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Shanzhai pictorial anti-essentialism: Varejão's depictions of Brazilian indigenous people

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Drawing on Critical Visual Discourse Analysis to examine how images reflect, produce, and challenge power relations, this paper analyzes how Adriana Varejão's *Invitation Figures I* and *II* negotiate with historical scopic regimes and visual rhetorics of Otherness, identifying mechanisms of interpellation and viewer inclusion. I argue that Varejão's strategy of appropriating 16th-, 17th-, and 18th-century artworks depicting Brazilian Indigenous peoples can be understood through the concept of *shanzhai*, as developed by Byung-Chul Han. Rather than imitating, *shanzhai* creations intervene in, parody, and transform original works, becoming more original than the original by addressing present concerns. This perspective contrasts with readings of her work as merely anthropophagic or simulacral. Understanding these artworks as *shanzhai* interventions enables an anti-essentialist reading of indigeneity in Brazil—one that challenges the racial and civilizational narratives historically used to naturalize subaltern social roles. I propose that Varejão's images reveal how memory and imagination about the other and the self emerge as sedimented traces—constantly updated, cut, forgotten, and reassembled through the lens of the present. In this reconstruction of history, forgeries, copies, and *shanzhai* artifacts can carry as much epistemic weight as official documents, subverting dominant narratives and proposing alternative ways of seeing and knowing.

KEYWORDS

cultural appropriation, ethnic and racial anti-essentialism, Varejão, *shanzhai*, authenticity

Introduction

Over the past few years, I have been researching how certain reinterpretations, copies, simulacra, and mock artworks problematize representations of indigenous peoples in Latin America, aiming to destabilize prevailing ideas about them. This research is part of this broader study, featuring case studies. The first focuses on Brazilian artist Jonathas de Andrade (Balán, 2021a), the second delves into the Indian hobbyist movement (Balán, 2021b), and the third investigates Alzate pottery (Balán, 2024), a type of fake pre-Columbian ceramics. I selected each case for its distinct approach to dismantling stereotypes surrounding Latin American Indigenous peoples, contributing to theoretical discourse in different ways. In this analysis, I turn my gaze to *Invitation Figures I* (1997, oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm) and *II* (1998, oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm) by Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão, examining the deconstructive dimensions that arise from the intertextualities, collages, pastiches, and palimpsests embedded in her work.

It is worth noting that intertextualities refer to the way artworks reference or dialog with previous works, styles, or cultural texts, creating layered meanings through connections to other visual or cultural references. Collages involve the assemblage of various materials, often

from different sources, onto a canvas to create a fragmented, layered composition that challenges traditional boundaries of medium and meaning. A pastiche is a work that imitates or incorporates the style, techniques, or themes of another artist or movement, often blending it into new contexts while respecting or celebrating the original form. Meanwhile, a palimpsest in painting refers to the visible traces of earlier layers or elements, which have been altered, erased, or covered, yet remain partially evident, reflecting the passage of time and the work's development through multiple stages.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1964, Adriana Varejão is one of Brazil's most celebrated artists. Her work critiques the violence of colonization and miscegenation that lies behind the material symbols of progress such as maps, tiles, porcelain, religious symbols, and historical paintings of indigenous peoples. Varejão masterfully weaves together installations, sculptures, paintings, and photographs, often drawing inspiration from 16th, 17th, and 18th-century imagery and artifacts. By reinterpreting these historical images through a decolonial lens, she invites viewers to engage in a dialog across different temporalities, as Moritz Schwarcz and Varejão (2014) note, challenging us to reconsider our understanding of history and identity.

Invitation figure II (Figure 1) shows a graceful woman, with voluptuous curves, rounded breasts and hips, long, tousled, wavy hair, who opens her arms delicately and innocently toward the viewer. She approaches the viewer with a sketched smile and an attitude of casual dialog, as if unaware of her own nakedness, or of the fact that in her

right hand she holds a fresh head of another woman, hanging from her hair. Her body is covered with drawings or tattoos that adorn her and evoke elements that associate her with nature and pagan rituals: the sun, the moon, the stars, wild animals, ethnic patterns and, on her right knee, a medieval representation of the devil (Figure 2). Behind her, she reveals a machete that serves as the sharp tail of a huntress. She is deadly blue, like the Portuguese tiles that frame her. This eroticized woman, perhaps petrified in this mosaic, seems to want to make the viewer fall under her icy charm with her pure nakedness and exposure, to attract the viewer's gaze like Medusa, to freeze them. The mosaic that escorts her is reminiscent of the courtly tradition of Portuguese tiles implanted in Brazil, but it is a mosaic decomposed and reassembled, riddled with conflicting signs that, unhinged, show the *agony* in its double meaning: a discussion understood as a battle of forces and the pain of a slow death.

An invitation figure is a decorative figure crafted from azulejos, or tiles. These life-sized cut-out images depict elegantly dressed noblemen and ladies, as well as halberdiers and footmen. During the 17th–19th centuries, they adorned the walls of palace entrances, stair landings, and patios, welcoming visitors in both Portugal and Brazil (Figure 3). In *Invitation figure II* (1998), Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão presents an indigenous Venus welcoming the guest to the banquet. A Caribbean-style banquet, as seen through colonial eyes, one with a savage voracity that loves to tear human flesh before eating it: behind her, the tiles display the delights of the Brazilian topical

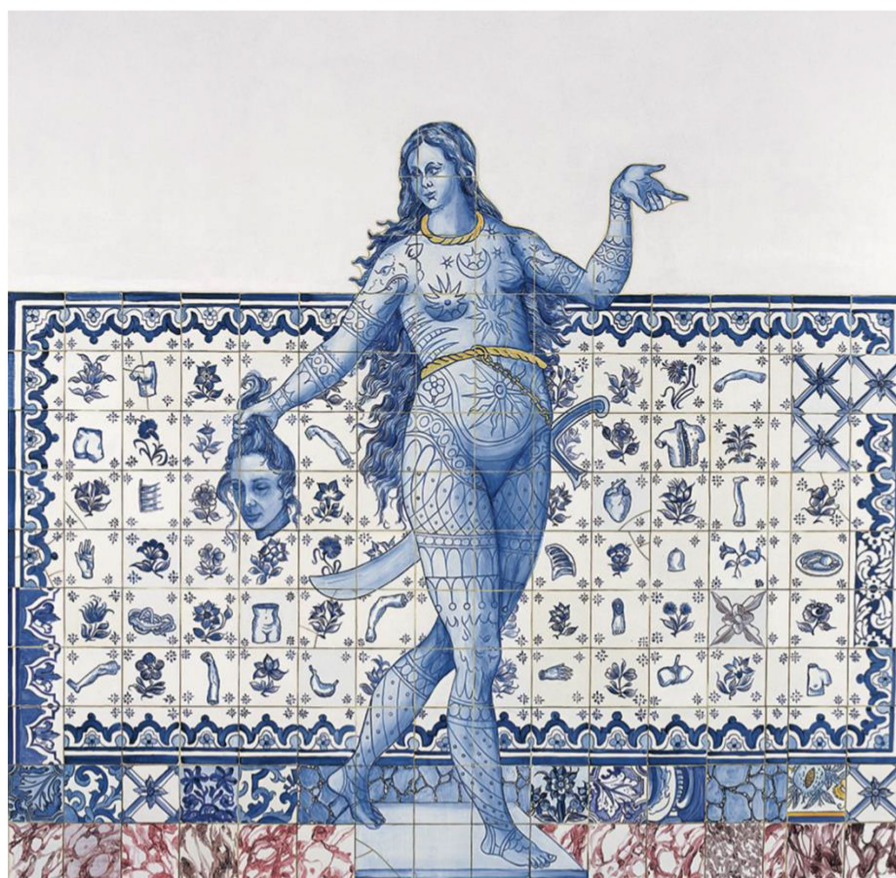


FIGURE 1
Invitation Figure II (1998, oil on canvas 200 × 200 cm, Adriana Varejão).

landscapes. The evoked aromas of exotic flowers and medicinal plants, never before seen in Renaissance Europe, mingle with the fetid scent of fresh pieces of human flesh. This is reinforced by the row of tiles



FIGURE 2
Detail of Hell (Giovanni di Pietro Faloppi, 1410, Basilica of San Petronio, Bologna) (Giovanni da Modena).

below the scene, which might as well be living flesh (the trope of living flesh behind walls and pillars is common in Varejão's work). Everything about the indigenous woman is "natural," dangerous, seductive and wild, even presented as a trophy of a conquest, hybridized under a Portuguese-American syncretism (as I will further develop) and even though she has been stripped of her warmth, converted into pure flat appearance, taxidermized, she retains her magnetic power which, innocently, invites barbarism. "High culture" and "barbarism" intermingle in the banquet to which the viewer is invited. Or perhaps they (we) are, in fact, the banquet.

The stratified or palimpsestic iconography that Varejão proposes, with sediments of time, fragments of interrupted versions, contested visions, is enlightening to me since the representations that surround the viewer and their way of looking at them are determined by historical, political and economic frameworks. At the same time, however, images are not just reflections of reality, they can be an instrument for shaping perceptions (Rosler, 1991) and questioning ways of seeing. Furthermore, as Sontag (1977) states: "[they] are a way of asserting a particular narrative and can profoundly affect how we interpret the world." In other words, as Mulvey (1975) says: "The gaze is a powerful tool that reflects and constructs social realities, allowing us to see how power dynamics are played out in visual culture."

The images appropriated by Varejão in her figures facilitated the exploitation, torture and enslavement of indigenous peoples perceived as uncivilized. Moreover, these images later provided the justification for theories and classifications that sought to explain and categorize social and racial hierarchies and to fix "biologically" based social positions (Trouillot, 2011 [2003]; Moritz Schwarcz and Varejão, 2014; Jáuregui, 2008, 28). Engravers, draughtsmen, colonial administrators, travelers and chroniclers contributed to this discourse, which became the breeding ground for



FIGURE 3
America part one (De Bry). American Indians grilling fish and indigenous people in their village carrying out daily activities.



anthropology employed for administrative purposes (Balán, 2021a).

Since the eye is a product of history, Varejão's brush is neither innocent nor unarmed when it mobilizes precisely some elements of De Bry's representations, some of the most widespread of the Brazilian Indians, the blue and white tile material and evocations of the Americalia (objects collected in America and exhibited in Europe as a symbol of the advancement of knowledge and exploration of the world, in Cabinets of Curiosities). By revisiting and reinterpreting these images, she x-rays the Renaissance and Baroque visual regimes surrounding South American indigenities and their underlying assumptions. At the same time, she seeks to challenge these ingrained visual paradigms through the manipulation of their forms.

It is worth clarifying that the process of construction of otherness was inevitably influenced by the regimes of truth and scopic regimes of each epoch, which shaped the perception and possibilities of representation of the world. According to Jay (1988), scopic regimes are the different historical and cultural ways of seeing that are deeply influenced by the power structures and knowledge systems that prevail in each society. Jay argues that they are not simply ways of seeing, but social structures that regulate what can be seen, how it should be seen, and what is excluded from visibility. These regimes are linked to the dominant ideologies of each era and reflect the relations of power, control and knowledge that determine the norms of visual perception in a given context. In this sense, scopic regimes reflect not only ways of seeing, but also the symbolic structures that influence what is considered worth seeing or knowing.

In this paper, I delve into the captivating works of Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão, specifically focusing on *Invitation Figures I* (1997) and *II* (1998). Varejão ingeniously weaves together the rich symbolism of 17th, 18th, and 19th century Portuguese tiles—once imported to the Brazilian colony as emblems of modernity and civilization—with striking imagery of an indigenous huntress, a figure represented by the painter White (1585–1593) and later appropriated by the engraver Theodor De Bry (late 16th and early 17th century). Through her mock ethnographic compositions, Varejão challenges and redefines the colonial gazes that have historically shaped perceptions of indigenous peoples, inviting viewers to reconsider the narratives that have long dominated this discourse.

My central argument is that Varejão creates a *shanzhai* form of cultural appropriation that undermines ethnic and racial essentializations through artifices such as the *pastness lookalike* (Holtorf, 2013) and the use of influential 16th-century European iconography of indigenous Brazilians, evocations of the Americalia (since the end of the 15th century), and the 17th–19th centuries courtly tradition of invitation figures. *Shanzhai*, a term used by Han (2011), refers to often parodic creations that become more original than the original by intervening in, transforming, and updating artworks to address contemporary issues. In this way, these pieces circulate and eventually replace the original thanks to their resemblance to the source material and their engagement with present and past imaginaries.

In the second section I explain the methodology for addressing the proposed question, Critical Visual Discourse Analysis. In the third section, I introduce my approach to Varejão's work by thinking of it as a *shanzhai* appropriation of previous representations. This helps me to think about what conception the artist promotes about indigenities in Brazil and to contrast it with hegemonic Western notions of

"identity." Moreover, I explain why I prefer the concept of *shanzhai* over the autochthonous category of anthropophagy, or even the notion of simulacrum. Furthermore, I explain the employment of *pastness lookalike* (Holtorf, 2013) to stylistically mimic historical artworks.

In the fourth section, I delve into the historical images with which Varejão engages, examining early modern representations of Brazilian (and Latin American) indigenous peoples and the ideas that informed them through visual archives of the period. In the fifth section, I examine the various provocations presented by the artworks, which encourage a reconsideration of Brazilian indigenous peoples through an anti-essentialist *shanzhai* lens. Sixth, I analyze how the nascent Brazilian and, more generally, Latin American republics fed on the vestiges of pre-Cabraline and pre-Columbian civilizations as their own inheritance from which to erect their patriotic legitimacy. Seventh, I draw on the appropriation of traditional Portuguese white and blue tiles (*azulejos*) in *Invitation Figures I* and *II* to examine why some early modern European imaginaries intertwined elements traditionally associated with the "Orient" and those from the "New World" in their visual representations of America. Finally, I summarize how *Invitation Figures I* and *II* contribute to undermining ethnic and racial essentializations.

Methodology

The research proposes a qualitative methodological perspective. The focus is on analyzing the dialog between the various forms of representation present in the artworks, their negotiation with historical scopic regimes concerning indigenities, and their mechanisms of interpellation and inclusion of the viewer. The aim is not to conduct a study on the communicative effectiveness of the artworks, how they affect different audiences, measure their effects on the represented communities, or their circulation and consumption in the art world.

I employ the methodology of Critical Visual Discourse Analysis (CVDA), which extends the boundaries of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), traditionally focused on the study of verbal texts, to include images as vehicles for the construction of meaning in social interactions. This methodology seeks to understand how visual representations not only reflect but also produce, reproduce, and reinforce power relations and social structures (Rogers, 2011). It assumes that images, like texts, are social practices influenced by specific historical, cultural, and political contexts (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 1993). Images are produced, distributed, and consumed within specific contexts that shape their interpretation, implying that not only the visual elements are analyzed but also the social processes of production and reception of these discourses (Wodak and Meyer, 2016).

My critical analysis of visual discourses follows the model proposed by Fairclough (1989), who suggests that CDA should be understood in three interrelated stages: description, which focuses on the formal aspects of images (colors, composition, iconography, etc.); interpretation, which examines the relationship between images and their contexts of production, distribution, and consumption; and explanation, which connects these elements to their social and contextual implications. This approach is cyclical, not necessarily sequential, as the stages of analysis interact with one another as the research develops (Fairclough, 2023).

CVDA also operates within a transdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from sociolinguistics, semiotics, cultural studies, critical theories, and social theories of discourse. As Van Dijk (1993) explains, images, like verbal texts, are constructed out of ideological structures that reflect the interests and power struggles within a given society. In this sense, the analysis of images allows for the identification of the ideological frameworks that underlie their construction and consumption, revealing how visual representations actively participate in the fabrication of consensus and the naturalization of certain power structures (Van Dijk, 1993).

Sociosemiotics is another key discipline that contributes to CVDA, as it allows for an approach to images not only as visual representations but also as signs that produce meanings within a social and cultural system (Rogers, 2011). Through the analysis of these visual signs, CVDA seeks to deconstruct the dominant narratives and the social structures that are perpetuated through them, identifying both the power strategies and the possibilities for resistance that images can offer (Fairclough, 1989).

CVDA is a powerful tool for understanding how visual representations contribute to the construction of social reality, particularly regarding power relations, identities, and domination. Through a critical and interdisciplinary approach, CVDA makes visible the hidden ideologies in images and how they influence how we look at and socially position the characters represented.

I used the method of image analysis proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) [1996], which seeks to unravel the complex relationships between visual elements, social context, and underlying power structures present in the image. It is a tool for understanding how images, like language, carry ideological meanings that affect their interpretation. Building upon the steps proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen, after conducting a descriptive analysis of the images, I identified a series of key elements in the artworks that helped me understand how they appropriate and challenge visual rhetorics from other times. These elements operate on different scales: (I) I focused on identifying the intertextualities and interpellation to visual representations through which the historical narrative of Otherness has been constructed. To do this, I closely examined their expository rhetorics—namely, the arrangement of elements in space, the lighting, the context, the materials they use or emulate, the mimesis of forms and characters, the labels. (II) In the bodies: I sought to identify which visual elements attempt to signify race and uncivilization by analyzing the performativity of the bodies and their differential diacritics. This was followed by tracking elements that serve to mark the bodies differently. It is important to note that I understand race in a non-biological, and non-ahistorical way as Segato (2007, 2015) does; with Taylor (2003), who emphasizes that race is transmitted through bodily practices, beyond pigmentocracy, features, and the form of the body, such as customs, clothing, and gestures; and with Langebaek Rueda (2009), who uses the category of civilization, focusing on moral aspects or behavior.

Up to this point, I located the conflicting forms of marking and unmarking Otherness in the bodies, and the intertextualities through the various historical representations and disruptive elements. These findings served as the foundation for (III) understanding how the visual primary documents are negotiated, ironized, denaturalized, and subverted, planting suspicions. To this end, (III.i) I analyzed how the forms of representation of contested Otherness in the bodies engage in dialog (following Taylor, 2003, who understands the mestizo body as a battlefield). These representations manifest as

palimpsests or sediments with historicities, meaning I had to identify which forms of seeing Otherness they were appealing to in order to discern why certain elements do not fit. (III.ii) I identified the traditional narrative logic being influenced, what is being highlighted, and what is being said about the primordial representations. (III.iii) I sought to account for the epistemic-corporeal position in which the works place the viewers: analyzing the gazes of the represented characters, how the colonial encounter is re-staged within the representation, and between the images and the viewers. This helps to understand how the observer is repositioned in relation to the indigenous figure represented, and whether a simulated game of gazes emerges that subverts assumed hierarchies. (III.iv) Furthermore, to analyze how the primary visual documents are negotiated, ironized, denaturalized, and subverted while planting suspicions, the analytical category of “*shanzhai*” was useful. This category helped to understand what is being staged that is not what it seems, referring to the appropriated element and the metalanguage surrounding it. Conceptually, to think about what this analytical category contributes to the study of how indigenous alterities emerge and historically shift, I put it into dialog with debates around strategic essentialism, multiculturalism, identity as cultural capital, always-in-becoming, in an anti-essentialist and performative way.

Shanzhai anti-essentialism

The imperative of authenticity forces the self to produce itself. Ultimately, authenticity is the neoliberal form of production of the self. It turns everyone into a producer of the self. The self as entrepreneur of the self is produced, represented and offered as a commodity. Authenticity is a sales pitch Byung-Chul Han (2018) [2016].

Varejão reinterprets, borrows, appropriates 16th century representations (De Bry), 17th–19th century materials (tiles) and the concept and function of the invitation figure from the 17th–19th centuries with its symbolic capital. An unsuspecting viewer might even think that Varejão's Invitation figures *are* Portuguese tiles from the 17th–19th centuries. In this sense, we could say that her work reproduces previous works, imitates them, passes itself off as an *original* in a double sense. There is a simulation, a double discourse: it is a piece of mock tilework that recovers a representation of an Indigenous woman from the 16th century and, at the same time, it is a contemporary work of art. The way it is read depends on the place where it's exhibited. Precisely, I would like to discuss the idea of the original in this section.

Han (2011) contrasts dominant Chinese and Western conceptions of the original. He says that in the West, the original happens once and forever and remains the same as itself. There is a will to preserve its unchanging, “pure” essence, to preserve the matter from which it was produced as it was made at the time it happened and thanks to the unrepeatable creative genius. Thus, for the West, usually “all reproduction entails a lack of being” (21), a lack of truth and spirit. In contrast, in China, the original:

is [usually] not understood as a unique creation but as an infinite process, it does not aim at definitive identity but at incessant transformation (...) it does not admit an essentialist fixation. The

Far East knows no pre-deconstructive dimension such as originality, origin or identity (Han, 2011, 20–21).

Han (2011) and Cheng (1979) explain that the more a Chinese work of art is appreciated, the more it mutates thanks to the inscription of seals that give an account of its owners or of the wise people who wanted to validate it by associating it with their name; new poems and inscriptions are added; texts are written about it; it is exhibited in different ways. In this way, the work is emptied, becoming a palimpsest that bears witness to the hands, eyes and times that have passed through its materiality. The artwork becomes an empty place where different inscriptions communicate with each other (21). In a sense, this parallels Tanizaki's (1977) melancholic essay about the Japanese admiration for the shadow, the veiled, the dark, and the hidden. For example, the opaque pots that absorb the greasy matter of the hands that pass through them, making them all the more precious. Byung-Chul Han points out that the transformation of a piece of work over time affects not only that piece, but retrospectively the author's entire oeuvre (23). Even copies, forgeries, reproductions of the work affect the original image (23; Balán, 2024), they change its subject, they update it and show its meaning for the new times (25). That is why the author says that what might be called forgeries in the West are more original than the original and calls them *shanzhai*. Moreover, the *shanzhai* has a subversive parodic effect in the face of monopolistic economic powers (74).

The author says that we can see this subversive and mocking power in the many Chinese brands derived from Western (especially American) brands, which play with their typography, names, logos and ideas generating an image that could be confused with that of the original, obtaining a caricatural effect. By mocking the epitome brands of capitalism, they mock the system that enthroned them as unique and original and therefore worthy of greater symbolic and exchange value.

But why understand Varejão's work in light of the concept of *shanzhai* rather than the Brazilian concept of (artistic or cultural) anthropophagy? It is worth recalling that anthropophagy in Brazil is a movement that emerged in the 1920s as a response to European cultural influence and, in general, to cultural coloniality. This concept proposes the "digestion" and reinterpretation of foreign influences in an autochthonous way, rather than simple imitation or assimilation. Among the most important representatives of cultural anthropophagy in Brazil are Oswald de Andrade, Mário de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral, artists who have greatly influenced Brazilian culture.

The concept of *shanzhai* is key for several reasons. First, because it shifts us from essentialist thoughts of "hybridisation," and questions the notions of identity, originality, and essence that are key to this analysis. Secondly, because anthropophagy proposes to absorb the power of the enemy and return stylistically to artistic primitivism; Varejão does not follow this path, but in her *Invitation Figures*, her reinterpretations continue in the style of the original work, sometimes passing themselves off as pieces from the 17th–19th centuries. Thirdly, because *shanzhai* connects us to a centuries-old tradition from China, which is key because Western imaginaries of China became intertwined with Western perceptions of America in the 16th century. The artist explores this theme further in other works, which I briefly address at the end of the paper.

The concept of *shanzhai* resonates deeply with the notion of the simulacrum, which I have previously used to analyze other artworks

(Balán, 2021a, 2021b). Both notions interrogate the idea of originality; however, the simulacrum suggests a reality constructed from mimicry, images, and pretension. In contrast, *shanzhai* regards artworks, buildings, books, and technological artifacts as vibrant, dynamic entities in a perpetual state of transformation. This perspective shifts the emphasis away from mere imitation and the superficiality of visual representation, inviting a richer understanding of the fluidity inherent in these creations.

To create mock images that evoke the nostalgic weight and worldview embedded in De Bry's representations, Varejão cultivates a sense of *pastness* through the materiality of her artworks (Holtorf, 2013). *Pastness* refers to the age-value of an object—the quality of being from a bygone era experienced through its material characteristics within specific cultural contexts. This includes elements like traces of decay, signs of aging, and hints of disintegration (432). Echoing Jones (2010), Holtorf (2013) suggests that authenticity can be imbued in an object, even if it lacks a unique cultural biography and wasn't created in the past.

Varejão employs several strategies to evoke this foggy sense of the past. She harnesses the cultural weight of the museum device, which embodies a historical logic as an institutional space where valuable and usually ancient artifacts are collected. She adopts the style of Portuguese tiles, emphasizing their decay—some tiles appear to be replacements for missing pieces, featuring various motifs and washed-out colors. She draws on the iconography of White and De Bry to portray the Indigenous huntress with European features and mimics the postures of 17th–19th centuries invitation figures, aligning her work with their original contexts. Moreover, she evokes lingering Renaissance imaginaries that portray Indigenous peoples as cannibalistic savages engaged in satanic rituals—an exploration I discuss in the next section. Varejão's figures resonate powerfully because they align with contemporary stereotypes of how representations from the blurred realm of the 18th century should appear (Holtorf, 2013).

Renaissance and baroque visual regimes of Brazilian and American indigeneities

In this section, I explore key trends in the representations of indigenous peoples in what would become Brazil, tracing pivotal milestones that contributed to the visual conception of Brazil as a land of anthropophagy, epitomized by the figure of the Tupinambá. This is crucial because Varejão draws on these imaginaries.

The encounter between Europe and the East Indies birthed the colonial archetype of the "Indian," relegating indigenous populations to a hierarchically inferior and homogenized status (Amodio, 1993; Quijano, 2020 [2000]). Within this Western narrative, Europeans wielded the gaze of power, while indigenous peoples were cast in roles molded by colonial exigencies. As Quijano points out, they were mapped cognitively according to their extractable value. Trouillot (2011) [2003] further emphasizes that the West constructed its other as a means of self-definition, establishing a historical framework of domination that lingers to this day. Initially, indigenous peoples embodied glory for conquerors, who envisioned these new lands as Eden-like realms inhabited by "Noble Savages." This idealized vision found expression in Theodor de Bry's (1590) *America Part I*, which,

despite De Bry never having set foot on the continent, forged a lasting visual narrative of Native Americans that shaped European perceptions from the late 16th to the 19th centuries.

De Bry's first collection of engravings draws from earlier ones by John White (Moritz Schwarcz and Varejão, 2014, 187), who had firsthand experience in the New World as the chief cartographer and artist for the ill-fated English colony on Roanoke Island (North Carolina, United States), founded in 1585, under the patronage of Sir Walter Raleigh. White's depictions, based on the writings of mathematician and cartographer Thomas Hariot (1560–1621), portray indigenous peoples engaged in serene activities of survival—hunting, dancing (Figure 3), and playful interactions. Additionally, personalized portraits feature individuals from various social strata, poised for the engraver.

This portrayal of America is no mere coincidence. Amidst food shortages in Europe, White depicted the continent as a bountiful paradise inhabited by people living innocently and effortlessly amidst nature's abundance. His imagery aimed to entice Europeans to settle or at least invest in exploring this alluring territory. The same trend is illustrated by the writings of Gandavo (2008 [1570–72]). In Brazil, the trend of depicting the country's abundant resources is exemplified in the exotic fruit illustrations by Dutch painter Eckhout. These works align with the *ufanismo* narrative that celebrated Brazil's natural wealth (Figure 4). Furthermore, the letter from Portuguese royal scribe Pêro Vaz de Caminha to Dom Manuel on May 1, 1500, reflects this vision of a fertile paradise, abundant with vegetables, honey, animals, gold, silver, and fresh water, suggesting that these indigenous peoples were ripe for evangelization: “And I believe that were Your Majesty to send someone here to stay longer among them, they will all be converted according to Your Majesty's desire” (folio 13).

As Sadlier (2008) states, Dom Manuel had tasked the famous cosmographer Amerigo Vespucci with embarking on a second voyage to Brazil to reinforce Portugal's claim to the region, but he also kept reporting to Medici. In Vespucci's second letter to Medici (1502) there is also that *ufanista* style: “sometimes I marveled so much at the

delicate scents of the herbs and flowers, and the tastes of those fruits and roots, that I thought I must be in the Earthly Paradise. What is there to say of the quantity of birds, their plumes and colors and songs and how many kinds and how beautiful they are? (...)” (in Formisano 199, 30–31). Gandavo (1570–72) also underlines the marvelous climate and the fertile ground. Following this trend, the Cantino world map of 1502—the first to depict the Brazilian coastline—features illustrations of vibrant parrots and lush trees in gold, green, and brown, highlighting the region's abundant resources.

Moreover, Caminha describes the native Brazilians as possessing a brownish-red complexion and attractive facial features reminiscent of Europeans, contrasting them with West Coast Africans, whom the Portuguese regarded as less appealing due to broader, flattened noses. He frequently remarks on the natives' cleanliness, physical fitness, and their unashamed nudity, likening their innocence to that of biblical Adam and praising them for their superior hygiene and purity of spirit compared to Europeans.

Yet, this idyllic vision was at odds with the colonial intentions of the newcomers. Without a narrative of heresy, there was no justification for conquest. Thus, the extermination and enslavement of indigenous peoples was rationalized by claiming that they had received the Gospel but rejected it. Moreover, as Jáuregui (2008, 26) notes, Europeans justified their entry into the Garden of Eden as necessary to protect the innocent victims of cannibalism. Consequently, blood became the purifying force. The natives transformed from inhabitants of an earthly paradise, innocent and unclothed, to demon-worshipping pagans (Amodio, 1993), reduced to symbols of humanity's darker instincts (Price, 1989). This degeneration, framed as that which we are not, manifested itself in gruesome depictions of indigenous figures with distorted nudity for moralizing (and erotic) purposes aimed at Christian Europe (Amodio, 1993:171–172) (Figure 5).

The iconography of the woman in *Invitation Figure II* and *I* (Figures 1, 6) is rooted in De Bry's *America – Part I*. De Bry (Figure 7) adapts White's engravings (Moritz Schwarcz and Varejão, 2014, 187) to portray an Indigenous huntress with European features, integrating iconography associated with the primal savagery of ancient Scotland (Figure 8). These Pictish engravings appeared at the conclusion of De Bry's collection, seemingly drawing a parallel between the contemporary inhabitants of the Americas and the primordial past of Europe (Elliott, 1992).

In De Bry's portrayal of Native Americans (Figure 7), the lingering influence of European phenotypical traits is striking. Some might argue that this choice reflects the absence of a fully developed concept of “race” at the end of the 16th century, but I have several objections to this perspective. First, since De Bry never set foot in the New World, he lacked the firsthand knowledge necessary to accurately capture the unique features of Indigenous peoples. Second, living during the Renaissance, De Bry was influenced by an esthetic that idealized beauty through stylized European characteristics and serene postures, creating a sense of timelessness. This Renaissance exaltation of the human figure emerged from a shift in perception, where humans began to be viewed as the center of the universe, and the body was no longer seen merely as a prison for the soul but rather as a vessel for exploration and understanding of the world through the senses. This notion laid the groundwork for the scientific method championed by Francis Bacon. If De Bry sought to depict the Indigenous peoples of the Americas as beings connected to an Edenic



FIGURE 4
Eckhout, Albert. Still life with watermelon, pineapple and other fruits.

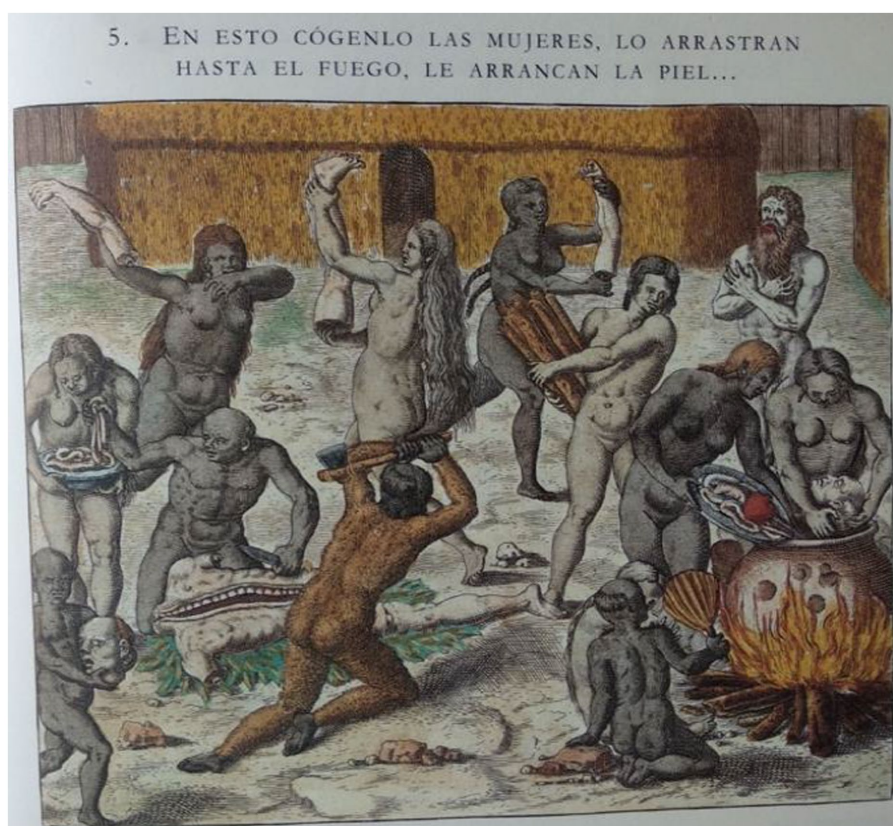


FIGURE 5
In America Part Three (Theodor De Bry).

ideal, he would naturally gravitate toward representing them in the stylized manner of European Renaissance art.¹ It is worth noting that during this period, artists were not only refining their observational techniques but also redefining themselves from medieval craftsmen to individuals recognized for their unique genius and scientific insight. They engaged in dissection to grasp the inner workings of the body, which allowed them to achieve more realistic poses. This muscular ideal, drawn from Greco-Roman antiquity, likely explains why the Indigenous figures in *America Part I* (De Bry, 1594) are portrayed with European features and bodies reminiscent of classical athletes, symbols of beauty, virtue, truth, and knowledge.

Moreover, the absence of a formal racial classification does not imply that Europeans were unaware of the existence of diverse phenotypes (Arias and Restrepo, 2010). For example, European traders had long interacted with a variety of peoples along the Silk Road, familiarizing themselves with a spectrum of phenotypic and linguistic diversity. Historical and archeological evidence, such as Sancai figurines from Tang Dynasty China (619 CE–907 CE), depicts Africans living alongside locals, with even exotic animals

like horses being imported. This suggests a multicultural environment in which people and goods from distant lands circulated freely (Figure 9).

While it is true that tales brought back by crusaders and merchants often exaggerated the exotic features of foreigners—the tympanum of the Basilica Ste-Madeleine in Vézelay, France (1120–32 CE) for example, shows pig's noses and massive ears (Figure 10)—the underlying awareness of diversity persisted. Marco Polo's famous book, *Il Milione* (1,298 CE), showcases a series of exoticizations that align with the period's fascination with the unfamiliar. Similarly, Mandeville's *Book of the Wonders of the World* (1524 CE), which draws upon Marco Polo's book, served as an inspiration for De Bry's engravings (Bueno Jiménez, 2010).

Throughout history, the Other has often been labeled a cannibal. As Montaigne reflects in his essay “Of Cannibals” (Montaigne, 1993 [1562]), the ethnocentric lens through which one views foreign cultures frequently portrays strangers as dangerous savages, when in fact, Europeans often engaged in far more brutal customs. Montaigne romanticizes the so-called “savages” as being in harmony with nature, brave, and embodying virtues that European society had lost through its artificial manipulation of natural products and their greed for conquest, and he underlines that Europeans had more vile practices toward their enemies:

I consider it more barbarous to eat a man alive than to eat him dead; to tear by rack and torture a body still full of feeling, to roast it by degrees, and then give it to be trampled and eaten by dogs and

¹ Nor would it be true to say that, during the Middle Ages, Europeans “forgot” how to portray in a naturalistic manner. Behind the flattened, frontal depictions of religious subjects there was a desire to exhibit the distance of these holy bodies from the viewers and the earthly world. In the Middle Ages, the senses were not supposed to disturb the mind in its communication with God.

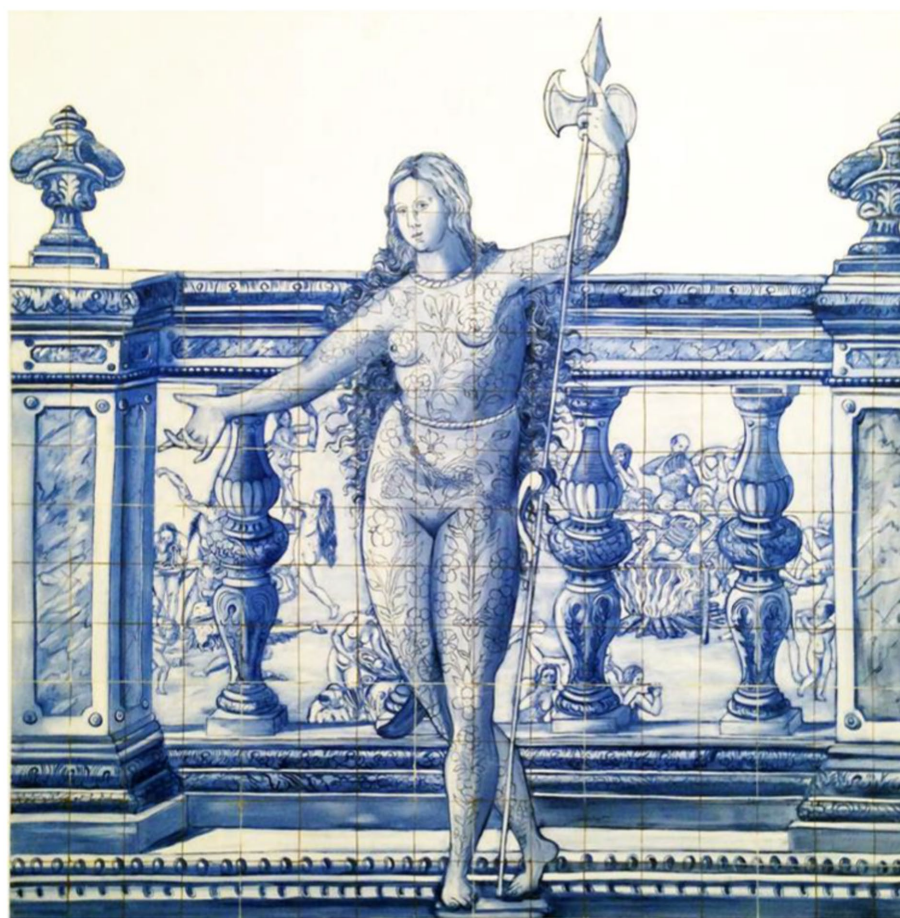


FIGURE 6
Invitation Figure I (Varejão, 1997, oil on lienzo).

swine - a practice which we have not only read about but seen within recent memory, not between ancient enemies, but between neighbours and fellow-citizens and, what is worse, under the cloak of piety and religion - than to roast and eat a man after he is dead. (Montaigne, 1993 [1580]: 113, italics are mine).

The third part of De Bry's volume of engravings is the one that most decidedly depicts Indigenous peoples as uncivilized cannibals (Figure 11). This selection illustrated Hans Staden's (1525–1579) travels in Brazil, edited by De Bry in 1592. Staden's travel stories grew out of an alleged abduction of the author in Brazil, where he claimed to have been held captive by the "anthropophagous" Tupinambá Indigenous people. The author decided to write about them in later decades and included a series of implausible events. The scene depicted in *Invitation Figure I* (Figure 6) echoes imagery from *America Part III*, capturing both the ravenous consumption of human flesh by the Natives and the ritualistic dances that accompany such feasts. Here, the cannibalistic nature of the gathering is framed within delicate marble columns, mimicking the ornate tilework of Portuguese Baroque architecture, which contrasts sharply with the gruesome act taking place.

Numerous other artworks reinforce the naturalization of cannibalistic practices. For instance, the Dutch painter Eckhout

arrived in Recife in 1636 with Prince Maurice of Nassau, and his portrayal of an Indigenous Tapuia woman (1641 CE) (Figure 12) subtly incorporates unsettling elements. The foot she carries in a basket, along with a cut hand in her hand, nearly go unnoticed, and her expression of innocence and calm underscores the everyday nature of such practices. The image suggests that, rather than feasting on fruits or vegetables, these Indigenous peoples habitually hunt and consume humans (Figure 13). Cesare Ripa's allegory of America (1603 CE) (Figure 13) shows how deeply these images had penetrated European society. The allegorical figure of America is adorned with feathers, her hair disheveled, and she wields a bow and arrow, while a human head and a lizard rest ominously at her feet. Ripa explicitly states the elements that must characterize the representation of America:

(...) *The human skull that she crushes with her feet shows very clearly how those people, given to barbarism, are generally accustomed to feeding on human flesh, eating those men they have defeated in war, as well as the slaves they buy and various other victims, depending on the occasion. As for the Lizard or Caiman, it is a very remarkable and abundant animal in this part of the World, being so large and fierce that they devour other animals*



FIGURE 7
Theodore de Bry.

and even men on certain occasions (Ripa, 1603, emphasis is mine).

In the late Renaissance, allegorical representations of the four known continents gained popularity, solidifying specific iconographic tropes that reflected the era's scopic regimes. In Flemish engraver Collert's allegory of America (1580–1600) (Figure 14), we again encounter the motifs of savagery: the consumption of human flesh, naked Indigenous combatants (nudity symbolizing uncivilization), primitive weaponry like the bow and arrow, and exotic wildlife, including a disproportionately large armadillo and a parrot. Ripa's depiction (Figure 13) features an alligator, an animal once associated with Africa, further emphasizing the continent's perceived wildness.

The persistence of Ripa's iconography is evident even two centuries later in the allegorical representation of America by Sasso (1809–16) (Figure 15). The depictions of Carib Indigenous people by Mocquet (1617) (Figure 16), a French engraver, show that the imagery of Native Americans as voracious cannibals crossed national borders. In his book *Voyages en Afrique, Asie, Indes Orientales et Occidentales*, it is clear that people from other continents were also depicted in this way. Moreover, a 1707 engraving by Dutchman Pieter van der Aa (Figure 17) illustrates that the demonization of the Americas' inhabitants endured well into the following centuries. In this work, a hermaphroditic idol adorned with five animal heads receives offerings from Indigenous people. The central figure—a grotesque idol with a human body and the heads of a bird or dragon—holds a bident, while half-naked Indigenous people engage in a procession, dancing and drumming in worship.

These artistic representations not only reflect the colonial imagination but also perpetuate a legacy of misrepresentation and othering, which has lasting implications for how Brazilian and Indigenous American peoples are perceived. This constructed image served not only to dehumanize indigenous cultures but also to reinforce a narrative of moral superiority among colonizers. The cannibalistic portrayal thus encapsulated broader themes of colonial control, reflecting the tension between fascination and fear, while contributing to the lasting stigma that continues to influence contemporary views of indigenous peoples. This is what Varejão pictorially attacks.

Deconstructing the indigenous huntress with European phenotypes

Following this line of cannibal representations, I suggest some interpretations of Varejão's work. In *Invitation Figure II* (Figure 1), the artist shows an icon of courtly solemnity, an Indigenous woman exoticized according to the European imagery, as a savage, seductive and voracious huntress who, after being painted, even cut off the head of her own portraitist (Adriana Varejão). The artist could be emulating the baroque revolution of Velázquez, with his bold self-portrait that looks at the viewer who takes the place of the kings in *Las Meninas*, subverting power in this gesture. However, in Varejão's painting, the power dynamics shift dramatically. Here, it is not the painter who commands the viewer's gaze; instead, the Indigenous woman, depicted in ornate tiles, claims both the artist's life and her own gaze with the edge of her sword. The narrative transforms: she—historically subjected to rape, mutilation, and enslavement—now asserts her presence and perspective.

Moreover, *Figure II* looks back, perhaps reflecting on the past. As we read from left to right, we might interpret the imagery as a timeline, with time itself advancing toward our right. Initially, it seems that the invisible figure she gazes at outside the frame could be the guest for whom the banquet—symbolized by the background tiles—is prepared. Yet, she walks into the future while casting her eyes backward, suggesting a complex interplay of temporalities that coexist in this frozen moment, rich with the memories and intertextualities etched into her body and the surrounding space.

In *Invitation Figure I* (Figure 6), the woman's gaze is directed forward, making it abundantly clear that we, the spectators, occupy the role of cannibal guests at this banquet. Or perhaps we are being invited to become the feast ourselves, echoing the constructed narratives surrounding Indigenous cannibalistic practices. By shifting the woman's gaze back to us, akin to Velázquez's technique in *Las Meninas*, she asserts her presence on equal footing with both contemporary viewers and the historical figures who once graced the Portuguese and Brazilian courts. No longer an objectified exotic artifact from the New World—arranged for the pleasure of the European audience—she emerges as the true owner of the gaze.

The display of mutilated body parts on the tiles behind *Invitation Figure II* (Figure 1) may symbolize at least three things. On the one hand, being next to flowers and medicinal plants, it evokes the naturalization of cannibalistic practices: "they are all things that emerge naturally in these lands." On the other hand, it can symbolize the history of indigenous American ethnocide: the background tiles



FIGURE 8
Pict Warriors (John White, 1585–1593).



FIGURE 9
Sancai tomb figure of a horse keeper, Tang dynasty, c. 700–750, earthenware with lead-silicate glaze and painted details, China, 20.7 x 6.7 cm (Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian, Washington, DC).

reveal how European Modernity, cloaked in the trappings of civilization, Christianity, and decorum, obscures the brutal realities of enslavement and extermination of colonized peoples behind its polished façades. On this issue of the violence hidden behind the

progress of marble and tiles, the artist has produced several works, such as the series *Jerked-beef ruins*. Third, the display of mutilated body parts on tiles may symbolize the display of America-exotic objects arranged in Cabinets of Curiosities—as we will explore in the next section. Flowers, bones, meat and usurped ritual objects are presented as elements of equal hierarchy, stripped of ownership, for the European enlightened delight.

It's also worth noting that in Varejão's *Figures I and II*, the woman stands out prominently compared to the other elements in the space. This may allude to the myth of the fierce, sculptural women known as the Amazons—a captivating narrative that fascinated conquistadors and endured well into the 18th century. For instance, the enlightened scientist Charles Marie de La Condamine was intrigued by this legend (Bueno Jiménez, 2010). Even Columbus was said to have fervently searched for them after hearing tales of their existence in Martinique (Bueno Jiménez, 2010). The power of the Amazons myth was so profound that the great river itself was named after this imagined narrative. This reference is crucial, as it prompts us to consider the intertwined dimensions of conquest and colonization, particularly regarding carnal desire and violence, including rape—a legacy that continues to manifest in place names, monuments, and institutions across various landscapes.

But in Varejão's transmuting brushstrokes, is the figure truly an Indigenous woman from the American continent? As we have noted, she bears the European phenotypes typical of White and De Bry's portrayals. Varejão seems to invite a dual interpretation: this wild, seductive, and violent figure could also represent the Portuguese crown itself. It is she who seduces with her idealized European features, her divine Christian law, her bourgeois and "civilised" customs represented by the Portuguese tiles and the courtly invitation



FIGURE 10

Pentecost and mission of the Apostles tympanum, central portal of the narthex, Basilica Ste-Madeleine, Vézelay, France, 1120–3. One can appreciate humans with ears so large as to envelop them, beings with pig noses or dwarfs who had to mount a ladder in order to get on a horse.

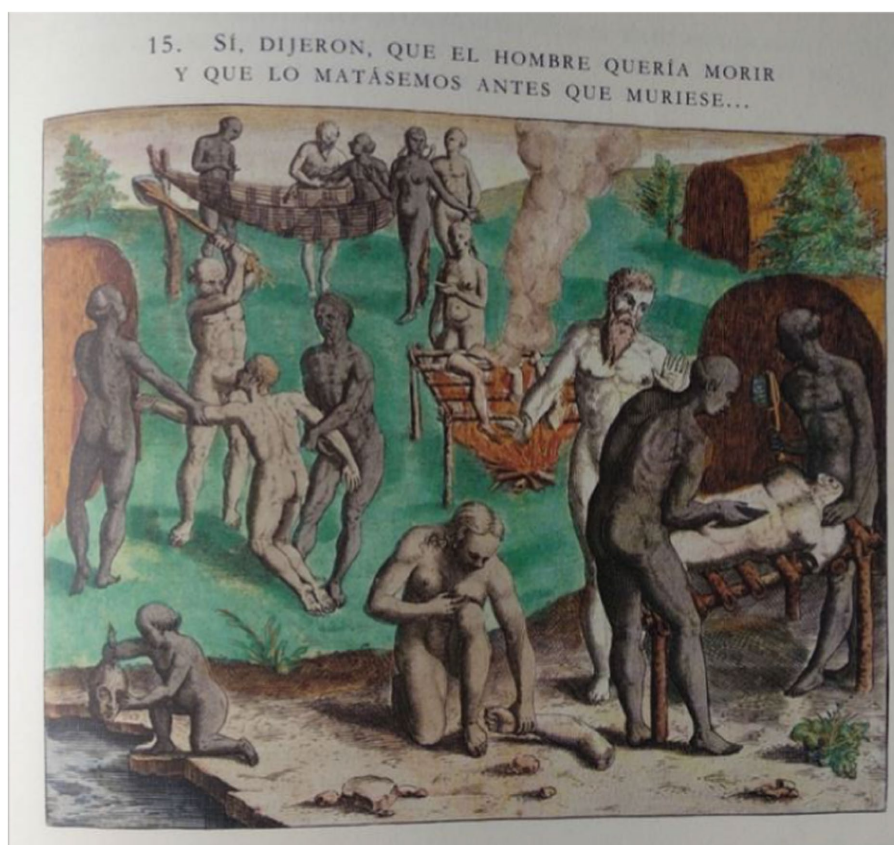


FIGURE 11

America part three (De Bry, 1592) Brazilian Indians dismembering and eating human bodies.



FIGURE 12
Albert Eckhout 1641. Tapuia woman holding a severed hand, Dutch Brazil.



FIGURE 13
America (Ripa, 1603).

figure. In her presence, the atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples find a troubling justification.

Moreover, the mutilated body parts on the tiles are reminiscent of Christian relics (Figure 18), which are one of the many Christian anthropophagic practices initiated by religious persecution during proto-Christianity. Even today, bones, organs and objects of martyred saints believed to have healing powers are venerated and adorned with precious stones. In this sense, the Portuguese huntress portrayed in

Invitation Figures I and II legitimizes the destruction of indigenous peoples by presenting their practices and beliefs as pagan and infidel, while drawing on hagiographies, the remains of saints, religious iconography and the “holy word” of the Bible. Varejão perhaps suggests that the conquistadors were, in many ways, more cannibalistic than they ever imagined Indigenous peoples to be, echoing Montaigne’s insights. Furthermore, historical accounts reveal that many cannibalistic practices were observed among starving Christians in America (see Schmidl, 1567; Cabeza de Vaca, 1984 [1537–40]; de Oviedo Y Valdés, 1851 [1959]; Jáuregui, 2008, 29).

Finally, as Jáuregui (2008, 13) argues, the trope of the cannibal woman serves as a metaphor for Latin American identity – it signifies anomaly and difference, and has functioned as a means of recognition and identity. It stands as a critique of the West, imperialism and capitalism. Through Varejão’s brush, this *shanzhai* return of the cannibal trope, coupled with tiles decorated with severed limbs and vibrant tropical plants and flowers, flirts with the sinister. For Freud, the sinister, ‘the uncanny’ or ‘unheimlich’ refers to a feeling of unease or strangeness that arises when something familiar becomes disturbing or bizarre. It is associated with the repressed and manifests itself in unexpected ways. What once seemed domesticated is unmasked, revealing its unruly essence through its *shanzhai* appropriations. What becomes sinister cannot be encapsulated in a single definition; it is in a state of perpetual transmutation, revealing the connections between the visible and our deepest infantile terrors and desires. It thus reveals the various layers obscured beneath rigid and essentialized notions of indigeneity.

The indigenous huntress emulating the patrimonialization and exhibition of indigenous people in the nascent republics

The backdrop of *Invitation Figure II* further evokes the cataloging of objects, remains and living beings in Universal Exhibitions, National Museums and anthropological exhibitions for scientific purposes. These “vestiges” were removed without a will to effectively include contemporary Indigenous people in the nation as equals (González and Andermann, 2006, 20; Langebaek Rueda, 2009). The shell of the Indigenous people, their differential diacritics, their “material culture,” the fetishistic power that emanated from their appearance, was extracted and used for legitimizing the nation’s independence.

In this context, the drawings on Varejão’s cold blue tiles suggest a chilling taxidermization (Rony, 1996) of indigenous images, exposing them to a Westernized society that seeks to consume them as inert objects of its desire, but not to understand them in depth. The ruling elites cannibalized this pre-Cabraline and pre-Columbian heritage as if it were their own, deriving from it a legitimizing power in the emerging republics. The conquering ego of the conquistador and then of the ruling elites positioned themselves as those with an insatiable appetite, those who had come to America to consume everything. This is why, according to Jáuregui (2008), the reversal of roles in the figure of the indigenous cannibal is viewed with horror, because it symbolizes the object of desire transformed into the subject of desire.

The cannibalization of the image of Indigenous Americans by Christianity, which sought to forge its own identity through



FIGURE 14

Allegory of America, from *The Four Continents* (1580–1600, Adriaen Collert, MET), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/385674>.



FIGURE 15

Allegorical image of America (1809–16, hand-colored engraving, removed from an unknown book) Sasso, Giovanni Antonio (©John Carter Brown Library, Box 1894, Brown University, Providence, R.I. 02912).

opposition, led to a disruption and a new form of cannibalism among the Creole elite during the era of the nascent republics. The mutilated body fragments behind *Invitation Figure II* reveal yet another layer of this complex history. Just as churches are built on the relics of a saint, from which they draw their spiritual power, the nascent Brazilian state had to drink from Indigenous ruins and

pre-Cabraline objects to glorify themselves and obtain a substratum from which to take root and gestate a promising nation. Thus, the mutilated limbs on display in *Invitation Figure II* recall, in addition to trophies of “holy” war, in the name of evangelization and civilization, the history hidden behind the nationalization of tokens of past glory. Thus, colonization



FIGURE 16
Illustrations of the Carib Indians. In *Voyages en Afrique, Asie, Indes Orientales Et Occidentales* (Mocquet, 1617).



FIGURE 17
Indigenous religious practices (van der Aa, 1707, engraving). American Indians worshipping their supposed idols. Published by Pieter van der Aa ©John Carter Brown Library, Box 1894, Brown University, Providence, R.I. 02912.

continued internally and capillary, with new faces —those of whitened Creole and mestizo elites — taking the place of the Portuguese conquistadors.

Following independence, Brazil faced an urgent need to construct a cohesive national identity. This endeavor involved delineating and uniting the nation through concepts of territory and race, with aspirations to transcend social inequalities (Wade, 2003). To facilitate this, Brazil's first museum was inaugurated in 1818. Also, museums in Latin America began to proliferate between 1820 and 1830. These institutions were designed to showcase the region's natural and historical riches, asserting the resources

available for a nation independent from Europe while simultaneously celebrating a grand past that could lend legitimacy to their aspirations.

The Creole elites situated this historical legacy in a mythic, prehistoric past—an origin story that rendered the cultures behind these achievements extinct (Earle, 2006, 38). The grandeur of pre-Cabraline civilizations was framed as evidence of the civilization, technical prowess, and cultural richness that had thrived prior to European contact. Independence was thus perceived as an opportunity to avenge and nurture the roots of these empires, which had been severed by colonial incursion. The importance of archeology was



FIGURE 18
Christian relic.

underscored: “the greater the ruins it possessed, the more important the state” (Earle, 2006, 27). As the market for natural history museums surged, the reclamation of Indigenous objects and the preservation of archeological sites became imperative for modern nations seeking competitiveness.

Museums emerged as privileged arenas for crafting historical narratives that validated social hierarchies and imposed norms of citizenship (Pinochet Cobos, 2016). In this context, the Creole and mestizo elites cannibalized Indigenous heritage, enacting a form of internal colonialism that marginalized contemporary Indigenous peoples, whom they disparaged as “degraded” and barbaric (Earle, 2006, 50–52). The persistent dichotomy of the nineteenth century between “the extinct Indigenous, the matrix of nationality, the Tupi, and the contemporary Indigenous who were part of the savage hordes who roamed the *sertões*, uneducated, would become increasingly scientific” (Andermann, 2006, 154; Balán, 2021a).

Another place where fragments of indigenous bodies and bones were cataloged and exhibited, as represented in the tiles of Varejão’s painting, were the Universal and Anthropological Exhibitions of the 19th century. These were also a powerful front for displaying the country, through apathetic classification that illustrated the reigning Order and Progress. They showed the consolidation of the nation as a civilized Modern one, domesticated and already eradicated of barbarism, where science reigned, that ensured the durability of a power “whose victory would be sealed, literally, by its exhibition, its spectacle” (Andermann, 2006, 7). The Anthropological Exhibition of 1882 exemplified this trend, with Indigenous life arranged in a sacrificial manner, portrayed as a primitive space in need of purification through the civilizing efforts of the nation (Andermann, 2006, 162–163). Living Indigenous people, skeletal remains unearthed from cemeteries and objects stolen from mounds were exhibited. Everything was arranged in a scientific prism that dissected reality into categories with a firm subtext: the mastery of primal instincts and tropical nature was being made effective through science and the power of civilization. The new physical anthropology contributed to pathologizing cultural aspects not subsumable to the emerging

capitalist regime that gained from the dispossession of communal lands and the exploitation of Indigenous labor (Andermann, 2006, 162).

In this way, faced with their need for differentiation for legitimizing purposes, the emerging nation-states cannibalized “objects of ethnographic interest,” archeological ruins and, above all, the appearance of the Indigenous people in order to claim a cultural heritage that would serve as a bulwark against the outside world (López-Caballero and Giudicelli, 2019; Balán, 2024).

Azulejería as mestizaje

Another intriguing lens through which to examine Varejão’s work is the rich tradition of Portuguese baroque tiles, or *azulejos*, that she artfully replicates in her paintings. This decorative practice was introduced to Brazil in the 17th century as a means of infusing the new territory with the “good and civilized customs” of the Portuguese court and church. For the Creole elites, *azulejos* became a powerful symbol of “order and progress,” serving as a visual strategy to assert their shared heritage and cultural identity. According to Portugal’s *Museo Nacional del Azulejo* (2023), the use of tiles in Lisbon began in the latter half of the 16th century, spurred by the arrival of Flemish craftsmen who settled in the capital. What makes these tiles particularly captivating is their ability to engage in dialog with their surroundings. Commissioned by nobles, the scenes often depicted mythological themes, hunting exploits, or military conquests, occasionally featuring Indigenous figures and exotic flora from the Americas. These images evoke the fascination of the Cabinets of Curiosities, where the wonders of the New World (*Americalia*) were displayed. In ecclesiastical settings, the tiles typically illustrated religious narratives, reinforcing the cultural and spiritual values of the time.

The tradition of tile work is a fascinating tapestry of cross-cultural exchanges. Their distinctive blue-and-white decoration, while often associated with Chinese artistry, emerged not as an

autonomous creation but as a response to the Persian esthetic, tailored specifically for export. As Moritz Swarcz and Varejão (2014, 104) elucidate, tiles were first utilized in Arab villages in the 7th century and later developed in regions like India, Morocco, and China, celebrated for their portability—easy to transport by both boat and camel.

This transnational negotiation of esthetics prompts Moritz and Varejão to underscore the mestizo origins of tiles—deriving from Arabic terms such as *alzulaic*, *al zulaycha*, and *al zulaij*—and the historical resonances this invokes for the Americas (2014, 104) (Figure 19). Varejão's engagement with tiles is anything but arbitrary; she deliberately intertwines European perceptions of America with the constructed imagery of the Orient. This is particularly significant given that European images of Native Americans in the late 15th and early 16th centuries were a complex amalgam, blending perceptions of Eastern peoples, landscapes and products with those of the newly encountered Americas, shaped by Cabral's and Columbus's expectations of encountering Asia. Varejão vividly evokes this intermingling across many of her works, including *Guanabara Panorama* (2012), *Carne a la Franz Prost* (1996), *Garden of Delights* (1994), *Equinoctial Line* (1993), *From Macao to Vila Rica* (1992), *China* (1992), *Wounded Painting* (1992), *Food* (1992), as well as in her *Irezumi* and *Leaves* series.

Final thoughts

As I have argued, *Invitation Figures I* and *II* could be understood as Varejão's *shanzhai* appropriation of Theodore de Bry's engravings, baroque white and blue tiles, Americalia and the Invitation Figure to mock historical scopic regimes about indigenous Brazilians and to show what could not be domesticated. By cannibalizing these historical representations, Varejão not only confronts the legacies of colonialism, but also highlights the ways in which such images resonate through time, shaping the self-conceptions and external projections of both indigenous and non-indigenous Brazilians.

As Jáuregui (2008, 13) articulates, the trope of the cannibal woman emerges as a powerful metaphor for Latin American identity—one steeped in anomaly and difference that challenges Western norms, imperialism, and capitalism. Through Varejão's vibrant palettes, we witness the uncanny-Freud's unsettling blend of the familiar and the bizarre—revealing the unruly essence of identity that defies easy categorization. This dissonance encourages us to peel back layers obscured by rigid notions of indigeneity, allowing for a richer understanding of Brazilian history as a tapestry woven from fragments and fluid identities and recover lost genealogies.



FIGURE 19
Alegoria de América (Varejão, 2015, 134 x 136 cm).

Segato (2015) says that in Brazil, whiteness is an ideal that no one can reach, and that Brazilians are always chasing and trying to exorcize the black (and, I would add, the indigenous) in themselves. Varejão shows how the memories of Brazilians and the traces on their bodies inhabit and evoke several times at once. Varejão includes them in the rediscovery of these forgotten layers of history, with all their contradictions of seduction, violence, alliances and betrayals.

The conception of otherness as a layered and evolving narrative invites a continuous reexamination of identity, history, and cultural influences. Rather than arriving at a fixed definition, this approach underscores the fluid and constructed nature of identities, shaped by historical forces, colonial legacies, and reinterpretations. In Varejão's work, these layers function as both literal material strata and conceptual inquiries, challenging essentialist notions of identity while exposing the tensions between erasure and visibility. This perspective leads us to a more nuanced understanding of subjectivity—one that embraces complexity and resists reductive categorizations, ultimately pushing the viewer to interrogate how histories of exclusion persist in contemporary society.

Moreover, I would like to emphasize that the transformation of the idea of authenticity and originality reveals the artifice of protectionist projects and self-contained indigenous reserves that neoliberal logics try to preserve intact, pure, original, traditional (Hale, 2002; Ramos, 2004; Balán, 2021b). In the identity politics of the 1990s, only Indigenous people imagined in Renaissance and Baroque terms, Indigenous people made of cardboard or porcelain, taxidermized, are validated by society. As Han (2018) says, authenticity is a technology of neoliberal production that forces the self to be produced as a commodity. Varejão's art serves as a powerful antidote to these reductive frameworks; her strategy is precisely to break through this illusion, the obsession with the original and the melancholic and romantic preservation of "pristine essences" that helped legitimize the exploitation of indigenous Brazilians.

Invitation Figures I and II show us how memory and imagination of the Other and of oneself are continuously constructed as a sedimentation of traces that are constantly updated, modified, cut out, undone, forgotten and reassembled, nourished by the load of experiences that impregnate the senses and by transformations in language and the narrative about oneself, the Other and in official and subaltern histories. Finally, copies, imitations, reproductions and palimpsests of historical images affect the original image and can undermine its pernicious effects on the present.

In terms of the limitations and prospects of this study, the analysis focuses primarily on visual and theoretical interpretations, leaving room for further empirical investigation into audience reception and institutional framing. Furthermore, while Varejão's strategies are examined in depth, a broader comparative approach with other contemporary artists could provide further insight into how different artistic practices navigate similar issues. In my previous research I have delved into other case studies (Balán, 2021a, 2021b, 2024), but further research could have a comparative focus or be extended to other case studies. Moreover, future research could explore how her work is received in different cultural and geopolitical contexts, particularly outside Brazil, to assess the translatability of its political charge. Engaging with archival materials, artist interviews and curatorial perspectives could also deepen understanding of the historical and institutional forces that shape the reception of her work.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that while contemporary art circles may attempt to depoliticize radical artistic practices, the resilience of Varejão's work lies in its ability to continuously provoke historical reckoning, unsettling dominant narratives, and exposing the tensions between erasure and memory. She strategically infiltrates her work into museum circuits of high symbolic capital, simultaneously producing a critique of the silences and transactions between art and colonialism. To counteract the forces of depoliticization, critical engagement with these works must go beyond esthetic appreciation to actively interrogate the socio-historical structures they reveal. By fostering discourse that situates Varejão's art within broader decolonial and racial debates, her work retains its political force, ensuring that the histories it resurrects are neither sanitized nor ignored but persist as active sites of resistance and re-signification.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

LB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Generative AI statement

The author declares that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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