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When Conviviality Hides Inequality

Lélia Gonzalez on Brazilian Racial Democracy

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Abstract

The idea of racial democracy, also known as the myth of racial democracy, is not just a mistaken belief. In fact, it encompasses a set of mechanisms that regulate social practices, power relations, forms of social interaction, and collective thinking within a historically established system of ethnic-racial domination. Based on Lélia Gonzalez's analysis, we will investigate which social actions concretize, support, and at the same time hinder the perception of everyday racism. How can we explain the widespread acceptance and propagation of the myth of racial democracy? And what does the myth of racial democracy hide, apart from what it reveals? The purpose of this text is to understand the paradigmatic issue of Brazilian racial democracy by assuming indirectly the conceptual framework of the relationship between conviviality and inequality. How does conviviality hide inequalities? And how could the nexus of conviviality and inequality contribute to the understanding of racial democracy? Lélia Gonzalez can help us find answers to these questions.

Keywords: racial democracy | conviviality and inequality | Black feminism

About the Autor

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1. Introduction: The Ideological Function of Racial Democracy Revisited

There seems to be no doubt anymore that Brazilian racial democracy, that is, the idea that Brazil was formed based on "a kind of racial paradise, a harmoniously mestizo country"[1] (Santos 2022: 211), is a "myth".[2] Anti-racism theorists and activists have been combating this myth for many decades and sought to reinforce that Brazilian society is racist, that the structures of racism are constitutively rooted in our way of life (Moura 2019). Still, when we look at the most diverse spheres of our daily lives, there seems to be an uncomfortable but permanent truth content surrounding this "myth": we continue to be a society that produces and reproduces multiple means to perpetuate everyday racism. How and why, despite all the questioning and anti-racist struggle, do we still embrace, so to speak, the forms of segregated integration of the population, allowing "racism to continue there, silent, but keeping the wheels working"? (Santos 2022: 211). The answer that Nilma Lino Gomes offers to this question is unequivocal: Because we are still "a society that *hides and keeps racism behind* the discourse of racial democracy, miscegenation, diversity" (Gomes 2018: 111).

Saying that racial democracy is a myth does not just mean concluding that, in reality, we live in a racist democracy or that true democracy is only possible without racism. It means that racism is perpetuated through the existing democracy, and only for this reason it ensures its effectiveness in social terms: "Racial democracy or the myth of racial democracy is not merely a false belief, but involves a way of functioning and regulating social practices, power relations, forms of sociability and social thought that make up a certain historically constituted ethnic-racial domination regime" (Sales 2023: 105). It is not, therefore, a question of denying that racial democracy operates effectively in the perpetuation of racism, nor of concluding that its effectiveness presupposes that we live in a democracy without racism. Certainly, "the denunciation of racial democracy as a myth occurs […] in the context of the criticism of political democracy as a farce" (Guimarães 2001: 147). But its criticism is directed less at some ideal of interracial democratic coexistence than at some hegemonic mode of domination and oppression that acts through everyday racial sociability itself. Who is interested in hiding the racism that actually exists behind discourses and practices that deny its existence? On the one hand, according to Antonio Sérgio Guimarães, "'Racial democracy' was extensively used to make Brazilian racial inequalities invisible", but it doesn't mean "to deny its

1 All translations are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

2 Florestan Fernandes was the first intellectual to talk about the "myth" of racial democracy. He problematized the processes of integration of the Black population in a class-stratified society. His research points to the social marginalization of the Black population and how the myth of racial democracy hinders the recognition of the intertwining of socio-economic inequalities and racial discrimination (Fernandes 2008 [1964]).

effectiveness in inhibiting grosser manifestations of racism" (Guimarães 2019: 41–42). On the other hand, racial democracy wouldn't have just the intention of perpetuating social inequalities (i.e., racial, class, and gender) between white and Black people. This would have the function of preventing critical anti-racist behaviour, demobilizing indignation and resistance (Santos 2022; Theodoro 2022).

But if something like racial democracy fulfils the role of hiding or dissimulating racism, what are the social practices that materialize, sustain, and simultaneously prevent the recognition of everyday racism? According to Lélia Gonzalez's formulation: "What happened for the myth of racial democracy to have so much acceptance and dissemination? What were the processes that determined its construction? What does it hide, besides what it shows?" (Gonzalez 2020g: 76). Recent literature has sought to investigate this issue on different fronts based on processes of subjectivation of domination and the internalization of racism. Concepts such as colour blindness (Bonilla-Silva 2020), whiteness (Bento 2022; Theodoro 2022), raciality devices (Carneiro 2023), or even interdicted (Faustino, 2021) or ambivalent recognition (Melo 2024) refer to attempts to explain the persistence of racism and social inequality in our democratic ways of life.

The purpose of this text is to re-read one of these attempts to understand the paradigmatic issue of Brazilian racial democracy by assuming indirectly the "conceptual framework" of conviviality (Costa and Nobre 2019: 12). More precisely, admitting an "inseparable nexus between conviviality and inequality" (Costa 2019: 28). Instead of an analysis specifically focused on social structures (although never failing to consider them), "conviviality specifically refers to the interactions observed in the realm of common life. They obviously include not only interactions based on cooperation but also those marked by competition, conflicts and violence" (Costa 2019: 27). However, according to our hypothesis, social interactions that constitute conviviality can be the path to understand the aspects of hidden inequalities that operate in the perpetuation of racism. How does conviviality hide inequalities? And how could the nexus of conviviality and inequality contribute to the understanding of racial democracy? If, conceptually, conviviality always contains inequality – once conviviality cannot be confused with good coexistence – would it be the function of the myth of racial democracy to hide and perpetuate social inequality through a kind of a veiled racism?

2. Gonzalez's Critical Approach

Lélia Gonzalez can help us find answers to these questions. Gonzalez knows that "like any myth, that of racial democracy hides something beyond what it shows" (Gonzalez 2020g: 80). As an intellectual activist who played a leading role in the struggles waged

by the Brazilian Black movement – always in an innovative way, incorporating issues of race, gender and class from a Latin American perspective – Gonzalez constantly confronted the myth of racial democracy in her texts and in her political practice.[3] In the wake of Florestan Fernandes's investigations about the integration of Black people into class society, she thematized the "place of Black people" (Gonzalez and Hasenbalg 2022) as a structuring factor in Brazilian social inequality. But in order to see what seems obvious, namely that racism (and sexism) produces inequalities, it was necessary to challenge the dominant ideology of the national integration project: the interpretation of Brazilian race relations as harmonious and without space for Black political and cultural expression;[4] the reproduction of racial and sexist stereotypes; and "the desire to become white […] internalized with the consequent denial of one's own race, one's own culture" (Gonzalez, 2020b: 114). On the other hand, it is possible to say that two apparently contradictory meanings can be identified in Gonzalez's texts regarding the issue of Brazilian racial democracy: the ideological unmasking of a democracy that, in reality, continues to be racist (Gonzalez 2020d) and the commitment to overcoming the myth of racial democracy so that a real racial democracy could be established in the country (Gonzalez 2020a).[5]

Evidently, the first of these two meanings already shaped what would be the main objective that Gonzalez shared with many other Black intellectuals and activists: to have the existence of racism in our society recognized. This was not limited, therefore, to unmasking a nationalist and racist state ideology that had been established since the 1930s – and revitalized with the military dictatorship from 1964 onwards. Recognizing that Brazilian racial democracy was racist even after the abolition of slavery implied a critical understanding of the formation of Brazilian society, whose genesis was slavery and which left traces of racism in our way of life, in our private and public culture, in the forms of everyday sociability. It therefore required a critical deconstruction of our supposedly racially harmonious national identity. But understanding the racial contradictions in the post-abolition period was never an easy task, because "this noisy silence regarding racial contradictions is based, in modern times, on one of the most

3 For an intellectual biography of Lélia Gonzalez, see Ratts et al. 2010.

4 "In 'racial democracy', it is therefore a question of preventing race relations from being presented as political relations in the spaces of public debate, in formal and institutional discourses in an explicit way" (Sales 2006: 254). In the same vein, Sueli Carneiro stresses the "strategic function" of racial democracy in avoiding social conflicts: "The discourse that shapes race relations is the myth of racial democracy. Its construction and permanence to the present day highlights its strategic function, above all as a peacemaker of ethnic-racial tensions" (Carneiro 2023: 50).

5 "As long as the Black issue is not taken up by Brazilian society as a whole, Blacks and whites, and together we reflect, evaluate, and develop a praxis of awareness of the issue of racial discrimination in this country, it will be very difficult in Brazil to reach the point of effectively being a racial democracy" (Gonzalez 2020a: 310). This second meaning, which refers to aspects of Gonzalez's political activism, will not be addressed in this text.

effective myths of ideological domination: that of racial democracy". In other words, "following the supposed equality of all before the law, [the myth of racial democracy] affirms the existence of great racial harmony" (Gonzalez 2020f: 144).[6] Since the myth of racial democracy would have us believe that "Blacks are citizens like any others and, as such, are not subject to prejudice or discrimination" (and Carnival and soccer would, for example, be proof of the existence of Brazilian "racial harmony"), we need to understand that "what predominates in Brazilian 'racial democracy' is *the prejudice of not having prejudice*" (Gonzalez 2020c: 168, emphasis in the original). How was it possible for this myth to take social root at the very heart of our racial contradictions?

3. Cordial Racism

Gonzalez herself is aware that this dispute over the silencing of racial contradictions and the social situation of Black people goes back to a long intellectual tradition in the country. "Historians and sociologists," she says, "have silenced their situation from the abolition of slavery to the present, establishing a practice that makes this social segment invisible" (Gonzalez 2020f: 144). This is a discussion that goes back to classic themes in Brazilian social thought, from the thesis on miscegenation to the debate on "cordiality".[7] In our context, "cordiality has the task of defending social peace and order, whose political structure is organized in such a way that some can defend the *status quo* against others, perpetuating it in 'racial democracy'" (Sales 2006: 231). Moreover, forms of cordiality are the way in which the supposed "pact of silence" about the existence of racism is internalized and put into effect. A cordial sociability contains, among its devices, exchanges of favours or the distribution of gratitude that led to the mitigation of an unequal coexistence. It allows to dissimulate relationships of oppression and make invisible inequalities hidden by (apparently) affective social interactions – the domination that has come to be called "cordial racism" (Turra et al. 1995).

In principle, the myth of racial democracy fulfils its hegemonic function if it can hide the unequal consequences of racism. And who is interested in hiding racism? In stratified and multicultural societies, racist social practices generate and perpetuate

6 Muniz Sodré radicalizes the idea that the "slavery social form" was maintained in the post-abolitionist period and even in the current social and institutional conditions of Brazilian democracy after the 1988 Constitution: "Brazilian racism or the national 'racial-democracy' has its specificity: the system of direct subordination of the kidnapped body has been politically and legally abolished, but the corresponding form remains: the slavery social form" (Sodré 2023: 238).

7 "Official history […] speaks of the Brazilian as a 'cordial' being and claims that the history of our people is a model of peaceful solutions to all the tensions and conflicts that have arisen in it". After making this statement, Gonzalez includes a footnote in which she reinforces the following: "Let's pay attention to the fact that this discourse is articulated with the myth of racial democracy, complementing it" (Gonzalez 2020b: 50).

material and symbolic benefits for the "dominant white group, which reveals its articulation with the ideology of whitening", as we shall see (Gonzalez 2020f: 144). Racism is absolutely fundamental to maintaining inequality. And this is linked to the understanding of "racism as an ideological construction" (Gonzalez 2020b: 55) which, with the myth of racial democracy, makes racism allegedly "false". This ideological function of distorting reality, according to Gonzalez, is always "necessarily oriented and biased" in favours of "the interests of those who benefit from it": racism represents the perpetuation and reinterpretation of the discourses of dominant white groups. In the end, racism naturalizes the "place of Black people" in our society as a place of subordination, the crystallization of social inequalities between the dominant and the dominated.[8] But how can we investigate "racism as an ideological construction" if ideology necessarily misrepresents reality? According to the definition offered by Gonzalez, in order to answer this question properly, "it is important to characterize racism as an ideological construction whose practices are concretized in the different processes of racial discrimination" (Gonzalez 2020b: 55).

4. Miscegenation and the Ideology of Whitening

The way in which Gonzalez investigated the concealment of racism as "unseen" oppression takes us to the phenomenology of everyday interactions. Her gaze (which favours a "bottom-up" research perspective)[9] focused especially on the persistence of racism and sexism in a set of social practices usually identified in Brazilian culture. These practices are a condition of possibility for racism and socio-economic exploitation – along with sexism, as we shall see – to continue to be intertwined, forming the set of experiences that make up our political culture. "But how does this racism work in our heads and in the heads of others? How do we experience it on a daily basis? How do white women and men deal with us?" (Gonzalez 2020d: 201). Some themes, phenomenological frameworks and epistemological perspectives will make up her answers: miscegenation and whitening, language and subjectivation, popular culture and the public sphere, the intersection of race, gender and class (or the "triple

8 Gonzalez refers here to the following quote from Carlos Hasenbalg: "Racism, as an ideological articulation incorporated into and realized through a set of material practices of discrimination, is the primary determinant of the position of non-whites within the relations of production and distribution" (Hasenbalg 1979: 114).

9 But it is not limited to this perspective. It is possible to say that Gonzalez works simultaneously with both the everyday (horizontal) and structural (vertical) perspectives of racism. The key idea of the "place of Black people" has a transversal explanatory potential in deconstructing the official narrative of racial democracy: it can mark structural social inequalities and hierarchies, in which the distancing crystallized by racism becomes clear (in access to education, health, the job market, etc.), or naturalized discrimination in everyday life, even in relationships of intimacy and friendship (for example, the situation of Black women in their families and closest communities). Gonzalez's "horizontal" research makes fundamental use of culture, psychoanalysis and language.

discrimination")[10]. All these aspects are intended to show how everyday interactions and ordinary discursive relations expose the "identification of the dominated with the dominator" (Gonzalez 2020g: 76), an identification that produces and reproduces the social conditions of the myth of racial democracy. Identification without which racial democracy would not be a form of hegemonic ideology that perpetuates itself not only through dissimulated domination, but also through consent, so to speak. All this so that "in everyday life" racism is "not felt" by those concerned as something violent and unjust.

Miscegenation plays an important ideological role in the myth of racial democracy. "The greatest effect of the myth," says Gonzalez, "is the belief that racism does not exist in our country thanks to the process of miscegenation" (Gonzalez 2020b: 50).[11] On the one hand, it reinforces the updating of one of the most central aspects of the "myth", namely that Brazil has found cordial forms of sociability so that the different races can live together harmoniously. On the other hand, it laid the foundations for a whitening project with far-reaching consequences.[12] How could there be racism where there were no clear marks of racial opposition between Black and white people? Miscegenation therefore formed the imaginary of a mestizo Brazil free of racial contradictions and discriminatory relations. But "the idea of miscegenation as proof of Brazil's 'racial democracy' is nonsense" (Gonzalez 2020d: 202). For Gonzalez, beyond the ideological aspect of miscegenation and its internalization of whitening, its strength lies in the way these elements have produced peculiar forms of persistence and consolidation of racism itself. It is in the (apparently) harmonious daily coexistence and common spaces of interaction that racial oppression resides, which is why from the perspective

10 "To be Black and a woman in Brazil, we repeat, is to be the object of triple discrimination, since the stereotypes generated by racism and sexism place her at the lowest level of oppression" (Gonzalez 2020b: 58).

11 Once again, we must emphasize the concealment of the violent aspect behind the miscegenation thesis. Gonzalez is critically opposed to the theory of lusotropicalism developed by Gilberto Freyre. According to this author, the Portuguese were not racist because they had already undergone processes of miscegenation before Brazil was colonized. Gonzalez opposes this theory by showing that Freyre does not take into account that miscegenation is "the result of the rape of Black women by the dominant white minority" (Gonzalez 2020b: 50).

12 "Two trends define Black identity in Brazilian society: on the one hand, the notion of racial democracy and, on the other, the ideology of whitening" (Gonzalez 2020c: 168). However, according to the author, the ideology of whitening is chronologically earlier (1890-1930) than the myth of racial democracy (which gained strength after 1930). Sueli Carneiro's position on miscegenation is also very enlightening and complementary: "The racial miscegenation present in our society has lent itself to different political and ideological uses. Firstly, miscegenation has supported the myth of racial democracy […]. Secondly, miscegenation has been an effective instrument for whitening the country" (Carneiro 2011: 66–67). Naturally, scientific racism and the ideological project of a racially harmonious Brazil were harshly confronted by the anti-racist Black movements. For the "path of ideas that naturalized the inferiority of Black people", see Santos 2005. For an analysis of this process, which was accompanied by the emergence of new ethnicities and the politicization of difference, see Costa 2006, chapter 5.

of the participants themselves it is often difficult to identify racism as some kind of more explicit oppression – even though this can certainly happen and present clearly violent traits.[13]

It is as if miscegenation provided Brazilian society with an entry into the "post-racial" condition in a quite different way to that which occurred in the USA, since in Brazil the supposed "post-racial society" (which also has ideological functions) would have been achieved without contradiction or conflict, i.e. in a depoliticized way: as a result of our multiracial character, harmony between the races would have led to a natural "racial tolerance".[14] This "racial tolerance" refers to a supposed better social acceptance of lighter-skinned people compared to darker-skinned people.[15] It has to do with the construction of a narrative that has the capacity to take root in social and symbolic practices – which produces the force of the ideal of whiteness in people's subjectivation. "Racism in Brazil is deeply disguised" (Gonzalez 2020e: 302) because it hides its true face behind concrete and effective interactions, behaviours, and attitudes. The long-term effect consists in undermining critical behaviours, the subjectivation of conflicting agencies and the praxis of confrontation, guaranteeing then the maintenance of racial and social inequalities.

13 Therefore, in terms of methodology, it is not a matter of comprehending these spaces of interaction as conflict-free rules for conviviality. On the contrary. We hypothesize that these relationships are best analyzed using the conceptual framework of conviviality. In this framework, conflicts, disputes and tensions marked by inequalities should not be excluded beforehand from the concrete interactions that make up a given convivial experience. This means that "the analytical use of theories of conviviality does not allow for a prior distinction between a supposed 'good conviviality' and conflictive conviviality" (Costa 2023: 90). Distinctly situated convivialities dynamically engender certain inequalities that only become explicit in certain contexts and interactions. It is only "at the level of concrete interpersonal interactions that inequality is signified and acquires concrete implications for life in society" (Costa 2023: 92).

14 The current diagnosis in the United States of the ideology of the post-racial society claims that, as a result of the struggles of the Black population for the recognition of their civil rights, as a consequence of multicultural affirmative public policies, and with individual achievements, greater inclusion and representation obtained by "racial neoliberalism" (Goldberg 2009) (in the wake of "progressive neoliberalism"), US society would have overcome the period of open racial conflicts. As a result, the maintenance of anti-racist struggles and, in particular, the critiques elaborated from the perspective of critical race theory would end up becoming a kind of "reverse racism", racializing once again social conflicts that had supposedly already been overcome. In other words, from this distorted perspective, the anti-racist would be the new racist. Of course, anti-racist social movements and representatives of critical race theory have publicly confronted the ideology of the post-racial society in the US. In David Theo Goldberg's view, confronting this discourse is now the central objective of anti-racism, because today post-racial ideology has become one of the main ways in which racism continues.

15 As well as making the desire for whitening explicit, the discourse of miscegenation and its categories of racial differentiation between the Black population (such as that between "Blacks" [*pretos*] and "Browns" [*pardos*], for example) work "effectively as an element of fragmentation of Black identity and preventing it from becoming an agglutinating element in the political field" (Carneiro 2023: 53).

5. Racial Subjectivation of Domination

Undoubtedly, one of the functions of the discourse of racial democracy is precisely to forget Black agency and resistance to social oppression. As Gonzalez reminds us, it is a great "historical lie" to claim that "Black people passively accepted" slavery and its long-term effects (Gonzalez 2020d: 202). On the other hand, Gonzalez investigates precisely hidden, less obvious and ambivalent processes of subjectivation – for example, the generalized symbolic language of "valuing" Black women in the background culture as a way of putting racism and sexism into effect. Violence that is not manifest because it is hidden in a language that is culturally normalized and recognized – but which Gonzalez always understands critically as the subversion of language in everyday life. A similar complexity is investigated by the author when it comes to understanding the internalization of racism by the Black population itself. If "we Blacks are in the garbage can of Brazilian society", how can we understand our specific and effective "logic of domination"? How can we critically explain "that Black people are what the logic of domination tries (and often succeeds, we know) to domesticate?". It is therefore a complex investigation into our society so that we can better understand that "the 'cool' [*barato*] thing is to really domesticate", and "its effectiveness lies in the 'cool aspect' [*barato*] of the ideology of whitening" (Gonzalez 2020g: 77–79). Submission to the codes of whiteness reinforces and concretizes the myth of racial democracy.

Gonzalez is following a concern already widely shared in important studies on the racial subjectification of domination. Many works in Brazil have tried to explain the racist figure of the "Black man with a white soul" – in the wake of Franz Fanon's work and in the critical appropriation of psychoanalysis, which, in addition to Gonzalez's investigations, also includes the analyses of Isildinha Baptista Nogueira, Cida Bento, and Neusa Santos Souza (Nogueira 2021; Bento 2022; Souza 2022). In all of them, it is a question of explaining the psychic devices at work that strengthen the "place of Black people" in unequal positions in the class structure.[16] In other words, it would not be possible for Black people to socially ascend in a class society without the ideology of whitening and racial democracy – this is the only way to sustain the structure of race relations in Brazil: "The history of the social ascension of Black Brazilians is thus the history of their assimilation into white patterns of social relations. It is the history of the ideological submission of a racial stock in the presence of the other that makes it hegemonic. It is the history of an identity renounced, given the circumstances that stipulate the price of recognition for Black people based on the intensity of their denial" (Souza 2022: 53).

16 In the same sense are Florestan Fernandes' concerns regarding the "sociopathic effects of social disorganization" and the assumptions of "racial heteronomy in class society", precisely where Fernandes formulates the thesis of the myth of racial democracy (Fernandes 2008 [1964]).

Without the ideology of whitening, the publicly imposed and recognized myth of racial democracy would not penetrate the private relations of life. In a society with a Black majority, this ideology was fundamental for the official projection of a racially white ("and culturally European") country to be effective and to continue "even today to define the identity of Black people in the Brazilian social context" (Gonzalez 2020c: 169). According to Gonzalez, in an intrinsically related way, racial democracy and whitening then produce a "double knot" as an effective form of subjectivation of domination: an official ideology used as a justification "to whiten the country's population" and the production of behaviours, forms of action, repertoire, vocabulary, negative images that crystallize stereotyped roles and places attributed to Black men and women. This is why the "place of Black people" in Brazilian society is not in intellectually qualified jobs or political leadership, for example, but in unskilled activities of subordination and inferiorization. On the other hand, whitening mechanisms produce "positive images" in which Black people play social roles assigned to them heteronomously by hegemonic discourses. They always refer to art or sport as the result of attributes considered natural to Black people (physical strength, rhythm, sexuality). For Gonzalez, "in all these images there is a common element: the Black person is seen as an object of entertainment" (Gonzalez 2020c: 170). Whitening mechanisms shape our public culture.[17]

6. Carnival and the *Doméstica-Mulata* Dialectic

As we are seeing, Gonzalez investigates the different practical ways in which racial domination takes root in our public culture. Racism is perpetuated through the myth of racial democracy because, through certain social practices, it produces and reproduces a kind of consensual domination. Some aspects of Brazilian popular culture have more power to make the myth even more effective. Gonzalez calls them "rites" that sustain and actualize this hegemonic function. Myths can only be perpetuated through rites. Paradigmatic in our popular culture are rites such as soccer and samba, phenomena that are widely accepted and emblematically linked to the presence of Black people, because "the images of Brazilian Carnival and soccer are widely used […] as 'concrete proof' of Brazilian 'racial harmony'" (Gonzalez 2020c: 168). Among these rites – which usually include other popular festivals – Gonzalez pays special attention to "Carnival": "The myth that we are trying to re-enact here is that of racial democracy. And it is precisely at the moment of the carnival *rite* that the myth is updated with all its symbolic force". And if "it is at Carnival that the myth of racial democracy is exalted", this is because it is impossible to talk about the carnival rite or, much less, the myth of racial

17 "In public spaces, Black people can dance, sing and play, but they cannot contest, protest and transform" (Sales 2023: 108).

democracy without putting a decisive character on stage – the Black woman (Gonzalez 2020g: 80; 92).[18]

It is well known that Gonzalez gives centrality in her reflections to the experiences and struggles of Black women. To understand them is to understand the contradictions and possibilities of our society, the obstacles and the emancipatory potential of our democracy. For this reason, the best way to investigate the ideological construction of racial democracy, the reality/falsehood dialectic that constitutes Brazilian racism, is by trying to understand the lives of Black women. Because "as with all myths, that of racial democracy hides more than it reveals, especially with regard to symbolic violence against Afro-Brazilian women" (Gonzalez 2020c: 165). So, what is hidden or revealed through these women that allows us to properly understand what is at stake in racial democracy? According to Gonzalez, racial democracy "exerts its symbolic violence in a special way on Black women, because the other side of carnivalesque deification occurs in the daily life of these women, when they become *domésticas*" (Gonzalez 2020g: 80).[19]

The *doméstica-mulata* dialectic defines, in Gonzalez's terms, the racialized recognition of Black Brazilian women. An identity heteronomously constituted by the way Black women are situated in the discourse of racial democracy. This dialectic refers to the "*place* in which we situate ourselves" based on the "double phenomenon of racism and sexism". Black women thus express "the *symptomatic* that characterizes *Brazilian cultural neurosis*" (Gonzalez 2020g: 76, emphasis in the original). She materializes negative and positive images in a dynamic and violent way – the *sum* of the ideological construction that sustains the extremes of the racial democracy discourse. It is the product of the interdicted and the unsaid of current language in Brazilian culture. A contradiction that should remain hidden under the hegemony of the ideological construction, but which is constantly revealed in the common language of our public culture. After all, how is it possible for *mulata* and *doméstica* to be attributed to the same subject? Why does it engender in white men and women (and Black men) simultaneous and contradictory feelings of desire and guilt, deification and aggression? *Mulata* or *doméstica*: "the name depends on the situation in which we are seen" (Gonzalez 2020g: 80). Therefore, Black women are seen in Brazilian society in an extremely contradictory way: "as a body that works and is overexploited economically, she is the cleaner, maid and cook, the 'pack mule' of her white employers; as a body that provides pleasure

18 Similar passages in other texts reinforce this thesis: "The myth we are describing is that of racial democracy, since it is precisely at the moment of the Carnival rite that the myth takes on its full symbolic impact. It is at this moment that the Afro-Brazilian woman is transformed into a sovereign, into that '*mulata*, my samba queen'" (Gonzalez, 2020e: 164-165).

19 We chose to keep the original Portuguese terms *doméstica* (female domestic worker) and *mulata* (a mixed-race woman, typically of African and European descent – an outdated and potentially offensive term today, historically associated with samba dancers in Brazil).

and is overexploited sexually, she is the *mulata* of Carnival whose sensuality falls into the 'erotic-exotic' category" (Gonzalez 2020c: 170). But this neurotic transfiguration always fulfils ideological functions, because it is precisely through it that racial (and sexual) contradictions remain hidden and justified by those affected themselves.

It is necessary to see the degree of symbolic violence that is operating behind the laudatory language directed at the "queen of Carnival", the exaltation of the *mulata*. "We know that the word '*mulata*' comes from mule – a *hybrid animal*", Gonzalez reminds us, a "permanent prisoner of nature". Her humanity is not recognized as a subject, she has no agency. The most she can aim for is to become an object of desire – "but never a *muse*", just "*a fruit to be tasted*". In the Carnival parades, the *mulata* "becomes a Cinderella: adored, desired and devoured by those who went there precisely to lust after her" (Gonzalez 2020c: 165). But everything is always accompanied by sexual violence (in the tension between repulsion and desire).[20] Furthermore, by becoming a professional due to the effects of capitalism, "she is never recognized as a human being and no movement has been made to restore her dignity as a woman. She has clearly been transformed into a commodity" (Gonzalez 2020c: 165–166).[21]

7. Sexual Exploitation of Black Women

Mechanisms of whitening also work to make all this symbolic violence suffered by Black women a reality. Gonzalez analyses interviews with domestic workers who also worked as samba dancers, in other words as *mulatas*. All the stories and her analysis bring out the inhuman side of the "fairy tale". First of all, *mulatas* couldn't be "completely white or completely Black". They had to fit into the "*national category of skin for export: mulata*" (Gonzalez 2020c: 166, emphasis in the original). For the "most important prerequisite" consists of the following: "*A mulata must have delicate white features if success is to be guaranteed*". This includes mestizo features and phenotypes that are not completely Black, but European, such as having a "fine nose and well-drawn lips". *Mulata* candidates are "rigorously examined '*as if they were horses*'" (Gonzalez 2020c: 168, emphasis in the original). Finally, *mulatas* need to know how to behave socially, which implies that the "export standard" requires them to take "*social etiquette classes*" so that they don't just know how to dance samba on stage. In order to "stand out on stage and be incredible in her profession", the *mulata* needs to "*learn to be a woman*".

20 There is brutality and disrespect in praising Black women as sexualized objects. Gonzales always offers many examples of very common uses of popular language when referring to *mulatas* "flatteringly": "What legs, man! Look at that *passista* [dancer] wiggling. What an ass! And look at her navel. She must be very good in bed! She's driving me crazy!" (Gonzalez 2020c: 164).

21 *Mulatas* are "subtly co-opted by the system without realizing the high price to pay: that of their own dignity" (Gonzalez 2020b: 59). In the end, as Gonzalez thematizes, they end up turning to prostitution.

These stories, according to Gonzalez, express very well “what it means to be a *mulata* in the ‘racial paradise’ called Brazil” (Gonzalez 2020c: 168, emphasis in the original).

But the internalization of the ideology of whitening leads to “identification with the ideology of the dominator”. Gloria Cristal, one of the *mulatas* interviewed, says: “Being a *mulata* is *the best profession in the world*, because we have the opportunity to become ladies. Everyone treats us with affection and care. *Sometimes I think I’m a porcelain doll and I really like that*” (Gonzalez 2020c: 167). The dominant ideological system subjects Black women (“young Black women from humble origins”) to a type of manipulation and sexual, social, and economic exploitation, exposing them to a veritable “brainwashing”: “Without realizing it, they are manipulated, not only as sexual objects, but as *concrete proof of Brazil’s ‘racial democracy’*: after all, they are so beautiful and admired!” (Gonzalez 2020b: 59, emphasis in the original). These young Black women see this type of work – *mulata* as a “profession” – as a means of ascension and a possible way out of their “place of Black people”, usually their original situation of poverty.

This sexual exploitation of Black women is totally linked to the obstacles they face in finding a humanly dignified place in the workforce and in everyday social relations. Gonzalez observes that the difficulties of mobility and social ascension for Black women are linked to everyday racism and the mechanisms of whitening that reinforce discrimination. In many professional activities (administrative work, school teaching, nursing services, receptionists, etc.), “Black women find it obviously difficult to be hired because many of these activities […] require direct contact with the public” (Gonzalez 2020c: 159). Thus, they are discriminated against because of the colour of their Black skin. In most cases, job advertisements for such activities already mention “the requirement of ‘good looks’. In practice, ‘good looks’ means that the candidate belongs to the dominant racial group” (Gonzalez 2020c: 159). In other words, this means that it is not desirable for “Black candidates to come forward, they will not be admitted” (Gonzalez 2020b: 58). This derogatory view of Black women (which, according to Gonzalez, always creates a counterpoint with the “fairy tale” image of the *mulata* – the dialectic between *doméstica* and *mulata*) materializes in the way they are treated in everyday interactions and are socially integrated: even if in a veiled way, they are always subordinated and inferior according to the rules of cordiality of Brazilian racial democracy. Therefore, “it can be concluded that discrimination based on sex and race makes Black women the most exploited and oppressed segment of Brazilian society, limiting their possibilities for advancement” (Gonzalez 2020c: 160). They are left to internalize racial domination and struggle to survive in deteriorating living conditions as *domésticas* for middle and upper class families in Brazilian society facing a double shift of work and care in their own home (looking after family members, especially

children), without medical care, without quality education for their children, resigning themselves to the "refuges" of society.[22] Even so, as we shall see, Black women have always resisted class, race and gender oppression in different ways.[23]

Black feminism – not white feminism – was the only one that worried about and fought against the forms of overexploitation of Black women. This is because Brazilian feminist movements, generally led by white middle-class women, disregarded the issue of race. "Although they deal with the relations of sexual, social, and economic domination to which women are subjected", says Gonzalez, "they do not pay attention to the fact of racial oppression" and therefore "neutralize the problem of racial discrimination" (Gonzalez 2020b: 61). At the end of the day, this forgetting or invisibilization of the racial issue would have the conscious intention of hiding the fact of the "exploitation of Black women by white women". This would demonstrate the (often unconscious) effects of the internalization of racism on progressive sectors, which do not realize that "in their own discourse, the mechanisms of the ideology of whitening and the myth of racial democracy are present" (Gonzalez 2020b: 61).

However, Gonzalez is not only harshly critical of white feminism. Even Marxist movements focused exclusively on class struggles "ended up becoming accomplices of a domination they intended to combat" (Gonzalez 2020f: 145): "It is worth noting that even the leftwing groups absorbed the thesis of 'racial democracy' to the extent that their analyses of our social reality never glimpsed anything beyond class contradictions" (Gonzalez 2020f: 144). In addition, Gonzalez does not shy away from criticizing the sexual discrimination present in the Black movement: "Our partners in the movement reproduce the sexist practices of the dominant patriarchy and try to exclude us from the movement's decision-making sphere. And it is precisely for this reason that we seek out the women's movement, feminist theory and practice, believing that we can find there a solidarity that is so dear to the racial question: sisterhood. However, what we really find are practices of racist exclusion and domination" (Gonzalez 2020f: 148). This means that Black women suffer racism from the feminist movement, sexism from the Black movement, and racism/sexism simultaneously from leftists guided by class struggles.

22 Including the constant danger of sexual violence. Gonzalez always points out that violence and desire are realized differently in situations where Black women are seen as *mulatas* or *domésticas*. But both always refer to the violent and symbolically structuring act of "rape". In addition to all kinds of difficulties and suffering, *domésticas* continue to reproduce the role of *mucamas* (in Brazil and Portuguese-speaking Africa, a young Black female slave who helped with household chores and accompanied the lady of the house on outings, and could also serve as a wet nurse) as sexual objects for their masters, bosses, fathers and their children.

23 This "Black woman's place" in society finds many parallels with the concept of the "outsider within" as later developed by Patricia Hill Collins (2019).

8. Black Women's Agency

Finally, we need to understand the strategies that Black women use in their daily lives to "survive and resist in a capitalist and racist formation like ours" (Gonzalez 2020b: 62). The Black movement and the feminist movement were responsible in Brazil for a "growing political awareness" on the part of Black women. But resistance to racial domination accompanied the history of slavery and institutionalized forms of racial discrimination in the post-abolition period long before the emergence of these contemporary social movements. And they have taught us to look at the "gaps" in our society's racist and sexist hegemony, at the confrontations and antagonisms that permeate the coexistence established by racial democracy. Black women, from Zumbi dos Palmares to today, acting in social movements or re-signifying popular practices in Brazilian culture, appropriating Afro-Brazilian religion or other Black artistic expressions, have always taught us never to give up the fight. But because it is a daily struggle, which needs to be fought within the very oppressive relations that are constitutive of our democratic way of life, all Black women end up being important in this daily process of anti-racist and anti-sexist resistance:

> Especially the *anonymous Black woman*, the economic, affective and moral support of her family, is the one who, in our opinion, plays the most important role. Precisely because, with her strength and courageous capacity to fight for survival, she transmits to us, her more fortunate sisters, the impetus not to refuse to fight for our people. Even more so because […] despite her poverty, her loneliness with regard to a companion, her apparent submission, she is the bearer of the flame of liberation, precisely because she has nothing to lose (Gonzalez 2020b: 64).

In other words, these "anonymous Black women", bearers of emancipation and agents of true racial democracy, are the same ones who materialize the "Brazilian cultural neurosis" (Gonzalez, 2020g: 76). It is important to understand that any form of resistance must be produced from within the very social relations constituted by class, race and gender domination. These Black women who resist are ordinary people, who work as *domésticas* ou *mulatas*, or take on so many other daily challenges and tasks, but who continue to fight both for their survival and freedom and for the survival and freedom of their brothers and sisters.

9. *Pretuguês* and the Figure of the Black Mother

However, there is yet another characterization of Black women, beyond the *mulata* and the *doméstica*, which expresses the essence of our neurosis and the complexity of the myth of racial democracy. It also shows us that forms of resistance have often

been created where we least imagine it. This is Gonzalez's rich analysis of the figure of the "Black mother [*Mãe preta*]". On the one hand, along with the *mucama*, which is precisely the genesis of the *doméstica* and the *mulata,* the stereotype of the Black mother retains a set of negative images. A slave who breastfed the children of white families in the Brazilian patriarchy, the Black mother – overlapped on the figures of the "aunt" and the "wet nurse" – became one of the symbols of interracial relations and, more specifically, of the racial assimilation of Black women into the ideology of miscegenation. Her figure as such was constituted as a "myth" to prove racial harmony in times of slavery and to naturalize the place of Black women in the patriarchal family (Roncador 2008: 132–133). This stereotype marked the future image of *domésticas* as subservient to the white families they worked for. However, "she is not this extraordinary example of total love and dedication that white people want, nor is she this surrenderer, this traitor to the race" (Gonzalez 2020g: 87). Gonzalez deconstructs this negative stereotype (treated as an "angel" or a "demon") and recognizes in the Black mother figure potential that has never been explored before. Surprisingly and unexpectedly, "exactly this figure, who is given a bit of a leg up, is the one who will undermine the dominant race" (Gonzalez 2020g: 87). In other words, the figure of the subservient and traitorous Black mother is transmuted into that of a Black woman who, in the exercise of her duties and without leaving the place imposed on her, operated "forms of passive resistance (but active in terms of their symbolic efficacy)" (Gonzalez 2020b: 63).

Resistance that resulted passively or indirectly from the bonds of sociability that were built from the place of submission and care, of servility and love that only the Black mother could satisfy. She was responsible for satisfying the "desire" of generations of white men for the "mother": "She's simply the mother. That's right, she's the mother. Because the white woman is actually the other. If that's not the case, who is she that breastfeeds, bathes, cleans up poop, puts to sleep, wakes up at night to take care of, teaches to speak, tells stories and so on? It's the mother, isn't it? Well then. She's the mother in this crazy cool aspect of Brazilian culture" (Gonzalez 2020g: 87). This has a direct and comprehensive relationship with Carnival, weaving a thread that runs from the Black mother (safeguarded in the "memory" of our culture) to the *mulata*: the desire to be fulfilled – but constantly obstructed and repulsed by the racist ideal of whiteness – awaits being satisfied in the figure of the *mulata*. In other words, we can only "officially" love Black women at Carnival, a moment of lapse ("*mancada*") in the dominant discourse – a love that needs to be repressed by the "conscience" for the rest of the year.

Gonzalez uses "memory" and "consciousness" as psychoanalytic terms. If consciousness plays a repressive role and represents the dominant culture, memory is responsible for fissures, for what cannot be completely mastered, and therefore for

resistance.[24] But how does this "memory" perpetuate itself in our culture, despite the oblivion harshly operated by "consciousness"? The "cunning of memory" is possible through language, more specifically due to the *pretuguês*, whose genesis is the responsibility of the Black mother: "It was up to the Black mother […] to Africanize the Portuguese spoken in Brazil (the '*pretuguês*') […] and, consequently, to Africanize Brazilian culture itself" (Gonzalez 2020b: 54). *Pretuguês* materializes what memory lets slip through the fingers of the ideological construction of racism. And it is by virtue of language "that Brazilian culture is eminently Black. And this despite racism and its practices against the Black population as a sector concretely present in Brazilian social formation" (Gonzalez 2020b: 55). By performing the maternal function, the Black mother passes on the values of her African culture to the white children. Therefore, the language responsible for the formation of Brazilian culture is *pretuguês*, since:

> [T]he maternal function concerns the internalization of values, the teaching of the *mother tongue* and a series of other things that are going to be part of people's imagination. It gives us this world of things that we will call language. And thanks to it, to what it passes on, we enter the order of culture, precisely because it is the mother who names the father (Gonzalez 2020g: 88).

Does the significance of the Black mother in Brazil reside in her capacity to transmit, even within white families, elements of African culture and resistance? If so, then the symbolic dimension traditionally seen as negative – merely a tool of racial hegemony that masks domination – reveals a more ambiguous character. This ambiguity would mean that resistance is not necessarily external to the dominant symbolic system but may also emerge from within it. But what exactly constitutes this symbolic ambiguity? Is there something inherently positive, a moment of truth, embedded in the existing symbolic configuration itself? Might this explain why Lélia Gonzalez sees *pretuguês* as a hybrid formation already present, at least partially, in the everyday practices and language of the dominated? If that is the case, then the symbolic is not simply an instrument of oppression, but also a terrain of contradiction – where resistance and oppression coexist. Two ideas are at work here:

> 1) That language is a privileged vehicle for cultural transformation; 2) That the Black mother carries out this transformation in a way that can be unrecognized.

24 "Consciousness is the place of ignorance, concealment, alienation, forgetfulness, and even knowledge. This is where ideological discourse is present. Memory, on the other hand, we see as the not knowing that knows, this place of inscriptions that restore a history that has not been written, the place where truth emerges, this truth that is structured as fiction. Consciousness excludes what memory includes. Hence, insofar as it is the place of rejection, consciousness expresses itself as the dominant discourse (or the effects of this discourse) in a given culture, concealing memory by imposing what it, consciousness, affirms as truth. But memory has its cunning, its game of wits; that's why it speaks through the maneuvers of the discourse of consciousness" (Gonzalez 2020g: 78–79). In this sense, Carnival is memory's "game of wits", in other words, a blunder, a slip of the conscience.

> This non-recognition leads directly to the issue of the concealment of the figure of the nanny in the subjective constitution of the child (Silveira 2022: 6).

On the other hand, is it only through symbolic ruptures – through the *mancadas*, for example – that this moment of truth comes to light? If so, then these missteps and lapses do not merely contest the dominant symbolic order; they expose its instability. They open a crack that reveals the symbolic for what it truly is: not a neutral system of meaning, but a mechanism that legitimizes racism and a racialized division of labour.

10. Conclusion: Symbolic Ambiguity and the Possibility of Liberation

Thus, the symbolic ambiguity lies in this tension. The Black mother does not simply reproduce the dominant order; she inhabits it ambivalently. Through her presence, gestures, language, and care – particularly in her intimate yet subaltern relationship with white families – she may simultaneously sustain and undermine the system. This ambiguity makes the symbolic dimension an element of resistance, rather than a monolithic structure of domination. In Gonzalez's perspective, *pretuguês* is precisely the name for this ambivalence: a cultural and linguistic practice that is both born within domination and capable of resisting it from within. But all this happens because the "child, this *infans*, is the so-called Brazilian culture, whose language is *pretuguês*" (Gonzalez 2020g: 88). What I am trying to emphasize is that this phenomenology of care, this relationship of closeness, this position of "outsider within" (Collins 2019), allows us to understand that Gonzalez's concept of the Black mother is marked by a deep ambivalence that reveals the entanglement of resistance and domination within Brazilian racial and gender dynamics. This figure is not just a social role but a symbolic site where multiple contradictions and ambiguities of Brazilian society converge. By analysing the Black mother, especially in her relationship with white families, Gonzalez exposes how Black women have historically been both the objects of oppression and the subjects of cultural and political resistance. Being an "outsider within" makes possible a kind of decisive influence, albeit suffered and hidden, in the formation of our background culture, it makes it possible to open gaps in the white and male hegemony of society. This is because the Black mother, through *pretuguês*, through her mother tongue, will act on the imaginary of the dominant culture.

Under no circumstances should we diminish the importance of this "power to name the father" (Silveira 2022). Especially since we cannot lose sight of the living conditions of the Black mother, which refers to the inequalities and violence experienced by the set of factors that involve the figure of the *doméstica*, mentioned above. We must not lose sight of the fact that, in the Brazilian context, the Black mother often worked (and still works) as a domestic worker, taking care of white children and maintaining

the white household. In Gonzalez's analysis, this role is charged with both racial and gendered domination: the Black woman is economically exploited, emotionally drained, and culturally marginalized. Her own family is often left behind – sometimes geographically, sometimes emotionally – so she can dedicate her care and affection to white children who will grow into the very structures that continue her (sometimes deep violent) subjugation.[25] Yet, it is precisely in this proximity to the white family that the contradiction emerges. The Black mother, who "is the mother" and "names the father", is intimate with whiteness, trusted and emotionally integrated into white family life, but never truly included or equal. She is the caretaker and, often, the emotional pillar of the white home, while being socially despised and structurally excluded. Her presence is made necessary by the very system that dehumanizes her. At this point the unexpected source of resistance emerges: as Gonzalez rightly points out, "through the figure of the 'Black mother', the truth emerges by equivocation", since this allowed her to become "the one who will undermine the dominant race" (Gonzalez 2020g: 87).

This is where Gonzalez introduces the notion of *pretuguês* – a hybrid, insurgent linguistic and cultural formation where Blackness re-signifies the dominant language and culture. The Black mother, in her marginal but intimate position, becomes a vehicle of *pretuguês*: she transmits Afro-Brazilian worldviews, speech patterns, values, and resilience strategies even within the white household. Her language, her gestures, her ways of caring – all these carry cultural meanings that resist full incorporation into whiteness. Resistance understood in the microphysics of conviviality and in the small margins of action of Black women who find themselves in this situation. However, despite "a reality lived with so much pain and humiliation", according to Gonzalez, we "cannot ignore the fact that there are variations in the forms of resistance. And one of them is the so-called 'passive resistance'" (Gonzalez 2020b: 54). Thus, her position is ambivalent. She is both a tool of domination – serving white families, sustaining the racial order through care work – and a vector of resistance – subtly transmitting Black cultural knowledge and challenging hegemonic meanings from within (producing the Africanization of the Portuguese spoken in Brazil and, ultimately, being responsible for the Africanization of Brazilian culture). Therefore, the whole "dialectic of oppression and resistance" (Collins 2019) is materialized in the figure of the Black mother and, in turn, in the *doméstica-mulata* dialectic itself. Understanding this ambivalence helps us grasp the depth of Gonzalez's critical vision: one that insists on reading Black experience

25 "As a *mucama*, she had the task of maintaining, at all levels, the good running of the big house: washing, ironing, cooking, spinning, weaving, sewing, and breastfeeding the children born from the 'free' wombs of the *sinhazinhas* [a form of address used by slaves to refer to the master's daughter]. And that not to mention the sexual advances of the white lord who often invited younger relatives to initiate themselves sexually with the most attractive *mucamas*. It was because of her role as *mucama* that the Black woman gave the figure of the Black mother, that is, the one who effectively, at least in terms of early childhood (fundamental in the formation of the psychic structure of anyone), looked after and educated the children of their masters" (Gonzalez 2020b: 53).

not through the binary of victimhood or heroism, but through the phenomenology of survival, invention, and historical contradiction that make up the everyday racism inscribed in our conviviality.

Language, mediated by the critical perspective of psychoanalysis, allows Gonzalez to take a sharp, deep and demanding look at what is not evident in our way of life. For her, "language is the factor of humanization or entry into the order of culture of the little human animal […], this is the reason why Brazilian culture is eminently Black. And this despite racism and its practices against the Black population as a sector concretely present in Brazilian social formation" (Gonzalez 2020b: 55). Gonzalez's diagnosis of racial democracy thus reveals the logic of domination in the concrete daily interactions that make up Brazilian culture. This domination is difficult to grasp in all its complexity because its phenomenology is apparently harmless. But racist manifestations end up appearing unexpectedly in everyday linguistic uses. There is no racial coexistence that is cohesive enough to prevent resistance from emerging on the fringes – and in the *mancadas* – of the hegemonic ideology of racial democracy. For this reason, forms of conviviality can be made up of affection and violence, oppression and resistance, and racial democracy wants all of this to occur in a very subtle and self-constructed way, with social practices that are simultaneously autonomous and heteronomous. Gonzalez's analysis therefore helps us to phenomenologically understand why racism is still so widely accepted and widespread, the complex processes of its construction and permanence in Brazilian society – unseen oppression that hides something beyond what it shows.

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