

BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE: COLORISM, RACIAL CLASSIFICATION, AND WHITE PASSABILITY IN BRAZIL

PARA ALÉM DAS CATEGORIAS PRETO E BRANCO: COLORISMO, CLASSIFICAÇÃO RACIAL E PASSABILIDADE BRANCA NO BRASIL

MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS CATEGORÍAS BLANCO Y NEGRO: COLORISMO, CLASIFICACIÓN RACIAL Y BLANQUEAMIENTO SOCIAL EN BRASIL

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ABSTRACT

This article examines transracialization as an emerging yet under-theorized concept in racial studies, arguing that racial identity differs fundamentally from gender identity because it depends not only on self-identification but also on social recognition, lived experiences of racism, and collective historical consciousness. Using the case of Rachel Dolezal, the study argues that claims of Black identity by white individuals lack social legitimacy because they disregard the structural dimensions of racialization and the privileges associated with whiteness. The article explores colorism as an intraracial system of hierarchy produced by structural racism, demonstrating that lighter-skinned Black individuals may enjoy relative social advantages over darker-skinned Black people while remaining subject to racial discrimination. Drawing on Brazilian and North American scholarship, the study shows that colorism reinforces whitening ideologies, fragments Black political identity, and reproduces material, symbolic, and psychological inequalities. The research further analyzes the impact of the 2001 Durban Conference and affirmative action policies on racial identity formation in Brazil, emphasizing the expansion of racial consciousness, the strengthening of Black political movements, and debates surrounding Blackness, pardo identity, white passability, and racial quota fraud. It distinguishes between pardo movements that deny structural racism and decolonial perspectives that understand pardo identity as a racialized position shaped by colonialism and colorism. Finally, the article argues that white passability functions as a structural regime of privilege influencing access to rights, opportunities, and social credibility. It concludes that examining transracialization, colorism, and white passability is essential for advancing racial studies, protecting the legitimacy of affirmative action policies, and confronting the historical and contemporary mechanisms that sustain white supremacy and structural racism.

Keywords: Colorism. Brazil. Racism. Policies. Black.

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RESUMO

O artigo analisa a transracialização como uma categoria ainda incipiente nos estudos raciais, distinguindo-a das experiências transgênero ao argumentar que a identidade racial depende não apenas da autodeclaração, mas também do reconhecimento social, da experiência vivida do racismo e da inserção em uma comunidade historicamente racializada. A partir do caso de Rachel Dolezal, demonstra que reivindicações de identidade negra por pessoas brancas não alcançam legitimidade social por desconsiderarem a dimensão estrutural da racialização e os privilégios associados à branquitude. O estudo examina o colorismo como um mecanismo intrarracial de hierarquização produzido pelo racismo estrutural, evidenciando que pessoas negras de pele mais clara podem usufruir de vantagens relativas em relação às pessoas negras retintas, sem que isso elimine a discriminação racial. Com base em autores brasileiros e norte-americanos, argumenta que o colorismo reforça o ideal de embranquecimento, fragmenta a população negra e reproduz desigualdades materiais, simbólicas e subjetivas. O artigo também discute os efeitos da Conferência de Durban (2001) e das políticas de ação afirmativa na redefinição das identidades raciais no Brasil, destacando o fortalecimento do Movimento Negro, a ampliação da consciência racial e os debates sobre negritude, parditude, passabilidade branca e fraudes nas cotas raciais. Conclui que a passabilidade branca constitui um regime estrutural de privilégios que condiciona o acesso a direitos, oportunidades e reconhecimento social. Sustenta, por fim, que compreender a transracialização, o colorismo e a passabilidade branca é fundamental para fortalecer a legitimidade das políticas de ação afirmativa e aprofundar o enfrentamento do racismo estrutural e da supremacia branca na sociedade brasileira.

Palavras-chave: Colorismo. Brasil. Políticas. Negro.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza la transracialización como una categoría todavía poco desarrollada en los estudios raciales y sostiene que la identidad racial se diferencia de la identidad de género porque depende no solo de la autodefinición, sino también del reconocimiento social, de la experiencia vivida del racismo y de la memoria histórica colectiva. A partir del caso de Rachel Dolezal, el texto argumenta que las reivindicaciones de identidad negra por parte de personas blancas carecen de legitimidad social al ignorar las dimensiones estructurales de la racialización y los privilegios asociados a la blancura. Asimismo, el estudio examina el colorismo como un mecanismo intrarracial de jerarquización producido por el racismo estructural. Demuestra que las personas negras de piel más clara pueden acceder a ventajas relativas frente a las personas negras de piel oscura, aunque continúen siendo objeto de discriminación racial. Basándose en autores brasileños y norteamericanos, el trabajo muestra que el colorismo fortalece el ideal de blanqueamiento, fragmenta la identidad política negra y reproduce desigualdades materiales, simbólicas y psicológicas. El artículo también analiza el impacto de la Conferencia de Durban de 2001 y de las políticas de acción afirmativa en la formación de las identidades raciales en Brasil, destacando la ampliación de la conciencia racial, el fortalecimiento del Movimiento Negro y los debates sobre negritud, identidad parda, pasabilidad blanca y fraude en las cuotas raciales. Además, distingue entre los movimientos pardos que minimizan el racismo estructural y las perspectivas decoloniales que entienden la pardidad como una posición racializada producida por el colonialismo y el colorismo. Finalmente, el estudio sostiene que la pasabilidad blanca constituye un régimen estructural de privilegios que condiciona el acceso a derechos, oportunidades y reconocimiento social. Concluye que el análisis de la transracialización, el colorismo y la pasabilidad blanca es indispensable para profundizar los estudios sobre identidad racial, fortalecer

la legitimidad de las políticas de acción afirmativa y enfrentar los mecanismos históricos y contemporáneos que reproducen la supremacía blanca y el racismo estructural.

Palabras clave: Colorismo. Brasil. Racismo. Políticas. Población Negra.



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INTRODUCTION

Transracialization unfolds through heterogeneous processes that vary according to the subject's initial racial designation. While legal guardians are typically responsible for assigning a racial category at birth, dissent regarding this designation does not necessarily emerge in early childhood, as is frequently observed in cases of gender identity incongruence. Structural racism itself may contribute to postponing or suppressing such divergence from the primary racial classification. In many instances, this postponement extends into early adulthood, particularly among individuals born of interracial unions. It is not uncommon for such subjects to initially benefit from white passability, only to lose it progressively over time.

When one considers gender incongruence, an asymmetry becomes evident. Despite the deeply sexist organization of social relations, the categories of “man” and “woman” do not occupy the terrain of domination in an equivalent manner. The fact that an individual designated male might come to identify as a woman, an identity historically positioned with less prestige and institutional power, does not, at first glance, appear paradoxical. Womanhood does not necessarily present itself as an unequivocally negative condition at the moment of self-declaration. Thus, the rejection of an initial designation cannot be reduced to a simple reaction against gendered or racialized power hierarchies. Rather, it is fundamentally tied to the constitution of subjectivity, particularly in the domain of gender. This process is grounded in a material and symbolic context that underwrites self-identification. To perceive oneself differently from the way one is socially perceived constitutes a demanding psychic and social labor, especially for those who resist designations imposed by authorities who never consented to the subject's self-understanding.

The controversial case of Rachel Dolezal (2017) is frequently framed as fraudulent, a characterization that does not preclude its analytical relevance. In *Full Color: Finding My Place*

in *a Black and White World* (2017), Dolezal narrates her trajectory as a white woman born to parents of Swedish and Czech descent, raised alongside four Black adopted siblings. Through familial proximity and political engagement, she was introduced to Black social movements, subsequently becoming an activist within anti-racist struggles. She earned a master's degree in Art from Howard University, a historically Black institution, where she filed, unsuccessfully, a racial discrimination lawsuit, claiming minority status as a white woman. Following her marriage to an African American man and their subsequent divorce, Dolezal became the primary caregiver for her Black siblings. She later worked for the NAACP, undergoing a deliberate process of racial transition, darkening her skin and altering her hair texture, in order to present herself as a Black woman. From adolescence onward, she claimed to feel misplaced in her body, self-identifying as Black and fabricating a paternal genealogy to support this claim.

In the United States, Dolezal's case has been overwhelmingly rejected by both Black and white communities. Her trajectory has thus become emblematic of transracialization as an anecdotal and contested phenomenon. The purpose of invoking this case here is not to adjudicate claims of fraud or psychopathology, but to underscore that, much like transgender identities, transracial claims are marked by profound processes of non-recognition. Dolezal cannot be socially legitimated as transracial, largely due to the perception that her actions reproduce exhibitionism, political opportunism, or a neo-colonial savior complex, wherein a white subject seeks to reoccupy spaces of political authority within anti-racist institutions, thereby delegitimizing Black political agendas.

Unlike struggles against sexism and male domination, transraciality introduces a qualitatively distinct tension within emancipatory politics. It does not function analogously to transgender politics in revealing the fundamentally gendered nature of social structures. Rather, it exposes the profound entanglement between whiteness and humanity itself.

One of the central challenges in theorizing emergent categories within the social sciences lies in the propensity for premature interpretation, often preceding sustained engagement with the conceptual frameworks that might render such categories intelligible. While the production of meaning is inherently democratic and embedded in linguistic practice, social scientific analysis demands caution against conceptual precipitation. Transracialization, while not entirely novel, remains insufficiently theorized within the field of racial studies, which has historically oriented itself toward exposing and combating structural racism.

The prefix *trans*, familiar from gender studies, invites analogical reasoning with transgender and transsexual experiences, concepts associated with crossing, displacement, and identity formation in tension with imposed designations. Yet racial designation operates through a distinct ontological and historical logic. Although race has been discredited biologically, it persists as a powerful social category. Its persistence reveals the fragility of any essentialism grounded solely in phenotype. Racial designation is phenomenological and relational; even biological attributes fail to secure it definitively. Hence, the possibility of a constructed Blackness cannot be dismissed outright.

Nevertheless, unlike gender, understood through performativity (Butler, 2003), there is no voluntaristic “becoming Black.” Blackness constitutes a *yet-to-come* grounded in Black consciousness and collective historical experience. The subject does not merely *see* themselves as Black; they *experience* themselves as situated within a Black world, a dense constellation of cultural practices, linguistic codes, affective economies, and modes of being that exceed ancestry alone. In traversing the imposed initial designation, the subject reappropriates it through a second designation: that of exclusion and racism. This process is invariably marked by pain and revolt. Once recognized as Black by the Other, there is no return; the subject’s world is irreversibly transformed.

Blackness, unlike whiteness, operates as a marker of distance from humanity. Whiteness functions as a guarantee of human recognition and citizenship, while Blackness signifies the negation of this recognition. Historically, this negation has been articulated through animalization, objectification, abjection, and exterminatory politics (Mbembe, 2001). Enslavement depended upon the prior denial of Black humanity, a denial that continues to structure post-abolition societies.

The principal obstacle to conceiving transracialization among white subjects lies precisely in this politics of displacement. To renounce whiteness is to denaturalize one’s humanity, a gesture rendered socially unintelligible, if not pathological. Whiteness admits no *yet-to-come*; it functions as an inherited gift, grounded in innatist essentialism and historically consolidated through republican ideals. The denial of whiteness is thus often interpreted as psychic disturbance rather than political or existential rupture.

In Brazil, affirmative action policies implemented following the Durban Conference (2001) have provided a crucial site for observing the limits of transracial claims. Cases of fraud involving white candidates self-identifying as Black or *pardo* in university admissions reveal not

transraciality, but rather opportunistic strategies that undermine Black political struggles. Despite constitutional validation by the Supreme Federal Court, counter-narratives persist, often invoking racial miscibility and the myth of racial democracy to contest the identifiability of Blackness, despite the persistent reality of structural racism.

Ultimately, Black identity requires social recognition; it must be legitimated by the collective. As Ndiaye (2008), following Shelby and Geertz, distinguishes thick *blackness*, rooted in historical consciousness and political struggle, differs fundamentally from *thin blackness*, an alienated identity produced under white domination. This distinction underscores that Blackness is not merely claimed; it is lived, imposed, resisted, and re-signified within a racialized world.

ABOUT COLORISM IN BRAZIL

With regard to colorism also referred to as color-based stratification or chromatic hierarchy both concepts denote a system of social distinctions and hierarchies historically articulated through policies of whitening. Such dynamics establish chromatic gradations that operate as criteria for the unequal distribution of privileges and for the production of dissension within racial relations. Within this logic, racism engenders processes of subjectivation that enable Black individuals with lighter skin tones to access, albeit partially and conditionally, certain social, institutional, and symbolic spaces, such as circulation within socially valued environments, access to healthcare, and specific forms of collective belonging. Conversely, dark-skinned Black individuals (*retintos*) face systematic barriers that generate and reproduce recurring experiences of exclusion, vulnerability, and social suffering.

According to Silva (2017), this constellation of practices and representations constitutes a direct legacy of racialized subjectivation and of the imposition of the whitening ideal. This ideal does not arise from an autonomous choice on the part of the Black population but rather from a historical strategy of structural and state racism, oriented toward the construction of a white-centered society deeply rooted in the slaveholding project. In general terms, colorism may be understood as a complex of symbolic and material prerogatives disproportionately enjoyed by lighter-skinned Black individuals at the expense of darker-skinned ones, thereby reiterating interracial inequalities profoundly shaped by racism (Silva, 2017).

An examination of the theoretical literature on colorism reveals that this phenomenon fragments the Black population both *per se* and *for itself*, sustained by a whitening ideal that

nevertheless fails to translate empirically into effective social mobility for so-called “light-skinned Blacks,” particularly when contrasted with the conditions imposed upon dark-skinned Black subjects. In opposition to this hierarchical logic, the concept of *Negritude* emerges as a political, cultural, and epistemological category of identity affirmation. As Munanga argues, “one of the fundamental objectives of Negritude was the affirmation and rehabilitation of cultural identity and the distinct personality of Black peoples” (Munanga, 1999, p. 2).

Munanga further emphasizes the semantic and political plurality of the term, which may refer both to an ideological movement and to a symbolic or mythological construction. Moreover, *Negritude* constitutes a process of reparation for cultural and individual values historically denied to Black peoples, while simultaneously functioning as a powerful catalyst for decolonization processes in Africa and across the Black diaspora (Munanga, 1999).

As an analytical category, colorism has been most extensively theorized by North American scholars. The term was originally coined by Alice Walker, who defined it as discrimination based on skin tone, operating both between different racial groups and within the same racial group. For Walker, colorism represents a direct legacy of slavery and colonialism, reproducing chromatic hierarchies that associate lighter skin with greater social, aesthetic, and moral value (Walker, 1983).

Within sociology, Margaret Hunter demonstrates that colorism functions as a structuring mechanism of social inequality, producing measurable effects on income, educational attainment, labor market opportunities, marital patterns, and exposure to violence. Her empirical research shows that lighter-skinned Black individuals tend to enjoy relative advantages over darker-skinned individuals, even while remaining racially subordinated in contexts shaped by white supremacy (Hunter, 2007; 2013). Consequently, colorism does not eradicate racism; rather, it reorganizes it internally, producing intraracial hierarchies compatible with the logic of whiteness.

Ellis Monk Jr. advances this analysis by arguing that skin tone operates as an autonomous axis of social stratification in the United States. According to Monk, skin tone significantly influences how individuals are perceived, evaluated, and treated by state institutions, the labor market, and the criminal justice system. He contends that colorism must be understood as a structural system rather than merely an interpersonal form of prejudice, as it is deeply embedded in historical processes of racialization and social classification (Monk, 2014; 2021).

From an intersectional perspective, Patricia Hill Collins and Melissa Harris-Perry highlight the particular ways in which colorism affects Black women. Harris-Perry demonstrates

that Eurocentric beauty ideals, strongly associated with lighter skin, straight hair, and fine features, profoundly shape Black women's self-esteem, respectability, and access to full citizenship, reinforcing patterns of symbolic and material exclusion (Harris-Perry, 2011). Collins situates colorism within the matrix of domination, emphasizing its articulation with gender, class, and sexuality in the production of social inequalities (Collins, 2000). Similarly, Keith and Herring, drawing on quantitative data, demonstrate that colorism significantly influences educational trajectories, income levels, and occupational status, confirming that skin pigmentation remains a decisive social marker even in formally post-segregationist societies (Keith & Herring, 1991).

Thus, the North American literature converges in understanding colorism as an intraracial device of power functional to the maintenance of white supremacy, insofar as it fragments racialized populations, produces internal hierarchies, and naturalizes historically constructed inequalities. Far from representing a subjective or voluntary choice on the part of Black individuals, colorism emerges as a direct effect of structural racism, operating simultaneously at material, symbolic, and psychological levels.

Colorism also enables racist policies and practices to assume differentiated forms depending on locality, region, social group, and institutional context. In Brazil, for instance, lighter-skinned Black individuals may, in certain regions, be socially perceived as white, a phenomenon that will be further discussed below, while in other contexts, lighter skin does not guarantee privileged access to social resources. The designations applied to non-retinto individuals often reinforce long-standing whitening processes dating back to colonial Brazil, sustaining the ideological construction of racial mixture and the enduring narrative of Brazil as a "brown" or racially harmonious nation.

Durban as a Turning Point: Blackness, Racial Equality, and Identity Formation in Brazil

Following the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, the promotion of racial equality became consolidated as a structuring agenda across broad sectors of Brazilian society (UN, 2001). Organized by the United Nations, the Durban Conference convened delegations from nation-states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and a robust civil society

presence, with particular prominence given to Black movements, intellectuals, anti-racist activists, and representatives of historically racialized peoples from diverse regions of the globe.

In the Brazilian context, the coordinated intervention of Black militancy played a decisive role in shaping both the debates and the resolutions adopted, especially through denouncing the enduring effects of slavery, colonialism, and structural racism in the production of social inequalities (Carneiro, 2003; Nascimento, 2002). Black delegations and civil society actors were instrumental in advancing key issues such as affirmative action policies, historical reparations, the production of racial data, and the accountability of the State in combating racism (Gonzalez, 1988; Werneck, 2016).

The repercussions of the Durban Conference in Brazil became increasingly visible in the years that followed, particularly through the formulation and implementation of public policies aimed at promoting racial equality. These included the institutionalization of affirmative action in public universities and the establishment of legal and institutional frameworks to address racial discrimination (Almeida, 2019; Silva, 2012). This process ignited a wide-ranging social debate concerning Blackness and the process of racial re-identification among individuals who had not previously recognized themselves as Afro-descendants, nor perceived themselves as targets of racism and discrimination (Souza, 1983). Within this context, the interrelations among phenotype, lived experiences of discrimination, and mechanisms of racial passability assumed a central position in public and academic discussions (Bento, 2002).

The return to Afro-diasporic matrices and the rejection of Eurocentric epistemological models deepened and densified these debates, exposing the historical erasure of African and Indigenous populations. This intellectual and political movement destabilized the so-called “myth of racial democracy,” articulated by Gilberto Freyre from the 1930s onward (Freyre, 1933) and extensively critiqued by Black intellectuals throughout the twentieth century (Nascimento, 1978; Gonzalez, 1988). As a result, issues such as racial profiling, institutional violence, Black aesthetics, Afro hairstyles, racial literacy, “Black money,” and analytical categories such as *negro retinto*, *pardo*, and whiteness became the subject of sustained and rigorous debate across multiple domains of social life (Bento, 2002; Ribeiro, 2017).

Within their intellectual genealogy, scholars such as Neusa Santos Souza (1983), Lélia Gonzalez (1988), Abdias Nascimento (1978), Jurema Werneck (2016), and Sueli Carneiro (2003) conceptualize becoming Black as an eminently political act. The Black activism of the 1980s, initially articulated within urban and cultural spaces, gained continuity and theoretical depth

among younger generations, intensifying challenges to the racialized social order. From 2019 onward, the affirmation of Blackness increasingly operated as a signifier of pride, political resistance, and symbolic power, intertwining with processes of Afro-centering and the reconfiguration of affective, familial, and communal relations (hooks, 2019a).

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, racial issues gained even greater visibility, particularly through the massive circulation of images and discourses on digital media, which laid bare historically naturalized structural inequalities (Almeida, 2019). Emblematic cases of racial violence, such as the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the killing of João Alberto Silveira Freitas in a Carrefour supermarket in Brazil, catalyzed protests and public debates on a global scale, reinforcing the centrality of the anti-racist agenda. The Black Lives Matter movement may thus be understood as a contemporary inflection of Black diasporic struggles, reinscribing demands for human dignity and social justice within a transnational framework (BBC News, 2020; Alves, 2021). In this context, cultural practices have assumed renewed importance as forms of political action and symbolic elaboration of racialized experience (Taylor, 2016; Glaude, 2020).

Digital media have consolidated themselves as privileged arenas of discursive struggle, while the notion of *standpoint* (*lugar de fala*) has conferred legitimacy upon enunciations grounded in racialized experience (Ribeiro, 2017). Academic research, in turn, has increasingly valorized socially situated epistemologies, such as *escrevivência* and transatlantic Black feminism, foregrounding authors such as Conceição Evaristo (2020), bell hooks (2019), Audre Lorde (1984), and Angela Davis (2016). The entry of Black and Indigenous women into universities, driven by affirmative action policies, has disrupted hegemonic forms of knowledge production and fostered new theoretical formulations rooted in historically and structurally subaltern positions marked by asymmetrical power relations and ongoing processes of social, political, and epistemological marginalization (Quijano, 2005; Lugones, 2014). Silvio Almeida's (2019) contributions on structural and institutional racism underscore the systemic nature of racial oppression, in dialogue with Achille Mbembe's (2018a) reflections on necropolitics and the politics of enmity, which are central to understanding the contemporary production of "killable lives."

Finally, critical awareness of racial oppression has elicited responses within psychoanalysis and philosophy, highlighting the subjective impacts of racism on the constitution of the subject (Fanon, 1961) and the possibility of resignifying Black experience as a source of

affection, dignity, and love (hooks, 2019b). Nevertheless, identity processes are neither fluid nor univocal; they generate polysemic meanings. Consequently, unveiling the dynamics of *parditude* remains a *sine qua non* condition for advancing this debate.

BLACK SELF-IDENTIFICATION AS A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL PROCESS

Within the historiography of racial relations in Brazil, Black movements were the first to claim *pardo* identity as an integral component of Black identity, politically defined as the aggregate of *black* and *pardo*. This formulation is reflected in the Statute of Racial Equality and in state mechanisms that guide the calculation of Black and *pardo* populations and the production of official data on social inequalities (Brazil, 2010; Osório, 2003; Guimarães, 2012). Such an understanding was pivotal in confronting the myth of racial democracy and in constructing public policies grounded in racial criteria (Munanga, 1999; Carneiro, 2003).

In contemporary Brazil, *pardo* movements constitute a heterogeneous, politically contested, and tension-laden field, whose configurations vary according to historical moments, disputes over racial identity, and the public policies in force (Telles, 2003; Fry, 2005). During the 2000s, debates surrounding *pardo* identity gained unprecedented centrality due to the implementation of affirmative action policies, particularly racial quotas in higher education and public service, which reconfigured the terrain of racial disputes in the country (Guimarães, 2012; Silva, 2012).

This period witnessed the strengthening of organizations and discourses that asserted the specificity of *pardo* identity, often in opposition to the political category “Black” (*black* and *pardo*) historically adopted by organized Black movements and the Brazilian State (Osório, 2003; Munanga, 1999). Controversies surrounding affirmative action were structured around several axes: critiques of racial quotas perceived as exclusionary or reductive of Brazil’s racial complexity; the defense of *pardo* identity as autonomous rather than as a subgroup of the Black population; the strategic appropriation of discourses of miscegenation and Brazilian racial exceptionalism; and the emergence of associations and manifestos challenging the racial binary of “white versus Black” (Fry, 2005; Telles, 2003).

Overall, this was a period marked by profound political ambivalence. While some *pardo* movements undermined anti-racist projects by denying the centrality of structural racism, others revealed constitutive contradictions within the Brazilian racial system itself (Almeida, 2019;

Schwarcz, 1993). In the current landscape, there has been an expansion of groups that explicitly reject identification with Blackness, mobilize discourses centered on the notion of being “neither white nor Black,” frequently minimize or deny structural racism, and, in some cases, align with conservative or revisionist racial agendas. Such groups often attribute social inequalities exclusively to class, thereby reproducing, implicitly or explicitly, the logic of symbolic whitening (Munanga, 1999; Fernandes, 2008).

Conversely, critically oriented and decolonial *pardo* movements recognize *pardo* subjects as racialized individuals shaped by structural racism; denounce colorism as an internal mechanism of hierarchy within the Black population; engage in dialogue with Black movements while preserving historical, phenotypical, and territorial specificities; and frame *pardo* experience as a product of colonialism, racial violence, and forced miscegenation (Munanga, 1999; Hunter, 2007; Almeida, 2019). From this perspective, *pardo* identity is understood as an intermediate position within Brazil’s racial hierarchy, simultaneously marked by relative privileges and structural exclusions embedded in the historical logics of whiteness and systemic racism (Bento, 2022; Mills, 1997).

Without claiming to exhaust or definitively delimit the complexity of this analytical field, this research seeks to illuminate some of its structuring dimensions, offering theoretical and analytical tools that may contribute to future investigations. Such an endeavor is justified by the intrinsic dynamics of Brazil’s ethnic-racial plurality, which continuously reconfigures the sociological, historical, and political landscape through ongoing disputes, tensions, and transformations in the realm of racial relations.

Affirmative Action as a Foundational Claim of Black Collective Action

Affirmative action policies constitute mechanisms of socio-political, historical, and cultural reparation aimed at populations that have been systematically dispossessed, enslaved, marginalized, or otherwise subordinated on the basis of their identities. In the racial domain, it is imperative to draw a clear analytical and normative distinction between, on the one hand, non-dark-skinned Black individuals (*preto não retinto*) who legitimately access racial quotas despite occupying an intermediate position within Brazil’s chromatic hierarchy, and, on the other hand, those who fully aware of the privileges conferred by white passability, or in more egregious cases

by unequivocal whiteness deliberately engage in fraud in order to benefit from affirmative action policies to which they are not entitled.

The mainstream media has recurrently reported cases in which applicants are rejected by hetero-identification committees despite belonging to families of Black origin, due to the absence of a phenotypic configuration deemed compatible with the criteria established for racial quota eligibility. Such cases arise both in admissions to public universities and in competitive examinations for public sector positions. At the same time, and in alarmingly significant proportions, there have been instances of manifest fraud uncovered only after candidates had already been approved either with or without the scrutiny of such committees revealing that individuals who benefited from racial quotas were, in fact, white and therefore categorically excluded from the intended scope of these reparative policies.

A particularly illustrative case concerns the civil settlement reached between the Brazilian Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (*Ministério Público Federal* – MPF) and a former medical student at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UniRio). In 2018, prior to the formal establishment of hetero-identification committees within the Unified Selection System (*Sisu*), the student fraudulently obtained access to the racial quota system by self-identifying as Black despite being phenotypically white. Following an administrative inquiry, the individual agreed to the imposition of a financial penalty as stipulated in the settlement (Soares, 2025).

This case not only exposes the structural fragilities of self-declaratory regimes of racial classification, but also underscores the imperative to protect affirmative action policies from opportunistic practices that erode their reparative intent and compromise the legitimacy of the broader struggle against structural racism.

White Passability as a Regime of Racial Privilege and Power

To engage critically with the notion of *white passability* necessarily entails an examination of the privileges historically and structurally associated with whiteness, understood both in their symbolic and material dimensions, and accumulated intergenerationally over time (Bento, 2022). For white populations, such privileges tend to operate as naturalized and, therefore, largely invisible social advantages. By contrast, for Black individuals, these privileges become empirically perceptible and objectively measurable, insofar as they manifest themselves in unequal access to opportunities, the opening or closure of institutional doors, and the differential

incidence of violence, particularly with regard to policing practices and state coercion (Almeida, 2019).

The silencing and systematic invisibilization of Black subjects within spaces of power and decision-making processes constitute central mechanisms through which racial hierarchies are reproduced and maintained (Bento, 2022). White passability further operates within the domain of social class and upward mobility, sustained by what has been termed the *narcissistic pact of whiteness*: a racialized agreement that preserves privilege, consolidates exclusionary logics, and restricts equitable access to positions of prestige, authority, and social recognition (Bento, 2022).

Quantitative analyses of the racial composition of Brazil's judiciary, medical profession, financial and industrial elites, architecture, and other socially valorized and ennobling professions reveal a striking and recurrent pattern: their overwhelming predominance by white individuals. According to data from the National Council of Justice (CNJ), Brazil's judiciary has historically remained a predominantly white institution. The *Ethnic-Racial Diagnosis of the Judiciary, Census 2023* indicates that 82.5% of judges self-identified as white, whereas only 14.5% identified as Black (the aggregate of *pretos* and *pardos*), with 1.7% identifying as *preto* and 12.8% as *pardo*, according to data from the Monthly Productivity Module (MPM) of the CNJ (CNJ, 2024). Racialized groups such as Indigenous and East Asian populations are represented in even smaller proportions (CNJ, 2024).

Within this framework, the reproduction of elites in positions of power operates through mechanisms of distinction and segregation that systematically marginalize *pretos* and *pardos*, as analyzed by Clóvis Moura (2014). In other words, individual autonomy and the relative freedom to choose professional trajectories and conditions of well-being in Brazil are profoundly conditioned by race and color. The possibilities of success and merit-based recognition are traversed by skin pigmentation and bodily configurations, which are socially and politically regulated (Butler, 2019; Louro, 2018). The body, in this sense, becomes subjected to socially constructed norms shaped by intersecting regimes of oppression, including racism, sexism, LGBTQIA+phobia, ageism, fatphobia, ableism, and other hierarchical structures.

Discussing white passability also requires acknowledging the presumption of innocence attributed to white subjects in contexts involving potential criminality, as well as the legitimacy and credibility routinely granted to discourses articulated by racially white individuals. In such scenarios, suspicion, humiliation, and moral scrutiny disproportionately fall upon Black people (Kilomba, 2019). Moreover, white privilege manifests itself through facilitated access to

restaurants, VIP spaces, elite educational and professional opportunities, and privileged forms of leisure, including circulation within affluent neighborhoods, upscale shopping centers, private beaches, and highly aestheticized and socially polarized territories. This repertoire cannot be explained solely through class position, since even when Black or racially marked individuals possess significant economic capital, access to ennobled spaces remains regulated by what may be described as a “reading of racial belonging,” frequently followed by symbolic or material exclusion (Fernandes, 2008; Santos, 2012).

At the symbolic level (Bourdieu, 2012), access to luxury buildings, designer boutiques, and sports practices associated with dominant classes is strongly conditioned by phenotype and the performative enactment of whiteness. The very working-class individuals employed in these spaces often internalize processes of racial profiling and imitation, learning to identify, categorize, and repel bodies deemed undesirable or “anomic,” particularly on the basis of skin color and social origin.

More broadly, these stigmatizing identity markers simultaneously constitutive of social identity, as proposed by Goffman (2019), operate as norms that complement racism as a quotidian practice of social death. As a logical operator of suppression, imbalance, and devaluation, racism mobilizes both explicit and implicit instruments that sustain the construction of a “white world” in opposition to a “Black world” (Fanon, 1961). Within this process, attributes such as individual and collective capacity, merit, “good appearance,” “socially acceptable behavior,” “strategic intelligence,” or “genius” are ideologically mobilized, often without correspondence to the concrete realities of social relations (Bento, 2022). Such categories systematically obscure the structuring role of institutionalized racism, which positions and hierarchizes individuals within societies stratified by gender, color, ethnicity, nationality, religion, class, age, and other social markers of difference (Hall, 2014).

Thus, to theorize white passability is to unveil the historical and symbolic genesis of oppressive structures and the complex social engineering that continues to operate over time, reproducing hierarchies, foreclosing the emergence of new social subjects, and subjecting bodies, choices, desires, affects, and aspirations to normative regimes of control. This analytical exercise also touches upon the question of white self-esteem, frequently anchored in a perception of superiority that manifests through processes of animalization, fetishization, and derision of racialized others. Finally, the category *Black* emerges as a fundamental methodological concept for global studies (Mbembe, 2018a) aimed at critically apprehending the worldwide pact of

whiteness, as theorized by Charles W. Mills, enabling a deeper understanding of the historical, political, and epistemological dynamics that sustain white racial hegemony on a transnational scale (Mills, 2023).

CONCLUSION

To reflect on transracialization in contemporary Brazilian society is to rethink racial relations beyond the analytical confines of structural and institutional racism. While these dimensions undeniably permeate and shape all forms of social exclusion, transracialization operates with particular intensity at the level of subjectivity, especially in the domain of identity formation. The tensions produced by colorism within Brazilian society reverberate directly within the Black Movement itself. Although the distinction between dark-skinned (*retinto*) and non-dark-skinned Black individuals does not exclude those identified as Black from the political agenda, it engenders cultural, symbolic, and affective conflicts that unevenly impact the subjects involved.

These tensions are further exacerbated by racist discourses anchored in the enduring myth of Brazilian “racial democracy,” which frames the nation as inherently mestizo and asserts social class, rather than race, as the primary determinant of inequality. Such narratives significantly hinder the expansion and deepening of racial debate across social, institutional, and epistemic domains in Brazil. In this context, Blackness emerges as a paradoxical condition: individuals are born Black into exclusion, yet become Black through political consciousness and struggle for liberation. Nevertheless, to identify as Black entails a degree of materiality, phenotypic, social, and experiential, that cannot be abstracted or purely performative.

This study deploys the concept of transracialization as an analytical lens to deepen the understanding of Black identity, placing particular emphasis on phenotypical distinctions between dark-skinned Black individuals and *pardos*, and on the differentiated social consequences these distinctions produce across the empirical material. Through a comparative engagement with the United States context, the analysis critically examines colorism in Brazil, unveiling the material and symbolic advantages associated with lighter skin tones as manifestations of intraracial inequality and as mechanisms that actively fracture the Black collective. Within this analytical framework, the study juxtaposes a “thick” conception of Black identity, anchored in cultural rootedness, historical continuity, and diasporic consciousness, with

a “thin” and instrumentalized form of Blackness, strategically mobilized within reparatory policy regimes. Particular attention is devoted to the corrosive impact of fraudulent self-identification practices on the legitimacy, credibility, and efficacy of affirmative action policies.

The findings further illuminate the enduring presence of whitening processes, quotidian expressions of racism, and the structural hegemony of white supremacy within Brazilian institutions, concomitant with the persistent reproduction of racial and social hierarchies. At the same time, the study underscores the expansion of racial discourse within the public sphere, propelled by digital media and the transnational reverberations of the Black Lives Matter movement, which have consolidated Black identification as an afro-centered epistemological and political project. In contrast, the analysis brings into sharp relief the internal tensions within *pardo* movements, exposing a divide between currents that relativize or dilute the centrality of structural racism and critical, decolonial approaches that affirm the *pardo* subject as unequivocally racialized.

Finally, the research interrogates the notion of white passability within reparatory and compensatory public policy frameworks, as exemplified by the case of the former UniRio medical student convicted of racial quota fraud. White passability is thus theorized as an effect of the presumption of innocence and the social credibility routinely conferred upon white subjects and their narratives. Taken together, these findings converge toward a critical reflection on the social effects of skin color, the racial engineering sustained by white supremacy, and the urgent imperative to confront structural and institutional racism in concrete, preventive, and epistemically accountable ways, both in everyday racial relations and within academic knowledge production.

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