

## Imagining a Colonial Home; or, Racialization Studies and Performance as Humanization

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*This paper analyzes statues and statuettes of racialized stereotypes found in a hotel meant to recreate a colonial home in Pirenópolis, a historical city in Goiás state, Brazil. It provides a theorization from a Black feminist perspective (Hartman, 1997; Roberts, 1997; Morrison, 1992) as well as from studies of representation (Riggs, 1986; Hall, 1997; Araújo, 2000, 2005; Lee, 2000). I analyze White imagination that deploys racialized representations as a means through which a trip back to the past is made possible and ask the following questions: What is this nostalgic past? What does the idea of reconstructing relations forged during slavery as a way of providing enjoyment, pleasure, leisure, and rest tell us about White middle class imagination? This paper is divided into four parts. First, it describes and classifies statues and statuettes of racial types found in the hotel. Second, it presents elements to situate the city's historical background in the larger context of other larger cities. Third, it provides an account of the racialized and gendered imagination embedded in the hotel's offerings of colonial amusements. Finally, it concludes examining racial and class privilege, linking it to the discussion of whether responsible spectatorship is possible (Goldsby, 2006).*

**Key words:** *Sexual/racial stereotypes; leisure; power; representation; violence; statues/statuettes; knowledge*

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### Introduction

“It’s a sexy mammy”, Nego<sup>1</sup> said and laughed, surprised. I believe that the adjective “sexy” may be understood as a difference between how the racial types “mammy” or the “black mother” are represented in Brazil and in the United States (Roberts, 1997; Araújo, 2000; Hall, 1987). The mammy statue took shape in a bright red dress, hair embraced by an equally bright yellow handkerchief, and hands holding a nest with artificial whitish and yellowish flowers. The statue was in the middle of the main congregating area in the hotel where we stayed for a weekend, the same area where food prepared from recipes that go back to earlier times was served. Indeed, instead of a table, the dishes were on an old ox cart. It did not take long, and perhaps motivated by his comment about the statue, a racial perception that was not activated before awoke and other statues became visible to me through a scrutiny of racialization.

In this text, I analyze statues and statuettes of racial types found in a hotel meant to recreate a colonial home in Pirenópolis, a historical city in Goiás state, Brazil, where Nego and I were guests. In addition, I analyze what I call White middle class imagination that deploys racialized and gendered representations as a means through which a trip back to the past is made possible. I ask the following questions: What is this nostalgic past? What does the idea of reconstructing relations forged during slavery as a way of providing pleasure, leisure, and rest tell about my and White Brazilian middle class racial imagination (Morrison, 1992; Araújo, 2000)? I describe the statues, trying to understand the relationship between them and the hotel’s environment. Next,

I discuss the city's historical appeal, linking it to anti-Black racism and Black resistance history in Pirenópolis. Finally, I conclude by discussing my racial perceptions while writing this text, and my and Nego's positionality as guests in the hotel as a way to discuss if it is viable or to what extent it is a viable responsible spectatorship (Goldsby, 2006; Pierre, 2008). I engage in this discussion employing theoretical references common in Black feminist literature, studies of performance, films, as well as perspectives of racialization.

### **The hotel, the garden & the statues**

The hotel where we stayed in Pirenópolis is comprised of a few rustic and small houses built surrounding and facing the garden where the statues and statuettes were located. In the garden, fruitful trees (oranges, mangos, guavas) provided the pleasant shadows where hammocks hang, and nice new cars were parked underneath. Right in the middle of the yard, there was a pool, and a little above it there was a small chapel. In the area where food was served, ancient domestic household utensils and their modern correspondents were carefully displayed on the walls. On the main wall, facing the entrance, there was a mask symbolizing one of the city's Portuguese-inspired festivals (the *Cavalhadas*). Pleasant, almost irresistible appeals for bucolic peace, freshness, and culture were manipulated to reproduce distorted, dehumanized images of Blackness.

On one side of the garden's entrance, there was another statue. This time, it represented a "White pregnant woman" carrying a jar and whose breast was being displayed. Differently from the mammy statues' "artificial" colorfulness, this statue gave me the impression that it was done with a "natural" material. Moreover, there was a distinction between what I call the clothes and her body color, whereas there was no differentiation between the body color and clothes of "the White pregnant woman" statue, which appealed to the "natural," or to an earthy tonality. On the left side of the entrance, there was a third statue, which I call a "mulata" type, but to Nego it was another mammy representation, sculpted in such a way that separated the body color, lighter than the mammy statue, and its dark blue dress (Araújo, 2000; Hall, 1987). The "mulata" statue held a jar as if pouring water on the plants. Actually, all of them were performing actions, which passed the idea that they were workers.

There were two other statuettes representing two "seated Black men in chains," "Uncle Tom" types in the United State or *pretos velhos* (literally: old Black men) in Brazil (Riggs, 1986; Araújo, 2000). The upper parts of the statuettes were naked. A differentiation between clothes and body was made, contrasting white pants to their black bodies. It puzzled me that the chains were the only part of the statuettes that were actual size. In comparison to the other statues, they were far removed from the "main" part of the hotel. They were not even in the garden, as in the case of the "white pregnant woman"

and “mulata” statues. The “seated Black men in chains” statuettes were in the work area and represented “slaves”. The work area was a sugar-cane engine re-creation: the ancient building, tools, equipment, and of course the statuettes represented the plantation regime of production.

The sixth statue in the garden was Nossa Senhora Aparecida, Brazil’s patron saint. It was located in the small chapel, a place for the guests to worship, in the middle of the garden. Nossa Senhora Aparecida is a Black saint. Using the saint’s representation was a stratagem to dissimulate racism. It could be argued that a Black representation in the highest position in the garden eliminates the chances of racism, and in this way, the saint could ‘save’ the garden’s racist design. In this sense, Kia Caldwell points out, the appropriation of African cultural heritage and ancestry has been constantly used to deny racism. African roots are activated in moments when it is convenient and produces benefits and forgotten when it brings negative results to the dominant white Brazilian elite (Caldwell, 2007). In the garden, the saint represented the perfect means to dissimulate racism. There were no other Black people workers or guests at the hotel, besides us.

My assessment of the White middle class imaginary is made, first, by analyzing which kind of tourism and which kind of tourist Pirenópolis attracts. Second, I analyze what are the underpinnings that make the hotel offerings and their consumption for leisure and pleasure violent in racial and gender terms. I start by situating the city’s historical background and its relations to other major cities in context.

### **Pirenópolis’ history**

Pirenópolis is a historical city located in the southwest region of Goiás state in Brazil. It was founded in 1727 during the golden cycle of Portuguese exploitation, which was also a time of colonial settlement expansion consolidating the Brazilian territory. Contemporarily, the city is one of the best examples of colonial historical preservation in the state. Illustrating the historical vocation, in 2002, the Nossa Senhora do Rosário Matrix Catholic Church burned down and the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Patrimony (IPHAN) released \$2.3 million for its restoration (Alves & Fonseca, 2002). The city is geographically situated in between Brasília and Goiânia, two planned cities created for the purpose of developing and populating the country’s interior in 1930-34 and 1955-60, respectively.

Tourism is the third most important economic activity. The other two main economic sectors are agribusiness and quartzite extraction (Alves & Fonseca 2002). Approximately 21,000 people live in Pirenópolis (Pirenópolis Prefeitura website, 2009). Every weekend, the city receives around 3,000-4,000 tourists interested in ecological parks, waterfalls, monuments, and festivals. During the Portuguese inspired celebrations, such as the Cavalhadas, and extended holidays, more than 20,000 people visit the city. The city is also part

of tourist routes. Besides tourists, the city is also famous for attracting hippies, hikers, and street artists.

Since the 1980s, White middle class Brazilians of alternative lifestyle, especially those eager to escape from Goiânia and Brasília's (racial) problems, have moved to Pirenópolis. Interested in this already existing touristic vein, entrepreneurs from Goiânia, Brasília, and other Brazilian cities opened business in the city recently. The increasing number of affluent new residents, ranging from intellectuals to well-established artists to businessmen, does not mean that the families of Portuguese descent are no longer influential. Indeed, there is a symbiotic association between the historical tourism, with its emphasis on colonial heritage, new age spiritualism, and commerce. It also can be said that promoting and maintaining historical tourism demands political and economic influence, which is a patrimony shared by the traditional families of Portuguese descent, whose political strength is everywhere: from architecture, paintings, and books to cuisine, handicrafts, and celebrations. For instance, the Cavalladas are part of the annual Catholic festivals and recreate battles between Christians and Moors that happened in the Iberian Peninsula more than 1,000 years ago. The mobilization around the Catholic Church's restoration mentioned earlier is one of those symbols of political, cultural, and economic influence.

Pirenópolis only became registered as part of the national historic and artistic patrimony in 1989 (Pirenópolis Prefeitura website, 2009). Before that, however, there were efforts by the local government and oligarchy to preserve certain historical buildings. Asymmetries of power based on race can be grasped by facts such as the extinction of the Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos church in the 1960s (Foucault, 1978). As a symbol of resistance, the Black church was constructed exactly opposite to where the recently restored Nossa Senhora do Rosário church lies (which does not have a qualifier, but implies that it was constructed for White residents' worship). The Black church was built from 1943 to 1953 in Baroque style, the only church so carefully ornamented and built. The Black church's description, some paintings, and the altar constitute the preserved memory of the Black church history in the city (Pirenópolis Prefeitura website, 2009). That is, efforts and lack of efforts for historical preservation erased racial oppression and Black resistance, leaving Pirenópolis as if it was a city where only the Portuguese memory was meant to reign sovereign.

The Black church is not the only example of Black resistance in Pirenópolis. Certainly, this text does not do justice to Black history in the town, because part of the sources available to tell the history of the city were found on the government's website, for instance. Furthermore, travel narratives (and ethnographic texts) not only create Blackness and Whiteness, but also constitute a "part of the process through which one aspired to and performed an elite class position" (Nelson, 2007: xiii, 49). In this sense, this text already

sounds like a failed attempt to establish identification with Black people in Pirenópolis. If this is not the case, it at least signals that a political compromise with Blackness may require other forms of political mobilization too.

Nonetheless, as precarious as this narrative may be, it is still possible to imagine a few stories of Black resistance in Pirenópolis. As a matter of illustration, there are stories of people such as Padre Rosa who lived in the beginning of the 20th century. It is said that Padre Rosa was a very smart priest who had a gun, liked alcoholic drinks, played card games and became popularly known for disobeying superior orders coming from the church. He was castigated because of his stubbornness and pride. Currently, people say he makes miracles. There is a Black restaurant in the historical center, named *Pensão do Padre Rosa* in his honor (Tourism in Pirenópolis website, 2009).

Another way to envision or trace a parallel to Black subjectivity in Pirenópolis was through cinema. It is very telling, for instance, that one recent film made by the Black film maker Joel Zito Araújo, *Filhas do Vento*, is about meanings of Blackness, motherhood, roots, migration, Black (extended) family living in a small and ancient town in Brazil's interior that could be Pirenópolis (Araújo, 2005). In the film, so beautifully and carefully done, experiences that at a first glimpse seem particular and geographically specific in truth describe the Diasporic complexities of Black people's lives. The film is about the daughters of thunder and the daughters of wind. The daughters of thunder are the women who decided to live intensely and pleasurably in the town. The women of wind, moved by dreams of becoming artists, left the town.

In the film, both women of thunder and women of wind had to deal with their own ways to live Blackness and the stereotypical images of Blackness (Lee, 2000). For the women who had strong roots in the city, stereotypical representations arrived in their homes through the radio and later on through TV soap operas. The women who had to leave the city to find existential meaning through arts had to perform stereotypical roles in TV soap operas, films, and plays or face professional marginalization. Nonetheless, the film appropriately discusses that the family was built upon such strong ties and values that the stereotypical representations and other dramas, though they impacted the womens' lives, did not overcome their strength, union, and love. Because of the official memory's precariousness narration of Black history in the town, the film offers a perspective that with justice speaks to the lives of resistance and meanings of Blackness that can be inferred are the case of Black people living in Pirenópolis too.

This text certainly will not grasp the full extent and complexity of Black lives in Pirenópolis. Certainly, there is much more about the city than the historical center, which corresponds to a small part of the city. There are rural communities outside the city, and settlements created recently that, according to people living in Pirenópolis, are stigmatized and criminalized. Similarly,

Black people also occupied the historical center successfully as entrepreneurs and residents, as the restaurant *Pensão do Padre Rosa* illustrates. Nonetheless, differentiation between the historical center and the regular commercial center can be made, because the historical center is the part of the city where tourists, mostly White middle class people, visit.

A way to understand this differentiation is comparing products' prices. Walking two streets towards where the city's everyday activities happen (banks, grocery stores, schools, pharmacies, shops) and common residents live, it is possible to find regular prices for goods that can be found in many other cities without historical and cultural appeal. Just as a matter of illustration, in the restaurants where the regular residents go, the same dishes that are offered in the historical center are served in aluminum boxes (self-service) or on plates and cost less. Pirenópolis is racially segregated and symbols of racial oppression are everywhere, like in all other Brazilian cities. Black people living there certainly face the same problems that people of African descent deal with on a regular basis in other places in Brazil. An analysis of racist manifestations in the historical city is just a way to discuss racial oppression. It does not mean that racism and White hegemony is less evident in the larger, so-called modern cities.

Still comparing goods offered in the regular parts of the city and in the historical center, products are overpriced in the places where tourists often visit. Goods offered in the historical center usually belong to the hippie style. There is a monastery in the city where the Catholic Sisters fabricate rugs deploying ancient machineries and techniques appreciated by tourists. It is also possible to find internationally known brands and stores in the city. Dishes, served *à la carte*, considered colonial or regional are very expensive in restaurants located in the historical center.

This section seeks to present background information to understand the basis of racial imagination used to create the garden's motifs rescued from a hegemonic understanding of slavery and media stereotypes. It intends to emphasize that there is White hegemony in the town undermining Black history, in spite of the fact that symbols of Black resistance are legible throughout the city. On the one hand, the text attempts to discuss what may allow the hotel's offer of colonial pleasure; on the other hand, it tries to understand the reasons why tourists choose the hotel.

### **Racial Imagination**

Similarly to what occurs in Brazil, most of the Pirenópolis' residents are Black people, but the "regime of truth" and asymmetries of power normalized the Portuguese memory (Foucault, 1978). A more realistic representation of a colonial farm would include constant worries and concerns about the enslaved people's possible uprising that the colonizer had to face on an everyday basis. It would include recurrent and collective runaways, murder, poisoning and so

on; but the colonial home and the official history of Pirenópolis emphasizes the version of the colonial house's descendents (Araújo, 2000).

Trouillot says that, "historical narratives involve the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such reproduction" (1995: xix). That people have had uneven access to narratives is true of how history is told in all the other Brazilian cities with or without historical touristic appeal. Nonetheless, the hotel in Pirenópolis demands attention because of its explicit and direct connection to slavery, plantations, and colonialism. Similarly intriguing is the fact that the garden was created and the statues put in the garden in a way that recreated a sense of colonial home, and all this symbolism was not seen as dehumanizing or violent by the people who created it. Dehumanizing and violent racial representations were naturalized, corresponding to normality, the unquestionable truth.

The garden and the statues are there as if their existence did not contradict the fact that the hotel was made for pleasure and enjoyment (Morrison, 1992). The "Africanist presence" helps to explain the assumed normalcy that the garden embodies. Morrison says, "the Americans [or in this case, the Brazilians] choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (1990: 17). The hotel's creators talk about themselves through the statues, statuettes, garden, and chapel. They are what they are in relation to what the statues, statuettes, garden, and chapel are imagined to be.

Taking into consideration that the hotel was thought to recreate a colonial home and captive people were also part of that particular colonial home recreation, it can be argued that the sculptures replace what were actual Black women, Black men, and somehow White women's bodies during the golden cycle or plantation regime. It does not necessarily mean that the garden, statues, statuettes, and chapel were created by a White heterosexual man, but that their creation/placement embodies a consciousness that is White masculine and heterosexual and/or thought to be acceptable and pleasant to a general, abstract human being who in Western societies has been epistemologically created as a White, heterosexual, man of European-descent (Goldenberg, 1983; Mills 1997; Butler, 2004).

Considering these elements, the re-creation of the colonial home as proposed by the hotel's creators represents a desire for racial, sexual, class, and gender control. It is also telling that on the restroom and bedroom walls were pictures of the people that would fairly represent the expected ideal guests. The restrooms' doors had pictures of famous European and American White artists. The hotel's creators patrol not only regimes of gender and racial representation/identification by posting White young men and women's pictures on the door, but they also control sexuality defining the two opposite binaries in which guests were supposed to fit, an example of what happens regularly

in other places. In the bedrooms the same pattern is repeated: right above the bed, there are pictures of famous European and American White men and White women, one on each side of the wall, demarcating the race, class, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, and health of the hotel's ideal guests.

The normalizing control proposed by the hotel's creators was never fully achieved since the initial moments of slavery and colonialism. In the hotel, however, this control is simulated by the management of historical recreation, converting it into a commercial product. Nego and I were the only two people of African-descent there, and the absence of other Black people in the hotel as guests and workers testifies to the desire of the hotel's creators to control the scenario and the human exchanges and interactions that could happen in the hotel. The hotel's creators were a family of famous Brazilian country music singers of Portuguese ancestry. The hotel's creators not only could exert ideological supremacy, but also could legitimate themselves as representatives of the colonial order and consequently could sell the hotel for the guests' entertainment.

Speculating about who the tourists are and what their intentions may be, it can be argued that the tourists did not completely embody the features of the ideal guests either. But they approximated it, in that they were usually White middle class Brazilians, coming from the three larger and modern cities in the Southwestern region of Goiás: Anápolis, Goiânia, and Brasília. Another explanation is that the White middle class guests in the hotel did not notice the racist representations or pay attention to them, but unconsciousness or "ignorance" also constitutes racial privilege (Tuana & Sullivan, 2007).

Another possible interpretation is that a nostalgic connection to happiness is created to reify slavery and being a master of slaves. In this sense, to the tourists, the hotel offers an escape from (racial) tensions in the larger cities. The hotel's motifs re-establish the foundational myth of racial democracy, where racial contact is idealized as happening in harmonious exchange, but under the surveillance and control of the White master's consciousness. In this way, the hotel democratically sells the opportunity to be a master of slaves to an abstract subject that theoretically could be anybody, but it is not in concrete terms. The tourist can even recreate or re-imagine her/himself and perform a different role.

Hall (1997), citing Said's concept of orientalism, mentions that representations constitute ways to understand projections of desires, repressions, and investments of those in a position to create representations. In the case of the garden, the statues and the statuettes are the absolute other. Certainly, Black people know and struggle against asymmetries of power in Pirenópolis, which include dehumanizing visual/artistic representations. Nonetheless, understanding orientalism or otherization also includes an analysis of positionality. The following section interrogates our positionalities and to what extent responsible spectatorship is possible (Goldsby, 2006; Pierre, 2008).

**Conclusion: Privileges & Responsible Spectatorship/Viewership**

Racial ignorance is privilege (Tuana & Sullivan, 2007). Thus, to not theorize about the garden would not be the best political strategy. Instead of ignoring that experience, this text is an attempt to engage in the exercise proposed by Pierre, who suggests that “what is most powerful and crucial and therefore ‘activist’ for our research is our conscious deployment of our unique individual and collective positionality toward truly liberatory politics” (2008: 144). In this text, I try to understand and be conscious of my and Nego’s positionalities, knowing that it is also not possible to be conscious all the time or that this consciousness is not always expressed in our positionalities in accurate ways. I try to address some of my conscious privileges as a tourist, which usually overlaps with the privileges of racially lighter-skinned people, and as the travel’s narrator.

In this sense, analyzing my and Nego’s positionalities, I also have to mention that I consider myself a light-skinned Black woman, although my affiliation with Blackness is very often interrogated by myself and other people. It was through affirmative action that I had access to graduate studies in anthropology at a prestigious university in the United States. In my family most people are African descendents, living in working-class communities or in regions where most residents are African people, and they preserve ties with other African Diasporic family members who migrated as undocumented workers to the United States, Spain, and Holland. Nego is an African American man who is writing his dissertation in anthropology in one of the most prestigious American universities. His family has migrated to many different countries in the context of North America and the Caribbean; he is highly educated and an example of upper middle class Black families who preserved ties with diverse Diasporic communities in the Americas and in the African continent.

Knowledge needs systems of classification whose basis is racialized thinking and produces racialization in a retrospective process (Goldenberg, 1983). However, as suggested by Hall, classifying can also be a tool against racism (1997). To classify is to attribute meaning, and naming is a step toward critical analysis of the real possibilities of changing asymmetries of power implicated in knowledge production. I do not believe that there is redemption to my complicity with racism in the hotel, insofar as all of us are compromised/implicated in racism in broader terms.

Nelson (2007) mentions a distinction between Black travelers and White tourists and the paradigmatic example of this distinction is the enslavement of African people and the journey through the Atlantic middle passage (46). Tourists travel “in upper class privileges” and travelers “travel purposefully or of necessity, often in discomfort,” according to Nelson (49). Considering this differentiation between tourists and travelers, it can be said that we fit more the idea of tourists than travelers. But in Nego’s case, despite the fact

of his nationality, class, gender, sexual, age, and educational privileges, it can also said that he came to Brazil during the Brazilian airlines' crisis to visit my family, and he and I stayed in the periphery of Distrito Federal. In Pirenópolis our identity as tourists was evident by the ways we circulated in the city's spaces, although we could blend in with the residents as the interactions amongst us and the city's residents showed.

Along the same lines, right now I am exercising the privilege of being the travel's narrator. I, the tourist, talk about the city's racialization. I construct Blackness and Whiteness and dehumanization in so far as I also engage in the exercise of classifying the statues or in practices of naming that created my understanding of what a dehumanized representation is. And in doing so, I repeat the problems I want to attack. It is important to say that it is highly possible that another Black person would have reacted to the hotel's racial, class, gender, age, violence immediately and undertaken a more activist approach to face the situation. But I do not know what it would look like. In Negro's case, language was also an issue and probably Pirenópolis was not a priority as a place where he could invest his Black activist energy. But this was not my case.

It has been two years since we visited the hotel. Since then I have spent some time trying to understand some of the dynamics of gender, sexual, racial, nationality, and age privilege that our stay in Pirenópolis and in the hotel involved. This text is the primary way I found to address the issue. In doing this exercise of theorizing, I became more conscious of how I constructed race, gender, nationality, class, humanity, age, and health condition, how these shaped my views at that time and now while I am writing. In Pirenópolis, my first attempt to protest was to take pictures. I shot all the places. I carefully examined the best angles, which constitutes a clear example of fetishism, according to Hall (1987). That is, it seemed fine for me to evaluate the statues, to take pictures, and to theorize the hotel, since I authorized myself as someone holding scientific authority, as a graduate student. I took the pictures. It seemed fine if I could evaluate and have them in my records as a scientist. I was authorized to do so, to detach from being an African descendent whose grandmother and mother worked as maids to White families in Brasília. But at that moment it was fine to disconnect myself from my history and be an anthropologist.

While writing I try to present Pirenópolis and Black history there as multiple, complex, and contextualized as I could. However, there may be better or worse politics that can still be figured out. The goal of this paper is to allow the ongoing thinking about what would be a better reaction coming from the witnesses who are also the consumers of racial, gendered, sexual, class, age, and health condition violence embedded in the hotel offerings for leisure and pleasure. During my writing process, I noticed that it became harder to think about the statues as objects and not as actual people. What does that say about

my racial imagination? In *Bamboozled* (2000) the statues of racial and gender types start speaking for themselves. In this sense, imagination and performance in association with studies of racialization can be the means through which humanization and enjoyment of the real become possible. I envision the day when the statues and statuettes will speak for themselves.

## NOTES

1 Nego is a nick name.

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