

Eustáquio Neves: images and memory of slavery in *Valongo: Letters to the Sea*

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the work of Eustáquio Neves on the memory of slavery in Brazil, focusing principally on his series Valongo: Letters to the Sea, inspired by the Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, considered the world's largest port of entry for enslaved Africans and recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. As well as exploring the process of producing images through the manipulation of analogical photography, the text also analyses the concept of contemporary slavery formulated by the artist.

Keywords: *Valongo: Letters to the Sea, Eustáquio Neves, Slavery, Brazil, photography.*

Introduction

Eustáquio Neves is one of the most important black Brazilian photographers, and a prizewinning artist of international recognition. In 2015, he was invited to participate in FotoRio 2015, a traditional photography festival held in the city of Rio de Janeiro, in the southeast of Brazil, since 2007. As an invited artist, Eustáquio produced artwork based on the memory of slavery in Brazil, the country with the largest population of Afro-descendants in the world. The title given to the artwork was *Valongo: Letters to the Sea*, inspired by the Valongo Wharf, the historical site of the memory of slavery in Rio de Janeiro.

Located in Rio de Janeiro's port zone, the Valongo Wharf is considered the world's largest port of entry for enslaved Africans. The slave trade lasted for approximately 350 years between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most recent studies estimate that around 11 million Africans landed in the Americas, brought on slave ships. Including those sent to Europe and Asia, the number of people taken from Africa by force rises to 12.5 million. As the largest destination for enslaved Africans, Brazil received around 45% of the total number who disembarked in the Americas, a contingent of around 5.5 million people.

The latest research by Emory University in Atlanta, USA, carried out using port records made over three and a half centuries, suggests that at least 3.5 million people passed through

Rio de Janeiro, brought from Africa enslaved by the Transatlantic trade. The number of Africans who arrived at the Valongo Wharf and the port region of the city was between 500,000 and a million, according to some estimates.

In 2011, the Valongo Wharf was accidentally rediscovered during excavations for an urban revitalization project. In 2017, the historical site received the title of World Heritage of Humanity from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The Valongo Wharf's rediscovery and its subsequent recognition as a World Heritage Site in 2017 confirm the importance of Rio de Janeiro as an international site for the memory of slavery. Since 2011, many artists, including black Brazilians, have developed research and artworks about the Valongo Wharf and its legacy. This article is about one such black artist, Eustáquio Neves, and the images that he has produced based on the memory of slavery, primarily the series *Valongo: Letters to the Sea*. According to the FotoRio 2015 catalogue:

Letters are messages, notes left for the future. Like the bottles that desperate sailors threw into the sea containing their final stories. Eustáquio's 'letters,' made from the traces of living memories, give voice to the first protagonists of this tragic legacy that created our people and country, and is, therefore, part of us all. (Guran 2015: 34).

This article analyses a self-portrait of the artist, the only one of Eustáquio's series *Valongo: Letters to the Sea*, produced for the FotoRio Festival and for the AfroBrazil Museum, located in São Paulo, where he also presented an exhibition of this series of works in 2017.¹ The first section of the article focuses on the history of the Valongo Wharf, recently rediscovered during the urban regeneration of the dock zone of Rio de Janeiro. The second section explores the artist's trajectory from when he first began to create his series on the memory of slavery and his process of producing images for the series *Valongo: Letters to the Sea*. Eustáquio's images denounce the inequality existing in Brazil, the structural racism in the country, and the 'contemporary slavery' of the black Brazilian population.

Valongo Wharf: rediscovering the memory of slavery

In Brazil, the archaeological discovery of the Valongo Wharf in 2011 definitively admitted the country in the Slave Route Project of UNESCO, which seeks to map and recognize the places of the memory of slavery throughout the world, an initiative organised by the formation of diverse national committees spread across various countries.

Valongo Wharf's application to become a World Heritage Site was launched on November 20th, 2013, the day when Black Awareness is commemorated in Brazil. On the same date, the Valongo Wharf became the first place in the world to receive a UNESCO plaque as part of the Slave Route Project, which recognizes it as a heritage site for the memory of the African forced diaspora.

The Valongo Wharf covers an area of two thousand square meters. Though unaware of its exact localization, the researchers knew of its existence, finally revealed in 2011 during the port zone reurbanization works that took over the region as part of Porto Maravilha, a regeneration project for the local area developed by the city council and begun in 2009.

The discovery, made by a team of archaeologists from the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) coordinated by Tânia de Andrade Lima, relates to the history of the slave trade in the city. Between 1790 and 1830, Rio de

Janeiro became the largest port of enslaved Africans anywhere on the planet.

The enormous contingent not only of enslaved people, but also of Africans who increasingly came ashore in Rio de Janeiro, upset the then Viceroy, the Marquis of Lavradio. What disturbed him, though, was not the 'trade in souls,' but the place where they arrived in the city, in the busy Rua Direita, today Primeiro de Março Road. In a letter he criticized "the terrible custom of the blacks, as soon as they disembark at the port, arriving from the African coast, entering the city along the main public ways, not only bearing innumerable diseases, but naked..." (cited in Pereira 2013: 221). The Marquis did not seek an end to the slave trade, he merely wanted it removed from the population's sight. For this reason, he decreed in 1774:

My decision is that when the slaves are unloaded at the customs house, they should be sent by boat to the place called Valongo, situated in a suburb of the city, separated from all contact, and that the many stores and warehouses existing there should be used to house them. (Cited in Pereira 2013: 221-222)

This region called Valongo covered the present-day districts of Saúde and Gamboa. The Marquis of Lavradio's decree was put into effect some years later, in 1811, when the Police Superintendency of the City Court of Rio de Janeiro built the Valongo Wharf. The number of enslaved Africans brought to the city by the Transatlantic slave trade further increased the size of the Valongo construction. Most of the Africans who disembarked at Rio's port came from Central Africa, principally Luanda and Benguela on the Angolan coast.

The Valongo Wharf was deactivated in 1843 to make way for the Empress Wharf, built in honour of the Princess of the Two Sicilies, Teresa Cristina of Bourbon, who had landed in Brazil to consolidate her engagement to Dom Pedro II. In 1911, as part of the urban reforms implemented by the mayor at the time, Pereira Passos, the Empress Wharf was landfilled to make way for the Praça do Comércio (Commerce Square). A century later, in 2011, Valongo resurfaced during a new urban intervention program, the construction works for the Porto Maravilha Project in the port zone. As André Cicalo observed, in this context, ...

¹The images of Eustáquio's series *Valongo: Letters to the Sea* are not titled.

...the archaeological remains of the Valongo Pier (the main slavery disembarkation point in Rio de Janeiro) emerged during Wonderful Port's excavations. These excavations, in fact, were not looking for slavery heritage but aimed to provide Gamboa with a modern sewage and water system. Once the historical importance of the discovery was ascertained by a team of archaeologists, Rio's Mayor gave an immediate order to preserve the site ... (Cicalo 2013: 173)

The appropriation of the memory of slavery and the historical and international importance of the Valongo Wharf recognized by the Rio de Janeiro city council of the time did not prevent disputes from emerging over the narratives of the place. According to one black activist interviewed by Cicalo:

In my opinion, we shouldn't permit decisions about the Valongo to be taken without fully hearing us [the black movement]. This is exactly what we must challenge. What you see here is our history; we should speak for ourselves, without being represented by others... (Quoted in Cicalo 2013: 179)

Thus, the Valongo Wharf "has started to be configured as a terrain of resistance and spatial reappropriation, which fits the broader scenario of the black struggle for inclusion in the city and the nation" (Cicalo 2013: 180). While the process of recognizing Valongo as a heritage site drew international attention to its importance, it also intensified the identity claims and negotiations surrounding the locality.

The placement of the plaque of the Slave Route Project at the Valongo Wharf in 2013 also signaled the importance of the wharf for the project. At the unveiling ceremony, the project director, Ali Moussa-Iye, declared:

For the first time anywhere in the world, the Slave Route Project is putting up a plaque recognizing a site as heritage of the memory of the African diaspora. It is a very important moment. I'm very happy and honored by the visibility and prominence that the city of Rio de Janeiro is giving to the Valongo Wharf, one of the most important places of memory of the African diaspora and the trade in enslaved Africans. Above all the plaque signifies an opening for

dialogue and comprehension of the resistance, freedom and heritage of African culture in the Americas.²

The event launching the Slave Route Project took place in 1994, in Uidá, Benin, one of the world's most important departure ports for enslaved Africans. The Portuguese arrived in the city in 1580, and began to call it Ajudá, a name by which it is still known today.

Fate determined that the coordinator of the Slave Route Project in Brazil at that time was precisely the anthropologist Milton Guran, who had been in Benin in 1994 conducting fieldwork for the research that would result in his book *Agudás: os brasileiros do Benin* (Agudás: the Brazilians of Benin). Guran is also the coordinator and creative force behind FotoRio, the event that invited Eustáquio Neves to produce his work on Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro. Two decades after his fieldwork in Uidá, the anthropologist found himself heading the project that he had seen born in Benin. This time, he was championing Valongo Wharf as a World Heritage Site.

When Eustáquio Neves disembarked in Rio de Janeiro, the Valongo Wharf had not yet been recognized as a World Heritage Site, but the process was already under way. The artist thus had the opportunity to read the bid dossier. "First, I read the application file for the Valongo World Heritage bid, which was several pages long, to learn more about the history of the place."³

The double position occupied by Milton Guran was without doubt the starting point for the invitation received by Eustáquio and the work he was commissioned to produce. As the artist pointed out:

That photo essay was commissioned in 2015 by anthropologist and photographer Milton Guran, director of FotoRio [International Photography Meeting of Rio de Janeiro], who at the time was on the technical committee for the Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site World Heritage bid.⁴

When he visited Rio de Janeiro to produce his work, the artist was able to see the

² "Cais do Valongo vira patrimônio cultural". Available in: <https://bandrs.band.com.br/noticias/10000645834/.html#>

³ Eustáquio Neves in: Orlandi, Ana Paula. In conversation with Eustáquio Neves "Letter to the Sea". Available in: <http://amlatina.contemporaryand.com/editorial/brazilian-photographer-eustaquio-neves/>

⁴ Idem.

renovations of the Rio de Janeiro waterfront, initiated by the city in 2009 in preparation for the 2016 Olympic Games. This experience provided Eustáquio with a critical view of the regeneration process.

I think there's a great contradiction. If, on the one hand, this revitalization is attracting visitors to an area that was once abandoned by public authorities, on the other, it winds up repeating past oppression. That's because the vast majority of the region's residents are ordinary, low-income people, and the local cost of living, such as the price of rent, has risen sharply since then. So, this revitalization has turned into an exclusionary process.⁵

Consequently, the artist produced images that did not seek to celebrate the Valongo Wharf as a tourist monument forming part of the regeneration project for the port zone. On the contrary, he developed a series that contained a powerful critique of the current situation lived by Afro-descendants in Brazil. A hallmark of his work ever since he began to produce artistic imagery.

Eustáquio Neves: the art and memory of slavery

Eustáquio Neves was born in 1955, in the small town of Juatuba, in the state of Minas Gerais, located in the southeast of Brazil. The area is marked by a strong African heritage, the result of the exploration of gold and diamond mining that brought thousands of enslaved Africans to the region during the eighteenth century. Deeply influenced by this legacy, Eustáquio lives and bases his studio in Diamantina, a historical mining town.

His training in chemistry and the decision to still use an analogical camera even today became two fundamental dimensions of his work. In the dark of the photo lab, the artist manipulates diverse chemical elements and uses a range of different materials to produce his images. As Kimberly Cleveland observed, Eustáquio "incorporates his knowledge of chemistry in his photographic processes. Over time, this use of chemical manipulation and other physical interferences becomes a hallmark of his work" (Cleveland 2013: 89).

The use of the analogical camera contributed decisively to Eustáquio articulating his artistic process with a reflection on memory. As the artist explained, this approach allows him to mobilize another temporality:

...the time of memory, the time to manipulate the negatives to create the image [...] In the case of *Valongo: Letters to the Sea*, this is reflected even in the cotton paper used as a backing on the images. Since the 9/11 attacks have made it difficult to bring chemical materials into several countries, including Brazil, I emulsified a fair amount of paper during a trip to the Netherlands in 2008. This paper obviously suffered the effects of time over the years, it got smudged and stained, which in the end reinforced the documentary idea of the photo essay. In addition, I'm not in a hurry in life, I think there's a time for everything, something I learned in the films of [Russian filmmaker Andrei] Tarkovsky. I can't say I'll never work with a digital camera, but I run counter to the immediacy and exaggeration.⁶

By emulsifying the cotton paper used as the support for his images, given the difficulty in transporting chemical materials between airports of various countries after the 9/11 attacks in New York, 2001, Eustáquio connected the time of memory to the wearing of the material that he brought from the Netherlands in 2008 but only used in 2015 for his work on the Valongo Wharf. He was interested in providing the images with an old document aesthetic.

In this way, the artist argues that the use of an analogical camera enables a relationship with time that avoids the immediateness of the image produced with digital equipment. Manipulation in the laboratory and his alchemic approach consolidate this process marked by another relation to temporality.

In this sense, given the difficulty of representing the memory of slavery through images produced in the contemporary world, Eustáquio's photographs are not concerned with representing the historical and tragic past. They do not seek references that can be directly related to the legacy of slavery, as objects of material culture or historical sites, approaching them from a documentary perspective. For this reason, although it did not happen in a

⁵ Idem.

⁶ Idem.

premeditated form, the images from the series *Valongo: Letters to the Sea* were not produced at the Valongo Wharf. As he told me in an interview conducted for this article:

I went to spend a week in Rio, interviewing people, walking around to get a feeling of what the region known as Valongo was really like. I didn't take any photos there, I just talked to people, despite having taken a film camera, a video camera, I didn't photograph anything. I came back to develop this work here, in my studio, based on some archives that I had. I work a lot through the use of archives. I just needed to understand what Valongo actually was, what happened there, for me to be able to develop this idea. That's what happened, when I returned home in the plane, I already knew what I wanted to do. I arrived here and already thought of some archives. Because I understood that in speaking of Valongo, in speaking of this memory, it was a work in which I would be speaking too of death [...] because many of the enslaved people who disembarked there arrived dead, the port zone became a mass grave, an open air cemetery. It was from this idea that I worked on the *Letters to the Sea*. Thinking of this place with its burden of suffering, but thinking this idea and distributing this thought came from the earlier practice of placing messages in bottles and releasing them in the sea for others to find. So my message is called letters to the sea for this reason. It's a message to the present, so that people do not forget this history, because this history is still perpetuated in memory.⁷

When I asked why he preferred not to produce images in the Valongo Wharf and the port region, the artist replied:

It's not a question of preference. I took all my equipment, but when I arrived there, I didn't feel the need. As I talked to people, I began to have ideas. I realized that the ideas I had didn't involve taking photos of people. I don't believe much in the cliché of the traditional photographer who walks around with a camera, afraid to lose an image that he or she is observing. I don't

lose images, I recreate them. It doesn't enter my head something like: "I lost that scene, if only I had my camera..." I don't think like that, I think that the scene in question was so striking... I'll make something thinking about that scenes I saw.⁸

The artist's detachment, his disinterest in apprehending the visible, and his aim of producing photographs through his imagination, recreating images that do not represent what was before his eyes, is the key to understanding Eustáquio Neves's series on the memory of slavery.

The intervention in images through chemical processes is another fundamental dimension in his production, since in this way it becomes clear that he has no intention to reproduce a document or seek a representation that can account for this past. After all, memory, as we know, is not history. It is not based on historical documents: on the contrary, it is a manifestation of the present, which actualizes narratives about the past through a selection of remembrances. (Halbwachs 1925; Nora 1984; Ricœur 2000)

Indeed, the idea of a memory of slavery that is actualized in the present through a selection of images and a contemporary critique of structural racism, the inequality imposed on the Afro-descendant population and the capitalist exploitation of the black body, was already present in his works on the theme made prior to the series on the Valongo Wharf.

In his first series on the memory of slavery, entitled *Other Slave Ships*, produced between 1999 and 2000, Eustáquio associates the black body transported and exploited in the slavery era with the contemporary mechanisms linked to a reality similar to the one lived by enslaved Africans in the past.⁹ Setting out from his critical and aesthetic view of this reality, he establishes the concept of contemporary slavery. As Cleveland explains:

Many contemporary Afro-Brazilians are either often forced to travel daily on overcrowded buses and trains for work, or are incarcerated in overfilled jails. Neves linked these incompatible and sometimes

⁷ Eustáquio Neves in: Castro, Maurício Barros de. Interview with Eustáquio Neves, 10/11/2019. Translation by David Rodgers.

⁸ Idem.

⁹ The second series on the memory of the slavery produced by Eustáquio is called *Mask of Punishment*. On this series, see Cleveland (2013). The third series is *Valongo: Letters to the sea*.

unsanitary places – such as public prisons, hospitals, and urban trains – to contemporary ‘slave ships.’ (Cleveland 2013: 94)

For this reason, the Portuguese word *carregado*, or ‘loaded,’ is repeated on several photographs in the photographic essay *Valongo: Letters to Sea*. According to the artist

... to show that those people, kidnapped in Africa and brought to Brazil against their will to work as slaves, were treated like cargo, like objects. But I also wanted to talk about contemporary slave ships, like suburban trains crowded with poor people, mostly black, who work in the city center, live on the outskirts of big cities, and spend three or four hours a day or more inside public transport.¹⁰

The word ‘loaded’ emerged from a photo taken by Eustáquio of a train carriage, again to recall how black enslaved bodies were treated as a cargo by the slave trade. In one of the most emblematic images from the series, it appears on a portrait of Neves, age 17, taken from an ID card:

When I returned to Diamantina, where I live, after digesting all that information, I decided to work with portraits of friends that I had taken in the past and even a self-portrait, actually an appropriation of a photo of me, taken at the age of seventeen, from an ID card. That’s because, in my view, the history of Valongo is part of the history of all people of African descent in Brazil.¹¹

In the image containing his photo at the age of 17, the word *carregado* (loaded) covers the eyes of the artist like a black stripe. In this way, Eustáquio recuperates the practice of Brazil’s sensationalist newspapers, which use this resource to partially cover the faces of young offenders, either imprisoned or dead, the vast majority of them black youths, which they regularly emblazon on their front pages and crime reports. As in all the other images from the series, the artist’s portrait is framed by photos of tombstones from the baroque churches of Diamantina, which are also all numbered,

explaining why the number 33 appears above his face. Below it, we can read ‘Lote 770088,’ again a reference to the idea of the black body as merchandise, another ‘lot’ to be ‘loaded.’ Another number that renders invisible the identity of subalternized subjects submitted in the past to transatlantic enslavement and in the present to ‘contemporary slavery.’ Next to the word ‘loaded’ and at the top of the image, the artist has printed two stamps evoking the rubber stamps, which, in his words, aesthetically evoke “a time, a practice, letters, documents” that legitimized and authorized the slave trade through the bureaucratic apparatus of slavery. Images once more recreated by the artist. As Eustáquio revealed: “these stamps are the lid of a salt pot, because there’s also a kitchen in my studio. Because my work is very organic, whatever is around me becomes an instrument for creation.”¹²



Fig. 1: Eustáquio Neves, *Valongo: Letters to the Sea*, 2015–2017

¹⁰ Eustáquio Neves in: Orlandi, Ana Paula. *In conversation with Eustáquio Neves “Letter to the Sea”*. Available in: <http://amlatina.contemporaryand.com/editorial/brazilian-photographer-eustaquio-neves/>

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Eustáquio Neves in: Castro, Maurício Barros de. Interview with Eustáquio Neves, 10/11/2019.

Conclusions

Today, Eustáquio Neves works with a limit of 20 images per series and three artist's proofs. In the case of the series *Valongo: Letters to the Sea*, he produced 12 images; three images are located in the United States, in private collections, one was donated to Fotofest, an education program for young people on low income, another was donated to the Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR) and forms part of the Rio dos Navegantes exhibition, and the rest are found at the Museu AfroBrasil, in São Paulo.

In terms of his fieldwork methodology at the Valongo Wharf, Eustáquio adopts something similar to an anthropological approach called 'participant observation.' As he explained:

I don't ask questions linked to what I'm doing there. They're conversations in which I try to get a feeling of how people live in the place, what they think, what they do, rather than saying that I'm doing research work, that I'd like them to answer questions about such and such. I prefer to feel the 'vibe' of these people, how they live. For example, I'll go into a store that repairs instruments and the guy tells me some stories, plays some music. That way, I can understand what that place is.¹³

Obviously, this does not mean that Eustáquio read or was inspired by ethnographic treatises. The artist also follows his intuition, or his own 'vibe,' when he enters the 'field.' Likewise, his work with private archives does not follow the methodological procedures of historiography. It is in the dark room, devoted to the procedures of analogical photography, mixed with his knowledge of chemistry, that the image emerges, even though this production of images is strongly connected to concepts pre-established by the artist, such as 'contemporary slavery.'

Thus, the artist also reaches some sociocultural conclusions through the images he produces and the concepts he formulates. For Eustáquio, the perception remains that his works are dedicated to a black population in Brazil that persists in a continual state of resistance, as occurs in the port zone of Rio, the region of the Valongo Wharf:

People are occupying these places still because they are resistant, despite this violent legacy of slavery, we have survived that fact, some with much joy, others with some melancholy, like in a bar where I met a guy who drinks away his pain. People who are there doing their job with dignity, raising a family, are less marked by this type of suffering. They're people who are getting on with life.¹⁴

For this reason, although he does not allow the violent memory of slavery to be forgotten, Eustáquio does not seek to recuperate this memory through images of pain. He prefers to recreate images that refer to overcoming and the struggle of black people, in a form irremediably critical of structural racism and the social inequality imposed on the Afro-descendant population in Brazil yesterday and today. It is the unavoidable legacy of the African heritage in the country and "the examples of resistance," as in his own life trajectory – a self-taught black photographer recognized internationally as an award-winning and established artist – which he projects into the future for new generations, like letters to the sea, but this time written not by the desperate, but by the winner.

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ Idem.

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