

*Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, Cultural Inquiry, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 247–76

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## Representing the World, Weathering its End

Arthur Bispo do Rosário's Ecology of the Ship

CITE AS:

Marlon Miguel, 'Representing the World, Weathering its End: Arthur Bispo do Rosário's Ecology of the Ship', in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, Cultural Inquiry, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 247–76 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17\\_12](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17_12)>

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**ABSTRACT:** This chapter explores the intrinsic relationship between weather/weathering and the imaginary of the sea, which features in the work of artist Arthur Bispo do Rosário. Bispo was a black man who spent most of his life in psychiatric institutions. There is an important interplay between his psychotic deliriums and the production of hundreds of objects, many of them ships or forms that relate to the sea. These objects open up a discussion on decoloniality as they are embedded with marks left by the transatlantic slave trade.

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# Representing the World, Weathering its End

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### PRE SCRIPTUM

If one looks at the definition of the word 'weather', one will find an intrinsic relation to the sea and the ship.<sup>1</sup> 'Weather' is, on the one hand, a noun that refers to 'the state of the atmosphere at a particular place and time', and, on the other, a verb, meaning:

1. to expose to open air and, therefore, to begin a process of transformation or alteration due to 'long exposure to the atmosphere'
2. 'to bear up against and come safely through', commonly referred to a ship coming 'safely through a storm' ('the sturdy boat had

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1 I would like to acknowledge the support of some people that made this text possible. First of all, the team of the Museu Bispo do Rosário Arte Contemporânea, in particular, the curator Ricardo Resende for authorizing the publication and sending the images of Bispo's works, as well as the coordinator for education and curatorship of the Museum, Diana Kolker. The latter kindly received me in the Museum in November 2019 and was a crucial interlocutor for writing this text. I thank also Tania Rivera for the essential exchanges around Bispo's work, as well as Eleonora Fabião and Márcio Seligmann-Silva for sending me their papers, which are quoted in this chapter. Finally, I thank Delfina Cabrera and Claudia Peppel for their crucial commentaries and for the discussions around this piece during the last year.

weathered the storm well’); ‘to make good, bad, etc. weather of a ship’; to behave well or ill in a storm. And then, by extension and, more metaphorically, ‘to live through a difficult situation or a problem,’ ‘to undergo or endure the action of the elements.’<sup>2</sup>

Etymologically, ‘weather’ comes from the old English *weder* (air, sky, breeze, storm, tempest) and the Proto-Germanic *wedra* (wind, weather). In the seventeenth century, it was associated with the idea of ‘coming through safely’ and often with ‘a ship riding out a storm.’ In nautical use, it appears also as an adjective, meaning ‘toward the wind’ (opposed thus to ‘lee’). An expression such as ‘under the weather,’ for example, also comes from nautical vocabulary and before evolving to the connotation it carries today of feeling unwell, it originally expressed the action of going down, below, under the deck and away from the elements. Later, in the course of the eighteenth century, ‘weather’ gets tied to exposure as a metaphor. In Latin, *tempestas* means ‘season,’ ‘weather,’ ‘bad weather,’ ‘tempest/storm,’ but also time, and we know how the French *temps*, Spanish *tiempo*, Portuguese and Italian *tempo* mean both the time and the weather — the only exception in Latin languages is the Romanian, which has  *timp* and *vremea*, meaning ‘time’ and ‘weather,’ although strangely *vremea* can also be used as ‘time’. Latin languages also have the derived terms of *tempestade/tempest/tempête/tempesta/tormenta/temporal(e)*/etc. It is thus remarkable that the terms in both Latin and Germanic languages evolved in a nearly parallel fashion; and even though the Germanic languages make the distinction between ‘time’ and ‘weather,’ the latter remains associated with the passing of time and the idea of ‘going through.’ As verb, ‘weather’ condenses the two meanings and synthesizes them into a certain contradiction: it relates to both the passing and the effects of time and the resistance to time and its effects.

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I would like to explore a constellation of issues that run through Arthur Bispo do Rosário’s work and posit how these

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2 See *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2020) <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>>, *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://www.oed.com/>>, and *Online Etymology Dictionary* <<https://www.etymonline.com/>> [accessed 28 June 2020].

works — and the topics they engage — reveal an intriguing relationship between weather/weathering, sea, memory, and artistic production. These terms are to be read, on the one hand, in the context of Bispo's eschatological narrative: his 'mission' of representing the world through objects that can weather till the end of times. But, on the other hand and beyond the artist's assumed discourse, his constructions are also a way of weathering obliteration and oblivion — of weathering the 'natural' fate he was destined for because of his racial, social, and clinical status. His objects — and among them, several types of ships — contribute to an inventive strategy to deal with memory and the process of recollection.

In 2017 and 2018, I collaborated on the exhibition *Lugares do delírio* (Places of Delirium), curated by the researcher and psychoanalyst Tania Rivera. The exhibition combined works of well-known artists from the established art circuit (such as Cildo Meireles and Lygia Clark) and those of more or less well-known 'mad' artists. In fact, the curator's aim was not so much to talk about madness, but rather about delirium, or about how, in her words:

[T]he field of the artistic production can be rigorously taken as cultural field of the construction of reality. In the art, one has deliriums [*delira-se*, a verb in Portuguese], the thought leaves its usual rails, the imaginary rails that fix the 'common' reality in which we alienate ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

By shifting, thus, the perspective from madness to delirium, Rivera reactivates the Freudian gesture, which looks at psychiatric 'disorders' as positive phenomena. In the case of the delirium, this means seeing it as a form of the production of subjectivity, an 'attempt at a cure or a reconstruction.'<sup>4</sup>

3 Fatima Pinheiro and Tania Rivera, 'In Situ | Lugares do Delírio — Entrevista com Tania Rivera', *Subversos* (2017); my translation <<http://subversos.com.br/in-situ-lugares-do-delirio-entrevista-com-tania-rivera/>> [accessed 28 June 2020]. See also Tania Rivera, 'Museu dos delírios — notas sobre a exposição *Lugares do delírio*', *Ao Largo*, 6 (2018) <<https://www.maxwell.vrac.puc-rio.br/33478/33478.PDF>> [accessed 28 June 2020].

4 Sigmund Freud, 'Neurosis and Psychosis', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), xix: *The Ego and the Id and Other Works (1923–25)* (1961), pp. 147–54 (p. 151).

To my surprise, when I arrived at the Art Museum of Rio de Janeiro (MAR), in the beginning of the exhibition's installation, I found mainly boats. The patients of the public mental health system, many of whom were Afro-descendants — as is common in the Brazilian psychiatric system — had built most of these objects. There were boats by, among others, Maurício Flandeiro (from Cariri in northeastern Brazil and patient of the public mental health system), Arlindo Oliveira and Luiz Carlos Marques (both attending the therapeutic space Gaia Atelier, at the Colônia Juliano Moreira, in Rio de Janeiro). Alongside these works, one could see also those built by Bispo do Rosário. They were very prominent, and it was clear that he was a key figure in the exhibition — he gave coherence to that strange ocean of objects displayed in the museum space. That particular institution seemed also the perfect place to host the exhibition as it is called MAR — 'sea', in Portuguese — and was recently built in the renewed waterfront district of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>5</sup>

My first association when observing this emerging milieu was Michel Foucault's *History of Madness*, its discussion of the ship of fools, and the mysterious relationship between water, navigation, and madness stressed therein.<sup>6</sup> And indeed, in the exhibition, by collect-

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5 The exhibition was originally proposed by curator and art critic Paulo Herkenhoff, curated by Tania Rivera. It was first shown at the Museum of Art of Rio (MAR), from 2 February to 17 September 2017 and subsequently, in an expanded version, at the SESC Pompeia, in São Paulo, from 12 April to 2 July 2018. About the MAR, see footnote 9.

6 'So the ship of fools was heavily loaded with meaning, and clearly carried a great social force. On the one hand, it had incontestably practical functions, as entrusting a madman to the care of boatmen meant that he would no longer roam around the city walls, and ensured that he would travel far and be a prisoner of his own departure. But there was more: water brought its own dark symbolic charge, carrying away, but purifying too. Navigation brought man face to face with the uncertainty of destiny, where each is left to himself and every departure might always be the last. The madman on his crazy boat sets sail for the other world, and it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. This enforced navigation is both rigorous division and absolute Passage, serving to underline in real and imaginary terms the *liminal* situation of the mad in medieval society. It was a highly symbolic role, made clear by the mental geography involved, where the madman was *confined at the gates of the cities*. His exclusion was his confinement, and if he had no *prison* other than the *threshold* itself he was still detained at this place of passage. In a highly symbolic position he is placed on the inside of the outside, or vice versa. A posture that is still his today, if we admit that what was once the visible fortress of social order is now the castle of our own consciousness. Water and navigation had that role to play. Locked in the ship from which he could not escape, the madman was handed over to the thousand-armed river, to the sea where all paths cross, and the great uncertainty that surrounds all things. A

ing ships, Rivera also tried to reframe the question of madness — as already noted — towards that of delirium, emphasizing the productive, creative force of the latter. In this way, she also echoed the proposal of the curator and art theoretician Frederico Morais, primarily responsible for the acknowledgement of the importance of Bispo's works, as well as for their reception in the art world. According to Morais, Bispo's deliriums should be seen as an attempt at 'ordering of ideas, [an] elaboration of concepts'.<sup>7</sup> As we will see, Bispo's production is a way of (re)building a world, a form of organizing what the medical order called his 'disorder' — 'paranoid schizophrenia', 'delusion of grandeur', etc. according to the several diagnoses he had received throughout his life.

However, I think there is more. Bispo's objects (and among them, ships) can be also the source of a series of radically different questions sending us to other seas. These questions relate, in particular, to a reflection on the ocean and the water beyond their only 'metaphysical' dimensions — or as a 'paradigmatic metaphor for existence'.<sup>8</sup> They relate also to memory in a world that is, we must more than ever acknowledge, necessarily marked by the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>9</sup>

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prisoner in the midst of the ultimate freedom, on the most open road of all, chained solidly to the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger *par excellence*, the prisoner of the passage. It is not known where he will land, and when he lands, he knows not whence he came' (Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. by Jean Khalfa, trans. by Jonathan Murphy (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 10–11).

- 7 Frederico Morais, *Arthur Bispo do Rosario: arte além da loucura* (Rio de Janeiro: Livre Galeria e Nau Editora, 2013), p. 66; my translation.
- 8 Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
- 9 In this sense, the position of the MAR in Rio de Janeiro's social and political geography adds a layer of complexity to my analysis that I should at least acknowledge. The museum was opened in March 2013 as part of the renovation project of Rio's city centre for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games. This area of Rio is historically very important. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not far from the Museum, a large slave market used to take place. Close to it, there was a vast slave cemetery (*Cemitério dos Pretos Novos*), which was built over and for a very long time forgotten, to be found again only at the end of the 1990s. It became, in 2005, the institute for black (or 'negro', *preto*) memory *Instituto de Pesquisa e Memória Pretos Novos*. The city centre renovation project was very ambiguous and highly problematic, based on a neoliberal agenda preoccupied more with attracting investments and tourism to the city than with progressive social change. Many people in the region were expelled from their homes. The populations living in the *favelas* around the area — such as the Morro da Providencia, the first favela built in Rio de Janeiro at the end of nineteenth century — were targeted in particular. The Institute became undesirable because it stood in the



Figure 1. *Vinte e Um Veleiros* (Twenty-One Sailboats), Museu Bispo do Rosário Collection. Photography: Rodrigo Lopes.

In this sense, I would like to suggest, inspired by the reflections of other contemporary thinkers, to look at Bispo do Rosário's production through the prism of decolonial critique and blackness. I propose to emphasize an aspect that was for a long time avoided in the analyses of Bispo's works, namely, that they are produced by a black man, in a society profoundly marked by racist and colonial elements.<sup>10</sup> The many ships he produced throughout his life can be read as part of an 'ecology of the ship'. They constitute forms that deal with, that assemble, and reassemble mnemonic elements inscribed in his body.

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way of a projected new line of the tramway system. Now, without public resources since 2017, the Institute is at risk again of being shuttered for good and hence exemplifies the national agenda of an erasure of memory and counter-memory. Despite having been born of this very city project, the MAR itself is now also at risk and has been targeted by the current municipal government.

10 I am of course not the only one emphasizing this dimension, neglected for too long. Ricardo Aquino, for example, also remarked upon the 'efforts in whitening Arthur Bispo do Rosário; of not evidencing his Negritude or his African background': Ricardo Aquino, 'From Picturesque to Points in Time: A Biographical Image', in *Arthur Bispo do Rosário*, ed. by Emanuel Araújo and others, curated by Wilson Lazaro; trans. by Regina Alfarano (Rio de Janeiro: Réptil, 2012), pp. 48–105 (p. 51).

## BISPO DO ROSÁRIO, THE MAN AND HIS MISSION

Bispo spent most of his life inside psychiatric institutions, and there is an important nexus between elements of his life, his psychotic deliriums and his production of hundreds of objects, many of them ships or forms that relate to the sea. For a long time, little was known about the artist, but archival research, interviews with those who knew him, in addition to the few interviews Bispo gave himself, and a more thorough analysis of his oeuvre have made it possible to at least partially reconstruct his biography.

An important work regarding his trajectory is that of his biographer Luciana Hidalgo, who assembled key data and managed to shed light upon Bispo's mysterious past. Arthur Bispo do Rosário Paes was born around 1909–11, in Japarutuba, Sergipe, in northeastern Brazil.<sup>11</sup> The city of Japarutuba was originally a Tupi village, whose population was diminished by a smallpox outbreak in the eighteenth century. Following the outbreak, the city was occupied by a Carmelites mission for a period of time — the *Japarutuba Mission*, a name that appears in one of Bispo's embroideries — and it remained a very Catholic city. Bispo spent his first years immersed in a religious environment of processions, moral customs, stories of sins and blessed martyrs, mixed with elements of African and indigenous traditions. The small city also developed an important tradition of embroidery. Some years later, records say that his parents moved with him to Bahia to work at a cacao farm.<sup>12</sup> At the age of fifteen, he joined the Navy, and then moved to Rio.<sup>13</sup> He also became a pugilist and, after being expelled from the Navy for 'disciplinary reasons' — according to Navy records — he started to work at the Rio's electricity company and later as a

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11 Three registers were found concerning Bispo's birth date: 14 May 1909 (Navy register), 16 March 1911 (electricity company register) and his baptism certificate found in the church of Japarutuba from which one can deduce that he was born most probably in the first week of July. Cf. Luciana Hidalgo, *Arthur Bispo do Rosário. O senhor do Labirinto* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2011), pp. 30–31.

12 For an analysis of the different documents and texts regarding these records, see also Viviane Trindade Borges, *Do esquecimento ao tombamento. A invenção de Arthur Bispo do Rosário* (doctoral dissertation, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2010), pp. 36–59 <<https://www.lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/22989>> [accessed 28 June 2020].

13 He started to work at the Navy in 1925. Records say that he was sent by his father, although some speculate that he was sold to the Navy, a common practice at the time.

domestic worker for a bourgeois family (the Leone family) — where he would clean the house, go to the market, and serve as bodyguard of the patriarch (not for a salary, which he refused as a matter of principle, but for food and lodging). He finally worked for two years as a handyman at a clinic owned by the patriarch's brother-in-law, again refusing a salary, since he saw salaries as the origin of all sins. The attic of the clinic became his living place and studio.

One night, on 22 December 1938, he had what was probably his first 'episode': seven angels descended on the Earth, transported and left him at the Botafogo neighbourhood, from where he began a peregrination to a church in the city centre. This crucial event consists, for him, in a moment of revelation: he is Jesus Christ — or, in other variants he gave, his son or 'Arthur Jesus', as he would sign some of his works — and had come to Earth to judge the dead and the living, to govern a new world, which he would recreate after its destruction through fire. Like many other biographical details of his life, which appear in his works, this date and the tale narrating the event were embroidered in a big banner (Figure 2) and repeated by himself in interviews given at the Colônia towards the end of his life.<sup>14</sup>

From this moment on, Bispo claims that he started to hear voices obliging him to work and to produce his objects. In an interview, he claims that it was not an option not to work, even if he did not want to. He was given a divine task by these 'voices' and had no other choice but to comply — thus he would claim to be their 'slave' or also 'slave of the Lord'.<sup>15</sup>

After what could be considered his major episode, Bispo wandered for two days before being arrested by the police. The police record defines him as such: a 'wandering black beggar ["indigent"], bearing no documents'.<sup>16</sup> He was then sent to the Hospital Nacional dos Alienados in December 1938 and to the Colônia Juliano Moreira in January

14 See *O prisioneiro da passagem: Arthur Bispo do Rosário*, dir. by Hugo Denizart (Centro Nacional de Produção Independente, 1982) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjgPILYLZOU>> [accessed 28 June 2020], a title (The prisoner of the passage) that echoes Foucault's passage about the ship of fools quoted above; as well as *O Bispo*, dir. by Fernando Gabeira (Globo TV, 1985) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9wc-\\_XoCcw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9wc-_XoCcw)> [accessed 28 June 2020].

15 *O Bispo* (1985), at ca. 8:00.

16 Luciana Hidalgo, *Arthur Bispo do Rosário*, p. 18.

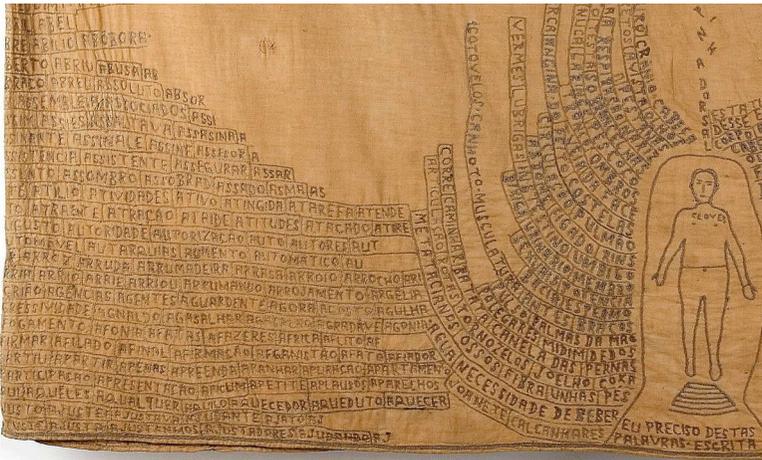


Figure 2. Above: *Eu Preciso Destas Palavras. Escrita (I Need This Words in Writing)*, Museu Bispo do Rosário Collection. Photography: Rodrigo Lopes. Below: Detail.

1939, becoming patient number 01662. As a typical poor, black figure of Brazilian society, he was just another person without a name, history, or identity — a mere black ‘indigent’, according to the police

record, to be locked away. When he died, fifty years later, his clinical record amounted to barely a few words.

Bispo would go back and forth between these two institutions (with some stays also at the Centro Psiquiátrico Nacional/Centro Psiquiátrico Pedro II) until 1948.<sup>17</sup> In 1964, he came back to the Colônia, where he then stayed until his death in 1988. In 1967, according to research conducted by Frederico Morais, he was put into a small cell of six square meters. In this period, he again started to hear voices obliging him to work, to produce his objects and reminding him about his salvation mission on Earth:<sup>18</sup>

My mission is that, it is to achieve that, what I have to the following day [is] to represent the existence of Earth that is there, everything I did. [...] I will be preparing and packing [encaixotando, boxing] the things. Because the order is to pack.<sup>19</sup>

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- 17 The psychiatrist Nise da Silveira ran a studio (which later, in 1952, would become the Museum of Images of the Unconscious) inside the Centro Psiquiátrico Nacional. Silveira emphasized the creation of a favourable working environment for artistic endeavours and considered the patient's production crucial instruments for the scientific study of psychosis. She organized permanent exhibitions and collaborated with figures such as the art critic Mário Pedrosa and the artist Almir Mavignier. Bispo was interned in other sections, and there is no evidence of an encounter with Silveira. The Colônia Juliano Moreira also contained an art section, with occupational activities and a painting workshop, being used in particular in the 1950s. See João Henrique Queiroz de Araújo and Ana Maria Jacó-Vilela, 'The Experience of Art at the Juliano Moreira Colony in the 1950s', trans. by Rebecca Atkinson, *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos*, 25.2 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.1590/s0104-59702018000200002>>. However, Bispo was not there during this period. In fact, he went back to Colônia within a week of the 1964 military *coup* and remained institutionalized during the 'years of lead', coinciding with the worst period of the Brazilian psychiatric system.
- 18 For a certain time, researchers would consider this moment key to the beginning of his production. Photos taken by Jean Manzon in 1943, however, show Bispo already dressed in his 'presentation mantle' next to a big ship built by him, Bianca Bernardo, 'Quem você deixaria entrar em sua cela sem precisar acertar a cor da sua aura?', in *Das virgens em cardumes e da cor das auras*, ed. by Daniela Labra (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2016), pp. 122–35 (p. 126). Ricardo Aquino also mentions a drawing of a boat dating from the 1930s, in his 'From Picturesque to Points in Time', p. 87.
- 19 Bispo do Rosário interviewed by Conceição Robaina, quoted in Flavia dos Santos Corpas, *Arthur Bispo do Rosário: Do claustro infinito à instalação de um nome* (doctoral thesis, Pontifícia Universidade Católica PUC-Rio, 2014), p. 90; my translation <<https://www.maxwell.vrac.puc-rio.br/35039/35039.PDF>> [accessed 28 June 2020]. According to Corpas, Bispo talks about a mission at least since 1938 and a medical record of the Centro Psiquiátrico Nacional (without date, but certainly between 1938 and 1948) states, in principle, his claim: 'it is a mission to reform the world we live' (ibid., p. 57).

After a certain period of time, he left this cell and started to progressively occupy other larger cells and spaces at the hospital — up to eleven cells at the end of his life — that constituted at the same time his living space and studio. He transformed this enclosed space into a living installation, a sort of labyrinth of hallways, galleries, and passages, which were constantly rearranged. In some cells, he stocked objects and raw materials (bricks, tiles, glass shards, wood sticks, syringes, etc.); others were rearranged and installed with the different pieces; in others, he lived, kept kitchen appliances, which allowed him to barter coffee, for example, for materials and tools from other patients. This generous allotment of asylum spaces only became possible thanks to the particular position he managed to occupy at the Colônia: he cleaned the space, took care of other patients, and also played the role of ‘sheriff’, beating, for example, patients in moments of crises, or administering medication prescribed by the doctors. Patients, doctors, and the personnel accepted and even respected Bispo’s strange manners, giving him space to do things more or less as he wanted.

Bispo exercised a sort of ascetic practice, eating very little, and even entering long periods of fasting. He believed he needed to, in his words, ‘dry’ in order to achieve ‘his transformation’ and become a ‘saint’. He avoided the same medications he gave to other patients, afraid of ‘lulling his senses’. His cells constituted also a fortified territory and only those capable of ‘naming the colour of his aura’ — blue — were given access to it. Whenever he felt the voices were again too strongly present, he would lock himself in his cell and avoid contact with others, sometimes lasting several months. That is, as I am tempted to put it, whenever he felt he was excessively *under the weather*, that his *inner turmoil* had become unbearable, he would seek refuge in his cell.

The conditions of the psychiatric asylums in Brazil at the time were truly terrible and the way in which the Brazilian system was structured early on implemented principles of eugenics and ideas of a necessary ‘cleansing of the race’, which undoubtedly explains why Bispo remained confined over so many years, just as in general black subjects spend disproportionately more time in asylums than white subjects.<sup>20</sup>

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20 For more precise data and a history of the Brazilian psychiatric system, I refer to another article recently written: Marlon Miguel, ‘Psychiatric Power: Exclusion and

That said, in contrast, for example, to Antonin Artaud, Bispo himself did not view his confinement at the psychiatric hospital as a torment but as a 'sign of recognition' and recognition, in particular, of his 'mission on Earth'. Through his deliriums — or, in Bispo's words, his 'visions' and 'voices' that ordered him to work — and the objects he produced, he found a way, at the same time, to survive and to stabilize his *madness*: he found a way, his own and singular way, to be in the world, that is, to construct a world for himself.

#### BISPO'S INVENTORY: WEATHERING THE END OF THE WORLD

Bispo do Rosário's objects speak about the asylum, his own history, about the people he met throughout life, lived with and talked to in the asylum and elsewhere. These objects are all part of a unique and rigorous system that aim at a 'representation of the existent material on Earth', as he often claimed himself.<sup>21</sup> I do not propose to read his work uniquely through a biographical lens, but the elements recalled above should help better situate his production and draw attention to the colonial and racial elements profoundly marked in his trajectory: from his childhood in Japartuba and later in a cacao plantation, from the Navy to footman, 'indigent', and to the oblivion in an asylum, *slave of voices*.

In order to produce his pieces, Bispo assembled everyday objects like tapes, forks, knives, fabric, shoes — everything he could put his hands on. More than eight hundred artistic objects were preserved over the years. After his death, in 1989, the asylum personnel wanted to dismantle the objects to return some of the everyday objects to their customary use. Thanks to the effort of several people, an association was created in 1989 and, in order to preserve his works, they were sent to the Nise da Silveira Museum, located at an old pavilion of the Colônia.<sup>22</sup> A first solo exhibition, *Registros de minha passagem pela Terra*,

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Segregation in the Brazilian Mental Health System', in *Democracy and Brazil: Collapse and Regression*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Jorge Chaloub, Frieder Otto Wolf, and Patricia Rangel (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2020).

21 Bispo do Rosário in Hugo Denizart, *O prisioneiro da passagem*, at ca. 16min; my translation.

22 Later, in 2000, renamed Bispo do Rosário Museum, and in 2002, Bispo do Rosário Museum for Contemporary Art, located at the Colônia Juliano Moreira.

was then, at the end of the same year, curated by Frederico Morais at the Parque Lage Visual Arts School, comprising some five hundred objects.<sup>23</sup> Morais, along with the psychologist Denise Almeida Correa, responsible for the Nise da Silveira Museum, started to organize and classify Bispo's works. In particular, they classified the series of works giving them names as, for example, 'O.R.F.A.' (objects wrapped by blue threads, also called 'mummified' or 'embalmed' objects), 'banners', and 'assemblages'. Bispo himself called the latter 'showcases' or 'display windows' (*vitruines*) combining different sorts of items such as powdered milk tins, packages, cleaning products, shoes, miniature saints, and other religious items, but also sometimes organic elements, such as apples. By organizing, classifying, and naming Bispo's production, Morais's tried to inscribe Bispo's work within the context of modern and postmodern artistic production, an ambiguous gesture one might want to critique, yet has to also understand as strategic, a question that will not be my focus here.<sup>24</sup>

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23 The work of Bispo was first exhibited in the 1982 collective exhibition *À margem da vida* at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio (MAM) thanks to the efforts of the artist Maria Amélia Mattei. The exhibition, made in a context of re-democratization process and movements for a psychiatric reform, reunited works from people living at penal and mental institutions. Bispo never visited the exhibition, but chose which works should be exhibited and how they should be displayed. Morais discovered the pieces at that exhibition and invited Bispo to go live and work at the MAM, offer that he refused. After the 1989 exhibition, Bispo became quickly recognized in the art world and had his work exhibited in different countries, in particular, at the 1995 Venice Biennale. Despite this worldwide recognition, most of his works, stored at the Bispo do Rosário Museum for Contemporary Art, lack of funding and interest to get the deserved attention and restoration work they need.

24 Transforming Bispo into a contemporary artist risks losing the *starting point* of his work, that is, the psychiatric institution. The danger is to lose the *situatedness* of his practice. This does not mean that his work would not have value in itself or that one has to make paternalistic concessions in order to see it as 'art'. On the contrary, Bispo engages in very complex conceptual and artistic procedures. But by situating them, one can better appreciate their critical quality. Indeed, as has often been pointed out, his work can be compared to (neo)dadaist work, Duchampian ready-mades, Warholian pop, Oiticican *parangolé*, or a total work of art such as that of Kurt Schwitters. Bispo, however, never tried to question the codes of art history and did what he did for other reasons. At the same time, one must recognize the strategy implied in Morais's gesture: to give symbolic prestige by inscribing it into art history and hence to attract interest to his work. By doing this, he achieved recognition for a black 'madman's' work produced at the periphery of capitalism and, above all, he secured a chance of saving it from oblivion and destruction. Kaira Cabañas critically engages, but also in a nuanced way, this discussion in a chapter about Bispo's work in her book *Learning from Madness: Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art* (Chicago: Chicago



Figure 3. *Talheres* (Cutlery), Museu Bispo do Rosario Collection.  
Photography: Rodrigo Lopes.

Bispo also created mantles and cloaks, sceptres, different kinds of maps, small installations, miniature representations of things on Earth (kites, carousels, ox carts, etc.), pieces, sashes, and tissues about Miss World pageants and participants — that construct a ‘Pop Geography’, according to curator and art critic Paulo Herkenhoff.<sup>25</sup> The works on fabric constitute often very complex, detailed, and repetitive embroideries. Among the mantles, one can find the ‘Exu cape’ or the famous ‘Mantle of presentation’, which he worked on for several decades. On the inside part of the latter, he inscribed the names of people he chose

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University Press, 2018). This book gives a recent and very good account in English of the Brazilian history of the relationship between art and madness.

25 Paulo Herkenhoff, ‘The Longing for Art and Existing Material in the World of Men’, in *Arthur Bispo do Rosário*, ed. by Araújo, pp. 140–83 (p. 145).

for redemption. This mantle was the object of his final performance: he would wear it before dying and presenting himself before God.

Finally, Bispo produced also several kinds of ready-mades, such as the *Roda da fortuna* (Wheel of Fortune), of a stunning resemblance to Marcel Duchamp's *Roue de bicyclette*.

The O.R.F.A are particularly interesting in respect to Bispo's 'archive fever'. These three-dimensional objects are often related to the domestic sphere and labour. They constitute, as Frederico Morais first pointed out, a kind of 'total inventory of a certain stage of Brazilian society', a 'double or shadow' of objects that existed and will disappear after the end of times.<sup>26</sup> There are around five hundred objects of this type, all wrapped by a blue thread, which mostly came from patients' hospital gowns, the uniform of the hospital — when Bispo started making them, he would use his own uniform as source for the thread. He identified these objects by a number and its corresponding name: *Moinho de Cana* (Sugar Cane Mill, [Figure 4](#)), *Pá de Lixo* (Dustpan), *Piã* (Spinning Top), *Rolo de pintar* (Paint Roller Brush), etc. All of the objects were produced in the enclosed space of the asylum and 'embalmed' with the blue thread as a way to resist weathering — as a way to make them survive the end of times; to, in a certain sense, weather the weathering; to weather both the passing of time and the end of times.

Bispo's world is strongly and rigorously organized, and it is related to what he calls his 'mission', that is, of representing the 'existent materials on Earth'. By 'representing' them — and Bispo, as we saw earlier, makes use of the word — he means in fact the work of archiving these objects or creating an inventory in order to save them for Judgment Day. A significant amount of his objects also has text on them: letters, words, names, notes, fictional and biographical descriptions. The names often refer to the people Bispo met and who are also to be 'saved'. Several women's names are inscribed in his objects, women that he considered important and pictured in his religious imaginary as 'pure' and 'virgin' — in one famous banner, one can read how he welcomes the 'school of virgins', as one would talk of a 'school of fishes'.<sup>27</sup>

26 Corpas, *Arthur Bispo do Rosario*, p. 193 [my translation], paraphrasing Frederico Morais, *Registros de minha passagem pela Terra*, Catalogue (1989).

27 *Virgens em cardumes*, in Portuguese. This banner gave the name of an exhibition *Das virgens em cardumes e da cor das auras*, curated by Daniela Labra in 2016–17 at the



Figure 4. Example of an O.R.F.A (object wrapped by blue threads):  
*Moinho de Cana* (Sugar cane Mill), Museu Bispo do Rosário Collection.  
 Photography: Rodrigo Lopes.

This task of creating an inventory of the world follows a logic of a ‘poetic of accumulation’ or of repetition through which he aims to repeat in order both ‘to understand’ and ‘to include himself in history (which excluded him)’.<sup>28</sup> The inventory process is ‘his way of rewriting the world.’<sup>29</sup> Flavia dos Santos Corpas identifies in Bispo’s production three types of actions — ‘extracting’, ‘reuniting’, and ‘registering’.<sup>30</sup> Through these actions, Bispo creates a very complex and coherent

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Museu Bispo do Rosário. See Labra, ed., *Das virgens em cardumes*. The exhibition emphasized in particular the performative dimension of Bispo’s works and a series of performances took place around the Museum during the exhibition.

- 28 Márcio Seligmann-Silva, ‘Arthur Bispo do Rosário: a arte de “enloquecer” os signos’, *ArteFilosofia*, 3 (2007), pp. 144–55 (p. 149; my translation) <<https://periodicos.ufop.br:8082/pp/index.php/raf/article/view/761/717>> [accessed 28 June 2020].
- 29 Ibid. See also Maria Esther Maciel, ‘A enciclopédia de Arthur Bispo do Rosário’, *Outra travessia*, 7 (2008), pp. 117–24 <[https://doi.org/10.5007/2176-8552\(07.2008\)\(117-124\)](https://doi.org/10.5007/2176-8552(07.2008)(117-124))>, who emphasizes the (anti)encyclopedic dimension Bispo’s work and the way he incorporates the ‘registers of the margins.’
- 30 Corpas, *Arthur Bispo do Rosario*, p. 203; my translation.

work, through which at the same time he constructs his own world and takes position in it — or, perhaps more accurately, takes position in history. The accumulation of these everyday objects does not constitute a mere reproduction or reification, but present an artistic choice, removing them from their usual context, arranging, organizing, and displaying them in deliberate fashion. This way of taking a position in his delirium is a form of ordering his disorder, or how Louise Bourgeois puts it, ‘he was looking for order in chaos, for the structure and rhythm in time and thought. One could say his was a pursuit for sanity, the very principle of organization behind all his work.’<sup>31</sup>

One could also add a fourth action to Corpas’ list: that of performing. Indeed, Bispo also uses the word ‘representing’ in a performative sense and, as already noted above, his mantles are objects he wears and that convey a certain disposition or figure. Also, one knows how he chose precisely how pictures of him and his objects had to be taken — often capturing his shadows rather than his body, thus emphasizing the objects — how to arrange his objects in space, how to represent and perform actions during these shootings.

The Exu Cape (see [Figure 5](#)) is of particular importance in this context. It is not known how exactly Bispo imagined the spiritual entity of Exu — an orisha — how much the artist knew about him, and whether he also ‘performed’ Exu with this cape. In any case, not only does Bispo explicitly engage with the Afro-descendent tradition of the Candomblé — as he does also with other works, such as the display window *Macumba* (referring to a form of black witchcraft)<sup>32</sup> — but he chooses this very specific orisha: Exu, who is the messenger between the human and divinity realms, who has an important relationship

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31 Louise Bourgeois, ‘Arthur Bispo do Rosário’, in *Arthur Bispo do Rosário*, ed. by Araújo, p. 27.

32 We can also mention here a work that remained unknown to the public until the exhibition *Quilombo do Rosário* at the Museu Bispo do Rosário Arte Contemporânea (August 2018–March 2019, curated by Roberto Conduru): an embroidery of the map of the African continent. Unfortunately, no catalogue was made for this exhibition. Conduru is also the author of a short entry on Bispo, written for *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*, ed. by Franklin W. Knight and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.74989>>.



Figure 5. *Capa de Exu (Exu Cape)*, Museu Bispo do Rosário Collection.  
Photography: Rodrigo Lopes.

to word and language, as well as to time, travelling between past and present, and deeply connected to *ancestrality*.<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to look at what Eleonora Fabião, referring to Bispo do Rosário, calls a ‘performative historiography’. She has in mind a form of historiography performed by a body as it is traversed by past, present, and future, by individual, collective, imaginary, and sensorial

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33 Cf. Florence Marie Dravet, ‘Corpo, linguagem e real: o sopro de exu bará e seu lugar na comunicação’, *Ilha Desterro*, 68.3 (2015) <<https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2015v68n3p15>>.

marks; by a body that actualizes these dimensions through its movements and gestures. Building on Hélio Oiticica's *objectact* and Lygia Clark's *quasi-corporeal* objects, she proposes to look at Bispo's works as constituting an 'object-archive' to be thought as an 'open circuit of acts'.<sup>34</sup> What is at stake here, following Fabião's suggestion, is the very gesture of the inventory, but also how these objects, in a certain sense, ask to be performed and what they re-actualize through this performance. Furthermore, these objects engage, re-organize, and re-actualize the marks of the past, those traversing and constituting Bispo's body.

Like other mentally ill patients, Bispo (re)organizes his inner turmoil by producing objects.<sup>35</sup> That is the form he finds to weather his storms. And in this singular (re)construction of the world, *his* world, ships play indeed an important role. Drawings of boats were found scratched on the walls of his cells; he produced different sorts of rafts, ships, boats, vessels, arks (of Noah), frigates, sometimes complex structures consisting of several boats; he also embroidered many ships in his fabric works. In a certain sense, his cell had also become a boat. And even his bed, in his last years, became, as he claimed, a '(space)ship' taking part in his final performance,<sup>36</sup> and which would carry him, as he would also wear his mantle of presentation, to the Judgment Day. While a lot has been said about the metaphors of the passenger or of the adventure at sea, I propose to read these objects also as surfaces of re-inscription of histories, memories, marks that certainly belong to the subject 'Bispo', but that exceed his only personal and individual biography. These boats thus also reveal a form of dealing with the history of the Atlantic Ocean and the consequences that he himself, as a black poor man in Brazilian society, suffered. These boats can be read in a long series, inside a constellation of several ship-objects, constituting, thus, a certain ecology and his own way of traversing the

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34 Eleonora Fabião, 'History and Precariousness: In Search of a Performative Historiography', in *Perform, Repeat, Record*, ed. by Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), pp. 121–36 (p. 126).

35 I should also add that even though Bispo spent most of his time at the asylum, he was not entirely cut off from the world. He kept reading newspapers and magazines, and his work contains several ironic references to politics and even mundane events — he was, for example, particularly obsessed with beauty pageants.

36 His bed was also the 'stage' of a 'performance' he did as a form to say goodbye to psychologist Rosângela Maria Grilo Magalhães at the end of her internship at the Colônia in 1983. It consisted in a kind of reenactment of Romeo and Juliet (Figure 6).



Figure 6. *Cama de Romeu e Julieta* (*Romeo and Juliet's bed*), Museu Bispo do Rosario Collection. Photography: Rodrigo Lopes.

oceans of history. I think it is no mere coincidence that ships are so recurrent in his artistic representations and productions — as well as in those of the other artists who are part of the *Lugares do delírio* exhibition.

Noah's ark, which appears in the film *O Bispo*, built with fabric and cardboard, was destined to 'save the world'. One can imagine that it would carry the inventoried objects chosen to weather the end of times. Also, on the raft (Figure 7), one can see the word 'representation' used once more: '[It] represents the maritime departments of all states. Universe. Raft.' It is the *universe*, the totality — a certain totality chosen by Bispo — which is represented and which will be saved. In his eschatology, Bispo inverts established positions, he is the master of representation, the redeemer, and chooses who and what will be saved. This totality or whole certainly counters both the 'social death'<sup>37</sup> and

37 Cf. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) as well as Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), in particular chapter 3.

the psychotic dismantlement experienced by him as black, poor, mad subject.

#### ECOLOGIES OF THE SEA

Rather than advancing any further, I would like to digress before concluding with a proposal. If one wants to take Bispo's work seriously, one has to assume that there is no such thing as a 'mad artist' outside culture. In Bispo's case, this is especially evident, and his work deals with historical, social, geographical marks; his work takes position in, with, against them. It takes position in a very aggressive *climate*.

Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is entirely built around metaphors relating to the sea and to boats. To begin with the title: 'wake' means 'the track left on the water's surface by a ship.' She conceptualizes 'weather' in a specific pessimistic way as 'the totality of our environments', as 'the machine in which we live' and this weather-machine, this 'total climate' 'is antiblack', 'slavery undeniably became the total environment'.<sup>38</sup>

I find the way she relates 'memory', 'weather', and the 'sea' particularly interesting. In the beginning of the fourth chapter (*The weather*), Sharpe takes a passage from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and constructs her argument around 'watered' images. Following Morrison's description, Sethe, the novel's protagonist and a former slave, tries to protect her daughter from the memories of the past. However, this past is not really a past, it persists in the present. As a consequence, Sethe has this 'thought picture', or, as she puts it, this 'picture *floating* around out here outside my head'.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, this picture is, first of all, characterized as *floating* and, secondly, it is not in her head, but *out there*. Sharpe concludes: 'It is weather, and even if the country, every country, any country, tries to forget [ ... ], it is the atmosphere.'<sup>40</sup> Sharpe emphasizes that, despite the end of slavery, its logics persist, it constitutes the atmospheric condition where one lives — with its consequences constantly affecting black bodies. Even if the state or a conscious subject

38 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 104.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 105, my emphasis.

40 *Ibid.*



Figure 7. *Jangada* (Raft), Museu Bispo do Rosario Collection.  
Photography: Rodrigo Lopes.

tries to obliterate the memory, there is such a thing as the *weather*, the atmosphere, where these questions and traces remain present. More than haunting, they structure the space, the world in which one lives; they give form to this 'one ecology of the ship that continues into the present'.<sup>41</sup>

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The relationship between the sea and death is a recurrent one in contemporary black literature. The Angolan writer Agostinho Neto writes the following in his short story *Nausea* (1985):

Mu'alunga. The sea. The death. This water! This salted water is perdition. The sea goes so far away, out there. Until it reaches the sky. It goes to America. Above, it's blue, below, it's very deep, black. [...] Cousin Xico died there, in the sea, when the raft sunk, there in the great sea. Died swallowing water. Kalunga. Afterwards, ships came, ships left. And the sea is always Kalunga. The death. The Sea took grandfather to other

41 Ibid., p. 106.

continents. Slavery is Kalunga. The enemy is the sea. [...] Kalunga chained people in the hold and the people only had fear. Kalunga whipped their backs and the people could only heal the wounds. Kalunga is fate. And why didn't the people flee the sea? Kalunga is really death. [...] And Kalunga don't know Man. It does not know that people suffer. It only knows to make them suffer.<sup>42</sup>

Neto makes an interesting move in this text by introducing the word *Kalunga* and making it resonate. In Kimbundu, *ka'lunga*, means 'sea', but it is also used in the sense of 'immensity' and 'grandeur', both related to its cosmological connotation. Clyde Ford recalls that *Kalunga* is often associated with death, but also with a feminine creative force, relating to 'the cosmic waters [...], the yolk inside the egg, the amniotic fluid of the womb'.<sup>43</sup> The sea, in Yoruba myths, is also where Yemoja dies at the same time as her womb dilates due to the salty water — giving birth, in the process, to the other Orishas of the African pantheon.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Édouard Glissant, in the opening pages of his *Poetics of Relation*, inevitably associates the sea with an abyss, but also makes it a principle of memory, knowledge, and shared history.<sup>45</sup>

While the sea is marked by the history of slavery and the trip to the hold, it also represents the connection to the homeland, the trace of a return or, in Martin Lienhard's words, the possibility of 'an archaeology of the discourse of slavery'.<sup>46</sup> Agostinho Neto is well aware of this and in his poem 'Havemos de voltar' (We shall return) describes the

42 Agostinho Neto, *Náusea* (Luanda: UEA, 2006), p. 25; my translation.

43 Clyde W. Ford, *The Hero with an African Face* (New York: Bantam, 2000), p. 197.

44 Cf. *Antologia do mar na poesia africana de língua portuguesa do Século xx*, ed. by Carmem Lucia Tindó Secco (Rio de Janeiro: Programa de Letras Vernáculas/UFRJ, 1996), 1.

45 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 8–9: 'For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange. [...] And for this Relation made of storms and profound moments of peace in which we may honour our boats. [...] We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.'

46 Martin Lienhard, 'O mato e o mar: apontamentos para uma arqueologia do discurso escravo', in *Brasil: um país de negros?*, ed. by Jéferson Bacelar and Carlos Cardoso (Rio de Janeiro/Salvador: Pallas/CEAO, 1999), pp. 113–23: 'For the enslaved Africans in America, the sea, which reminded them undoubtedly of the trip to the hold, appeared

coming back to the homeland through specific words that rematerialize the land: *mulemba* (a fig tree), *marimba* (a percussion instrument), *quissange* (also an instrument).<sup>47</sup>

The sea triggers what, in Portuguese, one calls *saudade* and, in Kimbundu, *banzo*, the affect of melancholia, nostalgia, homesickness, but also that which enables what the black Brazilian poet Conceição Evaristo names, with a neologism, *escrevivência* — writing to survive, writing to experience, writing to reconnect. ‘*The banzo stirs in me. | From the black ink of my oceans | the pain, revisited, submerges | flaying my skin | that surges in suns | and lofty moons of a | time that is now*’, she writes in the first verses of ‘Filhos na rua’ (Children in the street).<sup>48</sup> Or her ‘Recordar é preciso’ (Remembering is a necessity):

The sea wanders rolling beneath my thoughts.  
Turbulent memory sets sail:  
Remembering is a necessity.  
On the waters of recollection the to and fro  
of my weeping eyes crashes over my life,  
Curing my face and my taste. I am an eternal shipwreck.  
But the ocean depths do not frighten me or paralyze me.  
A profound passion is the buoy that rises before me.  
I know mystery lies beyond the waters.<sup>49</sup>

Conceição Evaristo does not succumb to the deadly attraction of the mysterious deep sea and, through her *passion*, she writes, making a

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also as bond to the original land and to the utopic path of a “return” (p. 118; my translation).

47 Agostinho Neto, ‘Havemos de voltar’, Fundação Dr. António Agostinho Neto (FAAN) <[http://www.agostinhoneto.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&id=561:desterro](http://www.agostinhoneto.org/index.php?option=com_content&id=561:desterro)> [accessed 28 June 2020].

48 Conceição Evaristo, ‘Children in the Street’, in Conceição Evaristo, ‘Poems’, trans. by Tamara Mitchell, *Hiedra Magazine*, 1 (2013), pp. 65–68 (p. 67; my emphasis) <<https://www.hiedramagazine.com/conceicao-evaristo>> [accessed 28 June 2020].

49 Conceição Evaristo, ‘Remembering Is a Necessity’, in Evaristo, ‘Poems’, p. 68. In the original: ‘O mar vagueia onduloso sob os meus pensamentos. | A memória bravia lança o leme: | Recordar é preciso. | O movimento de vaivém nas águas-lembranças | dos meus marejados olhos transborda-me a vida, | salgando-me o rosto e o gosto. Sou eternamente naufraga. | Mas os fundos oceanos não me amedrontam nem me imobilizam. | Uma paixão profunda é a boia que me emerge. | Sei que o mistério subsiste além das águas.’ See also Conceição Evaristo, *Poemas Malungos — Cânticos Irmãos* (doctoral thesis, Universidade Federal Fluminense, 2011) <[https://app.uff.br/riuff/bitstream/1/7741/1/Tese\\_Dout.Concei%C3%A7%C3%A3oEvaristo\\_def.pdf](https://app.uff.br/riuff/bitstream/1/7741/1/Tese_Dout.Concei%C3%A7%C3%A3oEvaristo_def.pdf)> [accessed 28 June 2020].

twist inside a long history. She takes over the ancient prescription ‘navegar é preciso, viver não é preciso’ (sailing is necessary, living is not necessary) and subverts it by emphasizing life and memory. The prescription first conveyed, according to Plutarch, by the Roman consul Pompey (*‘Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse’*), later immortalized by Petrarch, then commonly used by Portuguese sailors, immortalized by Fernando Pessoa, reworked by Caetano Veloso in the form of a Fado, finally becomes with Conceição Evaristo a matter of recollection, a question of survival — a struggle both for life and memory.

#### CONCLUSION: *ESCREVIVÊNCIA*

In the total climate of antiblackness that comprises Brazilian society, within which Bispo evolved as an artist,<sup>50</sup> he develops his weathering techniques in confinement; he performs his *escrevivência*, inscribing his name, through his works, in history, and searching to represent the world that should be saved.

Against the simplicity of very few words — thirteen, to be precise — defining Bispo in his medical record, he *writes*. His embroideries weave memories, reconnect constantly to (his) history, assemble and re-assemble mnemonic and historic marks. That is precisely what one realizes with the famous banner *Eu preciso destas palavras. Escrita*. One does not know if Bispo miswrites the last word and means ‘I need these words *written*’ or if he chooses to emphasize the noun ‘*writing*’: ‘I need these words. *Writing*’ (Figure 2). Among the series of words in the banner, one notes the strange sequence of words: ‘In The Chest

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50 I could not develop here the question of differences between the Brazilian, USA and other countries’ contexts, but they exist and are crucial. One must remember that Brazil was the last country in the world to abolish slavery (in 1888) and the largest importer of slaves coming from Africa. Despite these facts, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the myth of ‘racial democracy’ — in a great extent derived from Gilberto Freyre’s seminal work from 1933 *Casa grande e senzala*, in English as *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 1964) — helped to, on the surface, soften racial tensions and, above all, to conceal, even to deny for a very long time structural racism. At the same time that whitening practices, hygienics and racist discourses shaped Brazilian institutions — psychiatry perfectly exemplifies this — there was little organized struggle against these same structures. And when there was, they were often brutally repressed.

Carries Water Is the Word' (*No Peito Traz Água É Nome*; transformed into an orderly syntax — but should it be? — it could read: 'In the chest, water is carried, that is the word'). And as Paulo Herkenhoff first noted, the word 'Africa' also appears in the banner along with 'tasks' (*afazeres*) and 'afflicted' (*aflito*) — one can also add that, in the same line, the word 'fogamento' appears (probably '*afogamento*' misspelled, i.e., drowning). Far from a mere association, the *need* of words, of writing, expresses a positioning charged with historical meaning.

Here, the inexplicable list of ideas would not just be a surrealist 'free association' to trigger the unconscious. Bispo do Rosário is black. In that association, the artist needs words that can both build and synthesise the ultimate memory of slavery time. From the name Africa the following words are all read concurrently: origins, works (tasks such as slavery economic reasons) and punishment or suffering (afflicted). It is a triple incorporation — physical, spiritual, and political — in the anatomy with a body and a soul. [...] Black is another perception in Bispo do Rosário's anatomy, it is the designation of the non-colour, of the absence of colour or of slaves from Africa.<sup>51</sup>

The understanding of antiblackness as climate also explains how Bispo could spend so many years in confinement. And the Colônia Juliano Moreira was a typical psychiatric hospital designed according to the 'colony' model. Conceived at the beginning of the twentieth century and isolated from the urban centres, this sort of asylum constituted places where patients were meant to work as part of their treatment, in accord with the motto *Labor/Praxis Omnia Vincit* (work conquers all). Like many other institutions across Brazil, the 'colonies' were conceived as places not only for the mad, but for all those branded as undesirable: alcoholics, the mad, the retarded, delinquents, prostitutes, *indigents*, 'enemies' of the state or of powerful men, women pregnant as a result of rape — frequently by their bosses or lovers — or the daughters of influential landowners who had engaged in premarital sex. These spaces became very quickly over-populated over the course

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51 Herkenhoff, 'The Longing for Art', p. 152. Bispo's words appearing in the banner, placed below and on the left side, are in fact, as indicated above, 'Africa', '*Afazeres*' (Tasks), '*Aflito*' (Afflicted), as well as 'Fogamento' (probably 'Drowning' misspelled) in the beginning of the same line.

of the twentieth century; they were characterized by the use of abusive disciplinary methods and they took part, particularly from the 1960s onward, in what has been called the 'industry of madness', a model for the reproduction of mental illness and 'chronification' based on long-term hospitalizations — a lucrative business for hospitals receiving money from the state for each patient hospitalized.<sup>52</sup>

The term 'colony' is even more brutal in the case of the Juliano Moreira asylum, as the institution was created in an area that had indeed decades before been a colonial plantation. The new pavilions coexisted with the other old buildings of the slave master's house (*casa grande*), the slaves' quarters (*senzala*), the church in the central square... The asylum, as a result, was grafted onto this essentially colonial topology.

Taking these elements into account, Bispo's works can be understood in a new light. The re-utilization of iconic items from the asylum (uniforms, syringes, blankets) signals resistance to the psychiatric order. His boats (some of them resemble caravels and also point towards the colonial 'age of discovery'), as well as the Exu cape, for example, signal an attempt to re-actualize the marks referring to his roots — marks that were constantly obliterated by his surrounding society. Representing the world in his own way, he invents a way of rewriting it, he (re)constructs reality. And, in a certain sense, despite his stated or not stated intentions, he seemed aware of this narrative power as a strategy to counter all the effects of social death. As he used to claim, 'one day I simply appeared'. Through this constructed (but vital) narrative and auto-fiction, Bispo anchors himself in the world, his works are marked by an attempt to rewrite his biography. His work weaves his own history, resists the forced obliteration of memory and *ancestrality* imposed upon racialized subjects in racist societies.

The several boats Bispo built over and over are therefore to be read inside this ever-expanding, indefinite and interminable marine ecology — it is curious, apropos, as some ships appear in series inside a single object (see, for example, Figures 1 and 8). Hence, under no condition, his work is to be interpreted as a sort of final reparation

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52 See, for example, *Loucos pela vida: a trajetória da reforma psiquiátrica no Brasil*, ed. by Paulo Amarante (Rio de Janeiro: Fiocruz, 2000).

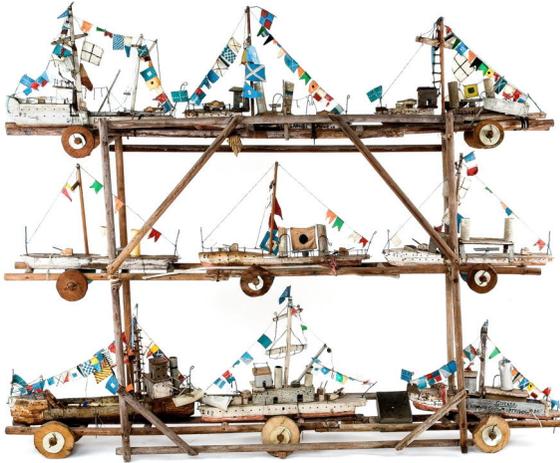


Figure 8. *Distroy* — Rio Grande do Norte, Museu Bispo do Rosário Collection. Photography: Rodrigo Lopes.

or reconciliatory synthesis. Bispo until the very end does not present himself as artist, citizen or mad, but rather as, *at the same time*, ‘slave’ — this indelible mark — and ‘redeemer’. It is this endless struggle and contradiction that is inscribed in and through his work. And if he names the ‘universe’, recreates a whole, it is only to counter the dismantlement, both social and psychic, of his body.

The *escrivência* is neither in this sense a reparative narrative that could be absorbed into the easiness of cultural memory, but constitutes a gesture of suspension in order to survive and to persist. To be ‘an eternal shipwreck’, but, *at the same time*, to become apt to look at ocean’s abyss and not getting paralyzed anymore. Buoy for Evaristo, ship for Bispo. In both cases, remaining in the sea, but finally attempting to navigate.

#### POST SCRIPTUM

During the years in which Bispo remained confined at the Colônia Juliano Moreira, another figure, another black ‘indigent’, was locked up there, as well, and wandered in those spaces, a woman by the name of

Stela do Patrocínio. Born in 1941, she was the daughter of a housemaid considered mad and sent to the Colônia, before she herself would suffer the same fate: she became a housemaid herself and was sent to the Colônia in 1966, remaining there until her death in 1992. The two figures, Bispo and Stela, probably never met since they lived in different pavilions.

Stela do Patrocínio kept erring in the asylum spaces and talking. She was known to practice a powerful way of talking, which she opposed to quotidian speech and defined as *fazendo falatório* (a very rough translation could be ‘making chattering’) or as *colocando o mundo para gozar* (‘putting the world into jouissance’). Her speeches were ultimately recorded in 1991 and later transcribed and published as a book. They are poetic, ferocious, raw, powerful. They constantly play with language, can hardly be translated and give form to a life marked by continuous gendered and racialized violence. As with Bispo’s objects, these speeches refer to a poetic form of reaction to the arbitrariness of a violent society that incessantly locked up people like them.

Eu sou Stela do Patrocínio  
 Bem patrocinada  
 Estou sentada numa cadeira  
 Pegada numa mesa negra preta e crioula  
 Eu sou uma nega preta e crioula  
 Que a Ana me disse

(I am Stela do Patrocínio  
 With a good patronage  
 I am seated on a chair  
 Attached to a table, black, negro, creole  
 I am a black, a negro, a creole  
 That’s what Ana told me)<sup>53</sup>

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53 Stela do Patrocínio, *Reino dos bichos e dos animais é o meu nome* (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue Editorial, 2001), p. 66; my translation.

É dito: pelo chão você não pode ficar  
Porque lugar da cabeça é na cabeça  
Lugar de corpo é no corpo  
Pelas paredes você também não pode  
Pelas camas também você não vai poder ficar  
Pelo espaço vazio você também não vai poder ficar  
Porque lugar da cabeça é na cabeça  
Lugar de corpo é no corpo

(It is said: on the floor you cannot stay  
For the head's place is in the head  
The body's place is in the body  
Around the walls you also cannot stay  
Around the beds you also cannot stay  
Around the empty space you also cannot stay  
For the head's place is in the head  
The body's place is in the body)<sup>54</sup>

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54 Ibid., p. 52; my translation.

| Marlon Miguel, 'Representing the World, Weathering its End: Arthur Bispo do Rosário's Ecology of the Ship', in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 247–76 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17\\_12](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17_12)>

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