

## The logic of obliteration as a repertoire: the reenactment of whitening throughout Aquarius archival memory

Volume 41  
issue 3 / 2022

Contracampo e-ISSN 2238-2577  
Niterói (RJ), 41 (3)  
sep/2022 - dec/2022

Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication is a quarterly publication of the Graduate Programme in Communication Studies (PPGCOM) at Fluminense Federal University (UFF). It aims to contribute to critical reflection within the field of Media Studies, being a space for dissemination of research and scientific thought.

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COMUNICAÇÃO  
MESTRADO E DOUTORADO UFF

TO REFERENCE THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE USE THE FOLLOWING CITATION:

Belo, Pollyane. (2022). The logic of obliteration as a repertoire: the reenactment of whitening throughout Aquarius' archival memory. *Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication*, Niterói, v. 41, n. 3.

**Submitted on: 01/20/2022; Reviewer A: 02/28/2022; Reviewer B: 08/03/2022;  
Accepted on: 09/13/2022.**

**DOI – <http://dx.doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v41i3.52842>**



## Abstract

The young version of Clara (a character in the feature film *Aquarius*) is played by Bárbara Colen (a self-declared black woman) and, when older, by Sônia Braga (a self-declared white woman). This article intends to think about the aesthetic, affective and narrative elements that mediate whiteness and blackness when convenient and thus obliterate non-white racialized traits of a black subjectivity-body. For this aim, the film's scenes were juxtaposed with extra-filmic archives that bring the two actresses. Thus, Clara's case enables a glimpse into the Brazilian whitening project as an embodied memory that flows into those responsible for pre-production, cinematographic development and the film's parabolic media products.

### Keywords

Whitening; Obliteration; Repertoire; Cinema; Aquarius.

## Introduction

Aquarius (Mendonça Filho, 2016) tells the story of Clara, a middle-class woman over 60 years old, who had breast cancer in her youth and now lives alone, in the same low-rise building that she has lived almost her whole life, namesake of the film's title. The plot addresses the attempts at modernization and real estate speculation on the edge of Boa Viagem beach (Recife - PE), cut out by the large window of Clara's living room.

In her young version, seen in the brief first sequence of the film, Clara is played by Bárbara Colen, a self-declared black woman,<sup>1</sup> and for the rest of the plot the role is played by Sônia Braga, a self-declared white woman.<sup>2</sup>

This article, therefore, seeks to map the subtleties of racial mediation made through the bodies of different races that play the same character. The first analysis was conducted through an aesthetic and narrative examination of the film's scenes. Then, a question arose around the pre-production of the work: why was a black woman cast to share a character with a white woman? For such a purpose, it was necessary to gather extra-filmic archives and moments both closely and distantly related to Aquarius, as it revealed an affective dimension: What kind of affective connection brings the two figures together in the film selection process? The archives brought for this purpose included a news article with photos from *Jornal Extra* introducing the newcomer actress Bárbara Colen to the readers, simultaneous to the film's release, and a digression to Sônia Braga's past work in the soap opera *Gabriela* (Avancini, 1975), a role that places her as a non-white woman based on a modulation of her skin.

With this movement I intend to refer to the materialist approach of compositional thinking (Silva, 2016). I approach film and media archives – “the ‘archive’ memory [that] exists in the form of documents” (Taylor, 2013, p. 48), textual, oral and imagery cataloging – to a record of symbolic and material annihilation of the non-white population (global racist movement). This approach is carried out in order to bring forth the Brazilian embodied memory (Taylor, 2013) that contributes to the erasure of non-white subjectivity-bodies, and symbols, that is, that fuels the logic of obliteration (Silva, 2006) within the archives brought here.

By embodied memory or repertoire, I consider actions aimed at bodily movement, orality, gesticulation, vocalization, interaction - in short, fleeting knowledge, subordinated to the literate knowledge; knowledge that has a radical empiricism not limited to modern descriptive capture and scholarly reproduction. Above all, the built-in memory, even though it can be printed in the archive, contrasts with the isolated capacity of the archival memory, since

repertoire requires presence - people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there”, being part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, actions in the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire at the same time guards and transforms the choreographies of meaning (Taylor, 2013, p. 50).

In order to understand the repertorial presence of human and media agents who ignore the

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1 In 2020, *Mostra Cin-Delas* on Canal Brasil broadcast testimonies about the representation of black women in cinema. Among those interviewed was Bárbara Colen: “I grew up in a generation where soap operas were white, right? Hair was straight, I played with blonde barbies. So how much has that weakened me? I can't tell you. (...) Even my positioning as an actress is difficult at times, I sometimes feel like an imposter, as if I have no right to be there. As if I didn't have the looks to be there. As if the right image were the white image, you know? So it's a matter of deconstructing the imaginary itself.” (Colen, 2020, s/p.)

2 Braga's self-declaration can be extracted from the following statement in an interview with the UOL portal, when commenting on a role in her soap opera resume: “Before ‘*Gabriela*’, I only played neurotic white characters, girls who spoke weird”, explained the actress (...). “I've always been very white. Arduino Colasanti (1936-2014), whom I was dating at the time, started taking me on boat trips. I came back tan and soft, ready to embody ‘*Gabriela*’.” (Braga, 2019, s/p.)

aesthetic imperative of Sônia Braga's whiteness and Bárbara Colen's blackness, this essay presents the following exposition: a) first, I situate the historical circumstances and discourses of domination around Brazilian miscegenation taken as "racial democracy"; b) I demonstrate how the logic of obliteration is the result of this myth and of the mestizo figure, which occupies the place of the synthesis of the dialectical process of races, transforming it into an instrument to appease national racial differences; c) I analyze the intra/extra-film aesthetic and narrative artifices and the pendulous role of archives in the construction of Clara's whiteness in the year *Aquarius* was released; d) I recover extra-film files distant from the year of the work's premiere (2016) but not separated from the film's whitening process, which friction and reiterate the latter.

## Background

Miscegenation engendered in national history receives the status of a eugenic device<sup>3</sup> after its review by studies critical to the myth of racial democracy (Azevedo, 1975; Nascimento, 1978; Munanga, 1999; Oliveira and Oliveira, 1979; Piza and Rosemberg, 2003; Skidmore, 2003; Skidmore, 1976). This myth points out the socioeconomic order as the main social discrimination, and disregards the hierarchies between whites and non-whites, in "racial democracy" these relationships are already balanced. Brazil is portrayed as the home of harmony between races: here there is no color prejudice.

To consolidate and become increasingly stronger, the myth manipulates some facts evidenced in the reality of Brazilian society, such as miscegenation, mythical personalities and symbols of black cultural resistance in the country. It will affirm that we are a mixed people – that is, neither white, nor black nor Indian –, a new Brazilian 'race', a mestizo race. Who will discriminate against whom, if we are all mixed race? (Munanga, 2017, p. 38)

While miscegenation is ideologically constructed as the resolution of racial inequalities in Brazil, it is anchored in some of the following pseudoscientific assumptions: polygyny, the postulate that defends different origins for human races; Lombroso studies or criminal anthropology, a corollary of classification and deduction of criminal predispositions according to the physical constitution of the person; and the degenerative miscegenation, that is, the centralization in the purity of the white race that deems the fruits of the mixture of non-white people with the white person as a degeneration.

A considerable part of these discourses was assimilated by institutions such as the Bahia School of Medicine (Mandarino and Gomberg, 2010) and the Law Schools of São Paulo and Recife, whose actions to accelerate the whitening of the population designated: the extradition of people who were enslaved back to the African continent; intercession in the adoption of restrictive policies with regard to immigration; and the limitation of the diaspora to white people, preferably Europeans (Schwarcz, 1994; Alvarez, 2002), entitled to transportation and accommodation allowances.<sup>4</sup>

The scenario of socioeconomic and legal suppression allows the rise of national racial socio-

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3 The concept of device derives from its Foucauldian conception, that is, "a decidedly heterogeneous set that encompasses discourses, institutions, architectural organizations, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions. In short, the said and the unsaid are the elements of the device. The device is the network that can be weaved between these elements" (Foucault, 2000, p. 244).

4 Decree nº 528, of June 28, 1890, established that the State would refund to transport companies 120 francs of the transport value of each European adult, 60 francs for tickets for children between 8 and 12 years old, and 30\$ for 7 to 3 years old. A bonus of 100,000 francs was promised to shipping companies that had transported 100,000 European immigrants within a year. In addition, the landowner who had 100 European families as tenants of his property would receive the prize of 5:000\$. On the other hand, the captains of vessels that brought the "indigenous people from Asia or Africa" would be fined between 2:000\$ and 5:000\$, and could lose their command post in case of recidivism. Retrieved September 26, 2021 from: <https://bit.ly/3muA8Oh>.

psychological symptoms: “the Brazilian cultural neurosis” (Gonzalez, 1984). Neuroticism is the prognosis given to the individuals who articulate means of hiding the symptom, and their tacit ignorance brings them advantages. In this sense, when considering the articulations of the Brazilian government and institutions throughout history to maintain precarious and dominated black peoples, the symptom they repress is racism itself. The ruling classes act based on legal, economic, and scientific justifications (such as those mentioned above), to dilute and withdraw from direct confrontation with the ways they created to camouflage racial discrimination.

The listed racist neurotic tricks, sponsored by the heads of state, are configured as eugenic measures codependent on the external stimulus (Fanon, 2008), that is, what often points to the blackness of a black body-subjectivity in a white environment. The ideology of whitening acts indirectly on the subjectivation of black people, either through written decrees or through discrimination in everyday life, as it does not allow these people to forget that they are not white, or not white enough, causing self-directed disgust and aversion to their peers.

It would be possible to say that the most efficient indirect work for the whitening of the population, created in the game of recognizing who is human<sup>5</sup>, was the idea that race is something physically and subjectively modifiable, both in the person’s own lifetime and within the future trajectory of their family lineage. In other words, the white national elite in its neurosis makes a false promise to those who are not part of Brazilian whiteness: the black person can leave the eternal trial of humanity. When whitening themselves, there is the hope of possible inclusion in the group of the Being. The sardonic comment made by Frantz Fanon (2008) illustrates the perspective of this “purge” of the black race through the whitening of the descendants of enslaved people: “(...) is there anything more illogical than a mulatto woman who marries a black man? For it is necessary to understand, once and for all, that she is trying to save the race” (p. 63). His criticism refers to racial relations in Martinique, but it can still be considered valid when we approach it with Lélia Gonzalez’s comment on the national mimicry of whitening, symbolized by the Brazilian “hero without any character”:

As everyone knows, Macunaíma was born black, “dark-skinned black and son of the fear of the night”. Then he whitens like many blacks we know, who, if not paid enough attention to it, will want to become Nordic. It is through this that we can understand the ideology of whitening, the logic of domination that aims at the domination of black people through the internalization and reproduction of western white values (Gonzalez, 1984, p. 237).

The atavistic value of the strategy of destruction of bodies-subjectivities, cultures, knowledge, visions, and senses of African and indigenous matrices from what was called *Terra Brasilis* in the colonization also has the dimension of performance. In this view, two points are fundamental in the path through this backdrop of national miscegenation: its weight spread through the archives, that is, the archival memory inscribing the project of whitening in materiality - the laws, the pseudosciences, the educational institutions - is in writing, typography, painting;<sup>6</sup> the second is in the built-in memory, which can fill the

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5 I emphasize that the rules of the game were created by the Brazilian white elite, who placed themselves as the center and primary reference of humanity.

6 It is interesting to note the painting *A Redenção de Cam* (1895), by Modesto Brocos, as the work semi-ologically circumscribes the scenario of national miscegenation. The picture can be described as follows: on the left, an older dark-skinned black woman is standing on a dirt floor, in an outdoor setting, with her hands raised to the sky in a thankful attitude. In the center, a younger, fair-skinned black woman is seated, also with her feet on the ground, and her white son is on her knees. To the right of the painting is the white man sitting under a doorway, watching his offspring. Its whiteness is contrasted by the interior of the house, which is not clear in the work. His feet are the only ones that step on a cobblestone pavement. The work is fundamental to think about the desired condition of whitening. Objectively, the painting portrays the junction of Portuguese and “mulata”, resulting in the white ending, and annihilation of black ancestry. The grandmother celebrates the “grace”, her descendants no longer have “the race problem”. Progress (paving stones) and social ascension is the guaranteed future. Retrieved October 26, 2021 from: <https://bit.ly/3GENlvO>.

archival memory of such a project. Embodied actions are in the minutiae of racial dynamics, situated in time and space, and which simultaneously travel and influence other performances from other cultures and other times, functioning in part as acts of transference that cut through life. The desiring condition of whitening would imprint a memory incorporated through the centuries of colonization, flowing into the present day.

From here on, we are talking about the repertoire of total annihilation that at the same time has no separation from racial violence and uses it to reach its goal. It is a project of the future which still belongs to the present. If archival memory encompasses what can be materially collected to write this text, the repertoire of the considered performance lies in the twilight of images and is synonymous with the obliteration of black people in the game of humanity.

## Obliteration

The logic of obliteration is the term used by Denise Ferreira da Silva (2006) to explain the historical, scientific, economic, legal, and especially erotic process of dilution and, later, annihilation of non-white populations in Brazil. Based on Gilberto Freyre's thesis ([1933] 2003) that establishes the mestizo as the national subject of Brazilian post-colonial<sup>7</sup> reiteration, Silva points to the strategic and historical value that miscegenation occupies as a political/symbolic tool that contributes to racial subordination in the face of those who are not transparent to racism.

To understand Silva's proposal, it is essential to account for the fictions created by the modern/colonial framework, the result of the French and German Enlightenment movements, which fable bodily and mental (moral and intellectual) distinctions between white people and non-white people. Therefore, racialization is the instrumentalization of codes about what is not intelligible as white characteristics in each context with the aim of domination. This instrumentalization is presented as necessary when the encounter between whites, the self-styled human and superior, and non-whites, the overdetermined inferior, takes place. Whiteness is sovereign in its racial transparency that it engenders around itself. Thus, non-white peoples, named in this way by the racial dialectic created by whiteness, occupy the racial category that orbits around the modern/colonial subject, outside the recognition of humanity (Fanon, 2008; Harney and Moten, 2019; Kilomba, 2019; Kilomba, 2019; Silva, 2019).

In the specific case of Brazil, Freyre's rhetoric constructs the national subject based not only on white/non-white dualism. His writing is anchored in scientific explanations of racial and cultural differences corroborated by the tools of Anthropology and Race Relations of the 1930s. Such sociological accounts used by the author authorize the argument that the modern national subject (Portuguese), since its "Moorish hybrid" origin – facilitated by the location and close relationship of Portugal to/with the African continent – would give the Portuguese affability towards Africans, overcoming sexual segregation and discrimination of the former against the latter. The Brazilian colonizer, in Freyre's reasoning, had fundamental qualities to inaugurate a "modern civilization", south of the Equator, and, consequently, to "assimilate" the "inferior cultures and races".

On the other hand, both the anthropological writing of the "native" as always already "disappearing" and the affirmation of race relations in sociology that miscegenation constitutes the only solution to the "problem of race relations" would support the thesis that Brazil is a racial democracy precisely because of the Portuguese lack of "racial prejudice", which resulted in the rapid disappearance of vulnerable Indians and Africans from Brazil. While Indians, Africans and Europeans are always already democratically united in the transparent national subject, miscegenation would constitute the "intrinsic difference" of Brazil, thus endorsing the reality of hopelessly mixed-race Brazilians with a precarious (tropical) transparency (Silva, 2006, p. 73).

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7 In that sense, post-colonialism is defined solely as temporally subsequent to the era of colonialism.



The mestizo ascends here as the amalgamation of national identity according to Freyre, and, thus, its manufacturing process covertly occludes the dichotomous divergence of racial categorization and hierarchization. For Silva (2019), the positive description of the mestizo as an allegory that translates Brazilian society is just another way of instrumentalizing his death and the death of the blackness he still carries. The mestizo, in this reinterpretation, is excess, the result of sexual violence between white masters and enslaved black women. A leftover that rises in its primary moment as fruitful for the colonial/capitalist<sup>8</sup> interests of the lords of the big house, it is able to work in the tropics and promote the wealth of its owner. However, in the long term, this excess of miscegenation is configured as waste, something eschatological that deserves to find its end to consolidate sovereign white society.

That is, miscegenation safely inscribes a double historical movement, namely the teleological trajectory – the movement towards transparency – of the white/European subject of a patriarchal “modern civilization”, the eschatological trajectory of its “others”; but, more importantly, it also institutes a precarious social subject, the mestizo – the more or less black or white Brazilian – whose destiny is to fulfill a desire for self-effacement (ibid, p. 73-74).

In the passage above, the role of the mestizo subject on the national scene is evidenced beyond a dilutive allegory of racial conflicts. To this figure is delegated the role of an intermediary in the whitening project that takes place between the non-white population and the desired ubiquity of whiteness. The mestizo represents the time that is about to end, the time that still carries people of color, but is not so dark anymore, his body is an omen of his own end.

In writing about the precarious transparency of this national symbolic subject based on racial and cultural properties, Silva (2006) identifies that Freyre produces the temporal trajectory of the mestizo, and, therefore, the idea of harmonic miscegenation as an effect of Portuguese desire. “Its crucial move is to choose patriarchy, among modern conceptions of legal authority and economic relations, to make ‘family’ and ‘sex life’ privileged places for the use of (masculine) Portuguese desire” (ibid, p. 74). Therefore, the lord of the big house’s desire has legal-moral authorization, which makes him sovereign in his lands and over bodies circumscribed therein: all the women on the farm are his legal property. Wife and daughter are made available through marriage and slavery allows the black woman to be taken over by purchase. In this way, the Portuguese erotic desire for Freyre is not marked by an erotic transgression, a return to a certain animality as the study of the theme by Bataille proposes<sup>9</sup>, because “from beginning to end, [it is] made possible by regulation, it is not established as a breach of norms, but it is possible precisely because the subject of the erotic is also the sovereign subject of the rules” (ibid, p. 77-78).

Thus, the desire of the Portuguese conditions the regulated and authorized reproduction of their legal property. The body of the enslaved black woman becomes a sexual instrument to produce offspring that will be legally claimed as the property of the master. At this juncture, Freyre’s text establishes the European and the slave “as the main agents of miscegenation (instead of agent and instrument)” (ibid, p. 79). The racial democratic celebration organized by Freyre only contributes to reinforcing the signifier of erotic freedom in the Brazilian colonial system, that is, the creation of a particular scenario where the white Portuguese man can continue to produce economically from his juridically-morally agreed desire, whose realization takes place through an instrument, here in this case, the body of the enslaved black woman. Such a body, in Freyre’s writing, is always/already ontologically/materially annihilated and its descendants are destined to be spent in the service of the white slave-owning elites.

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8 Capitalism and colonialism are inseparable. They are historically codependent. See Quijano (2002, 2005, 2009).

9 Silva highlights *A parte maldita* (Bataille, 1993) to explain the proposition that the French philosopher makes between the erotic and its approximation to a certain “state of nature”. The erotic for the author operates through the breaking of reason, in the transgression of the rules that constitute the individual as a human.

On the other hand, the fictionalization of the mestizo as a synthesis of the myth of racial democracy camouflages this productive/destructive desire of the Portuguese. After all, it seems that miscegenation and its “products” enshrine the balance of races, and therefore, the mestizo rises as a symbolic social subject. However, whoever figures as a *modern/colonial national subject* in the materiality of decisions, power, gains, privileges, and more livable lives was (and still is) the white (Portuguese), because it is he who has the right to be master of his own wills, whose accomplishments happen productively for his own gain. According to Denise Ferreira da Silva,

(...) while the product of Portuguese desire, the mestizo, becomes the symbol of the specificity of Brazil, being a fundamentally unstable figure, as it is a temporary incorporation of Brazilianness, a necessary step towards its real expression, the Brazilian subject is always already white, because Freyre, like others before him, constructs Portuguese as the true subject of Brazilian history. Behind this text is a concern with the consequences of this representation of Brazilianness, more especially with the current writings on urban violence, which, I think, are the expected materialization of a national hegemonic narrative, which is based on the disappearance of the mestizo, the social subject which is, first and foremost, the product of a destructive desire (Silva, 2006, p. 63).

In the ballast of this non-transgressive productive/destructive desire protected by the myth of racial democracy, knowledge, memory and a sense of social identity are engendered. The whitening project then undermines the social fabric as an act of vital transference. That is, Portuguese desire, the trigger of the logic of obliteration, whose economic, legal, and erotic project takes place behind the curtain of the myth of racial democracy, is, in this sense, seminal for the repertoire, as it constitutes the perpetuation of a memory incorporated through of the Brazilian colonization process and that crosses time and space.

In view of this, it is worth remembering that although the repertoire is commonly linked to performances that continue the incorporated memory of populations subalternate in colonization, and that can propagate outside the archival capture (dominated and instituted by the colonizers), the repertoire will not necessarily be a counterpart to the files. The archive and the repertoire, in short, the performance ensemble is not “(...) clearly binary - with the written and the archival constituting the hegemonic power and the repertoire offering the anti-hegemonic challenge. Performance belongs to both the strong and the weak.” (Taylor, 2013, p. 53).

In this sense, the Brazilian “harmonic miscegenation” produces an archive and repertoire within a violent performative process: the whitening project that cuts through national history. It is worth questioning, then, whether the incorporated and archival memory of the logic of obliteration carries/overflows in/from the rhapsody of archives referring to *Aquarius*.

## *Aquarius* Archive

At 4 minutes and 6 seconds of the feature, Clara appears for the first time for those who watch. The scene is temporally located in 1980 and is contained in the segment of the film called “Part 1 – O Cabelo de Clara”. This is the younger version of the character, played by Bárbara Colen from Minas Gerais. The setting is nocturnal, the film’s photography casts an amber light over her body – an audiovisual photographic resource that “contains” time (Aumont, 1995), in this case, the woman’s past. Along with the strategy of the tonality of light affected by the time of 1980, there is a subtle blurring of her figure provided by a transparent lens, highlighting the presence of the glass of the car in which she is sitting (Screenshot 1). Later in the narrative, on the same night, we have the portraying of a relative’s birthday party, given in her fateful apartment. Her skin tone doesn’t change in these passages due to the light faithful to her temporality (Screenshot 1). In juxtaposition to the retro photographic resources, one feature of Colen’s body is muted: her voluminous curly hair was cut into a cut “à la Elis Regina”, as her fictional husband



describes it, as Clara had undergone aggressive treatment against breast cancer in the previous year.

Image 1 – Sequence of Clara (Colen) in 1980



Source: Adapted from Globoplay images

At 17 minutes and 45 seconds, we are introduced to the aged version of Clara, played by Sônia Braga from Paraná (Screenshot 2)<sup>10</sup>. In the very first sequence of the character, we have the scene of her going to the beach during the day – an action that, throughout the film, shows up every day. There is no indication in the diegetic universe about which year that scene is circumscribed, but his photography brings the current temporality in the images that are “constructed from the principle of transparency: (...) the scene has a typically naturalistic photograph (lighting), which represents “a real world” and produces an effect of presence” (Damasceno, p. 61).

The contemporary<sup>11</sup> impression demarcated by this direct photograph, bathed in natural light (different from the lighting of the young Clara), raises a narrative and aesthetic paradox in the demarcation of the racial distance between Colen and Braga: even if Braga’s complexion, in contrast to her long straight black hair, visually indicate a lighter shade in natural light, her act of going to the beach leaves her with a tan (Screenshot 2). This action casts doubt on the already displayed image of her past. For those who watch the film, it may appear that young Clara (Bárbara Colen) was also an avid beach goer at Boa Viagem, and the nighttime lighting with its yellowish photography reminiscent of the 80s made her appear darker than her older version when exposed to naturalistic sunlight. The dissimulating method alludes to the structuring racism in the history of photographic/filmic lighting that neglects the color of non-white people<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore, the beach, the hair and the colors of the photographic light in the film become mediations between the color identities of the two women. In other words, the film’s narrative and aesthetic devices

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10 Considering that this text deals with erasures, it is worth mentioning the low presence of actors and actresses from Pernambuco in the central nucleus of a work that takes place in Recife, with the exception of Irandhir Santos and Zoraide Coletto. This occlusion evidences a certain absence of the Pernambuco accent during the film, prioritizing accents predominantly in the south of the northeast region. Unfortunately, this territorial deletion cannot be examined in this article for reasons of extension and respect for the text limit allowed by the journal.

11 The film does not specify the year of this new moment as it does with the 1980 foreshadowing.

12 In *Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Color Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity* (2009), Lorna Roth demonstrates how photographic technology was built and patterned around Caucasian skin, imagistically neglecting the nuances of black, yellow, and red skin tones. Such photographic reverberations can be found from developing emulsions to the machinery of digital cameras. Roth argues that myopia in the process of capturing non-white skin is not related to a technical problem. In fact, it is due to a choice made by photographic industry developers in search of the public with more purchasing power for their equipment: the white percentage of the population, which we can link to structural racism (Almeida, 2018). It is important to emphasize this point in a note, as it explains the inseparability of human action in technology, and therefore, in the structuring of racist biases in the representational apparatus. According to Roth, the layer at the base of the film that reacts with light and chemicals to form the image “could have been designed initially with more sensitivity to the continuum of yellow, brown and reddish skin tones, but the design process would have to be motivated by the recognition of the need for a broad dynamic between the color bands” (Roth, 2009, p. 118)

trigger a racial conciliation that appeases the difference between the whiteness of Sônia Braga and the blackness of Bárbara Colen in closing, that is, regardless of whether or not the author's intention expressly passes through obliteration – whether in the credible haircut to a post-chemotherapeutic treatment, or in the indirect and direct lights of the photograph –, ultimately, the erasure of black lines is printed on the filmic screen.

Image 2 – Sequence of Clara (Braga) in the contemporary



Source: Adapted from Globoplay images

## Parabolic Files to *Aquarius*

A search made by the author was carried out on the Google search engine to find online news about Bárbara Colen's participation in the film and possible racial demarcations about her. The time window considered was related to the entire year of 2016, as we sought the speeches immediately following the release of the work, that is, how Bárbara Colen was retold in the journalistic archives contemporary to the film. Three articles dedicated exclusively to Colen were found: one from the online portal UAI and two from newspapers that have online and printed<sup>13</sup> versions, *Hoje em Dia* and *Extra*. The subjects are respectively: Bárbara Colen returns to her childhood city in "Aquarius"<sup>14</sup>; Featured in 'Aquarius', Bárbara Colen has projects in cinema and theater<sup>15</sup>; and Actress from Minas plays young Sonia Braga in the film "Aquarius": 'When I saw her, I was paralyzed'. The last article was chosen for the analysis because it is the only one that brings more than one photo of Bárbara Colen, in addition to making a more attentive comment on the actress' physique: the newsroom emphasizes that the woman had to cut her "long wavy strands" to interpret Clara.

Released on September 7, 2016, six days after the film's national premiere, Colen was presented by *Extra's* newsroom as an unknown actress who asked to resign from her position as a civil servant to focus on her new career. The direct quote from Colen reveals the justification given by the director of *Aquarius* for his hiring: "I was chosen more because of the energy than because of the similarity with Sonia" (Colen, 2016, s/p.). Colen herself comments in the interview that she was impacted by a certain similarity when seeing the film: "'(...) even I thought I looked similar'" (ibid). The explanation provided by Kléber Mendonça Filho about the "energy" that he felt does not directly explain a relationship between energy and racialization, which can be speculated by those who read the article as something related to attitude, tone, intonation, etc. However, the strategies perpetuated by the logic of obliteration that permeate this place of the presence of a certain repertoire are tacit, that is, they operate at the moment

13 It was not verified whether the news about the actress also came out in the physical published version of the newspapers.

14 Retrieved September 26, 2021 from: <https://bit.ly/3vZyyHi>.

15 Retrieved September 26, 2021 from: <https://bit.ly/3vY4BHI>.

that Colen, in person, is inscribed in proximity to Braga by Mendonça Filho. It is not just what was said (“energy”) but the transmission of unspoken repertoire acts provided by “being there” (Taylor, p. 50). If we talk about erasure/silencing – here in the case of blackness – it is to consider acts of transference that do not surface in oral/spoken discourse. The memory incorporated here performs a subtle exercise: the analogous movement (Colen similar to Braga) that a third party (the director) performs is not qualified primarily by the race of the non-white mixed-race person (Colen). There is no prioritization of this figurative mark in the hiring experience for the film. Which leads us to question: why is not the racialization of this light-skinned black woman a conditional element for a categorical dissimilarity between Colen and Sônia Braga? Why doesn’t Colen’s racialization materially challenge the “energy” that creates the affinity between the two actresses?

Positive miscegenation creates a space for possible answers. I do not disregard other points of proximity between the two that were verified by Kléber Mendonça Filho, however, the historical movement of the logic of obliteration, fed by “racial democracy”, provides tools for this racialization to go unnoticed as a potential tension between the figures. An environment is created where racial difference is not a primary issue.

Here racial difference has no role in the legal, economic and moral configuration of colonial Brazil. On the contrary, it is determined in the interiority of the “lightly tanned” subject of the patriarchy. It is not surprising that the logic of exclusion cannot capture the mode of racial subjection that this account authorizes, as it assumes that miscegenation, as a process and as an indicator of the obliteration of racial difference, institutes social configurations in which the racial does not operate as a strategy of power (Silva, 2006, p. 74).

As summarized in the Obliteration section and revisited in this passage, the mestizo social subject, in its symbology, carries racial difference within, for Freyre, an intrinsic difference of Brazil. The racial element of this subject has no real power in the restlessness of the society, since hybridity is the homogenizing and fundamental mark of Brazilianness. This line of thought opens up space for the logic of exclusion to not consider race as an unavoidable factor of difference, as the “slightly tanned” skin aligns with the downplaying of race in the face of “legal, economic, and moral configuration” and its capture in a presence outside of the “power strategy.” The precarious (tropical) transparency of the mestizo subject weakens the identification of this mestizo as a predetermined racial subject and subjugated by the modern national subject (Portuguese). Such transparency weakens the delineation not only of the violence that the non-white mestizo suffers, but of the non-white mestizo itself.

Thus, the repertoire perpetuated by the logic of obliteration that takes place at the moment before the recording of the scenes, in the presence of the agents, softens Colen’s racial imperative. Allegorically, we can reread “energy” as a visible part of something that harbors in its shadow the reproduction of the destructive desire of the Portuguese. Thus, it is not up to us to investigate whether the director’s real intention was to whiten Bárbara Colen, but rather to verify the previous and structural conditions of the national whitening repertoire that, in its ballast, allows the writing of the erasure of the mestizo subject also in this particular case. In summary, in Aquarius’ images, regardless of whether “energy” means something else, the non-white mixed-race woman becomes white. It is, as pointed out by Silva, the end of his own race, an end already articulated in pre-production and, later, in the filming of the feature.

This fact is negotiated by Colen’s own expectorality, she also sees herself as similar to Braga. By the way, I’m not claiming that Barbara Colen denies the racial difference between her and Braga. This information was not found during the search. The point here is to point out that the non-prioritization of the racial imperative also slips here, that is, there is a mediation of the similarity between the two that does not emerge primarily through racialization.

The chosen images to illustrate the article (Photographs 1, 2, 3, and 4) and the focus of the text corroborate the contract of appeasement of Colen's blackness within the film, but this time in a satellite archive to the audiovisual production. Note the direct lighting and more straightened hair in Photographs 1 and 3, whose adjective "wavy" is more properly applied while ignoring the structure of the actress's strands in Photographs 2 and 4, which depict visibly curly strands. Such softening of Colen's hair refers to the specific case of whitening of black women in the national context. Her figure is required to conform to the margins of "good looks", that is, within the parameters of beauty of Eurocentric whiteness (Gonzalez, 1984). Despite her technical efforts to achieve a certain job and/or school function, the black woman needs to negotiate with the whitening filter, whose negotiation takes place "(...) through an aesthetic performance that includes, from straightened hair, the way to dress and behave even to the religion one professes" <sup>16</sup> (Andrade, 2016, p. 706). The narrative and imagery constructions about Colen's body in the journalistic article reverberate this "palatable" filter of her blackness and femininity.

We noticed that the only photo of Colen and Braga together (Photograph 4) shown by the news is a black and white image taken from the former's Instagram social network, in which the skin tones of the actresses, despite being demarcated by a difference in tone, do not escape certain pasteurization due to the null saturation of the image.

In a photo of Aquarius' press conference that took place on September 29, 2016<sup>17</sup>, and which is not part of the news brought, we notice different tones between the two women (Figure 5). It is worth mentioning that this photo is also available on Colen's<sup>18</sup> Instagram and is dated one month before the film's premiere, therefore, the publication is one month and seven days before the article in the cited newspaper, being available at the time of its editing.

Photo 1 – Colen with full body and short haircut



Source: Ethel Braga / Reproduction Extra Newspaper

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16 This role of adaptation to whiteness that the black woman needs to face, echoes in Colen's statement, when she points to the white aesthetic matrix as the origin of her feeling of powerlessness mentioned in footnote 1, "(...) I I feel, like an imposter, as if I had no right to be there. As if I didn't have the image to be there. As if the right image were the white image, you know?"

17 Retrieved October 25, 2021 from: <https://bit.ly/3nJhr8X>.

18 Retrieved October 25, 2021 from: <https://bit.ly/3w28laV>.

Photograph 2 – Colen with curly hair



Source: Ethel Braga / Reproduction Extra Newspaper

Photograph 3 – Colen with wavy hair



Source: Rodrigo Guedes / Reproduction Extra Newspaper



Picture 4 – Colen and Braga in a photo without saturation



Source: Bárbara Colen's personal Instagram account / Reproduction Extra Newspaper

Picture 5 – Colen and Braga in press conference for the film Aquarius



Source: Manuela Scarpa / Brazil News

In this sequence of images, especially in Photographs 2 and 3, I highlight the lightning in the lightning and editing of these materials. In such aesthetic parameters that exclude nuances of skin blackness, remnants of the beginnings of photographic work<sup>19</sup> still exist, seeking to promote the idea of whiteness closer to the Caucasian aesthetic ideal and the subsequent recognition that it carries (Craig-Henderson,

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19 See footnote 12.



2014). However, when dealing with obliteration, it is ineffective to point out whether the choices of photographs by the editors of the article by Bárbara Colen in light editing are conscious or unconscious, thus isolating and individualizing the problem in those responsible for writing and editing the news. The repertoire of the logic of obliteration is autonomous in its heritage from the authoritarian practices of whitening that are prevalent in Brazilian white elites. It is not overdetermined by the eugenic device, they walk side by side, granting strength and conquest in its adherence, in a movement of codependency. It is a sewing of white meanings that are felt by the agents involved, but that are not limited to them. Therefore, the photographs presented show how the repertoire of obliteration is structural and, at the same time, molecular, affecting racial perception and meaning. The curation of the photographic archives may not have been overtly and intentionally racist, however, such obliteration happens without necessarily being deliberate. It is based on the historical ballast of an expressive culture and incorporated in whitening, and simultaneously, in the subtleties of gestures and practices of knowledge stored in bodies, whose interpersonal encounters can (re)produce such culture.

In view of this, when trying to deal with the obliterating repertoire - the acts that *may* not be materially archived and that constitute, simultaneously, a certain ephemerality and continuity in the national historical trajectory -, the affective dimension in Colen's selection for the role "felt" by the director emerges as an important point.

As far as affection is concerned, I take it under the aegis of affective economies (*affective economies*, Ahmed, 2004), and, therefore, it constructs particular realities, not only as a psychological disposition, but as a mediator of the "relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (Idem, p. 119<sup>20</sup>). Affection, in this perspective, creates an adhesion between symbols and figures, "sticking" two or more singularities in the same umbrella of meaning, and thus generating an effect of coherence that resonates with the idea of "collective". Thus, the inflection carried out on the concept of affect distances itself from its ability to inhabit a person or a figure positively - it is not essentially about what causes a certain emotion in a certain person - it is about affection "to bring people together" (bind), figures and senses, creating a material effect.

In this sense, Bárbara Colen's racialization does not pass unscathed by the logic of obliteration, as there is an affective identification of an acceptable artistic value that emanates from the whiteness of Sônia Braga. If "the mulatto woman is the middle ground, part of the path taken, between blackness and whiteness" (Craveiro and Carvalho, 2017, p. 74), "energy" is a correlate of "great performance", whose paradigm tends towards whiteness from Braga. Bárbara Colen is not dark-skinned and that is why the obliterating repertoire revisits her closer to whiteness, due to the affection caused by her excellent staging and the neglect of the non-white racial in the narrative of positive national miscegenation organized by Freyre. Colen's work *affects* in a similar way to that of Sônia Braga, and for this reason, it *glues* the two figures together, returning them both to the transparency of whiteness. The first is no longer a mixed-race black woman, "the symbol of the specificity of Brazil, (...) a fundamentally unstable figure, (...) a temporary incorporation of Brazilianness" (Silva, 2006, p. 63), and through his art paired with the whiteness of Braga, Colen embodies the real Brazilian racial expression (white), finally, her black part is obliterated.

## Distant, but not separate archives

The eventual absence of any record (textual or categorical imagery) from the newsroom of the online newspaper about the message of whitening between generations that the film brings and the small part dedicated to Colen at the beginning of the film, crystallizes that the actress is an image that orbits the around Braga and its subsequent whiteness. The omission of Colen's name in the headline of the analyzed

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20 Original text: "(...) to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective." (Translated by the author).

news item, which refers to her as the “Minas Gerais actress” who was paralyzed when she saw “Sônia Braga”, corroborates this fact. In addition, her appearance on the screen, and in the subsequent media dissemination of the work, must suit the actress who would be the star of the film, whose professional trajectory is already consolidated in the national and international scene<sup>21</sup>, unlike the first, a newcomer in the audiovisual sector.

In the wake of this binding dynamic of the actresses, Sonia’s career cannot be ignored in this analysis. Specifically, a past role of hers could prove important in Colen’s consecration as a young part of her. Braga achieved national recognition through the telenovela *Gabriela* (Avancini, 1975), shown by Rede Globo, a television adaptation by Walter Jorge Dust of the novel by Jorge Amado, *Gabriela, Cravo e Canela* (1958). The story takes place in the municipality of Bahia, Ilhéus. Braga embodies the epitome of the “Brazilian mulatto” (Screenshot 3), a role that required the actress to change her skin tone<sup>22</sup>.

Sônia Braga, who already has the hybrid type, needed a lot of tanning to play Gabriela. This demonstrates the knowledge of soap opera directors about the degree of acceptance of these characters in relation to the viewer, as evidenced by the strong resonance established between Sônia Braga and the Brazilian target audience, perpetuating her as a model for Amado’s Gabriela and other characters, in the cinema and TV, such as Dona Flor and Tieta (CALDAS, 2009, p. 124).

For Caldas, Sônia Braga occupies the “hybrid type”, even starring in *Saramandaia* (Mamberti and Saraceni, 1976) the year after *Gabriela*, a telenovela in which her skin tone was much lighter than the previous character (Photograph 7). Thus, Gabriela’s archival legacy does not only feed the archetype of the national mulatto, with Aquarius, we realize that the figure of Sônia Braga is still placed in this place of dual racial fluidity that cuts through time - from whiteness to blackness and vice versa. It is not just Bárbara Colen who suffers a pasteurization to whiteness, Sônia Braga being “hybrid” in her “Amado’s Gabriela” past signals the same repertoire of obliteration, activated at the mercy of the white (Portuguese) destructive, viscerally erotic desire<sup>23</sup>.

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21 In 2020, Sônia Braga was elected by The New Yorker magazine as the 24th best actress of the 21st century. The magazine nominated 25 actors and actresses for the ranking. Braga was the only Brazilian one (Dargis and Scott, 2020). Having said that, it is essential to reiterate that this article is based on a national racial approach. Even though Sônia Braga is considered a “Latina” when she launches herself in the United States and Europe, and therefore, non-Caucasian, this fact does not extinguish her self-declared whiteness in Brazilian territory. In this way, the whiteness of its appearance cannot be relegated to relativization, thus denying racial tensions aimed at the non-white mestizo that I tried to demonstrate in the course of this writing and a whole framework of historical significance of national struggles for the recognition of the black population.

22 Braga’s racial self-declaration reiterates the awareness of such modulation. See footnote 2.

23 Gabriela was and still is a highly sexualized figure, whether in audiovisual or literature. The character is portrayed as a poor girl who seduced men “unintentionally”. It is underlined that Gabriela’s focus of romantic-sexual interest is her former employer, the Syrian foreigner named Nacib. Despite being from the Middle East, Nacib in Brazilian lands resembles European authoritarianism in his relationship with the “mulata”. He behaves like Gabriela’s owner, embodying the white’s destructive erotic desire.

Image 8 – Sônia Braga in a scene by Gabriela (Avancini, 1975)



Source: IMDb

Image 9 – Sônia Braga and Juca de Oliveira interpreting Marcina and João Gibão, respectively, in Saramandaia (Mamberti and Saraceni, 1976)



Source: Rede Globo Divulgação

In other words, “the degree of acceptance” of the Brazilian public is directly linked (binded) by the erotic will of destructive desire, flowing into the logic of obliteration. Thus, Sônia Braga transforms herself (is) into a “mulata”, palatable for this desire. Her body is momentarily glued to the signs of the coveted mestizo, whose racial specificity is allegorical to the twilight between blackness and whiteness. Sônia Braga, through Gabriela, becomes a seminal Brazilian media character by materializing the object of the Portuguese’s unrepressed desire, referring to a body that will generate the end of the black race, whether in its intra-plot consumption (in the novel Gabriela) and /or extra-thread (in the popular imagination).

The body of the “mulata” incarnated by Braga and allegorical to Colen suffers double violence. Ontologically, the “mestiça” occupies the place of excess, of surplus, it is not integral and worthy of full

humanity. As a result, her body needs to be consumed by the destructive desire of the Portuguese to be erased from Brazilian history, to create entirely white descendants in her phenotype. Sônia Braga, then, ascends as a reminder: in 1975, her image is used by the productive force of the destructive desire of the true national subject (the Portuguese) that consumes “whatever is necessary to demarcate its particularity” (Silva, 2006, p.71), that is, the full humanity of the white subject. At the same time, the figure of Braga gets rid of the blackness zones, returning to transparency (whiteness) in 2016, and thus, promotes and participates in the violent erasure of blackness from the body of a non-white mestizo woman with light skin (like Gabriella).

In short, the repertoire perpetuated by the logic of obliteration is reinforced because in the past Sônia Braga was able to play a non-white character even though she was a white woman. Her “temporary incorporation of Brazilianness” (Silva, 2006, p. 63) happens in life. The non-importance of racial as a categorical element for the organization of a mixed Brazil “par excellence”, gives to the figure of Braga the possibility of modulating her whiteness and thus inhabiting the precarious social subject. It is essential to realize that the actress, considering her self-declaration, starts from an undoubted place of full transparency (whiteness) to reach precarious transparency (non-white miscegenation). In *Aquarius*, Braga’s *Clara* rehearses this gesture again, however, with another body (Colen’s *Clara*) that is narratively and aesthetically contiguous to her whiteness within the plot, as well as outside it, in the extra-filmic files brought. Finally, Braga’s whiteness operationalizes her departure from the role of an erotic instrument used by the Portuguese destructive desire to produce more precarious social subjects.

## Final remarks

In this article, we have seen that the repertoire of the logic of obliteration relocates Bárbara Colen as a satellite figure of Sônia Braga, and consequently, the blackness of the former is revised by the whiteness parameters of the latter. The archival memory brought back mainly demarcates the erasure and racial “balancing” scenario in the following points: a) in the sometimes yellowish nocturnal lighting; now a daytime naturalist of the scenes of *Aquarius*; b) in Clara’s haircut, an important black racial characteristic of Colen’s body, and the insertion of this cut as a narrative resource according to the character’s previous history of cancer; c) the journalistic naming of her hair as “wavy” when it is curly; d) the choices of photos for the report in line with the film’s appeasement; e) nostalgia for the “mulatto” allegory and racial “hybridity” in Sônia Braga’s past as an intermediary to Colen’s blackness.

Therefore, the readings on *Aquarius*’s whitening cannot be carried out only from the economic discursive perspective juxtaposed by the racial issue, that is, it is insufficient to say that “in the film, whites are rich and successful, while non-whites are untrustworthy and subordinates (...), whoever gets rich also gets whitened, as it happens in Clara’s life” (Messina et al, 2019, p. 123). Although the linearity of the narrative can be taken as an allegory to the history of the national whitening project – Clara as a young woman is black and then becomes white –, we must pay attention to the obliteration being projected as a repertoire even before the film was made.

In this weave, white destructive desire continues to paste white and non-white figures and meanings in the archives and bring their repertoires closer to obliteration. These performances allude to the myth of racial democracy, since in 2016, Clara (the name advocates) from 1980 is already whitened by the time Sônia Braga replaces her, reaching the final annihilation of her black characteristics, the complete occlusion of the excess produced by destructive desire. Braga, on the other hand, when framed in the manufacture of the “mulata” for scopophilia in 1975, feeds the symbolic and the material, which flows 41 years later in her “tanning” acquired at *Praia de Boa Viagem* and in a woman with a complexion similar to that of Gabriela cast to make her younger version.

By taking this path, I propose that the logic of obliteration not only acts as a repertoire of whiteness,

ascending in the archives over time, the obliterating repertoire needs affection as an aggregator of the agents involved in pre-production, in the film scene itself, in journalistic dissemination, in the reception by the audience, in the past and in the future.

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