

RACIALIZATION, OTHERNESS AND SENSIBILITIES IN ARGENTINA. A CRITICAL APPROACH FROM THE SOCIOLOGY OF BODIES AND EMOTIONS

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Abstract: *This article critically reflects upon the production and reproduction of the formations of otherness in Argentina from the emergence of the Nation-State to the present day, highlighting the tensions and transformations that have converged in the category “black,” which is defined as the privileged locus of the processes of the sub-alternization. The documentary analysis carried out enabled, firstly, the systematization of some strategies of “invisibility” of the Afro-descendant population on a national level. Secondly, the article studies, from the Sociology of Bodies and Emotions, the process of “negrification” of otherness as part of the politics of sensibilities and reflects upon the “politics of the gaze” as an essential analytical key to observe current practices of racialization. Finally, the conclusion suggests that since the 19th Century Argentina has witnessed a constant and complex process of the racialization of otherness that, coupled with class, has defined “superfluous humanities” concerning the extinction of blackness, first, and its widespread sub-alternization, second, reproducing the pattern of colonial dominion and exploitation even well into the 21st Century.*

Keywords: Racialization, Afro-descendant, sensibilities, politics of the gaze otherness.

1. Introduction

Why are there no black men or women in Argentina? For some time this question has surfaced in the collective imaginary, which elicited various dubious answers suggesting that the disappearance of all African traces in the country is an objective and inescapable reality.

The transatlantic slave trade from the 16th through the 19th Centuries explains the presence of African people¹ in Argentina, and in the Latin American region. However, various historiographic and anthropological studies have revealed that the African “component” of the social and cultural life in Argentina has been considerably underestimated. Scholars argue that this misjudgment is a consequence of the project for a “racially white and culturally European” Nation conceived by the “Generation of 1880”².

The narrative of “whiteness” and the promotion of European immigration, which were conceived as state policies, have been the two great pillars of the “myth of origin” of the Argentine Nation (Adamovsky, 2012; Segato, 2007). This narrative demanded to renounce to any ethnic or racial claims in order to become a citizen. A double denial followed: one issued by the State, and the second one encouraged by Afro-descendants, who designed “whitening” strategies to be considered a part of the “national” group.

This scenario increasingly dislocated the collective of Afro-descendants, displacing them practically and symbolically towards the position of a “prehistoric otherness that had disappeared, i.e. without significance for the history of the country” (Lamborghini, Geler and Guzmán, 2017: 70; translation by author).

Some scholars argue that academia’s almost complete disregard for this issue furthered the invisibility of all African trace demanded by the project of “the whitening of Argentina” (Frigerio, 2008; Geler, 2016). Research from the 20th Century on this issue, which

¹ During this period, the slave trade that populated the American territory entailed the largest forced diaspora in history involving between 10 and 11 million persons. Studies agree that between 50% and 60% of enslaved people were forced to disembark in Latin America (Borucki, Eltis and Wheat, 2015; Klein, 2010).

² Ruling political and intellectual elite between 1880 and 1916.

consisted of few studies, disregarded intermixing (*mestizaje*) while assuming “beyond doubt” the local “disappearance” of black people.

The 1989 Spanish translation of the book *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, by the American historian Reid Andrews, was the first to dispute the premise of the “disappearance” of Afro-descendants in Argentina. This publication raised new questions that renewed the theoretical and methodological strategies for the study of Afro-descendants in Argentina.

This article will critically reflect upon the production and reproduction of definitions of otherness in Argentina from the foundation of the Nation-State to the present day. The text will underscore the tensions and transformations of the category of “black,” defined as a privileged *locus* of the process of subalternization in the country.

The article will outline the arguments as follows. Firstly, the documentary analysis leads to the systematization of some strategies of “invisibility” of the Afro-descendant population on a national level. These strategies have underpinned the dynamics of erosion/erasure of the racial other originated in 1880. Secondly, the article understands the process of “negrification” of otherness as part of the policies of sensibilities and reflects upon the “politics of the gaze” as an essential analytical key to observe current practices of racialization. Finally, the conclusion suggests that since the 19th Century Argentina has witnessed a constant and complex process of the racialization of otherness that, coupled with class, has defined “superfluous humanities” concerning the *extinction* of blackness, first, and its *widespread subalternization*, second, reproducing the pattern of colonial dominion and exploitation even well into the 21st Century.

2. The Invisibility of Afro-Descendants as a Politics of National Sensibility

The building of the Nation-State was not a uniform process throughout Latin America. In Argentina, the production, dissemination, and legitimization of the narrative of “whiteness”—which was presented as the core element lying in the origin of its population—was an integral part of the local “civilizatory” project of capitalism.

The birth of the Nation-State entailed an authentic “erasure” of those populations that did not “fit” its basic principles (fundamentally, Africannesses, and indigenous people). In consequence, institutional and structural racism was one of its core foundations. It is worth mentioning that Argentina formally became independent from Spain in 1816, yet only in 1853 the enactment of the Constitution of the Argentine Nation abolished slavery. This Nation-State enjoyed four decades of independence with slaves inhabiting its territory. This illustrates the framework of racism, violence, and discrimination that became the basis for the foundational project, leaving discernible social, political and cultural traces in the future of this Nation-State.

The invisibility of the African “component” in the country materialized in various ways. The three main operations that jointly built the “great myth” of Argentina as a “white and European” land were the systematic promotion of European immigration, historiographic denialism, and the manipulation of the racial variable in statistical records (Alberto and Elena, 2016; Barbero, 2020; Frigerio, 2008).

In relation to the latter factor, a review of the first municipal censuses of the city of Buenos Aires shows that the erasure of the racial other began locally with the statistical “annihilation” of the Afro-descendant population. In fact, between 1838 and 1887, the black population declined by 7 thousand people representing 1.8% of the total population of the city in contrast to the previous 26.1% (Reid Andrews, 1980).

Conventionally, scholars have located the “disappearance” of the Afro-Argentine population in the second half of the 19th Century. In consequence, various conjectures emerged to explain the phenomenon, which have survived and have become a deep-rooted idea of common-sense knowledge.

The first conjecture suggests that the cause for the disappearance of the black population was the death toll from the war of independence and the civil strife of the 19th

Century. The second conjecture identifies as a cause the intermixing that followed the massive casualties of black men in armed conflict. The third conjecture revolves around the yellow fever epidemic that broke out in Buenos Aires in 1871. Finally, the fourth conjecture centers on the decline in slave trade. This version sustains that legal dispositions – i.e. the abolition of slave trade and the Freedom of Wombs Law, passed in 1813– blocked the importation of African slaves at a large scale, which hindered the possibility of “compensating” for the high mortality among black men and women registered in the country.

Reid Andrews (1980) carried out some research in Buenos Aires to test the abovementioned hypothesis. He examined documents available in archives and libraries in the country and concluded that the effects of the yellow fever as well as the death toll from the wars and civil strife have been overestimated as explanatory factors. Likewise, the unusual vitality that this researcher observed in Afro-Argentine organizations and periodicals – particularly between 1873 and 1882– constitutes further proof to disprove any hypothesis related to the “disappearance” of this population.

Reid Andrews (1980) explains the “discrepancy” between census data and the information from the archives suggesting that Afro-Argentine people were underrepresented in the 1887 census –even when considering the exponential growth of the European population in the city¹. Therefore, Reid Andrews highlights the mechanism of “erasure” of the Afro-descendant population that reinforced the narrative that accompanied the process of the strengthening of the Nation-State.

In the same vein as the previous hypothesis, the author affirms that since 1816 censuses have popularized the category “*trigueño*” to label, particularly, individuals at prisons and the Army as well as employees of the city of Buenos Aires. This category is essentially ambiguous and opaque. The term is applied to dark-skinned people (*trigueño* means literally “wheat-colored”), while not necessarily implying African descent, in contrast to the terms “*mulato*” or “*pardo*.”

Reid Andrews formulated the idea of “statistical transference” to argue that official records enabled two converging strategies aimed at strengthening the already existing process of the “whitening” of the population. On the one hand, Afro-Argentine people were forced to self-identify as “*trigueños*” to avoid the stigma of their past of slavery. On the other hand, anyone with “racially mixed” features was labelled as “white.” In consequence, this author argues that the drastic decline in the Afro-descendant population of the city of Buenos Aires between 1838 and 1887 owes to the fact that lighter-skinned individuals were labelled as “white.”

The dominant narrative of the newly formed Argentine Nation-State consolidated since the early 19th Century, and developed “whitening” strategies, channeled through the redefinition of racial categories, which shaped the Argentine national project and plenty of the State policies of the 20th Century. The power and efficacy of this narrative is apparent in the way an “original mythology” consolidated, first, by placing the “extinction” of black men as the cornerstone of the birth of the Nation-State and, additionally, by displacing and considering as “foreign” all those individuals and objects that were not “white,” “European,” or “modern.”

The continuous “discoloration” of Afro-Argentine people, which is the outcome of the widespread implementation of census categories defined to mask African ancestry, lead to a twofold process. On the one hand, the amount of Afro-descendants fell dramatically in official records. On the other hand, Afro-Argentine people and lighter-skinned *mestizos* appropriated ambiguous racial categories (e.g. “*trigueño*”) as a means to achieve upward mobility in a deeply hierarchical and racialized society. The adoption of these ambiguous racial categories contributed to the “erasure” of all African trace in Argentine society and culture, which was promoted by the local political and intellectual elites.

¹ This growth was the outcome of European immigration, which was promoted by a general policy for the “betterment of the race” from mid-19th Century (Barbero, 2020; Bastia and Vom Hau, 2014).

Consequently, already in the late 19th Century, the category “black” lost its intrinsic and particular characteristics and shifted towards a notion applied to those bearing simultaneously a few and very specific physical features: black skin, kinky (or very coarse) hair, a broad nose, and thick lips. Reducing “blackness” to a bare minimum of phenotypic traits, coupled with the high rate of intermixing, resulted in a sharp decrease of the number of Argentine citizens that could be identified as “real black people” (Frigerio, 2008).

Within this framework, “whiteness” gradually became the norm that defines and restricts the social characteristics associated with what is “normal,” “native,” and “national.” In contrast, “blackness” (exclusively defined by a group of visual and physical markers) became the “exception,” which was associated with various situations involving the strange, the exotic, and the foreign (Cervio, 2020a).

In sum, while scientific research and the initiatives and re-actions of the local Afro-descendant community have disproved the hypothesis that offer explanations on the “disappearance” of black people in Argentina, these ideas are still part of this country’s social, political, and cultural imaginary. This proves that the erasure of the “afro” component is not only a metaphor but also a successful politics of sensibility, in force in the present, which produces subjects and society.

3. The “Negrification” of Otherness in Argentina

The processes of racialization have functioned as political, economic, and moral arguments for the foundation of Nation-States in the 19th Century, leading to distinct consequences in the structuring of national sensibilities (Quijano, 2000).

This article analyzes racialization, defined as a political and ideological subjectivation process (Tijoux and Palominos Mandiola, 2015), in relation to the policies of sensibilities, which have historically produced and explained racial differences as “natural” and “necessary” foundations for colonial domination. The concept of policies of sensibilities refers to a group of practices that go unnoticed while organizing every-day life, the ways subjects shape their preferences and values, and the parameters and configuration of the time and space of social interactions (Scribano, 2017). Within this theoretical framework, sensibilities (re)produce capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial fabrics of domination (Grosfoguel, 2011) masked as “everyday” practices and feelings. The enormous social and epistemic power of sensibilities rests on the daily, inconspicuous, and socially regulated operations that govern the feelings of individuals (i.e. how they feel and how they react to those feelings).

Sensibilities intersect with the racialization processes, which operate as the common ground for the daily experiences of various social groups. Racialization involves a social, political, and epistemic process through which domination “produces” racialized subjects. This process takes place within the frame of a power structure that names, categorizes, and classifies individuals according to ancestry, linguistic, geographic, and phenotypic criteria, among others (Banton, 2002; Miles and Torres, 2019). In everyday life, racialization functions through social categories that name, distinguish, fix, and distribute racialized typologies of subjects, giving this ontological production the *status* of an “objective reality.”

In Argentina, the racialization of poverty constitutes a dynamic that shapes practices, subjects, and spaces across various social spheres. Since the 19th Century, “black” has become the quintessential term to refer to subaltern groups. Therefore, terms such as “*negros*” (literally, “blacks”)¹, “*cabecitas negras*”² (literally, “little black heads”), “*negros villeros*”

¹ The term refers to migrants from Argentine provinces other than the capital –with darker skin and hair color, in comparison to those prevailing in the Pampas and the central region of the country– who travelled to Buenos Aires and other urban centers in the 1940s and 1950s due to the industrialization process fostered by the Peronist administration (Ratier, 1971). Other terms employed during these years were “*descamisados*,” “*grasitas*,” “*orilleros*,” or “*negrada*,” all of which were equally stigmatizing.

² Shantytowns are urban settlements representing the “paroxysm” of poverty and informal housing in urban areas of Argentina. The dwellers of these shantytowns, contemptuously called “*negros villeros*,” are “portrayed” with images

(literally, “blacks from the shantytowns”), and “*negros del plan*” (literally, “blacks on social welfare”)¹ testify to the various ways *to name otherness* that have been employed in Argentina in the last 150 years. The figure-stigma of the *black person* (in terms of race or class) encompasses the abovementioned terms defined as “social surplus.” Particularly since the mid-20th Century, the category “black,” once associated with African descent (which at the time was considered an “extinct otherness,” as abovementioned), shifted to symbolize a subaltern status linked to popular and poor classes (Geler, 2016; Cervio, 2020a).

Framed in this stigmatizing dynamic, the term “black” consolidated as a metaphor for a perpetual colonial experience (Fanon, 1986), therefore, becoming the political, cultural, and semantic field to name the remainder and the dissimilar, i.e. that which accumulates within “the pure power of the negative” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 11). Consequently, in the 21st Century, the term “black” –in a similar way as the terms poor, undocumented, urban outcast, or migrant– is not limited to skin color but encompasses the *superfluous humanities* whose existence has been restricted to their condition as objects.

The definition of blackness, as *surplus*, enables the government of these “superfluous” bodies via stigma, imprisonment, exploitation, and even torture, and death (Mbembe, 2016). Theory shows that the ways societies organize the administration and government of the bodies/emotions respond to the policies of sensibilities, which serve as foundation for the power relations (Scribano, 2017). Now, these sensibilities need the “policies of the senses” to “naturally” organize everyday life according to structural precepts. These policies –defined as essential nodes of sensibilities shaping domination across its various scenarios– socially signify, produce, locate, and distribute particular ways of smelling, touching, hearing, seeing, and tasting from a particular society in a given time period, which constitute a radical intersection between class, race/ethnic group, and gender (Cervio, 2022).

In consequence, bodies that occupy the place of the social “non-place” embody the registers of the foul smelling, the untouchable, the dis-sonant, the despicable, and the repulsive of a given space and time frame². This article will adopt the analytical viewpoint of the “optical effect” because physical traits outweigh the rest of the characteristics of subjects in the practices of racial stereotyping and stigmatizing. A brief digression follows that reflects upon the politics of the gaze and its links with the processes of the racialization of poverty.

4. Outline of a Politics of the Gaze

In Western societies, sight is the hegemonic sense (Berger, 2009; Urry, 2003; Rodaway, 1994; Le Breton, 2017). One learns that with only opening their eyes their understanding potentially dominates the relation of the subject with the world and its becoming. Common-sense knowledge dictates that sight is related to a series of rational actions such as knowing, examining, comparing, and proving. By definition to see means the group of capabilities involved in the sense of sight, which theoretically raises the possibility to gain a “clear” knowledge of things. Therefore, sight is the privileged sense of the surface, i.e. sight locates and projects the subject in front of various objects and phenomena through which the world spreads or expands.

Sight exclusively adjusts things to the surface, which positions this sense at the top of its hierarchy since Antiquity (Howes, 2014; Rodaway, 1994). Precisely, in a social and economic accumulation regime in which the power of objects imposes as language and world, mediating the modes of construction, acknowledgment, and acceptability of the social (Marx, 2007), the predominance of sight over the rest of the senses cannot be “over-looked.” Sight

related to violence, decay, and excesses. These classifications marginalize the subjects who are regarded as exotic objects, erasing the sociological, historical, and economic conditions of social inequality (Cervio, 2020b).

¹ The term refers to the recipients of social welfare and state programs.

² For example, in Ahmed’s study of otherness (2000), the strangers are defined as “bodies out of place.” According to the author, the recognition of strangers involves an “economy of touch”, as well as a “visual economy”.

pervades, defines, and produces meaning over social relationships according to colors, shapes, perspectives and depths.

This article aims to reflect critically upon the racialized otherness, or upon the negrification¹ of otherness, which leads to defining the politics of the gaze as an essential node of the sensibilities that build the “other” as *surplus* in current societies².

From the viewpoint of sociology of bodies/emotions (Scribano, 2012), this article defines the *politics of the gaze* as a dynamic group of intersubjective constructs that give rise to particular ways of looking exerting a differential impact on social relations. The intersection between the race, class, and gender of the subjects who look and of those who are looked at radically affect the politics of the gaze, which becomes meaningful within the framework of the scopic regime of capitalism –where *to look involves a way of touching from the distance*. The tactile dimension of the gaze allows subjects to position themselves in relation with the object or subject being looked at, to anticipate the impact, and to foresee courses of action. The characteristics associated (here and now) with the objects/subjects that are being looked at forcefully project on them, revealing the definitive nature –*in aeternum*– of the judgements of the gaze and the social relations it enables or hinders.

Following the abovementioned ideas, the politics of the gaze challenges the exclusively biological nature of sight, thus clearly underscoring its unquestionable social nature³. In fact, to see is not an action restricted to the projection of the world on the retina. Sight defined as a physical sense is active and selective. Sight is capable of *willingly* scanning the most distant horizons and, then, returning to a close place in a fraction of seconds. Sight may capture objects, which are visible from a particular position thanks to light, and also build ways to come closer or move away from these objects to place them in a more favorable angle or perspective. This power shows that the sense of sight cannot be isolated from the body movements of the eyelids, the legs, the head and the torso, among others.

In the essay “*The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of Senses*”⁴, Jonas (1954) sustains that most of the capabilities associated with sight are enabled by body movements. This author argues that the continuum between the animal body and the human body appears fundamentally in the possibility to perceive distance, sight being the privileged sense to achieve that.

Jonas (1954) sustains that sight enables animals to perceive distant objects and, at the same time, to develop more “complex” capabilities, given that sight triggers directed long-range motility aimed at approaching their prey or, on the contrary, at escaping danger.

The difference between the sight of animals and the sight of human beings lies in the fact that the latter entails not only the capacity for perceiving objects at a distance and intentionally heading towards them, but also the faculty for image-making based on the objects which are perceived. This means human sight is not limited to a mere instantaneous perception but that it can abstract the shapes of objects. This capacity widens the distance between the human eye and its surroundings given the mediacy of the image (*eidos*). The image, understood as the abstraction of the perceived object, is independent of the contact-

¹ Fanon explains that negrification is *an* efficient device of subjectivation that names, identifies, describes, and morphs feelings towards the other, who becomes that who “has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (Fanon, 1986, p. 83).

² The approach of this article assumes *that* the five senses supplement and influence each other while shaping social and sensible relations (Howes and Classen, 2013).

³ This article draws from the renowned work by Marx on the social value and the origin of physical senses and their relation with the construction of human sensibility. Marx argues that human sensibility comes to be only by virtue of *its object*, i.e. “humanized nature” (Marx, 2007). Social human beings *affirm* themselves in the objective world precisely through and because of the physical, practical, and mental senses (love, will, intuition, etc.).

⁴ The philosophy of life of Jonas aims at understanding the ontological continuum between the organism and the human being. Jonas argues that the human body is similar to the rest of the bodies of living beings and, therefore, the author seeks to prove the biological foundation of “highly spiritual” capabilities.

sensation. Therefore, human beings manipulate images, in lieu of the real objects, and, in this way, they experience the latter.

In addition, Jonas affirms that sight is the ideal distance-sense. In contrast to touch and hearing –which need proximity to the objects to gain better information–, the advantage of sight lies in distance. Distance improves the quantity and quality of information that sight collects on the environment, improving its faculty to prevent and anticipate situations. In consequence, the author maintains that the best view is not the closest view because that relies on taking the proper distance. The power of sight rests in keeping some distance. By moving away from the object, sight may capture the simultaneity and the extension of the environment, producing strategic information for the observer to move/displace themselves with some degree of certainty. Inversely, reducing the distance weakens the strength of sight given the possibility to get in “touch” with the object.

Drawing from the theory of Jonas, this article affirms that sight operates exclusively in the register of appearances. As such, sight fills the distance between the eye and the object, building images that reduce the “real” to merely the “perceived.” Images constitute a kind of surplus of reality, i.e. a *construct-other* that the observer produces to move around the world and deal with its various differences. Thus, sight, understood as a body disposition, incessantly weaves images to assess, guide, or consider with certain discernment the actions of the subject in-and-with-the-world. The *eidos*, resulting from a special process of abstraction of the object being perceived, constitutes not only the outcome of the work of the sense of sight but also the raw material from which the world gets trapped in the superficial “simulation” of things (Jonas, 1954).

By analogy with the intellectual superstructure, sight is one of the main guarantees for truth in contemporary societies, where *to see* is a synonym of *believing*, *knowing*, and *comprehending*. The evident enters the realm of that which cannot be denied, that which is stable, and even fixed and eternal, ruling over the empire of appearances. Visual sensations, which are simulations of the real, “swallow” the singular traits of things, replacing them with images that are familiar, strange, unusual, ordinary, spectacular, etc. These images project themselves in an infinite and diffuse manner as (perceived) proof of the world.

For sight to transform into the gaze¹ requires an active subject, who can exercise the will to look, as well as various other choices linked to the focus: what to look, how to look, and from what perspective, etc. (Berger, 2009).

In strictly biological terms, eyelids mediate the shift from sight to the gaze. The sociology of the senses, which draws from and expands the questions phrased by Simmel (2009) in dialogue with Marx’s ideas (2007) on human sensibility, fosters a debate on the social dimension of eyelids. Social, economic, and cultural history leaves traces in these membranes, a history that is updated each time we close and open again our eyes. In the process of opening and closing the eyelids, and focusing and defining the visual field, emerge the subjects who look and project themselves in each gaze. The objects and subjects on which the gaze focuses, the perspectives from which they are looked at, and the meanings attributed to them constitute socio-historical constructs that depend on the intersectionality between race, gender, and class, conditioning the autonomy of the subjects that look and of those that are looked at. This conditioning turns the gaze, as it does with the rest of the senses, into an unavoidable problem for a sociology that is committed to the critical comprehension of the social world and social practices as well as of the ways subjects live and feel them.

This framework defines the gaze as the action of apprehending and selecting through the eyes parts of the world via their contemplation and assessment from an individual viewpoint on the surface, but that is historical and social regarding its origin and results. To

¹ *Seeing* is not a synonym of *looking* nor of *observing*. These three dissimilar sensitive positions affect in diverse ways the social relations involving our own eyes and those of others as well as their signifying structures. For further analysis, see *Cf. Cervio, 2015.*

look is to impose a perspective that outlines the word, and to focus the attention (“to fix one’s gaze”) on an object, subject, or situation for a period of time. One of the differences between the actions to see and to look is that the latter implies an extent of time, which is tied to an undivided and meticulous attention focused on details.

This subjectivation of the gaze, on the one hand, enables the subject to act in the world, and, on the other, entails the cost of reducing the “real” to the perceived. This issue assumes crucial importance when studying –as this article does– the processes of negrification of otherness, which entail social ties subjected to the judgment of appearances in the first place (Fanon, 1986).

In relation to the links between racialization and the gaze, Mbembe (2017) adopts a critical position on the perspectives that define race exclusively regarding the optical effects. This author argues that race is not only defined by skin color and a series of body markers but also by a primal representation sending us, above all, back to “surface simulacra” (Mbembe 2017, p. 10). Domination explains race through its visual effects in order to “essentialize” the concept and build it as an objective, stable, and natural category, leading to concrete consequences given its power “to distort the real” (Mbembe 2017, p. 32). Race is defined by the fundamental characteristic of always engendering a mask, or a substitute, i.e. the universal replacing the particular and subsuming the subject (their history, affections, desires, conflicts, and resistances) under the characteristics of their bodies. Despite this, the “other” is built as something they are not. Racialization does not produce the other as a *fellow* human being but as a threat to be “neutralized.”

Drawing from the works of Fanon (1952/1986), in connection to the guiding ideas of psychoanalysis, the Cameroonian thinker argues that race lacks any essence. This phenomenon is not genetic or anthropologic. The race is the product of colonial power relations and, therefore, has a political and economic origin with effects that may be “measured” through the fear, torture, and suffering it fuels. In consequence, race, as well as racism, entails fundamental processes of the unconscious (Mbembe, 2017).

Noticeably the racialized subject “is not reduced to” their phenotypic traits. The racialized subject results not only from their body appearance but also from the act of racial assignation, i.e. “the process through which certain forms of infralife are produced and institutionalized, indifference and abandonment justified, the part that is human in the other violated or occulted through forms of internment, even murder, that have been made acceptable” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 32).

The disregard for subaltern groups is an essential part of power relations, thus, the traits universally associated with these subjects (laziness, weakness, ignorance, ungratefulness, crime, irresponsibility, etc.) are key to justify the set of rules, norms, and institutions that, jointly, present the colonial situation as an “eternal,” “natural,” and fundamentally “necessary” condition for life (Fanon, 1986). In consequence, (neo) colonial power needs to name, describe, and (dis)qualify the “other” to dominate, whether through its security forces or through the government of the “social question” via public policies.

The “other” is subjugated to this subjective transformation, which consists of the imposition of a series of negations indisputable at first sight. “Far from wanting to understand him as he really is, the colonizer is preoccupied with making him undergo this urgent change (...) It consists, in the first place, of a series of negations. The colonized is not this, is not that. He is never considered in a positive light; or if he is, the quality which is conceded is the result of a psychological or ethical failing” (Memmi, 2003, p. 127-28). Therefore, the lives of the subaltern become intelligible through their (ethical, economic, psychic, aesthetic, political, etc.) failures projected –eternal and infinite– over every aspect of their subaltern existence. The operation of the politics of sensibilities, intrinsically connected to the power structure, becomes clearly distinct in the folds of the abovementioned process.

Paraphrasing Mbembe (2017), the *becoming black of the world* forcefully leads to reflect upon the radical difference and distance between the colonizer and the colonized

sustained by and from an unquestionable material surface, i.e. the body/emotion. At the core of this process lies the distinction between the human and the non-human, which is based on a chromatic metaphor that refers not only to skin color but also to the *superfluous humanities* produced and enclosed by the regime of life and death of capitalism beyond color. In other words, in the 21st Century “black” –defined as the material and sensible field of otherness– still represents a sign of inferiority, insult, and submission. “Black” constitutes the universe of emptiness, of absence, of flaws, and of error. Overall, “black” is an accurate synthesis of the “out-of-place” that cannot avoid being looked at (from a certain distance) with eyes filled with horror but also with fascination¹.

5. Conclusions

In 1996, during a diplomatic visit to the United States, the Argentine president at the time, Carlos Menem, was asked about the black population. His answer was unequivocal: “In Argentina black people do not exist; Brazil deals with those issues” (Ocoró Loango, 2018, p. 284; translation by author). This answer by the former head of state provides irrefutable proof of a national feeling deep-rooted in common-sense knowledge that has been building “history” and “society” for more than 150 years. The statement by the former president perfectly illustrates that the question of Afro-descendants in Argentina not only *is an issue* (which is non-existent in his opinion) but is also limited to two converging dynamics that ostensibly evidence the virtual “non-existence” of the issue, i.e.: the *extinction* and *subalternization* of any form of “blackness.”

The genealogy of this question is lengthy, complex, and contradictory. This article aimed at depicting this genealogy with the focus on some of the various intervening factors. Consequently, the first section analyzed the key role that the classifications of surveys played in the “whitening” process of the population, which was enforced by the newly formed Nation-State in the 19th Century. In the same vein, the hypothesis of the “statistical transference” (Reid Andrews, 1980) outlines that the manipulation of survey categories explains the “disappearance” of black people in Argentina in a more adequate way than epidemics or the massive “casualties” on the battlefield.

As abovementioned, the rejection of the populations that did not “fit” the blooming national principles (i.e. mainly indigenous and black people) lead to the assumption that Afro-Argentine people had gradually become “extinct.” Consequently, an original mythology consolidated establishing the “disappearance” of all African ancestry as one of the cornerstones of the emergence of the Nation-State. Additionally, this mythology displaced and characterized as “extinct” all those who were not white, and European. Halfway through the 20th Century, the category “black” returned as part of a social strategy to identify subaltern bodies: fundamentally, migrants from the Northern provinces and the Littoral region of Argentina who were drawn to the main urban centers by the industrialization process. The “*cabecitas negras*” synthesize the bodies-*others* (Peronists, the poor, workers, and inhabitants of shantytowns) *produced* by the urban elites of the 1940s and 1950s based on despise and a purported classist and racial supremacy.

Race –publicly and/or silently–pervades the everyday lives of societies that were shaped by the processes of racialization, which stem from their colonial past (Fanon, 1986). This process occurs through gestures, acts, words, or omissions that place the “other” within the universe of the insult, error, and absence. In this way, adopting the *definition* of sensibilities presented in this article leads to understanding racialization, firstly, as a dialectical game between the accumulated effects that the “other” (who is racialized by the colonial reason) *produces* with their (physical, remote, or imaginary) presence on the

¹ On the tension between the horror and seduction embedded in the gaze, see the notion “cannibal delicacy” conceived by Robert Louis Stevenson in *In the South Seas* (1998), which Georges Bataille recovers in *Story of the Eye* (1977).

colonizer and their institutions. Secondly, racialization implies the effects this asymmetric, unfair, and painful social relation *produces and will produce* (in practical, cognitive, material, and affective terms) on the body/emotion that systematically is and has been its object.

The skin becomes the marker par excellence that establishes hierarchies and that defines the thresholds of humanity. Consequently, the practices of racialization, which weigh heavily on the everyday lives of certain groups, are ingrained in the bodies producing different registers of feelings that inexorably become particular ways of perceiving and doing in the world of the subjects. Within this framework, race, class, and sensibilities are essential dimensions to *understand* the neo-colonial landscape of the present. From the viewpoint of a sociology of the bodies/emotions, the abovementioned aspect provides “fertile” ground to reexamine the spaces and conflicts linked to the inequalities perpetuated in the Global South.

The politics of the gaze constitutes an essential node of the policies of sensibilities that serve as foundation for the organization of the neocolonial relations of domination, which at “first sight” classify subjects and objects based on their appearances. Consequently, the politics of the gaze becomes a powerful analytical device to understand how differences are normalized as social inequalities. The analysis of the negrification of otherness performed in this article opens some analytical considerations outlined below as a momentary conclusion and as an agenda for future research:

- *Particular/universal*: the gaze classifies and racializes enabled by depersonalization and dehumanization. This gaze unifies, encompasses, and swallows the subjects defined by their faults and deficiencies, projecting towards infinity the “insurmountable” differences and distances between the eyes that look and those that are looked at. The colonial gaze transforms the *you* into an anonymous and uniform *them* replacing the particular with the universal. The definition of the substantializing features of subaltern subjects –as if these *objects* enjoyed a universal status– entails alienating the other from their social and historical background, their life courses, and their various desires, and resistances. In this way, the body/emotion is the main *locus* of the colonial struggle.

- *Distance and truth of appearances*. The gaze that classifies and racializes prevents social relations from adopting any shape other than the one marked by despise and subordination, which are linked to the objectification of people. The gaze that keeps a certain distance replaces any other possible relation given, firstly, the series of faults, deficiencies, and flaws that universally characterize the “other,” and, secondly, the fact that every dimension of subaltern lives faces some kind of threat over the future. This pre-emptive and accusatory gaze draws sustenance from the truth of appearances. Keeping some distance constitutes a way to “avert” the impending dangers of the presence of the “other” in order to erect abstract and tangible walls that divide these seemingly antithetical lives. The other (in terms of race or class), who is stripped of their humanity, is reduced to an “unreliable,” “dark,” and “wild” outward instance that only the “managed” distance of the gaze can foresee because “knowledge at a distance is tantamount to foreknowledge” (Jonas, 1954, p. 519).

- *Negrification / Inferiority*. The gaze that classifies and racializes is productive because it constitutes a powerful device for the creation of subalternized subjectivities. As part of its policies of sensibilities, the colonial situation turns the “negrification” of otherness and the “epidermalization of inferiority” (Fanon, 1952/1986, p. 4) into two crucial processes to shape the subaltern experience in at least two converging ways. On the one hand, the subjects are *fixed* in an essence alien to themselves. The stereotypes that shape the other confirm the “reasons” that justify the differences between “us”/“them,” which are the foundation for the colonizing act. Additionally, the “other” bears on their bodies/emotions the burden of all the things the colonizer intends to expel outside of themselves (impulses, faults, etc.). Therefore, the other becomes the “scape goat” of a society governed by the principle of economic accumulation based on the material, vital, and sensible expropriation and dis-possession. The colonial gaze produces the “other” based on an external (body, skin) feature, which projects as the quality-substance of the subject performing ways of acting, feeling, and

perceiving the world. Within a dialectical relation with the rest of the policies of the senses, the colonial gaze turns the “other” into an inferior being, an essence, an object that becomes an *opaque being*. The colonial world constantly strips the “other” of the space and time of humanity, compromising their chances to attain autonomy and emancipation.

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