

Mais Viva!

Reassembling Transness, Blackness, and Feminism

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Abstract The author focuses on the concept of *mais viva*, a term in Brazilian Portuguese that can be roughly translated as “more alive, alert, savvy.” She theorizes the concept of *mais viva* as an embodied knowledge of black and trans resistance, a kind of critical awareness necessary for building self-love and building communities, along the lines of bell hooks’s work. This discussion is an outcome of the dialogic theorizing that took place in the author’s conversations with black Brazilian *travesti* activist Selen Ravache and her engagements with the work of Brazilian black feminist Beatriz Nascimento. The author argues that Selen’s story is an instantiation of trans feminist work that taps on the Afro-diasporic legacy of fugitivity as refusal to lose oneself, even when one’s self constitutes transformation, movement. She connects that discussion of fugitivity in the Brazilian African diaspora with the debates on trans and black fugitive principles in the United States indexed in the work of Tourmaline, Miss Major, C. Riley Snorton, Saidiya Hartman, and James Ford III, to name a few. Foregrounding black trans experiences from the southern hemisphere in relationship to transnational debates on gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and nationality, among others, as part of a contingent conglomeration of elements, using Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore’s terms, an assemblage constitutes one of the possibilities to rearrange, reassemble the ways we understand, move within, and intersect black, trans, and feminist studies.

Keywords black trans fugitivity, *travesti*, transfeminism, black feminism, Brazilian African diaspora

In 2014, when I did a summer visit from the United States to Rio de Janeiro, in the southwest part of Brazil, my fieldwork merged with my search for community.¹ The main questions that have guided my transitioning work, which were also present in that diasporic movement, are: What shifts are needed within knowledge production to make intelligible the embodied theorizing and call for action of black and trans people transnationally? What can the embodied experiences of black *travestis*/trans women/transsexuals in Brazil tell us about the ways black bodies are imagined, gendered, sexualized, and racialized locally but also connected with a broader experience in the African diaspora? What are the strategies of resistance and care for ourselves and our communities in the face of the haunting and material presence of death?² How do we imagine possibilities of

livable lives, of freedom, well-being, and transformative change, as we resist death? To address these questions, I have been invested in the methodology I call *papo-de-mana*, roughly translated as “sista talk,” that is, foregrounding conversations with and from, as well as putting in conversation with, black women’s voices, be they trans or cis, through face-to-face and also digitally mediated interactions as a site of dialogic theorizing. I draw from the legacies of already everyday ongoing practices of caring for one another with intimate checking ins between black and trans sisters, such as a phone conversation started by “E aí, mana!” (Hey sis!), and from the black feminist critiques acknowledging that black people have always been theorizing through oral history, as Barbara Christian (1988) reminds us. I engage with the work of April Few-Demo, Dionne Stephens, and Marlo Rouse-Arnett’s (2003), who have used the phrase *sister-to-sister talk* to describe dialogic qualitative methodologies of working with/as/for black women that take into account an ethics of care but also a critical perspective on the not-taken-for-granted insider status of the scholar writing the work. According to Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett, this approach stems from the usual meaning of the term *sister-to-sister talk*: “Afrocentric slang to describe congenial conversation or positive relating in which life lessons might be shared between Black women” (205). I engage in/promote all these kinds of conversations to access/build with the multisited archive of black trans women knowledge in Brazil. The multisited archive of black trans women experiences is accessed and activated then by our embodied knowledge and the body of work that we make available by us through our praxis of self and collective healing, caring, networking, and fighting, in relation to what is produced about us. The body of work can mean, but is not limited to, the ways we care for ourselves and for our communities, our relation to our landscapes, the discourses we create, the artistic work we produce in different media, and the imaginaries and emotions that are precariously disembodied into language.

Within that research for those conversations, in 2014 I took part in a support group called Trans Revolução (Trans Revolution). The group was consisting of a range of trans people that identified locally as *travesti*, *transsexual* (transsexual person), *mulher trans* (trans woman), *homem trans* (trans man), and *não binária/o* (nonbinary people) from the outskirts of Rio. As I have transitioned along imposed sexually gendered racialized geopolitical boundaries between the United States and Brazil diasporas, I have learned to approach trans and transitioning as a nonlinear, undirected, dislocated, and localized movement, as also argued by such thinkers as Adela Vazquez and Jaime Cortez (2004), C. Riley Snorton (2011), and Kai M. Green (2015). The experiences of *vivências insubordinadas* (unsubordinated living) (Evaristo 2007) by people embodying undirected movement along the outcomes of (un)gendered racialized (Spillers 1987)

formations that characterize the afterlife of slavery (Hartman 2007) within the Brazilian diaspora is what I call *Afro trans vivências*. Despite the fact that trans experiences in Brazil comprise a range of embodiments beyond the scope of this article, and there is very important work being done, for instance, on black Brazilian trans masculinities by black trans activists and writers such as Leonardo Peçanha (2018), my focus here is on black trans women *em movimento* (in movement). *Women in movement* references the discussion brought by Brazilian black feminist Sueli Carneiro (2003) in “Mulheres em movimento,” which refers to the participation of black cis women within feminist social movements in Brazil. When she does not talk about black women’s movement but instead black women *in* movement, she covers the meanings of how black women move, the movement within communities and organizations, and black women participating in different movements. Movement becomes then motion, action, and collective organization.

Tourmaline (2016), a trans activist and writer, says isolation is one of the *I*s of oppression. In this sense, black trans people and trans people of color socializing, sharing our stories, coming together to care for one another is indeed a form of trans revolution. Expanding Emi Koyama’s (2003) perspective on the Transfeminist Manifesto, what I call *trans feminism* here constitutes a movement of liberation against gendered racialized oppression, a movement that draws from the archive of trans, black, and feminist legacies of theory and action. Considering that approach, the space of Trans Revolution and the travesti and transsexual people’s movements in Brazil is trans feminist work. Reassembling blackness and transness in order to question which genealogies we want to the field(s) of black/trans/feminist studies aligns with Angela Davis’s (2016: 104) emphasis on feminist methods of “thought and actions that urge us to think about things together that appear to be separate and to disaggregate things that naturally appear to belong together.” Assembling is also a practice of what Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008: 13) call trans-ing, assembling “gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly.”

Travesti in Brazil is one of the instantiations that embodies that trans movement. *Travesti* does not correspond to the English *travesty*, which is related somewhat to a performance in drag. *Travesti* is an identification that indexes a political position of resistance by trans femme/feminine/women’s bodies of, historically, mostly black and people of color from poor communities. In one of my conversations with Jovanna Baby,³ a black travesti, one of the pioneers in trans organizing in Brazil, she said travestis started the movement in the country by fighting against the police brutality especially directed toward sex workers. That

struggle is part of a transnational movement, including the United States, against the violation of our bodies.

There is a political distinction but also an overlap and at times interchangeable naming among *travesti*, *transsexual*, and *mulher trans* in the country. The term *travesti* has been attached to a history of exclusion that has become classed and racialized in Brazil. The names, and the pictures posted before 2016, you will see in overwhelming numbers on the Transgender Day of Remembrance website (tdor.info) are those of violently murdered travestis, poor, usually black trans people whose lack of resources precluded their access to the technologies that would make them comfortable with their embodiment and connected with themselves in that manner. There are those cases that not making use of such technologies is not out of lack of resources but out of a choice of embodying their transness, womanhood or femininity not focusing on that aspect.

Transexuais (transsexual women) and *mulher trans* have acquired a more recent visibility on the media for cases of women like the Brazilian top model Lea T. Some trans people even having access to resources and embodiments that would place them as transsexuals by some people in that scenario, affirm their travesti identity because of that history of resistance. This erasure of the self-identification travesti is what the Brazilian trans scholar Luma Nogueira de Andrade (2016) calls *mulheramento da travesti* (womaning the travesti). When I ask Andrade if what she says constitutes an opposition to womanhood, she says, “No, I mean we are not *that* kind of woman” (Andrade, pers. comm. September 10, 2016). Calling oneself travesti is not a total negation of themselves as women, as Don Kulick (1998) has affirmed. It is a negation of an imposed dominant expectation of womanhood that centers on people who are cisgender, heteronormative, able-bodied, elitist, and white. Thus, if we want to decolonize trans studies, it is important to understand that the resistance of translating *travesti* to just “trans woman” in English without contextualizing it comes with the risk of erasure of that history of fight in that part of the trans and black diaspora that is indexed by that term. It is also an invitation to think in which extent we are talking about *trans*, *trans woman*, and *gender nonconforming*, for instance, which are grounded in a local and Anglophone context, as reference of universality and unquestioned translation. *Transfeministas negras* in Brazil such as Hailey Kaas (2016) and Jaqueline de Jesus and colleagues (2014) invite us to think of *transfeminismo* not just as an import but as resignified theory, a creation of our own that takes into account those range of experiences. For this reason, I choose to keep this text trans-linguistic not only to turn the text as a space of transition itself but also to reassemble the exemplarily linguistic categories we use to think trans, travesti, blackness and negritude. It is a reminder that this is a work of constant

precarious translation. This is the context I would like to preface the introduction of Selen.

A luta é nossa! Viva a vida! (It Is Our Fight! Live Life!): Fugitivity as Refusal

Selen Ravache is a black travesti activist and performer who currently lives in the Rocinha favela in Rio de Janeiro. I met Selen in the group Trans Revolução. Since then, in our conversations I have shared my journey navigating academia as a black trans woman in the United States, and she narrates the everyday adversities and her persistence in keeping her current job as janitor in a hospital. Sharing our *vivências* (living) does not imply erasing or equating the power relations that take place in the institutional spaces in our lives, but it does offer an exchange that is different from me simply asking Selen to tell me about her life. Most of the women I talk with are very interested in the lives of black and trans people within the US diaspora. Also, since I am aware of the possible outcomes of the consumption of black trans women's stories in academia, the last time I called her I checked again that she would be comfortable with me using her story and her name within academic settings and texts; she replied, "Claro! A luta é nossa!" (Sure! It is our fight!) (Ravache, pers. comm., January 19, 2018). I smiled as I heard the familiar power in her voice. She had said that her job as a janitor was a transition from sex work, but not as a salvation job, since she emphasized what sex work made possible, including buying the land where she lives now.⁴ This was a shift to a job with legal guarantees such as a retirement plan and benefits. She told me her presence at that job is also a testimony of what trans people endure to be in formal labor conditions:

They say no, I say yes! They test me all the time! They test your patience, your desire/your horniness, your professionalism. They misgender me all the time; there are men grabbing their crouch and flashing on me, inviting me to this little room in the hospital. Just dumb tests! I know it is a trap. I know once I get there they will beat me to death and say I was harassing them or get me fired with just cause. They want to make me quit, but I don't quit. . . . I won't shed a tear for this people.

I told her I am very interested in the strategies we, as trans and black people, use to not be broken at the end of the day after transphobic racist aggressions. "What do you do?" I asked. Selen took a deep breath: "Wow, nobody ever asked me that question. . . . I'm gonna tell you what I do." She paused. "Eu vivo a vida, Dora! Eu vivo a vida!" (I live life, Dora. I live life!) The sentence had a different sonic quality. It was fast paced, assertive, intense, intentional. And she added, "They say we don't make until thirty. I am in my forties. *Opa!* That's a victory right there!"

The deaths of trans and black people mobilize more action than our living, our *vivência*. In their work on trans necropolitics, C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013) use Achille Mbembe's concept of the politics of investing in keeping some alive while letting others die. One of the examples they discuss to address "the good" of the afterlife of black trans women is the death of Tyra Hunter, who died in a car accident after being refused medical care. That story mobilized funding for LGBT organizations that do not have trans women within their team or that do not impact them directly. Despite the fact that it is fundamental to honor the dead by demanding justice, there is a risk that trans women, especially black trans women, are discussed only as a corpse. The questions that are never asked—What do you do as a living being? What do you do to heal?—are the untold and unwanted stories I am interested in. It is fugitivity embodied in a living of refusal. Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best (2005: 3) state that fugitive justice comes from that space between hope and resignation, a "political interval in which all captives find themselves," and "in this interval we find the mutual imbrication of pragmatic political advance with a long history of failure." Drawing from the work of authors such as Hartman, James Ford III (2015: 110) defines fugitivity as "the artful escape of objectification," whether that happens "through racialized aesthetic framing, commodification, or liberal juridico-political discipline."

"Viva a vida!" (Live life!) is a call to keep that space of hope within us as we move forward but aware of the oppressive systems we move within. Even "*viva!*" (alive) is a liminal space within us that carries the instances we felt dead due to humiliations and instances when we became more alive because our communities helped us continue. The last time I talked to Selen, she told me she sued her company and looked for local trans organizations to help her go public with her case. She said the last straw was when her company forced her to use men's bathroom. She narrated: "As I slowly walked into the bathroom, I could see the crowd who gathered to watch. I felt like being stabbed that day! Help! I felt dead. My sister and some people tell me to be careful since the supervisor may have connections with some gangs here, but I am not afraid to die. They already killed me once. But of course, I need to take care of myself and be alert, you know" (Ravache, pers. comm., January 19, 2018). *Mais viva!*, more alert, more alive, is that embodied knowledge developed within that liminal space of not forgetting the imbrications between experiences of violence and the ways we find joy and acknowledgment and support, even if that comes in a micro-intimate level. For Selen, it is not only inviting friends over, staying connected to trans activist collectives, but also clubbing, hooking up, educating herself on her rights, and not quitting her job. Those liminal spaces of unsubordinated living that constitute the body of unwanted disruptive stories are what I call *vivências* in conversation with

what Brazilian black feminist writer Conceição Evaristo (2007) calls *escrivencia*, that is, unwanted narratives written in words, drawn on the ground, complemented by our gestures: writing life, writing as living, a writing-living body, braking silences, being seen.

My own theoretical definition of *mais viva* is imbricated with the knowledge developed as strategies to experience one's own self-making with more intensity, a sense of urgency, by persistently refusing imposed distorted images and expectations. It means being more alive in the sense that living does not constitute a taken-for-granted existence that has only self-awareness as evidence. Living is not just self-awareness; it is also a form of a Fanonian double consciousness (Fanon 1967), in this case, multiple consciousness of oneself, of the other, and of the other in relation to oneself and histories of collective consciousness, an anticipation of scenarios that inform possibilities of routes of escaping violence by caution and also by experiencing joy, pleasure, and meaningful connections. It means "being-alive-savvy," it is not just being alive but more alive; it is transitioning in the world by transcending, trans-ing life. Being *mais viva* becomes the outcome and a condition to resist death. It is related to what bell hooks (2003a, 2003b) calls "vigilant awareness," the critical thinking needed to build community and build self love by challenging racist sexist and, I add, transphobic messages. Selen's story illustrates that refusal to quit, to accept the narrative of premature death as destiny, refusal to take in the expectations of failure, refusal to accept the imposed gendered and racialized ways of living, refusal of the shaming of her pleasure and her language by a politics of respectability.

Mais Viva! Fugitivity as *Quilombo*

To situate the discussions of fugitivity in the Brazilian black diaspora, here I introduce the work of Beatriz Nascimento, a black Brazilian historian whose work focuses on *quilombo* as a place of resistance. Related to Maroon communities within the Caribbean diaspora, *quilombo* can be the territories that have been occupied by descendents of fugitive slaves who settled their own communities and political systems. Quilombo can be a psychological place of resistance, which Nascimento calls her internal black (*negro interno*), the one that yells back inside when you're distraught and at times paralyzed by racism. Quilombo can be a place of joy and creative work that escapes from the imposed Eurocentric aesthetic and literary models to reconnect with Afro-diasporic rhythm and imaginary. Most black movements in Brazil mobilize blackness by remembering Zumbi, a black male figure who was a leader of quilombos of Palmares, during the beginning of the seventeenth century, famous for its resistance against the Portuguese Empire. What interests me in Nascimento's work is how she is trans-ing quilombo by narrating scenes in which black womanhood is tied to the refusal to accept that

blackness needs to be imagined through a masculine figure and that womanhood needs to be imagined through a phenotype, or features associated to whiteness. In the documentary *Ori* (Gerber 2008), narrated by Nascimento, she says, “Zumbi, eu te vejo mulher” (Zumbi, I see a woman in you). What she means is that while Zumbi occupies a sign of black resistance in the Brazilian imaginary, the way of articulating the resistance of black women is to see a woman in/through and beyond the Zumbi representation of quilombo.

On her article “Acerca da consciencia racial” (“On Racial Consciousness”), Nascimento (2015a) narrates a scene of herself and another black girl called Jurema in their middle school, from whom she felt distinct but also related, given that Nascimento was submitted to similar humiliations. She says because she had short natural hair with tight curls, their classmates would say she was a boy and would laugh at her, with the complicity of the adults. In addition, Nascimento narrates, “one day, a child lifted my dress to see if I was a boy or a girl. That was the worst humiliation!” The other black girl, Jurema, went through what Andrade (2012) calls compulsory dropping out, which Andrade uses to address the experiences of travestis at school. I expand her concept to define it as mechanisms of gendered and racial violence that push nonconforming bodies out of school. Nascimento persisted despite the aggressions. She wrote that later in life she met that girl, and after sharing she was still in school, Jurema told her: “Don’t let them do to you what they did to me!” Nascimento answered her call by dedicating her work to understand, remember, and share black women’s legacies of resistance. As Nascimento is unable to talk directly to her at this point, Jurema becomes metonym for sister, and Nascimento (2015a: 110) addresses her by saying: “Jurema, how many things have not been taught to us. But I learned. I do not know if it was because I continued. . . . The Prejudice is the same, although today *sou mais viva*.” (I am more alive/savvy), and “do not let it destroy me as it has destroyed part of you.” Being *mais viva*! is that healing knowledge that does not let you be in pieces; it is that knowledge that refuses losing ourselves by aggressions produced by racialized gendered violence that negates us. When Selen says “Viva a vida!” she joins the call by Jurema and Nascimento. I remember Selen told me that one of the things that motivated her to go public was not letting other girls develop urinary infections for containing themselves for being forced to go to men’s bathrooms. It means “do not let them destroy you! *Seja mais viva*! Be more alive, savvy! Learn what they haven’t taught us!,” which is seeing ourselves. As we find in the work by Koyama and Miss Major, one of our elders who took part in the Stonewall riots, an important principle of trans feminism is the right for self-definition as self-care. Seeing our bodies, our knowledge production, creative work, and memories as places of resistance against racializing gendered violence against bodies that are not considered normative is where trans feminism and black feminism meet. In

this sense fugitivity is a refusal of systems that keep us captive to situations that oppress us. For black and trans people, that refusal comes in the form of persisting in having a connection with ourselves and our communities. It is refusal to lose oneself.

Still Here! Refusing to Lose Yourself

Tourmaline (2016) reminds us that the Stonewall riots in New York were refusals of incarceration and police brutality as punishment for trans and queer people of color for connecting with our communities by just hanging out in a bar. The riots were also refusals of the criminalization of their gender-nonconforming embodiment that allowed them to connect with themselves. Tourmaline states that isolation is part of the logic of a carceral system that finds punishment as the solution for social issues. In “Making It Happen, Mama” Miss Major and Jayden Danahue (2015) say that the industrial prison complex is one of the most efficient systems to make you lose yourself: the criminalization of trans people, especially people of color; the gendering of the prison space by placing trans women in men’s facilities; the placing of trans women in solitary confinement under the argument that is for their own protection. Miss Major created a pen pal program while she was a director of the Trans Gender Non-conforming and Intersex Justice Project. She narrates that the time when she was incarcerated for being trans, without receiving letters from the outside, she grabbed an stranger’s postcard that said “hey girl” as a form of connecting and remembering who she was. “You can lose yourself in there,” said Miss Major (308). Refusing to lose oneself is passing for ourselves to ourselves everyday in the face of misrecognition, it is the “agential power of affirming one’s own reading of self” (Snorton 2009: 87). We turn passing from a narrative of dominant gaze on our bodies, as Sandy Stone discusses in the “Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1993), to a new meaning that keeps us sane, as an everyday affirmation of ourselves. For Selen, and for so many of us, refusing to lose her patience, her sanity, her professionalism, her job, her joy is the embodied everyday praxis of fugitivity. My goal here is not to present a prescriptive recipe of how to be alive. I am more interested in a kind of typology of archives of resistance where being *mais viva* constitutes a situated experience, that contingent movement that is trans and those routes of escapes that also defines blackness.

Thinking of black trans women experiences is not about replacing the sign that stands for blackness; it is about how we reassemble the ways we understand racialization of black bodies as gendered, with as many genders as we encounter, but at the same time that blackness also ungenders and is trans-ing bodies. Hortense Spillers (1987), whose work Snorton (2017) discusses, talks about the differences between bodies, which imply will and meaning to flesh, the zero

meaning that is carved, beaten, unable to ward off violence and touch. When blackness becomes flesh, the kind of violence that goes across the board turns black bodies into ungendered flesh. The negation of black womanhood, for both cis and trans women, because our bodies are considered nonnormative, ungendered flesh, is not uncommon in the black diaspora. Lavern Cox takes the echoes of Sojour Truth's voice in the text "Ain't I a Woman?" to address that kind of disavowal (Kerr 2013).

To do black trans feminist work is to bring in the fugitivity of blackness, that unspecified movement of transness and the gendered and ungendering racialization of bodies pointed out by black feminism. That work is also constituted by a vigilant awareness of self-critique, of being *mais viva* as we transition along our fields of study in order to unpack the silences and negations that we still find in those studies, especially when it comes to the experiences of black trans women. It is asking questions such this one posed by Davis (2013): "What would it be like to have, say, a black trans woman [like Miss Major] who has been involved in struggles against violence, struggles against the prison industrial complex? What would it be like for that woman to stand in as the sign of the category women?" What if we center black trans women like Selen Ravache within the discussion of trans feminist work by thinking of her persistence in being critically aware, *mais viva!*, and of taking care of herself as that knowledge of liberation? Davis's call invites us to think of the category "woman" as rhizomatic, as black trans women as hydorrhizomatic, along the lines of Édouard Glissant's work discussed by Treva Ellison, Kai Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton (2017): with floating roots, disturbed by the traces of the water's wake in the Middle Passage, as stated by Christina Sharpe (2016). I propose we think of womanhood by taking seriously the rhizomatic growth and visibility of black trans women's experiences and move away from the perspective that transphobic groups known as trans exclusionists and radical feminists have pushed. Their argument is that trans women are parasitic to womanhood. However, cutting us from the rhizomatic set of embodiments of *woman* does not push us to attach to other formations—it kills us. I interpret that seeing black trans women as the "the sign" does not mean putting us as sole representative of the category "women" alone; it doesn't mean the erasure of perspectives that takes black cis women, for instance, as a "sign" within black feminism—it pushes for the reconfiguration of the set of signs that we take to think womanhood. Requiring trans women and any other trans and gender-nonconforming person to prove our existence, to be asked for evidence of our existence, is what Sara Ahmed (2016) calls a hammering that chips away our being. Instead of hammering trans people, Ahmed proposes the hammering of the oppressive systems that keep us captive. She calls for an affinity of hammers, which is a collective work that understands the ways each of us is

stopped along our journey. Affinity of hammers, she says, is an intentional work and an acquired ability to be attuned to the cases when someone is stopped. It is also being aware of when we are not stopped, which constitutes privilege. I have discussed here that intentional work of being tuned is already happening, but there is still a lot of work to be done. That kind of affinity of hammers reminds of what Audre Lorde (2014) calls choosing “the edge of each other’s battles.”

The other day I called Selen (pers. comm., January 19, 2018). Checking in on the phone is that kind of work that wins battles with intimate care for each other. As we talked, I expressed some of my concerns to honor these stories. Before I hung up, she raised her tone with excitement and said, “Vai lá mana! A luta é nossa! Viva a vida!” (You go sista! It is our fight! Live life!). I hung up. I let her energy sink in. And I told myself, *That* makes me more alive, mais viva!

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Notes

1. I am from northeastern Brazil, so this trip provided a space of familiarity but was also a process of reconnecting since I had not lived in Rio before then.
2. I use *we*, *us*, *our*, *ourselves* as a political commitment of acknowledging my positionality also as a black Brazilian trans woman, despite the fact that I am critical of how my privileges such as access to academic spaces make me experience violence differently from most women I’ve worked with.
3. Jovanna Baby, phone interview by the author, May 20, 2016.
4. Selen Ravache, phone interview by the author, June 6, 2016.

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