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Jene Watson-Aifah

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JENÉ WATSON-AIFAH

Escrava Anastácia Speaks

I am the silence that is incomprehensible
and the idea whose remembrance is frequent . . .
I am the hearing which is attainable to everyone
and the speech which cannot be grasped.
I am the one below
and they come up to me.
I am the mute who does not speak
and great is my multitude of words.

—From “The Thunder: Perfect Mind”
The Nag Hammadi Library

People from Espirito Santo to Pernambuco and all points in between tell stories about me, Miraculous Anastacia. I am the color of pecan shells, have eyes like blue fire and lived before Crown Law permitted the *crianças da África* to wear shoes. I inhabit the back room that you avoid in your night dreams and flutter in the belfry of your ancestral memory.

Minha historia? Some say that I am a *nagô* from Nigeria or an Angolana who saw my destiny when I gazed into the domain of the Lady of Seas; my eyes responded by taking the same hue. Then there are ones who insist that I am *brasileira pura*, born on 12 May in Minas Gerais to a Bantu queen as young and green as a plantain sucker, and a Moorish Lusitanian who oversaw the business of the *fazenda*. Others count me as a chimera that sprang from the idle mind of a father rather than having come through the open flesh of a mother.

No matter which of the tales about me is true *meu bem*, Carnaval revelers sing jubilant *enredos* in my honor. Umbanda devotees have inducted me

into the pantheon of *pretos velhos*, for yes, I am old as Earth, dark as a void, and devoted as this name ascribes. The maids of Rio and São Paulo and the lovely whores of Salvador can tell my story as if it were their own. For like them, my body has been used more times than I care to count.

No symbols of my being stand atop Dois Irmãos or Corcovado Mountain for all the world to see. It is to the humble altars of Olaria, Madureira, and Vaz Lobo that the faithful tread when they want to bend their knees to me. Laying chrysanthemums and pleas for answers to their problems near the head of my statue or tucking them into picture frames holding my image, they intone their prayers:

Blessed Dark Mother
You are so pure and noble
That God took you to heaven
Giving you power to cure,
Grant peace
And perform limitless
Miracles.

Anastacia we ask you
To look after us,
Protect us.
Hold us in your warm embrace.
Look upon us with
Mercy and tenderness.
Protect us from those who
Seek to bring harm to us.*

Cradling their heads against my full bosom I say, “Hush, children. Hush,” with my heart, not my mouth. A blessed saint they call me. Without a word, I collect their broken hearts and hopes and set about mending them. I listen and never interrupt because I cannot. This muzzle and thick gold ring around my neck wed me to silence and rub my skin bloody raw.

Não meu bem, I don’t sing or speak with tongue against teeth and am not sure that I ever will. I have learned that silence can be turned into its own language, and I dance my story in the *congada*, embroider it onto the shawls that Sinha wears to mass, mix it into *canjica* porridge and sprinkle it on top of *couve* leaves like toasted manioc.

Inside of my suffering I have found some sweetness. I have borne lovely daughters and sons, ones truly blessed in that they have strong voices *pra gritar*. To shout. To shout. Among them are Alma, for she is my soul. Cora, who is my heart. Vida, who holds the shards of my life. Luz, my little keeper of light. And Alvorecer who reminds me that I can, if I choose, live to see dawn. They seek to break my silence with picks, files, iron cutters, and keys. These children want to know what lies deep beneath. Don't you?

NOTES

Angolana- a woman from Angola

Canjica- sweet hominy porridge

Congada- Afro-Brazilian dance to celebrate the holidays of Nossa Senhora do Rosario and São Benedito

Couve- collard greens or kale

Crianças da Africa- children of Africa

Dois Irmãos (Two Brothers) and *Corcovado*- two mountains in the coveted South Zone of Rio de Janeiro

Enredo- "theme," in this case sambas *enredos*, the story-songs performed by samba schools

Escrava- female slave

Fazenda- plantation

Meu bem- term of endearment

Minha historia- my history, my side of the story

Pretos Velhos- "old blacks" immortalized in folklore and religion

Nagô- belonging to the Yoruba nation

Não- no

Sinha- slaveholder's wife

* translated from the back of a prayer card