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Between Memory and Erasure: Coloniality and the Politics of Forgetting in the Borba Gato Case

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Abstract

Starting from the controversy surrounding the monument to Borba Gato in São Paulo, this article investigates the relationships between monumentalisation, forgetting, and public contestation. To this end, the study combines a Foucauldian-inspired qualitative discourse analysis of six documentary units, produced between 2021 and 2022 by activists, political-institutional and legal actors, with supplementary historical documentation. The *corpus* is examined in terms of the meanings ascribed to the monumentalised figure, the positions taken on the legitimacy and capacity to intervene in its public inscription, and the institutional criteria invoked in response to these interventions. In addition, the historical reconstruction situates Borba Gato within the expedition led by Fernão Dias, an undertaking associated with mineral prospecting and the capture and circulation of Indigenous people held in captivity. The contrast with the artwork's representation thus reveals an asymmetry between the monumental image of the *bandeirante* (a member of a Portuguese colonial expedition in Brazil) and the colonial violence associated with the historical experience under examination. At the same time, the interventions analysed altered the meanings attributed to the monument and called into question both the capacity to act on this urban presence and the conditions under which it could be challenged. Accordingly, the findings suggest that the politics of forgetting can persist even under conditions of contestation, since transforming meanings does not necessarily eliminate inequalities in the public organisation of the past. Within this framework, coloniality provides an interpretive lens for understanding the persistence and historical rearticulation of these relationships.

Keywords

public memory, coloniality, politics of forgetting, monuments, public space

Entre Memória e Apagamento: Colonialidade e Política do Esquecimento no Caso Borba Gato

Resumo

Tomando como ponto de partida a controvérsia em torno do monumento a Borba Gato, em São Paulo, este artigo investiga as relações entre monumentalização, esquecimento e disputa pública. Para isso, o estudo combina análise discursiva qualitativa de inspiração foucaultiana de seis unidades documentais, produzidas entre 2021 e 2022 por atores ativistas, político-institucionais e jurídicos, com documentação histórica complementar. O *corpus* é examinado segundo os sentidos atribuídos à figura monumentalizada, as posições relativas à capacidade de agir sobre sua inscrição e os critérios institucionais mobilizados diante das intervenções. Além disso, a reconstrução histórica situa Borba Gato na expedição de Fernão Dias, empreendimento relacionado à prospecção mineral e à captura e circulação de indígenas cativos. O contraste com a representação produzida pela obra evidencia, assim, uma assimetria entre a imagem monumental do bandeirante e aspectos da violência colonial associados à experiência histórica

examinada. Ao mesmo tempo, as intervenções analisadas modificaram os sentidos atribuídos ao monumento e colocaram em disputa tanto a capacidade de agir sobre essa presença urbana quanto as condições de sua contestação. Desse modo, os resultados sustentam que a política do esquecimento pode persistir sob contestação, uma vez que a transformação dos sentidos não suprime necessariamente desigualdades na organização pública do passado. A colonialidade oferece, nesse quadro, uma chave para interpretar a persistência e a rearticulação histórica dessas relações.

Palavras-chave

memória pública, colonialidade, política do esquecimento, monumentos, espaço público

1. Introduction

The monumental inscription of the past in public space gives durable and visible form to particular figures, experiences, and events. This materialisation, however, does not definitively fix the meanings associated with what is remembered, since the monument's permanence may coexist with changes in how it is understood over time.

This article examines the public controversy surrounding the monument dedicated to Borba Gato, a seventeenth-century *bandeirante* from São Paulo, located in Santo Amaro, in the city of São Paulo. On 24 July 2021, an intervention near the statue intensified this conflict and became a reference point for the contestation of activists, political-institutional, and legal responses, which constitute the main *corpus* of this research.

Against this background, this article addresses the following research question: under what conditions can the monument to Borba Gato be interpreted, through the lens of coloniality, as producing effects of forgetting even when the memory it materialises remains contested?

It is argued that, in the case under examination, coloniality can operate through the monument to Borba Gato as a politics of forgetting in public space, insofar as its memorial configuration selectively distributes the conditions under which certain past events acquire presence, permanence and recognition. At the same time, subjects, experiences and forms of violence associated with relations of colonial domination may be displaced, obscured or inscribed unequally. This politics can persist in contexts of conflict, including when monumentalised memory is challenged, reinterpreted, and contested, since transforming the meanings attributed to the figure does not necessarily eliminate the asymmetries that structure its public inscription.

The political character of this category refers to the power relations involved in organising public memory. In this sense, the analysis focuses on these relations, irrespective of whether there is a centralised plan for erasure, a formal State policy or a shared intention among the actors involved.

Methodologically, the study undertakes a Foucauldian-inspired qualitative discourse analysis. The main *corpus* comprises six documentary units produced between July 2021 and December 2022, and is examined alongside supplementary historical

material on Borba Gato, the *bandeirismo*, his monumentalisation and the interventions involving the monument. This material also provides a basis for verifying historical attributions concerning the figure.

The discussion unfolds in three stages. First, it reconstructs the monument's material and memorial formation and its relationship to the historical experience associated with Borba Gato. It then analyses the interventions and the political-institutional and legal positions articulated in the controversy. Finally, these findings are interpreted together.

2. *Corpus* and Methodological Procedure

The material object of this analysis is the Borba Gato monument. The empirical object corresponds to the memory controversy that has developed around this monumental presence, understood as the set of disputes arising over its inscription in urban space. This distinction allows us to separate the artwork as a material object from the social, discursive, and institutional relations that take shape around it.

The contextual timeframe spans 2020 to 2022, a period when public challenges to monuments intensified. Santiago Júnior (2023) observes that "the attack on Borba Gato joins the many anti-colonial monumental challenges that gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, following the death of George Floyd in May 2020"[1] (p. 2). Within this broader context, the main *corpus* covers 23 July 2021 to 16 December 2022. The fire of 24 July serves as a critical event for organising the selected units, but is not regarded as the origin of the controversy. The end date corresponds to the institutional communication issued by the Court of Justice of the State of São Paulo, published on 16 December 2022, concerning the first-instance judgment relating to the protest intervention of 24 July, which involved setting fire to tyres around the statue.

The main *corpus* consists of six documentary units arranged chronologically. The first two are posts published by the Revolução Periférica collective on its Instagram account on 23 and 24 July 2021. The third is a statement by São Paulo mayor Ricardo Nunes on the TV Cultura programme *Roda Viva* on 26 July. The fourth is a public statement by Paulo Roberto da Silva Lima, known as Paulo Galo, a member of Revolução Periférica, and identified as one of those responsible for the intervention in which tyres were set alight around the statue of Borba Gato. The statement was made on 28 July, when he presented himself at the 11th Police District of Santo Amaro. The analysis is completed by the judicial decision of 10 August 2021, relating to case no. 1517911–14.2021.8.26.0228, and the institutional communication issued by the Court of Justice of São Paulo, published on 16 December 2022, concerning the judgment handed down in relation to the intervention.

[1] The reference to the COVID-19 pandemic here delimits the temporal context in which these challenges gained international prominence, without establishing a causal relationship between the health crisis and interventions involving monuments. Santiago Júnior (2023) situates their intensification after the death of George Floyd in May 2020 and mentions, among the episodes in this cycle, the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol (United Kingdom), as well as interventions involving monuments dedicated to Leopold II, Winston Churchill and Christopher Columbus in Europe and the Americas.

The six units were selected purposively and qualitatively, taking into account their direct connection with the public dispute under examination and the diversity of the contexts from which they were produced. This composition makes it possible to compare statements formulated in different contexts, without claiming to exhaust the range of positions concerning the case or to achieve statistical representativeness.

The units in the *corpus* present different conditions of access and preservation. The Revolução Periférica posts, which are currently unavailable at their original addresses, were retrieved through the academic record provided by Gomes and Lanes (2024). Ricardo Nunes's statement was consulted in the original audiovisual recording of *Roda Viva*, while Paulo Galo's statement was retrieved from a subsequent academic transcript by Santos (2023). The decision of 10 August 2021 was consulted in a digital copy of case no. 1517911–14.2021.8.26.0228; the institutional communication of 16 December 2022, in turn, reproduces only excerpts from the judgment and is not equivalent to the full text. These differences delimit the scope of the analysis: the actors' statements are treated as documented positions within the memory process under examination, while historical and factual claims are independently verified where necessary.

The analysis adopted is qualitative and discursive, drawing on Foucauldian methodological principles developed in *A Arqueologia do Saber* (The Archaeology of Knowledge; Foucault, 1969/2008). Within this approach, documents are not treated as complete statements; instead, specific formulations are selected and examined for their enunciative functioning. This distinction follows Foucault's (1969/2008) definition, according to which the statement "is a function of existence that properly belongs to signs" (p. 98), whose description requires consideration of the conditions under which this function is exercised. On this basis, the analysis examines the objects constituted by these formulations, the enunciative positions from which they become possible, and the articulations established within the discursive field under examination. Such positions are not reduced to the individuals who occupy them or to the intentions that may be attributed to them. At the operational level, the *corpus* is analysed along three axes: the meanings attributed to the monumentalised figure; the ways in which the capacity to act upon the memorial inscription is asserted or contested; and the legal and institutional criteria invoked to assess the interventions.

In this analysis, the monument to Borba Gato is understood as a material and spatial component of a broader configuration. This perspective draws on the Foucauldian notion of the "dispositif", according to which "the *dispositif* is the network that can be established between these heterogeneous elements" (Foucault, 1978/1998, p. 244), shifting the focus from the isolated object to the configuration in which it is embedded. In memory studies, Basu (2012) develops this approach through the category of memory *dispositif*, in which "systems of relations are organised around particular historical figures" (p. 6). Applied to this case, this category makes it possible to consider Borba Gato's material presence, public institutions, conservation and intervention practices, public statements, and political and legal responses together. The monument thus forms part of this memory *dispositif* without being conflated with the *dispositif* as a whole.

Additionally, the research draws on a historical body of material concerning *bandeirismo*, Borba Gato's life, his memorial construction, and the conditions surrounding his monumentalisation. Its use follows a principle of controlling historical attributions: evidence directly relating to Borba Gato is distinguished from evidence concerning *bandeirismo* in general and from evidence of practices documented in the expeditions in which he participated. Accordingly, attributions concerning the individual remain limited to what the sources allow us to establish, avoiding the transfer of characteristics specific to collective processes, actors, or undertakings. This material also supports reconstructing his involvement in *bandeirismo* and the subsequent trajectory of his monumental inscription. Interventions predating the main timeframe, discussed in Section 4.1, provide only diachronic context for the controversy.

3. Monumentalisation and the Forgetting of Colonial Violence

The public inscription of a historical figure results from processes that select forms of representation, give the past material form, and organise its permanence in urban space. Examining Borba Gato in light of this condition requires understanding how his image was historically produced and which aspects of his life became recognisable through monumentalisation. The contrast between this public configuration and the experience that can be reconstructed from documentary evidence thus makes it possible to identify the selectivity underpinning this form of remembrance and the conditions of its endurance and recognition.

3.1. The Monumental Production of Borba Gato

The Borba Gato monument dates to 1948. In an interview with *Gazeta de Santo Amaro*, Júlio Guerra identified that year as the time when he conceived a project for the entrance to Santo Amaro, comprising a mural on local history, a statue of the *bandeirante* and other landscape features (Bastos, 1962, as cited in Grupo Sul News, 2022). In the same context, José de Oliveira Almeida Diniz, then a São Paulo city councillor for the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (Brazilian Labour Party, PTB) and a member of the City Council's Public Works Committee, also dated the presentation of a project to 1948, intended for the "construction of a monument to the *bandeirante* Borba Gato and a mural recounting the history of Santo Amaro from its foundation" (Câmara Municipal de São Paulo, 1956). The initiative secured the practical means for implementation through Law No. 3,334, of 4 January 1956 (1956), which allocated funds to Júlio Guerra to execute the mural and the monument. Taken as a whole, this trajectory shows that Borba Gato's monumental presence resulted from a process of artistic development and gradual public institutionalisation.

In Júlio Guerra's original project, Borba Gato formed part of a broader composition intended to represent Santo Amaro's history in the public sphere. The memorial dimension attributed to the work is particularly evident in the same testimony, given in August 1962, when the monument was already being assembled. Explaining the

meaning he attached to the undertaking, Guerra linked it to the preservation of local history and the public affirmation of Santo Amaro:

> Deputy Scalamandré Sobrinho understood the value and importance of perpetuating Santo Amaro's history through monuments to the great figures of this land, as well as what it means to the people of Santo Amaro at a time when they are fighting to restore their political and economic autonomy. (Bastos, 1962, as cited in Grupo Sul News, 2022, para. 3).

In this light, the statement explicitly reveals the language of memory through which the artist himself presented the project. In Guerra's conception, monumentalisation meant granting public permanence to figures considered representative of Santo Amaro's history. Within this framework, Borba Gato featured among the "great figures of this land" through whom this past would be inscribed in urban space. The testimony does not establish why Borba Gato was specifically chosen, nor does it justify extending this understanding to all the neighbourhood's inhabitants; it does, however, make it possible to recognise his inclusion in a local memory project aimed at ensuring the public permanence of certain historical figures.

Júlio Guerra's execution of the monument culminated in its inauguration on 27 January 1963, at the junction of Santo Amaro and Adolfo Pinheiro avenues. The statue is approximately 13 metres tall and weighs 20 tonnes. It has a reinforced concrete structure incorporating reused tram rails and is clad in coloured basalt and marble stones. Regarding the technique employed, the Departamento do Patrimônio Histórico (2008) describes the work as a "three-dimensional mosaic" (para. 2). The structure rests on a plinth approximately two metres high, made of rough-hewn granite. Through this materialisation, a specific monumental image of Borba Gato is inscribed in urban space, and its visual configuration provides a basis for examining how the *bandeirante* was represented.

The monument's visual configuration depicts Borba Gato standing upright, wearing clothing attributed to the seventeenth century, which Costa and Campos (2019) describe as "probably stylised" (p. 37). The Department of Historical Heritage's survey also notes his gaze directed towards the horizon and the "enormous blunderbuss in a resting position" (Departamento do Patrimônio Histórico, 2008, para. 2), incorporating the weapon into the figure's representation. Júlio Guerra further stated that he had sought to create a polychrome sculpture, using colours that approximated those attributed to the clothing of the *bandeirantes* (Bastos, 1962, as cited in Grupo Sul News, 2022).

The statue's visual attributes can therefore be situated within historically established conventions for representing *bandeirantes*. Waldman (2018) highlights, among these, the figure of the *bandeirante* as "upright" and "heavily armed" (p. 46), characteristics that correspond to Borba Gato's erect posture and weaponry in Santo Amaro. The visual identification of the figure as a *bandeirante* thus draws on conventions that predate Júlio Guerra's work and were reworked in its sculptural configuration.

3.2. Selective Memory and Colonial Violence

Moving from the monumental representation to Borba Gato's historical experience requires reconstructing the context of *sertanismo* (expeditions and activities undertaken in the Brazilian interior) in São Paulo and, within this framework, distinguishing what pertains to *bandeirismo* as a broader phenomenon from what the sources allow us to establish about his individual activities.

In seventeenth-century *sertanismo* in São Paulo, procuring Indigenous people for labour was central to the incursions launched from the Piratininga plateau, where the settlement of São Paulo was located. Questioning the conventional division of *bandeirismo* according to distinct objectives, Monteiro (1994) identifies the need for Indigenous labour as a recurring driver of penetration into the interior. Within this framework, the historical context allows us to situate Borba Gato's activities as a *bandeirante* and, in the second half of the century, to understand the connections between expeditions into the interior, mineral prospecting, and the procurement of Indigenous people.

Monteiro (1994) states that "in the São Paulo region, the search for silver, gold and emeralds was fundamentally linked to the pursuit of Indigenous captives" (p. 96). This relationship situates mineral expeditions within a broader dynamic of *sertanismo* in which capture and captivity remained prevalent. Fernão Dias's expedition fits within this context.

Manuel de Borba Gato is documented as a participant in this expedition. Concerning the documentary evidence, Barreiros (1979) reproduces a testimony recording the composition of the group at Sumidouro: "Fernão Dias Pais ordered his *Bandeira* (an expedition into the Brazilian interior) to proceed towards the Sumidouro region, leaving behind only his governador, his son Gracia Roiz Pais, his son-in-law Manoel de Borba Gato, and the Indigenous people under their compulsory service" (p. 71). This passage documents Borba Gato's presence in the undertaking, alongside Garcia Rodrigues Pais and the Indigenous people designated as "obligatory Indians". The record does not establish the nature of Borba Gato's personal relationship with these Indigenous people, nor does it individually attribute to him the practices carried out by the expedition.

Fernão Dias's expedition provides a specific example of the connection between mineral prospecting and Indigenous captivity. Assessing its results, Monteiro (1994) states: "although Fernão Dias believed that he had discovered an emerald deposit, the principal return from the long sojourn in the interior materialised in the flow of captives sent to São Paulo" (p. 97). Considered alongside the preceding record, this passage, together with the documentary evidence of Borba Gato's participation, establishes that he was part of an undertaking historically implicated in the capture and circulation of Indigenous captives. However, the sources consulted do not make it possible to determine which specific actions he performed in this process.

Comparison with the historical documentation reveals that the relations of Indigenous capture and captivity associated with the undertaking in which Borba Gato participated find no equivalent expression in the monument's configuration. This comparison thus reveals an asymmetry between what the monument makes publicly visible

and aspects of the historical experience reconstructed from documentary evidence, raising the question of the selection involved in the public configuration of this past.

This contrast can be understood through the selectivity inherent in configuring the past. Ricoeur (2000/2003) observes that "narrative necessarily involves a selective dimension" (p. 581), since no representation can exhaustively reproduce what occurred. In light of this selectivity, the case under examination makes it possible to distinguish between the attributes incorporated into Borba Gato's public image and the historical aspects attested to in the available sources but omitted from the monument's representation. This difference, in itself, does not justify characterising the representation as manipulation or deliberate forgetting. Given this limitation, the question becomes whether a selective configuration produces effects of forgetting.

The inherently selective nature of memorial configuration does not preclude certain forms of selection from producing effects of forgetting. In this regard, Ricoeur (2000/2003) observes that "strategies of forgetting are directly embedded in this work of configuration" (p. 581), associating this possibility with operations such as shifting emphasis and reconfiguring the elements that make up the narrated past. In the case under examination, this problem emerges from the difference between the visibility afforded to the monumental figure of the *bandeirante* and the inscription of the relations of colonial violence historically associated with the undertaking in which Borba Gato participated. Here, forgetting refers to the displacement or obscuring of these dimensions within the very public form through which he is remembered. Its occurrence does not depend on the disappearance of the past: aspects of the past that remain evidenced in historical sources and open to reconstruction may occupy a secondary position within the memorial configuration. It follows that the effect of forgetting lies precisely in the possibility of making certain aspects of the past publicly remembered while others remain obscured within that which is itself preserved.

3.3. Presence, Duration and Recognition

Memorial configuration also becomes a temporal presence when materially inscribed in public space. Its permanence raises the question of duration, understood as the work's continued public existence within its spatial setting. At this level, the first dimension of this duration corresponds to the monument's material and spatial permanence.

This permanence does not exhaust the monument's spatial presence, which also takes shape through the relationships it establishes. Similarly, in conceptualising space through the relationship between systems of objects and systems of actions, Milton Santos (1996/2006) observes that "action does not take place without an object; and, when performed, it ends up redefining itself as action and redefining the object" (p. 61). This relationship makes it possible to understand the monument's presence in connection with the actions and practices that develop in urban space, opening the analysis to its forms of public recognition.

Recognition of this presence is documented in the institutional account provided by the Departamento do Patrimônio Histórico de São Paulo (2008), according to which "old Borba Gato (...) has become a recognised city landmark, immediately associated with the Santo Amaro district" (para. 5). This characterisation is complemented by records of divergent assessments of the work, making it possible to distinguish recognition from approval: the monument's public recognisability can coexist with differing judgements about it.

The association between the monument and Santo Amaro also emerges from research conducted with residents as part of the *Identidade São Paulo* (São Paulo Identity) project. Costa and Campos (2019) note that the statue of Borba Gato has been incorporated into the district's visual representation and observe that "it is the monument that represents the district, rather than the historical figure being honoured" (p. 39). This finding indicates that, among the respondents considered in the study, the identification of Santo Amaro may centre on the monumental object itself, distinguishing the urban landmark established by the statue from the historical figure it represents.

From a complementary perspective, Arantes (1984) situates the interest in the "defence of the past" within processes of constructing and appropriating the environment that are shaped by disputes between different social groups:

> in my view, the interest in the "defence of the past" is combined with the construction of the environment (place and territory) in which different ways of life develop, often in contradiction with one another. For this reason, this process is structured around intense competition and political struggle, in which different social groups compete, on the one hand, for spaces and natural resources and, on the other (which is inseparable from this), for particular conceptions or ways of appropriating them symbolically and economically. (p. 9)

This formulation makes it possible to consider how references to the past inscribed in space may form part of distinct modes of symbolic appropriation. Consequently, the monument's presence remains open to divergent attributions of meaning and to contestation in public space.

4. Public Space as a Field of Contestation

The duration and recognition acquired by a monumental inscription do not end the relationships that may be established with it in public space. Its permanence also creates conditions in which different subjects can produce interpretations, interventions and forms of re-signification capable of calling into question the figure represented historically. The analysis thus turns to the practices through which this inscription is contested, the subjects who claim the capacity to act upon it, and the conditions under which such interventions receive institutional recognition or encounter institutional limits.

4.1. Re-signifying the Monumentalised Figure

Interventions predating 2021 show that public contestation of the monumentalised figure of Borba Gato predates the fire. At different moments, the statue was used as a site for actions that questioned and re-signified the meanings attributed to the historical figure. From a diachronic perspective, revisiting these events makes it possible to situate historically the cycle of contestation that gained renewed intensity in 2021.

In the earliest record identified, on 19 April 2008, a popular trial held beside the statue of Borba Gato symbolically reversed the position occupied by the monumentalised figure. The event brought together different collectives and activists and publicly staged an accusation, defence, trial and conviction. During the performance, the judge declared: "the people decide here; this is a popular jury!" (Waldman, 2018, p. 180). In this context, the accusations form part of the positions articulated by the participants and do not, in themselves, constitute historical evidence of acts individually committed by Borba Gato. Later, Waldman (2018) records an intervention involving the materiality of the work: "a month later, the *bandeirante* statue appeared chained up" (p. 181).

Years later, in 2015 and 2016, further interventions connected the *bandeirante* figure with contemporary political conflicts. In 2015, the statue appeared covered in red paint, with the inscription "murderous agribusiness *bandeirante*" painted on its plinth. Waldman (2018) situates the episode "within a major demonstration against PEC [Proposed Constitutional Amendment] 215/2000", which was then associated with disputes over the demarcation of Indigenous territories (p. 184). Since no author was identified, the relevant point lies in the association created by the inscription itself. The following year, posters produced by the Comitê Paulista de Solidariedade à Luta pelos Tapajós (Committee for Solidarity with the Tapajós Struggle) depicted the toppling of Borba Gato beneath the inscription "*bandeirantes* out of the world!" and included among these "bandeirantes" references to "the State", "banks", "agribusiness", "mining" and the "Military Police" (Waldman, 2018, p. 24). Through this semantic shift, the intervention transfers the designation "bandeirantes" from the historical figure to contemporary relations and actors critically invoked through the image itself.

In the period immediately preceding the fire, on 23 July 2021, Revolução Periférica put up posters in public spaces in São Paulo, placing the question "do you know who Borba Gato was?" at the centre of the action. The material featured a photograph of the statue with an X covering its head, the instruction "find out here" and a QR code linking to the collective's digital platforms (Gomes & Lanes, 2024). Through this combination, the intervention connected urban presence with digital circulation. The question distinguished between recognising Borba Gato's name and image and having historical knowledge of the figure represented.

Immediately afterwards, the question directed at the historical figure was followed by a material intervention in its surroundings. On 24 July 2021, "protesters set fire to tyres scattered around the statue, enveloping it in an aura of fire and smoke" (Gomes & Lanes, 2024, p. 210). Records of the action circulated on the collective's digital platforms, accompanied by the caption "fire to racists in praxis" (Gomes & Lanes, 2024, p.

215). From this interpretative perspective, the wording forms part of how the collective publicly presented the action and should be examined as a position articulated in the context of the intervention, rather than treated as independent historical evidence of Borba Gato's life.

4.2. Who Can Act Upon Public Memory?

At this point, the controversy surrounding Borba Gato shifts from the meanings attributed to the monumentalised figure to the subjects who claim the capacity to act upon a shared memorial inscription. With this shift in focus, the responses to the fire of 24 July 2021 make it possible to examine how this capacity is asserted, questioned and related to the collective.

At the political-institutional level, Ricardo Nunes's position frames the monument debate in terms of institutional procedures, such as the City Council and public hearings. By stating that "it will not be a group that makes a decision for the entire city" (Roda Viva, 2021), the mayor contrasts the initiative of "a group" with the "entire city" as the horizon for decision-making. This opposition gives rise to a criterion of legitimacy based on the collective dimension of the decision-making process, without allowing us to infer the actual position of São Paulo's inhabitants.

In contrast to this position, a different relationship between initiative and decision emerges in Paulo Galo's statement of 28 July 2021, reproduced by Santos (2023):

> that act was carried out to open a debate, and the debate has been opened. Because now everyone knows that Borba Gato is a genocidal figure, an abuser of women, who killed and enslaved many people. So, those who say that things should be done through democratic channels, we sought to do that by opening the debate so that it could take place, and people could now decide whether or not they want a thirteen-metre statue of a genocidal figure. (p. 25)

For the purposes of this analysis, the characterisations of Borba Gato in the statement belong to Paulo Galo's position and do not constitute the historiographical conclusions of this article. The focus is on the relationship established between the action, the opening of the debate and a subsequent decision attributed to "people". As for the reference to "democratic channels", it forms part of how the intervention is justified, but it does not, on that basis, allow it to be classified as a democratic course of action.

By way of comparison, in Ricardo Nunes's formulation, "a group" appears as a subject whose initiative is constrained by the reference to the "entire city"; by contrast, in Paulo Galo's statement, the group undertakes an action presented as capable of "opening a debate", while the subsequent decision is left to "people". These expressions do not refer to empirically equivalent collectivities and articulate different relationships between initiative, participation and collective decision-making, without the *corpus* making it possible to determine who has legitimate authority to decide the monument's fate.

4.3. The Legal and Institutional Limits of Contestation

As the case entered the judicial sphere, the court distinguished between political mobilisation and conduct classified in legal terms. In the decision of 10 August 2021, concerning pre-trial detention in case no. 1517911–14.2021.8.26.0228, Eduardo Pereira Santos Júnior reproduced an excerpt from an interim ruling by Justice Ribeiro Dantas of the Superior Court of Justice, according to which the detention appeared to have taken greater account of the defendant's "political movement" — "an activity that is not, in itself, in principle, illegal" — than of the "possible unlawful acts" attributed to him (Tribunal de Justiça do Estado de São Paulo, 2021, p. 3). At this initial procedural stage, the excerpt distinguishes political affiliation from possible illegality without thereby establishing the legitimacy of the fire or of the forms of protest employed.

The judge himself delimits this distinction when he states that "any possible political motive is irrelevant to the Criminal Court at this stage" (Tribunal de Justiça do Estado de São Paulo, 2021, p. 3). In this context, the phrase "at this stage" limits its meaning to the assessment of pre-trial detention then being undertaken and prevents it from being construed as a general proposition about the legal irrelevance of political motivations. At that stage of the proceedings, the decision revoked the pre-trial detention orders after finding that the requirements for their continuation had not been met (Tribunal de Justiça do Estado de São Paulo, 2021).

At a subsequent procedural stage, the institutional communication published by the Court of Justice of the State of São Paulo on 16 December 2022 places the case in a different legal context. The document summarises a first-instance conviction that was subject to appeal and reproduces excerpts from the judgment's reasoning, without reproducing the full text of the judgment (Comunicação Social TJSP – RD, 2022). The publication records that Paulo Galo said he set fire to the statue "as a form of protest" and that the judge considered his conduct to fall within the "criminal sphere" (Comunicação Social TJSP – RD, 2022, paras. 2–3). The grounds for this legal classification relate to the specific manner in which the action was carried out: although there were no casualties or structural damage to the monument, the fire was considered to have created a risk to people and property. At this stage, the analysis concerns the relationship between the exercise of rights, the specific form taken by the intervention and its classification under criminal law.

It is precisely in this communication that the dispute surrounding the figure of Borba Gato is explicitly incorporated into the legal and institutional formulation. In reproducing the reasoning behind the judgment, the Court of Justice of the State of São Paulo attributes the following statement to the judge:

> setting fire to tyres around monuments or in public spaces is not the way to legitimise public debate about controversial historical figures. Legal avenues exist, however tortuous they may seem. This is how one lives in a democratic State governed by the rule of law. (Comunicação Social TJSP – RD, 2022, para. 4)

The formulation acknowledges public debate about "controversial historical figures" and directs the restriction toward the means used to promote it. Regarding the forms of intervention deemed admissible, the reference to "legal avenues" contrasts the action undertaken with legally permissible courses of action, although the source does not specify what these avenues might be. By placing the verb "legitimise" near the expression "legal avenues", the statement links legitimacy and legality without treating them as equivalent categories. This connection establishes an institutional boundary between the possibility of controversy and the forms of intervention employed. The document also does not allow us to conclude that the historical contestation of Borba Gato is illegitimate, or that the criminal response is intended to preserve his monumentalised memory.

Finally, regarding the distinction between individual responsibilities, the communication records the acquittal of two other defendants, demonstrating that different forms of conduct were distinguished. Taken together, the legal and institutional statements issued in 2021 and 2022 do not establish an automatic equivalence between political contestation and unlawful conduct. Whereas, in the 2021 assessment of pre-trial detention, political affiliation is distinguished from possible unlawful acts, the 2022 communication focuses on the legal classification of the specific form taken by the intervention. This legal and institutional trajectory brings into view public space as a field of contestation over the meanings of the memorial inscription, the capacity to act upon it and the institutional conditions governing its contestation.

5. Coloniality and the Politics of Forgetting

The empirical findings presented in the preceding sections make it possible to move towards a historical interpretation. The question now is how the memorial configuration examined can be interpreted in the light of coloniality, and under what conditions its effects of forgetting may persist even when this memory is publicly contested.

5.1. Coloniality and the Selective Configuration of Memory

The findings presented above reveal an unequal distribution of the conditions under which the past acquires a public presence. To understand this historically, it is necessary to situate this distribution within the relationships established through the colonial experience and how these relationships may persist and be rearticulated in subsequent contexts.

As a first step in this interpretation, Quijano (2005) identifies racial classification as one of the fundamental axes of the pattern of power established with the Americas, originating in colonialism and enduring beyond colonial rule itself. According to Quijano (2005), this axis proved to be "more durable and stable than the colonialism within whose matrix it was established" (p. 117). This persistence makes it possible to examine whether hierarchies established through the colonial experience are rearticulated in contemporary forms of public inscription of the past.

Further developing this argument, Quijano's (2005) intersubjective dimension broadens the interpretation. The pattern of power established in the Americas brought together experiences, histories, and cultural products within an order under European hegemony, which also concentrated control over subjectivity, culture, and knowledge production (Quijano, 2005). In this process, domination affected the "patterns of production of meaning", the "symbolic universe" and the forms of expression of colonised populations, while also repositioning their peoples, histories and cultures within the past of a historical trajectory whose culmination was identified with Europe (Quijano, 2005). This historical organisation makes it possible to situate the monumental asymmetry within the conditions through which subjects, experiences and pasts are assigned different positions in the production and public recognition of historical meanings.

Continuing this line of interpretation, Mignolo (2017) adds another element by defining coloniality as "the underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilisation" (p. 2), and relating it to a narrative of modernity that celebrates its achievements while obscuring its "darker side". Applied to the case of Borba Gato, this contrast makes it possible to interpret the memorial asymmetry as a way in which historically constituted relationships may be rearticulated through the public inscription of the past. The contestation of this configuration, demonstrated in the preceding section, therefore raises the question of how such disputes affect the effects of forgetting.

5.2. The Politics of Forgetting and Contested Memory

The public contestation documented in the preceding section makes it possible to recover and debate dimensions of the past that were displaced by the monumental configuration. In light of this finding, forgetting cannot be understood here as absolute disappearance or as the impossibility of knowledge. The question, therefore, becomes how effects of forgetting can persist even when this memory is publicly challenged.

In this article, we use the expression "politics of forgetting" as an analytical category to designate a historically constituted configuration of public memory in which the selectivity of remembrance distributes the conditions of presence, duration and recognition unequally, producing effects of displacement or obscuring of subjects, experiences and forms of violence associated with colonial domination. From this analytical perspective, applied to the case of Borba Gato, the category makes it possible to interpret the unequal distribution described above as a way coloniality may operate in the organisation of public memory. The political character of this configuration derives from the power relations involved in this distribution and from its effects on the possibilities for public recognition. The category does not require evidence of a centralised plan of erasure, a formal State policy or a shared intention among the actors involved, since its analytical scope lies in the relationships and effects produced by the organisation of public memory.

To understand how contestation and transformation can coexist with the persistence of hierarchical relationships, Mignolo (2017) offers an important conceptual

mediation. The author observes that the colonial matrix can be "shared and disputed by many contenders" (p. 2) and attributes to the logic of coloniality the capacity to generate, reproduce, modify and maintain interconnected hierarchies. In keeping with this formulation, he states that "the context and content change, but the logic continues" (p. 12). From this perspective, the contestation and transformation of meanings can coexist with the rearticulation of asymmetrical relationships.

At the empirical level of the Borba Gato case, the contestations analysed effectively altered the meanings attributed to the monumentalised figure, bringing interpretations that associate *bandeirismo* with colonial violence into public circulation and making the monument an explicit object of memorial conflict. Under these conditions, the politics of forgetting may persist within publicly contested memory when the effects of contestation coexist with unequal conditions of presence, duration and recognition for the different inscriptions of the past in public space.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the findings indicate that the effects of forgetting associated with the monumental configuration of Borba Gato may persist even when this memory is publicly contested. The asymmetry identified in the inscription of the past is manifested in the unequal distribution of presence and recognition among different historical dimensions, some of which remain displaced or obscured. Within the interpretative framework adopted, this asymmetry is understood in the light of coloniality.

From a historical perspective, the reconstruction shows that Borba Gato's monumental presence resulted from a process of artistic development, institutionalisation, and spatial inscription that established him as a recognisable *bandeirante*. Comparing this representation with the documentation on *sertanismo* in São Paulo made it possible to situate his participation in Fernão Dias's expedition, an undertaking historically associated with mineral prospecting and the capture and circulation of Indigenous captives. The sources consulted do not justify automatically attributing to Borba Gato, as an individual, practices documented in relation to the expedition or to *bandeirismo* in general. This comparison reveals an asymmetry between the monumental representation produced and the dimensions of colonial violence associated with the historical experience in which he participated, for which no equivalent expression is found in this public inscription.

Alongside the work's permanence, its recognition as a landmark associated with Santo Amaro coexisted with a history of contestation predating 2021. Interventions throughout this period, including the fire, brought critical interpretations of the commemorated figure into public circulation and made the memorial conflict surrounding the monument explicit. Beyond the dispute over meanings, the controversy also extended to who may act on this public inscription and the legal and institutional criteria invoked to assess particular forms of intervention.

The contestations analysed made it possible to recover and publicly debate historically displaced dimensions, altering the meanings attributed to the monumentalised

figure. At the same time, these changes may coexist with inequalities in the public inscription of different pasts. In this context, the politics of forgetting designates a historically constituted configuration of public memory capable of producing effects of displacement or obscuring. In terms of the relationships involved, its political character refers to the power implicated in this organisation of public memory. Coloniality, thus, provides an interpretative framework for understanding the persistence and historical rearticulation of these asymmetries.

Regarding the limitations of the research, the available documentation does not support attributing to the case a scope beyond what the evidence itself warrants. The study has not demonstrated a centralised plan or a shared intention to erase the past. Individual attributions concerning Borba Gato remain restricted to what the sources allow us to establish, and the qualitative *corpus* does not claim statistical representativeness. Even within these constraints, the case allows us to examine relationships between monumental inscriptions, public memory, space, and conflict. With its necessarily situated scope, the category of the politics of forgetting may contribute to investigating other memorial configurations shaped by historically constituted relations of domination, provided its application preserves the documentary and historical specificity of each case.

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