

**METAPHORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY:
WOMEN'S VOICES "STITCHED" IN A
RITUAL AESTHETIC OF CHILDHOOD**

8

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*Cosmic Spider weaves nostalgic maps
hip to hip
walks to the nomadic land of lace
roots of your braided hair
tracing centuries of marronage
in her threads*

—poem by author, Chota Valley, Ecuador, 2015.

Introduction

This paper analyzes the narratives surrounding objects that I like to call *ethnographic sculptures*: rag dolls are soft sculptures that symbolize elements from an individual's childhood, and through the act of creation of the dolls, metaphorically rehearse the life stories of the women creating them. Women are empowered as they share the intimate memories that emerge during the creative process of making the dolls. As they share their stories, they are reminded of the voices of their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other relatives. The process of sharing reveals critical cultural information regarding taboos, beliefs, values, religion, and spirituality. I see this folkloric art form as a metaphorical body, expressing the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which refers to an African institution of human solidarity.¹ From this perspective of interconnectedness, I see the childhood stories told through the rag dolls as a metaphorical ritual aesthetic that allows the women participating in the creation of the dolls to process and even resolve their own internal emotions.

The purpose of this chapter is to encourage reflection about the voices that emerge from shared memories through the creation of rag dolls. Ecuadorian

¹ Ubuntu is a word cognate with the word *Bantu*, 'people', commonly attested in African languages south of the Sahara. Its general gloss is 'humanity', has been widely adopted as a term by peoples of the African diaspora.

women of African descent have long endured a legacy of *marronage*—resistance to bondage, that first took the form of chattel slavery. Slavery may have formally ended, but women still face many challenges based upon its legacy. So, contemporary Ecuadorian women's *marronage* refers to ritual practices and metaphors designed to liberate them from past practices. This discussion proposes to generate new policies of reproductive health, giving women the power to make decisions regarding their bodies based on their own emotional, visceral, and *kisceral* (spiritual) experiences (Gilbert 1994). Gilbert coined the word *kisceral*, basing its prefix on the word *ki*, which is attested in some Asian languages, and which alludes to the element of life energy. The *kisceral* refers to an argumentation of emotional logic, based on belief, faith, and even magical action. Not unlike a ventriloquist's doll, the rag doll communicates emotional, visceral, and *kisceral* narratives that reflect the voices of women regarding their own bodies, desires, and memories.

Metaphorical Semiosis in Black Rag Dolls

Rag dolls are practical and metaphor-rich handcrafts found in many cultures and in diverse creative styles. The rag doll is one genre of folk art that has survived the onslaught of commercialization. The embodied metaphor of the rag doll is rich, thick, and grounding. Some of the rag doll's metaphoric dimensions include the creative, persuasive, cognitive, interpolative, and imaginative dimensions. Rag dolls made by contemporary adult African women can be considered historical, political, and ideological representations of diverse worldviews with regards to disputes, alliances, or negotiations amongst the personal senses inside a sort of semiosphere (Lotman 1984: 12). The sphere of semiosis in which these childhood signs circulate in the universe is a self-reflexive world called the *Umwelt*.

The making of a rag doll integrates both the childhood memories and adult experiences of the person creating the doll, thus generating new semiospheres. The rag doll functions as a "bilingual mechanism" with translatable "filters" (Lotman 1984: 208–210)—in this case, the childhood memories of the adult woman. The rag doll allows for the creation of a model of reality that translates the senses of the real world into a play world, in a come-and-go of consciousness (Thibault 2016). The doll serves as translator of the creator's current space and new spaces between semiospheres. These memories and experiences allow for the emergence of different logics, wisdoms, affectivities, representations, and corporealities. As described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this may sometimes be the only way to communicate in certain circumstances. Metaphors such as the rag doll become a precise tool to shed light upon and organize life experience in a coherent manner.

Metaphor is dynamic, complex, dialogical, and connects other levels of subsumed and assumptive domains of meaning. Peirce discusses to metaphors on two levels: creative and conventional. Peirce argues: "Every symbol is, in its origin, either an image of the idea signified, or a reminiscence of some individual occurrence, person or things, connected with its meaning or is a metaphor" (1903: CP 2.222; see Harry this volume). According to Douglas Anderson, "Creative metaphors are iconic and therefore, the ground of conventionalized metaphors. My contention is that this view makes sense both of Peirce's use of metaphor within his semiotics and of his ideas concerning the growth of symbols" (1984: 455). In this tenor, the semiosphere of childhood has a dynamic, imaginative, and community chronotope that allows the production of multimodal voices in the continuum of knowledge in self-representation. "If the actor plays the part of a person, the doll/puppet plays the part of the actor, and becomes the image of another image" (Lotman 1978: 149).

Some key aspects found in the aesthetic ritual metaphor include the creative function (*poiesis*) present in any time-space, including artistic practices, folk art, and ritual aesthetics, from the sacred to the profane and from the individual to the community. One of the most sustained aspects of metaphorical resources for creative output is the dialogic condition of the creative subject and the doll. The repetition, differentiation, and subversion of dominant codes requires political and rhetorical strategies that aim to generate critical changes in the outlook and worldview through metonymy, parody, paradoxes, hyperbole, ellipsis, and more, which can be part of the metaphorical episteme. Aesthetic argumentation of metaphor allows us to experience astonishment (*kalos*) because metaphor generates emotion.

Complex Metaphorical Model

Taking into account these considerations, I analyze metaphor using the continuum *firstness-secondness-thirdness* from the metaphorical thinking ("creative reason") evocative of its character, representative of meta-iconic or hypo-iconic realms identified by Peirce (1902: CP 2.276–277; 1905: CP 5.36, 5.520). From this model, *Firstness* in this research corresponds to the affective dimension of the remains of childhood images (i.e., nostalgia, joy, sadness, happiness, loneliness). In the case of *Secondness*, we will take into consideration the corporal experience that explores the analogous relation between the fancied body and the elaborated body of a handmade doll with respect to indexical signs. The index shows us that this important process isn't totally arbitrary (Deacon 2018: 67–84). And finally, *Thirdness*, is manifest through metaphor, and symbolizes what is going to happen—a process

of raising awareness of values, norms, and belief forming the imaginary that organizes, locates, and structures the memory and transmutes it.

In this way, this awareness of the rag doll can function as an *interpretant*. As Vincent Colapietro stated: "Any interpretant can itself function as a sign, that is, represent an object and generate an interpretant" (Colapietro 2003: 29). In this semiosis, a rag doll triggers different kinds of memories for women of all ages, including among those who didn't like to play with rag dolls when they themselves were children. This becomes a way of understanding resilience through hand-created folk art which reflects the creator's current situation. It helps the creator to become aware and to transcend her current existence, leading her to exercise her right to a new existence. Though this process, the rag doll/metaphor has a healing and curative impact on the creator's emotions and resilience, which assists them in resisting the power of stereotypes and/or the dominant culture that were responsible for painful imprinting in the first place.

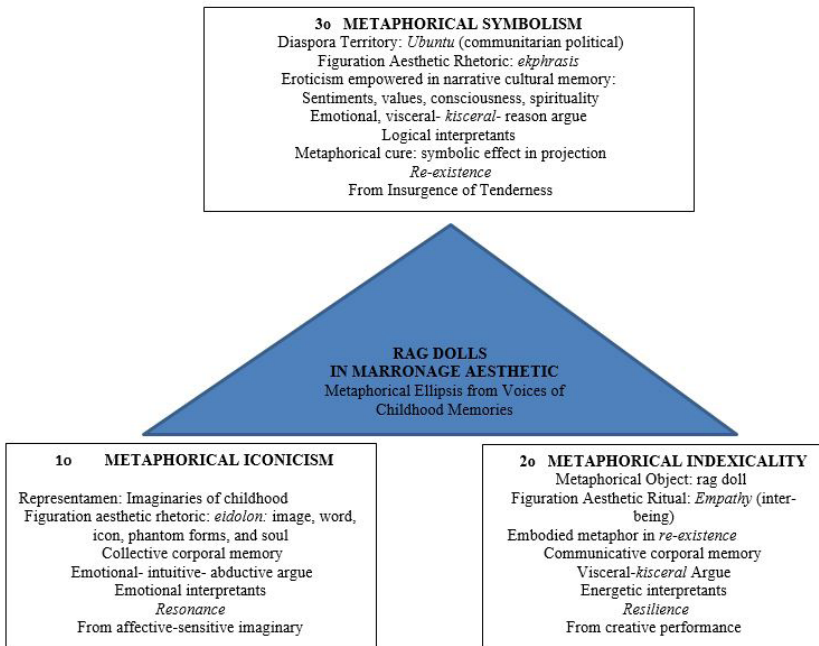


Figure 1. Complex Metaphorical based on C. S. Peirce's Phenomenology

Metaphorical Iconicity: Echo, Voices, Resonance

The metaphor presents the possibility of iconic innovation through a creative dimension. It is in this sense that we can begin to speak of the metaphorical

continuum with a polyphonic, nomadic, and multilingual capability. The symbol allows for the presence of multiple resonances of generated voices that activate the once repetitive notions, as well as the renewal of said notions or innovative capacity, which then manifests itself in an iconic metaphorical statement. These manifestations can often disturb the order of the sense of power, the institutions, and the various mechanisms of social control, and generate controversy, discussion and critique. This demonstrates the interpretive and interpellative capacity of metaphor due to abductive third-value freedom from pure logic.

From an Afro-diasporic perspective, here would be the locus of debate, reconstruction, reconciliation, of emergence of political projects. Here would be new stories and logics that make possible the marronage of an imaginary of power, for creation of a borderline, diasporic and "decolonial imaginary" (Perez 1999), which can serve as a theoretical tool for uncovering the hidden voices of women of African descent that have been relegated to silence, to passivity, and to the whisper in that third space where agency is enacted through third space feminism empowered by "formations of intimacy" (Lao-Montes 2007: 315–316).

The metaphoric perspective of childhood experiences for women in doll-making is found in many cultures where the process is learned from elders in the community. The process of doll-making actualizes a deeper collective and personal experience. Rag dolls create a passage back to childhood, even if the childhood experience was fraught with despair. The rag doll "speaks" various languages and expresses itself in many discourses; it is a polyvocal discourse. The dolls encourage questions regarding childhood emotions, and enable access the hidden knowledge and experiences of the creator's dialogue as she makes the doll. Therefore, the metaphor has the creative capacity to aesthetically shape cognition and translate emotional, corporal, and spiritual memories.

I approach the imaginary as a sphere of representations intertwined in the memories of the embodied identity of the aesthetic subject in question, where memories resonate with emotional interpretants:

If the historically defined subjectivity that is identity is thought of as an echo, then replication is no longer an apt synonym. Identity as a continuous, coherent, historical phenomenon is revealed to be a fantasy, a fantasy that erases the divisions and discontinuities, the absences and differences that separate subjects in time. Echo provides a gloss on fantasy and destabilizes any effort to limit the possibilities of 'sustained metaphoricity' by reminding us that identity (in the sense both of sameness and selfness) is constructed in complex and diffracted relation to others. Identification (which produces identity) operates as a fantasy echo, then, replaying in

time and over generations the process that forms individuals as social and political actors. (Scott 2001: 192)

From this definition of fantasy, the voices that emerge from the perception of sensations and emotions, affect childhood memories. This may have the character of intuitions, sounds, noises, words, or even silences attributed to characters close to their experiences: mothers, aunts, grandmothers, nannies, neighbors, and others who left traces in their memories.

It is thus a politics of representation and ethnographic documentation intended to include epistemologies and everyday knowledge to access other types of communication, as well as the poetics of life. This dialogue incorporates emotion as a visible and invisible thread of the semiotics of play: A doll creates a new world in which the player duplicates her life (Lotman 1978: 150). Therefore, the dimensions of memory reflected in the rag dolls' bodies create a polyphonic dialogue based on the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status that form a complex matrix of tensions and counterpoints coalescing in a multidimensional semiosis. There is a dialogic mode of metaphorical work between the rag doll and its creator. I refer to identify the creators as *imaginers*, or visionaries rather than simply as craft-makers.

Metaphorical Indexicality: Embodied Memories

Skin is a map of life where memories are stored from the imprint of life's encounters. The skin becomes the place—the space—behind which we hide through visible masking. Our clothes may mask our internal musings, and make-up or creams may make us appear to feel positive. Yet, emotions may remain hidden in unresolved painful memories. This body politics metaphor weaves perspectives of gender, class, race, and ethnicity, together with post-colonial feminist criticism and critical intercultural theories, into what Lao Montes has termed a “politics of translocation” that links “geographies of power at various scales (local, regional, national, global) with the subject positions (gender/sexual, ethno-racial, class, etc.) that constitute the self” (2007: 316).

African Diasporic peoples have withstood the ravages of economic exploitation, colonialism, and global capitalist work regimens. They have survived these ravages through their own distinct logic, rhetoric, wisdom, as well as other memories of being, doing, and feeling than those imposed on them. Historically, in the diaspora between America and Africa, there were powerful indicators of how the dynamics of the diaspora created a social and affective dimension regarding the maternal experience. Under the conditions of poverty that affected the African continent, women worked under the most disadvantaged conditions that shaped their economy and daily life.

For example, during the slave era, mothers, fathers, and children found themselves in a forced into an involuntary bonding process with slave own-

ers. Children were sold separately from their mothers when shipped to the new continent. Women could not even raise their own children, as they were separated from them. These children were adopted by other black women who raised them. Black women in America had to engage in a series of maternal tasks such as mothering, surrogate mothering and wet nursing for the white slave owner's children as well as for the African children which were assigned to them for rearing. These experiences are some of the conditions that set the stage for trauma, but also a kind of resilience.

Even today, women of different ages often encounter unwanted pregnancy. In the Chota Valley in Ecuador, for example, young girls and adolescents become mothers. Their grandmothers assume the role of mothers for these babies. Because of these early, unwanted pregnancies, by the time these women become adults, they already have an average of four or five children. As single mothers, there is no chance for education; consequently, they are doomed to economic poverty. Because of this life of despair, there are only a few options for economic survival: either perform agricultural work or sell produce in the market, from trucks or in the streets. Due to the lack social welfare benefits or governmental support, these working conditions are extremely challenging. There are laws to prevent these injustices; however, since many women have not experienced agency or personal empowerment, they live in a constant state of marginalization and intergenerational poverty.

According to Rossi Braidotti (1994), the nomadic state is the subversion of established conventions, not necessarily just the literal act of traveling. Skin is the imaginary territory crossed when traveling from age, gender, race, class, cultures, mind, and other social imaginaries. The nomadic journeys incorporate creative forms of transformation, like a performative metaphor that allows encounters with sources of interaction, experience, and knowledge stemming from an aesthetic empowerment. Nomadism allows a kind of critical consciousness that resists settling in socially coded modes of thought and behavior; this is a figurative approach of nomadism used to explore the associative quality of the nomadic state, and leverage its metaphorical richness.

The various styles of contemporary ethnography cannot be understood without the performative metaphor. The performative act of stitching a rag doll appears to be like a performative ethnographic representation that combines corporal knowledge, lifeways, and childhood memories of creative women of African descent. In this process, the visionaries (creators) are immersed in the emerging feelings, emotions, desires, hopes, and spiritualities that bring creative energy directly from the economy of the symbolic object—the rag doll. This allows for a personal synergy and empathy between the visionaries and the subject-object. Hence, I propose a model of ethnographic study from the *Anthropology of the Senses* (Howes 1989), which I have come to identify as ethnographic sculpture, a way of working life stories from the metaphorical

aesthetic chronotope (Cárdenas 2011: 49). The rag doll works well because the visionary/creator can enter and exit this ethnographic locus and inhabit a chronotopic figuration of experiences from various metaphorical visual declarative places: ethical, aesthetic, and erotic. The doll, as the interpreter of memories, rituals, and emotions communicates and nurtures the visionary through the discourse of heteroglossia or polyphony, as resonances generated from different women's voices.

Sculpting in cloth, from the time-space perspective, produces playful sensations, memories, and emotions. Attention to detail and working with the needle and thread create a rhythm of soothing, of pause, and of inspiration. It is also a way of exploring gender through colored threads, interpreting it through the plasticity, thickness and rich texture of the memories generated. The process evokes the linking of the doll's body with ancestors in various roles (i.e., as daughters, wives, etc.). Hence, the creation of the doll is a narrative process that co-creates the community in a metaphoric-metonymic continuum. The emergence of signs creates the possibility of stimulating multiple senses, weaving analogies with other women who contribute to the texture, use different colors, and exploring particular nuances. The female body is explored in its differentiated corporeality, phenotype, variance of clothing, and other codes of identity. Thus, the creators' worldviews are expressed—ways of being, feeling, working, and living in community.

Metaphorical Symbolism: Ethnographic Sculptures in *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu, the principle of community among those of African descent, contains ancient wisdom reflecting racial and ethnic worldviews. The word comes from Bantu languages such as Zulu and Xhosa in South Africa. *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* means that a person is only a person through relationships with others. *Ubuntu* is an everyday concept of traditional use that also involves healing. A person in *Ubuntu* is open and available to others and does not feel threatened or in competition in contrast to relations within the capitalist system. Similar notions appear in many traditional cultures. *Ubuntu* can be analogous to *Suma Kawsay* of the Kechwa indigenous peoples living in South America, which is often translated to mean 'good living'. *Suma Kawsay*, like *Ubuntu*, reflects the state of being relational, comprehensive, complementary, and coherent. From this wisdom of African peoples and their descendants, each individual exists only in relation to others: present or absent, implicit or explicit, from different time-spaces, and always with permission from the ancestors (Cárdenas 2016). This creates a sense of adequate security that comes from knowing that one belongs to a greater, common whole that includes ancestors, nature, and animals, as well as all the human beings from one's family, tribe, and other communities (Tyrone and Sonkosi 2002).

This symbolic interaction within and among cultures produces a meaning-rich dialogue between diasporic women seeking equality, despite their individual differences. It is a place of mutual exchange of knowledge, from partnerships that are generated from the insurgency of tenderness. Women tell stories of their childhood, sing, recite, laugh, stand silent, and gesture. Through this exchange, they arrive in a position of mutual affection, co-participation, complicity, learning, and alternative technologies in the creation of a sculpture in clay, a rag doll, or other handicraft. It is important to recognize that African-descended cultures, just as is the case of other cultures, have their own expressions of sensibility. The material culture of objects becomes a place that allows its creators access to characters, fantasy, dreams, and imaginary narratives that generate a kind of visual literacy.

The rag dolls cross over into a territory of empowerment that emerges from the insurgency of tenderness (Guerrero 2007), taking the shape of an "epistemic disobedience" that decolonizes the being from "de-colonial freedom" (Mignolo 2009: 13). Their nomadism is subsequently empowered through the diaspora with tenderness, nostalgia, joy, happiness or sadness. This aesthetic ritual gesture speaks to the complex sense of signals and languages—visible and invisible—of various capacities, perceptions, and dimensions. The voices of this aesthetic ritual also transmit the concepts of marronage, of imagined communities of women, of Afro-Latin, Afro-Caribbean and general African-descendant people, co-participating in the creation of a communal diasporic corporal map of the body. This can be seen and experienced through various types of journeys, both collective and personal, and always, at one's own pace. This process empowers the visionaries to claim their own pace, rhythms, desires, and choice in the process.

Final Threads

The essence of metaphorical aesthetic ritual is that it can be used to awaken a sense of the importance of individual and communitarian agency. One of the most critical challenges facing women today is the generation of new policies regarding reproductive health. When empowered, women can make decisions regarding their reproductive health by tapping into their emotional, visceral, and spiritual arguments, and not simply being controlled by the norms created by the dominant culture through the institutional control of the legal apparatus.

In the sewing process, there is a border; the border in the gap, the fold, and lace creates the path for the metaphorical work in the imaginary diaspora that is like a uterus that gives birth to all of the emotions that have been locked up within the doll maker, the creator. Thus, the emergence of internal dialogues initiates a self-analysis, a clarification of one's own experience, through the

wisdom of diverse community creators, bringing their own knowledge, rituals, styles, and corporal politics via the making of the dolls that, in the end, represent the corporal experience. It becomes an exercise that allows the search for gender equality from the point of view of the recognition of diversity and aesthetics of the living as a collective creative right.

For all of these reasons, doll making could be seen as an exercise of transdisciplinarity (Nicolescu 2014) through the different levels of reality of the subject and the complex logics of discourse, including the intercommunication with the ancestors, from a *semiotic of the invisible* (Haidar 2013: 205). Paraphrasing and adapting Ingold (2010: 21), the contribution of past generations to subsequent ones is not only accomplished through shared information acquired through engagement in the world of life and experience, but also through creative labor within environmental contexts, wherein members of the current generations develop their own skills. In the metaphorical creation of rag dolls, women weave not just objects, but also imagination, feelings, sensations, perceptions, spirituality, energy, and ultimately community policy.

With the interaction of aesthetics and ethnography in a creative process coming from the narratives of these processes, the value arises as a ludic communication and can function as a device for expressing emotions. This explains why the practice of performative ethnography represents the symbolic body from its comprehensiveness, interrelatedness, and complementarity, and works in partnership with inter-being and inter-acts as a subject and as a community. The doll speaks an integrative language from the compassionate word; it is therefore a meta-word. The rag doll's word has an affective function which helps to convey emotion that emerges from communitarian resilience. As Myrdene Anderson and Katja Pettinen (2018: 76) have argued: "We illustrate that performativity extends beyond the linguistic even when considering languaging, and that entire other unscripted genres of performativity may productively be pursued semiotically." I therefore believe that taking into account the ongoing process of de-colonization, it is possible to decentralize the frontiers of thinking from the nomadic place (the Diaspora). The construction of narrative data with other languages and alternative registers, such as the ritual object, constitutes dialogic communication that is enabled by an "Anthropology of the Senses" (Howes 1989).



Figure 2. Jobita Lara, a *visioner* (creator) and the rag doll she created. Lara is from the Piel Canela collective, Chota Valley, Ecuador. This photograph was taken by the author in 2107.



Figure 3. Altar in honor of Sara Baartman, 2017. African American Studies, and Gender and Women's Studies Department, University of California, Berkeley.



Figure 4. Altar in honor for Marielle Franco, Brazilian feminist, sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies in University of California, Berkeley, 2018.

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