

# MACHADO'S VALONGO IN RIO DE JANEIRO'S CARTOGRAPHY: URBAN SLAVERY IN MOTION

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**Abstract:** Drawing from selected writings by Machado de Assis, this article discusses the contemporary relevance of the word Valongo which was the name given to the largest slave market in colonial and imperial Brazil, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Buried and erased from the map and urban landscape of Rio for nearly two centuries, Valongo was "rediscovered" in 2011 during an archeological excavation within the context of an expansive city-planning reform of the docks area: the Marvelous Port Project. This article reflects upon the power of Machado's prose for (re) reading the history of Brazilian slavery and its legacy.

**Keywords:** Machado de Assis; slavery; Rio de Janeiro; representations; social memory.

## O VALONGO DE MACHADO NA CARTOGRAFIA DO RIO DE JANEIRO: A ESCRAVIDÃO EM CENA NA CIDADE

*Resumo: Este artigo discute, em diálogo com passagens selecionadas de Machado de Assis, o que pode condensar, na contemporaneidade, o nome próprio Valongo, lugar de desembarque de centenas de milhares de africanos e onde operou, no Rio de Janeiro, o maior mercado de escravos do Brasil Colônia e Império. Esquecido dos mapas e do imaginário da cidade por quase duzentos anos, o Valongo foi "redescoberto" arqueologicamente no ano de 2011, no seio de uma ampla reforma urbanística da área portuária carioca, o projeto Porto Maravilha. Nestes termos, faz-se aqui uma reflexão a respeito da potência da prosa machadiana para a leitura do passado escravista brasileiro e suas heranças.*

*Palavras-chave: Machado de Assis; escravismo; Rio de Janeiro; representações; memória social.*

In *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, the Valongo emerges in the narrative in chapter 68, titled "O vergalho" (translated by William Grossman as "The Master"). Its appearance is the product of chance. The narrator was returning from a visit to Gamboa, and along the way, "through Valongo" he stops his train of thought to observe a scene: "it was a Negro who was whipping another Negro in the square", Brás Cubas tells the reader. The Negro was Prudêncio. It was his childhood slave, whom he would ride like a horse and whom he had already mentioned in a previous chapter. As an ex-master, the Machadian narrator begs Prudêncio to grant mercy, which he does. The small crowd witnessing the scene melts as the tension dissipates and Brás himself continues walking, but not without first registering his impressions of the episode:

It was a way that Prudêncio had to rid himself of the blows he had received in his lifetime – by transmitting them to someone else. I, as a child, had sat on his back, had put a reign in his mouth and had beaten him mercilessly; he had groaned and suffered. Now, however, that he was free and could move his arms and legs when and as he pleased, now that he could work, relax, sleep, as he willed, unrestrained, now he rose and became top man: he bought a slave and paid to him, in full and with interest, the amount he had received from me. See how clever the rascal was!<sup>1</sup>

See how clever the rascal was. Could it be the devil? The first mention of the former slave appears in chapter XI, "The Child Is Father to the Man", in which, from beyond the grave, Brás recalls his childhood:

He would place his hands on the floor and would take a rope as a rein between his teeth; and I would climb onto his back with a little stick in my hand, would beat him, and would turn him this way and that, and he would obey – sometimes groaning, but he would obey without a word or, at the most with a "Gee, Nhonhô!", to which I would reply: "Shut your mouth, beast!"<sup>2</sup>

The narrator's reunion with his childhood toy takes place as he walks "through Valongo". Chance composes the narrative. Valongo is where Brás crossed paths with his past. It could have been in any other part of the city,

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<sup>1</sup> ASSIS, *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p. 26.

perhaps, whose geography the character moves about throughout the book: in the area around the Pharoux Hotel, for example, where he frequently has lunch or on the way to the country house in Tijuca. In nineteenth-century Rio, of course, slavery was everywhere: in the first decades of the century the slave population made up almost half of the total population.<sup>3</sup> Their presence was "ubiquitous" as noted American historians Zephyr Frank and Whitney Berry, who listed, in the year 1869 (coincidentally the same year as the death of Brás Cubas in Machado's novel), more than 100 places where transactions – points of purchase and sale – with slaves took place in the city, in a survey conducted using newspaper ads.<sup>4</sup>

The product of an unexpected encounter leads to the narrative or the fraying of memory. It is the reader's responsibility to have full access to the narrative by returning to the pages to find how Prudêncio "had to play that he was [Bras's] horse". In both the childhood and Valongo scenes, there's the stick, the whipping, the groaning – and between them, split by years, there is an invisible thread of transferability. This is where the rascal operates. What is carried over is not the institution of slavery itself, but rather, its subtleties. It has an element of passing on, as if it were something from a father to a son, a "condition". It is this condition – to be the property of another in the Machadian prose – that makes slavery so much more than slavery alone. It's about the transfer of property and its psychological subterfuge (suggested but not explained), that allow Prudêncio to collect interest. Our inheritance? What would it be? An uncomfortable question only presented or provided as a complexity in the narrative of "The Master".

This episode is not chronologically dated in the Machadian fiction. The scene takes place at some point between the beginning of the nineteenth century and 1869, when Bras dies "at 2:00 p.m. on a Friday in August", then "some 64 years old".<sup>5</sup> The expression "through Valongo", in Portuguese, "aquele Valongo fora" prints a diffuse dimension on the geographic location. Associated to memory's atemporality, as a narrative effect it seems to imaginarily disperse the master's place throughout the city. Until 1831, when the slave trade became illegal, it was the largest slave market in the country, with warehouses distributed on the slopes of the hills of Conceição and Livramento, along the shore of the Guanabara Bay, on a stretch of coastline indented by bays and occupied by wharves and piers. A neighborhood

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<sup>3</sup> KARASCH, *A vida dos escravos no Rio de Janeiro (1808-1850)*, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> FRANK & BERRY, *The Slave Market in Rio de Janeiro circa 1869: Movement, Context and Social Experience*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p. 55.

marked by a market and a pier and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Africans in the former colonial and imperial capital; flanked by the city where the slave ships arrived from the other side of the Atlantic. Machado's narrator organizes and contextualizes the city through his imaginary movement through the geographical space. And in it is Valongo, the proper name that combines a universe of possibilities of signification, whose contours are related to slavery (still present then) and more specifically to its traffic and to Africa.

### Valongo in the city's geography

Rediscovered in 2011 in an archaeological excavation in Rio de Janeiro's port district, the stones of Valongo's old slave piers have since been publicly displayed as a monument; they are a mute witness of a part of Brazilian history. Visitors will most likely come up to it on foot. If you are arriving from the city center, you will take the busy avenida Rio Branco, turn left on rua Marechal Deodoro and then right on long and narrow rua Camerino which was used to be called 'rua da Imperatriz' and, in the late eighteenth century, 'Valongo.' Machado de Assis's characters walked there. What do street names spell out? What is their ability for signification?

The hillsides of Valongo were the home to the largest slave market in Brazil – a place that until recently had been forgotten, in the sense that it has been left out of certain narratives about the city and the country. In 2011, at the beginning of the construction for the Marvelous Port project, a public-private partnership that aims to give a new look to the port area with road and infrastructure works, there were no references to that old market in the urban topography. No sign, museum or reference. In the city's history books, if not omitted, the fact that seven hundred thousand Africans arrived at that stretch of coast between the mid-eighteenth century until 1831, when the slave trade became illegal, is only implied. In an excerpt from the book *Morro da Conceição, da memória o futuro*, for example, published in 2000, one can read that the area was obliged "to coexist with the undesirable equipment throughout the city".<sup>6</sup>

In the *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira* [Great Portuguese and Brazilian Encyclopedia], the word refers to the 12th century Portuguese: it is the contraction of the words 'valley' (vale) and 'long' (longo) and

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<sup>6</sup> PREFEITURA, *Morro da Conceição, da memória o futuro*, p. 50.

designates a village that in previous centuries provided bread and port to navigators. And in fact, in Google searches in 2010, before the archaeological "rediscovery" of Valongo, most of the (few) references to the word referred to the Portuguese city, which exists to this day. The quotations marks around the word rediscovery are justified, since actually, it has always been known that the wharves of Valongo had been in that place. There was even an old iron plate affixed to a commemorative monument – a stone column five meters high (the rest of a nineteenth century fountain) – which, in the place where the excavating for the archaeologists' work, in the *Jornal do Comércio* square, on which was written:

The Cais da Imperatriz (Empress's Wharf) once stood here. In 1843 the old Valongo wharf was widened and embellished to receive the future Empress Teresa Cristina<sup>7</sup>

Drawn up by the city government around the 1990s, the statement contained on the plaque was, until the rediscovery of the pier's stones in 2011, the only textual (written) reference to the memory established at that location. The plaque did not make any reference to slavery, to the trafficking or to the largest slave market in Brazil which operated just a few meters away from that spot. Before the archaeological excavations in 2011, anyone who read the two sentences that make up the text on the plaque, would come to the conclusion that it was the place where the future Empress of Brazil (in this case, Teresa Cristina, who married Dom Pedro II) would arrive, and what was there before that was a pier, called Valongo, possibly narrow and ugly, given the fact that it was "widened" and "embellished". And in fact, two decades after installing this sign, archaeologists found the physical remains of both of the piers: under a set of granite stones that had been "inscribed" (those of the Empress), there was another set of irregular stones, also known as "pés-de-moleque" or rough cobble stone, which also means little boy's feet in Portuguese, those of Valongo.<sup>8</sup> Both landings disappeared from the urban surface in the first decade of the twentieth century when the area was leveled for the construction of the current port, the mainstay of the so-called "modern reforms" sponsored by Mayor Pereira Passos (1902-1906), when the city, in the words of that time, "become civilized".

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<sup>7</sup> On the plaque hung by the city in the 1990s; annotated text by me on site in January 2010.

<sup>8</sup> JORDÃO, *As pedras esquecidas do cais*, p. 36.

In current dictionaries Valongo is a synonym for slave market, "in Brazil's slave trade, a site used for selling slaves (in the days when there was valongo, slaves were cheaper)", as recorded in the *Houaiss Dictionary*. In the 1975 edition of *Aurélio Buarque de Holanda*, another well-known dictionary in Brazil, however, there is no entry. Furthermore, in the Cândido de Figueiredo dictionary from 1947, the word is not related to slavery, but does mention the town of Valongo, a village on the outskirts of Porto, referring to its inhabitants. "Valongueiro, adj. pertaining to Valongo. M. A native or an inhabitant of Valongo: 'the beautiful *valongueiras*'".

The word also designated a geographic landform on the coast of Rio de Janeiro in the eighteenth century: The historian Claudio de Paula Honorato, who defended his master's thesis on the old slave market at the Fluminense Federal University (UFF) in 2008, tells us that Valongo was the name of a "cove".<sup>9</sup> A cove is a coastal entry into land as if it were a small bay. In old maps, Vallongo (sometimes spelled with two l's) was also a beach. It is a family name: a Viscount of Valongo had landed in Brazil in 1817, records the *Great Portuguese and Brazilian Encyclopedia*. It also designated in the past a place away from the city, according to the description of Marques of Lavradio, Viceroy of Brazil, in whose report to the Portuguese Crown of 1779 had designated that area as the landing place for slaves in the then colonial capital:

There was... in this city, the terrible custom whereby as soon as the blacks landed at the port from the African coast, they were brought into the city along the main public roads, not just laden with countless diseases, but naked [...] and they do everything that nature would prompt them to do in the middle of the street [...]. My decision was that when the slaves arrived at customs, they should be sent by boat to the place called Valongo, which is located in a suburb of the city, away from all contact, and that the many shops and warehouses should be used to accommodate them (Report to the Portuguese Crown by Marquês of Lavradio, 1779).<sup>10</sup>

A century after Lavradio's report, Machado, under the pseudonym of Manasseh, mentioned Valongo in one of his chronicles, *História de Quinze Dias (Story of Fifteen Days)*, from October 1876, in the magazine *Ilustração*

<sup>9</sup> HONORATO, *Valongo: o mercado de escravos do Rio de Janeiro, 1758 a 1831*.

<sup>10</sup> PEREIRA, *À flor da terra: o cemitério dos pretos novos no Rio de Janeiro*, p. 72.

*Brasileira*. In the publication, and like the chronicler of the story of his time, or at least of the last fortnight, Machado thematized "various subjects related to the news [...] his texts ranged from politics to theater, from social events to everyday happenings".<sup>11</sup>

The chronicler, after imagining an ox who views public opinion for ruminating on Brazilian interstate border issues, highlighting the emergence of a holy woman in Bahia in eternal fasting or the start of paving rua das Laranjeiras, reminds the reader of the the five-year anniversary of the public declaration of the Law of Free Birth (1871). In line with the Brazilian gradualist agenda for the abolition of slavery – which would not occur until twelve years after that chronicle – the law stipulated that children born to slave mothers would be free from that point on, in spite of a number of conditions imposed on them. In his text, Machado-Manasseh observes that in the months leading up to the chronicle, 230 slaves had been freed through the Manumissions Fund (created by law to indemnify owners), "only in some municipalities", waiting, the chronicler states, for the number to grow when freedom "is granted throughout the empire".

Remembering Valongo here activates the last key:

The law of September 28 is five years old. God grant it longevity and health! This law was a major step in our lives. Had it come about thirty years before, the situation would have been different.

The law did not come thirty years ago, but the slaves did, smuggled, and openly sold at Valongo. In addition to the warehouses, there were the dungeons. An acquaintance of mine feels nostalgia for the whip.

– Today slaves are elevated, he usually says. If we beat one, someone will quickly intervene and will even call the police. The good times, there they go! I still remember when we would see a black person dripping in blood passing buy, who said: – "Walk, devil, you're not this way because of what I have done". – Today...

And the man let out a sigh, from so deep inside, so from the heart... that it cut the expression. *Le pauvre homme!*<sup>12</sup>

The Machadian narrator operates like a box cutter with irony. *Le pauvre homme!* (the poor man!), laments the chronicler, quoting Moliere's *Tartuffe*, upon ending the passage, intersected by a black oozing blood – the good times "there they go!" referring to a hope for civilization, they seem to

<sup>11</sup> ASSIS, *História de Quinze Dias*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, p. 109.

(comically) suggest the French words. For a civilization whose mold is in Europe, however, peculiar, in which punishment (the whip) assumes its power to order, the chronicler makes clear, despite the fact that the country was changing. The "The Story of Fifteen Days" opens with a power game that the narrator captures.

Valongo, in Machadian prose, is a mnemonic feature in the city of this sedimenting Brazilian civilization, with its hierarchies of values, whose angular rock affirmed the natural superiority of some (Europeans, whites) to others (slaves, black-Africans and in a rising scale, mulattos and native Americans). Ideology, or rather, slavery advocacy, is what found its resiliency in time, in the so-called racial theories that were in vogue in nineteenth century and the turn-of-the-century Brazil, and that transferred the Darwinian premises of natural selection to social analysis. The whitewashing and miscegenation ideals elevated whiteness as a model (physical, psychological) to be achieved in a country that faced itself, in post-abolitionism, with the issue of its black-African population now as part of the nation's contours. Whitewashing, as Thomas Skidmore underlines, was a theory and a practice accepted "by the majority of the Brazilian elite in the years ranging from 1889 to 1914",<sup>13</sup> and whose underlying aspects combined, in subsequent years, the myth of racial democracy and its corollary, the belief in a harmonious life between the different races and social classes. These are theories, practices, policies, which, quite comprehensively in the context of time, the thinker Abdias Nascimento systematized in terms of "genocide",<sup>14</sup> given their potential for the deletion of blacks by whites.

But in that time, in the time of the Machadian chronicler, the civilization the *pauvre homme* longed for – an anonymous "known" (anyone? The reader?) – was that of a still recent past, in which smuggled slaves landed and were sold in Valongo, in the early days of so-called illegal slave trafficking in Brazil, which lasted until 1850. Thus, it was a recent past because slavery still existed and its traffic was still stitched as a recent mark.

### The slave ship in Machado

Still in *Brás Cubas*, in Chapter 12, titled "An Episode of 1814", in a brief passage during a dinner, the narrator mentions the news of the arrival of

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<sup>13</sup> SKIDMORE, *Preto no Branco: raça e nacionalidade no pensamento brasileiro*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> NASCIMENTO, *O genocídio do negro brasileiro: processo de um racismo mascarado*, p. 41.



slaves to the Carioca port, which at the time was one of the main centers for the trans-Atlantic traffic, Valongo being one point on that path:

One fellow, near me, was giving another man news of the shipment of negroes that was soon to come, according to letters he had received from Loanda – one letter in which his nephew wrote that he had negotiated about forty head and another in which... He had them right in his pocket, but he couldn't read them at that time. He assured the other man that we could rely on receiving at least some hundred and twenty negroes on this voyage alone.<sup>15</sup>

The slave ship is quoted in the novel *Counselor Ayres' Memorial* published in 1908, when Machado de Assis's narrator refers to the erasing of the memory of slavery in the country while simultaneously suggesting that its future memory will be woven in poetry, meaning, with words. The memory of slavery, in this case, is recorded in the passage across the Atlantic. In the character-narrator's diary entry for May 13, 1888, the date of Abolition in Brazil, one can read:

Good that we did away with it! It was time. Even though we should burn all the laws, decrees and opinions, we cannot do away with the private actions, bills of sale, and inventories, nor wipe the institution off the pages of history, nor even from the pages of poetry. Poetry will speak of it, in particular those verses of Heine's in which our name is indelible. In those verses the captain of a slave ship tells of having left three hundred Negroes in Rio de Janeiro, where the "house of Gonçalves Pereira" paid him 100 ducats a head. No matter if the poet corrupts the buyer's name and calls him Gonzales Perreiro; it was the rhyme or his bad pronunciation that led him to do it. We also do not have ducats; there the seller changed the buyer's money into his own language.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth taking a moment to look more carefully at this paragraph by Machado. The narrator quotes the German poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) and his poem "The Slave Ship" [*Das Sklavenschiff*]. First published in 1854 in German and later translated into French<sup>17</sup>, the scene in Heine's poem's takes place on a slave ship. In the scene evoked by the poet, the ship's captain,

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<sup>15</sup> ASSIS, cit, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*, *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> HEISE, *Diversidade na convergência*, p.26.

Mynheer Van Koek, who sets the course toward Rio de Janeiro with his cargo and who calculated that he would start with 600 slaves on board – a “bargain” he picked up in Senegal – and if he made it across the Atlantic with at least half of them, he would still turn a good profit.

Six hundred negroes, I closed the deal  
I’ll come out ahead eight hundred percent,

With only the half surviving.  
If only three hundred negroes remain  
By the time we reach Rio de Janeiro,  
I’ll be getting a hundred ducats per head<sup>18</sup>

The captain, who is in his cabin, sudden has his line of thinking interrupted by the surgeon on board – a fellow whose face is covered in warts and is awkwardly thin – who informs him of an epidemic aboard the ship and that bodies had been cast to sea. And that in order to mitigate the problem, it would be necessary to take the slaves off the quarterdeck and make them dance so that they can recover their energy:

And also some died from melancholy,  
A disease that will fatally bore them;  
Perhaps some fresh air, some music and dance  
Might give us the means to restore them.

In Heine’s poem the slaves dance in the cabin and the captain prays that his shipment arrive safely. The sharks that follow the ship are witnesses to the scene that takes place on the high seas, waiting for more bodies (It’s just the funniest thing to behold/ How they snap up the dead as they follow!/ One grabs the head, one grabs the leg,/ The scraps by the others are swallowed) e as estrelas no céu (Many thousands of stars are swimming/ They gaze from the heavens, shining and wise).

On the date of Abolition, the narrator in Machado de Assis’s *Counselor Ayres’ Memorial* writes that in these verses “our name is indelible”, even though he writes down on paper a correction necessary for the recording of the story – for its perpetuation. It was Pereira, not Perreiro, who profited from the trafficking of slaves and, the latter only exists due to “rhyme” or due

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<sup>18</sup> Translation from German to English by Daniel Platt. Available online: <http://davidsbuendler.freehostia.com/slaveship.htm>.

to "bad pronunciation". However, neither do we have ducats; "there the seller changed the buyer's money into his own language" – the trick is in the telling of a story, in the language. The Machadian narrator, with his sarcastic criticism, pulls a banal detail out of the everyday – in exchange for a proper local name in a poem written by a stranger – and he provides it with a historic dimension. The burning of the papers is very likely a reference to the decree signed in 1890 by the then Minister Rui Barbosa, ordering the burning of the bills of sale from the slave trade by public offices; unofficially, at the time, a measure taken to undermine the former slave-owners' indemnity requests post abolition.<sup>19</sup>

"There is poetry, but look there, pay attention to the words", Machado de Assis's paragraph from 1908 seems to denounce, since one must remember slavery – a history that is now erased, then corrupted.

### Father against Mother: the city condenses destinies

Valongo is also cited in the short story "Father against Mother" as a place of piers and market in the city. A citation emerges in the third paragraph when the narrator introduces the reader to the "work and tools" that have disappeared with slavery, among these, the iron around the neck to prevent fleeing:

Escapes happened repeatedly, however. There were even cases, exceptional though they were, when a contraband slave, no sooner had he been bought in the Valongo, took to his heels, even though he was unfamiliar with the city streets. Some of those who went into private houses, as soon as they were used to their surrounding, asked their masters to fix a rent, and went to earn it outside, selling items in the street.<sup>20</sup>

The story's plot is well known: Cândido, a poor white man, captures a run-away slave, Arminda, a mulatta, and he receives a reward of one hundred thousand réis, thus preventing him from having to take his newborn son to foundling wheel (a place where children were left for adoption), an option he had to consider in light of his tight financial situation. In the plot, the slave, upon thrashing against her capturer – a

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<sup>19</sup> FUNDAÇÃO CASA DE RUI BARBOSA, Rui Barbosa e a queima dos arquivos.

<sup>20</sup> ASSIS, Father against Mother, p. 256.

common occupation in nineteenth century Rio during slavery, – aborts the child she carries. The result of the conflict leads Cândido to conclude, in the very last words of the story: “– Not all children make it”, said his beating heart.

In the Machadian story, Arminda, the “fleeing mulata”, appears before Cândido on rua da Ajuda, as he was walking to the foundling wheel with his son in his arms. Before this crucial moment, the reader can only imagine her path through the city based on clues the narrator peppers throughout the pages. Perhaps she is “being protected by a lover”, speculates Cândido, when, upon flipping through the old bounty announcements for run-away slaves in the newspapers, he came across the one with a high amount or one hundred thousand réis. His hunt in the city leads him to largo da Carioca, to rua do Parto and rua da Ajuda – all located in the city center – where he inquires about the slave’s whereabouts, unable to find her until the very last chance.

Arminda, anyway, is an absent presence in the geography of the streets: for most of the story, what we are following are traces of her. She was not “fresh off the market at Valongo” – the marketplace mainly for newly-arrived blacks from Africa until 1831 – bolting to run in spite of not knowing the city streets, since from the beginning it is suggested that Arminda is “ladina”, an expression used to designate a slave who is versed in Portuguese.<sup>21</sup> She probably disappeared “quitandando”, or selling groceries through the city, since it is presumed that she even had a lover, besides a well-established owner on rua da Alfândega who used to publish ads in the newspapers.

Valongo – a slave trading post (among so many that existed in nineteenth century Rio) – composes a constellation in the narrative such that the city seems to condense the characters’ fate. It is the environment for one of the occupations – slave hunting – that slavery took with it to the grave. It is the knowledge of its corners, tricks, people that Cândido and others live an increasingly precarious survival, since the competition for prey and reward became more aggressive over time (a situation that almost resulted in taking the newborn to the foundling wheel). However, the Machadian narrator says in a sibylline way that all of that has passed in this story published in the collection titled *Relics of the Old House*, in 1906, when there was no longer slavery in Brazil.

The outcome, however, raises questions in relation to how much this past has actually passed. In what temporal and spatial dimension would a newborn child survive at the expense of another who has not made it to life?

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<sup>21</sup> LOPES, *Enciclopédia brasileira da diáspora africana*, p. 378.

Machado offers the contemporary reader an appetizer of the Brazilian complexities. According to Roberto Schwarz: "This literary form captures and dramatizes the structure of the country, which becomes, so to speak, the musical staff, the order beneath the writing. And it is true that, Machado's narrative prose is one of the few that, simply in their movement, constitute a complex sociohistorical spectacle, of the greatest interest, and in which the surface subject is of little moment".<sup>22</sup> The observation somehow offsets the issue of Machado's so-called "absenteeism" regarding the questions of slavery and race in Brazil in his work,<sup>23</sup> at least in the approach taken in this article. These are present in Machadian prose, in the citations here collected, such as Brazilian complexities that may not be limited to slavery itself, but to its institution and resiliency. Hence the power of Machado's writing. In these terms, his prose, or its shrapnel, help us think about the legacy of slavery in Brazil as a phenomenon that unfolds with time. Moreover, in my opinion, retrospectively finding fault with an author (or subject) due to an absence, assuming there is one, that is of much greater breadth and shape, does not seem to be productive.

In these terms, the current "rediscovering" of the stones in the old slave wharves also unearths one word, which enjoys new circulation. What does this proper name reveal about the city's cartography?

Upon reading it in Machado, in the excerpts selected for this essay, it appears as a point connected with the plots in which not slavery itself, but the conditions derived from it are highlighted like circumstances that can be transmitted in time. Property relationships and their vices; the use of force (rape can be imagined) against the black woman by the white man. Brazilian social order, after all, that inherits the past perhaps more than it is ready to admit, even to this day. This is the "socio-historic spectacle" that, perhaps, a passerby among the wharves' ruins, sometimes forgotten, sometimes remembered, could foresee, or a reader of Machado willing to inquire about what meanings the name of a place can condense.

Valongo is the remains of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that during three centuries operated the forced migration of ten million Africans to the Americas, four million of whom were brought to Brazil.<sup>24</sup> It is also a physical and imaginary inscription of this history in the city of Rio de Janeiro. History has often wanted to forget, yet the old pier's physical disappearance itself

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<sup>22</sup> SCHWARZ, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*: Machado de Assis, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> For a summary of the terms of this debate: VITAL, *Quase brancos, quase pretos*, p. 23-40.

<sup>24</sup> FLORENTINO, *Em costas negras*, p. 23.

(and the lack of references to them in the urban fabric for almost 200 years) is an index of the city's participation in slavery.

In these terms, the word Valongo suggests a double reminder: that of the history of slave trafficking and the trajectory of forgetting this past in the city. This erasing that in turn reverberates with the resiliency of racial ideologies in the country and that have been in place for a long time. The inscription of Valongo in Machadian prose – even if was only cited a few times – appeals to the interpretive potential of this place in Rio and Brazil to the current reader, after all, we always read in the present. It allows the reader to understand Valongo as a geographical place connected to the experience of slavery in Brazil and its possible resiliency. Supporting the imaginary, providing opportunities for updating and grasping the past in its temporal and spatial dynamics, perceiving its unnerving continuity: the hiding of racism, the ongoing inequalities in Brazil, the asymmetrical power relations in the country, the notion that some people are superior to others. These are transmuted aspects in social psychology that Machadian prose absorbs and welcomes us to reflect upon.

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