

Report

Indeed, *filha da puta*. The town my paternal family comes from, Araçuaí, inland of Brazil, in the state of Minas Gerais, was founded on the turn of the 18th to the 19th century, when the *Vale do Jequitinhonha* was being progressively invaded by colonizers. A canoe of sex workers navigating the Jequitinhonha River moored at a recently established village, Itira, located at the intersection of two voluminous rivers, the Jequitinhonha and the Araçuaí. Itira began to grow as a village around the church built by the priest Carlos Pereira Freire de Moura, the local authority at the time. Freire de Moura had imagined his new village as an impeccable catholic settlement. The group of sex workers settled in Itira and started their business taking advantage of the busy intersection of the two frequently navigated rivers. Some say the priest was a regular customer at the brothel; a customer who may have enjoyed the brothel's services free of charge. Ronald Claver in one of his many chronicles, suggests that after being demanded to pay for the church's tithe, Luciana Teixeira Lages, sex worker and owner of the brothel, denied free services to the priest, who ended up expelling the brothel from Itira. Despite this fabulated detail of the story, since the reasons for the expulsion of the sex workers from Itira are unknown, local oral histories affirm they were forced to leave. Luciana and her co-workers oared their canoe up the Araçuaí river until they found lands on which to settle. Again, at a river's crossing, the Araçuaí river and the Calhau stream, their brothel became well known. With time, a settlement flourished around them and became what we today know as the town of Araçuaí, while the village of Itira decayed in prosperity and growth.

Over the past summer, I traveled to my grandmother's town, Araçuaí, hoping to learn more about its history, as well as that of Luciana and her anonymous coworkers. Besides this historical interest, as a researcher of visual culture, I

wanted to visit Araçuaí to meet and interview Maria Lira Marques, a 79 year old contemporary artist who is part of a long line of artists in the region and who has dedicated her life's work to nurturing and celebrating Vale do Jequitinhonha's cultural production. Alongside friar Francisco Van Der Poel, known as friar Chico, Maria Lira Marques founded the Museu de Araçuaí, a self-organized museum that hosts a collection of objects and documents on local religious practices, traditions, and artworks by local artists.

Upon my arrival, I first visited the Museu de Araçuaí to look at a collection of books written by friar Chico on the research he and Maria Lira undertook on the culture of the region as well as to see the artworks by Maria Lira, Zefa, Seu Tião, Ulysses de Caraí, Arioswaldo, among others. I was impressed with the substance of the museum, which began as a self-organized collection stored at auxiliary spaces of the main church in Araçuaí. In this first visit, I was lucky to be guided by Renata, one of the local and experienced museum guides, who shared with me and two other visitors a thorough history and contextualization of the objects, documents, and artworks exhibited.

At the entrance hall of the museum, there was an opening text that narrates the history of Araçuaí and Luciana Teixeira. This was the first time I saw Luciana Teixeira being named with her full name: Luciana Teixeira Lages. The added last name, Lages, is the same last name I have. Coming across our potential lines of kinship and the history of Araçuaí made me think about the complexity of social relationships shaped at once by coloniality, catholic moral determinations, as well as by the non-normative, disruptive logics created by a brothel and its legacy. Much of Brazil's lived ethos, and as it is the case for that side of my family's way of being, is shaped by the intricate interplay of class, race and gender hierarchies, catholic morals, and a culturally specific proclivity for sensorial pleasures that disrupt

modern colonial norms. And my research tackles this interplay that is at once contradictory and

On a second visit to the museum, in that same week, I found out that the last name Lages was given back to Luciana after friar Chico found her property inventory documents in his Church, on which he noticed she was named with two last names, Teixeira and Lages. I was told this by Ângela Gomes Freire, a literature researcher who works at the museum; she also showed me the book *O Rosário dos Homens Pretos* written by Friar Chico, where this story is told. Apparently, soon after Friar Chico's encounter with Luciana's documents, a heavy flood took over the town, as it is customary during summer rains. This year, nonetheless, the flood was particularly destructive, leaving many unhoused and wiping out most of people's belongings. The church was also significantly ravaged and lost its archive, including Luciana's documents. Regarding her identity and more details on her life and work, my next steps are to look at the *Arquivos da Torre do Tombo*, in Portugal, where I may find copies of the same property inventory papers once seen by friar Chico. Despite my personal curiosity in finding out about our potential familial connection, I am interested in researching more details of this history as I plan to use it as an anecdotal, guiding arch in my dissertation analysis of the erotics of power in the racial formation of Brazil.

As Ângela shared with me, local entities, such as the catholic church, have historically contested and attempted to erase Luciana's history as a sex worker, offering a different narrative of Araçuaí's beginning. Friar Chico himself, in his book *Rosário dos Homens Pretos* claims Luciana's property to be "um local de pessoal religioso, ordeiro e direito," a place of religious, orderly and righteous people, implying that no sex as work was done there. Nonetheless, as much as Luciana has a vigorous presence in the local imaginary and the oral histories of the region, so-

called accredited historical sources have also written about her. She is mentioned in one of the travel diaries written by Auguste de Saint-Hilaire, a french botanist who undertook a few research expeditions throughout Brazil in the early 19th century, including the sertões of Minas Gerais and the *Distrito dos Diamantes*, the Diamond Township, where he visited Araçuaí. In his book, *Viagens Pelas Províncias do Rio de Janeiro e Minas Gerais*, Saint-Hilaire describes his stay at Luciana's property on the day of Pentecostes, on which religious leaders came to celebrate a mass. He does not describe it as a brothel, but as a boarding/inn farm. He portrays Luciana as an independent mulata woman, a generous host, who did not charge him for his stay, but asked, while stroking his legs, for paper and a pen. Saint-Hilaire may not have wanted to overtly state that he had stayed in a brothel during his travels in his research reports. Nonetheless, his mention of Luciana on her knees stroking his legs is quite suggestive of his whereabouts. Coming across Araçuaí's history in the museum, hearing about Luciana in the words of so many local people, reading friar Chico's books, as well as coming across the writings of Auguste de Saint-Hilaire expanded my understanding of this history and the ways in which I could work with it in my dissertation.

In my analysis of the ways in which the erotics of power shape the racial formation of Brazil, I look at the ways in which contemporary artworks contest the narratives of racial democracy, or *mestiçagem*, in Brazil, as well as the ways in which these artworks articulate possibilities of otherwise worlds, disrupting modern colonial determinations of being. To begin exploring this portion of my research, I undertook a semi-structured, in person, and filmed interview with Maria Lira Marques. In our 3-hour long conversation, Lira shared with me rich details about her practice and trajectory as an artist. For an artist with international recognition, Lira walked an unusual path, defying western epistemic hierarchies and the norms

of art institutions. She was not trained in a fine arts academy, she learned how to work with clay with her mom, Odília Borges Nogueira, who used to build nativity scenes in raw clay to distribute to her neighbors. Later, Lira learned from Joana Poteira techniques for extracting and baking clay. She says she was very observant and curious and would ask artisans to teach her new ways of working clay. As Lira developed her own work as an artist, she first exhibited her work in regional craft fairs that would show traditional and local crafts from different regions in Minas Gerais. Meanwhile, she worked with Friar Chico in an extensive research project about local traditional songs and religious practices, which fed the work they led together at the chorus *Trovadores do Vale*. Both projects contributed to the founding of the Museu de Araçuaí. Lira and I also spoke about the hierarchies imposed by art institutions on what is considered art and what is considered crafts. In this regard, she spoke about the ways in which she perceives her presence in art galleries, museums, and other institutional places as of an outsider, one with a different trajectory and background than most. Lira also spoke about her sculptures and paintings as creations that come from a very intimate and personal realm, from her imagination of living beings from the Vale. It was an honor for me to meet Lira in person and to hear her talk about her work and trajectory in her own words.