are these ceilings [roofs], but there are different ones, the material, that old ceiling [roof] [...]. (Ruth, Downtown, February 2019)

In Ruth's memory, a trace of the present-absent living with her mother, of living in a community with her family, anchored in the gaze cast on places she has known in the diaspora, caused her to travel through her most affectionate memories.

Ruth commented, through the photo, on the housing differences in Rio de Janeiro, and how this demonstrated the social inequality in Brazil. Violence was another important point. She spoke about the insecurity that everyone lives with on a daily basis, and how people have become used to it, to the point of not taking care of the outside of the house anymore so as to avoid drawing attention to it in case of possible burglaries.

Those who live there [in the favela] are people with little money, right? The houses rising up like that are very beautiful. I've seen it in other places, the house is hopeless, but inside there's a lot of good furniture, the person has money, has the possibility, has a car, has everything. One day I asked: Why is this like this in Brazil? People are afraid of the bandits. They don't want to make the outside of their beautiful so as not to attract the attention of a thief. [...] [In the DRC and in Angola] we all live together. One single separation is between a rich neighborhood, like Copacabana, and a poor one, like Brás de Pina, where I'm living. A specific community where the drug dealer lives, I had never seen before. Look at the girl who gets shot in the chest? She died. Why? Violence is always growing, growing. One day it will turn into a war. Brazil has never been through a war. But it will pass, if it doesn't stop, there will come a day when trafficking takes over the State. There will come a day that will turn into civil war. [...] If one day they see the world differently, if they think like Africans, it will become a rebellion. Have you ever heard of rebellion? (Ruth, Downtown, February 2019)

The second photo that Ruth brought was of the street where she lived in Brás de Pina, but from a different perspective and time (Figure 3). She took it at one o'clock in the morning when she had just arrived home from work<sup>16</sup>. I questioned her about the difference between being in the city in the day and at night, linking it to the issue of security, which ended the analysis of the previous photo, primarily

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16. When I started my research with Ruth, in 2018, she was working at a company in the area of technology, in Curicica, in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro. But she was fired in February 2019 and has still not managed to find a steady job. Her dream is to earn her living as an actress and singer.

from a woman's reflection, who experiences the city in a different way. However, I was interrupted by Ruth, who said that this was not what she wanted to talk about, and that she wanted to speak about the old man sleeping in the street.

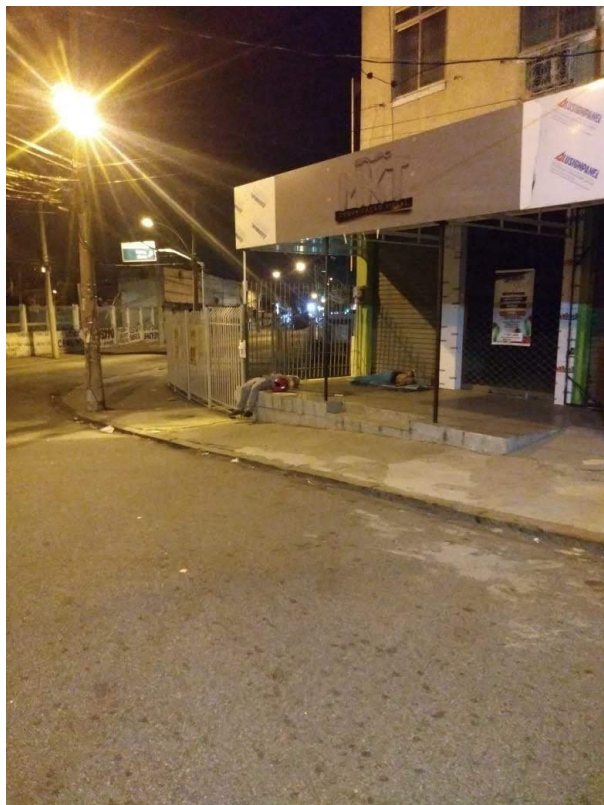


Figure 3. The street where Ruth lives, at night

Source: Ruth's personal collection (2019).

I wanted to take this picture of him because I see a very big difference between white culture and our African culture. In families it is different. Why? Older people at that age may have lost their home, perhaps. I've heard something like that. That's why I keep asking why that is. A lady once told me in Madureira that she had worked as a doctor, prepared her retirement and now her money is making her support herself in the old people's home. So I keep seeing... In Africa, are there people living on the street? Yes, but it's hard to see an older person living on the street. [...] Because a young man has a house to live in. Sometimes he doesn't want to. Maybe this young man is addicted to drugs, sometimes choices take the person to the street. But an older person like that doesn't have a family or the family has abandoned him. Maybe his house was on credit. Maybe he has no one. These things don't happen in Africa like that. You will not see an older person on the street. It can be, but you can go through the whole of Rio de Janeiro, you might see two. It's rare. Or is it that crazy person, who is different from a homeless person. (Ruth, Downtown, February 2019)

Based on the image of that street at night in Brás de Pina, Ruth expressed her indignation at the way we Brazilians take care of our older generations. Those abandoned bodies – many of them anonymous, who die on the street from cold and hunger –, in contrast to the numerous empty houses across the city, makes us think of the intolerable images of boats adrift, on the border with European countries, with invisible bodies, with no identity, who die at sea, without the right to farewell rituals. Lives that just become numbers.

In the conversation about the photo of the street at night, Ruth also revealed that, like the mothers exiled in Nyamata in Mukasonga's book, she struggles to raise her children far from her customs, her family, her land. By choosing to look for somewhere to live in Brás de Pina, there was an attempt to be closer to its practices and customs, since it is one of the regions with the highest concentration of Congolese in Rio.

My children are growing up here, but I will never let them grow up like you white people. Ah! To go to your sister's house, do you have to make an appointment? Can't I just suddenly turn up? These limits are good for these times, but when old age arrives it gets heavier. Another thing, having a child is not mandatory today. But having a child for me, I see it's good [...]. How many older people are dying with no one to help? Rich, yes. Babysitter? Carer for older people? Go away! There's time, there's schedules. What if you can't prepare for your old age? How will you stop? You can't leave your mother. I don't believe you're leaving your mother. Because she had a daughter. My mom won't let me. I want my children to grow up in the family bond.

In Africa we only need one person to make a living and it's for everyone. Just one person. We struggle with this. We don't think like you here: I'm working, my bank account, I'm going to prepare my future, there there there, it's for me. My sister? Yes, I will help when I can. [...] There are many families that don't have love. There are other families here, they are white and they are very close, like the Africans. [...] I keep researching there. There are houses that have no one. Do you know how many apartments in Copacabana, Leblon where the owner died and there is no one? If you look, he has a big family. He had a family, why is it that a person has worked all his life and doesn't share? Because you fought for it. But not us! I fight for myself, for my children, my nephews [...]. (Ruth, Downtown, February 2019)

For Ruth, we are very individualistic, we only think about our own profit and we do not value our ancestors. Her mother had her when she was very young and she hardly ever lived with her father, but her uncle's family helped to raise her. A vision we need to learn in order to value our ancestors even more.

## Final considerations

In “*Na makanisi na nga: my memories*”, I told the story of the book *A menina que abraça o vento* [The girl who embraces the wind] (2017), by Fernanda Paraguassu, about Mersene, a Congolese child who came to Brazil as a refugee with her mother and brothers, and whose father had to stay in the DRC. While listening to the story, Ruth made several comments. In an excerpt, the narrator explains the reason for the girl’s forced migration. Ruth talked while I read: “That’s exactly it!” or “This war will never end.”

I asked Ruth to do a drawing for the character in the book, and she did two. In the first (Figure 4), she drew Mersene’s father holding the girl’s hand. Ruth explained that the idea she had was of him already in Brazil, walking with his daughter. The second (Figure 5) depicts the day when the girl, the father and the mother return to Africa and find the family cooking food.



Figure 4. Drawing 1 by Ruth, on the book *A menina que abraça o vento*  
Source: Drawing by Ruth, 2019.

It is interesting to note that, in this drawing, the sheet is practically blank. There are no landscapes, no people, just the two characters: father and daughter. By identifying that the scene takes place in Brazil, Ruth is perhaps also expressing what she feels: the loneliness in a foreign land, the loneliness of a black woman with her children in a new country, where they are refugees and where they need to reestablish affective bonds to reduce the burden of living far from home.

In the second drawing, new elements appear: a house with the word Africa written on the roof, as well as people sitting on a bench near a long table, beside the house. In front, a pot is being heated on an outdoor stove. Food is one of the main memories that connects her to her origins, to her roots. As she described in her letter to the future, her wish is to be home again. That's where your *inzu* is.



Figure 5. Drawing 1 by Ruth, on the book *A menina que abraça o vento*  
Source: Drawing by Ruth, 2019.

As an actress, Ruth's first performance in a play was playing a refugee woman in *Kondima* – about the crossings. Because of her performance, she was invited to do another play, *Hoje não saio daqui* [Today I don't leave here], a production by Cia Marginal. Staged in the woods of Parque Ecológico da Maré, the play had six actors from the company and six Angolan guest actors. Ruth was one of them, and played Queen Nzinga Mbandi. The play portrays the meeting between Brazil and Angola, the barbecue with the *mufete*, *funk* and *kuduro*.

Queen Nzinga Mbandi was an Angolan political and military leader who, for forty years, fought against Portugal's entry into the African continent, especially in Angola. Nzinga became a symbol of resistance to colonialism and to the fight against the slave trade.

If in fiction Ruth interpreted this symbol of residence in Brazil, alongside other refugee women, she can make the Congolese *inzu* in Madureira a space that overcomes social marginalization, segregation and refugee resistance in Rio de Janeiro, just like the urban quilombos conceptualized by Beatriz Nascimento.

I believe that this article may help to echo the voices of Black refugee women, when dealing with displacements through various territories – both real and symbolic. Likewise, existing theory and proposed methodology suggest debates on issues of gender, class and race. With “*Na makanisi na nga: my memories*”, I intend to broaden the viewpoint and listen to the experiences of territorialization and reterritorialization of these diasporic women, represented in this article by Ruth. Echoing Nascimento that: “The Earth is my quilombo. My space is my quilombo. Where I am, I am. When I am, I am” (NASCIMENTO apud RATTS, 2006, p. 59).

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