


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Living Legacies of Slavery: Racism and Racial Acrobatics in North-East Brazilian Puppet Play, 1940–80

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## Abstract

This article probes the racially conflictual plotlines of *mamulengo*, a form of improvised popular puppetry in North-East Brazil. Drawing on a corpus of transcribed shows performed between the 1940s and 1970s, it shows how audacious Black protagonists – often named Baltazar or Benedito – took part in a game of racial ‘acrobatics’. By playing the roles of fools (*bobos*) and aggressors (*desordeiros*), these heroes simultaneously reproduced a racist status quo and offered a spirited and violent resistance to its abuses. While *mamulengo* has never been brought to bear on discussions of race in Brazil, this oft-overlooked form of cultural expression forces us to confront the uncomfortable aspects of race-making and belonging as they are elaborated ‘from below’.

**Keywords:** *mamulengo*; puppet play; North-East Brazil; racial humour; racial acrobatics

## Introduction

In early January 1978, a municipal dentist documented a humorous exchange between a street peddler and a circle of onlookers gathered around the São José Public Market in downtown Recife, North-East Brazil. Rather than touting fantastical curatives or consulting with mystical entities, as itinerant vendors often did, Steel Throat (Garganta de Aço) primed the crowd of marketgoers for a visiting performer from the neighbouring state of Bahia. Having just arrived by bus, Severino dos Santos prefaced his act by explaining that he was working with a dark-black stand-in for his partner. His friend, a hand puppet named Benedito, was waiting for him at the bus terminal along with his suitcase.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Liêdo Maranhão de Souza (1927–2014), a municipal dentist who documented his interactions with market people in an impressive 10,000 pages of diary entries from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, dutifully transcribed the routine. Handwritten diary, *livro 4* (28 Dec. 1977 to 11 March 1978), 11 Jan. 1978, pp. 59–61, Casa da Memória Popular, Olinda, Pernambuco. All translations are by the author, unless otherwise stated.



Santos quipped that the replacement figure, also a black puppet named Benedito, was approximately three times ‘smaller’ than the puppet he was accustomed to (size mattered). The suggestive remark provoked uproarious laughter among his audience of sex workers, mendicants and street vendors. Benedito began by affirming his desire to marry a different woman every hour, who he would feed ‘sausage’ on the evening of their nuptials. Benedito also made it clear that he had no intention of paying obeisance to his new fathers-in-law. He vowed to taunt them as ‘sons of a mare’ (*filhos de uma égua*), a Brazilian expression that might be rendered in English as ‘sons of bitches’.<sup>2</sup> After this opening exchange, Benedito threatened to pull out his penis (*torneirinha*, literally a small faucet) if he could not return to his hotel room immediately.

The ribald, wisecracking puppet who enraptured marketgoers in Old Recife channelled an ethos of irreverent male puppet play well-known throughout North-East Brazil (see Figures 1 and 2). Termed *mamulengo* in the state of Pernambuco, this quintessentially rural form of *brincadeira* (game, joke) was historically practised by and for poor men, most of them Black or mixed-race, on plantations and in small towns and hamlets.<sup>3</sup> In the early decades of the twentieth century, Black trickster figures like Benedito and Baltazar – named, perhaps sarcastically, after two revered Black saints in Afro-Atlantic Catholicism – accompanied rural migrants as they established roots in coastal cities like Recife and João Pessoa.<sup>4</sup> In improvised performances, these impish beings used a combination of wit, suggestiveness and violence in their interactions with a panoply of social types. Imitative of life in the interior and big city, these included policemen, landowners, politicians, philandering bohemians, and teachers. Baltazars and Beneditos even jostled with spectators themselves.

As in Punch and Judy puppetry of the Anglo-Atlantic world, *mamulengo* derived much of its entertainment value from interpersonal violence. However, racial hostility was also an integral part of dramatic storytelling.<sup>5</sup> Black male protagonists were routinely demeaned as scoundrels (*cachorros* and *safados*), boys (*moleques*), imbeciles (*imbecis*) and bandits (*bandidos*) and denied admittance

<sup>2</sup>According to Mauro Mota, this refers to an ‘ordinary, vile subject’ (*sujeito ordinário, vil*). See Mauro Mota, *Os bichos na fala da gente* (Recife: Instituto Joaquim Nabuco de Pesquisas Sociais, 1969), p. 131. Calling someone a ‘mare’ might also refer to a prostitute or sexually promiscuous woman, thus being synonymous with being dubbed a ‘son of a whore’ (*filho de uma puta*). See Bobby J. Chamberlain and Ronald M. Harmon (eds.), *A Dictionary of Informal Brazilian Portuguese with English Index* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1983), p. 193.

It should be remembered that the words analysed here are transcriptions of oral speech pronounced by poor north-easterners. In these challenging texts, the language of puppet artists and their audiences does not always conform to the rules of learned Portuguese, and the ‘precise’ meaning of words and particular turns of phrase are sometimes elusive, as at least one early scholar-transcriber of *mamulengo* found. My translations of surviving transcriptions draw on 18 months of fieldwork in Pernambuco. They are also supplemented by an array of folkloric dictionaries and compilations of aphoristic ‘wisdom’.

<sup>3</sup>In this article, I refer to ‘*mamulengo*’ in the broadest possible sense – that is, as a general variety of popular puppetry common to several states throughout the Brazilian North-East. Thus, I have deliberately chosen not to adopt state-based expressions when describing puppetry in Paraíba (João Redondo or Babau) and Rio Grande do Norte (João Redondo) for reasons of legibility.

<sup>4</sup>Saint Balthazar is revered as the Black magus who gave the infant Jesus a gift of myrrh. Saint Benedict – commonly known as Saint Benedict the African, Benedict of Palermo and Benedict the Moor, among others – was born to enslaved Africans in Italy and was renowned for his works of charity.

<sup>5</sup>Addressing the ‘public secret’ of racial antagonism in *mamulengo* opens the door for future investigations of how differences of class, gender and geography were hashed out in this ludic world in miniature.



**Figure 1.** An Artist and His Hand Puppet Perform outside the Mercado Público de São José in Recife, Pernambuco

Source: Split-frame photograph by Liêdo Maranhão de Souza. Late 1970s. Reg. No. 01111. Casa da Memória Popular. Used with permission.

to community parties to eliminate the special ‘threat’ they posed to respectable (read White) women. The ‘master’ of ceremonies, Captain João Redondo (*redondo* meaning ‘round’ or ‘plump’), a cudgel-toting landowner puppet, could boast that he ‘couldn’t care less about Black men’ (*nêgos*) because his oversized club (*pau*, literally a stick but symbolically a phallus) served as a ‘special medicine’. One self-declared ‘scourge of the Blacks’ (*flagelo dos negros*) spoke of eagerly awaiting a monetary reward for killing his one-hundredth Black man, a reference to colonial and imperial Brazil’s slave catchers (*capitães do mato*), often Black or mixed-race.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>In an episode dubbed ‘The Death of Sergeant Zé Fincão’, performed in Cabedelo, Paraíba, in 1963, the captain declared: ‘A minha volta pra nêgo é por dentro ... Tenho um xarope pra nêgo.’ See Manuel



**Figure 2.** The Same Artist Paints a Baby Doll Dark Black outside the Mercado Público de São José in Recife, Pernambuco

Source: Split-frame photograph by Liêdo Maranhão de Souza. Late 1970s. Reg. No. 01138. Casa da Memória Popular. Used with permission.

Though targets of racist abuse, Black heroes were never passive victims. In north-eastern puppet plays performed across four decades, protagonists' surfeit of bawdy jokes and uncontrolled violence toward aggressors provided a cathartic

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Francisco da Silva, 'The Death of Sergeant Zé Fincão', in Altimar de Alencar Pimentel (transcriber), *O mundo mágico do João Redondo* (Rio de Janeiro: Serviço Nacional de Teatro, 1971), p. 24. The 'scourge of the Blacks', who made an appearance in Chico Daniel's Oct. 1979 performance of 'The Contest of João Goodness (the Scourge of the Blacks)', in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, said he had been 'andando matando nêgo. Já vou matando 99 nêgo. Sube que tinha esse aqui e vim matá-lo.' See Chico Daniel, 'The Contest of João Goodness (the Scourge of the Blacks)', in Deífilo Gurgel (transcriber), *O Reinado de Baltazar: Teatro de João Redondo* (Natal: Fundação Capitania das Artes, 2008), p. 102.

thrill for those living humble lives of deference to the more powerful.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, underutilised transcriptions of live shows reveal that Baltazars and Beneditos often had an ambivalent relationship with the stigma of their colour.<sup>8</sup> At the core of these conflictual dramas is what I term a game of racial ‘acrobatics’. This trading of insults and comebacks recalls the celebrated form of verbal duelling known in the North-East as the *desafio* (or *peleja*). As we shall see, Baltazars and Beneditos oftentimes validated the social ‘truths’ cited in racist harangues. They also appealed to the prejudices that were on plebeian audience members’ ‘minds and tongues’.<sup>9</sup>

Non-White males from the lower classes (*camadas inferiores*) were the most frequent (and perhaps devoted) enthusiasts of north-eastern puppet shows. Still, like the diminutive beings that peered at them from behind makeshift stages and curtains, spectators were sometimes reluctant to self-identify as ‘Black’ (*preto* or *negro*).<sup>10</sup> Common people more likely referred to themselves as ‘Brown’ or ‘mixed’ (*pardo*, *moreno* or *mulato*) to identify with what has been called Brazil’s ‘aspirational’ or ‘virtual’ Whiteness.<sup>11</sup> Its appeal was perhaps strongest in the North-East, where over three and a half centuries (1533–1888) of racial slavery indelibly scarred social relations and worldviews.

This article suggests that puppet play of the mid- to late twentieth century divided Brazil’s racial spectrum not into Black and White, but Black and non-Black. It is hypothesised that popular audiences reckoned themselves safely distant from unruly protagonists’ exaggerated dark complexion and racist stereotyping. To be sure, dark-skinned spectators imaginably assured themselves that they were at least not ‘Black like *that*’, referring to the heroes who fought, murdered, and chased White women as revenge. From a still wider angle, *mamulengo* highlights the braiding of anti-Black and anti-racist discourse before Black (with a capital ‘B’) emerged as a politically salient cornerstone of racial identity after the 1970s and Brazil’s ethnic identity renewal jumpstarted in the 1980s and 1990s. Like many exemplars of plebeian culture, north-eastern puppet play tracked

<sup>7</sup>Hermilo Borba Filho, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo (o teatro popular do Nordeste)* (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1966), pp. 144, 260.

<sup>8</sup>In addition to Borba (1966), Pimentel (1971) and Gurgel (2008), this article examines transcriptions published in José Bezerra Gomes, *Teatro de João Redondo* (Natal: Fundação José Augusto, 1975) and Fernando Augusto Gonçalves Santos (transcriber), *Mamulengo: Um povo em forma de bonecos* (Rio de Janeiro: Edição Funarte, 1979). Gurgel’s 2008 study builds on his 1986 work, *João Redondo: Teatro de bonecos do Nordeste* (Petrópolis: Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, 1986).

<sup>9</sup>A puppet artist interviewed by Izabela Brochado for her 2005 thesis simultaneously affirmed and refuted the suggestion that racially charged words and situations reflected racist beliefs. In his words, *mamulengo* merely ‘show[ed] what [wa]s in people’s minds and on their tongues’. Izabela Brochado, ‘Mamulengo Puppet Theatre in the Socio-Cultural Context of Twentieth-Century Brazil’, PhD diss., Trinity College, Dublin, 2005, p. 328.

<sup>10</sup>In Portuguese, ‘Black’ can be translated as *preto* or *negro*. *Preto* is the historical term used in the census while *negro* has been favoured by Brazil’s Black movements as a political statement of unity.

<sup>11</sup>Patricia de Santana Pinho, ‘Whiteness Has Come Out of the Closet and Intensified Brazil’s Reactionary Wave’, in Benjamin Junge, Sean T. Mitchell, Alvaro Jarrín and Lucia Cantero (eds.), *Precarious Democracy: Ethnographies of Hope, Despair, and Resistance in Brazil* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), pp. 70–2; Elisa Larkin Nascimento, *The Sorcery of Color: Identity, Race, and Gender in Brazil* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007), p. 42.

between reproducing the operating logic of White supremacy and offering a spirited, often violent resistance to its orthodoxies.<sup>12</sup>

### Sources, Methodology and Critique

This article tightens its focus on the racially conflictual dramas that constitute nearly 40 per cent (13) of a larger evidentiary base of 34 live puppet shows. Elite cultural entrepreneurs transcribed and published their accounts over a 40-year period. This untapped body of transcriptions partially illuminates the repertoire of 17 puppet artists who resided in three north-eastern states (Paraíba, Pernambuco and Rio Grande do Norte). Classifying the extant works by instances of physical altercations, verbal slights, racist stereotyping and Black characters' responses to racial aggressions illuminated this pause-worthy vein of commentary. The penultimate section examines the motifs and substance of this smaller subset of plays alongside improvised sung 'duels' (*desafios* or *pelejas*). It shows that racially charged speech-acts also characterised this adjacent – and indeed intertextual – form of expressive culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The fact that analysis draws on textual transcriptions of spontaneous performances requires further explanation. University-educated men (*letrados*) transfigured the orality of plebeian culture into a script, consequently disaggregating a practice in which movement and sound, including speech and music, were complementary. Thus, our evidentiary base is incomplete and unable to divulge, for instance, how puppets spoke or how they communicated non-verbally. These texts are also snapshots of shows that were performed before a singular audience. We will later see that spectators determined the outcome of play by consenting to the puppet artist's programme or by demanding closer adherence to their distinctive tastes. Performers were doubly pressed to satisfy the expectations of elite scribes who thirsted for 'typical' or 'emblematic' episodes at this fountainhead of the 'people's culture' (*cultura do povo*). Finally, hundreds of thousands of performances eluded the written record. One can only speculate as to the kinds of sagas that went unchronicled – racially conflictual and otherwise.

### Mythopoetic Origins and Puppet Artists

The mythopoetic origins of north-eastern puppet play interested early scholars. The accounts of two practitioners and a folklorist – published in 1966, 1971 and 1978, respectively – contended that *mamulengo* emerged in the crucible of plantation

<sup>12</sup>This article draws inspiration from the work of Michel de Certeau (1925–86). In the 1970s, the French Jesuit priest and cultural theorist analysed the miracles Pernambucan peasants imputed to Frei Damião (1898–1997), an Italian-born Capuchin priest. De Certeau's fieldwork in north-eastern Brazil shaped his linguistic approach to 'popular' culture. In his 1984 work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he held that popular culture was the practice of 'playing and foiling the other's game' by utilising 'imposed systems'. Although it is uncertain whether de Certeau watched a *mamulengo* show during his travels, this neglected game illustrates what he called the 'opacity' of plebeian culture. De Certeau's discussion of verbal sparring and word-play also helps one understand similar contests of deception and wit including north-eastern *desafios* and *pelejas*. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 18.

slavery.<sup>13</sup> However, the variant stories collected by folklorist Altimar de Alencar Pimentel (1936–2008) and dramatist Hermilo Borba Filho (1917–76) claimed the honour for two different states. Pimentel's source, a puppet artist from Paraíba, alleged that *mamulengo* originated on a plantation in Bahia's rural interior. However, the famed *recifense* performer Mestre Ginu (Januário de Oliveira, 1910–77) told Borba it was rural Pernambuco. The competing origin stories also diverged over the artistic progenitor's sex. Ginu held that the first performer was an enslaved man named Tião (a shortened form of the name Sebastião) while Pimentel's informant claimed it was an old Black woman.<sup>14</sup> Whatever their location and identity, both accounts agreed that puppet play had a sanctioned space within structures of power. The artist furtively sculpted figurines of humans and animals and used them to rehash scenes of enslavers abusing their human chattel. Rather than punishing the culprit (as his wife wished in Ginu's account), the plantation owner authorised the 'small diversion' (*pequena diversão*).<sup>15</sup>

The first cohort of learned observers and enthusiasts debated *mamulengo*'s genealogy vis-à-vis the Old World. Borba argued that puppet play was a direct descendant of the European *commedia dell'arte*.<sup>16</sup> The noted folklorist João Emídio de Lucena (1912–86), more commonly known as 'Lieutenant' (Tenente) Lucena, acknowledged that *mamulengo* drew together puppet traditions from Europe and Africa, but he maintained that *mamulengo* was quintessentially Brazilian because the practice was forged in slavery.<sup>17</sup> Izabela Brochado, who authored the most detailed study of *mamulengo* in English, hopes that scholars will take the African connection seriously, particularly given remarkable similarities in form and function as well as content, technique and construction. These 'possible links', as Brochado presents them, will certainly deepen and enrich our understanding of the manifold ensembles of 'performing' objects dispersed across the African diaspora.<sup>18</sup>

In the mid- to late twentieth century, north-eastern puppet artists went by many different names. They were variously termed 'puppeteers' (*mamulengeiros*, *calungueiros* or *titeriteiros*), 'players' (*brincantes*) and 'masters' (*mestres*). Hailing from poor families in the countryside and suburbs, boys and young men sometimes contracted what two artists from rural Pernambuco called the lifelong 'passion' or 'vice'

<sup>13</sup>Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 90; Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, pp. 90–4; Humberto Braga, 'Segundo Encontro de Mamulengos do Nordeste', *Mamulengo*, 7 (Dec. 1978), pp. 28–9. Brochado has translated portions of these origin stories. See Izabela Brochado, 'African Puppetry and Brazilian Mamulengo: Possible Links between Symbolic and Material Representations', *Living Objects: African American Puppetry Essays*, 26 (2019), pp. 1–3.

<sup>14</sup>Manuel da Silva divulged that a plantation owner called João Redondo lent his name to both the practice and its puppet leader of ceremonies. Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup>Borba's 1966 study of Pernambucan *mamulengo* also included the story communicated to Pimentel, which was first published in the programme of Cabedelo's Noite Folclórica do Terceiro Congresso de Crítica e História Literária in 1963. Pimentel also included this vignette in his 1971 study. See Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 8; Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, pp. 93–4.

<sup>16</sup>Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, pp. 78–9.

<sup>17</sup>Braga, 'Segundo Encontro de Mamulengos do Nordeste', pp. 28–9.

<sup>18</sup>Brochado, 'African Puppetry and Brazilian Mamulengo'. For a seminal study of 'performing' objects, see Frank Proschan, 'The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects', *Semiotica*, 47: 1–4 (1983), pp. 3–46.

(*vício*) of puppet play.<sup>19</sup> Spellbound and gape-mouthed, they marvelled at the thrashings inflicted by and upon the diminutive beings in this enchanted play world. For many, what occurred in small booths and behind makeshift curtains mimicked reality. As a young man, Mestre Solon, born Solon Alves de Mendonça (1920–87), remembered being both ‘enthusiastic and astonished’ and deeply ‘horrified [by] how [the puppets] killed each other’. For him ‘everything was alive’.<sup>20</sup>

At some point during what might be likened to an apprenticeship, the master puppeteer invited their student to perform solo. The occasion must have been as nerve-racking as it was exhilarating. Most of them holders of daytime jobs – such as truck drivers, carpenters and fieldhands<sup>21</sup> – neophytes and seasoned artists alike undoubtedly spent countless nights thinking up and refining their routines. It is easy to imagine them carving, repairing and clothing their dolls as well as envisaging new storylines to try with audiences. The night (or day) before a performance could be daunting, but it seems to have also been auspicious for creative energies. Pacing about one’s small plot of land or perhaps dreaming beneath the stars, time for contemplation and introspection was generative, even magical, to the point that it seems to have been a kind of ritual for many performers.<sup>22</sup> On the evening of a performance, taking liberal gulps of sugarcane-based spirits perhaps quelled artists’ nerves and offered a spirited push through several hours of continuous play, sometimes as many as eight.<sup>23</sup> The most reserved puppet artists like Antônio Biló and José Petronilo Dutra drew energy from the electric atmosphere of a *mamulengo* show. Both underwent what Borba and puppet artist and researcher Fernando Augusto Gonçalves Santos (1947–2022) judged a complete ‘transfiguration’ (*transfiguração*).<sup>24</sup> It was as if a spirit had taken hold of them.

Novices began coming into their own once they secured their own puppet. The requisite object itself was costly, however. Mestre Zé de Vina spent three years working alongside another master to save enough money to purchase a puppet. Ginu borrowed 5,000 réis to purchase a female doll from his deceased teacher and mentor.<sup>25</sup> Some puppeteers who produced their own dolls attained fame as sculptors. Mestre Luiz da Serra, who resided in a smaller city located 46 kilometres to the west of Recife, supplied puppet artists with incalculable numbers of dolls. In the late 1970s, he estimated producing somewhere around 1,000 puppets during his lifetime. However, Santos observed that Luiz da Serra would have been more famous as a sculptor of saints (*santeiro*).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup>See the testimonies of Mestre Luiz da Serra and Mestre Zé de Vina (1940–2021), in Santos, *Mamulengo*, pp. 64 and 70.

<sup>20</sup>Mestre Solon recalled: ‘eu fiquei entusiasmado e impressionado quando eu vi os bonecos batendo um no outro. Pensei que tudo aquilo era vivo. Porque via eles brigando, dando cacetada um no outro. Virge! Eu fiquei horrorizado com aquilo. Como é que se matava, porque para mim tudo aquilo era vivo.’ Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 114.

<sup>21</sup>Composite biographical data, albeit limited, can be gleaned from the works of Borba, Gomes, Gurgel, Pimentel and Santos.

<sup>22</sup>See Borba’s characterisation of José Petronilo Dutra in *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, p. 177. See also Santos’ profile of Ginu in *Mamulengo*, pp. 108–9.

<sup>23</sup>Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 92; Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, p. 177.

<sup>25</sup>Santos, *Mamulengo*, pp. 69 and 106.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.



Since they could be used in small acts of hustling such as ventriloquism, it comes as no surprise that some puppets were acquired in duplicitous ways. Manuel Amendoim, whose nickname evoked his peanut-like physique, told Borba he acquired a *mamulengo* – and presumably its puppets – after ‘subduing’ (*abafando*, literally smothering or suppressing) a partner for whom he initially worked as an assistant.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps intending to try their hand at puppetry (or merely wanting to sell it), someone stole a puppet belonging to Ginu, twentieth-century Recife’s most famous *mamulengueiro*. In an exchange with fellow puppet artist and researcher Santos, Ginu alleged that the thief returned the doll because he thought it caused him to get sick.<sup>28</sup>

Ginu revealed much about the public persona of a renowned puppet artist. Borba admirably characterised this one-eyed performer as a ‘pernicious, talkative [...] teller of rough tales’.<sup>29</sup> A brazen philanderer (*mulherengo*), Ginu estimated that he had ‘somewhere’ between 45 and 62 children resulting from liaisons with some 47 women. Perhaps to exaggerate the shrinking supply of available women, he told Santos that one of his partners, a beautiful ‘Brown’ woman (*morena*), turned out to be one of his daughters.<sup>30</sup> Luiz da Serra also admitted that he could not give an accurate count of how many children he had but suspected that he fathered around 46.<sup>31</sup>

It is not unthinkable that puppet artists fathered legions of children throughout the North-East. Their primary occupations followed the ebbs and flows of inter- and intra-regional migration. Even so, the testimonies of Ginu and Luiz da Serra capture the hyperbolic exuberance of artists who lived their lives in the spirit of their puppets. Invoking musician Luiz Gonzaga’s (1912–89) renown as the ‘King of the Baião’, a rural music and dance genre, Ginu often anointed himself ‘King of the North-Eastern Mamulengo’ as well as its ‘artistic director’. Despite his showy eponym, as Borba pointed out, this sovereign of puppet play gave modest shows. In lieu of a decorated stage, Ginu used a sheet affixed to wire or string.<sup>32</sup> Technical sophistication did not guarantee renown just as celebrity did not mean that artists would not die in poverty, as Ginu did in 1977, overcome by poor health and abandoned by Brazil’s cultural organs.<sup>33</sup>

### Social Condition and Colour in a ‘Theatre of Laughter’

*Mamulengo* is a ‘theatre of laughter’ comprised of broadly legible social types.<sup>34</sup> Historical photographs and retired puppet specimens exhibited at cultural

<sup>27</sup>Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, p. 146.

<sup>28</sup>Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 113. Ginu originally had many puppets, but Recife’s catastrophic flood of 1975 destroyed all but 25 of them. See *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup>Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, p. 111.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111; Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 107. Borba interviewed Ginu in the early 1960s, and Santos did so in the late 1970s. In Santos’ account, the puppeteer initially said that he had 72 children. In the same interview (or sequence of interviews), this number shrunk to 45. Borba wrote that Ginu fathered 72 children with 47 mothers.

<sup>31</sup>Luiz da Serra indicated that 28 was a more accurate figure since it reflected the number of children who were living and whom he had met. Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 85.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 107; Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup>Ginu: ‘Um mamulengueiro de valor que morreu sem glória’, *Diário de Pernambuco*, 25 Dec. 1977, p. A-10.

<sup>34</sup>Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, p. 257.

institutions such as Pernambuco's Museu do Mamulengo present a lurid coterie of such figures. These include landowners, industrialists, politicians, physicians, attorneys, musicians, debutantes, fieldhands, flirts and the mentally ill. Brochado has shown how *mamulengo* puppets communicate through a system of 'figurative codes', which denote figures' social locations through colour, size, clothing, gestures and sounds.<sup>35</sup> Obstinate Black male heroes, typically named Baltazar or Benedito, sometimes wore the simple clothing of a rural labourer (*peão*). Like all social subordinates, they were also physically smaller than their social superiors who, like landowners, were usually much larger. For Pimentel, the predictable victories of these tiny but quick-witted and intrepid underlings recalled the biblical encounter between David and Goliath.<sup>36</sup>

When contemplating *mamulengo* puppets, one is immediately struck by a discernible grotesqueness. Figures' heads dwarf their petite trunks, and their arms are appreciably shorter than one would expect given their exaggerated slenderness. Because their bodies are so small, the eyes are drawn to their heads and faces, which often exhibit protruding noses, missing (and sometimes golden) teeth, elongated eyes, serious brows and unnaturally broad mouths. During a play performed in Paraíba in 1968, one puppet named Mr (Seu) Fuá addressed his strange appearance. He explained that a rough ride in the 'parrot's perch' – a flatbed truck used to transport migrant workers in the rural interior – left him with disproportionate facial features.<sup>37</sup> While erudite observers variously typified them as 'rustic', 'primitive' and even 'figurative', artists clarified that their puppets were intentionally 'ugly'.<sup>38</sup> As Ginu once put it, in *mamulengo* there was 'no use in being a cute doll' as beauty did not appeal to the audience. Puppets that were 'really ugly' (*feio mesmo*) succeeded at making the 'most serious spectator' laugh.<sup>39</sup>

Our understanding of puppets' skin colour lags far behind their assembly and kinetics. At first glance, surviving puppets seem to mirror Brazil's radical racial fluidity by capturing hues that range from beige and paper white to earthen and even purple colours.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, Baltazars' and Beneditos' mono-pigmentary and unmixed palette – 'dark black' (*preto mesmo, preto preto or preto retinto*) in colloquial Portuguese – produces a visually restricted grammar of Blackness (see Figure 3).

This more inclusive non-Blackness and more restrictive sort of Blackness might be explained in two ways. First, the exaggerated darkness of characters who enacted colour-based stereotypes likely helped non-White audiences distinguish themselves

<sup>35</sup>Brochado, 'Mamulengo Puppet Theatre', p. 225.

<sup>36</sup>Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup>Luis Barbosa dos Santos, 'The Punishment of Baltazar', in *ibid.*, p. 177. The term might also refer to a method of torture. See Jane-Marie Collins, 'Parroting the Past: Historical Continuity and Change through Cultures of Cruelty in Brazil', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 24: 3 (2018), pp. 341–65.

<sup>38</sup>Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 2; Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, p. 254; Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 159.

<sup>39</sup>Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 110.

<sup>40</sup>See the sequence of photographs included in Brochado, 'Mamulengo Puppet Theatre', pp. 193–319. See also Steve Tillis, *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* (New York: Greenwood, 1992); Proschan, 'The Semiotic Study of Puppets'. For Brochado's brief discussion of colour, see 'Mamulengo Puppet Theatre', pp. 244–5.



**Figure 3.** Detail of the Puppet Benedito, Produced by Mestre Luiz da Serra of Vitória de Santo Antão, Pernambuco

Source: Museu do Mamulengo – Espaço Tiridá. Olinda, Pernambuco. Photograph by the author.

from the boisterous protagonists. Put differently, Black and ‘Brown’ spectators might concede that while they were ‘not White’, they were certainly not ‘Black’ – both in terms of conduct and their physiognomies – like Baltazar or Benedito. This hypothesis is supported by the notion that a significant number of Brazilians historically self-identified as *‘pardo’* rather than *‘preto’*, a pattern that continues well into the twenty-first century.<sup>41</sup> Second, one might speculate that black puppets functioned as masks that enabled artists and audiences alike to flee the vicissitudes of everyday life. Pimentel hypothesised that Paraíba puppet

<sup>41</sup>The 1950 census first decoupled these racial categories.

artists employed Baltazars and Beneditos as ‘alter-egos’ to exact ‘revenge’ against the violent tenets of the dominant classes.<sup>42</sup>

Before turning to the racially conflictual dramas that form the analytical backbone of this article, readers must imagine what it would have been like to bear witness to a *mamulengo* show. A *recifense* journalist cautioned that north-eastern puppet play differed substantially from bourgeois theatre. Plebeian audiences did not merely ‘watch’ *mamulengo*; they vigorously ‘live[d] it’.<sup>43</sup> Inbuilt notions of interactivity and improvisation make *mamulengo*, in the anthropologist and folklorist Frank Proschan’s useful terms, a rich site of ‘co-creation’.<sup>44</sup> This fecund but potentially volatile dialectic between performer and audience made puppet play unruly. Alcohol flowed abundantly and spectators shouted at the miniscule beings on stage. This required performers to be deft in their handling of interventions so a basic degree of artistic control could be maintained. Artists also had to satisfy the public’s expectations. We have already seen that ugliness was a requisite part of puppets’ visual characteristics. De Vina, founder of the group Happiness of the People (Alegria do Povo), in 1979 shared that improvised plots needed to encompass lively ‘stories of fighting ... [and] of struggle’.<sup>45</sup> Humiliating interpersonal violence – both physical and psychic – is perhaps the most prosaic element of puppet shows. To be sure, across the 34 episodes analysed here, 45 characters were beaten, flogged and stabbed. Female characters were spared from being murdered (unlike seven men) but were targets of thrashing and whipping.<sup>46</sup>

### The Fool Who Deceives: Crashing Captain Redondo’s Party

After a musical prelude or jokes, Redondo announced the protagonist’s arrival: ‘Now I am going to call the puppet that everyone likes most, [in terms of his] funniness and struggle, the Black man, Baltazar.’<sup>47</sup> Bearing vague marks of ruralness – such as a straw or leather hat – yet often lacking a specified occupation, the dark-black protagonists arrived with much whooping and laughter. As representatives of the ‘inferior strata’ (*camadas inferiores*), their names may vary but their character attributes and flaws remain the same. Whether called Baltazar, Benedito or even Gregório, the pint-sized figure was a fool (*bobo*) and troublemaker (*desordeiro*).

The Black protagonist assumed the role of a clown or fool in six of our transcribed episodes.<sup>48</sup> Simple-minded and sometimes crass, the *bobo* frequently gave

<sup>42</sup>Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 6. Since puppet artists’ colour was never explicitly documented in formal studies of *mamulengo*, I refer readers to the photographs included in the works of Borba, Gurgel and Santos. It remains uncertain, of course, how they self-identified in terms of race.

<sup>43</sup>Maria do Carmo Barreto Campello de Mello, ‘Mamulengo – janela rústica aberta para o sonho’, *Jornal do Commercio*, 2 (25 Nov. 1965), p. 6.

<sup>44</sup>Frank Proschan, ‘Co-Creation of the Comic in Puppetry’, in Dina Sherzer and Joel Sherzer (eds.), *Humor and Comedy in Puppetry: Celebration in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1987), pp. 30–46. Brochado also adopts this analytical framework. See ‘Mamulengo Puppet Theatre’, pp. 344–71.

<sup>45</sup>Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 71.

<sup>46</sup>This number refers to acts inflicted upon single characters. If one were to count the number of times single characters were beaten or whipped, this value would be substantially higher.

<sup>47</sup>Chico Daniel, ‘The Misadventures of Baltazar and João Redondo’s Journey’, in Gurgel, *João Redondo*, p. 73.

<sup>48</sup>Of the 34 episodes analysed here, 21 include a Black protagonist.

literal and suggestive answers to riddles and tested more 'serious' characters' patience. Liêdo Maranhão de Souza, the long-time observer of life around Recife's São José Public Market, wrote down an exchange between a performer named Inaldinho and Benedito in November 1975. The mischievous puppet amused nearby sex workers and street vendors with his nonsensical answers to a series of questions posed by his human manipulator. Inaldinho asked where Benedito had been born, and the puppet replied, 'in the bed'. The performer enquired about the puppet's geographic origins (*natural*), which Benedito understood as a question about how he liked his water ('*natural*' as in still water). The headliner finally revealed that he had been born in the state of Bahia but later rattled off a sequence of confused demonyms, declaring that someone from the northern state of Piauí was a *piolhento* (someone infested with lice), someone from Pará was a *paralítico* (a paralysed person), and someone from China was a *chinelo* (slipper).<sup>49</sup>

As we shall see below, the *bobo* did not exist independently of the troublemaker. A string of ten episodes documented by the folklorist Deífilo Gurgel (1926–2012) in 1970s Rio Grande do Norte suggested that both images were two sides of the same coin. The first episode featured Redondo poking fun at Baltazar's simple-mindedness. The protagonist shared a rambling story about being lost in the rural interior. As in Inaldinho's routine in Recife, Baltazar confused common words and could not distinguish between a train station (*estação*) and dental 'extraction' (*extração*). Amused, but perhaps also moved by pity, the captain acknowledged that Baltazar's naïveté was characteristic of a broader – and, surprisingly, untraced – class of country people (*matutos*) who he believed 'never sp[oke] correctly'.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere in the multipart spectacle, Baltazar tested the patience of authority figures, beginning with a serious-minded teacher from Rio de Janeiro who arrived to teach poor people how to read. Baltazar agreed to study with 'Professor Master' Guedes but delivered insults and sexual jokes during his lessons.<sup>51</sup> Baltazar later visited a priest because he decided he wanted to get married, a common plot. Although he confessed to knowing nothing about religion, Baltazar saw an opportunity to pose humorous riddles. The exchange culminated with Baltazar asking the cleric why old men 'smelled bad'. Initially taken aback by the question, the priest explained that elderly people were sometimes too infirm to take a bath. Baltazar corrected him, explaining that they 'carr[ied] two fetid balls and a dead dick'.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup>Liêdo Maranhão de Souza, *Classificação popular da literatura de cordel: Marketing dos camelôs de remédio ou o mundo de camelotagem* (Recife: Cepe Editora, 2013), pp. 221–2.

<sup>50</sup>In Daniel's 'Misadventures', Redondo complained: 'Eu num gosto de lutar com gente matuta, não, que gente matuta nunca fala direito.' See Daniel, 'The Misadventures of Baltazar', pp. 64–160. *Mamulengo's* Black protagonists were not necessarily sympathetic to country people. See Benedito's exchange with a hearing-impaired rural peasant (*campesino*) in Manuel José Lucas, 'The Son Who Hit His Mother', in Gurgel, *João Redondo*, pp. 78–80.

<sup>51</sup>Chico Daniel, 'Professor Master Guedes', in Gurgel, *João Redondo*, pp. 140–6. In the north-eastern state of Rio Grande do Norte, nearly 44 per cent of those aged ten and older were illiterate in 1980. Alceu R. Ferrari, 'Analfabetismo no Brasil: Tendência secular e avanços recentes (resultados preliminares)', *Caderno de Pesquisas*, 52 (Feb. 1985), p. 40.

<sup>52</sup>In Daniel's episode 'Baltazar's Marriage', the protagonist corrected the priest: 'Nada disso. O velho fede, porque carrega dois ovos podre e um pinto morto.' Chico Daniel, 'Baltazar's Marriage', in Gurgel, *João Redondo*, p. 154.

In the preceding examples, Black protagonists enacted stereotypes of ignorance and vulgarity. Yet their antics were strategic acts of *playing* the fool rather than being one. This act of subterfuge (*trapaça*) was perhaps appealing because it prevented Baltazars and Beneditos from being treated disapprovingly. To be sure, their behaviour confirmed what Brazilians already knew to be 'true' about Black actors. The act thus comes into view as a defensive strategy that plebeian spectators certainly used at various points in their lives, perhaps to diminish the rage of a plantation or factory foreman or even a police officer. Feigning stupidity was far safer than adopting the tactics of the next avatar, the troublemaker (*desordeiro*), whose belligerence and daring was suicidal for all but the most audacious of the *povo*.

Ten transcribed performances revolve around the figure of the troublemaker. This hot-blooded bully refused to act deferentially and often had a thirst for vengeance. In half of these vignettes, the initial conflict involved the Black protagonist being blocked from attending dances hosted and overseen by Redondo. The exclusion mirrored the racist belief that, if admitted, Black men would pick fights and cause a general disturbance.<sup>53</sup> As we shall see, this prohibition tracks deeper concerns about contact between White females and Black men.

Predictably, Baltazars and Beneditos invited themselves to communal gatherings, thus generating the conflict essential for dramatic storytelling. In an undated performance by Amendoim (also known as Babau) in rural Pernambuco, Benedito instigated a sequence of conflicts by first threatening a swaggering philanderer named Girls' Joe (Zé das Moças). Zé told a young woman that she should only dance with White men like himself. A fuming Benedito beat and eventually killed his rival.<sup>54</sup> A cycle of assaults began anew after another partygoer – a plantation owner from Lapa – reprimanded Benedito for kissing his daughter. The audience dared the protagonist to kiss the young woman again, which he did without hesitation. The father warned his daughter to 'join a White man, but never a ...', stopping midsentence, seemingly unable to utter the word 'Black' (*negro*). At a spectator's urging, Benedito beat him, too.<sup>55</sup>

In mid-century Brazil, the topic of interracial sociability, including romance, was also grist for the scholarly mill. In his 1956 study of race relations in Recife, the anthropologist René Ribeiro (1914–90) drew the curtains on the gossip, polite affability and socio-economic restrictions that oversaw interactions across lines of colour and class. He discredited the common, if 'vulgarised', belief that Black men were dangerously infatuated with White women.<sup>56</sup> Surveying high-school and university students, invariably upper class, presented clear evidence of racist attitudes

<sup>53</sup>This belief is captured in the oft-cited expression that a 'Black man at the party [takes] a club to the forehead'. Other racist sayings can be found in Paulo de Carvalho Neto, *El folklore de las luchas sociales: Un ensayo de folklore y marxismo* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1973), p. 113; José Pérez, *Provérbios brasileiros* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora de Ouro, 1969), p. 86.

<sup>54</sup>Manuel Amendoim, 'Benedito's Tricks', in Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, pp. 155–61. Borba wrote that he gave the episode this title.

<sup>55</sup>The father warned: 'Minha fia, a senhora se ajunte com homem branco, mas não se ajunte com home ...' *Ibid.*, pp. 162–3.

<sup>56</sup>René Ribeiro, *Religião e relações sociais* (Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Educação e Cultura, Serviço de Documentação, 1956), p. 110.

in his majority non-White city. While Ribeiro's subjects insisted that they were amenable to having Black friends and neighbours, they were reluctant, if not outright opposed, to having Black relatives by marriage.<sup>57</sup> Ribeiro noted that female interviewees were significantly less tolerant of Black and mixed-race people. One 17-year-old girl divulged that she feared Black men 'because of the complex they have ... and the harm they do'. She added that she would expel Black and mixed-race Brazilians if given the opportunity.<sup>58</sup>

Ribeiro similarly broached the topic of Brazil's customary – rather than legal – segregation. Non-White persons were historically barred from associations and clubs, some public spaces, and other establishments owing to an alleged propensity for poor conduct. Ribeiro acknowledged that this pattern of exclusion was camouflaged because one could argue that actors' improper dress code, level of culture, and general comportment – rather than their colour – justified their non-admittance.<sup>59</sup> In the case of public and private dances, Black *recifenses* shared how they went to great lengths to 'avoid unpleasant incidents', particularly while in the company of White women. They reportedly approached them only if they had been properly introduced.<sup>60</sup>

The Black heroes of *mamulengo* presented a striking contrast to the level of prudence observed by Ribeiro. These impetuous beings aggressively defied convention and attacked restrictions on their freedom. Several manifestations of these characters struck pre-emptively against public authorities and representatives of the captain, although not usually the master of ceremonies himself. Hot-headed and eager to demonstrate their strength and stubbornness (*teimosidade*), Baltazars and Beneditos made emphatic declarations of their violent predispositions in laudatory prologues (*loas*). Banned from the captain's dance, one Benedito warned Redondo that 'Blacks (*nêgos*) [were] a good group' because they did not 'promise anything ... they [gave] it right away'.<sup>61</sup> In an undated show performed in Paraíba, Benedito swooped in and stole 'Doctor' Mané Relojo's dance partner. The enraged reveller struck Benedito after calling him a 'Black thief (*nêgo bandido*) and a 'Black disgrace' (*nêgo desgraçado*). The protagonist demanded 'respect' and did not object to being called a thief, but a *Black* thief.<sup>62</sup> Benedito ultimately killed his challenger and, after trying to frame a musician for the crime, accepted his fate. Professing Blackness on his own terms, he mused that 'Black men only [had] one word ... a hand on the ear and a knife in the stomach'. Benedito then tried to 'sell' the corpse as fresh meat to the audience.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup>See tables 1, 1-A, 4, 12 and 13 in *ibid.*, Chapter 4.

<sup>58</sup>The subject said she would reject the advances of a Black man 'por causa do complexo que eles têm, e assim fazem o mal'. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>59</sup>In Thales de Azevedo's and Roger Bastide's studies, Black and Mulatto informants indicated a deliberate avoidance of spaces where they were not welcome. See Thales de Azevedo, *As elites de cor: Um estudo de ascensão social* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1955), pp. 72–3 and 146–7; Roger Bastide, *Relações raciais entre negros e brancos em São Paulo* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1959), p. 223.

<sup>60</sup>Ribeiro, *Religião e relações sociais*, pp. 144–5.

<sup>61</sup>Benedito asserted that 'Nêgo é uma classe muito boa. Não promete, dá logo.' Manuel José Lucas, 'The Son Who Hit His Mother', in Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 74.

<sup>62</sup>Paulo Vitorino Monteiro, 'The Cost of Marriage', in Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, pp. 120–1.

<sup>63</sup>Benedito asserted: 'Eu sou home. Nêgo não promete não: dá é logo! A palavra de nêgo só é uma. É mão no pé-de-ouvido e faca no bucho.' *Ibid.*, p. 121.

In December 1963, Benedito killed a tyrannical officer of the law in Paraíba. Sergeant Joe Fincão (Cabo Zé Fincão) shut down the dance just as Benedito arrived. He explained that Black men were banned from dancing at the venue.<sup>64</sup> An enraged Benedito countered that he was ‘in charge ... Me! Benedito de Lima, ladies’ clove and girls’ rosemary!’ Benedito dared Fincão to shoot him with his oversized revolver before wresting the gun away from the officer and thrusting a large knife into him.<sup>65</sup> The episode culminated with the hero offering to serve Redondo as a ‘criminal’ (*criminoso*) for hire. Having observed the murder from a safe distance, the landowner shook his head and complained that ‘Black men [were] really wrong’. Benedito accepted being ‘really wrong’ but also ‘resilient’, boasting that he ‘won the war’ by killing the officer.<sup>66</sup>

Baltazar antagonised the sergeant, but did not kill him, in a confrontation that occurred over a decade later, in 1979. In this version of the encounter, the protagonist squared off with Fincão not because he was barred from attending the dance, but because the owner of the performance venue failed to obtain the proper ‘authorisation’ from the police.<sup>67</sup> Speaking in the informal second person, Baltazar warned the officer not to ‘play’ with him. Fincão ordered the ‘boy’ (*moleque*) to surrender (*render-se*). Baltazar the aggressor revealed his inner fool by interposing a joke in an otherwise tense moment. Thinking the officer was referring to a physically deformed person (*rendido*), he shared that he had once taken pity on a ‘herniated’ Black man (*negro rendido*).<sup>68</sup> Fincão’s insults became more unequivocally racial after Baltazar attacked him. He warned the ‘bothersome Black man’ (*nêgo da mulesta*) that he would ‘teach him a lesson’ if he only had his knife. Ever defiant, Baltazar countered that Fincão had no authority at the dance before beating the sergeant and running him off the stage.<sup>69</sup>

Black *desordeiros*’ belligerent manoeuvring suggests that these characters identified with, and perhaps aimed to displace, more powerful figures. In two instances, these protagonists engaged in a revealing game of mimicry where they parroted – but also mixed up – their superiors’ words for humorous effect. In Manuel Francisco da Silva’s 1963 episode ‘The Death of Zé Fincão’, Benedito and Redondo delivered virtually identical self-introductions. Appearing first, the landowner boasted that he was a ‘beast that never die[d]’ and did not fear mortals. He warned of gratuitous violence by invoking a club to the head, ‘phlegm running, and

<sup>64</sup>The antagonist asserted: ‘Nêgo aqui não dança . . . A vorta [volta] aqui é pro dentro que nem pavio de vela.’ Silva, ‘The Death of Sergeant Zé Fincão’, in Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 33.

<sup>65</sup>Benedito retorted: ‘Quem manda aqui nessa pitomba sou eu. E eu! Benedito de Lima, cravo das moças, alecrim das meninas!’ He later taunted: ‘Toca, toca. Tá com medo? Você tá com medo, tá?’ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–9.

<sup>66</sup>João Redondo likened Blacks’ ‘wrongness’ to their hair and grilled tapioca: ‘O cabelo do negro é mesmo que tapioca no taboleiro, viu? O negro é muito errado.’ Benedito responded: ‘Eu sou errado, mas tem uma coisa. A guerra quem venceu foi eu e o soldado eu tirei do mundo, não sabe? Eu sou muito errado e raçudo.’ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>67</sup>Gurgel, *João Redondo*, pp. 52–3. Puppet artists related confrontations with municipal authorities, including police officers and fiscal agents (*fiscais*). Manuel Amendoim told Borba that a police officer became upset because the artist presented a character bearing his name. Borba, *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo*, p. 147. Antônio Biló denounced local police stations for demanding – literally ‘eating’ (*comendo*) – bribes. Santos, *Mamulengo*, p. 61.

<sup>68</sup>José Soares de Assis, ‘The Authority of Sergeant Zé Fincão’, in Gurgel, *João Redondo*, pp. 52–5.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*



these kids with swollen bellies licking' their wounds. Benedito delivered the same impassioned preamble twice, but he included a small personal touch the second time. Instead of mentioning ill children (swollen stomachs are classic symptoms of parasites), he said that he would force his enemies to swallow their phlegm.<sup>70</sup>

In August 1964, Benedito and Redondo engaged in a striking power struggle. The protagonist daringly mocked the landowner after he tried to expel Benedito from the dance venue. Redondo ordered the human musician to remove Benedito. Mocking the captain's order, the troublemaking attendee turned to the musician and told him to send the captain away. The outraged captain demanded to know if Benedito was mocking him ('*nêgo você tá me arremando é?*'). Like the fools examined above, Benedito humorously confused the words for imitation (*arremendendo*) and mending or patching (*remendendo*). Consequently, he asked the captain whether he was 'patching [him] up'. Redondo repeated his claim that any 'place where Blacks play[ed]' was 'no good'.<sup>71</sup> Benedito head-butted the landowner and threatened to break everything if Redondo's dance proceeded as planned. The enraged captain then flung humiliating racist maxims at the protagonist to break his resolve.<sup>72</sup>

This particularly confrontational incarnation of Benedito exhibited the same level of aggression toward a partially deaf man who appeared at a dance. This stranger, named Mané Braz, answered Benedito's increasingly hostile questioning with nonsensical statements. When Benedito demanded to know his name (*nome*), Braz answered that he was not hungry (*com fome*). The protagonist reproduced the humiliation he experienced as a Black man by telling Braz he was not welcome at the dance and then beating him.<sup>73</sup> Benedito's treatment of Braz revealed that, in a world where authority and violence were coterminous, the 'big' abused the 'small' on all rungs of the social ladder.

### Cunning, Deceit and the Price Paid for Black-White Marriages

We have already seen that Black male protagonists were excluded from White dances to prevent romantic relationships. Two episodes stand out for their creative imaginings of how a Baltazar or Benedito could win over not just any White woman, but Redondo's daughter, as well as what this marriage would look like. In the first instance, performed in Rio Grande do Norte in the 1940s, Baltazar de Sousa Miguel decided that he wanted to marry Minervina de Morais.<sup>74</sup> In line with many other plays, the protagonist was arrested at the captain's dance. Rather than resisting or otherwise escalating conflict, Baltazar conferred with an attorney (implying that he had money) to secure his release. Ever more determined

<sup>70</sup>João Redondo and Benedito both declared that they were a 'bicho que nunca morreu e nem tem medo de quem morre, bicho de tampa e rampa, o cabelo é pouco e não aguenta grama, pisa no chão a tapioca alevanta. Aqui é nove ou noventa, é o couro da testa e o pau da venta, é o pau batendo e o catarro correndo.' While the former referenced 'esses meninos sambudos lambendo', the latter simply mentioned 'o catarro correndo e mandando engulir'. Silva, 'The Death of Sergeant Zé Fincão', pp. 23–4 and 31.

<sup>71</sup>The captain complained that any 'luga qui nêgo brinca não presta'. Manuel Francisco da Silva, 'The Son', in Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, p. 73.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 74–5.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 96–9.

<sup>74</sup>The transcriber dubbed Dantas' play 'representative'. Gomes, *Teatro de João Redondo*, pp. 32–50.

to woo Minervina, Baltazar hatched a plan and implored the captain's second-in-command to tell her that he was 'not Black' and in fact had a 'stable colour' (*cor segura*). Minervina learned that a wealthy 'brunette' or 'tan' man (*moreno*) arrived from the South to find beautiful women in the North-East. Probably assuming the visitor would be lighter in complexion, she agreed to meet him. Baltazar assured the captain's daughter that he was indeed a 'Brown man of colour' (*moreno de cor*) but 'free and unimpeded' (*livre e desimpedido*), implying that his wealth made him at least non-Black.<sup>75</sup> While Minervina agreed to marry Baltazar, she said she could only do so in secret as her father, Redondo, would certainly object. The couple found a priest to perform the ceremony in exchange for a turkey wing.<sup>76</sup> In a surprise ending, the secret nuptials did not throw the captain into a fit of rage. His new son-in-law apologised for the 'ungratefulness' that stemmed from his extreme 'youth' (*mocidade*). The captain accepted Baltazar's apology and welcomed him into the family.<sup>77</sup>

The meanings of this unusual play are open-ended. It is uncertain whether Baltazar was who he said he was (i.e. a wealthy, non-Black southerner). It is also unclear whether Redondo and his daughter were supposed to be deceived by the ruse or if father and daughter merely 'played along' given the promise of wealth. Buoyed by his sense of cunning (*malícia*), Baltazar surely recognised that wealth overrode (or at least mitigated) the stigma of his colour. The play explored the malleability of Blackness, but it also implied that the captain's family was in dire financial straits. Thus, Baltazar's claim to wealth guaranteed the captain's approval, since he probably saw the marriage as a means of elevating or recuperating his family's status. Finally, the notion that Baltazar identified as a southerner cast doubt on a regional claim to Whiteness.

A second play, performed in Paraíba in 1968, imagined the marriage between the Black protagonist and the captain's daughter after the dust from their nuptial merrymaking had settled. If Baltazar was in his prime in Sebastião Severino Dantas' work, Luís Barbosa dos Santos presented an older version of the hero.<sup>78</sup> This Baltazar was a shiftless drunkard (*cachaceiro*) and a self-declared follower of Satan who left his wife and young daughter to pursue a lifestyle of drinking and gambling. When Baltazar demanded that his wife give him money, she cried out that her father, Redondo, was correct about 'never trusting Black men'.<sup>79</sup> Baltazar spent 12 years drinking heavily and gambling but eventually reassessed his situation. He implored male spectators to respect their families because 'otherwise you are on the path to Hell like I am already stuck inside Hell'.<sup>80</sup>

The protagonist-turned-villain roamed the streets asking for pocket change. One day, he encountered his estranged wife and daughter. Baltazar did not initially

<sup>75</sup>'Não sou negro não', Baltazar explained. 'Tenho uma cor segura.' He also assured Minervina that he was 'um moreno de cor. Mas livre e desimpedido'. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 44–5.

<sup>78</sup>Barbosa dos Santos, 'The Punishment of Baltazar', pp. 170–84.

<sup>79</sup>The wife exclaimed that Captain Redondo, her father, 'bem que me dizia que eu não desse confiança a negro'. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>80</sup>'Não seja contra a sua esposa, não seja contra seus filhos', Baltazar sermonised, 'porque senão tá no caminho do Inferno como eu já tou atolado dentro do Inferno'. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

recognise them, and mother and daughter did not recognise Baltazar. Perhaps to lighten the mood of the dispiriting episode, Baltazar's wife described her predicament in the form of a riddle. She explained that she was neither married nor widowed, later divulging that her husband had abandoned her. The young girl then revealed herself to be Xandoquinha Redondo, Baltazar's daughter and the captain's granddaughter. Overjoyed to be reunited with his family, Baltazar implored his wife to forgive him. She acceded only after Baltazar, still malevolent at the core, threatened to kill her.<sup>81</sup>

Vice was at the core of Barbosa dos Santos' morality play, but the superseding conflict stemmed from the mismatch between Black husbands and their White wives. Many interracial marriages were often subjects of gossip, if not outright disregard, in North-East Brazil until at least the late 1960s. Ribeiro found significant opposition to what he called 'extremely unequal' marriages regardless of social class unless these arrangements brought improvements in status and wealth.<sup>82</sup> One of the anthropologist's subjects, a man with many years of 'experience and observation', opined that White women and Black men 'always live[d] in disharmony'. He further added that the wife usually betrayed her husband, thus reinforcing Black husbands' pattern of 'criminal conduct'.<sup>83</sup> Another informant, identified as a poor Black man who married a poor White woman, told Ribeiro that his future mother-in-law did everything in her power to thwart the relationship. The couple eloped and the woman continued to warn that the Black husband would 'unleash his colour' on her daughter during their first quarrel. The informant reported that the White wife eventually left her husband to 'live maritally' (*amasiando-se*) with a mixed-race (*mulato*) man.<sup>84</sup>

While Baltazar trounced the stereotype of the evil husband in Dantas' playlet, he revealed his 'true' nature after marrying and having a daughter. Seemingly extraneous to the plotline, his devotion to Satan is significant. The character's remarks about his 'father' and 'protector' appealed to the enduring belief that Black men were children of evil, a myth linked to Brazil's slaveholding past.<sup>85</sup> Traces of these historical associations are found in an immense body of popular expressions collected by multiple generations of folklorists. Several of the most common sayings ranked racial groups in descending order of their moral standing. According to these expressions, Whites were devoted children of God while Black Brazilians were sorcerers (*feiticeiros*) and sons of Satan who were condemned to Hell.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>82</sup>Ribeiro, *Religião e relações sociais*, pp. 116 and 118. A subject who the author described as a mixed man of Indigenous descent explained that he would 'historically kill' a Black man if they appeared in his family. *Ibid.*, p. 119. One of Ribeiro's informants relayed that a church in one of Recife's noble neighbourhoods was filled to the brim with strangers who wanted to see a rich White woman marry a Mulatto navy official. He found that this anecdote exemplified the 'strangeness provoked even today by extremely unequal marriages'. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 111.

<sup>85</sup>Ribeiro documented the enduring belief that African-descended men cast spells (*feiticos*) to attract White women using hair and bits of clothing in addition to large frogs. *Ibid.*, pp. 111–12.

<sup>86</sup>See the expressions independently captured in Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil: A Study of Race Contact at Bahia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1944), p. 364; and Carvalho Neto, *El folklore de las luchas sociales*, pp. 36 and 85.

Baltazar's wife, who transcriber Pimentel characterised as 'pure, correct, exemplary [and] a victim', suffered tremendously at the hands of her 'perverse' and 'bad-natured' husband, who was above all a 'rebel against God'.<sup>87</sup>

The 1968 performance stands out for its sobering portrayal of Baltazar. In our larger archive of puppet plays, the Black troublemaker was not bound to conventional notions of right and wrong. However, Baltazar the abusive husband could not exploit the ambiguity of his actions, revealing that the world of play had its moral limits. Barbosa dos Santos' minidrama thus offered a troubling reassessment of the hero. It conceivably even held a mirror to male spectators who also struggled with addiction or engaged in domestic abuse. These weighty subjects likely caused the enchanted world of play to fold.

### Two Games of Racial Acrobatics: *Mamulengo* and Verbal Duelling (*Desafios*)

Transcriber Pimentel granted that a particularly strong tinge of 'reactionary racism' (*racismo reacionário*) coloured 'The Punishment of Baltazar'.<sup>88</sup> He also hinted that Barbosa dos Santos' dramatic admonition was a failure not because it vilified Black masculinity, but because the performer evidently broke the 'rules' of the game. Omitting verbal contests and paroxysms of violence deviated from the conventions that linked variant forms of plebeian oral culture, including North-East Brazil's legendary sung poetic duels (*desafios* or *pelejas*). These 'stylized exchange[s] of personal insult', as Linda Lewin helpfully defines them, are better known than their puppet cousins.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, contests between famous competitors are immortalised in the region's legendary chapbook literature (*literatura de cordel*), a genre that historically enjoyed a higher cultural standing among Brazilian intellectuals.<sup>90</sup>

Transcriptions of *desafios* that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries disclose that race was a standard target. Examining *desafios* and puppet shows in tandem reveals that both improvisational practices adhered closely to a logic of racial 'acrobatics'. Human and puppet contenders took turns launching and responding to racial attacks in this lively *pas de deux*, where common rejoinders included evasions, partial affirmations and even bold, uncompromising assertions of one's Blackness. In our body of transcribed puppet plays, Black protagonists sometimes eluded their rivals' assaults. However, the absence of *verbalised* responses should not be mistaken for silence. Indeed, Black protagonists' physical retaliation *was* a response, albeit one that confirmed the stereotypes of aggressors and troublemakers.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>87</sup>Barbosa dos Santos, 'The Punishment of Baltazar', pp. 169–70.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>89</sup>Linda Lewin, 'Who Was "O Grande Romano"? Genealogical Purity, The Indian "Past", and Whiteness in Brazil's Northeastern Backlands (1750–1900)', *CLIO – Revista de Pesquisa Histórica*, 25: 1 (2007), p. 86.

<sup>90</sup>In fact, Liêdo Maranhão, the observer who transcribed the routine between Benedito and Severino dos Santos at the beginning of this article, was most enthused by *cordel*. He produced two book-length studies of the genre and amassed a sizable collection of chapbooks sold throughout the North-East.

<sup>91</sup>Studies of ordinary Brazilians' responses to racial aggressions are scarce, but a 2016 trilingual study authored by Michèle Lamont, Graziella Moraes Silva and others contributes much to our understanding of 'normative' and 'idealised' responses to racist and discriminatory incidents. See Michèle Lamont, Graziella Moraes Silva, et al., *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 169–87.

In both *mamulengo* and *desafios*, the most common response to racial aggression entailed partial affirmation. These statements of 'Black but' involved the target of macroaggressions simultaneously upholding and exempting themselves from the 'truths' cited in verbal slights. The Pernambucan and Alagoan folklorists Francisco Augusto Pereira da Costa (1851–1923) and Théo Brandão (1907–81) documented striking examples of these retorts in *desafios*. Pereira observed a match-up between two men incarcerated in Recife's detention house (*casa de detenção*) in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The White competitor, a washerman, doggedly pursued his rival, a Black nurse's servant. The washerman declared that Black and White Brazilians were not cut from the 'same cloth' and mocked two of Brazil's most important abolitionists, Joaquim Nabuco (1849–1910) and José Mariano (1850–1912). Wagering that his rival would likely associate his skin colour with filth and a bad odour, the servant conceded that he was Black but pointed out that he was at least 'fragrant'.<sup>92</sup>

Brandão observed a similar tactic in a contest involving two musicians, one Black and the other of European and Indigenous (*caboclo*) ancestry. The Black contestant, also on the defensive, asserted that he was a 'unique Black man' who was 'sweeter than sugarcane [and] smell[ed] just like the rain'. Intriguingly, the *caboclo* only targeted his rival's colour when he bragged that young ladies (*moças*) found him attractive. The *caboclo* opined that no respectable woman would kiss a Black man, leaving him with cod and Black women (*nêgas*), which he granted were 'two sides of the same coin'.<sup>93</sup> Statements of 'Black but' are also plentiful in our puppet plays. Ever eager to find a romantic partner, the Black protagonist, this time named Gregório, danced with Redondo's mother in January 1964. She continued to call him 'Black' (*nêgo*) despite his objections. Perhaps stunned by her junior partner's rebuke, she likened his skin colour to 'pencil lead' (*miolo de lápis*). Benedito countered that he at least 'wrote well'.<sup>94</sup>

Frontal assaults on Whiteness are one of the more striking aspects of *desafios*. In the example of the contest held at Recife's prison, the Black interlocutor lambasted his foe as a 'dishevelled White man' who needed to take a proper bath.<sup>95</sup> In the legendary 1874 encounter between the 'Grande Romano' (circa 1840–91) and the enslaved Black poet Inácio de Catingueira (1845–79), the latter belied the former's

<sup>92</sup>The White competitor sang: 'Há muito negro insolente, / com eles não quero engano; / veja lá que nós não somos / fazenda do mesmo pano, / disso só foram culpados / Nabuco e Zé Mariano.' The Black servant responded: 'Sou negro, mas sou cheiroso.' Francisco Augusto Pereira da Costa, *Folk-lore pernambucano* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria J. Leite, 1908), pp. 562–3.

<sup>93</sup>Joaquim Carpina said: 'Seu Nene nem sou um preto / mas um preto singulá. / Sou doce que nem a cana, / cheiro iguarmente a amaná. / Sou calunga de loiça fina, / das menina vadiá.' Manuel Nenen corrected Carpina: 'A moça que beija nêgo, / p'ra doida não farta um grau; / o nêgo não beija moça, / nêgo beija é "bacalhau" / Nêgo beija é outra nêga / que é cunha do mesmo pau.' Théo Brandão, *Folclore de Alagoas* (Maceió: Casa Ramalho, 1949), pp. 136–7.

<sup>94</sup>José Barreto do Nascimento, 'D. Pelonha's Boyfriend', in Pimentel, *O mundo mágico do João Redondo*, pp. 55–6.

<sup>95</sup>The Black nurse's servant declared: 'Você é branco foveiro, / se quiser cantar comigo, / vá tomar banho primeiro; / eu tive um cavalo branco: / que era pior que um sendeiro.' The White contender reiterated that Black men were dirty thieves and invoked the 'proper' racial hierarchy through the platitude that the 'White man was born for the parlour / and the Black man for the kitchen'. Disappointingly, a prison guard interrupted the *desafio* before a victor could be declared. Costa, *Folk-lore pernambucano*, p. 563.

claim to Whiteness. Although the documentary record is incomplete, Catingueira's rejoinders show that Romano boasted that he was a White slaveowner. 'For someone supposed to be White', Catingueira countered, his rival's kinky hair and skin tone – what he likened to the 'colour of roasted coffee beans' – was equivalent to his own. Although the Black poet erroneously surmised that Romano's grandfather had been enslaved, exposing his false claim to Whiteness facilitated Romano's shocking defeat in Paraíba.<sup>96</sup>

Apparently common enough in the realm of *desafios*, direct attacks on Whiteness do not surface in transcriptions of puppet plays produced between 1940 and 1980. Growing the evidentiary base might yield examples of Baltazars and Beneditos debasing antagonists as filthy Whites or aspiring to a false Whiteness. Nonetheless, the extant documentation could be representative given that social asymmetry is a defining animus of puppet plays. While *desafios* seemed to entail assumptions of reciprocity – predicated upon equivalent retaliation between co-equals, or at least rivals of lesser social distance – the Black heroes of *mamulengo* seem keenly aware that their retaliation is never equal in power to the initial assault. While the literal silence of Whiteness could signify its uncontested power, it is more likely that this silence bifurcates a world into non-Black and Black, thus unsettling the fiction of racial purity albeit more discreetly than the contest between Catingueira and Romano.

### A Settling of Accounts: Tackling Gendered and Racial Oppression in *Mamulengo*

This article has examined a form of puppet play deeply intertwined with the culture and mythos of North-East Brazil. Although the meanings of this ludic universe reside in multiple domains – such as the movements and outlandish physiognomies of puppets and their suggestive double-entendres – we have looked most closely at the racially conflictual dramas that surge through a body of exceedingly rare transcriptions of improvised shows. Collected by a small group of male litterateurs from the 1940s to the late 1970s, these crucial traces have not been appreciated as worthwhile objects of study. Barring a spate of fine ethnographies conducted over the last 20 years, historical studies of *mamulengo* are lacking. This paucity might well indicate scholars' unease with a practice historically rooted in humiliating physical and psychic violence.

Clear instances of racial violence in puppet play might surprise those who were once convinced that Brazil is 'less racist' than other post-slavery societies in the Americas. Some might quibble over whether it is correct to racialise *mamulengo*, perhaps countering that it is at best an example of 'recreational racism', a term that legal scholar Adilson Moreira has coined to address what has been called

<sup>96</sup>Catingueira charged that 'Para o senhô ser branco / sua cor imita à minha, / seu cabelo é agastado. / Eu negro e o senhô branco / da cor de café torrado! / Seu avô veio ao Brasil / para ser negociado.' Lewin, 'Who Was "O Grande Romano"?', p. 86. Lewin casts doubt on Catingueira's claim. She contends that he employed 'poetic hyperbole' to point out Romano's racial hypocrisy. *Ibid.*, p. 113. Lewin proposes that Romano was of European, Indigenous and African ancestry. It should also be noted that the 'King of the Desafio' (Rei do Desafio) was literate. *Ibid.*, pp. 94–5.

the ‘subtleness’ of racism in Brazilian humour.<sup>97</sup> *Mamulengo* rejects all notions of subtlety by centring and normalising racial animosities – particularly racist aphorisms – that scholars of the twentieth century reckoned to be ‘folkloric’ in nature.<sup>98</sup> Thus, this powerful site of race-making ‘from below’ contradicts elite fantasies of an eminently ‘peaceful people’ (*povo pacífico*) elaborated by such figures as Gilberto Freyre (1900–87).<sup>99</sup> While *mamulengo* rejects nationalist and regionalist mythmaking vis-à-vis Brazil’s supposed racial lubricity, it is also detached from a different kind of political elite: Afro-Brazilian social movements. Black characters seldom invoke a language of dignity and respectability. In fact, the Baltazars and Beneditos found in our transcripts do accuse their rivals of racial prejudice, revealing that affirming and explicitly anti-racist discourse takes time to punctuate a largely oral universe.

Although it appears less firmly redemptive than other forms of Black cultural expression, *mamulengo* is a facet of Brazil’s anti-racist struggle and affirming Blackness.<sup>100</sup> Expressions of protest draw on discursive universes that are finite and historically circumscribed. It is unsurprising, therefore, that racial degradation and gratuitous violence reigned supreme even in the world of play in a region where nearly 360 years of slavery powerfully shaped understandings of power and the exercise of authority. We saw that Baltazars and Beneditos eagerly accepted the base ‘rules’ of the social ‘game’ by aspiring to the petty despotism wielded by the Redondos of the world.

Protagonists’ tactics of racial acrobatics – as we termed the evasions and half pronouncements of their colour – were also expected given both the denigration of Blackness and the broader appeal of Brazil’s ‘virtual’ Whiteness.<sup>101</sup> It has also been suggested that plebeian audiences simultaneously identified with the Black heroes of *mamulengo* and found themselves safely distant from the kind of Blackness exhibited for amusement. Indeed, puppet play of the mid- to late twentieth century explicates north-easterners’ reluctance to identify as ‘Black’ (*negro* or *preto*) and a broader inclination to find refuge in the racially indeterminate category

<sup>97</sup>See Adilson Moreira, *Racismo recreativo* (São Paulo: Pólen Livros, 2019); Edward Eric Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 154–5.

<sup>98</sup>Five published studies capture a remarkably coherent and consistent body of racist sayings captured over nearly a century. These include Costa, *Folk-lore pernambucano*; Arthur Ramos, *O folk-lore negro do Brasil: Demopsychologia e psicanalyse* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1935); Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil: A Study of Race Contact at Bahia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1944); José Pérez, *Provérbios brasileiros* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Ouro, 1969); Paulo de Carvalho Neto, *El folk-lore de las luchas sociales* and ‘Folklore of the Black Struggle in Latin America’, *Latin American Perspectives*, 5: 2 (1978), pp. 53–88; Mário Souto Maior, ‘O folclore do negro’, *Folclore*, 5 (1976), pp. 1–4.

<sup>99</sup>The fact that *mamulengo* was crosshatched by racial domination, submission and violence is a powerful reminder of the ‘neglected nexus between conviviality and inequality’. See Sérgio Costa, in Fernando Baldraia, Luciane Scarato and Maya Manzi (eds.), *Convivial Constellations in Latin America: From Colonial to Contemporary Times* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2020), pp. 11–25.

<sup>100</sup>The two-volume 2018 work *Cultura negra* looks at how, in pre- and post-abolition (1888) Brazil, Black identities have been elaborated and strengthened through music, merrymaking (*folgedos*), works for the stage and religious expression. However, none of the work’s 27 essays examine Black cultural practices that recall the duality of *mamulengo* puppet play. See Martha Abreu, Giovana Xavier, Livia Monteiro and Eric Brasil (eds.), *Cultura negra: Novos desafios para historiadores*, 2 vols. (Niterói: Eduff, 2018).

<sup>101</sup>Pinho, ‘Whiteness Has Come Out of the Closet’, pp. 64–5; Nascimento, *The Sorcery of Color*, p. 42.

of 'Brown' and 'mixed' (*pardo* and *mulato*), a tendency that has ebbed and flowed over the last half-century.

Baltazars' and Beneditos' elusions or stereotype-centred statements of their Blackness ('Black but') in the 1940s through to the late 1970s cleared the way for uncompromising affirmations of Black agency and dignity ('Black *and*'). In the twenty-first century, the cumulative effects of mobilisation around Black dignity and anti-racism are reflected in *mamulengo*. Puppet play appears to be experiencing a particularly major settling of accounts regarding its historical undertows of racism, misogyny and homophobia. Scholars and scholar-practitioners have started to unpack the 'racist and unacceptable' depictions of Black protagonists while remaining open to the anti-racist promise of puppet play.<sup>102</sup> Anthropologist Zildalte Ramos de Macêdo has investigated a 'modernised' form of *mamulengo* conceived by a university-educated performer in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Taking potential charges of racism seriously, Heraldo Lins (born 1962) presents both 'traditional' and what he styles 'politically correct' (*politicamente correto*) versions of his craft. The conventional variety employs a dark-black Benedito puppet while the star of 'contemporary' shows, primarily used for government patrons, is light brown (*pardo*) rather than dark black.<sup>103</sup>

A new generation of female artists has also challenged the chauvinist ethos of *mamulengo*. At the age of 50, the late Dadi (Maria Ieda da Silva Medeiros, 1938–2021) of Rio Grande do Norte purportedly became Brazil's first documented female puppet artist. While some of her storylines seem to have been predicated on racial conflict, Dadi's incursions into *mamulengo* have inspired girls and young women to lend their voices to the *brincadeira*.<sup>104</sup> Having successfully carved out space in the male-dominated craft, female puppet artists in Glória do Goitá, Pernambuco, have set out to 'break taboos'.<sup>105</sup> Five puppeteers interviewed by performing-arts scholar Barbara Duarte Benatti have signalled that Brazilians' growing consciousness of race and gender make 'traditional' *mamulengo* increasingly objectionable. These artists work hard to satisfy rural audiences' hunger for traditional *mamulengo* while making incremental but decisive 'adaptations to jokes grounded in gendered – and racial – oppression'.<sup>106</sup>

In contemporary *mamulengo*, a tug-of-war between the traditional and modern is unlikely to abate in the immediate future. When extricated from the historical logic of racial domination and White supremacy, tenacious Black protagonists who do what they wish rather than what they are told can effect change in the conventions of the art form and the society writ large. Introducing himself in self-laudatory speech, the hero declared that the 'little Black Baltazar has arrived,

<sup>102</sup>Published by the Associação Brasileira de Teatro de Bonecos between 1973 and 1983, and only sporadically in the mid- to late 1980s, the journal *Mamulengo* was relaunched in 2020. See André Carrico, 'Apontamentos sobre o personagem negro no teatro de bonecos', *Mamulengo*, 18 (June 2021), p. 72. See also Gleydson de Castro Oliveira, 'O teatro de bonecos como prática antirracista', in *ibid.*, pp. 31–6.

<sup>103</sup>Zildalte Ramos de Macêdo, "'Show de Mamulengos' de Heraldo Lins: Construções e transformações de um espectáculo na cultura popular", master's thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, 2014.

<sup>104</sup>Maria das Graças Pereira Cavalcanti, *Dadi e o teatro de bonecos: Memória, brinquedos e brincadeira* (Natal: Fundação José Augusto, 2011).

<sup>105</sup>Barbara Duarte Benatti, 'Mulheres no mamulengo, ressignificando o preconceito', *Revista Arte da Cena*, 6: 1 (2020), p. 234.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 244.



who fights in the barn and by any means, head on and in a gang. I am a little Black man above all the rules.’<sup>107</sup>

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### Los legados vivientes de la esclavitud: Racismo y acrobacia racial en el teatro de marionetas del Nordeste brasileño, 1940–80

Este artículo explora los guiones racialmente conflictivos de *mamulengo*, una forma improvisada de teatro de títeres en el Nordeste brasileño. A partir de un legajo de espectáculos transcritos realizados entre las décadas de 1940 y 1970, se muestra cómo audaces protagonistas negros – con frecuencia llamados Baltazar o Benedito – tomaron parte en un juego de ‘acrobática racial’. Al interpretar el papel de tontos (*bobos*) y agresores, estos héroes reprodujeron un estatus quo racista y simultáneamente ofrecieron una resistencia violenta y de corazón a sus abusos. Mientras que *mamulengo* nunca ha sido utilizado en las discusiones sobre raza en Brasil, esta forma de expresión cultural con frecuencia ignorada nos obliga a confrontar los aspectos incómodos de la configuración de raza y pertenencia cuando estos han sido elaborados ‘desde abajo’.

**Palabras clave:** *mamulengo*; teatro de títeres; Nordeste brasileño; humor racial; acrobática racial

### Os legados vivos da escravidão: Racismo e acrobacia racial no teatro de marionetes do Nordeste brasileiro, 1940–80

Este artigo investiga as tramas racialmente conflituosas do mamulengo, uma forma de teatro popular improvisado do Nordeste do Brasil. A partir de um corpus de espetáculos transcritos realizados entre as décadas de 1940 e 1970, mostra como audaciosos protagonistas negros – muitas vezes chamados de Baltazar ou Benedito – participaram de um jogo de ‘acrobacias raciais’. Ao desempenharem os papéis de bobos e desordeiros, esses heróis simultaneamente reproduziam um status quo racista e ofereciam uma resistência espirituosa e violenta aos seus abusos. Embora o mamulengo nunca tenha sido utilizado nas discussões sobre raça no Brasil, essa forma de expressão cultural muitas vezes negligenciada nos força a confrontar os aspectos desconfortáveis da criação e pertencimento racial à medida que são elaborados ‘a partir de baixo’.

**Palavras-chave:** mamulengo; teatro de marionetes; Nordeste do Brasil; humor racial; acrobacias raciais

<sup>107</sup>Dantas’ iteration of Baltazar announced his arrival: ‘Chegou o negrinho Baltazar, que briga a granel e de todo jeito, de frente e de banda. Eu sou um negrinho todo em cima da regra.’ Gomes, *Teatro de João Redondo*, p. 32.

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