

BASTARD IMAGES OF A HYBRID SAINT: AN ESSAY ON THE SURVIVAL OF SAINT SEBASTIAN ICONOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICAN VISUAL CULTURE

Dieison Marconi^{1, a} 
¹Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

 admpereira@fsh.unl.pt

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Abstract

Ever since the early 20th century, artists from several minority artistic and cultural settings have made use of canonical images from the Baroque and Renaissance periods of Saint Sebastian to explore subjects such as death, religion, and homosexuality. However, the existing literature regarding the reappearances of Saint Sebastian over the last century and in contemporary times merely investigates minority artistic contexts located in the Global North. As such, this essay seeks to understand how the canonical iconologies of Saint Sebastian were appropriated, as well as their survival in the Latin American context, identifying a process of iconological inflection that connects and gives weight to topics such as religion, sexuality, ethnicity, coloniality, cultural hybridization processes, and minority aesthetic sensibilities, a process that the essay refers to as the production of “bastard images”.

Keywords: Bastard images; cultural hybridity; Latin America; Saint Sebastian.

Resumen

Desde principios del siglo XX, artistas de diferentes contextos artísticos y culturales minoritarios se han apropiado de las imágenes canónicas (barrocas y renacentistas) de San Sebastián para explorar temas como la muerte, la religión y la homosexualidad. Sin embargo, la bibliografía existente sobre las reapariciones de San Sebastián a lo largo del siglo pasado y en la época contemporánea sólo ha investigado contextos artísticos minoritarios situados en el Norte Global. De este modo, este ensayo busca comprender cómo las iconologías canónicas de San Sebastián han sido apropiadas y han sobrevivido en el contexto latinoamericano, revelando un proceso de inflexión iconológica que conecta y tensiona temas como la religión, la sexualidad, la etnicidad, la colonialidad, los procesos de hibridación cultural y las sensibilidades estéticas minoritarias, un proceso que el ensayo denomina la producción de “imágenes bastardas”.

Palabras clave: Imágenes bastardas; hibridación cultural; América Latina; San Sebastián.

INTRODUCTION

To conduct this research, I employed a methodological approach centered on systematic data collection during visits to several museums. Specifically: a) I documented canonical representations of Saint Sebastian found in various European and Latin American museums; b) I conducted complementary research through digital image archives and online platforms that reference traditional iconographies of the saint. As a result, I compiled an image database comprising of over 200 modern and contemporary works from various countries that appropriate the traditional iconology of this saint. The analyzing of this material, in conjunction with an in-depth literature review, allowed me to identify a significant gap in existing studies on endurance and appropriations of Saint Sebastian's iconology.

When I began this my mapping of artwork, I had already formed an “imaginary museum”¹ of Renaissance and Baroque paintings of Saint Sebastian. I was also familiar with some of the most recognized homoerotic reinterpretations of the saint, such as the camp-style photographs by Pierre et Gilles and the queer cult film *Sebastiane* (1976) by Derek Jarman. These observations are contextualized within an emerging body of academic literature that studies the recurring iconological appropriations of Saint Sebastian in minority artistic and cultural contexts of minority groups. Notable examples include the works of researchers Alexandre Santos² and Isidro Souza³, who focus on analyzing how the image of this Christian saint has been transformed (especially throughout the twentieth century) into a homoerotic icon within homosexual artistic production. Both authors interrogate the cultural meaning attributed to this Christian martyr in queer subcultures, analyzing both the latent homoeroticism present in Renaissance and Baroque representations and the thematic power of Saint Sebastian's tragic suffering, which evokes experiences of trauma and violence historically endured by sexually dissident individuals.

A parallel theoretical perspective is offered in the works of the Canadian researcher Nikola Stepic⁴. Stepic investigates the iconography/iconology of St Sebastian in two plays. The analysis encompasses *Suddenly, Last Summer* by U.S. playwright Tennessee Williams and *Lilies* by Canadian playwright Michel Marc Bouchard, along with their respective film adaptations: the 1959 film directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and the 1996 production by John Greyson. For Stepic, Saint Sebastian plays a dual role: he enables the constitution of homosexual identity and serves as an expressive medium for what might be called “homoerotic anxiety.” In these works, the saint becomes a symbolic site of personal and cultural memory for dissident subjects, as well as an agent that catalyzes historiographical revision from a queer perspective.

British scholar Ryan Kearney⁵, in turn, has demonstrated how Saint Sebastian - a medieval figure venerated as a protector against plague - was reclaimed as a potent symbol within queer communities during the HIV/AIDS epidemic crisis (1980s–1990s) in the United States and Europe (at a time when the disease was stigmatized as the “gay plague”⁶). Kearney shows how the saint's martyrdom came to represent collective resilience in the face of anti-queer discourse. In his analysis of works by David Wojnarowicz and Ron Athey, he reveals how the appropriation of these images served to challenge homophobic narratives and affirm the cultural agency of marginalized subjects.

This growing literature – situated at the intersection of art historiography, gender and sexuality studies, and critical theology – shares a common hegemonic emphasis: the analysis of visual and literary productions as biographical traces through which artists articulate queer individual and collective experiences. As outlined in my recent publication⁷, this literature follows two main strands: (1) appropriations of the saint's iconography in the context of the

HIV/AIDS epidemic; and (2) reiterations of Saint Sebastian as a “gay icon.” However, the studies remain geographically limited, focusing almost exclusively on the Global North. Even the Brazilian contributions, such as those by Santos, tend to emphasize the symbolic resonance of the saint within Western European postwar homosexual culture.

This geographical limitation reflects a broader fragmentation in existing studies, many of which are scattered across ephemeral digital platforms or tied to exhibitions and art shows, without systematic articulation in academic discourse. This is where this research proposes its first contribution: the construction of an unprecedented transnational and intercultural mapping of contemporary appropriations of Saint Sebastian’s iconography. To date, no comprehensive visual survey exists that traces the survival and transformation of these iconologies across diverse historical and cultural contexts.

Faced with this gap-ridden context, in which most of the knowledge produced regarding the survival of Saint Sebastian iconology is still restricted to blogs, news websites and art exhibits⁸, I hereby propose an original viewpoint. First, because of the starting point itself: an extensive mapping of visual and audiovisual products (from different countries, eras, and cultural contexts) that have appropriated the classical iconologies of Saint Sebastian. This mapping can be considered an original starting point because, in fact, the research that has been carried out so far did not manage to establish an image bank that would allow us to comprehensively visualize the displacements, survivals, and intermittent reappearances of these iconologies throughout history and within cultures.

The second critical contribution of this research concerns the persistence of Saint Sebastian’s iconography in Latin American visual art—a region often absent from previous discussions on minority artistic practices. By situating the investigation within the field of Latin American culture, the research raises questions that have not been addressed by the existing literature. The reinterpretations of the saint, often produced by dissident artists in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, articulate conflicts between artistic practice, coloniality, and cultural hybridity. On a continent shaped by European colonization, these spectral images of Saint Sebastian function as remnants of both neocolonial mechanisms and evangelizing regimes imposed on Indigenous populations⁹.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL INSPIRATIONS

In this essay, I propose the adoption of the operational term “bastard images” to analyze Latin American appropriations of Saint Sebastian's iconography. I introduced this term in a 2022¹⁰ publication, based on two central premises. First, these reappropriations destabilize the ontological purity of their European referents: they operate as partial heirs of “legitimate art” while incorporating aesthetic impurities, contradictions, and a “promiscuous hybridity”. Second, these images enable the survival and resignification of Sebastianist iconology precisely by rejecting a redemptive hermeneutics, as conceived by critical theory. What makes these appropriations unique is their ability to subvert binary essentialisms and inhabit what Homi K. Bhabha¹¹ calls an interstitial space—a zone of negotiation and translation between cultures.

The theoretical framework of this research is anchored in Omar Rincón's¹² formulation of bastard cultures, which dialogues with Néstor García Canclini's¹³ studies on cultural hybridity in Latin America. Like Canclini and Rincón, I am not interested in an idealized cultural fusion,

but rather in the hybridization process that structures these iconologies. I aim to trace their singularities and contradictions, their stylistic degenerations, their proximities and distances. In doing so, I reject a purist logic of synthesis between images or cultural traditions, opting instead for a philological (and conflicting) approach to iconological survival.

From a methodological perspective, this research draws on the works of Georges Didi-Huberman and Aby Warburg¹⁴, particularly in their emphasis on montage as a method of knowledge production. In the 1920s, Warburg developed the Mnemosyne Atlas, a visual atlas composed of 63 panels featuring photographic reproductions of artworks, advertisements, maps, and texts. His goal was not to organize knowledge linearly or chronologically, but rather to create constellations of meaning through juxtaposition, contact, and visual friction. As I explained in another article published in 2022¹⁵, this methodological perspective reveals Warburg's reliance on associative thinking - an audacious intellectual maneuver that sought to generate meaning through the dynamic interplay of images.

By forging connections across visual materials, he aimed to elicit new insights emerging precisely from their juxtaposition: friction, contact, conjunction, and shock. In this way, Warburg's Atlas not only challenged traditional art-historical paradigms but also rendered the discipline itself perpetually unsettled, driven by the generative instability of its visual constellations. Inspired by this Warburgian montage gesture, I propose a relational analysis between works by Latin American artists - such as Frida Kahlo, José Leonilson, Glauco Rodrigues, and Ángel Zárraga - and canonical representations of Saint Sebastian in the European tradition. Rather than seeking a universal interpretation of sacred iconographies, this approach advocates a restless process of montage, dismantling, and remounting, one that embraces the contradictions, affects, and aesthetic noise of each image. In doing so, it destabilizes the historical fixity of traditional iconography and the historiographic essentialism of art.

APPROPRIATION AND SURVIVAL IN SAINT SEBASTIAN

In the Renaissance engraving *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (1699), by the Frenchman Nicolas Dorigny (1658-1746), currently on display at The British Museum, we have the following dramatic configuration of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian: the Christian saint is tied to a cross in the center of the image. In the upper part of the image, an angel places a crown on his head. In an even higher part, we see Jesus Christ supported and announced by a legion of angels blowing their trumpets. Christ approaches the body of the dying saint and, from above, looking down on the earthly ground, his gaze is not only benevolent, but also announces and ratifies the fate of every martyr: Sebastian suffers, just as Christ himself suffered on the cross, but he will overcome death.

One may also notice, in the lower part of the engraving, a kneeling man on the left retrieving the bow and arrows that injured the martyr. Other soldiers and torturers surround the body of the saint; there are also mourning women in the foreground. There are many characters, events, and gestures that make up this ontological scene of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom. The black and white tessitura in the image gives it a funereal tone, without preventing it from showing a certain beauty in the physical aspect of the bodies and in the movements of the clothes. Above all, we have an iconology that is vastly reproduced not only in the Renaissance and Baroque images themselves, but also gestures, features, and body positions that were appropriated in

works produced throughout the 20th century and in contemporary times, all of them much later than this work by Dorigny.

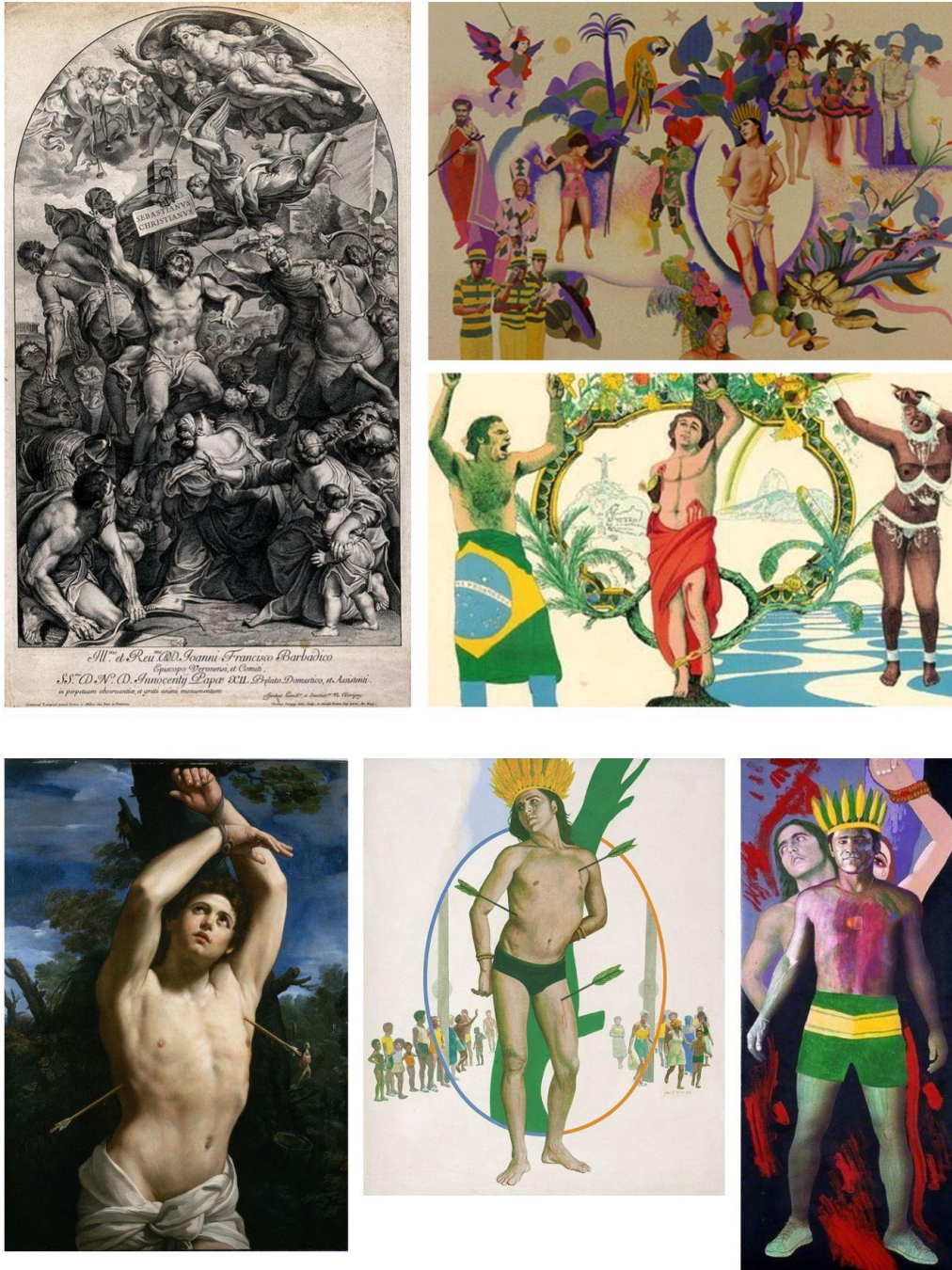
Brazilian painter Glauco Rodrigues, for instance, did not necessarily specifically appropriate this scene of martyrdom produced by Dorigny. Still, given the strength with which the iconology of Saint Sebastian spread throughout the West through the diastases of coloniality and Christian catechization, and later still due to the technical and aesthetic reproducibility of these figures, one could argue that such scenes are part of an imaginary museum of different populations and communities, including the generation of painters that included Glauco Rodrigues. In fact, throughout his career as an artist, Glauco Rodrigues produced over 100 works about Saint Sebastian, including paintings, sketches and engravings.

Amidst these hundred works about the saint/soldier of European origin, the painting *Abaporu* (1981) also presents the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian amidst an agglomeration of characters, gestures, and events. However, in this Brazilian painter's agglomeration, characters such as Jesus Christ, angels, soldiers, torturers, and devout women are replaced by samba school dancers, tambourine players, and *baianas*¹⁶. In fact, the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, a figure that still takes center stage in the canvas, seems to take place in the middle of a Carnival party. In this festivity, Saint Sebastian is still shot by arrows and displays his apollonian body, but his head is now adorned with a green and yellow headdress.

In addition, Glauco added to his painting elements such as flowers and tropical fruits, macaws, coconut trees and hills that harken back to the Rio de Janeiro landscape and, at the bottom of the canvas, there is a soldier wearing a faded green outfit. All these hyper-colored elements are placed atop a white background, a characteristic that, according to the film-biography *Glauco do Brasil* (Zeca Britto, 2016), the artist maintained until the end of the Brazilian dictatorial period, as if the phantasmagoria of the opaque white depicted the disenchantment with the historical moment people were living through. Furthermore, while Sebastian bleeds in the middle of Carnival, the presence of the soldier dressed in green also allows for interpretations about how the Brazilian dictatorship (which lost strength in the early 1980s) was present in a spectral way.

Glauco Rodrigues had already built this same carnival party in many other works, all with the presence of Saint Sebastian. In the 1979 painting *São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro*, the Christian saint also occupies the center of the canvas and, in the background, one can see the Corcovado Mountain and the Guanabara Bay almost dissolving into opaque lines. To the left of the saint, shot and bleeding, a man wrapped in a Brazilian flag scream with his fists in the air, while, to the right, a black woman dances the samba barefoot on the sidewalks of the southern region of Rio de Janeiro. In another work by Glauco, painted in 1980, Saint Sebastian includes an indigenous man who cries with his eyes turned upwards, as if he were also trying to see the Jesus Christ in the sky painted by Dorigny. In addition to the white background, the colors that are the most relevant in the canvas are, to some extent, green, blue, and yellow. In the background, a group of black and brown people, mostly women and children, move through the space. Meanwhile, in *Meu Brasil Brasileiro* (1986), Saint Sebastian embodies another "Brazilian archetype", more specifically a soccer player wearing a headdress. In both works, references to the European Sebastian (arrows, white injured body, apollonian beauty) are present through an intercultural game with adornments from popular and/or mass¹⁷ Brazilian culture, giving this work by Glauco Rodrigues an inauthentic, posthumous, or even bastardized expression (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. At the top are the work *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, by Nicolas Dorigny, 1699 (on the left) and *Abaporu*, by Glauco Rodrigues, 1981, (on the right). Below, by Glauco Rodrigues, reproduction of the work *São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro*, from 1979. Further down, on the left, a reproduction of the classic work by Guido Reni (*São Sebastião*, 1615/1616); in the middle, a reproduction of the work *Oxossi/São Sebastião*, Glauco Rodrigues 1992; and on the right, *São Sebastião* (1985), also by Glauco Rodrigues.



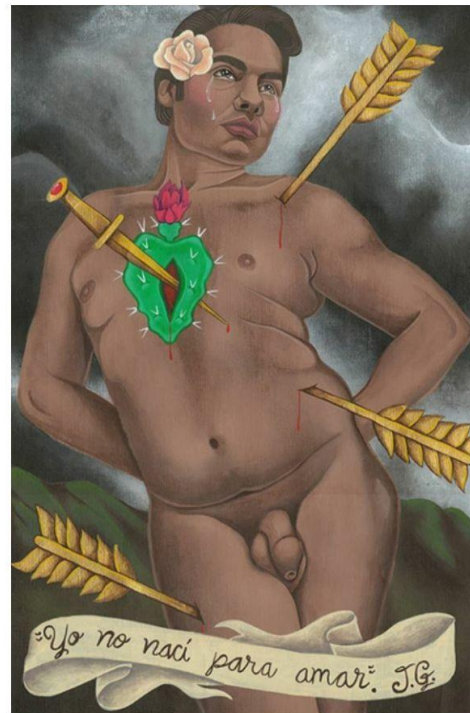
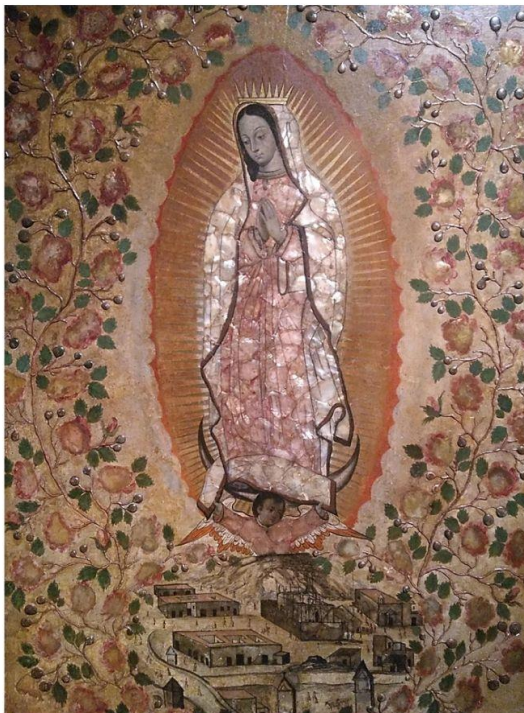
Source: photographs by the author

Although there are many possible interpretations of these works, which, for some critics, should be precisely analyzed as expressions of “Brazilian pop art” or “anthropophagic pop art”, I prefer other terms that can help us understand and constellate these and other Latin American works as bastard images. By cross-referencing the images made by Glauco Rodrigues with other works, especially classical works like the one by Dorigny, a creative, aesthetic, and political tension is made evident. This tension can be illuminated by the hybrid and mythopoetic force of the moment in which Medieval Christian iconology, the progress of mimetic Renaissance techniques, and the dramatization of the European Baroque are appropriated and erased in this and other Latin American artworks, which brings us closer to a *rasquache* aesthetic.

I opt for *rasquache*, among other aesthetic sensibilities that help to understand the bastardization of Sebastian’s iconology, because I believe that this term is better able to jointly describe, in the words of Tomas Ybarra-Frausto¹⁸, the art of “*los de abajo*” or, even, the art of the underprivileged. Although the idea of a *rasquache* sensibility is still an unreferenced conceptual category in the world of fine art, or at least not as well referenced as the expressionist or surrealist movements, for instance, the *rasquache* (which in Spanish can mean crumbs, leftovers, something of little value) concerns a *Chicano* (but not exclusively) artistic sensibility that appropriates discarded, recycled objects, fragments considered tasteless, second-hand, frugal, poor, or even objects originally considered to belong to fine art, but that are now inscribed in the culture as hybrid, popular, massive, or hyper-commercialized images, like the *Taco Bell Chihuahua*, the found objects of Pepon Osorio, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe printed on second-hand t-shirts, or the vernacular images of *Divino Niño Jesus*.

However, at this time I would like to refer to an expanded idea of the *rasquache* sensibility, so that it can also describe the bastardized weaving of Latin American artworks that are inserted in the circuits and strategies of appropriation, reversal, and inversion of classical repertoires of Saint Sebastian iconology, especially as a result of the processes of colonization and coloniality that took place not only in their legal, economic, and religious facets, but also in their artistic and cultural aspects. In this way, I refer to a type of *rasquache* art that encompasses not only the “tropical pop art” of Glauco Rodrigues, but also the works in which the young Colombian artist Meduska brings Saint Sebastian close to the vernacular sensibilities of the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe, of the vernacular images of Oxóssi (syncretized with Saint Sebastian in some Afro-Brazilian religions), of the Mexican *retablos* of the devotees of Saint Sebastian or even the work of French photographers Pierre et Gilles, who also add homoerotic tones to the classical iconologies of divinity and the *rasquache* aesthetics present in paintings and sculptures of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. On top, a reproduction of *Saint Sebastian*, by Pierre et Gilles, 2009 (left); on the right, a vernacular reproduction of the *Virgin of Guadalupe*; below, on the left, a photograph I took of Gonzáles Miguel's *Virgin of Guadalupe* (1697), exhibited in the Museum of America, Madrid, Spain. Besides, on the right, reproduction of the work *Yo no nací para amar*, by Meduska, 2020.



Source: photographs by the author

When looking at these images together, I believe it is necessary to pay attention to the available resources, that is, the iconic, material, symbolic, classical repertoires of Saint Sebastian that became the object of syncretism, juxtaposition, and a conflicting integration in Latin American artistic production, given that *rasquachismo* “is a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence, a combination of existing material and the satirical vein, the manipulation of artifacts, codes and sensibilities from both cultural sides”¹⁹ that constitute certain artistic objects. I also think that combining these images unveils a frontier work between past and future, for they are works of art that capture the iconology of Saint Sebastian not only as a mere social cause of a past of colonization that would ultimately also be an aesthetic precedent. These are works, above all, that “renew” the artistic and phantasmatic past, as well as reconfigure such temporality in an “in-between contingent place”. That is, by letting the past survive, one also innovates, hybridizes, and polemicizes the presence of this past in the present.

Homi K. Bhabha²⁰ would call this an “interstitial perspective”, that is, a work that seeks “the articulation of cultural differences in between spaces as innovative places of collaboration and questioning”. This argument also draws my attention because, by cross-referencing the different images of Saint Sebastian, as well as the different symptoms and the different temporalities that these images mobilize, I am not only analyzing the effect of colonial power in Latin American artistic production, but rather a form of space or place of translation and hybridity that allows us to visualize what is unraveling and what does not blende in these *rasquache* visualities of Saint Sebastian, as well as the deterritorialization of symbolic processes and the expansion of impure genres.

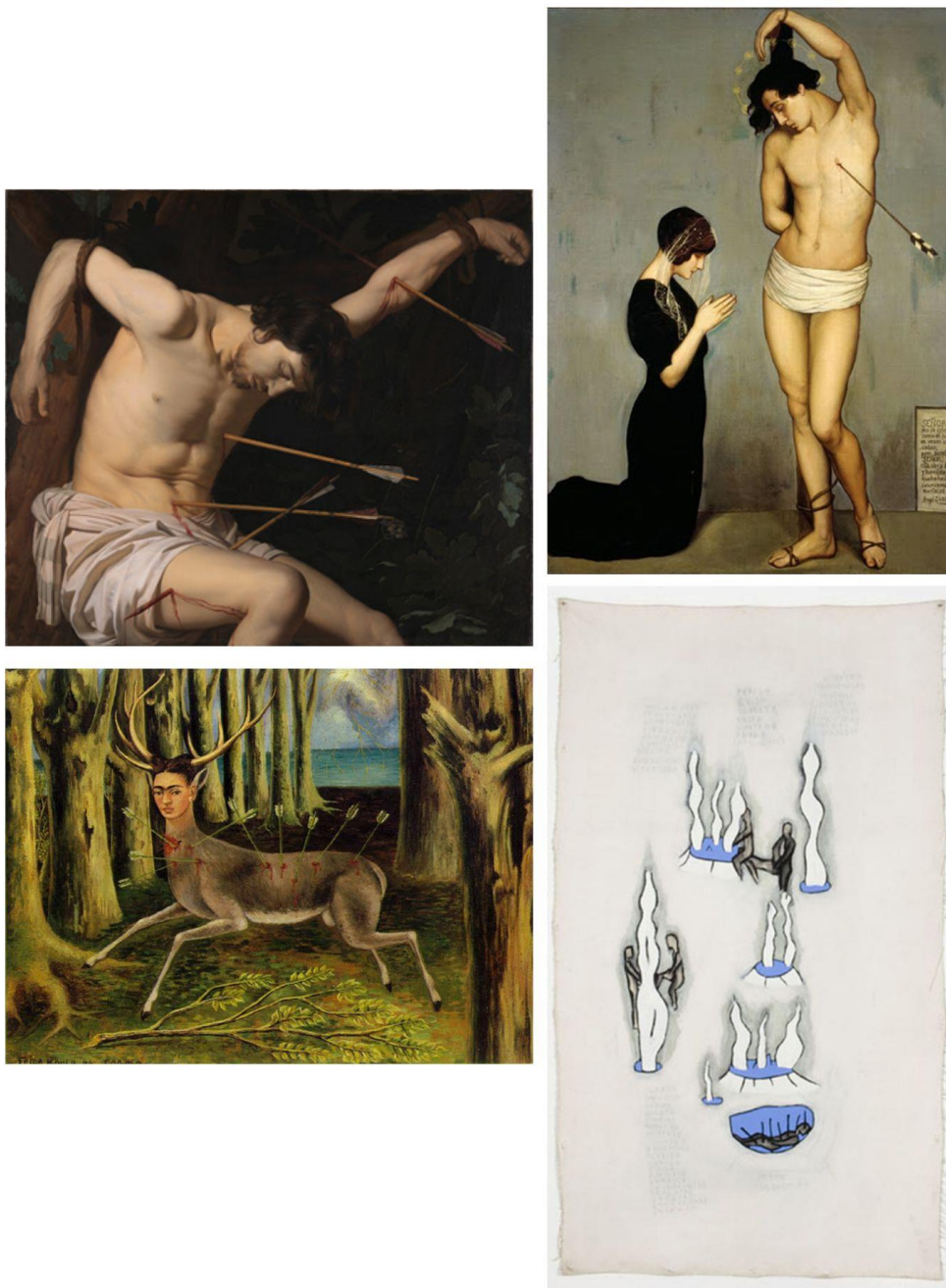
Such *rasquache* sensibility can also be noticed, albeit to a lesser extent, in the work of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, specifically in one of her best-known works, *El venado herido*, of 1946. In this work, Kahlo builds another one of her countless self-portraits, in this case, a hybrid of animal and human, male and female. The deer's body is shot with nine arrows. Its right front leg is slightly raised, as if it were injured or moving. It is easy to interpret connections between these injuries and the Mexican painter's personal life, whether in terms of the car accident she suffered in her adolescence that physically maimed her until the end of her life, or her love for Diego Rivera and her homosexual experiences with other women. However, the neck of the deer, or Frida Kahlo's necked, is cocked, its face is facing us, showing little or no expression of pain. Maybe just melancholy.

El venado herido also evokes elements that refer to the European and Latin religious traditions that were part of the life of the painter herself, the daughter of a German father and a mixed-race mother. In the painting, the deer is in a forest and on the ground, in the foreground, a branch stands out. While the branch reflects a popular Mexican tradition of placing a tree branch over tombs, the arrows directly refer to the martyrdom of the European saint. In front of this image, as Didi-Huberman proposes, one must “lengthen one's gaze” in order to understand that the survival of Saint Sebastian is not expressed as an essence, a global trait or a mere archetype, but rather as a symptom that unveils the tenacity of tiny things, like the syncretism of the Mexican branch in the foreground with the arrows of the European saint that cross the body of Frida Kahlo's melancholic deer.

Melancholy is also the “aesthetic sensibility” that the Brazilian José Leonilson recovered in his work *Pobre Sebastião* (1993). Made of acrylic and colored pencils on canvas, Leonilson's work presents a form of *via crucis*, in which the Christian martyr is carried to some sort of tomb that burns in high flames, although in the foreground the body shot by arrows seems being immersed in a cold, watery blue. As we approach the work, it is possible to read words like fear, courage, danger, defeat, desire. In general, Leonilson's works invest, through a personal, subjective or even autobiographical repertoire, in the production of paintings, engravings, drawings and sculptures in which one may notice, from a queer perspective, a constant staging

of a melancholic sensibility, mourning and loss that, among other factors, materializes in the artworks due to the experience of cultural and subjective displacement that the artist felt facing the spaces and culture of heteronormativity, from family, love and professional relationships, to the way he attempted to deal with HIV infection and the presence of death and homophobia (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Top left, a photograph I took of the work *Sebastian*, Gerrit Van Honthorst, 1623, exhibited in the National Gallery, London; top right, a reproduction of the work *Votive Offering*, by Angel Zarraga, 1911; below and to the left, *The Wounded Deer*, by Frida Khalo, 1946; to the right, a reproduction of the work *Pobre Sebastião*, by José Leonilson, 1923.



Source: photographs by the author

When coming across Kahlo's work, and especially Leonilson's work, I understand that the survival of the iconology of Saint Sebastian not necessarily embodies triumphant political narratives with progressive stories, which are very present in the excessive positivity of some neoliberal activisms. Works like this actually delve into a disorganized experience from the perspective of sex/gender normativities, coalescing traumatic, melancholic, and failed memories²¹, especially by merging the biography of the Christian saint with the cultural and personal experiences of Latin American queer artists who lived and created during the 20th century.

In this sense, the images I have referred to as “bastard images” in this paper do not exclusively concern hybridity and popular or vernacular expressions – in other words, arts and cultures that would be like a “bastard son or daughter” of a legitimate art, as is the case of Rincon and García-Canclini's argument. Rather, these works would also be connected to “minority aesthetic sensibilities”²², such as melancholy²³, queer failure²⁴, death drive²⁵, or even frustrated passion. Just as Sebastian was seen by the Spanish poet Garcia Lorca as one of those boys for whom he used to “get lost in seas and hearts”²⁶, to the point of drawing the Christian martyr on his self-portraits, for Leonilson the Christian saint probably meant one of those “boys who were just beautiful landscapes in his path”²⁷. Saint Sebastian, Garcia Lorca and José Leonilson could very well belong, along with the Brazilian writer Caio Fernando Abreu, to the lineage of the “delicate boys”²⁸, those young men who burned themselves in an exalted romanticism, even when they displayed *bad boy* attitudes.

Although this last paragraph may seem like mere poetic rhetoric, the works gathered here, especially in the case of Latin American gay and bisexual artists like Leonilson, or even the Mexican painter Angel Zarraga, who attempted to reproduce Saint Sebastian in his apollonian features, help us understand what these gay men, who lived in different times and in different cultural/historical contexts, would have in common. It is possible that David Halperin, from his book *How To Be Gay*²⁹, would respond to this subject by saying that there would be many differences and many similarities among them, all of which would go beyond the essentialist discourse that the only thing in common would be that they are men who are sexually attracted to other men. Halperin's hypothesis is more creative. To him, “being gay” is a practice closely linked to homosexuality but separate from it. As a cultural practice, “being gay” is something that can be instructed and learned, which shows that not every homosexual man will be culturally gay (for that, it would suffice for him to not have gone through any initiation process).

On the other hand, according to Halperin, some straight people may have, as indeed they do, a strong identification with gay cultures, indicating that these subjects appropriate a set of aesthetic sensibilities and a set of cultural practices: camp sensibility; musicals; “antiquarian queerness”; pop music and its divas; dress-up and drag queen culture; the aesthetic appeal of “effeminacy”, “affectation”, and “hyperfemininity”; a taste for frivolous or “minor” aesthetics; the detachment from a pretentious “authentic culture” and, also, the experience of melancholic homosexuality, characterized here less as a medical/legal category and more as a slight perspective on facing disorientation, the fleetingness of the world, and the weight of its crystallized and normative tropes. Aware of this, and at least with regard to homosexual experiences in the West, and more specifically in the Latin American context, it is possible to say that Saint Sebastian is a sensitive element that was and is part of this extensive repertoire of tastes and gestures that can contribute to understanding “being gay” as an aesthetic and cultural practice linked to homosexuality, but not restricted to it. And which thus makes it

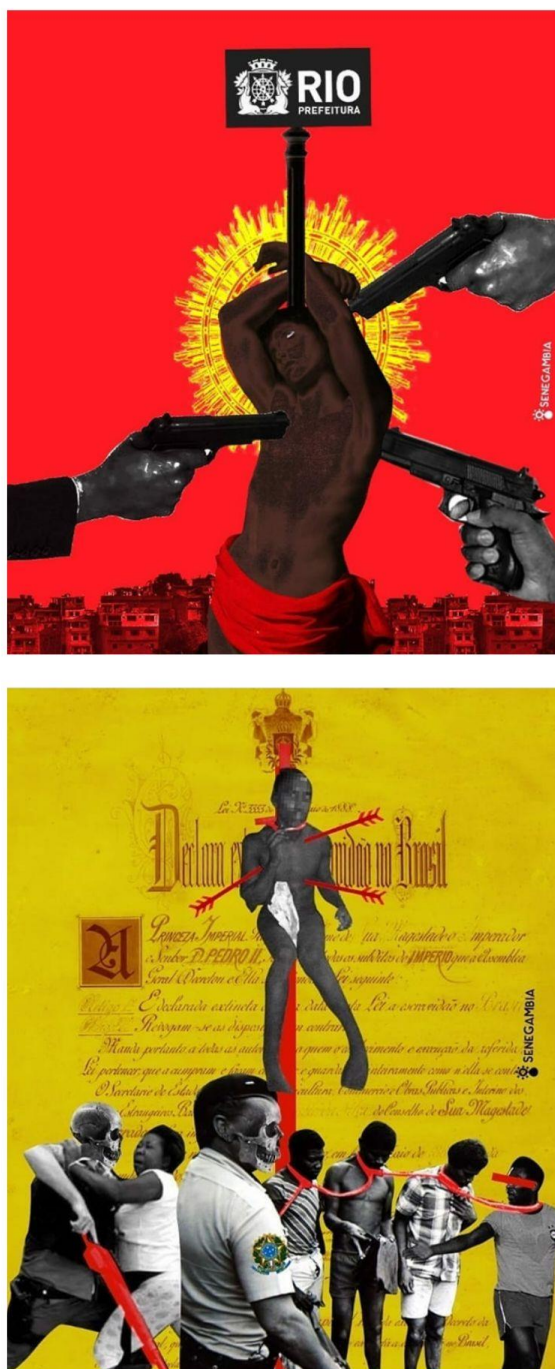
possible to bring together a broad set of gay and/or queer artists who gather around a saint that Richard Dyer³⁰ has come to name as a “melancholy young homosexual”.

However, José Leonilson was not the only Brazilian gay artist to have appropriated the mythological figure of Saint Sebastian. In the field of cinema, for example, one can remember the films by the Pernambuco collective *Surto e Deslumbramento*, which used the image of Saint Sebastian in three films: the feature film *Seita* (2015) and the short film *Vênus de Nike* (2020), both directed by André Antônio Barbosa; and the short film *Virgindade* (2015), directed by Chico Lacerda. In the first, the Christian saint is inserted in a party that worships a collective dandyism or, even, a grouping of allegories of dissident bodies that find a space and a moment in which to be “plural and singular”. In *Vênus de Nike*, also by André Antônio, Saint Sebastian emerges mixed with other bodies of gay men who explore several sexual fetishes, BDSM practices and collective sex, mixing images from porn videos with the classic feature film *Sebastiane* (1976), by Derek Jarman. In the case of Chico Lacerda's *Virgindade* (2015), on the other hand, the figure of the saint is immersed amidst a multitude of other naked men, as well as being involved in a verbose narrative by the director himself about his sexual experiences in the public places of a Latin American metropolis.

Thus, as a whole, all these works stress themes that have historically constituted, or still constitute, narrative and political disputes, such as the historical tensions between homosexuality and religion. This tension refers to the fact that, if the consumption and diffusion of the iconology of Saint Sebastian in our Latin American imaginary is, on the one hand, the fruit of colonization processes, on the other hand, it also indicates an ironic or engaged critique against colonial values of race, gender, and sex that does not adhere to the rhetoric of anticolonial nationalist optimism, without promising any kind of fantasy of elsewhere, much less an oblivion of our shared history of power relations and exploitation. This is true, for instance, when the appropriations of the iconology of Saint Sebastian denounce the genocide of black boys at the hands of the military police in Rio de Janeiro, as shown in one of the most recent collages by Brazilian artist Luang Senegambia.

In his work, Senegambia ambivalently appropriates the classical iconology of Saint Sebastian. Against a red background, perhaps saturating with black blood, the white, apollonian body of the European martyr is replaced by the body of a black boy tied to a pole. The boy's genitals, usually covered by a white cloth in the European tradition, are now covered by a red cloth that, despite its red color, is able to stand out from the background in which a Rio de Janeiro slum is stained red. While in the classic European figures it is the arrows that aim and pierce the body of the saint, in Senegambia's work the body of black Saint Sebastian is the target of revolvers and bullets sponsored by the capital and the state of Rio de Janeiro. It is no wonder that, at the top end of the pole to which the young black Saint Sebastian is tied, we see a plaque that reads “City Hall of Rio de Janeiro”, the city for which Saint Sebastian is the patron saint (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Luan Senegambia's works, both titled *São Sebastião* (2020).



Source: Instagram of Luan Senegambia's

In Rio de Janeiro, the most frequent murder victims are black men between the ages of 15 and 30, and these deaths must be analyzed as part of the genocide of the black population and as the result of the action of a State that operates under the framework of necropolitics, in which racism is an ideological tool that renders black bodies disposable. In the midst of this voluminous context of violence, some episodes of murder or aggression of young blacks that have gained repercussion in the media are incorporated by Senegambia in his works. In another

work, for instance, the artist produces a collage that mixes photographs of a young black man³¹ who, in 2014, was beaten, left naked and tied to a post by a bicycle lock in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro, next to the other symbols that traditionally refer to the classic iconology of Christian martyrs.

In the background of the collage, one can see the text of the *Lei Áurea*, officially Law No. 3,353 of May 13, 1888, which formally abolished, slavery in Brazil, at least on paper. However, in the foreground, and contradicting the law signed by Princess Isabel, we see this young black man, beaten, suffocating with his neck tied to the pole by the bicycle lock. Arrows pierce the body of the boy who, humiliated, tries to hide his genitals with his white T-shirt. Traces of a real fact and mythological symbols intersect to denounce, once again, not only the specific violence of the case in question, but racism as a legacy of a slave-owning country. Besides the black boy who embodies Saint Sebastian, or the Saint Sebastian who embodies the black boy, the same work by Senegambia presents policemen with cadaverous faces who assault other black people, all cases that have been covered by the media.

There are many possible interpretations given such a strong critique; however, by mixing Christian iconology and a critique of racism through the practice of collage, Senegambia's work mainly reminds us that Christianity was a colonial imposition that established one of the main bases of racism and white supremacy and that, as such, the iconological diastases of Saint Sebastian in Brazilian territory carry the stories of the European invasion and colonization process, the catechization of the indigenous communities, the prohibition of religious cult of the African population that was enslaved here, and also the persecution of homosexuals during the counter-reformation³².

Regardless, by using the figure of Saint Sebastian, patron saint of the city of Rio de Janeiro, Senegambia attempts to demonstrate that the black population, just like Saint Sebastian himself, is unjustly dying at the hands of their executioners. In the artist's work, it becomes clear how the consumption and appropriation of iconological traditions can be used, as García-Canclini had already said in the 1990s, as a resource to fight against those who, in the name of tradition itself, seek to defend conservative discourses of different orders. It is with this perspective that Senegambia's work anachronizes our present, for it unveils the coexistence of an impure temporality (slaveholding Brazil and contemporary Brazil, Christianity as the sustainer of white supremacy and the Christian iconology now used as an artistic and political artifact to criticize racism). These are the fragments, symptoms, or sparkles that prevent us from looking at Saint Sebastian as an object enclosed in itself. For García-Canclini, hybridization is not a process of synonym and merger without contradictions. On the contrary, by using distinct material and symbolic apparatuses, Senegambia demonstrates that the works I have referred to as bastard images are precisely what Rincón names, inspired by Michel de Certeau³³, as those conflicting "marks of doing", the "ways of practicing", the "tactics" of everyday life, and the "inventions of the weakest" that is, mobile, unstable, fluid, sometimes contradictory forms of resistance that express themselves in the context of artistic production.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this text, I did not attempt to see *with* these images, that is, within or alongside them, nor to see *against* them. I sought to see *in between*, because I believe that it is this strategy that in fact made it possible to better understand the movements of the iconologies discussed. Perhaps it is Homi K. Bhabha who best describes this strategy of seeing *in-between*, as I have not sought to show the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but rather the inscription of difference and the articulation of iconological hybridity in cultures. For this, and as Bhabha

did, I must stress that the intercultural, that is, this cutting edge of translation, of negotiation, the in-between place, is what carries the *burden* of meaning in cultures. It is this place that allows us, in the author's own words, "to glimpse national histories, antinational histories, people's histories", and thus "avoid the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves"³⁴.

Thus, my use of the expression "bastard images" is not meant as a mere jargon that can stand alongside terms such as "mestizaje" (mixture of ethnicities), "syncretism" (mixture of religions), and "creolization" (mixture of languages), because, as García-Canclini³⁵ has already explained, these categories are insufficient to name and explain modern and contemporary forms of interculturality and hybridization processes. Though in this statement García-Canclini does not refer only to the imbrications or interculturalization of artistic culture, I believe that this thought is valid to describe bastard images not as mere objects, but as processes of aesthetic, political, and cultural hybridization.

In other words, these are processes that embody the tension of difference and political contradiction instead of mere "provincial denial"³⁶, with the consequent emergence of the restless, surviving, revisionary and hybrid energy of a sacred aspect that survives in a translated and polemical way, intertwining traditions of European classical painting with Latin American arts, resulting in a set of images that are the "bastard daughters"³⁷ of "legitimate art" and that degenerate their origin and nature, circulating "minor sensibilities". I believe, once again drawing inspiration from Homi K. Bhabha, that a queer critique or even a post-colonial critique in the field of images and art are not efficient because they eternally separate the terms of master and slave, of trader and Marxist, or even the terms of distinct "aesthetic traditions". Instead, I believe that a critical theory can only be truly efficient to the extent that it goes beyond the opposition bases that are given there and opens a space of negotiation and translation that destroys negative polarities, so we can may with the true complexity of imagetic diastases.

The appropriations of the classic iconographies of Saint Sebastian in Latin American visual culture occur among different groups and social strata, from artists linked to queer arts to engaged artistic productions, especially those connected to contemporary debates such as racism and colonialism. In this case, it is possible to see that aesthetics such as *rasquache*, Brazilian pop art, camp and arts connected to contemporary activism alter the classic iconographies of the saint to make room for aesthetic and political re-readings focused on minority experiences, so that these movements perceived throughout the 20th and 21st centuries both flex and abandon certain figurative aspects of Christian, Baroque and Renaissance iconography, while at the same time revitalizing and allowing the survival of the iconography of the Christian saint in a transmuted way.

Finally, this text has not attempted to exhaust the terms and concepts mentioned. It is more of an essay, freely written in the first person, as it is the last text on a critical and affective involvement with Saint Sebastian for around six years. Those interested in this debate can also access broader and more in-depth texts published in Portuguese listed in the bibliography section.

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End notes

- ¹ André Maulrax, *Le musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale, Des bas-reliefs aux grottes sacrées* (Paris: Gallimard/Galerie de la Pleiade, 1954).
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- ³ Souza, Isidro. São Sebastião, ícone gay. *Revista Korpus*, Lisboa, 1999, 114-125.
- ⁴ Stepic, Nikola. The Reproduction of Saint Sebastian as a Queer Martyr in *Suddenly, Last Summer and Lilies*. In: *Journal of Religion and Culture*, 26: 1-23 (2015/2016). Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.
- ⁵ Kearney, Ryan; *Rubber Intercessions: Saint Sebastian as Queer Communal Instigator during the AIDS Crisis*; University of Birmingham: Birmingham, 2018.
- ⁶ Marconi, (2022)
- ⁷ Idem.
- ⁸ In 2004, at the Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna, Austria), curated by Wolfgang Fetz and Gerald Matt, the exhibition "Saint Sebastian – A Splendid Readiness for Death" was organized. The introduction referred to Saint Sebastian as "a sado-maso icon, an androgynous dandy, an ambiguous warrior, a martyr in love with death, the very embodiment

of the artist's exemplary suffering, a mix of vamp and narcissus, patron saint of soldiers, homosexuals and people suffering from diseases”.

⁹ *Idem*

¹⁰ *Idem*.

¹¹ Bhabha, Homi. *O local da cultura*. Belo Horizonte: Editora, UFMG, 2013: 57.

¹² Rincón, Omar. O popular na comunicação: culturas bastardas + cidadanias celebrities. Tradução: Ciro Lubliner, *Revista Eco Pós*, 19: 3, 2016.

¹³ Canclini, Nestor Garcia. *Culturas híbridas*. São Paulo: Edusp, 2011.

¹⁴ Didi-Huberman, George. *A sobrevivência dos vaga-lumes*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2011. Didi-Huberman, George. *A imagem sobrevivente: história da arte em tempo dos fantasmas segundo Aby Warburg*. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, 2013. Didi-Huberman, George. *Atlas ou Gaia saber inquieto: O olho da história, III*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2018. Warburg, Aby. *A renovação da Antiguidade pagã: contribuições científico-culturais para a história do Renascimento europeu*. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, 2013. Warburg, Aby. *Histórias de Fantasmas para gente grande: escritos, esboços e conferências*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2015.

¹⁵ Marconi, Dieison (2022).

¹⁶ Among other things, they are Brazilian women who dedicate themselves to the traditional craft of selling *acarajé* and other African and Afro-Bahian foods. They may also be devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions.

¹⁷ Jesús Martín-Barbero, “Culturas Populares.” in *Términos críticos de sociología de la cultura*, editado por Carlos Altamirano, 49-69. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2002.

¹⁸ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

¹⁹ Ybarra-Frausto, *Rasquachismo*, 29.

²⁰ Bhabha, *O local da cultura*, 19.

²¹ Jack Halberstam, *A arte queer do fracasso* (Recife: Cepe, 2020).

²² Sianne Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde.” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005). Sianne Ngai. “Our aesthetic categories: an interview with Siane Ngai.” *Cabinet Magazine* 43, (2011).

²³ Lopes, Denilson. *No coração do mundo: paisagens transculturais*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2012.

²⁴ Halberstam, *A arte queer do fracasso*.

²⁵ Lee Eldeman, *No future: queer theory and the death drive* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁶ In the poem *Gacela X: De la huida*: “Many times he lost me by the sea, how I pierced in the heart of some children”, present in the book *Diván del Tamarit* (São Paulo: Biblioteca Azul, 2014).

²⁷ These guys (...) they're just beautiful landscapes in my way. In the voice of José Leonilson in the movie *A Paixão de JL* (Carlos Nader, 2014).

²⁸ Ana Cristina Chiara, “Afinidades eletivas.” *Ipotesi*, (2017): 9-17.

²⁹ David Halperin, *How To Be Gay*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³⁰ Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*.

³¹ According to Brazilian press reports at the time, the young man was attacked by a group of three men, whom he referred to as “vigilantes”. The boy was beaten, stabbed in the ear, stripped of his clothes, and held by his neck to a pole. Firemen from the Catete Fire Station responded to the assault and released the boy. He was taken to the Souza Aguiar Municipal Hospital. More information at: [Jovem negro é acorrentado nu em poste por grupo de ‘justiceiros’](https://www.pragmatismopolitico.com.br/2014/02/jovem-negro-e-acorrentado-nu-em-poste-por-grupo-de-justiceiros/) <https://www.pragmatismopolitico.com.br/2014/02/jovem-negro-e-acorrentado-nu-em-poste-por-grupo-de.html>

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³³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

³⁴ Bhabha, *O local da cultura*, 76.

³⁵ García-Canclini, *Culturas híbridas*.

³⁶ Bhabha, *O local da cultura*.

³⁷ Rincón, “O *popular* na comunicação”.