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# Rio de Janeiro as a Park of Ruins: Digging through Images in a Site-Specific Poetry Book

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### Article abstract

This text proposes a reading of *Parque das ruínas* (*Ruins Park*, 2018), a poetry book by Marília Garcia, which places words and images in a dialogue in order to question *ways of seeing* through constant changes of spatial and temporal scales. Mediated by optical devices, it exposes a body of perception as crossed by “practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectivation” (Crary, 2012). Our aim here is also a re-assembling of the book’s images in their relation to Rio de Janeiro’s history grounded in slavery and their related struggles regarding memory. By referring to the archaeological *strata* of Rio de Janeiro’s formation, moving through the “ruins” of its modern institutions such as the museum and the university discussed in Garcia’s book, we suggest an underlying sense that ties the poem to the present dynamics of extractive capitalism.

# Rio de Janeiro as a Park of Ruins: Digging through Images in a Site-Specific Poetry Book

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VINÍCIUS XIMENES

**W**e will never forget 2018. First, because of the most fateful elections in Brazil's history, but also because of the fire that completely destroyed the National Museum, on the second day of a terrible September, in the year in which it would celebrate its 200 years of existence. Founded by Dom João VI in 1818, the Museum is the most ancient scientific institution in the country, the place where princess Leopoldina signed the Independence Declaration in 1822, and where the first Constitutional Assembly took place two years later. With some 20 million pieces in its catalogue, the Museum housed the biggest collection of natural history in Latin America, the biggest Egyptian collection of the continent, 5,000 objects from Indigenous and African collections, the archives of the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, including tapes containing recordings of different ethnic groups whose languages are no longer spoken, and a library of 537,000 books.

Two images of the National Museum are reproduced at the end of *Parque das Ruínas* (*Ruins Park*), a poetry book by Brazilian writer Marília Garcia:<sup>1</sup> a lithograph made in 1831 by Jean-Baptiste Debret, a painter from Napoleon's court who participated in the first French artistic mission to colonial Brazil, and an aerial photograph of the museum ruins after the fire, taken on 3 September 2018

On the occasion of the fire, a former professor at the institution, and its most famous ethnologist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, said he preferred "that the whole thing remain in ashes, in ruins": "to leave the ruin as memento mori, as the memory

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1. Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Brazil, Luna Parque, 2018.

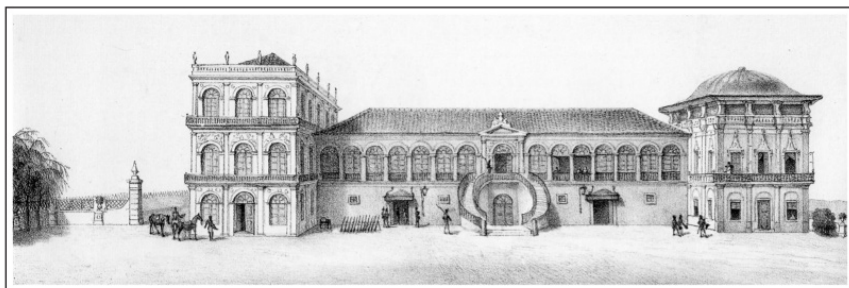


Fig. 1. Jean-Baptiste Debret, “Vista do Paço de São Cristovão,” lithography, 1831. Taken from Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 96.



Fig. 2. National Museum of Brazil after the fire, photography, anonymous, 3 September 2018. Taken from Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 96.

of the departed, the dead things, the dead tribes, the dead archives.”<sup>2</sup> Despite plans to restore the National Museum over the next few years, the ruins have since become a monument for the loss of national memory. This is a double loss, if we take into account that the archive involves the pillaging of objects that belonged to so-called “primitive” societies, “as mourning and memory of their disappearance.” Aiming to produce an “universal archive of these cultures,” the ethnographic museum works “as the flip side of the process of genocide (and ethnocide, Pierre Clastres would say) configured in the Modern age.”<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this article is to read Garcia’s book<sup>4</sup> with a consideration of these two images—which can be associated with the colonial foundation of the Brazilian nation and the loss of its memory—as central for the significance of the poem, even if they appear at the end of the book. They can be taken as a metonym of Rio de Janeiro in present times, marked by recent reforms but also by decadence, connecting the city to its colonial and violent history. We propose a reading of the main image/metaphor of the book, the ruins, in relation both to Rio de Janeiro’s history grounded in slavery and to contemporary political struggles around identity, resistance, and memory. While referring to the archaeological strata of Rio de Janeiro’s social formation, moving through the metaphorical ruins of its modern institutions, such as the museum and the university (as we will see later), we also aim, at another level, to highlight the geo-economic dynamics of capitalism and its materiality based on extraction.

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*Ruins Park* is the last and perhaps the most thought-provoking book by Garcia,<sup>5</sup> one of the most well-known contemporary poets in Brazil. It is divided into three

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2. Alexandra Prado Coelho, “Gostaria que o Museu Nacional permanecesse como ruína, memória das coisas mortas,” interview with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Público/Ipsilon*, Lisbon, Portugal, 4 September 2018, <https://www.publico.pt/2018/09/04/culturaipsilon/entrevista/eduardo-viveiros-de-castro-gostaria-que-o-museu-nacional-permanecesse-como-ruina-memoria-das-coisas-mortas-1843021> (accessed 4 November 2021). Quoted by Joana Matos Frias, “Apesar das ruínas, testar a memória,” postface, in Garcia, 2018, p. 90.

3. João Camillo Penna, “A espectrologia de Serge Margel, in Serge Margel,” *Arqueologias do fantasma: técnica, cinema, etnografia, arquivo*, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Relicário Edições, 2017.

4. We are going to focus only on its homonymous first part, “parque das ruínas.”

5. Marília Garcia’s poetry books include: *Câmera Lenta: Poemas*, São Paulo, Brazil, Companhia das Letras, 2017; *Um teste de resistores*, Rio de Janeiro, 7Letras, 2014; *Engano geográfico*, Rio de Janeiro, 7Letras, 2012; *20 poemas para o seu walkman*, Rio de Janeiro, 7Letras, 2007, and two shorter publications, *Encontro às cegas*, Rio de Janeiro, 7Letras, 2001, and *Paris não tem centro*, Rio de Janeiro, 7Letras, 2016.

parts: “ruins park,” whose first version was presented as part of a talk at the State University of Rio de Janeiro; “the poem in the test tube,” presented for the first time in 2014 at the Federal University of São Paulo, and a short postscript that comments on the two previous parts. In the postscript we read that the first two parts were written for oral presentations and are to be accompanied by a projection of images, some of which are reproduced in the printed version. Throughout the first part, the dialogue between word and image (there are thirty-six images in forty-five pages) questions the ways of seeing through constant changes of spatial and temporal scales, made possible by optical devices (especially the photograph and the microscope). To see again, to see from a different point of view and on a different scale is also, as the poem says, “fazer com que as coisas existam de outra maneira” [to make things exist in another way].<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, our reading procedure finds motivation in the poem’s form. The narrative and oral style of the poem bring it close to prose, except for its rhythm, marked by the cutting of the verses. One could say that it is a text in verse rather than a “poem” in the traditional sense. For that reason, the poem does not call for a traditional interpretation concerning sound, metre, and so on. Divided into short parts or chapters, the narrative is very fragmented, jumping from one subject to another, full of gaps and omissions. The “narrator” or “lyric voice” of the poem tells about a visit to an art exhibition in Rio de Janeiro and about an art residency that the author held in France in 2015, where she worked with a family archive from World War II. The narrator also makes reference to the moments of writing and oral performance of the poem we are reading, and to many films, photographs, and images. The reading we propose, then, aims to deepen the connections, only slightly suggested in the book, between some of these images and between images and text, in order to perceive and make explicit its “symptoms” and silences. We emphasize the montage of the book, considering how the metaphor of the ruins is attached to a second metaphor, that of spectres; our hypothesis here is that these “spectres,” that is, the unseeable side of the images evoked in the poem, are remains of a repressed memory of the city and the country.

In other words, our reading is based on the poem’s montage gestures, looking after what is absent “between” images and text. By doing so, we aim not to interpret the poem but to present a reading affected by different echoes of the moment and

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6. Garcia, 2018, p. 23.

place where it was produced and released, digging into the economic and cultural conflicts it refers to.

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*Ruins Park* begins with a “visual epigraph”: the photograph of a tear drop seen through a microscope. The image integrates the work “The Topography of Tears” by Rose Lynn Fisher. Zooming in 400 times through a microscope on the image of a tear drop produces a result that looks like an image of the Earth 400 times afar: our eye cannot differentiate between too close and too distant.

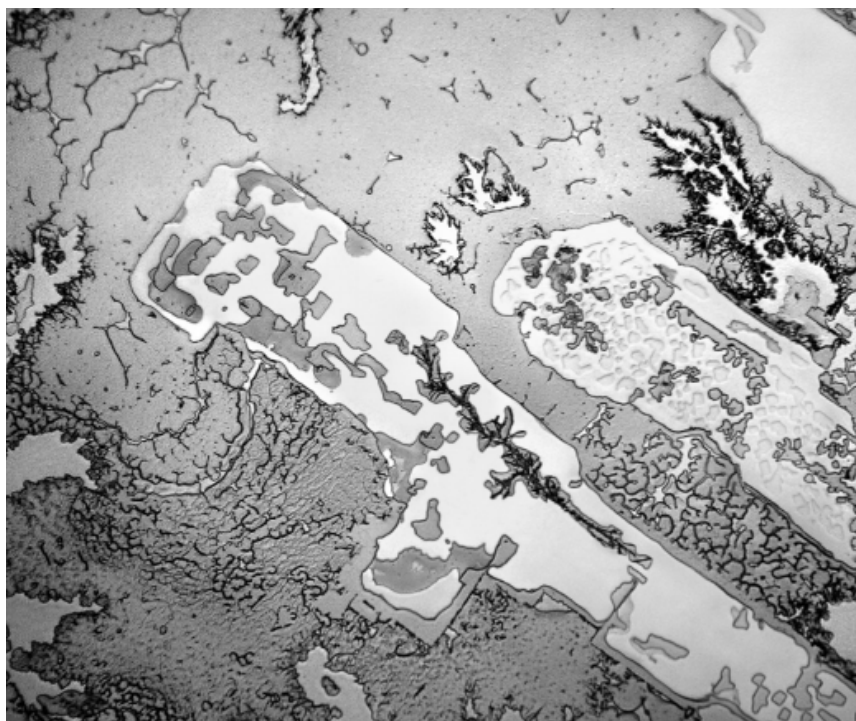


Fig. 3. Rose-Lynn Fisher, “Topography of tears,” photography, 2017. Taken from Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. II.

[...] são como fotos aéreas:  
terrenos plantações uma cartografia vista de cima  
essas imagens poderiam ser uma espécie de  
“atlas temporário” pois consistem em registrar  
um pequeno instante na vida de uma lágrima<sup>7</sup>

Taking the epigraph's suggestion as a departure point, we can imagine that the whole poem, marked by circumstantial and contingent traces of indexicality, takes the form of a “temporal atlas.” It is not by chance that in the third part of the book Garcia refers to it as a “site-specific” performance. And it may also be worth noting that Garcia studied the French poet Emmanuel Hocquard in her PhD thesis, emphasizing his treatment of topology. Commenting on the term chosen by Dominique Rabaté for characterizing Hocquard's poetry, *une fabrique de l'écart*,<sup>8</sup> Garcia states:

The semantic field of the word *écart* is very wide and helps to define another type of spacing at stake. *Écart* can mean, besides from distance, a moving away, detour, a spacing, a field that is not only spatial but also includes the movement of being aside, or to keep away, isolated (*à l'écart*), always in relation to something. Thus, this language, producing a factory of distance, seeks to operate an isolation that is present in many different ways in his books.<sup>9</sup>

As we will see later, these movements—moving away, coming close, as in the topography of a tear—refer in Garcia's poem to ways of seeing and ways of reading. Ways of perceiving space that can also be understood as ways of understanding time. These movements also refer to itineraries that are, above all, her own routes within the city: a landmark of her writing since her first book, *20 Poems for Your Walkman* (2007), where the lyric subject most obviously rambled through the different neighbourhoods, but they have also been present in *Engano Geográfico* (*Geographic Error*, 2012) and *Paris não tem centro* (*Paris Has No Centre*, 2016). Nevertheless, what seems to be new in reading Ruins Park is that, by reconstructing some of the geographic movements

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7. “they are like aerial photographs / terrains farms a cartography viewed from above / these images could be a kind of / “temporal atlas” since they consist in registering / a brief instant in the life of a tear drop.” Ibid., p. 11. Our translation.

8. Dominique Rabaté, “La fabrique de l'écart,” *Le chaudron fêlé. Écarts de la littérature*, Paris, José Corti, 2006.

9. Marília Garcia, *Emmanuel Hocquard por Marília Garcia*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, coll. Ciranda da Poesia, 2020, p. 15–16. Our translation.

and compositional procedures made by the poet, we find an interesting proposal of digging through the city's history.

But first let us highlight an important point in her treatment of space and time. A “temporal cartography,” as she characterizes the image of the tear drop, designates an anachronism (what is a tear out of time, out of the body and the flow of life?), as much as an archaeological procedure. If we think of the past as a time “charged with here-and-now” (according to Walter Benjamin’s “Thesis on The Philosophy of History”<sup>10</sup>), it is through the scale changes that the “complexification of the present” becomes noticeable in Garcia’s poem. In the case of the tear image, as in many others included in the book (we will discuss other examples further on), the role of photography is less related to registration and documentation, and more to the evocation of a spectre: the spectre of a time that is no longer there. We might remember that in her famous essay on photography Susan Sontag suggested that looking at a photograph provokes an experience close to the surrealist’s, because something that is unrecoverable presents itself as a material trace of a presence.<sup>11</sup> In the same direction, in his *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes argued that the noem of photography, its essence, is “that-has-been” (“ça a été”): “[W]hat I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject.” He adds: “Hence it would be better to say that Photography’s inimitable feature is that someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) in flesh and blood or, again, in person.”<sup>12</sup> However, what demands our attention here is that many of the photographs reproduced in Garcia’s book were actually taken by someone who did not see, did not realize what was going on. *Ruins Park* evokes precisely what is absent in them (the ghosts or spectres).

In fact, a series of spectres, both from history and from her own biography, are called upon the poem: in her archival materials for the artistic residency, Garcia evokes the memory of a grand-uncle who served in World War II and the ghost of a woman who used to meet her lover during that war at Pont Marie (a bridge in Paris, located in front of the house where Garcia was living during her art residency, and where she took a photo every day from the same angle for her art project “Sentimental Diary of the

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10. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969.

11. Susan Sontag, “Melancholy Objects,” *On Photography* [1973], New York, Picador, 2001.

12. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* [1982], trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill & Wang, 2010, p. 82–84.

Pont Marie”). As an inspiration for this diary, part of which was later integrated into the poem, she quotes from films that are also inhabited by phantasms: *Smoke* (Paul Auster, Wayne Wang, and Harvey Wang, 1995) and *Blow Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), where, let us remember, someone takes a picture that would later change the course of the stories, as well as Harun Farocki’s *Images of the World and Inscriptions of War* (1988), where photography also evokes the spectre of the past; and the filmed *Diaries* (1983–2002) of Israeli filmmaker David Perloff, where, apparently, there is “nothing to see,” but where Garcia sees herself in her childhood.

In *Ruins Park*, phantasms emerge especially from the images of ruins: from the homonymous park,<sup>13</sup> where she wrote some of the lines of the poem, referred to in the title of the book; from the National Museum, evoked at the end of the book; from the wars, in her personal archive and in Farocki’s film; and, finally, from the State University of Rio de Janeiro, where she studied literature, an institution that, she underscores, was going through its biggest crisis at the time when she went there to perform the poem that would later become the book.

In the printed version of the performance/poem, Garcia reproduces a sense of co-presence between author and reader while also reinforcing the reference to her own person, to the point that it is difficult, in this case, to differentiate between the poet and the lyric subject. However, it is noticeable that although the autobiographical first person is present throughout the poem, it is a depersonalized one, without any interior substance, indicating an evident schism between subjectivity and point of view. For example, in the case of Rose Lynn Fisher’s work with the tear drops, those indexes of feelings, the interposed microscope mediates the subjective approach to them—but, at the same time, the artist deactivates the positivist use of this instrument designed for objective verification. This is a significant characteristic of the whole poem: a subjective voice combined with acts of vision that produce constant strangeness in perception. The other devices evoked to see the ruins and phantasms (cinema, photography) suggest the idea—and this is our working premise—that every perception is permeated by technological media. Even our perception of racialization and exploitation.

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13. Ruins Park is a cultural centre situated in the high part of Santa Teresa, the ruins of the mansion that belonged to the famous arts patron Laurinda Santos Lobo, and a site where local avant-garde artists met in the 1920s. It is placed in the middle of a huge park, with a panoramic view of the city and the bay, a multistory building, whose project of refurbishing included leaving it partially in ruins. The house has an art gallery, a theatre, an outdoor stage, and a café. As suggested by the poem’s “narrator,” Garcia’s homonymous book was imagined in that café.

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After the epigraph of the tear drop, the poem begins, telling us of a visit to an exhibition of Jean-Baptiste Debret's works at Chácara do Céu Museum (located beside Ruins Park) in July 2016. Portraying everyday life in the colony, Debret became a chronicler of those times, producing the most famous visual records of slavery in Brazil.

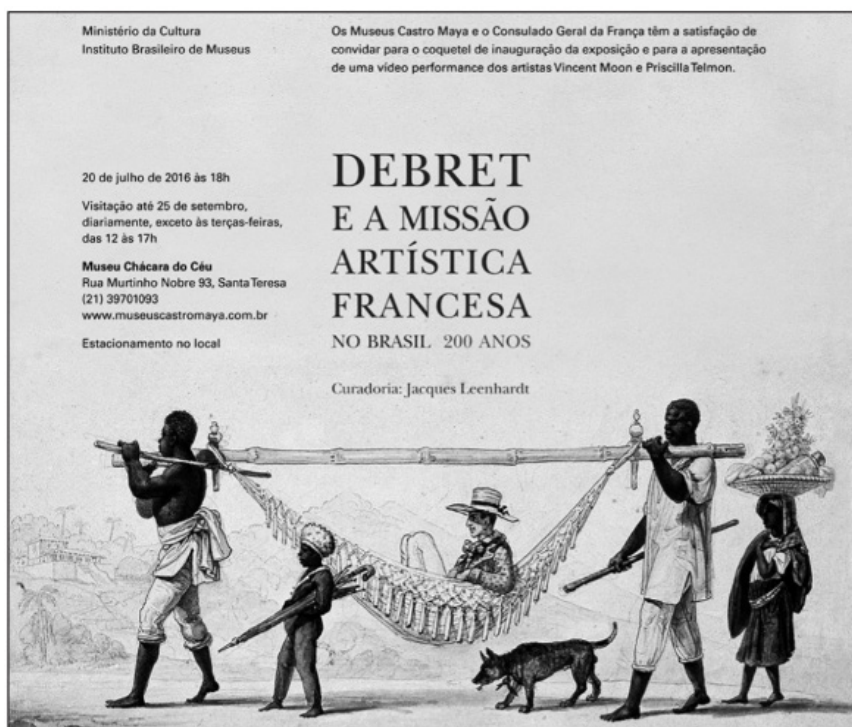


Fig. 4. Jean-Baptiste Debret Exhibition, Museu Chácara do Céu, 2016. Taken from Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 18.

In the first section of the poem, the subject tells the reader that she was visiting this exhibition when she received an email inviting her to give a talk at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ):

naquela época julho de 2016  
a UERJ estava no meio da maior crise da sua história  
sem repasses do governo não tinha como funcionar  
e momentaneamente a universidade estava  
com as atividades suspensas  
já se passaram 26 meses daquele dia  
e não só a universidade continua em crise  
como o **rio de janeiro** anda mergulhado em **ruína**<sup>14</sup>

eu estudei na UERJ  
E durante muitos anos da minha vida fiquei andando  
por aquelas rampas  
vendo o mundo de dentro desses quadrados

*é difícil olhar as coisas diretamente  
ainda mais quando estão destruídas*

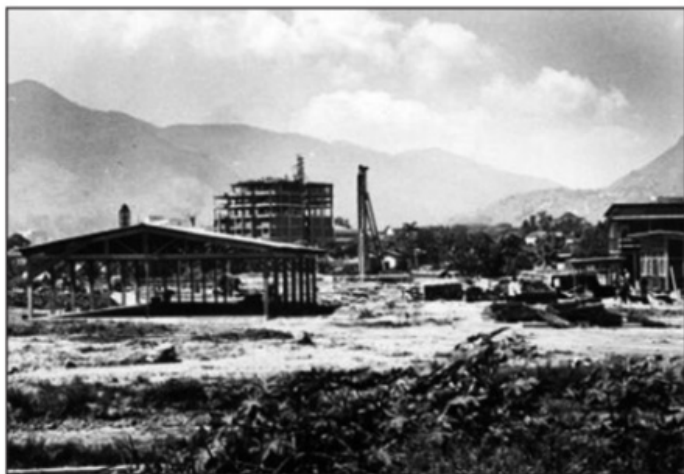


Fig. 5. UERJ construction. Taken from Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 16.

14. “at that time / July 2016 / UERJ was going through the biggest crisis in its history / without governmental aid / it couldn’t function / and temporarily the university is / with suspended activities / it has been 26 months from that day / and not only the university is still in crisis / like rio de janeiro it is sinking into ruins.” Garcia, 2018, p. 16.

naquele momento    no parque das ruínas  
percebi que temos falado muito

essa palavra ultimamente:    *ruína*



Fig. 6. UERJ construction. Taken from Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 17.

não só na UERJ    ou no rio  
mas em todo canto

não sabemos o que fazer  
quando tudo parece a ponto de desabar

[\*definir: *ruína*]<sup>15</sup>

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15. “I studied at UERJ / and for many years of my life I have been walking / on those ramps / seeing the world from within those squares / it is difficult to look at the things directly / especially when they are destroyed / at that moment in the park of ruins / I realized that we have talked a lot / this word lately: *ruin* / not only at UERJ or in rio / but everywhere / we don’t know what to do / when everything seems about to collapse / [\*define: *ruin*].” *Ibid.*, p. 16–17.

When the poet remembers her relation to the State University of Rio de Janeiro, regretting its abandoned status, she leads us to think that those historical layers also refer to the university's history. The photographs evoke the times when the university campus was constructed, built up on the wreckage of the "*favela doesqueleto*" ("skeleton favela"). It was an abandoned structure of what should have been a public hospital, occupied during the construction of Maracanã Stadium, when Rio hosted the soccer World Cup championship in 1950. The favela community was growing around the ruins until it was removed by the state governor at the beginning of the 1960s. The construction of the campus building began in 1969 and was inaugurated in 1976.

Alongside these images, the poem refers to a twofold present time, giving the reader the feeling of an (impossible) simultaneity between writing and reading scenes. The narrator is still located at Ruins Park where she is having a coffee after seeing the Debret exhibition:

eu estava neste lugar  
olhando a vista do parque das ruínas  
quando chegou um e-mail de um professor da UERJ  
a universidade do estado do rio de janeiro  
ele me chamava para um encontro  
onde apresentei este texto que você está lendo.<sup>16</sup>

The reference to the Debret exhibition shortly before talking about the university's and the city's decadence ("rio de janeiro is sinking into ruins") could suggest, therefore, a connection between both historical moments, the nineteenth century portrayed by the painter and the present when the narrator visits the exhibition.

The economic and moral crisis of Rio de Janeiro mentioned in *Ruins Park*, including an interruption in the basic funding for the maintenance of its State University, is a crisis that points precisely to the period after Rio hosted two "mega-events," the Olympic Games in 2016 and the FIFA World Cup in 2014. In the years leading up to the events, Rio's harbour area—which includes a group of neighbourhoods also known as Little Africa, an area of Black resistance<sup>17</sup>—went through a so-called

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16. "I was in that place / seeing the sight of ruins park / when an email from a UERJ professor arrived / the university of the state of rio de janeiro / he called me for a meeting / where I presented this text you are reading." *Ibid.*, p. 15–16.

17. Cristiane Viegas, *Cais do Valongo: expressão da resistência social negra na região portuária carioca*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Autografia, 2019.

“revitalization” (the creation of what is now known as Porto Maravilha, or Marvelous Port)<sup>18</sup> that included the construction of new museums. During the infrastructure works, archaeologists from the National Museum coordinated several digs and found thousands of pieces from the colonial and slavery eras. In 2012, the place was declared an archaeological site and part of UNESCO’s International Slave Route. However, while Black movements, research groups, and civil society organizations clamoured for the construction of a Memorial of the African Diaspora in the area,<sup>19</sup> the government instead inaugurated the Museum of Tomorrow (Museu do Amanhã), which makes no reference to the historical grounds where it is located, and transferred its management to a foundation held by the country’s largest media company.

Economic assemblages and cultural struggles that are contemporary to the release of the book, then, can perhaps be better seen through an archaeological approach to the city’s landscape. Offering the reader a panoramic view of the city from the perspective of a peripheral museum,<sup>20</sup> the poem invites us to recall the conflicting memories that are enmeshed with continuous, historical, transnational, and even technopolitical relations. In this sense, if we take into account that global capitalism (of which those mega sporting events could be considered an ideological veneer) is historically based on colonialism and racism, then those events hosted in Rio ironically reconnect it with one of the important places where it originated.

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In Brazil, the political reparation process for slavery began only in this century, with the Lei de Cotas (Quotas Law), passed in 2012, which determines that institutions of higher education must reserve 50 percent of their admission seats for Black or Indigenous students: it was precisely the State University of Rio de Janeiro, evoked as being “in ruins” in the poem, that was the first to implement the quota system. In fact, racism, slavery’s legacy, and identity are central issues in academic and public agenda in Brazil today. Throughout our text, we aim to emphasize that these issues are presently taken into

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18. See Chapter 4 by Guilherme L. Gonçalves and Sergio Costa, *Um porto no capitalismo global: desvendando a acumulação entrelaçada no Rio de Janeiro*, São Paulo, Brazil, Boitempo, 2020.

19. See Simone Pondé Vassallo and Luz Stella Rodríguez, “Conflitos, verdades e política no Museu da Escravidão e da Liberdade no Rio de Janeiro,” *Horizontes Antropológicos*, no. 53, 2019, p. 57–90, available at Journals OpenEdition, <https://journals.openedition.org/horizontes/2872> (accessed 4 November 2021).

20. Since Chácara do Céu is not a popular site and, also, because it is located on a hill.

consideration, not without disputes, when surveying the historiography of Rio de Janeiro and its institutions, as are the increasing struggles for “other” voices to be legitimized.

In this context, the notion of place of speech (or standpoint), and the perception that gender, race, and class are determinant factors of discourse, has been largely discussed in public debate, academia, and the media. Without neglecting the importance of these material conditions and of identity-based demands, we propose a reading of the poem that reassembles this discussion by taking into account that the body supporting speech is always a body of perception of reality, and not a self-sufficient one. On the contrary, the body has become, according to Jonathan Crary, “*a component of the new machines*, apparatuses, economies, whether social, libidinal, or technological.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the body should still be considered as physically marked (“Black body,” “a woman’s body,” etc.), but should also be seen as a body crossed by “certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification”<sup>22</sup> that imply historical forms of perception of the real. Yet, even referring to slavery, identity issues are not at stake in Garcia’s poetry, which instead draws our attention to the ways subjectivity is affected by perception, including our ways of seeing and reading. As stated above, the autobiographical first person is depersonalized, without interiority, thus avoiding marks of identity that are usually associated with racial matters in contemporary poetry. Shifting the emphasis from identity to perception, we may enter a field where what is unchained is not a self-representation, but the possibility of sharing the gesture of the “act of seeing” differences and otherness<sup>23</sup> (hence making them exist).

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After talking about Debret’s exhibition and the university that invited her to perform “the poem we are reading,” the narrative/lyric voice refers to the “sentimental diary” the author produced during her residency in Paris, where she was working with her grand-uncle’s story from World War II. The procedure of the diary consists in taking a picture every day of the same place (Pont Marie, the bridge upon the Seine)

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21. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1990, p. 2, our emphasis.

22. *Ibid.*

23. David Lapoujade, *As existências mínimas*, trans. Hortencia Santos Lencastre, São Paulo, Brazil, n-1 edições, 2017.

from the same angle, like the protagonist in *Smoke*. In that film, an image of the past reveals something that remained unperceived at the time it was taken: by zooming in on it (and hence changing the scale), a man discovers his now dead wife in one of the photos. Replicating this procedure, the photographs of the sentimental diary anticipate a future where they may reveal something related to the place and the times of the art residency that coincided with the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine (on 7 January 2015). Would the image of the bridge taken that day reveal something to a future observer about what happened in the city? The narrator seems to wonder. Could we see in these images traces of people who used to cross this bridge during the world war? “How to see this place?” is a question that returns throughout the poem. “Talvez com a foto pudesse recortar um instante / um fotograma,”<sup>24</sup> she says.

As in those films, in Garcia’s book, photography is not a record of the real, but an optical device that supplements vision. It is not only a matter of approaching the lens, but also the possibility of extracting an instant of the past and looking at it again in the present, anachronistically.

debret pintou o dia a dia<sup>25</sup>  
mas para ele esse dia a dia é pitoresco  
e extraordinário

*smoke* e *blow-up*  
retratam o extraordinário  
e de repente algo aparece:

algo que já estava ali  
mas ao ser lido com outros olhos  
pode virar fantasma                      algo que já estava ali

24. “Maybe with the photo I could capture an instant / a photogram.” Garcia, 2018, p. 26.

25. “Debret painted everyday life / but for him / that everyday life is picturesque and extraordinary / *smoke* and *blow up* portray the extraordinary / and suddenly something appears: something that was already there / but upon being read with different eyes / can turn into phantasm / something that was already there / but it needs an external gaze in order to become / an extraordinary event / perlov’s *diary* 1973–1983 is also about the extraordinary / and seems to almost touch life / in a certain point of the film that lasts / almost 6 hours / perlov comes to brazil / he stays in são paulo for some time / where he lived in his childhood / and then he goes to rio the city where he was born / and films copacabana / then he makes a single scene in the santa teresa neighbourhood / with the tram passing / in this unique scene / filmed at the times when I was born / I see in the background / the house of my childhood / my extraordinary / the window from where I used to see the world / [in the film the image is blurred / out of focus in my memory / the image is blurred and out of /focus I almost can’t / capture the point I ask / the reader to imagine this window / with the tram’s noise in the background].” *Ibid.*, p. 39.

mas precisa de um olhar de fora para ser tornar  
acontecimento extraordinário

o *diário 1973–1983* do perlov também trata do infraordinário  
e parece quase tocar na vida

em certo ponto do filme que dura

quase 6 horas    perlov vem ao brasil  
ele fica um tempo em são paulo  
onde morou durante a infância  
e depois    vai ao rio    cidade onde nasceu  
e filma copacabana  
em seguida faz uma única cena no bairro de santa teresa  
com o bonde passando  
nesta única cena    gravada na época em que eu nasci  
vejo ao fundo  
                         a casa da minha infância                    o meu extraordinário  
a janela de onde via o mundo

*[no filme a imagem está tremida  
e fora de foco    na memória  
a imagem está tremida e fora de  
foco    por pouco não consigo  
capturar o ponto    peço ao  
leitor que imagine essa janela  
com o ruído de bonde ao fundo]*

Temporal distance provides the conditions to see something where there is apparently nothing to see. We propose to extend this same procedure to the reading of the poem itself. If we adopt Garcia's metonymic approach to Debret's images, what might they show us of the city's ruins or of World War II? And how do these ghosts from the past affect our way of reading? These questions, somehow, bring the echoes of others: What can we see, and what can we not see? What do we neglect? What is invisible for us, right now?



Fig. 7. Still frame, David Perlov, *Diary, 1973–1983*. Taken from Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 39.

Our reading position borrows from the Argentine critic Josefina Ludmer, who proposes a way of reading literary texts that are attached to disputes over land and memory. Throughout her books,<sup>26</sup> she develops a materialist approach to literature that could be characterized by a symptomatic gaze: an assemblage of perception and reading that connects the uses of discourses in literature to the uses of bodies in the labour market, drawing attention to the economic dynamics of gaps in modernization in Latin American countries. Her work exposes, then, a speculative relation between language and biopolitics. In this sense, seen from the present, those images of slavery in Debret's exhibition can be connected to the capitalist extractivism that made possible technical developments including, paradoxically, war technology.

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26. Josefina Ludmer, *El género gauchesco: Un Tratado sobre la Patria*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1988; *El cuerpo del delito: Un Manual*, Buenos Aires, Perfil, 1999; *Aquí América Latina: una especulación*, Buenos Aires, Eterna Cadencia Editora, 2010.

Here we also follow Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra's expanded approach to extractive operations,<sup>27</sup> since they (along with other researchers<sup>28</sup>) suggest that a biopolitical expansion of production, surrounded by environmental and energetic exploitation, sustains the regimes of information technology. Seeking financial and logistical dynamics through the operations of extraction, they show how struggles in distant realms are actually related. In fact, both data mining processes and storage devices depend upon a logistics for hardware production that also raises questions—although they usually “remain out of the perceptual field”<sup>29</sup>—concerning the geopolitics and geophysics of energy.<sup>30</sup> And, as Jussi Parikka's *Geology of Media* shows, this is part of a history that “participates in stories of global expansion through colonialism and the rush for resources: the invaluable materials from minerals to oil and other energy sources such as uranium—a global mapping of territories increasingly exhausted.”<sup>31</sup> So, from this point of view, we can historically relate these media and their materiality with extractivism, slavery, and—moving along in the metonymic frontiers—the role of Latin America (and the South Atlantic) in these assemblages. And all this brings us back to the poem.

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*Ruins Park* begins and ends in Rio de Janeiro, a city formed by the transatlantic slave trade and built by a Black population, which in the nineteenth century was in the majority and anything but passive, despite official representations. One of the images reproduced of Debret's exhibition shows chained Black bodies being tortured in the streets.

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27. Verónica Gago & Sandro Mezzadra, “A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital: Toward an Expanded Concept of Extractivism,” trans. Liz Mason-Deese, *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 29, no. 4, p. 574–591, 2017. See also Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 2–3. By doing this, they are aligned with Silvia Federici's critiques of those perspectives that see a tendency to immaterialization in capitalism, perspectives that do not “question the material basis of the digital technology the Internet relies upon, overlooking the fact that computers depend on economic activities—mining, microchip, and rare earth production—that, as currently organized, are extremely destructive, socially and ecologically.” Silvia Federici, “Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation,” *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland, California, PM Press, 2012, p. 142.

28. Matteo Pasquinelli, “The Automaton of the Anthropocene: On Carbosilicon Machines and Cyberfossil Capital,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 116, no. 2, 2017. See also Matteo Pasquinelli, “Italian Operaismo and the Information Machine,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2015, p. 49–68.

29. Andrés M. Tello, *Anarchivismo: Tecnologías políticas del archivo*, Buenos Aires, La Cebra, 2018, p. 105.

30. Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

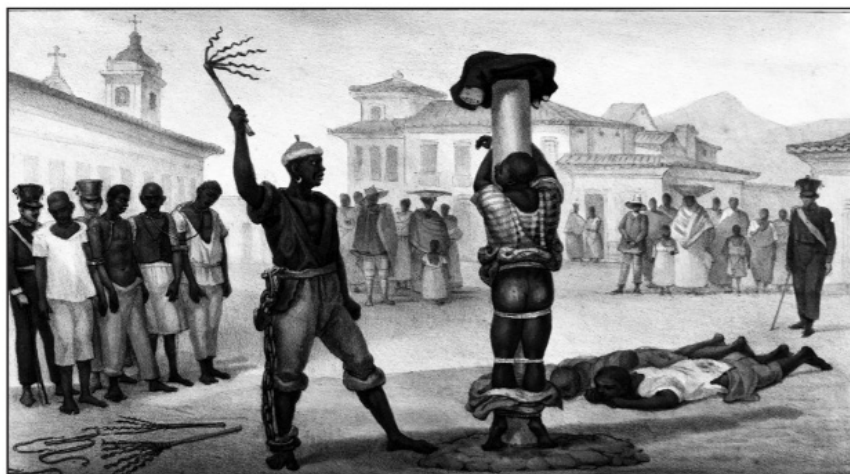


Fig. 8. Jean-Baptiste Debret, “L’Exécution de la Punition du Fouet,” lithography, before 1830. Taken from Marília Garcia, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 21.

The image shows the harbour area: Valongo Wharf hosted a market that, statistically, was the biggest space of commercialization of enslaved populations in the Americas in that century, sending thousands of labourers to extract gold in Minas Gerais, expanding the logistics networks of primitive accumulation, in a socio-technic assemblage that produced media infrastructure. Claudio Honorato’s thesis<sup>32</sup> tells the story of this market, which is precisely the site of one of Debret’s censored paintings (*Boutique de la rue du Val-Longo*). The cemetery of this area was active until 1830.<sup>33</sup>

In the post-abolition period, at the turn of the twentieth century, Rio de Janeiro’s mayor, Pereira Passos, promoted the demolition of many houses in the harbour area,

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32. See Cláudio de Paula Honorato, *Valongo: o mercado de almas da praça carioca*, Curitiba, Brazil, Editora Appris, 2019.

33. As we said above, bones were discovered in the Valongo Wharf area over the last decades (first, in 1996): there were vestiges there of a huge informal cemetery where bodies of the so called “*Pretos novos*” (New Blacks), who arrived already dead from the transatlantic crossing, were left unburied. This name (*Pretos novos*) also served to obliterate their ethnic past and homogenize these populations in a process of blood cleansing and religious conversion—the same that motivated the New Christians of Jewish diaspora. But even if already converted to Christianity, as Julio Cesar Pereira tells us, the “new Blacks” were abandoned (*à flor da terra*), without the appropriate mourning rituals. See Júlio César Medeiros da Silva Pereira, *À flor da terra: o cemitério dos pretos povos no Rio de Janeiro* [2007], revised and enlarged second edition, Rio de Janeiro, Garamond, 2014

based on a positivist sanitation ideology of whitening, inspired by Georges-Eugène Haussmann's politically motivated interventions into Paris' urban fabric.<sup>34</sup> By opening the Central Avenue (today's Rio Branco), the government further promoted an infrastructural acceleration that served to ship the products arriving from overseas, and at the same time expanded real estate speculation towards the city's southern zone, where Garcia situates her other books. Thus, the images of Debret's exhibition reproduced in *Ruins Park* make us realize that urban renewals of both twentieth and twenty-first centuries tended to erase the memory of this past. In this sense, what is at critical stake in the book, taken here as a perceptual apparatus, as well as in Debret's exhibition, is also a *tabula rasa* of the structural violence of colonial society.

Besides the fact that Garcia takes as her writing material an exhibition of documents from the period of slavery first published in a volume that was rejected by the national archives of the Historical and Geographical Institute<sup>35</sup> (as it delivered an image of the official archive that the Institute would rather forget), it is also symptomatic that Debret's exhibition took place in a small, secondary, and relatively unknown museum. In a book about the process of formation of the modern national state in Argentina and Brazil, Jens Andermann highlights the biopolitical importance of museums and proposes to understand the "optic of the state" as an "effect of images from nature and history generated by a new way of seeing," and also by "new forms of visual address."<sup>36</sup> Understood as a "cultural form," the state perspective should be referred to "visual technologies of arrangement and reproduction of the real that emerged in parallel to its political consolidation in the twentieth century."<sup>37</sup> Exhibitions are "scopic rituals." And the effects of Debret's exhibition in Garcia's poem shows less the success of the state perspective than the failure of its consolidation.

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34. This process was the main transformation that motivated Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project. In his book about Paris, David Harvey highlights precisely that Haussmann's urban renewal, inspired by "new technologies" and "facilitated by new organization forms," prompts an "extraordinary change" in "the spatial scale of both thought and action," which "enabled him to think of the city (and even its suburbs) as a totality rather than as a chaos of particular projects." This is something that, he says, "Walter Benjamin fails to register in his Arcades project in spite of his intense interest in the spatial forms of the city." David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 12–13.

35. See Jacques Leenhardt, "Jean-Baptiste Debret: um olhar francês sobre os primórdios do império brasileiro," *Sociologia & Antropologia*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2013, p. 509–523, available at SciELO.br, <https://doi.org/10.1590/2238-38752013v367> (accessed 4 November 2021).

36. Jens Andermann, *A óptica do Estado. Visibilidade e Poder na Argentina e no Brasil* [2007], trans. Guilherme Puccini, Rio de Janeiro, Editora UERJ, 2014, p. 13–14.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 21–22.

Highlighting this, our reading of the metonymic gesture of montage in *Ruins Park* suggests that against official cynicism, a ruinological option<sup>38</sup> is appropriate to make visible the forces around another historical truth.

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olho agora para esta página em que estamos  
e para essas letras impressas sobre o papel:  
    será que aqui temos como ver  
    algo além deste instante?  
no dia em que falei este texto  
tirei uma foto do auditório onde estava antes da fala—  
seria possível mais cedo ver quem estaria ali no momento  
de ler o texto?      será que aquilo que acontece agora  
no rio de janeiro      e no brasil  
era algo que já estava evidente nas imagens de antes?  
e nas de hoje?<sup>39</sup>

All these questions echo the proposals of displacement spread throughout the poem—“a cartography seen from above,” “a temporary sentimental atlas,” or, as in the following verses, the suggestion to take a “temporal distance in order to read”:

outra referência para o “diário sentimental da pont marie”  
é o documentário do harun farocki  
*imagens do mundo e inscrições da guerra*  
nele farocki trata justamente de uma situação em que  
alguma coisa aparece com a distância

o filme conta que em 1944  
pilotos americano fazem fotografias aéreas de algumas  
fábricas de borracha na alemanha

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38. See Raúl Antelo, *A Ruinologia*, Florianópolis, Brazil, Cultura e Barbárie, 2016, p. 15–17.

39. “now that I look at this page where we are / and at these letters printed on the paper: / perhaps we have ways to see / something beyond this instant? / on the day I spoke this text / I took a photo of the audience where I was before the speech— / could it be possible to see who would be there at the moment / of reading the text? could it be that what is happening now / in rio de janeiro and in brazil / was something that was already evident in the images from before? / and in those of today?” Garcia, 2018, p. 47–48.



Fig. 9. Still frame, Harun Farocki, *Images of the world and inscription of war*, 1989. Taken from Marília García, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 33.

33 anos depois já nos anos 1970 a cia percebe  
que eles fotografaram também um dos campos de concentração de auschwitz  
na época eles não viram o que já estava nas fotos  
porque não sabiam da existência dos campos e por isso  
não havia nada para ver  
depois quando começam a ver  
as fotografias com outros olhos  
algo aparece:  
uma verdade que ainda não existia

*aparição fantasma*



Fig. 10. Still frame, Harun Farocki, *Images of the world and inscription of war*, 1989. Taken from Marília García, *Parque das ruínas*, São Paulo, Luna Parque, 2018, p. 34.

neste caso  
precisam de uma distância temporal  
para ler<sup>40</sup>

40. “In addition to the films I already quoted / another reference for the “sentimental diary of pont marie” / is harun farocki’s documentary / *images of the world and inscriptions of war* / there farocki shows a situation in which / something appears with a distance / the film recounts that in 1944 / american pilots took aerial photographs of some / rubber factories in germany / 33 years later in the 1970s the cia realizes / that they also photographed / one of the concentration camps in auschwitz / at that time they did not see what was in the photos / because they did not know about the existence of the camps and thus / there was nothing to see / later when they begin to see / the photographs with other eyes / something appears: / a truth that did not yet exist / *apparition ghost* / in this case / they need a temporal distance / in order to read.” *Ibid.*, p. 33–34. Our emphasis.

It makes sense then to leave the ruin as a memorial, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro proposed, hoping that in the future someone would see the ghosts that frequent them. The verse that referred to Farocki's film ("in this case / they need a temporal distance in order to read") sounds strange (wouldn't it be better to say that a temporal distance is necessary in order to *see something?*) but, in fact, in the poem, the changes of scales approximate *ways of seeing* and *ways of reading* (as did Josefina Ludmer):

aqui lembro que o ricardo piglia  
analisa algumas fotos de borges quando está quase cego  
borges tem um livro diante do rosto  
e se coloca muito perto do livro tentando ler:  
o olho fixo sobre a página a página contra o olho  
ele tenta enxergar no fiapo de luz que ainda resta  
este que é um dos maiores leitores do século  
diz piglia  
e no entanto para ler precisa chegar muito perto  
às vezes a leitura é um jogo de escala:  
é preciso se aproximar a ponto de perder o todo  
mas outras vezes é preciso se afastar muito do texto<sup>41</sup>

"Literature, as well as painting and cinema, is like a screen," Ludmer once said in the inaugural class of a seminar.<sup>42</sup> On that occasion, she drew inspiration from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, where we read that: "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves."<sup>43</sup> There are many ways of reading Marília Garcia's poem, many ways of reading any poem. In the case of *Ruins Park* the possibilities are multiple because Garcia produces a constellation of texts and images that open a great number of matters and questions, and that connect rhizomatically to many different points. Autobiographical histories connect with twentieth century History, fiction films connect with a diary, Rio de Janeiro with

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41. "here I remember that ricardo piglia / analyses some portraits of borges when he is almost blind / borges has a book in front of his face / and gets very close to the book trying to read: / the eye fixed on the page the page against the eye / he tries to see in the slight lint of light that still remains / this is one of the greatest readers of the century / piglia says / and nonetheless he needs to get very close in order to read / sometimes reading is a game of scales: / it is necessary to get so close as to nearly lose everything/ but at other times it is necessary to move far away from the text." Ibid., p. 32.

42. Josefina Ludmer, Clases 1985, *Algunos problemas de Teoría Literaria*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2015, p. 39.

43. John Berger et. al, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 9.

Paris, our times with colonial ones. It is not by chance that the bridge (mainly Pont Marie, but also the one that connects Parque das Ruínas and Chácara do Céu) is the image (in both senses of the word, as a poetical image and as a picture) that traverses the poem from beginning to end. As an effect of her acts of seeing, moving through the ruins of two modern institutions (the museum and the university), Garcia tests a reading composition that shares some of the sensible mediations of our current historical perception. We chose to read in those images a History beneath the ruins of the present and an archeology of the disputes around them.

# Rio de Janeiro as a Park of Ruins: Digging through Images in a Site-Specific Poetry Book

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## ABSTRACT

This text proposes a reading of *Parque das ruínas* (*Ruins Park*, 2018), a poetry book by Marília Garcia, which places words and images in a dialogue in order to question *ways of seeing* through constant changes of spatial and temporal scales. Mediated by optical devices, it exposes a body of perception as crossed by “practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectivation” (Crary, 2012). Our aim here is also a re-assembling of the book’s images in their relation to Rio de Janeiro’s history grounded in slavery and their related struggles regarding memory. By referring to the archaeological *strata* of Rio de Janeiro’s formation, moving through the “ruins” of its modern institutions such as the museum and the university discussed in Garcia’s book, we suggest an underlying sense that ties the poem to the present dynamics of extractive capitalism.

## RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte propose une lecture de *Parque das ruínas* (2018), recueil poétique de Marília Garcia, dans lequel dialoguent entre eux mots et images, questionnant les *façons de voir* à travers des changements constants d’échelles spatiales et temporelles. Par le biais de dispositifs optiques, est exposé un corps de perception, traversé par « des pratiques, tech-

niques, institutions et procédures de subjectivation » (Crary, 2012). Notre but, ici, est également un réassemblage des images du livre dans leur relation avec l'histoire de Rio de Janeiro, fondée sur l'esclavagisme, et avec les luttes politiques contemporaines autour de la mémoire. En nous référant aux *strates* archéologiques de la formation de Rio de Janeiro, par un regard sur les ruines de ses institutions modernes telles que le musée et l'université, comme mentionné dans le livre de Garcia, nous suggérons un sens sous-jacent dans le poème lié à la dynamique actuelle du capitalisme extractif.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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