THE AFFECTIVE LOGIC OF RACE: A CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR THE ANALYSIS OF RACIAL IDENTIFICATION PRACTICES

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Abstract

Racial identification practices are a critical issue in the current public debate in many countries, including Brazil. The theoretical framework of cultural psychology is used to discuss the process of racial identification. The analysis is based on the construct of affective logic, that is the theoretical assumption that our primary relationship with the world is affective, both in the sense of the immediate apprehension of the outward appearance of things and in the sense of our individual preferences, as the starting point of experiencing reality. As a system of interpretation of the relationship between events of psychological experience, affective logic is grounded on five basic concepts, namely: 1) semiotic relationships; 2) cogenetic logic; 3) binding and unbinding; 4) *Gegenstand*; and 5) seeing-as. First, a systematic contextualization of these concepts into the field of racial identities is provided. Then, these concepts are used to offer an analysis of racial identification practices, using the controversy around the music video *Vai Malandra*, starred by Brazilian pop singer Anitta, as a case study. We argue that the act of associating human bodies with particular racial identities is an affective process that stems from the negotiations between social suggestions and one's individual preferences and idiosyncrasies. As such, to racially identify someone is an act that does not always happen in an "eye to eye" manner even among members of the same culture. In fact, to see a particular human body as the embodiment of a particular racial identity might be an assessment of reality that may be true only to the eyes of the beholder.

Keywords: Affective Logic. Racial Identities. Racial Perception. Racial Identification Practices. Cultural Psychology.

The realm of culture is the realm of the production and exchange of meanings. Culture depends on more or less stable, shared interpretations of reality among members of a given social group. Thus, to say that two individuals belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret and make sense of what's happening around them in broadly similar

ways. In turn, the meanings that circulate within a particular culture orient social practices and conducts, and produce real practical effects in people's lives (Hall, 2016).

One of the implications of the interpretive nature of culture is that, as meaning-making agents, we never experience things *per se*, but we always “see things” as “something” under specific contexts (Tateo, 2018). Elements of the phenomenal world rarely (if ever) have one single, fixed, and unalterable meaning, even among members of the same culture. Accordingly, different perceptions of the phenomenal world are related to different ways of *feeling into* and responding to it. For instance, that which is called a “wild animal” in some English speaking cultures (conventionally defined as any animal “living in a state of nature; not tamed or domesticated”¹) is sometimes called a *Yarope* by the *Yanomami* people of the northern Amazon and is understood as an avatar of their mythical ancestors². Thus, an urban European and a *Yanomami* who happen to come across a jaguar in the middle of the Amazon forest, regardless of the potential imminent danger of the situation, will perceive, feel and act differently due to the different meanings that their respective cultures associate with such creature³.

The same principle at stake in the relationships between humans and non-humans also works in human-to-human relationships, for instance, the different racial meanings attributed to different physical types. By definition, meaning is impermanent, situated, enacted, and historicized. So, how do we know that, when “looking” at something or someone, two or more people are actually “seeing” the same “thing”? Where do we draw the line between culturally constructed consensus and personal experience of the phenomenal world? We address these questions focusing on the case of racial identification practices.

Racial identification

The fluid character of racial identities has long been acknowledged: Stuart Hall, during a lecture at Goldsmiths' College in 1996, described race as a “floating signifier”⁴. In other words, racial identities are always socially and historically situated, and so are the meanings attributed to them. There is no ontological truth or essence upon which they can rely that is not itself a product of culture. From this perspective, we understand racial

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/wild?s=t>

² <https://www.indios.org.br/pt/Povo:Yanomami>

³ Psychology has long tried to explain the primacy of perception over feeling or the other way round, but we will instead discuss the complementarity of these ways of relating to the world.

⁴ <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/mrcvault/videographies/race-floating-signifier>

identification practices as the socially and historically situated act of racially identifying an individual or a group of individuals. That includes the symbolic associations between specific sets of attributes and specific physical types that substantiate different racial identities. Despite the amount of evidence proving that racial identities are socio-historical constructions, some layers of this phenomenon still need to be further explored.

The act of associating human bodies with particular racial identities (as much as the different meanings culturally ascribed to them) is a process that does not always happen in an “eye to eye” manner among members of the same social structure (much less among people from different cultures). Yet, racial identification practices continue to persist as a fundamental structural feature of western and westernized societies. Much has been said about the socio-historical processes through which racial identities are constructed, lived-out, transformed, and destroyed. However, efforts to understand these identities from a socio-psychological perspective seem to have placed their emphasis on the discursive aspects of race to the detriment of explorations of its affective dimension.

Based on the idea that psyche is a semiotic process and that human experience is mediated by signs (Valsiner, 2014), cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics can provide a useful theoretical framework to the understanding of some of the psychological aspects involved in racial identification practices. One of these frameworks is the theory of affective logic.

Affective logic

Like any theoretical approach rooted in cultural psychology, affective logic departs from the premise that psychological phenomena are socially and historically situated processes (as are the theoretical schemes created to understand them). That also means that any attempt to understand a psychological phenomenon requires an understanding of the cultural context in which the phenomenon is situated and from which it emerges. Our experiences in the world, as meaning-making creatures, are mediated by the signs produced within and by the cultures we participate in. Signs produce social suggestions that affect us by promoting specific conducts and feelings that we are expected to experience in a given situation while inhibiting other conducts that might be considered inappropriate. What makes our individual experiences unique is the negotiations between the social suggestions to culturally consistent meanings and our preferences and idiosyncrasies: our personal cultures (Tateo, 2018).

Human primary relationship with the world is affective, though culturally mediated, both in the sense of the immediate apprehension of the outward appearance of things (taken as offering some insight into their characters) and in the sense of our individual preferences as the starting point of experiencing the phenomenal world. “Feeling into” is the source for primary distinction in the flow of experience: “I feel, then there must be something”. Idiosyncratic feeling leads to the emergence of distinctions: if there are different feelings, there must be different things, and one must be better than the other must. Hence, the sign system provides the tools for a categorical distinction to be created: from the feelings, we enter the realm of categories that is the realm of culture. However, the relationship is complementary, as we have seen before that one of the main features of culture is to provide social suggestions orienting feelings.

As a system of interpretation and understanding of the relationship between events of psychological experience, affective logic is grounded on five basic concepts, namely:

- 1) *Semiotic relationships*: to which the fundamental process of psyche is the production, maintenance, and destruction of meaning through an infinite semiotic activity (Tateo, 2018);
- 2) *Cogenetic logic*: to which the primary conceptual unity of distinction is represented as a triad of distinguishable undefined components that are definable in terms of one another (Herbst, 1976);
- 3) *Binding and unbinding*: the idea that human meaning-making works through forms of “inclusive separation” (Valsiner, 1987), i.e., every time we create a meaningful distinction, we also create a meaningful totality;
- 4) *Gegenstand*: as we invest an object with our intentionality, we provide it with some sort of active agency as it acquires the capacity of promoting or inhibiting some specific conduct (Valsiner, 2014);
- 5) *Seeing-as*: we do not just “see” a thing, we always see a thing “as” something, actively selecting some properties and neglecting others, relating to it by the light of our preferences, affects, and idiosyncrasies (Tateo, 2018).

A systematic contextualization of these concepts into the field of racial identification practices is provided below. By using affective logic as a theoretical tool to investigate some of the psychological aspects of racial identification practices, we hope to offer new ways of understanding more basic levels of racial perception, as much as the

conducts, attitudes, and practical effects produced by the symbolic associations that substantiate racial identities.

The semiotic dimension of racial identities: the human body as a racial sign

An understanding of the semiotic dimension of racial identities must begin with a reconceptualization of the human body as a racial sign. That also implies coming to terms with the fact that, in western culture, any human body represents the embodiment of a racial identity for a particular person in a particular socio-historical context (even when that person is not completely sure of how to racially categorize a particular human body in a given situation). When we come across another human being, we cannot help but associate that person's physical appearance (among other markers such as their mannerisms or the way they dress) to a particular racial group, despite the possibility of our judgment be completely wrong. By saying this, we are not trying to disregard the personal choice of those who identify as biracial, multiracial, “aracial”, or that are emotionally committed in the myth of colorblindness (people have the right to identify as they wish, and to choose the way they consider best suited to cope with issues of race and racial identity). Our point here is that as much as some of us try to avoid it (or deny it), we all struggle, consciously or unconsciously, with the symbolic associations between one's physical appearance and the set of attributes socially and historically ascribed to members of a particular racial group. As individuals who grew up in societies in which concepts of race and racial identities have always been part of their meaning-making repertoire, we all have been culturally “trained” to make such associations, whether or not we are aware of it and regardless of how we feel about it.

In semiotic terms, a sign can be briefly described as any object that stands for something else for someone in some respect or capacity (Tateo, 2018). Any phenomenal instance can thus become a sign. The human body can also work as a racial sign to the extent that it represents the embodiment of a racial identity to a particular person in a given situation. As such, the racialized body should be understood in terms of a triadic structure composed by 1) a particular human body, 2) the race which that human body supposedly represents to a particular agent (here understood as the person who comes across that human body), 3) the conduct produced in the agent who engages with it.

In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon (2008) provided a rather poetic glance into his own experience as a black man living in France during the first half of the 20th century:

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up (p. 86).

In the above example, Fanon's body (the first element of the triadic structure) works as a racial sign in relation to a little white boy, who sees it as the body of a "Negro" (the representation of a particular racial identity, or the second element of the triadic structure). In other words, when the little boy comes across Fanon's body, immediately a semiotic object comes to mind ("look, a nigger"). Here, the object contains the ideas associated with a particular racial identity: "the Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly". Once the little white boy has racially identified Fanon's body as being the one of a Negro (or a "nigger", in the boy's words), a correspondent conduct (the third element of the triadic structure) is produced in relation to the racialized body: "the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up".

The production of the racial sign puts human bodies and racial identities in relationships of unification, substitution, distinction, and temporality:

- *unification* because it brings together elements that were not necessarily sub-parts of the triadic structure before (e.g. a particular human body, a particular racial identity, and a particular conduct);
- *substitution* because the human body stands for a particular racial identity (in the above case, Fanon's body stood for a "Negro" identity);
- *distinction* because the human body is just a representation of the racial identity it stands for, and not the racial identity itself (by logic, Fanon's body is not the racial identity it supposedly represents);
- *temporality* because such a process is subjected to the effects of space and time (racial identities and the ideas associated with them are social and historical constructions).

What interests us most in the above scenario is the conduct produced in the little white boy by the semiotic process that was triggered by his encounter with Fanon. From

an affective logic perspective, the racialization of Fanon's body (or its reconceptualization as a racial sign) cannot be completed without a correspondent conduct by the white boy. Since our primary relationship with the world is affective, the outcome of the semiotic process produced by their encounter depends on the boy's immediate apprehension of Fanon's outward appearance, in correlation with the social suggestions embodied by Fanon's body (or the discursive dimension of racial identities). However, to consider the boy's conduct as a mere reflection of the discursive aspect of race is to disregard the individual dimension of the semiotic process that makes the boy's experience unique. To do that is to assume that any white child that comes across a black man, who shivers with cold in a public space, will always display the same type of conduct as a result of the hegemonic discourses from which a particular idea of blackness has been culturally produced in a particular society during a particular historical period.

The process we have just described in terms of a triadic structure provides both the "meaning" of the sign and the necessary degree of uncertainty to allow any form of development, for it implies the possibility of disagreement, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, negotiation, and even deception (Tateo, 2018). As stated earlier, the cultural dimension of the semiotic process determines that we never experience things *per se*, but always "as something" under "some conditions". That's precisely what makes racial identities historically and socially situated constructions, which also means that the bases on which they stand are subject to a great deal of trembling once human bodies are displaced from the cultural contexts in which those identities were forged. For instance, it is not rare that white Brazilians living in the United States are forced to face the fact that they no longer enjoy the same racial privileges they did back home (a rude awakening for someone whose perception of reality was constructed based on the privilege of being socially perceived as white). Conversely, some light-skinned black Americans in Brazil may experience certain racial privileges due to the ways their racialized bodies are socially perceived in the Brazilian context, while, for the same reason, they could have their blackness challenged by some black Brazilians.

The proliferation of human arenas in contemporary societies increases the variety of social suggestions that contribute to enlarge the window of possibilities produced by such encounters, but that also weakens the specific social suggestions of a given community, introducing further complexity in the negotiation between the individual and the context in the elaboration of the personal trajectory (Tateo, 2018).

The deconstruction of the semiotic process through which signs are produced helps us to understand how human bodies come to stand for specific racial identities. The cultural dimension of these processes implies an affective relationship with the sign (in this case, the racialized body, whether ours or someone else's), which is determined by the constant struggle between our individual subjectivities and the social suggestions of specific cultural contexts, including the very repertoire of racial identities to which we can resort when we come across another human body.

The cogenetic logic of racial differences: a theory of boundaries

Racial identities do not exist in isolation. They are invariably immersed in relationships of distinction and comparison. Every time we define a racial identity, we create, by comparison, a distinction between that identity and everything that does not fit its definition. This basic process is a good departure point to understand the cogenetic logic of racial differences or, we may say, of racial otherness.

As in the case of semiosis, cogenetic logic understands the primary production of distinction in terms of triadic structures (Tateo, 2016, 2018): e.g., **X** – *boundary* – **Y**. To be more specific, the boundary produces a distinction between **X** and **Y**, in which **X** is internal to the boundary, and **Y** is external. Remove the boundary, and a distinction between inside and outside is no longer possible. That's because, to create a conceptual distinction between elements of the same whole, we must first define one of these elements.

Fig. 1. Triadic set of primary distinction

However, the representation of distinction in terms of a triadic structure, in which a distinguishable element **X** is defined by a boundary that sets it apart from the rest of the whole, suggests that the relationship between **X** and that which is external to the boundary (or what we are calling “**Y**”) is not one of conceptual oppositions but a relationship between a defined element and the negational dimension of that element. In other words, **X** is not the opposite of **Y**, or vice-versa, which also means that **Y** should be understood

as a **non-X**. Thus, the triadic structure must be reconceptualized in terms of **X** – *boundary* – **non-X**. Translating into racial terms, every time we define a racial identity we automatically produce the negational dimension of that identity: e.g. **White** – *boundary* – **non-White**; **Black** – *boundary* – **non-Black**; **Asian** – *boundary* – **non-Asian**, and so on. Accordingly, as we define a particular racial identity **X**, we are also defining **non-X** as everything that cannot be included in the definition of **X**. Thus the boundary that creates a distinction between a racial identity **X** and its negational dimension **non-X** also puts the two together in a relationship of co-definition.

Unfortunately, racist ideology has instilled us with the tendency of understanding racial identities in terms of dichotomies and conceptual oppositions, being the relation “white $\diamond$ black” the most prominent example. Take, for instance, Fanon’s account of his encounter with the little white boy. By describing the scene from a double perspective (the boy’s and his own), Fanon denounces a social construction of blackness as a fixed state of the “Other”; hence a classificatory label to which value becomes attached (Negro = animal, bad, mean, ugly, etc.) is thus constructed in contrast to a white “Me” (white = human, good, kind, beautiful, etc.). Yet, while this construction may guarantee a qualitative relationship between the opposites, it can only accommodate transitions between the opposite themselves, thus not allowing for the emergence of more complex forms of racial identification (Abreu, 2020). Such a perception of racial otherness reflects an inability to recognize racial differences beyond the constraints of racist ideology. In the words of Homi Bhabha (1997):

What is denied the colonial subject, both as colonizer and colonized, is that form of negation which gives access to the recognition of difference. It is that possibility of difference and circulation which would liberate the signifier of *skin/culture* from the fixations of racial typology, the analytics of blood, ideologies of racial and cultural dominance or degeneration. ‘Wherever he goes,’ Fanon despairs, ‘the Negro remains a Negro’—his race becomes the ineradicable sign of *negative difference* in colonial discourses. For the stereotype impedes the circulation and articulation of the signifier of ‘race’ as anything other than its *fixity* as racism. We always already know that blacks are licentious, Asiatics duplicitous.... (p. 299).

To think of the primary production of racial distinction in terms of a triadic structure, in which the definition of a racial identity **X** results in the production of a negational dimension **non-X**, allows the possibility of more complex forms of racial identification. Such complexity is made possible by the fact that the field of meaning that

is external to the boundary constitutes a scenario of openness and indeterminacy, which permits the emergence of new and hybrid forms (i.e., **quasi-X**, **not-quite-X**, **possibly-X**, etc.) that can be subject to further meaning-making and, under specific socio-historical conditions, can trespass the boundary and become included into the **X** category (Marsico & Tateo, 2017).

Fig. 2. Triadic set of racial distinction

It is the boundary, however, that mediates the meanings of the subparts of the whole, since meanings are here understood as socio-historical constructions that culturally organize and shape human psychological functioning in relation to the intelligible world. We create boundaries with the purpose of articulating, differentiating, and/or hierarchically integrating with others, with the physical environment, and with ourselves (Marsico *et al*, 2013). From this perspective, we could say that racial boundaries stand for the cultural psychological processes by which we define racial identities, and which makes them socially and historically situated constructions. In a sense, racial identities are nothing more than the boundaries that stand between them.

Binding and unbinding: the inclusive separation of racial identities

The concept of “inclusive separation” (Valsiner, 1987), understood in the context of racial identification practices, is intrinsically connected to both the semiotic dimension and the cogenetic logic of racialization. In the first case, the symbolic associations that give substantiality to the semiotic process create both a relationship of binding and unbinding between a particular human body and a particular racial identity. While two initially unrelated things are bound in the form of a racial sign, they are also unbound by the fact that the racial identity and the body to which it is associated are not the same thing.

As to the second case, the boundary that defines a particular racial identity separates and unites two parts of what was previously a single instance. That’s because while we are all distinguishable from each other as individuals, as members of a particular

society we can only be racially defined by the boundaries that set us apart from everyone else as (perceived) members of a supposed racial group. In other words, by creating a boundary between two individuals (or two groups of individuals) to designate them as racially different from one another, we connect them in our consciousness by relating them to each other as members of a higher level totality (be it a crowd of people, a particular society, the inhabitants of a continent, or even the whole of humanity).

When we separate two parts of what was previously a single instance, by creating a distinction between them, we attach preference to the new subparts. On the other hand, when we bind elements that are perceived as distinct, we tend to create an internal hierarchy in the new emerging whole (Tateo, 2018).

Both the apprehension of racial differences and the production of racial meanings imply conformity to a value system that responds to the social suggestions we have internalized as members of a given culture. However, both of these processes are also crossed by preferences and idiosyncrasies that are individually constructed as a result of personal experience. There is a non-shareable affective dimension to racial perception that is capable of taking us beyond the social suggestions of a given culture, and which allows not only the possibility of indeterminacy but also the opportunity for an active deconstruction of racist ideology through conscious evaluations of the affects that the apprehension of racial difference produces in each of us.

Racial identities as *Gegenstanden*

One of Cultural Psychology's theoretical assumptions is that any psychological activity (thinking, feeling, knowing, etc.) has the character of being directed to something, which, in turn, becomes an object of cognition or volition. But every time we invest an object with our intentionality (the ability of the mind to "go towards" something), it obtains some specific relational properties with respect to us as it acquires the capacity of promoting or inhibiting some specific conduct (Valsiner, 2014; Tateo, 2018). The object thus becomes a *Gegenstand* ("stand against" us—*Gegen* + *stand*).

How does the concept of *Gegenstand* can help us better understand some of the psychological processes involved in racial identification practices? Let's begin by agreeing that to be a "human being" one must possess a "human body". Now think for instance of that which we call a "human body" just as a mere "something" existing in the physical world. By investing this "something" with our intentionality, it becomes an object of cognition. However, this object of cognition can only be "transformed" into a

"human body" after it becomes the object of culturally channeled practices, which include not only the elaboration of a concept of "human body", and the ideas associated with it, but also the type of treatment dispensed to this particular type of body as a result of these ideas. This newly conceived "human body" thus exerts a grip on us by promoting or inhibiting some specific conduct (e.g. human bodies must be treated with dignity), but it also "stand against" us by "refusing" to correspond to the ideas associated with the very concept of "human body" (e.g., the idea that human bodies must always be dressed in public only makes sense in specific cultural contexts).

Now let's take a step further and think of what it meant to be a human being in the times of the transatlantic slave trade. During that period, the very idea of humanness coexisted with the fact that certain types people ("human bodies"), due to their cultural and physical characteristics, were not seeing as complete humans by the very people who came up with the idea of humanness, but as some sort of sub-human species, or quasi-humans so to speak. On a psychological level, once "white" Europeans directed such projections onto the "black" bodies of Africans, they attributed to those bodies some sort of active agency by providing them with the ability to promote or inhibit specific conduct within Europeans themselves (e.g., the commodification of "black" bodies, or the inhibition of certain social and individual interactions between black and white bodies). In that sense, the black body began to exert some type of grip on the Europeans as a result of having become the object of their racist ideology (regardless of the possibility that some Europeans could internally and silently doubt the very notion that Africans were less than a human). This psychological process is part of the larger process that made possible the transformation of African bodies into black bodies, and European bodies into white bodies.

By that same token, once Africans and their descendants projected onto their own bodies the very notion of humanness created by the Europeans, a new *Gegenstand* was produced: their "black" bodies became the object of their own idea of humanity. This new meaning-making process rejected the European conceptualization of the black body as a synonym for racial inferiority or sub-humanity to resignify it in terms of human diversity, substantiating the psychosocial resistance of Africans and their descendants: "If the white man challenges my humanity, I will impose my whole weight as a man on his life and show him that I am not that *sho' good eatin'* that he persists in imagining" (Fanon, 2008, p.178). These two very different ideas of the black body—as much as the very different psychosocial effects produced by them—are part of two distinct processes of the socio-

historical construction of blackness, which Achille Mbembe (2014) respectively describes as the “Western Consciousness of Blackness” and the “Black Consciousness of Blackness”.

In the words of Jaan Valsiner (2014): “the *Gegenstand* is the result of our action with things, a projection into the object, and our action is relative to the projected object” (p. 153). Thus, every time we associate a particular racial identity to a particular human body, that body becomes a *Gegenstand* as it acquires some specific relational properties in relation to us. It should also be noted that the psychological process by which a *Gegenstand* emerges is always the same, regardless of the ontological status of the object (Tateo, 2018). That is to say that even as abstract concepts, racial identities such as “black” or “white” can still be the object of thoughts, feelings, and desires, which makes their “reality” in psychological terms undeniable (even though to be black or white means different things in different cultural contexts).

“Seeing-as”: racial identities in the eyes of the beholder

At the beginning of this paper, we argued that we never “see” things as they really “are”. There are two levels of human experience to which the above statement can be applied. The first, and more basic one, has to do with our primary relationship with the physical world, which is governed by the fact that our minds and senses are too limited to capture it in all its subtlety and complexity. The second (and with which we’ve been dealing in the present discussion) relates to the fact that our understanding and knowledge of things are always mediated by culture.

To say that we never “see” things as they really “are” is to say that there is no simple relation of mirroring or direct correspondence between the things of the physical world and the mental constructions we produce of them. Things exist in our minds only as mental representations of something, and not as the something itself. In that sense, a mental representation is a successive analytical-synthetical reconstruction of a primary presentation of reality as content of thought. This is a fact of human psychology that is intrinsically related to culture. From this perspective, mental representations of things should be understood as a crucial part of a larger process through which meanings and values are produced and shared among members of a particular culture through language (Hall, 2016). Thus, we not only do not “see” things as they really “are”, but we learn to “see” them as “something”.

We have mentioned elsewhere the case of an African-American friend of very light complexion, and her discomfort due to being racially identified as “white” by a black Brazilian woman while vacationing in the city of Salvador: “It was that white woman there,” said the Brazilian, pointing towards the black American. The phrase, although pronounced innocently, was received as an insult by the American, who immediately responded in an offensive manner (Abreu, 2018). As the above example demonstrates, “seeing-as” is a meaning-making process that affects and transforms altogether the agent, the object, and their relationship, even if just temporarily. When we are “seeing” things “as” something, we are, to some extent, conforming to culturally constructed consensus, but we are also relating to it in accordance with our preferences, affects, and idiosyncrasies by actively selecting some properties while neglecting others. We take a position towards that “thing” (we “stand against” it), and in return, the “thing” becomes a *Gegenstand* (it stands against us). By selecting some properties and neglecting others, we afford different potential courses of action upon the object that will trigger different forms of resistance (Tateo, 2018).

“Seeing-as” has to do with the ways our affective relationship with the world is shaped by culture and produces a certain perception of reality, which in turn provides both a repertoire of analogies and a repertoire of conducts. Nonetheless, cultural contexts provide so many variable, contradictory and ambivalent repertoires that, in many cases, it can be quite difficult to predict which one will be meaningful for any specific person (Tateo, 2018). Daily life is filled with events in which we have to engage in complex negotiations between seeing a person (e.g. a dark-skinned man wearing a jumper, running on the streets of a wealthy part of the city), seeing him as something (e.g. a potential threat, a suspect of some wrongdoing, or someone jogging in his own neighborhood), and deciding different courses of action (calling the police, or ignoring our own racist bias and moving on with our lives). In the realm of racial identities, to “see” someone as “something” might be an assessment of reality that may be true only to the eyes of the beholder.

The *Vai Malandra* case: a matter of “seeing-as”

Ever since the release of the music video, *Vai Malandra*, in 2017, Brazilian pop star, Anitta, has been placed at the center of Internet debates around racial identity and cultural appropriation. Born to a white mother and a black father, in a humble household, Anitta has been accused of combining elements of black culture to *favela* imagery with

the intent of (conveniently) personifying a racial identity to which she has never self-ascribed. The discomfort produced by the video amongst some black activists can also be explained by the singer's history of always adopting a "white look" on previous works and public appearances, despite being "racially mixed".

Those unfamiliar with Brazil's racial identification practices may feel tempted to compare criticisms of Anitta's "white" aesthetics to past accusations of "whitewashing" directed to American superstar, Beyoncé (Kooijman, 2017). Despite their similarities, such a comparison conceals a fact that renders these two cases fundamentally different. There has never been any doubt to the American public that Beyoncé is, in fact, a black woman. This is not the case with Anitta in relation to her Brazilian audience.

Fig. 1. Top row: Anitta in the music video *Vai Malandra*, at the 2018 Grammy Latino, and in the music video *Muito Calor*. Bottom row: Beyoncé in different periods of her artistic career.

Two accounts of Anitta's case—respectively given by journalist and cultural producer, Kauê Vieira, and columnist, Stephanie Ribeiro, both black activists—illustrate the lack of consensus when it comes to individual perceptions of racial identities in Brazil. According to Kauê, "Anitta is not white", but a "light skin black woman". Therefore, it would be a mistake to accuse the singer of cultural appropriation, since cultural appropriation, according to Kauê, has to do with promoting a certain culture, and profiting from it, while excluding those who represent the ethnic-racial group in which that culture was forged: "A fashion show of Nigerian clothes starring nonblack models, or a debate

about black culture without the participation of black people, this is cultural appropriation”⁵ (our translation), argues Kauê.

Stephanie, by her turn, proposes shifting the discussion from that of cultural appropriation to one about “racial convenience”. To the columnist, mixed-race people, such as Anitta, have the privilege of getting to choose their own racial identity—something denied to those whose physical appearance determines that they cannot be anything other than black. Thus, the fact that Anitta has a black father does not necessarily mean she is socially perceived as a black person; neither that would be sufficient to grant her a black identity. To Stephanie, Anitta’s lack of racial consciousness is what keeps her from identifying (and being identified, to a certain extent) as a black woman, while having no shame of using blackness as a mere accessory for a music video whenever convenient:

To me, as a black feminist, it makes no sense to grant blackness to those who have already chosen that it is better not to be black. [...] To be black is to adopt a collective consciousness. Either you are or you are not. There’s no going back, for it’s a matter of connecting consciousness to identity. [...] It’s our consciousness that makes us see ourselves as blacks (our translation).⁶

Although these are all valid arguments, what is interesting in this case is that Kauê and Stephanie express significantly different perceptions of Anitta's racial identity, despite both having the same nationality, self-identifying as black and being politically engaged in the fight against racism in Brazil. In other words, despite sharing the same racial identity and having very similar cultural origins and political views, they were affected differently by Anitta's new “black look”, hence the very different conduct that the music video produced in each of them. Obviously, we do not expect black activists in Brazil to always agree on issues of racial identity. Our objective here is to understand the cultural psychological aspects of the affective dimension of these identities, and how these affects result in different racial identification practices. However, to provide a cultural psychological assessment of the above scenario, oriented by an affective logic theoretical framework, we must first try to understand what the idea of a “black identity” means to both Kauê and Stephanie.

⁵<https://www.hypeness.com.br/2017/10/fraude-nas-cotas-apropriacao-e-anitta-um-debate-sobre-o-que-e-ser-negro-no-brasil/>

⁶<https://www.geledes.org.br/stephanie-ribeiro-por-que-anitta-incomodou-os-negros-com-o-clipe-de-vai-malandra/>

Three major race/color categories have been featured in almost every Brazilian Census up to date, namely: *branco*, *preto*, and *pardo* (Anjos, 2013). While *branco* and *preto* are respectively translated as the colors white and black, the term *pardo* is defined as a “poorly defined color, between yellowish, brownish and grayish”⁷, or even as “whose color is between white and black”⁸. In racial terms, those who self-identify as *brancos* often see themselves as representing the lighter end of the race/color spectrum, while those who self-identify as *pretos* tend to see themselves occupying the opposite end. As to the term *pardo*, it is commonly understood as a residual category, or even as a “non-label”, designed to include those who see themselves as neither *branco* nor *preto*, but as something in-between (Campos, 2013).

Historically, racial identification practices in Brazil have been oriented by social and individual perceptions of phenotypical differences, thus the affiliation to one of the above categories is predominantly determined by one’s physical appearance. That also means that the threshold between the types attributed to the different racial groups is indefinite, subjectively variable, context-sensitive, and influenced by other factors such as class and gender (Bailey & Telles, 2006; Nogueira, 2007). As explained by Liv Sovik (2009), to be *branco* in Brazil does not exclude those with “African blood”, as long as they have light skin, “European facial features”, and straight hair, or the combination of two of those three elements. Conversely, the greater the combination of dark skin, tightly curled hair, wide nose, and full lips, the greater the chances of one being identified or socially perceived as *preto*. The *pardo* identity, by its turn, generally embodies the idea of racial indeterminacy, and although it is also associated with physical appearance, the term is commonly used on birth certificates to identify the offspring of interracial couples (Silva & Leão, 2012). Although these categories have been preserved as conceptual references over the years, shifts in research methodology and interpretation of official data have resulted in new racial identification practices that ultimately influenced the ways Brazilians understand and perceive these racial identities.

At the end of the 1970s, a research conducted by sociologists Carlos Hasenbalg and Nelson do Valle Silva was the first of many to combine the quantitative data provided by the Brazilian Census with a critical view of modernization theory to measure socioeconomic inequality and the levels of opportunities granted to members of different racial groups (Maio & Santos, 2005). The study showed that racial prejudice and

⁷<https://dicionario.priberam.org/pardo>

⁸<https://www.dicio.com.br/pardo/>

inequality in Brazil were not mere remnants of the past, doomed to be surmounted as the nation paved its way through modernization, as suggested by earlier analysts. Instead, it was a product of symbolic benefits historically granted to whites as a result of an ongoing systemic process of subalternization of African descendants. Their findings revealed that individuals who identified as *pretos* or *pardos* shared a socioeconomic reality that set them in a significantly inferior position to those who identified as *brancos*. Additionally, the chances of upward social mobility were twice as high to *brancos* in comparison to *pretos* and *pardos*, even when they all shared similar levels of income and education (Silva & Leão, 2012; Campos, 2013).

Although it is not possible to be certain, these findings are probably the reason why Hasenbalg and Silva opted for including *pretos* and *pardos* in the same statistical category of *não-brancos* (non-whites); a methodological strategy that became adopted by the majority of subsequent studies. On the other hand, black activists argued that *pretos* and *pardos* should be identified as *negros*, since these studies proved that individuals who identify as *pardos* are victims of racism just as much as those who identify as *pretos*. From this perspective, the term *negro* would work as a non-white umbrella category unifying *pretos* and *pardos* based on socioeconomic experience, racial consciousness, and self-affirmation (Campos, 2013)⁹. Thus to self-identify as *negro* (here translated as black) is to acknowledge one's African ancestry while being conscious of the fact that this African ancestry is precisely what makes oneself a victim of racism.

Both Stephanie and Kauê use the term *negro* when referring to “black identity”, which indicates that, despite expressing different perceptions of Anitta's racial identity, their understanding of what it means to be black is oriented by their political activism. It should then be safe to say that they both agree that a black identity may include all of those with black parentage and distinguishable traces of African ancestry, regardless of skin tone or the predominance of these features. Explaining their different reactions to Anitta's music video thus becomes a matter of understanding the “inclusive separation” that allows the singer to be seen as black by one and as non-black by the other.

⁹ Historically, the terms *preto* and *negro* have been commonly used to refer to those who are placed at the darker end of the color/race spectrum. Despite the fact that both terms are roughly translated as “black”, over time they have come to retain slightly different connotations, mainly under the influence of the Brazilian Black Movement. While over the last decades the term *negro* has been increasingly used for ethnic affirmation, *preto* became a term that refers primarily to dark skin. Not rare, such a distinction is expressed by the maxim “*preta é cor, negro é raça*”, which roughly translates as “*preta* is the color, *negra* is the race” (Bailey & Telles, 2006; Rocha, 2010).

At this point, we have a somewhat clear definition of black identity that reflects a socially and historically situated racial discourse grounded on social activism and the political struggle against racism. This definition of black identity is just one of the many social suggestions that emerge, transform, persist, and/or become extinct in the meaning-making “battlefield” of any given society. However, sharing a definition of black identity as the unification of *pretos* and *pardos* based on African heritage and socioeconomic experience was not enough to make Stephanie and Kauê agree on Anitta’s racial identity. That is because such social suggestion had to be negotiated with their individual preferences and idiosyncrasies, thus producing unique perceptions of reality. On the one hand, Stephanie places a strong emphasis on racial consciousness as a symbolic boundary separating blacks from non-blacks. In that sense, she seems to be negatively affected by Anitta’s ability to transit between black and non-black identities; something she describes as “a convenience that is only possible because she [Anitta] is mixed-race” (our translation)¹⁰. On the other hand, to Kauê, the fact that Anitta has black parentage and distinguishable traces of African heritage is enough to grant her blackness. To him, the singer’s supposed lack of racial consciousness should be understood as a product of Brazilian racism, something for which she should not be blamed:

Whether or not Anitta recognizes herself as black is just a result of Brazilian racism. How many of us blacks go through moments of a complete absence of racial consciousness? Anitta, as I said, is a light-skinned black woman. Because of Brazilian colorism, she enjoys certain privileges that are not granted to dark-skinned women. That’s the explicit perversity of this type of discrimination. Instead of excluding or accusing her, why don’t we include the singer in the discussions about race? (our translation)¹¹.

From a cogenetic perspective, the negational dimension of racial identities always represents an open set in the socio-historical sense, which also implies the possibility of disagreements, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, negotiations, deception, and even boundary-crossing. For instance, in the Brazilian context, some of those who used to be seen as “non-black” (e.g., *pardos*, *morenos*, “mulatos”, *brancos*, *indígenas*, etc.) can become, overtime or under certain social circumstances, included in the “black” category, as in the case of the unification of *pretos* and *pardos* into the category *negro* as a result

¹⁰ <https://www.hypeness.com.br/2017/10/fraude-nas-cotas-apropriacao-e-anitta-um-debate-sobre-o-que-e-ser-negro-no-brasil/>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

of the political struggle against racial inequality. As Stephanie's discourse suggests, "mixed-race people" can be considered black, as long as they demonstrate "racial awareness". As for Kauê, those same people will be seen as black as long as they have distinguishable traces of black parentage, regardless of how they self-identify. Both perceptions are only possible due to the production of a new repertoire of meanings associated with the phenomenon of miscegenation in Brazil, as a result of the political struggle for social justice by anti-racist activists. However, no matter how elaborate and convincing Kauê's and Stephanie's arguments might be, it does not change the fact that Anitta will still be seen as a non-black woman (which includes *brancos* and *pardos*, but also a whole range of terms Brazilians commonly use to define race/color categories¹²) by a considerable number of Brazilians who do not share their political views; or simply because their individual trajectories have produced a perception of reality that does not necessarily match that of Kauê and Stephanie.

We should also note that both Stephanie's and Kauê's perceptions of Anitta as "mixed-race" is determined by the semiotic dimension of the singer's racialized body. That is to say that they racially perceive Anitta as a mixed-race woman not because she has both white and black parentage (i.e. a white mother and a black father), but because her body is semiotically read as such. In other words, Anitta's body is reconceptualized as a racial sign that indicates racial mixture, thus producing a perception of her racial identity that is overdetermined by her outward appearance. Had the singer been born with a strong predominance of "African features" (darker skin, fuller lips, curlier hair, wider nose, etc.), the fact that she has a white mother would be of minor relevance, and would not influence the way her body is racially perceived in the Brazilian context. In this case, there would probably be no disagreement between Stephanie and Kauê regarding her racial identity: she would probably be seen as black by both of them.

However, it is not the outward appearance of Anitta's body that ultimately determines her racial identity, or even her ability to cross racial boundaries. To believe that is to believe in a preexisting and objective visual reality that superimposes the social construction of race. This is not an observation of minor importance, since it implies that if racial identities are socially and historically constructed, so is our sight. We see a particular human body as the personification of a particular racial identity not because it

¹² In 1998, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) conducted an examination to investigate how Brazilians would self-identify in an open ended survey. The result was 136 different forms of race/color identification, 14 of which were used by 90 percent of respondents (Campos, 2013).

is, but because we were culturally trained to “see” it that way. In that sense, to believe that there is something about Anitta’s body that incontestably indicates racial mixture is the same as reifying the biological discourse about race. We see Anitta’s body as the one of a mixed-race person not because it is, but because we have learned to see certain combinations of physical features as indicators of racial mixing.

Nevertheless, if our perceptions of reality were limited to culturally constructed consensus, there would be no disagreement between Stephanie and Kauê. They express different perceptions of Anitta’s racial identity not because they come from distinct racial and cultural backgrounds or have opposing political views (none of those is the case), but because they affectively relate to it in different ways. Therefore, they “see” something different even though they are looking at the same “thing”. From this perspective, affects should be understood as an unshareable experience that reflects the uniqueness of our personal trajectories and of who we are as individuals.

Finally, the reconceptualization of Anitta’s body as a racial sign that stands for racial mixture produces a symbolic buffer zone that establishes, at the same time, both the rules for separation and the rules for permeable borders between a black identity and its negational dimension (i.e. blacks and non-blacks). Because Anitta is seen as a mixed-race person, she can be (under certain circumstances and to some people) included in the black category. But the fact that she is seen as being racially mixed is precisely what allows her to (under other circumstances and to the eyes of other people) be also seen as non-black. The relationship black $\diamond$ non-black, which at first a glance appears to be an oppositional pair, reveals, at a closer look, to be a complementary one in which black and non-black dynamically co-define each other in a process of “inclusive separation”.

Fig. 2. Inclusive separation black $\diamond$ non-black in the Brazilian context.

By way of conclusion

In this paper, we used the theoretical framework of affective logic to explore some of the psychological aspects of racial identification practices. We presented a brief analysis of the controversies around Anitta's music video, *Vai Malandra*, as a case study to explore how these processes take place in a particular cultural context. For obvious reasons, our efforts did not include in-depth explorations of the personal preferences and trajectories of Stephanie and Kauê—such an opportunity would certainly have further enriched this work. Thus, we suggest that further applications of affective logic in the field of racial identification practices should be associated with other methodological approaches, such as surveys, semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, among others, according to the purpose of the investigation.

As we hope to have demonstrated, in the meaning-making arena of any given culture, some social suggestions speak louder to each of us on each particular occasion. These social suggestions are negotiated with our preferences and idiosyncrasies in a simultaneous process from which our affects emerge, thus producing different perceptions of reality. By perceiving a particular human body as the personification of a particular racial identity we allow this racialized body to exert a grip on us (it becomes a *Gegenstand*), thus promoting or inhibiting some specific conduct. This is the affective dimension of racial perception and the stem from which different racial identification practices are produced. We hope that, by understanding these processes, we might be able to create opportunities for conscious evaluations of the affects that the apprehension of racial difference produces in each of us, thus opening space for new ways of recognizing racial differences that would hopefully take us beyond the constraints of racial prejudice and racist ideology.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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