

Beatriz Nascimento, *The Dialectic Is in the Sea: The Black Radical Thought of Beatriz Nascimento* (edited and translated by Christen A. Smith, Bethânia N. F. Gomes, and Archie Davies), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780691241227 (cloth); ISBN: 9780691241203 (paper); ISBN: 9780691241210 (ebook)

Reading *The Dialectic Is in the Sea* was my first encounter with Beatriz Nascimento. Nascimento was a Black-Brazilian academic, activist, mother, and poet, and was a prominent figure in the Brazilian Black Movement. *The Dialectic Is in the Sea* is among the first collections of her writings in English, and captures Nascimento's prolific literary activity, including her academic scholarship, public opinion pieces, essays, and poetry.¹ The background of this collection's editors, which include Nascimento's daughter and professional dancer Bethânia Gomes, anthropologist and African diaspora scholar Christen Smith, and cultural and historical geographer Archie Davies, tells us about some of the intentions for bringing this translation project into the anglophone world. It is an ode to a woman who was fully immersed (and immersed those around her) in the African-Brazilian experience and its cultural and political ties to the African diaspora. It is also a project to place Nascimento in "her rightful place in the global Black radical tradition" (p.4). In this review I will discuss Nascimento's theorization of Blackness, specifically in light of the editors' proposal to read her as a cultural geographer (p.23).

The location of Nascimento's work within the intersection of Black studies and geography should be appreciated not just in terms of her empirical findings that largely focused on quilombos (communities formed in Brazil by runaway enslaved Africans during the 16th century). It is also the approach she undertook and her understanding of the challenges and implications of studying the history of Black Brazilians during the peak years of the country's military dictatorship. In the collection's opening text, "For a History of Black People", which foregrounds some of her poignant critique of the state of Black history in Brazilian academia, Nascimento asks:

¹ "In Front of the World": Translating Beatriz Nascimento" was published in *Antipode* in 2021. In it, Smith, Davies, and Gomes introduce Nascimento's life and work and present two essays, "The Concept of Quilombo and Black Cultural Resistance" and "For a (New) Existential and Physical Territory", and two poems, "Dream" and "Sun and Blue".

How can we make, how can we write History without being enslaved by its fragmentary approach?

Is it possible to reduce it to the History of Man, Total History, to specialisms? Is it possible to reduce it to a science that simply verifies what we seem to live? Can we limit History to a historically reductive time, and understand it only as it has been presented to us since the nineteenth century? As just another Science?

How should we approach, for example, the History of Black people in Brazil? Can we only do so through ethnographic, religious, or socio-economic approaches? That is, fragmentarily. These approaches have been brilliantly done, but what about the History of Black people? In the end, we are humans, individuals who must be studied as such. (p.81-82)

When reading Nascimento's research on quilombos, her essays on racism in Brazil, and the excellent introduction written by the editors, we are provided with nuanced and intimate insights on how anti-blackness operates within a so-called post-racial democracy such as Brazil. Her scholarly work was produced within an intellectual and political environment that would fund her research on quilombos but not her work on "the contemporary world of favelas" (p.18). An environment that used miscegenation as justification for the alleged lack of racism in Brazil because, as her geography teacher told her, it would mean that "black people are going to disappear" (p.84). Or that challenged her sense of blackness because she was less knowledgeable about Afro-Brazilian religion than white scholars of African studies (ibid.). Within such a context one can think about how research becomes a decolonial practice. For Nascimento it was by reclaiming Afro-Brazilian history from white Brazilian scholars and by foregrounding it within the socio-political reality of contemporary Black culture. Her spatial and material approach for history writing and making is manifested through her deep understanding of where particular knowledges and practices can emerge and how the past is an active force in the production of liberatory spaces. It is perhaps also why it was important for the editors to emphasize the different location from which two overlapping, but essentially different fields of studies have been formed in Brazil. The first one is Black studies, "an intellectual-political project that was defined by the organic intellectualism of the

Black Movement” (p.21). The second one is Afro-Brazilian studies, a program that had been “established *within* (not against or despite of) universities to research Black people not as subjects but as objects of study’ and that have historically (ibid.). It is clear to see where Nascimento’s intellectual legacy is located and how it has been “in direct conflict with the white-mestizo university system” (ibid.).

Spatiality is also present in Nascimento’s poetic, fantastical, and spiritual imageries. The title of this collection, *The Dialectic Is in the Sea*, a paraphrase of a line taken from the poem “Portugal”, points to the centrality of the ocean in Nascimento’s work and more broadly in the articulation of Black thought (or perhaps the ocean in troubling thought, as proposed by Sharpe [2016: 5]). In “Portugal”, the Atlantic is reflected as a space of life and death, fragmentation and connection, and exile and new geographies. Here we can very much see how geography, history, and poetry are intertwined as a means of becoming:

... I am Atlantic. Now I have found a beautiful reference. / Some went through that ocean. / Others came from it. / And I am here, I went from it, and came from it. / Oh infinite peace to be able to make connecting links in a fragmented history ... (p.324)

A spatio-temporal configuration, the ocean enables connections beyond geographical confinement, and/or a singular event. The ties to the ocean are the product of a catastrophe, of the transatlantic slave trade and the commodification of the black body. But it does not stop Nascimento from (re)turning to the sea in her search for joyful ways of being and a sense of continuation. This endeavor is iterated throughout this collection and derives from her onto-epistemological critique of the reductionist and objectified ways through which Black people in Brazil have been studied. In, “For a (New) Existential and Physical Territory”, she writes:

Dedicating myself once again to academic work, I have felt trapped by the literary form necessary for this ritualization of knowledge. It has meant overturning my own mode of expression. It has provoked a physical repulsion to the written word. (p.306)

Nascimento’s usage of metaphors and experimental language to articulate Black experience and the practice of writing takes a more prominent place in her later works. They are collated

in the fourth part of the collection and can be read as a biographical chapter of the last years of her life that was violently cut short. Much of this work is fragmentary and was not published during her lifetime. Smith, who wrote the introductions for each of the collection's sections, encourages us to open "our conception of what counts as intellectual work when writing Black women's intellectual history" (p.274). The draft-like quality of much of these texts, as Smith tells us, is partially the result of lack of access to institutional resources (ibid.). However, they are also material testimonies to the challenges and possibilities when one wishes, using Nascimento's words, to "detach myself from the masters" and to "invent a language inside this one in which I write" (p.309).

It is helpful thinking about the properties of Nascimento's work through Katherine McKittrick's (2021a, 2021b, 2022) theorization of Black methodologies as practice of textual accumulations from a range of genres, disciplines, and media. Engaging with "Black miscellanea" reinforces the entanglement of location and creativity in the process of knowledge production that unsettles the confinement of physical boundaries and disciplinary systems. They unravel, as McKittrick suggests, a particular kind of clarity, one that is needed to be understood and felt on an affective and embodied level. It is perhaps why Nascimento turned to film making and together with Raquel Gerber co-produced *Óri* (1989), a documentary looking at the history of the Black Movement in Brazil. The film brings not only Nascimento's research on quilombos and the Black transatlantic space, but also Nascimento herself, her voice and her body, and the landscapes that enriched her in ways that literary work alone might be unable to utter. Nonetheless, the accumulation of Nascimento's textual work in this collection is a valuable source for showing us how to think and engage with moments of intelligibility and perceives them as prompts for knowing and being otherwise (McKittrick 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

The last piece of Nascimento in the collection beautifully sums up the movement between clarity and opacity. In this piece, titled "The First Great Loss: Grandma's Death", Nascimento describes the double grief of losing both her grandmother and a chest she owned. In the chest there was a book telling a story about warriors and palm trees that fascinated Nascimento as a child. Despite the loss Nascimento felt happy after learning that her mother threw the chest to the sea following her grandmother's death. The sea is where things are lost

but also persist. “One day”, Nascimento tells us, “I will dive to look for the book inside the chest. The book inside the chest, the book that I have to write...” (p.343).

References

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