Built Heritage

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Memorial agency, heritage dissonance, and the politics of memory in the preservation of Rio de Janeiro's Valongo slave wharf

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Abstract

The article aims to understand the tensions inherent to the commemoration of a difficult and conflicted past and the conservation of dissonant heritage. It explores the politics of memory and identity, and the power struggles that underscore the heritagisation process through a study of the transformation of Rio de Janeiro's port in preparation to host the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics. The paper uses the notion of heritage dissonance to shed light upon contemporary struggles over the interpretation of the port's contested history and explores the debates that have surrounded the 'discovery' of archeological remains, which exposed a controversial past marked by collective amnesia. The paper identifies various actions, instruments, and strategies used by various actors to either support or undermine the project, from inertia and obstructionism to memorialisation and ritual agency. The analysis of these findings reveals the transformative potential of heritage, as an instrument of empowerment in the ideological battle over collective memory, and a tool of resistance against historical denial. It discusses the way debates over heritage have stimulated public debate, inflected the official historical narrative, and allowed the legacies of slavery to infiltrate collective consciousness. The paper concludes with a discussion of how heritage dissonance can engender actions leading to conflict mediation, thereby promoting reconciliation and dialogue, and, ultimately, societal change.

Keywords Industrial heritage, Slavery, Rio de Janeiro, Waterfront redevelopment, Dissonant heritage, Valongo, Porto Maravilha, Mega-events

1 Introduction

This paper investigates the complex politics of memory and identity, and the deep power struggles that underscore the heritagisation process. It uses the context of mega-events preparations as a lens to study the tensions inherent to the commemoration of a difficult and conflicted past (Logan and Reeves 2008; McDonald 2009) and the conservation of dissonant heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). With their tight deadlines and focus on the construction of a positive urban image, mega-events provide an ideal context to study urban transformations in a condensed and magnified manner (Broudehoux 2017).

The transformation of the old, industrial port of Rio de Janeiro in preparation to host the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics represents a unique case-study to examine these dynamics. The paper studies the debates that have surrounded the massive urban redevelopment project that sought to turn this post-industrial landscape into a new tourism and entertainment district, especially the 'discovery' of long-buried archeological remains, which exposed a controversial past marked by sustained collective amnesia. The paper investigates the actions, instruments and strategies used by various

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actors to either support or undermine the project, from inertia and obstructionism to memorialisation and ritual agency. It uses the notion of heritage dissonance (Kisić 2016) to shed light upon contemporary struggles over the interpretation of the port's contested history. The paper closes on a discussion of the possibilities that heritage dissonance may offer in paving the way towards truth, reconciliation, and dialogue.

This paper stems from over a decade of research in Rio's port and is based on multiple historical, journalistic, empirical, and ethnographic sources. It draws upon on-site observation, and formal and informal interviews with local actors, at the city administration and neighborhood levels. Participant observation was also carried out at the occasion of various local events, including festivals, public consultation meetings, forums, street demonstrations, informal gatherings and political protests held during the study period. Information was supplemented by a wide range of resources, including extensive press reviews, historical documents, scholarly literature, media reports, official websites, activist blogs, NGO reports and other relevant secondary sources.

2 The politics of heritage dissonance

Much more than a mere contrast between an 'objective' and a 'subjective' reading of the past, the notions of history and memory can be distinguished by uses of power and control, especially who determines which particular version of the past is officialised (Benjamin 2005; Samuel 1994). History thus consists in a consciously selective mix of remembrance and forgetting in the service of power and ideology (Sham 2015). Dominant groups in society have the monopoly to impose their own hegemonic interpretation of the past and to select which aspects are to be suppressed, ignored, and neglected, or appropriated and subsumed (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011). Far from being neutral or free of value judgements, sites of remembrance and other *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1996) are ideologically loaded, and their creation, promotion or willfully ignorance and erasure aim above all to serve power (den Boer 2010). In this context, official history, discursively constructed as apolitical and presented as an unquestionable truth, becomes a determining factor in the way different segments of the population are integrated into society and positioned within a national hierarchy. It thus deeply influences their life opportunities and political voice. Questioning dominant narratives and upholding alternative versions of the past thus become political acts of resistance carried by those who refuse subjugation, silencing and exclusion (Sham 2015).

Heritage can be understood as a social construct, a subjective interpretation of the past informed by current social, cultural, and political concerns, needs and aspirations (Smith 2006). It is both a contemporary product shaped from political negotiation of identity, place and memory, and a meaning-making process whereby the present is given form through a selective interpretation of the past. Gramsci (1971)'s work demonstrates how the production of meaning is a key instrument for the stabilisation of power relations, wherein those relations become undeniable, naturalised, and common sense.

The notion of heritage is also closely related to identity formation. Historically, a common form of oppression carried out by power holders against marginalised groups was to oppress their memories through the destruction of their material culture. For those who have been denied a voice in history, reclaiming a lost heritage can serve as a form of 'moral resistance', and is a central part of a post-trauma recovery process (Sham 2015).

Heritage is thus inherently political and is deeply embedded in power relations (Jacobs et al. 2023). Who interprets and controls the past, for which reasons, and how, determines the value and meaning attributed to specific heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). Heritage can thus serve as a powerful tool for the accumulation of power and the reproduction of injustice (Smith 2006).

By giving shape to collective memory, heritage plays an important role in identity formation (Halbwachs 1997). This signifies that heritage can simultaneously be a factor of cohesion and division (Sevcenko 2010). The formal recognition of one's heritage is understood as an assertion of its social and cultural value, giving legitimacy to particular historical and cultural narratives. Conversely, ignoring another's heritage can be seen as an expression of subalternisation, marginalisation, and control (Chilton and Silberman 2010; Smith 2006). Yet, alternative, competing and conflicting interpretations of historical and cultural narratives continually challenge and reassess dominant perceptions of heritage as harmonious and consensual, in ways that can sometimes upset power relations (Smith 2006).

Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) have labelled *dissonant heritage* instances where conflict, discord, or lack of agreement inflect the way the past is represented and interpreted. It occurs when diverse and competing meanings are attached to heritage, and when disagreement arises over whose experiences and perspectives are to be perceived as valid or not (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Smith 2006). The desire to reduce dissonance can lead both to the imposition of a consensual and naturalised interpretation of history that reflects the beliefs, values, and aspirations of those in power, and the destruction, ignorance, or invisibilisation of subaltern heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996).

Drawing upon Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), Kisić (2016) suggests the term *heritage dissonance* to acknowledge that all heritage is inherently dissonant and its meanings, contingent. Dissonance, she claims, exists as a latent quality of any heritage. It can be activated when new voices are articulated, thereby leading to disputes or conflicts. For her, the fluid boundary between latent and active dissonance opens the space for diverse empowering actions, that include negotiation, reconciliation, and dialogue (Kisić 2016). In this sense, dissonance is not negative in itself but can be seen as an opportunity for critical thinking, agentivity, and change. Acknowledging the dissonant nature of heritage allows to broaden our understanding of heritage, as a political process of mediation and regulation of identity, conflict, and power relations (Kisić 2016).

This paper seeks to demonstrate the dissonant nature of Rio de Janeiro's port revitalisation project, as a space invested with a 'contested past' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). While authorities seek to portray it as a festive culture and entertainment district, other view it as a a 'place of pain and shame' (Logan and Reeves 2008), 'capable to impose collective trauma or stigma upon a social group and to create the grounds for continuous political tensions and disputes' (Logan and Reeves 2008, 13). It can also be labeled as 'difficult heritage' (McDonald 2009), a space that recalls violence, oppression, and division, where victim communities struggle for recognition of past atrocities in the face of state denial.

3 Rio de Janeiro's port in history

Rio de Janeiro's port was developed in the early 18th century, mainly to serve the needs of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. After abolition (1888), as the sugar and coffee replaced human cargo, the port became one of the main export centers in Brazil (Honorato 2011). This area, near the city centre, was peopled by a predominantly poor, black population, employed in various port-related activities (Lima, Sene and Souza 2016). After Rio de Janeiro lost its status as Brazil's national capital with the construction of Brasilia in 1960, port activities began to decline. The advent of containerisation in the 1970s sealed the fate of the old port, as more modern installations were built further down the bay. The area's industrial infrastructure subsequently fell into relative abandonment. Its derelict shophouses and depots housed an indigent afro-descendant community, mainly engaged in the informal economic sector.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Rio de Janeiro's government made several failed attempts to turn this derelict post-industrial sector into a leisure and tourism district, with a series of revitalisation projects that never materialised. In 2009, the city's selection as host of the world's two most important sporting events over a two-year period, namely the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics, finally provided the momentum, opportunity, political will, and economic means to push forward the large-scale revitalisation of the port district (Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013). A massive project labelled Porto Maravilha, (The Wonderful Port) was soon launched, becoming the largest public-private partnership in Brazilian history. With their sense of urgency and important symbolic weight, mega-events would provide the impetus, public and private investment, and planning instruments that would allow the realisation of this controversial urban project (Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013; Broudehoux and Monteiro 2017).

In 2010, a series of important public works projects were launched, largely inspired by waterfront redevelopment projects carried out around the world, from Baltimore in the 1970s, the London Docklands in the 1980s, Barcelona's Port Vell in the 1990s, to Buenos Aires' Puerto Madero in the early 2000s. Porto Maravilha became a textbook example of culture-led redevelopment. Using both the rhetoric and instruments of neoliberal urban planning, Porto Maravilha sought to capitalise upon the creative economy and various cultural manifestations to transform the image of the sector, from a working-class, Afro-Brazilian neighborhood into a festive art and entertainment destination meant to attract international tourists and local members the creative class (Sánchez and Broudehoux 2013; Broudehoux and Monteiro 2017).

A kilometers-long elevated highway was dismantled, while car traffic was diverted underground with the construction of a major tunnel, which allowed the realisation of a pedestrianised, waterfront walkway named 'Olympic Boulevard'. Initially slated to include some official venues associated with the 2016 Summer Games, including the referees' village, the port district ended up only hosting event-sponsor kiosks and live sites for the public viewing of competitions. Giant screens, showrooms and various food trucks and concession stands were distributed around the newly remodeled Praça Mauá and Olympic Boulevard.

The project includes the creation of several major cultural attractions, large-scale projects meant to act as anchors for the revitalisation of this blighted neighborhood. These include the Rio de Janeiro Art Museum (MAR), which occupies two, remodeled vacant buildings at Praça Mauá. Nearby, on an old Pier projecting into the Guanabara Bay lies the spectacular Museum of Tomorrow, designed by world-renowned portuguese architect Santiago Calatrava. Further down along Olympic Boulevard is AquaRio, Latin America's largest aquarium (Figs. 1 and 2).

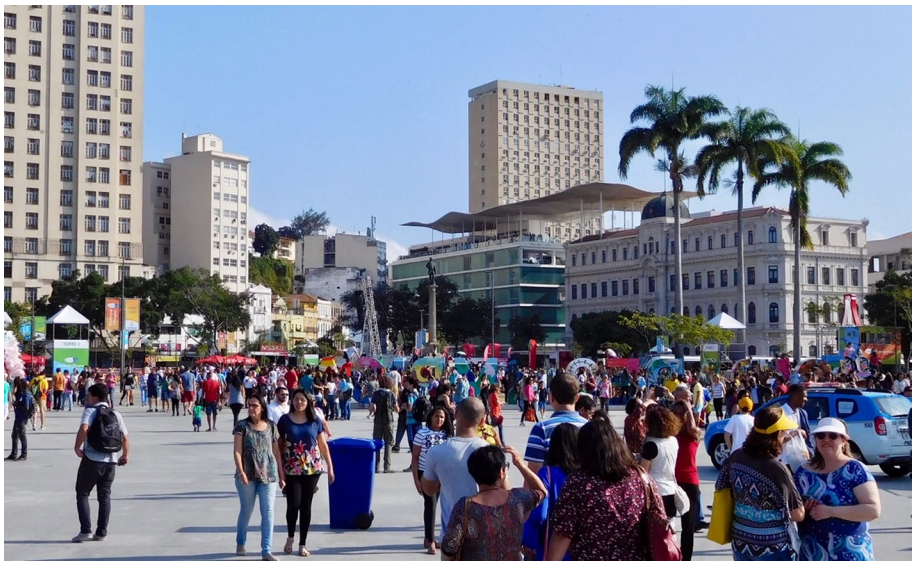

Fig. 1 MAR Museum (Museo de Arte do Rio de Janeiro), in two recycled buildings at Praça Maua, July 2016 (Source: the author)

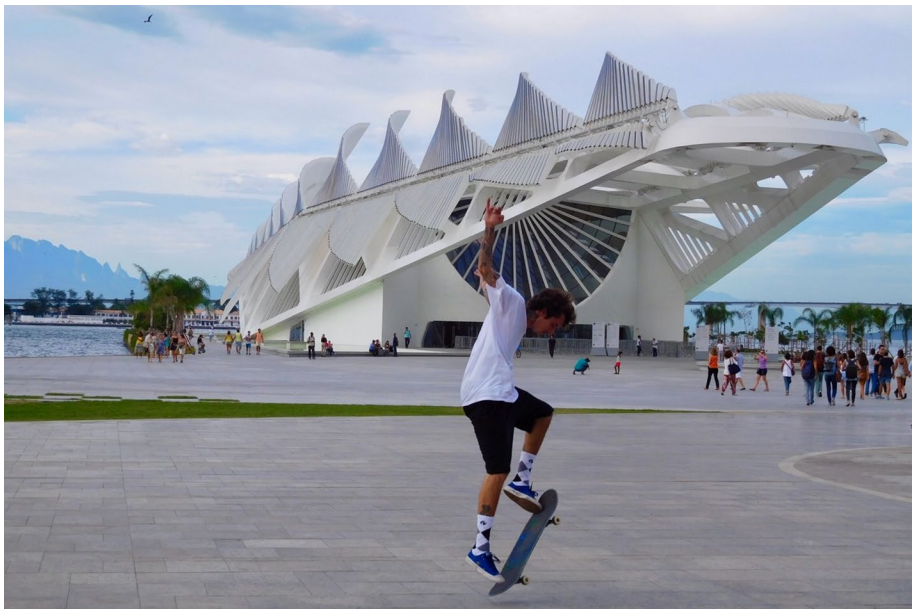

Fig. 2 Museo de Amanha (Museum of Tomorrow) on Maua Pier on Guanabara Bay, 2016 (Source: the author)

Several industrial structures were recycled. On the Guanabara bayfront, gigantic terracotta-colored warehouses were converted to serve various purposes: from an international cruise-ship terminal to multi-use spaces to hold cultural events ranging from music and film festivals to book fairs, conventions, shows, parties, and Rio's Fashion Week. Giant industrial cranes painted bright yellow punctuate the waterfront as decorative industrial relics. Along Sacadura Cabral street, 19th century storehouses were turned into hip nightclubs, shops, and restaurants. On Olympic Boulevard, the brick façades of various industrial buildings were adorned with giant murals by world-class artists. A series of newly created urban spaces offer arts and crafts stalls, gourmet food, a Ferris wheel, designer street furniture, as well as multiple selfie-opportunity displays. A brand-new light rail system (VLT) was built to connect various destinations in the port to other transportation hubs (train, metro,

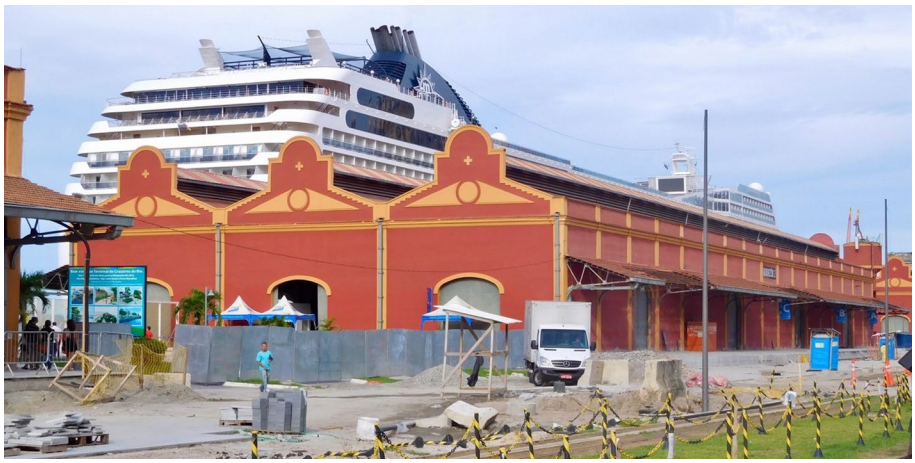

Fig. 3 Cruise-ship terminal in converted warehouse along Boulevard Olimpico, July 2016 (Source: the author)

Fig. 4 Giant red cranes along the Guanabara Bayfront at Praça Maua, July 2016 (Source: the author)

bus). Further inland, the old 1930s Bhering chocolate factory was turned into an art and design destination, with several artist studios and small businesses including antique shops, designer boutiques, foodie eateries and art galleries. At the time of writing in 2023, a 19th century flour factory was in the process of being recycled into an upscale shopping mall (Figs. 3, 4 and 5).

While several industrial buildings were the object of adaptive reuse, little efforts were made to both interpret and mediate the port's industrial past. As the Museum of Tomorrow suggests, the revitalisation project was turned more towards the future than towards the past. Overall, Porto Maravilha rested upon an instrumentalisation of the port's industrial heritage, used as a mere backdrop and industrial-chic stage-set in the creation of a commodified, upscale playground for international tourists and local elites (Broudehoux and Monteiro 2017).

However, such utilitarian recuperation of heritage was not the main source of contention regarding the area's industrial past. A much larger issue concerned sustained efforts, on the part of public and private stakeholders, to keep an essential aspect of the port's heritage both out of sight and out of mind. Namely, its status as the world's busiest industrial hub for the traffic of enslaved human beings.

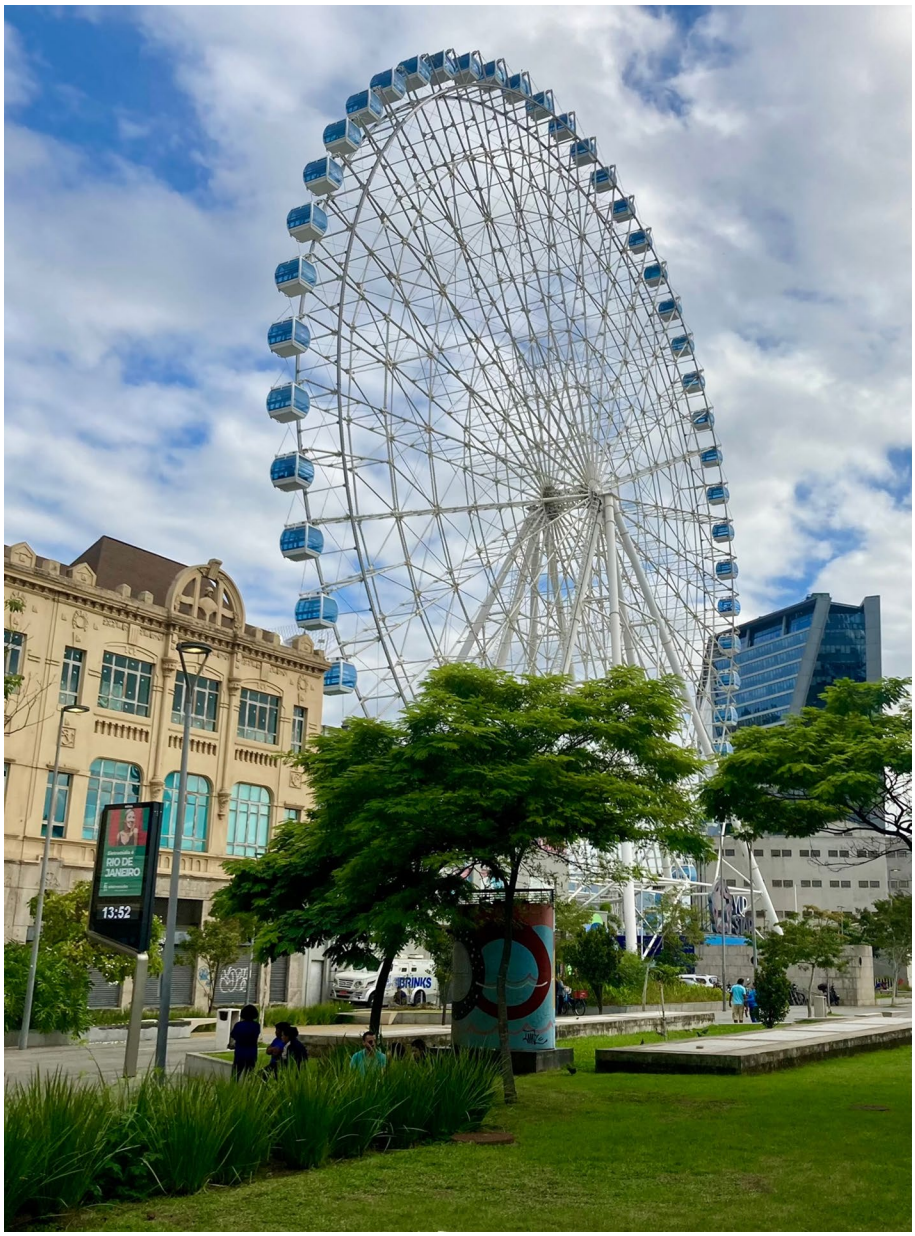

Fig. 5 Ferris Wheel in front of AquaRio aquarium, on Boulevard Olimpico, May 2023 (Source: the author)

4 The "discovery" of the Valongo wharf

In 2011, excavation work in Rio de Janeiro's old port unearthed the ruins of an ancient stone wharf. Archeologists identified it as the Valongo, known as the focal point of Rio de Janeiro's historic slave trade. During the three hundred years of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the Portuguese settlement of Brazil imported more captives from Africa than any other European colonial holding. An estimated four million enslaved Africans or almost half of all slaves shipped to the Americas were brought to Brazil (Soares 2011). More than half of those landed in Rio de Janeiro, making it the busiest slave trading complex in the Americas. Close to one million enslaved Africans are believed to have landed at the Valongo wharf alone, where they were fattened, sold, and exchanged in nearby warehouses (Santos 2015; Vassallo and Cicallo 2015; Soares 2011). The Valongo is now recognised as the landing point of the largest forced migration movement in world history (UNESCO 2017).

For centuries, the port of Rio de Janeiro's main activities centered around the slave industry. Not only was the port an important landing stage for human cargo but

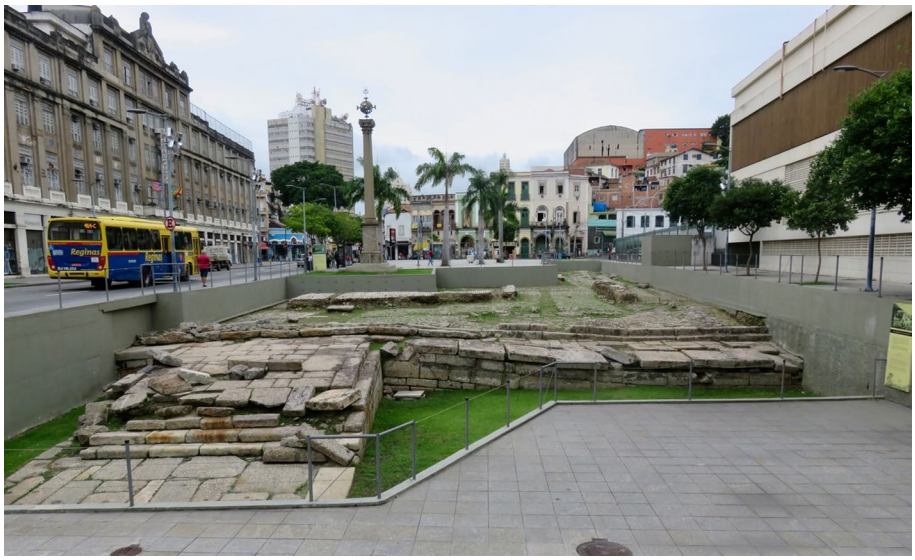

Fig. 6 Valongo Wharf, 2015 (Source: the author)

it was also an extensive export and distribution centre (Soares 2011; Lima 2020). The development of the city and the nation itself rested upon the slave-based economy, which relied upon the bodies of enslaved Africans, exchanged as commodities, as well as on their unpaid labor (Honorato 2011; Lima 2020). Much of the city's urban landscape, from territorial expansions through the flattening of hills and land reclamation, to most monuments and urban infrastructure, is the product of slave labor (Santos 2015; Vassallo and Cicallo 2015; Soares 2011). The slave industry was instrumental to the city's growth and required important infrastructures, including wharves, warehouses, and transportation hubs.

Following abolition, the ruling elite made conscious efforts to conceal the hateful trade upon which the city was founded. Several urban projects would do away with most material traces of this shameful past. After successive waves of land reclamation, the Valongo became landlocked, was paved over, and turned into a city square. Like other slavery-related sites, it was given a new name and fell into oblivion (Lima 2020). Over time, historical amnesia, and a conscious avoidance of racial issues in official discourse effectively managed to expunge most remnants of the slave industry from collective memory (Souty 2018; Broudehoux and Monteiro 2017).

5 Dissonance in interpreting the slave past

The discovery of such a rare, surviving trace and tangible proof of the slave past carried tremendous political and symbolic weight for Rio de Janeiro's afro-descendant community. Not only did it bring to light the area's long hidden and forgotten past, but it was a unique opportunity to leverage some power and have their voices heard, after decades of invisibilisation and silencing. Academics, activists, and members of the Black Movement understood the potential of this discovery to provoke tremendous changes in Brazilian society and be instrumental in the struggle for racial equality and reparation (Guran 2018). It could launch a timely national discussion about the resignification of the collective past, as a first step to satisfy the decades-long demands of the Black Movement for the Brazilian state to address the role of slavery in national development (Vassallo and Caceres 2019). Local Afro-descendants and their allies thus strove to protect the site against yet another invisibilisation endeavor, especially from being paved over for a parking lot, as was initially planned.

From onset, it would be an uphill battle to preserve the ruins and archeological findings. Archeologists had to insist that public work be stopped in order to excavate the site. They were granted a few months to carry out their searches, until part of the site was filled in and paved over. Only a portion of the wharf itself was kept visible, made accessible with a wide stone stairway, surrounded by bannisters (Fig. 6). Most efforts made to preserve the site and make it known to the world would ultimately come from the grassroots.

A civil society entity, constituted of activists, academics, and archeologists, was established to oversee the site's protection. Between 2014 and 2016, they elaborated a candidacy file and petitioned UNESCO for the Valongo's recognition as World Heritage (Candidacy file 2016; Guran 2018). The UNESCO candidacy was supported by municipal authorities, key branches of the

Black Movement, as well as various organs of the federal government[1] (Vassallo and Caceres 2019). Thanks to the converging interests from multiple levels of government and civil society organisations, the proposal was quickly assembled. The candidacy file highlighted how the highly coveted World Heritage title could stimulate a transnational dialogue about the slave trade, and help Brazil take a leading role in such debates, thereby building new relations with other world nations (IPHAN 2016).

State authorities may not have initially grasped the political charge of such a recognition, in a nation where amnesia about the slave past remained generalized. They may have seen it as an opportunity to enhance Brazil's international standing and Rio de Janeiro's tourist appeal. Porto Maravilha did endeavor to exploit the tourism potential of the port's African legacy and to capitalise upon its Afro-Brazilian heritage as a consumable and marketable product, with the creation of an African Heritage walk, identifying six sites linked to the port's Black history with summary interpretative plaques. This initiative was denounced by members of the Black Movement for its selective appropriations, historical simplifications, and blatant insensitivity, especially the euphemistical labeling of slavery-related sites as African Heritage, as if slavery had been an African cultural product.

Authorities soon realised that the port's slave past was in clear dissonance with the city's costly image-construction initiatives, the stated objectives of mega-events, and the festive, recreative and easy-go-lucky atmosphere devised for the redeveloped port. Bent on building a picture-perfect image of the city to host visitors from the world over, authorities were not keen on bringing attention to the historical atrocities upon which the nation's entire economy was built. They were unwilling to openly confront this difficult past, at the source of much of contemporary socio-spatial inequality, race-based poverty, and segregation, especially under the scrutinising eye of international journalists.

While the hosting of mega-events may be credited for the uncovering the Valongo, it would be in spite of these events that its conservation would be achieved. During the two sporting mega-events of 2014 and 2016, authorities did as little as possible to attract attention to the site and appeared steadfast in their efforts to keep it out of the public eye. While accessible to the public, the Valongo was not identified as a major attraction in the newly touristified port district. Located a few meters from the famous Kobra mural on Olympic boulevard, the ruins remained in the shadows during both events. The brand-new light rail system (VLT) installed in the port failed to name the nearby stop after the Valongo, an omission that would later be remedied[2] (Figs. 7 and 8).

6 Political debates, obstructionism and sabotage

This initial dissonance in interpreting the local, national, and global significance of the Valongo would soon be complexified. In July 2017, UNESCO officially designated the Valongo, identified as the only known physical remain of the landing of African slaves in the Americas, as part of World Heritage (UNESCO 2017). The committee recognised the Valongo as intangible heritage and used criterion vi to assess the site's outstanding universal value, thereby highlighting its importance as a sensitive site of memory, pain, and suffering (UNESCO 2017). UNESCO's intangible heritage criterion encourages the recognition of formerly marginalised forms of heritage, which include commemorative sites marked by a dramatic moment in human history, such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps, Robben Island, or the Memorial to Peace in Hiroshima (Luxen 2000; Deacon et al. 2004).

The UNESCO titling came in the midst of a conservative tsunami that would radically transform both Brazil's and Rio de Janeiro's political landscapes, in ways that deeply impacted the trajectory of the Valongo's conservation. In August 2016, Michel Temer took over the presidency after Dilma Rousseff was impeached. Two months later, Marcello Crivella, an evangelical bishop, was elected mayor of Rio de Janeiro. At the end of 2018, ultra-conservative Jair Bolsonaro was elected president. This newly aligned leadership, oblivious to the poor and hostile to Afro-Brazilian cultures, did not enthusiastically embrace this global recognition of Brazil's shameful past. All levels of government practically ignored the titling and would find multiple ways to quietly stall and derail the memorialisation project.

The UNESCO convention had identified the Valongo as a site of both national and transnational importance, that should be managed by a federal entity. However, federal authorities never truly took on this responsibility. After months of inaction, critics publicly denounced what they saw as an abdication of state responsibility, which clearly implied that the government neither valued nor prioritized the condemnation of slavery (Vassallo and Caceres 2019). The press castigated Brazil's delay in recognising the atrocities committed during the slave trade and underlined the fact that the country did not have a

[1] These include the National Bureau for the Promotion of Racial Equality (Seppir), the federal Ministry of Culture, the National Institute for Historical and Artistic Heritage (Iphan) and the Palmares Cultural Foundation (PCF) for the protection of black culture.

[2] Following public pressure, in the early 2020s, most of the port district's VLT stations were renamed to reflect the area's African heritage.

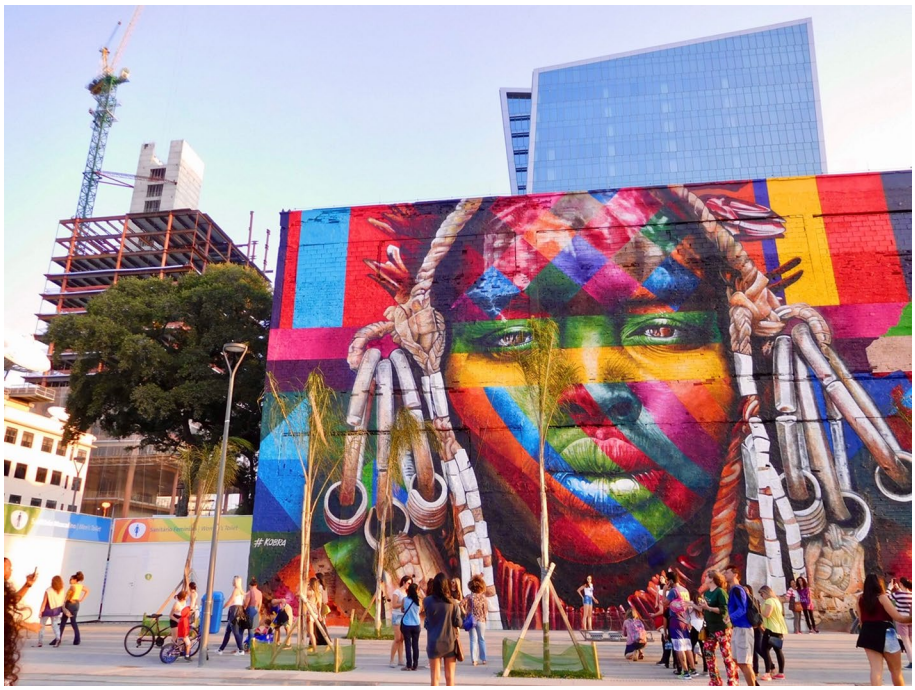

Fig. 7 Giant mural by artist Kobra along the Boulevard Olimpico, July 2016 (Source: the author)

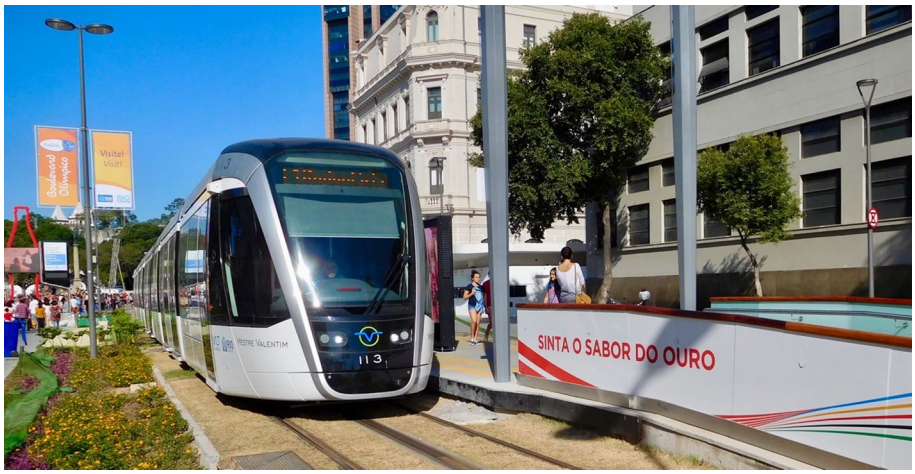

Fig. 8 Light-rail system (VLT) along Boulevard Olimpico, July 2016 (Source: the author)

single national museum dedicated to what should be considered as the nation's single most important historical fact. Under pressure, the federal government decided to unburden itself, devolving the responsibility for the protection of the Valongo to the Rio de Janeiro city government (Vassallo and Caceres 2019).

As part of the conditions for the attribution of this status, UNESCO had required the creation of a memorial to the African diaspora, near the wharf ruins, within 500 days of the Valongo's titling (thus before December 2019) (UNESCO 2017). Failing to fulfil this requirement could cost the Valongo its coveted recognition. When the Municipal Secretary of Culture of the newly elected Crivella administration was put in charge of the memorial project in 2017, she held a series of public consultations that gave rise to heated debates, which found echoes in the press and on social media.

A first point of contention concerned the main object of the future memorial and revealed competing visions of the project's dominant narrative. They opposed two

conceptualisations of Afro-Brazilian culture that had dominated internal struggles within the Black Movement throughout the 20th century: one that saw slavery as the traumatic departure point for the birth of a unique Brazilian culture; the other that celebrated African roots and heritage and their contributions to the development of the nation. Should the memorial focus on the negative legacies of the slave past in terms of inequality and prejudice or on the positive aspects of a shared African identity and culture? Many commentators insisted on the necessity that the museum be about resistance, survival, and pride, rather than trauma, pain, and suffering. Members of the candidacy team were especially vocal in pressing for a Memorial of the African diaspora, rather one devoted to slavery. They argued that to consistently tie Afro-descendants to slavery would condemn them to a perpetual stigma, from which they worked so hard to free themselves, by portraying them as victims rather than proud agents of their own liberation (Lima 2020).

Debates also surrounded the nature of the memorial itself, and whether it should serve a commemorative function or more didactic one, taking the form of a museum. The very notion of a traditional, brick-and-mortar museum was brought into question. A group of intellectuals, backed by members of the Black Movement, called for a multi-site territorial museum that would engulf the portion of the Port district known as Little Africa (C. Vainer: Museu Africa-Brasil, Termos de referencia, unpublished). This living museum would retell the history of slavery through multiple heritage sites scattered throughout the sector, where the bulk of the slave trade was conducted. It would also acknowledge the living culture of descendants of African slaves who still reside in the area, and which gave birth to many iconic practices now intrinsic to Brazilian identity, including samba, capoeira, and carnival (Honorato 2011).

On her part, the Municipal Secretary of Culture, headed by Nicelmar Nogueira, an Afro-Brazilian woman with deep roots in Black culture, favored the creation of what was tentatively called the Museum of Slavery and Freedom (*Museu da Escravidao e da Libertade* or MEL in its Portuguese acronym).[3] Nogueira sought to approach the question of slavery from the point of view of truth and reconciliation. The MEL was presented as a collective, bottom up, project, which would give visibility to the presence and participation of the city's black population, with the support of civil society.

Another widely debated question regarded the memorial's venue. The UNESCO proposal had suggested that the memorial be housed in the Docas Pedro II building, a historical warehouse adjacent to the Valongo (IPHAN 2016). Designed in 1871 by brothers André and Antonio Rebouças, Brazil's first black engineers, the warehouse was the first great civil work built in the empire without slave labor (IPHAN 2016). It appeared a natural choice for the memorial, not only because of its symbolic appeal as the embodiment of post-abolition empowerment, but also thanks to its large size, proximity to the Valongo, and the fact that it was owned by the Federal government. Negotiations towards the repossession of the Docas Pedro II warehouse from Citizen's Action (*Ação da Cidadania*), an NGO that had occupied it for over two decades, were initiated but procedures came to a halt in 2017, when the new federal government refused to expel the NGO. Nogueira, on her part, favored the José Bonifacio Cultural Center, a long-vacant, 19th century public school building located in a remote section of the port district, one kilometer from the Valongo.[4]

The most heated debates centered around the question of *who* should be in charge of protecting and memorialising the Valongo. Critics had long warned of the dangers of mandating the Brazilian state with the realisation of such a sensitive memorial, given its past record of chronic disinvestment, misrepresentation and disinterest towards Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage and institutions. In Brazil, the rare few museums that focus on the Black experience are the products of individual and community efforts and survive with or no little government support (Santos 2015).

The municipal government taking the lead on the project raised concerns, especially under the leadership of right-wing evangelical mayor Marcello Crivella, accused of deep biases against Afro-Brazilians. His tenure was marked by the gradual withdrawal of funding for programs that protected and supported the black community and coincided with a sharp rise in religious intolerance towards African-derived practices.[5] His blatant disinterest for the Valongo itself was denounced. Crivella was said to never have publicly uttered the word 'Valongo' in his years in office (Guran 2018). Neither did he attend the commemoration of the site's World Heritage designation.

[3] Many critics condemned the name MEL as a strategy to edulcorate an institution as perverse as slavery. In Portuguese, MEL (honey), refers to a sugar cane by-product that provided essential nutrients, especially carbohydrates and iron, to the enslaved workers on sugar cane farms in colonial Brazil.

[4] A provisory version of the MEL would ultimately be installed there, with great discretion, with no official launch, public announcement or press conference. A simple banner bearing the MEL's name was hung out on the gate. Due to lack of funds, artefacts, and state support, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, this provisory space would sit empty for years.

[5] According to Távora et al. (2019), in 2017–2018 there was a 56% rise in arson attacks against Afro-Brazilian religious sites in Rio de Janeiro.

Over the following years, the ruins were left in a state of abandonment, as the city failed to provide for security and maintenance. Flooding was a recurring issue, appropriation by vendors, skateboarders, night-owls, and addicts became rampant, as was the theft and sale of pieces of stones to tourists (Vassallo and Caceres 2019). Civil society representatives, members of the UNESCO proposal team and leaders of the Black Movement appealed to the Federal Minister of Culture to reverse this transfer of responsibility, claiming it downgraded a project of transnational importance to that of a localised endeavor. They condemned the premature deterioration of the ruins and the lack of respect expressed for such a sensitive site that many considered sacred.

Many questioned the real intent behind such transfer of responsibility to the municipal level. Not only was it seen as a total abrogation of democracy and blatant contempt for World Heritage, but it was also perceived as an intentional act of sabotage (Guran 2018). Upon taking office, Bolsonaro had openly stated that he would "deconstruct many things" during his presidency. Willful obstructionism around the Valongo was thus understood to be part of a deliberate, well-planned policy of dismantlement.

It soon became clear that neither local nor federal authorities intended to protect such a politically charged heritage site highlighting Brazil's role in the slave trade. Activists, intellectuals, and preservationists realised that the state's relentless attempts to stall the conservation work not only impeded the memorial's realisation but could cost the Valongo its World Heritage title. Members of civil society thus appealed to the courts. In 2018, a public civil suit was brought forth by the Public Ministry of the State Rio de Janeiro and the Federal Public Defender's office against the Federal government and its institutions, to force them to protect the Valongo. In response to the municipal government's inertia, Brazil's attorney general transferred responsibility for the site back to the Federal Ministry of Culture, who in turn devolved it to the National Heritage Institute (IPHAN). Still, nothing would be done to protect and preserve the ruins in the following years.

In October 2021, a federal judge declared that IPHAN had failed to respect its legal obligations towards the Valongo. In what was described as a landmark decision and a fundamental precedent in the public management of heritage, the Heritage Institute was ordered to create a management committee, establish a detailed work calendar, have a management plan approved. Despite the five million R$ fines faced for non-compliance; these conditions were not respected.

In May 2022, the Public Defender's Office denounced the deteriorating state of the Valongo and its protected buffer zone in these terms:

> *'The source of such abandonment is racism, in its various forms. In its environmental dimension, by failing to address the right to memory. In its social dimension, which relentlessly confines the black population in a condition of marginality, violence, and invisibility, especially in an urban sector whose economic activity thrives upon aesthetic racism. It is also racism in its cultural dimension, by going against any form of respect for Afro-Brazilian heritage.'*[6]

7 Resistance strategies and memorial agency

In the face of political disinterest and obstructionism, the Afro-descendant community and concerned sympathizers took upon themselves to protect the highly symbolic wharf. Ever since the Valongo's unearthing, a host of militants, including local residents, members of the Black Movement, as well as historians, intellectuals, artists, and other allies, have been particularly active in their attempts to legitimise Afro-Brazilians' territorial claims, choosing to give a wider political significance to their cause by linking it to a long overdue reparation process. In their discourse, they emphasise the conditions of arrival of enslaved Africans, talking about ancestrality, continuity, and longevity to establish a direct lineage with the port's contemporary Black population, and protect them from Porto Maravilha-related gentrification and evictions. They strove to inscribe slavery in official historiography and to turn Rio's port into a symbolic gateway between Africa and the New World. They also sought to reframe the port's Afro-Brazilian heritage in their own terms, using it as a political tool in their struggle.

Over the years, they devised various strategies to increase public awareness of the slave past, to attract media attention to the Valongo's fate, and to keep the ruins in the spotlight. Their main a tool of resistance against invisibilisation and silencing was hypervisibilisation and representational saturation through continuous spatial occupation of the site. The Valongo was used as a stage for various embodied practices, organised actions, and rituals, associated with African identity, many of which were historically banned, repressed, or carried out in secrecy like jongo sessions, capoeira circles, or candomblé. Expressions of such memorial agency include festive gatherings, music, poetry, gastronomy, arts, crafts or folklore, guided tours, conferences, and exhibitions, were held all year round at the Valongo to bring positive attention to their struggle (Figs. 9, 10 and 11). These demonstrations also signified the historical continuity of Black presence in the port, and the fact that such

[6] Public defender Rita Cristina de Oliveira

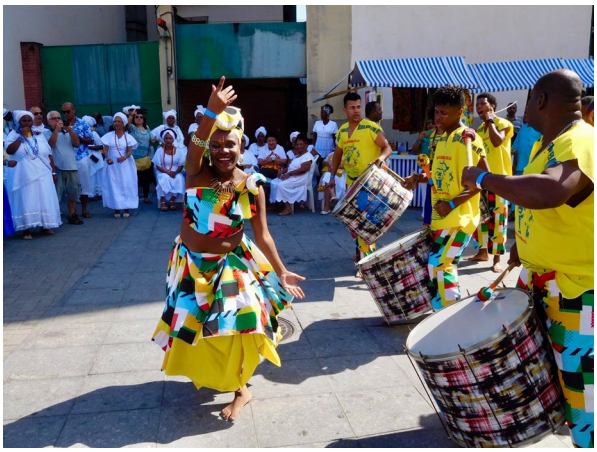

Fig. 9 Danse demonstration at the Valongo, July 2014 (Source: the author)

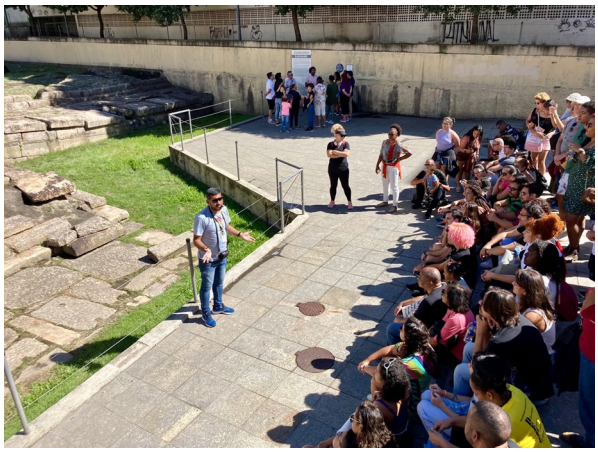

Fig. 11 Tour guide with group at the Valongo, May 2023 (Source: the author)

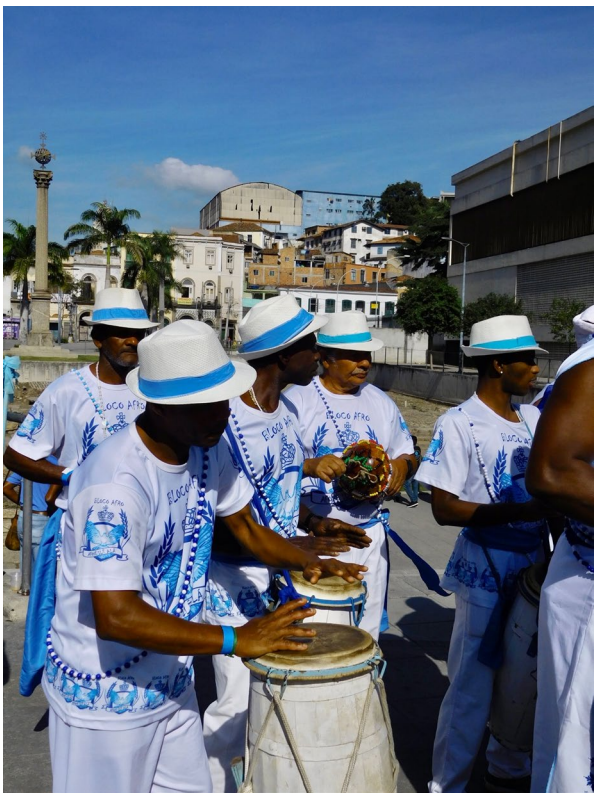

Fig. 10 Music performance by Afoxé Filhos de Gandhi at the Valongo, July 2016 (Source: the author)

practices are still part of a living culture, rather than confined to a long-forgotten past.

Afro-Brazilians and their sympathizers also embraced the notion that the production of knowledge about slavery is the best way to counter amnesia (Hourcade 2015). After years of inertia, the city's failed Museum of Slavery and Freedom (MEL) became the thriving Museum of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture (Muhcab), inaugurated in November 2021 (Miranda 2021). Complete with a research and documentation library, it displays artefacts found during the Valongo excavations and hosts conferences, debates, and various exhibitions. Nearby, the Instituto dos Pretos Novos, a small archeological research center located on the site of an old slave cemetery was recently transformed into a formal memorial museum. It exhibits the remains of some of the African captives who died upon arrival, gives free heritage tours of Little Africa, and holds events, exhibitions, and conferences. Like the Valongo, both institutions play a crucial testimonial role in the documentation of the slave past, and display rare material proofs of the historical existence of the trade.

Despite years of neglect, the Valongo came to carry enormous historical and symbolic value. For Afro-descendants, in the Americas and the world over, the exposed ruins of the slave wharf stand as an open-air memorial of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. For visitors, the simple recognition of being spatially coincident with the world's most significant slave wharf, and to stand on the very stones on which close to a million captives first stepped onto American soil, is a unique, evocative, and highly powerful experience.

The Valongo also acquired tremendous spiritual value and religious significance, thanks to a series of rituals that developed around it (Souty 2018, 2020). One key practice is the symbolic cleaning and purification of the ruins, which first appeared shortly after the Valongo's discovery in 2011. At the time, archaeologists working on the excavation site invited religious leaders from traditional African religious communities to visit the Valongo and pay tribute to the spirits of their African ancestors (Souty

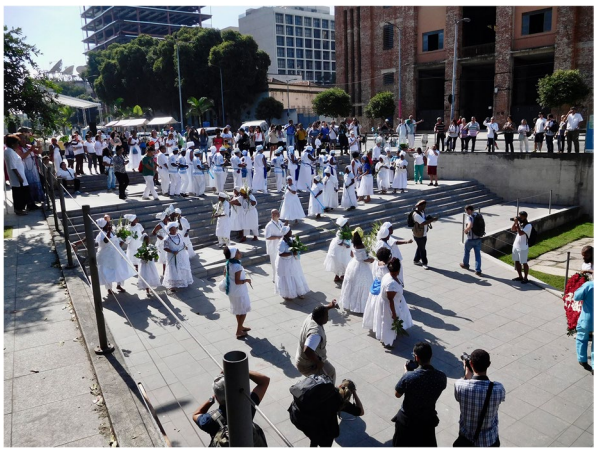

Fig. 12 Ritual Washing of the Valongo, July 2016 (Source: the author)

Fig. 13 Ritual Washing of the Valongo, July 2016 (Source: the author)

2018, 2020). Known as the Washing of the Valongo (*Lavagem do Valongo*), this ritual is now held every year on the first Sunday of July. At this occasion, members of local Afro-descendant religious communities parade around the archaeological site and surrounding square, wearing traditional white apparel and headdress. Priestesses use brooms, consecrated water, and flowers to symbolically wash the pain away from the stones and mourn the lost lives of those who forcibly landed there (Figs. 12 and 13).

This form of invented tradition, labelled 'ritual agency' by anthropologist Jerome Souty (2018), is one of the diverse forms of appropriation which have, over the years, turned the Valongo into a 'site of conscience' (Sevcenko 2010), considered by many as a Holy site. Against all odds, the Valongo Wharf has thus managed to become a unique, exceptional place, both as a tangible *lieu de mémoire* and as a sacred space of spiritual value (Souty 2020) (Fig. 14). For Sham (2015), the reclaiming of a lost heritage, in this instance through various embodied performances, is a form of 'moral resistance', a central part of a post-trauma recovery process for those who have been denied a voice in history.

8 Wind of change

In October 2022, President Jair Bolsonaro was defeated by Lula Ignacio da Silva of the Workers' Party, which brought an important reshuffling in various ministries and institutions. Under a new leadership, IPHAN announced, in February 2023, the imminent creation of the Valongo Wharf Participative Management Committee, responsible to manage and protect the site. The Institute also confirmed that the Celebration of African Heritage Reference Center and the Urban Archeology Open Laboratory would soon be created near the Valongo.

Also in February 2023, Brazil's National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES) announced its participation in financing the creation of a Memorial Museum at the Valongo. At the occasion of President Lula's recent visit to Washington DC the same month, Brazil's First Lady, along with newly nominated Minister for Racial Equality, Anielle Franco, visited the National Museum of African American Culture and History, explicitly looking for inspiration for the realisation the Valongo museum. Between March and November 2023, a series of public works entirely restored the public infrastructure surrounding the Valongo. It was also. At the occasion of her visit to Rio de Janeiro's port, Franco announced that a museum, exhibiting a selection of the 1.5 million artifacts found at the Valongo, would open in 2026. She declared: 'There will be a museum at the Valongo, but it will not be about slavery' (Santos 2023).

9 Discussion: heritage dissonance in Rio de Janeiro's port

Over the dozen years which have followed the Valongo's discovery, the patrimonialisation of the site, of Rio de Janeiro's old port, and of its Afro-Brazilian heritage has been the object of heated debates and competing interpretations, thus revealing various levels of dissonance. A first level of dissonance surrounded the interpretation of the historical role slavery played in national development and in the constitution of a collective Brazilian identity. The Valongo's discovery forced slavery to enter the political debate and greatly disrupted the official discourse that had long defined how the nation saw itself, revealing the mythological foundations, elaborated over the course of

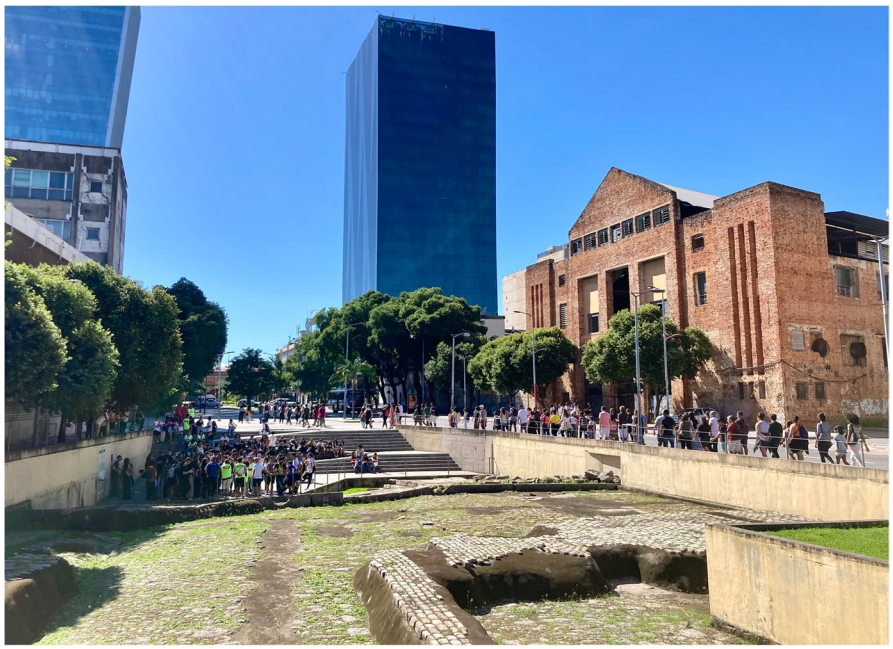

Fig. 14 Tourists at the Valongo Wharf, May 2023 (Source: the author)

centuries, upon which the image of the nation would be forged.

The unearthing of the Valongo wharf also revealed a deep dissonance in the territorial re-signification of the port, which had, up to that moment, relied upon the production of a consensual version of the past, and a naturalized interpretation of history that reflected the values and aspirations of the white elite. Despite state efforts to depoliticize the port's history through its spectacular commodification as part of Porto Maravilha, Afro-descendant communities would actively engage in its reinterpretation as the site of one of the darkest chapters of human history.

There was also vast disagreement over the valuation of the Valongo as heritage. While the international community recognised its universal significance as a tangible and intangible testimony to a global historical atrocity, local grassroots groups embraced its inestimable symbolic value, as both an ancestral and religious heritage. However, the state's refusal to view the Valongo as heritage worthy of preservation revealed its inability to acknowledge historical truth. Such dissonance would affect the formulation of the memorialisation project and its objectives, responsibility for its management, the memorial approach to be followed, as well as the location of the memorial itself.

Finally, the memorialisation of the Valongo revealed important dissonance within Afro-descendant communities, especially regarding their conceptualisation of Afro-Brazilian cultures, and their role in defining modern Brazil. There was no consensus regarding how slavery should be memorialised, whether as a dark reminder of past sufferings or as a symbol of the Black struggle for emancipation and the recognition of afro-descendants as key contributors to Brazilian society.

It is clear, however, that, as Kisić (2016) suggests, these various levels of dissonance have offered multiples opportunities for critical thinking, agentivity, and change. It is, at least in part, this dissonance, especially the obstructionism that surrounded the Valongo's World Heritage nomination, that empowered members of the local Afro-descendant community to take a more active stand in reclaiming their right to memory and representation. While some, like Kisić (2016), suggest that nominations for World Heritage may at time play a part in silencing dissonance and conflicts around particular heritage, it appears that in the case of the Valongo, it did just the opposite. The UNESCO recognition was an essential instrument of resistance, providing leverage for the Black community in challenging the state and giving legitimacy to their demands.

This dissonance became the driving force for Afro-descendants and their allies to come together and find creative ways to undermine state sabotage. They devised multiple strategies to capitalise upon the testimonial power of heritage. By keeping the memorialisation project on the agenda, these grassroots memory agents

managed to stimulate public debate, inflect the official historical narrative, and allow the legacies of slavery to infiltrate collective consciousness.

The various forms of moral resistance (Sham 2015) and memorial agency that emerged in reaction to the dissonant interpretations of the Valongo and the port's African heritage may ultimately prove to be instrumental in the healing of collective trauma (Sham 2015). Kisić sustains that heritage dissonance can engender actions leading to conflict mediation and resolution, thereby promoting reconciliation and dialogue (Kisić 2016). And, as Sevcenko (2010) suggests, heritage can be a powerful stake that mobilises people to fight for change and help heal societal wounds (Sevcenko 2010).

10 Concluding remarks

The literature on mega-events describes these events as catalysts for urban and social transformations, from civic pride, growing involvement in sport, and increased worldliness, to improved infrastructure and communications (Vainer et al. 2017; Broudehoux 2017). In some ways, Rio de Janeiro's mega-events may have, unwittingly, triggered a chain of event which could end up bringing fundamental changes to Brazilian society. Mega-events provided the impetus that allowed to unearth a long-concealed industrial past. Admittedly, mega-events' requirements for a flawless, consensual urban image played a part in the neglect suffered by this historical site and the postponement of its recognition. While mega-events did not contribute to its preservation, the unexpected discovery of the Valongo wharf, coupled with the high level of dissonance between the version of the past it revealed and the city's image construction efforts, played a central role in activating the local agency who would ultimately defend this heritage.

The Valongo saga could also herald a new era in the global memorialisation of slavery. It coincided with a moment of growing global interest about the memorialisation of past atrocities, while various countries are revisiting their own participation in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. While many "departure point" memorials exist in Africa, recent years have seen multiplication of initiatives in European countries who participated in the triangular trade, as seen in Nantes, Bordeaux, Liverpool, or Bristol among others. There are still very few memorial projects on the arrival side of the Slave Route, in the Americas and Caribbeans. Brazil now seems to be ready to take a leading role in the transnational dialogue about the slave past and its participation in this memorialisation process could even be a turning point in how heritage can serve as a tool of reconciliation and dialogue.

Today, the Valongo continues to stand as material proof Brazil's participation in the Slave Trade, and as a reminder of this industry's fundamental role in national development. It also stands as a testimony to the tremendous symbolic power of heritage. As a visible, tangible proof of the long-negated reality upon which Brazilian society was built, the Valongo became an instrument of empowerment in the ideological battle over collective memory, and a tool of resistance against historical denial. The relentlessness with which members of the white, conservative, political establishment attempted to erode the wharf's symbolic appeal, to lessen its universal relevance, and neutralise its potential to effect changes in Brazilian society demonstrates how much they feared and understood its transformative potential. Ultimately, it was their denial and the dissonance it engendered that inspired the actions that paved the way towards dialogue and mediation, and, hopefully, reconciliation, healing, and societal change. The coming years will show what role the Valongo will play in the local, national, and international stages, as a potent symbol in the international quest to memorialize the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Abbreviations

BNDES	Banco Nacional do desenvolvimento Economico e Social (Brazil's National Bank for Economic and Social Development)
IPHAN	Instituto do Patrimonio Historico e Artistico Nacional (National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute)
MAR	Museo de Arte do Rio (Rio de Janeiro's Art museum)
NGO	Non governmental organisation
R$	Reais, Brazilian currency
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VLT	Veículo Leve sobre Trilhos (Light rail)

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