

Tactile Colonialism: From Multisensory Perception to the Colonizing Gaze in Gilberto Freyre's Work

FRANCISCO QUINTEIRO PIRES
New York University

Abstract: Almost 20 years after publishing *Casa-grande & senzala* (1933), interpreted as a springboard for the myth of racial democracy in Brazil, Gilberto Freyre visited the five remaining Portuguese colonies in Africa. Freyre's theses on miscegenation and Portuguese exceptionalism from the 1930s would influence his racializing perspective about African peoples in *Aventura e rotina* (1953), a travel journal in which he introduced the concept of Lusotropicalism. When Freyre read African and Afro-diasporic bodies in his travels, he adopted an ocularcentric approach that replaced the multisensory discourse of *Casa-grande & senzala*. The description of sexual violence faced a paradox in his Lusotropicalist work. To depict Portuguese colonialism as soft, he gradually erased references to the tactile sense from his rendition of miscegenation. By de-emphasizing touch, Freyre offered a conceptual justification for the Portuguese to racialize African peoples and animate their search for "novos Brasis" in Africa.

Keywords: Africa, Lusotropicalism, miscegenation, Portugal, sensory studies

In *Casa-grande & senzala: formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal* (1933), Gilberto Freyre contrasted the specificities of Portuguese colonialism with the hegemonic model represented by British colonialism. In this controversial book, Freyre announced plasticity as the most striking singularity of Portuguese colonizers and extended this notion, relatively

speaking, to enslaved African peoples, whom he defined as an “óleo” that has supposedly softened the “dura” and “seca” European culture in tropical lands (*Casa-grande* 115). By invoking sensory perceptions, he emphasized the tactile concept of Portuguese miscibility, the condition of Portugal as a liminal territory—a bridge between Europe and Africa—and the alleged Portuguese ability to adapt to the tropics. Freyre concluded that the Portuguese colonizers’ propensity for physical intimacy with people of other ethnicities shaped Brazil sexually as a miscegenated society under the slave regime. Miscegenation, in turn, marked the difference between Portuguese colonialism and those of other European empires. With these arguments, Freyre addressed the particularities of colonial Brazil through a reading that metaphorically recorded the sensorial aspects of sexual violence promoted by Portuguese colonization. Freyre’s framework consisted of theories of sensory studies *avant la lettre*, which he deployed in his interpretation of the formative period of Brazilian society, described as “um organismo ainda tão mole, plástico, quase sem ossos” (*Casa-grande* 90).¹

Almost two decades after publishing *Casa-grande & senzala*, a source full of examples used to support the myth of racial democracy in Brazil, Freyre undertook a series of trips between 1951–52 under the sponsorship of the Portuguese state to its colonies in Africa and Asia. Freyre’s thesis about miscegenation in the 1930s influenced his racializing discourses in the Lusotropicalist period, inaugurated in the early 1950s by the publication of the travel diary *Aventura e rotina: sugestões de uma viagem à procura das constantes portuguesas de caráter e ação*.² It is possible to note a genealogy between *Casa-grande & senzala* and the tenets of Lusotropicalism. Freyre’s theories about African and Afro-diasporic bodies

¹ Muniz Sodré shares a similar perception. Although Sodré does not examine the sensory elements of Freyre’s work, he considers Freyre a “pioneiro . . . ao incluir afetos, formas e até mesmo odores em suas análises da sociedade brasileira” (Sodré 13).

² As the anthropologist Miguel Vale de Almeida states, João Leal was the first researcher to investigate the Portuguese roots of Lusotropicalism and note a mutual influence between the ideas of Gilberto Freyre and the Portuguese ethnologist António Jorge Dias. Leal traced the Portuguese unease with decadence and marginality of Portugal in relation to the industrialized countries of Europe back to the second half of the nineteenth century, specifically to *O povo português*, a book by Teófilo Braga read and quoted by Freyre in *Casa-grande & senzala*. According to Almeida, Braga presented a series of contradictory elements to claim that the Portuguese historical experience oscillates “entre sonho e acção, bondade e violência, adaptação e capacidade de guardar o carácter próprio, . . . liberdade individual e solidariedade” (Almeida 198). To approach these contradictions regarding Portuguese identity, both Freyre and Dias produced a discourse based on “etnogenealogia,” according to which the ability to mix cultures is proportional to the preservation of the originality of the mixed elements (Almeida 198).

developed in a spiral, gravitating around two central signifiers: the ideology of miscegenation and the myth of Portuguese exceptionalism. When reading those bodies, Freyre produced in *Aventura e rotina* a palimpsest of his 1933 book that becomes increasingly reductive in sensorial terms.³ The multisensory emphasis of *Casa-grande & senzala*, with constant references to touch and tactile metaphors, gives way to a strong preference for an ocularcentric approach in the Lusotropicalist period.

In *Casa-grande & senzala* and *Aventura e rotina*, Freyre approached race as a social construct that also depends on sensory filters to come into being and have material meaning. Especially in *Casa-grande & senzala*, it is possible to argue that he addressed racialization along the lines of Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown's exploration of "race as a multisensorial event, paying attention to how race is constructed, reproduced, and experienced *feelingly* through our sensory perceptions, affective engagements, and embodied experiences" (Sekimoto and Brown 1). However, Freyre's writings became more ocularcentric in the 1950s, as he had not found in the Portuguese colonies in Africa what he had ideally envisaged in the formation of the Brazilian family under the patriarchal regime: the widespread phenomenon of miscegenation. In his view, the racial mixture operates simultaneously as the visual representation of Portuguese exceptionalism and the supposed genesis of the identity of "um europeu com sangue africano" adapted to the tropical zone (*Aventura* 110). This identity may be defined as "ecocultural" to the extent that it "situates group or individual ecological affiliations and practices as inextricable from—and mutually constituted with—sociocultural dimensions" (Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor xviii).⁴ As Freyre describes in *Casa-grande & senzala*, miscegenation resulted from the "condições sempre *tensas e vibráteis* de contato humano entre a Europa e a África" (66; emphasis added). When Freyre went to Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau,

³ Ocularcentrism leads people to forget that reading is not exclusively a visual act. For example, people can read with fingers, an operation that senses letters or symbols without the mediation of vision.

⁴ Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor propose "ecocultural identity" as a "perspective on identity" that offers an "expanded, potentially recuperative lens for understanding self, other and existence as intrinsically relational and broadly ethical" (xix). However, when the concept of "ecocultural identity" confronts Freyre's proposition of a European with African blood as a Lusotropical identity—which does not conceive the notion of ecology as separate from the human—it faces the possibility of being resignified as another racializing and patriarchal tool for colonizing African people.

Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe, he sought to confirm the conditions for the Portuguese to establish “possíveis novos Brasis” throughout Africa (*Aventura* 25). In those “novos Brasis,” Freyre contended that Portuguese culture and the Portuguese language should prevail and erase any evidence of resistance to colonialism, such as Kriolu, a Creole language spoken by Cape Verdeans that Portuguese colonists could not understand without previous and regular exposure to its articulation.

Tactile Colonialism: The Paradox that Disguises the Sexual Violence

Tactile colonialism is a type of colonization marked by intense racial mixing, which is the result of unbridled and unpunished sexual violence exercised by Portuguese colonizers against African and Amerindian bodies.⁵ It materializes from the asymmetric and predatory relationship between the bodies of the colonizers and the colonized. Described by a series of sensory metaphors, with a special emphasis on touch, tactile colonialism expresses itself in an atmosphere that Freyre declared to be of “quase intoxicação sexual” (*Casa-grande* 161). According to Freyre, this relationship consisted of frequent sexual encounters that spread many venereal diseases among the population of Brazil, chiefly syphilis (*Casa-grande* 400).⁶

However, miscegenation faces a paradox central to Freyre’s Lusotropicalist discourse, which obscures the notion that racial mixing results from nonconsensual sexual encounters between slaveholding men and enslaved women. To regard Portuguese colonialism as soft, Freyre gradually erased references to tactile sense from the rendition of violent sexual encounters. He interrupted the rhetorical gestures that activate, and appeal to, sensory metaphors in *Aventura e rotina* to de-emphasize the relentless sexual violations committed by the Portuguese.

⁵ *Casa-grande & senzala* includes a chapter about the influence of Amerindians on the formation of the Brazilian family. Freyre compared Amerindian peoples to a “bando de crianças grandes” (*Casa-grande* 158). Freyre also contrasted the “tristeza de introvertido” of Amerindian peoples and the “energia moça, tesa, vigorosa” of enslaved African peoples (*Casa-grande* 229). Helena Bocayuva listed the characteristics, such as “inferior” and “inadaptável,” which Freyre attributed to Indigenous peoples based on the categories of gender and sexuality (Bocayuva 127). The stereotyped descriptions of Indigenous peoples in *Casa-grande & senzala* deserve a more complex assessment that transcends the scope of this article.

⁶ In one of many excerpts about the bacterial infection spread by sexual contact, Freyre remarks that “a sífilis fez sempre o que quis no Brasil patriarcal” (*Casa-grande* 401).

According to French anthropologist David Le Breton, sensory experience “is first and foremost tactile experience, contact with others and objects, the feeling of our feet touching the ground. The world imparts its forms, volumes, textures, shapes, masses, and temperatures to us through its endless layers of skin” (95). It is possible to argue based on Le Breton’s proposition that the bias in favor of vision hampers the function of touch as a sensory matrix.

Permeated by the politics of amnesia, Freyre’s Lusotropicalist writings gradually obliterated the tactile contents associated with miscegenation, which can express the violence committed against colonized bodies. His works encouraged forgetting that miscegenation embodies tactile colonialism; moreover, they also advanced miscegenation as the root of racial democracy.⁷ The preference of Freyre’s Lusotropicalist writings for the visual sense and their simultaneous politics of amnesia concerning touch also advance a colorist reading that highlights the different skin colors among Brazilians as a visual representation of the exceptionality of Portuguese colonialism and a certain “prova ocular da ausência de racismo” (Pires 33).

By being ocularcentric, Freyre’s discourse can paradoxically depict Portuguese colonialism as more benign, prone to transnational contact and racial mixing, marked by a supposed “*doçura* no tratamento dos escravos” (*Casa-grande* 298; emphasis added). Moreover, the Portuguese colonization would be more amenable and affectionate, because, according to Freyre, “o português sempre pendeu para o *contato* voluptuoso com mulher exótica. Para o cruzamento e miscigenação. Tendência que parece resultar da plasticidade social, maior no português que em qualquer outro colonizador europeu” (*Casa-grande* 265; emphasis added). Tactile colonialism conceals sexual violence behind an alleged tender facade of consent: “o que Freyre não leva em conta . . . [é] que a miscigenação se deu às custas da violentação da mulher negra” (Gonzalez 50).

Although Freyre regarded miscegenation as a beneficial phenomenon capable

⁷ Many scholars from different fields of inquiry have addressed the myth of racial democracy, Lusotropicalism, and the deployment of paradoxes in Freyre’s works. Scholars have approached these topics from historiographical, biographical, sociological, diplomatic, educational, gender, class, and culturalist viewpoints by examining the psychological and theoretical trajectories of Freyre, state ideology, discourse, and race relations in Brazil (Almeida; Anderson et al.; Araújo; Avelar; Castelo; Dávila; Ferreira; Gonzalez; Guimarães; Júnior; Melo; Nascimento; Pallares-Burke; Vianna). However, these works have so far ignored the discursive operations in Freyre’s writings that activated the senses and produced an embodied knowledge for the Portuguese to continue their colonization of Africa.

of correcting socioeconomic disparities in the formation of Brazilian society, he offered haptic references to interpret the existence of different skin tones as visual evidence of the physical, violent, and destructive experience of slavery. In *Casa-grande & senzala*, Freyre claimed that “[n]ão há escravidão sem depravação sexual” when repeating a colorist and sexist discourse that had historically associated excessive debauchery with Black women of lighter skin, described as having the most beautiful bodies (399).⁸ This description of the body and sexuality of enslaved women depended mainly on the activation of tactile perception.⁹

Jacques Rancière defined “the distribution of sensible” as “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that . . . establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts” (12). That distribution results from “the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière 13). Rancière’s politics of sensory perception, if applied to the Freyrean logic, raises questions about preconceived ideas concerning miscegenation and its (ab)uses in the formation of Brazilian society. Miscegenation signifies a form of visual representation of the alleged softness or sweetness of Portuguese colonizers. As a consequence of this approach, the supremacy of vision over the other senses may become “an obstacle . . . to our knowledge of reality” (Jay 1).

In the next section of this article, I discuss the theoretical framework employed for investigating sensoriality in Freyre’s works. Then, in the two following sections, I approach examples of the sensory shift that privileged the visual sense in the 1950s and reinforced the colonizing gaze in Freyre’s reading of African and Afro-diasporic bodies. By manipulating the colonial operations of the eye and de-emphasizing tactile perception in *Aventura e rotina*, Freyre offered a conceptual blueprint for the Portuguese to escalate their colonization of African territories

⁸ Alessandra Devulsky defines colorism as an ideology, and colorist discourse reinforces a “sistema sofisticado de hierarquização racial e de atribuição de qualidades e fragilidades que, no Brasil, é oriundo da implantação do projeto colonial português” (30, 29). When commenting that Freyre repeats the sexist stereotype that “a mulata serve para fornicar,” Devulsky claims that Brazilians have historically imagined this “concepção de unidimensionalização do corpo feminino: aquela que o homem faz dela” (Devulsky 139).

⁹ Even when taste, hearing, and smell appear in *Casa-grande & senzala*, they are subordinate to the master metaphor of tactile colonialism. That subordination corroborates Le Breton’s claim that “skin is a vast geography that nourishes different sensory domains, encompassing them within its web, and providing singular perspectives on reality that cannot be isolated from one another” (95–96).

after the Second World War.¹⁰

Skin as a Historical Site of Fiction and Violence

For Le Breton, “skin is the point of contact with the world and with others. It is always a site of material meaning” (97). When skin is understood as a field of semantic references, the value of touch as a cognitive model “may thus not be carnal comprehension, but rather point to violent collisions, . . . ethnic misunderstanding and racist prejudice” (Elsaesser and Hagener 141). By reducing the body to physical appearance and giving skin color the status of a fiction with a biological basis, the Euro-American world turned race into a codified madness. Because race operates as a material and phantasmagoric category, it has historically been the cause of unprecedented physical devastation (Mbembe 2). When proposing a sensorial analysis, this article approaches race as a material category, a perspective that allows to investigate the way Freyre described African and Afro-diasporic bodies.

One can argue that, between the 1930s and 1950s, Freyre undertook a rhetorical turn that separated human beings into two categories: the “eye person” and the “skin person.” The German naturalist Lorenz Oken invented the concepts of “eye person” and “skin person” in the early nineteenth century to define Europeans and Africans, respectively (Benthien 152). Claudia Benthien addresses the conceptual proposition of Oken, for whom Europeans were human beings according to the clarity and transparency of their skin. Epidermal clarity and transparency supposedly allowed people to observe that Europeans felt human emotions. For example, the fact that cheeks blush and turn visibly red is confirmation that Europeans could feel shame. The darker skin of African peoples, in turn, dehumanized them because it veiled the transparency and visibility of their emotions (Benthien 152). This sensory dichotomy historically attributed to the colonizers a transparent identity and dehumanized colonized peoples as receptacles of essentializing definitions based on their perceived opacity.

¹⁰ More recent scholarship has investigated coloniality in Freyre’s Lusotropicalist writings. Michel Cahen coined the expression “mestiçagem colonialista” and described it as an ideology that supports colonizing expansionism within Brazilian borders (335–49). Luiz Feldman proposed “uma leitura dos escritos lusotropicais como parte de uma concepção imperial de Gilberto Freyre sobre a ordem mundial.” according to which it would be possible to notice “um vislumbre da grandeza imperial não de Portugal, mas do Brasil” in Freyre’s works (Feldman 147, 148).

Throughout his Lusotropicalist writings, Freyre read the bodies of Cape Verdeans and Bissau-Guineans as representatives of the concept of “skin person.”

The “eye person” and the “skin person” are two racializing sensory concepts that serve to better understand the cultural function of the gaze in the representation of colonized peoples. The self-proclaimed ability to establish and maintain distance through the visual sense allowed Europeans to imagine themselves as more rational and complex beings than Africans and Amerindians. Ulla D. Berg and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas propose the concept of “racialized affect” by saying that white people are defined as capable of having an “empowering affect,” “the affect associated with privilege and always-already perceived as complex, nuanced, and beyond essentialism,” while Africans and Amerindians are identified with the “liable affect,” “the affective practices that serve to racialize, contain, and sustain conditions of vulnerability and a constitutive element of subject formation” (662). White individuals possess the privilege of a sovereign subjectivity, whereas Black people have “no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (Fanon 83). As Frantz Fanon affirms, white people can seal persons of African ancestry into “objecthood” without the risk of being in a reciprocal position (82).

The tactile sense, associated with sensuality and the inability to sustain distance, historically has personified the supposed irrationality of African peoples. Touch announces a cultural categorization that is territorial, ethnic, racial, and ontological. Skin “is the primary agent that individualizes a human being and forms a closed world around him or her” (Benthien 170). However, colonialism does not attribute to African peoples’ skin the capacity for individualization or the sovereign cultivation of an inner world. In *Casa-grande & senzala*, Freyre reaffirmed discourses that claimed Black African people as the owners of a body physiologically more adapted to slave labor in the tropics and a skin capable of sweating through all pores “e não apenas pelos sovacos. De transpirar como se todo ele manasse um óleo, e não apenas escorressem pingos isolados de suor, como do branco” (370). As Benthien notes, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Enlightenment philosophers and physicians attempted to “[establish] the physiological basis for the difference [in skin colors] and thereby undergird it with scientific evidence. In this process, African people were all but reduced to their skin” (152). When reduced to their skin, African and Afro-diasporic persons were racially represented as highly reactive to external sensory stimuli.

The epidermis relies on ocularcentrism to operate as a form of control over racialized bodies. Drawing from the thinking of Fanon on colonial discourse, Homi Bhabha argues that skin, “as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as ‘common knowledge’ in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies” (Bhabha 112). Skin establishes the most visible opposition by which colonizers exercised power over colonized peoples (Bhabha 112).

Fanon further addresses such power when reflecting on the destabilization that a white boy has caused to his identity. When the white boy noticed Fanon’s presence inside a train that they both had boarded, he pointed his finger at Fanon and said to his mother, “Look, a negro!” (84). Fanon defined this encounter as the moment in which he “was an object in the midst of other objects” and “the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye” (82). For Lewis Gordon, the destabilizing encounter narrated by Fanon registers a Black person as “a being without inner life or self-control” (Gordon 48). At that instant, Fanon “thus found himself ensnared, dried up, and laid out in a world of ice-cold exteriority. There he realized his situation as a two-dimensional object as in Euclidean geometry: He was ‘out there,’ a surface, so to speak, without an inside” (Gordon 48). Processes of racialization take effect—and place—in the skin of Black persons, which is sensorially constructed as a material site of opacity, inferiority, and otherness.

The Eurocentric notions of distance and transparency in the construction of identities are crucial for understanding how Freyre developed his hypotheses in *Aventura e rotina*. Freyre’s ideas depended on the relation between the construction of racialized bodies and the landscapes in which they function. To approach these core ideas of Lusotropicalism, two of Fanon’s concepts, “historico-racial schema” and “racial epidermal schema,” can be elucidating (84).¹¹ Allexe Karera addresses the correlation between the two schemas coined by Fanon as a gradual process of “epidermalization,” which “is the internalization of sociohistorical myths, . . . founded and nurtured by repressive economic conditions” (Karera 292). According to Fanon, colonization produces violence that is legitimized by “a thousand of details, anecdotes, stories,” the aforementioned

¹¹ Fanon defines “schema” as both a “slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world” and “a definite structuring of the self and of the world” (84).

“historico-racial schema” (84). Additionally, it visually fixes the identities of Black subjects as things and inscribes their experience as an always-already particular event, never able to be a source of universality for humanity. After Freyre gradually abandoned the emphatic use of tactile metaphors to explain the formation of Brazilian society in the tropics, he concentrated his rhetorical gestures on vision, which Western thought deems, according to Martin Jay, “the noblest sense” (21). For this reason, Freyre shaped his reading of African and Afro-diasporic bodies in consonance with the primacy of vision, a sense that, while “[i]ntrinsically less temporal than other senses as hearing or touch . . . tends to elevate static Being over dynamic Becoming, fixed essences over ephemeral appearances” (Jay 35).

Jens Andermann discusses the fixed essence ascribed to a colonized person. He approaches the problematic belief that a detached gaze and the performance of rationality in the tropics are impossible. In mentioning specific examples of the foundation of natural history museums in Argentina and Brazil during the nineteenth century, Andermann examines the link between sovereignty and systems of classification established by these institutions. “This special articulation between science, sovereignty, and a particular construction of perspective,” Andermann claims, “is often missed by histories of colonial knowledge” (27, 30). The ocularcentric perspective locates the tropics in a zone of production of irrationality, where the subjects are incapable of being autonomous and producing theory, “which meant to look at attentively, to behold” (Jay 23). To differentiate the Portuguese from other European colonizers, Freyre extolled what he saw as the creation of a new culture of Portuguese origin in the tropics. He reacted, to a certain extent, to the Eurocentric belief that it would be impossible to generate a civilization, produce science, or be rational in a tropical region since there would not be enough distance between who observes and whom and what is observed. The idea of objectivity demands neutral subjects who do not allow themselves to be affected sensorially by what or whom they turn into objects of scrutiny.

Miscegenation and Syphilization: “O europeu com sangue africano”

In *Casa-grande & senzala*, Freyre defined his research method as being Proustian, “uma aventura de sensibilidade” (45). His main subject would be the intimacy of the colonial Brazilian society, because “[e]studando a vida doméstica dos

antepassados sentimo-nos aos poucos nos contemplar: é outro meio de procurar-se o tempo perdido” (Freyre, *Casa-grande* 45). From the analysis of newspaper ads, personal diaries, foreign travelers’ annotations, and cooking recipes, Freyre claimed to have found “um passado que se estuda *tocando* em nervos” (*Casa-grande* 45; emphasis added). For Freyre, Brazilian slave society developed in a tropical region affected by a “pegajenta luxúria em que nos sentimos todos prender,” a type of lust stimulated by the “sistema econômico e social da nossa formação” (*Casa-grande* 403).

In this interpretive framework, the white man has a pansexual appetite in the “clima extremamente *orgiástico*” of colonial Brazil (Araújo 66). As Freyre controversially affirmed, the “furor femeeiro do português se terá exercido sobre vítimas nem sempre confraternizantes no gozo” (*Casa-grande* 113). This indirect and sexist syntax gestures toward a supposed rule in colonial Brazilian society: many enslaved women would have experienced masochistic pleasure as sexual objects. Freyre defended the idea of a supposed balance between sadists and masochists within the Brazilian slave society, which resulted in “casos de pura confraternização do sadismo do conquistador branco com o masoquismo da mulher indígena ou da negra” (*Casa-grande* 113). He also asserted that the sadism of the white master would have originated in childhood through his bodily, homoerotic contact with an enslaved boy, “seu companheiro de brinquedos e expressivamente chamado de leva-pancadas,” with whom “iniciou-se muitas vezes o menino branco no amor físico” (113). At the same time, in an attempt to desexualize enslaved African men, he effeminized their representation (Bocayuva 89–99; Avelar 177–81). In *Casa-grande & senzala*, Freyre contrasted colonists’ genitals, which he deemed more virile, and enslaved African people’s, who had bodies that were “gigantes, enormes, mas pirocas de menino pequeno” (518). For him, there was essentially a “moderação do apetite sexual entre os povos africanos” (Freyre, *Casa-grande* 398).

Through Freyre’s sensory metaphors, the body of the white man—a hypersexualized being—“quase se tornou exclusivamente o *membrum virile*” (*Casa-grande* 518). In colonial Brazil, “[a]s relações entre colonos e mulheres africanas foram os de franca lubricidade animal, pura descarga dos sentidos” (Freyre, *Casa-grande* 516). The animalizing descriptions also referred to the colonizers—nicknamed as “[g]aranhões desbragados”—and their attraction “pelas possibilidades de uma vida livre, inteiramente solta, no meio de muita mulher nua”

(Freyre, *Casa-grande* 83). Deformed by the slave regime, Brazilian society practiced violent promiscuity, a frank sexual depravity acoustically encapsulated by the “rede rangendo, com o senhor copulando dentro dela” (Freyre, *Casa-grande* 518). Freyre also cited the case of a slaveholder who “para excitar-se diante da noiva precisou, nas primeiras noites de casado, de levar para a alcova a camisa úmida de suor, impregnada de bodum da escrava, sua amante” (*Casa-grande* 368). He stated that enslaved African men literally became the hands and feet of their masters, whether “andando por eles, carregando-os de rede e de palanquim,” or helping them “se vestirem, se calçarem, se abotoarem, se limparem, se catarem, se lavarem, tirarem os bichos dos pés” (Freyre, *Casa-grande* 517).¹²

This climate of debauchery and consummate idleness fostered what Freyre defined as “vida mole dos senhores descansando o dia inteiro” (*Casa-grande* 520). When the slaveholders used their hands, it was for the specific case of “agradar, apalpar, amolegar os peitos das negrinhas, das mulatas, das escravas bonitas dos seus haréns” (Freyre, *Casa-grande* 518). Freyre regarded slaveholders’ daily life as a “vida de rede,” “alagada de preocupações sexuais” and impregnated by constant leisure and unbridled sensuality (*Casa-grande* 518). Freyre’s presentation of this lifestyle is based on a sensory enumeration of the activities that slaveholders performed inside the hammock, where they stay “palitando os dentes, fumando charuto, cuspidando no chão, arrotando alto, peidando, deixando-se abanar, agradar e catar piolho pelas molequinhas, coçando os pés ou a genitália; uns coçando-se por vícios, outros por doença venérea ou da pele” (*Casa-grande* 518).

Although Freyre defined slaveholders in colonial Brazil as “homens moles,” he acknowledged that one could not underestimate the violence that the colonizers were capable of ferociously inflicting on the colonized (*Casa-grande* 518). In *Casa-grande & senzala*, he lists a series of brutal, sadistic gestures. For instance, Freyre mentions “senhores mandando queimar vivas, em fornalhas de engenho, escravas prenhes, as crianças estourando ao calor das chamas” (*Casa-grande* 46). Portuguese colonizers embodied the paradox of tactile colonialism, and their ferocity eventually would be minimized under the characteristics of softness and sweetness that Freyre attributed in sensorial descriptions to this form of

¹² Helena Bocayuva mentions the centrality of the body and “reiteradas referências” to feet in *Casa-grande & senzala* (71). However, Bocayuva’s approach focuses more on Freyre’s perspective on gender and sexuality rather than the sensory descriptions attributed by Freyre to Africans, Amerindians, and Europeans.

colonization (*Casa-grande* 518).

Freyre's interpretation, based on binaries and contradictions, offers a dialectical scheme that marks tactile colonialism: miscegenation and syphilization. Freyre contrasted miscegenation and syphilization, forms of bodily contact that can be representative of harm or illness, without establishing clear limits on what would be the cause or effect in the formation of colonial Brazil. Freyre asserted that in relation to the "vantagem da miscigenação correspondeu no Brasil a desvantagem tremenda da sifilização" (*Casa-grande* 110). Freyre interpreted miscegenation and syphilization as dichotomous, concomitant events in the history of Brazil, "uma a formar o brasileiro—talvez o tipo ideal do homem moderno para os trópicos, europeu com sangue negro ou índio a avivar-lhe a energia; outra, a deformá-lo" (*Casa-grande* 110).

African Portugal: In Search of Lusotropicalist Examples

In *Aventura e rotina*, Freyre commented on his visits to the five remaining Portuguese colonies in Africa from August 1951 to February 1952. In these trips, he sought to register examples of miscegenation between Portuguese colonizers and colonized Indigenous Africans. The tactile colonialism that would shape the identity of the "europeu com sangue negro," which were supposedly more apt to live in the tropics, should have its premises applied and expanded in Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe (Freyre, *Aventura* 110). To defend his hypothesis, Freyre substituted the tactile metaphors of *Casa-grande & senzala* for the ocularcentrism of *Aventura e rotina*. This rhetorical gesture in favor of a colonizing gaze established racial mixing as a necessary strategy for the supposed "civilizing" of African peoples who occupied, according to Freyre, Portuguese territories in Africa.

To reinforce the visual aspect of the Freyrean project, the first edition of *Aventura e rotina* included a notebook of captioned black-and-white photographs of houses and individuals, in an ethnographic style. In the preface of this travel journal, Freyre considered his observations more expressionist than impressionist, which accentuates the dramatic expression of his gaze in leading the speech and producing a testimony. Freyre also asserted that his "impressão foi a do *déjà vu*, tal a unidade na diversidade que caracteriza os vários Portugais espalhados pelo mundo; e tal a semelhança desses Portugais diversos com o Brasil. Donde a

verdade, e não retórica, que encontro na expressão ‘luso-tropical’ para designar complexo tão disperso; mas quase todo disperso só pelos trópicos” (*Aventura* 9).

Aventura e rotina further harbors a tension between invisibility and hypervisibility. Invisibility operates in the remarks about the colonies of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, whose people and territories require, from Freyre’s perspective, a more intense Portuguese colonial domination. In these two colonial territories, Freyre did not find visual elements of extensive racial mixing to prove his theory. As a result, he obliterated the local cultures of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde in his Lusotropicalist writings. For Freyre, these cultures were not relevant, since their destiny was to be assimilated by the expansion of Portuguese civilization in the tropics. Moreover, the success of that assimilation was predicated on the sexual contact between Portuguese men and African women.

One of the manifestations of invisibility in *Aventura e rotina* is Freyre’s mention of having found persons who wore glasses in Guinea-Bissau. In that description, he emphasized the following scene: “vi negros quase nus, de óculos” (*Aventura* 367). He criticized the interest of African people in glasses as self-indulgence. For Freyre, Africans wore glasses for “esnobismo” and not “necessidade” (*Aventura* 387). He did not grant to Bissau-Guinean peoples any form of self-control over their own gaze, a power that became exclusively reserved for the Portuguese colonizers. Moreover, Freyre’s observation about glasses represents an instance of how processes of racialization “produce and regulate the felt resonance and dissonance between familiarity and foreignness, proximity and distance, affinity and otherness” (Sekimoto and Brown 140). The condition of being unseen resulted from the construction of distance and feeling of disregard that Freyre had developed in relation to Portuguese colonies where, in his opinion, African cultures were excessively salient.

Above all, hypervisibility permeates Freyre’s comments in his visits to Angola, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe, where he declared having seen specific examples of miscegenation or a Lusotropical society. These examples presented visual patterns to be imitated, similar to what was supposed to have happened in colonial Brazil, as he described in *Casa-grande & senzala*. When Freyre arrived in São Tomé and Príncipe, he described this colony as “um regalo para os olhos dos volutuosos da natureza tropical, do mesmo modo que os bombons feitos com seu cacau são uma delícia para o paladar” (*Aventura* 346). The use of visual and gustative metaphors to refer to the landscape and the

economic specialities of this Atlantic colony soon gave way to the ocularcentric description of its inhabitants in Freyre's journal. The islands of São Tomé and Príncipe would be, in comparison with Brazil, "as mais velhas em sua condição de lusitanas," where the "exploração, que chegou a ser crua, de africanos pelos proprietários de fazendas ou roças de cacau" took place (Freyre, *Aventura* 347). These landowners, who also employed enslaved people from Angola and Cape Verde, became, at least in appearance, "donos de casas-grandes semelhantes às dos senhores de engenho do Brasil" (Freyre, *Aventura* 348). Freyre's view of São Tomé and Príncipe, an important trading post for the transatlantic slave trade, boiled down to the perception that the Portuguese could continue their colonial experimentation "no sentido de melhorar-se a condição do trabalhador africano" (Freyre, *Aventura* 348). As Freyre stated, on these islands of "África portuguesa," a Brazilian "descobre . . . projeções da sua cultura, do seu *ethos*, do seu modo social de ser" (Freyre, *Aventura* 349).

After visiting Angola, Freyre compared this African colony to a "Brasil já amadurecido em sociedade híbrida" (*Aventura* 355). The colony's capital, Luanda, "se oferece aos nossos olhos com todo o seu rigor . . . lusotropical" (Freyre, *Aventura* 425). The figure that visually symbolized the hybridity of Angolan society was a type of woman who was "lusotropical completa," classified by him as "europeia de pele preta ou parda, assimilada, mulata filha de pai rico e bem-educada" (Freyre, *Aventura* 361). The gendered and classist discourse of *Aventura e rotina* propagated the standpoint that the miscegenation of tactile colonialism would come from "ventres geradores não só de novos escravos como de novos portugueses" (Freyre, *Aventura* 363). Impacted by these Angolan women, Freyre mentioned his belief that the Portuguese in Africa would have become a "povo extra-europeu," ecologically harmonized with "paisagens, valores e mulheres" (*Aventura* 376).

When Freyre did not see examples of miscegenation outside of Luanda, he complained about the negative influence of Anglophone culture. This was the case of the Diamond Company in Dundo, in Northeastern Angola, where Freyre visualized an antitropical environment, "um conforto profilático e quase clínico, de que os europeus do Norte e, principalmente os norte-americanos, de tal modo se cercam nos trópicos que vivem vida de estranhos à natureza tropical" (*Aventura* 378). Freyre suggested that the disconnect between the British colonizers and the tropical landscape they occupied was reproduced in the segregationist race

relations between these same colonists and African people. This racial segregation contrasted with the “solução portuguesa,” which would be miscegenation, “a interpenetração de culturas” promoted by Portuguese colonialism “sem excessos de violência imperial” (Freyre, *Aventura* 460). Once again, Freyre activated miscegenation as an ideology that defines the Portuguese colonizers as gentler and softer, given their supposed propensity for racial mixing.

In Mozambique, Freyre also found examples of what he considered the positive influence of Portuguese colonialism. The case he praised the most was that of Ilha de Moçambique, located off the coast of the Indian Ocean, in the north of Mozambique. Freyre claimed to have observed on the island “o ambiente ideal para o estudo da interpenetração de culturas paralelo ao da miscigenação” (*Aventura* 448). As proof of this special function of the island, which was “destinada a caracterizar a paisagem social de Moçambique,” he cited the “mulatas,” whom he defined as “as mulheres mais profundamente ecológicas” (Freyre, *Aventura* 448–9). Freyre compared Ilha de Moçambique with Lourenço Marques, the colonial name of the Mozambican capital, today called Maputo. He depicted Lourenço Marques as an “arianizada, anglicizada” city (Freyre, *Aventura* 428). Much influenced by the British empire, which Freyre considered to be a manifestation of archaic colonialism in the twentieth century due to its segregationist practices, Lourenço Marques needed a shock of “estabilização portuguesa” that would result from the miscegenation with local women (*Aventura* 445). Freyre conceptualized as “método português” the supposed ability of the colonizers to “aceitar fraternalmente a ascensão social dos grupos e indivíduos já assimilados à sua cultura” (*Aventura* 435). The symbol of the “solução portuguesa,” a way of assimilating the other “sem excessos de violência imperial,” would emerge, according to Freyre, as the visual manifestation of a mixed social landscape dominated by Portuguese culture (*Aventura* 460).

Freyre also believed that the patriarchal model established in northeastern Brazil could be replicated in Guinea-Bissau, where he noted an insufficiency of the “método português” or tactile colonialism (*Aventura* 435). That colony paradoxically “é ao mesmo tempo a mais antiga e a mais moça das terras ocupadas pelos portugueses nos trópicos” (Freyre, *Aventura* 267). Freyre continued “a ver estes negros da Guiné, ainda quase no mesmo estado dos de 15000 e de 16000: como que parados no tempo” (*Aventura* 267–8; emphasis added). They still were “peças de Guiné,” the label given to the enslaved Africans in Brazil (Freyre,

Aventura 262). Freyre complained about the designation of “peças de Guiné” not because it represented an objectification of human beings, but a denial of what he claimed to have verified “com os próprios olhos”: ethnic diversity (*Aventura* 242). He highlighted the generalization of the racializing label of “peças de Guiné” because it conceals the ethnicities of enslaved African people kidnapped and taken to Portugal and Brazil. Without denouncing the reification of African bodies, Freyre celebrated the diversity of the ethnic groups, underscoring their perceived differences “nas formas do corpo, na cor da pele e sobretudo nas formas de cultura” (*Aventura* 243).

Although Freyre regarded Guinea-Bissau as the cradle of Lusotropicalism, given the vast number of enslaved people who were transported from Western Africa to Brazil, he did not find visual examples of tactile colonialism among different ethnic groups. Freyre adopted a Hegelian perspective on history by contending that he continued “a ver estes negros . . . parados no tempo e com as mesmas belas formas de corpo expostas ao sol, os mesmos gestos, os mesmos risos, com que vários deles saíram daqui para entrarem na história e na vida e na cultura do Brasil” (*Aventura* 247). In Guinea-Bissau, he had “uma sensação física” of being “dentro de uma máquina inventada por um novo [H.G.] Wells, . . . proustianamente decidido a capturar o tempo perdido,” instead of the future (Freyre, *Aventura* 243). Guinea-Bissau, “não só pouco europeizada no espaço como no tempo,” would have the basic conditions to replicate the tactile colonialism first implemented by the Portuguese in Brazil (Freyre, *Aventura* 243).

Freyre also saw an alleged shortage of European culture among Cape Verde’s islanders of African descent (*Aventura* 264–5). Cape Verde represents one of the earliest experiences of miscegenation promoted by Portuguese colonialism in the Atlantic Ocean. It was unpopulated until the fifteenth century, when Portuguese colonizers brought enslaved African people to establish a plantation economy. The archipelago then became the first permanent European settlement in the tropics. In that sense, what became known as Cape Verde began as an always-already Afro-diasporic space, nevertheless crucial to the Portuguese empire. Portuguese colonizers used the archipelago as a commercial center for the transatlantic slave trade, which contributed to enabling the establishment of slave societies on a large scale in the Americas.

For Freyre, this Atlantic archipelago comprised “dez ilhas pirandelicamente à procura de alguma coisa que até hoje não encontram: um destino definido, claro,

digno deles e do autor de sua vida histórica que foi, sem dúvida alguma, Portugal” (*Aventura* 264). Contrary to the relative praise of the Black African people’s contribution to the formation of Brazilian society, Freyre offered an unequivocal negative interpretation of miscegenation in Cape Verde by criticizing African cultural retention and what he called

a incaracterização cultural do cabo-verdiano, instabilidade cultural de que são indícios . . . o uso generalizado pelos ilhéus de um dialeto e a ausência entre eles de artes populares com uma saudável interpenetração das culturas que neles se cruzam, sem terem se harmonizado numa terceira cultura, caracteristicamente cabo-verdiana. (*Aventura* 277)

Freyre referred to miscegenation but dismissed the evidence of sexual violence that comes from racial mixing in his recommendation to reinforce the European colonization in the African archipelago. He contrasted Cape Verdeans and Brazilians to contend that the former were “comparsas” and the latter “co-autores” of Portuguese colonization (Freyre, *Aventura* 264). Sensory metaphors are scarce in this interpretation of tactile colonialism that took place on the islands and among islanders “tão pobres e aparentemente tão sem futuro como os de Cabo Verde” (Freyre, *Aventura* 265).

Alberto da Costa e Silva suggests that the Portuguese state officials who accompanied Freyre on his journeys through the African colonies censored his movements and curiosity, which would have obliterated his senses and made him misunderstand what he had seen (22).¹³ Freyre alluded to these officials but did not suggest that his observations had faced considerable obstacles. During his stay in Cape Verde, Freyre described himself as an observer, “perito em surpreender sobrevivências africanas em mestiços quase brancos” (*Aventura* 271). By acting as a transatlantic arbiter of Portuguese colonization in Africa, Freyre expanded the role that Lélia Gonzalez ascribed to him: “ideólogo oficial das relações raciais no Brasil” (Gonzalez 33).

¹³ As Alberto da Costa e Silva contended, Freyre’s “percepções, aproximações, comparações e reflexões inéditas e antecipadoras” in *Aventura e rotina* derived from the permission that the Portuguese colonists gave the Brazilian author to “demorar o olhar, o tato, o olfato e o gosto” when visiting Africa (Silva 22).

Freyre's thesis about miscegenation first consolidated in *Casa-grande & senzala* had an influential transatlantic circulation. Different writers and intellectuals from Africa criticized the tenets and implications of Lusotropicalism (Melo 75–76). Amílcar Cabral, the political and intellectual leader of the struggle for the independence of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, rebuked Freyre for propagating the myth that colonized Africans were very “fortunate” people who lived in “a Lusotropical paradise” (Cabral 9).¹⁴ The Angolan poet Mário Pinto de Andrade criticized Freyre's ideas for obscuring the violence of Portuguese colonialism as an economic enterprise (Andrade 27). Freyre's remarks about Cape Verde disappointed Cape Verdean intellectuals who had interpreted *Casa-grande & senzala* as an affirmation of the agency of African people in the former Portuguese colony and recognition of the creation of an Afro-Atlantic Creole culture. However, the Brazilian anthropologist claimed that, unlike Brazil, in Cape Verde “o elemento de origem africana” was still very much in evidence (Freyre, *Aventura* 290). He further underscored his contempt for the Creole language spoken in the archipelago by referring to it as a dialect. Yet, Freyre's ideas about racial mixing were, in part, the object of admiration among the Cape Verdeans who formed *Claridade*, a literary movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Writers such as Baltasar Lopes and Gabriel Mariano read Brazilian authors with a great deal of attention. They approached Freyrean theories as a reference for their views regarding the project of national identity in Cape Verde, but would later be frustrated with Freyre's opinion about the archipelago and its inhabitants (Melo 75–85).

In *Aventura e rotina*, Freyre registered the conviction that Cape Verde could not reproduce the same experience as Brazil because the archipelago's culture was indeterminate and its population was “predominantemente africana na cor, no aspecto e nos costumes” (266). According to Alfredo Cesar Melo, Freyre rejected Cape Verdean Creole because, for his theses to be successful, it was essential to place the Portuguese—both people and language—at the top of cultural and racial hierarchies (Melo 71). Freyre associated the creolization in Cape Verde with the cultural processes of Caribbean islands, such as Martinique, Barbados, and

¹⁴ When denouncing Freyre and “the fascist colonialism of Portugal,” Amílcar Cabral stated that a “powerful propaganda machine was put to work at convincing international opinion that our peoples lived in the best of all possible worlds, depicting happy Portuguese ‘of colour’ whose only pain was the yearning for their white mother-country, so sadly torn from them by the facts of geography” (Cabral 9).

Trinidad (*Aventura* 270). He emphasized his impression that those Creole-speaking societies in the Caribbean had become too Africanized, and with that comparison warned that Portuguese colonization in Cape Verde has been deficient to assimilate African cultures. This suggestion of insufficiency, which stems from Freyre's visual perception of a predominance of the African people over the Portuguese, would explain the emergence and persistence of Cape Verdean Creole in the Atlantic archipelago, a phenomenon similar to that on the Caribbean islands occupied by French and English colonizers. Freyre could not embrace Kriolu since it was its own language and the symbol of a culture that had resisted Portuguese domination.

Tactile Colonialism as a Form of Body Domination and Cultural Erasure

When Freyre found experiences and subjects in Africa that escaped the visual similarities between Portugal and Brazil, he rendered them sometimes hypervisible, sometimes invisible. He had followed the example of those who—when they wish to understand nothing—see only race and Blackness, “twin figures of the delirium produced by modernity” (Mbembe 2). A similar sensorial operation transpired in relation to his view of miscegenation between the 1930s and 1950s, when he came up with a justification for the Portuguese to intensify their colonization of Africa. To assert Portuguese colonialism as soft, Freyre has gradually erased the tactile contents from his ocularcentric description of violent sexual encounters. He also kept regarding different skin colors as the visual representation of racial harmony. That sensory shift produced a discursive paradox in his Lusotropicalist work through which the primacy of vision softens and effaces the brutality of colonial racial mixing.

Freyre argued that the creation of a Lusotropical civilization was contingent on suspending the distance between bodies and nature. Thus, for him, Brazil became a “fácil laboratório” of a Lusotropical civilization that generated a society influenced by the supposed inability to keep a sexual, racial distance and by the stereotype of innate extroversion of enslaved Black African people, who are “ruidosos, exuberantes, quase sem nenhuma repressão de impulsos individuais” (Freyre, *Casa-grande* 372). Freyre contended that the Portuguese should reproduce the Brazilian colonial experience in Africa, which would implicate more miscegenation. Freyre's ocularcentric approach in *Aventura e rotina* presupposed

the sexual exploitation of African bodies for the creation of new Luso-tropical cultures and people. As a result of this proposition, the Portuguese would act as the plastic protagonists of the sexual violence inherent in tactile colonialism.

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