

**CONFESSING DIASPORA FROM WITHIN:
TRANSGRESSION AND AFRO-BRAZILIAN IDENTITY
IN HELENA PARENTE CUNHA'S *MULHER NO ESPELHO***

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Abstract: This article explores the intersection of confessional discourse, race, and gender through the protagonist's journey to the Afro-Brazilian diaspora in Helena Parente Cunha's novel, *Mulher no Espelho*. It examines the myth of racial democracy that was popularly embraced and disseminated throughout Brazil in the twentieth century and argues that the novel uses language and imagery to contest the invisibility of racial stratification. Through the protagonist's confessional dialogue, she highlights the transgression of racial and gender norms in her own search for subjectivity, which mirrors issues pertinent to Brazil's own transition to democracy as the dictatorship was coming to a close in the early 1980's. Ultimately, Cunha's novel forms part of a larger dialogue about race and national identity in Brazil.

Keywords: Brazilian literature, 1900-1999, Helena Parente Cunha, Afro-Brazilian culture, Brazilian women, Gilberto Freyre, racial democracy, confession, race, candomblé, diaspora, transgression, dialogue, identity

Resumo: O artigo explora a interseção entre discurso confessional, raça e gênero através da viagem da protagonista à diáspora afro-brasileira no romance *Mulher no Espelho*, de Helena Parente Cunha. Examina o mito da democracia racial que foi abraçado e disseminado durante todo o século XX no Brasil e propõe que no romance o uso da linguagem e imagens questiona a invisibilidade da estratificação racial. Pelo diálogo confessional, a protagonista destaca a transgressão das normas raciais e sexuais na sua busca pela subjetividade, a qual reflete os temas relevantes à transição à democracia do Brasil nos anos iniciais da década dos 80. Argumenta que o romance de Cunha forma parte de um diálogo mais amplo sobre a raça e identidade nacional no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Literatura brasileira, 1900-1999, Helena Parente Cunha, cultura afro-brasileira, mulheres brasileiras, Gilberto Freyre, democracia racial, confissão, raça, candomblé, diáspora, preto, transgressão, diálogo, identidade

What makes a black Brazilian black? This question has been the topic of many studies over the years, a question that still elicits strong reactions and a multitude of opinions. From the long-standing belief in a “racial democracy” to contemporary black movements in Brazil, people struggle with the concept of race and ethnicity with its concomitant themes of phenotype and social construction. Being black is complicated, with many Brazilians still socialized to believe that darker skin is less desirable while others, usually part of a growing black movement, prefer to call themselves black or afro-descendants (Telles 22-23). Edward Telles’s recent comprehensive study of race relations in Brazil considers the socio-political ideologies behind racial classifications, revealing that Brazilians are hesitant to call others black, for fear of showing disrespect, or that Brazilians seem to agree on who is white, but differ more on who is brown versus black, preferring an unclear color line (78-106). Yet, Telles concludes “these racial distinctions are used to create social hierarchies, further strengthening the racial boundaries” (106). This study will focus on those racial boundaries, and how and why people cross them.

Helena Parente Cunha’s *Mulher no Espelho* (1983) is often celebrated for its postmodern development of an autobiographical narrator whose fragmented narrative voice lays bare a deeply internalized struggle with patriarchy. The narrator’s transgression of sexual and gender norms moves her to ultimately reject her role as passive housewife and question the role of women in Brazilian, specifically Bahian, society. Recently, three critics, Cristina Sáenz de Tejada (1997, 1998), Vanessa Valdés (2009, 2014) and Isabel Asensio-Sierra (2009), have conducted full-length studies highlighting the clear symbolism and references to Afro-Brazilian culture as reflective of essential components of the narrator’s growing consciousness and ethnic identity. While it is true that the narrator discovers and even adopts elements of her Afro-Brazilian inheritance, there is also a more subtle crossing of borders that occurs in the novel that makes the intersection of race and gender problematic. I argue that the novel reflects a white gaze that makes evident and consequently challenges the reader to confront the invisible borders of Brazil’s narrative of a racial democracy. The narrator’s obsession with elements of Afro-Brazilian culture reveal both a curiosity to examine

her own multiracial identity and her objectification, or even appropriation, of the exotic. For the reader, the racial dynamics are unclear, and originally resulted in little critical attention; for example, Melissa Fitch Lockhart commented that at times Cunha, perhaps “unintentionally,” produces images that were “offensive and reinforc[e] many of the grossest legacies of slavery” (7). Even Valdés concludes a chapter about the importance of Candomblé in the novel by stating, “for Helena Parente Cunha, the white Brazilian writer, though there may be genuine respect for Candomblé and for the *orixás*, the religion remains exotic, an expedient tool by which to combat the dominant patriarchal culture” (*Oshún* 161). I find this contradictory role of race in *Mulher* fertile ground for continued dialogue about Brazilian identity politics and subject formation.

Mulher is characterized by movement. Thematically, it emphasizes the female narrator’s physical movement from domestic to public space as she embraces agency and subjectivity; structurally, the text relies upon a dialogue between the fragmented voices of the narrator (*eu* and *a mulher que me escreve*), a movement between differing perspectives. For this reason, I approach the novel’s representation of race and ethnicity through two lenses: confession, which emphasizes dialogue and transgression, and diaspora, which highlights movement between spaces and groups of people.

In my work on *Mulher*, I have proposed reading the text as a confessional narrative.¹ Not only does the theme of transgression figure predominantly in Cunha’s novel, but the interplay of the two narrative voices --when read as confessor and confessant-- explores the relationship between power, authority, and textual production. The narrator and the “woman who writes me” engage in a dialogue that exposes power relations that privilege white men. Cunha plays with the notion of authority (and authorship) by separating the voices of the narrator and the voice that authors her text. While the narrator initially appears to follow more conservative gender roles, the authorial voice presents itself as an educated woman whose ideas were formed through a feminist, Freudian analysis of social structures and who claims to

¹ In their preface to the translation Ellison and Lindstrom highlight the novel’s “possibly confessional aspect” (v). I analyze *Mulher* specifically as a confessional text in *Daughters of Saint Teresa*.

resist (or transgress) expected norms for female behavior. The “author” appears to have more power and authority in the relationship²; however, over the course of the novel, this relationship shifts as the narrator gains confidence and power through her own lived transgressions of gender and racial norms. In the end, it can be argued that the narrator gains control of her text as the third person narrative is integrated into the first.

The dialogue in *Mulher* emphasizes an important characteristic of confessional discourse. While confession is popularly viewed as a way for someone to articulate his or her sins, traditionally confession was also a way to publically *profess* one’s faith.³ Church authorities used the confessional process to officially reintegrate wayward practitioners into the religious fold by eliciting acceptable thoughts and practices. In the process towards absolution, the confessant publically professed his or her beliefs. However, confession can also be used ironically as a way to question the very structures that establish official discourse. Confession as profession may seek to subvert or resist traditional power structures by making visible the negative consequences of such practices through the dialogic practice. As the narrator confesses her transgressions, like embracing her sexuality, she professes a need for Brazilian society to change, an alternative to patriarchal practices. The inversion of authority through the confessional narrative structure of *Mulher* privileges the transgression of normative behavior for upper-class, white women in Brazil.

Likewise, studies on diaspora literature also highlight transgression; for example, Aihwa Ong observes that the prefix “trans” is suggestive of a variety of crossings:

‘Trans’ denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the transversal, the transactional, the translational, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behaviour.... (qtd. in Mishra 18-19 [Ong 1999:4]).

² For ease of use, I will refer to the “a mulher que me escreve” as the author.

³ According to Lewis’s *Latin Dictionary*, the ecclesiastical meaning of the noun *confession* (confession) was “a creed, avowal of belief” (412). St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is considered the seminal work that established confessional discourse as a way to profess one’s faith and ideas.

An examination of diaspora, therefore, emphasizes space, both literal and figurative, as places of negotiation that allow the subjects that inhabit them the opportunity to redefine their relationship to others. Traditionally, diasporic movement focuses on leaving a homeland, whereas this study focuses on a diasporic space within the nation-state, a transgression of borders that are not geo-political, but rather are unwritten lines that confine and even define cultural space and identity politics. In reading Cunha's novel as a confessional text that views the Afro-Brazilian diaspora as a site of difference, we see how the protagonist transgresses both racial and gendered boundaries as an opportunity to break free from the normative constraints of the white, upper-class patriarchy that has traditionally defined the nation-state.

The question of race in Brazil has a long and contentious history. Popularly seen as a racial utopia, scholarship in the last several decades has fought against the image of the racial democracy that Gilberto Freyre made famous in his *Casa-Grande e Senzala*, which validated the contributions of both landowners and slaves in creating a nation of mixed races whose fortitude and strength originates from both its colonizing and enslaved ancestors.⁴ Contemporary scholars have criticized how the State consciously adopted Freyre's ideas as indicative of a racial democracy, thus rendering race invisible. Bernd Reiter and Gladys L. Mitchell claim that the State effectively silenced Afro-Brazilianist movements until 1985, after the collapse of the military dictatorship.⁵ In fact, Reiter and Mitchell argue that,

In 1999, when Michael Hanchard's collection, *Racial Politics in Contemporary Brazil*, first appeared, finding racism in Brazilian society was still a counter-hegemonic endeavor, aimed not just against mainstream scholarship, but also against the official self-identification of the Brazilian state, as well as a great part of its population, black and white alike" (Reitner and

⁴ It should be noted that Freyre did not actually coin the term. His descriptions and the use of "social democracy" led to the term being associated with him. For more about the evolution of the term "racial democracy," see Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães and Telles.

⁵ I do not intend to de-emphasize the importance of Afro-Brazilian movements such as the *Teatro Experimental do Negro*; however, the scholars I cite see these movements as consistently interrupted by authoritarian regimes before 1985. Reiter and Mitchell mention the 1978 creation of the MNU (Unified Black Movement) as the first "national framework for black activism" (3). Other studies cite the late 1970's (especially with the weakening of the dictatorship) as the beginning of a series of Black movements in Brazil. However, most studies emphasize the hold of "racial democracy" as a widely accepted ideology in Brazil throughout the 20th century.

Mitchell 5).

Due to the strong link between the concept of racial democracy and the imagined community of the Brazilian state, texts that highlight an Afro-Brazilian diaspora disembody the myth of the nation-state, literally forcing the gaze away from nation to individual subjectivity and difference.

Published in 1983, Cunha's novel came out during this time of ideological struggle. Keeping in mind that Freyre's ideas were still largely accepted as the basis of national identity, Cunha's treatment of race in *Mulher* is transgressive, and provides the basis of my analysis of the intersection of confession, race, and diaspora.

The three main black characters provide the most overt references to race in *Mulher*. Throughout the novel, the protagonist repeats the same descriptions of these figures: her black nanny, who is described as kind and comforting, and whose rough hands lovingly stroke the young girl; the young black son of the cook next door, who sits on the wall sucking mangos, and who occasionally shows the young protagonist his genitals; and the beautiful, tall, muscular black man dressed in white who the woman finds alluring, especially when he dances, and with whom she has sex at the end of the novel. She repeats phrases like "Que preto bonito. Que preto bonito dançando no estrado. Que pretinho bonito" (145). These images are as problematic as they are essential to the development of her subjectivity.

In terms of racist stereotyping and exoticism, the protagonist clearly objectifies all three characters. The nanny's hands, the boy's smiling lips and protruding sex, and the man's dark, muscular body all stand in contrast to the protagonist who asks why she can't see herself in their shiny darkness. At one point she visits the Pelourinho, staring at black people dancing and working only to wonder if black people were shinier during slavery, and noting their dirty, diseased sexes that come together in dance (141). These descriptions appear to reduce Afro-Brazilian identity to sex, dance, and the care of upper-class children, all of which are common stereotypes of black Brazilians. Such duplications of the colonizing gaze suggest that the protagonist does not understand her

role as consumer of exoticized Afro-Brazilian culture and racial stereotypes.

As the daughter in an old, landowning family, the narrator has been raised white. She is taught not to play with black children or to participate in Candomblé. Yet, in her highly patriarchal family, she finds protection and an escape from fear in the arms of her black nanny, someone hired to care for her. Her childhood imprints on her in a way that she seeks out the familiar feelings of protection through Afro-Brazilian culture. However, she sees this culture from the outside looking in. She fails to see that she seeks out the company of the black man for *her* needs. She objectifies him, as we know little more about him than that he is the son of Xangô, he dances well, and he is a “pretinho bonito.” Though possibly a term of endearment, the use of the diminutive also infantilizes the man, which is a characteristic of the colonial gaze. In “consuming” the black man, through the sexual act, she feels “whole,” but we see nothing of him or his life (162-163). She even acknowledges that her relationship with him is fleeting. Thus, the novel purposely uses a white gaze to complicate the dynamics of power, as gender and racial inequality are teased out through the interactions of the narrator with black individuals.

With respect to confession, black people represent the object of her desire, the guilty pleasure, or transgression, that she wants to enjoy at the cost of angering her father. Early on she realizes that her father sees the world inhabited by blacks as different from his own: “os meninos pretos, filhos das cozinheiras e dos pescadores não pertenciam ao mundo ordenado por meu pai” (19). She uses her relationships with black people to weaken the stronghold of patriarchal power by refusing to conform to the wishes of her father, husband, and even her sons, who feel especially dishonored by her interaction with *pretos*. Only through transgression of racial and sexual norms does the narrator find space to examine who she wants to be. The confessional dialogue shifts at this point in the book. At first, the author claims to be open-minded and free, the model for the confessant to follow. By the end of the novel, the author argues the perspective of traditional white society when she chides the narrator for ruining her sons’ lives through the shame of her reckless sexuality, especially with black men. In

this ironic confessional turn, the confessant-narrator has accepted the teachings of the previously liberal confessor and professes her “faith” in a new order, a society that resists the patriarchal norms of a past order, despite the empty rhetoric of the now conservative confessor-author. Just as the author’s sections in italics grow ever less frequent, the narrator now assumes control over her story. The transgression of patriarchy is realized through the transgression of racial boundaries and the narrator confesses her freedom. The novel, therefore, simultaneously uncovers the narrator’s white, colonizing perspective at the same time it celebrates the transgression of the colonial order.

One way we can look at this apparent paradox is through the language in the novel. The use of “preto” is of particular interest in regard to racial politics in the novel. Hanchard cites many studies about the myriad racial identifiers of Brazilians, but most revealing are Yvonne Maggie’s 1988 and Eduard Telles’s 2006 studies which found that the effects of whitening are so strong that both whites and non-whites rarely use the term “preto” or “pardo” to describe anyone they know, preferring instead, other descriptive words (Maggie 8-9; Telles Chapter 4). Contrary to this finding, Cunha uses only the word “preto” to describe the black people with whom the narrator seeks contact. By emphasizing their blackness, and by resisting the pressure of whitening, the narrator not only defies the norms imposed on her, but also exposes the racism inherent in Brazilian society. The protagonist makes visible what had deliberately been made invisible before. Therefore, what initially appears as racist depictions can also be read as a criticism of racism itself. The strange repetition of “preto bonito” has the effect of bringing race to the forefront for the reader: it proposes a new way of seeing.

The narrator also begins to see herself as part of a racialized world. She never calls herself black, but she does refer to her skin as “morena” and “queimada” (145, 146, 158). This would follow Telles’s findings that people are willing to be brown, but not black and would seem to follow the idealized myth of racial utopia. However, for someone considered white and from an important family, it would be uncommon to call oneself or be called “morena,” as exemplified by the father’s shushing of the

narrator when she calls herself brown (145). Cunha's protagonist challenges the false premise of racial democracy in calling herself "morena" and by choosing to have sex with a "preto" because she knows it is not acceptable. She highlights the fact that racial boundaries do exist in Brazil and not everyone is an idealized "brown." Valdés argues that calling the black man "'bonito' reminds the reader of her father's designation of everything associated with Candomblé as ugly" and that by embracing unpopular terminology, "Parente Cunha suggests a replacement of worldviews... permitting [the narrator] instead to live according to her own sensibilities" (*Oshun's* 140). Although the association of blackness with sexual desire is not new, the narrator's desire to see herself as Africanized does change the nature of the relationship. Therefore, we see these linguistic transgressions as a tool for the narrator to find herself and her sensibilities, but it is not for mere personal consumption of the exotic. She sees her own identity tied to blackness.

The black characters in *Mulher* are not solely defined by their descriptions. In seeking to transgress societal boundaries, the protagonist begins to see the world around her in terms of spatial divisions through which she is able to pass because of her relationships with black people. These spaces create what I will refer to as the Afro-Brazilian diaspora because of the protagonist's clear positioning of them outside of normative culture. Some examples include the streetcars (bondes) that carry black fishermen back and forth to the sea from which the winds of Africa blow, the Pelourinho district of Salvador, the *terreiro*, and the wall between her house and the neighbors where the little black boy sits.⁶ As a child she looks to these places from within the family home, unable to escape the rigid boundaries of acceptable white space, except for once in a while with her nanny. However, over the course of the novel, she breaches all of these spaces in her journey to self-discovery, thus inverting traditional diasporic movement —moving from privileged space to underprivileged space-- and begging the question of whether she herself is a diasporic subject.

⁶ Sáenz de Tejada sees this movement correlated to the physical map of Salvador: as the narrator moves to the center of the city (Pelourinho), we see a gradual "re-africanization" both architecturally outwardly and in narrator's simultaneous journey inwards" (*La (re)construcción* 97).

In an effort to find a new space of freedom, the protagonist enacts a series of transgressions that lead her into Afro-Brazilian diasporic space. At first, she is an outsider:

Você quer ir a um festival de música afro? . . . Meus novos amigos são artistas e intelectuais que amam as manifestações de arte do povo e quase todos se interessam de algum modo pelas raízes africanas da nossa cultura.

Somente agora passei a frequentar os ambientes populares, que no tempo de meu pai e de meu marido, eram evitados como lugar de gatinha, de preto, de canalha, de bêbado. . . (143-144)

The protagonist deliberately crosses the boundaries that have been vilified in order to maintain a racial hierarchy. With her new friends, we see the rising consciousness of racial difference and a re-valorization of African culture; yet, at the same time, Afro-Brazilian culture appears to continue to be a commodity to be consumed by white “cultural tourists.”⁷ Many times, the narrator questions this position: in the Pelourinho she asks “Com que direito eu estou aqui?” (140) and after watching the black man dance, she wonders “Mas onde é o meu lugar?” (147). The narrator forces the reader to question whether the Afro-Brazilian diaspora is a place for all Brazilians.

The narrator enters the quintessential Afro-Brazilian diasporic space when she attends a Candomblé celebration in which she enters a trance and where she is linked to Oxum. This scene forms the crux of the arguments by Valdés, Sáenz de Tejada, and Asensio-Sierra who see her adoption of orixás and her participation in Candomblé as foundational acts of integrating her fragmented selves through a discovery of her Afro-Brazilian heritage. In fact, she does continually use representations of Xangô, Iansã, Yemanjá and Oxum among other symbols from Candomblé as catalysts for change and transformation. The wind, storms, and salty ocean air provide her with an escape and relief from the pressures of her father’s rules and disapproval. By entering the *terreiro*, she even seeks a new home, a spiritual home. Asensio-Sierra sees the trance that the

⁷ Floyd Merrell’s comprehensive study of Capoeira and Candomblé notes that in the 1960’s it became trendy to for middle class Brazilians to participate in Candomblé: “intellectuals, poets, student writers, and artists participated in this new enlightened quest for identity. [...] It seemed to fill a vacuum left by modern secularized lifestyles in industrialized cities” (118).

protagonist enters as an authentic African space that gives her a new identity (119). Returning to racial terms, it is when she enters further into the Afro-Brazilian world that she refers to her darker skin and curly hair. She wonders about her grandparents and her racial inheritance (158). The Afro-Brazilian diaspora provides her with a new space in which to define herself at the same time it articulates black culture as a source of power.

While these arguments are compelling, I find them ultimately unsatisfactory. For example, one of her most interesting diasporic crossings is through her imagination when she creates an African fairy tale in which the black boy on the wall returns to Nigeria with her and makes her his princess:

Os seus antepassados viajaram para as costas da Bahia num navio negreiro e perderam seu reinado e perderam seu poder, mas o príncipe herdeiro se prepara e voltará e exigirá os seus direitos, ele quer que eu o ajude a libertar o seu povo, ele quer que eu seja proclamada princesa da tribo. . . eu não sei se meu pai consentirá que eu parta para a África, sobretudo para me casar com um preto. . . (97-98)

She plays with her father's desire for her to be a good girl by helping to free the Nigerian people, clearly underscoring that her desire to be accepted by the other is mediated by her desire to save them. Like many of the previous examples, at best, she frames this crossing of boundaries as a transgressive act used to free herself from the bonds of her father, at worst, she doesn't realize that she re-colonizes the space through her own rule as "African princess." Her Africa is not real, but rather a symbolic space of freedom. Frequently, as a child, she sees black people whose parents were slaves and wonders if they were kings or queens of noble tribes, and she wants her nanny to be a queen (98). Africa is an exotic setting for her to transfer her privileged status and for her to see black people as noble too. In trying to escape her father's authority, she unconsciously duplicates colonial sensibilities. Sáenz de Tejada writes that in embracing her African roots, the narrator realizes an act of resistance, albeit one that is "idealized" ("Representaciones" 47). Unlike the people she sees in the Pelourinho, the narrator does not imagine herself in the lived diasporic space of other Afro-Brazilians; rather, she reverts to a space of fantasy.

The crux of issue is how authentic Afro-Brazilian culture is framed in the novel. Olivia Maria Gomes da Cunha writes that for black movements beginning in the late 1970's,

The concept of "black culture" was . . . introduced into these circles as a racialized counterpoint to the idea of popular culture. The move reified 'pure' black cultural practices as opposed to those seen to have been 'commercialized' and manipulated. In some ways this debate can be understood as a protective artifact --the remapping of boundaries, the formulation of concepts and words of one's own-- that would distance black movement discourse from the celebration of miscegenation. (230)

Do references to Candomblé, Carnival, and Capoeira in the novel truly constitute more than the popular commercialization of Afro-Brazilian culture? Is the protagonist more than a white, middle-class consumer of the exotic other? Sáenz de Tejada affirms Afro-Brazilian culture as a syncretic space, similar to Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone," where cultures and their unwritten rules blur, thus explaining the father's discomfort and lack of control (*La (re)construcción* 93). In this space, the narrator can begin to cross boundaries and leave the culture in which she was raised and find value in new cultural experiences. However, Sáenz de Tejada also concludes that the protagonist learns that she does not share a black "sensitivity" and must confront the idea that she is privileged ("Representaciones" 48). Ferreira-Pinto claims that she cannot occupy an Afro-Brazilian space of freedom due to "centuries of cultural whitening and by her standing in the class structure of Brazilian society" (66). Valdés asserts that the protagonist "regains a lost heritage within her family" (*Oshun's* 134). Later, Valdés argues that women who claim European heritage can find authentic meaning in the African diaspora through religious practices, such as Candomblé, and that the "African Diaspora does not just include those who can claim biological or genetic ties to it" (*Oshun's* 165).⁸ These varied conclusions reveal the importance of the protagonist as the site of inscription of multiple ideologies that were coming together in the late 70s and continue today. If we consider the narrator's body as symbol of the

⁸ This study is not comparative, so I have not included any reference to the United States, even though the concept of "racial democracy" is often compared to the politics of race in the US. However, I would like to briefly draw attention to the scandal that broke out in the US in the summer of 2015 when Rachel Dolezal claimed to be black without any black ancestry. The question of who can be black is just as pertinent today as it has been in the twentieth-century.

nation, how we interpret the ending of the novel can help draw us back to the question of Brazil's racial democracy.

At the end of the novel, by sleeping with the beautiful black man, the protagonist crosses a boundary that results in the death of her son and the end of her confession. The protagonist literally embraces the other when she sleeps with the "preto bonito." Although race plays a part in this ending, no one has written about its symbolism. First, when she sleeps with the beautiful black man, she symbolically creates the Afro-Brazilian diaspora within her home. Their union culminates in an orgasm that frees her from all the ties of her previous life. Even after the black man leaves, she refuses to answer any call from the outside world and, consequently, does not open the door when her son comes desperately banging. However, she cannot hide from reality and soon learns that her son came with a gun to confront her about dishonoring him, particularly by sleeping with a black man. When she wouldn't open her door, her son shot at the black man, fled, and later was found dead. Here the two worlds inextricably collide: the white son lashes out at his mother's black lover, and both end up injured or dead. The protagonist is consumed by guilt and in the storm of that guilt, a mirror is shattered by lightning. Only then, on one fragment of glass, she sees her-selves united.

The ending of the novel has been interpreted in several ways: as empowering at a price—she must sacrifice her son to be freed from the bonds of patriarchy (Sáenz de Tejada); as frustrated because she cannot escape guilt (Ferreira-Pinto); or as postmodern due to the impossibility of complete integration and wholeness (Lockhart). Through the lens of diaspora, the shattering of the mirror imitates a dispersal of seeds, the foundational metaphor of diaspora. She sees herself in one shard, a part of the mirror that can no longer be whole.

So what does the novel tell us about Brazilian racial politics? I argue that the ending destroys the myth of racial democracy. The black man is attacked by the old nobility who will not accept his integration into dominant society. Yet the young white man is killed in trying to maintain his place in that tradition. Perhaps the protagonist's

guilt is the growing pains of a Brazil that must see itself in a mirror that has been shattered and dispersed. By creating clearly defined Afro-Brazilian spaces, Cunha transgresses the politics that render race invisible as part of a myth of racial utopia that defines the nation-state and, instead, suggests that the fragmentation of the female subject mirrors the fragmentation of the nation.

The biggest challenge in reading this text as part of the Afro-Brazilian diaspora stems from the fact that the woman moves from dominant society to diaspora when she really does not form part of the diasporic group. Can the privileged “other” flee to a diaspora? This inversion of the diasporic subject could be read as another form of cultural appropriation, as evidenced by the racist stereotypes and white gaze. Yet, this positioning of the woman stretches our concept of how diaspora is articulated and how cultural boundaries can exist without becoming lost in their own artifice. Cunha’s protagonist both discovers her Afro-Brazilian roots and becomes aware of the boundaries that distance her from them. The novel does not escape popular representations of Afro-Brazilian culture, but it does expand the reader’s exposure to Candomblé through its meaningful role for the protagonist. The privileged protagonist cannot completely appropriate the diasporic space, therefore highlighting the stratification of Brazilian society. The protagonist states that she is not black: “Não sou a moça preta, vestida de branco, flor no cabelo... Os deuses poderosos não podem mudar meu destino. Meu caminho. Minha escolha” (167). She must decide how to proceed. The recovery of her Afro-Brazilian heritage is a journey she has just begun, a remapping of boundaries that she is just beginning to understand. It is neither clear nor free from its colonial past, but it is in the protagonist’s, and therefore Brazil’s, desire to see difference that helps her feel in control of creating a new identity for herself.

On the other hand, we must recognize that there is no black voice in this novel. The woman does not see herself as black, nor do we ever see the black man speak or hear of his destiny after the protagonist’s son shoots at him. So, while the protagonist can begin to reconstruct herself, we need to recognize the voices of the other shards,

the others whose inner dialogue and subjectivity is not captured in these pages. It is time for the protagonist to dialogue outside of herself.

Finally, if we return to the concept of confessional discourse, we can see the ending in a new light. The protagonist does not receive absolution. Traditionally women (Catholic nuns) wrote confessional life stories in order to justify their thoughts and actions within a highly regulated patriarchal system. In this confession, the woman uses confession to break with such authority. The lack of absolution shows that there is no one who controls or judges her actions. There is no priestly figure. Instead, she faces herself. If the protagonist can move forward in the face of her guilt, so can Brazil. At the end of the novel, we see that her confession is also the Nation's: Brazil must part with its racist sons and recognize the wounds of racism in order to move forward. The novel's most powerful transgression, therefore, is that of breaking with Freyre's popularized narrative of racial democracy and creating dialogue about the reality of race in Brazil, particularly in 1983 when it was first published.

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