


What the eyes can't see: the future according to Monteiro Lobato

O que os olhos não podem ver: o futuro segundo Monteiro Lobato

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ABSTRACT

Over the last years, Monteiro Lobato has been rightfully accused by Brazilian and Latin American scholars of expressing racist and eugenic ideas in his body of work. In this article, we take a step further and add to this traditional portrait of his literary production an analysis of the impact of a new set of technological media during the first decades of the twentieth century on his writings. We discuss how these two main issues – i.e., technology and race – played out in Lobato’s historical representation of Brazil’s past and future and the influence that the United States could play in it. We show how a revisionary and racist version of the United States’ history and the ideal of an American technological prosperity in the 1920s inspired one of Lobato’s most contentious novels, the technological dystopia *O Presidente Negro*, ou *O Choque das Raças*, published in 1926.

KEYWORDS

Monteiro Lobato. Nationalism. United States of America

RESUMO

Nos últimos anos, Monteiro Lobato tem sido justamente acusado por pesquisadores brasileiros e latino-americanos de expressar ideias racistas e eugênicas no conjunto de sua obra. Neste artigo, tomamos um passo adiante e somamos a esse tradicional retrato de sua produção literária uma análise do impacto que o advento de um novo conjunto de mídias tecnológicas teve em seus escritos durante as primeiras décadas do século XX. Em suma, discutimos como esses dois grandes problemas – raça e tecnologia – são mobilizados por Lobato em suas representações históricas sobre o passado e o futuro do Brasil e como os Estados Unidos influenciaram tais representações. Demonstramos como uma versão revisionista e racista da história dos Estados Unidos, somada ao ideal de prosperidade tecnológica americana nos anos 1920, inspirou um dos romances mais controversos de Lobato, a distopia tecnológica *O Presidente Negro*, ou *O Choque das Raças*, publicado em 1926.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Monteiro Lobato. Nacionalismo. Estados Unidos da América.

I have all my hopes in America

José Bento Monteiro Lobato (1882-1948) is a household name in Brazilian literature and a pivotal intellectual figure in the first half of the twentieth century. His body of work is marked by the author's exploration of a wide range of genres: adult and children's fiction, political, sociological, scientific, and economic books, etc. Today, in a historical and cultural background highly charged with "cancel culture" feelings, he is remembered once again in the public sphere (online and offline) for controversial and racist representations of African Brazilians in his series of children's books. Over the last years, this issue has reached the high courts in Brazil, raising concerns about such ideas being spread among school-aged children. As we will see in the following pages, such racist ideas were also expressed in his other writings.

At a very early stage of his literary career, Lobato was already known in the United States thanks to American critic Isaac Goldberg (1887-1938), a great Portuguese and Spanish literature propagandist. In 1922, after reviewing the work of a young Monteiro Lobato, Goldberg said: "He is much more than a promise, it is only that his fulfillment is not clearly defined." As soon as these words reached Monteiro Lobato's ears in Brazil, he took his typewriter and wrote Goldberg a letter, introducing himself:

I was born on April 18, 1883, in Taubate, State of São Paulo, the son of parents who owned a coffee estate. I initiated my studies in that city and proceeded later to São Paulo, where I entered the Department of Law. Fond of literature, I read a great deal in my youth, [but] I never let myself be dominated by anyone. I like to see with my own eyes, smell with my own nose. All my work reveals this personal impression, almost always cruel, for, in my opinion, we are the remnant of a race approaching elimination. *Brazil will be something in the future, but the man of today, the Luso-Africano-Indio, will pass out of existence, absorbed and eliminated by other, stronger races...just as the primitive aborigine passed.* Brazil is an ailing country (GOLDBERG 1922, p. 290).

"To cure an ailing person," he claimed, "he must first be convinced that he is, in fact, a sick man." For the young writer, this illness had a name: miscegenation. The adverse reaction that Monteiro Lobato and some of his Brazilian contemporaries projected onto miscegenation was rooted in the idea that different races, coexisting at the same time and space in various stages of civilization, needed to be arranged to promote and perpetuate only the best hereditary traits found among them. This emphasis on heredity, seen as the main explanation of the historical development of

races, challenged a monolith interpretation of modernity that described *reason* as the beacon of the historical process (KOSELLECK 2004; KOSELLECK 2018; ARMITAGE; GULDI 2014).

From the early nineteenth century to the years preceding World War I, European nationalism with its industrialism and rationality, was considered a civilizational model to be imitated by underdeveloped nations like Brazil. After the war, American economic prosperity, fueled by the effectiveness of assembly lines and advancements in new technological media, replaced the European supremacy model. When the hopes on the old nationalism shattered, *scientific racism*, a theory taking shape since the last decades of the nineteenth century, found a fertile terrain to flourish. As the American eugenicist Madison Grant said in 1916: "We must [realize] that race pure and simple, the physical structure of man, is something entirely distinct from either nationality or language" (GRANT 1918, p. xxi). Language can be learned; aliens can be naturalized. Race is hereditary – it cannot be changed (DA SILVA 2007). The eugenics debate emphasized a theory of radical and immutable differences among races, thus reinforcing a supposed hierarchy among them. The ultimate goal was to eliminate the unwanted: "Man has the choice of two methods of race improvement," said Madison Grant, "He can breed from the best, or he can eliminate the worst by segregation or sterilization" (GRANT 1918, p. 51 and 52).

Sorrowfully, Monteiro Lobato lamented the impossibility of implementing such methods in Brazil. The sight of a crowded street in Rio de Janeiro reveals that it was already too late:

in the afternoon parade, every kind of degenerate passes by, every human type except the normal. How will we put these people right? The poor African Negro created terrible problems for us by his unintentional revenge [i.e., miscegenation]! Perhaps our salvation will come from São Paulo and other areas with a heavy influx of European blood. The Americans preserved themselves from miscegenation by the barrier of racial prejudice. We have that barrier here also, but only among certain classes and in certain areas. In Rio, it doesn't exist (LOBATO *apud* SKIDMORE 1998, p. 192).

A few years before Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre consolidated the idea of "Brazil's ethnic pout-pourri" as one of Brazil's most valuable assets, miscegenation was still seen as a monumental burden (SKIDMORE 1998; SCHWARCZ 1994, p. 138). Over the last decades, Brazilian and Latin-American scholars have been rightfully

denouncing Monteiro Lobato's fictional works as an example of the racist and eugenic ideas propagated by a group of Brazilian intellectuals and scientists in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite minor ideological differences, this group found common ground in a widespread radical theory based on the discourse of scientific racism and the biological determination of racial inequality, and the idea of "whitening" the Brazilian population through a meticulous process of miscegenation among the races (LEAL 2020; DE SOUZA 2017, p. 28; SCHWARCZ 1993; SKIDMORE 1998; HABIB 2007; STEPAN 1991; DE SOUZA 2016).

Indeed, some of Monteiro Lobato's works can be read as chapters from a racist epic written in the 1920s, narrating the overthrown of the Southern European immigrant, African, and Native American populations by a stronger one: the white Nordic race. That is the plot of one of his most contentious novels, *O Presidente Negro, ou o Choque das Raças* [The Black President, or the Racial Clash], which we will analyze in the following pages. Set in Rio de Janeiro and the United States between 1926 and 2228, the story is constructed as a story-within-a-story. The first part of the book tells us about a scientist, Professor Benson, born in the United States but raised in Brazil, who invented a technological device – the *porviroscópio* (*porvir* is a synonym for future in Portuguese) – which allows him to see into the future. One day, a young man named Ayrton Lobo crashes his automobile next to Benson's house. The scientist takes it upon himself to care for the man's recovery. When Lobo is fully healed three weeks after the accident, Benson decides to make Lobo his confidant. While at the house, Lobo meets Miss Jane, Benson's only daughter, with whom he falls in love. A feeling that is not reciprocated; she is more preoccupied with analyzing time cuts from the past and the future in her father's invention. Knowing that he will die soon, Benson destroys all the equipment in his laboratory, including the *porviroscópio*. After his death, Miss Jane convinces Lobo to write a novel about the events she saw in the year 2228, which she will dictate to him. Here, the second story in the book begins. In 2228, Miss Jane saw the US society divided into three political parties: the white male party, led by President Kerlog; the white feminist party, led by Ms. Evelyn Astor; and finally, the Negro Association party, whose leader was Jim Roy. In a series of unfortunate events for the male and white female parties, the Negro Association's candidate wins the presidential election, making Jim Roy the first black president in the United States' history. Unwilling to concede his defeat, Kerlog summons his cabinet to develop a strategy to overthrow the election's result. A scientific invention creates a final solution that will prevent Jim Roy from taking office as president and eliminate the country's Black population forever.

Going through a period of financial trouble, Monteiro Lobato had bet all his hopes in the publication of *O Presidente Negro* abroad. He moved to the United States in 1927 to take the role of commercial attaché at the Brazilian Consulate in New York City, where he remained until 1931 (LAJOLO 2010). On the eve of his departure, he wrote to one of his friends: "I have all my hopes in America" (*apud* AIEX 1996, p. 3). Since its inception, the novel was designed with the US readership in mind. In a letter sent to Brazilian novelist Godofredo Rangel on July 8, 1926, Monteiro Lobato showed his excitement about the project: "Do you know what am I preparing? A mother-idea! An American novel, that is, publishable in the United States. I already started, and it is going fast. Like in Wells, with a vision of the future" (*apud* DE SOUZA 2017, p. 138).

While in New York, he sent the translated manuscript to several US literary agents. The feedback was mostly the same: the interest in the book was above average, but the central plot was said to be sensitive to Americans – the book was deemed too racist. Running out of options, Lobato came up with a plan to self-publish the story by establishing an affiliate of his Brazilian publishing company in the United States, under the name *Tupy Publishing Co.*: "[...] it will grow bigger than Ford," he said, "making us all millionaires" (*apud* DE SOUZA 2017, p. 138). The plan failed, and *O Presidente Negro* never saw the light of the press in the United States. In a letter written on October 5, 1927, a frustrated Lobato lamented to Brazilian writer Godofredo Rangel his disappointment: "My novel cannot find an editor. The *Tupy Company* failed. They think the book is offensive to American dignity [...]. *It was my mistake to come so late. I should have come during the time they lynched the negroes.* The manuscript is with Isaac Goldberg to see if there is any makeup to be made. Goodbye, *Tupy Company!*" (*apud* DE SOUZA 2017, p. 138). The novel was published in book format in Brazil in 1926. When the first reviews came out, they were mostly negative (BROWN, JR 1965, p. 99). Despite the critics, Monteiro Lobato seemed very satisfied with the final result. Upon returning from the United States in 1931, he said: "I do not have to change anything in '*O Presidente Negro*'. The America I portrayed in my book is absolutely the same America I found there" (*apud* AIEX 1996, p. 9).

In the 1920s, the United States Monteiro Lobato saw was a mix of nativism and eugenics that inspired a revisionist history of the US past as the history of the so-called old American stock, the Nordic European, which was also fueled by a growing fear that the white race was under menace. This historical narrative was forged during the Harding Administration, which labeled its economic program as "back to normalcy," its political program a harsh attack on immigration, and its cultural program originated an aesthetic movement known as the Colonial Revival, "both looking inward, and backward,"

explains Harvard historian Jill Lepore, “portraying and celebrating an American heritage, a fantasy world that never happened” (LEPORE 2018, p. 407; STODDARD 1922).

One of the most significant representatives of this revival movement was Madison Grant and his book *The Passing of the Great Race* (GRANT 1918). Grant was one of the founders, and later chairman, of the New York Zoological Society, where he associated intimately with leading American biologists and eugenicists. As historian John Higham pointed out, the resurgent racism of the 1920s drew its central inspiration from Grant’s book (HIGHAM 2011, p. 271). Grant’s lead disciple was the political scientist Lothrop Stoddard. Based on principles of scientific racism, Stoddard commented in several of his writings on what he believed to be the lowest-ranked Black race: “We see that, in the negro, we are in the presence of a being differing profoundly [from] the white man.” Stoddard believed that Black men were politically inept, had no past, and never evolved a civilization of their own. Because the Black has no history, Stoddard concluded, he “welcomes novelty and tacitly admits that others are his master” (STODDARD 1920, p. 91-92).

Black intellectuals, especially writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, countered the white nostalgia of the Colonial Revival and resurgent racism of the 1920s with a new and critical attention to the nation’s Black past (RORTY 1998, p. 7). *The New Negro*, a black manifesto edited by Alain Locke in 1925, was a response to those attacks perpetrated by men like Grant and Stoddard. Black historian Arthur A. Schomburg contributed with the essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past.” In order to have a future, the black historian proclaimed, “the American Negro must remake his past”: “Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past,” he wrote, “what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. [...] History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset.” (SCHOMBURG 1925, p. 231).

Much of the tensions between the white and black races in the United States during the 1920s turned into extreme acts of violence perpetrated by the Ku-Klux-Klan. Monteiro Lobato nods to these tensions in a passage of his novel: “[In 2228], the permanence in the same territory of two disparate and infusible races disturbed the national happiness. The constant attritions, although did not end as before in the violence of the Ku-Klux-Klan, constitute a permanent motive for disquiet” (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 97). In a letter sent to Brazilian eugenicist Arthur Neiva in 1928, Monteiro Lobato explicitly praised the Klan: “[Brazil is] a country of mongrels where the white has no strength to organize a Klux-Klan, it is a country lost to high destinies. (...) Justice will be made to

[Ku-] Klux-Klan one day; had we a defense like that, which keeps the negro in his place [...]” (*apud* LEAL 2020, p. 93).

The Klan was founded in Tennessee in 1866, a fraternal organization of Confederate veterans dressed in white robes to, according to one of the original Klansman, appear as “the ghosts of the Confederate dead, who had arisen from their graves in order to wreak vengeance.” As Jill Lepore explains, the Klan was a “resurrection, not of the Confederate dead, but the armed militias that had long served as slave patrols that for decades terrorized men, women, and children with instruments of intimidation, torture, and murder.” (LEPORE 2018, p. 318-319). After a second Ku-Klux-Klan emerged in 1915, Lothrop Stoddard was outed as a member of the secret society in an exposé written by journalist Norman Hapgood in 1923. A photocopy of a letter sent by the Klan’s chapter in New York to their office in Georgia showed that reading Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color* was highly recommended (HAPGOOD 1923, p. 12; GORDON 2017; HOFSTADTER 1963).

In 1926, the *North American Review*’s Spring issue published an open letter from Hiram Wesley Evans, a humble dentist from Texas who was also the Imperial Wizard of the Klan. Evans praised the white race’s contribution to the foundations of the American nation and acknowledged that African Americans were brought to the United States against their will, being the country’s responsibility to protect and give them opportunities. But there were certain limits: “We will not permit [the negro] to gain sufficient power to control our civilization [...]” (EVANS 1926, p. 60). To support his arguments, he cited the books of Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard.

In the following number, the journal published a series of articles opposing Evans’ views. Among them, a reply by W. E. B. Du Bois. In his response, Du Bois stated that the Klan’s nativism feelings were nothing but fear of Jews, immigrants, and African Americans. Color lines aside, Du Bois focused his response on what is still today a fundamental piece of the nation’s origins – the immigrant: “America only survives and flourishes because of the alien immigrant with his strong arm, his simple life, his faith and hope, his song, his art, his religion.” But he also denounced what he called American Fundamentalism, comparing the Klan to the fascist inclinations seen in Spain and Italy (DU BOIS 1926, p. 294).

At the end of the 1920s, Du Bois faced Stoddard in a debate organized by the Chicago Forum Council. Like Stoddard, Du Bois also held a Ph.D. in History from Harvard. The main question argued was: *Shall the Negro be encouraged to seek cultural equality?* At the debate, Stoddard said: “We know that our America is a White America [...] and the

overwhelming weight of both historical and scientific evidence shows that only so long as the American people remain white will its institutions, ideals and culture continue to fit the temperament of its inhabitants – and hence continue to endure”. “Your country?” Du Bois asked Stoddard. “How come it’s yours? Would America have been America without her Negro people?” (REPORT 1929; LEPORE 2018, p. 411; FRAZIER 2019).

At the time of the debate, Du Bois was widely known among black and white Americans, mostly for his work at the N.A.A.C.P., which he helped found. Between 1939 and 1940, Stoddard spent time as a correspondent journalist for an American newspaper in Nazi Germany. He died in 1950, ignored and completely forgotten. But his debate with Du Bois over the nation’s origins never ended. Years earlier, it had echoed in Monteiro Lobato’s *O Presidente Negro*; today, it is evoked in slogans like *Make America Great Again* and the cries of despair from black men and women’s haunting last words: *I can’t breathe* (GORDON 2008; BEVERNAGE 2012; KLEINBERG 2017).

The radio will kill the wheel

Throughout his works, Monteiro Lobato created a very particular type of literary “hick” realism (*realismo caipira*) that portrays Brazil mostly as a forgotten rural country and its typical dweller: the fictional character *Jéca Tatu*. Inspired by the real native-born subsistence farmer from the Paraíba valley in the state of São Paulo, Monteiro Lobato first wrote about this fictional character in 1914, when he spoke about the sickness, laziness, and ignorance of the *caboclo* – a catch-all term used to describe the native-born Paulista (SKIDMORE 1998, p. 192-197). But the *ruralism* in Monteiro Lobato’s works is not a modernized version of Romantic literature’s celebrated pastoral life. Instead, it denounces the backwardness of Brazil against an emergent modern technological world. In *Cidades Mortas*, published in 1919, Monteiro Lobato imagines the country as a network of small towns that, despite having enjoyed glimpses of prosperity in the past, were doomed to fall into oblivion. A year later, Sinclair Lewis would be launched into literary stardom in the United States with a very similar book project: his novel *Main Street* was considered a harsh and satirical look into the lethargy of small-town America. “Main Street,” Lewis said, “is the climax of civilization” (LEWIS 1920). Compared to Main Street, the small town of Oblivion in Brazil was not even close to its apex:

The small town where I live reminds me of the soldier who, weak and unable to follow his battalion, is left behind, exhausted and alone, on the

side of the road, wistfully gazing at the clouds of dust that rises in the horizon—civilization diverted from this small town. The telegraph does not connect it with the rest of the world, nor the railroad remembers to join it to the modest transportation network [...]. Wealthy and nimbly in the past, the world forgot about the town of Oblivion, like men forget the famous actress as soon as her youth fades away (LOBATO 1921, p. 6).

Modern machines and technological media are themes rarely explored in studies dedicated to Monteiro Lobato's work, even though they are a constant presence in his writings. Focusing on this issue is essential because the technological transformations of media in the early twentieth century was an extremely complex process, with significant repercussions not only in cultural and political issues, but also in how the general public experienced time and history (KITTLER 1990; KITTLER 1999; KITTLER 2013; GUMBRECHT 1985). "The ability to record sense-data technologically," wrote Friedrich A. Kittler, "shifted the entire discourse network circa 1900. For the first time in history, writing ceased to be synonymous with the serial storage of data [...]" (KITTLER 1990, p. 229 and 230). With the emergence of a new set of technological devices that allowed to record, store, and reproduce sounds and images, the world bid farewell to Gutenberg Galaxy's monopoly (MCLUHAN 1962; BOLZ 1999).

In her pioneering work on the impact of new technologies and the literary profession in Brazil between 1890 and 1940, Flora Sússekkind discusses how Brazilian writers were forced to reckon with and navigate through a unique landscape of literary dissemination techniques. Yet, this reckoning was faced, paradoxically, with technological limitations. Sússekkind cites Brazilian literary critic Brito Broca to explain those constraints: "[The] pressure of technical rationality in Brazil was still at an early stage. Science did not coordinate our reality, but it was a looming presence on the horizon. The encounter, the confrontation, was muted and latent, a silent process" (SÜSSEKIND 1997, p. 11-12; GALLO 2010).

In *O Presidente Negro's* opening chapter, Monteiro Lobato explored the tension between new and old technologies, opposing the modern world's efficiency and high-speed to the feeling of obsolescence and slowness rooted in the past. Ayrton Lobo is at the branch of the London Bank in Rio de Janeiro, waiting for the bank teller to call his number to process a check: money is an old device that stores skill and labor, in the same way as writing stores speech (MCLUHAN, 1962, p. 3). He then sees a broker, with whom he is acquainted, napping on a bench in the back of the room. Lobo goes to him, happy with the opportunity to remedy the boredom of the waiting. Soon enough, the conversation shifts from small talk to moral reflections on dishonesty.

Long waits in the bank, explains the broker, are the result of dishonesty. Time is taken away by the need for double checks to rule out any chance of abuse in check falsifications. If all men were honest, says the broker, processing a check would be an instantaneous action (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 1). Long waits in a bank line create a feeling of stagnated time; it is also driven by the bureaucratic machine invented by the State to control society. Time is money, and for the broker, the only way to save time and money would be to eliminate the wicked through *eugenics*.

After leaving the bank building, Ayrton Lobo wanders through the streets of Rio de Janeiro meditating on the mediocrity of his own life. He works as a fee collector for the trading company *Sá, Pato, & Cia.*, and he dreams of owning an automobile: "My God! The nights I spent thinking about it, seeing myself at the wheel, looking steadily ahead, clearing off my path, through the screams of the klaxon, all the poor, scared pedestrians!" One day, after saving enough money, his dream came true: "I entered the dealership and bought the machine that would change my social condition – A Ford." As someone who spends most of his days on the streets ("the world for me was nothing but a street that goes around the earth," he says), Lobo sees the world as divided between the superior (driver) and the inferior (pedestrian) man. When he becomes a driver, he does not only change his "caste"; people start seeing him differently. His bosses even double his salary:

The pedestrian (caste in which I was born and lived until I was 26 years old) was a disquiet being, with little income, forced to wear out the sole of his boots, sweat profusely on hot days, get wet on rainy days, and be prodigiously cautious to avoid being run over by the proud and impassive *driver*. This superior man does not walk but slides fast. How many times I stopped on the sidewalk to watch the great show that was seeing my pedestrian brothers opening the way to the arrogant Cadillac [with its] shinning polish and metals! (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 5)

Despite the madness of the streets, better paved roads allowed for not only more cars, but also faster speed. While traction remains a major practical issue, automobiles reach respectable levels of speed. Such a disproportion between traction and engine performance makes automobiles dangerous for drivers and pedestrians (GUMBRECHT 1997, Location 390). As a pedestrian, Lobo explains that he used to be in a permanent state of angst and restlessness: "We have to walk with 50 eyes wide opened," he says, "to prevent being pushed to the ground by pedestrians or hit by cars." As a driver, he receives several speeding tickets, kills several dogs, and runs over a deaf man

who could not hear the klaxon's sound. His resentment as a pedestrian turns into a driver's pride echoed in road rage episodes. Lobo shifts from being sympathetic to hating the pedestrian, mainly because their existence frustrates his "right to speed in a straight line." He even considers filing a legal petition with the city representatives, which would forbid pedestrians from walking on asphalted streets: "I have acquired the driver's mentality, despising the pedestrian as something of less importance in life" (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 5).

The increasing assimilation of new machines into everyday life destabilizes the terms and conditions that regulated the world before their existence (GUMBRECHT 1997, Location 433). If Monteiro Lobato opens his novel highlighting the automobile as one of the most important modern inventions, soon enough it becomes a thing of the past. In a temporal cut of the year 3,000, Miss Jane observes in the *porviroscópio* a museum in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania: *The Wheel Museum*. As expected, wheeled objects – from ox carts to the tiny and detailed wristwatch gears – were displayed in the museum windows. Later, she explains to Lobo that the museum would shelter items from the Wheel Age, a world that ceased to exist: "The radio," she says, "will kill the wheel" (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 95). Among the modern technological media, the radio was one of the most celebrated devices among Brazilian writers in the 1920s. As Brazilian journalist Antonio de Alcantara Machado confessed with a mix of disdain and fascination: "The obsession of today is the radio. Not long ago, people were passionate about the gramophone. It actually became one of the tortures of mankind. The radio replaced it. Nobody can resist the temptation to listen at least once to a sound coming from unknown, exotic countries" (GUMBRECHT 1997, Location 3387).

The *porviroscópio* occupies a central place in Monteiro Lobato's novel. Although an invention of the writer's imagination, the machine is a clumsy but sophisticated combination of modern scientific inventions, such as the microscope and the telescope, and new technological media, such as the telephone, the gramophone, film, the radio, and the typewriter. Benson explains to Ayrton Lobo that it took him 30 years to build his laboratory and its "electro-radio-chemical" devices. When he sees it for the first time, Lobo is fascinated and confused by the sight of the paraphernalia:

Along the walls, framed pictures – not the regular ones, painting or portraits, but pictures of marbles like those in hydroelectric power plants, covered with tiny ebonite buttons. Reentrances, funneling into the walls like the gramophone horns, electric lightbulbs resembling the strangest shapes, wires that came in groups of four, five, twenty, suddenly vanishing

into the wall. However, what most caught my attention was an enormous crystal globe beside the Professor's desk. There was a curious instrument for looking under the desk, pointed at the globe, which reminded me of the microscope (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 12).

Like the telephone and the gramophone, the *porviroscópio* makes present those who are absent or dead. "Producing human sounds in the absence of human bodies," Gumbrecht says, "the gramophone inspires both the fear of ghosts and the hope for eternal life" (GUMBRECHT 1997, Location 1317). Based on one of her visions of the future in 2228, Miss Jane describes to Ayrton Lobo the operations in the *Intermundane Herald*: "a newspaper of meta-psychic radiation that came to fulfill the old desire to communicate with the living, which the dead have always manifested. Instead of the sorrowful souls wandering aimlessly in search of a psychic reading table – the only means they have to talk to us today – they read the *Intermundane Herald*." Ayrton Lobo then asks Miss Jane how the deceased would communicate with the living, since they could not physically manifest themselves. She then explains: "This was the responsibility of the Psychical Corporation, owner of the great central station in Detroit. Spirits flocked there, and then called the living on the meta-psychotonic international line, just as we call each other today using the telephone" (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 39).

The increasing speed at which modern technological media were being developed raised expectations on the unlimited possibilities that wireless communication would bring to life. On January 27, 1926, the British engineer John Logic Baird introduced his "televisor," which made possible the wireless transmission of moving pictures in a very rudimentary way. For Baird, "seeing by telephone" seemed to be a logical consequence of "hearing by telephone" (GUMBRECHT 1997, Location 2867). With similar reasoning, Miss Jane explains to Ayrton Lobo that, "today, we only have the radiocommunication. But the day will come when there will be radio-sensation and radio-transportation." In the future, she continues,

radio-transport will make useless the great agitations of our present day. Instead of going to the office every day and coming back home riding a streetcar, [the] employee will work from home and "radio" to his office. In summary: he will work remotely. I find this evolution very logical. Are the messages not transmitted instantaneously through the telephone these days? (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 41 and 42).

The new world inaugurated by new technologies created expectations that one day predicting the future would be possible. In *O Presidente Negro*, Professor Benson includes the power to predict the future among his most successful scientific experiences:

[...] As soon as we write the *present* 2+2, the *future* four is *already predetermined, even before the hand turns it into present* in the paper. Here, however, the elements are so simple that the human brain by itself, writing 2+2, automatically sees the future four. Everything changes into a more complicated case when, instead of 2+2, we have, for example, the Bastille, Louis 16, Danton, Robespierre, Marat, the mood in France, the hate in England, the Gaul combined with the Roman inheritance, in summary – the billions of factors that made the France of 89. Even though all of this had predetermined the “four” Napoleon, this future could not be foreseen by anyone due to the human brain’s weakness. Well: I discovered the means to predetermine this future – and see it! (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 24).

New technological media allowed new ways of apprehending reality that are impossible for the human brain to capture. As Walter Benjamin pointed out in his analysis of photography, “process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens [...]” (BENJAMIN 1968, p. 220). In *O Presidente Negro*, the apprehension of images of reality inaccessible to natural vision is made possible by the devices invented by Professor Benson: “I can concentrate the present in my hands,” he says, “the actual moment of the universe’s life, like a great panoramic landscape that reflects in the photographic plate and conserves itself latent in it until it is developed” (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 28).

Although new technological media reveal the limits of what the eyes can see, and the ears can hear, it would be inconceivable to imagine those inventions without their close relationship to the human body. As Friedrich A. Kittler put it, a telegraph as an artificial mouth and a telephone as an artificial ear set the stage for Thomas Edison’s phonograph. “The progress of national welfare (or military technology) can be measured by transportations costs,” Kittler said. No means of transportation is more economical than those that carry information – i.e., data – rather than goods and people. After all, “artificial mouths and ears, and technological implementations of the central nervous system, cut down on mailmen and concert halls” (KITTLER 1999, p. 28). In 1959, anthropologist Edward T. Hall had already pointed out that “man has developed extensions for practically everything he used to do with his body” (HALL 1959, p. 79).

As Marshall McLuhan discussed in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, “man the tool-making animal, whether in speech or in writing or in radio, has long been engaged in extending one or another of his sense organs in such a manner as to disturb all of his other senses and faculties [...]” (MCLUHAN 1962, p. 4). German media theorist Norbert Bolz also points out that the organic characteristic of bodily organs restricts the number of tools that they can work with at any time. On the other hand, machine tools are free of these organic shackles: “a human being can only interfere in a uniform and continuous production movement. The simultaneity and ‘continuity of special processes’ desanthropomorphize work” (BOLZ 1999, p. 49). In *O Presidente Negro*, an excited Miss Jane tells Ayrton Lobo about Doctor Lewis – “a magician of anatomy” –, who in the 2200s would perform, for the first time in human history, a groundbreaking surgical procedure:

We possess two eyes and two ears, which act like two horses pulling the car in one direction. Lewis altered this. He unplugged the optical and auditive nerves through a delicate surgical procedure, giving each one autonomy. Therefore, one could see something with one eye and a different thing with the other, the same with the ears (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 49).

In Monteiro Lobato’s future, men and machines inhabit the same world – artificial intelligence is what unites them. The celebration of new technological media as extensions of the human body could also explain why *talking dolls* are a constant presence in Monteiro Lobato’s fiction: *Emília*, the talking ragdoll from his children’s book series *Sítio do Pica-Pau Amarelo*; the doll that says “mama” and “papa” in his short story *Negrinha* (1919). According to Friedrich Kittler, a competition sponsored by the Saint Peterburg Academy of Sciences in 1780 made voice sounds, particularly vowels, an object of research, then inaugurating not only speech physiology but also the experiments involving mechanical language reproduction:

Inventors like [Wolfgang von] Kempelen, [Johann Nepomuk] Maelzel, and Mical built the first automata that, by stimulating and filtering certain frequency bands, could simulate the very sounds that Romanticism was simultaneously celebrating as the language of soul: their dolls said “Mama” and “Papa” or “Oh!”, like Hoffmann’s beloved automaton, Olympia. Even Edison’s 1878 article on phonography intended such toy mouths voicing the parent’s name as Christmas presents (KITTLER 1999, p. 25- 26).

In *O Presidente Negro*, a multi-task doll not only speaks, but also sweeps the floor, cooks, and washes clothes (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 139). In this case, dolls that mimic human actions represent a world where new technological media was altering the dynamic between humans and machines. In the future imagined by Monteiro Lobato, radio technology liberated men from going to work and released them from menial everyday tasks; the doll performs the work avoided by humans. She is a robot, like Alexa, the voice-controlled virtual assistant.

The doll in Lobato's fiction is not just a showcase of what new technological media had accomplished in the first decades of the twentieth century (or what it could achieve in the future); it can also be considered an example of a favorite propaganda strategy. Erich Auerbach called it the *searchlight device*. From his exile in Istanbul in the early 1940s, this is how he described it:

It consists in over illuminating one small part of an extensive complex, while everything else which might explain, derive, and possibly counterbalance the thing emphasized is left in the dark [...]; Especially in times of excited passions, the public is again and again taken in by such tricks, and everybody knows more than enough examples from the very recent past. [...] Whenever a specific form of life or a social group has run its course, or has only lost favor and support, every injustice which the propagandist perpetrates against it is half consciously felt to be what it actually is, yet people welcome it with sadistic delight (AUERBACH 1968, p. 403-404).

In *O Presidente Negro*, Jim Roy, the *Negro Association* party leader, died under unknown circumstances a day before taking office as the first black president of the United States in 2228. On that same day, the defeated candidate Kerlog spread a radio-message across the country announcing the release of a new toy: a doll that knew how to dance the tango with such perfection that "it would amaze adults and create ecstasy in the children." This release was a plan architected by Kerlog to dissipate any sign of social unrest within the black population by distracting them. But the new toy was just a backup plan.

Hoping to win a second term, Kerlog had never accepted his defeat to Jim Roy. After the election's result came out and Jim Roy was declared the new president, Kerlog summoned his cabinet to create a plan to revert the situation. Among its members was John Dudley, the great inventor of the group. Dudley announced to Kerlog that he had invented the machine that could permanently uncurl the black population's hair. A successful skin depigmentation process had already been implemented decades before

– all Americans, Black and White, already had the same skin color: white. However, John Dudley's new invention was the *omega rays*, which had a miraculous property to modify the African hair texture from coiled to straight – the last step left for blacks to become completely white. Soon after this new invention was announced, the *Dudley Uncurling Company* established posts in all American cities. Miss Jane describes the impact that this invention had in the cosmetic industry:

The factories of combs, hairpins, shampoos, hair gel, hair dye, etc. – worked night and day to supply the sudden demand for such products. Hairstylists appeared everywhere, and they could not handle so many requests, no matter how much they worked. The negro women, above all, lived perpetually smiling, spending the days looking at the mirror, combing and messing their hair freely. When running their fingers through their hair with the omega effect, their happiness made them forget the long past of the humiliating curly hair. Whites, at last! Freed from the heinous stigma! (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 150).

The news of Jim Roy's death was announced to the whole country through the radio. But the initial feelings of social unrest, stirred among the Black population when listening to the announcement, was immediately overshadowed by the release of the new tango dancing doll. Very soon, the black population was back at being inebriated by their unique hair texture. Months later, the Blacks' birth rate started to decrease significantly: in March 2228, exactly nine months after the first Uncurling salon had opened its doors, the birth rate had been reduced by 30 percent, which doubled in April and reached 97 percent in May. By June, only 122 black children were born in the United States. In August, the Dudley Uncurling Company ended its activities and distributed the dividends. The whole truth only came out on May 7, 2228, months after Jim Roy's death: in addition to straightening the texture of the black population's hair, the omega rays also sterilized them (FANON 2008; MBEMBE 2019).

Right after the election, Kerlog had rushed to pass an amendment to the Owen's Law. As described in Monteiro Lobato's novel, Owen's Law was inspired by the fictional writer Walter Owen, author of *The Right to Procreate*, published decades before the racial clash in the United States in 2228. In his book, Owen launched the foundations of the Racial Code, which advocates for the sterilization of perverts, physical, and mental defectives. A few years after the law was implemented, deaf-mutes, handicaps, mentally insane, hysterics, born criminals, fanatics, prostitutes, etc., had all been eliminated from the country (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 72-73). The amendment approved the inclusion of a new type of defective trait in the law:

the White Convention decides to amend Owen's Law and pass to include, among the deviances denounced that entails sterilization, the camouflaged black pigment... The white race authorizes the American government to use any resources that it may consider convenient to execute this supreme and irrevocable sentence (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 169).

In the article *O radiomotor*, published in 1910, Monteiro Lobato showed tremendous excitement about Marie Curie's isolation of the radium particle. A few lines later, he praised Gustave Le Bon's discovery of the manifestation of a new force – the *intra-atomic energy*, a harbinger of the Atomic Age (LOBATO 2008 [1910]). In the future portrayed in *O Presidente Negro*, new technologies make life easier by turning time and space shorter; but they also become weapons of mass destruction. Authors such as Norbert Bolz and Friedrich A. Kittler had pointed out in their works a media genealogy in which war is the father of all things technical (KITTLER 1999, p. xxxvi; BOLZ 1999). In Monteiro Lobato's novel, Professor Benson seems to be aware of the threats that such inventions could inspire if found in the wrong hands. That is why he destroyed the *porviroscópio* before he died – the invention was a burden and a threat to humanity:

[...] Just know that you find yourself in front of a man condemned to take his invention with him to his grave because this invention exceeds the human capacity to adapt to discoveries. If I made it public, poor humanity! It would be impossible to predict the consequences that this would provoke. If good sense predominated among men, the superior intelligence, the noble qualities, I would have made my remarkable discovery known to the world. But because man is like he is, vicious and evil, with an irreducible instinct for despotism, I cannot leave among them such dangerous weapon. [...] If I wanted... I could become the lord of the world for I am armed with a potency that the mystics had judge exclusive of divinities (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 14-15).

The *porviroscópio* gives Professor Benson privileged (though unauthorized) access to information concealed to others, which raises the question of privacy. The device works as a peephole, in which one can see others without being observed back. Benson can see whatever he wants through a receptor that captures all information available in the world: his wealth, made from investments in the stock market, results from this privileged access to future data. Professor Benson describes to Ayrton Lobo a series of unrelated events happening in real-time, seen through the *porviroscópio*, from "a fish shoal that at this exact moment is agonizing

in the middle of the ocean while being caught in the Gulf Stream” to a “little ant that was smashed by a galloping foal in the Argentine’s pampas;” or “the kiss that Gloria Swanson is about to receive from Valentino in a Hollywood studio...” (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 30).

The growing fear that new inventions and technologies could violate one’s privacy had been widely discussed at least since 1890, when Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren published the article *The Right to Privacy*:

Recent inventions and business methods call attention to the next step which must be taken for the protection of the person, and for securing to the individual what Judge Cooley calls the right “to be let alone.” *Instantaneous photographs* and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that “what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops” (BRANDEIS and WARREN 1890, p. 195).

On January 29, 1916, Louis Brandeis was nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court of Justice, becoming one of the most influential legal thinkers of the twentieth century. During his term, many of the cases that came before the court had to do with new technologies, like the telephone. Brandeis was on the court that ruled on wiretapping in 1928, the *Olmstead v. the United States* case. In his dissent, Justice Brandeis argued that what one says on the telephone still belongs to the person, even if it is just simple electrical pulses. In the end, it is still your voice. In his argument, Brandeis tried to explain why it would constitute a dangerous situation to think otherwise. As Jill Lepore explains: “[Brandeis] pointed out that governments used to torture you, to try to get you to confess. Or they could invade your house, they could seize your stuff, to get evidence against you. But the rules of evidence in a trial by jury, and the 4th and 5th Amendments were meant to put a stop on that. Wiretapping, he argues, was just a newer version of those same old tricks” (LEPORE 2020). For Brandeis, “subtler and more far-reaching means of invading privacy have become available to the Government. Discovery and invention have made it possible for the Government, by means far more effective than stretching upon the rack, to obtain disclosure in court of what is whispered in the closet” (BRANDEIS 1928). In his final argument, Brandeis concluded that wiretapping amounted to an unconstitutional invasion of privacy. And issued a warning:

The progress of science in furnishing the Government with means of espionage is not likely to stop with wiretapping. Ways may someday be developed by which the Government, without removing papers from secret drawers, can reproduce them in court, and by which it will be enabled to expose to a jury the most intimate occurrences of the home (BRANDEIS 1928; LEPORE 2020).

His ideas had much in common with Sigmund Freud's studies on psychoanalysis being published around that time. The "radio revolution" brought significant changes in many everyday habits, generating concerns about possible effects on human perception and emotions. Amid the general enthusiasm with wireless technology, a debate was revived about the possibility of transferring thoughts from one mind to another without any external signs or manifestations (GUMBRECHT 1997, Location 2944 and 2945). In his *Work of Art*, Walter Benjamin explained that a different kind of nature opens up to the camera, which human eyes cannot see: "The camera," he said, "introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (BENJAMIN 1968, p. 235- 236; SONTAG 1977). Camera. Unconscious impulses. Dreams. In *O Presidente Negro*, they all come together in the *Oneiric Theater* – one of the most significant technological innovations of 2228. According to Miss Jane:

They discovered a process to fix dreams on the screen, as today the cinematographer fixes material movement on film. And given the richness of our subconsciousness, the sea from which dreams emanate, a deep sea of which the consciousness is nothing but the surface, Mr. Ayrton can imagine what marvelous representations did not take place in this theater. [...] [It] became a supreme art [and] a science. The human soul only ceased to be the enigma that it is today when it became possible to be photographed in its manifestation of absolute nudity (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 52).

In 1928, the American publicist Edward Louis Bernays, who was Freud's nephew, published one of his most famous books, *Propaganda*, inspired by his works on advertising and public relations. In the opening chapter, titled *Organizing Chaos*, Bernays wrote: "The unconscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinion of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country" (BERNAYS 1928, p. 9).

Public sentiment is everything

Whether conscious or not, Bernay's words evoke one of Abraham Lincoln's most famous remarks, repeated time and time again: "Public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed. Whoever molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes, or pronounces judicial decisions" (*apud* LILA 2017, p. 5-6). In *O Presidente Negro*, Jim Roy and President Kerlog are very aware of this strategy, although the means used by each is what will determine the outcome. Right before casting his vote, Jim Roy retreated to his office in the Negro Association headquarters. Through the window, he casts his eyes over the city of Washington, D.C. What he sees is a collection of memories of a "mournful past of a wretched race," from the African shores to the cotton plantations in Virginia (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 107).

For Jim Roy, despite Lincoln saying enough was enough when he ended slavery in the United States, "the shackles fell out of the wrists but the stigma remained. The iron shackles have been replaced by the moral shackles of the outcast. The white partner denied the Black partner participation in the moral profit from the common work. Equality and fraternity were denied, although the Law [...] mandated the equality of the two races" (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 107-108). For Jim Roy, historical justice would only be accomplished "by force." Not in violent terms. Instead of supporting one of the white candidates, Jim Roy dared to put his own name on the ballot for president. On his way to the voting booth to announce and cast his vote, Jim Roy passes by a bust of Lincoln, put his hands on his shoulder, and says: "You began this work, Jim will finish it..." (LOBATO 2019 [1926], p. 108). Lincoln is mentioned several times in a conversation between Jim Roy and Kerlog in *O Presidente Negro's* last chapters. Through Jim Roy's words, Lincoln always emerges as an authority from the past, if not as the past itself. Kerlog acknowledges this authority, only to dismiss it immediately: for him, the authority that emanates from his white blood is beyond this authority from the past – it transcends history.

The Lincoln Memorial, a U.S. national memorial erected in honor of the 16th President of the United States, was inaugurated on May 30, 1922, four years before *O Presidente Negro* was published. Inside the building, a large solitary figure of Abraham Lincoln, sitting in contemplation and measuring 19 feet (5.8m), struck the audience by its splendid appearance. In Lobato's novel, Lincoln's bust is just a statue: a mute, immobile carved stone piece. In 2228, the appeal to the past (history) lost its capacity to exert any significant influence over political and public issues. In this future, the US society – Blacks and Whites – sold their freedom, their right to privacy, their own history, to

be entertained by a tango dancing doll, mesmerized by the false peaceful promises of a war that would never again be fought in the trenches. They only forgot that the next battles would be staged in the realms of wireless technology.

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FUNDING

Not applicable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am indebted to Professor Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Thamara de Oliveira Rodrigues, André Ramos and Eric De Feo for their generous feedback and comments on a preliminary version of this article.

COMPETING INTERESTS

No declared conflict of interest.

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Not applicable.

EVALUATION METHOD

Double-Blind Peer Review.

RESPONSIBLE EDITOR

João Rodolfo Munhoz Ohara - Executive Editor

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PEER REVIEW HISTORY

Received in: 2 october 2020.

Changed on: 8 january 2021.

Approved in: 12 january 2021.