CHAPTER 6

Colonial Bodies: Collecting the Exotic Other

One of the most iconic preparations from the eighteenth-century Leiden anatomical collections is a male foetus of about five months old, wearing strings of black-blue and white beads around its neck, waist, wrists, and ankles. It is now considered a ‘top piece’ from the historical collection, on permanent loan to the Leiden Museum Boerhaave. It has been assigned to the collection of Leiden anatomy professor Sebald Justinus Brugmans (1763–1819), and according to the catalogue description is ‘African,’ although its origins are unclear. And this beaded baby is not alone: another nine similar preparations of human foetuses decorated with beads are housed in Leiden, and four more are found in the Utrecht University Museum, the Amsterdam Museum Vrolik, and the St. Petersburg Kunstkamera respectively. Apart from this preparation, several of the other foetuses have been documented in books on collections and collecting. One beaded baby has been pictured in three books in the past twenty years, in one case together with the very similar preparation from the St. Petersburg collection. It is hard not to linger on these preparations, as they instantly evoke many questions: where are they from, and how did they end up

1 For a more general discussion on the fate of these and other colonial anatomical preparations, see Hendriksen, “The Fate of the Beaded Babies.”

2 LUMC catalogue number Af0044. Malik, The Meaning of Race: Race is obviously a tricky concept, rather a social construction than a biological fact and now largely obsolete in the life sciences. Yet in the period that the preparations discussed in this chapter were made, ‘race’ was an only an emerging concept, first applied as a metaphor in matters of organic reproduction and used both for biological and biopolitical ends. See Mueller-Wille and Rheinberger, “Heredity,” and Mazzolini, “Las Castas.” Moreover, as B. Ricardo Brown, Until Darwin, 10, points out: “…the ability of science to fix—however unstable and temporary this might be—the classification of human variety has contributed mightily to the establishment of the authority of the science of life in our understanding of the truth about human nature and society.” Terms like ‘black’ or ‘African’ and ‘Asian’ were used by eighteenth-century natural philosophers and natural historians in attempts to create categories within the continuum of variations of human appearances. As the preparations discussed in this chapter were defined in these terms by their initial collectors, I will maintain these categories here.
