

Defying the Fetish: Gender Transformations and Material Culture Economy in the Lutherie Industry of Argentina and Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the traditionally male-dominated lutherie industry in the Southern Cone of South America. Women, non-binary, and queer-identified luthiers are leading the charge, offering affordable, locally sourced custom-made instruments. In Argentina and Brazil, women and non-binary luthiers have reshaped the artisanal musical instrument industry by using local materials and communal crafting expertise. This novel trend diverges from the traditional standards of individual master-apprentice settings and the common practice of sourcing imported exotic and endangered tonewoods, such as ebony, rosewood, Canadian red cedar, and European spruce. By fostering a more equitable field and encouraging appreciation for their craftsmanship, these luthier communities transform established conventional standards and urge broader recognition of diverse talents in lutherie. In contrast to a superficial approach that merely follows tradition for profit or family lineage, their dedicated commitment honors breaking with precedents and inspires reconsideration. This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in São Paulo and Curitiba, Brazil, as well as interviews with members of Red Lutherística from Buenos Aires, Argentina, a Latin American network community of

women and non-binary luthiers. It sheds light on the impact of these vital luthier networks and communities, emphasizing particularly the role of public universities and low-cost guitar-making courses in promoting gender equality, diversity, and innovation. Furthermore, I argue that these efforts have contributed to de-fetishizing the field of lutherie in South America. Overall, in this research I aim to showcase the contributions of underrepresented luthiers and the impact of their innovative practices on reshaping the material culture, economy of handmade instruments, and lutherie landscape in Argentina and Brazil.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

My interdisciplinary research draws insights from the fields of material culture, cultural geography, and global feminisms, among others. I conducted fieldwork in Brazil over three trips in February, April, and September of 2024. In São Paulo, I focused on visiting workshops and interviewing various luthiers for my research. During my trip in April, I also traveled to Curitiba, where I visited the lutherie program at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR). While there, I attended classes, interacted with professors and students, and toured the workshop of UFPR graduates. I also interviewed participants of Red Lutherística from Buenos Aires and completed an online French polishing¹ course with Flor Centurión, its founding member. The three sites for my research were selected for their unique contributions to the field of lutherie. São Paulo is home to a small but active community of women luthiers, emerging from accessible, private courses. Curitiba is notable for hosting Brazil's only university degree in lutherie at UFPR. Lastly, Buenos Aires is significant for its impact on the regional lutherie network, housing over thirty members of Red Lutherística.

This paper takes the fetish as a key theoretical concept for approaching the study of musical instruments, arguing that lutherie scenes led by women play a significant role in questioning and defying the fetishization of musical instruments. Additionally, public and low-cost courses as part of comprehensive lutherie education are crucial today in nurturing resistance to this fetish.

THE FETISH OF OBJECTS, THE FETISH FOR MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, AND DEFYING FETISH

Arjun Appadurai (1986, 50-56) uses the term “fetish” to describe the symbolic and socially significant meanings that commodities are imbued with, extending beyond their economic value.

¹ French polishing is a finishing technique of applying many individual thin layers of shellac varnish to wood, using a cloth pad (rubber) to spread and buff the liquid finish until it forms a dry, polished surface. Shellac is made from the resin of the female lac beetle, processed into flakes, and dissolved in alcohol so that it can be applied with a pad. French polishing is a traditional finishing method commonly used on high-end classical guitars. Production of an even finish requires considerable skill and time. Although the result is less durable than a modern polymer like polyurethane, some luthiers and classical guitarists believe that French polish's thin finish adds little mass or damping, improving the sound of instruments by allowing the wood to vibrate freely (French 2022; Bogdanovich 2007).

For Igor Kopytoff (1986, 73-77), fetishization endows commodities with socially constructed power beyond their true worth through “cultural singularization.” Louise Green (2018) explains how fetishes encompass the ability of certain material objects to embody desire, represent incomprehension, and hold contingent moments of encounter. Jane Bennett (2010) defines fetish as an object that has become a conduit to something that the human subject has oppressed or disregarded, emphasizing the agency and vitality of non-human entities. Peter Pels (1998) and Michael Taussig (2010, 25) describe fetish as a powerful animated entity that can dominate persons, challenging relationships between humans and objects. These notions of fetish uncover a complex interaction between commodities and cultures, highlighting how objects are not merely passive exchange tools. Instead, they function as actors infused with social, political, and psychological significance extending beyond their material worth and restructuring our sense of value in human-object relationships.

The fetishization of musical instruments rises from socio-cultural narratives that assign them significant symbolic value. Kathryn Dudley (2014) emphasizes that guitar-making is intertwined with masculinity and tradition, framing these instruments as culturally rich commodities rather than mere tools. This view is reinforced by romanticized notions of craftsmanship that elevate instruments to works of art, often obscuring their usefulness. Similarly, Thomas Kies (2013) argues that luthiers should focus on the practical and most evident aspects of guitars instead of viewing them only as fetishized collectibles, enabling a reconsideration of their intrinsic value. The emotional attachment musicians form with their gear, including musical instruments, tools, and equipment, as discussed by Jan-Peter Herbst and Jonas Menze (2021), can lead to prioritizing acquisition over honest use, complicating interactions with musical instruments.

To confront this fetishization, some authors suggest strategies to reframe the narrative surrounding musical gear. By emphasizing functional and expressive qualities, the appreciation of these instruments can become more balanced, recognizing their roles in creativity alongside their cultural significance. Jonathan Sterne (2018) introduces the concept of spectral objects, which are musical instruments and technologies that encapsulate both tangible qualities and intangible social meanings, transcending their physical attributes. This perspective critiques the fetishization of instruments within capitalist and patriarchal frameworks, where value and agency are misattributed to the objects themselves rather than the social dynamics behind them. Chris Gibson and Andrew Warren (2021) advocate for greater transparency in the guitar industry to demystify the allure of traditional lutherie and encourage sustainability. Eric Broess (2023) suggests that a historical context regarding musical gear production can challenge romanticized views that foment fetishization. Steven Cole (2018) highlights the role of virtual communities in redirecting the focus from acquisition to the use value in music-making, fostering healthier relationships between musicians and their instruments. Together, these insights promote a transition from fetishistic consumption to a more practical appreciation of musical gear grounded in artistic expression rather than mere desirability.

In parallel to the scholars cited, I argue that women and non-binary luthiers in Argentina and Brazil are challenging the fetishization and patriarchal traditions of artisanal musical instruments by promoting a culturally distinctive appreciation for their craftsmanship. By reframing these instruments as tools for self-expression, they emphasize their use value over exchange value (Taylor 2024) and engage in meaningful activities like playing and producing music. This shift promotes collective ethics around consumption within their communities. Furthermore, they aim for greater transparency in lutherie, diversifying materials, and establishing direct communication with musicians. They also offer nuanced historical perspectives on instrument production, recognizing its political dimensions, and collaborate with experts to create sustainable alternatives to traditional materials. Lastly, I assert that they advocate for innovation in crafting while preserving cultural significance, involving local communities in decision-making, and promoting environmental conservation.

RED LUTHERÍSTICA AND THE LUTHIER COLLECTIVES OF BUENOS AIRES AND SÃO PAULO

Red Lutherística is a Latin American collective of women and non-binary instrument makers challenging gender norms in the music industry. They produce musical instruments of notable quality by integrating traditional craftsmanship with modern innovations. Utilizing local materials, they emphasize sustainability and durability while striving to reclaim the historically male-dominated field of lutherie. Their instruments are characterized by unique sound qualities and exceptional construction, which involve complex production techniques that are challenging to automate or master. The members, from diverse backgrounds, promote cultural diversity and sustainability through their work. The name “Red Lutherística,” a combination of “red” (network) and “luthería” (instrument-making) in Spanish, symbolizes their shared values of support, cooperation, and artistry. Skilled makers and activists, the members of Red Lutherística use their craft to promote social justice and gender equality, conducting workshops and mentorship programs in their communities.

This research focused on six women and non-binary luthiers in Buenos Aires and São Paulo. They were chosen for their growing presence and popularity in the lutherie scenes of these cities, thanks to their competence and alternative approaches to instrument-building. In a direct communication with Red Lutherística coordinators, Flor Centurión and Dalila Cabrera, they expressed eagerness to have their voices heard and were pleased to contribute to this research, advocating for a more gender-balanced lutherie environment. Despite having individual workplaces, they collaborate on local joint projects, clinics, conferences, and activities promoting gender equality in lutherie. They also subcontract their services to other luthiers, guitar factories, and music stores for specific tasks such as setups, varnishing, and installing inlays. Here, I highlight three Argentinian luthiers, two of whom identify as women and one as non-binary: Flor Centurión, Camila Luna Martínez, and Wayun Luthier. Additionally, I highlight

three Brazilian women luthiers: Cibele Minder, Nayara Daisy, and Paula Bifulco. All three Brazilian luthiers took affordable private courses to learn their craft.

Flor Centurión, Camila Luna Martínez, and Wayun Luthier are contemporary luthiers based in Buenos Aires. They are deeply committed to instrument-making, blending traditional techniques with innovative practices. Each has honed their skills through specialized education at public universities and affordable courses, focusing on creating, restoring, and customizing string instruments. With expertise in guitar and violin construction, Flor Centurión teaches private seminars and is part of the teaching staff for the Diploma in Lutherie at the National University of the Arts while also being a founding member of Red Lutherística. Camila Luna Martínez specializes in building, customizing, and repairing folkloric instruments like charangos, cuatros, and guitarrón criollo, as well as classical and electric guitars. She is renowned among Argentinian luthiers for her distinctive marquetry and custom designs, thanks to her engaging online postings showcasing her artistry. Wayun Luthier combines conventional techniques with sustainability, crafting Creole guitars, ukuleles, cavaquinhos, cuatros, electric guitars, and basses using locally sourced woods and recycled materials in their workshop.

In São Paulo, a pioneering group of women luthiers focusing on chordophones used in popular music exemplifies a collective commitment to creativity and cultural preservation. Cibele Minder, trained in classical guitar-making through the course offered by Rosana and Agostinho Cardoso, stands out in the scene with her emphasis on sustainable wood and visually striking instruments. Her talents as a guitarist and sought-after roadie further complement her craftsmanship. Similarly, Nayara Daisy has distinguished herself in São Paulo after honing her skills at B&H Escola de Luthieria.² Since completing her training, she has been an integral member of the PLG Luthieria³ team, building and repairing various string instruments. Additionally, she actively engages in cultural traditions through her work as a flutist and percussionist. Paula Bifulco, who also improved her lutherie skills at B&H, has carved out a unique niche by founding Pauleira Guitars. “Pauleira,” a wordplay in Portuguese, cleverly combines the name Paula with the slang for ‘hardcore’ or ‘tough,’ symbolizing the brand’s strength and resilience. She has built a dedicated following through her dynamic teaching programs and an online presence highlighting women’s growing influence in the lutherie field.

ACCESSIBLE LUTHERIE EDUCATION: DEFYING FETISH

Public universities in South America, particularly in Argentina and Brazil, have played a crucial role in offering accessible and affordable education to students from diverse backgrounds, including degrees in lutherie, focusing on stringed instruments such as guitars, violins, and folkloric instruments. Recently, educators within these institutions have emphasized gender equality and diversity, encouraging more women and non-binary individuals to pursue lutherie courses. In Argentina, the National University of the Arts and La Escuela de Luthieria de

² The name B&H is derived from the last initials of its owners, Marcio Benedetti and Henry Ho.

³ The name PLG is derived from the first initials of its founders, Paulo Cunha, Lucas Caracik, and Guilherme De Paula.

Cafayate provide comprehensive, cost-free degrees in musical instrument-making. In Brazil, the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR) offers a free degree in lutherie, significantly impacting the music-instrument-making environment in the region. Graduates of these programs have started their own lutherie businesses. Furthermore, affordable private courses in Argentina and Brazil, offering personalized and intensive skill development, are essential for women and non-binary individuals pursuing lutherie careers. I contend that by providing affordable courses, some established luthiers are also challenging the patriarchal dominance and control that has historically been present in musical instrument-making.

During my visit to the UFPR lutherie department in Curitiba in April 2024, I had the opportunity to attend classes, engage in conversations with faculty and students, and discuss their course schedules. This experience made it evident that this degree program holds transformative potential in de-fetishizing the traditional lutherie field. The reason is mainly due to the professors' diverse educational and professional backgrounds, representing various disciplines in the humanities, environmental studies, and quantitative sciences. Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of this program sets it apart from traditional and monolithic lutherie education. In a conversation with Professor Thiago de Freitas and Professor Igor Fomin, a physicist and a forest engineer respectively, they made a compelling argument that local, non-endangered woods like "roxinho," "imbuia," and "marupá" possess similar acoustic and physical properties as exotic woods such as rosewood, ebony, and Canadian red-cedar which are typically prized in traditional lutherie. They also highlighted that these sustainable woods are more affordable for students and beginner luthiers, making them a practical choice for crafting musical instruments.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of women and non-binary luthier collectives in Buenos Aires and São Paulo challenges competitive masculine heteronormative standards. Cibeles Minder and Nayara Daisy both shared experiences of facing prejudice from cis-male customers and colleagues while working alone in all-male workshops, often being questioned about their expertise and strength to complete demanding tasks. However, they observed that when other women were present and working alongside them in these workshops, it significantly reduced misogynistic behavior and increased the acceptance of women luthiers. In tandem, Flor Centurión describes how Red Lutherística challenges traditional masculine norms through a three-pillar approach focused on collaboration, professionalization, and diffusion. By promoting professional exchange and showcasing members' work through training sessions, seminars, and exhibitions, Red Lutherística fosters a supportive environment. Their practices aim to create spaces that contrast with the exclusive and secretive nature of traditional male-dominated luthier settings. Also, by creating counter-narratives that reflect their identity and experiences, they seek to deconstruct traditional representations and stereotypes, promoting inclusivity in patriarchal artistic spaces (Neiva 2019).

The luthier collectives in Buenos Aires and São Paulo exemplify Edward Soja's (1996) concept of Thirdspace, functioning as hybrid spaces that challenge heteronormative norms and empower women and non-binary luthiers to address oppression. Drawing on Ruth Finnegan's (1989) standpoint on the significance of local amateur musicians, I argue that these collectives, while still somewhat hidden from prevailing cis-masculine lutherie, play a crucial role in local and regional networks, contributing to a dynamic economy. They are also more democratic, creative, and cooperative than mainstream groupings. Furthermore, the women and non-binary luthier communities in these cities already represent unique, flexible urban scenes. Will Straw (1991) defines a "scene" as an inclusive, welcoming space for diverse individuals, and alongside Andy Bennett's (1999) concept of "Neo-tribes," these collectives highlight adaptability and a sense of belonging.

In conclusion, the transformation of the traditionally male-dominated lutherie industry in Argentina and Brazil and the material culture and economy of handmade instruments can be attributed to three coexisting strands: 1) The collaborative initiatives of women and gender-fluid luthiers. 2) Emerging alternative music scenes. 3) Public universities and affordable lutherie programs. First and foremost, it is evident that these collectives are highly aware of the fetishization of musical instruments and have worked attentively to defy it. Additionally, in collaboration with musicians, educators, and allies from other areas, establishing new local and regional alternative music scenes has been instrumental in advancing change. Moreover, the role and increasing visibility of public universities offering degrees in lutherie and the accessibility of low-cost private guitar-making courses promote gender equality, diversity, and innovation, propelling a new generation of luthiers free from the constraints of patriarchal lineage. This shift is gradually but steadily carving out space for individuals who bring fresh perspectives and groundbreaking approaches to lutherie in South America.

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