

# ANIMATE DOLL, TROPICAL FETISH: STRUCTURES OF RACE AND PROPERTY IN THE ARTISANAL FOLKLORE OF POSTCOLONIAL BRAZIL

## BONECA ANIMADA, FETICHE TROPICAL: ESTRUTURAS DE RAÇA E PROPRIEDADE NO FOLCLORE ARTESANAL DO BRASIL PÓS-COLONIAL

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines certain aesthetic dynamics through which the memory of transatlantic slavery finds a social incarnation in the realm of cultural production, and specifically in the traditional and popular arts. I take as an ethnographic case study the artisanal *namoradeira* doll, a folk genre of handcrafts that depict images of black women in a state of ambiguous agency. I consider how these figurines' gendered representations of blackness stage a visual and literary relationship of affectable embodiment that allegorizes those early modern ontologies of property and personhood that licensed and administered colonial subjugation. Synthesizing a number of genealogies of the commodity form that turn on the historical and juridical figure of the slave, I argue that the dolls' overdetermined figurations of racialized subjectivity do not simply affirm liberal conceptions of individuation and freedom, but rather enact a poetics that registers the internal contradictions that besiege this humanism.

**Keywords:** slavery, race, liberalism, memory, handcraft

### 1. Introduction

A lucid reappraisal of the concept of the symptom allowed Frantz Fanon to elaborate the collective dynamics of psychic life under conditions of racialized subjugation. While stationed in North Africa at the outset of the blood-soaked Algerian War, the Martiniquais psychiatrist oversaw treatment for military and civilian patients who had born witness to the extraordinary upheaval that had been set in motion by the struggle to replace a colonial status quo suffused with the banal and murderous catastrophes that had become the structure of ordinary life for the colonized. In the space of the clinic Fanon documented numerous cases of psychoses, psychosomatic pains and nervous disorders that testified to an “atmospheric” social malaise in the eyes of the analyst. “Nowadays,” he writes in *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), “we know perfectly well that one need not be injured by a bullet in order to suffer in one’s body just as in one’s brain from the existence of the war” (p. 280). In the singularity and particularity of the life story of each tormented patient, the symptom functioned as a manifestation of the intertwined past and future of the afflicted North African peoples. The symptom, then, was no mere sociological index for Fanon; rather, it was a knot of temporal forces. There, the futuristic force of necessity that heralded the destruction of the

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colonial order of things becomes entangled with the force of collective memory, the mark of an originary violence that had instituted a paranoid, extractive and bloodthirsty social order in the colony. The tormented colonial collective spoke through the ailing individual without recourse to language; and it spoke not of its transparent identity, nor of an empirical condition to be “cured,” but of the possibility of understanding how the structure of the experience of the symptom itself clarifies the significance and stakes of any liberatory praxis.

At a moment when our contemporary world seems no less structured in the service of totality than it was in those decades when European imperial powers desperately clawed at their drifting colonial possessions around the globe, the symptom remains a compelling analytical companion in the examination of contemporary forms of life marked by the assaults of racialized violence, and certainly those forms of life beset by the legacies of chattel slavery in the Atlantic World. This question is particularly relevant for Brazil, where the ascendancy of nationalist political agendas has revived the specter of militarized authoritarianism and has served as a reminder of the threats that have for centuries been leveled against the lives and livelihoods of indigenous and Afro-Brazilian groups, as well as dispossessed urban communities, in the name of the market, the family and the fatherland. The historical record unequivocally suggests that the juridical and economic institutions of post-industrial Brazil continue under the conceptual sway of the pillars of colonial-era political economy and their well-documented consequences: the decimation of indigenous ecosystems and peoples, the appropriation of labor from racialized masses, and the exploitation of natural resources for global markets, as modeled in the sugarcane plantation (Prado Jr., 1967, 1942; Schwartz, 1986). In this light, the current juncture facing Brazilian society emerges as yet another episode in the life of the postcolony, as Mbembe (2001) described it. The moment of extractive violence that founded the nation-state has produced a vertiginous temporal landscape of social experience made up of disturbances, oscillations, and interlocking pasts and futures, in which history is no longer a question of chronology or unilinear causality.

The present article identifies an instance in which a temporal “knot” of historical memory and emancipatory expectation can distill significant experiences of embodiment, racialization and labor in contemporary Brazil by means of the *image* as a symptom: an incarnate disturbance marked by the involuntary persistence of overdetermined formal arrangements at a collective scale. Adopting an ethnographic mode of critique, I focus my analysis on a type of ornamental object that I encountered during fieldwork among artisans in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre: the *namoradeira* doll, a public depiction of predominantly black women under conditions of ambiguous

agency and in a putatively historical setting. I describe these dolls' socio-historical context in order to propose that this genre of handcraft emerges from a collective, social compulsion toward *repetition* that produces “returning” or “surviving” images, not unlike those forms and motifs which the art historian Aby Warburg saw as expressive of supra-historical cultural forces linking disparate temporal terrains (Didi-Huberman, 2002).<sup>2</sup> In dissecting the visual tropes through which the *namoradeiras* achieve a complex poetic relationship to their commodity status, I point out how they echo other transnational representations of blackness that rely on an animated affect that emphasizes affectability, a susceptibility to manipulation and possession from without. I then describe how this aesthetic structure is inextricable from the constructs of personhood and private property that were mobilized during the eras that saw the expansion of the colonial market for chattel slaves in the Atlantic World. Although I take a specific kind of artisanal handcraft as the empirical object of my analysis, my intent with this article is to suggest how an approach that considers the temporality of the image can be relevant for understanding the political dimensions of other modern and traditional popular expressive forms that implicate the historical memory of slavery in Brazil. Therefore, I argue that cultural products such as those analyzed here constitute not an individual reinscription and endorsement of racist “ideology,” but an ambivalent folk meditation on the fragility of the fundamental liberal ideals of freedom and individuation in modern times.

## **2. The Production of Tradition in the Brazilian South**

At 6:00am, right as the morning sun starts to peek over the waters of the Guaíba Bay, the Public Market of the city of Porto Alegre explodes with color. The Market, whose neoclassical façade enlivens an entire block in Porto Alegre’s downtown district, sits squarely across from City Hall, silently awaiting the hordes of commuters that will stream by on foot in a matter of minutes. Inside the two-story structure, the sunlight has begun to filter through the semi-covered roofing, shedding a morning shine on the sounds and smells of the awakening marketplace. I make my way into the Public Market, as I normally do on Thursdays, and finally reach the open space where the artisans are already assembled, pulling away large pieces of blue cloth that cover the small wooden tables that

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<sup>2</sup> Michel de Certeau, in his comparison of the postures of historiography and psychoanalysis with respect to temporality, has argued that the two sciences respond differently to a shared problem of “relat[ing] the representations of the past or present to the conditions which determined their production” (Certeau, 1986, p. 5). However, the central gambit of this article proposes that a close scrutiny of the unconscious transmission of history through form—a “symptomatology of the image,” to use Didi-Huberman’s language—has some of the potentials that de Certeau sees as specific to psychoanalysis: namely, the capacity to offer specific tools for studying how the space of memory is organized in ways that do not entirely conform to the perceived homogeneity of historical time, itself a cultural byproduct of early modern historiographical methods (Koselleck, 1985; Fasolt, 2004).

contain their livelihoods: a colorful inventory of jewels, knitted scarves, small wire sculptures, embroidered towels, macramé designs, and ceramic figurines. Luana,<sup>3</sup> one of the artisans whose work I had been accompanying at different fairs around Porto Alegre for several months, greets me with a quick hug and tells me to help her fold up her blue tarp while she prepares to greet the potential customers who are now beginning to navigate the aisles of the marketplace. Within the hour, one older woman stops in front of our table and surveys the objects fashioned by Luana's hand: a gallery of small plaster dolls fondly termed *namoradeiras* in local parlance. These figures, traditionally intended to be placed on windowsills, depict the torsos, arms and heads of black women clothed in colorful south-central Brazilian garb. With an intentionally designed wistful look, the *namoradeiras* rest their cartoonish heads on one of their hands and await the return of their faraway lover. The customer points to one of these dolls near the edge of the table, one whose sleepy, round eyes and dark skin provided a contrast to the minimalist white and green stripes of her dress and bonnet. "This one here is cute [*fofa*]. How much?"

Once the transaction is complete, Luana stows away her newly earned twenty-five *reais* while I ask her about the dolls. Other artisans had informed me that the *namoradeiras* originated in the state of Minas Gerais and are rooted in the use of women's bodies as status markers during the colonial mining era. Luana is not certain, but she confirms this nonetheless. She explains that the craft has spread to other parts of Brazil in the past two or three decades; they can now be found at most artisanal marketplaces throughout the country. "They are recent here in Porto Alegre," she says, "or I don't know, they certainly weren't here when I moved here. I like them, even though they don't sell as well as the *gaúcho* items. But they bring me a joy that is not just about money."

Luana's dolls are highly peculiar artifacts in the context of the artisanal economy of Porto Alegre, a city that encapsulates multiple contradictions inherent in the formation of racialized settler-colonial imaginaries of national and regional identity. Despite its reputation as both an urban laboratory for institutional innovations in participatory democracy and an enclave of support for the Brazilian Worker's Party (Junge, 2018), the city is also the economic epicenter of an agrarian region often understood in terms of a politics of race associated with its relatively belated incorporation into the national fold by means of intensive German and Italian immigration. Beginning in 1818, the concept of race became central to those facets of Brazilian immigration law that sought to civilize and tame the Empire's sparsely settled southern lands by incentivizing colonization by individuals

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<sup>3</sup> The names of all individuals involved in this research have been replaced by pseudonyms in this publication, in the interest of their anonymity. Unless otherwise specified, all participant observation and ethnographic interviews on which this article is based took place in Porto Alegre during fieldwork conducted between May and August of 2015.

perceived to be of efficient, assiduous and morally upright ethnic stock (Seyferth, 1990; Pesavento, 1997; Biehl, 1999, 2008). As German immigrant laborers began streaming into the mountainous areas of the South in 1824, settlers from the Azores Islands and from elsewhere in Southern Brazil who had populated the *campanha*—the rustic pampas bordering what are now Argentina and Uruguay—began to develop a distinct sense of identity that would eventually blossom into the mythological figure of the *gaúcho*: the virile, taciturn, mate-drinking cowboy on horseback, known for his courage and fierce sense of independence. The representational power of this bucolic character soared during those periods of rapid urbanization and political centralization that rattled Brazil in the 1890s and the 1930s, when politicians and intellectuals resorted to Romantic cultural archetypes in their attempt to balance the country’s regional diversity with the recently ignited need to construct a pliable but unified national identity (Oliven, 1996, 2006).

Eventually, the *gaúcho* became the binding symbol of a Southern Brazilian identity, uniting widely disparate ethnic groups and social classes by the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Its ubiquity was only further certified when the *Gaúcho* Traditionalist Movement emerged in the wake of a period of authoritarian military rule that, for two decades after 1964, had made the centralization of Brazilian identity a pillar of its nationalist governance. Since the 1980s, the *Gaúcho* Traditionalist Movement has quickly spread to other parts of the Brazilian South, dispersing its central mission of reviving, demarcating and preserving the traditional repertoire of the *gaúcho*. It has done so chiefly by founding thousands of *Gaúcho* Traditionalist Centers (CTGs), spaces designed to transmit and showcase an array of folkloric forms that include *gaúcho* clothing, music and dance. The tenets of the Traditionalist Movement and the activities of numerous CTGs have been the subject of controversy due to their reliance on public rituals of historic commemoration that routinely expunge the role that indigenous and enslaved black denizens of the region played in the political-economic development and everyday life of the *campanha* (Bornholdt, 2010). But in spite of a rich body of historiography that contradicts any framing of the nineteenth-century *campanha* as a racial democracy (e.g. Cardoso, 2011 [1962]; Maestri, 2003), the elaborate and seemingly race-blind iconology that flourished around the figure of the *gaúcho* remains a potent marker of identity among residents of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, many of whom connect this regional symbol to those racially coded ideas of moral character, civilizational progress and economic productivity that once stood sharply in contrast with the

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<sup>4</sup> To this day, *gaúcho* is the most common demonym used in Portuguese to refer to inhabitants of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. While the pronunciation of the roughly equivalent term in Spanish (*gaucho*) accentuates the letter *a* on the first of two syllables, the Portuguese word has three syllables and carries a stress on the letter *u*, in accordance with the diacritic that accompanies the vowel.

realities of life in the *campanha* but were nonetheless emphasized by federal law and by local elites during the pre-Republican period (Seyferth, 1982, 1990; Silva, 2015).

The affective and folkloric associations that surround the image of the pampas cowboy are no less influential in the local tourist industry, as evidenced by the tremendous demand for *gaúcho*-themed paraphernalia that dictates the majority of artisanal production in Porto Alegre. At the time of the execution of the fieldwork on which this article is based, the city's artisans—and especially those who sold regularly at the Public Market—sustained a significant portion of the city's modest tourist industry, supplying some of the most portable and publicly visible emblems of the region's distinctive “culture” that one could find outside of CTGs in the form of souvenirs and other handmade memorabilia: miniature mate gourds, boot-shaped magnets, or shirts featuring equestrian themes. My initial interviews and surveys in collaboration with over three dozen artisanal workers in Porto Alegre suggested that almost none of the artisans—the majority of them women from working-class backgrounds with little to no nostalgia for the countryside—derived any specific enjoyment from creating items reflective of this vision of local culture. However, few could afford to risk not conforming to tourist demand as they experienced it, and as it was recounted to them by government representatives from the Municipal Bureau of Culture, who oversaw the logistics of artisanal fairs in publicly owned locales. Consequently, most artisans I spoke with described their role in purely economic terms. They saw their work not as artworks, but as interchangeable and nondescript products with perhaps one element of personal flair or another. As another artisan once told me: “Yes, I developed other specialties over the years, but when you sell here you have to obey the money where it is sure to come.”

### **3. Race, Animation, Affectability**

The overwhelming economic dominance of *gaúcho* symbolism in the artisanal marketplace motivated my initial interest in the figures of black women that Luana and a few other artisans created, especially the *namoradeiras*. While the dolls enticed the occasional local who purchased these “cute” and romantic items for their own home, most shoppers searching for tokens of local culture in Porto Alegre's Public Market took little interest in these depictions of tropical scenes that seemed so out of place amidst the visual indices of the pampas that were the restricted purview of the local artisan. However, after observing dozens of these dolls and carefully examining clients' interactions with them, I noticed how the dolls' composition and their surrounding lore were structured by an unsettling and familiar dynamic of dissipated agency, instantiated in shapes and colors but intimately

related to representations of black womanhood in other artistic genres and social contexts. The *namoradeiras*, although crafted according to tacit but recognizable nation-wide standards that limit their formal variability, are no less shaped by a visual archetype that amalgamates simplicity, docility, sensuality, and vibrant colors. Furthermore, while there is no written historical record of the development of this artisanal genre in Minas Gerais, the orally transmitted lore circulated among artisans and clients links these figures' traditional location in the household windowsill to an architectural history of public-private divisions that began shifting in the colonial era. Much of this folk knowledge mirrors a historical narrative of gender relations popularized by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1936), which highlights the progressive character of young women's newfound freedom to face the public through the window in the late nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> However, with its colorful clothing and its cartoonish lips, the artisanal doll examined here might seem to be the opposite: an anthropomorphized portrait of effusive feminine passivity that those who frequent artisanal fairs praise as "cute" either for its obedience, for its loyalty to a faraway lover, or for the comely docility of its daydreaming. The *namoradeira* form thus joins a long tradition of producing ventriloquized images of black women in Brazil,<sup>6</sup> a pattern that reveals how the apparatus that signifies race leads to the production of modern political subjects besieged by the lurking presence of the affectable element that threatens their sovereignty over a transparent interiority purportedly legible on the body.

By claiming that the *namoradeira* dolls manifest a cultural logic that surpasses the intentions of an individual artisan at a particular place and time, I suggest that these artisanal images find their social efficacy in the force of their affect. Sianne Ngai (2007) discusses the problem of affect with respect to that which scholars variously refer to as "tone," the "ambient feeling" of an aesthetic work. Ngai is concerned with those "aesthetic emotions" that configure a work of art's "global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world." In literature and film, for instance, these qualities constitute the formal attributes that make it possible

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<sup>5</sup> The history of urban households expounded in *Sobrados e mucambos* (1936) relies on Freyre's signature "ecological determinism," an analytical outlook that emphasizes the material-geographical determinants of social life (Pesavento, 2006, p. 198). In Freyre's eyes, the socio-material landscape of the household offered a microcosm of a Brazilian civilization that was shifting as its populace timidly migrated into cities. The sociologist argues that in this context white women gained the right to occupy a more public space through the introduction of windows in the upper-class dwellings called *sobrados*, urban staples in the Lusophone world.

<sup>6</sup> The tradition of producing gendered representations of animated, affectable blackness in Brazil is long and rich, and includes notable figures such as those of the docile slave Chica da Silva (Brown, 2007), the sensual *mulata* Rita Baiana from Aluísio Azevedo's influential 1890 novel *O Cortiço* (Piscitelli, 1996), and the seemingly exotic female performers that helped Rio de Janeiro's carnival rise to global fame with the release of Marcel Camus' 1959 film *Orfeu Negro* (Fléchet, 2009).

“for critics to describe a text as, say, ‘euphoric’ or ‘melancholic,’ and, what is much more important, the category that makes these affective values meaningful with regard to how one understands the text as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations” (p. 28).<sup>7</sup> One aesthetic structure that Ngai terms *animatedness* emerges out of her engagement with images of racialized embodiment in American abolitionist literature, which is discussed in the context of more contemporary clay-based animation technologies that the author indicates function as “a ‘magical’ screen practice, but also [as] a rhetorical figure and the general process of activating or giving life to inert matter” (p. 92). In works of art where animatedness is an organizing force, animation takes on a sinister veneer, for its “surprising interplay between the passionate and the mechanical” buttresses the construction of an overemotional racialized subject that is “unusually receptive to external control” (p. 91). Animatedness, in its capacity to highlight exaggerated emotional profusion, thus functions in North American contexts as indicators of racial or ethnic alterity.

The examples the author draws from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) are some of the most effective illustrations of “the degree to which emotional qualities seem especially prone to sliding into corporeal qualities where the African-American subject is concerned” (p. 95). Ngai quotes the following from Stowe: “The negro mind, impassioned and imaginative, always attaches itself to hymns and expressions of a vivid and pictorial nature; and as [the hymns were being sung], some laughed and some cried, and some clapped hands, or shook hands rejoicingly with each other...” (as cited in Ngai, 2007, p. 97). Bearing in mind the gaze responsible for this depiction, Ngai makes a case for thinking of how this affective quality assumes that an animated body is more privileged than an inert one. Yet as it desperately tries to frame an agentive subject, the animate affect frames or maintains an object as its predicate. In doing so, these otherwise well-intentioned techniques for endowing the inanimate with life fail to overturn those normative hierarchies of agentive power that order what can animate and be animated and that, according to queer theorist Mel Chen (2012), have been the traditional foundation for humanist conceptions of agency. These hierarchies are in fact so intrinsic to the modern understanding of the human that they find

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<sup>7</sup> This is to suggest that the intersubjective force of the image does not rest in the representational aspect of what it depicts, symbolizes or “signifies” for any individual mind. Ngai frames the history of the affect-emotion divide as an attempt to solve the problem of the *Nebenmensch* as it appears in Lacan, i.e. the problem of distinguishing between first-person and third-person feelings, “and, by extension, feeling that is contained by an identity from feeling that is not” (2007, p. 27). She chooses not to rely on any formal difference between emotion and affect, recognizing that certain kinds of affect are most powerful “when we are most uncertain if the ‘field’ of their emergence is subjective or objective...” In my analysis I propose that the affect of the artisanal dolls is neither a positive, formal attribute nor a cognitive response, but a binding phenomenon that, at once subjective *and* objective, cannot be reduced either “to representations of feeling within the artwork, or to the emotional responses the artwork solicits from its viewers” (p. 28).



themselves reinforced, for example, in political and linguistic associations of different kinds of oppressed subjects with “animals, meaning, not the class of creatures that includes humans but quite the converse, the class against which the (often rational) human with inviolate and full subjectivity is defined” (p. 95).

Readers familiar with histories of artistic presentations and representations of blackness across the Americas and the Caribbean will hardly be surprised by this muddling of human and nonhuman capacities, or by the relationship between agency, rationality and the body configured by animacy as an affective structure in art. These aesthetic histories highlight a gaze that repeatedly stages a violent syntax of dominance on a visual or literary register, frequently relying on the imputed warmth, liveliness and vigor of black expression to blur the distinction between freedom and coercion in a representational act. I am interested here in the ways in which these patterned aesthetic events are intimately related to the traffic of transatlantic slaves as a historical phenomenon of its own kind. Where animation is a structural affective force, we encounter a poesis of the ideologies that were the conditions of possibility for slavery: a set of constructs of race, property and the body that were embedded in reflexive assumptions about the world and its constituent agents, including the human being. Saidiya Hartman (1997) has highlighted the significance of comparable instances of animacy and its poetics in her analytical survey of the public performances of slave subjection in the United States. She notes that spectacles of white slaveowners’ mastery and dominion over enslaved black subjects often relied on representations of “direct and primary forms of domination as coercive and consensual” that in turn confirmed the legal and discursive identity of the slave as property and as a pained object of violence: “The paternal endowments of will, voice, and humanity deny the pained and punitive constitution of the slave as person and the necessary violence of racial slavery” (p. 53-54).

Implicit in my uptake of affect, then, is the contention that aesthetic portrayals of blackness acquire a “political” force not insofar as they explicitly defend or depict any one particular argument about slavery as a sociological fact or historical event, but in the way that they manifest the ideological structure that was and continues to be actualized in the production of race itself, and thereby of chattel slavery as one of its attendant political-economic projects. Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) has emphasized how the procedures that generated analytics of raciality were underwritten by the logical production of a condition that she terms “affectability,” i.e. the attribute, state or position of being susceptible and subjected to natural circumstances and to the power of other minds. With the inauguration of a transparent and transcendental “I” in the nineteenth century, Man surfaced as

the self-determining subject of reason at the same time that it became possible to make universal claims upon the human as a natural phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> This possibility was fulfilled by the ascendance of the science of life and of the sciences of Man that followed its lead, such as the early incarnations of anthropology. Over the course of colonial encounter and subjugation, Silva contends, such knowledge projects produced two kinds of modern subjects by linking certain bodily and mental traits to different global regions: first the transparent subject, whose interiority is governed by universal reason, and then the affectable subjects, those non-European minds subjected to exterior determination either by the corporeal influence of nature itself or by the tutelage of more productive minds (p. 267). Racial analytics emerged in this context as a way to laminate affectability onto the rationally defined body, thereby producing an idea of radical, unsurmountable difference between modern subjects—a procedure that was necessary to *externally* affirm the value and self-sufficiency of interior reason as the purview of the European, as science was wont to do after the nineteenth century.

Luana's artisanal dolls encapsulate the privation of self-determination entailed by Silva's understanding of affectability. Through the colorful and exotic "cuteness" that makes it occasionally desirable,<sup>9</sup> the *namoradeira* form illustrates another vision of racialized womanhood that was central to the seminal theory of racial democracy that Gilberto Freyre himself had promulgated earlier in the 1930s. There the sociologist had tethered Brazilian national identity to the unique affordances of racial miscegenation as it unfolded under the allegedly benevolent tutelage of Portuguese imperialism (Freyre, 1994 [1933]; Larsen, 2008, 2011). Silva (2007), however, traces how the conceptual inscription of transparency and affectability operates even in Freyre's widely influential account of the historical-sociological "essence" of Brazil. In order for the fledgling construct of Brazilian national identity to demonstrate its civilized, interior self-determination on the global scene of the early twentieth century, the narrative of racial democracy that was popularized in the twentieth century by sociologists like Freyre would have to endow racial miscegenation with an eschatological

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<sup>8</sup> Silva traces the privileging of self-determination as the constitutive attribute of reason to the sixteenth-century disavowal of bodies in extension by Descartes. Subsequent philosophical interventions, such as those by Locke, Leibniz, Kant, Herder and Hegel, attempted to defend this account of reason from the attacks of natural science and its emphasis on outer determination, ultimately resulting in the positioning of universal reason as both an interior *and* exterior determinant (the transparent "I") that provided the ontological context in which the universality of the human sciences could thrive.

<sup>9</sup> In a more recent text, Ngai (2012) offers "cuteness" as an aesthetic category that governs judgments of taste that respond to forms associated with "powerlessness" and with "pliancy or responsiveness to the will of others" (pp. 64-65). In other words, we find something cute because it is willing to submit itself to us. In the context of consumption, the "cute" therefore invites both tenderness and aggression by virtue of the power relation it stages, in which "the cute thing is the most reified or thinglike of things" (p. 105).

meaning that would make hybridization or *mestiçagem* tantamount to the obliteration of unsurmountable racial difference. In this way, the elimination of the affectable African or indigenous Other “would result in the reinstatement of transparency in social configurations that actualize a European consciousness” (p. 248).<sup>10</sup> Therefore the double affectability of the black female figure became central to the teleology of racial democracy, for only through the patriarchal appropriation of the bodies of black women could Portuguese productive power be deployed according to the logics of productive miscegenation. Paradoxically, then, the same national-historical mythos that frames the window as the site of female agency finds its negative mimesis in the *namoradeira* insofar as this window-bound doll dramatizes the animation and the ultimate objectification of the black woman’s body, its ossification into pure ornament.

#### 4. Tribunals of Personhood

The conceptual problematics raised by the poetics of animation and affectability—especially those questions of possession, manipulability, ambiguous agency and muddled interiority—suggests how the *namoradeira* form allows for the objectification of objectification, a poetics that registers how a cross-temporal racial analytics affords legibility to objects and well as to humans. This explains why, in the context of the marketplace for artisanal goods in Porto Alegre, Luana’s artisanal creations are widely acknowledged as aberrant or lacking in utility within an economic context dominated by figures of “post-racial” regional culture. This is evident in the contingencies that afflict the social and economic relations that spin out from these objects as they modulate and arrest the process of exchange that defines artisanal labor. For example, any artisan that makes *namoradeiras* in Porto Alegre will readily admit that these do not sell nearly as well as any item that can lay claim to *gaúcho* iconology. When they *do* sell, however, these objects are chosen by tourists (and it is almost invariably tourists who purchase them) for their handmade “Brazilianness” in its most generic and least regionally inflected form. The figurines therefore bear traits both of objecthood, as material entities to be bought and sold for a particular monetary amount, *and* of the particular kind of juridical personhood that is the animated but unfree figure of the chattel slave. In other words, the affective

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<sup>10</sup> When Silva identifies the condition of affectability—and the philosophical scenes of interiority and exteriority on which it is predicated—she does not intend to recognize race as a sociological or historical truth; race in her account is instead an instrument of signification that relies on the ability to unveil the truths of Man from his exterior, thereby legitimizing and re-inscribing an onto-epistemological context that privileges the interior self-determination of universal reason.

image of blackness in these objects marks them with a negation of “personhood” that elicits desire or disdain from consumers.

It is not sufficient, then, to link the poetics of the *namoradeira* to the historical fact of slavery, for the dolls are themselves commodities that illustrate in the process of exchange how race and racial slavery resulted from the conceptual principles of modernity and of what Sylvia Wynter (2003) has described as its “biocentric” and “economic (rather than civic) humanism” (p. 322): a rational freedom underwritten by transparency, self-possession, universality and self-determination. Put differently, the dolls’ commodity status is subsumed into their poetics, serving as a reminder that modernity and its ontology of the human person, as Bruno Latour (1991) famously describes it, is a normative impossibility rife with hybrids and contradictions, which nonetheless needed to be secured by an arsenal of categories and procedures for affirming the importance of skin-bound personhood and private property amidst the actualized contradictions of racial slavery and genocide. Not in the stasis of their discursive content but in the social processes in which they participate, the *namoradeiras* point to precisely this tension in the early modern tenets of property, possession and the body; and they do so by presenting the paradox of the commodity as inextricable from the paradox that produces the ideal person—the rights-bearing, reflexive subject—of liberalism.

The conceptual terrain shared by the chattel slave and the liberal notion of property offers an enlightening point of entry from which to begin specifying how the poetics of the artisanal dolls allows them to exceed their commodity status. The anthropologist Stephan Palmié (2006) has proposed that the transatlantic trade in slaves provided the historical conditions of possibility for the emergence of modern notions of selfhood and individuation that departed from a conception of “the body as the primary fetish as which it emerges in classical economic theory—a thing possessed by a mind and self” (p. 854). Under the aegis of the philosophical formulations of *homo oeconomicus* at the time of imperial expansion, the syntax of possession that had articulated the body as external to the mind since the sixteenth century eventually made this corporeal-material externality the ground for possession and, in turn, a requirement for “the capacity for appropriation” that determined social personhood. Eventually, the writings of John Locke in the seventeenth century would cement the understanding of freedom and individuality *as a function of possession*. Thereafter, Palmié adds, the idea of free labor came to signify “the voluntary entrance into a contractual arrangement consisting in the hiring out of embodied capacities for value-creation for a specified time and price,” particularly since

the prerequisite for personhood in Lockean (or Hegelian, for that matter) conceptions of civil society is inhabiting a body capable of removing objects out of a “State that Nature has provided,” mixing one’s labor with them, and so incorporating them into one’s self as

additional qualifiers of social personhood, that is, property—or, alternatively, disposing of them in an equally self-interested, self-chosen, that is, contractual manner. The body thus becomes the primary tool of the properly individuated self, an objectified means of production of further property, the archetypical motor of the generation of utility and the satisfaction that possession brings to the self (p. 856).

In this philosophical context, the slave emerged as an uncanny product of the highly contradictory notion of property that motivated the regime of value that arose in the wake of the colonial encounter, and *the* product that encapsulates the corresponding vision of labor and utility. The very existence of the slave as an economic and legal form admitted to property's conceptual and practical dependence on the literal seizure of an affectable body and its transformation into an objectified entity that derived its own ghastly appropriability and exchangeability from the ascribed incapacity for self-possession and individuation, the qualities that had come to define the human person in the metropole. In a manner that does not merely mirror the structure of agency that produces racial analytics but is in fact *central to it*, this particular commodity exposed the processes that made all commodities possible; for it was only by formatting the slave as a source of extractable value—expendable and amenable to mechanization or depersonalization—that modern economic speculation was able to subject entire worlds within and beyond Europe to the rule of the absolutely interchangeable.

Ironically enough, nowhere else is this more apparent than in those moments when these systems of personhood and property experience dramatic transformations in response to contingencies that betray their internal instability and decay. As Stephen Best (2004) notes in his commentary on the philosophical and legal underpinnings of nineteenth-century American property law, the contradictions that inhered in the slave as an intelligible form reached a historical turning point with the passage of laws such as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 that sought to punish slaves from escaping their owners and fleeing from their enslavement. For how could one punish a slave for theft or breach of contractual obligations if the culprit, as non-human chattel, was not subject to the rights and obligations of the law? The legal solution was to codify the fugitive as person-like property, selectively applying the law to the runaway slave as two persons in one, “pilfered property and indebted person, object of property and subject of contract” (p. 9). Crucially, the jurisprudential impasse instigated by the figure of the fugitive slave coincided with the law's reckoning with new technologies of visual and acoustic reproduction, which precipitated major legal battles to recognize images, vocal styles and intangible ideas as property. The courts of the nineteenth century, then, had to reconcile the paradox of the commodity form in the face of a crisis in the constitutional understanding of the human. Jurists were suddenly forced to account for not only fugitive persons

but also what Best terms “fugitive personhood,” those errant, intangible and unstable values circulating within a market economy of increasingly abstract subjects and objects. The resolution of this dilemma entailed, in the realms of both copyright law and slave law, a wholesale shift in the very idea of property itself:

Theft [...] now included any action that reduced the market value of property... Within an emerging market of infinite abstraction, interminable speculation and miraculous profits, property served as a synonym for certainty, and property law became a means of proscribing actions in such a way that the future remained consistent with current calculations. In essence, property was a species of pathetic fallacy, a personification of individual ‘interests’ by way of the fabrication of specific ‘outcomes’—in short, a formalization of a way of thinking about future actions, a means of substantializing acts as a form of property (pp. 32-33).

The significance of these historical instabilities in the meaning of possession points to the way in which the institution of racial slavery was not simply a historical phenomenon reducible to “racism” as a widespread psychological phenomenon, or even a self-contained sociological event with discrete boundaries, but an structurally consistent consequence of the first principles of the humanisms that guided the deployment of the political mechanisms responsible for the parallel production, delimitation and governance of persons and property in the Atlantic World.

Even though the *namoradeira* dolls are empirical “things,” their affective charge simultaneously invokes and materializes the violent thing-status of the animated and the affectable, which determines these items’ entrance into *or* obstruction from financial exchange. The “race” of a given figurine is the variable that indicates whether it will be deemed by the consumer to be insufficiently local, or whether it will be ambivalently desirable as an optimistic index of gendered domesticity in the age of Brazilian racial democracy. We might therefore add that just as liberal humanism in its early modern form made the paradox of “two persons in one” a socially potent legal form, so does it make thinkable the aesthetic notion of “two property-objects in one,” the carbon copy of that which the figure of the slave discloses as the objectification of what objectivity becomes when deprived of subjectivity. If certain folk images of blackness in Brazil and elsewhere echo the slave-form at the level of their aesthetic composition, as the *namoradeiras* do, they might do so not necessarily by representing the slave as an empirical, historical being, but by performatively revealing the ontological conditions whereby racial analytics create a slippage that transforms the body into an unexploited resource that begets external possession. Here the aesthetic has the capacity to draw attention to the ways in which the rise of a legally operable idea of inalienable property relied on the fetishistic muddling of the distinction between persons and things, as well as on the preceding

philosophical and political-economic moment that instituted the categories of “person” and “thing” in their modern guise.

Precisely by not allowing its own transaction in the market to be straightforward, if even possible to begin with, the poetics of the slave-form present in Porto Alegre’s *namoradeira* dolls intensifies the tensions that have made the project of regionalism in the Brazilian South a vexed and incomplete one. The formation of a national identity has depended on the subjection of particular bodies and lands to the logics of racial democracy, miscegenation and national identity, which in this region of Brazil turn out to be no less identical to the logics of a liberal humanism that hinges on the maximization of utility and the safeguarding of property. While a growing number of activist efforts to address everyday anti-black violence in Porto Alegre have relied on the conscious mobilization of historical narratives as their point of departure, the artisanal reproduction of the *namoradeira* form thus operates in parallel to these efforts with the most oblique, unwitting and dispersed spontaneity. The genre’s arrival in the city is historically untraceable, its persistence in the broader urban marketplace is economically inexplicable for the most part, and its representational import as a folkloric genre is negligible to most. Yet the dolls’ black, caricatured faces nonetheless pose a stark contrast to what is supposedly proper to the South in the trade of handcrafted regional symbology. In the meantime, Luana and a handful of her peers continue to produce these dolls while their lives and those of their clientele continue to be ruled by a regime of value in which these dolls figure only as absolute excess: either entirely dispensable or perversely desirable. The artifacts’ racial impropriety grants them a certain independence from the immediate economic determinations of the artisanal industry, at the same time that a broader nexus of property and value relations deeply imprisons their form and empirically determines it in the last instance.

Luana’s figurines bear in their relation to their social and historical context an aspect of the phenomenon of fugitivity as defined by Gary Wilder (2017) in the context of slave marronage: “a situation of precarious autonomy under conditions of asymmetrical interdependence.” Taken together as a general form and as a localized commodity, the *namoradeira* as it appears in Porto Alegre mimics those aspects of the runaway slave as a historical phenomenon that define the fugitive according to an insistence on the insufficiency of the liberal model of freedom that opens up at the moment when (juridically non-human) property defies productive consumption. The unprofitable *namoradeira* risks its own economic annihilation and that of the livelihoods of its black and nonblack artisan guardians, but at the end of the day it attracts the occasional customer precisely because it allegorizes the structure of affectability that connects its aesthetic organization to the totality of racial

violence that exists beyond the world of the artisans and even beyond Brazil itself. When this bipolarity manifests in an image it provides a particular vantage point from which to name the contradictions, tensions and gaps in the maintenance of the status quo which the *namoradeiras* have as their referent.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the doll's insubordinate but recognizable repetition of its own historical conditions makes possible a critique of that history, and of the very specific ideal of freedom that it bequeaths.<sup>12</sup>

## 5. Conclusion: The Anachronic Poetics of the Disturbance

In this article I have taken up a particular instance of the Brazilian *namoradeira* doll as an example of a folk art with an ambivalent socio-political life. On the one hand, I have shown how its composition reiterates the first principles of the liberal notion of private property, with the ontological constructs of individuation, freedom and personhood that it necessarily entails. I have traced these principles as they manifest not merely in some episodes in the history of the commodity—and of the slave as its most peculiar and grim form—but also in the genealogy of race as an analytic begotten from the construction of the subject as universally describable, as inhabiting demarcated terrains of interiority and exteriority, and as biologically differentiable according to globally varying degrees of affectability and self-possession. On the other hand, I have hinted at one way in which the artwork's reiteration of these principles need not always be any one particular agent's endorsement thereof but could instead be understood as a social *poetics*, a dramatization or amplification that precedes any critical self-awareness of these principles' prevalence in contemporary governance and social life. While this analysis might seem to hide the motivations of artisans, philosophers, politicians and activists behind a curtain of metaphor and personification, I have focused on the properties and histories of the artisanal products themselves in order to emphasize how expressive cultural practices can bring to light different aspects of the concepts shared and mobilized by disparate agents in their production of a surprisingly coherent social form.

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<sup>11</sup> Form becomes an agentive and causal element “when a culture finds within it space to constrain expectations, to organize uses, to channel meaningful purposes” (Best, 2004, p. 25); as such, the work of analogy enacted by the poetics of the figurine makes it uniquely possible to have a sensuous and simultaneous encounter with *all* of the extant social institutions that are united in the object—in this case, the narrative of racial democracy and the naturalization of capitalist property relations.

<sup>12</sup> It is crucial to note that at the level of the object this critical possibility stands as precisely just that: a possibility. The critical potential must be actualized as it often is in other realms of artistic and cultural production in Porto Alegre; however, the artisanal profession, as a trade in specialized crafts often coercively tied to the market for regionalist symbolism, seldom attracts the kind of critical attention necessary to explain where and how the artisans' handcrafts are related to their own labor conditions at the level of their formal composition.



Let us remember that the affective structure of animatedness that is at work in the racialized and gendered imagery of the *namoradeiras* evokes an agency that lies beyond the control of the possessed, animated body. The anthropologist Teri Silvio (2010) has described animation along these lines as the assumption of inert matter as an extension of one's agency, and thus as the inverse of performance: "If Butler's reading of Lacan posits performance as the introjection of the environment into the self, a psychic theory of animation focuses on the projection of the self into the environment" (p. 426). I have argued that this structure of agency that is implicit in animation becomes itself an aesthetic motif in the *namoradeira*, thereby acquiring a certain publicity that allows for its scrutiny. In this respect many of the figurines' "fugitive" qualities are a function of the way in which in them the body becomes an avatar, in the sense employed by Uri McMillan (2015) in his study of black women performance artists who redeployed their bodies through strategies of subversive and ludic self-objectification. In the figurines *qua* detachable and independently circulating elements, the intricacies of the violent, gendered history that made them conceivable in the first place are overtly displayed, even exaggerated. Still, the projection and distribution of a *self* is central to the performance of objecthood as McMillan understands it, or to animation as Silvio explains it. Since the *namoradeira* as a widespread Brazilian folk genre is not the original creation of any one particular artisan, what exactly is the agency that exerts causality through the doll as its avatar or prosthesis?

In light of the aesthetic and sociological phenomena described in this essay, any adequate answer to this question will have to contend with the fact that this might not be a self at all—at least not in any sense of individual intentionality or stable reflexivity. For perhaps what the dolls reiterate most fiercely in their animatedness is precisely the impossibility of selfhood in the wake of the psychotic invasion that Fanon (1952) describes as the condition of life and its decimation under colonialism: the aggressive ambush by the gaze of white supremacist sovereignty, which installs its own fantasy and symbolic order at the core of the colonized subject and which structures this subject's most intimate experience of exteriority and interiority in the image of the colonial state. With the Other incorporated into the self, Fanon explains, the colonized subject lives in a state of perpetual proximity to death and to annihilation, under siege from within as well as from the outside. The sociogenic illnesses that the psychiatrist encountered in the clinic were consequently the traumatic repetition, at the collective level, of this originary moment of violent intrusion, a repetition on the order of what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*, "afterwardness" (Laplanche, 1999, p. 238). Reading the *namoradeiras* as a sociocultural poetics of possessed subjectivity, and thus as an example of such erratic repetition, raises the stakes for thinking with the poetics of a "surviving," symptomatic image.

If these artisanal handcrafts appear in Porto Alegre as the overdetermined object of either Lusotropicalist fantasy or nationalist-regionalist phobia, they do so only insofar as these structures of misrecognition determine their form: the color on the skin of their incomplete bodies, the shape of their lips and hair, and the motifs of their accompanying oral lore. But not unlike many other of Brazil's folk arts, the dolls provide the material articulation of a memory that repeats the primordial invasion that orphaned it, a nominally collective memory that imagines the possibility of true collectivity by means of the very materials that insist on making this possibility unimaginable. ■

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo procura analisar uma dinâmica estética através da qual a memória da escravidão transatlântica se encarna socialmente no âmbito da produção cultural, e especificamente nas artes folclóricas e populares. Em função de estudo de caso, examina-se uma manifestação local da boneca artesanal chamada “namoradeira” que tradicionalmente retrata a mulher negra sob condições de agência ambígua. O trabalho considera o jeito em que essas representações materiais da negritude forjam uma estrutura visual-literária de corporificação afetável que alegoriza as ontologias modernas da pessoa e da propriedade privada que autorizaram e administraram a subjugação colonial. Ao sintetizar várias genealogias da forma mercadoria que dependem na figura histórica e jurídica do escravo, argumenta-se que as bonecas, como figurações sobredeterminadas de subjetividade racial, não simplesmente afirmam as noções liberais da individuação, da utilidade, e da liberdade, mas ao contrário atualizam uma poética que expressa as contradições que são próprias deste humanismo.

**Palavras-chave:** escravidão, raça, liberalismo, memória, artesanato gaúcho

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