

A MUSEUM IN FLAMES, AS VIEWED BY ONE OF ITS ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Aparecida Vilaça

September 4, 2018

We know we have nothing left: no walls, no rooms, no collections, not even any books since our library, the most important anthropology library in Latin America...it all burned

Like many people in Brazil, I sat for hours in front of the television Sunday night, hypnotized, watching images of the fire consuming the National Museum. Unlike most people, however, I was trying to identify, in the scenes appearing on the screen, the window of my office, hoping not to see flames shooting out. Rafael, with whom I share that room, pulled me out of my daydream: yes, it *is* burning, Aparecida! Some books, original cassette tapes (but already copied, thank goodness!) of my recordings from the Wari' Indians with whom I have worked for 30 years, computer, camera, chairs, the round table for talking with students, the walls I had painted yellow, and the little frog-musician sculptures, a memory-keepsake of my colleague and friend Gilberto Velho.

These are, I know, very small losses compared to those of colleagues who lost all their personal libraries and all their research materials. And infinitesimal when compared to the lost collections of objects, linguistic records, and other documents that researchers from all over the world had deposited there in the Museum for centuries, in confidence that they would be safe for posterity. They were not safe. And it was not because of the failures of our leaders, the series of forceful directors of our museum who constantly called on officials in state and federal agencies and were treated like children asking for a new and superfluous toy. They knew, we all knew, what was inside those walls, and the state of those walls: falling down, with termites, cracks. No one gave up trying: trying to work in the midst of dangerous conditions, trying to ask for help.

For more than half my life I went to the Museum almost daily, first as a master's student in social anthropology, then as a doctoral student and finally, with immense pride in my heart, as a professor in our Graduate Program in Social Anthropology. Ours is the oldest in Brazil, created

in 1968 at the height of the military dictatorship, by visionary teachers determined to create a space to discuss pressing issues and do science in the midst of political chaos. Before the fire, we were organizing the commemoration of our 50 years of existence, half a century in which we have remained one of the best graduate programs in anthropology in Brazil and the world. To speak of the National Museum in any academic environment opens doors and evokes immediate respect. Today this is reflected in the avalanche of messages we are receiving from colleagues all over the world, dismayed, offering help, books, classrooms.

Monday morning, standing in front of the skeleton of the palace, we still saw smoke coming out of one of the front rooms. Pieces of paper were identifiable among the ashes floating in the air. Out of safety concerns, the firefighters would not let us in. Dismayed, we speculated about whether this or that might have survived the flames. But we know that we have nothing left: no walls, no rooms, no collections, not even any books since our library, the most important anthropology library in Latin America...it all burned. We, the professors of anthropology, doctors and post-docs, top-level researchers at CNPq (Brazil's National Scientific Research foundation) and Faperj (Rio de Janeiro's State Research Foundation), with all their awards, medals and enormous international recognition...we are now a nomadic group of UFRJ employees. Yesterday, in front of the burned Museum, we gathered under a tree in the garden that still survives around the ruins, to talk, to guarantee to each other that at least we are together. And with us, there at our sides, with a spirit to give hope to any homeless, were our employees and our students and alumni.

How could one not be moved to see those young men and women, tears overflowing, hugging each other? They are determined to continue, as are we. And do not think that their conditions before the fire were the best: a good part of our students found themselves without scholarships and without any money for research as a consequence of the radical cuts imposed by the government. And research is the life-blood of our work. Anthropologists go to distant places, live with other societies and other peoples for months or years on end, and come back to tell us what they learned in their theses, articles, books. Through them we envision other ways of living, we have access to precious knowledge, ideas, techniques, languages. Other worlds, some of them about to disappear, especially now after their last records burned in those terrifying flames. A

knowledge that is lost to us, to our descendants, and to the people themselves, who visited the museum seeking to know some of the objects produced by their dead grandparents, or to know the language they no longer speak.

We are all poorer today, even the officials and politicians who have no idea of the gravity of what happened, and who go around giving interviews in which they talk about reconstruction and recovery, as if it depended only on the money that now miraculously begins to appear. If the imperial palace can, who knows, be reconstructed, what was inside it never can. No money can replace our collections, for these objects, records, documents, recordings, papers, engravings no longer exist anywhere in the world.

Looking at the skeleton of our museum, the image came to me of an immolation, of someone setting fire to their body as a protest, as a revolt against so many mistreatments and neglect. Understanding that silent, vehement message, we held our museum in our lap in the only way we could, surrounding it with a collective hug. All together--teachers, staff, and students--we managed to press through past the belligerent police who were throwing bombs and pushing people at the front entrance. Together we hugged our dead, embracing the charred remains, cherishing the corpse of our home.

To have my students by my side--strong, hand in hand, hopeful, loving--made me see a beautiful facet of the chaos that lit a spark of hope for the future. A country in ruins, corrupt, without any respect for education and culture...and here are these students showing that what they experience in their studies is crucial to their lives and they are ready to fight for it. Know, dear students, that with you I have lived some of the best moments of my life, that I have certainly learned more than I taught, and that I am ready to continue, and to hold classes outside under the trees of our garden, if need be.

Aparecida Vilaça is Professor in the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology of the National Museum of UFRJ. She is the author of *Strange Enemies: Indigenous Agency and Scenes of Encounters in Amazonia* (Duke Press, 2010) and *Praying and Preying: Christianity in Indigenous Amazonia* (UC Press 2016).

Translated by Beth A. Conklin, Vanderbilt University.

THE ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN NEXO ESSAYS ARE AUTHORED BY INDEPENDENT CONTRIBUTORS TO THE JOURNAL AND DO NOT REPRESENT THE IDEAS OR OPINIONS OF NEXO. NEXO ESSAYS IS A SPACE DEDICATED TO PROMOTING MULTI-FACETED DEBATE ON TOPICS RELEVANT TO NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC ISSUES. TO PARTICIPATE, PLEASE EMAIL ENSAIO@NEXOJORNAL.COM.BR; INCLUDE YOUR NAME, PHONE, AND EMAIL.

Link to the original article:

<https://www.nexojournal.com.br/ensaio/2018/Um-museu-em-chamas-visto-por-uma-de-suas-antrop%C3%B3logas>

© 2018 | All rights to this material are reserved to NEXO JORNAL LTDA., Pursuant to Law No. 9.610 / 98. Publication, redistribution, transmission and rewriting without prior authorization is prohibited.