

“Faço tábula da fábula rasa”. Decolonial rewriting of Brazil in Paulo Leminski’s *Catatau*

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Quando formos embora, o câncer de Brasília engolirá tudo
ou o núcleo de ordem da geometria dessas jaulas prevalecerá aqui?

Verzuymt Brasilien [...]¹

Paulo Leminski
Catatau/um romance-ideia

Paulo Leminski’s magnum opus *Catatau*, first published in 1975, presents itself as “an idea-novel”² about the Dutch colonization of Brazil in the mid-17th century. As a particular form of “historiographic metafiction” (HUTCHEON, 1989), the novel seems less concerned with the factual colonial history than with the epistemic dimensions of the colonial discourse on Brazil.³ *Catatau* is substantially based on intertextual references, especially to European authors whose texts are subjected to a decolonial “re-escritura”: a resignifying writing back in the sense of an “escritura sobre outra escritura” as Silviano Santiago (1978, p. 23, italics in the original) has put it (without referring to *Catatau*). In the reading proposed here, Leminski’s *romance-ideia* is understood as a decolonial “instrument of thought”⁴ (DAS, 1993, p. 410) based on particular performative aesthetics and intertextual

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¹ According to a footnote in the second and final edition of *Catatau*, the phrase means “‘Brasil perdido’, em holandês seiscentista” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 25).

² The term “romance-ideia” is the subtitle of the modified final version of *Catatau*, first released in 1989. This article refers to the final version, which appeared shortly after Leminski’s death, but was designed and authorized by the author. The first edition, published in 1975, contains far fewer paratexts. Genre designation, explanatory footnotes and epilogues were added in the 1989 edition (cited here in a reprint from 2011).

³ For a reading of *Catatau* as a historical novel, cf. ESTEVES, 2010, p. 124-137. For a comprehensive study of subject constructions in *Catatau*, cf. ABRÃO, 2019.

⁴ Veena Das critically observes that non-European cultures gained legitimacy “only as objects of thought — never as instruments of thought” (DAS, 1993, p. 410). Even though Das wrote this in the early 1990s, this tendency has only been partially overcome, despite the advances in postcolonial discourse (for the case of Brazil, cf. MELO, 2020). All translations are by the author of this article, unless otherwise indicated.

appropriations that undermine Eurocentric epistemes, or “epistemologias dominantes” (SANTOS, 2019, p. 19) in the discourse on Brazil.

A few words about the author of *Catatau*: Paulo Leminski (1944-1989), born in Curitiba, is one of the most dazzling figures of Brazilian literature. A poet and novelist, he also wrote essays and biographies, besides acting as a judoka, musician, and presenter of a subcultural television program. Leminski’s experimental prose is situated in a double field of tension: on the one hand, between the scholarly literature of a *poeta doctus* and the use of colloquial language, including obscenities and puns, and on the other hand, between neo-Baroque abundance and the reduction of the written language to its materiality in the vein of concrete poetry. In *Catatau*, these different dimensions are laid out in a particularly complex form and serve above all to critically reflect on the “Brasis”, as Darcy Ribeiro (1995, p. 269) termed the heterogeneous Brazil in the plural.

Brazilian colonial history as ‘*tábula da fábula rasa*’

The plot of *Catatau* is simple: René Descartes is waiting under a tree in the botanical garden of Vrijburg in Dutch-Brazil for Krzysztof Arciszewski, who finally — at the end of the book, after nearly two hundred pages — appears in the distance and drunkenly staggers toward the philosopher.⁵ While the *histoire* is limited to mere waiting, the *discourse* is of almost excessive opulence, as will be explained in more detail later. A cryptic phrase from the meandering stream of consciousness produced by the protagonist René Descartes seems emblematic of *Catatau*’s action: “faço *tábula da fábula rasa*” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 93). This phrase implies a meta-commentary on the radical reduction of the plot and epitomizes the novel’s decolonial impetus. Characteristically for *Catatau*, what comes into play here is a procedure of resignification applied to idioms, proverbs, and quotations. The sentence in question is a play on words that crosses the terms *tábula rasa* and *fábula*. This permutation suggests that Descartes transforms the *fábula rasa* (flat narrative) into a *tábula*, which might mean any number of things in Latin: an arithmetic or writing tablet, a table of laws, a painting, a map, a deed, a register, a list, a protocol, and an account book.

The seemingly frivolous phrase “faço *tábula da fábula rasa*” is thus highly ambiguous. In other words, the narrative is ironically presented as flat, while it is highly complex and overdetermined. This field of tension between a supposed narrative shallowness and an abyss of meaning is characteristic of *Catatau*. The novel repeatedly reduces language to the materiality of letters, i.e., to purely visual and tonal dimensions swelling up to a white noise beyond all semantics. But then again, this noise is transformed into a veritable maelstrom of meaning

⁵ Here and in the following, Descartes refers to the novel’s protagonist and not to the historical figure, unless stated differently. The character Arciszewski also is a historical person: he served as vice-governor and admiral of Dutch-Brazil from 1637 onwards. In contrast, the historical René Descartes never left Europe during his lifetime.

through the accumulation of highly polysemic words, neologisms, onomatopoeia, multilingual passages, and complex compounds that form an almost impenetrable web of significations.

The particular use of language in *Catatau* is by no means an aesthetic play of signs. Rather, it forms part of a decolonial strategy of representation, whose significance becomes evident against the background of Brazil's colonial history. As mentioned, *Catatau* is set in Nieuw Holland or Dutch Brazil, a short-lived Dutch colony that was wrested from the Portuguese colonizers and existed between 1630 and 1654. In Leminski's book, Descartes appears in the botanical-zoological garden belonging to Johann Moritz, Prince of Nassau-Siegen. From 1636 to 1644, Moritz was governor-general for the estates of the Dutch West India Trading Company in Nieuw Holland, where he founded Mauritsstad — today's Recife — had fortifications built, promoted the cultivation of sugar cane based on slave exploitation, and attracted European immigrants. He brought a whole armada of scientists and artists to the Dutch colony, including the cartographer, botanist, and astronomer Georg Marcgrave, the physician Willem Piso, the painter and architect Pieter Post, and the artists Albert Eckhout and Frans Pos. They depicted the natural environment and the indigenous population of the colony. In short, these scientists and artists generated knowledge of the country and its inhabitants in the service of the Dutch colonial power.

Against this background, the phrase “faço tábula da fábula rasa” acquires a critical thrust. It implies a decolonial rewriting of the aforementioned practices of exploration and exploitation, based on cultural techniques such as recording and surveying, cartography, and categorization, all of which are conceptually connected to the word *tábula*. Leminski's *romance-ideia* undermines this taxonomic knowledge production. It confronts the reader with textual abysses full of semantic opacity and extreme ambiguity, frequently including appropriations of pre-texts, especially those that refer to the colonization of Brazil. *Catatau*'s approach of decolonial rewriting, epitomized in the phrase “faço tábula da fábula rasa” does not only imply resignifications of the colonial discourse on Brazil, but also of epistemic structures inherent to the respective forms of representation.

Decolonial textuality: between “O mundo, Xxxxxxx” and “Occam (Ogum, Oxum, Egum, Ogan)”

While a “hegemonic epistemology with emphasis on denotation and truth” prevails in the colonial discourse, to which *Catatau* refers critically in various forms, Leminski's *romance-ideia* is characterized by the creation and complex orchestration of “subaltern epistemologies with emphasis on performance and transformation” (MIGNOLO, 2000, p. 26). A number of pre-texts in *Catatau* — such as the *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae* (PISO and MARCGRAVE, 1648), to be discussed in more detail later — were created in the context of colonial expansion, serving to the descriptive and taxonomic registration of Brazil. The *romance-ideia* undermines such

functional usage of writing by rendering language extremely poetic and performative. This results in a particular indetermination and interpretative openness already manifest in the programmatic book title.

The word *catatau*, presumably of onomatopoeic origin, immediately captivates by its sonority. It should be noted that the tonal – and visual – dimensions of language often come to the fore in *Catatau*, particularly with the effect of destabilizing the semantic functionality of sign systems in colonial discourse on Brazil. This can be exemplified by the following passage towards the end of the novel: “O mundo de Xxstychsky. O mundo de Xxxxxxx. O mundo de Xxxxxxx. O mundo de Xxxxxxx. Xxxxxxx. Xxxxxxx. Xxxxxxx. Xxxxxxx. O mundo, Xxxxxxx” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 199). In the first sentence, “O mundo de Xxstychsky” distortedly echoes a series of preceding short sentences beginning with “O mundo de Axstychsky” In *Axstychsky* especially in the phonetics of Portuguese, we can still recognize the name Arciszewski – the character for whom Descartes has been waiting in vain so far. As was previously mentioned, the historical Arciszewski served as vice-governor and admiral of Dutch-Brazil from 1637 onward. Against this background, “O mundo de Xxstychsky” appears as a cipher for the colony of Nieuw Holland or pars pro toto for colonial Brazil. As such, this world becomes increasingly incomprehensible in the protagonist’s stream of consciousness.

And this despite – or perhaps because of – the complex and overdetermined verbal instruments available to the fictional Descartes. His use of language and the corresponding way of thinking seem ill-suited to reducing complexity in order to gain knowledge; he appears unable to use the Cartesian method. Just like the extremely heterogeneous language, the manifestations of Brazil represented in it are also subject to constant transformation. Significantly, *Xxxxxxx* suggests manifold multiplication as well as the sign for a variable or for something unknown. Furthermore, the x in Portuguese is phonetically very diverse, ranging in pronunciation from /ʃ/ and /z/ to /ks/ and /s/. In the phonetic sequence *Xxxxxxx* especially in its multiple repetition, language becomes semantically opaque, increasingly devoid of meaning, displaced by senseless, and guided primarily by rhythmic, tonal and graphic parameters. This creates a certain proximity to concrete poetry and sound poetry, to the *verbivocovisual* – a portmanteau borrowed by Haroldo de Campos from *Finnegans Wake* to characterize *poesia concreta* as a primarily sonic-visual phenomenon.⁶ As is typical of the meta-reflexive mode in *Catatau*, the designification of the signifier in *Xxxxxxx* is anticipated by an ironic commentary; a few lines before the passage in question, we read: “Ondediabo [*sic*] terei deixado meu significado?” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 199).

⁶ Leminski also made a name for himself with concrete poetry. Tellingly, *Catatau* is dedicated to the *concretistas* Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos, who were both practitioners and theorists of this literary movement (cf. CAMPOS et al., 1975). For the relation of Leminski’s poetry and the São Paulo’s concrete poets cf. CÂMARA, 2020.

But back to the poeticity and performativity of the book title and the paratextual structure in which it is embedded. The “perceptibility of the signs” (JAKOBSON, 1979, p. 93) characteristic of Leminski’s prose is manifest in the very title of the book, the onomatopoetic *Catatau*. Such poeticity appears not only in the striking sound of the colloquial word but also in its extraordinary semantic wealth, which results in a slippage or oscillation of meaning, contrary to the classificatory function of language common in colonial discourse in Brazil. *Catatau* has no “significado etimológico” (BYLAARDT and LEMOS, 2016, p. 104) and is one of the most polysemic words in Portuguese, which the author explicitly mentions in a paratext.⁷

It denotes both something very small and very large. *Catatau* can mean, among other things, a beating/punishment or a playing card, a penis, or an old kind of sword; it also occurs in diverse phrases, such as “ugly as a *catatau*”.⁸ The decisive factor here is above all that the expressions are specifically regional and colloquial, rather than standardized, generally valid meanings recorded in common dictionaries. Such expressions make up a significant part of *Catatau*’s vocabulary — often in contrasting combination with academic expressions and words from foreign languages. Significantly, *catatau* also means long speech as well as noise, babble, whirring, and humming, but also witticism and confusion. Separately and all the more so in combination, these meanings aptly characterized Leminski’s *Catatau*, referring both to the protagonist’s uninterrupted stream of consciousness and to the babble of voices that resounds in his utterances, from innumerable intertextual references to the whirring and humming of signs, as in the cited example with the letter X.

While *catatau* is extremely polysemic, a genre marker on the title page — “um romance-ideia” — might at first seem to instead delimit this open text. However, what comes into play here is a destabilization of genre’s classifying function and taxonomic thinking more generally. The particular hyphenated genre designation not only underlines the conceptual nature of the novel, but also implies the paradox of a genre *sui generis*, or a singular generic work. After all, genres — as well as subgenres — by definition refer to a larger number of works with certain characteristics. Thus, Leminski designates *Catatau* in terms of genre while implicitly questioning generic classification by emphasizing its particularity as a singular subgenre of the novel. Characteristic of *Catatau*’s epistemic meta-reflection, the term *romance-ideia* suggests the inescapability of genre but at the same time undermines its classificatory function by emphasizing — without referring to — what

⁷ In an epilogue to the second edition, Leminski cites some meanings of “*catatau*”, pointing out that the title of the book also stands for its particular openness to a “multiplicidade de leituras” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 212).

⁸ As a book title, *catatau* also contains an anecdotal meaning relating to the genesis of the work. According to his biographer Toninho Vaz, Leminski carried a pile of notes on his book project with him for years in his hometown, Curitiba — in addition to sheets of paper, he wrote on napkins, beer mats, etc. His acquaintances used to say, ironically: “Lá vem o Leminski com aquele *catatau* embaixo do braço!” (VAZ, 2001, p. 109).

Derrida called “the law of the law of genre” which is inherent in any genre: “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (DERRIDA, 1992, p. 227). In *Catatau*, the usually implicit generic principle of contamination is accentuated as such and pointedly applied as a representational strategy in the context of colonial discourse. Corresponding with the hybrid genre marker, it comes to the fore in the appropriation of various genres such as chronicle, natural history, and philosophical treatise (or at least texts belonging to them⁹). These appropriations are part of *Catatau*’s decolonial textuality, which is also manifest in specific combinations of extremely heterogeneous verbal registers and the pronounced performativity of the *romance-ideia* that destabilize colonial regimes of truth.

Catatau undermines textual mechanisms and literary conventions that tend toward the fixation of meaning or the positing of a singular truth, particularly in relation to colonial discourse (on Brazil) and its epistemic foundations. Part of the novel’s multi-layered structure are certain explanatory paratext. In the style of a scholarly annotated edition, 14 footnotes provide background information on some historical personalities, events, and foreign-language terms, primarily from 17th century Dutch. However, they lack any systematic approach, not only because many obscure terms and references remain without explanation, but also because the footnotes are restricted to the first quarter of the book.

Two footnotes stand out as examples of the decolonial re-writing of Brazil that is characteristic of Leminski’s *romance-ideia*. In the second footnote, the author explains that he “incorporated” into his text a peculiar spelling for the indigenous Tupinambá from 16th century French chroniclers, which, through their “fantasia ortográfica” function as an “índice de estranheza” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 15). This explicitly addresses a central aesthetic procedure of *Catatau*, namely the intertextual appropriation of colonial discourse on Brazil and its specific forms of representation. By using the particular term “Tououpinambaoult” the *romance-ideia* refers to Jean de Léry’s *Histoire d’un voyage faict [sic] en la terre du Brésil* (1578), a chronicle dedicated to the short-lived French colony in Brazil called France Antartique (1555-1567), which includes “ethnographic” descriptions of indigenous peoples. According to the logic of colonial othering, Léry distinguishes between “our Toioupinambaoult” and “these little devils of Ouetacas”: supposedly, under the influence of the French, the former no longer eat human flesh, resemble Europeans in stature, and have partly devoted themselves to Christian faith. In contrast, the “Ouetacas eat raw meat like dogs and wolves”, particularly human flesh, and belong “to the most barbaric, cruel and dreaded peoples” in the Americas, who do not engage in contact and trade with the French (LÉRY, 1994, p. 413 and p. 152).¹⁰

⁹ As Derrida emphasizes: “Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (DERRIDA, 1992, p. 230, italics in the original).

¹⁰ “nos Toioupinambaoult” versus “ces diabolins d’Ouetacas”: “comme les chiens et loups, mangeans la chair crue; mis au rang des nations les plus barbares, cruelles et redoutées qui se puissent trouver en toute L’Inde Occidentale”.

Thus, according to their alliance or enmity with the French, the indigenous others are either assimilated or stigmatized as inhuman. By exposing the “fantasia ortográfica” and the othering implied in this representation, *Catatau* deconstructs what can be termed its “epistemic and ontological colonial violence” (SANTOS and MENESES, 2020, p. xxii).

Another paratextual reference with a decidedly decolonial impetus is contained in footnote 6. It refers to the figure of Occam, described as “o monstro textual” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 20), followed by a reference to his “retrato verbal” in the book’s appendix. This verbal portrait, ironically titled “Descordenadas artesanias” describes Occam as a “personagem puramente semiótico, abstrato” and as “um princípio de incerteza e erro, o “malin genie” da célebre teoria de René Descartes” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 212). Significantly, in this definition, the name appears in a sequence of nominal alterations: “Occam (Ogum, Oxum, Egum, Ogan)”. What comes into play in this series of assonances is a sort of cultural counterpoint, a metamorphosis shift that combines the reference to William of Occam with four entities related to Afro-Brazilian religion, particularly to Candomblé and its West African heritage. The scholastic philosopher and Christian theologian Occam is often considered as one of the precursors of modern science and logical thinking. His ontological principle of parsimony, known as Occam’s razor, stands for a reasoning based on the fewest possible factors, regarded in mid-20th century by analytical philosopher Bertrand Russell as “a most fruitful principle in logical analysis” (RUSSELL 2000, p. 512). *Catatau* appropriates Occam’s thinking—including Western epistemic traditions that resonate with it—and actually inverts the principle of parsimony, turning it into a principle of unbounded verbal proliferation, variability, and ontological multiplication. This fundamental epistemic transformation is related to a sort of spiritual quaternity (in contrast both with the Christian doctrine of Trinity and Occam’s theological thinking).

The sequence “Ogum, Oxum, Egum, Ogan” stands for a complex belief system and cultural practices that originated from Western Africa and developed in Brazil due to the atrocious Atlantic slave trade organized by European colonial powers—particularly Portugal, but also including the Netherlands in Dutch Brazil, among other countries. As Abdias Nascimento points out, in Brazil “religiões africanas e seus derivados afro-brasileiros” were vital for the “luta antiga da persistência cultural” (NASCIMENTO, 2019, p. 119 and p. 115) of African slaves and their descendants. This cultural persistence and the complex epistemology inherent in Afro-Brazilian religions comes to the fore in the phrase “Occam (Ogum, Oxum, Egum, Ogan)”. Analogue to the syncretistic practice of disguising Afro-Brazilian divinities in the form of Catholic saints (in order to retain the repressed beliefs and cultural practices), Occam appears to be a façade of a subjacent epistemic otherness and cultural resistance to hegemonic Eurocentric thinking. Through a series of assonances, Occam gives way to *orixás*, divinities in Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian religion, and figures related to it.

The first is Ogum, the *orixá* of metalwork, agriculture, and war, who was the first to descend to Ilê-Aiê (Yoruba for house and earth) with the aim of finding a dwelling for future human life (D’OBALUAYÊ, 2017, p. 23). Mentioned second is Oxum, the *orixá* of love, fertility, and freshwater, followed by Egum, an ancestor and spirit of the dead, whereas Ogan — in Brazil — is a male priest of Candomblé. Particularly noteworthy is the epistemic multiplicity manifest not only in the manifold *orixás* (of which two are exemplarily referred to), but also in the extremely diverse cultural practices related to them. As Reginaldo Prandi (2001, p. 24) emphasizes: “cada orixá pode ser cultuado segundo diferentes invocações”. Consequently, “cada orixá se multiplica em vários, criando-se uma diversidade de devoções, cada qual com um repertório específico de ritos, cantos, danças, paramentos, cores, preferências alimentares”. What is more, the belief system also differs from the idea of a single origin of mankind, as Christianity presupposes, since humans are regarded as descendants of the *orixás*, i.e., a plurality of divinities (PRANDI, 2001, p. 24). In short, the four entities referred to are characterized by a multiplicity of meanings, attributes, and interrelations connected to African heritage in Brazil and its vital role for the cultural persistence of Afro-Brazilians as well as their resistance to (neo)colonial repression.

The inversion of the principles of parsimony and unity by a principle of multiplicity and interconnectivity is also manifest in the overall textual structure of *Catatau*. The *romance-ideia* is based on a particularly performative textuality, evident in the complex paratextual structure of the novel, that repeatedly breaks up literature’s linearity. As such, it resembles certain characteristics of the rhizome, particularly its “principles of connection and heterogeneity” (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2005, p. 7) — albeit with a decidedly decolonial impetus. *Catatau*’s textual structure with its complex rhizomatic web of references undermines the Eurocentric “coloniality of power” (QUIJANO, 2000, p. 533) still present in Brazil at the time of *Catatau*’s publication (and beyond), particularly the “racionalismos colonizadores” (ROCHA, 2004, p. 250) of hegemonic thinking. These rationalisms are symbolically manifest in Cartesian thought: to be more precise, in its instrumentalization in the (neo)colonial discourse on Brazil, which is subjected to multiple forms of *re-escritura*.

‘Brasíliocartésioaquias’: language of difference and the de-interpretation of Brazil

In the context of Brazilian colonial history, *Catatau*’s characteristic *re-escritura* can be grasped via a concept formulated by Silviano Santiago in his seminal postcolonial essay *O entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano*, first published in 1971. According to Santiago, the colonizers in Latin America tried to prevent multilingualism and religious pluralism in order to consolidate their power: “Na álgebra do conquistador, a unidade é a única medida que conta” (SANTIAGO, 1978, p. 16). However, the supposed manifestations of “unidade” and “pureza” were increas-

ingly contaminated by “novas aquisições, por miúdas metamorfoses, por estranhas corrupções, que transformam a integridade do Livro Santo e do Dicionário e da Gramática europeus” (SANTIAGO, 1978, p. 18). In the process, the “elemento híbrido” became paramount in the “entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano” (SANTIAGO, 1978, p. 23). This hybrid element comes to the fore in an “escritura sobre outra escritura” (SANTIAGO, 1978, p. 23, italics in the original). Such intertextual writing often tends towards pastiche, parody, and digression.

In *Catatau*, it appears in many forms, including what could be called a second degree *re-escritura*. This is to be discussed in more detail in the context of references to the storytelling parrot from the novel *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter* by Mário de Andrade – which, in its turn, also refers to numerous pretexts, above all to indigenous legends of the Taupépán and Arekuná written down by the German ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg.

The main text of *Catatau* delves right into *re-escritura*: “ergo sum, aliás, Ego sum Renatus Cartesius” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 15). This, of course, refers to the well-known dictum *ego cogito, ergo sum*, which is the basis of Cartesian metaphysics: “this knowledge, *I think, therefore I am*, is the first and most certain to be acquired by and present itself to anyone who is philosophizing in the correct order” (DESCARTES, 1983, p. 5, italics in the original). Before the Latin version from the *Principia philosophiae* (1644), Descartes had formulated the principle “*je pense, donc je suis*” (DESCARTES, 2018, p. 56, italics in the original). It appeared in the *Discours de la méthode* (1637), programmatically subtitled “treatise on the method of the correct use of reason and the scientific research of truth”. In the fourth part of *A Discourse on Method*, discussing the “Foundations of Metaphysics” the founder of modern rationalism finds his way from doubt to a certainty that he believes is irrefutable. Following a critical reflection on illusions in sleep as well as in the waking state, Descartes proceeds:

I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be something; and as I observed that this truth, *I think, hence I am*, was so certain and of such evidence that [...] I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search (DESCARTES, 1912, p. 26-27, italics in the original).

Descartes reaches a conclusion that contains central axioms of his philosophy and worldview:

I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that ‘I,’ that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that

although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is (DESCARTES, 1912, p. 27).

Descartes thus postulates that the ego is constituted by pure thinking. The unrestricted primacy of reason is accompanied by a categorical rejection of the senses and the power of imagination as a means of cognition (DESCARTES, 1912, p. 31-32). In *Catatau*, Descartes’s principle loses its “ego cogito” the decisive “I think”. The postulate of a subject whose very being results from thinking is reduced to “ergo sum: therefore I am”. These are the first words of the novel’s main text. Consequently, the word *ergo* which is supposed to introduce conclusions, refers not to a thinking subject but to a void, which is also mirrored by a blank page preceding the main text. Instead of the Cartesian self-empowerment of the subject through thinking, the fictitious “Renatus Cartesius” states that he is lost “neste labirinto de enganos deleitáveis” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 15).

In the opening sentence, the missing *cogito* is replaced by “vejo” repeated three times, and referring to different elements of a coastal landscape, followed by the equally laconic and suggestive sentence “Vejo mais”. The dominance of sensory perception in absence of self-assuring knowledge-producing cognition is also manifest in the protagonist’s gaze through the optical instrument “lentes de luneta”. His mediatized vision is reflected pseudo-mimetically in the typeface. The sentence continues in majuscules, as if it was itself magnified through the binoculars: “Do parque do príncipe, a lentes de luneta, CONTEMPLA A CONSIDERAR O CAIS, O MAR, AS NUVENS, OS ENIGMAS E OS PRODÍGIOS DE BRASÍLIA” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 15). The mediatized gaze, however, hardly leads to ontological certainties or to a taxonomy of the visible; not only do the quay, the sea and the clouds appear enlarged, but also the enigmas and miracles of Brasília. These mysteries will loom just as large and remain enigmatic to the protagonist throughout the *romance-ideia*.

In Brazil’s “labirinto de enganos deleitáveis”, reason hardly appears as the “universal instrument that is alike available on every occasion” as postulated by Descartes (DESCARTES, 1912, p. 45). This is evident in the phrase “CONTEMPLA A CONSIDERAR”. The largely synonymous words *contemplar* and *considerar* mean to reflect, to ponder, to contemplate, but also to look at and thus indicate an interflow of perception and thinking. Contrary to Descartes’s postulate, the protagonist’s thinking is not independent of body and environment, but appears substantially shaped by the sensory world. While looking through a telescope is a mediatized visual perception from a distance, the protagonist also inevitably enters into direct contact with the “New World”. He is exposed to an omnipresent “vapor” that apparently also affects his stream of consciousness, leading to a heightened poeticity and constant linguistic transformation, in the sense of a “fala que fermenta” (SANTOS, 2015, p. 268): “O vapor umedece o bolor, abafa o mofo, asfixia e fermenta fragmentos de fragrâncias. Cheiro um palmo à frente do

nariz, mim, imenso e imerso, bom“ (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 15). This immersive sensory experience, which combines olfactory self-perception with external scents, seems intensified by the protagonist smoking “ervas de negros” and indulging in “tabaqueação de toupinambaults”, i.e. adaptations of non-European cultural practices with a presumably mind-altering effect (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 17).¹¹

The pipe and telescope thus appear as insignia of a philosopher affected by the world of the senses, whose stream of consciousness expresses the corporeality of thought, a swan song to the abstract, supposedly universal reasoning of *ego cogito, ergo sum*, which seems inadequate in Brazil. For Descartes, the “lentes de luneta” turns into an instrument of both cognition and de-cognition that kaleidoscopically mixes perception and reflection, no longer corresponding to the strict Cartesian methodology. The optical device reveals “OS ENIGMAS E OS PRODÍGIOS DE BRASÍLIA” without transforming them into factual knowledge. Strikingly, Descartes uses the word “BRASÍLIA” to refer to Brazil. Throughout *Catatau*, *Brasília* appears much more frequently than the common Portuguese term *Brasil*. One might think that this is a Latinism: after all, the Latin word *brasil* is the basis for the country name *Brasil*,¹² and the protagonist of the *romance-ideia* repeatedly uses Latin. However, the accent in *Brasília* makes clear that this is not the pertinent explanation. Rather, *Brasília* apparently refers to the present-day capital of Brazil. Inaugurated in 1960 by president Juscelino Kubitschek, merely four years later it became the seat of government of a 21-year-long military dictatorship. Since *Catatau* is set in the mid-17th century Dutch colony, the repeated references to *Brasília* establish a temporality and a way of thinking that differ from prevailing concepts of historical progress and a positivist notion of modernity.

In a sense, the *romance-ideia* corresponds with the regime of time analyzed by Octávio Ianni in regard to modern Brazil: “Uma história na qual a modernidade está mesclada no caleidoscópio dos pretéritos, dos “ciclos” desencontrados de tempos e lugares, como se o presente fosse um depósito arqueológico de épocas e regiões” (IANNI, 1992, p. 37). As a particular form of literary fiction, *Catatau* addresses Brazil’s past through the prism of the present, and its present through the kaleidoscope of past tenses. In an allegorical reading suggested by the term *Brasília*, the second sentence of Leminski’s text — a quotation from Ovid filtered through Descartes’s stream of consciousness — could be interpreted as referring to the present: “Isso de ‘barbarus – non intellegor ulli’ dos exercícios de exílio de Ovídio é comigo” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 15). The protagonist signals his identification

¹¹ This may have prompted Haroldo de Campos to coin the apt phrase ‘Leminskiada barrocodélica’ for Leminski’s writing style: “barrocodélica” suggesting a baroque language with a psychedelic touch. Cf. CAMPOS, 1992.

¹² The name of the country probably goes back to the Latin term *brasil* for color of embers, i.e. ‘red’: “Europeans used the term ‘pau-brasil’ to describe the reddish ‘brasil wood’ exported by the Portuguese and French in the 16th century as the colony’s first important merchandise. Another, less common, hypothesis is that the name ‘Brazil’ comes from the Celtic words ‘Hy Bressail’ and ‘O’Brazil’ and means ‘happy island’. On the etymology of Brazil cf. SCHWARCZ and STARLING, 2015, p. 32-33.

with the exercises of exile attributed to Ovid by quoting (in abbreviated form) a passage from *Tristia*: “barbarus hic ego sum, qui non intellegor ulli” (I am a barbarian here because nobody understands me) (OVID, 2011, p. 272 [V, 10, 36]). In the context of *Catatau*, this sentence suggests a cultural relativism that undermines the universalist claim of Cartesian thought. At the same time, it appears to be a coded reference to the author’s inner exile. Leminski belonged to a leftist counterculture that rejected the ideology of the military regime. The critical revision of Brazilian history and present in *Catatau* must also be seen in the light of the cultural policies at the time: works that glorified Brazil’s past, for example historical films such as Carlos Coimbra’s nationalist blockbuster *Independência ou morte* (1972), were promoted by the military regime.

The coexistence of different times and places is expressed in *Catatau* not only by textually slipping the present-day capital Brasília into the colonial era of Dutch Brazil. Rather, the double focus on Brazil through the kaleidoscope of past tenses and the prism of the present is a structural characteristic of the *romance-ideia*. It also comes to the fore in the extremely diverse linguistic registers of the novel. *Catatau* contains numerous words and sentences from Latin, but also from the Tupi languages, as well as from Dutch, German, French, Polish, etc., and this partly in archaic forms — alluding to the languages spoken by the 17th century population of Mauritsstad, known as Recife today. At the same time, the text is interspersed with words that did not emerge until the 20th century, particularly Brazilian colloquialisms such as idioms, puns, and obscenities.

The “caleidoscópico dos pretéritos” does not only manifest itself in the diversity of linguistic registers. *Catatau* also kaleidoscopically interrelates a plethora of pretexts. In addition to quotations from Descartes’s writings, countless other texts from different periods enter the novel, especially those that refer directly to Brazil or are important to Brazilian intellectual history. For instance, there are intertextual references to Georg Marcgrave. In the service of Johannes Moritz, Marcgrave played a decisive role in designing the zoological-botanical garden in Vrijburg, i.e., the very place where the protagonist René Descartes lingers. Significantly, Marcgrave co-wrote the *Historia naturalis Brasiliae* with Willem Piso. Commissioned by Johannes Moritz in the context of colonial expeditions and published in 1648 by Johannes de Laet, this work was for a long time considered the most important reference to the geography of Brazil. A passage from the *Historia naturalis Brasiliae* precedes the main text of *Catatau* as the first of four mottos. For most of his book, Marcgrave soberly taxonomizes the nature of Brazil, rendering it understandable to Europeans. However, the passage quoted by Leminski is a significant exception, describing as it does “um pinto totalmente monstruoso”: a mix between a goose and chicken with feathers and fur, an almost fantastic creature that would

seem more at home in a bestiary than a natural history.¹³ In tune with Marcgrave's description of this "monster", the protagonist of *Catatau* regards all the fauna of Brazil as being composed of "animais anormais" (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 15). Whereas the *Historia naturalis Brasiliae* attempts to render the exotic nature of Brazil comprehensible through systematic description and classification, Descartes considers the species he encounters – an anteater, a tapir, a boa, and a capybara – as mythical creatures that defy any interpretation. While page-long descriptions of the "abnormal animals" almost resemble a bestiary, there are no allegorical dimensions that would suggest moral interpretations, references to salvation history, or otherwise give meaning to the "Singulares excessos" of Brazilian nature (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 17). Even the historical Descartes's "strictly rational methodology" (CASSIRER, 1996, p. XLV) seems unable to force the strange manifestations of Brazil to make sense. Indeed, *Catatau*'s protagonist is disturbed by his impressions to such an extent that seeing becomes to him an incomprehensible fable, his optical devices turning into "aparatos para meus disparates" (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 19 and p. 18).

The novel refers not only to historical nonfiction but also to fictional works. References to *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter* by Mário de Andrade are particularly significant, also because this modernist novel is an important literary reflection on Brazil.¹⁴ *Catatau* repeatedly alludes to the parrot in Mário de Andrade's book, which tells the story of Macunaíma to the narrator: "Tudo ele [the parrot] contou pro homem e depois abriu asa rumo de Lisboa. E o homem sou eu, minha gente, e eu fiquei pra vos contar a história" (ANDRADE, 1978, p. 148). In *Macunaíma*, the parrot serves as a vehicle for a new way of writing, like "fala impura" (ANDRADE, 1978, p. 148) that defies conventional linguistic norms. Not unlike *Catatau*, it includes regional expressions, popular idioms and aphorisms, Tupi-Guarani proper names, Africanisms, and – mostly used in parody – phrases from foreign languages such as Latin and French. All these elements are harmonically fused. In Andrade's highly rhythmic and sonorous text, indigenous myths merge with scenes of modern urban life and depictions of Afro-Brazilian cult practices. Different stylistic elements and genres, including epic legend, chronicle, and pastiche, are used to great effect. These diverse aesthetic forms correspond with the construction of the main character, who eludes all fixed definitions. Instead of the principle of unity, Macunaíma, with his ambivalence and linguistic diversity, stands for multiplicity and transformation. Nevertheless, this language – synthesized into a "fala mansa, muito nova, muito!" by the parrot (ANDRADE, 1978, p. 147) – serves the narrator to produce a coherent, albeit ironical and critical, narrative of Brazil. *Catatau* repeatedly refers to the way the parrot in *Macunaíma* serves as an intermediary between orality and written literature. In a few

¹³ In the original source, the monstrous-looking hybrid is also depicted in the 'Liber Quintus qui agit de Avibus' (Book V, Chapter XV) under the entry 'PULLUS gallinaceus monstrosus.' Cf. PISO and MARCGRAVE, 1648, p. 129.

¹⁴ Timbóm compares *Catatau* with *Macunaíma* regarding general "questões ligadas à identidade-alteridade" (TIMBÓM, 2011, p. 112), but neither traces intertextual references, nor elaborates on the substantial differences between the two novels.

different passages, Descartes complains, “um papagaio pegou meu pensamento amola palavras em polaco, imitando Arczewski [*sic*] (Cartepanie! Cartepanie!)”. He later asks “Quem lá vem falando com papagaios?” and finally states, “A ave do Brasil é o papagaio porque repete palavras; a ave do Brasil é o papagaio que embora paraguaio parece iugoslavo, boguslav bubulcus!” (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 17, p. 67, p. 96). This last phrase is driven by a deconstructive humor typical of *Catatau*: Boguslav is a Serbo-Croatian male name that means praise God; the Latin word *bubulcus* in this context presumably refers to the cattle egret (*bubulcus ibis*) – a “false parrot” of sorts. On its own, it means cowman of oz farmhand.

While oral and colloquial language are of similar importance in *Catatau* as in Mário de Andrade, Descartes’s references to the parrot increase the level of intertextuality but create no overarching narrative. And even if a *Macunaíma*-style narrative were to emerge from the words of the transcultural parrot, the last-mentioned quotation implies that it would not be written in the national language of Brazil but rather in Polish, Guaraní and Spanish (Paraguay) as well as Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian and Macedonian (Yugoslavia). The reference to Mário de Andrade thus serves to critically reflect on the construction of national identity in the canon of Brazilian literature, which has remained largely monolingual despite some hybrid language forms. Though different population groups, each with its own cultural and linguistic background, came together in Brazil, no multilingual literary tradition has developed, or at least no multilingual line has entered the canon of national literature. Leminski, too, has chosen Portuguese for his writing, but he uses an extremely polyglot style, in which numerous foreign languages are deliberately conflicted in the text – rather than merged into a harmonious “fala mansa”. While in *Macunaíma*, a specifically Brazilian idiom can be discerned and the rather sporadic foreign-language terms form counterpoints in Brazilian Portuguese, the language in *Catatau* hovers at the limits of intelligibility.

In contrast to the organic expression of linguistic heterogeneity in Mário de Andrade’s “fala impura” Leminski’s *romance-ideia* features a language of difference – a difference also to Brazilian Portuguese, which is subjected to incessant ruptures in a frenetic juxtaposition of the most diverse linguistic registers. This particular language corresponds with the protagonist’s spluttering stream of consciousness as well as the kaleidoscopic time regime and the rhizomatic paratextual structure of the *romance-ideia*. What we experience here is a thinking that does not follow a logical line but keeps taking on new forms, always referring to other texts and contrasting linguistic registers. Accordingly, this fictional Descartes is arguably an echo chamber of discourses rather than a coherent character. In resonance with the many meanings of *catatau*, the protagonist’s stream of consciousness is affected incessantly by “noise”, and a “babble of voices”, as well as “witticism, and confusion, sabotaging rational thinking”, the supposedly “universal instrument that is alike available on every occasion” (DESCARTES, 1912, p. 45).

What is being placed at the reader's disposal here is not just the interpretability of Brazil and its history. Rather, we are dealing with a paradigm of thought, which is illustrated in *Catatau* by Cartesianism but has a substantially wider reach (as exemplified by the references to Georg Marcgrave). In view of the outside world, reason fails in the protagonist: "Este mundo é o lugar do desvario, a justa razão aqui delira" (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 19). Quite contrary to the Cartesian method, with its four basic rules of thought that build on each other¹⁵ (DESCARTES, 1912, p. 15-16), and its analytical decomposition of complex problems into simple ones, the protagonist's stream of consciousness often combines words into ambiguous portmanteaus — sometimes merging the subject and the object of enunciation, for example in the exclamation "Brasíliocartésiomaquias!" (LEMINSKI, 2011, p. 195), a fusion of words including *Brasília*, *Cartesian*, and *make-up*. This coinage succinctly sums up the fictional Descartes's inability to decipher the manifestations of Brazil and provide them with meaning.

The failure of Cartesian thought also seems related to the protagonist's stasis. Significantly, the historical Descartes's philosophy is explicitly conceived as practical, meant to provide knowledge "highly useful in life" and "render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature" (DESCARTES, 1912, p. 49). In *Catatau*, though, Descartes certainly does not act as a master of his environment. Rather, he appears as a postcolonial figure: there he is with his pipe and his telescope, sitting under a tree — from which, at one point, a sloth defecates right into his mouth — pursuing his solipsistic thoughts. Or is it the thoughts that pursue him? The protagonist appears as a mere field of discourse, an echo chamber of endless *re-escritura* — and thus a counter-image to the colonizer taking over the "New World" with sword, cross, and "tábula". In the mind of this fictional Descartes, all "colonizing rationalisms" (ROCHA, 2004, p. 250) are negated by a proliferate, unbounded language of difference — resulting in a sort of de-interpretation of Brazil¹⁶ as a means of unthinking coloniality.

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¹⁵ According to Descartes, the basic rules of thinking consist of (1) starting from unquestionable insights, (2) dissecting problems analytically, (3) proceeding from the simplest to the most difficult things and (4) examining for completeness.

¹⁶ This wording inversely paraphrases the programmatic book title *Brazil: an interpretation*, by Gilberto Freyre (1945), who tends to gloss over the colonial violence in Brazil — which has had a large discursive impact up until today.

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Abstract/Resumo

“Faço tábula da fábula rasa”. Decolonial rewriting of Brazil in Paulo Leminski’s *Catatau*

Peter Schulze

As a particular form of historiographic metafiction dealing with the Dutch colonization of Brazil, Paulo Leminski’s “novel-idea” *Catatau* (1975) seems less concerned with factual history than with the epistemic dimensions of colonial discourse about Brazil. On the reading proposed here, Leminski’s novel is understood as a decolonial “thought instrument” (V.Das) based on a performative aesthetic. *Catatau*’s textual strategies transform the protagonist, a fictionalised Descartes, into an echo chamber in which colonial rationalisms are denied by the appropriation of certain pretexts and genres and a prolific language of difference, resulting in a “de-interpretation” of Brazil as a way of “de-thinking” coloniality.

Keywords: Cartesianism, Colonial Discourse, Gender, Intertextuality, Performativity.

“Faço tábula da fábula rasa”. Reescrita decolonial do Brasil em *Catatau* de Paulo Leminski

Peter Schulze

Uma forma particular de metaficção historiográfica sobre a colonização holandesa do Brasil, o “romance-ideia” *Catatau* (1975) de Paulo Leminski parece menos preocupado com a história factual do que com as dimensões epistêmicas do discurso colonial sobre o Brasil. Na leitura aqui proposta, o romance de Leminski é entendido como um “instrumento de pensamento” (V. DAS) decolonial baseado em uma estética performativa. As estratégias textuais de *Catatau* transformam o protagonista, um Descartes ficcionalizado, em uma câmara de ecos na qual os racionalismos coloniais são negados por apropriações de certos pré-textos e gêneros e uma prolífera linguagem de diferença, resultando em uma “des-interpretação” do Brasil como forma de “des-pensar” a colonialidade.

Palavras-chave: Cartesianismo, discurso colonial, gênero, intertextualidade, performatividade.