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EPISTOLARY ESSAY FOR MACALA:
memory, theory, affectivity and the right to self-determination

ENSAIO EPISTOLAR PARA MACALA:
memória, teoria, afetividade e o direto à autonomeação

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Abstract: This epistolary essay addresses the ancestral figure of Macala, a Black woman photographed by Marc Ferrez in the nineteenth century and renamed by the writer Luciany Aparecida. By writing her a letter, the authors establish a dialogue with Black feminist theorists such as Saidiya Hartman, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Conceição Evaristo. The text starts from Macala's image to reflect on the colonial continuities that traverse Black bodies in diaspora, addressing themes such as erasure, resistance, counter-hegemonic epistemologies, the memory of the seas, and insubmission in the face of necropolitics. Assuming the format of the letter as a literary and theoretical device, the essay weaves memory, theory, and affectivity through writing that honors the legacies of Black women and claims the right to (self) appointment. Macala's clenched fist, a symbol of resistance, becomes the central metaphor of the narrative, invoking the urgency of maintaining the ancestral fire, the voice, and the dignity denied. By employing a spiral narrative—heir to oral traditions and the performance of curvilinear time—the letter proposes a critical reinterpretation of colonial archives, a denunciation of epistemic violence, and a radical affirmation of Black life.
Keywords: epistle; critical fabulation; Black feminism; memory; resistance; Macala.

Ensaio epistolar para Macala:
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Resumo: O presente ensaio epistolar dirige-se à figura ancestral de Macala, mulher negra fotografada por Marc Ferrez no século XIX e rebatizada pela escritora Luciany Aparecida. A partir do gesto de escrever-lhe uma carta, as autoras constroem um diálogo com teóricas feministas negras como Saidiya Hartman, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins e Conceição Evaristo. O texto parte da imagem de Macala para refletir sobre as continuidades coloniais que atravessam os corpos negros em diáspora, abordando temas como apagamento, resistência, epistemologias contra-hegemônicas, a memória dos mares e a insubmissão diante da necropolítica. Assumindo o formato da carta como dispositivo literário e teórico, o ensaio costura memória, teoria e afetividade, em uma escrita que honra os legados de mulheres negras e reivindica o direito à (auto)nomeação. O punho cerrado de Macala, símbolo de resistência, transforma-se em metáfora central da narrativa, invocando a urgência da manutenção do fogo ancestral, da voz e da dignidade negada. Ao elaborar uma narrativa em espiral – herdeira das tradições orais e da performance do tempo curvilíneo –, a carta propõe uma reinterpretação crítica dos arquivos coloniais, uma denúncia da violência epistêmica e uma afirmação radical da vida negra.
Palavras-chave: epístola; fabulação crítica; feminismo negro; memória; resistência; macala.

Salvador, 31 de março de 2025,

Precious and beloved sister Macala,

We hope this letter finds you well and in good health in whatever plane or dimension you may inhabit. In this epistle, we come to share with you a kind of *Sankofa* narration (Brooks; McGee; Schoellman, 2017), as named by our *sistah* Kinitra D. Brooks (Kilomba, 2019). Yes, indeed! This letter-essay was written jointly: two sisters, *comadritas*[1] in and through writing, addressing you above all in an effort to establish a rich and fruitful dialogue with you, sister who offered us so much in so few pages about your passage here on Earth—even though part of that time you were still on the other side of the world, mapped and thus divided/partitioned by the hands and minds of colonizers, with the Indian Ocean[2] washing over your existence. Drawing on what we learned from another of our own, the Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa (2021), we chose to invest in and commit to an epistolary essay format (Nascimento, 2021) for this communication, as throughout these pages we will bring together several theoretical contributions—a kind of catalog of findings and (dis)coveries concerning what has been produced by Black women living, it seems, in uninterrupted and therefore permanent diaspora and exile. This also explains the many footnotes in this lengthy letter to you. Consequently, this communication is also addressed to Luciany Aparecida, author of the chapbook of the same name published by *Círculo de Poemas*, the one who attuned herself to you through the memories of the waters and in the condition of *nepantla* (Anzaldúa, 2002). According to the scholar, *nepantleras* are liminal people who move within and between different worlds and dimensions—a kind of "visionary cultural worker" (Keating, 2021, p. 213).

This long message that we write and dedicate to you, Macala, is also a tribute we humbly offer, conceiving and feeling you as our ancestor and, therefore, our foundation, as understood by another elder of ours, Toni Morrison (1984), in recognition of all that you and those who preceded us had to accomplish so that we might be here today in the present century. Without the efforts you undertook, we would not be here to critically fabulate stories about your existence.

We begin, dear friend, by declaring that we have already advanced on many fronts and that we are eternally grateful to all of you who came before us and turned the few existing cracks into wide and multiple roads, enabling us for some time now to occupy spaces and places once unimaginable for our elders. We concur with Walidah Imarisha (2020) when she states:

1 The term was coined by Gloria Anzaldúa to refer to the friends who gathered with her to write a variety of texts.

2 Based on clues in the narrative, all indications suggest that her country of origin was Mozambique (Maputo). In addition to the note following the narrative on the origin and meaning of the name Macala (p. 19), there are at least two passages in the chapbook that cite the Indian Ocean as a reference—waters that border this country in southern Africa. They are, respectively: "[...] (there) flat light over the Indian Ocean [...]" (p. 8) and "From the townhouse,/ *on the day of my birth*,/ I see the flat light over the Indian Ocean/ and I am happy" (p. 11, emphasis added; our translation).

> We are the dreams of enslaved Black folks, who were told it was "unrealistic" to imagine a day when they were not called property. Those Black people refused to confine their dreams to realism, and instead they dreamed us up. Then they bent reality, reshaped the world, to create us (Imarisha, 2020, p. 8; our translation).

Let us begin, then, by updating you: beyond the Atlantic forever stained red and black by so much blood shed through countless forced crossings, other waters have entered our routes of escape. Other—and ever more fragile—vessels (almost always rafts and small boats) now cross different seas in search of survival and of dignified conditions for (sur)viving. Yes, our dear one, fugitivity (Moten; Harney, 2024) has been the keynote of our existence—we, Black bodies conceived as the "afterlife of slavery," as named by Saidiya Hartman (2020; 2021). Countless shipwrecks have left a trail of victims; bodies, even those of children, are found floating in the ocean or carried by the waters to the shore. Black people—and now also people of different backgrounds and countries—board boats that cannot hold even a fraction of those on board, driven by desperation. Any possibility is grasped with faith. Yet after the wrecks, they are quickly forgotten, ignored by nearly everyone. They become—and produce—what Christina Sharpe (2023) calls "the wake." She writes: "[...] I am interested in how we imagine ways of knowing that past, in excess of the fictions of the archive, but not only that. I am interested, too, in the ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, that past not yet past, in the present." (Sharpe, 2023, p. 33; our translation). She continues in her incisive thesis: "[...] the wake produces Black death and trauma—'the violence […] precedes and exceeds Blackness'—we, Black people, wherever we are, still produce in, for, and through the wake an insistence on existence: we echo Black life in the wake" (Sharpe, 2023, p. 29; our translation).

For the above-mentioned theory, the wake will be understood as "the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow" (Sharpe, 2023, p. 12; our translation). And the wake, in turn, is understood as "the state of wakefulness; consciousness. It was with this sense of wakefulness as consciousness that most of my family lived an awareness of itself as, and in, the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation" (Sharpe, 2023, p. 17; our translation).

Always the Kalunga, right, sister? The sea, for so long a cemetery for our people, since the times of colonization/enslavement, with a hunger that seems unceasing, and therefore, it appears, impossible to appease. The Door of No Return, as a place (or space) far beyond the geographical (Brand, 2022), increasingly present in our existences. It is not possible to go back. What we left in our soils of origin no longer exists. Only dust and memories of other times remain, without invaders. No one can tear these memories from us. We carry them in our DNA, and for that very reason, we dare to critically fabulate.

In this sense, for Brand (2022):

> There are maps to the Door of No Return. The physical door. They are well worn, gone over by cartographer after cartographer, rendered from Ptolemy's *Geographia*

> to orbital photographs and magnetic field imaging satellites. But to the Door of No Return which is illuminated in the consciousness of Blacks in the Diaspora there are no maps. This door is not mere physicality. It is a spiritual location. It is also perhaps a psychic destination. Since leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however deeply buried. There is, as it says, no way in; no return (Brand, 2022).

Very close to the exercise carried out by Luciany Aparecida, to whom we also dedicate and send this letter, and who is copied here, since it was through her that we were able to access and know your story, Macala; we allow ourselves to undertake a journey to the century of our dispersion and thus find you again, even if within the wakes, the only possible condition for reaching you, *dengo nosso* (our dear).

Luciany, a contemporary of ours, in the healthy, necessary, and urgent exercise of critically fabulating (Borges, 2021) an existence for you—one that goes beyond the frozen image manufactured in a photographic studio, which possibly intended to sell an unreal image of a country that resisted as much as it could, postponing the end of the dreadful process of enslavement—invites and summons us to listen carefully and fully to the possible narrative about your existence.

Marc Ferrez, in 1885, thirty years after the Malê Revolt, made a record of you that would travel across different geographies over two centuries, but he named you in a style very common during the colonization period, calling you "*Mulher negra da Bahia*" (Black woman from Bahia), attempting to confine and erase you in all your subjectivity. As a body meant for use, a name was not something conceived for such existences.

Image 1 - Black woman from Bahia

Source: Marc Ferrez, 1885[3]

3 Ferrez, Marc. Mulher negra da Bahia, 1885. Available from: https://brasilianafotografica.bn.gov.br/brasiliana/handle/20.500.12156.1/2570 . Accessed on: Feb. 10, 2026.

You must follow our journey (isn't that right, sister?), both theoretical and literary, the most recent productions, and among them the proposal of Critical Fabulation elaborated by the Black American historian Saidiya Hartman (2020; 2021; 2022), which consists, very synthetically, of: i) revisiting the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence; ii) imagining characters who were silenced in history, speaking with their own voices; iii) attempting to fill the gaps and offer closure in which there is none. In general terms, it is about "the possibilities of speculative writing and the ethical limits when dealing with historical documents" (Borges, 2021; our translation).

Ultimately, it is about a possibility, here a literary one, of giving you back (and/or creating) a name and, even if very briefly, the history of your lineage, of your soil of origin. In this narrative of speculative tone and intention, it is possible to notice your pride and determination in sharing your memories with us—your readers, mostly composed of your peers, your Black sisters scattered and (re)united by the diasporic waters.

Enslaved was a condition imposed on you, but even in the face of cumulative violence, they could not subtract/tear away your agency as a subject in the world. The attire that froze your body in time and space is one of those clues, and we will return to comment on that aspect later, alright?

A name is a fundamental and foundational element in the processes of identity construction, and you and Luciany know this, right, sister? The author, before the COVID-19 pandemic, made use of what she called aesthetic signatures, which according to her:

> When inventing names, heteronyms, I do not merely elaborate a work of literary creativity. Because, in this stale context of colonial violence (patriarchalism, machismo, racism, homophobia, and transphobia), I am not allowed to be merely creative. I always have to be creative and something more. Thus, I say that I perform, with the signatures, a countercolonial theatrical creation. And not a heteronym marking a Fernando Pessoa-like tradition (Aparecida, [2021]; our translation).

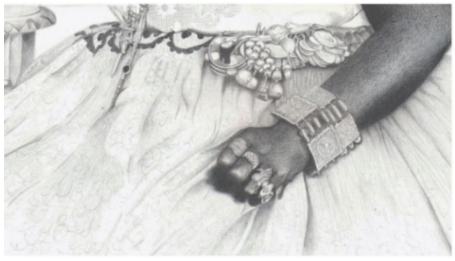
For the author, "the desire was to create a language performance. A text work. I created the signatures to associate myself with the tradition of African-American and Indigenous women, who are women who rewrite their names out of a desire for life" (Protazio, 2021; our translation).

With the advent of the pandemic and, we believe, facing the inescapable finitude of life, the author reviewed her position on signing the works she produced and politically decided to change the posture she had exercised up to that point. According to Edma de Góis, a sensitive, competent researcher highly dedicated to analyzing Luciany Aparecida's writing, "isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity to rethink the narrative voices she had created up to that point, and the need to write in a third register, neither melancholic like Margô, nor violent like Ruth, but with a 'desire for enchantment,' under her own name" (Gois, [2022]; our translation).

Can you see, dear sistah, that the author, in the condition of nepantla, tuned in with you, claiming for herself and for you the right to (self)naming/(self)definition, proposed by so many of

our elders—such as Audre Lorde (2019) and Patricia Hill Collins (2018)—the act of (re)naming oneself based on references other than those imposed by patriarchy? According to Aparecida (2024), in the same interview granted to Nathállia Protazio, it is about binding oneself to another tradition, and therefore the notion of heteronym would not suffice. Absorbed in the image captured by Marc Ferrez, Macala, Luciany becomes even more intrigued by the fact that her fist is firmly clenched. What could she be guarding with such determination and strength? And so the connection is established. And it is precisely this firmly clenched fist that is the focal point of the artwork by visual artist Carolina Vidal Alves, titled *Résistance I (*Negreiros, 2021), reproduced below

Image 2 - *Résistance* I, by Carolina Vidal Alves, *Afrofuturista* series



Source: Negreiros, 2021[4]

Begin by wishing to hear the story you selected to present to all of us, the readers. Listen, also, to your own name and the passage so that you can introduce and narrate yourself. Neusa Santos Souza (1983), in the classic *Tornar-se negro* (Becoming Black), begins by stating that "one of the ways to exercise autonomy is to possess a discourse about oneself" (p. 17; our translation), thus breaking the silence imposed for so many years, practicing both the exercise of "talking back" (hooks, 2019a) and that of "the transformation of silence into language and action," in accordance with Audre Lorde (2019). It is Lorde (2019), in her homonymous essay, who asks: "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?" (p. 53; our translation). And she further declares: "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" (Lorde, 2019, p. 54; our translation).

It is clear, therefore, that the exposure of feelings and the sharing of findings and (un) coverings ultimately strengthen the sisterhood (Evaristo, 2018; 2021) that we, Black women in permanent diaspora, have woven for so long. We have the mission to carry forward the trailblazing that all of you who preceded us accomplished over the centuries, making our occupation of strategic places today possible and real—places that were unimaginable to you in your respective historical periods, as Imarisha (2000) signaled and which we shared earlier.

4 The drawing titled *Résistance I* (part of the studies for her *Afrofuturista* series) by visual artist Carolina Vidal Alves reproduces a detail of Ferrez's photograph, attributing symbols and forms of resistance to the clenched fist and the adornments composed of elements from Afro-Brazilian religions, according to Negreiros (2021).

In the latest novel published by Conceição Evaristo, titled *Canção para ninar menino grande*, at the end of the work, the author presents the notion of *confraria* (sisterhood). She says: "We are all alone, but our sisterhood prevents us from feeling lonely. We are, and we stand, with one another. And when the emptiness in our chest torments us, we do not surrender to despair; we share the ancestral pain that exists within each of us" (Evaristo, 2018, pp. 122-123; our translation). We conceive this notion as very close to Alice Walker's (2024) idea of womanism, to hooks' ideas of "Communion" (2024) and "Sisters of the Yam" (2023), to Kilomba's (2019) concept of sistah, already presented in this missive, and to Mombaça's (2019) proposition "in the breaking. Together," among others.

It is also necessary to mention, sister, that when we insist on bringing so many theoretical-conceptual contributions into a letter—a genre that usually carries such an intimate tone—it is out of a desire and opportunity to organize and present in this missive, as well, the great deal we have produced in this dimension, which broadly and powerfully contemplates studies on our Black female bodies in uninterrupted diaspora: the scattering and (re)union of our people, as previously explained.

And in this inevitable and essentially curvilinear, spiral time (Martins, 2021), we renew and update our repertoires, so that perhaps we can thus expand our legacies and possibilities for *fugitivities*, even though we are physically and emotionally exhausted by such conditions. We bring to you, our ancestor, multiple and diverse legacies forged by our sisters. The hope is that, through such sharing, we may gain more strength and conditions to advance toward emancipation and empowerment, envisioning other routes, coves, and clearings toward the *Igbo Mimo* (Sacred Forest). We must value and enforce the continuous effort of our female elders. It is, mainly, through this condition of time that *rememory*[5] (Morrison, 2021) and the return to meet with you, dear sistah, become possible, even if we must resort to processes of fictionalization and/or fabulation to do so.

These memories, born from the waters, are impregnated in our imaginary. They overflow and empty out, above all, into our literary legacy. Strongly present in our poetry collections, novels, and the most diverse genres, we keep trying to symbolize the inconceivable, the unspeakable; perhaps, or certainly, that is why we resort to the fictionalization of such events, so that, perhaps, in a vain attempt at working through, we might advance beyond the pain, as hooks (2016) advocates and prophesies.

Poetry collections entirely made of water are updated countless times—as we can note in the most recent productions by authors like Heleine Fernandes (2024), with Voltar para casa; Luna Vitrolira (2024), with the book Memórias têm águas espessas; Lilian Almeida (2024), with

5 For Toni Morrison, the notion of rememory is first made explicit in the novel Beloved (1987), only to be properly theorized later in the essays that comprise the work The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations (2019). Very loosely based on the author's idea, it refers to memories that irrupt repeatedly, without our planning or desire, reproducing events of a traumatic nature. For further details, see the dialogue between mother and daughter, Sethe and Denver, in the aforementioned novel.

the work *Fecundo a terra enquanto choro*; not to mention Lubi Prates (2018), with *Um corpo negro*; Ana Fátima (2019), with *Já fui água um dia*; and Juciane Reis, with *Umbilicus*, among others. They remain haunted by memories of crossings they did not make, but which nevertheless echo and reverberate within their bodies and existences, beloved Macala. It must also be said that this poetic current is voluminous and is not exhausted by the works mentioned here. It long precedes these titles, as exemplified by the wonderful poet Fátima Trinchão (2020), belonging to another generation, who also chooses the *kalunga* and the crossing as themes. Not to mention some poems authored by our doyenne Conceição Evaristo in the book *Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos*, such as Recordar é preciso, *A roda dos não ausentes*, *Certidão de óbito*, and *Apesar das acontecências do banzo*, among others. The movement is constant and uninterrupted, and it never ceases to increasingly swell its banks.

We list these titles in a kind of delicate and sophisticated reliquary, beloved, so that you may clearly see that over here, the fist remains clenched in resistance, opening only to record—some in a literary vein—these pasts that stubbornly refuse to pass. Regarding this aspect, Kilomba (2019) helps us understand this phenomenon of stubborn and painful memories, when she declares that "Colonialism is a wound that has never been treated. It always hurts, sometimes it gets infected, and other times it bleeds" (Almeida, 2019; our translation). In the work Plantation Memories, she asserts that" the colonial past was 'memorized' in the sense that it 'was not forgotten.' Sometimes we prefer not to remember, but, in truth, what cannot be done is to forget" (Kilomba, 2019, p. 213; our translation). One notes, in this way, Macala, that it is a constant struggle between remembering and desiring to forget, and remembering without being able or managing to forget, which torments so many of our generations. This generates traumas—the most diverse, almost always transgenerational—and often also severe, and sometimes irremediable, psychological illnesses, beloved sister. It is Hartman in the work *Lose Your Mother*, in the suggestively named chapter *The Book of the Dead*, who validates all that has been said so far when she reminds us that "It is said that if you look at the sea long enough, scenes from the past come back to life. It is said that 'the sea is history.' And 'the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave'" (p. 173; our translation).

Yet another record of you has been discovered, also belonging to the Marc Ferrez collection and this time alongside another sister, in the same imposed condition of enslavement. The attire you wear, Macala, is very similar to the first image that generated the narrative produced by Luciany Aparecida. The care in dressing is the same; the sophistication and elegance are also maintained. Your countenance, your performance in letting yourself be photographed, is equally very similar. Inevitably stern, since you had no reason to smile—especially if we take into account the absurd social and historical context and the treatment imposed on us, Black women, something that reverberates to this day throughout the diaspora.

A little further on, we can access yet another record by Marc Ferrez, from the same year, 1885, in which your image is present, my sister Macala, this time titled in the plural "*Negras da Bahia*," always reinforcing the anonymity of our existences.

We make available below, dear sister, so that you can more clearly understand the outcomes of those moments when we suspected that, even if one could be a *forra* (freedwoman) and have her own savings—and therefore, perhaps, own some property—we knew well that this was not the reality for women like us in that historical context. Can you believe that they even went so far as to draft legislation seeking to control our clothing? Yes, my friend, our haughtiness profoundly bothered the oppressors, to the point that they took the trouble to legislate against such aspects. We reproduce, below, two pieces of this legislation for your knowledge:

Image 3 - *Negras da Bahia*, by Marc Ferrez, Bahia, c. 1885. Gilberto Ferrez Collection, IMS Archive

Source: Negreiros, 2021

Let us, then, get to know the aforementioned legislation, as well as requests for legal measures in the same direction and regarding the same "demand":

> In all of this state of Brazil, in none of its captaincies, may African and Creole women, enslaved and freed, in the condition of merchants, wear dresses of noble silk fabrics, nor use cambric or holland cloth, with or without lace, for any use, nor gold or silver trimmings on their dresses, or any luxury object! (Excerpt from a royal charter, an imperial law issued on February 20, 1696; our translation).
>
> Most Illustrious and Excellent Sir. The Directing Board of the Commercial Association, having devoted itself to the *beautification* of the squares neighboring its building, *finds itself thwarted in the efforts it continually makes for the maintenance of cleanliness and policing thereof*, and among other obstacles it encounters, there is one that the Board cannot remove by itself because it depends on Police action: it is the gathering of Black *ganhadeiras* (wage-earning market women) and sellers of sweets, fruits, and other goods on the steps of the square's building. Not only do they interrupt the transit of all the persons who must go up or down the streets frequented by Merchants, but in the afternoon, after the House closes, the gathering increases to such a point that it ends in shouting accompanied by swear words that are not only impolite but rather offensive to morals and decency, in a place surrounded by the *dwellings of honest families* who are often forced to retreat from their windows. What the Board asks of Your Excellency are measures so that these gatherings may be dispersed by Police Agents [...] (APEBa – Public Archive of the State of Bahia, Section of Colonial and Provincial Archives, Police, Commercial Association of the Bahia Square, 1870. Bundle 6178, emphasis added; our translation)[6].

6 We became aware of this document from: SANTOS, Isis Freitas. "Gosta dessa baiana?" Crioulas e outras baianas

Can you perceive, Macala, how our existence, even in such adverse conditions, was full of dignity? They, the colonizers, could not subtract it. Our haughtiness bothered them to the point of generating documents seeking to legislate on such aspects. Do you notice how your haughtiness, always present in your countenance at the most diverse moments, impacts us and still influences us today? Our *àṣẹ* (vital energy) was always present in abundance, always plentiful. A distinct notion, but one we conceive as equivalent given its potency, is what Audre Lorde (2019) calls the erotic, which profoundly distinguishes and distances itself from the notion used by common sense for said term. According to the theorist, "the erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire [...]" (Lorde, 2019, p. 68; our translation).

And seeking to mend the threads that compose this letter-mosaic-reliquary, Macala, we are reminded, almost compulsorily, of Luciany Aparecida's dramaturgical text—Joana Mina—which makes use of resources similar to those used by us, the senders of this letter: an archive backed and sustained by Black feminist epistemology, elaborated and defended by Collins (2018), which, among other points, establishes "lived experience as a criterion of meaning" (p. 148; our translation), a notion that, for us, is very similar to Evaristo's (2020) proposal of *escrevivência*, a writing that will always belong to the collective order, "a writing of us."

Still regarding the image that allowed all this unfolding—including your connection with Luciany Aparecida, an author committed to researching and writing about our female ancestors, who has been standing out in the Brazilian scene with works that choose Black female protagonism and the love between these same women—we wish to inform you, Macala, that a third photographic record of you was found in another archive, this time in the postcards of Rodolpho Lindemann (1880-1920), a French photographer, with the title J. Creoula. Let us, then, get to know this other photographic record, through another lens, from another photographer:

nos cartões postais de Lindemann (1880-1920). 2014. Dissertação (Mestre em História) - Programa de Pós-Graduação em História, Salvador, 2014. Available from: https://repositorio.ufba.br/handle/ri/18776 Accessed on: Feb. 10, 2026.

Image 4 - J. Creoula, postcard by Rodolpho Lindemann, Bahia, c. 1880-1900. Gregório de Mattos Foundation Archive

Source: Negreiros, 2021

> At this moment in our communication, some questions become inevitable: was the "trade" of being a model remunerated? It seems there was some kind of agency, even considering the slavery period, in a sort of relatively active negotiation and participation by you, our sisters, in this act of letting yourselves be photographed. What screams the loudest to us, the senders of this letter, is the clothing and adornments, signaling a kind of co-creation of these images, as argued by Hanayrá Negreiros (2021)—fashion researcher and professor, Master in Science of Religion from PUC-SP, and columnist at ELLE Brasil—and what Manuela Carneiro da Cunha will call "dar-se a ver" (giving oneself to be seen) (Negreiros, 2021).

You, Macala, intrigue so many with your somber look, "two cowrie shells of flesh" (p. 9; our translation), and clenched fist that managed to dribble chronological time and today, in *con(tra) temporaneidade*[7] (Carrascosa, 2014), continue to provoke the imagination of your descendants, as we can note in the work of Estúdio Roncó (2020), a page on the social network Instagram that used Artificial Intelligence to promote the movement of your image, bringing you even closer to us. According to them: "this is another animated art piece from the #EbóAnimado series that seeks to bring to life historical images of important women in the creation of popular commerce" (our translation). Having the possibility to see you move, albeit artificially, gives us a "good scare," such is the proximity provoked, almost restoring you to life, given the sensation the movement elicits.

In the collage made on the page Aqualtune Colagem (Instagram), distinct times (are they really?) are superimposed, as we can note in the image below:

7 A wordplay with counter and contemporaneity in Portuguese.

Image 5 – Aqualtune (Collage)

Source: Aqualtune, 2020

If we decided to linger on the images-unfoldings of the original photo, it is because we understand that your strength crosses times and continues to impact us pressingly. It is as if the sentence uttered by you and sensitively channeled by Luciany Aparecida—through critical fabulation (Hartman, 2008), the traces, and the wake (Sharpe, 2016) left by your image—gained body and movement and, in a seemingly endless *ginga*, would not let us forget your arduous existence when you were forcefully brought here to Brazilian lands. Your command "lift up your head" (p. 10; our translation) has been taken very seriously by us, who came after and from you, *sistah*. It is you, through the *orí* (head) of Aparecida, who utters the following words—which we believe, in the sense of drawing our attention to your agency as a subject, the owner of your history, even while experiencing the dismal imposed condition of an enslaved woman:

> I am not in this photography studio, / I am prior to this nation cartography of yours / the lighting that recorded this image of mine, / which your silence admires, / is not my longing / they are our crevices / and oh how it hurts / I extend my clenched fist and place in your hand / the lit Macala (Aparecida, 2022, p. 12; our translation).

Or even when she says:

> Macala is the mineral of my tongue / *where I rest my strength*, / I *keep longing* among my rings, / *I sustain faith in the volume of my skirt*, / in the symbols of my *balangandã* / iron axes for sculpting courage / *scream* in my ears: / hold your head high (Aparecida, 2022, p. 10, emphasis added; our translation).

If Rugendas and Debret relentlessly populate our imaginary, violating us in the most diverse ways, reproducing, time and again, in so many media and vehicles, the violence present in the period of enslavement, the archives presented here (Marc Ferrez and *Rodolpho Lindemann)* only update and reinforce such feelings. What soothes and comforts us is knowing that even as they tried to turn them into nothing, reinforcing the idea that they were pieces, things, rendering them anonymous, something in the expression of all of you touches and captivates us to the point of needing to unfold, to tell/fabulate your histories and existences, but this time with the extreme and non-negotiable care of no longer reproducing the scenes of violence.

A quick and perspicacious look at these archives reveals without much difficulty—at least to trained, sensitive, and astute Black looks (hooks, 2019b)—details of the agency of the photographed women, whether in the scope of facial expressions or reinforced by the garments worn, which make it explicit that non-Black people were not equipped to reproduce with such perfection certain things that are so ours, such as turbans, among others.

In the almost always vain attempt to stop being haunted by "intrusive colonial memories" (Kilomba, 2019, p. 219), and precisely due to this character, they tend to return without any warning and at the slightest sign of constant triggers, even after so much time has passed. The plantation spiral (Miranda, 2018) places us, again and always, in the whirlpool and kaleidoscope of situations very close to those you experienced, *alafiando* (confirming) Jurandir Freire Costa (1983) when, in the preface to the classic and aforementioned *Tornar-se negro*, he declares that "to be Black is to be constantly, continuously, and cruelly violated, without pause or rest, by a double injunction: that of embodying the body and the Ego ideals of the white subject and of refusing, denying, and annulling the presence of the Black body" (p. 2; our translation).

Kilomba (2008) also signals that "[…] our history haunts us because it was not properly buried. Writing is therefore a way of resurrecting a traumatizing collective experience, and burying it properly [...]" To write, to poetize, to fictionalize, to *escreViver* (write and live), to fabulate, to perform, to sing, to dance—poor us, Macala, were it not for our rich and diverse Black art to alleviate the sorrow and distance us from succumbing. For us, Black women, you know well, Macala, "poetry is not a luxury" (Lorde, 2009), but has always been a "revelatory distillation of experience" (Lorde, 2019, p. 46; our translation).

We absolutely agree with our Chicana comadrita Anzaldúa (2000) when she theorizes about the power of writing for us "women of color":

> Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I can and that I will write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. I will write about the unsaid, without caring for the gasp of outrage of the censor and the audience. *Finally I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing* (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 232, emphasis added; our translation).

Luciany Aparecida's noble and purely audacious act of critically fabulating her existence restores not only her so-outraged dignity but also returns hope to us in this *Sankofacation*[8]. And

8 Turning the Akan proverb—which states "it is never too late to go back and fetch what you left behind"—into an action verb.

taking advantage of the fact that we are talking about Black art, for us, the authors of this letter, intertextuality was inevitable, especially from your repeated call for us to hold Macala, a burning coal, with the poem by Sonia Sanchez, an African-American poet, written in the mid-90s and still so current. She speaks about the importance of locating the fire that dwells in each of us and passing it on. She deals, therefore, with the responsibility of not letting it go out. Let us hear her cry:

> Catch the Fire
>
> (Sometimes I wonder:/What to say to you now/in the soft afternoon air as you/ hold us all in a single death?)/I say—/ Where is your fire?/ I say—/ Where is your fire?/ You got to find it and pass it on./ You got to find it and pass it on/ from you to me from me to her from her/ to him from the son to the father from the/ brother to the sister from the daughter to/ the mother from the mother to the child./ Where is your fire? I say where is your fire?/ Can't you smell it coming out of our past?/ The fire of living...not dying/ The fire of loving...not killing/ The fire of Blackness...not gangster shadows./ Where is our beautiful fire that gave light/ to the world?/ The fire of pyramids;/ The fire / that burned through the holes of/ slaveships and made us breathe;/ The fire that made guts into chitterlings;/ The fire that took rhythms and made jazz;/ The fire of sit-ins and marches that brought us/ past barren borders;/ The fire that took street talk and made/ Imhotep raps./ Where is your fire, the torch of life/ full of Nzingha and Nat Turner and Garvey/ and DuBois and Fannie Lou Hamer and Martin/ and Malcolm and Mandela. / Sister/Sistah Brother/Brotha Come/Come/ CATCH THE FIRE...DON'T KILL/ HOLD THE FIRE...DON'T KILL/ LEARN THE FIRE...DON'T KILL/ BE THE FIRE...DON'T KILL/ Catch the fire and burn with eyes/ that see our souls:/ WALKING./ SINGING./ BUILDING./ LAUGHING./ LEARNING./ LOVING./ TEACHING./ BEING./ Hey. Brotha/Brother. Sistah/Sister./ Here is my hand./ Catch the fire...and live./ live./ livelivelive./ livelivelive./ live./ live (Sanchez, 1995; our translation).

The poem "Catch the Fire" is a powerful call to reflection on the identity, the historical struggle, and the resistance of Black people, highlighting legacies of suffering and overcoming. It addresses transgenerational legacies and traumas, which are passed from generation to generation as a cycle of pain, but also of resistance and strength. Fire here symbolizes the flame of life, of resistance, and of memory.

The healing of these traumas is possible, but it requires a continuous process of recognition, acceptance, and transformation. Writing and reflecting on these themes, as suggested in the poem, are essential steps for healing; they allow us to rescue historical memory, value achievements, and resignify suffering, creating paths for emotional and social reparation. The healing process is underway, especially when we engage in narratives that bring these legacies to the surface and seek, at the same time, to offer light and reconciliation.

Heading toward the end of this lengthy missive, beloved Macala and Luciany, we wish to thank you, once again and always, for not letting us forget our legacies and, with them, also our responsibilities in passing on the fire of Macala, a lit coal, perpetuating the exercise of opening paths for the generations that will succeed us. We long, with all the love and admiration directed to you, our elder, that you may enjoy some peace and well-living wherever you are at this moment, in this

other time (is it?). The "shared inner connection" proposed by Lorde (2019, p. 71; our translation) in her essay "Uses of the Erotic" was what made this circle possible with Aparecida, with you, with us, the senders of this long letter, and with all the sistah who at some point have accessed and will access the critical fabulation elaborated by Luciany, as well as her image in the most diverse media and vehicles. It is so constant, recurrent, and present that we inevitably end up creating bonds with you, our beloved. You affectively and definitively populate our imaginary.

Since Lorde (2019) is one of the pillars of the writing of this letter, we risk, without fear, bringing her up again—without fear of tiring you, Macala, Luciany, and even our sisters who may later access this document—when she provokes and summons us to always think of other ways to keep the fire and the coal burning. She says:

> If what we need to dream, to drive our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core—the fountain—of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds. For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt - of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7 A.M., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead - while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibilities and strengths (Lorde, 2019, p. 49; our translation).

Let us continue together, firm in the desire and the opportunity for a world in which our existence is experienced fully and with dignity, but this, as we have known for quite some time, will never be offered; it will always be a non-negotiable pursuit, the fruit of struggle and conquest. Your part is done. It remains for us not to let the fire brought by Sonia Sanchez (1985) go out, nor Macala, the lit coal brought by you and Luciany, united as sisters. They must remain lit so that, possessing them, we can continue in the struggle for better days, times, and eras in which *dororidade* (shared pain) (Piedade, 2017; our translation) is no longer the keynote of/in our journeys. May womanism thrive increasingly, and may the sisterhood be strengthened on every front. May it also be possible to reach moments in which fugitivity gives way to the possibility of permanence, if that is our desire. À*ṣẹ!!*

Stay with all our love and admiration!

From your sistah and comadritas,
Livia and Hildália

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