SCHOOL OF ANTHROPOLOGY
AND MUSEUM ETHNOGRAPHY
51-53 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE



Candidate number: 1079412

EMERGING FORMS OF LIFE FROM MUDDY RUINS:

AN ETHNOGRAPHY ABOUT CARE AND VIOLENCE

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Abstract

This thesis discusses emerging forms of life in Petrópolis, Brazil. In specific, this study delves on how people care for life amidst recurring socioenvironmental disasters, and the processes of 'becoming-with' through which embodied subjectivities, more-than-human socialities, and landscapes take shape. Through ten weeks of ethnographic fieldwork, I engaged with activists, governmental workers, dwellers, and policymakers, tracing the emerging forms of life in its shifting landscapes, seasonally trespassed by floods and landslides. I paid particular attention to the diversity of care work practices that unfold in this context, recognizing that these extend beyond formal institutions and may become embedded in people's daily lives, as part of their ongoing struggles to survive. I approach these practices as situated efforts that often have to grapple with moral dilemmas, navigate conflicting temporal-spatialities, and work within systems that are themselves sources of exclusion and harm. This study is situated within the broader framework of more-than-human anthropology and critical place inquiry, and aims to contribute to understanding how violence reverberates across time, space and matter, producing material and immaterial traces in people's lives and landscapes. In order to break away from a 'damage-centered' perspective, that tends to depict certain groups as being solely defined by subjection to injustice and marginalization, this study undertakes a temporal reorientation of knowledge, paying attention to how pain and desire might become intertwined. Through a life-affirming writing, this research seeks to apprehend the processes through which people grapple with destruction, uncertainty and precarity, reconfiguring their relationships with the world and with one another.

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PALIMPSESTS



This thesis aims to discuss an ethnography conducted in Petrópolis, Brazil, which sought to understand emerging forms of life in a context where socioenvironmental disasters – floods and landslides – are recurrent and increasingly frequent – seeking to apprehend the active processes through which people grapple with destruction, uncertainty and precarity, reconfiguring their relationships with the world and with one another.

During ten weeks of fieldwork in Petrópolis, I talked and accompanied activists, environmental police officers, community dwellers, workers, and public policy makers in their daily efforts to make precarious and shifting landscapes inhabitable. I witnessed their struggles, shared with them laughs and sometimes tears, learning that sustaining life in such context is rarely a matter of clear victories or defeats. Instead, it involves navigating contradictions and caring for fragile possibilities.

This thesis is partly guided by calls to apprehend destruction, in its various forms, as an integral part of capitalism and to investigate how this can be generative, in the sense that it produces bodies, socialities and landscapes (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Gordillo 2014; Khayyat 2022).

By paying attention to the generative aspects of destruction, this study delves into stories of resistance and creative survival, not to romanticize catastrophe, but as a way to make sense of it – how it is lived, endured, evaded or fought against. It seeks to take seriously the knowledge and experience of those who inhabit unstable and precarious landscapes, even if these forms of life are not easily turned into objects of celebration in academic circles (Khayyat 2022: 232).

This study is situated within the broader framework of more-than-human anthropology, but from a critical perspective. It builds upon Kohn's argument that an 'anthropology beyond

the human is in large part about learning to appreciate how the human is also the product of that which lies beyond human contexts' (2013:15).

More-than-human studies can offer a valuable framework to understand contexts of environmental change in which humans are not the ones 'in charge' (Tsing 2014: 33), and where 'becoming-with' the other is not necessarily a matter of choice, but part of an ongoing struggle to survive (Kohn 2013: 150).

Encounters between human and more-than-human can be violent. A point of critique towards more-than-human studies is how these often adopt a celebratory tone when discussing socioecological entanglements, which doesn't give proper account to the power dynamics trespassing them (Luciano and Chen 2015; Barua 2023: 11).

Moreover, such celebratory tone is also based on a certain understanding of materiality that is questionable. In specific, the presumption that only the immediate material reality is locus of 'authentic socioecological relationships' (Harvey 1996: 313). That is, as if only through sensuous and direct interactions with matter one could make sense of its constitutive role in shaping reality. Harvey (1996) argues that parting from this presupposition may incur in neglecting broader structures and circuits of power and inequality that are not always directly visible or tangible.

Naive celebration of socioecological entanglements and presumptions that only direct and sensuous encounters count as authentic socioecological relationships stand in the way of politically attuned more-than-human research. How to talk about matter without losing sight of power, and vice-versa?

Instead of thinking of matter as 'things' in themselves, this research takes a praxiographic approach by examining the 'complexities, frictions, intractabilities, and conundrums of ‘matter in relation’. For it is in their relations that matters become political, whether those politics are

loudly contested or silently endured. It is here that the question arises of which relations to foster and in which direction to go' (Abrahamsson et al. 2015: 13).

In this work I seek to apprehend how violence *reverberates* across time, space and matter, pondering how are humans, mud and water implicated in histories of violence and destruction in Petrópolis. I pay attention to the afterlives of violence – its material and immaterial traces in people's lives and landscapes (Navaro-Yashin et al. 2021: 8).

But in the spirit of Eve Tuck's (2009) critique, the present study aims to move beyond a 'damage-centered' perspective, that tends to depict certain groups and communities as being solely defined by subjection to injustice and marginalization. The underlying assumption of damage-centered approaches is that some people (those who suffer the 'damage') are merely passive responders to external events, instead of actively engaged with their realities. As an antidote to damage-centred research, Tuck (2009) proposes a desire-based approach, that aims to better apprehend the complexity of life-worlds, that intertwine despair with hope.

In order to make room for desire and hope in this study, I engage with a temporal reorientation of knowledge (Miyazaki 2004), which entails experimenting non-linear forms of writing – narratives that move back, forward and sideways – to convey how being alive is bearing an ever-unfinished nature whose forms are continuously becoming (Biehl and Locke 2017: 43).

This temporal reorientation is in dialogue with critical place inquiry (Tuck and McKenzie 2015: 19), which understands places as layered with histories that unfold across different temporal scales. Rather than treating place as a static stage for human activity, critical place inquiry invites to see places as actively shaping social life.

This work draws from participant observation, archival research, and walking methods, to convey what Felwine Sarr frames as a 'palimpsest'[1] city (2016: 141). Thinking with palimpsests, Sarr discusses the complexity and liveliness of African cities, 'at the heart of which several movements, several layers, several strata have been superimposed and sedimented' (2016: 141, my translation).

Sarr (2016) draws on the notion of palimpsest to describe how multiple layers of history and time shape contemporary African landscapes. I build on this notion to suggest that, spectres of the future – anticipations, anxieties, desires and imagined (im)possibilities – also compose lives and landscapes. In the following chapters, I will discuss how different temporalities are enacted through care work practices, and how future is *made* present in people's daily lives through engagement with the environment.

In order to grasp the different rhythms of life, and how they are materialized in the Petrópolis heterogeneous layers, the conventional structure of writing has been rearranged. Instead of seeking to convey a uniform narrative about Petrópolis and its people, as if past, present and future were clearly separate, this work is composed of flows, detours and fragments that embrace the coexistence of multiple stories.

Thus, the next chapter, *Flows of Matter*, will introduce Petrópolis – its geographies, histories and dilemmas – through the embodied and partial perspectives of its dwellers and of myself. Furthermore, this section seeks to allow for concepts to emerge from the ethnography, foregrounding the more theoretical and methodological reflections that follow.

In *Margins,* I trace the theoretical and methodological reflections that shaped the present study in more detail. I tell how collaborators, Petrópolis' weatherscapes and different theoretical frameworks contributed towards adopting 'indirection' as a methodological guide in

[1] Palimpsest is an old manuscript over which different layers of writing have been added, erased, and overwritten, leaving traces of earlier texts beneath the surface.

research (Strathern 2004), and how this entailed cultivating a rather improvisational attitude during fieldwork (Rivoal and Salazar 2013), and 'indifference' in writing (Woolf 2012).

Limos-caminhos is an exercise of indirection in writing. This chapter demands patience from readers that might be more used to straightforward forms of academic analysis. As it will be discussed, it seeks to reflect Jacque Lacan's notion of logical time and Friedrich Nietzsche's compelling philosophy, through a life affirming writing.

It weaves together ethnography, art, philosophy and vernacular knowledges to give form to what resists explicit articulation – the reverberations of violence in people's lives. Its title is a neologism composed by Brazilian poet and writer Conceição Evaristo (2017), and it expresses some of the means through which people grapple with destruction and its remnants.

Afterlives is more about articulating the main reflections drawn from fieldwork, than making an extensive list of research findings. It is a reference to how the concept of afterlives has been used by other authors, but also seeks to move beyond that.

Afterlives has been commonly used to refer to remnants of destruction in the present (Navaro et al. 2021: 9), how these might articulate different processes of ruination (Gordillo 2014: 20) and how such processes may become 'enfleshed' (Murphy 2017). Here, I add that afterlives are also about a particular orientation in care work, one that guides practices through which longer timespans are enacted.

FLOWS OF MATTER



Poema Marginal	Marginal Poem
[Marginal é quem escrever à margem]	[A marginal is one who writes at the edge]
Marginal é quem escrever à margem deixando branca a página pra que a paisagem passe e deixe tudo claro à sua passagem	A marginal is one who writes at the edge leaving the page white so that the landscape passes and leaves all clear as it passes by
Marginal, escrever na entrelinha sem nunca saber direito quem veio primeiro o ovo ou a galinha.	Marginal, to write in-between the lines not ever knowing for sure who came first the egg or the chicken.

Poema Marginal, by Paulo Leminski

In this chapter, I follow the flows of matter that cross Petrópolis and I delineate the 'field' through the embodied and partial perspectives of its dwellers and of myself, as we navigate its margins. By flows of matter I refer both to material flows of mud, water and to flows that matter, that is, that affect.

Like in Paulo Leminski's poem, quoted above, I stand alongside the 'margins' in order to make sense of the emerging landscape. By margins, I refer to both the edges of hills and rivers, where many of my informants live or work, to the margins of the state – where the boundaries between public/private are in dispute – and the limits between human or more-than-human that socioenvironmental disasters often disrupt.

Marginal Poetry is an artistic and political movement most active during the 1970s in Brazil. Marginal poets became known for often subverting the usual themes explored in poetry, by paying more attention to the unpretentious ordinariness of life, rather than to the spectacular (Rebechi 2017: 153). Attention to commonplace events sits well with the purposes of this thesis, as I attempt to make sense of how everyday experiences and mundane practices, such as walking around or listening to the sound of rain, both shape and reflect broader social, political, and environmental dynamics.

Leminski's poem, like that of many other marginal poets, was written in times of political authoritarianism in Brazil. 'Writing in between the lines' was the way many critics of the Brazilian dictatorship (1964-1988) found to express their views in times of censorship and torture. Thus, allowing the 'landscape to pass' and leave 'everything clear in its leaving' was a strategy of subtly conveying that which could not be said directly and explicitly.

In this study, following flows of matter represents a form of methodological *indirection*, to borrow Strathern's (2004) term – an indirection that speaks both to the ethnographic realities encountered and to the analytical approach adopted. Rather than pursuing knowledge through direct, linear inquiry, this approach engages with the circuitous paths through which meaning, matter, and social life unfold in practice.

Indirection in the ethnographic reality will be further explored in the following pages, as I trace knowledge making practices and forms of care work in more-than-human worlds – practices that require attention to often subtle and sparse traces and impressions. Following people and learning with them how to trace the paths of water, how to perceive the signs of muddy encounters in the patchy landscape around us, how to tell the difference between clean and dirty water, or the contrast between rain and rain of concern.

Indirection as a method, because here I engage with Leminski's Marginal Poem as guide to convey the more-than-human entities that actively participate of the following stories. Mud and water are important characters in them, but are, nevertheless, wordless (Tsing 2014).

Considering that 'to understand materials is to be able to tell their histories – of what they do and what happens to them when treated in particular ways' (Ingold 2012: 434), following flows of matter guides the task of noticing and writing about how more-than-human forces are actively (re)shaping the affective and political geography of the city. Marginality is the place, literal and metaphorical, from which I can comprehend histories of people, but also of mud and water.

The image-concept of margins is adopted as a theoretical and methodological orientation tool for it resonates with what emerges from fieldwork. Adopting this strategy is partly based on calls to open up new ways of apprehending urban socialities, that preconceived notions – such as the dichotomy centre/periphery or delimited concepts like 'neighbourhood' – often fail to capture (Magnani 2013; Telles 2006). It can be argued that not only urban, but also more-than-human socialities might benefit from thinking place differently (Tsing 2014).

With this form of writing, I also aim to break away from the colonial gaze that maps space from above, and that narrates lives through linear historicities. This gaze distances the 'observer' from the messy realities unfolding on the ground. Instead, I engage with Petrópolis' landscape from within.

This approach aligns with feminist and decolonial ethnographic practices that emphasize positionality and relationality as central to knowledge production. I understand this to be part of what it means to make sense of the research context: to delineate the 'ethnographic object' I also need to articulate the 'subject position' from which I engage with it (Strathern 2004: 38).

Introducing Petrópolis from relational and embodied perspectives requires more time and more words. It might have been less demanding to simply lay out, in a couple of pages, general notes about this city – its geography, weather, demographic data, historical marks, numbers about disasters and its victims. But this would lead to a portrait of Petrópolis as a static, almost dead place.

To apprehend its openness and liveliness, it matters to write otherwise. Therefore, this chapter also occupies a space at the margins, as it does not fit neatly within the conventional structure of a thesis. It is neither a standard 'introduction', nor a typical 'fieldwork' chapter, nor a strictly methodological one. Instead, it exists *in-between.*



M.[2] is a retired Black woman that in her third age has been increasingly involved in the matter of 'disasters'. We met at one of the many events that often happen in the city to discuss its seasonal landslides and floods.

She lives in a 'risk area' that has been harshly affected by landslides in the past. On my way to visit her home, mindful of my ability to get lost, I decide to take a cab. However, as we go up the hill where her house is, the driver appears increasingly unsure of the way.

The streets of so-called *comunidades* (communities) – low income neighbourhoods that are sometimes called *favelas* – can feel chaotic in contrast with other parts of the city. Their structure conveys the processes of construction in the relative absence of the state that often accompany their formation.

My effort in not getting lost was in vain, and after some time driving in circles, I kindly ask the driver to drop me off, so that I could ask around for information. Up the *morro* (hill[3]), finding yourself demands talking to people on the street. Its structure pushes you towards the other, differently from other parts of the city, where Google maps and traffic plaques do the work of preventing contact with strangers.

Up there I can't help noticing traces of landslides on the surrounding terrain: a wide path of red earth cutting a nearby hill from top to bottom, and the patchy landscape, with localized absences of houses and trees in some areas, telling of recent events. Not too far from that, I see children playing in a football court, older men drinking at a small bar, and a woman sweeping

[2] I did my best to preserve the anonymity of those who contributed to this research. Considering it is a relatively small city with 300.000 inhabitants, those who are familiar with Petrópolis, and with me, might be able to deduce who collaborated with this research. I have avoided describing the exact locations in which I did my fieldwork. I also refrained from describing physical attributes (e.g. using gender neutral pronouns, like they/them), unless when it seems important to understand the gender and racial issues involved in the stories I share.

[3] In Rio de Janeiro, the word morro is often used as a synonym to favela. This association stems from the historical development of favelas, many of which emerged on the steep hillsides surrounding urban centres. This idiom is also used in Petrópolis. Although Petrópolis' predominantly rugged terrain complicates such distinctions, the most impoverished parts of the population still reside predominantly in steep hills and next to river margins.

her doorstep. The contrast makes me wonder, how does destruction and life coexist in this place?

My thoughts are interrupted by the sight of M, who invites me to her home, a small house made of brick walls with no plaster, and a ceiling of aluminium tiles – common materials in places where construction is done with issues of affordability in mind. Outside, a small garden with growing vegetables, which she shows me with pride.

We sit together in the living room, over a couch covered with a carefully knitted blanket, and chat for a moment about her knitting machines in the room, that provide her a second source of income in her retirement.

M has an easy laugh, and I am frequently struck by the contrast between her cheerful tone and the pain enmeshed in the stories she shares with me. Our conversation proceeds in movements of flow and arrest, as we talk about the different moments in which her life was trespassed by mud. Throughout our conversation, I grapple with whether or not to join her laughter, since what would often begin in the form of a joke, would suddenly end with a tragic note. But I can't help myself when she joyfully tells me about the day she gave orders to a BOPE commander.

BOPE stands for Battalion of Police Force Operation. BOPE's symbol is a subject of frequent criticism by human rights activists: a stabbed skull crossed by two guns is a clear representation of one of the deadliest police forces in Brazil, known for going into Rio's favelas and leaving a trail of dead black bodies behind.

BOPE was called to act during the *tragédia* (tragedy).[4] M's neighbourhood was one of the most affected areas then. And she, alongside many other dwellers, participated actively in cleaning up the mud and the ruins, in search for survivors.

[4] Tragedy is a short name for the series of landslides that happened in the city, in 2022, but it is also used to refer to similar events that happened in other years. I have adopted this term throughout this study, always in reference to how it is used in Petrópolis.

In the aftermath of destruction, seeing a BOPE commander visibly lost in his efforts to clear routes of access to her community, M tells him which paths to clear and how. She knows the area better than him, and he was wise enough to follow her instructions. M jokingly says: 'These men can't do anything on their own, can they?'

Her story suggests that the same equipment used by BOPE to destroy barricades made by members of drug traffic, in Rio de Janeiro city, was also used to clean up routes of access blocked by the ruins of the catastrophe, pointing to the overlap between how socioenvironmental disasters and the ongoing, and unacknowledged, war in Brazil[5] are addressed.

The tragedy is often described through an idiom of war. News from that period, alongside testimonies from different collaborators to this study, sprout with comparisons between the 2022 landslides and wartime destruction. War's violent fragilization of the separability between interiority and exteriority, subject and other, human and non-human (Tlatli 2023) seems to resonate with the experience of those whose lives have been disrupted by landslides and floods in Petrópolis.

M history has been repeatedly marked by landslides. When she was ten years old, her house was destroyed by one. Later on, when she was already an adult, her house was destroyed again, nearly taking her life with it. She is no longer sure about in which year these events took place, making me wonder if, with time and repetition, these events overlap in such a way that they are no longer experienced as remarkably distinct memory-events, but rather as a continuous state that eventually culminates into destruction.

[5] I refer to the long lasting 'war against drugs', as it is often called in Brazil, which involves the state, paramilitary groups and members of drug traffic. To give a dimension of it, it is estimated that this conflict incurred in more than 15.000 deaths during the year of 2023 alone (Cerqueira 2024: 20).

Although in 2022 her house was spared, her daughter's house was destroyed, suggesting that, at least to some, destruction is not an isolated event but part of an ongoing cycle of vulnerability and recovery that unfolds through generations.

'I could feel my house move two days before the mud took it', she tells me, referring the second time her house was destroyed. Nowadays, she feels and perceives her home differently and, when it rains, she watches her street attentively, communicating through a virtual group chat with other dwellers, and sharing information about the rain and the aspect of the water that runs down the hill. Muddy waters with personal belongings flowing down are a bad sign.

Indoors, our conversation drifts around death and destruction. When we go outside for a walk, however, it becomes somewhat more ordinary. The scorching sun of midday has soothened. Children's voices echo faintly in the distance. The soft wind on my face reminds me to breath in and out again, and I realize I had been holding my breath as I listened to M.

As we walk, M teaches me the *caminhos da água* (paths of water). Like a hunter tracking an animal, attention to earthy textures and patterns tell her where and how water flows. Through noticing earth, knowledge about water is made, from which the potential routes of mud, in the case of a heavy rain, can be deduced.

Paths of water are not just physical traces, but a living memory of past storms and signs of future risks. Tracing them is an exercise of indirection: it produces knowledge through attention to traces, absences, and subtleties on the landscape. It is a knowledge making practice that attends to what is not immediately visible or tangible.

M has a cultivated awareness to the terrain. While I see undifferentiated mud and earth, she shows me the invisible lines where water carves its way through the landscape. Others in her community call her for advice. Once, a neighbour complained to her that there was someone digging a hole around his house. She looked carefully at the terrain and explained to him, it was no man who did that, it was water.

Earth is talked about through a bodily idiom, placing those who attend to it in a similar position to that of a healer who cares for an injured person. Big and long cracks on earth are 'scars' (*cicatrizes*) and they raise concern.

Scars can emerge after hot sunny days and can make the soil propense to be torn apart during intense rain, leading to a potential *queda de barreira* (earth barrier fall). Scars can also become deeper and deeper with rain's continuous erosion, eventually becoming a *voçoroca*[6] (a deep ravine).

There are different kinds of mudslides. Queda de barreira is one of them. The word barreira derives from *barro*, which can be translated as mud. Although I use the word mud in a rather undifferentiated manner in this study, in Brazilian Portuguese there are many ways to refer to it, like *barro*, *barreira*, *lama*, *terra*, *limo*, *lodo*, *argila*.

Overall, these words can be used interchangeably, but argila (clay) is more often used to talk about a mixture of earth and water that can be used for art and construction purposes. While as lama and lodo are more commonly used in affectively charged narratives of violent muddy encounters.

Lama can also be used as a vernacular expression to describe a state of moral or emotional degradation – 'being in the lama' implies being caught in a humiliating or painful situation. This dual sense, both literal and metaphorical, often seems to be present in people's testimonies of the tragedy.

Another word for earth is *saibro*, which refers to a kind of sandy earth, commonly found in Petrópolis, which is associated with higher risks for landslides, according to an informant familiar with house building practices. Interestingly, saibro can also be mixed with cement to make *argamassa* – the material that is put between house bricks to stick them together.

[6] Voçoroca is a geomorphological formation that resembles a linear crater. The word voçoroca comes from Tupi-Guarani languages, meaning 'torn land'. Voçorocas can be 'alive', when in process of becoming deeper and wider through time, and they are known for being often resistant to human efforts of reparation.

Vocabular diversity to name earth and mud stems from practical engagement with the world and growing skilled perception of the environment. The ability to differentiate matter reflects an intimate familiarity with its qualities, and these distinctions inform daily practices and survival strategies.

M. explains how over time the flow of water shifts, sometimes redirected by new constructions or by queda de barreiras. The landscape is not static. She points to a wall recently built by a neighbour, which made the street narrower, prompting water to flow faster through it. Someone's house becomes matter of public concern when it is seen as posing a risk to others around it, and sometimes neighbours fight over each other's interventions onto the terrain.

While she shows me around, other neighbours join us. Two women, who were going to visit someone in the area gather around, curious, and engage in noticing the paths of water with us. One of them points down a hole, and tells with concern that when it rains heavily she can hear watery sounds coming from there.

Water flowing freely through unplanned routes is a potential problem and M goes to investigate, leaning over the edge of the crack to see where the water is falling. I am impressed by how fluidly and confidently this 60-year-old woman climbs around ruins and walks on the edge of steep slopes.

The neighbour they were going to visit sees us from her house, and also joins the conversation. Living at the edges of hills allows one to see from far, even if still by the front door. The landscape seemed to be actively forging our encounter.

After some friendly introductions, we talk about water, mud and the structural repairs the local government has done in the area to prevent more landslides. The city council has built a big *parede de contenção* (contention wall) with drainage tubes and channels to allow for the water to flow through it and prevent it from soaking the earth. Much of the structural work

being done to prevent landslides in the city involve strategies that seek to impede the mixture of water and earth.

After some discussion, the group decides to inform the city council of the need to make further infrastructural repairs, in order to manage water's flow through more appropriate paths. Pointing how such paths are not merely a product of human intervention over the terrain, for the decision about where to build water drainage channels is also shaped by water's leaky insubordination.





A contention wall and water drainage channels. Ruins left by the 2022 tragedy[7].

One of the women brings coffee, and we drink together while chatting. The conversation unfolds mostly on a cheer full, yet critical, note. Before 2022, some of them used to get water directly from a local water spring. But in the aftermath of destruction, the state grew its presence in the area, and now local dwellers use pipe water. Some of them complain about having to pay for it, while others argue that at least pipe water is 'clean'.

Their tone of voice becomes more solemn and serious when they tell me that the area, where now lies the contention wall, used to be filled with houses. The houses were dragged down the hill during the tragedy. If they hadn't told me that, it would have been hard for me

[7] All pictures and images in this study have been taken by the author of this research, unless otherwise stated.

to guess, since it is now filled with vegetation covering up its ruins. But I learn to notice how, differently from the surrounding forest, it is composed mostly by bushes and small trees.

As the sun begins to set, we say goodbye to our chatty group and continue our walk. The steep terrain demands we move slowly, and slowing down allows for encounters to occur more easily. It's the end of a warm and dry day, and some people are sitting outside their homes to enjoy the fresh breeze. M takes the opportunity to catch up with neighbours while I learn how daily life looks like in Petrópolis.

Some of these encounters are not so smooth and friendly. There are disagreements in place. M thinks that the ruins left by the last landslides should be demolished, and on that place, a square should be built. But some neighbours disagree. One of them, a woman we meet cleaning the dirt that repeatedly accumulates in front of her house, is afraid that a square might become spot for parties and social gatherings, bringing unwanted noise. M however argues that with the square she wouldn't have to clean her doorstep so often, because the mud would be covered by cement. The conversation ends with both seemingly unconvinced of each other's points.

Seeing women watering plants in the street, cleaning the sidewalks in front of their homes, arguing about what to do about mud and water are examples of care work practices for that which lies beyond the physical boundaries of individual 'property'. These practices do not restrain themselves to them, extending towards the street, the hill, and the shared infrastructures of daily life.

Efforts to blur the boundaries established by notions of property are also part of governmental environmental campaigns. For instance, a local project called 'The river is ours' (*O rio é nosso*) sought to nourish the perception of Petrópolis' rivers as communal places, aiming to prevent people from throwing litter onto them.

In these gestures – watering plants, sweeping sidewalks, tracing water paths, claiming rivers as communal spaces – home emerges as a porous and relational structure, mirroring its own vulnerability to water and mud. Care work extends outward in the same measure that matter seeps inward.

By care work I refer broadly to practices that nurture life, creating and maintaining means for it to flourish (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), which are not restricted to activities more commonly understood as care. Care work can consist of a range of tasks, from household cleaning and caring for others, to coping with broader threats to liveability (Barbagallo and Federici 2012:4).

Framing such practices as care *work* is a means to avoid romanticizing people's relationship with place and with others, considering that the word 'care' alone often evokes a sense of positive and loving affects which don't necessarily represent people's lived experience when performing it. For instance, it is worth highlighting that in more economically privileged neighbourhoods in the same city, the state is more present and engaged in maintaining clean public spaces, in repairing water drainage channels and even watering public gardens.

The word 'care' on its own risks rendering invisible how these practices might relate to broader systems of economic and racial oppression (Gonzalez 2020: 56; Federici 2017: 53). M's engagement with matters of disaster is situated in a context in which locals are often impelled to find means of survival in conditions of lasting inequalities and state neglect.

In Petrópolis, caring for built infrastructure has been (re)shaped by the threat of landslides and floods. While everyday life is partly oriented by concerns about unwanted mixture between water and earth, in the aftermath of disaster, care work deals directly with its effects: mud. The pictures bellow give a sense of the effort involved in reclaiming the city:



Pictures from before and after the city cleansing, in the aftermath of 2022 tragedy (images retrieved from Sou Petrópolis).

After just three hours of rain on February 15, 2022, much of the city was under mud and rubble. Local residents dedicated extensively to cleaning the streets and looking for survivors. Some of those who spent the following days searching for missing family members tell of the rising sense of knowledgeable intimacy with the rivers and terrain (Coelho 2022). Not in the sense of a tender and fond familiarity, but rather as unwanted physical closeness.

Surviving in this context means knowing to walk amidst mud and ruins, and paying attention to the paths of water. Bodily movements, perception and kinship are shaped throughout the transformative process of 'becoming with' the landscape (Haraway 2008). This form of embodied knowledge, however, unsettles the tendency in post-humanist studies to melt the boundaries between human and more-than-human into positive and smooth relations (Luciano and Chen 2015: 186).

Although the 2022 landslides were significantly spread across the city, some people only heard about them through others or on the news. There were areas less affected by events, mostly those more economically privileged neighbourhoods that are situated in flatter terrains.

While caring, people are doing and undergoing, in Ingold's terms (2025). In the process of engaging with materiality through care work practices, embodied subjectivities are shaped. But in this context, such emerging practices of walking, sensing, and remembering point to the frictions and asymmetries that come with living in and caring for a damaged and unequal world. Mud does not connect all bodies equally – it sticks to some more than others.

This fabric of communications, as perfect as it is unexpected, weaving through ravines, currents, thickets, swamps, cliffs, and hollows, is what most astonishes visitors. In the metropolis of the Empire, they had not been accustomed to anything resembling what they find in these mountain peaks.

Carlos Augusto Taunay, in *Picturesque Journey to Petrópolis, Serving as a Guide for Travelers and a Souvenir of This Pleasant Brazilian Land* (1862)

Arriving at Petrópolis for the first time I couldn't help being impressed by the presence of the Atlantic Forest. The rugged and hilled terrain allows one to see the forest even from the city's central areas. When I expressed my awe to some of my collaborators, most would usually shrug their shoulders, and say 'really?' Their reaction suggested that to them the forest was somewhat faded in the fabric of everyday life, while as for me it stood out vividly in the landscape.

My awe had to do with how the forest was distinguishable for me, since its enmeshment in the city transgressed my preconceived notions of what 'urban' might look like. My amazement was foreign, like that of Taunay's, quoted above, who expressed similar feelings when arriving in Petrópolis for the first time, in 1862.

To Taunay, the sight of Petrópolis was remarkable partly due to its resemblance to European landscapes. It stood out from the usual Brazilian landscape, that to him was very far away from the cherished European standards. According to him, Petrópolis was a 'tropical Switzerland': but beautiful all year through, and not only during summer.

The ways through which one is affected by more-than-human presences shifts, shaped by what is remembered, valued, and wished for. Taunay's description of the landscape tells how the intertwine between 'nature' and humans was for him a testament of science's civilizing force: 'The engineers' graphometer and level, along with the settlers' hoe, shovel, lever, and

wheelbarrow, overcame obstacles that might have been considered insurmountable' (Taunay 1862: 24, my translation).

In his accounts, the Atlantic Forest, once an obstacle, became the picturesque background of a society ruled by reason. Today, however, ideas of control over 'nature' are rather complicated. People's accounts of the city are far from Taunay's romanticized vision. The forest and rivers more often evoke feelings of vulnerability, than of mastery.

Taunay's praise of Petrópolis was also as an ode to the Empire. By celebrating its tropical nature, his work inserts itself in a wider trend of romantic nationalism in Brazil, which, according to Schwarcz (2023: 16) 'would allow for the affirmation of particularisms, the construction of an identity in opposition to the Portuguese metropolis, availing itself of particular elements – tropical nature and its wildlife – as well as universal ones', such as science and technology.

Brazil became independent from Portugal in 1822, when Dom Pedro I proclaimed independence. Ten years later, his son, Dom Pedro II, became Brazil's second and last emperor, who in 1846 issued a decree that allowed the construction of a summer house for the royal family, where now lies the city centre of Petrópolis. The royal family started a custom that endures to this day, as many elite *cariocas*[8] own luxurious summer houses in Petrópolis.

The emperor's decree was based on 'Koeler's Map.' Júlio Frederico Koeler, a German engineer, was responsible for designing the map that laid the foundation for Petrópolis' construction.

[8] Carioca means someone from Rio de Janeiro city, which is about 140 km away from Petrópolis.



Koeler's Map. On the right, a more detailed image of the map showing the construction plans around Quitandinha and Palatino rivers – two tributaries of Piabanha river (images retrieved from Koeler and Sepetiba 1846).

The streets and houses were planned to accompany the rivers' margins. But differently from the usual Portuguese colonial style – in which houses would be built with their backs to the rivers – Koeler's plans were in line with the German style, positioning houses with their facades towards the rivers (Laeta et al. 2023).

German influence over the construction of the city is also present in its names – Bingen, Mosela, Ingelheim, Bauer, Nassau are local street/neighbourhood names that refer to cities and rivers in Germany – which Taunay celebrates as a 'fitting tribute to those who populated them with settlers of that nationality' (Taunay 1862: 54, my translation).

Some indigenous names however managed to escape erasure. The city's main river, Piabanha, carries a name of Tupi origin: *pia'wãya*, which means 'dotted fish'. Piabanha used to be a common fish in its waters, but now it is threatened of extinction (Molinari 2015: 95).

The river stands as a marker of ghostly presences in the landscape, denouncing the settler colonial process through which indigenous peoples are eventually turned into ghosts (Tuck and McKenzie 2015: 66) and through which some forms of livelihood and multispecies entanglements disappear.

The arrival of European people through what could be understood as a second wave of colonialism after Brazil's independence (this time closer to settler colonialism than with earlier extractive forms) fed an enduring association between whiteness and industrial development. During the 20th century in Brazil, there was an official governmental program to attract European migrants to Brazil (Gonzalez 2020: 36), mostly Germans and Italians, amongst which my own family.

This effort was openly described as a means to 'whiten' the nation and supposedly develop it, but it basically served to cast Black Brazilians to the margins of capitalism and cities (Borges 1993), configuring new, yet perduring, forms of racial violence that started with colonialism and slavery.

Initially, however, Petrópolis landscapes were resistant to attempts of turning it into a profit. Its rugged terrain with sandy earth and susceptibility to landslides made agricultural enterprises more challenging, sparing the region from the plantation systems that were the main form of colonial exploitation until then (Magalhães 1966: 26). Were it not for this, its forests might have met the same fate as other parts of the Atlantic biome, that has been reduced to 12% of its original size (Ribeiro et al. 2011).

The watery landscape was interesting to textile industries, however, which allowed the city to become the first industrial centre in Brazil (Magalhães 1966). Directly and indirectly, textile factories use water in different stages of fabric production, either in its liquid or vaporous forms, from the initial preparation of fabric to the finishing processes:



A textile company in Petrópolis. River water goes through the first 'treatment station' where it is separated from mud (A); treated water and vapour are used for dyeing textiles (B); a warping machine prepares threads for fabric production, a process that is facilitated by higher air humidity (C).

Taking a closer look at Petrópolis industrial infrastructure allows complexifying the analysis about how more-than-humans have been shaping life in the city, and better delineating what is meant for 'care work' in this context.

This particular company was founded around 100 years ago by European settlers. New machines and technologies have been adopted progressively since its start, partly due to technological advance and efforts to 'stay in the market', but also due to new environmental laws and norms about water usage and disposal of industrial chemicals. Before these norms, water would be returned to the river without any further attention, and the rivers would turn red, purple or green, depending on what dye paint was being used that day.

New and old technologies are carefully weaved together, shaping socialities and temporalities of work: it demands time to learn how to work within a socio-material assemblage that has been crafted by multiple hands over more than a century.

Operating and repairing machines demands skills that are not always found in instruction manuals. These skills are developed over time, which is partly why the company creates the means for workers to want to stay, by offering better work conditions and salaries. Thus, many of its workers have been there for decades, sometimes generations, which is increasingly rare in a social context of labor precarity.

There too, workers develop skilled forms of attention. The image above (C) shows a worker overlooking the process of warping threads. Warping is meant to homogenize threads before weaving them into fabric, and it shapes textiles' texture. This process demands being careful about the intensity of tension that is exerted over the threads, for if it is too intense, they might be torn. Petrópolis' air humidity, that is partly kept by the nearby forests, helps preventing threads from being damaged during this process.

Attention to water is fundamental too. Before it can be used in production, it needs to go through 'treatment' (*tratamento*): a series of purifying procedures that seek to make water clean and appropriate for industrial usage. The quality of river water varies on a daily basis, for instance, it can be quite muddy after floods and landslides. Thus, its treatment demands learning to tell its variations and adapt to it, changing the duration of procedures or the amount of chemicals used to treat it.

After the water is used, it needs to go through another treatment, this time to decontaminate it from chemicals used during the textile production process. And again, skilled forms of attention play a role. Visiting the company with a collaborator responsible for its water treatment, I often struggled to see what he was describing when we were both looking at the same glass of liquid:



Water collected at different treatment stages.

Although tests on water also help, the perception of sediments, transparency and water color are fundamentally guiding its treatment. It is a complex process cleaning the water from textile chemicals. Their stickiness is resistant and multiple agents are involved in their removal, some of which are too small to be seen by the naked eye.

One of the steps that removes dye paint from water is partly done by aerobic bacteria that degrade it into less harmful substances. These bacteria already exist in the river, and thus don't need to be added to the water. But they need to be cared for: since they are aerobic, requiring higher levels of oxygen to survive, one of the treatment steps includes devices that increase the contact between water and air.

Although Taunay saw Petrópolis as a symbol of imperial control over nature and others, the stories and lives shared so far allow decentralizing human agency in the 'urban' and understand Petrópolis not in terms of human achievement over a passive background, but as a formation that emerges from relationships between humans and more-than-humans (Barua 2023: 4).

Focussing too much on the visual might diverge attention from subtler, less spectacular forms of attuning to place. Noticing the forms of intimacy that shape life in more-than-human ecologies demands slowing down, and paying closer attention to the different temporalities of life. In Petrópolis, more-than-humans make themselves present in daily life in the air’s humidity and smell of river when walking around the city, in the diverse soundscape of birds singing in the morning, or in the noise of mysterious creatures running over the roof at night.

They shape day-to-day movement: the repetitive acts of sweeping the floors to keep it free from leaves, or closing the window before leaving home, to avoid uninvited visitors. The forest moulds people's movement across the heterogeneous and patchy landscape, and the city's very material structure, that often seems to have been built to contain its excess, constantly at the brick of flowing into the city, like the rivers often do.




Walls around the forest and *Quitandinha* river, in Petrópolis.

These relationships compose socialities and spatial-temporalities that are nourished and sustained through different care work practices, such as evaluating water quality. This example may seem distant from what is usually thought about as care. After all, it does not involve direct attention to human life, it is closely tied to profit, it is mostly performed by men, and is not usually driven by 'love'. Treating water can be distressful and irritating, especially when workers are called during the weekend to check why the water is still too colorful with dye.

I consider it a form of care work nevertheless, because it involves a continuous, embodied engagement with the well-being of a shared environment. It requires attention and a sense of responsibility. The labour of maintaining water quality sustains not only industrial processes, but also the ecosystems and communities downstream.

As many forms of care, it is morally ambiguous (Cook and Trundle 2020). A closer look into textile industries in Petrópolis highlights how care work sustains livelihoods often enmeshed with economic and racial systems of oppression.

Extensive industrial usage of water in the city (although nowadays mostly by beer production companies), has generated a paradox: amidst a context of increasingly frequent floods and mudslides, the high volume of water used by industries contributes to water shortages in some parts of the city. This paradox between abundance and scarcity of water is

precisely why one of my research collaborators succinctly framed the problem of Petrópolis as simply 'water'.

There is a rather common saying in the city that *no baixo enche, no alto desaba* (bellow it floods, high it falls), which points to the dominant feeling that no area is felt as safe anymore, since floods can happen in lower parts of town, while landslides threaten those living on the hillsides. A collaborator noted, with morbid humour, that there is also third possibility: beyond floods and landslides, one's house can also be destroyed by rocks that fall from the hills.

When I asked another informant about when does life 'go back to normal' after it is trespassed by such destructive forces, the answer was a blunt 'never'. The events of 2022 were experienced as a turning point to many in Petrópolis, partly because they seem to have contributed to a shared – although uneven – sense of 'we are not in charge', as Tsing (2015: 33) puts it.

The shared feeling of vulnerability and precariousness in face of more-than-human forces emerges and submerges in the flows of everyday life, according to seasons and weather. It becomes conspicuously present during the rainy season, submerging again during the dry months. This seasonal shift in people's experience gave way to what some locals call *síndrome do céu azul* (blue sky syndrome) to refer to the illusory tranquillity engendered by a blue sky with no clouds.

The usage of biomedical terminology (syndrome) serves as a form of critique towards the sense of peacefulness associated with dry weather, an affect that is framed as the result of illusion and collective forgetting. Thus, blue sky would not symbolize safety, but the

invisibility of danger. In contrast with that, rain would reveal the truth about life: its precariousness, vulnerability and transitory nature.

Rain often sets the city's rhythms, shaping daily routine. When heavy rain is forecast, schools cancel classes pre-emptively. Those who work as educators, are left navigating difficult decisions: should children be sent home before the storm begins, or wait until after it passes? Will there be enough time for them to reach home safely?

The municipal government may suspend in-person activities deemed non-essential. Gatherings and public events can get cancelled or postponed. The streets empty, as people look for shelter. Fear and concern build up with emergency alerts sent by the Civil Defence. In these moments, the city seems to hold its breath.

Once the rain is gone (which might take days), life seems to stir again, as many engage in repair work, such as cleaning the mud from streets and houses, inspecting the damage, and mobilizing to help those who were most affected. This rhythm of destruction and repair, has become part of what it means to live in Petrópolis.

In this context, rain can feel viscerally different. As M. put it to me: as if *o coração vai sair pela boca* (the heart is going to come out through the mouth). I don't think M. was alone in this. When speaking to different people, I often had the impression that even when there was no explicit reference to this vernacular expression, the feeling of a heart wanting to scape one's chest would still be present in the subtle act of placing one's hands over the chest while speaking of the rain, almost as if trying to hold the heart where it belongs.

In contrast with that, sometimes rains and floods are treated as trivial. During a conversation, talking about a street that frequently floods in the city, a collaborator ironically joked, 'That street (*Rua Coronel Veiga*) flooded again? *Que novidade*! (tell me something new!)', to which someone else added that they saw no point in the Civil Defence warning

people about floods in that street, since it was such a common thing, 'flooding in Coronel Veiga is the first thing that happens whenever it rains!'

The radical shift experienced in 2022 has become increasingly enmeshed into the ordinary through the mundane phenomena of rain. Governmental officers who work at the Civil Defence struggle about when to warn the population about potentially dangerous rain. There is concern amongst them that if the Civil Defence sends too many warnings, or if they send too few, they will lose credibility.

There are different rains falling over the city, and a heterogeneity of object-practices act to compose what is rain of concern. The usual flooding in Rua Coronel Veiga is not enough, although it also has a role in this process of composition. It is a collective effort: sirens blaring, trees bending under strong winds, news broadcasted on national level, the sound of water running down drains and streets, Civil Defence warnings, mud flowing down a hill, beloved ones not answering their phones, power outages. This collective configures the blurry threshold that marks the shift between different kinds of rain.

During a sunny Saturday morning, at a meeting between the Civil Defence and representatives of 'Community Civil Defence Nuclei' (*Núcleos Comunitários de Defesa Civil* - NUDECs), the main concern was how to foster people's engagement (*mobilização social*) in practices that aim to prevent 'disasters'. NUDECs are groups of voluntary dwellers from 'risk areas' in the city who collaborate with local Civil Defence authorities to raise awareness about risks and train residents to act in emergencies.

The meeting was organised by the municipal governmental department of Civil Defence, but it was set at an NGO headquarters, that has had an active role in assisting victims of

landslides and floods. The NGO provided not only the physical space for the meeting, coffee and food, but also seemed to help in the effort of untying the associations between NUDEC volunteers and the government, which some see as an important strategy to foster community engagement around the city.

As we all gathered for a chat and coffee before work began, one of the Civil Defence workers talks excitedly about an ongoing project with local schools, in which children and professors participate of 'response to disaster simulations' (*simulação de resposta a desastre*). The expression they use to describe the project can be somewhat misleading, since the simulations seem to go beyond the re-enactment of disaster scenarios, and also involve playful competition between students and schools, resembling gymkhanas.

The project, called Resilient Schools, involved training each school about what to do in the event of a disaster (and by disaster it is meant floods or landslides). The school whose teams evacuate faster, in accordance with their specific protocols, would be the winners. The protocol involved practices such as leaving classrooms in a coordinated manner and reaching the designated 'support point' (*ponto de apoio*).

The Civil Defence worker was visibly pleased with the children's enthusiasm for the activities and proudly shared that one of the school teachers had even joked about them *'putting Duracell'* in the students – referring to their unusually energized mood, in contrast to the typical boredom and distraction seen in daily classes.

But that kind of enthusiasm was not the prevailing tone of the meeting that day. When it was time to start, all community volunteers sat in a big circle and shared stories of frustration regarding the lack of participation in NUDEC meetings organized in their communities.

One person said 'she did everything', from knocking on people's doors, to preparing coffee and snacks, but very few actually participated of the meetings. Some nodded in solidarity, and someone joked that maybe if they offered a barbecue, people might show up.

The overall mood was of weariness at the same time that a sense of urgency permeated the group. Someone's statement *o verão tá aí* (the summer is right there) lingered throughout the morning. In Petrópolis, summer is no longer simply warmth or holidays. It has become, also, a season of remembering past tragedies and of fearing future ones, since it is also rain season.

Exhaustion in the city often extends beyond the familiar and widespread complaints of lack of community engagement. It seems to be fed by the perception that the city's situation is deteriorating partly due to global-scale events, like climate change, which foster a sense of powerlessness in front of their magnitude.

These intertwined feelings of urgency and weariness often manifest as frustration and scepticism towards conventional political and democratic processes. One expression of this frustration is the understanding that the democratic alternation of power itself contributes to what is perceived as a failure of the state to address the city's pressing social and environmental challenges.

As one informant put it to me: 'Every time a new government comes, it unmakes everything the previous one did, there is no continuity'. Criticisms of 'lack of continuity' imply that if projects and policies were carried out fully, the city might be better prepared to face recurring environmental crises. This sense of unfinished work fuels a broader scepticism toward political transitions, where each new administration is perceived not as building on past efforts but as starting over from scratch. As a result, long-term solutions to social and environmental challenges are felt as elusive, trapped in cycles of abandonment and (re)invention.

During the meeting with NUDEC members, people were invited to discuss the 'fortresses, weaknesses, opportunities and threats' in their neighbourhoods, that should be taken into

consideration in the work of prevention and preparation for disasters. 'Political factors' were listed, more than once, both as a weakness and as potential threats.

Political factors are seen as an issue based on the understanding that without unity there is no continuity. In opposition to the risk of division posed by politics, many refer to 'public policies' as the solution – as that something which can solve issues of discontinuity, since it is thought to transcend political partisanship.

Urgency and avoidance of division also shapes the prioritizing of some issues over others in the political landscape. Racism and economic inequalities are not usually amongst the privileged themes, but structural repairs and public preparation for disasters are.

In this context, apparently technical solutions – such as the creation of a city council 'Department of Soil and Water' composed by experts and scientists, or the transformation of Petrópolis into a 'sponge city' – attract supporters from both sides of the political spectrum. Possibly not just because of the still dominant faith in science's potential to solve complex problems, but also because such proposals are expected to be unaffected by the political turnover that disrupts other initiatives. By framing these interventions as technical rather than political, they offer a promise of continuity – an assurance that some actions can persist regardless of which party is in power.

This case suggests that aforementioned comparisons between the destruction caused by war with Petrópolis' socioenvironmental disasters, which are frequently expressed in news and local testimonies, have been, to some extent, shaping efforts to address the city's challenges.

Andrews (2020), exploring the implicit military metaphor in the public discourse of 'fight against climate change', points out some of the entailments of war narratives, one of which is that 'fighting is with an enemy'. She contends that this metaphor ends by portraying climate change as an adversary that is external to society itself, and not something imbricated in its social-materiality.

She notes also how this framing may be strategically employed to evoke a sense of urgency, unity, and sacrifice in response to a perceived shared threat – aiming to drive collective efforts, and build public backing for specific policy measures (Andrews 2020). Those who do not abide to the elected measures are often seen as implicated in the problem that is being fought against (Hartmann-Mahmud 2002: 427).

The sense of urgency and avoidance of internal division that shape warfare (Andrews 2020) also seem to organize socialities, care and politics in Petrópolis. And raises the questions: in this context, what, or who, is the unpatriotic other that is being fought? And, where is the line that separates care from violence?

'It takes so long to build something, but it is so fast to destroy', was one of the sentences that echoed during our walk at the edge of an environmental reserve, where governmental agents were destroying houses.

But I was corrected when I called them houses. 'They are support structures', someone told me, carefully and slowly saying *estruturas de suporte*. Support structures are constructions used to store farming materials and to support farming practices in the area. Some petropolitans live in the city, but use land somewhere else to cultivate crops for their own consumption. Despite how the event was framed, traces of dwelling were scattered over the muddy terrain, such as a child's shoe and clothes on the floor.



A small shoe found amidst the ruins of a demolished house.

Together with the Centre of Human Rights (CDDH), a local NGO, our visit there was meant to accompany the destruction of these structures. The community, that lies at the edge of a local natural reserve, had gained some visibility as a celebrity shared a picture of the sewage pouring from it into the reserve.

The community was invisible however, when the lines that define the natural reserve where traced using satellite images. As one of the environmental officers explained to me later on, that community probably already existed in the area before the demarcation. Its origins are blurred by time in people's memories, but story says it began with an indigenous, or maybe black woman, who was searching for a place to live her life in peace.

Another tale about that place tells that, a few decades ago, when environmental officers went there to study the terrain and decide where the reserve would be marked, they found houses, but no one inside them. 'They were probably hiding from them', I was told. A practice that still endures in the city, as government agents are seen with suspicion by those who live in so called 'occupations'.

On our way to the sites of demolition, a local dweller called out a legal worker in the group to ask for advice. He shows his mother's house right ahead of us, and on its side, walls being built. He tells that someone from the city arrived there not so long ago, took that terrain for himself and started building walls there. The man was worried that the new dweller was

going to obstruct his mother's house entrance. She would have to climb over a barreira to be able to exit her home, instead of taking the usual earthen path. 'But she is old and has difficulty to move around', he tells. The man wanted to know if the legal worker would have any council for him.

They explain to him, that legally, there is not much to be done there, as none of them have the legal claim over that land. It's an 'occupation', after all. They suggest though, that the new dweller could be accused of an environmental crime, since he was accumulating construction rubble nearby. Making a formal denounce could be a way of making the newcomer go away.

At that point in time, CDDH had been able to convince the judge in charge of the case to destroy only the support structures that weren't being used, while sparing others. But later on, during my second visit to Petrópolis, I found that had changed, and more houses were expected to be demolished, as they were seen as an 'environmental risk'.

These two examples give a glimpse of how environmental laws can be differently mobilized, in the same place. In one case, denouncing an 'environmental crime' would serve as a means to safeguard the necessities of an older woman from an inconsiderate neighbour, in a context where both are legally seen as occupiers of land, and therefore, unentitled to it. In another case, the same legal framework is used as a way to protect the 'environment' from people who are seen as threat, and as it will be discussed ahead in this thesis, as a means of dispossession.

In both cases, there is a (re)configurations of what is 'property', shaping people's relationships to place and to others in that process. This illustrates how environmental laws become entangled with power structures and materiality.

The *destruição* (destruction) was an event that gathered dwellers, workers of the judicial system, environmental police officers, social assistants, CDDH members, and me. We walked

from structure to structure, watching its demolition. On the way, people told stories, got to know each other, and shared tears and even laughs.

Amid the debris, there seemed to be a quiet expectation among some dwellers of foraging materials that could still be used. As we gathered around one of the crumbling structures, a woman remarked that she needed a gate for her house. Yet, as she spoke, she turned to me and shook her head, silently expressing that she could not, or would not, do so.

The atmosphere was heavy. Some were crying as they watched, even though those were abandoned structures, mostly. Temporalities of construction and destruction mark the city's landscape and its people. The event condensed a feeling that trespasses the city more broadly: witnessing destruction brings to fore the realization that one can take a lifetime to build a house, but it can take only one storm, or one judicial order, to destroy it.

The uneasiness escalated when people realized that one of the structures being demolished was someone's house. But before that was realized, the front door had already been taken down. The house overall was in such precarious condition, the clothes hanging outside seemed so dimmed and dusty, that most thought it was abandoned. It was only inside the house, when someone found food inside a fridge, that the place was acknowledged as a house.

One could imagine there would be animosity between community members and governmental officers, but if there was, it momentarily vanished as people watched the remarkable effort in their work. Houses are not easily destroyed, even if already in ruins.

Destroying something demands a collective effort and knowledge of which walls to tear down first, where to position oneself, and where to hit in order to tear the structure down more efficiently. The soundscape would vary from moments of concentrated hammering, to moments of lively debate about where to hammer and how. In the end, after intense effort, as the last wall was torn down, some people clapped, caught in a puzzling wave of thrill and celebration.

Leaving the last demolition site, people made comments about how that house was probably one of the first to be built in the area, since it was made of adobe. Its destruction made visible how some of its walls, until then covered in white paint, where made with clusters of mud and wood. 'Imagine all the effort it must have been to build that', some said as they left.

I lingered around for a moment, beside a quiet older man who gazed at what was left from the house. He tells me he used to work there, and was waiting to get an object from the ruins, at the request of its owner, who couldn't be there. He wanted the plaque that used to be on top of the house's main entrance, in which it was written its name. Looking at the plaque in the middle of the ruins, it carried an uncanny resemblance to a grave's headstone.



Adobe house before being demolished.

As the group returns, environmental officers go from home to home paying attention to infrastructures of sanitation and housing. Evaluating the possibility of landslides in the area is one of their preoccupations, and one of the officers, looking at a small house at the edges of the hill, tells me that its residents will eventually need to be relocated since the house lies in a 'risk area'.

Although the officers belong to a governmental department responsible for preserving biodiversity, as many others in Petrópolis they also have become increasingly engaged in the matter of disasters. Either by acting together with the legal system in processes of land tenure

regularization, either during the aftermath of landslides and floods, distributing food and supplies to those who have been somehow affected.

But most of their efforts in the region still concentrates in rescuing wild fauna that is captured to be sold in the illegal wildlife traffic that stirs Rio de Janeiro's economy. Many of these animals, mostly birds, are sold in shops spread across Petrópolis or in fairs in nearby cities, from where animals of the most various kinds enter the international wildlife market, with high demand in Global North countries, amongst which the USA is the main world buyer (Velden 2018: 57).

It is not uncommon to come across *passarinheiros* (bird hunters and breeders) during hikes or walks through the surrounding forests of Petrópolis. Capturing birds is usually a men's practice, performed in family – often a father with his sons. Making bird traps is a transgenerational skill that sons learn with fathers, who on their turn learnt with their fathers, and so on.

At least 100 birds were rescued that day, many in the same community that watched its houses being destroyed, generating some unease amongst the human right workers present, 'it is difficult to defend *comunidade* (community) when they do this (wildlife traffic)', told me one of them, with a disappointed tone.

Having birds as domestic pets is usually associated by locals to a persisting 'tradition'. And for those more actively engaged in wildlife traffic, either as buyers or as sellers, this practice is usually framed through a 'language of affect,' that is, as an issue of taste or 'love' for animals[9] (Velden 2018: 109).

[9] When colonizers arrived in Brazil, they noted how indigenous groups lived alongside animals in their villages, such as monkeys and birds. This indigenous practice was explored by the Portuguese, and transformed into wildlife extractivism, which lingers to this day in wildlife traffic. These historical linkages gave way to narratives that portray wildlife traffic as a 'cultural thing', which has been analysed through critical lenses by Velden (2018) who highlights how animals become ontologically different as they circulate between forests, villages and markets.

Discussing wildlife traffic in details goes beyond the purposes of this thesis. The point in sharing this short ethnographic story about houses, forests, birds and people is to highlight that 'how to care?' is an insistent question in Petrópolis, one that inevitably touches upon regimes of value and moralities concerning both humans and more-than-human beings.

Through everyday decisions, politics of care and inhabitation intertwine, expressing broader struggles over how environments are shaped, who gets to thrive within them, and whose needs are prioritized.

How to care for people who live in areas of increased risk for landslides, should they be relocated or should their homes go through further infrastructural repair? How to tackle wildlife traffic, without further stigmatizing those who find in it a means of subsistence at the margins of capitalism? These are some of the dilemmas that shape Petrópolis landscapes.

Care work practices can be convergent, parallel or conflictive, but fundamentally, they are negotiated in and through everyday life. And such negotiations do not rely on humans alone. For example, where to build water drainage channels is contingent on where water flows through, and when to allow children to go home after classes relies on the intensity of rain.

Moreover, negotiation entails potential conflict and friction between different temporalities of care (McKie et al. 2002: 914). While some care work is driven by a sense of urgency, like the feeling that 'the summer is right there', others evolve through slower temporalities, through routines of maintenance, observation and waiting, like watching the water that flows the street during the rain.

Although not always explicitly expressed, futures are made present through care work: tracing the paths of water and listening to the sound of rain to prevent landslides; finishing classes earlier to allow students to go home before rain of concern begins; demolishing support structures to handle the 'environmental risk' associated with the presence of impoverished

people next to environmental reserves. Through anticipations, presumptions of (im)possibility, or valuations of (un)desirability, different temporalities are *enacted*.

Presumptions of (im)possibility organize practices in accordance with what is conceived as possible or not under certain circumstances. Political agreement regarding environmental change is considered to be unlikely or even impossible. As opposed to that, people seek to strengthen 'public policies' and defend the implementation of techno-scientific solutions that presumably would not be hindered by 'political factors'.

Desired and undesired futures are made present in electing or prioritizing some objects of care over others. And what gets cared for and what is neglected shapes the contours of what futures, and lives, are made (im)possible.

MARGINS



This thesis is written thinking with feminist scholarship that objectivity is not the absence of subjectivity, but a reflexive attitude regarding one's own situatedness and attention to the positionality of the researcher can be an endeavor towards more meaningful academic debate. In the spirit of that, this chapter aims to reflect on the trajectories, experiences, and tensions that shaped this study (Haraway 1988).

This piece of writing is placed in the middle of this thesis in consideration of Springgay and Truman's (2019) proposal to think of methods as ‘speculative middles,' in the sense that they are not fully determined in advance of research. These authors argue that methods ought to be developed through contextual and theoretical engagement, which unfolds throughout research.

I am also inspired by views that research is a process that is not neatly separated in 'data collection' and 'analysis', for to do research is to critically engage with reality from beginning to end (González Rey and Torres 2017). Therefore, in this chapter I seek to discuss method and theory in articulation and present the paths I took to grasp the emerging forms of life in Petrópolis.

Earlier I introduced a poem by Paulo Leminski, called Marginal Poem. Thinking with this poem was not only a guide throughout the writing process, but also during as I reflected on how to tell stories of not only people, but also of leaky and sticky matters, like mud and water.

As fieldwork unfolded, I would often find myself at margins – of hills, recent landslides, rivers, environmental reserves. And in this sense, Leminski's poem was an interesting perspective to think of margins not merely as spaces of social and economic marginalization, but also as spaces of knowledge making. Eventually, being at the margins, both metaphorically

and physically, and following the flows of matter, became a conscious approach, even if it wasn't initially clear to me what would emerge from it.

Early on during fieldwork I noticed how some preconceptions implied in my framing of the research problem were not entirely adequate and had to be changed. I realized that the category 'climate change' I had initially adopted did not resonate adequately with people's experience in Petrópolis.

The initial specific objective of this study was originally to 'understand how the future is enacted in the daily lives of those who work and live in places affected by climate change'. Although climate change is usually acknowledged as real and related to the issues that trespass the city, most people – with the exception maybe of governmental officers, public policy makers, and scientists – don't make sense of daily life in those terms.

In contrast with that, I found that directing my focus to housing and inhabitation matters was a more suitable way of apprehending people's lives in Petrópolis and the challenges they face in their everyday struggles of survival. It was through conversations about evictions, rebuilding, waiting for compensation, or resisting relocation that broader environmental concerns emerged, albeit in terms that were locally meaningful and politically charged.

The term 'climate change' often felt distant or abstract in everyday conversations – not because people were unaware of environmental transformations, but because their experiences of such changes were deeply entangled with histories of inequality, state abandonment, and the fight for dignified living conditions. Thus I came to realize how my initial presumption that 'climate change' would be an adequate framing to this study was rooted on my own positionality of a white middle-class Brazilian, who has never been through forced eviction or lost loved ones to a landslide.

Another issue that demanded reflection, implicit in the objective delineated for this study, was whether daily life was in fact affected by seasonal landslides and floods, or if such events

were experienced as temporally circumscribed to periods of time, after which life would go back to 'normal'. Puzzled by this question, I would openly discuss it with some of my collaborators.

Although there was a pervasive feeling that 'things had changed' after 2022 landslides, many also seemed to struggle to put this change into exact words. And when they did, most would refer to rain – when it rained it would become clearer how things had changed. But my initial fieldwork was done during dry season, and rain was a less frequent event.

However, one my collaborators noted quite insightfully how, after 2022, shops in the city center started placing iron bars at their doors every night after closing, even when there was no sign of rain.

Thus, blue skies, the elusive nature of change in daily life, together with my friend's observation regarding the city's materiality signaled that what I was trying to study wouldn't be accessible solely through direct questioning – such as 'what changed?' – and invited closer attention to bodies, places and practices. Putting such matters into words called for indirection.

Indirection was discussed by Marilyn Strathern (2004), in a paper entitled 'Social Property', in which the author addresses the challenges of making 'interdisciplinarity' explicit and measurable. She shares an anecdote about a worker at a newly stablished 'Interdisciplinary Research Network', who finds himself pondering about how to demonstrate and measure his accomplishments at work.

In such context, the author argues, measuring work efforts and results demands developing ways to turn the 'virtual' into explicit. Interdisciplinarity is virtual because the outcomes of interdisciplinary academic collaborations are not always explicit. In Strathern's words, 'what makes interdisciplinary work difficult is knowing how to recognize that it has happened' (2004: 33).

Based on Strathern's considerations about indirection, here I engage with this concept as a methodological tool to apprehend aspects of reality that refuse linear and open revelations. The tendency towards indirection was somehow already present before fieldwork, in theoretical framework chosen to understand what is 'future'. But in practice, it took some time for me to let go of the appealing straightforwardness of directionality.

Letting go of directionality was hard partly because it is prescribed and expected in academia. There is institutional pressure to abide to research norms inherited from more quantitative fields of study, built upon standardization and proceduralism. This has potentially detrimental effects in Departments of Anthropology, where researchers often study phenomena that can't be 'assessed' through standard procedures (Rivoal and Salazar 2013).

An example of such institutional pressure is having to delineate (semi)structured interview questions as part of project evaluation processes by Ethic Committees. Added to that, there is an implicit expectation throughout this process that such questions will be *directly* related to the theme that is being studied, which is based on the idea that that direct questioning will provide the answers that matter.

Unquestionably, direct questions will provide answers, but not necessarily the ones that *matter*. (Semi)structured interviews place the informant in the role of responder: the researcher is leading the interview, framing the problems at hand, and the informant is invited to provide answers that fit the researcher's framing (González Rey and Mitáns Martínez 2016: 10). And these answers don't necessarily correspond to what is important to research collaborators, neither to researchers interested in studying that which is meaningful to participants.

Avoiding the usage of a list of pre-formulated questions is also based upon an ethical attitude of leaving the encounter open to what the collaborator wants to say (as far as that is possible). During a conversation, the informant can assume a more active role in its direction

and can guide the flow according to what feels meaningful, safe, or relevant to them. This openness allows for a less extractive dynamic.

As mentioned earlier, indirection in this particular research was also meant to adequately address a theoretical issue. In specific, the question of how to apprehend 'future'. Attention to how the future is enacted in daily life, was the theoretical and methodological angle I chose in order to grasp emerging forms of life. This temporal orientation was driven in part by Tuck's (2009) call for desire-based approaches in research, as opposed to damage-centered ones.

I began studying frameworks that sought to collectivize imagination, and came upon Beckert's (2016) book *Imagined Futures*, where the author discusses how capitalism is based on a temporal orientation towards the future, which is performed as an open horizon of possibilities for profit (Beckert 2016: 22).

The author gives the example of the 'American Dream', understood by him as a configuration of imaginaries in which social and economic ascension are expected outcomes of individual effort. He argues that the American Dream is a significant cultural representation of envisioned futures that deeply influenced economic attitudes in the USA (Beckert 2016: 5).

Beckert's effort in approaching imagination from a critical social perspective is noteworthy, but other authors pose relevant criticisms to notions of 'imagined futures' and 'social imaginaries' that he engages with, arguing that these often to serve as rather simplistic substitutes for 'culture': an all-encompassing framework for thought and action that explains everything and nothing at the same time (Sneath et al. 2009: 7).

I would also add that framing futures as 'imagined' willingly or not puts the researcher in the position of someone who can tell whether certain futures are imagined, while others are predicted, thereby reproducing a questionable authority.

At the same time Beckert reproduces the essentializing category of imagined futures, he offers a way out of it, when arguing that these fictional expectations are performed, that is, they

are embodied and practiced (Beckert 2016: 276). This allows for a much more situated analysis of imagined futures.

His notion of performativity, however, still comes carried with the implicit understanding that, first, there is 'representation,' and then, there is practice. This idea presumes that representation is the real that determines what happens in practice, leaving little room to understand the intertwining and co-constitutive relationships between words, things, and practices.

Beckert's representationalism didn't seem entirely adequate for a study with materialist and more-than-human inclinations. Looking for alternatives, I also came across perspectives that understand future as a virtuality that is *made* present in practical engagement with the world.

For instance, Kohn's (2013) proposal to think future as a constitutive absence – a virtual dimension of life that nevertheless shapes action – and Manning's (2009: 29) discussion about movement as incipient action, in which she reflects about the feeling of movements taking form before the actual displacement, both offer conceptual tools to think of life as continually oriented toward what is not-yet.

In addition to these frameworks, Mol's (2002) theory of enactment also helped paving the way towards more nuanced understanding of futures in practice. In *Body Multiple*, Mol uses the notion of enactment to understand how atherosclerosis is *enacted* by vascular medical doctors, surgeons, pathologists, and patients. She proposes a praxiography of disease in order to breach the body/social divide, and attend both to the physicalities and socialities of disease (Mol 2002).

This allowed her to trace how, through practice, disease can multiply. Disease multiplies with the manifold practices that enact it. Patients enact atherosclerosis differently from medical

doctors, at the same time they are all referring to the 'same' disease. There is work of coordination in place, that allows for these different diseases to 'hang together' (Mol 2002).

Could 'time' also be thought in these terms – multiplicity that hangs together somehow? Two people at work together can have quite different experiences of time: to one time seems to fly and there is barely any to do all that needs to be done. To the other, time feels almost still, despite efforts to distract oneself with tasks or with the phone. But when time is due, both leave work, often relieved that is over.

This silly example just means to say that there is 'work of coordination' holding different temporalities together, in this case, performed by clocks, tired workers, and/or bosses who do not want to pay extra hours. Sometimes coordination is performed by the rising sun in the sky, that tells a new day is beginning; or the smell of food flowing from the kitchen, that reminds people lunch time is near; or the rhythm of music according to which people dance.

Temporalities too are multiplicities that 'hang together' through social and material practices that coordinate disparate experiences of duration and rhythm, and that involve both human and more-than-human agents. In this sense, time is continually enacted and experienced through situated interactions between bodies and environments.

In Petrópolis, temporalities are partly coordinated through people's engagement with rain. This coordination is not without friction, as the temporal rhythms of rainfall often clash with other temporalities, like those of work, education, and care. In such contexts, the work of temporal coordination becomes a matter of survival. Rain, as both an environmental and social force, interrupts routines, reorders priorities, and compels people to rearrange their daily practices in response to the threat of rain of concern.

And here also lies an important difference between time and atherosclerosis, that needs to be considered. Time is enacted, but not always directly. In many occasions people are not

consciously engaging with 'time' as an entity. That is, time is often enacted while people are distracted doing something else.

At initial stages of fieldwork, this 'something else' was not entirely clear to me. It was through following flows of matter – at first as an experimentation, later on as a consciously adopted method – that I came upon care work practices as a focus of research.

Another unplanned aspect of this research was the attention given to ruins. This study did not set out to explore ruins, yet they insisted on becoming part of it – emerging both through people's accounts and through encounters in the field. Their materiality pushes people towards facing memories of the past, recognizing challenges that linger in the present, and reflecting about what might come next. Attention towards how people engage with ruins gives a sense of how temporalities are lived and enacted.

Indirection demanded sustaining an improvisational attitude during this ethnography. This attitude went beyond fieldwork, and into the writing stages of this research, as I sought ways to make sense of ruins, futures and emerging forms of life. These phenomena do not translate easily into linear forms of writing, partly because they entail temporalities in which past, present and future are enmeshed.

For this task, I searched for help in literature. Beyond Paulo Leminski mentioned before, other authors have been influential as well. Gabriel García Márquez's fluid prose and the way his stories unfold into other stories, transmitting the very flow of life. The work *Hopscotch*, by Julio Cortázar, fascinating for its radical subversion of linear temporalities. And the book *Ordinary Affects* by Kathleen Stewart, with her careful sensibility towards the tensions of everyday life, conveyed through small, yet meaningful, fragments.

On a more theoretical note, Jacque's Lacan notion of 'logical time' was also helpful in finding alternatives to linearity in writing. To Lacan, a psychoanalytical session shouldn't abide to the arbitrary chronological time – according to which its duration should be pre-established

(e.g. one hour) – but to its *logical time*. Put simply, logical time would be a circular temporality in which the beginning of the session meets its end. The analyst ends the 'session at a moment that makes the last word(s) said to resonate with something that was said earlier' (Hoens 2022: 8).

Borrowing Lacan's theory helped the task of finding ways to write attuned to non-linear forms of temporality that emerged in fieldwork, and the notion of logical time shaped the writing of the third part of this study, which also seeks to follow a circular temporality. And therefore, is longer than what is institutionally, or chronologically, prescribed at Oxford.

Finally, in order to tailor theory and method, but also a form of writing that would convey the complex stories that are being shared, it was necessary to cultivate some 'indifference', as Virginia Woolf (2012) put it.

Woolf (2012) wrote about the necessity of cultivating indifference so that a woman could write. Firstly, because if a woman were to attend to the social expectations of her time, she wouldn't write at all. Secondly, because to write authentically it is necessary to cultivate indifference towards the hegemonic expectations of what good writing might be. Woolf formulated these critiques in the 1920s, in the United Kingdom, partly referring to dynamics she perceived in elite universities of this country.

In the present study, cultivating indifference helped thinking critically about institutional expectations of direction in research, and about pressures to reproduce the 'British way' of writing. Which does not mean to say that dominant academic conventions were totally discarded, but rather that conventions are adopted here through a conscious and reflective attitude, rather than passivity.

Therefore, I cultivated indifference not in the sense of apathy, but in the spirit of writing as an affirmation of the lives that are narrated, and of the life that narrates them, rather than as an attempt to fit into dominant expectations of British academia.

LIMOS-CAMINHOS



Limo: Moss; a plant from the algae family (*Conferva rivularis*). Mud; filth. That which is impure.

Caminho: Path. A strip of land through which one travels from one point to another. Road. Destiny; destination. Direction.

An educator who works at CDDH shared how talks about the *tragédia* would often come up during conversations about different topics, pointing to what he saw as a sign of the collective need to talk about this subject. They gave the example of how, during an event organised by the Centre to discuss the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the conversation between the participants *desaguou* (flowed) into a discussion about the destruction caused by mud[10].

I think they have a point there. Much of what I was told about destruction and violence in the city emerged not through direct questioning, but often unexpectedly – surfacing in the midst of conversations about seemingly unrelated topics. The result was an assemblage of fragments: memories, sensations, and images that echoed the material ruins scattered throughout Petrópolis.

However, describing these accounts as fragments does not mean to presume a prior experiential wholeness. A unity that is later on shattered by violence and suffering. As Strathern (1991) points out, the expectation of finding a coherent and cohesive narrative that automatically springs out of fieldwork is often based on assumptions that selves and 'cultures' are homogenous and integrated, which doesn't necessarily reflect people's experiences in the world.

What is meant here is that: some stories take shape as clear, well-marked paths, *com começo, meio e fim* ('with a beginning, middle and end'), as it is commonly said in Brazil. This expression – 'a story with a beginning, middle and end' – usually refers to a narrative that follows a linear temporal progression. Often, this phrase is used to emphasize a sense of order, implying that the story is neatly wrapped up, without too many loose ends.

[10] Brazilian Portuguese has a variety of vernacular expressions that are used to refer both to water and to other phenomena. *Desaguar* can refer both to the flow of water and to the flow of conversation. Other expressions are: *mergulhar em memórias* (to dive into memories), *vazar uma informação* (to leak information), *transbordar de alegria* (to overflow joy), *afogar-se em mágoas* (to drawn in pain), *diluir tensões* (to dilute tensions), *ferver por dentro* (to boile inside, means to feel very angry), *cabeça fervendo* (head boiling, to have many thoughts at once).

Other stories follow less defined routes, meandering through detours, interruptions, and repetitions (Alison 2019). Rather than progressing in a straight line, they unfold more like a wander through ruins, where the path is not clearly predetermined.

Walking through ruins both invites and constrains movements in a different fashion, demanding heightened attunement to body and place. There is a multiplicity of potential paths, some more difficult than others. Common-sense boundaries – such as what is inside or outside of a house – are often disrupted. Different kinds of objects can obstruct the way, and even walking over seemingly clear paths demands attentiveness to the risk of crumbling surfaces. What looks solid may give way, what appears impassable might offer a hidden route. In this landscape, movement is shaped by relative uncertainty. Ruins do not guide, they suggest, resist, and sometimes mislead, requiring those who pass through them to constantly improvise (Edensor 2008).

Walking through ruins disrupts linear notions of temporality, blending past, present and future. Gordillo (2014: 15) illustrates this in his reflections on the landscapes of Esteco, Argentina, where his initial encounter with ruins included not only remnants of a colonial past but also the more recent decay of a collapsed tobacco farm and its workers' homes. His conversations with local residents revealed that their understanding of the ruins of Esteco was deeply intertwined with contemporary experiences of social and economic decline.

Gordillo (2014) develops and interesting criticism to the concept of ruins. He argues that differently from his attitude of reverence towards ruins, those who actually lived in Esteco had a much more familiar engagement with them. He gives the example of a collaborator who casually punches the wall of an old church to show how fragile its structure was, prompting in Gordillo a 'visceral reaction', that made him realize how his academic disposition towards the materiality of the ruined church was different from that of his friend.

The author thus choses to speak in terms of 'rubble', arguing that the notion of ruins consists of an abstraction, built upon elite sensibilities, that frames some objects as worthy of preservation. As opposed to ruins and their social self-enclosedness, the author proposes the concept of rubble, which would better capture the existence of the 'afterlives' of the debris of destruction. In this sense, rubble would have an afterlife because it acts in the intertwining of different social-material processes of ruination. It is not an inert leftover, frozen in past.

Gordillo's poses sound criticisms to the potential fetiche-like character of ruins upon which heritage industry makes most of its profits. In the present study, however, I chose to stick with the word ruins, partly because it is one of the diverse ways locals use to refer to the remnants of destruction. In Petrópolis, there are different ways to refer to them: *escombros* (wreckage), *destroços* (rubble), *ruínas* (ruins), *restos de casas* (house's remnants) and even *casas* (homes), depending on context.

For the local commerce, built upon tourism, the sight of ruins can be bad for business. It does not contribute to the image of Petrópolis as the Imperial City, a paradisiac place where elites can spend their summers, protected from the violence of bigger cities. Thus, in the most touristic places of the city, ruins are rubble. Something that demands prompt erasure. The governmental eagerness to clean the touristic areas of the city, in detriment of the communities where the most impoverished live, is one of the main criticisms towards the state, which is seen as a corrupt institution in service of the interests of the elites.

On the other hand, for those who had their homes partly or totally destroyed by landslides, the word *casa* is not immediately abandoned. In the same vein, the expression *restos de casas* also seems to acknowledge that the wreckage was someone's home once.

Accompanying a friend and collaborator driving around the city of Petrópolis, they take me to see the *casinha*[11] (little house), telling the driver, 'you know, that little house...' (*sabe, aquela casinha...*). The driver barely needs any further explanation and takes us up a hill, through a narrow street surrounded by houses. Arriving at the hilltop, I am presented to the casinha. It lies almost invisible in the middle of grass and threes that have taken over the abandoned terrain[12].



Casinha in 2024, and a picture of it in the early aftermath of the 2022 landslides (image retrieved from Rezende 2022).

They tell me how this little house became well known during the tragedy, when a picture of it was shown in international news media. Behind it, there used to be more houses, but they were dragged down in a mudslide, accumulating over the casinha, that was surprisingly still standing.

My friend compares it to Petrópolis itself: an apparently ordinary place that looks somewhat fragile and precarious, covered by layers of wreckage and mud, but that stubbornly endures. The house's materiality ties past, present and future. It tells that other tragedies are yet

[11]Words in their diminutive form are commonly used in Brazil and often bear a sense of affectionate reference to something, without necessarily reflecting its physical size.
[12]A journalist came upon an interesting vernacular expression in Petrópolis: *o mato cresce, o povo esquece* (the grass grows, people forget), used to criticize the way public tragedies and governmental neglect fade from public consciousness over time (Lazzeri 2014).

to come, but at the same time, that life will likely go on, however precariously. Life in the city is conceived through its structure. Its ruins bear an afterlife, in Gordillo's terms.

But this example also points to a fundamental difference between Gordillo's research and the present one. The case described by the author of someone casually punching the walls of an old church to show a researcher its fragile structure seems inadequate to reflect the affective geography of Petrópolis that I, as a woman, was able to notice. The house is familiar, but mourning and identification with it still grounds a form of tender affection that is not acknowledged by the term rubble.

Something Gordillo seems to have left aside in his analysis is how his situated experience of a man talking (mostly) with other men, seems to invite some forms of expression rather than others (like punching walls). Gender shapes people's relationship to materiality, and to researchers, although it seems to be rarely taken in to account in studies about ruination and destruction.

But Gordillo's warning against the naive romanticizing of people's relationship to ruins is nevertheless valuable for the present study. There are other forms of social valuing of destroyed structures that are not adequately captured by the affectionate idiom of *casa* either. During an event in which researchers and activists from nearby cities visited some of the remaining wreckage of the 2022 events, some of them began taking selfies, while smiling and talking loudly, to the discomfort of local dwellers that were accompanying the group. Their cheerful and touristic attitude in face of destruction was taken as an offense by some.

Another example is that after the 2022 landslides there was a wave of looting and burglary in the city, which just added another layer of fear to the event. Some would go into other's houses and take whatever object of value they could, to sell it afterwards, showing how people's relationship with material ruins can vary deeply.

I only found about the looting casually, while talking to a collaborator about why people hesitated in leaving their houses to seek shelter at support points. Likewise, these events are not something that emerge in official narratives or media reports, which tend to emphasize stories of solidarity. Yet the practice of looting reveals the uneven moral landscapes that form in the wake of disaster. In this context, ruins are not only sites of mourning or memory but also spaces of tension and suspicion.

Therefore, either as a morbid touristic site, as in the case of the event with academics and activists, either as a source of goods to be scavenged and sold, the remains of destruction are commodified. Now, it is not rubble, or house, it is a commodity, an object that has been made exchangeable within broader circuits of value. In this process, the material traces of destruction become items of consumption, whether through spectacle or resale.

Considering that, the reader might begin to wonder if there is any adequate form of referring to what remains after a mudslide at all (and also, what is the point of this long discussion about how to name things). The point is: the problem is not only in the framing per se (is this a house, rubble, commodity or ruin?), but in the presumed dichotomy between subject and objects-that-are-known (Mol 2002).

Building up on Strathern (1991) and Mol (2002), it can be argued that ruins are not simply an integrated, homogeneous unit – as the discussion above highlights – and neither a mere juxtaposition of differences, since there is a very material connection between ruins-rubble, ruins-houses, or ruins-commodities. Yet, such connections are partial: one unit does not collapse into the other, at the same time it is not totally apart either.

Based on Strathern's theory of partial connections, Mol (2002: 82) endorses the possibility of objects that are 'more than one, but less than many', and adds that such multiplicity emerges through practical engagement. She calls for a praxiographic shift: instead of studying things as things per se, situate them in the practices through which they are enacted.

Different ruins are enacted when someone gazing upon the remnants of a house and affectionately calls it a casinha; or when taking a selfie with it and posting it on social media, or when scavenging it for potential goods to sell.

The word ruins (ruínas) can be used to describe to what is left of a house after a landslide, but also to the remains of abandoned textile industries, or the material imperial remnants in the city, such as old palaces. Furthermore, broadly speaking, in Brazil, the word ruins is used not only in reference to material wreckage per se, but also to refer to states of social, emotional, and institutional breakdown. One might say *minha vida está em ruínas* (my life is in ruins) to describe the experience of living in a precarious socio-material reality. Thus, when talking of ruins, this study seeks to build upon this multiplicity that blurs the boundaries between the subject and the objects-that-is-known, in Mol's (2002) terms.

In order to apprehend the partial connections that hold multiplicity together, Strathern (1991: 48) suggests thinking about a 'journey' as an imaginative device, *as long as the presumption of an integrated self is overcome*. Thinking with ruins might help with that.

Going back to the beginning, it was argued that narratives of destruction would often unfold like a wander through ruins, meaning that these narratives do not follow a predictable path, but rather emerge through detours, silences, sudden eruptions of memory, and emotionally charged gestures.

Also, I mentioned how ruins disrupt linear temporalities, intertwining past, present and future, just like the stories I was told would often not correspond to stories 'with a beginning, middle and end'. Thus, I contended that, differently from other narratives-experiences, those related to destruction emerged like a walk through a path that is in process of definition.

Moreover, it was emphasized how thinking about narratives as a wander through ruins does not presume a pre-existing integrated reality, since the tool for thought here is the *practice*

of wandering through ruins, and not just the materiality of ruins, nor solely just the subjects that wander.

Considering the ideas presented so far, it can now be added that this wandering metaphor is not just a narrative matter, it reflects also the way people live with, navigate, and make sense of destruction in Petrópolis. It highlights modes of experiencing tragedy, in which meanings, temporalities and boundaries are in dispute, and in which partial connections are being made. This process is not about recovering a lost coherence, but about living through and with social-material fragmentation, by crafting the partial connections that might hold lives together.

Such connections are made through practical engagement within the world and are politically relevant. Enacting ruins as rubble, homes, or commodities enables or constrains certain forms of care and governance. These practices, or rather, emerging forms of life, are shaped both by broader political economies of visibility and value, but also by intimate, embodied forms of becoming-with the material.

Having now delineated the initial issue regarding how violence and destruction emerged during fieldwork, and what is meant here by ruins, I can now present the dilemma that has accompanied the writing of this chapter.

As I began to consider how to put these stories without a beginning, middle and end into writing, my initial impulse was to ‘repair’ the pieces – to assemble them into a coherent, linear narrative that would align with dominant academic conventions. In doing so, however, I risked producing a form of writing that offered only resolution, rather than openness – foreclosing what made these accounts so meaningful, and failing to capture the ongoing process of emergence they entail.

On the other hand, it is necessary to ponder whether trying to preserve such fragments in writing would cast yet another layer of violence over them. Is it not, perhaps, the task of the scholar to recompose such fragments – to engage in a form of intellectual and affective repair

that allows destruction to be not only documented, but also made sense of? Might the work of reassembly itself offer a gesture of care, rather than erasure?

In other terms, the dilemma faced in this chapter is: how to talk about destruction without falling into a deathly and enclosing form of writing? How to write in a way that, as Nietzsche (1990) would say, affirms life? And why does it matter to do so?

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (2008) calls for a life-affirming attitude, insisting that to live virtuously, one must not deny the tragic dimensions of existence, that is, the inherent suffering that comes with being alive. He argues that when people act out of fear or guilt – when they deny the tragic – they are responding to external pressures or moral judgments. For Nietzsche, life should be lived not in reaction, but as an affirmation.

In exploring the tragic, Nietzsche reflects about ancient Greek tragedy, which he believes renders the unbearable bearable through art. Greek tragedies to Nietzsche were born out of the spirit of music, and like a symphony – at once painful and beautiful – draw the subject to continue listening to it, despite the sorrow and pain it evokes, much like life itself (Nietzsche, 2008).

Nietzsche can be inspiring, but when foregrounding his views upon the lives of ancient Greeks, his thoughts can feel quite distant to the realities of those in Petrópolis. Other authors have built upon his insights, directly or not, to discuss issues that feel closer to the present challenges, however.

Of interest to this dissertation is the book *Politics of Time: Imagining African Becomings* (Mbembe & Sarr, 2022), which brings a collection of essays written by authors interested in reflecting what it means to think Africa beyond the temporal frameworks imposed by colonialism. Should Africa be understood merely as the outcome of violent colonization and slavery? One of the authors, Diagne (2022), argues that:

> I will consider here the movement whereby the meaning of African existence and 'presence' ceases to denote the resistance, defense, and illustration of an identity and turns into a question

> of pluralism and becomings. It will be argued that we have moved from the reactive, mass Africanity (Africanité) that was the appropriate response to colonial negation toward a system of thought adapted to a situation that obliges Africanity to understand itself as open and diverse.... (p. 4).

Diagne is arguing, appropriating Nietzschean thought, that Africa needs to be thought of as something that is not merely a reaction to what has been done to the continent and its people. He is interested in how Africanity also entails a movement of becoming, and ponders about how to face the task of 'affirming' Africa in the world, that is, to recognize and critically cultivate Africa's world-making force (Diagne 2022: 7).

The issue of temporalities is central to the book as whole, and one of the questions it poses is whether it is possible to move beyond temporalities organized around either irremediable apocalypse or irrevocable technological worship. Such temporalities often paralyze action and imagination when it comes to matters of climate change, either by fostering a sense of inevitable doom or by placing blind faith in technofixes that disregard structural inequalities and historical responsibilities. In this duo, there is no space for openness, since the future is already set. There is no space for politics, since the solution (techno-scientific) is already decided.

Attaining to these temporalities alone would mean to overlook the continuous efforts of many, in Petrópolis and beyond, that work and fight to nurture the possibility of alternative futures. Overlooking these efforts would entail what is meant here by a deathly writing.

Kohn notes how in living, semiotic beings, the future – though absent – can still have a role in shaping the present. Futures are what he calls a constitutive absence, shaping the present even if it is conceived as just a possibility (and it might be added, when it is not as well). Life, then, would be marked by this form of causality that fundamentally blurs strictly mechanistic logics, in which only linear stories, with a beginning, middle and end make sense.

In this sense, a life affirming writing would be one that bears some form of openness. It consists of a theoretical and methodological effort that seeks to discuss realities in which it is

politically relevant to nurture the present as a potentiality, and the future as relatively indeterminate.

.....



Quando chove eu me assusto!

Não é mais como antes:
dormir com o cantar dos pingos,
compondo no teclado do telhado
as músicas do meu ninar…
Não! Não é mais como antes…

Hoje, quando chove,
chove dor –
parece bombardeio!
A gente se abaixa,
se esconde na gente mesmo:
fica ali embolado,
agasalhado de medo.

Quando chove

When it rains, I get scared!

It's not like it used to be:
falling asleep to the song of raindrops,
composing, on the rooftop keyboard,
lullabies to make me sleep
No! It's not like it used to be.

Today, when it rains,
it rains pain –
it sounds like bombing!
We crouch down,
hiding inside ourselves:
huddled there,
wrapped in fear.

When it rains,

é uma tristeza danada:	It's such a sadness:
desce lama, corre água;	mud slides down, water rushes;
morre gente, leva casa.	people die, houses are swept away.
Só quem sofreu é quem sabe!	Only those who've suffered know!

Quando chove eu me assusto, by Petrolício.

I found this precious poem-song in the archives that the Centre of Human Rights (CDDH) kindly allowed me to read. Written by someone called Petrolício, possibly a local artist, it was found alongside news clippings from the beginning of the 1980s, which allows to presume this work was written around then.

The front page shows a crying cloud blowing wind and rain over a hill covered with houses. Petrolício seems to have used a mimeograph to produce it, typing the poem-song in its inner pages. It's worth to mention that the mimeograph became more widely known in Brazil during the 1970s, partly due to its extensive use by the Marginal Poets, who also became known as the 'mimeograph generation'. Mimeographs allowed to reproduce and distribute poetry made by those who stood at the margins of the publishing scene, serving not only to sell their art, but also to make their political views known by a broader public (Monteiro 2015: 307).

Moreover, I call Petrolício's work a poem-song because its form and content also reminds of *Literatura de Cordel* (Literature on a String), a form of singed poetry that began in Northeast Brazil during the 18th century, and spread across de country. Cordel artists often present their works as pamphlets hanging on threads, like clothes hanging on clotheslines to dry, thus its name. The cover illustrations are usually done using woodblock printing, which, analogously to the mimeograph, allows for a wider dissemination of one's work. And its song-poems explore various themes, mostly related to people's daily lives, through an astute political criticism (Musser 2019).

The title – *Quando chove eu me assusto* (When it rains I get scared) – sets the tone for the most part of the poem-song. Just like the lives of those who inhabit Petrópolis, it is

rhythmically punctuated by the refrain 'when it rains'. The poem also conveys the occurrence of rupture: there was rain before, and another rain after. The rain from before was not painful, its sound was soothing like a lullaby. The rain from after is not only painful, but also deadly, like bombs falling from the sky.

Petrolício draws attention to how tragedy entails a radical shift in the affective landscape. A feeling that remains present until today. The 2022 landslides marked a similar shift. As one collaborator noted 'the rains of 2011 were severe but after that there was still a sense of security in the city, because they happened mostly in one part of the municipality. After 2022, we realized that there was no safe place in Petrópolis, everywhere is a risk area'.

There is a Brazilian vernacular expression that goes like *um antes e um depois* (a before and an after). This expression is commonly used to refer to either events or people that promoted some sort of remarkable change, thus stablishing a temporal division, that is, a before and an after. I would like to take a moment and reflect about how Petrolício's song-poem and this piece of Brazilian vernacular wisdom might help in the task of better delineating what it means to say 'ordinary' in the context of Petrópolis, and who, or what, composes it.

Stang (2009), having lived and learnt with the Mehinaku people in Brazilian Amazonia, poses an interesting critique to how the notion of 'ordinary' is often essentialized in Anthropology. She argues that parting from a perspective that the ordinary is constituted through a certain set of predefined activities, may lead to a failure in grasping its situatedness.

She tells of an interesting anecdote in which her own whiteness became conspicuously obvious to herself. She went to the river accompanying some of the villagers for a bath. Seeing the beauty of the place, she asked if it would be possible to stay there for a moment, appreciating the view. They responded urging her to return to the village. It made no sense to simply stay put.

Stang understood this event as an example of how the Western conception of 'time off', associated to suspension of daily activities, doesn't sit well with the Mehinaku. She then suggests that, in this context, ordinary reality (or interstitial reality, as she frames it) relates to an embodied 'flowingness' that gains expression throughout the everyday practices of the Mehinaku (Stang 2009: 76 - 78).

Stang makes an interesting analysis, and thinking with her might help developing a more situated understanding of ordinary life, having in mind the context of Petrópolis: the vernacular saying um antes e um depois conveys a divided temporality that entails, as an implicit opposition, that, were it not for tragedies, time would unfold as a continuous flow (although not necessarily homogeneous). Based on that, ordinary life could be understood as those everyday practices that unfold as a flow – without presuming a predefined set of activities that compose it.

But to consider ordinariness as something merely temporal would risk falling into a subjectivist understanding of it, as if materiality had no role in its shaping. Which certainly doesn't seem to correspond with Petrolício's poem-song, nor with the lived experiences of those who inhabit Petrópolis.

The materiality of the hill, of the mud, of the rain, is not secondary to the experience of the ordinary – it is constitutive of it. The poem-song does not only tell about time, it also sings of place. The refrain 'when it rains I get scared' marks a temporal disruption *and* evokes a material relation with the world that is somewhat suddenly altered. Materiality also participates of the work of coordination that ties different temporalities together.

The incorporation the ferocious into the ordinary – as Hastrup puts it (2014: 15), an ordinary that is not based on a presumption of harmonious normalcy – gains expression in different practices and structures across Petrópolis. Walking around the city, one can frequently see traces of past destructive events, and of efforts to prepare for future ones:



Contention walls (A, C[13], E), signs alerting against the dangers of flood water up to a certain level (B), contentions bars (*barras de contenção*) that are daily placed on the doors of closed stores to prevent the entrance of mud (D), the spread of homemade pluviometers to measure the precipitation of rain (F): these mundane objects and infrastructural reconfigurations tell of the pervasive tension that trespasses the city.

Tension that emerges from the encounter between different forces. Such encounter can be delicate and subtle – like the surface tension of water that holds a droplet's shape or allows a leaf to float gently on a pond – or it can be visibly intense, like the vigorous force that keeps a ship afloat.

……

[13] This contention wall was built by CDDH as part of the project *De Volta pra Casa* (Going Back Home), in which the center provided technical and material support to repair and construct structures and homes of those living in risk areas, but who did not have the financial means to make the necessary changes on their own.



'None of that, now only *desabrigados* are allowed in'. Comic cartoon found in the archives of the Centre of Human Rights (CDDH), originally published in Jornal de Petrópolis, 1988.

The above cartoon was published in a local newspaper, in March 6 of 1988. The cartoon shows a jail, in front of which a police officer informs another that the prison is only meant for *desabrigados* (displaced people). The other officer, having arrested an offender with a wicked smile, scratches his head in visible perplexity. In February of that same year, another disaster had hit the city, taking 277 lives with it, and leaving at least 2.000 displaced (Carmo and Anazawa 2014: 3675).

The cartoon above shows, with morbid humour and a critical tone, some of the issues faced by desabrigados in the city to this day. In search of a place to live, many *occupy* new land and rebuild their homes there. Others, not seeing any other option, stay in the same place where their homes have been destroyed, rebuilding their houses there, despite the risks.

In dominant public discourse, desabrigados are often casted as partly responsible for tragedies, although not always explicitly. This is conveyed through the grammar of 'bad soil usage' (*mau uso do solo*), used to refer to practices of occupying edges of hills and margins of rivers, destroying local vegetation to build houses, not building adequate drainage systems, and

so on. Bad soil usage is often casted as the main cause of socio-environmental disasters in Petrópolis.

Land occupation is the act of settling on or taking possession of land without legal authorization. The state's response to such practices has been varied, but consisted mostly of arrests and legal prosecutions, especially in times of dictatorship, illustrating the continuities between state violence, social inequality, and environmental vulnerability. Connections that are not completely overcome, although now they take place less obviously.

Reports from March, 1988, show that the *Serviço Nacional de Informação* (SNI) was still actively spying groups that were seen as potential threats to the authoritarian state of affairs, including the group of *desabrigados* from Petrópolis. SNI, also known as the 'monster of dictatorship', existed from 1964 to 1990 and was a national institution designed to spy and censor those known as *inimigos da pátria* (enemies to homeland), working closely with other governmental departments more directly involved in practices of torture (Veiga 2024). One of the reports goes as follows (my translation):

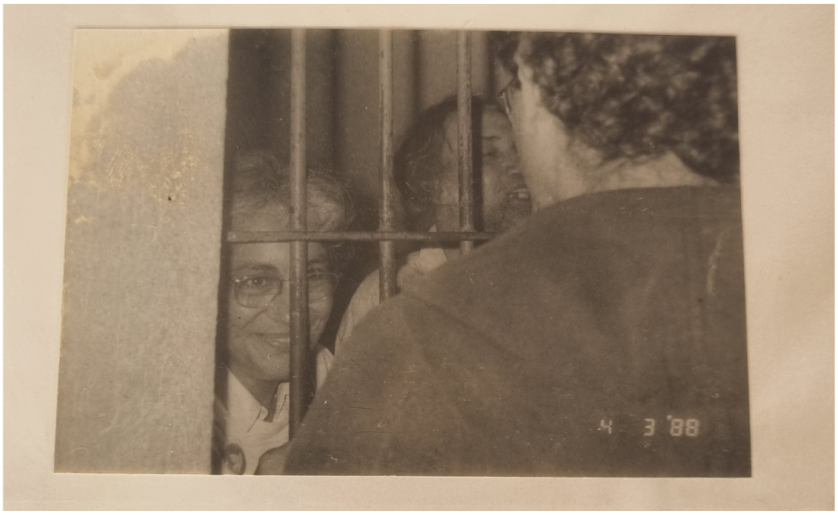
CONFIDENTIAL

FRIAR LEONARDO BOFF AND INVADERS ARRESTED IN PETRÓPOLIS

Friar Leonardo Boff, along with his brother Friar Clodovis Boff, Friar Basílio, Sister Dulce ... and people left homeless by the rains, were arrested yesterday, March 3rd, and taken to the 67th Police Precinct in Petrópolis for having occupied the Sítio Cebolinha ... The arrest occurred after Judge Luís Felipe Medeiros Francisco, of the 22nd Civil Court of Petrópolis/RJ, granted a request for restitution of property made by the owners of Sítio Cebolinha ... The religious figures, after being heard, were released, but remained at the police station as a form of protest against the authorities' failure to respond to the needs of the disaster victims. The displaced people of Petrópolis have scheduled a demonstration for today through the city centre, set to begin at 4:00 PM at Praça da Independência (Independence Square), marching through the main streets to City Hall, where they intend to camp out if a solution is not offered by Mayor Paulo Rattes.

The report tells of the judicial response to the occupation of land by a group of *desabrigados*, which led to their arrest and expulsion of that territory. Both the report and the cartoon refer to the same event. Despite the obvious attempt to intimidate the movement with

arrests, they not only kept on smiling (see image below) but also went on to organize a demonstration at Praça da Independência[14] on the following day.



A picture of the arrested in prison, found in CDDH archives.

For hours I sat in CDDH's storage room, surrounded with boxes of papers yellowed by time, wondering first what had prompted the selection of such heterogeneous objects. Children's letters to George Bush asking him to stop the bombing of Iraq, photographs of cheerful gatherings, and religious sermons, side-by-side with pictures of corpses covered by mud, minute meetings with governmental representatives, news about the 'invasion' of land by desabrigados. And this picture – a woman with greyish hair smiling from behind prison bars.

Leonardo Boff, one of the people mentioned in the report, is known for being one of the main voices in Theology of Liberation, a Latin American movement that sought to articulate marxist and Christian views, and, alongside other Christians, participated of the political organization of groups affected by mudslides and floods in Petrópolis, in their struggles for accessible and safe housing. Boff is one of the founders of the Centre of Human Rights, that

[14] Independence Square (*Praça da Independência*) used to be the place where Black people would buy their freedom during slavery times, thus its name. But the government changed it to Rui Barbosa Square, in 1923, in honor of Rui Barbosa, who was Minister of Economy in 1891, when he signed a decree ordering the burning of all historical archives related to slavery in Brazil (Nascimento 1978: 49). Changing the square name was another attempt to erase traces of Brazil's racial violence. Despite being until today officially named Rui Barbosa Square, most still refer to it as Independence Square.

still actively assists families affected by diverse socio-environmental issues in Petrópolis, partly by providing support in the process of social mobilization of these communities.

According to Boff, Theology of Liberation seeks to break with an individualistic understanding of the Christian message, restoring its political and historical situatedness. Inspired in Jesus history – who not only promised a new reality, but began to realize it in the present – Boff understands Christian faith as an embodied practice of engagement with the world in the present, having in mind that 'the Kingdom of God is not only future or utopia: it is present and finds historical manifestations' (Boff 2012: 27).

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the Franciscan order of Petrópolis, to which Boff belonged at that time, was engaged in the *Movimento dos Desabrigados* (Movement of the Displaced People), which gathered displaced by different tragedies. This movement was involved in organizing protests, occupying land, collective building efforts – in which many would gather to build houses for themselves and others – and religious Christian events.

News from December of 1983 convey a public note distributed by the *Comissão de Desabrigados* (Commission of Displaced People) in which they describe a mass performed in memory of the victims of the rains of 1981 and 1983, this is some of its content (my translation):

> For us desabrigados the mass held in memory of our relatives was a moment to remember those who died beneath barreiras, and also to remember our brothers and sisters who still live in the hills without a safe home. We have faith that our mission is the celebration of life first and foremost. That is why this celebration in December is a source of strength that sustains us.
> […] At the offertory, we offered to God not only the 'fruit of our labour,' but also all the suffering we have endured from not being able to enjoy the benefits of our labour. As a result, we live in miserable shacks that collapse with the rains. What we offer to God at the mass is what remains of us, and it is this that keeps us going. In the *retratinho* (small photograph) one of us brought of our family members, we felt the memory of those who died and asked God that their deaths be an incentive to keep us organizing; in the pieces of wood we also offered, we felt the pain of fallen houses and remembered the homes that are still at risk, as we remain in danger.
> For us desabrigados the meaning of this mass goes beyond the sad memory of seeing our loved ones die under the earth. It is also the opportunity to seek in Christ, who died so

> that all may have life, the strength to fight for our rights. For the dead are the commitment to continue sustaining the journey.
> […] For us, the desabrigados and those in solidarity with us, what seems especially important beyond the mass is feeling that the Church is reclaiming its true identity. When it opens this space, it is not only fulfilling its doctrinal obligations, but also responding to the cries of the people – not to incite revolt or disturb the peace of the community, but to show that peace is the work of justice, not the result of complacency and silence.

'The dead are the commitment to continue sustaining the journey', they say. There seems to be a form of temporality that articulates painful loss with movement. But movement is not something innate, or spontaneous, it needs to be 'sustained' somehow.

A 'celebration of life' is the source of strength that 'sustains' people in movement. To celebrate life, they come together, offer the fruits of their labour and their suffering to God, they remember and honour the dead. Movement is nourished through the coming together – with each other, with God, and with the dead.

Loss, celebration, struggle – past, present, future. In movement all these come together, constituting a flow that affirms life, seeking to sustain its potentiality, the possibility of a future.

……

Some occupations by desabrigados were emptied, but other endured and took root. One of them is the community that, for anonymity protection purposes, will be called Morro do Taioba. A research commissioned by the Municipal Government and led by Corrêa, in 1986, shows that by then the community housed no more than 500 families and many of its dwellers arrived there in 1966, after losing their houses to a series of mudslides that happened that year (Corrêa 1986). Displaced by the events of 1988 also sought refuge there (Brasil, 1988). Thus, Taioba aggregated a number of displaced from different tragedies.

Nowadays, in local public perception, Taioba community is often associated with high levels of violence. Drug and wildlife traffic are indeed present. There is debate in Petrópolis about whether or not it would be a *favela*.

Some in Petrópolis argue that there are no favelas there, since violence in local communities is not as explicit as it is in the city Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro's city is often used as a contrast to understand Petrópolis social reality. But the term favela is used by some of the people I spoke to, and who live in Taioba, so it is also adopted here.

Favela is often translated as slum in English. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, slum is 'a very poor and crowded area, especially of a city' and 'a very untidy or dirty place' (Cambridge Dictionary 2025). Depending on the context, to call a place favela, or to call someone *favelado*, can be a means of discrimination, which is partly why the word community *(comunidade*) is often used instead, since it is less stigmatizing.

But there has been a growing movement of appropriation and subversion of the word favela. Some of those who live in these areas use this term with pride, challenging dominant narratives that associate their lives solely with poverty and crime. Life can be remarkably difficult in such a context, but to reduce a favela to that has been subject of increasing criticism.

J is one of those people who proudly recognizes herself as a *mãe de favela* (mother of favela). This expression is thought provoking, as it can be read both in the sense of a mother who lives in a favela, as in the sense of a mother of the favela itself. This resonates yet with another commonly used expression, to say one is *cria de favela* (son/daughter of favela) means to say that this person has been raised in a favela, but it could also be read as someone who is the daughter or son of a favela. There is kinship with and within favela's materiality.

She is also one of the many Black women in Petrópolis that have been at the frontline in reconstructing the city and acting to prevent further damage. Like others, J endures a 'triple

work load': working to economically sustain herself, caring for family, and dedicating to the community.

Her family was originally from a nearby state, and moved to Taioba in search of work. The final destination was not known when their journey began. Her mother travelled *de balaio*, that is, working as a maid in different homes in sequence, and dislocating along the way. Her father settled there partly because it was not too far from the factory where he found work.

Nowadays, most men in Taioba work in construction, and women as house maids in the richer neighbourhoods nearby. Ironically, those who work more directly with caring and repairing houses, don't own one. Most people there don't have *título de propriedade* (property registration), a document that legally attests one's property rights over a terrain. Having título de propriedade allows someone to sell the land, or to leave it as an inheritance, in ways considered official by the state.

When there is some form of documentation, what most have is *escritura de posse* (possession deed), which, simply put, consists of a 'claim' over land. That is, when someone lives on a terrain and claims to own it. Basic infrastructure – such as electricity, water, public transportation and litter collection services – are more difficult to access in areas where most houses are not recognized as legitimately owned.

Thus, locals often struggle to make basic services available, such as electricity. Less than four years ago, Taioba had no public street lights: 'if you looked to the hill at night you wouldn't see anything, you would think there was no one there!' J. tells me, and, pointing to a light pole close by, adds with a tired tone how that single light pole had been the result of a long *batalha* (battle).





Morro da Taioba.

J doesn't recognize her work as political – at least not in its traditional sense of antagonist struggle – she conceives it as *trabalho social* (social labour): it is compromised with social change, but not through the institutional spaces of the state (as far as that is possible). J. is evangelical and began working with *social* after making a promise to God. In gratitude to Him, she would offer him the fruits of her labour, in the form of all the souls she would work to save from violence.

J walks around with me, showing places destroyed by landslides not too long ago. She shows where the litter is thrown, and where it accumulates. Since there is no service of litter collection inside the community, many throw their trash on the edges of the hill. It falls in a creek at its bottom, that often floods, affecting the houses at its margins. The only place where it is legally authorized to discard trash, is by the bottom of the hill. There, the litter is collected by public service.

The hill is steep and the sun is scorching, and soon we are both soaked in sweat. Going up or down demands a slower pace. And in this rhythm J. often stops to greet someone, to have a quick chat and to ask how is life going. She has lived there all her life and knows most of its dwellers.

Inside the forest, not too far from main the entrance of the community, she shows me ruins, which are now mostly covered by vegetation and surrounded by police cordon tapes. J.

thinks they look like a *senzala*. We look at them from behind the cordon tapes. But none of us goes beyond that, instead we carry on our walk.

Senzala is the name of the house where enslaved people used to be confined in Brazil. If those ruins were or not senzalas at some point, it is not the focus of the present study to determine. Although it wouldn't be surprising.

What this ethnography allows to say, for now, is that J's testimony nevertheless points to the ghostly presence of slavery in Morro da Taioba. Here I engage with the notion of ghostly as that which 'gives a glimpse' of a dimension that usually remains invisible but that is nevertheless constitutive of the world (Delaplace 2014: 65).

In Taioba, the ghostly presence of slavery in the landscape seems to contribute to the appeal of so-called 'informal' economic practices and in the effort to grow apart from the state, whenever that is seen as possible. J is very much engaged in such practices.

She has been organizing a multiplicity of projects to 'improve' her community. As part of a collective effort, she organized the sorting of litter for recycling purposes, and part of the money gained by selling it to recycling companies was used to provide school supplies to local children. By the time I met her, this project had been temporarily suspended. It was election period, and she wanted to 'protect' this initiative from political influences.

J wants her community to flourish independently from politicians. As we walk past a barreira that looks threatening even during good weather, she tells with indignation of a politician who promised to 'do something about it' but never finished the work. The barreira had thus become a tool to ask for votes, in the logic of 'vote for me, and I will finish the job'.

Now, she is focussing instead in promoting accessible courses about hair cutting and braiding. Hair braiding in the African style is meant not only to allow people to have a source of income, but also familiarize with cultures from Africa. J wants people to have other option besides drug traffic, which is a common source of income in the area.

I go to the first reunion of new students of the course. We gather in a circle, outdoors, because it is a sunny day. It starts with a prayer. We are free to pray to whatever god we wish, J says, and explaining herself adds that 'I like to start with a prayer because everything that starts with God, is fated to end well'.

She invites each one of us to present ourselves and say what we dream of. There is a lot of emotion in the circle, many cry while speaking of dreams and desires. A woman says 'no one has ever asked me that!' and after a pause to reflect, expresses how tired she is of being repeatedly mistreated by employers, adding that by being *autônoma* (a self-employed worker) she can reconcile her work with other responsibilities, like raising her child.

A young man shares with a decided attitude that he wishes to have his own bakery. He is learning first how to be a barber, to gather the money he needs to then pay for a bakery course, and then open his own bakery. There is no bakery in Taioba, after all, he says. People have to go all the way down the hill to have freshly baked bread.

At first, I could not understand why his words gave rise to such cheerful commotion. Later on, I am told this young man's family has been involved in drug traffic for at least three generations. It was a rewarding surprise to hear his dreams, 'this is what I am working for', J. tells me later on. Her care work consists of nourishing the possibility of alternative futures.

Many in the group share their disbelief in formal jobs (*de carteira assinada*), one of them tells with some indignation 'I see my parents working all week to gain a salary that barely allows us to pay the rent'. The appeal of informal jobs seems to share the same reasoning that motivates some to engage with drug and wildlife traffic: a disbelief in the possibilities of formal employment, as its precariousness is deeply felt in everyday life.

This phenomenon seems to go beyond Taioba, as there is a growing national tendency towards *empreendedorismo de favela* (favela entrepreneurship) (Ribeiro and Moraes 2022). Empreendedorismo de favela is often lead by black women in search of possibilities to both

generate income and to address socio-material problems commonly seen in favelas, such as litter accumulation and violence (CartaCapital, 2025). Considering this, it could be understood as one of the ways found by them to address Black women's triple work load.

Some argue that empreendedorismo de favela is yet another face of neoliberalism (Ribeiro and Moraes 2022). But its collective orientation does not resonate fully with the individualistic character of neoliberalism, as this is predominantly conceptualized, although it reinforces neoliberal logics and practices, to some extent.

Verônica Gago (2014) is critical of 'victimist' readings of popular economies – the diverse economic practices that compose people's everyday life – and argues against reducing these to the result of social and economic exclusion. Instead, she proposes to understand how these practices can consist of a response 'from below' to dispossession, functioning both 'in terms of self-management, mobilization, and insubordination, as well as in forms of servitude, submission, and exploitation' (Gago 2024: 49).

In Morro da Taioba, search for sources of income that do not rely upon the legal apparatus of the state is partly built upon an insubordinate refusal of the state and its structure, at the same time that it is imbricated in socio-material precariousness. Such insubordination is weaved together with the ghostly presence of slavery in the landscape.

Beatriz Nascimento traced the historical continuities between maroon communities (*quilombos*) and modern favelas in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Geographical areas that were once quilombos, became later on favelas (such as Catumbi and Corcovado, in the city of Rio de Janeiro). According to her, such continuities go beyond the physical location, and also extend to forms of political resistance (Nascimento 2021: 130).

Nascimento (2021) parts from a critique towards the fact that much of what is known of quilombos is based on a white-centred perspective, that is, it is based on the accounts of the direct conflicts between quilombolas and white settlers. She understands this tendency as part

of racist presumptions, in which the historical importance of Black people's acts would rely solely in how they affect white trajectories.

As opposed to that, Nascimento contends that understanding the moments of 'peace' of quilombos would be far more relevant to understand the prevalent reality of many black peoples today. She argues that quilombos ought to be understood as systems based on 'self-defense and resistance as a political form', instead of insurrectional projects, as perspectives focussed on insurrections and some marxist readings would frame it (Nascimento 2021: 110).

Based on Gago (2024) and Nascimento's (2021) considerations, to argue that Taioba is merely a product of neoliberalism would be an unfair simplification. Unfair because it would reproduce the same logic that casts some forms of political engagement as more historically relevant than others. As if the practices 'from bellow' had no role in world-making.

The forms of politics exemplified by J and M (mentioned in the previous chapter) unfold in the interstices of infrastructure. It beholds relatively less visibility, in comparison with institutional political practices, but not less importance.

Thinking with the story of J and Morro da Taioba, empreendedorismo de favela could be understood as forms of labour that seek to tackle multiple challenges trespassing the lives of favela inhabitants, specially its women, who often endure triple work-loads (working for income, caring for the family, (re)building community). Here, labour and care meet, and at the same time there is interest in generating income, there is also concern about sustaining life's potentiality through caring for the collective. A collective that goes beyond the human.

These practices aim to nourish the formation of collectives outside the racially biased apparatus of the state. However, they are not totally outside dominant economic and material structures; rather, these practices articulate in variable and often ambiguous ways with the very systems of inequality and exclusion they seek to transcend.

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Minhoca-da-terra (earthworm) – A common expression in Petrópolis, often used with pride to refer to one's local origins, as in 'I am *minhoca-da-terra'*.

Carioca – Someone born in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Many *cariocas* move to Petrópolis to run away from the Rio's day-to-day violence, or to spend holidays in their summer houses in Petrópolis.

...

At eight thirty in the night I was already in the favela breathing the odour of the excrements that mix with the rotten mud. When I am in the city I have the impression that I am in the living room with its crystal chandeliers, its velvet carpets, satin cushions. And when I am in the favela I have the impression that I am an object out of use, worthy of being in a junk room.

Quarto de Despejo, Carolina Maria de Jesus

Quarto de Despejo, or Junk Room, is the book Carolina de Jesus is most known for (Jesus 2020: 40). This book consists of fragments of her diaries, in which she describes life in a favela in São Paulo, Brazil.

Her diaries convey a form of temporality marked by repetition. She wakes up, fetches water, cooks, gets upset with the lack of food, collects discarded paper, sells it, gets angry with the price of food, feeds her children, feels hungry. And again, and again. It transmits a feeling of entrapment in the everyday (Lopes 2021) and resonates with the punctuated temporality by rain of concern, that emerged in Petrolício's poem.

Yet when she writes about her writing, a shift occurs. The verbs move away from the punctuated immediacy of reaction and survival into a mode of continuity – of movement and flow. But Carolina had her goals well set. She was a single mother of three children, she

dreaded hunger and financial precarity, and her writing was partly motivated by the prospects of profiting from it, so that she could buy a 'real home', one made of bricks.

Carolina might help in the task of *manter os pés no chão* (keeping the feet on the earth). Earth conveys a sense of mundane, just like dirt and mud in de Jesus diaries, or the expression minhoca-da-terra in Petrópolis. To keep the feet on the earth means to be attuned to the daily struggles of life.

In the present case manter os pés no chão means to avoid falling into violent romanticizing of life in a favela, that Carolina calls a 'junk room'. In the junk room, there is mud and excrement, she says, it is where objects out of use are thrown. Discarding that extends to people themselves, as the writer argues that she is herself like an 'object out of use'.

She lived in that favela until the moment her diary was published. Under growing threats from those who she described in her writing, and with income from the selling of her work, she fled to a middle-class neighbourhood. There, she would face other forms of violence, while she tried to 'find a place to sit' in the shiny living room (Jesus 2021: 94).

The living room of Petrópolis is growing in size, in the same proportion that the local real estate market increases its profit (O Globo 2021). As an informant shared, talking about an area of the city that was harshly affected by the mudslides in the past: 'Nowadays I pass by those hills and see all those big and fancy mansions, and remember all the little houses (casinhas) that used to be there, that the mud dragged down'.

The erasure of low-income communities (or their displacement) by the economic interests in the area is, to some extent, made invisible, partly because only those who have been there, and who have witnessed the destruction somehow, are able to tell what has been destroyed and what has been built over the ruins.

This invisibility is also present in words. Desabrigados (displaced), *flagelados* (afflicted), *vítimas da tragédia* (victims of tragedy) are some of the names used to refer to those who lost

their homes due to socio-environmental disasters in Petrópolis. These denominations highlight the affliction involved in losing one's home and evoke a sense of solidarity towards them, as long as they stay in the place of victims.

In different contexts, like in the case of Sitio Cebolinha mentioned earlier, the same people that were once victims are afterwards renamed as *invasores* (invaders), *ocupantes* or *posseiros* (occupiers). In this case, the ties between the past displacement and the present occupation are erased. And the act of 'invading' is reduced to a moral issue, instead of a social one.

Adding to that, one name is meaningfully absent from the hegemonic narratives about this matter: dispossessed (*desapropriados*). This absence could be related to how many of those who are affected by mudslides and floods are not always seen as legal owners of their land, in the eyes of the state and elites.

As the story of M shows, dispossession repeats itself throughout generations. After losing one's home, illegal occupation of new land (or even the same land) is not uncommon, and often occurs in risk areas – at the margins of rivers, or on the edge of steep hills, where others can choose not to live. Often, there is a financial transaction involved in the so-called occupation, but the one selling the land didn't have property rights over it – a situation that is then extended to the new dwellers.

Moreover, the process that allows occupiers to gain legal right over their land can take years. The community mentioned in the last chapter, where houses were demolished, is an example of that. There, the legal process that would allow the beginning of land tenure regularization has been unfolding over the past 20 years. This shows how the very structure and legal apparatus of the state promotes and reinforces dispossession.

Dispossession is not always an explicit phenomenon that is clearly recognized as such. Dispossession related to socioenvironmental change highlights how this process is not just

about direct land grabs and it can occur more subtly, such as through the dismantling of the institutions and means that allow people's subsistence in a certain place (Vorbrugg 2019). This has a fundamental role in capitalism as a whole.

Harvey (2003: 149), basing himself on the contributions of Rosa Luxemburg (Svampa, 2019, p. 19), criticizes the idea that violent dispossession is restricted to an 'original state' that precedes the rise of capitalism itself, as Marx had originally conceived in terms of primary accumulation. According to Marx (1972):

> the so-called primary accumulation ... is nothing other than the historical process whereby the producer is divorced from the means of production. It assumes a 'primary aspect' because it belongs to the primary phase that is traversed immediately before the history of capitalism begins, immediately before the establishment of the method of production proper to capitalism. (p. 792).

To Marx (1972: 817), after an initial stage of forceful expropriation of means of subsistence, violence supposedly becomes an exception in capitalism, since people's subjugation is maintained through their dependency on capital. One of the effects of this first stage of primary accumulation is the formation of masses of workers deprived of means of production, which promotes a downward pressure on wages and, thus, the accumulation of surplus value.

Building up on that, Harvey proposes the notion of 'accumulation by dispossession'. He argues that one consequence of accumulation is that there comes a moment in which the accumulation of surplus value is such that it cannot find enough profitable investment opportunities. It 'lies idle', as Harvey notes (2003: 149), triggering a reduction of profits and economic crisis.

In this context, the economic exploration of nature's resources emerges as a solution, and offers new opportunities to turn labour power and natural resources into profitable use, thus avoiding the reduction of accumulation of surplus value. Harvey (2003: 149) contends that primitive accumulation, and the violent dispossession that accompanies it, constitute ongoing

processes in capitalism, necessary to deal with the crises derived from overaccumulation of surplus.

When Harvey talks of 'exploration of natural resources' this is usually understood in its most usual sense: mining, deforestation for agriculture, extraction of oil and gas, and so on. However, Petrópolis shows how there are other ways through which the exploitation of 'natural resources' articulates with dispossession by accumulation, which that are not necessarily based on wide destruction, but instead, on preservation efforts.

Preserved nature is source of profit in tourism and in real estate market. Summer houses in the middle of the Atlantic Forest are in demand amongst those who can escape the big city's violence for a couple of months per year. Regarding the legal process that led to the demarcantion of APAs in Petrópolis (areas of environmental protection), the following news from 1982 are telling:

> Environmental Protection Areas (APAs) Will Combat *favelização* of the City
>
> Reinhold Haack ... who is expected to join the commission currently studying the delimitation of Environmental Protection Areas (APAs), spoke yesterday about the APAs, which 'for the first time will be established on national territory, and for that reason alone, it is already important for the municipality, which has been chosen by the Federal Government' .... he warns about the way the City Hall has acted in recent years regarding the occupation of hillsides in Petrópolis. In his view, this has hampered environmental preservation, as building houses on the slopes leads to the cutting down of numerous trees, which are not replanted, thereby increasing the risk of landslides. Haack considers the Department of Public Works ineffective in preventing the spread of favelas in the city and in enforcing existing laws, as the Building Code mandates the demolition of irregular constructions. (Jornal de Petrópolis, 1982, my translation).

Petrópolis was the first place in Brazil to behold an APA, which now constitutes around 60% of the Municipality's territory. The news point that amongst national authorities, APAs were seen as a solution to *favelização* (the spread of favelas in the city).

There are different types of so-called environmental conservation units (*unidades de conservação* - UCs). Some of them, like national parks, are state-owned. Others, like APAs, belong to private owners. Being privately owned, it is permitted to buy and sell land in APAs.

Construction is allowed, as long as it abides to certain legal criteria and norms. If it doesn't, then people can be subject to fines, or structures to demolition.

One of the norms that orients administration of Petrópolis' APA by local authorities is its *Plano de Manejo* (Management Plan) (MMA/IBAMA 2007). This Plan divides APA in different zones, and in each one of these zones there are different norms that need to be respected, and established goals to be achieved. For example, in the zones where habitation structures are allowed, there needs to be adequate discard of trash and land tenure regularization.

Adequate discard of trash and land tenure regularization. These two are already formidable challenges, as the previous stories illustrate. Moreover, the Plan states as one of its goals the prevention of 'disaster victims'.

The associations between landslides and environmental degradation are very material. Local vegetation helps to diminish the flow of water over the terrain. By cutting down the trees of a hill, the water of the rain falls upon the earth with higher velocity and intensity. Water and earth get mixed up on a fastened pace. The roots of trees are no longer there to help the drainage of water. This accelerates the process of erosion, loosening the soil and increasing the likelihood of land movements.

But the juxtaposition between the two – environmental degradation and landslides – in public narratives, *without reference to the socio-historical processes that led to the occupation of risk areas and conservation zones*, contributes to adding another layer of criminalization to those who occupy land – for they are conceived not only as property invaders, but also as the very perpetrators of tragedies. In this context, the ruins produced by landslides and foods are a crime scene.

Environmental legislation in Petrópolis became part of the socio-material circuit of dispossession of low-income and racialized peoples. This circuit is composed of different

agents – mud, bureaucracies, prisons, rain, ruins, legal frameworks, and litter – that together compose the socio-materiality of dispossession, racism, and tragedies.

This shows that dispossession by accumulation is not restricted to what is traditionally understood as extractivism, for even in landscapes where 'nature' is protected, it unfolds. In this context, environmental protection is co-opted into the process of maintaining old inequalities, which fragilizes the promises of a renovated and 'sustainable' capitalism.

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esperança - hope

esperar - to wait

In Petrópolis, at an event that aimed to discuss issues of racism and housing in the city, one of the people present raised the question: 'how can we sustain hope for change and keep on fighting for it in such desperate times?' Her question stirred up the room for a moment, as people nodded their heads and moved in their chairs.

One of the speakers at the event responded referring to the gathering itself, in which women from different backgrounds were together to talk and try to find ways to deal with the city's housing issues. She used a neologism: *esperançar*, in which the word *esperança* (hope in Portuguese) was transformed into a verb. 'This is esperançar', she said, gesturing towards the gathering of people that surrounded her. Hope came forth as a collective practice, not as passive waiting.

.....

Me and several others wait for the beginning of the day's event at the Centre of Human Rights (CDDH): a play about Teresa de Benguela followed by a discussion about *negritude* (blackness) and art.

A theatre stage has been carefully arranged with straw mats, plants, wood boxes and clay vases. The story of Teresa de Benguela is told through an intercalation and sometimes overlapping of narration, acting and music.

The sound of drums signals the beginning of the play, and the voices fall silent. Benguela was a woman who led a *quilombo* (marron community) in Brazil during the XVIII century, she is a symbol of resistance and of *povo guerreiro* (fierce people), we are told.

As all eyes turn to the stage, the women appear from behind the audience, and singing in unison, each takes their place. Daily life in the quilombo unfolds as a heterogeneous continuity: while some cook, others wash clothes, fetch water for the quilombo, or tend the fields.

The drums quicken, and suddenly, a scream. 'They killed Piollho! They killed Piolho!', shouts a man. His voice starts loud and strong, transforming into a painful whisper when he falls upon Tereza's feet. She looks at him, and closes her eyes. Her face is solemn, as if the news did not surprise her.

Tereza is joined by the dignified company of other women, and silence.

After Piolho, her partner, is killed by 'soldiers of the state', Tereza is now the main leader of the quilombo, she is told. Her first command after the violence of murder: 'we must care for the newcomers'. Although looking ahead, her serious semblant tells that the past, and the loss, have not been forgotten.

The one who managed to escape the violence of slavery is received with singing, dressing, washing and adorning. All gather around her, and their touch feels tender, as opposed to the past brutalities made present through the sadness of their song.

Slowly, life seems to pick up its pace again. They move smoothly: farming, cooking, sewing, washing. Multiple temporalities intertwine – grief, crop cycles, household routines, and songs – each carefully sewed together to sustain life. Joy seems to find space amidst pain, and Tereza dances.

But, once more, the flow of life is halted. 'The quilombo has been invaded! The quilombo has been invaded!', shouts the man. People run chaotically, bumping into each other. Their movement is frantic, while the drums beat in the rhythmic of panic. But in no moment the violators appear.

The quilombo is emptied. There is silence again.

And then, two women arrive, sitting together. One of them braids the other's hair. 'Did you know that people used to hide food in their braids?' she tells her companion, 'like small seeds and grains'. Braid's beauty is not just for distant admiration, but also a means of sustaining life, be it through hiding food, or through the caring touch of a friend.

They are joined by others, and the play ends with one final song*: 'Eu vim da Mãe África, eu vim do quilombo, já fizeram tanto pra tombar mas eu não tombo*' (I came from Mother Africa, I came from the quilombo, they tried so hard to make me fall, but I don't). And Tereza dances.

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No meio do caminho: deslizantes águas

Ao Drummond, com licença,
pois sei das pedras
e também das águas de Gerais

Da advertência de Carlos
faço moucos meus ouvidos
e sigo com lágrimas-águas
contornando a tamanha
extensão da pedra.
E tantas são as deslizantes águas

In the Middle of the Path: Slippery Waters

To Drummond, with permission,
for I too know of the stones
and of the waters of Gerais

From Carlos's warning
I make my ears deaf
and go on with tear-waters
skirting the vast
expanse of stone.
And so many are the slippery waters

E são tantas as águas deslizantes
E deslizantes são tantas águas
E águas, as deslizantes, são tantas
que nas bordas a áspera rocha,
encontro um escorregadio
limo-caminho. Tenho passagem.
Sigo a Senhora das Águas Serenas,
a Senhora dos Prantos Profundos.
Sigo os passos, passo a passo
e fundo outro caminho.

Sigo os passos.
Passo a passo.
Sigo e passo.
As águas passam.
e as pedras ficam

And so many are the waters that slip
And slipping, so many are the waters
And waters, the slipping ones, are so many
that at the edges of the rough rock,
I find a slippery
limo-caminho. I have passage.
I follow the Lady of Serene Waters,
the Lady of Deep Sorrows.
I follow the steps, step by step
and forge another path.

I follow the steps.
Step by step.
I follow and pass.
The waters pass.
and the stones remain.

No meio do caminho: deslizantes águas, by Conceição Evaristo.

No one knows what happened to Tereza de Benguela, and her story was partly lost amidst the historical erasure of Black struggle in Brazil. What is known is that the quilombo existed for nearly 20 years, until it was invaded and destroyed.

I watched the play three times, and in all of them I was overcome by a deep sadness but also a sense of powerful liveliness. At first, I thought my feelings were due to my own emotiveness. But talking to others afterwards the plays, and paying attention to their reactions during it, it was quite visible how there was a level of shared sentiments trespassing us, although still maintaining a relative differentiation, as our feelings emerged entangled into each one's unique thread of life.

After the play was staged for the first time, there was a conversation amongst those present about blackness and art. A woman who proudly introduced herself as the mother of one of the actresses shared how she had perceived a very meaningful change in her daughter as she got involved with CDDH's project[15]. She shares how her daughter had 'suffered a prejudice'

[15] This play was produced as part of CDDH's project with local youth (*Projeto de Jovens do CDDH*).

(*sofreu um preconceito*), but she faced it with her head up (*de cabeça erguida*). Again, the group, and myself, were deeply touched by her words.

The moving beauty of Tereza's story emerges from its situatedness. The play doesn't end with the death or capturing of Tereza, but with two women braiding their hairs and sharing stories. There is an implicit but very tangible continuity that extends beyond the play, into the lives of those who watch it.

During one of the conversations after the play, the scene of hair braiding was discussed. One of the people present noted with a tone of irony that Black people's hair faced the same fate as many Blacks, for it was often 'made captive' (*encarcerado*) through tied hair styles. The act of hair braiding conveys a form of liberation, of hairs and peoples. The play tells of violence, but maintains the future as an open possibility.

Evaristo's poem might help finding the words to grasp this. It is a playful and critical reference to Drummond's well-known poem 'In the middle of the path'[16] in which the lyric subject (*eu lírico*, that is, the voice of the poem) faces a stone in their path. Although Drummond used to highlight how the poem was just about an 'insignificant rock', in opposition to more metaphorical readings of it, the expression 'a stone in the path' became vernacular in Brazil, and it is often used to refer to life's challenges and obstacles (Higa 2009: 53).

The lyrical subject in Evaristo's poem, on the other hand, is fluid, like the waters that flow over the edges of stones. She is guided by the Lady of Serene Waters, the Lady of Deep Sorrows, which are the other names of Oxum, the *orixá* of 'sweet waters' (*água doce*, such as the water of rivers, lakes and ponds), love and fertility.

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[16] In the middle of the path (*No meio do caminho*), by Carlos Drummond de Andrade (2012: 237, my translation): In the middle of the path there was a stone / there was a stone in the middle of the path / there was a stone/ in the middle of the path there was a stone / I shall never forget this event / in the life of my so weary eyes. / I shall never forget that in the middle of the path / there was a stone / there was a stone in the middle of the path / in the middle of the path there was a stone

Oxum is an orixá (a divinity in various African-American religions), known for her beauty and for her propensity for compassionate emotivity, that often leads her to tears. Tear-waters, as Evaristo says. But this is not a sign of weakness, for they are so many, that they flow over rough stones. Their force lies in their collective and insubordinate fluidity.

Tereza de Benguela's play and Evaristo's poem suggest an ordinary that is not equivalent to normalcy or harmony. There is sorrow and sadness, there are stones on the way, disruption on the flow, but the many slippery waters pass.

Neither is the passing a spontaneous movement. Its flow is movement 'sustained', as in the open letter of the Comissão de Desabrigados. The lyrical subject in the poem cultivates a purposeful indifference to the stillness of stones. She says 'from Carlos' warning, I make my ears deaf, and go on with tear-waters, skirting the vast expanse of stone'. This is an important point. It is indifference, not apathy. The vastness of the stone is rough, and it does not go by unnoticed, but it doesn't determine the path, for the waters keep flowing.

The place of loss in the play, that mimics that of a stone along the way, resonates with a how tragedies in Petrópolis are often experienced as part of recurring events, rather than anomalies. This experience is not only verbally expressed, but also materialized in contention walls, sirens, homemade pluviometres, little houses in ruins, and hearts about to come out of the chest.

Play, poem and life in Petrópolis share temporalities. Like the play, the passing of waters in the poem unfolds through generations[17], composing a flow that brings past, present and future together. This composition also emerged in the mass performed by Comissão de

[17] This sense of transgenerational movement in the poem becomes salient when this piece is situated alongside others by Evaristo, in which this theme also arises*, for example in Voices-women* (Evaristo 2017: 24, my translation): The voice of my great-grandmother / echoed as a child / in the ship's holds. / It echoed laments / of a lost childhood. / The voice of my grandmother / echoed obedience / to the white masters of everything. / The voice of my mother / echoed softly in revolt / in the back of others' kitchens / beneath the bundles / of white folks' dirty clothes / along the dusty path / toward the favela. / My voice still echoes perplexed verses / with rhymes of blood / and hunger. / The voice of my daughter / gathers all our voices / gathers in herself / the muted, silenced voices / choked in our throats.…

Desabrigados for example, in which the past of loss, the present of celebration, and the future of struggle became enmeshed in and through remembrance of the dead and collective gathering to celebrate life.

There is a form of care work that allows for the punctuated time of rain of concern – denoted in Petrolício's song-poem and in Carolina de Jesus' diaries – and the divided time of a before and an after tragedies, to transform into the 'flowingness' of the ordinary. Such ordinary, however, is far from harmonious. It is marked by tension that emerges through the turbulent engagement between humans and more-than-humans.

Such care work consists partly in crafting partial connections that might hold lives together – finding slippery limos-caminhos through the ruins. Holding lives together like the tension on the surface of water, that allows a leaf or a boat to stay afloat. It allows sustaining the present as a potentiality and the future as a possibility, without erasing the past.

AFTERLIVES



A theme that has permeated this ethnography from beginning to end has been violence, in its manifold forms: colonial erasure of indigenous lives and modes of being; slavery and exploitation of Black peoples; dispossession of 'landslide victims' and their later criminalization as 'invaders'; destruction, commodification and extraction of wildlife; dictatorial authoritarianism; and mud that sticks to some bodies more than others, trespassing lives repeatedly, and across generations.

Violence here goes beyond circumscribed events, for it *reverberates* through mud, crossing time, space and matter (Navaro *et al*. 2021, p. 10). Reverberation, as a physical phenomena, consists of travelling sound waves – vibrations that trespass different materials. Reverberation entails a heterogeneous form of continuity in time, space and matter in the form of a vibration wave.

When it comes to violence, reverberation refers to modes of destruction that complicate the dichotomies event versus structure, or normalcy and catastrophe. Reverberations of violence produce material and immaterial remnants in lives and landscapes. These remnants have afterlives, in the sense that they are not inert leftovers, frozen in past. Instead they produce lingering reverberations in the present, which are constitutive of lifeworlds (Gordillo 2014; Navaro-Yashin et al. 2021).

I engage with the concept of violence with caution. It comes way too loaded with presumptions of human agency in order to adequately grasp how mud is not just passively serving as a conduit of human-made violence, it is also shaping it. Mud constitutes a fundamental part of the socio-material circuits of destruction, dispossession and racism.

Inasmuch as mud blurs the boundaries between what is 'natural disaster' and what is human-made violence, it allows for destruction to be framed either as an inevitable consequence of climate change, either as a result of human-made environmental disruption, that is, of 'bad soil usage.'

In this context, those who have been historically casted to the margins of capitalism, and to the margins of rivers and hills, are seen as the main responsible for bad soil usage. While these are removed, either by mud or by the state, the real-estate market profits grow exponentially. And through these muddy paths, colonial violence finds ways to persist in new shapes.

Khayyat (2023: 117), discussing the long-lasting war in Lebanon, contends that destruction is often a brutal experience that people die and live with. She argues that war is not a circumscribed event of destruction, but a structure of violence that is also generative of more-than-human worlds, in the sense that, it reconfigures everyday lives, bodies and landscapes.

As opposed to potential criticisms that her views dangerously naturalize war, she argues that the political and intellectual task at hand is to apprehend and recognize that war is a process 'integral to the 'normal' workings of capitalism and the nation-state', and not anomalies to them (Khayyat 2022: 14). In this thesis, I too have attempted to understand how violence and destruction may be 'generative' of social worlds, in Khayyat's terms, and integral to broader structures and circuits of racial violence and capitalist dispossession.

Tracing the different layers of history that compose Petrópolis palimpsest, I pointed how violence may remain etched to the landscape as a ghostly presence, glimpsed in names that resist erasure, in muddy ruins being slowly covered by grass, or in mansions emerging where there were once *casinhas* (little houses). These material remnants and meaningful absences are traces of violence that, even if invisible to some, are constitutive of emerging forms of life in this context.

In Petrópolis, to become-with muddy ruins is to experience violence in a more-than-human world. In this world, rain can feel like 'bombs' falling from the sky. This comparison between rain and bombs, present in Petrolício's poem-song, touches upon the blurry boundaries

between human-made violence and 'natural disasters'. Petrolício expressed in art what I mean here by muddy reverberations of violence.

Skilled movements, knowledgeable perception of earthly textures, and fear of watery noises are born out of intimacy with muddy ruins. This intimacy constitutes a form of embodied knowledge shaped by prolonged engagement with precarious environments. The muddy ruin, as both a material site and a metaphor, demands an attentiveness to instability, decay, and the potential for sudden transformation.

Memory and forgetfulness are also shaped in place. The material remnants of slavery – such as ruins that resemble a senzala – invite remembrance of historical racial violence and attention to their reverberations across generations. Memory is not simply an abstract mental process but an embodied and spatialized practice, entangled with the textures, sounds, and atmospheres of place.

Thoughts and affects aren't detachable from places and bodies. Subjectivity is deeply entangled with the material environments in which people live (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 159), and can't be apprehended in exclusively individual terms (González Rey and Torres 2017). Shared meanings and affects emerge from witnessing destruction and living with its remnants.

Rain that feels like bombs falling from the sky, associations between the genocide in Gaza and destructive landslides, comparisons between the aftermath of *tragédias* with scenes of war: these recurring connections between landslides, floods, and war related destruction give expression to experiences of boundary fragilization that are perceived as shared across these different situations.

Destruction – whether from war or from shifting earth – renders bodies and landscapes, painfully permeable to one another. This experience may not be easily expressed in words, but is conveyed through war metaphors, bodily sensations and place-making practices.

Contention walls, signs alerting against the dangers of flood water up to a certain level, contentions bars that are daily placed on the doors of closed stores to prevent the entrance of mud tell of the pervasive tension that trespasses the city and of ongoing efforts to guard boundaries – survival relies on it.

The feeling that one's heart is about to 'come out of the chest', felt by M during rain of concern, is a stark example of how the transgression of limits can leave painful scars. Hearts wanting to escape chests, during rain that feels like bombs, express how the boundaries that circumscribe bodies and homes are both at stake.

In contexts socioenvironmental change, matters of inhabitation gain increasing attention and visibility in institutional political spaces, similarly to what other authors have discussed about war contexts (Abourahme 2025: 174). Inhabiting a place is no longer seen as a private matter. For example, when someone builds a wall that diverts the paths of water, this becomes a concern to neighbours, who gather to discuss what to do next.

On a broader scale, decisions about where and how people live are shaped by overlapping concerns with risk management and social order. Building affordable housing in Petrópolis is subject of continuous struggle. Those who already dwell in a certain area might oppose social housing projects, arguing that new structures would cause environmental damage and increase violence in the area. Those who wait for a new home, after having lost theirs to landslides, fight to find a place to live in the meantime, and often have to relocate multiple times. Government efforts to address these demands are marked by uncertainty over how and where to allocate its limited resources.

In Petrópolis' institutional public spaces, politics of inhabitation grapple with questions about who can live where and how. And the answers to them are often shaped by war metaphors, that inform how people in engagement with the state, in its multiplicity and heterogeneity, address socioenvironmental challenges.

Although these metaphors are not always explicit, they reproduce the logic that a battle is being fought against an 'external' enemy. While this can mobilize urgency, unity, and public support for certain policies, they also risk labelling some groups as part of the problem that is being fought, failing to address the structural issues at hand, such as the histories of racial violence that have shaped the local geography.

To some extent, care work and warfare become entangled, raising questions about where is the line that separates care from violence. The fight against *lama* (mud) is frequently waged at the expense, or even against, racialized and impoverished groups that, in parallel with weather seasons, are casted as either 'victims' or as 'invaders'.

This institutional approach reflects the sense of urgency that trespasses people's lives in the city, expressed in the local saying 'the summer is right there'. In this context, efforts to sidestep 'political factors' – often seen as barriers to timely interventions – may inadvertently perpetuate the very structural inequalities that make some lives more precarious than others.

Techno-scientific solutions are prioritized in detriment of measures that address racial and social inequalities more directly, not simply because of enduring faith in scientific progress, but because it promises stability and continuity amidst the city's fractured timescapes.

However, alongside the urgency coordinated by seasonal rain there are other temporalities. These are enacted through care work practices embedded in daily life, articulated to politics of inhabitation that unfold in the interstices of infrastructure: listening to the sound of water and tracing its paths on the earth, arguing about what to do about the mud that accumulates on the street, braiding hairs and weaving social ties, or organizing to turn litter into school materials for children.

In these infrastructural spatial-temporalities of care, nurturing the future as an openness is of foremost importance. Struggle for life is framed not as a circumscribed event but as something that has been trespassing generations, and will continue to go on. It is informed by

knowledges that remind there have been other 'stones' on the way – but stones stay, and waters pass.

These are forms of care work attuned to afterlives – the lingering presences of past violences *and* of liberation desires – that continue to shape the present. In this sense, care is not only about tending to immediate needs but also about sustaining possibilities for living otherwise, amid the spectres of histories that have not fully passed, and of futures that are yet to come.

Through these practices of care – institutional and infrastructural – people cultivate ways of inhabiting precarious and shifting landscapes which unfold within structures that themselves produce exclusion and harm. These are grounded efforts that frequently entail grappling with moral tensions and dilemmas, navigating and coordinating conflicting spatial-temporalities – and reveal that sustaining and nurturing life in such context entails caring for often fragile possibilities.

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