

Dom Casmurro, the semiotic novel of whiteness or the genocidity of Capitu's infinite body /

‘Dom Casmurro’, o romance semiótico da branquitude ou a genocidade do corpo infinito de Capitu

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ABSTRACT

Proceeding from the premise that *Dom Casmurro* is the semiotic novel of whiteness, whose foundational historical nexus is the enactment of the Free Womb Law and its surrounding contexts, this article approaches the novel through two contiguous moment. The first consists in laying out the terms of this semiosis, that of whiteness, by analyzing the narrator's discourse as an exposition of the "pact of whiteness" (Bento, 2022)² – a process of racialization and capture of Capitu's undefinable body. Second, I demonstrate the immaterial power of this corpus infinitum (Silva, 2019), which does not conform to the stigmatizing semiosis and is therefore rendered a killable body, through the lens of the crisis of the ideology of Brazil's seigniorial order.

KEYWORDS: Dom Casmurro; Whiteness; Racialization; Corpus infinitum.

RESUMO

Com base na premissa de ser *Dom Casmurro* o romance semiótico da branquitude, cujo enlace histórico fundante é a promulgação da Lei do Ventre Livre e seu entorno, objetivo neste artigo pensá-lo a partir de 2 movimentos contíguos. O primeiro consiste na exposição dos termos desta semiose, a da branquitude, analisando a discursividade do narrador como exposição do "pacto da branquitude" (Bento, 2022), processo de racionalização e captura do corpo não enquadrável de Capitu. Em seguida, demonstro a potência imaterial deste corpus infinitum (Silva, 2019), não pertinente a toda semiose estigmatizante e por isso mesmo designável como corpo matável.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dom Casmurro; Branquitude; Racialização; Corpus infinitum.

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² The translator of the present article has translated all quotations from works that either do not have an English edition or are otherwise inaccessible. Translated by Iá Niani Belo Maia.

1 Premises

Dom Casmurro is the semiotic novel of whiteness by virtue of its narrator's inescapable point of view – he who names everything – together with the novel's persistent self-reflexive turn toward the act of writing: "this itch to write, when you catch it in your fifties, never goes away" (Assis, 1997, p. 134). Its core meaning lies in its own intrinsic violence, which is constitutive of the "pact of whiteness". Naming is inseparable from racialization, insofar as the racial tensions of nineteenth-century Brazil, as Luiz Felipe de Alencastro observes, "permeate all of society" (1997, p. 24). Indeed, "the historical conditioning factors of this process have lastingly shaped daily life, sociability, family life and Brazilian public life" (1997, p. 17).

Cida Bento defines whiteness as "a positioning of structural advantages, of racial privileges. It is a point of view, a place from which white people look at themselves, others, and society" (Bento, 2022, p. 62). For Lourenço Cardoso, it is "a structural place from which the white subject sees others and himself, a position of power, a comfortable place in which he can attribute to the other what he does not attribute to himself" (Cardoso, 2011, p. 81).

John Gledson states that *Dom Casmurro* is "a study of 'Bentinhos' pathological obsession and not of Capitu's adultery" (1991, p. 33). It is precisely this "pathological obsession", I argue, that constitutes the semiosis of whiteness, *par excellence*. The novel encodes a critical juncture in the decline of Brazil's seigniorial ideology, rooted in the period surrounding the Free Womb Law, enacted on September 28, 1871. That same year also witnesses the death of Escobar, Bento Santiago's closest friend and the novel's narrator's friend. At Escobar's wake, Capitu gazes at the corpse with what the narrator calls "undertow eyes", "large and wide open", "like the waves on the sea out there, as if she too wanted to swallow up that morning's swimmer" (Assis, 1997, p. 257). This "undertow" gaze divides the narrative into two distinct temporalities, two forms of writing, and two semioses of the gaze – both of them stemming from the gaze itself.

In *Machado de Assis, Historiador*, Sidney Chalhoub argues that "the crisis of the slave-owning society fundamentally stemmed from the historical process of slave emancipation" (2003, p. 48), identifying the debate over the Free Womb Law as a watershed in this process. It is crucial to note that Machado de Assis joined the Ministry of Agriculture in 1873, and, by 1876, had ascended to the leadership of the section responsible for overseeing the Law's implementation, a

role that required him to issue frequent opinions on the matter. It is through Chalhoub's analysis of the short story "Mariana" that I ground my premise: *Dom Casmurro* operates as semiotic novel of whiteness shaped by the impasses generated by the enactment of the Free Womb Law. In January 1871, when the story was published, "emancipation was the prevailing topic, and it would dominate parliamentary discussions throughout the entire year of 1871" (Chalhoub, 2003, p. 136).

John Gledson underscores the significance of the year 1871 in *Dom Casmurro*, noting that "the date of March rather than September 1871 suggests a more nuanced and intricate perspective on the crisis than merely associating abolition with the downfall of the empire" (1991, p. 111). For Gledson, "Machado regarded 1871 as a decisive year in *Quincas Borba* and *Esaú e Jacó*, marking the emergence of the first divergences and substantial challenges within the oligarchy" (1991, p. 87).

It is around Berenice Bento's (2024, p. 100) concept of genocidity (*genocidade*) – "a continuous condition unbroken with the slave-owning past, which innovates the techniques for promoting the death of the Black population implemented by the State" – that I intend to read the becomings of Capitu's body under Bento Santiago's pen and within his pact of whiteness. The gaze segments the body into what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as "faciality". For them, the face and, by extension, the gaze "is a whole body unto itself: it is like the body of the center of significance to which all of the deterritorialized signs affix themselves, and it marks the limit of their deterritorialization" (1987, p. 167). They further observe that "faces are not basically individual; they define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations" (1987, p. 233-234).

Building on the premise of the semiotic novel of whiteness and its inherent semiotization of genocidity, it is relevant to consider the structuring event in *Dom Casmurro* – Escobar's death, and Capitu's correlative gaze towards his body during the rise of the Rio Branco Cabinet – as "the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present", since "it does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future." (Deleuze, 1990, p. 1). Escobar's death coincides with a political counterpart, namely the rise of the Rio Branco Cabinet and the legislative agenda that immediately followed the Free Womb Law. Both events virtualize historical time in its multiple becomings. This virtualization is mapped onto Capitu's own trajectory, from the "house next door" phase to that of the "undertow eyes", and later her exile and death in Switzerland.

To address these premises, I will make two moves, corresponding to the following sections of this article. The second section, "The semiocracy of Bento Santiago" analyzes the semiotic processes underlying what Roberto Schwarz referred to as the "abject implications of certain forms of authority" (1997, p. 9), which serve as the foundations of the racialization of Capitu's body. I then reposition these "implications" to demonstrate how this form of authority presupposes – and indeed renders abject – the racialization of Capitu's body. The third section, "The abnormal undertow of thought or the infinite body of Capitu," employs what Hartman (2021) calls "critical fabulation", interpreting "with and against the terms of the archive itself" in order to perceive Capitu as a kind of infinite body beyond the narrator's semiocracy – "Capitu was reflecting, reflecting, reflecting..." – which progressively erodes the epistemological foundation of whiteness, its brutal and sardonic "sobriety," by refusing every stigmatizing ontology.

2 The semiocracy of Bento Santiago

The semiotic nature of racialization processes has drawn the attention of several scholars. Daniel Castillo Durante (2007) terms the semiotic matrices underpinning Western ethnocentrism "semiocracy", given their objectification of alterities. He argues that, within the Western tradition, "any engagement with the other is mediated by a metaphysical apparatus that, since Plato, traps this issue in a vicious cycle: one cannot speak of the other without simultaneously confining him within the bounds of a representation that objectifies him" (Durante, 2007, p. 16). This objectification is achieved through semiotic devices and genres of discourse, "whose primary role is to keep difference immutable" (Durante, 2007, p. 18).

Frantz Fanon observes that, "in the white world, the Black man finds it difficult to develop his body schema. The knowledge of the body is solely an activity of negation" (2008, p. 104). Achille Mbembe terms this "activity of negation" "Black reason", grounding it in the elaboration of "figures of knowledge" and "a paradigm of subjection" (2022, p. 27). Mbembe further states that this process is driven by "a fundamentally imaginary relationship, even when its intention was to develop knowledge aimed at apprehending it objectively" (Mbembe, 2022, p. 31).

"Semiocracy" (Durante), "white masks" (Fanon) and "Black reason" (Mbembe) are concepts that converge on the semiotic processes underlying what Cida Bento refers calls a "pact

of whiteness" – "an alliance that expels, represses, hides what is intolerable to be endured and remembered by the collective" (2022, p. 25).

Dom Casmurro departs from the usual tendency of whiteness to render its own privileges invisible; instead it semiotizes the narcissistic elaboration of the pact itself from a moment of crisis. The singularity of Bento Santiago's narrative lies in its claim to truth: a truth that names, suspects, accuses, judges, condemns and affirms the power to exercise necropolitics over Capitu's abject body. This truth is asserted with such vehement authority that it ultimately raises questions about the discursive *ethos* that produces it. In "Chapter II/ The book", we read:

One day, quite a few years ago, I had the notion of building in Engenho Novo a replica of the house I had been brought up in on the old Rua de Matacavalos, and giving it the same aspect and layout as the other one, which has now disappeared. [...] When we moved into the Matacavalos house, it was already decorated in this way: it had been done in the previous decade [...]. Finally, there is, now as in the old days, the same contrast between life inside the house, which is placid, and the noisy world outside.

Clearly my aim was to tie the two ends of life together, and bring back youth in old age. Well sir, I managed neither to reconstruct what was there, nor what I had been. Everywhere, though the surface may be the same, the character is different. If it was only others that were missing, all well and good: one gets over the loss of other people as best one can; but I myself am missing, and that lacuna is all-important. What is here, if I can put it this way, is like dye that you put on your beard and hair, and which only preserves the external habit, as they say in autopsies; the internal parts will not take dye. A certificate saying I was twenty years old might fool others, like any false document, but not me (Assis, 1997, p. 33).

The *discursive ethos* of the fragment is entirely oriented toward recovering a lost unity between inner and outer life, drawing on the house's attributes as a space of protection for interiority and childhood and, by extension, for the past order. The act of reproducing one house within another seeks to pacify the narrator through political amnesia, enclosing the becomings of history within that what Sidney Chahoub, in his analysis of Estácio in *Helena*, calls the "mere expansion of his will or his concession" (2003, p. 22). In this regard, the weight of the word "clearly" in the sentence that opens the second paragraph is worth noting. Functioning as evidence of authority and self-imposed legitimacy, it reveals its own lack and fragility, exposing itself as mere appearance: "[it] is like dye that you put on your beard and hair, and which only preserves the external habit, as they say in autopsies". Preserving the pun, the novel thus becomes a clear autopsy of the very crisis of seigniorial ideology itself, unfolding across a forty-year arc and fissured around the rise of the Rio Branco Cabinet and, above all, the Free Womb Law.

Bento Santiago's discursive strategy seeks to legitimize a dimension of time that he wants to remain unalterable, subject only to the capricious will of those who hold the power to repeat it "for the control of a stubborn reality" (Gledson, 1991, p. 79). Yet if the movements of history cannot be rendered unalterable, then the displacement of memory into time – and, with it, into the centrality of the subject's own gap – flattens into the sphere of interpersonal relations what is in fact a broader structure involving race, gender, and class. In other words, the recourse to individual memory renders irrelevant everything that exceeds the sphere of the self as an ideological twist designed to mask the essential. What is thereby exposed is the very mode of whiteness as a narcissistic ideology of the Brazilian seigniorial class, one that "does not recognize the existence of social antagonisms" (Chalhoub, 2003, p. 22), reducing them to mere relations between subjects. It is widely known that José Dias was the first to define Capitu's eyes, "a gypsy's eyes, oblique and sly", and Bento Santiago also attributes to him an important dialogue with D. Glória:

Dona Glória, madam, are you still set on the idea of sending our Bentinho to the seminary? It's past time he went, and there may be a difficulty in the way."

"What difficulty?"

"A great difficulty."

My mother wanted to know what it was. José Dias, after a few moments' careful thought, came to see if there was anyone in the corridor; he didn't notice me, went back and, subduing his voice, said that the difficulty lay in the house next door, the Páduas. (Assis, 1997, p. 35).

He continues about Capitu's father: "He has a real penchant for vulgar people. No sooner sniff someone common – that's your man" (Assis, 1997, p. 77). Both "the difficulty lay in the house next door" and "no sooner sniff someone common" operate as processes for constructing abject identities, in which spatial marks identify the Pádua family with what is lowest, what crawls, and what is therefore distant from any relationship with culture and civility. The olfactory metaphor and the phrase "a real penchant for vulgar people", with their reduction of alterity to the body, reinforce this association. The ultimate target of this semiosis is the frame of Capitu's body, for, as every semocracy demands, all alterity must be encapsulated within a single identity. This is precisely what Suely Rolnik and Félix Guattari describe as the process of "pass[ing] the singularity of different ways of existing through one and the same identifiable frame of reference" (Guattari; Rolnik, 1999, p. 68). Guacira Lopes Louro and Judith Butler have problematized the mechanical links between body and identity, arguing that "bodies are not as evident as we usually think. Nor are identities a

direct consequence of the 'evidences' of bodies" (Louro, 2016, p. 15). The capture of Capitu's body as "evidence" serves to stabilize Bento Santiago's own subjectivity, grounded in what Butler describes as "a force of exclusion and abjection", "one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation"(2016, p. 155).

To situate this "gaze zone" of Bento Santiago's semiocracy, Denise Ferreira da Silva' concept of "patriarch-form" is particularly relevant. She writes:

By the expression "patriarch-form", I refer to the formal condition of enunciation of any legal (political) subject, including social subjects (racial, gender, sex), as something endowed with authority, that is, as a decision-making entity. [...] The patriarch-form emphasizes how the individual signatory of the "social contract," the citizen in formation, was not only a father but also a proprietor, a husband, a merchant, a farmer, a *plantation* master, a slave master, a settler, and as such bound to the land, to the maidservants, natives, and slaves; and always already affected by, because implicated with, those who become "others" or "objects" in legally (mediated) relationships, such as conquest, marriage, title, contract, etc. (Ferreira Da Silva, 2021, p. 205).

In Machado de Assis, since *Helena*, the "patriarch-form" has consistently operated in response to a certain absence of the father. This paradoxical mode of semioticizing that absence – in a body of work that generally orbits more around widows than their husbands – is what allows Machado to denounce their discursive technologies and power relations more effectively, as well as to demonstrate the powers of differentiation of aggregated women. Their ambiguity places them in a dangerous and borderline zone, somewhere between quasi-sisters and quasi-slaves, a condition analogous to that of *Helena*, *Estela*, *Iaiá Garcia*, and *Lalau*, whose undecidable status renders them both abject and potent. In the period spanning the narrative from 1850 to 1871, Bento Santiago functions as an extension of the "patriarch-form" around D. Glória. This discursive order contains him, yet the privileged subject who will soon enunciate in his own voice will acquire his own "determining self-determination" – as he puts it: "there are things which can only be learned late in life; to do them early on you have to be born with the talent". (Assis, 1997, p. 58).

Throughout the first part of the novel, before the fateful year of 1871, Capitu's body still appears shrouded in a certain fog. This is demonstrated by D. Gloria's response to José Dias' inquiry concerning Bentinho and the daughter of Pádua family: "It doesn't seem right to me that our Bentinho should be hiding away in corners with Turtleback's daughter" [...] "because if the two of them start flirting in earnest, you'll have a struggle to separate them". To which she replies with a

question: "I don't think so. Hiding away in corners?" (1997, p. 35). To associate Capitu with the "people that lay in the house next door" is to "hide in corners". This is the first moment that Bento Santiago himself racializes Capitu's body:

I couldn't keep my eyes off this fourteen-year-old girl, tall, strong and well built, in a tight fitting, somewhat faded cotton frock. Her thick hair hung down her back in two plaits tied together at the ends, as was the fashion at the time. She was of a dark complexion, with large, pale eyes, and a long, straight nose, a delicate mouth and a broad chin. Her hands, although used to hard household work, were well cared for; they were not scented with fine soaps or toilet water, but she kept them spotless with water from the well and ordinary soap. She wore strong cloth shoes, flat and old, which she herself kept mended. (Assis, 1997, p. 56).

The first movement of the gaze works to constitute Capitu through the categories of gender, – "tall, strong and well built"; class – "a somewhat faded cotton frock"; and race – "thick hair hung down her back in two plaits", whose synthesis is "dark complexion". Yet despite the narrator's obsession with containing the body within his gaze, it somehow exceeds the very frame he attempts to impose. It exceeds race – "and a long, straight nose", "a delicate mouth and a broad chin"; it exceeds gender – "her hands, although used to hard household work, were well cared for"; and it exceeds class – "she wore strong cloth shoes, flat and old, which she herself kept mended". This is a body that becomes, a body that transforms the things it touches and refuses to let them paralyze. It "historicizes" these things into worlds always in the process of becoming otherwise through the work of transformation, opening onto dimensions beyond its own signifiers.

Capitu's dark complexion and gypsy nature – along with her oblique and sly acts – exceed her own gaze. In Denise Ferreira da Silva's terms, this illustrates how Bento Santiago is "affected and implicated". Racialization, intertwined with gender and class, results in the dispossession of the other, which is crucial for the self to attain its own unity, revealing a tense interplay of identity and multiplicity. In other words, I define myself through the attribution of a series of implicits and assumptions, thereby claiming my own positionality while dispossessing the target of my gaze, of its (of the other's) own attributes, of its own multiplicity. That is what Sueli Carneiro identifies as the logic of power: "the dynamics instituted by the power apparatus is characterized by the dynamism of being in opposition to the immobility of the Other" (2023, p. 29). Within a society shaped by both the crisis of the seigniorial ideology and the institution of slavery, Capitu's body constitutes a becoming-Black. Yet precisely because of its resistance to stagnation within a single perspective, the narrative seeks to encapsulate it in a frame that subdues its multiplicity – "race manifests as an

antecedence in the arrangement of women's bodies, influencing not only gender structures but also all facets of social relations" (Bento, 2024, p. 2).

Let us now examine how these processes are detailed in the chapters entitled "Undertow Eyes" (chapters XXXII and CXXIII respectively), which are separated by a significant narrative division. The former addresses the much-mentioned hairstyle episode, while the latter takes place at Escobar's wake; roughly, 10 years elapse between them:

I had remembered the definition José Dias had given them; "a gypsy's eyes, oblique and sly." I didn't know what oblique was, but I did know what sly was, and I wanted to see if they could be called that. Capitu let herself be stared at and examined. She only asked me what the matter was—had I never seen her eyes before? I found nothing out of the ordinary: just the color and the soft sweetness I knew of old. When I took so long over this contemplation, I think she got another notion of what I wanted; she thought it was a pretext to look at them more closely, with my eyes longingly fixed on hers: and to this I attribute the fact that they began to get larger, larger still and darker, with an expression... (Assis, 1997, p. 93).

Finally, the time came for commending his soul to God, and for the final goodbye. Sancha wanted to say farewell to her husband, and the despair of the scene dismayed everyone. Many men were weeping too; all the women. Only Capitu, supporting the widow, seemed able to control herself. She consoled her, and tried to get her away. There was general confusion. In the midst of it, Capitu looked for some moments at the body with such a fixed gaze, with such a passionately fixed gaze, that it's small wonder that into her eyes there came a few silent tears ...

Mine stopped immediately. I stood looking at hers; Capitu wiped them hastily, looking sidelong at the people in the room. She redoubled her caresses for her friend, and tried to take her away; but it seems that the body held her back, too. There was a moment when Capitu's eyes fixed on the body, like those of the widow though without her tears or cries, but large and wide open, like the waves on the sea out there, as if she too wanted to swallow up that morning's swimmer. (Assis, 1997, p. 257).

In the first passage, everything remains hypothetical. The narrator does not have control over his own language; his relationship with the signifier fails to hold the referent, which must allow itself to be "stared at" and "examined" in order to achieve a signification that, at this moment, still finds "nothing out of the ordinary" [...] "I wanted to see if they could be called that". Yet it is worth correcting him: what stands out in Capitu's eyes is precisely their extraordinary, eccentric, centrifugal nature – a nature that can only be "seen" when language becomes elliptical in its ability to fix through naming, thereby reflecting the divergence that compels the patriarch-form to see itself

in terms of its own gaze: "with my eyes longingly fixed on hers" [...] "larger still and darker". Prior to 1871, the "undertow eyes" resisted fixation, as the undertow stemmed from the gaze itself, frustrated by its failure to perceive what refuses to be framed as a double of the self. In the second passage, dated March 1871, language's power to fix identity is now, though still precariously, secure enough to be enunciated; hence, the ellipsis takes on a new significance. Bento Santiago describes Capitu's eyes in terms similar to those he used for his own gaze in the earlier chapter, "large and wide open". This demonstrates how the same grammar, now imbued with a more explicitly political bias, captures otherness under the signs of the same: "fixed gaze, such a passionately fixed gaze".

What is fundamentally new in CXXIII is the suggestion that Capitu's eyes are capable of lying and being "sly", "without her tears or cries". In chapter XXXII, the ellipsis registers a failure of language; in chapter CXXIII, however, the same punctuation mark already conveys the accusatory charge: "but it seems that the body held her back, too", "it's small wonder that into her eyes there came a few silent tears...". The accusation has no found its own language: what was once a body full of powers has been fixed, and its fruit, Ezekiel, must be excluded from human order just like his mother: "and that you will agree with me; if you remember Capitu as a girl, you will recognize that the one was in the other, like the fruit inside its rind" (1997, p. 293). From this point forward, the bodies of mother and child are persistently associated with death. To grasp the significance of the year 1871 is to understand it in its properly political dimension, beyond its mere historicity. Capitu's body is now a sterile-womb-body, whose racialization as "dark complexion" and "gypsy" reveals its assigned value: that of an abject, killable body.

This is the context for Sônia Brayner's observations of the disturbing sterility of Machado's women: "Throughout Machado's oeuvre, most of his major female characters are marked by a profound sterility and absence. Why is that? Why no more than that?" (1982, p. 327).

Capitu's sterility is all the more disturbing because, at its limit, it is not sterile in the ordinary sense of the term. Rather, her sterility stems from the inadequacy of its gestational potency. Unlike Natividade in *Esau and Jacob*, for example, Capitu is able of generating her own illegitimacy and non-belonging. This non-sterile sterility is the target of genocidy as a production of the abject. I employ Berenice Bento's concept of genocidy because she proposes a new interpretation of the Free Womb Law, as "a proto-experience of the new stage of the genocide of the enslaved population". For the author, "as would later occur with the Sexagenarian Law and the Golden Law,

the State apparently legislated in favor of the enslaved person, while in fact continuing to operate its actions within a logic of promoting death" (Bento, 2024, p. 96).

The engine of the narrative after March 1871 is the management of death, both of Capitu and of her son: "I swore to kill them both, either at a single blow, or slowly, to divide all the moments of my deluded and anguished life by the time it took them to die." (Assis, 1997, p. 268). In the chapter in which he recounts his reading of Shakespeare's *Othello*, identifying with the Moor of Venice and casting Capitu as Desdemona, Bento concludes: "The last act showed me that it was not I but Capitu that ought to die" (1997, p. 273). Yet, to prevent any ethical impasse – for the reader as well as for himself – concerning Desdemona's innocence, Bento Santiago projects:

"And she was innocent," I said over and over as I walked down the street, "what would the public do if she were really guilty, as guilty as Capitu? And what death would the moor give her then? A pillow would not be enough; he would need blood and fire, a vast, intense fire, which would consume her completely, reduce her to dust, and the dust would be thrown to the winds, extinguished forever ..." (ASSIS, 1997, p. 273).

Berenice Bento argues that "the management of death became the central axis of the State's policies across the pre- and post- abolition period" (2024, p. 73). She links this management directly to the production of abject bodies: "a degraded or excluded condition within the terms of sociability", "bodies whose lives are not considered lives and whose materiality is understood as not important" (2024, p. 115). The insertion or permanence of the abject, she warns, risks "provoking the threat of psychosis, that is, of the dissolution of the subject itself" (2024, p. 115) – the subject of whiteness and its pact.

It is worth reminding the reader that I am not treating Capitu as part of the "enslaved population", this bears repeating. In a society systematically mediated by processes of racialization that affect a significant portion of its population, all social relations are "affected" by them, especially the epistemological foundations of the seigniorial elite. Its "looks" are racializing, whether directed at the aggregated, the impoverished, servants, or those considered "quasi-sisters", quasi-slaves" – in Capitu's case, "quasi-mother". The abject body – the sterile-womb-body of Capitu as quasi-mother – thus transmutes into a flesh that precedes it, a motherhood that merely arrests monstrosities, other modes of sterility, "that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). That is, "the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating

metaphors of captivity and mutilation", thereby denying all becoming of time and history, "as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism" (Spillers, 1987, p. 68). Bento Santiago, guided by his own "dynamic of nomination and evaluation", as a "leading episteme", focuses his efforts on Capitu with indifference: "it was a dry, brief word; most times, I didn't even look at her. She always looked at me, waiting" (Assis, 1997, p. 278); "Capitu had begun to write me letters, which I replied to curtly and drily" (1997, p. 283).

The "solution" consists of a plan that leads them both from ostracism to death. Even if Bento Santiago does not carry it out with his own hands, as he once intended; he does so through his power to distribute identities and their bodies across the ditches of the worlds. Genocidy, therefore, culminates in what Butler (2023, p.13) theorizes as "the unequal distribution of grievability: "a process that decides which lives are considered valuable and worthy of a grief". This is reflected in Bento Santiago's words about Capitu's fate during Ezequiel's visit: "his mother – I don't think I've said that she was dead and buried. She was; there she rests in the earth of old Switzerland" (Assis, 1997, p. 287). The circumstances of her death and her life in Switzerland are never mentioned. When Ezequiel tries to speak of her – "she was beautiful at her death" – the narrator swiftly changes the subject: "let's go in to lunch" (Assis, 1997, p. 287).

To share with the reader the discomfort of Bento Santiago's genocidy, I conclude this section with the full text of the first paragraph of the chapter entitled "There was no leprosy" – the antepenultimate chapter of the novel – in which he narrates Ezequiel's death: "There was no leprosy, but there are fevers in all lands where human beings have lived, ancient or modern. Eleven months later, Ezequiel died of a typhoid fever, and was buried in the vicinity of Jerusalem"; "In spite of everything, I dined well and went to the theater." (1997, p. 291), he concludes.

3 The abnormal undertow of thought or the infinite body of Capitu

"We begin to understand that everything there is to see, however exposed, however neutral in appearance it may be, becomes ineluctable when sustained by a loss" (Didi-Huberman, 1998, p. 33). Georges Didi-Huberman's remarks about tomb images might well serve to define the statutes of Bento Santiago's gaze on Capitu's body – a gaze in which "to see is to lose", since the essential eludes him, despite his efforts to transform blindness into a victory of vision, or rather, a victory over the split itself. In Didi-Huberman's words: "it troubles my capacity to see it simply, with

serenity – insofar as it reveals to me that I have lost that body which it holds within its depth” (Didi-Huberman, 1998, p. 38).

Not only does the rebuilding of the Matacavalos house in Engenho Novo metaphorize the desire for mastery over what escapes the discursivity of the gaze, but numerous other passages reveal a mode of writing grounded in the difficulty of semiotizing multiplicity: “No, no, my memory is not good. On the contrary, it can be compared to someone who has lived in numerous lodgings, without remembering either faces or names, and only a few of their circumstances.” (Assis, 1997, p.145). The perverse irony of this memory of “numerous lodgings”, which retains neither “faces or names” is that it has repeatedly confined Capitu's gazes within the very terms José Dias first suggested and that the narrator, through constant reiteration, expanded and ultimately facialized.

Beneath the apparent layers of the gazes and discourses that frame them, other temporalities, other statuses of thing, another “humanity” always persist – “traces” of supplementary and heterogeneous times that “burn” beneath the gaps in the archive, beneath the “deliberate or unconscious censorship, acts of destructions, aggressions, and acts of faith” (Didi-Huberman, 2012, p. 211). This entails reading, in a certain sense, against the work itself, against the narrator's discursive *ethos*, effacing his values and his imaginary, shaped by an imagination that cuts out the real in order always to make the same emerge from the same. In other words, it means undertaking an operation in many respects similar to what Saidiya Hartman called “critical fabulation”: an operation of reading “to disorder and transgress the protocols of the archive and the authority of its utterances” (2021, p. 118).

I would argue that a fundamental aspect of both the semiosis of abjection that the narrator constructs around Capitu's undefinable body and his own split lies in the fact that Capitu's body is a thinking body, deeply absorbed in the workings of language and, by its very nature, resistant to the forms of framing and apprehension imposed by the misogyny of the Brazilian seigniorial ideology and its processes of racialization. Her deep investment in intellectual pursuits clashes with everything around her: “she read our novels, leafed through our books of engravings, wanting to know all about the ruins, the people, the military campaigns, the name, the place, the story behind everything.” (Assis, 1997, p. 90). The narrator then, astonished, articulates it even more forcefully: “How could she control herself so easily when I could not” (Assis, 1997, p. 188).

Capitu's workings of language and self-control clash with the discourse of the emerging medical sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century, which lent scientific credibility to the imaginary of reducing women “to the power of their sex”, since “modesty and shame [are] not innate

to her, but must be carefully cultivated to restrain her desires, which, unlike those of female animals, cannot be reduced to the biological cycle" (Kehl, 2016, p. 52). In other words, what astonishes the narrator is that Capitu refuses to fit within the strictures of the feminizing order imposed upon women of her time: "Capitu was Capitu, that is, a very particular person, more of a woman than I was a man." (Assis, 1997, p. 89).

The paradoxical meaning of the phrase "more of a woman than I was a man" reveals the aporia to which Capitu's infinite body subjects seigniorial ideology. At the same time that it exceeds the "common" division of roles and identities, her body can be understood as constituting the very outside of the ongoing feminization project – "Capitu is a man" -- and, in an ongoing movement, intensifies the need to cling to the process of abjection – "more of a woman"–, in an attempt to arrest the flow of her processes of singularization. Hence, at another moment, the narrator states: "She was a woman inside and out, to left and right, a woman from every side, from top to toe." (1997, p. 188). The repetition – "woman..., woman..., woman" – sets the capture machine in motion, gathering the fragments of the split.

Bell Hooks draws her own experience as a Black woman to illustrate the challenges faced by any woman who transgresses stereotyped identities, particularly the reductive image of a body incapable of intellectual labor: "I knew the importance of being smart but not too smart. Being too smart was synonymous with intellectuality, and that was cause for concern, especially if one was female. (1991, p. 149).

The Capitu of the first part – whose voice is later silenced – lives a life devoted to the immaterial labor: the elaboration of linguistic strategies aimed at subverting the established order. Her first action was to remove the narrator from the seminary, a move that generates new lives for both: "Capitu was reflecting. Reflection was not a rare occurrence with her" (Assis, 1997, p. 65).

Capitu asked me to repeat all the dependent's replies, the alterations in his gestures and even the pirouette, which I had hardly mentioned. She asked for the tone of all his words. She gave it all her minute attention. She seemed to ruminate on everything, the story itself and the dialogue. Or you could say that she was comparing, labelling and, as it were, pinning my account up in her memory. (Assis, 1997, p. 89).

Reduced by the narrator to the tautologies of the gaze, Capitu's analysis of situations is far more complex and elaborate. It always presupposes an intersemiotic perspective that is not satisfied with the simple and redundant mechanics of the signifier and the signified, but instead

attends to its intensities, thereby unveiling instances of affection and the speakers' hidden intentionalities, articulating words with gestures, with the performance of the body in situation, and with the nows of the interventions. Under no circumstances was it a matter of trusting words and gestures, but rather of thinking them within a broader context of hidden intentionalities, one that demanded other modes of hearing and seeing: "it is not surprising that, opposing my plans for open resistance, she went by milder means, persevering, with words, by slow, daily persuasion, and giving consideration first to the people we could count on". (Assis, 1997, p. 67). It is precisely the singularity of a girl from the "house next door" that gives Capitu this awareness of situations and of the several strata of discourses and their significations. This is a sense of the temporality of actions as political agency, which must unfold at a pace consonant with the very social position from which she speaks – with tenacity, yet with her own rhythm, capable of dissolving, "by leaps", the triggers that whiteness feels no shame in activating.

If the body – the woman's body – is a body placed in a state of nature, always instinctive, turned toward its own interiority as inferior matter, incapable of venturing into external realms of immateriality and intellectuality, how can we continue to call "body" this existential territory that escapes the very foundations of phenomenological thought? Denise Ferreira da Silva names this existence *corpus infinitum* "the existence beyond Space-Time, where The Thing resists, dissolving any attempt to reduce what *exists and happens* to the registers of the object, the other or the commodity" (Silva, 2019, p. 109,). This "infinite because immeasurable" body, she argues, must be "tamed, apprehended as a signifier of *exteriority* within modern Western thought" so that it can be "repeatedly used as a referent for other ways of existing as human beings, of that which exceeds and, therefore, threatens the narratives of law and morality authorized by sovereign reason" (Silva, 2019, p. 74). Capitu's infinite and immeasurable body allows me to answer the narrator's rhetorical question in the novel's closing chapter, entitled "*Well, and the Rest?*". This chapter constitutes a synthesis of the semiotics of whiteness: everything is laid bare – the presupposition of capture, the racializing episteme of a body reduced to nature, incapable of being otherwise, precisely because it is absolutely "infinite". Around this body, only the metaphor of ontologizing circularity can pacify the split.

Now, why is it that none of these capricious creatures made me forget the first love of my heart? Perhaps because none had her undertow eyes, nor her sly, oblique, gypsy look. But this is not really what remains of this book. What remains is to know if the Capitu of Glória beach was already in the girl of Matacavalos, or if the latter had been changed into the former because of some intervening incident. Jesus, son of Sirach, had he known of my first fits of

jealousy, would have said to me, as in his Chapter IX, verse I: "Be not jealous of thy wife, lest she deceive thee with arts she learned of thee." But I think not, and that you will agree with me; if you remember Capitu as a girl, you will recognize that the one was in the other, like the fruit inside its rind. And anyway, whatever the solution, one thing is left, and is the sum total, or the total residue, to wit, that my first love and my best friend, both so affectionate and so beloved—destiny willed it that they ended up joining together and deceiving me ... May the earth rest lightly on them! On to the *History of the Suburbs*! (Assis, 1997, p. 293).

What, properly speaking, is this "what remains" – a remainder that makes it so that "none of these capricious creatures made me forget the first love of my heart?". To return to George Didi-Huberman's terms, this is a remainder that burns: fire beneath the ashes, a remainder that leaks beyond all paralyzing ruin, a remainder that is still present and, therefore, alive. To contain it within deadly capture, to paralyze the odors of its not-yet-formed matter, it becomes urgent to racialize it once again – "her sly, oblique, gypsy look" – through a signifying repetition that says less about the "object's" powers than about the narrator's own desire. This repetition is the sole way to uphold the ideology of truth, relevant as a univocal instance of reality – a reality that always bears loss and splitting. To this end, the narrative constructs a performativity that requires the reader's assent in order to pacify itself – "and that you will agree with me"; "if you remember"; "you will recognize that" – itself reiterative, abusive in its very insecurity, in its own limited pertinence.

It is this reiterative signifier, now coupled with the authority of the Bible, that gives the narrator confidence to answer the question that constitutes the very reason for the narrative as a whole: "to know if the Capitu of Glória beach was already in the girl of Matacavalos". And the answer: "one was in the other, like the fruit inside its rind". Nothing is more pertinent than a "vegetable" metaphor, "the fruit inside its rind", to paralyze the becomings that the girl from the "house next door" dares to undertake within the Brazilian seigniorial ideology, in its historicity, its religiosity, its truth. The fruit inside its rind as an ontology without an outside, as an object prevented from becoming a subject of her own history, her own "truth", her own singularity, because trapped within the narrator's racializing determinism.

The remainder is this infinite "History of the Suburbs", which does not begin now, which does not cease to happen, which does not cease to "remain", to "burn", which cannot be contained in the narrator's folly of believing that the world of the suburbs begins only now. He has already mobilized it "by the pen", in more than one sense of the term; he has already written it, already made it clear to the reader capable of fabulating beyond the discursive order of a truth that, to recall

Guy Debord, reveals itself only as an instance of the false. For *Dom Casmurro* is nothing other than a *history of the suburbs* – the *locus* of the impoverished and of the powers of their many creolities.

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