

Asphyxiational Modernity, and Other (Brazilian) Clouds

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I went to the archive to find air. Not necessarily to breathe, though respiration certainly conditioned my time spent paging through crônicas, albums, and annotated poetry manuscripts. At the archives of Instituto Moreira Salles (IMS-RJ), I inhaled the blasting air-conditioning through my KN-95, coldly sensible for permeable lungs and impermeable sweaty-gloved hands alike. At Casa Rui Barbosa, an open window, soft breeze, and handful of mosquitoes marked a different (itchy) relationship between text and bodies. In my time doing what we tend to call ‘pre-dissertation archival reconnaissance’— generously funded by the Tinker/CLACS summer research grant— I was taking the first hesitant breaths towards a long-term project on the construction of the object of air itself. My research inquires into air as it condenses into visual and literary representation as clouds, sky, constellations, and breath in the Brazilian nineteenth and twentieth centuries. How is air fixed in place, made to be ontologically still, intelligible, or controllable— and how is it always, as quilombola activist and ‘translator’ Antônio Bispo dos Santos writes, ‘transfluencing’?¹ At the heart of the question of air is a question of sovereignty— and thus the question of land, of seeing, and of death. It is a question— and here I use the singular flippantly, imprecisely, in the spirit of a tentative and non-militaristic ‘reconnaissance’— whose response, or listening, is structurally unable to be given solely by the Archive as such, though its architectures are certainly informative. My time in Brazil was thus caught between the imperative of recurring to the literary and visual Archive— many museums included— and, delightfully, unsystematically, in personal conversation and presence with folks/academics thinking and asserting Brazil as Afro-Indigenous territory, against a modernity of suffocation.²

In Rio de Janeiro, at the IMS-RJ, I was able to access seventeen crônicas from Rachel de Queiroz, Mário Quintana, and Otto Lara Resende relating to clouds, breath, and the sky, as well as an original 1928 photographic album documenting a dramatic railroad route between Curitiba and Paranaguá. In a number of chronicles written across the latter half of the twentieth century, Rachel de Queiroz, *cearense*, understands clouds as signs whose

¹ Antônio Bispo dos Santos, “We Belong to the Land,” *Futuress*, April 12, 2023, <https://futuress.org/stories/we-belong-to-the-land/>.

² ‘Modernity of suffocation’ is the analytic that I borrow from the critiques of Alana Moraes, Salvador Schavelzon, Jerá Guarani, Lucas Keese and Marcelo Hotimsky. See, Alana Moraes et al., “UM LEVANTE DA TERRA NA METRÓPOLE DA ASFIXIA,” *Piseagrama*, 2021, <https://piseagrama.org/extra/um-levante-da-terra-na-metropole-da-asfixia/>.



Sala de pesquisa credencial.
(Photo by author).



Visitante pesquisa credencial.
(Photo by author).

positive affect shifts as one is further from the sertão, where the sun is the ‘enemy’ against which the clouds promise meteorological salvation. So strong is this northeastern sky-reading practice that in one crônica, she recounts how an old friend who would prophesize by ‘interrogating’ the clouds and stars and other sky media when the following year’s rain would arrive. In other crônicas, she writes of toxic Los Angeles air, of the cosmic awe of childhood astronomical practices with her cousin, and of novel respiratory physiotherapy practices. Meanwhile, Otto Lara Resende writes of how the centennial anniversary of abolition ‘passed as a white cloud,’ without real recognition, while storm clouds seem to linger over the imminent electoral process pointing a way out of dictatorship. In a large, early-twentieth century photographic album I consulted, clouds linger above and in front of photographer Arthur Wischral’s lens. Clouds become figures of both desire and frustration in his construction of a sublime ‘Brazilian’ landscape now conquered by railroad as the sign of the modern. Although this album had been partially digitized by the IMS, being able to physically study the work allowed me to register the captions that had been left out of digitization. These short texts that modulate the 123 photos often aim to correct for any narrative fragilities Wischral must have perceived in his work— that is, the possibility contained in the image that his ‘Man’ and his ‘Railroad’ are in fact rather tenuous. In many of these captions, he constructs the train as a breathing subject, panting up inclines and across mountains. Interestingly, he often interrupts the album’s otherwise linear journey down the railroad with images of the landscape totally enveloped and obfuscated by low clouds— a sign Davi Kopenawa, Yanomami shaman and activist, apprehends as a sign of colonial processes that are making the sky fall, precipitating yet another end of world/s.³ Also absent from this album’s digitization were the semi-opaque parchment papers, decorated with spiders and spider webs, that separate each page of images from the next — a common feature of a photographic album, but one that would have otherwise escaped my attention without my physical visit to the IMS. The presence of these mediating parchments meant that reader of the album would rehearse across its many pages the process of pulling back the veil— or the foggy cloud— in order to reveal the next page’s view of the national landscape. Being able to spend time with Wischral’s album allowed me to strengthen my hunch that the ontological conversion of land into territory is a process that is accompanied and haunted by the somewhat

³ Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 350.

intractable problem of the air— its opacity, its resistance to capture, its coming and going.

In Casa Rui Barbosa— Brazil’s largest public literary archive, also in Rio— I leafed through Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s *crônicas*, a handful of his poems that had been annotated by Mário de Andrade; and a (terrible) poetry book entitled, somewhat deceptively, *Nuvens [Clouds]*, given as a gift to Rui Barbosa himself sometime after its publication in 1916. (Terrible because, like much parnasian poetry, the author Lycido Paes narrates his melodramatic emotions for a ‘beloved’— a rather undelightful encounter for everyone involved, most of all for the so-called ‘beloved,’ but by extension the rest of us. I digress). Drummond, for his part, is an insistently atmospheric writer, but what most caught my eye as I leafed through a binder with *crônicas* from 1960-1965— it is always the accidental encounters that make one’s breath accelerate in the archive— was a 1960 piece entitled, “O mundo acabou?” Many who concern themselves with contemporary Brazil, (or who find rocks in the middle of the road, or a rock no longer above their head), understand the tenor of apocalypse rhetoric as it pertains to colonized peoples; Ailton Krenak often cites Drummond, and here Drummond seems to respond directly to Krenak’s more contemporary invitation to consider pluriversal cartographies and the postponement of the end of the world.⁴ In his *crônica*, Drummond recalls how, at age seven, when the Halley comet made its appearance, he imagined he would die with its dense light— a failed event that led him to conclude that perhaps worlds are always ending incessantly, “in silence, or [only] making a small, soft sound of a leaf. Only some time after is when we notice, but we already live in another world, with its own structure and regulations [...] Pieces of the other wander about, roaming— like colonialism, the oppression effectuated by financial groups, the civil subservience of women— but they pertain to a liquidated context, like the tail of a gecko vibrating after its body was slaughtered.” He concludes, somberly, inverting the cosmic— and again, somewhat precociously in 1960 — “the earth and the comets should have fear of us.”⁵ (Drummond uses the the capacious ‘us’ of the colonizers— an ‘us’ perhaps made up of the more and the less sensible, but colonizers nonetheless, as anthropologist Alexandre Herbetta would remind us at UFG a few weeks later— but more on that soon). Drummond in his other *crônicas* is also concerned with the transformation of the clouds on

⁴ Ailton Krenak, *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2021).

⁵ Carlos Drummond de Andrade, “O mundo acabou?” *Mundo Rio Ilustrado*, 19.XI.1960. Consulted at Casa Rui Barbosa, July 2025.



Tijolos of the outer wall of BH's Mercado Central.
(Photo by author).



Liça Pataxoop, *Hãm kuna'ã xeka*
(Photo by author).



UFG - Terra Indígena
(Photo by author).

the beach— not as vacuous past time, but as a key political and aesthetic concern. In another, he celebrates the installation of a telescope in Copacabana as in fact the arrival of the moon to the neighborhood, thus collapsing the cosmic back into the quotidian, and back out again, always inching towards and insisting on a specular and spectacular cosmic relation.

Beyond these two archives, I could elaborate others scenes of institutional learning that my Tinker/CLACS grant facilitated—the used book store in Pinheiros, Instituto Tomie Ohtake, Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Mário de Andrade's house, MAC-USP, Chácara do Céu, Cais do Valongo and the Instituto Pretos Novos, CCBB-RJ, Museu de Imagens do Inconsciente, Museu de Astronomia e Ciências Afins, Museu de Folclore Edison Carneiro, Museu da República, Museu da Amanhã, Museu de Arte do Rio, MM Gerda, CCBB-BH, Museu Mineiro, Casa dos Contos de Ouro Preto, Igreja Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos, Palácio das Artes, Livraria Quixote, Curcuito Urbano de Arte de Belo Horizonte— but for now these shall remain a list, gesturing towards my time as museum-goer, the wandering-about of curation in all its colonial inheritances and resistances, the lively and dusty and affective encounters of these spaces that, again, the Tinker/CLACS grant made possible.

In Belo Horizonte, I had the great delight of meeting up with Renata Marquez and Wellington Cançado, both professors of Architecture & Design at UFMG, and two of the editors of the magazine *Piseagrama*— a project of more than a decade that looks towards “thinking other possible worlds in alliance with urban, LGBTQIA+, Afro- and Indigenous collectives.”⁶ They were immensely generous to show me around BH over multiple days (including the massive downtown mural by Liça Pataxoop, “*Hãm kuna'ã xeka*,” and another by Sueli Maxakali, expressing Tikmu'un knowledges and histories)— as well as share experiences about curation and collaborations, and chat about museums, translation, and (of course) air. (Indeed, Wellington Cançado writes at the end of his whirlwind doctoral dissertation on Indigenous cinema and urbanism that contemporary movements are “activating the capacities to glimpse the future in the textures of the clouds, in the color of the sun, in the sense of the wind.”⁷)

I spent my final week+ in Goiânia in my capacity as a member of the CLACS-based translation collective of the Revista Pihhy. We convened at the winter gathering of the Núcleo

⁶ See, <https://piseagrama.org/>

⁷ Wellington Cançado Coelho, “Sob o pavimento, a floresta: cidade e cosmopolítica” (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2019), <https://repositorio.ufmg.br/handle/1843/35246>.



Books in the library of the Núcleo Takinahakỹ are organized by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authorship. (Photo by author).



UFG - Céu / Nuvens



Brasília's Congress / Céu (Photo by author).

Takinahakỹ de Formação Superior Indígena at UFG to share ideas about translation and get to know the students and educational program of the intercultural licenciatura. This was an intense and beautiful week that I had the joy of sharing with 5 others from CLACS— wonderful especially because we were there not as researchers, but as translators, collaborators, and learners. I dare not pretend to be able to write decisively now all that this experience was and meant, both professionally and personally; I rehearse parts here not to archive them, to draw out their final conclusion (as we are so incessantly taught and drawn to do), but to simply acknowledge their impact. (Indeed, this report, as it goes on, tries, and perhaps fails, to converse in a way that escapes what Alexandre Herbetta identified as ‘question and response— the way *os brancos* converse and research’). On our first day at the UFG, Gregório Huhte Krahô, curator of the Revista Pihhy, lectured on the many meanings and occasions of what we poorly understand as ‘music’— explaining, for example, how the small holes in the maracá breathe; or, how the word Pihhy, which we monovocally translate as ‘seed’ but also contains many meanings, implies a set of subjects that respire and inspire. One of the primary questions circulating in the room amidst the turma of 40+ Indigenous academics was what differences exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research, and why Indigenous pesquisa performed by and *for* their own povos/aldeias mattered. We sat in on a dissertation defense by Amuneri Kamayurá on the political body, *huka-huka*, and contemporary crises in the Xingu. Our host, who I’ve now mentioned a few times, the anthropologist Alexandre Herbetta— ‘sensible colonialist,’ advisor, trusted and always reflexive facilitator— taught us the grace of teaching with openness and ease, with humorous self-deprecation (of the university, and his role in it), and with trust in affect, struggle, and rhythms other than that of urgency. We spent the weekend in the urban Aldeia Karajá - Buridina, witnessing the encroachment (*‘bagunça’*) of settlers, attending a community film screening, and learning of and from the botos and jacarés on the Rio Vermelho and Rio Araguaia. Amidst all this I learned to appreciate the complexities of being vegan at the meat-heavy buffet in the strange agro-city of Goiânia; the utter glee of ararás screeching across the sky (with gratitude to our colleague Luíza for pointing, jumping with joy); and that breath— in words, song, performance, silence, and translation— is a thing of always-plural movement. I could have anticipated little of this at the outset of my project— and as I explored Brasília in my final two days, I walked in gratitude for the confluencing forests not only ‘beneath the pavement,’ but atmospherically, insistently, transparently above it.