


# **LEGACIES AND MEMORIES OF VIOLENCE IN BECOS DA MEMÓRIA**

*Legado e memórias da violência em Becos da memória*

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**Abstract:** This essay examines how the concept of “slow violence” (NIXON, 2011) features in the narrative of Conceição Evaristo’s novel *Becos da memória* (2006). Nixon defines slow violence as a diachronic process of disenfranchisement that affects principally low-income communities and racial minorities and that is often less visible. Slow violence manifests in different ambits, including environmental depredation and marginalization. It is the environmental aspect of slow violence that differentiates it from structural violence, though both types intersect. Evaristo’s text confronts the reader not only with the consequences of structural violence (GALTUNG, 1969), but also how this violence impacts the experience of spatiality and of environmental marginalization for impoverished racial minorities and, as a result, the everyday lives of these groups. In this sense, the novel touches upon the effects of slow violence on marginalized communities. *Becos da memória* therefore brings to light the confluence between environment and the lived experience of subjects who live both at the social and the spatial margins.

**Keywords:** Slow Violence. *Becos da memória*. Environment. Space.

**Resumo:** Este ensaio reflete sobre como o conceito de “violência lenta” (slow violence) (NIXON, 2011) estrutura a narrativa do romance *Becos da memória* (2006), de Conceição Evaristo. Nixon define a “violência lenta” como um processo diacrônico de marginalização que afeta principalmente grupos nas margens econômicas e minorias raciais. A violência lenta é também, segundo Nixon, muitas vezes menos visível. Ela se manifesta em diferentes esferas, incluindo a depredação e a marginalização ambiental. É a faceta ambiental que distingue a violência lenta da violência estrutural, ainda que ambas expressões intersectem. O texto de Evaristo revela não somente quais são as consequência da violência estrutural (GALTUNG, 1969), mas também como este tipo de violência influencia a experiência espacial e, pelo tanto, a vivência cotidiana, de populações pobres e racializadas. Nesse sentido, o romance de Evaristo aborda os efeitos da violência lenta sobre comunidades marginalizadas. Dessa forma, *Becos da memória* traz à tona, a confluência entre meio ambiente e a experiência de vida de população social e espacialmente marginalizadas.

**Palavras-chave:** *Slow violence*. *Becos da memória*. Meio ambiente. Espaço.



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## Introduction

This essay examines how the concept of “slow violence” (NIXON, 2011) appears Conceição Evaristo’s novel *Becos da memória* (Alleys of memory 2006). Evaristo’s text confronts the reader not only with the consequences of structural violence (GALTUNG, 1969), but also shows how this violence structures the experience of spatiality of impoverished racial minorities and, as a result, impacts the everyday lives of these groups. In this manner, *Becos da memória* brings to light the confluence between environment and the lived experience of subjects who live both at the social and spatial margins.

Rob Nixon uses the term “slow violence” to characterize a type of a “violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (NIXON, 2011, p. 2). For Nixon, this type of violence, which remains generally “out of sight” (NIXON, 2011, p. 2), disproportionately affects low-income populations and racial minorities and encompasses many expressions of violence, including but not limited to structural violence. Nixon compares slow and structural violence: “Slow violence, by contrast [to structural violence], might well include forms of structural violence, but has a wider descriptive range in calling attention, not simply to questions of agency, but to broader, more complex descriptive categories of violence enacted slowly over time” (NIXON, 2011, p. 11). Slow violence, as Nixon understands it, intersects with issues of environmental exploitation and the deleterious consequences of these practices for subaltern populations. In this sense, Nixon’s concept of slow violence reinterprets Robert Bullard’s idea of “environmental justice” (BULLARD, 1990). Similarly to Bullard, who examined the connection between environmental depredation and Afro-American communities in the Southern United States, Nixon employs the lens of slow violence to look into how marginalized populations are affected by different types of environmental violence, including forced removals to build oil pipelines and mega dams. At the same time, Nixon’s text dialogues with Joan Martínez-Alier’s (2002) and Ramachandra Guha’s (2002, 2013) conceptualization of an “environmentalism of the poor”, which inquire into how disenfranchised populations bear the disproportionate ecological burden of economic modernization.

Though Evaristo’s novel does not directly broach the type of environmental destruction that Nixon touches upon in his book, the story of *Becos da memória* centers around the forced removal of *favela* residents. The narrative does not specify the exact purpose of the eviction: “They said that it was to build a hospital, or a gas company or maybe a large clubhouse” (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 108)<sup>1</sup>. The vagueness of the infrastructural project functions as an allegory for a certain *modus operandi* in which communities become casualty of economic interests.

According to Nixon, displacement tears into both the material and the intangible fabric of existence. Though Nixon refers specifically to the dislocation occasioned by construction of

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<sup>1</sup> Esta e todas as traduções do inglês são da autora. “Diziam que era para construir um hospital ou uma companhia de gás, um grande clube, talvez”.

mega dams, the argument can be extended to forced removal of marginalized peoples in general. He observes that:

Forced removal involves agonizing adjustments to bleak accommodation, unfamiliar ecologies, and typically barren, hostile terrain, it involves the additional challenge posed by temporal violence: how to survive in a truncated, severed present, torn by involuntary displacement from the numinous fabric that had woven extended meaning from time-in-place. (NIXON, 2011, p. 162)

### **Material and Affective Environments**

It is precisely the rupture between the subject and his or her community, between space and memory that appears in *Becos da memória*. The space from which the novel's characters are displaced is "home" in both a material and a symbolic sense. The removal resonates with other losses, as suggested by the story of the character Tio Totó:

life is one big loss. I lost Miquilina and Catita. Lost the father and mother that I never really had, as they labored as slaves in the fields. I lost a place, a land that the parents of my parents said was a big space, of forests and beasts. Of free people and strong sunshine ... And today, now, we lose a place that we believed was ours. To lose the *favela*! (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 32)<sup>2</sup>

Personal bereavement – of spouse and children, of parents, of home – coincides with the loss of cultural heritage and of a memory that becomes overlaid by reoccurring histories of suffering. These losses in turn overlap with the destruction wreaked by (multiple) displacements that culminate with the last eviction of residents from the *favela* where Tio Totó settled. The emphasis in the last sentence of quote, indicated by the exclamation point, highlights the acuteness of this loss, which is at the same time a new form of bereavement and encapsulates previous ones. Space, in Evaristo's novel, hence is not only a geographic marker, but gains a human dimension. It becomes another character in the text, one that inspires and reflects the emotions and stories of its dwellers. Thus, for example, when one of the text's characters immolates himself and burns his shack down, the surrounding alleys are the silent witness of the tragedy: "the alleys that were close by heard the sobs of the man who burned his pain" (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 105)<sup>3</sup>. The anthropomorphism of the description highlights the connection between subject and environment, which mingle into a single consciousness.

By focalizing the space of the *favela* and imbuing it with a multiplicity of meanings, Evaristo's text links environmental and social justice questions, much like Nixon, Bullard, Guha, Martínez-Alier (2013) and other critics concerned with the intersection of these two issues do. More importantly, *Becos da memória* substantiates these links through a fictional

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<sup>2</sup> "a vida é uma perdedeira só, tamanho é o perder. Perdi Miquilina e Catita. Perdi pai e mãe que nunca tive direito, dado o trabalho de escravo nos campos. Perdi um lugar, uma terra, que pais de meus pais diziam que era um lugar grande, de mato, bichos. De gente livre e sol forte ... E hoje, agora, a gente perde um lugar de que eu já pensava dono. Perder a favela!"

<sup>3</sup> "Os becos mais próximos escutaram os soluços, os gritos do homem queimando a sua dor"

narrative. It's narrative fabric emulates the labyrinthine geography of the place that the novel describes as well as the winding, manifold pathways of memory that compose the text. Text, memory and space become entwined.

*Becos da memória* is polyphonic in that it incorporates various points of view, stories and temporalities. The text's polyphonic arrangement transmits the idea of a collectivity. The manifold perspectives that are part of the *favela*'s social and mnemonic fabric become embodied in the novel's different characters. The novel favors the first-person narrative, emulating the testimonial genre and actualizing the experiences of the (fictional) *favela*'s residents.

The text's decentered perspective is nonetheless partially anchored in a central voice that seems to echo that of the author (i.e. Evaristo). Through the voice of its narrator-protagonist, Maria-Nova, a young girl who lives in the community, the text chronicles the everyday life of the *favela*, as well as the forced displacement of its dwellers when the terrain of *favela* falls prey to urban renewal and real estate speculation. Maria-Nova, who, in the words of Aline Deyques Vieira represents the *favela*'s collective memory (VIEIRA, 2016, p. 126) observes how an anonymous construction firm ("Firma Construtora") slowly dismantles the *favela* not only physically, tearing down homes and transforming the public spaces, but also destroying its sociability and its mnemonic structure (what Nixon calls the "numinous fabric"). The "Firma Construtora" is a synecdoche for a system of structural violence that impacts the lives of Afro-descendants at various levels, including, geographically. It is an embodiment of what Nixon calls "attritional catastrophes" that:

Overspill clear boundaries in time and space (and) are marked above all by displacements – temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological displacements that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs. Such displacements smooth the way for amnesia, as places are rendered irretrievable to those who once inhabited them. (NIXON, 2011, p. 7)

Not coincidentally, the "Firma Construtora" is an omnipresent and ominous entity whose sole purpose (contradicting its name, which signals to the notion of creating) appears to be destruction. The company's namelessness and all-encompassing presence relays the sense of threat that the dwellers experience from social forces such as state actors and elite sectors that, nonetheless, obfuscate their ideology or mode of operation. Such actors often activate different mechanisms to leverage more control and/or profit, an operation that frequently comes at the expense of marginal(ized) subjects and communities. To quote an example from Nixon: "the structural violence embodied by a neoliberal order of austerity measures, structural adjustments, rampant deregulation, corporate megamergers, and widening gulf between rich and poor is a form of covert violence in its own right that is often the catalyst for more recognizable overt violence" (NIXON, 2011, p. 10-11). In other words, in Evaristo's novel the "Firma Construtora" is a metaphor for the structural violence that affects many low-income and racialized communities. *Becos da memória* metaphorizes this process at the same time that it

literalizes its consequences. One evening several men of the *favela* decide to “play” with the tractors left in the community by the construction business. The next morning, their dismembered corpses mingle with the “dirt, the dust [...] One could not even recognize the dead bodies. [...] After a long time the police arrived and collected everyone, and only emptiness remained (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 73)<sup>4</sup>. The image highlights the abjection of the deceased men, whose mutilated corpses suggest other processes of fragmentation (of lives, families, sociability) and which, in turn, result in an existential vacuum (“only emptiness remained”).

As mentioned above, spatiality is one of the novel’s central elements. Space is the locus where both slow violence is materialized and where it is resisted. In the introduction to the volume on space and Afro-descendant experience in Brazil, Henrique Cunha Júnior and Maria Estela Rocha Ramos trace the heritage of spatial disempowerment that affects Afro-descendant subjects. According to them, this practice begins in the colonial era and assumes different (though interrelated) guises in various time periods. Cunha Júnior and Rocha Ramos explain that:

The systemic disenfranchisement of Afro-descendants are political gestures that originate in colonial Brazil. They are based on the criminal statute of slavery that culminates in Imperial Brazil. These processes of subjugation of Afro-descendants continue after the abolition of slavery through public policies of de-Africanization of public spaces in Brazil, of an “Europeanization” of Brazilian cities and through immigration policies that followed the model of an universal civilization. The socio-political-spatial processes reach their apex in the form of spatial segregations that run contrary to the interests of Afro-descendant populations. (CUNHA JÚNIOR; RAMOS, 2007, p. 11)<sup>5</sup>

While the *favela* of *Becos da memória* highlights the genealogy of violence that Afro-Brazilians have endured over centuries, it is also a terrain where, through memory, cultural practice and writing, this history is contested. Specifically, writing challenges the effects of slow violence that Evaristo’s novel describes. Writing and by extension, reading, is therefore another *Leitmotif* of *Becos da memória*.

It is through reading that the character of o Homem (the Man) is able to access the discourse of rights and to transmit this discourse to his community: “he was reading for the others, with them he studied a newspaper that explained bit by bit what was an union, a strike, the peasants’ league, agrarian reform” (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 63)<sup>6</sup>. The collective act of reading

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<sup>4</sup> “pó, a poeira. [...] Nem dava para reconhecer os corpos, os mortos. [...] Veio a policia depois de muita espera, recolheu todos, e tudo ficou um vazio”.

<sup>5</sup> As práticas sistemáticas de poder contrárias aos afrodescendentes são posturas políticas decorrentes do período Brasil-Colônia, baseadas no estatuto criminoso do escravismo, culminando-se no Império. A continuidade dos processos de dominação sobre os afrodescendentes permanecem no pós-abolição através de políticas públicas de desafricanização dos espaços públicos brasileiros, de uma “europeização” das cidades brasileiras e das políticas de imigração, guiadas por um modelo de civilização universal. As práticas sócio-políticas-espaciais culminam em segregações espaciais que funcionam como ações contrárias aos interesses dos afrodescendentes.

<sup>6</sup> “estava lendo para os outros, estudando com eles um jornal que explicava tintim por tintim, o que era sindicato, greve, liga camponesa, reforma agrária”.

words such as “union” suggests a community into which o Homem is inserted. The enumeration of terms in the sentence suggests a direct correlation between the word and claims for rights. These rights encompass various spheres, as suggested by expressions that are traditionally associated with urban, factory-based labor such as “strike” that are juxtaposed to concepts that reference the countryside (“peasant leagues”)<sup>7</sup>. The pairing of the words establishes a bridge between struggles for rights in the city and in the country.

The character’s name, “Homem”, a capitalized noun, suggests an individual, but nonetheless renders the holder of the name anonymous. As such the proper name reflects the not only between individuality and collectivity, but also between agency and lack thereof that o Homem embodies and that he seeks to transcend by becoming a lettered subject. In her prologue to the 2006 edition of the text, literary scholar Maria Nazareth Soares Fonseca notes that in the book: “writing is the tool employed to reconfigure the ample tableau of memories rooted in the ‘experience of poverty’” (FONSECA, 2006, p. 13)<sup>8</sup>.

*Becos da memória* proposes that though writing and reading the manifold expressions of slow violence that affect low-income and Afro-descendant communities can be made visible, and, consequently, tangible. In so doing, *Becos da memória* reinvents the community’s story. It no longer is relegated to obscurity but becomes part of a literary imaginary, (re) gaining materiality in and through language. Nixon argues for the role that creative representation has in resisting slow violence. According to him:

To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time. The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency. (NIXON, 2011, p. 11)

*Becos da memória* effectuates a representational recuperation of the erasure that the (fictional) community has endured. The lyrical, fragmented narrative – the novel is composed of parts, not individual chapters, suggesting both textual fracture and fluidity – counteracts the act of disappearance effected by the forced removal of residents from their homes and their emotional lifeworld. The disjointed narrative in a way reproduces the slow tearing apart of the community while simultaneously also recomposing it as a patchwork of remembrances, words and affects.

Even though the narrative of Evaristo’s novel follows a diachronic line that accompanies the slow dismantling of the material and symbolic space of the *favela*, the story we read is not chronologically linear. Temporal jumps punctuate the plot as it deviates to follow individual characters and loops back to accompany the process of the community’s slow disassembling.

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<sup>7</sup> The words in the quotation also suggest a broad and yet specific timeframe for the novel, namely the period between 1945 and 1951 or between 1954-1964.

<sup>8</sup> “escrever é a ferramenta utilizada para recompor o vasto painel de lembranças calcadas na “experiência da pobreza”.

The storyline seamlessly oscillates between past and present, just as it does between the different perspectives that form the narrative fabric. The text's temporal indeterminacy suggests a diachronic continuum of disenfranchisement and repeated gestures of resistance against this disempowerment. It is not surprising, then, that though set in an indeterminate present, *Becos da memória* repeatedly alludes to Brazil's slave-holding past. Maria-Nova, one of the novel's main character and, possibly, the would-be author of the text we are reading, observes the correlation between the contemporary favela and "a contemporary slave quarters. Its inhabitants were not free, as they did not have any means to survive" (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 137)<sup>9</sup>.

Though it was published in 2006, Conceição Evaristo originally wrote *Becos da memória* in 1988. In the preface to the book, the author traces the text's origin to a 1968 essay title "Samba-favela", in which she "attempted to describe the ambiance of a *favela*" (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 9)<sup>10</sup>. *Becos da memória* takes up the idea of portraying the *favela*'s ambiance and infuses it with a subtle dose of social criticism about the socio-spatial conditions that residents of low-income communities in Brazil endure. The novel describes a process that has become all too familiar in low-income and racialized neighborhoods. Local residents are displaced to give place to infrastructural projects that will benefit middle or upper income residents of the city. Forced displacements are not a new form of violence. They reflect shifting power dynamics and priorities. In Brazil forced removals have primarily affected racialized communities that are, not coincidentally, also among the most economically marginalized.

Even if the favela in which *Becos da memória* takes place remains unnamed, suggesting both a metaphoric terrain and the relative invisibility of such communities in hegemonic discourse<sup>11</sup>, echoes of Evaristo's biography reverberate in the pages of the novel. Photographs of the author and her family at the beginning of the text suggest a link between the fictional story and the author's life<sup>12</sup>. In his analysis of *Becos da memória*, Luiz Henrique Silva de Oliveira compares the novel's protagonist, Maria-Nova to the author, remarking that: "We can link the people in the photograph metonymically, to the characters in the novel. [...] The photograph at the top right hand side of the cover invites us to, at a first glance, recognize the author in Maria-Nova" (OLIVEIRA, 2016, p. 76)<sup>13</sup>. The experiences that the novel's protagonist details do bear resemblances to Evaristo's own life. Both perceive writing as a manner not only to capture a history that has been obfuscated, but also as a mode of resistance. Evaristo characterizes her writing as an "act of insubordination". Similarly, Maria-Nova confronts what she learns in school with her own experience. In the gap between lived reality and the knowledge transmitted by text books, Maria-Nova inserts her voice. A voice that defies

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<sup>9</sup> "uma senzala que, hoje, seus moradores não estavam libertos, pois não tinham nenhuma condição de vida".

<sup>10</sup> "tentava descrever a ambiência de uma favela".

<sup>11</sup> By "invisibility" I mean that these communities are not often perceived by the hegemonic public as terrains of sociability, history, cultural and individual memory. As many studies indicate (see for example Ventura 1994), most frequently, *favelas* are associated with violence, criminality, transgression.

<sup>12</sup> The photographs at the beginning of the 2006 edition also evoke the images of the favela do Canindé and of the author of *Quarto de despejo: Diário de uma favelada* (1960), Maria Carolina de Jesus that punctuate this book.

<sup>13</sup> "Podemos entender os integrantes das fotografias, metonimicamente, ao conjunto de personagens da obra. [...] A fotografia na porção superior à direita da capa convida-nos inicialmente a desdobrar a autora em Maria-Nova".

the silences of the dominant episteme. The dissonant echoes caused by the protagonist's challenge to prevailing knowledges allow her to shape her own wisdom. Using the old and new fragments of knowledge, Maria-Nova writes her own story and – potentially – the story of her community.

Nonetheless, despite the resemblances between Evaristo's history and the novel's storyline, Evaristo does emphasize that *Becos da memória* is not an autobiography (BARBOSA, 2006). But she admits that her experience in the Favela do Pindura Saia (Belo Horizonte) colors the fictional community that the novel depicts (EVARISTO, 2006). Evaristo spent her childhood and adolescence in Pindura Saia, which was located in what nowadays is the Cruzeiro neighborhood, in the south-central region of Belo Horizonte. The favela was demolished to give way to the Afonso Estrada Avenue in the 1960s.

In a metafictional game of sorts, *Becos da memória* opens with a nod to the autobiographical. In a retrospective narrative Maria-Nova, surveys her environs, noting the ambiguity of her locality – the social misery that exists side by side with a sense of a simpler life: “Today the remembrance of that time brings tears to my eyes. We were so poor! Maybe even miserable! How life was simple and yet, how everything was so complicated!” (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 20)<sup>14</sup>. The verb in the past imperfect, the tense of storytelling, highlights the connection between recounting and remembrance, a connection that is also made clear in the title of the book, which associates remembering and space. In Evaristo's text, memory work functions as a geo-experiential cartography. In this manner, *Becos da memória* creates what Nixon terms a “vernacular landscape”, one that is “shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological and surface geological features. A vernacular landscape, although neither monolithic nor undisputed, is integral to the socio-environmental dynamics of community rather than being wholly externalized” (NIXON, 2011, p. 17). Maria-Nova's narrative captures not only the past, the histories of the *favela*'s residents (stories that are also under continual threat of removal, of erasure). Her stories (which we might be reading) allude to the repertoire of dispossession that Afro-Brazilians endured over time.

The superimposition of this historical-cultural trove onto the map of the *favela* transforms the community she describes into a complex symbolic ecosystem. The narrator recognizes the need to communicate the legacy of slavery and resistance, of dispossession and defiance: “maybe I would write this story one day? Maybe she would put onto paper what was written, embedded, engraved on her body, her soul, her mind” (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 138)<sup>15</sup>. The fictional testimony, one that vividly evokes Evaristo's concept of “*escrevivência*” (“lived writing”), captures the “amorphous catastrophes” of multiple forced displacements (beginning with the forced removal of Africans from their native communities) and of poverty, one of the

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<sup>14</sup> “Hoje a recordação daquele tempo me traz lágrimas aos olhos. Como éramos pobres! Miseráveis talvez! Como a vida acontecia simples e como tudo era complicado!”

<sup>15</sup> “quem sabe escreveria esta história um dia? Quem sabe passaria para o papel o que estava escrito, cravado e gravado no seu corpo, na sua alma, na sua mente”.



legacies of these displacements.

The community that *Becos da memória* portrays is both idyllic and a place in which violence assumes manifold expressions. Hunger, physical and sexual abuse, alcoholism are all part of the daily life of the *favela*. As are wonder, love, solidarity and celebration. Stories of suffering are interspersed with joyful episodes such as the *festivals de bola* (ball games) and the *festas juninas* (June parties). These events highlight the conviviality in the favela, the habits of sharing that characterize the social fabric of this place. We learn for example that:

In the *favela* there were young virgin girls that dreamt about their prince charming. There were weddings, parties, bridal gowns and bouquets thrown into the air. There were wood and tin shacks that the bridegroom carefully build for his betrothed. There were dreams that did not fit into shacks, that never became reality. There were daydreams that helped one to live. (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 111)<sup>16</sup>

The deprivation that the residents experience, indicated in this passage by description of the housing (“wood and tin shacks”) is counteracted through the apposition between material scarcity and the richness of imagination (“dreams that did not fit into shacks”) and of affect (“that bridegroom carefully build for his betrothed”). The portrait of the *favela* in *Becos da Memória* is, therefore, complex and focalizes the residents’ rich humanity, their various experiences.

This rich fabric of sociability and of memory is disrupted by the gradual, forced removal of the residents who mourn the loss not only of the houses, but also of other facets of their lives, including the life stories of generations of residents: “Everybody knew that the *favela* was not paradise, but no one wanted to leave. Their work, their survival were close by. What were we going to do in the faraway places to where they were forcing us to move? There were families that had lived there for many years, half a century or longer even” (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 68-9)<sup>17</sup>. The description of the *favela* as a site of memory (“families that had lived there for many years”) suggests an intricate material and symbolic arrangement that both encompasses and transcends the disenfranchisement that emblemizes the residents’ everyday life in the *favela*. The *favela* is not just a geographical terrain. Its cartography encompasses social relations, genealogies, networks of survival. It is, in sum, the “numinous fabric” of everyday and of historical experience. In light of this, the forced displacement from the familiar social-geographic environments reiterates the diasporic experience of many residents who came to the *favela* fleeing a legacy of violence and/or dispossession that transverses generations and geographies.

Emblematic of the imbrication between past and present is the character of Tio Totó. The

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<sup>16</sup> “Havia meninas virgens na favela que sonhavam com o príncipe encantado. Havia casamentos, festas, vestidos de noiva e lançamento do buquê para o ar. Havia barracões de madeira e zinco que o noivo cuidadosamente preparava para a eleita. Havia sonhos que não cabiam em barracos, que não se realizavam jamais. Havia a ilusão para se aguentar a viver”.

<sup>17</sup> “Todos sabiam que a favela não era o paraíso, mas ninguém queria sair. Ali perto estava o trabalho, a sobrevivência de todos. O que faríamos em lugares tão distantes para onde estávamos sendo obrigados a ir? Havia famílias que moravam ali há anos, meio século até, ou mais”.

son of slaves, he seeks to forget the legacy of subjugation that haunts him and his family. He leaves the farm in which his family was forced to labor: “They were leaving. They wanted to forget the stories of slavery – their own and those of their parents. They spent many days surviving in the woods. They remembered pleasant stories of grasslands, of open spaces and bare-skinned men, of lions in faraway lands. They remembered black, steadfast gods” (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 25)<sup>18</sup>. The countryside that Tio Totó’s passes through during journey is juxtaposed to an imaginary landscape. This hybrid scenery intimates both the prospect of a new existence, removed from the specter of bondage, and the inevitable shadows that the past casts on this future. Though Tio Totó can distance himself from the experience of slavery, he cannot erase its personal and collective sequels. The narrative of *Becos da memória* weaves a tapestry of memory in which the characters’ past becomes part of a larger pattern that mingles stories of disenfranchisement and resistance. As suggested by the geographic reference in the title of Evaristo’s novel (“becos”), space organizes this pattern.

The slow violence that saturates the space of the farm, a memento of slavery, stands in contrast to the wide open spaces of unbuild nature. The description of the rural space, with its nostalgic overtones, brings to mind a pastoral vision of nature as an utopian locale. Nonetheless, even though the natural landscape that surrounds Tio Totó and his family elicits transgenerational memories of a time before enslavement and diaspora, it is also a territory that signifies another diaspora and renewed loss. As they cross a river enlarged by the rain, Tio Totó’s first wife and his two small children drown. The tragic crossing and the watery deaths conjure another crossing, that of the Atlantic by enslaved Africans. The journey in this context is both a signifier of a violent loss and the search for another story. This pursuit leads Tio Totó, like other characters in *Becos da memória*, to migrate to the city. This space becomes emblematic of another futurity, one that the subject can construct. Tio Totó imagines that in the city:

New dreams sprouted from Tio Totó’s mind. He came knowing where he would stay.

A friend was awaiting them. He had enough money to buy a shack. He would learn a trade. He would learn how to build a brick home. [...] Here in the capital one must learn everything anew, one must learn a new lifestyle [...] (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 84)<sup>19</sup>

In the city, Tio Totó is able to materialize some of his dreams. His house, once a one bedroom shack, becomes a four bedroom home. Homeownership becomes a metaphor of the subject’s insertion into the city and, by extension, into a national project. James Holston describes how, for dwellers of urban peripheries, homeownership, particularly

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<sup>18</sup> “Tiriam partir, queriam esquecer as histórias de escravidão, suas e de seus pais. Foram dias e dias sobrevivendo pelo mato. Lembravam histórias mais amenas de campo, de vastidão, de homens nus, de leões em terras longínquas. Lembravam-se de deuses negros, reais, constantes”.

<sup>19</sup> “Sonhos novos brotavam na cabeça de Totó. Vinha sabendo onde iria ficar. Um amigo estava esperando por eles. Tinha dinheiro suficiente que dava para comprar um barraco. Iria aprender uma profissão. Aprenderia a fazer casas de tijolos. [...] Aqui na capital carece da gente aprender tudo, da gente aprender um modo novo de viver [...]”.

autoconstruction, “is a measure of both their self-development as persons and their social drama as citizens. It grounds their sense that their achievements in both entitle them to full citizenship rights” (HOLSTON, 2008, p. 115).

However, the spaces that subjects like Tio Totó occupy, and which endow them with a sense of belonging and agency, nonetheless are part of a continuum of marginalization, which, in Evaristo’s text culminate in the forced removal of the residents from the *favela*. As Mike Davis has pointed out, much of the urban development in the global south in the last decades of the twentieth century, was dominated by the growth of slums (DAVIS, 2006, p. 17). Many of these communities are located in environmentally risky or fragile areas.

Evaristo’s novel describes the community as physically precarious – open sewers and perilous spaces that threaten to “devour” the residents. An example is the Buracão (“big hole”), an immense hole in the ground situated in the center of the *favela*:

In the midst of the *favela* there loomed an enormous hole that grew during the rainy season with the continual mudslides. The place was called the *Buracão*. The *Buracão* was large, bigger perhaps than the world. Drunkards and children would fall into it. Though there were no deaths, there were broken necks, legs, arms! (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 119)<sup>20</sup>

The capitalization of the noun “hole” transmutes the pit into a living being that is as much of the social life of the *favela* as the people who periodically fall into it. At the same time, the augmentative form transforms it into an ominous presence. Like the “Firma construtora”, the living hole becomes a metaphor of a structure of disenfranchisement that circumscribes the residents’ lives (“The *Buracão* was large, bigger perhaps than the world”). It emblemizes the lack of adequate infrastructure that defines many low-income communities in Brazil and globally. At the same time, the pit also connotes symbolic disenfranchisement. In this context, the act of falling in the crater, of disappearing, evokes other forms of erasure that the novel touches upon.

## Conclusion

Though a fictional work, *Becos da memória* does conjure the structural deficits that characterize life in many slums of the global south. The community is prone to landslides and the houses, made of recovered, recycled materials, are often destroyed in extreme weather. Inevitably residents lose life and property to these catastrophes. The book also points to the neighborhood’s deficient infrastructure. Homes do not have running water, and dwellers must use public spigots and showers (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 43).

While signs of slow violence are manifest in the physical spaces of the *favela* that *Becos da memória* describes, it is, as Nixon suggests, not a static process. Evaristo’s novel pinpoints

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<sup>20</sup> “No meio da área onde estava situada a favela, havia um buraco imenso que crescia sempre e sempre na época de chuvas com os constantes desbarrancamentos. O local era conhecido por Buracão. O Buracão era grande, maior que o mundo talvez. Ali caíam bêbados e crianças distraídas. Mortes não havia, mas pescoço, pernas, braços quebrados, sim!”

how the forced displacement of the residents is yet other expression of a genealogy of dispossession. *Becos da memória* points towards both toward the material and the social, affective dimension of loss implicit in processes of slow violence.

Though fictional, *Becos da memória* echoes historical processes that reverberate in the contemporary period in the forced removals of underprivileged subjects from their homes as cities engage in infrastructural projects that cater to national and global elites. Recent examples include the eviction of several impoverished communities from the city of Rio de Janeiro as the *carioca* capital prepared for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Nixon advocates for the importance that the output of what he calls “writer-activists” to counteract these, and other examples of forced removals and/or other manifestations of slow violence. For Nixon, writer-activists are able to actualize the processes of slow-violence. The texts of writer-activists achieve this by creatively engaging these goings-on. For Nixon, “The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen” (NIXON, 2011, p. 15).

*Becos da Memória* imaginatively creates a spatial and temporal cartography of the slow violence that Afro-descendants have endured in Brazil. The novel is nevertheless not only a mapping of victimization, but also reveals the strategies of resistance to slow violence. Among these strategies, storytelling occupies a privileged position.

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