Under Heavy Fire: Brazil and the Politics of Anti-Memory

Carlos Fausto

What kind of times are these when a talk about trees is almost a crime? Among other things, they are times of forgetfulness. Forgetting does not mean that reminiscences just vanish as time goes by. It is, on the contrary, a major cultural force grounded in a politics of anti-memory. One needs to forget in order to keep repeating oneself. In this article, I argue that the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro did not burn to the ground merely because of the lack of resources, but because being burned to the ground has always been a virtual feature of the existence of the museum since it was created in 1818. It burned as part of a long-term politics of anti-memory in Brazilian history.

Keywords: memory, forgetting, museums, indigenous peoples, slavery

¿Qué tiempos son estos en que una conversación sobre árboles es casi un crimen? Entre otras cosas, son tiempos de olvido. Olvidar no significa que las reminiscencias se desvanecen con el paso del tiempo. Es, por el contrario, una gran fuerza cultural basada en una política de antimemoria. Hay que olvidar para seguir repitiéndose. Este artículo sostiene que el Museo Nacional de Río de Janeiro no se quemó hasta los cimientos simplemente por la falta de recursos, sino también porque ser quemado hasta los cimientos fue una característica virtual de su existencia desde su creación en 1818. Se quemó como parte de una política a largo plazo de antimemoria en la historia de Brasil.

Palabras clave: memoria, olvido, museos, pueblos indígenas, esclavitud

> The world is weary of the past,
> Oh, might it die or rest at last.
> Percy B. Shelley, *Hellas* (1822)[1]

The Brazilian journalist Ivan Lessa once said that "every 15 years, Brazil forgets what happened in the previous 15 years." At the present juncture of Brazilian history, the aphorism sounds particularly true. Following the waves of an economic crisis, disillusionment with traditional politics, and increasing criminal violence across the country, the population elected a far-right government, whose authoritarian leanings make us all remember the dark days of military dictatorship. As Bertolt Brecht (2006 [1939]:71) asked in a moment of despair, "What kind of times are they, when a talk about trees is almost a crime?"

Among other things, these are times of forgetfulness. Building a new narrative about the past, and establishing a new cultural and political hegemony, demands the production of new affects through selective remembering and forgetting. Forgetting here does not mean that reminiscences vanish with time. On the contrary, it is a major cultural force that undergirds a politics of anti-memory. It is necessary to forget in order to once again wade into the same waters. Anti-memory is thus not the absence of memory but the selective suppression of memory. My argument in this article is that the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro did not burn to the ground because of a lack of resources, but because being burned to the ground was a virtual feature of the existence of the museum since it was created in 1818. In particular, I argue that it burned down as part of a long-term politics of anti-memory in Brazil.[2]

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Cannibal Appropriations

Founded under the name of the Royal Museum by D. João VI in 1818, four years before the independence of Brazil, it was conceived as a natural history museum meant to "propagate the knowledge and the study of Natural Sciences in the Realm of Brazil," as stated in its founding charter. The collections dating from the nineteenth century were constituted in several ways. Some were duplicates of what famous European naturalists had collected during their expeditions to Brazil; others resulted from an imperial order for the provincial governors to furnish the museum with "all natural products within their territories" (which included ethnographic artifacts); still others were bought or collected by or donated to Emperor D. Pedro I himself and later his son D. Pedro II (Castro Faria 1949:5). From the twentieth century on, many collections resulted from the work of Brazilian scientists and great figures like the German-born father of Brazilian ethnology, Curt Nimuendaju (see Oliveira, this issue).

From 1818 to 1891, the museum operated in a building in downtown Rio de Janeiro, at the Campo de Santana, and was open to visitation once a week. It would only be moved to the Imperial Palace at the Quinta da Boa Vista—occupying one of the residences of the recently expelled royal family—in 1892, three years after the Proclamation of the Republic. The Portuguese court had moved to Brazil in 1808 to escape Napoleon's clutches, and the emperor was installed in this building. The palace-to-be was originally owned by a Portuguese-Lebanese merchant named Elias Antonio Lopes, who had made a fortune trafficking people and goods. He even owned a dozen slave ships (Cunha 2018). In the next decades, the building was renovated and expanded, as were the gardens, becoming a symbol of both the Brazilian nation and the Brazilian monarchy (Dantas 2007).

During most of the nineteenth century, the Royal Museum, still housed at the Campo de Santana, suffered from a chronic lack of resources. The directors constantly complained about the precariousness of the building and the insufficient financial support they received. As Friar Custódio, director of the Royal Museum for almost 20 years, wrote to one of the imperial ministers in the 1840s, "The utility of our museum is not yet perfectly felt within the National Representation" (Castro Faria 1949:7).

The use of the expression "National Representation" here is an interesting one, especially coming from a friar within an empire. Brazil was then a bicameral parliamentary monarchy, but ever since independence in 1822, authorities had been struggling to foster the notion and sense of a single nation out of the many regional and cultural particularities.[3] For Friar Custódio, the museum could be highly useful to this end: its archaeological and ethnographic collections could represent Brazil's bygone past and point to the birth of a new nation. Unlike Peru, Colombia, or Mexico, this past was only made visible through fragile materials—feathers, wood, and pottery—and not by sturdy stone monuments. There was no precolombian indigenous state with which the new empire could identify. Tupi-Guaran indigenous people who inhabited the Atlantic coast in the sixteenth century had been classically portrayed as lacking "faith, law or king" (Gandavo 2008 [1576]:65), a fact that had a palpable impact on European political theories but made them unsuitable as building blocks for a new nation.

However, this did not prevent mid-nineteenth-century Brazilian culture from trying to root itself in sixteenth-century Tupi-Guarani culture by creating new literary and visual myths. In a somewhat bizarre way, Brazilian culture-to-be established a link with the most famous ritual practice of the sixteenth-century Tupi-Guarani: warfare cannibalism. In 1851, for example, Antonio Gonçalves Dias, a major figure of Brazilian Romanticism, published the famous poem "I-Juca-Pirama" (He Who Is Destined to Die), adapting the style of medieval chivalrous fables to the tropics. Gonçalves Dias gave voice to both the killer and the victim, who was about to be executed and eaten. Both are heroes who do not fear death; honor is their main inspiration. Gonçalves Dias also attributes piety and compassion to these figures and carefully avoids references to the anthropophagic festival, thus purifying the past that he wants to graft onto the Brazilian character.

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Cannibalism would later become central to the 1920s Modernist movement in Brazil, which would adopt it as its main metaphor as a commentary on the relationship between national and international art: let us devour the alien in order to digest it and produce a new art, an art that would be Brazilian by addition and not by subtraction (Fausto 1999). Opposing nationalism and xenophobia, the Modernist movement was "open to the other" in a cannibalistic way. In 1928, Oswald de Andrade wrote the famous "Anthropophagous Manifesto" in which he affirms, "I'm only interested in what's not mine. Man's law. Law of the anthropophagus." This very same motif would surface again in another key moment in Brazilian cultural history during the 1960s, with the Tropicalist movement.

As Carneiro da Cunha and Viveiros de Castro have argued, Tupinambá cannibalism was part of a system that gained dynamism from a principle of interminable vengeance, oriented to producing the future: "It is not of the order of social recovery and reproduction, but of creation and production: it is instituting, not instituted. . . . It is openness to the alien, the elsewhere and the beyond. . . . It is, in short, a way of manufacturing the future" (1985:206). Just like all avant-garde artistic movements of the twentieth century, the cannibal regime of historicity was futuristic: the present is conceived as a becoming and not as a reiteration of the past. It is not about tradition or patrimony but about a desirable future. So forget about the past.

Irretrievably Lost

In an article published just four days after the National Museum burned down, the French-Brazilian journalist Peter Moon (2018) makes an inventory of what was lost in the fire:

> In Physical Anthropology, the most visible loss was the skull of Luzia, "the first Brazilian," found in 1977 in a cave in Lagoa Santa, Minas Gerais state, where the woman lived 12,500 years ago. . . . It was not only Luzia's skull that was lost. There were, for example, in the human skeleton collection of the National Museum, dozens of skulls of the Botocudo indigenous group. It was this name that Portuguese settlers gave to members of a tribe of warriors who lived until the middle of the 19th century in the Doce River valley, between Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo and Bahia. The Botocudos, or "vis aimorés," as mentioned in the poem "I-Juca Pirama," of Gonçalves Dias, were dubbed with this nickname due to the great wooden discs (the *botoques*) that they inserted into their lips and ears.

The most common question journalists asked us after the fire was "What was irretrievably lost?" Superficially, this was an easy question to answer, but once we adopted a more thoughtful stance, difficulties immediately appeared. What is a thing that is irretrievably lost, and what are the consequences of such a loss? Botocudo skulls are a case in point.

The so-called Botocudo were a Ge-speaking people who inhabited the Doce River basin, between the current states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, in the nineteenth century. They were possibly descendants of the Aimoré, a non-Tupi-speaking people that lived between Minas Gerais and Bahia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were most likely the forebears of the current Krenak people, still living along the Doce River, which include Krenak (2019), one of the most distinguished Indigenous intellectuals in Brazil (see, for Instance, his most recent book, *Ideas for Postponing the End of the World*).

Because of their location—not far from the country's capital of Rio de Janeiro—the Botocudo were "visited" during the nineteenth century by a great number of naturalists and travelers of the time. To name a few: in the 1810s by Prince Maximiliano Wied-Neuwied (who took a Botocudo skull back to the Ethnological Museum of Goettingen) and the German botanist Johann Pohl (who took two living Botocudo to Vienna, where they resided for many years); in the 1820s, the French botanist August de Saint-Hilaire and the German painter Johann Rugendas; in the 1840s, the British-French naturalist Francis de Castelneau; and in the 1870s and 1880s, the Canadian geographer Charles Hartt and the German ethnographer Paul Erhenreich. All of them were very well-known

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scientists, who left us rich descriptions of the Botocudo (among many other things). Living Botocudo individuals, by the way, would also be exhibited at the Anthropological Exhibition of 1882 at the Royal Museum, causing great excitement in the city.

At the time of the 1882 exhibition, our Royal Museum, which had until then been a sort of large cabinet of curiosities, was gradually becoming a scientific institution in line with other museums in Europe. Physical anthropology, particularly phrenology, became one of the privileged branches of this new scientific enterprise. The first course in anthropology ever taught in Brazil took place in 1877 under the guidance of João Batista de Lacerda (Schwarcz 1993:72–73). According to the course description, Professor Batista de Lacerda provided a series of lectures on the anatomy and physiology of man, which he considered "the main basis of anthropology" (1877:165). Indigenous skulls had by then become a favored object of study, but they were not that easy to obtain. In Batista de Lacerda and Peixoto's words: "It is necessary to struggle against the superstitious ideas of the Indians, on one hand, and with the scruples of the missionaries, on the other, . . . in order to obtain the skull of an Indian" (1886:53). Despite these superstitions and scruples, the museum managed to constitute a "good" collection of Botocudo skulls, which permitted Lacerda to claim that they were on the same level as "the Neo-Caledonians and the Australians among the most notable races for their degree of intellectual inferiority" (71–72).

About 100 years later, as Ventura Santos and Douglas (2020) show, these same Botocudo skulls were once more called on to answer scientific questions, this time as subjects of DNA studies. The renewed interest in these skulls emerged from the work of the Brazilian geneticist Sérgio Pena, who was involved in the Human Genome Project in the 1990s and later in the Human Genome Diversity Project with Cavalli-Sforza. This latter project garnered much controversy and could not be successfully conducted in many parts of the globe, including among South American Indigenous peoples. To work around this problem, Pena started investigating urban Brazilian populations, trying to make visible the hybridity contained in the "Brazilian genome": we are all mixed, and this is what Brazilians are. However, still searching for an original *Homo brasilis* predating the mixing, Pena turned his attention to the collection of bones coming from Lagoa Santa in Minas Gerais, an archaeological site first discovered by the Dane Peter Lund in 1841. Unfortunately, Pena's team could not extract any DNA from the bones. He then turned to "our" Botocudo skulls dating from the nineteenth century. For Pena, these skulls could be as a proxy for the lost *Homo brasilis*. But why?

As Ventura Santos and Douglas (2020) write, "From a historical perspective, it is ironic that the Museu Nacional's collection of 'Botocudo' skulls has recently become so central to studies on the biological formation of the Brazilian population and its diversity, since a century ago 'the Botocudo' were routinely described as 'primitive,' 'backward,' an impediment to the country's development, and destined to vanish." To develop a new "bionarrative of the nation," Pena had to forget another bionarrative of the nation (and humanity), one based on race rather than on DNA. However, in order to choose the Botocudo as proxies for a *Homo brasilis*, he had to remember their nineteenth-century conflation with primitiveness, while at the same time forgetting to question such conflation.

It is interesting to note that this evaluation of the Botocudo as *the* primitive was in strict continuity with the sixteenth-century Tupi-Guarani view of the Aimoré and other non-Tupi-speaking peoples living near the Atlantic coast. From the perspective of the Tupi, these peoples generically called Tapuya were backward and nomadic savages. The Europeans accepted this view at face value and continued to reproduce it until very recently. This long thread of memory, crossing ethnic barriers, surfaced many times later on; for instance, in the *Handbook of South American Indians*, published in 1948, where Ge-speaking peoples, despite their incredible social complexity and sophisticated agriculture, were classified among the "Marginal tribes," the most inferior stage of civilization in the Americas.

The greatest irony of this whole story is that, as Ventura Santos and Douglas show, two of the oldest Botocudo skulls from the National

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Museum collection tested for DNA were genomically of "Polynesian origin" (Malaspinas et al. 2014). The Botocudo-Polynesian genetic identity reignited theories of a very early Polynesian sea crossing to the Americas, but as far as I am concerned, it is most probably the result of museological mislabeling. At any rate, the saga of the Botocudo skulls is exemplary in terms of a politics of anti-memory. How could twenty-first-century scientists continue to reproduce a sixteenth-century Tupi-Guarani perspective of their enemies, and further carry this bias over into a bizarre nineteenth-century conflation of Lagoa Santa archaeological remains from more than 10,000 years ago with Botocudo skulls collected 150 years ago? The past lingers in the present exactly because it is systematically forgotten and, in this way, remembered in a phantasmatic mode. So one of the things that are probably irretrievably lost are Botocudo skulls with extractable DNA.

Forgetting Slavery

In 1888, Brazil finally abolished slavery. It was the last country to do so in the Americas. Some say that Princess Isabel, daughter of Pedro II, signed the Law of Abolition at "our" palace. A year later, the Republic was proclaimed, and the royal family was expelled from Brazil. Between 1889 and 1891, the palace housed the First Constituent Assembly of the Republic, and in 1892 it eventually became the National Museum.

A new beginning needs new symbols. The recently installed Republican government launched a contest for the composition of a new anthem, which became known as the "Hymn of the Republic." The second stanza opens this way:

> We do not even believe that slaves once
> Existed in such a noble Country…
> Today the red glimmer of dawn
> Finds brothers, not hostile tyrants.
> We're all the same! To the future
> We will know, united, lead
> Our august banner, which, pure,
> Shines in triumph, the Fatherland at the altar!

The first sentence contains the adverb of time "*outrora,*" a contraction of "other" and "hour," meaning in a distant past, erstwhile, in ancient times. It is possible that José Joaquim de Medeiros e Albuquerque, who wrote the lyrics, was looking at the past from the eyes of the future: after all, a hymn is meant to last a long time. Nonetheless, I see it as part of a more general anti-memory operation. Slavery had been abolished less than two years earlier, and the hymn claimed that we (the people, the country, the nation) could not even believe that it had ever existed. Rather than a silencing of the past (Trouillot 1995), we face here a denial in the Freudian sense. It is the negation of the repressed that reveals what was repressed: "to negate something in a judgment is, at bottom, to say: 'This is something which I should prefer to repress'" (Freud 1961 [1925]:236). In the hymn, the line "We do not believe" indexes exactly that which Brazilian society cannot obliterate or change, no matter how hard it tries.

The abolitionist movement never succeeded in putting in place the necessary social reforms that should have accompanied liberation from the shackles of slavery. Two of its main leaders, Joaquim Nabuco and Andre Rebouças, had struggled to achieve a profound agrarian reform, based on the taxation of large states and the promotion of small states, for settling the freed slaves. In 1884, during his campaign for the Parliament, Nabuco proffered his famous slogan: "To finish with slavery is not enough. It is necessary to finish with slavery's product," meaning the *latifundium* (Ventura 1991:134).

As time passed, slavery became a thing of the past, but at the same time it remained strongly present in each and every social interaction in twentieth-century Brazil. The myth of Brazil as a racial democracy could only be possible if we were to simultaneously forget and remember: forget the institution of slavery and remember each person's place in society, a remembering strongly conditioned by the color of one's skin. This is how a segregated society endured for decades, espousing the creed that, unlike the United States, it was not racially biased . . . as long as the blacks knew well their place.

It was only in the last decade that affirmative action for blacks and Indigenous peoples was

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implemented in Brazil. Our Graduate Program in Social Anthropology adopted it in 2013. Today, approximately 25% of our students are black or Indigenous. Our large ethnographic collection was being re-qualified with the help of Indigenous people, for whom the well-locked wardrobes containing "our" treasures were being progressively opened (see Oliveira, this issue). This collection, mostly made of feathers, straw, and wood, is irretrievably lost. These objects could have served as a link between the past and the future, a past that still waits to be the object of memory and critical debate in Brazilian society.

Conflagrations

In the first half of the twentieth century, the National Museum achieved great respectability as a place of science, and for safeguarding the large anthropology, archaeology, botany, zoology, paleontology, and geology collections it held. Between 1938 and 1955, under the guidance of Heloísa Alberto Torres, the first woman to become director, it gained prominence in the popular imagination, taking an active role in, for instance, the creation of the Xingu National Park, the first large Indigenous territory in the country.

In 1946, it was incorporated into the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, becoming subordinated to it and progressively losing direct access to the highest levels of state administration. The last Brazilian president to visit the museum was Juscelino Kubitschek in 1958. Two years later the capital of the country was moved from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília, creating an even greater distance between the powers-that-be and our institution. The museum that was designed to solidify, as Friar Custódio once put it, the "National Representation," shrank to a city museum with an oxymoronic name: National Museum of Rio de Janeiro. As a city museum, it acquired an important local function: most public schools in Rio and its whereabouts used to bring their students to visit. For most of them, it was the only museum they had ever been to or would ever be in. Located at the Quinta da Boa Vista, the largest park in the neighborhood, the museum was also visited by lower-middle-class families during the weekends, creating a sort of intimate family memoir of visits stretching three generations.

In terms of the science it produced, the National Museum became less and less relevant. During the 1960s, it was mostly deemed outdated, given that advanced science was carried out in university labs. Indeed, the nineteenth-century model of natural science museums had already been dead for a while around the globe. In 1968, during the military dictatorship, a small group of anthropologists led by Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira founded the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at the museum. At the time, there was no place for such an entity in the museum's structure, but relying on financial support from the Ford Foundation, it eventually thrived and became the most important PhD program in anthropology in the country (and probably in Latin America). Other graduate programs in archaeology, zoology, and botany would be created at the National Museum in the years to come. In 2018, the Graduate Program in Anthropology was set to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary. But that was before the fire. On September 2 everything changed. In a couple of hours, the flames consumed the whole building.

As a student and later as a professor, I had regularly stepped into that building for the past 30 and so years. When I first arrived in 1986, the building was in an even more precarious condition than just before the fire. Over the next three decades, always confronted by the lack of money and bureaucratic impediments, a number of renovations were made—but they were clearly not enough. In a conference in 1982, the former director Luiz de Castro Faria called attention to the inherent contradiction between a historical building and modern scientific activity: "Either we destroy the palace," he said, "or we will be destroyed by it" (1993:79). The only solution, he continued, was to move out of the palace, which should become solely an exhibition space, into new and modern buildings. Two decades later this solution was on the verge of becoming reality in a project designed by the architect Glauco Campello. Unfortunately, only one of the five projected buildings was constructed. After having authorized the project, the Institute for the Artistic and Historical Patrimony retracted its decision, prohibiting the

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continuation of the project. This decision is directly implicated in the loss of the collections.

But was all this just a tragic accident? Consider that there was a series of fires:

- In 2009, the work of the pop artist Helio Oiticica was incinerated in a fire.
- In 2010, the Instituto Butantã in São Paulo caught fire, and a collection of tropical serpents with 80,000 specimens disappeared in the snap of a finger.
- In 2014, the collection of the Liceu de Artes e Ofícios, founded in 1873 in São Paulo, was reduced to ashes.
- In 2015, an eighteenth-century church in Ouro Preto, where the greatest Brazilian sculptor Aleijadinho was buried, suffered minor losses from a fire.
- In the same year, the Museu da Língua Portuguesa was burned to the ground.
- In 2016, fire consumed part of the collection of the Cinemateca Brasileira in São Paulo.
- In 2018, the National Museum burned down.

Whenever one of these fires happens, most people say something like "Brazil burns its history" and conclude that this results from neglect: "Dwindling financial support reduced our history to ashes," as Wagner Baja, then-head of the System of Museums in Brasília, put it after the fire consumed the National Museum. My point is that it is not the economy: there is more to it. It is not just that "culture or art is sadly not a governmental priority," but that there is a potent cultural force, running deep in the country, that makes us reduce history to ashes. It suffices to compare the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro with its Latin American counterparts, the Museo del Oro in Colombia, or the Museo de Antropología de la Ciudad de México.[4] Why are these museums a priority and our museums are not? If it is not the economy, then what is it? My hypothesis is that there is a deeply introjected force that makes us oblivious to the presence of the past in the present. Everything has to be new in our unending march into the future. Forget the past, forget the Indians, forget slavery, forget the dictatorship—and then repeat it all over again in new guises. But these are the very moments when we have to defend the obvious. It is time for resilience, resistance, and renewal.

So now what? The first set of questions to face is, Shall we start all over again? What is the meaning (if any) of assembling a new collection of objects and storing them in cabinets and boxes in the twenty-first century? Shall we do it all over again with the children of the twenty-third century in mind? Once we answer these questions, we will have to face contemporary issues. How do we do the collecting without repeating colonial practices? From whose perspective do we assemble a collection? How do we make a single museum out of the partnership with a multitude of actors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous? Moreover, whose cultural memory will be (re)presented in this new museum, "which can no longer be safely secured along the traditional axes of nation and race, language and national history" (Huyssen 1995:9)? And finally, shall we dispense with material objects and rely only on digital images? What is (if any) the importance of materiality?

I do not have definitive answers to these questions. I guess nobody does. The best we can do at this point is to keep brainstorming, learning from other experiences, and charging the museum with new energy.

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Data Availability Statement. All relevant data are included in this article.

Notes

1. I could not avoid choosing this verse for it contains an unexpected coincidence. Shelley wrote *Hellas* in 1821 during the Greek War of Independence and published it in 1822, the same year Brazil became independent from Portugal. The past that the world is weary of is exactly that of war.

2. I coined the expression "politics of anti-memory" as a way of simultaneously pointing to and differentiating from the much more common expression, "the politics of memory." As Rappaport put it in her book, which bears precisely this title, "History is a question of power in the present, and not of detached reflection upon the past" (1998:16). A politics

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of memory normally implies a contested past and the definition of who is entitled to speak for it in the present (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003:1). It may also refer to national or local strategies of memorialization and forgetting. Huyssen, for instance, talks both about a politics of memory, characteristic of postwar Germany, and a politics of forgetting, characteristic of Socialist regimes (2003:79). On adding the suffix "anti-" to memory, I aim at creating a certain dissonance in order to convey the image of an effort at memorialization that constantly turns into its contrary. Here, conjunctural power relations reveal themselves as part of a long cultural history, running deep into the constitution of society.

3. Although it seems obvious that, as Huyssen affirms, "re-presentation always comes after" (1995:2), in Frei Custódio's phrase it comes before, because there is no prior presentation to be re-presented. Memory is here about a presence-to-be, not one that was. It is a memory of a future still to be attained: "Giant by nature itself // You are beautiful, you are strong, impassive colossus // And your future mirrors that greatness" (Brazil's national anthem).

4. These two museums were founded much later, well into the twentieth century. Although official accounts usually establish their continuity with earlier institutions, one may ask "whether it is legitimate to insist on these connections, which tend to canonize a notion of permanence attaching to present-day museums" (Podgorny and Lopes 2016:3).

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