

# Lineage, Language: Archival Fabulations in *Water is a Time Machine*

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**Abstract** The article investigates Aline Motta's artistic and political fabulation in *Water is a Time Machine* (2022). Making use of archive materials, her language reenacts "poetry by other means" (Perloff 2010). On the other hand, her research on her own lineage, which intertwines with the history of black lives in Brazil, points to other horizons of invention. In dialogue with reflections by Leda Martins on 'spiraling time', by Saidiya Hartman on 'critical fabulation' and by Marylin Strathern on contemporary kinship studies, we observe how the artist performs a phantomalization related to her matrilineal genealogy.

**Keywords** Aline Motta. Archive. Critical fabulation. Matrilineality. Phantomalization.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Uses of the Archive in the Work of Aline Motta. – 3 Performative Phantasm and Matrilineality. – 4 Intertextuality at the Crossroads. – 5 Lineage as Language. – 6 Final Considerations.



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The article we are presenting here is the translation of “Linhagem, linguagem: fabulações do arquivo em *A água é uma máquina do tempo*”, which originally appeared in Portuguese in the Brazilian journal *Texto Poético*.<sup>1</sup> The interest of this re-edition lies not only in the possibility of a broader dissemination that profits from both a language that is more widely understood in academia, and European networks of journal circulation, but also and especially in the themes it discusses. By presenting and analysing the first literary work by the Brazilian visual artist Aline Motta, the two authors delve deep into various issues related to Black diasporas and literatures: the heritage of slavery; the search for the writer’s origins; a hybridity that is autobiographical as well as formal; the recovery of epistemologies of African descent and the empowerment deriving from this. While not integrated into this issue’s dossier for obvious geographic reasons, Miguelote’s and Ricotta’s essay engages with the reflections developed there on the meaning of Afro-descendant identity(ies) for contemporary, postcolonial literatures wherever in the world they are produced, be it in former colonies or former colonial centres. In so doing, it also challenges our disciplinary boundaries and compels us to rethink the categories we tend to apply when studying postcolonial literatures.

## 1 Introduction

This domain of phantasms is no longer the night, the sleep of reason, or the uncertain void that stands before desire, but, on the contrary, wakefulness, untiring attention, zealous erudition, and constant vigilance. Henceforth, the visionary experience arises from the black and white surface of printed signs, from the closed and dusty volume that opens with a flight of forgotten words; fantasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds. (Foucault 1998, 105-6)

There is something spectral and mournful in *Water is a Time Machine* (2022),<sup>2</sup> by Aline Motta. A phantomalization manifests itself in a performative way in this book, in which the absences in everything make themselves present. Aiming at restituting the family’s

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1 Translated from Portuguese by Luiza Leite.

2 All excerpts from the book *Water is a Time Machine* found in this article were translated by Sophie Lewis and Julia Sanches for the Sharjah Biennial 15.

genealogy, the author and artist seems to open “imaginary drawers” that are testimonials of a past that insists on remaining incomplete. It is impossible not to recall Brotero in “Old Papers” from *Collected Pages*, by Machado de Assis, who “opened the drawer [of old papers]; pulled out two or three bundles and undid the string”. Once facing “the letters [that] were stained by time”, and “whose general appearance was that of a cemetery, he started to read them, one by one [...], diving into this dead sea of erased remembrances, personal or public affairs” (1955, 138). In the case of Aline Motta, the family’s “old papers”, photographs, ads from Rio de Janeiro’s nineteenth-century newspapers, documents from notary offices, an old map of downtown Rio de Janeiro, pages of notebooks and planners, collected by the author and presented in new circuits of association and context, reveal not only infernal and daily episodes of our social formation but also the incorporation by the author and artist of a material history of objects and places, of different bodies that belong to her affective micro-community and of historical and literary events in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

In effect, an intertwining between a performative phantomalization<sup>3</sup> and the work with archives is enacted on the next to last page, on which we read: “Nicaldes, an archivist, | exhaled this book” (Motta 2022, 140). Signed by Aline Motta, therefore, the book would have been exhaled by Nicaldes, her great-grandmother’s sister, the one who “pointed to phantoms while tidying imaginary drawers” (9). The drawers, so frequently alluded to in the book, are not only those that hold papers, documents, clothes or objects; they are also the drawers in the cemeteries, in which we deposit the coffin and the bones of our dead. Hence the mournful aspect we referred to. Mourning is also a political moment of her memory of her mother’s illness and death, in “The dead are bodies in the world that no longer belong to anyone. | A body cut off from its memories is no longer a person. / It is no use putting up a sign saying who it was. To make a tombstone with a photograph is also of no use” (83). The gesture of the author, in this regard, is not only that of witnessing the illness and death of her mother, but to confront us readers with invocations of phrases that are phantasmatically supposed to have come out of or fallen out of her mouth, such as “I am no longer alive, now I can only protect her in thought” (80-1).

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**3** Martins (2002, 72) defines the performative mode in its relationship with ritual. She speaks of a performance of rites and of a “mythopoetic of the rites”, in which the voice and the body are articulated or orchestrated as gestures that inscribe “knowledge of various types”. In other words, corporeality, the choreography of voice and gestures are constituted in an episteme, in instituted knowledge and continuously repeated, which in this sense distances us from any representative-mimetic connotation that the gesture could attain in the articulation of the symbolic.

The book was published in 2022 by the collection *Círculo de Poemas*, a partnership between the publishing houses Luna Parque and Fósforo. It is presented, therefore, as a book of poetry. The poet herself, however, during a public reading at the bookstore Travessa, in Botafogo, Rio de Janeiro, on September 16th of 2022, said she was not certain it is a poetry book. “After reading it, tell me what it is, please”, she asked the audience. After quickly flicking through the pages, we observe, beyond the presence of the already mentioned archive documents, a variety of graphic dispositions of the text: short prose paragraphs, versified excerpts with various alignments, uppercase words spread over the page, many blank spaces. The work with the visuality of textual matter attracts the eyes, therefore, which is not surprising since what we have in our hands is the first book of a visual artist. In fact, the appropriation of various documents, which has become a common procedure in 21st-century literature, can also be regarded as a continuation of her visual art works, a field in which appropriation has been central for a longer time. In this context, Aline’s comment regarding not knowing if the book at hand can be classified as poetry becomes even more significant. The marks in *Water is a Time Machine* that motivate her hesitancy gain relevance, because they are situated in that which Perloff (2010, 42) uses to define the conceptual poetry of Kenneth Goldsmith and others to whom “it is possible to write ‘poetry’ entirely devoid of ‘originality’ and it would still be seen as poetry”. This is what the author understands as “poetry by other means” or “citational poetry”, which gains relevance after 2010 and consists of poetry made “with the words of others, words and phrases already existent [which] may be framed, recycled, appropriated, cited, submitted to restrictions, visualized or made into sound” (Perloff 2010, 12-13).

## 2 The Uses of the Archive in the Work of Aline Motta

There is nothing new in the association of family, history, anthropology and processes of creation in Aline Motta’s work, which can be perceived in her video installations *Bridges over the Abyss* (2017), *If the sea had balconies* (2017), *Other fundamentals* (2017-19) and *Natural Daughter* (2018-19). *Bridges over the Abyss* (2017), the first of her video installations, starts with an off-screen narration by the artist over the sound of a collective chant accompanied by clapping and drums: “I see a mother and a daughter. I see a grandmother and a great-grandmother. They are connected by their heads. They are black, they are part of my family. I descend from them. They are no longer alive, but I can evoke their images. Wind and mist”. Accompanying the images, photos of these black women printed on transparent fabric oscillate in the wind. Next to them, a detail of the birth

certificate of the artist, also printed on fabric, shakes in the wind as well and is framed by the camera: “color: WHITE”.

The work constitutes the trajectory of the artist’s search for her origins, beginning with the recuperation of the traces of a secret revealed by her grandmother Doralice, born in Rio de Janeiro in 1911. Doralice reveals to her that she never met her own father, Enzo. Her mother (Mariana, Aline’s great-grandmother) was made pregnant by the son of the owner of the house where she worked and was fired. Enzo never registered his daughter. With Doralice, however, another family was born: “the other half of my grandmother’s DNA”, affirms a voice off-screen. At this moment we understand the presence of a blown-up photograph of a white man, also printed on fabric, which had appeared a few instants before in the video. It should be highlighted that, while the photographs of the black women always appeared associated with bodies of water, submerged, floating or close to oceans and rivers of various continents (America, Europe and Africa), the image of this man is superimposed on a house in ruins, invaded by and surrounded by the bush.

We would like to highlight here, however, the work with public and private archives in this first video installation, which became paradigmatic of others by the artist. Although the research for the elaboration of the work made use of various sources, from oral narratives to a diversified documental investigation, which includes parish registries, criminal trials and slave owners’ inventories, the archive material whose visuality appears the most in the videos comes from twentieth-century newspapers. Enzo seems to have been extremely popular, for his name is present in many social columns. In the images of the three screens that constitute the video installation, we see, therefore, various newspaper clippings with his name. A red pen underlines or circles the name, subsequently crossing-out the remaining text.

The research, recontextualization and signifying of newspaper archives have been recurrent in the work of other contemporary Brazilian artists, such as Rosângela Rennó, in *Universal Archive* (1992-2003) and *Daily mirror* (2001), Leila Danziger, in *Public diaries* (2002-11), and Marilá Dardot, in *Diary* (2015) and *Coloring Book: Retrospective 2015* (2016). In these works, what is frequently at play is a critique of the ephemeral and superficial nature of journalistic information, of the criteria of what constitutes news and of the implicit decisions regarding what should or should not be recorded and divulged, constituting the complex fabric called public opinion. The singularity of Aline Motta’s work, amid this panorama, consists of the fact that what interests her in journalistic archives is not exactly their generic mode of functioning, and the correlated artistic possibilities of subversion of this *modus operandi*. What she looks for in the published newspapers of the past is information (or even the lack

of information) about her own family and her own history, lost and scattered in this immense paper collection. And, given the various possibilities that the use of the archives and textual materials with distinct registers produce in the work of Aline Motta, she ends up having as a result a multiplication of artistic forms. Everything seems to indicate that here the poetic language resonates with the turn alluded to by Marjorie Perloff (2010, 11-12) in *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, in which invention gives way to appropriation, and the dialogue with previous texts, written by others, transforms itself into a movement of “writing-through”, allowing “the poet to participate in a larger and more public discourse”. More than this, Aline Motta’s work with archive materials seems to be in consonance with “the history of the constitution [...] of black cultures in general”, which seems “to reveal the primacy of these processes of dislocation, substitution and resignification, suturing the voids and cavities originated by losses” (Martins 2002, 80).

In this regard, her documental and artistic research into her own lineage should not be understood as narcissism or self-absorption. To those who would classify the artist’s work as overly constituted by navel-gazing, she would not present an objection, but offer a re-evaluation of the procedure: “Given the centrality of the navel in Central African and Afro-Brazilian cultures, talking about one’s own navel does not constitute an act of narcissistic mirroring” (Motta 2021, 336). What seems to be decisive in this intertwining of personal history and fictional writing is precisely the ethical and speculatively utopian attitude of

illuminating the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our present while it is interrupted by this past and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but as the anticipated future of this writing. (Hartman 2020, 17; emphasis added by the author)

Motta (2021, 336) thus challenges our lives in contemporaneity, with the objective of actualizing (ethically) knowledge from the past, and proposes, as the artist herself suggests, a “navel epistemology”. As in *jongo*, this navel dance - that is, being in the center of a circle and projecting the navel forward - implies inviting someone to substitute oneself. The meeting of the navels is the moment of change, a question and an answer, alternation. The whole collective of the dead dances, and the author, who said she was the “daughter of the funeral”, makes a funeral monument out of her body able to apprehend the gestures of the “dead that entered without asking permission | inside the cemetery” (Motta 2022, 131) - where they, while buried, were converted into books: “Of body I fashion an altar | On which the dead may dance” (95).

### 3 Performative Phantasm and Matrilineality

There is not only one spirit watching You. Since this spirit ‘is’ everywhere, since it comes from everywhere (*aus Allem*), it proliferates *a priori*, it puts in place, while depriving them of any place, a mob of specters to which one can no longer even assign a *point of view*: they invade all of space. Number is the specter. But in order to inhabit even there where one is not, to haunt all places at the same time, to be *atopic* (mad and non-localizable), not only is it necessary to see from behind the visor, to see without being seen by whoever makes himself or herself seen (me, us), it is also necessary to speak. And to hear voices. (Derrida 1994, 168-9; emphasis added by the author)

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, in a rooming house on Evaristo da Veiga Street, number 43, next to the center of the Federal Capital, lived Ambrosina Cafezeiro Gomes, Aline Motta’s great-great-grandmother. Ambrosina died of tuberculosis “on the fifth of June of eighteen hundred ninety-four”, according to a document written-up and certified in an old registry office in Rio de Janeiro, consequently found in a public archive and reproduced in *Water is a Time Machine*. The document attests that she was married to Manoel José Gomes and that she had passed away at 37 years old. It states furthermore that the couple had an offspring of seven children: Ambrosina, Iracema, Antonio, Honorina, Cassiunda, Izaulina, Nicaldes. The author descends from all these anonymous dead (Pereira 2019, 106). Named here, the anonymous dead, through the fragmentary path of their diffuse presences, are magnetized and attract the resonance of the author herself, connecting her to a thread of individual and collective belonging.

In *Water is a Time Machine* what we hear is a collective voice, a choir of voices of women who are intimately related. In the book’s flap the poet Ricardo Aleixo refers to the artist as a “‘horse’s’ double of who knows which and how many voices”. In the *Umbanda* religion, the body of the one that incorporates the spiritual guides, which transforms itself into a vehicle for the entities, for communication between the two worlds, is called a horse. If Aline Motta can be called a “horse’s double”, it is because she performs in her writing this capacity of talking on behalf of the dead, her ancestors, reviving and phantasmizing her ancestry in the present.

In this regard, Nicaldes is a key character, the one that both suffers haunting and haunts.<sup>4</sup> Having gone crazy during carnival, when

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<sup>4</sup> The whole book is haunted. It should be noted that Jacques Derrida signals in “A specter is haunting Europe - the specter of communism”, from the *Manifesto of the*

she sees a man dressed as a ‘skeleton’, the girl faints. When she regains consciousness, she will never be the same again: “A dead man had entered her” (Motta 2022, 9). It is then that she starts to emit “unusual sounds” and to point to “phantoms tidying imaginary *drawers*” (9). The brief narrative about Nicaldes going crazy and incorporating, told on the very first pages, resonates many times throughout the book. It resonates in the fear of going mad “[...] a constant in our family” (113), and the provocations of the girl Aline who, for this same reason, insists on calling her mother crazy, crazy, crazy, much to her exasperation. It resonates as well when, while making a reference to her mother’s death and funeral, the author questions the meaning of the burial. “A *skeleton* arranged in a box” we read on page 83; “The drawers give the skeletons artificial boundaries” (because the skeletons become specters themselves, we could add), we read on page 96. Between these two excerpts, Nicaldes seems to speak for herself:

I’m tidying drawers in the air. They’re crammed full of things. I take out one at a time. Heavy steps in the house, I’ll be discovered. I began with the top drawer, haven’t yet done the others. If they catch me talking to the voice again, they’ll say I’m mad and I’ll never find a husband. I try to cover my movements by whispering, as if this were music, and pretend I can’t see the mess. I feel a pitying gaze in my direction, but already it’s moved on. Relief. Now I can get back to my work. I have so much to do. (93)

Is Nicaldes talking to herself or to Aline? Who speaks through her? The dead man that entered her body? The voice with which she speaks? Or is it she who talks through Aline, who becomes the “horse” for her voice? Voices and temporalities become intertwined. In fact, this is the intertwining alluded to in the title of the book. As the writer explains, according to a Congo-Angola worldview. “What separates the dimensions of those who are alive and dead is a thin line of water called *Kalunga*. According to this mode of seeing the

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*Communist Party*, by Karl Marx, the apparition of phantoms and spirits that would survive in the future of the heirs, giving place to the spirit of Marxism. Anamaria Skinner, translator into Brazilian Portuguese of the essay by Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, points to a “specterpoetic” invading Marx’s discourse, in the instigating commentary in the book’s flap. A specterpoetic, we imagine, by the recognition of the power that the specters have of haunting us and supporting us in the great responsibility that we have of inventing a place for those who are alive. Two passages of Derrida’s text illuminate how phantomalization is mobilized in Aline Motta: “The subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements; one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see” and “The *phainesthai* itself (before its determination as phenomenon or phantasm, thus as phantom) is the very possibility of the specter, it brings death, it gives death, it works at mourning” (Derrida 1994, 169-70).



world, water holds memory, water is seen as a vehicle, water is a time machine” (Motta 2021, 335). We are reminded of Leda Martins’ reflections in “Performances do tempo espiralar” (Performances of Spiraling Time). In this essay, the author affirms that spiraling time is, together with ancestry, one “of the most important philosophical and conceptual African notions” (Martins 2002, 72).

The primacy of the ancestral movement, source of inspiration, colors the curves of a spiraled temporality, in which the events, devoid of a linear chronology, are in the process of a perennial transformation. [...] In the spirals of time everything goes and everything comes back. (84)

It is within this other temporality that it is possible “To upend the logic of embryos | The daughter who becomes a forebear to the mother | Memory and vehicle” (Motta 2022, 137). This is the same temporality of which the *Yoruba* saying speaks, regarding the power of the lord of the crossroads: “Exu killed a bird yesterday with a stone he threw only today”. That is, we are faced with a conception of time and history that not only affirms the accumulated experience of the past, the ancestral legacy of practices and knowledge, but which understands it as possible, from the present, to reinvent this past. In Aline Motta’s book there is a play between visibility and invisibility, continuity and becoming, narrativity and counter-narrativity, creative process and knowledge, a play that allows the reestablishment of relations, the making of connections between different time frames and the filial inscribing in a lineage marked by matrilineality.

With respect to the recovery or fabulation of a matrilineal genealogy, her work is aligned with the writing of other contemporary Brazilian authors. In the field of literary fiction, there comes to mind the novel *Her Mother’s Mother’s Mother and Her Daughters* (2002), by Maria José da Silveira, which traces the history of successive generations of women from the same family. Starting with Inaiá, a *Tupi* girl, who is born on the 21st of April 1500, at the moment when the Portuguese ships come near our land, and finishing with Amanda, who is born in 2001, in Rio de Janeiro, the narrator recuperates the trajectory of 20 generations of women, whose lineage spans five centuries of Brazilian history.

In the field of poetry, Aline Motta is in consonance with what Paim (2021, 35) points out as one of the most potent axes of the contemporary poetic production of female authorship: “the reelaboration of genealogies that provoke a fissure in the idea of a main narrative, a matrix on which lay nationalism, fascism, machismo and racism”. This movement can be observed above all among black women writers. In this regard, Paim (2021) points out the poems “Voices-women”, by Conceição Evaristo and “mrs. Rosa”, by Floresta, to which we add “eating from the hand”, by Heleine Fernandes. The first one

portrays the voice of five generations of women, of a great-grandmother who, in the past, “emitted cries | of a lost childhood” in the basement of a ship to a daughter who, in the future, will emit a cry of “life-liberty”, by bringing together in herself the voices bottled up in the throats of those who came before her - the “obedience | to the whites who owned everything”, the murmurs of revolt “in the back of someone else’s kitchens”, the “perplexed verses | with rhymes made of blood | and | hunger” (Evaristo 2017, 24-5). In the last two poems, the relationship is established above all between grandmother and granddaughter. In “mrs. Rosa”, the poet assumes in her writing the voice and knowledge of her ancestry: “I am my grandmother | even here writing | mrs. Rosa during a great part of her life | did not know how to read neither to write like the others | although she did do other types of reading” (Floresta 2019). As for “eating from the hand” speaks of an affectionate memory of the care dispensed by a grandmother that extinguishes her granddaughter’s hunger by giving her something to eat with her own hands. The grandmother offers the scarce food to the child as someone who offers “her breasts | full of milk” (Fernandes 2021, 33). The “captain” of which the poem speaks, a little ball made with beans and manioc flour rolled up in the palm of one’s hand, integrates the repertoire of habits of survival in the dry regions of Northeastern Brazil. This way, we are reminded that beyond that which is transmitted by documents conserved in libraries, museums and archives, there is a live memory inscribed in the oral and bodily repertoires, in the gestures and habits of a community. In fact, Floresta tells us of this ancestral knowledge transmitted from generation to generation, in another excerpt from “mrs. Rosa”:

I am mrs. Rosa  
that knew by heart all the leaves in the garden  
and from the street as well  
from where we took her seedlings  
on our way back from school  
where she came to get me sometimes

she made remedies with them  
she blessed me  
she cured me  
(Floresta 2019, 15-16)

The cure with plants, on the other hand, points us to the recipe that appears on the last page of Aline Motta’s book. The step-by-step preparation of the leaves of plantain can be read as the last performative gesture of the book, when the author incorporates a ritual of another of her ancestors, “Cassiunda, nickname Bizoca”, who “cured with herbs and smoke” (Motta 2022, 140).

#### 4 Intertextuality at the Crossroads

*Water is a Time Machine* gathers and brings together here and now the author's family and literary ancestors. Great-great-grandmother, great-grandmother, the mother, the father and Machado de Assis are summoned in order to witness the potent self-manifestation of her identity in the present. By restituting and (re)creating the presence of the past, scouting vestiges of routes and pathways articulated by the social institution of slavery of the black population, she makes our experience of the city appear parallel to the life of her deceased relatives. In this regard, at the same time that she brings the phantoms of the past into the present, the book projects us, as readers, into the past, making it possible for us to also inhabit it in a phantasmatic way.

A good example can be found in the pages that present sentences from the short story "Father Against Mother", by Machado, as drawings from a map, as if she suggested that the places, archeologically scouted, change our conditions of cognition. She declares: "People don't know, but places know" (Motta 2022, 132). The effect is an ingenious inscription in the Machadian text which is reproduced in a tangle of crisscrossed phrases and words, intersected by corners and bifurcations, making it possible to read another text from the same place - where now the 'new' writing or rewriting about the chase and escape of the "fugitive mulatta", "Arminda", not only transforms herself into a palimpsest of Machado's literature, but constitutes a point of access to a 'sub-represented' past, making us feel the violent tugs and pulls that the enslaved woman experiences at the hands of Candinho. Through the hands of Aline Motta, the act of reading the phrases and words by Machado, as if we were walking through their labyrinthine configurations, makes us go back, in effect, to a time in which each of those streets and corners, no matter how familiar, become strangely full of terror.

The procedure of cutting up phrases from a literary text and distributing them in the form of a map evokes the work of the artist Rosana Ricalde, above all her maps constructed from excerpts of the book *Invisible cities*, by Italo Calvino: maps of cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Venice, Rome and London, as well as the *Mapa Mundi* (2011) made from settings of diverse cities from the six continents. However, the purposes and motivations of the two artists are very distinct, as are their effects. In Ricalde's maps, the texts that compose the drawings of the avenues, streets, squares and alleys have nothing to do with the cities that are drawn. The artist reconstitutes maps of touristic cities that are well-known with phrases that describe fantastic cities, imagined by Calvino. This way, she poses the question of "how we could find these same fantastic cities inside any city" (Ferreira 2015, 30).

The map of words created by Aline Motta, which appears some pages after the reproduction of a map of old Rio de Janeiro, is also not made from a text that described the city, which would resemble the proposition of the calligrams. However, “Father Against Mother”, published in *Old House Relics*, in 1906, is a short story full of references to the streets of Rio de Janeiro: Rua dos Barbonos, Rua da Carioca, Rua do Parto, Rua da Ajuda, Rua da Guarda Velha, Rua de São José, Rua dos Ourives and Rua da Alfândega. The streets are not only mentioned, but almost all of them covered by the character Candinho, who evokes possible paths through the city. Some of them had their names changed, such as Rua dos Barbonos, called Rua Evaristo da Veiga since 1870. On this street there was the foundling wheel, where newborn babies could be left in order to be collected and cared for by nuns. In Machado’s short story, all of Candinho’s drama revolves around what, because of his financial difficulties and debts, seems to be the most appropriate destiny for his loved and desired baby: to be left at the wheel.

It was precisely on Evaristo da Veiga Street that Aline Motta’s great-great-grandmother, Ambrosina, lived. And it is this coincidence that allows, on the one hand, the dialogue with the short story by Machado and, on the other hand, the parallelism in *Water is a Time Machine*, between the narrative of two simultaneous scenes, which occurred a few meters from each other. Ambrosina is ill in her room, late at night in 1894, a little before dying. While her body “disintegrates in coughs”, she hears the sound of a bell on the other side of the street. The bell serves the purpose of notifying the nuns of the convent that another baby has been left at the foundling wheel, the child that a black girl has just given birth to. The first moments of the uncertain life of a baby abandoned against its will unfold in parallel with the last moments of the life of an adult woman, mother of seven children, who suffers from tuberculosis. The story ends with the sentence “Not all mothers make it” (Motta 2022, 15), which appears immediately after the citation of the last sentence of Machado’s short story: “‘Not all children make it,’ his heart told him” (Assis 2018, 344).

Certainly it was not only a geographical coincidence that motivated the writer to recuperate “Father Against Mother”. This is one of Machado de Assis’ short stories which most vividly exposes the violence of Brazil’s colonial past marked by slavery. As is well-known, Candinho, a poor white man, lived off cash rewards, progressively scarce, that he received in exchange for runaway enslaved persons. In his last act of capture, the reward for which allows him to keep his baby in the family instead of abandoning him to chance at the wheel, exposes the abyss between black and white people, even the poorest. Arminda, the runaway enslaved woman, was pregnant, and after wrestling with Candinho, she suffers a miscarriage at the

moment when she is returned to her master. Candinho gets his reward and returns home. While kissing his baby, he cries with joy at being able to keep him, not caring about the death of Arminda's baby: "Not all children make it", is all he says. To incorporate Machado in a book that openly condemns slavery is therefore a way of summoning him for this battle; it is, above all, a way to illuminate that which, in his work, already pertained to this debate, but was not always pointed out by critics.

The intertextual dialogue with Machado, in Aline Motta's book, can also be regarded from the perspective of the concept of *crossroads*, proposed by Leda Martins as central to a reflection upon the constitution of black cultures and the hybrid forms that emerge from "the processes of transnational, multiethnic and multilingualistic intertwining" (Martins 2002, 73). She continued (73)

the crossroads is the radical place of centering and decentralizing, intersections and deviations, texts and translations, confluences and alterations, influences and divergencies, fusions and ruptures, multiplicity and convergence, unity and plurality, origin and dissemination. An operator of languages and discourses, the crossroads, as a third place, is a generator of a diverse signal production and therefore of plural meanings.

But let us return to the architecture of the map created by Aline. In it the street-phrase: "He reached the bottom of the alleyway and was about to turn right, in the direction of Largo da Ajuda" (Assis 2018, 341) is situated at the end of the reading with the final phrase of the following sentence: "Once fed, the little one fell asleep, and his father picked him up and headed off toward Rua dos Barbonos" (341). In effect, the junction between Largo da Ajuda and Rua dos Barbonos corresponds to the drawing of the map of the city around 1860, the date when Machado's narrative probably takes place.

This procedure invites the reader to investigate this city from the past, invisible today, in the current and visible city of Rio de Janeiro. Not only are the history and the urban reforms of the city revisited but also the history of the names of the streets and the characters after whom they are named. The writer does not investigate the history of Evaristo da Veiga after whom the street where her great-great-grandmother lived was named, but, alluding to a brief episode in the professional life of another character, whose name is given to another important street in Rio de Janeiro, she ends up reminding the reader of these layers of the city's history. "Nowadays, the avenue that cuts through the Leblon neighborhood bears the name of the case's assigned justice of peace" writes Aline Motta (2022, 37), making a reference to Ataulfo de Paiva. A few pages earlier, four clippings from an 1891 newspaper narrate, in fragmentary form, a rape case

involving a thirteen-year-old girl. This is Michaela Iracema Gomes, another of Ambrosina's daughters, the author's great-great-grandmother. The resolution of the case occurs, not with the imprisonment of Eurico Juvenal da Cruz, who had violated the girl, but with their marriage, before the compliance of the judge Doctor Ataulfo Napoleos de Paiva. Michaela, however, has "her way of saying no. Her belly would not hold babies, it remained an impenetrable place, remained inviolable, unbreakable. [...] Michaela would give Eurico no children" (Motta 2022, 39). Mother against father.

## 5 Lineage as Language

We are, in the case of Aline Motta, dealing with an (artistic and political) fabulation of lineage and language, by a black writer who aims at revealing the terms in which the truths about the past are enveloped in the consensual fictions of society: "In my case, in effect, lineage is language" (Almeida 2022). Blood kinship appears as a fabulation of the historic and genealogic, "together with oral narratives and the found documentation about my family" (Almeida 2022).

The scene of the death of her great-great-grandmother, Ambrosina Cafezeiro Gomes, is narrated in a way similar to a documental report: "Bore seven children, among them my great-grandmother. She died of tuberculosis" (Motta 2022, 6). However, a voice insinuates, deviates and contests, from the beginning of the book, the truth of the report, and more: that what is considered the attested and certified truth of the document is the always threatening instrument that annihilates the black presences in our formation. On a "trail of milk and blood" left by the death of Ambrosina, the passage offers a counternarrative of the lost bodies and things that Aline Motta attempts to reunite:

people say it was the bombs in Guanabara Bay that scared her to death during the Naval Revolts. The navy versus the army, the Republic just another coup. Windows splintered, coffee cups trembled, the structure of the house was weakened. (2022, 6)

By forcing language in favor of 'submerged stories' about her family, of intertextuality with Machado and the archives, the author makes a continuous appeal towards new combinations of the historic and genealogical materials, without intending, however, to treat them as a historian would. In this regard, the epigraph from a chapter of *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected: Relatives Are Always a Surprise* (2005), by the English anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, seems perfect. We reproduce here the epigraph extracted from the first definition of "anthropology" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, by Richard

Harvey, in 1537. It reads: “Genealogy or issue which they had, Artes which they studied, Actes which they did. This part of History is named Anthropology” (Strathern 2005, 50).

Aline Motta’s submerged history is (social) anthropology. It tackles expressively the issue of the statute of a genealogy that searches for, in documental registers and reliable sources from public and personal archives, inventive modes of dislocating the narrative of what happened in a way that is supposedly transparent, certified and authorized. That which we call anthropology in the author’s work resides in the folds of the biological over the social engendered by kinship relations, once the relationship of the author with the dead from her family dislocates and surpasses the limits of her biological links,<sup>5</sup> and she goes on to explore their connection with our social life marked by colonialism and slavery. The archives observed in Aline Motta’s invention and fabulation are definitely survivals of African knowledge and memory. And the genealogy remains here the – impossible – part of the history shaping the way in which Aline Motta’s memory observes the bodies socially and culturally erased in the political community. If we consider the sparse and fragmentary forms of Aline Motta’s performativity as a result of a ‘method’ of “recombining narrative”, the procedure that Hartman (2020) speaks about, it is above all because we observe, in her work, a surpassing of the historical frontiers from the past, a critique of historical language and imagination observed by the insistent presence of colonialism. We have, therefore, a practice of “critical fabulation”<sup>6</sup> that intervenes in the contemporary theoretical conjuncture of other epistemologies (Hartman 2020,

<sup>5</sup> Strathern’s study is situated in the field currently denominated “new kinship studies” in social anthropology and consists of an important example of how the use of biotechnology and its use of “recombining families” dislocate kinship relationships, imposing conceptual, epistemological and ontological challenges to kinship constituted by the nuclear and biological family. A passage from the present study elucidates the issue: “What biotechnology adds – especially through the ARTs – is the prospect of reading distinct social identities back into the very process of conception (for instance, via gamete donation and its proliferation of social sources). Yet in one sense indigenous (Euro-American) notions of kinship already make persons combinations of other persons. This is not a question of losing one’s identity but of specifying it: the fact that everyone is a part of someone else is held to conserve the individuality of each recombination. This is less a conclusion than a shift in register. Being parts of others carries its own responsibility” (Strathern 2005, 28).

<sup>6</sup> In an interview given to Stephanie Borges (2021), Saidiya Hartman defines what she understands as “critical fabulation” and speculation, especially, regarding the condition of incompleteness of historical materials found in archives. She says: “For me, critical fabulation is to think about the type of speculative history that may arise out of the archive, it is a type of speculative non-fiction. I make use of strategies found in novels, but I still need the documents, even if they serve only to give contours to the real lives of those people. I find these people fascinating. I truly feel that my work is to honor these lives. That is why I don’t consider writing fiction. I want to honor these lives that have been devalued and forgotten”.

28). We could say consequently that in *Water is a Time Machine* there are echoes of the questionings by Saidiya Hartman in the aforementioned text “What is there left to know?” and “Is it possible to construct a narrative from the *locus* of the ‘impossible voice’ or resuscitate lives from ruins? Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love offer a way of ‘exhuming buried cries’ and reanimating the dead?” (Hartman 2020, 16).

Layers and more layers of consensus have crystallized history from a universalist perspective of the whites, defining the place of black women in colonial order. The meaning and intimate value that the documents from the past have for Aline Motta reveal other collective truths. There is a profound dislocation of the past. The intimate papers of her history are felt as an immediate past that becomes present, in the act and the body of its manifestation; in this regard, it is amplified in the public sphere of recognition. The vitality with which the materialistic perspective of Aline Motta touches the past that remained occult alters decisively its legibility.

If, as Stengers (2017, 15) considers, we are at that point of “metamorphic transformations in our capacity” of “feeling, thinking and imagining”, in which we are led to engage with texts and images from the past with an “animated force” that invites us to participate ‘in’ the world, the archive papers “make bridges” and “weave relations” with the past of Brazilian coloniality.

It should, we might add, affect our present through specters. These specters do not only consist of manifestations that name the future of what manifests itself, but constitute another form of real occurrence (when the black women of Aline Motta’s lineage are made manifest in those who evoke them today). ‘To make connections’ with the live memories of the past forcefully echoes Stengers’ (2017) idea that the “connections” are necessary in order to cure the wounds of the past; Aline Motta’s family constellation seems to be that of the cure. Also necessary for the practical learning of another type of attention is the one that deals with “[...] a capacity of becoming involved with a relevant metamorphic attention” (Stengers 2017, 14). This other type of attention is present in the last verses of *Water is a Time Machine*. They ritualize gestures connected with ancestral knowledge and impel us to produce a cure “with herbs and smoke” (Motta 2022, 140).



## 6 Final Considerations

In the intense dialogue of words and image in the book, in this type of technical horizon incorporated by Aline Motta's poetics, a new and ingenious performative practice of writing, along the lines of the spiraled construction by Leda Martins, signals the survival of an erased past in and of Brazilian historical narrative. In "Performances do tempo espiralar", the author defines the black culture of the Americas in its "double face", "double voice", insofar as in its "fundamental constitutive modes" there was "a disjunction between what the social system presupposed that the subjects should say and do and what, through various practices, they really said and did" (Martins 2002, 71).

In Aline Motta's poetic practice, the traveller of the time machine that she becomes announces and processes symbolic correspondences between the ritualistic sphere of death and the rhetorical instances of language. The coexistence between word and image, under which various meanings unfold for the proposed ruptures, deviations, and symbolic displacements, generates effects of symbiosis between them. In this regard, the possibilities of apprehension of other processes that the erasure of the photography by Augusto Malta of a post-convulsive Machado de Assis produces are called to our attention.

On two dark pages, the only two in the book printed in black, references to one of Machado's last photographs, in 1907, a year before his death, appear in white letters. On the page on the left, a brief description of the image accompanied by commentaries, such as: "He didn't always come over faint on the quayside, but that day his collapse did not go unnoticed" (Motta 2022, 22). On the page on the right, in the bottom corner, the caption: "Dr. Maxado de Assis stricken by a fainting fit on the Pharoux Quay - Rio-1-8-1907". Above the caption, however, there is no image, just a big void. When she subtracts from the image what would otherwise be revealed, Aline Motta leaves a dark void, which is, however, convulsive. What we perceive there is the phantasmatic character of Machado's unconsciousness as if it were possible to recuperate the spectral condition of his consciousness that sees our history with the eyes of a phantom.

In 1848 Marx gave a diagnosis of the human making of history, affirming that it is above all marked by the circumstances left and transmitted by the past. Here we cite Marx from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged with revolutionising themselves and things [...], they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service" (Marx 1972, 10). Marx omitted to say that women equally conjure up the spirits of the past. And this is precisely what Aline Motta does.

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