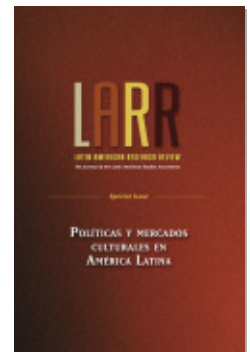# Whiter Shades of Pale: "Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil

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WHITER SHADES OF PALE

"Coloring In" Machado de Assis and Race in Contemporary Brazil

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*Abstract: Debates surrounding race in Brazil have become increasingly fraught in recent years as the once hegemonic concept of racial democracy (*democracia racial*) continues to be subject to an ever more agnostic scrutiny. Parallel to these debates, and yet ultimately inseparable from them, is the question of what it is to be "white." In this interdisciplinary paper, we argue that whiteness has become increasingly established in Brazilian public discourse as a naturalized category. Seeking a fresh perspective on what we perceive to have become a sterile debate, we examine Machado de Assis and his work to illustrate how assumptions surrounding his short story "Pai contra mãe," and indeed comments on the author's very body, reveal the extent to which whiteness has come to be seen as nonnegotiable and fixed. Placing a close reading of Machado's text at the heart of the article, we explain its implications for the scholarly debates now unfolding in Brazil concerning the construction of whiteness. The article then develops an anthropological reading of whiteness by pointing to the inherent differences between perspectives of race as a process and perspectives of race as a fixed and naturalized given.*

Debates surrounding race in Brazil have become increasingly fraught in recent years as the once hegemonic concept of racial democracy (*democracia racial*) is subjected to an ever more agnostic scrutiny. In a public sphere where certain "'types of mixture' are clearly preferred to the detriment of others" (Pinho 2009), what can be understood as whiteness has an obvious and tangible importance, with various signifiers having varying levels of meaning. The texture of hair, the shape of facial features, even certain embodied notions of interaction can connote discrete positions on a racialized hierarchy. As Pinho (2009, 40) states, following the tradition of 1950s anthropologists such as Oracy Nogueira (1998) or Donald Pierson (1971), skin color is perhaps only the beginning of someone's subjective judgment: "One's 'measure of whiteness,' therefore, is not defined only by skin color; it requires a much wider economy of signs where, together with other bodily features, hair texture is almost as important as epidermal tone. In any given context, the definition of whiteness is also, necessarily, shaped by the contours of gender and class affiliation."

These judgments take place within a wider historical discourse that has promoted the "whitening" of Brazil as a country and race. Dávila (2003) describes how from the turn of the nineteenth century, state actors in Brazil implemented policies that had at their heart a belief in whiteness as a naturalized state identified with strength, health, and virtue. This racial category was gradually shaped in opposition to "blackness," a status that carried an explicit cargo of laziness, primitive and childlike nature, and an inherently antimodern gaze to the past. Dávila outlines how state actors believed that the nation could be "whitened" by educating people out of a black identity and leading them toward a white set of behaviors and morals. In this way, race was not a biological fact, it was rather a metaphor for the imagining of Brazil's modernist trajectory; race was a malleable tool with which to better the future. Thus, the racial mixing of Brazilian society was a deterministic process toward securing a brighter, "whiter" future, one where blackness and its degeneracy could be cast aside and social ascension would guarantee a more productive population. Dávila (2003, 6) states that in the 1930s, "white Brazilians could safely celebrate race mixture because they saw it as an inevitable step in the nation's evolution." But it is important to note here that the supposedly realizable goal at the end of this process was essentially being cast as a *naturalized* category. There were no searching questions as to exactly what whiteness represented on this hierarchical trajectory; the definition was based upon a certain Europeanness and was whatever blackness or indigenousness was not. As Dávila (2003, 7) states, "whiteness" was defined through both "positive and negative affirmation," becoming a sedimented and fixed category without any internalized processes of self-reflection.

Despite this historical lack of analysis, recent state interventions have prompted a more quotidian interest into questions of whiteness in Brazil. Carlos Hasenbalg and Nelson do Vale Silva's groundbreaking research in the 1970s had already demonstrated the disparities linked to race in socioeconomic indicators between self-classified "whites" and "browns/blacks," with the latter grouped together due to the similarity of results when compared to the "white" group. Such work helped to destabilize the myth of racial democracy, as well as the "mulatto escape hatch" thesis, the idea that the space ceded to people of mixed race in Brazil allowed some to escape the "disabilities of blackness" (Degler 1971, 178). However, the recent introduction of racial quotas at federal and state universities has brought into sharp relief how binary manners of self-identification can have a profound influence on one's social trajectory, or as Vron Ware (2004, 38) describes it, "the relationship between social and symbolic power." With an expanding middle class and growing competition for places, university places reserved for those who do not identify as white has brought into the open questions and prejudices that many people might have perhaps preferred to remain opaque. The debates around the implementation of affirmative action policies have brought into sharp focus the serious issues that a bureaucratic reconfiguration of racial categories implies, given that the category "black" subsumed those that self-declared as mixed race. At the center of these debates is the question of what it is to be black and, discussed much less, what it is to be white, a subject that has acquired all the more significance with the recent publication of census data demonstrating that for the

first time since records began, those that self-identify as white are in a minority (47.7 percent) in Brazil (Phillips 2011). In this article we will build upon recent literature on whiteness as well as more classical work on race and race relations to reinforce the idea that, rather than being a fixed category, whiteness is in fact a volatile and nuanced construction continually subject to social reinterpretations as well as state-determined reconfiguration.

THE ARGUMENT

In what has become an increasingly polemicized and sterile debate, we seek a new interdisciplinary perspective with which to realize a more nuanced stance on contemporary Brazilian racial politics. We examine a short story by Machado de Assis, one of Brazil's most canonical authors, and reactions to the author *and* his text to illustrate how whiteness, often characterized as a naturalized state, is in fact in a state of flux, negotiation, and construction. We first demonstrate how whiteness has come to be commonly viewed as a naturalized category by focusing on the polemical reaction to Machado's body and its physical characteristics. Machado, due to his whiteness and alleged self-whitening, has often been labeled a traitor to his blackness, despite his well-known and very public white and black ancestry. This polemical reaction underlines the limited binary framework of naturalized white/black categories. Second, we analyze the critical reaction to Machado's work, particularly "Pai contra mãe" but also his wider oeuvre, positing that Machado has been seriously misinterpreted and misunderstood by a critical position that places the naturalized categories of white and black in opposition, something Machado did not intend to do. We argue that Machado's ambiguous narration details his understanding of the oppressiveness of a slave-owning society and simultaneously invites the reader to assert his or her own prejudices as regards racial characterizations. In other words, Machado employs a playful irony, inviting the reader to "color in" the characters, something he never explicitly does himself.[1] Machado's text is not prescriptive; the author's intention is rather to invite the reader into what amounts to a common misreading and thereby demonstrate that the solidity of whiteness, which many take for granted, is in fact negotiable and socially constructed. However, the fact that Machado continues to be misread underlines how fixed the idea of whiteness has become in contemporary Brazil.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Machado de Assis was born the lowly son of a mulatto wall painter and an Azorean Portuguese washerwoman but became the first president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters; this fact has been the source of much discussion on the

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1. Although we acknowledge that it was a common literary practice not to describe the characters' race unless they were nonwhite, we argue that this practice itself reflects the process of naturalization of whiteness and its entanglement with notions of norm and humanity that are at stake in Machado's short story.

greatest of Brazilian authors. "Pai contra mãe," originally published in 1906 in *Relíquias de casa velha* (Relics of the old house), is one of the only pieces of writing in which Machado explicitly deals with slavery and issues pertaining to race. Clearly there was a wider context to his output, and of particular interest are the theories that abounded in his epoch regarding racial miscegenation.

Count Arthur de Gobineau, a diplomatic representative of the French government who resided in Rio de Janeiro during Machado's lifetime and was a friend of Dom Pedro II, the Brazilian emperor, advanced racialized theories that prefigured those of other intellectuals of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Brazil in their conviction that there existed a Nordic race whose superiority to indigenous, black, and mixed races was self-evident. Corollaries to this view were the support for the end of the slave traffic, abolished in 1850, which officially halted the influx of Africans into Brazil, and the promotion of European immigration as the path toward the whitening of the country.

Although ideas about whitening were already well established, there were two differing positions with regard to the role that the native, already admixed population would have in this process. On the one hand, intellectuals such as R. Nina Rodrigues (1899) argued that racial mixture was degenerative and that it would be impossible for a white nation to arise out of a process of racial admixing. On the other hand, figures such as Sílvio Romero (1954) considered miscegenation as a circumstance that could eventually be "purified." Following Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and opposing Gobineau's views on the innate superiority of white races, Romero considered the superiority of the Aryan race to be the result of a long process of racial purification, opening the possibility of Brazil's population undergoing a similar transformation. Taking as facts the admixed character of the Brazilian population and the progressive "extinction" of indigenous peoples and Africans, he envisioned a future of an ethnically stable, whitened population. In a similar vein, João Batista de Lacerda, writing in the early years of the twentieth century, argued that the successive crossing between the native population with the arriving European immigrants would eventually lead to the complete whitening of the country, which he predicted would happen in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Santos and Maio (2004) point to how both positions were deeply rooted in the science of the time and how the call for increased white immigration to Brazil was embedded in evolutionary readings of the process of racial admixture.

Writing in such a context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Machado chose not to make issues of slavery a central feature of his work. This is not to say that outside of the unflinching portrayal of the contradictions of a slave-owning society in "Pai contra mãe" there is a lack of comment. Indeed, Duarte (2007) asserts that Machado was very much a supporter of abolition and that although his struggle against slavery was clandestine, Machado "knew how to be a warrior, conscious of his weapons and his targets" (2007, 150). Chalhoub (2003) also argues that Machado articulated subtle criticisms of the social institutions of his time, to be found in Machado's way of dealing with the relationships between his characters, portrayed as embedded within a system based on paternalism and dependency (Chalhoub 2003, 49).

Machado's subtlety in narration was first highlighted by William Grossman's (1953) and Helen Caldwell's (1953) translations of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* and *Dom Casmurro,* respectively, and Caldwell's seminal text, *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis* (1960). These works have been pivotal to Machadian studies, as Caldwell concretely identified the unreliable narrator of Machado's novel *Dom Casmurro* and therefore the idea that one of Machado's most important literary devices was to playfully leave the reader unsure and without absolutes, or as Machado might term it, *pé atrás.* Until Caldwell's scholarship, critics considered the narration of this novel unbiased, a fact that would place Bento Santiago, the narrator, as the victim of Capitu's betrayal. Caldwell questioned this narration and placed Capitu, the woman, as the victim of Santiago's jealousy. This ambiguity of narration is a theme to which we will return, as we contend that Machado uses this device consciously in "Pai contra mãe" to invite his readership to color in the characters along the lines of their own prejudices.

Later critics such as Roberto Schwarz (2001, 2005, 1997) and John Gledson (1986, 1991, 2006) have also built upon Caldwell's scholarship of ambiguity to inform a critique that is characterized by an interest in class. The narration of *Memórias póstumas,* for example, centers on the nineteenth-century Brazilian upper class, which directly reflects Machado's readership, many of whom would have been slave owners. For Schwarz (2005, 102), the geniality of Machado's mature work—that is, following the publication of *Memórias póstumas* in 1881—explicitly resides in the fact that Machado moved "the narrative point of view to the upper-class position." Before this phase, Machado's narrators "sympathized with those in a precarious, socially dependent situation, fretting over the arbitrary and unreliable behaviour of those who called the shots" (2005, 102); in other words, Machado's earlier works directly criticized his society in a didactic and even naive way. In Machado's mature work, Schwarz (2001) argues that this perspective shifts, and in attempting to subtly reflect the prejudices of his own readers, the unreliable narrator suddenly appears center stage and with a whole new discursive importance. Inherent to this idea, it is important to note that by shifting perspective, Machado was not seeking to corroborate or implicate himself in the politics of an upper-class perspective. Rather, the subtle narrative style that we intend to analyze in the short story "Pai contra mãe" is more a tool with which to expose, in a complex manner, the prejudices of his readership. As Schwarz (2005, 102) notes: "Instead of bewailing the fickleness of our liberal, slave-owning and paternalistic propertied class, Machado took to imitating it in the first person singular, so as to provide plentiful and compelling natural illustrations of all the misdeeds of which its social dependents would accuse it, were they in a position to do so."

For Schwarz, nineteenth-century Brazilian society had a division that we consider important to the present article. Brazilian society was divided between owners and slaves, but in between these fixed and naturalized categories, Schwarz placed what he called *homens livres.* These "free men," part of a slave-owning Brazilian order, lived in a state of dependency, not subjugation, but they also were not employed in the strict sense. As Schwarz (2005, 100) outlines, "The oddities of the national situation that Machado sought to capture came from the unexpected,

meandering ways in which clientelism, slavery, and modernity concatenated in Brazil."

It is this undefined and indeterminate space that we problematize in this article. Although Schwarz focuses more on the class vectors inherent to this borderland of society, racialized dimensions are implicit in his arguments. This strata of free men was, after all, composed of the descendants of slaves, a heterogeneous group of mestizos, and also European descendants, all of them without proper jobs or occupations, living much like Cândido Neves, the main character of "Pai contra mãe," searching for jobs or means of subsistence. As Schwarz perhaps acknowledges by choosing not to focus on issues of race, it is difficult to delineate the racial origins of these free men. In the case of "Pai contra mãe" for example, it is possible to state, keeping in mind the unreliable narrators of Machado's fiction and the strata in which the main character is placed, that Cândido Neves could be of any color, with Machado purposely misleading the reader by not making explicit his nonwhiteness. In this sense, our argument directly dialogues with Schwarz's: free men in the slave-owning Brazilian society cannot be placed into naturalized categories such as white or black, slave or owner. They inhabit an undemarcated borderland both in terms of class, as Schwarz argues, but also, we will argue, in terms of race.

By proposing "Pai contra mãe" as an interesting optic through which to configure contemporary racial debates, we can also add to the bibliography on Machado's less-studied texts, an effort that also echoes scholars such as Paul Dixon (2006) and João Cezar de Castro Rocha (2006). In a special issue of *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies* dedicated to Machado, these critics reassessed Machado's short stories, suggesting original critical approaches (Dixon 2006) and new approaches to Machado's oeuvre with the short stories as a point of departure (Rocha 2006). However, the focus of these specific articles, as well as of the other texts compiled in the special issue, is the placing of Machado within a wider, "universal" literary tradition, configuring Machado as the link between author, tradition, and text. Our article is more influenced by Schwarz and Gledson in that it seeks to place Machado's short stories into dialogue with wider societal dynamics concerning the anthropology of race, beyond a critical literary sphere.

MISREADINGS OF MACHADO DE ASSIS: COLORING IN THE PERSON

Critical attention devoted to the connections between Machado and issues of race has generally been sparse, but where critics have made explicit links, much reproof has been directed toward Machado for his supposed lack of support for the abolitionist cause (Nascimento 1979; Rodrigues 1997; Brandão 1957; Belo 1935; Veríssimo 1945). In addition to these accusations of absenteeism from the political campaigns of the time, Machado's very person has become subject to reconfigurations of racial identity, and attempts have been made to characterize him as ashamed of his black ancestry and indeed, as a traitor to blackness more widely. Machado's African ancestry, his phenomenal contemporary critical success, and how he negotiated living in a slave-owning society as a mestizo have always been

subjects of interest, but equally, this traditional contextualization is almost always accompanied by a certain critique of Machado's perceived self-whitening (*embranquecimento*), the device with which he is said to have engineered his social climbing. Pereira (1988) in particular created a popular locus of critical debate in a sequence of photographic portraits of Machado that, she argued, depicted an author who was making himself ever whiter, with a white beard that was kept ever larger in order to mask the physiognomy of his ancestry. Indeed, as Duarte (2007, 135) notes, "[a] few critics have gone so far as to assert that a beard and moustache, nearly mandatory among upper-class men of that period, served to help mask Machado's Negroid features. There also exist allegations that photographers retouched shots of Machado so as to lighten his skin."

The effects of this debate are far-reaching. Ironildes Rodrigues's *Introduction to Afro-Brazilian Literature* (1997, 256) for example, describes Machado as "a white writer who did not feel the least bit of black blood coursing through his heart . . . remaining at the margin and worrying himself very little with the social movements of his time, such as Abolition." Abdias do Nascimento (1979, 275), in his "Reflections of an Afro-Braziliano," depicts Machado as one of the "notorious Afro-Brazilians who thought, wrote and acted as mirror-images of the dominant society (white or Aryanoid), and who despite being influential writers, in their work included almost nothing that would identify them in any kind of connection with their African origin."

What is of particular interest in Nascimento's critique is how he describes Afro-Brazilians as acting as "mirror images" to a dominant, white society. Nascimento's stance perfectly reflects the polemicized and binary nature of the critical reaction toward Machado's body in that Nascimento's tropes of "white" and "black" are placed into a directly oppositional hierarchy, where each category is naturalized and therefore constitutes the other. It therefore follows for Nascimento that Machado's writings can be dismissed as merely an aping of a white culture and its values, and that Machado has betrayed his blackness. But these naturalized categories presuppose that racial identity is fixed and unmoving rather than flexible and negotiable, and we contend that these binary presuppositions are commonly encountered not only in the critical reactions to Machado's very body but also in the critical reaction to his text.

MISREADINGS OF MACHADO DE ASSIS: COLORING IN "PAI CONTRA MÃE"

Very little of significance has been contributed to the academic literature directly regarding Machado de Assis's late short story "Pai contra mãe." From our point of view, considering that this is one of the very few short stories by Machado that directly concern slavery, this omission is perplexing in light of the debates surrounding Machado's identity and, more broadly, race relations and racial inequalities. Indeed, even recent critical work on Machado and issues pertaining to race (Wasserman 2008) that does discuss "Pai contra mãe" does not broach a debate about the implicit racial identities of the characters themselves, identifying the main characters as white, an assumption, we argue, which Machado's

ambiguous narrative leads the reader to make.[2] This assumption, and the fact that so many critical readers have allowed their prejudices to be reflected in seeing Cândido and Clara as white, throws light on how whiteness in Brazil has become a naturalized category.

"Pai contra mãe" depicts the brutal realties of slavery through the entanglement of the family of Cândido Neves, mired in poverty, and a runaway slave, Arminda. The opening paragraphs outline through explicit description the barbarous nature of slavery and how slaves were treated in mid-nineteenth-century Brazil. The character of Cândido Neves is then introduced, the narrator highlighting how his feckless nature has eventually led him into the trade of catching runaway slaves for reward. Cândido marries Clara, a young, impoverished woman who lives with her aunt, and the narrator describes the happiness that greets the arrival of their first child. However, such is the young family's lack of financial means that Clara's aunt eventually advises the couple to give up the baby for adoption. Upon being evicted from their house, Cândido, having refused to change his trade despite the aunt's advice, accepts the inevitable and sets out to deliver his son to the convent from which the baby will be taken to a foundling hospital. The reader is then returned in the final section to the barbarity of a slave-owning society through the depiction of Cândido's capture of Arminda on his way to abandoning his child at the convent. Unsuspecting, a pregnant Arminda is forcibly carried off by Cândido to her owner's home. Pleading with Cândido to release her, perhaps for the sake of her unborn child, which she suspects she may lose, Arminda resists, but she is nonetheless presented to her owner, whereupon Cândido receives his reward and Arminda miscarries in front of the two men. Unmoved by this scene, Cândido returns home with his son, delighted to have secured the means for his family's short-term financial security. And in perhaps the story's sharpest observation, neither he nor the aunt express sympathy for the runaway; the aunt is moved to deliver "harsh words" about Arminda, while Cândido merely observes that "not all children make it" (Machado 2008, 270).

This last comment of Cândido's, which closes the story, has provoked strong critical reaction, and for Duarte (2007, 143), the significance is clear: "Such an assertion carries much social meaning, especially with respect to how the death of the black child provides the 'salvation' of a white child, who was about to be left on the 'roda dos expostos,' 'wheel of the foundlings,' due to the indigence of the kidnapper." Duarte argues that by depicting slavery more directly, as Machado does, for example, by describing instruments of torture, "the temperature rises." And he sees in the behavior of Cândido Neves the social commentary that many see as lacking in Machado's fiction. For Duarte, the salvation of Cândido's white child for the equivalent death of a black child is a powerful sociorealist treatment of "the threat of violence against slaves based on race and status." Duarte concludes that such a text, which reveals in brutal detail the dark realities of a slave-

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2. It is interesting to note that the other author that Wasserman analyses—Lima Barreto, a contemporary of Machado and a critic of his literature and political position—made explicit the color of all of his characters, even white ones.

owning society, could only have been composed from "a distanced, non-white vision, compromised by the perspective of the subalterns." Thus, he posits that Machado's "unmasking critical focus" reveals the writer, however compromised in the social reality of his time, to be explicitly antislavery and agitating against the superiority of the white race.

However, despite the fact that we concur with Duarte's argument that Machado was indeed involved in issuing a strong commentary against a slave-owning society during his lifetime, we find his binary analysis of "Pai contra mãe" indicative of the assumptions that have tended to surround this short story, assumptions that are crucial to teasing out the ambiguities that are essential to any discussion of the concept of whiteness. Duarte, similarly to other scholars (Scarpelli 2004; Dourado 2010; Diogo 2008; Neves 2007; Mangueira 2009; Moraes 2009; Muniz 1996), makes the assumption that Cândido and Clara are white and that therefore when Cândido's baby is saved from starvation by the delivering of the runaway slave Arminda to her owner, an action that results in Arminda miscarrying, a black child's life has been given so that a white child may survive.

In some ways it is unsurprising that so many readings of "Pai contra mãe" have made this assumption. After all, it was common usage at the time, and, we will argue, even today, to racially describe only characters that were not white. Also, the story's very title suggests binary opposites from the first line. Caldwell commented in her classic study *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis: A Study of Dom Casmurro* that the Machadian narrator was always to be considered with a degree of suspicion, that he was certainly not a figure in whom one could place absolute trust. Indeed, Schwarz observed that Caldwell was the first critic to fully understand that the narrator of *Dom Casmurro* really did leave the reader always one step behind, and the shifting and dubious position of the narrator in Machado's oeuvre is crucial to how Machado plays to his audiences prejudices in "Pai contra mãe" and allows the reader to color in the characters without ever doing so himself.

The immediate irony of the text, as Duarte notes, resides with the names of the characters. The names of Cândido, Clara, and Neves all allude to whiteness. "Cândido" has connotations of purity and innocence; in a poetic register, it can be translated as "white." "Clara" means "light" (as in "light-colored") or refers to egg whites or the white of the eye, while "Neves" draws allusions to snow (*neve*) as well as being a direct translation of whiteness. Therefore, just as the characters laugh about the puns of their names in the story (see figure 1), it seems impossible to assume, as do critics that depict this story as a narrative of a black life being given in exchange for a white life, that Cândido and Clara are anything but white. Indeed, in a popular comic strip version of "Pai contra mãe" (Lima and Rodrigues 2003, 16, 20), designed to encourage a new audience for canonical short stories, Cândido and Clara are depicted in a manner in which Machado never *expressly* depicts them: they are both white, and to reinforce the point, Cândido even has a somewhat lantern-jawed aspect (see figure 2).

The key point is that Machado's narrator in "Pai contra mãe," despite the deliberate heavy-handedness concerning the characters' names, never makes explicit other facets of their racial identity. Mired in schemes of polarity, it is difficult to

Figure 1 "*Tudo na gente é branco!*"

imagine that Cândido is anything but a binary reflection of Arminda. Moraes (2009, 6), for example, is typical in this regard, stating that in "Pai contra mãe," Machado depicts the struggle "of a white father and a black slave mother." For Moraes, it is a question of naturalized and fixed categories in opposition. Cândido hunts slaves for a living; his white child lives and the black child dies. Operating from within this binary schematic, it seems impossible that "Pai contra mãe" functions as anything but a commentary on white versus black.

But this must be contextualized by data regarding free persons of color in pre-abolition Brazil. Klein and Luna (2000, 925) assert through statistical analysis of historical data that "in the port of Santos, the free colored were 22 percent of all slave-owners (and a quarter of all free colored owned slaves)." Barickman (1999)

Figure 2 The happy couple, Cândido Neves and his wife, Clara

also highlights the relative importance of freed slaves as slave owners them-selves in Bahia, while Mahony (1997, 63) states that "a significant number of Ilheus [Bahia] landowners in 1920 were of Afro-Brazilian descent," noting that "55 per cent of the blacks and mulattoes in Bahia had been free as early as 1808."

A further sense of ambiguity is created by the way in which Machado char-acterizes Cândido and Clara. Although their physical appearance is not made explicit, their socioeconomic classification, behaviors, and employment status are, and these are highly significant in the resonance they would have had for a con-temporary readership. As we have discussed, racialized thinking during the pe-riod contemporary with Machado and up until the 1930s emphasized the natural determination of a nation as driven primarily by racial factors of its population (see Schwarcz 1993, 13). From the perspective of this biological racism, the pres-ence of blacks and the processes of miscegenation not focused on the whitening of the population were condemned as the cause of the degeneration of the country, leading Brazil further away from what many saw as its natural position as a civi-lized European nation.

This emphasis on the Europeanness of their country meant that Brazilian sociopolitical elites embraced a correlated ideological differentiation between the civilized, aristocratic, and superior part of the population, identified as white, and the inferior, backward, and uncivilized population, identified with indigenous peoples, "blacks," and those of mixed race or mestizos (Skidmore 1999, 67–73).[3]

3. It is important to note that the term "black" currently has two translations into Portuguese: *preto* and *negro*. Both terms were used, until recently, to refer to those with a very dark complexion and Afri-can features such as having a wide nose or tightly curled hair. Since the 1980s and the visibility that the

Therefore, ideas about race went beyond mere appearance, invoking discourses pertaining to behavior and morals.

Thus, with this paradigm in mind, Cândido is described as in a state of poverty, "all he owned [being] debts": "This man had a grave defect—he never lasted in any job or trade, and lacked stability; that's what he called a run of bad luck. . . . An assistant in a notary's office, office-boy in a government department attached to the ministry of the interior, postman, and other jobs were abandoned soon after they were obtained" (Machado 2008, 257).

As we pointed out in the introduction, blackness has historically been associated with laziness, unhealthiness, and a lack of progress. Nelson (1945, 208) also wrote extensively on how black slaves were perceived in Brazil, citing one observer's comment that "the Africans were naturally an indolent and careless race of people who could not work without compulsion," while Costa (1977, 293) comments how popular characterizations of nonwhites also included perceptions surrounding being "irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but given to lying and stealing." Further, Nash (2008, 14) describes how "blacks were blamed for the nation's non-modern ills and were tagged as lazy, ignorant, and superstitious."

Cândido's indolence, debts, and inability to hold down employment therefore identify him squarely with the prejudices regarding slaves, freed slaves, and indigenous peoples that the contemporary readership would have held. In this sense, Cândido's condition, marked as he is by his torn and patched clothes and his eventual homelessness, can be transfigured and reimagined as the "tin-plate mask" that Machado describes as an apparel of slavery and one of the means by which a slave's condition could easily be identified. Both function as visible symbols of degradation; from behind the white-skinned, lantern-jawed portrayal of the comic strip, perhaps another figure that could represent the jobless, constantly restless Cândido begins to emerge, the outline of the drawing that accompanies the small advertisements regarding runaway slaves that Machado describes in "Pai contra mãe."[4] "Often the advertisement carried above it, or at the side, a little vignette of a black man, barefoot, with a stick over his shoulder and a bundle on the end" (Machado 2008, 256).

What is interesting about the depiction of Cândido is the subtlety that Machado employs in his palette of characterization. Machado never has to detail Cândido's skin color, as the reader does so in his stead. Perhaps this is because of the fundamental oppositions that "Pai contra mãe" seems to establish: father against mother, or rather, black against white; the life of a black child in exchange for the life of a white child serving as a moral lesson regarding the toxicity of slavery. However, what becomes clear when looking at contemporary sources is that the details that embellish Cândido's life and his socioeconomic status point toward a set of prejudices current at the time about nonwhites. Machado (2008, 262; our

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Black Social Movement has gained in its struggles against racial inequality, the term "negro" has been used officially to subsume both *pardos* (browns) and pretos, although the terms "preto" and "negro" are still used in common parlance as synonyms.

   4. It is also worth pointing out that most public slave whippers and *capitães do mato* (whose responsibilities included capturing fugitive slaves in the interior of the country) were freed slaves, either black or of mixed descent (Degler 1971, 84).

emphasis) further complicates this portrayal of our fluid Cândido in one of the most ambiguous lines of text in the story:

"That's all we needed!" Aunt Monica exclaimed when he came in, after he'd told the story of the mistake and its consequences. "Give it up, Candinho; look for another way of earning your living."
Cândido truly did want to do something else, not because of this advice, but because he felt like a change of job; it would be a way of *changing skin or identity.*

This passage of admonishment occurs as Aunt Monica's pent-up frustration comes to a head over Cândido's fecklessness and propensity for a good party. As Cândido wonders about acquiring another job, it is clear that he views such a change as fundamentally interconnected with his *skin* or identity. This is significant as in the projected whitened future, alongside the Lamarckian emphasis on the idea of the heredity of "improved characteristics" embraced by the eugenics movement in Brazil (Stepan 1991), the level of physical admixture present in Brazil's population would ensure that binary oppositions would give way to a more embracing category of whiteness, in which certain individuals of mixed ancestry that showed a cultural disposition toward traits seen as European could come to be socially acknowledged as white. Indeed, Joaquim Nabuco, the distinguished Brazilian statesmen, saw Machado as a "Greek" rather than mixed race, outlining in a letter to Veríssimo that "Machado was white to me" (David 1957, 164, cited in Haberly 1983). As this quote reminds us, the identification between whiteness and Europeanness was not only a matter of physical appearance but also of education, manners, and life objectives, and perhaps, in Cândido's case, his employment. But even in the context of the broader paradigmatic scheme of whiteness, Machado leaves Cândido's identity imprecise. What is transparent, however, is that prejudice and oversimplification of both historical and contemporary audiences effectively color in the characters of "Pai contra mãe" without the author having to do so himself, thereby proving how whiteness exists in the critical imagination as a naturalized category. Gledson (1991, 8, our translation) highlights the fact that "Machado was able to elude the reader by flattering his or her prejudices," and Clara's depiction is equally ambiguous.

Clara is portrayed in the opening lines of her description as an orphan, twenty-two years old and living with her aunt while doing sewing jobs in an "impoverished" house in which they lodge. She is poor, like Cândido, and unusually for Machado's oeuvre, her marriage does not result in an improvement of her social status (Muniz 1996). Therefore Clara's portrayal would have elicited a prejudicial response from a contemporary audience similar to the response to Cândido, apart from the fact that Machado informs us that she is employed. But her employment has a curious connotation. Immediately after Clara's basic socio-economic depiction and place of lodging, there are allusions to her femininity and how this is expressed. "Her sewing didn't stop her flirting a bit, but her suitors only wanted to pass the time of day; that was as far as it went. They came by of an afternoon, looked her up and down, and she them, until night fell and she went back to her sewing" (Machado 2008, 258).

In mid-nineteenth-century Brazilian imagination and reality, there were con-

nections between the seamstress's workshop, domestic service, and prostitution (Teixeira 2004, 159; Alves 2004) involving slaves, freed slaves (Graham 1991), and white women from various countries, including Portugal (Nunes 2000; Vainfas 1986). Indeed, Nunes (2000, 55) describes how "it seems that some poor Portuguese women who immigrated to Brazil in order to work in domestic service ended up working as prostitutes," and Menezes (2009, 23) highlights reports of French women who emigrated to Brazil to work as seamstresses engaging in "sexual favors," using their employment, or their employment being used, as a facade for prostitution. Menezes also details how the Brazilian imagination surrounding "loose" seamstresses was perhaps inspired or reinforced by certain liaisons, among them the relationship between Dom Pedro I and Clémence Saisset. Considered a "red-haired beauty" (2009, 239), Saisset was a seamstress by profession, and her relationship with the emperor resulted in illegitimate children.

We are not trying to argue that Clara's sewing work is a euphemism but rather that her socioeconomic status is ambiguous; that she cannot be so simply categorized as part of a "white section" of society that is totally distanced from a "black section" of society. Indeed, as Moraes (2009, 6) notes, the precarious situation of Cândido and Clara is not so dissimilar to Arminda's circumstance, even if, in Moraes's reading, their skin color places them on different sides of an important societal schism.

Therefore, despite their awareness of Machadian techniques of elusive narrative, critics and commentators have assumed that Clara and Cândido are white. This circumstance leads one to ask whether the naming of Cândido and Clara is in fact some form of irony that Machado is deliberately choosing to employ. Is this the last substantial game of *pé atrás,* the game of doubt that he chose to play with his audience, on a subject on which he had always been elusive, and therefore criticized? These questions matter because in the comic strip version of "Pai contra mãe," whiteness is definite; the story is in fact distilled to the essence that almost every other commentator has reached, a straight confrontation between the races, white versus black, a black child's life exchanged for that of a white child.

However, we would like to suggest that these assumptions, though commonplace, are premature. What is important to highlight here is that, whether Cândido and Clara are white or not, what is inescapable is that the idea of whiteness within this text is ambiguous and negotiable, and ultimately the reader is left unsure as to whether the dominant narrative of the story contains a more subtle critique of common perception and the oversimplification of a complex reality.[5] The deliberate play that Machado makes on the characters' names—for example,

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5. Indeed, poor whites were also often accused, alongside freed slaves, of the crimes of vagrancy and lack of work ethic (Maciel da Costa as cited in Azevedo 1987, 49). From this we can infer how poor whites also had to bear the weight of the antivagrancy laws, created with the idea of controlling the slaves freed by the Europeanized white elite. The poverty of these whites, given that it contradicted the view of the innate superiority of this racial stock, was then interpreted as an association with the wrong activities and people, eroding their status as white. This process also contributed to the degree of flexibility of whiteness.

calling them to our attention by introducing allusions to whiteness, including the characters themselves making puns on their names—has been interpreted as proof that Cândido and Clara are white (see for example Mangueira 2009, 9), but we dispute such an interpretation. We argue that Machado's use of such heavy-handed language only serves to deepen any sense of ambiguity, as Machado is, in our reading, deliberately invoking the language of polarity to make an ironic comment on a situation that in reality is far more heterogeneous. The allusions to whiteness, far from proving that the characters are white, in fact only function to call whiteness into question, to provoke a debate around the fundamental values behind whiteness. Cândido clearly believes that he is closer to the master than to the slave; Machado (2008, 257) describes how for Cândido, "the obligation of attending to everyone and serving them touched a raw nerve of pride."[6] The uneasy tension between Cândido's racial identity and his moral character is, we believe, one of the most significant and overlooked aspects of this text. Cândido may indeed be white, but does he conform to the whiteness agenda of late nineteenth-century Brazil (Degler 1971; Guimarães 1999) as regards possessing an industrious character of high morality? And if not, then what is whiteness? "Pai contra mãe" makes plain the instability of racial identities. This is further made clear in the manner in which Machado describes Cândido's landlord, who has arrived to perform the eviction. "When you saw him you wouldn't think he was a proprietor; but words made up for appearances, and poor Candinho shut up rather than answering back" (Machado 2008, 264). Machado is subtly prompting the question of what someone who owns property *does* look like. And around these characters, a whole lexicon of unspoken characterization and prejudice is being explored and highlighted.

In fact, the only character in "Pai contra mãe" that is identified in a racial manner in any sense at all is Arminda, the slave girl, described as a mulatto woman. And in a further complication, the reader is left in doubt as to who is the father of her baby. Given his reaction of great interest in having the slave returned to him, is it Arminda's (maybe white, maybe nonwhite) owner? Fundamentally, we argue that literary critics' assumptions about the racial identities of the characters in "Pai contra mãe" are not direct textual readings but rather proof that a naturalized category of whiteness has firmly embedded itself into the Brazilian imagination of hierarchy.[7] The inextricability of racial categories from other social classificatory systems such as class and prestige is an obvious corollary (DaMatta 1991; Fischer 2004; McCallum 2005), and in recognition of this we develop below an anthropological reading of whiteness that demonstrates how such schemes of binary configuration have not only historically influenced the Brazilian public sphere but continue to do so.

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6. Florestan Fernandes (1965, 159), analyzing the city of São Paulo in the 1950s, argued that blacks tried to avoid low-paid, grueling work that reminded them of slavery.

7. However, outside literary studies, the ambiguity of Machado's text has been more fully understood. For example, Sérgio Bianchi's 2005 film, *Quanto vale ou é por quilo,* is a loose adaptation of "Pai contra mãe" in which Cândido is represented by the actor of color Sílvio Guindane.

ON WHITENING

As we noted earlier, nineteenth-century debates on race in Brazil revolved around accomplishing whiteness, be it in terms of appearance and/or practices, and the potential for whiteness, its essential fluidity, whether of a certain individual or the nation as a whole. As such, these discourses constructed the historical framework in which Machado developed his oeuvre. However, this article focuses on the academic thought of the twentieth century surrounding ideas of race and its impact on contemporary racialized readings of "Pai contra mãe," specifically the manner in which so many critics have imposed their own binary visions of race on what is essentially an ambiguous narrative.

Social science literature from the 1930s until the 1970s emphasized the fluid nature of Brazil's system of racial classification.[8] Central to this line of thinking was Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-grande e senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves,* 1946), which asserted that miscegenation, both cultural and physical—which arose from the historical experience of the Portuguese as more inclined to intermarry—was the key constituent of Brazil's national identity, being fundamental to the racially democratic (*democracia racial*) and adaptable nature that differentiated Brazil from the United States, for example. Freyre's portrayal of Brazil as a racial democracy inspired some authors in the 1950s to reflect on the unfixed nature of racial categories in Brazil. The system of race relations found in Brazil in the mid-1950s, as described in detail by Nogueira (1998), implied that the racial identity of a given person was not determined merely by ancestry and the presence of physical traits associated with certain ancestries. There was the possibility of appealing to factors such as one's level of education, income, beauty, and degree of perceived effort, to hold a social position that would, in effect, allow someone to be socially considered as less dark (1998, 200). Given that racial identity was, to a certain extent, "in the eye of the beholder," the system still worked on the presumption of a certain ambiguity around the whiteness of certain individuals, and the possibility of overcoming phenotypical marks not associated with whiteness through other marks of prestige. Similar ideas with regard to this flexible and unfixed configuration of racial classification, but with a greater emphasis on whiteness, were developed by Donald Pierson (1971). Carrying out research in the city of Salvador, Bahia, a city that he described as a "multiracial class-based society," Pierson argued for the existence of local terms to name those individuals who were socially recognized as whites but were also seen as having mixed ancestry. Other anthropologists undertaking research in the Brazilian Northeast, such as Marvin Harris, also pointed to the existence of more than one term used to classify a person as white, and a continuum of color categories rather than a bipolar black vs. white taxonomic system (Harris 1952, 60).

Therefore, research that destabilized the notion of fixed racial categories in Brazil has a strong historical lineage. However, not all social scientists writing in the 1950s and 1960s followed this line of thinking, and in providing the

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8. A noticeable exception is the work of Oliveira Vianna, a follower of Sílvio Romero, who centered his analyses on the importance of race and racial mixing for the future of the country.

foundations for the turn toward challenging the myth of racial democracy, the notion of fixed categorizations came to dominate. In his seminal work on the persistence of racial discrimination after abolition, Florestan Fernandes (1965), intending to denounce the ideology of racial democracy, used the binary terms "black/white," explicitly avoiding the analytical use of intermediate categories. Fernandes argued that racial inequalities were the result of the incomplete transition from a slave-based economic system to a capitalist society with a class structure. The practice of ignoring color assisted the elite white class in dismissing the socioeconomic disparities of the poorer nonwhites by allowing them to blame a vague underdevelopment or to doubt the personal capabilities of this class.

The emphasis on the extent of racial disparities in Brazil, following the 1950s studies that showed the existence of racial discrimination in socioeconomic terms, gained new impetus with statistical studies undertaken from the 1970s onward. These studies, alongside the increase in organization and political significance of the Black Social Movement, resulted in an increasing use by many, from political activists to the state itself, of the category "black" to encompass all those of any (visible) non-European ancestry. When Machado is referred to as "denying" his blackness, as critics such as Rodrigues or Nascimento have done, it is to this bipolar racial schematic that they refer. At the same time, academic analyses that focus on whiteness, such as those by Carone, Bento, and Piza (2002) or Sovik (2009), often disregard the existing classical and contemporary literature on the fluid nature of whiteness and the way it is experienced and lived, falling prey to a naturalized, static portrayal of racial categories.

Thus, we argue that the questions that Machado prompts with his playfully ambiguous narrative are increasingly pertinent to contemporary Brazilian racial politics, following this gradual move to a system of categorization that does not allow room for fluidity between absolutes. Clearly, if the racial category "mixed" is to be done away with, as proponents of a bipolar classificatory system based around the *branco/negro* divide endorse, not only will blackness be reconfigured so as to include those currently socially considered as mixed, but whiteness will also necessarily have to be reconstructed and reinterpreted. Currently, "white" is still a category with enough ambiguity to include individuals who have some visible traits of African and/or indigenous ancestry (Harris et al. 1993). But if these white individuals start to abandon this racial category, or newer generations stop self-identifying as white and start identifying instead with the more ambiguous category *pardo* or "brown," as recent census data has indicated is already happening, the meaning of being white will be entirely reshaped, and ultimately, made more absolute. At this point, when for the first time in history less than 50 percent of the Brazilian population self-identifies as white, it is also a possibility that public policies that provide advantages to those who self-classify as brown, could darken the self-identification (at least at critical points in their lives) of some individuals.

In parallel to this debate, the process of "conscientization" as blacks of all those self-classified as nonwhites, undertaken by sectors of the Black Social Movement, implies a conscious reworking of these individuals' racial identity to embrace their

blackness and to connect with fellow blacks in the struggle for racial equality.[9] This process, we argue, results in a de facto naturalized portrayal of whiteness, in the sense that, in the effort to disambiguate the figure of the mulatto so as to attain his (self-)classification as black, there is also a correlate disambiguation of whiteness. Those previously considered borderline whites, who had to appeal to nonphysical prestige marks so as to be considered part of the category "white," would be classified as blacks, leaving white as a niche for those "naturally" white, that is, without any phenotypical marks deemed to be of African ancestry. At the same time, the polarization of society into two distinctly reconfigured racial spaces, black and white, and the emphasis on solidarity ties between blacks as the foundation for a black identity implies a rereading of historical institutions, such as slavery, within this resignified racial scheme. And it is precisely this reworking of whiteness as an unambiguous category opposed to blackness that we argue is at play in contemporary readings of "Pai contra mãe" that assume a white identity for Cândido and Clara arising out of their opposition and animosity to the black slave.

CONCLUSION

The categories of racial identity in Brazil have, at differing times, been subject to differing definitions and changing fashions. In the twenty-first century, a relative fluidity is once again being replaced by a set of bipolar, either white or black systems of classification, even used in the implementation of some public policies that demand check-box responses. In our analysis of "Pai contra mãe," we demonstrated how the reader's understanding of the text is essentially premised on whether one chooses to follow the most obvious narrative of a black child being sacrificed for a white child. But there is another choice, and that is to engage in the indistinctness of Cândido's racial identity, jettisoning widely held interpretations to construct a more nuanced reading, one that Machado's deliberately ambiguous narrative demands. In this article, we are not suggesting that Cândido and Clara of "Pai contra mãe" are black. Rather, we are approaching an important text with the subtlety that its critical reaction has lacked, using this example to foreground the idea that whatever constitutes whiteness is nuanced and resistant to interpretation but increasingly subject to binary reconfiguration. Further research on state policies based on the clear racial identification of its beneficiaries is required to examine the impact of this materialization of theory into a practical environment, an environment where perhaps the greatest ambiguity is in the premise of validity of a system that can hope to determine one's racial identity in such a perfunctory manner. At the same time, Santos and Maio (2004, 372) argue persuasively that "even though it is increasingly evident that Brazil is not a 'racial democracy', as the socioeconomic statistics indicate, there remains the view of a racially and culturally hybrid country . . . [which is] [v]alued by broad segments of Brazilian society." It remains to be seen whether this hybridity and the ambiguity inherent to it are to be maintained in Brazilians' social relations and then

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9. Regarding the state implementation of a "black population health programme" see Maio and Monteiro (2005).

acted upon and somehow implemented further in public policy. What is certain, however, is that the ambiguities present in Machado's text of 1906, which seemingly offer a straightforward bipolar confrontation, have yet to be fully resolved, either in literary consciousness or in the imagination of wider society.

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