

SHOWING THE ROPES: RACE, OBJECTS, AND ABOLITIONISM IN SÉRGIO BIANCHI'S *QUANTO VALE OU É POR QUILO?* AND MACHADO DE ASSIS' "PAI CONTRA MÃE"

Com as cordas à vista: raça, objetos e abolicionismo em Quanto vale ou é por quilo?, de Sérgio Bianchi, e "Pai contra mãe", de Machado de Assis

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SUBMETIDO: 02.08.2024
ACEITO: 14.09.2024

COMO CITAR:
LOPES DE ALMEIDA,
Pedro. Showing the
Ropes: Race, Objects, and
Abolitionism in Sérgio
Bianchi's *Quanto vale ou
é por quilo?* and Machado
de Assis' "Pai contra mãe".
*Revista Brasileira de Literatura
Comparada*, v. 26, e20240992,
2024. doi: [https://doi.
org/10.1590/2596-
304x202426e20240992](https://doi.org/10.1590/2596-304x202426e20240992)

ABSTRACT

Having premiered in 2005, the film *Quanto Vale Ou É Por Quilo?* is Sérgio Bianchi's creative adaptation of Machado de Assis' short story "Pai Contra Mãe" (published in *Relíquias da Casa Velha*, 1906). In the film, Bianchi unravels two parallel plots, each taking place in a different historical period. In this paper, I will address the relationship between Sérgio Bianchi's film and Machado de Assis' short story, focusing on the material elements that create a symbolic portal between the world of Machado and that of Bianchi. I am especially interested in how artifacts of the pre-abolition society are paralleled by artifacts in contemporary Rio de Janeiro. These relationships, which emerge through my reading of Bianchi's film, complicate common ideas about historical continuities and ruptures in everyday life in that city. I argue that these objects are themselves interpreters of Brazil in the sense that they create, organize, and transform meaning around them. I find, in particular, an engagement between the rope of the short story and the police cars of the film, pointing toward a critique of the police apparatus as an afterlife of slavery, but also a controversial and complex critique of the "nonprofit economy" and the maintenance of structural inequalities. These networks of meaning, I propose, only become entirely visible once we understand Bianchi's film as a mode of dialogue with Machado de Assis' story.

KEYWORDS: ropes; policing; abolitionism; Machado de Assis; Sérgio Bianchi.

RESUMO

Estreado em 2005, o filme de Sérgio Bianchi *Quanto Vale Ou É Por Quilo?* constitui uma adaptação criativa do conto "Pai Contra Mãe", de Machado de Assis (publicado em *Relíquias da Casa Velha*, 1906). No filme, Bianchi desenvolve duas tramas paralelas, cada uma ocorrendo num período histórico diferente. Neste artigo, abordarei a relação entre o filme de Sérgio Bianchi e o conto de Machado de Assis, concentrando-me nos elementos materiais que criam um portal simbólico entre o mundo de Machado e o de Bianchi. Interessa-me especialmente a forma como os artefatos da sociedade pré-abolição são colocados em diálogo com artefatos do Rio de Janeiro contemporâneo. Essas relações, que emergem através da minha leitura do filme de Bianchi e do conto de Machado, complicam ideias comuns sobre continuidades históricas e rupturas na vida quotidiana da cidade. Defendo que esses objetos são eles próprios intérpretes do Brasil, no sentido em que criam, organizam e transformam o significado da realidade em seu redor. Encontro, em particular, uma ligação entre a corda do conto machadiano e os veículos de polícia no filme, apontando para uma crítica do aparato policial como uma sobrevida da escravatura, mas também uma crítica controversa e complexa da "economia sem fins lucrativos" e da manutenção de desigualdades estruturais. Essas redes de sentido, proponho, só se tornam inteiramente visíveis quando entendemos o filme de Bianchi como um modo de diálogo com o conto de Machado de Assis.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: cordas; polícia; abolicionismo; Machado de Assis; Sérgio Bianchi.

I knew whatever was in front of me was happening and then the police vehicle came to a screeching halt in front of me like they were setting up a blockade. Everywhere were flashes, a siren sounding and a stretched-out roar. Get on the ground. Get on the ground now. Then I just knew.

And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen. An American Lyric* (2014)

When was the last time you used a rope?

To answer this question, you might have to rack your brain a bit and think about somewhat uncommon activities, such as sailing, rock climbing, or towing your car in desperately unprepared circumstances. Until not that long ago, however, and for most of the time of humanity, your answer would have been much less eccentric. Until about a century ago, ropes were a ubiquitous element of human life, from the moment one woke up until one went to sleep. Whether you were getting your morning water from the well, preparing your donkey or horse for the day of work ahead, mending your fishing nets or reaching your small boat anchored near the docks, lifting a heavy box with a suspended pulley wheel, securing your cargo on the back of a carriage, or rigging your shelter or tent to spend the night in the field, you were using rope. As a tool, ropes were so central to human activity that entire areas of some cities were built around the rope making industry, “*cordoarias*.” When I started thinking more seriously about ropes (as part of a larger research project on fibers), I realized that one could say about ropes what Oliver Sacks wrote in a famous piece for *The New Yorker* about the mysterious vanishing of horses when horse-drawn carriages disappeared from the streets: where have they all gone?¹

We could argue that ropes have simply changed, and somehow their primordial function, that is, to connect objects and create pathways for energy transfers, is nowadays performed by other similar devices in our digital life, such as our phone and laptop charger cords, USB and HDMI cables, the Wi-Fi modem and router cables, fiber optic networks, and so on. But in what follows, I would like to propose a slightly different answer to this question. I will invite you to think about ropes not only as what they are and what they do *for us*, but also what they do *to us*. I will suggest that ropes are in fact very much present in things such as texts, vehicles, and objects around us, not exactly because of what they do, but precisely for what they do *to us*.

I would like to think about different ropes as metaphors, or perhaps as *forms*. In this paper, I will consider two objects, created almost exactly a century apart. The first is Machado de Assis’ short story “Pai contra Mãe,” and the second is Sérgio Bianchi’s film *Quanto Vale ou É Por Quilo?* I will argue that 1) both deploy powerful interpretations of transhistorical continuities in Brazilian society, 2) both create links between past and present through a contemplation of material entities spread massively

1 “My favorite aunt, Auntie Len, when she was in her eighties, told me that she had not had too much difficulty adjusting to all the things that were new in her lifetime—jet planes, space travel, plastics, and so on—but that she could not accustom herself to the disappearance of the old. ‘Where have all the horses gone?’ she would sometimes say. Born in 1892, she had grown up in a London full of carriages and horses.” The piece was written in the last months of Oliver Sacks’ life and published posthumously under the title “The Machine Stops” in the February 11, 2019 issue of *The New Yorker*.

through space and time; and finally, 3) they both offer glimpses into a possible different future, and that future is abolitionist.

While one could argue that *abolitionism* meant different things for Machado de Assis and Sérgio Bianchi, I would like to propose that, in essence, the kind of abolition that both "Pai Contra Mãe" and *Quanto Vale ou É Por Quilo?* point to is fundamentally the same. I ground this claim, among others, on the work of Derecka Purnell, who demonstrates that the contemporary prison-industrial complex, encompassing both the carceral system and the administration of police brutality, is an extension of the institution of enslavement, and the abolition of one is not complete without the abolition of the other:

Policing is among the vestiges of slavery, colonialism, and genocide, tailored in America to suppress slave revolts, catch runaways, and repress labor organizing. After slavery, police imprisoned Black people, immigrants, and poor white people under a convict-leasing system for plantation and business owners. (...) Black people, including Black slavery abolitionists, have tried different routes to stop police violence. They have resisted the role of prisons and police for centuries by physical force, flight, hiding, and the courts. They even tried becoming police officers to protect Black communities from racist mobs and white police officers. Believing that they were entitled to equal protection under the law, they tried, usually to no avail, to reform the patrol and the police. (...) Abolition, I have learned, is a bigger idea than firing cops and closing prisons; it includes eliminating the reasons people think they need cops and prisons in the first place. (Purnell, 2021, p. 5-6).

If, for Machado de Assis, *abolitionism* refers to the political movement fostered, in Brazil, by figures such as André Rebouças, José do Patrocínio, or Joaquim Nabuco, whose efforts to bring an end to the ownership and commerce of Black and Brown Afro-Brazilians granted them a place in the history of abolition, it could be argued that the same concept enjoys, today, a somewhat extended orientation.² In the past few decades, progressive intellectual and political movements have used abolitionism as a program for radical change towards a society emancipated from state-sanctioned violence. Among circles of Black feminists, anarchists, and other grassroots political communities, abolitionism has come to represent a horizon where the devices and structures created to discipline, control, and punish throughout the past five centuries have no place (Clover, 2016, p. 164). In a chapter titled "The Police Are Not Here to Protect You," Alex Vitale discusses how slavery created the modern institution of policing, and how the current police apparatus is the direct heir to "slave patrols":

Slavery was another major force that shaped early US policing. Well before the London Metropolitan Police were formed, Southern cities like New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston had paid full-time police who wore uniforms, were accountable to local civilian officials, and were connected to a broader criminal justice system. These early police forces were derived not from the informal watch system as happened in the Northeast, but instead from slave patrols and developed to prevent revolts. They had the power to ride onto private property to ensure that slaves were not harboring weapons or fugitives, conducting meetings, or learning to read or write. They also played a major role in preventing slaves from escaping to the North, through regular patrols on rural roads. (Vitale, 2017, p. 45-46).

2 While the relationship between Machado and abolitionist thought is beyond the scope of my essay, please see the fundamental work by Sidney Chalhoub on Machado de Assis' political and social ideas: *Machado de Assis, Historiador* (2003), especially chapter 4, "Escravidão e cidadania: a experiência histórica de 1871." For a detailed and recent account of the subject, see the work of André da Silva Ramos, *Machado de Assis e a Experiência da História: Melancolia, Raça, e Assombração* (2023), especially chapter 2, "Heranças."

Paraphrasing Purnell, the contemporary horizon of abolitionism encompasses not only the abolition of police forces themselves, but, through community work and education, the creation of a political consciousness, mutual aid, and community-based self-government that renders obsolete the very reasons why people are led to believe that they need armed, often even paramilitary, forces to regulate life in community. Jackie Wang, in her book *Carceral Capitalism*, demonstrates how the dual process of social disinvestment and prison expansion renders police forces an extractive agent, actively profiting from vulnerable populations, mostly Black and Brown, in ways that closely follow the logistics of enslavement policing (Wang, 2018, p. 120-149). This understanding of abolitionism gained a heightened visibility following the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis in May of 2020, prompting a series of protests under the banner “Black Lives Matter,” which denounced the anti-Black bias of police forces as well as the pervasiveness of structural racism in American society, particularly evident in the prison-industrial complex, whose population is overwhelmingly Black or Brown. In the ensuing months, many authors likened the Black Lives Matter civic uprisings to the Civil Rights movement of the late 60s or the abolitionist movements of the late 18th and 19th centuries. As a moment of collective reckoning, these protests served as a reminder that many of the devices, material and symbolic, that enslavement created are very much still present among us. The repercussions of these demonstrations all over the world—in Brazil, particularly—serves as a testament to the persistence of the afterlife of slavery in many parts of the globe. But it also signaled a shared commitment to abolition on the part of demonstrators on the streets from New York City to Rio de Janeiro or Lisbon. By reading Machado de Assis and Sérgio Bianchi in light of their respective—different, but interrelated—abolitionist horizons, I hope to gesture towards ways of reading literature and film that signal openings towards a more hopeful collective future.

The alignments I will signal in this paper between Machado de Assis and Sérgio Bianchi, I hope, serve as material reminders of the enduring reality of interdependence between the deployment of racial violence and the monopoly of state-sanctioned violence. Such interdependence, as both Machado and Bianchi in distinct but interconnected ways show, gestures toward the mutual implication of anti-Black violence and police brutality in Brazil.

“*Pai Contra Mãe*” (the original title of our short story) was published in 1906, about eighteen years after the formal end of slavery, as part of the book *Relíquias da Casa Velha*.³ It takes place in Rio de Janeiro, then the capital of what was known as the Brazilian Empire, following its independence from Portugal. The first section of the text engages with the title of the book, describing with excruciating detail the artifacts and occupations related to the enforcement of slavery upon Afro-Brazilians, here summoned as physical reminders of a previous period in the history of the country. In a tone that resembles a museum catalogue, Machado offers an account of the shapes and uses of an iron collar, shackles, an iron muzzle, and the activity of those who profited from sequestering Black women and men escaping to freedom.⁴ He then declares that the story that ensues talks about one of such individuals.

3 For a thorough reading of the ethnic and racial implications in this narrative, particularly attentive to the Spencerian and Darwinist undertones of the plot, please see the work of Selma Vital, *Quase Brancos, Quase Pretos: Representação Étnico-racial no Conto Machadoiano* (2012). Vital argues that “*Pai Contra Mãe*,” although published after the Lei Áurea was issued, should be inscribed in the author’s project of demonstrating the persistence of inequality, oppression, and exploitation characteristic of the slavocracy regime even beyond the formal abolition of slavery.

4 The opening sequence of “*Pai Contra Mãe*” can be aptly described as an illustration of what Paul Dixon, along the vein of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has coined “the phenomenological tendency of Machado’s short story aesthetics,” implying consciousness as a product of material reality and the mutual inclusion of subject and object (see Dixon, 1992, p. 16).

Cândido Neves, or Candinho, is a lower-class white (or white passing)⁵ man who can't seem to hold down any job or trade, whose only source of income are the rewards he collects from pursuing and catching fugitive slaves. He marries Clara, and despite all evidence that they wouldn't have the means to support a baby, Clara soon becomes pregnant. The extreme precarity of Cândido's occupation gets even worse when competitors show up in his neighborhood, thanks to the minimal training and devices needed to capture people and also, we may add, thanks to the increasing organized resistance that the *quilombos* of the last decades before abolition inspired. As the narrator states, all that the job required was "*força, olho vivo, paciência, coragem e um pedaço de corda.*" (Assis, 1962, p. 663) Cândido's debts begin to pile, and without the instant rewards he had been able to garner before, life becomes much harder. He and Clara begin to eat poorly and on credit, and they are eventually evicted for missing rent payments. Clara and Candinho, who by now live with an aunt of Clara, *Tia Mônica*, laugh at their difficulties, and in fact the dominant trait of their demeanor is how lighthearted they seem to be. The baby, a boy, is born in an annex provided by Tia Mônica as temporary shelter (a makeshift construction with obvious reverberations of the biblical scene of the nativity). Clara's aunt demands that they put the baby up for adoption, since the survival of the newborn is highly uncertain. That night, Cândido spots a poster announcing a hefty sum for the recapture of a certain runaway Afro-Brazilian woman. Against his wishes, Cândido begins to take his son to the foundling wheel at the convent on *Rua dos Barbonos*, a designated place to leave abandoned babies.

Cândido heads out, carrying the baby in his arms and keeping him carefully wrapped up while he kisses and covers his face to protect him from the damp night air. He approaches his destination but is hesitant to proceed: "*— Hei de entregá-lo o mais tarde que puder,*" he murmured (Assis, 1962, p. 666). At this point, the narrator tells the reader, something happens that would change the course of events that night: "*Chegou ao fim do beco e, indo a dobrar à direita, na direção do Largo da Ajuda, viu do lado oposto um vulto de mulher; era a mulata fugida*" (Assis, 1962, p. 666).

As Cândido recognizes the woman from the poster he had seen earlier, he quickly drops his baby at a pharmacy and walks toward her. Her name is Arminda, and Cândido calls out to her by name to make sure she is the person announced in the poster: "*Arminda voltou-se sem cuidar malícia. Foi só quando ele, tendo tirado o pedaço de corda da algibeira, pegou dos braços da escrava, que ela compreendeu e quis fugir. Era já impossível. Cândido Neves, com as mãos robustas, atava-lhe os pulsos e dizia-lhe que andasse*" (Assis, 1962, p. 666)

Arminda tells Cândido that she is pregnant, and implores him, for the love of his own child, to let her go. Without success: Candinho tells her to keep walking and leads her to the house of the slave-owner. Upon arrival, she goes into labor and eventually gives birth on the floor to a stillborn. Cândido collects the hefty reward, goes back to pick up his son, and returns home with baby and money. And this concludes the story.

⁵ The text is notably ambiguous about Candinho's racial identity, and never openly gives us any clue about this. Furthermore, racial classifications in Brazil operate on premises entirely different from those used, for instance, in the US. We can deduct, from the social status of Candinho, that he belonged to the majority "mixed race" population, and that he circulated among the not-dark skinned lower classes. The only detail about the race of the couple throughout the text contributes to this ambiguity: both the words "Cândido" and "Clara" mean *white* or *light* in Portuguese (and they are synonymous, when referring to the spectrum of colors). The narrator tells us, quite enigmatically, that Candinho and Clara referred to this every now and then, and "laughed a lot about it." It is unclear if their laughing is due to the coincidence between the names of both of them and their perceived race (and their seemingly fondness for joking around and laughing), or precisely because of the *irony* of it, in case they *were not*, in fact, white or light (skinned).

“Pai Contra Mãe” unfolds in a distinctly Machadian style, especially evident in Machado de Assis’ use of irony and sarcasm.⁶ But the narrative also allows us to peek into the tensions and sufferings of a certain social configuration in Brazilian cities in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is a changing society, and the seemingly geometrical plot (with the attempt to convey a certain symmetry, expressed from the very title) hides the complexities of racial relations at this juncture of Brazilian history (see Silveira, 2010, p. 149-170).

From the very onset of the narrative, the male protagonist of the story, Cândido Neves, is invested by the narrator with an aura of utter poverty, for which his lack of stability is to blame:

Cândido Neves, – em família, Candinho, – é a pessoa a quem se liga a história de uma fuga, cedeu à pobreza, quando adquiriu o ofício de pegar escravos fugidos. Tinha um defeito grave esse homem, não aguentava emprego nem ofício, carecia de estabilidade; é o que ele chamava caiporismo. Começou por querer aprender tipografia, mas viu cedo que era preciso algum tempo para compor bem, e ainda assim talvez não ganhasse o bastante; foi o que ele disse a si mesmo. (Assis, 1962, p. 660).

At some point, the reader is told, Candinho seemed to be on the path of upward mobility, by taking up a career in commerce. “With some effort” he manages to secure a job at a street store. But he would not last long in that position. The reason, while never openly declared by the narrator, is subtly hinted, with Machado’s unique sibylline voice, in two almost inconspicuous words:

O comércio chamou-lhe a atenção, era carreira boa. Com algum esforço entrou de caixeiro para um armazinho. A obrigação, porém, de atender e servir a todos feria-o na corda do orgulho, e ao cabo de cinco ou seis semanas estava na rua por sua vontade. Fiel de cartório, contínuo de uma repartição anexa ao Ministério do Império, carteiro e outros empregos foram deixados pouco depois de obtidos. (Assis, 1962, p. 660).

It was “*a obrigação (...) de atender e servir a todos,*” or the obligation to attend and serve *every one* that made Cândido Neves quit this job. Once we know how the story will unfold, it is not hard to read into that “everyone:” Cândido Neves could not tolerate having to serve Black customers. After five or six weeks, his racist demeanor prevented him from continuing in the job. Being unable to refuse service to some of his customers pokes a nerve in him and, according to the narrator, pulled (yet) another cord, “*a corda do orgulho*”.⁷

There is, however, a revealing anecdote described in passing, which signals something I find central to understanding this narrative. This was a changing society, and Candinho was losing authority. So much so, that he was once beaten by a black family: “Certa vez capturou um preto livre; desfez-se em desculpas, mas recebeu grande soma de murros que lhe deram os parentes do homem” (Assis, 1962, p. 663).

6 John Gledson argues that “Pai Contra Mãe,” despite the evident Machadian use of irony and sarcasm, manifests a certain exhaustion of the narrative construction: “Por que esse desgaste? É fácil especular, impossível ter certeza, mas desconfio que em parte devido à falta de assuntos que o inspirassem, ou que lhe parecessem adequados ao gênero. (...) Quem ler o primeiro parágrafo de ‘Pai contra mãe’ verá que Machado se desforra de um tema que ele nunca tinha se sentido capaz de abordar como merecia.” (Gledson, 1998, p. 52)

7 This line, moreover, gestures toward the disputed character of the public space in the city at this time: while it was still possible to make a living capturing African-Brazilian women and men, some positions entailed keeping open doors for Black customers. From this standpoint, Candinho personifies the brutality of the society that refused to accept the humanity of non-white bodies. If it is remarkable how Machado de Assis manages to convey the abhorrent nature of his behavior with a minimum of traits and through a discursive economy that encapsulates this in less than a sentence, it is also a powerful material *cum* textual reminder of the pervasiveness of racial codes in his language.

Candinho's power is not unlimited. On the contrary. He is described as a weak individual, not even able to secure the means to assure the survival of his son.⁸ So, what grants him his position in the monopoly of violence? When Machado starts tying the knots of the fate of Candinho, leading him into his irredeemable moral descent, the reader is confronted with the material surroundings of his activity. In the harrowing description offered by the narrator, one object is singled out, and acquires symbolic, metaphorical, and ontological meaning. That object, which seems to parallel Candinho's downward spiral, is a rope:

Cândido Neves perdera já o ofício de entalhador, como abrira mão de outros muitos, melhores ou piores. Pegar escravos fugidos trouxe-lhe um encanto novo. Não obrigava a estar longas horas sentado. Só exigia força, olho vivo, paciência, coragem e um pedaço de corda. Cândido Neves lia os anúncios, copiava-os, metia-os no bolso e saía às pesquisas. Tinha boa memória. Fixados os sinais e os costumes de um escravo fugido, gastava pouco tempo em achá-lo, segurá-lo, amarrá-lo e levá-lo. A força era muita, a agilidade também. Mais de uma vez, a uma esquina, conversando de cousas remotas, via passar um escravo como os outros, e descobria logo que ia fugido, quem era, o nome, o dono, a casa deste e a gratificação; interrompia a conversa e ia atrás do vicioso. Não o apanhava logo, espreitava lugar azado, e de um salto tinha a gratificação nas mãos. Nem sempre saía sem sangue, as unhas e os dentes do outro trabalhavam, mas geralmente ele os vencía sem o menor arranhão. (Assis, 1962, p. 663).

What grants Candinho a position in the monopoly of violence against African-Brazilian bodies in the society of Rio in the 19th century is *um pedaço de corda*, the rope, and his perceived race: "*coragem, e um pedaço de corda.*" A "length of rope," however, is not an equivalent to "patience, and courage," as the narrator seems (perhaps maliciously) to suggest. They are, in fact, precise opposites, and their juxtaposition is a device of Machado's sarcastic irony. The rope dialogues with Cândido's inability to hold down any job or trade, and somehow allows him to compensate for that lack of control and his extreme poverty. But the rope is also a stand-in for his perceived racial status. As a symbol of whiteness, the rope that he carries identifies him with a clear side in the racial template of the city.

Objects create reality around them. This is what, in the past few years, several authors have tried to demonstrate in the emerging field known as Object-Oriented Ontology, frequently shortened as "Triple-O." My reading of "Pai Contra Mãe" starts as an object-oriented act of interpretation, focusing on this everyday object that plays a pivotal role in the story: the length of rope. It is worth observing that literature, especially narrative fiction, proceeds by *showing objects*. In other words, it is through objects that a story is told. Machado de Assis signals that in quite an explicit manner, as the first paragraphs of this narrative exemplify in the careful description of objects, suggesting an exercise in *ekphrasis*. If we want to gain a deeper understanding of the storytelling process of the *Bruxo do Cosme Velho* and a more nuanced engagement with the literary work, staying with the objects allows us a certain intimacy with the text otherwise difficult to establish. Here, this *rope* functions as a discrete organizer of reality around it. In keeping with the cautionary words of Graham Harman, one of the early proponents of an object-oriented philosophical inquiry, I do not seek to resolve the tension between the material

⁸ When he first fell in love with Clara, we are told, Candinho was living with a cousin who was a professional woodcarver. Cândido tries his hand at the shop, but "*querendo aprender depressa, aprendeu mal*" (wanting to learn quickly, he learnt poorly). All he was able to carve were chair details and claw feet for sofas ("*apenas garras para sofás e relevos comuns para cadeiras*", p. 660). It is worth noting how the story continues to unfold under the sign of highly symbolic objects: the claw (usually, of an eagle or a lion) dialogues with Cândido's future endeavors, while the fact that he was only able to execute (and quite poorly) details for the furniture fixtures *where others would sit* is telling about his social (actual and aspirational) location.

reality of the rope and the metaphorical *cum* symbolic value we can ascribe to it (Harman, 2018, p. 9).⁹ It is precisely in the transit between those poles that the creative dynamic of object-oriented studies proves the most generative: by avoiding taking the object as a stand-in for something else while also avoiding an excessively literal understanding of the material object. This attitude, that Harman qualifies as decidedly anti-idealist, enables us to read the rope neither simply as a metaphor (even though it might elicit metaphorical and metonymical reverberations), nor as a simple artifact for consumption or use (even though it is also, and significantly, part of a material landscape of extraction, production, exchange, and disposal). In other words, paraphrasing the genius of Gertrude Stein, *a rope is a rope, is a rope, is a rope*.

The rope functions here as a material companion extending Cândido Neves' reach, a form of prosthetic —, *i.e.*, a non-organic extension of his body—that grants him a place in the distribution of violence, and perhaps makes up for the ambiguity of his own perceived racial identification.¹⁰ During the denouement of the story, his lack of control brings him closer to Arminda in the sense that both occupy precarious positions in society, and also literally, as both are in the ally due to this precarity. But then, Cândido has a rope. And yet the rope in a way also binds them together, and therefore casts light on the title of the short story. It is through the substance of the rope, the fibrous connective capacities of this object, that the “father” and the “mother” in the title become materially entangled, while radically separated by the racial divide. In this sense, the death of Arminda's baby hovers over Cândido because of this unbreakable bond.¹¹

While the rope brings them into each other's lives, due to the social institution of slavery, Cândido and Arminda ultimately end up on opposite ends of the same length of rope. In another sense, however, Cândido is the exact reverse of Arminda. Her courage to run away from bondage at the peak of her pregnancy is countered by Candinho's childishness and inability to find a stable occupation. He is subtly ridiculed throughout the story, whereas we only know Arminda through her act of rebellion. The gender difference between Candinho and Arminda also affects our perception of their characters. Arminda's pregnancy (along with her femaleness) makes her a more sympathetic and helpless figure, and yet her blackness seems to override this for both Cândido and Machado. Arminda's lack of characterization

9 “As OOO sees it, the true danger to thought is not relativism but idealism, and hence the best remedy for what ails us is not the truth/knowledge pair, but *reality*. Reality is the rock against which our various ships always founder, and as such it must be acknowledged and revered, however elusive it may be. (...) Some of the basic principles of OOO are as follows: 1) All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional. 2) Objects are not identical with their properties, but have a tense relationship with those properties, and this very tension is responsible for all change that occurs in the world. 3) Objects come in just two kinds: real objects exist whether or not they currently affect anything else, while sensual objects exist only in relation to some real object.” (Harman, 2018, 9-10)

10 It is also worth pointing out that the rope evokes a number of other functions, chiefly among them death by hanging, either through the administration of capital punishment or by suicide. Machado's text, by placing side by side the rope and “courage,” seems to hint repeatedly in this direction. In more than one way, Cândido's decision to capture Arminda can be interpreted as his symbolic suicide, by discarding his own sense of humanity.

11 While Cândido forcibly walks Arminda toward the slave owner, another symbolic dimension of the rope seems to be evoked, especially if one considers the phonetic similitudes between the words in Portuguese and the fact that the reader knows about Arminda's pregnancy: the rope (*corda*) between the father and the mother shadow casts an umbilical cord (*cordão umbilical*), projecting yet another layer of meaning over the title of the narrative. For a feminist critique of Object-Oriented Ontology, see Mudde (2018) and Behar (2016). In her introduction to the volume *Object Oriented Feminism*, Katherine Behar states: “OOF originated as a feminist intervention into philosophical discourses—like speculative realism, particularly its subset OOO, and new materialism—that take objects, things, stuff, and matter as primary. It seeks to capitalize perhaps somewhat parasitically on the contributions of that thought while twisting it toward more agential, political, embodied terrain. Object-oriented feminism turns the position of philosophy inside out to study objects while being an object oneself.” (Behar, 2016, 3).

also makes it harder for readers to recognize her humanity. But again, the irony of Arminda's stillbirth set as the very reason Cândido is able to keep his child does create an ethical pull toward her capture.

What is the reader supposed to do with this loose rope? The title, as I mentioned, draws an implicit, perhaps ironic, act of equivalence between the father and the mother, a horizontal line that reproduces the structure of the rope binding together those two bodies walking through the streets of Rio de Janeiro late at night, concealing the fundamental fact that there is no possible equivalence, since the vulnerability of these two bodies is radically different. But, as literary objects do, this short story does a number of things with the reader, in a sense that is not entirely different from how ropes do things with other things, and with people—bringing them together, keeping them apart, uniting what is disjointed or separating what someone wants to keep apart. As readers, this *roping* is, in a sense, what we are expected to do with the text, or rather what the text invites us to do. Though "invites" might not be the accurate word, perhaps the text *forces* its readers, the same way that no rope "invites" the bodies it binds to remain bound.

In 2005, the filmmaker Sérgio Bianchi,¹² originally from Ponta Grossa, Paraná, released *Quanto Vale ou É Por Quilo?*, a properly unclassifiable work. It is not a fiction feature, since it relies heavily on statistical data; it is not a documentary, since it develops a plot with original characters; and it is not an adaptation, though it (also) adapts the short story by Machado de Assis I have discussed above. However, Bianchi's film creatively elaborates on Machado's plot, establishing a double timeline to juxtapose the late-nineteenth century and the early twenty first in Rio de Janeiro.

Quanto Vale ou é por Quilo? offers a critical and satirical look at the social and economic disparities in Brazilian society, drawing parallels between the country's colonial past and the contemporary era. The title, which translates to "How Much is it or by the Kilo?,"¹³ reflects the film's exploration of the commodification of human lives and social issues. The film employs an anthology format, weaving together several stories that illustrate the corruption, exploitation, and hypocrisy prevalent in various sectors of Brazilian society, including charity organizations, the corporate world, and the government. These narratives are interspersed with historical vignettes that depict the brutal exploitation of enslaved people during Brazil's colonial period, among which we find an interpretation of Machado de Assis' "Pai Contra Mãe," suggesting that the dehumanizing attitudes and practices of the past have persisted into the modern day.

12 In 1982, Bianchi directed the film that would bring wide visibility to his work, with a scathing critique of bureaucracy, anti-Indigenous racism, and exploitation of Indigenous lands: *Mato Eles?* was the winner of the Best Director award at the Gramado Film Festival, Best Short Film in the Brasília Film Festival, and the Grand Prize at the Mexico City Film Festival. The film is a denunciation of the situation of the Xavante, Guarani and Xetás communities, squeezed in the middle of a contentious fight between the Slaviero Group, FUNAI, and the Paraná state government. Expelled from their ancestral lands, they are forced to work cutting and extracting wood from their own reserve, in a logging company set up by FUNAI. Showcasing aesthetic and self-reflective tropes that will also reemerge in *Quanto Vale ou É Por Quilo?*, the film includes multiple moments of deconstruction of the protocols of documentary filmmaking, especially aimed at ridiculing the genre's semblance of selflessness. Not even the filmmaker himself escapes denunciation: the scene in which the Guarani chief asks the director "how much money does he earn" for filming the Indigenous communities can be considered one of the most emblematic in Brazilian cinema. For more on *Mato Eles?*, see Stam, Robert, "Hybrid variations on a documentary theme," in *Revista Brasileira de Estudos de Cinema e Audiovisual*, Ano 2, Número 4 (Jul-Dec 2013), pages 15-36. Besides these titles, Bianchi's filmography includes, among others *Jogo das Decapitações* (2014), *Os Inquilinos* (2010), *Cronicamente Inviável* (2000), and *A Causa Secreta* (1994), the latter also an adaptation of a short story by Machado de Assis.

13 The international English title, however, was translated freely as *What Is It Worth?*.

Bianchi's film, written by Bianchi himself, Sabina Anzuategui, and Eduardo Benaim, brings together a star-packed cast (including a young Lázaro Ramos and other faces familiar to audiences of Globo-produced *telenovelas*, such as Herson Capri, Ana Lúcia Torre, Caco Ciocler, or Caio Blat). The film moves between the two timelines through which different but interconnected narratives unfold. If the main plot, centered in the present, is shot in a more or less conventional filmic language, the vignettes taking place in the pre-abolitionist past feature ominous voice-over narrations, and archival fragments read out loud, such as the autos compiled by Nireu Cavalcanti.¹⁴ In a not-so-subtle (and at points heavy-handed) social intervention, the film takes aim at the business of extreme poverty management by denouncing, both overtly and symbolically, the hypocrisy at the core of initiatives that set out to fight social injustice publicly while preserving the structural imbalances that are responsible for poverty in the first place: “*In Brazil alone—we can hear early on in the film, in a section titled “Selling social responsibility”—“there’s an estimated number of 20 million volunteers. For companies, this is a tremendous market of potential consumers”.*

The central plot of *Quanto Vale* involves a non-profit organization that exploits the poverty of the communities it claims to help, using their plight to generate profits and social benefits for the wealthy donors and administrators in donations, public funding, tax credits, and high-profile media operations centered on social justice. One of the workers at the NGO, Arminda (played by Ana Carbatti, the same actress that impersonates Machado's character of the same name in the sub-plot that adapts “Pai Contra Mãe”), notices that the non-profit, registered under the name “Consciencia.org,” is actually using homeless children for profit; the NGO is operating what is known in Brazil as a “*Caixa 2*,”¹⁵ illegally generating salaries for the top administrators through ethically questionable exploitation of poverty and blackness. The leaders of the organization find themselves in trouble when Arminda (who, in this segment of the film, is referred to as “*Arminda dos computadores*,” since that's the area she oversees for the organization) denounces the financial schemes that the charity has been using to steal public funds, while using communities in the periphery to create a public profile of social justice. She threatens to go public with this information, and eventually starts a campaign denouncing the practices of “Consciencia.org.”

Ricardo Pedrosa and Marco Aurélio (played by Ciocler and Capri, respectively) are the top administrators of the NGO, and here are portrayed as ruthlessly unscrupulous businessmen with only a thin facade of humanitarian concerns. During a meeting with potential donors where they introduce the presumably socially responsible mission of the organization, they declare: “Hiring individuals who are serving time in jail is much cheaper than paying employees. It's called social re-inclusion.” Ricardo and Marco Aurélio do not hide the complicity between their project and the carceral system in their country: they take advantage of the prison population to obtain cheap or free labor, while trying to reframe the whole venture as a philanthropic project. Both the resemblance with enslavement and the implication of police forces could hardly become more explicit.

¹⁴ Throughout the film, several short episodes collected by Cavalcanti are incorporated into the narrative, mostly taken from the architect and historian's influential volume *O Rio de Janeiro setecentista: A vida e a construção da cidade da invasão francesa até a chegada da Corte* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 2003).

¹⁵ The informal designation, in Brazil, of an illegal bookkeeping practice that consists in keeping parallel banking accounts dedicated to clandestine or non-declared financial transactions, reserved for bribes, tax evasion, or illegal distribution of profits. The practice resembles what in the US context is known as “slush funds.”

The two timelines of the movie get briefly mixed up, as if by the action of a peculiar glitch. Candinho, the slave catcher from Machado's story, walks ominously among the refined guests of a philanthropic banquet for "Consciência.org." In his 19th-century garments, Candinho wanders through the crowd gathering at an opulent venue, holding a rope and, in a daydream sequence, looking straight at Arminda—in this timeline, the computer person.

Mônica Silveira, played by the actress Cláudia Mello, is also a volunteer at the same NGO, but she has fallen into hard times. Despite working hard, taking on multiple jobs, and selling sweets to pay the bills at the end of the month, Dona Mônica struggles to sustain herself and her family—much like Machado's Tia Mônica. Her daughter's fiancé, Candinho (played by the actor that interprets the homonymous Machadian character, Silvio Guindane), is unable to find a job, and has a particularly hard time trying to satisfy the expensive and futile buying impulses of his blonde girlfriend, Clarinha (Leona Cavalli). He eventually starts taking up jobs in the world of organized crime, acting as a hitman for local drug dealers. Dona Mônica Silveira, however, warns him that these "odd jobs" will not last forever, since there are *others*, better equipped and with other means, that perform such jobs these days: "Professionals better prepared to do them, they have much more experience. You get it, right? *Entendeu, né?*" As we hear her saying this line, on the screen we witness a sinister sequence of what happens behind the scenes of the NGO she volunteers for: a police car pulls over by a group of homeless children in the middle of the night, and the officers capture them one by one, using brute force. The car drives away with the red lights on, and we know that a material transference is taking place between Candinho and the cops. The police forces do the "odd jobs" of illicit violence that people like him *used to do*.

I argue that this sequence encapsulates the most fundamental intervention of *Quanto Vale ou É Por Quilo?*, and also the most capacious reinterpretation of "Pai Contra Mãe." Here, Sérgio Bianchi produces a trenchant critique of the role police forces play in perpetuating inequality through networks encompassing charitable organizations, suggesting that the "fourth sector" (as the organizations that combine market-based approaches of the private sector with the social aims of the public and non-profit sectors have come to be known) necessitates extreme poverty to maintain wide structures of employees and well-paid top administrators. Police officers function as recruitment forces for unscrupulous non-governmental organizations, who in turn make sure that the communities they serve never become fully autonomous, either through strict control or by never allowing them to disassociate from the organization.¹⁶ By keeping vulnerable populations at the mercy of organizations that depend on them to obtain funding, the charitable sector replicates the model of bondage and control designed within the slavocrat society depicted in Machado's short story. Here, however, in lieu of slave-owners, we find

¹⁶ In several moments of the film, the viewer is reminded that the NGO must keep the populations served in conditions that prevent them from becoming autonomous, even at a greater financial cost. One good example is the sequence where the voiceover confronts the viewer with the sheer numbers of charitable assistance to homeless infants in the city of Rio, in what also constitutes an oblique reference to Machado's story, and the business of exploiting destitute children: "Estima-se que existam de quatorze mil a vinte e dois mil entidades assistenciais, ONGs, e associações em todo o Brasil. Gasta-se em aluguer, manutenção das propriedades, taxas municipais, estaduais, e federais, montagem de escritórios, salários de pessoal, viagens de avião, computadores, diárias de hotéis, contas de restaurantes, taxis, mídia, propaganda, jingles, agências de publicidade. Em todo o país, apenas entre as entidades que prestam assistência a menores carentes, calcula-se que sejam movimentados mais de cem milhões de dólares por ano. Cada criança carente corresponde neste novo mercado à criação de cinco novos empregos (...) temos cerca de dez mil crianças abandonadas nas ruas. Se pegássemos os cem milhões de dólares, quantia estimada da movimentação financeira das entidades que atendem os menores carentes, e dividíssemos pelo número estimado de crianças, que são dez mil, cada uma delas receberia dez mil dólares por ano. Com esse dinheiro, seria possível comprar um apartamento de quarto e sala para cada criança a cada dois anos. Ou ainda pagar estudos em escolas da rede particular até à faculdade." [50:53-53:20].

the charitable organizations, working with the complicity of state forces, especially police authorities, who now play the roles previously played by slavecatchers.

By promoting this analogy, *Quanto Vale* also relaunches the reflection issued by “Pai Contra Mãe” on the material afterlife of slavery: the artifacts listed at the beginning of the short story, paired with certain *odd jobs*, are reminders of the enduring presence of modes of exploitation that outlived the abolition of chattel slavery. The opening line of Machado’s narrative places the reader in direct, unmediated contact with this objectual landscape: “A escravidão levou consigo ofícios e aparelhos, como terá sucedido a outras instituições sociais. Não cito alguns aparelhos senão por se ligarem a certo ofício” (Assis, 1962, p. 659)

The artifacts (“*aparelhos*”) and jobs connected to slavery reemerge in Sérgio Bianchi’s work as fully integrated into the model of carceral capitalism practiced in Rio de Janeiro. This way, the movie invites the spectator to a meditation on how policing is intrinsic to the perpetuation of racialized poverty in the city, with the police car performing the same functions of repression, control, and bondage that ropes played little over a century before.

I am suggesting that now, the police car is a form of rope. It connects multiple lives in different positions of precarity through the distribution of violence. In ways that are comparable to Machado’s rope in “Pai Contra Mãe,” here the police take the unsheltered children from the streets to bring them to the NGO, characterized as corrupt and taking advantage of the public sympathy for philanthropic causes to divert large sums of money to the wealthy top administrators. By doing so, Bianchi’s film develops a sharp critique of the links between the police apparatus, the carceral state, and the economy of NGO’s, suggesting that these realms are not only interconnected, but interdependent.

Juxtaposing contemporary social issues with historical episodes of slavery, *Quanto Vale ou é por Quilo?* challenges viewers to reflect on the ongoing impacts of colonialism and capitalism on human relationships and societal values. The film is a provocative commentary on the price of human life in a society where everything, including compassion, can be commodified and sold. Bianchi’s film seems to signal that only a form of abolition can bring an end to this. It is not enough to reform the system, or to patch it. Actually, any material improvement of this unjust system of charitable assistance perpetuates the violence that creates poverty in the first place. The “patching” of extreme social inequality is part of the problem, not the solution. Machado’s short story points in the same direction, by identifying the wicked devices of slavery that persist after its formal end. Be it either through the rope (“*coragem, e um pedaço de corda*”) or the police patrol car, positions of extreme vulnerability become a fertile soil for small- and big-time exploitation and the distribution of state-sanctioned violence.

I have argued that these objects are themselves interpreters of Brazil in the sense that they create, organize, and transform meaning around them. I find in particular an engagement between the rope of the short story and the police cars of the film, pointing toward a critique of the police apparatus as an afterlife of slavery, but also a controversial and complex critique of the “nonprofit economy” and the distribution and maintenance of structural inequalities. These networks of meaning, I propose, only become entirely visible once we understand Bianchi’s film as a mode of dialogue with Machado de Assis’s story, and the call for abolition embedded in both objects. Both the *pedaço de corda* and the police car are designed to constrain movement without the constant effort of another human being to restrain the members of the ones standing on the shorter side of the rope. Institutionalized, socially

normalized devices of control and predictability are mobilized to *keep things in place*—in other words, to keep each individual exactly where they are, both as bodies and as part of the social fabric.

One day, what seems to Candinho and Dona Mônica to be the opportunity of a lifetime presents. The CEO of the philanthropic organization says he has “a very important job” for Candinho, one that could change the financial prospects they face for good. According to him, someone needs to be silenced, a former “collaborator” of the NGO... Arminda.

While *Quanto Vale ou É Por Quilo?* officially ends with Candinho killing Arminda execution-style and thus reiterating Machado's ending, in a post-credits sequence Bianchi offers the spectator an alternative ending. When Candinho points the gun at Arminda's chest, she suddenly stands up, faces him, and delivers a passionate discourse about the extreme poverty that brings them together. To conclude her speech, and as she gets closer to his face, Arminda issues Candinho a proposition: that the two join forces to sequester the owner of the NGO instead. We never get to know what Candinho's answer to this challenge is, but the audience positioned in Candinho's place could take that as a starting point to imagine an abolitionist future.

To conclude, what is the vantage point of ropes here? They connect everyday, routine, normalized, effortless gestures with far flung political (and also aesthetic, social, and ideological) designs of violence and hierarchy. In this sense, and this is what I have argued here, they reinscribe power in everyday gestures, intersecting planes that are imagined to be discrete. Even if almost unnoticeable to the characters who use it, the organizing and brutalizing effects of the rope are impossible to hide from the reader, causing the deep unsettlement that this short story and this film are certain to cause. Perhaps that unsettlement can then become a different mode of social binding that becomes a radical form of repair—something that ropes, sometimes, can also do.

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