

DISSENT OF THE DEAD: Spiritism and the Paris Commune

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*From March to May of 1871, the Paris Commune proclaimed itself the foremost bastion of secular, progressive government in the world. Study of this dramatic period in French history predominantly focuses on its socio-political character, highlighting radical thinkers and ideas of anarchist or social-democratic bents. Alongside these more researched trends, however, were fringe associations in an equal struggle to survive the siege and Commune. This paper focuses on one such group—the Spiritists—as they attempted to reconcile egalitarian mores, integral to their philosophy, with petty-bourgeois investiture in religion as integral to social structure and governance. Examining articles from the Paris-based *Revue Spirite*, it is found that the Spiritists approached the Commune from an opportunistically supportive stance, eventually shifting their language to full-blown animosity and disregard as the Versailles recaptured the city and put down the Communards; these views being articulated through the uniquely Spiritist platform of mediumship.*

By the end of 1870, Paris was in flames. Radical thinkers of various persuasions fomented dissent under the auspice of the Prussia's cannons, while the French government in Versailles failed to provide basic relief to the former capital. Concessions made in late January to Bismarck's army increased the rage of the starving and angry population. With the declaration of the Paris Commune in March, respite was not to be found for the city and its people until the climactic atrocities of Bloody Week that May.

Through this volatile and tumultuous period, the Parisian Spiritists were isolated from the rest of France and struggled to live within the battered city walls. The Spiritist's primary publication, dedicated to further developing their doctrine, was the Paris-based *Revue Spirite*. In spite of nearly six-months of continuous strife within the City of Light, the *Revue* persisted in print and publication while many issues were held in reserve until "each subscriber ... receive[d] the numbers that the state of siege had not allowed [the editors] to send."¹ This was an impressive display of fortitude, given that much of its work was undertaken by a single person, editor Armand Theodore Desliens. Analyzing articles from the siege/Commune-era *Revue Spirite*, this research paper highlights the journal's discussion and criticism of events during this watershed in Parisian history alongside devices, largely unique to the world of Spiritism, that these writers utilized in articulating Spiritism's stance on both the siege and Commune.

Spiritism, developed by American Spiritualists, originated across the Atlantic. Spiritualism swept the Americas through the mid-nineteenth century. Adherents

¹ Pierre-Gaetan Leymarie, "To subscribers of the *Revue Spirite*, a Retrospective Glance," *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (January 1872), 2.

generally subscribed to the belief that after death, the dead possessed an ability to communicate with the living by various means, and one of the more common methods was table-turning. This craze for spirit messages ran tandem with the West's whiggish pursuit of scientific knowledge. In the view of the Spiritualists, this was a march toward an inevitable conciliation between science and religion through occultic means. Table-turning eventually made its way to Europe and rolled along to France in 1853.² Across the world, experimentation meant to improve transmission between the dead and living resulted in further refinements, such as a proto-Ouija board, the planchette, and automatic spirit-writing. It was amidst these developments that Allan Kardec entered the Spiritualist community.

Allan Kardec was born in Lyon in October 1804 as Hippolyte-Leon-Denizard Rivail.³ Steeped in Catholicism and tutored in a variety of sciences, Kardec dabbled in various esoteric movements through early adulthood before he settled upon the sphere of spirit communication. In session with a medium, he was tasked by the spirits present to compose a book—*The Spirits' Book*—and began the process of codifying their true intent in communication with the living. First published in 1857, the movement of Spiritism spread globally from this tangible cornerstone of doctrine. Its distinguishing features were an emphasis on reincarnation and the communications of the dead as incontestable, scientific proofs of the afterlife.⁴ For Kardec and his Spiritists, the meaning behind spirits' presence was to gain insight on one's current life, compelling the believer to work toward greater purification of their personal spirit in future corporeal lives. Kardec proselytized his science for twelve years, and he died of an aneurysm in 1869, one year before the Franco-Prussian War.⁵

In contrast to Spiritism's cornerstone, information on Armand Desliens is scarce. What few scraps to be found in the dustbin of history are obscure Brazilian and Spanish-language internet forum posts, lacking citation and serving, at best, as circumstantial evidence. Taken as a whole, however, the faint yet plausible outline of a man takes form. It seems an educated guess that Armand worked closely with Kardec who, in addition to his role as religious codifier, was the first editor of the *Revue Spirite*. After Kardec's death, Desliens assumed editorship within the year, in time for the War and, as the *Revue* later opined, the "communal insurrection."⁶

In the initial stages of the Prussian's siege, Desliens and those writing to the *Revue* dove headfirst into the pits of prophecy, questing for rational explanations and confident declarations of when the siege would end. This search for meaningful prophecies took center stage in the *Revue*, in spite of doctrinal insistence that the "influence of passions, aspirations, [and] secret patriotic desires of the mediums" often rendered prophecies and prophetic spirit messages unreliable.⁷ Regardless, analysis of the Prussian assault on Paris was relegated to examining such things; many of which, notably, were of non-Spiritist origin.⁸

² Lynn L. Sharp, "Building a Movement" in *Secular Spirituality* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2006), 49.

³ Sharp, "Building," 52.

⁴ Sharp, "Building," 53.

⁵ Sharp, "Building," 73.

⁶ Editors and Armand Theodore Desliens, "Retirement of Mr. Desliens," *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (September 1871), 165.

⁷ Armand Theodore Desliens, "Forecast on the current war, prior to spiritism," *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (April 1871), 64.

⁸ Armand Theodore Desliens, "Forecasts," *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (December 1870), 221-225.

Consistently, the *Revue* took a stance seemingly at odds with the large volume of working-class adherents to the movement.⁹ During the Siege especially, an emphasis was placed on the culpability of the German and French people, rather than leaders on either side, who were “the acting arm, the striking instrument and nothing more!”¹⁰ This argument was defended in a way Spiritists would recognize and reflect upon earnestly—through the shared belief in karmic response to past life misdeeds. For Desliens and the *Revue*, past attacks by the French upon German States justified what was happening contemporarily. Though the city of Paris suffered, belief in reincarnation and karma made it only fair that Parisians “logically become the oppressed after being the oppressors.”¹¹

Such sentiments were taken even further through the suggestion that Otto von Bismarck was a German equivalent, and possible reincarnation of, France’s Cardinal Richelieu. Both were heroic figures who worked toward federation and unity for their respective peoples. In glowing words, one article postulates whether if, “at different epochs of history, we would not see periodically appearing the same characters under the human masks of the great princes and great ministers of antiquity and the Middle Ages?”¹² This kneejerk response by the *Revue* to utilize reincarnation as an explanation and justification for Parisians’ collective suffering was a trifle, however, to their reaction toward the Commune those fateful, subsequent months.

The March issue identifies the declaration of the Paris Commune as a “Blockade of Paris,” further indulging the readership’s panic by turning to further collective karmic missteps, condemning them postpartum through parroting prophecy.¹³ Communication with the rest of France was open for a limited time during the armistice and was then shut off as it had been during the siege. In the interim, though, “numerous letters addressed to us, in spite of the difficulty of communications” found their way to the *Revue*, including an offer by a provincial miller to house refugee Spiritists.¹⁴ Aside from this initial address, Desliens, in his capacity as editor, went silent on the matter of the Commune and Communards until May. However, implications found throughout the March-issue’s “Spiritual Dissertation,” attributed to the spirit of Allan Kardec are notable.

His tone was cautious regarding Paris’ revolutionary tension, and he insisted several times that “fraternity practiced in its purity cannot be alone, for without equality and freedom there is no true fraternity.”¹⁵ Yet balancing out this caution is what appears to be open, albeit lukewarm, support of the social promises these soon-to-be-Communards represented. Kardec’s spirit insists that humanity must “destroy in the laws, in the institutions, in the religions, in the education ... causes which maintain and develop these eternal obstacles to the real progress,” addressing those institutions soon to be reworked under the Commune.¹⁶ Kardec’s spirit proclaimed, “It is up to the men of progress to activate this movement by studying and putting into practice the most effective means.”¹⁷

⁹ Sharp, “Building,” 54.

¹⁰ Desliens, “Forecasts,” 223.

¹¹ Desliens, “Forecasts,” 224.

¹² Desliens, “Forecasts,” 225.

¹³ Armand Theodore Desliens, “War and Spiritism,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D’Etudes Psychologiques* (March 1871), 47.

¹⁴ A. Veve and Captain B., “Correspondence - Spiritism in the provinces and abroad during the war,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D’Etudes Psychologiques* (March 1871), 54.

¹⁵ Kardec, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” 44.

¹⁶ Kardec, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” 44-45.

¹⁷ Kardec, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” 45.

In contrast to these reservations, his spirit's immediate response to the brutal aftermath of the Commune is simply remarkable—and most explicit, for the *Revue*, in addressing the Communards. For an article commemorating the second anniversary of Allan Kardec's death, a medium was asked to consult the founder. Kardec briefly glossed over the subject of his afterlife and eagerly shared his thoughts on recent events. In earlier communications from March and April, Kardec's spirit expressed grumbling distaste for the rule of radical working-class Parisians, certain that “on the pretext of equality, the little one lowers the great to replace him, and becomes the tyrant in turn,” while also warning readers of the *Revue* to “stay away from all these things ... because you have nothing to do with the wreckers.”¹⁸ When the prospects of the Commune were uprooted in utter oblivion by Thiers and his soldiers during the aptly-named Bloody Week of late May, Kardec instructed those reading to “follow the current, without mixing in it, [and] let men of violence do their work of blood: let them pile ruins on ruins, rubble on rubble.”¹⁹

This “work of blood” carried on with futile opposition, save the Communard's execution of hostages, as Versillais troops ravaged the city; they were better trained, better equipped, and left thousands of massacred Parisians in their wake. In concluding his appeal for apathy, Kardec's primary criticism of the Commune, its irreligiosity, becomes ever more palpable—his spirit remarked, “to repair a house that has fallen into ruin, to recreate a cracked wall that trembles on its secular foundations, one only postpones an imminent fall!”²⁰

In the aftermath of Bloody Week, a swell of letters and information was made available to the *Revue*. The backlog of correspondence was so great that a prefatory note was placed in the July issue, alerting readers that “the multiplicity of news ... by which we would not want to be overwhelmed” required an adjustment of format.²¹ To update Spiritist citizens on what transpired during the Paris Commune, the *Revue* presented two spirit communications: one received from a Spiritist guard, Brigadier Pons, and another from non-Spiritist Archbishop Darboy. Pons, killed by the Communard forces after having been arrested March 18th, assures readers that it was the ideas of Spiritism which “gave me the courage ... lacking to many who died by the shooting.”²²

Of far greater significance, however, is the message received from Paris's former Archbishop. The message is unique among Siege/Commune-period communications, as it is a vision the medium received, versus writing or speech. The unnamed seer describes “the Archbishop of Paris surrounded by hostages who, like him, were victims of the revolutionary movement.”²³ Text appeared above Darboy's head, extolling the principles of Spiritism before delivering the remarkably sympathetic heart of his message:

Social revolutions are terrible, but they must inevitably bring about a great moral change, they must shake the thrones to unite the peoples: they must persecute the

¹⁸ Kardec, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” 44; Allan Kardec, “Spiritual Dissertations - Role of spiritualists in present circumstances,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (April 1871), 73.

¹⁹ Allan Kardec and Armand Theodore Desliens, “Second anniversary of Allan Kardec's death,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (May 1871), 80.

²⁰ Kardec and Desliens, “Second anniversary,” 81.

²¹ Editors, “Announcement,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (July 1871), 113.

²² A. Pons and Armand Theodore Desliens, “Spiritual Dissertations - Bishop Darboy, Archbishop of Paris,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (July 1871), 130.

²³ Pons and Desliens, “Spiritual Dissertations,” 129.

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clergy to bring it back to a sound doctrine. The rich will suffer failures in their ambitious plans and considerable losses in their financial calculations, which will lead them to understand more easily the worries and privations of the working class. He will no longer regard the people as something for his use.²⁴

Anomalous when compared with the *Revue's* general, if indirect, stance on the Commune and the Communards, this message offers strong evidence that there were Spiritists in support of, if not also active agents in, the Commune movement. During those fated months, Desliens addressed this division between Parisian Spiritists; some were “called by law or by their political convictions in either camp,” and the gathering of a unified Spiritist community during such polarization was an insurmountable challenge.²⁵

Amidst the revitalized exchange with the rest of Paris, an article by Charles Monselet, noted journalist and gastronome writing for the magazine *Illustrated World*, was brought to the *Revue's* attention. Written in the midst of May, it was a sardonic sally of Spiritism—with rhetorical inquiries deemed offensive enough by the *Revue's* editors to be reprinted in their entirety:

Where did the Spiritists go? We have heard nothing of it since the beginning of the war. However, it would be a good time for them to come forward and make some communications about events. There must be in the air, presently, a multitude of spirits who want no better than to talk. What do we question them as before? It would be infinitely interesting to have the opinion of Monsieur de Talleyrand on Monsieur de Bismarck for example, or that of Frederick the Great on Monsieur Thiers, or that of the painter [Jacques-Louis] David on the painter Courbet.²⁶

Normally dispassionate in their condescension of the non-Spiritist, secular world, this particular incident strikes a noticeable change in the *Revue's* tone. The review which follows Monselet's comments was vicious and angry, deriding *Illustrated World* as a mess of “fools and jugglers!” The greatest criticism aimed at Monselet, however, was that he failed to understand the crux of Spiritism, and that thorough study was required before he should dare make light of Kardec's philosophy. “Perhaps then,” the *Revue* retorts, “M. Ch. Monselet [will] think that there is something better to do than ask the great men of the past their opinion of the men of today.”²⁷

By the end of the Siege and the Commune, Armand Desliens had worked himself into an irreparable fatigue. Resuming communication with the provinces, coupled with the vast backlog of correspondence still unsorted, was too daunting a task for the man who had, in his own words, been “writing monthly the articles necessary for the regular publication of the *Spiritual Review*.”²⁸ In late June of 1871, Armand withdrew from his position as editor. His letter of resignation, published in the September issue of the *Revue*, detailed the struggle of his work:

During the vicissitudes of the siege of Paris and later during the Communal insurrection, in spite of the difficulties of the moment, I insisted on accomplishing my duty to the end ... I was very seriously indisposed from the beginning of March last, and soon had to abstain from long walks, because of a general weakening which obliged me to keep the room for more than six weeks. Nevertheless, with much effort,

²⁴ Pons and Desliens, “Spiritual Dissertations,” 129.

²⁵ Kardec and Desliens, “Second anniversary,” 80.

²⁶ Pis, “Variety - Spiritism and the press,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D’Etudes Psychologiques* (July 1871), 113.

²⁷ Pis, “Variety,” 117.

²⁸ Editors and Armand Theodore Desliens, “Retirement of Mr. Desliens,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D’Etudes Psychologiques* (September 1871), 166.

I still managed to meet the task I had imposed myself after the master's [Kardec's] departure.²⁹

Subscribers had nothing to worry about, though, as a replacement had been procured in August: Pierre-Gaetan Leymarie. Immediately following Desliens's printed farewell, the new editor wrote to remind the *Revue*'s subscribers that, in his wisdom, Kardec had admonished successors not to be mere imitations of his fully rounded spirit—Leymarie's intention being to nullify any semblance of loss in Armand's retirement. A report appended to this notice, produced by the *Revue Spirite*'s administrators, reinforces the new editor's sentiment in so many words, stating: "The existence and the future of society do not rest especially on the head of any individual; one of us can die, disappear, change our way of seeing, without the society suffering from it, since the group that composes it replaces as and when is needed."³⁰ Leymarie waved off his predecessor with an assurance that, "Like him we must remain impersonal, we are part of a group of administrators, disinterested and above all spiritualists in the meaning of the word."³¹

Leymarie, in contradistinction of the "essentially cosmopolitan" character of Kardec's Spiritism, charged the *Revue* with political vehemence, professing an elitism which until now had subtly simmered between the lines of the siege and Commune.³² His first contribution to the *Revue* was an analysis of one Baron d'Holbach's writings—the selection of which includes the following observation: "a good education, above all, must teach the rich, the noble, the powerful, that they must make themselves loved by their inferiors."³³ These sentiments were in rapport with the hierarchical thought of returning Versailles. Leymarie then opened his analysis of d'Holbach with the following sentiment, that "this high lesson comes from the eighteenth century. Can we really say that society has changed?"³⁴

After the devastation and slaughter of Parisians, the letter of the day for the Spiritists of Paris became forgive and forget; to try and unify the country under the winners, Thiers & his high society camp, rather than allow further divisiveness between the classes. A correspondent, whose name is given discreetly as E.M., wrote the *Revue*, "Our thought must be summed up in a community of action, obeying this divine motto: Unity is strength."³⁵ Glowingly, the new editor Leymarie responded in kind, speaking on behalf of the *Revue* and its readers in saying, "we cannot better advocate a better cause."³⁶ In an earlier article as well Pierre-Gaetan writes, "Disunity must be a forgotten word."³⁷ Such lofty statements, however, did little in stopping Leymarie and other contributors to the *Revue* from dredging the past; recollecting to recuse proponents of the Commune and its ideals.

²⁹ Editors and Desliens, "Retirement," 166.

³⁰ Pierre-Gaetan Leymarie, "Subscribers," *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (September 1871), 167.

³¹ Leymarie, "Subscribers," 167.

³² Captain B. and Armand Theodore Desliens, "Correspondence," *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (July 1871), 122.

³³ Baron d'Holbach and Pierre-Gaetan Leymarie, "The universal morality of Baron d'Holbach," *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (August 1871), 135.

³⁴ d'Holbach and Leymarie, "Universal morality," 135.

³⁵ E.M., and Pierre-Gaetan Leymarie, "Correspondence – The Spiritist Woman," *Revue Spirite – Journal D'Etudes Psychologiques* (August 1871), 142.

³⁶ E.M. and Leymarie, "Correspondence," 142.

³⁷ Leymarie, "Subscribers," 167.

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In the November issue of 1871 a story was printed about Henri Sarcy, described in the article as “a victim of our civil discord.”³⁸ Sarcy, a young man of fifteen, had been called by his merchant parents to witness the bloodbath on the boulevard near Rue Drouot, from a friends’ mezzanine, and the author of the article describes their desire to watch as an “irresistible need.”³⁹ Though Henri did not want to, he felt his refusal would upset his mother, so he went, “climbing very fast,” to them.⁴⁰ As he asked for forgiveness, “a bullet, coming from the barricade of the Montmartre street, ricocheted ... and cut the jugular vein of Henri Sarcy who, drowned in his blood, died a few minutes later.”⁴¹

The story revels in the despair of tragedy, only later revealing the purpose in its submission to the *Revue*; Henri’s father, worrying over an unrelated legal dilemma, was visited by the spirit of his son, who provided useful guidance to him. The *Revue* found the story of Henri one which needed to be heard—not only because he was a victim of the violence surrounding the Commune, but because, in their own words, he was “a serious Spirit having lived long enough, having finished the last cycle of his earthly existences.”⁴²

With this, observations of the *Revue* moved toward the future. The years following the Paris Commune featured no reflection or retrospection, instead focusing on the alienation of Spiritists by the Spiritualist community at large, leading to such declarative & reactionary statements as, “Spiritualism must die!”⁴³ The last echo of the Commune/Siege era appears in the October 1873 issue, in which a medium communicated a spirit-dissertation by Henri Sarcy regarding Kardec and Truth. The message itself is obscure and irrelevant to the boy’s life, and its significance was primarily an appended note reminding readers who Sarcy was.⁴⁴

A particularly fascinating feature of the late-1870 to early-1871 issues of the *Revue* are their struggle to maintain some degree of objectivity in spite of being stuck amidst intensely passionate social and political upheaval. Try as Armand and the many correspondents did to avoid discussing the “fratricidal and impious struggle” and the “deplorable infighting” by its very choice of phrase, the *Revue Spirite* proclaimed its stance often and ever louder.⁴⁵ It was undoubtedly made easier during the Commune for Armand to remain unaffected by the fires of revolution, for the majority of March up to the middle of April he had become a reclusive writer in poor health.⁴⁶ If he had much knowledge of the goings on of Paris, it would have been from his window, or through the notice of fellow Parisian Spiritists. Upon the second anniversary of Allan Kardec’s death, it was felt that “in the midst of all these conflicts, it was impossible for us, as in previous years, to think of bringing together the Paris Spiritists.”⁴⁷

³⁸ Henri Sarcy, and Pierre-Gaetan Leymarie, “Variety – A victim of our civil discord,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D’Etudes Psychologiques* (November 1871), 193.

³⁹ Sarcy and Leymarie, “Variety,” 193.

⁴⁰ Sarcy and Leymarie, “Variety,” 193.

⁴¹ Sarcy, and Leymarie, “Variety,” 193.

⁴² Sarcy and Leymarie, “Variety,” 195.

⁴³ Pierre-Gaetan Leymarie, “To subscribers of the *Revue Spirite*, a Retrospective Glance,” *Revue Spirite – Journal D’Etudes Psychologiques* (January 1872), 2.

⁴⁴ Henri Sarcy, “Spiritual Dissertations – The truth, how to say it?” *Revue Spirite – Journal D’Etudes Psychologiques* (October 1873), 183-184.

⁴⁵ Kardec and Desliens, “Second anniversary,” 79.; Sarcy, “Dissertations,” 184.

⁴⁶ Editors and Desliens, “Retirement,” 166.

⁴⁷ Kardec and Desliens, “Second anniversary,” 80.

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The main reason Kardec's spirit and the *Revue Spirite* distanced themselves from promoting or highlighting the Commune and its ideals was quite simple: Spiritism identified itself as a philosophy bridging the gap between religious faith of a blatantly Catholic foundation and scientific reason. The Paris Commune, in contrast, was organized by materialists and anticlerical thinkers. Though the progress made toward greater social equality was in line with Spiritist thought, the advocacy of the Commune in removing religion, and more specifically Catholicism, from its controlling stance on public life was simply out of line.

The mode of the siege/Commune-era *Revue* then was to endorse the petty bourgeois and the more religiously-inclined stance of Spiritism's benefactors. The best way to do this was to utilize spirit communication, with the understanding that such otherworldly observers' disinterestedness in worldly affairs would make their condemnation of the Communards and the Paris Commune all the more powerful. Victims of the Commune's destruction and Bloody Week, along with their dearly departed founder, became posthumous mouthpieces for the *Revue*. Through their voice, the *Revue* furthered the belief that the secular foundation of this popular demand for social justice was but the lesser work of ambitious and selfish individuals, wholly apathetic to the plight of the poor.

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Appendix

An 1891 Parisian electoral roll lists an Armand Desliens as having been born the 3rd of November 1843, in the Parisian commune of Villeneuve-le-Roi.⁴⁸ This mutually supports a *Yahoo* forum post online, where an anonymous individual includes a purported transcription of Allan Kardec's death certificate, which made note of "a twenty-five-year-old employee at Boulevard du Prince-Eugene No. 110" by the name Armand Theodore Desliens signing the death certificate as a witness.⁴⁹ Kardec's death having occurred in 1869, this would put the birth year of Desliens as near the same as on the electoral roll. He also makes an appearance on the website *Casa de Recuperacao e Beneficios Bezerra de Menezes*, where he is described as Allan Kardec's secretary.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Archives Electorales: Electeurs 1891. Paris: ARFIDO S.A., 2006.

⁴⁹ "Por que Allan Kardec se suicidou, se era um espirito em alto grau de evolucao," Yahoo Answers, Yahoo.

⁵⁰ "Artigos – Museu Roustaing," Casa de Recuperacao e Beneficios Bezerra de Menezes, CRBBM.