

The portrayal of racial bias in *Bacurau* (2019)

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the portrayal of racial bias against northeastern Brazilians film *Bacurau* (2019). The white-centred racial dynamics involving Northeastern Brazilians, a Southeastern Brazilian couple, and a group of US-Americans and German foreigners expose two conflicting notions of whiteness: a local one, within the long-standing Southeast/Northeast Brazil divide, and a global one, opposing Global South and Global North.



KEYWORDS: Northeast Brazil. Bacurau. Whiteness. Racism.

A representação do preconceito racial em *Bacurau* (2019)

RESUMO: Este artigo aborda a representação do preconceito racial contra populações do Nordeste brasileiro no filme *Bacurau* (2019). Através da interação entre moradores de uma vila ficcional em Pernambuco, um casal do sudeste brasileiro e um grupo de estrangeiros, o filme expõe duas noções conflitantes de branquitude: uma opondo Sudeste e Nordeste brasileiro, e outra considerando a dicotomia Sul/Norte Global.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Nordeste. Bacurau. Branquitude. Racismo.

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1 Two Levels of Divide

In the film *Bacurau* (2019), directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, a group of white foreigners organises a human hunt in the fictional village of Bacurau in Northeast Brazil. Upon acknowledging the purpose of the foreigners' presence there, the villagers work together to resist the foreign threat and avoid a massacre. The most immediate and explicit conflict portrayed in the film is the clash between the Northeastern Brazilian villagers and the group of invaders, comprised of seven US-Americans and a German. However, this paper focuses on the racial and ethnic bias behind another conflict depicted in *Bacurau*, one between Northeastern and Southeastern Brazilians. For instance, the characters João and Maria, a southeastern Brazilian couple, assist the foreign group in organising the human hunt in the fictional village of Bacurau. They are responsible for executing crucial tasks for the success of the mission, such as picking the village as their hunting site and hiring local contractors to block road access to the settlement.

The scenes depicting the interaction between the southeastern couple and the northeastern villagers are read as an insistence of "hundreds of years of systematic cultural and political misrepresentation and otherisation" of northeasters within Brazilian racialised society (SERRAO, 2020, p. 3). The history of immigration policies aiming at whitening Northeast Brazil populations, and the misrepresentation of the northeaster as the exotic other, have clearly contributed to a particular image of the Northeast that is exploited and criticised in *Bacurau*.

At a certain moment in the film, for instance, after impulsively shooting two villagers to death, the southeastern couple returns to the foreigners' headquarters. They were asked by Bob, one of the US-Americans, if they were friends with the victims. João quickly denies it, stating that they come "from the south of Brazil, a very rich region with German and Italian colonies". He considers themselves more akin to the foreigners ("We are more like you, guys") than to Bacurau's inhabitants. João's mention of his region's wealth to distinguish himself from the villagers can be read as a manifestation of Brazil's "internal Orientalism", where

part of Southeast Brazilians believe they are “exclusively or disproportionately responsible for the greatness and sustenance of the nation” (WEINSTEIN, 2015, p. 11). Besides the economic aspect, João’s mention of his alleged European heritage reveals a cultural facet of the Southeast/Northeast divide.

While Southeast Brazil is often described as “modern, industrial, capitalist, and white (i.e., European), a picture of the coloniser”, Northeast is a construct of the Other — the Afro-indigenous — the image of the colonised (SERRAO, 2020, p. 3). In a generalising fashion, Northeasters are often considered “subnationals, colonial subjects, an inferior group of people that does not belong to modern Brazil” (SERRAO, 2020, p. 3). Such sense of economic and cultural superiority shapes the couple’s behaviour throughout the film and can be traced as a decisive factor in their willingness to support the human hunt. However, the Brazilian Southeast/Northeast divide is not something that the group of foreigners seems to be aware of. In fact, the US-American Terry does not share João’s view regarding the similarities between foreigners and southeasters.

Terry immediately contests João’s comparison between the couple and the foreigners, stating that João and Maria “kinda look white, but they’re not”. Michael, the white German leader of the group, also questions their whiteness while reinforcing the similarities between the couple and their victims (“You killed two of your own people”). As “branco-mestiços” (SOUZA LOPES, 2014, p. 47), that is, Brazilian mixed-race individuals with predominant white phenotype, João and Maria are generally considered “whites” within Brazilian’s “pigmentocracy”, defined as a hierarchy “based on both ethnoracial categories, such as indigenous and black, and a skin colour continuum” (TELLES, 2014, p. 3). In the case of Brazilian pigmentocracy, the whiter an individual is, the more societal privileges they will enjoy from a racial standpoint.

However, the foreigners perceive the branco-mestiço couple as non-whites. Terry, for example, remarks that Maria’s lips and nose are shaped in a way that does not comply with the white phenotype standard (“Her lips and her nose give it away”). In decolonial terms, the foreigners’ responses to João’s statement expose a second level of divide portrayed in Bacurau, one between “Global North”

and “Global South” (MIGNOLO, 2011), represented respectively by white foreigners and non-white Brazilians, including Northeasters and Southeasters. In this context, as Northeast Brazilians, the villagers of Bacurau are subject to racial and ethnic bias in both levels of divide: Brazilians/foreigners and Northeast/ Southeast.

On the one hand, the film depicts a series of occasions on which the villagers have their language, customs and beliefs deemed inferior by the foreigners. The US-American Joshua, for instance, ignorantly generalises the villagers under the name of “Farmer Pablo”, a Hispanic stereotype often attributed to the Latin American rural population, despite Brazil’s official language being Portuguese. These scenes seem to echo the persistence of a bigoted colonialist logic of validation of knowledge since XV-century Brazil, where the coloniser’s “particular tradition/approach [is considered] to be the only true or proper approach” (MONAHAN, 2019, p. 83). On the other hand, the villagers also experience the effects of more recent sources of racial and ethnic bias, including US-American neocolonialism, that is, the influence exerted by United States’ economy and cultural imperialism over South America, and internal Orientalism.

2 The Paulista Identity and the “Invention of the Northeast”

The social divide between Southeast and Northeast Brazil is supported by economic and cultural aspects regarding a regionally based notion of whiteness. Both of these aspects can be related to the process of formation of the *paulista*¹ identity and its implications for other regional identities, especially in the northeastern region. A crucial period in this process was between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the Old Republic (1889-1930) and the early years of the Vargas regime (1930-1945), the Brazilian state of São Paulo produced most of the country’s budget owing to its extensive coffee bean production. However, a series of actions adopted by Getúlio Vargas, including the appointment of interveners who took control of São Paulo’s economic policies, led to widespread dissatisfaction among *paulistas* towards the Federal Government.

1 An individual who is born in the southeastern state of São Paulo, Brazil.

This rising political tension culminated in the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932, a three-month civil war between the insurgent state of São Paulo and federal forces, resulting in more than one thousand deaths (VILLA, 2010). The insurrection's main goal was to confront the Vargas regime's authoritarianism and establishing a new constitution, limiting its powers. However, while not being consensus among the rebels, a separatist bias started to manifest within the insurgent forces (VILLA, 2010). Despite São Paulo's crushing defeat in the revolution of 1932, separatist wishes among a minor part of the state's population persisted throughout the years.

In 2016, for instance, partially encouraged by the Brexit referendum, the separatist movement *São Paulo Livre* promoted a public poll to inquire *paulistas* about their dissatisfaction with the Federal Government, as well as their wishes to see the state as an independent country. From 48.912 answers, 54,2% favour the state's independence.² Since *Bacurau* is set in the future, the existence of a fictional entity named *Brasil do Sul* (South Brazil) points to a fictional scenario in which separatist claims are consolidated. Such a process also results in an institutional subjection of Northeast Brazil to Southeast Brazil, notably São Paulo. Through the actions of *Brasil do Sul*, *Bacurau* also expands on the pervasiveness of "structural racism" (ALMEIDA, 2019) within Brazilian institutions. That is, racial and ethnic bias are portrayed in the film as "a result of the social structure itself" (ALMEIDA, 2019, p. 50), directly affecting political, economic, and legal relations.

For instance, the first minutes of *Bacurau* depicts villager Erivaldo driving a water tanker truck on a dirt road with Teresa in the passenger's seat. At one point, Teresa, a former inhabitant of *Bacurau* who has recently returned to the region, is watching a broadcast on the car stereo LCD screen. The opening close-up of the broadcast shows the logo of *Brasil do Sul*, which is composed of two maps. The background map is in the shape of the current official Brazilian territory in the shade of green. There is also a light-yellow version of the same map overlaying the green one, but with part of the Northeast region missing, including the state

2 Available at <https://saopaulolive.org>. Accessed in November 2022.

of Pernambuco, where the fictional village of Bacurau is located. Such a composition implies an institutionalised political divide between the two regions.

Fig. 1: Brasil do Sul map



Source: Bacurau

**Fig. 2: Map of Brazil
(Northeast region highlighted)**



Source: Wikimedia Commons

Despite the absence of current Northeast Brazil from Brasil do Sul’s map, there is evidence within the film’s microcosm that such entity has police-like powers over the region, at least over Pernambuco. The entity’s logo, for example, introduces a digital wanted poster in the broadcast, followed by Teresa, at the beginning of the film. The poster informs a hotline for anonymous tips on Adailton Santos do Nascimento, a local vigilante commonly known as “Lunga”, who is framed by Brasil do Sul as a “high-risk” offender. Along with the information of a monetary reward offered for Lunga’s “head”, as stated by Erivaldo, the wanted poster contributes to building the atmosphere of a “western Pernambuco” (GUARANÁ, 2020, p. 77).

The role of Brasil do Sul in constructing a Western genre atmosphere is reinforced further in the film through Bacurau villagers’ struggles for survival. The depiction of marginalised populations fighting authority to preserve their lives and traditional lands are “widespread motifs” in westerns — including John Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948) (IKEDA, 2020, p. 82). The theme is also portrayed in Brazilian films inspired by the genre, such as Glauber Rocha’s

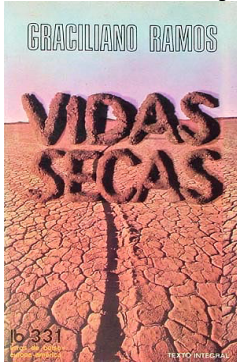
iconic *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (1964), where cowboy Manuel rebels against exploitation and shoots Colonel Moraes.

In *Bacurau*, the villagers face the harm of Brasil do Sul's authority over the region. The entity seems to permeate various fundamental aspects of their daily lives, including the control of their water supply. For instance, when Erivaldo and Teresa stop the truck by the side of the road on their way to Bacurau, he says that Lunga has tried to reclaim the blocked dam that supplies the village in an armed conflict. Despite not directly mentioning Brasil do Sul, Erivaldo's testimony could indicate Lunga's central role in resisting the entity's intervention in the region, to which he and Teresa are also against ("Do not count on me to report Lunga". Resisting the harms caused by the lack of water and the struggle of local populations to obtain it is also a common topic in the portrayal of Northeast Brazil.

For instance, the image of large fields of naked soil cracked by severe drought is recurring in the depiction of the Northeast in Brazilian film and literature. Within scenarios consisted of sparse trees with dry and twisted branches, typical of the caatinga ecoregion, such image is most often seen in works addressing the *sertão*³ sub-region. For example, the emblematic novel *Vidas Secas* (1938), or *Barren Lives*, by Graciliano Ramos, portrays the geographical, social, and psychological aspects of recurring droughts in Northeastern *sertão*. In his work, Ramos not only mentions "the cracked mud, dry and white on top, but soft and black underneath" (RAMOS, 2021, p. 34), but this image, along with the leafless trees, is also present in the covers of many editions of the novel. In *Barren Lives*, the harshness of the *sertão*'s drought is reinforced by the constant presence of a dazzling sun that "sucked up the water from the ponds" (RAMOS, 2021, p. 104). Ramos' work was also adapted as a film of the same title by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, a central filmmaker in the Cinema Novo movement.

3 A semi-arid sub-region of Northeast Brazil comprising parts of the states of Alagoas, Bahia, Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Ceará, Maranhão, Piauí, and Sergipe. The sub-region is often, and mostly stereotypically, associated to its history of intense droughts and economic struggle of low-income rural populations.

Fig. 3: Cover of the 1983 Portuguese edition of Barren Lives map



Source: Publicações Europa-América

Fig. 4: Cracked soil and sparse trees in the caatinga ecoregion



Source: Agência Econordeste (Jean-Claude Gerez)

The film *Vidas Secas* (1963) depicts the severity of the semi-arid sun by using high-key and low-contrast lighting. Such technique is also widely used in many of Glauber Rocha's films to represent the sertão's unforgiving weather, including *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*. In *Bacurau*, however, the sertão displays a diverse and dense flora. The land is covered with bushes and trees of different sizes and shapes. *Bacurau's* representation of the northeastern sertão as a bearable and even fruitful territory directly opposes the long-standing stereotype of the region as a wasteland. Contrary to the overrepresented cracked soil, the predominance of green and robust vegetation evokes a well-irrigated land. In fact, the film attributes the lack of water in the village region more to Brasil do Sul's actions than to the caatinga semi-arid weather.

For instance, although Brasil do Sul is seemingly omnipresent across the film and has direct consequences on villagers' lives, it is portrayed as a distant, almost enigmatic entity acting in the region. The entity's name is not directly mentioned by the characters in the film, being occasionally referred to as "they". When Erivaldo and Teresa observe the dam from a distance, he says that "they blocked everything". Standing on high ground, Erivaldo and Teresa are depicted from a low-angle shot, with the sky as the background, and their facial expressions are clear to the viewer in

a close shot. In contrast, the point-of-view shot is Teresa's view through a binocular, revealing a green sertão, where the vegetation extends beyond the horizon. However, despite the unprecedented richness of natural resources in the region, Erivaldo says that it is only possible to collect water from a location "around five or six kilometres" away, but "they won't let them". This scene shows the dimension of Brasil do Sul's control over the region while emphasising its totalitarian and dystopian nature.

With the aid of binoculars, Teresa also spots a blocked dam, a single man, a tent, and three vehicles. Suddenly, the man points a gun to the sky and shoots, attempting to intimidate them. The unknown man is seen by Teresa and the viewers from a distant high-angle shot, where his physical traits and facial expressions are not recognisable. In this way, despite the mystery surrounding Brasil do Sul's nature, which is always depicted from a distance, its actions are clear: a blocked dam and a gunshot. Therefore, the fictional village's water crisis portrayed in the film is not attributed exclusively to the semi-arid climate, but it is also the result of the actual systematic policies of subjugation by Brasil do Sul. As such, while opposing the stereotype of an eternally dry sertão, the film also links the lack of water in the region to the deeds of a powerful and oppressive institution. The representation of such dynamics in Bacurau can be further read as a mention of the long-standing *indústria da seca*, or drought industry, in Northeast Brazil.

A widespread notion within Brazil, the *indústria da seca* refers to a complex system where some politicians and private enterprises actively seek to benefit financially and politically from the impacts of the droughts in the sertão. This scheme can be linked to the formation process of Northeast Brazil as a distinct and well-defined geographic region, dating back to the late 19th century. This process is strictly related to the difficulties faced by local populations during semi-arid droughts.

The so-called Grande Seca, or the Great Drought, is a decisive period in the "invention of the Northeast" (ALBUQUERQUE JÚNIOR, 2012) as a dry and inhospitable place. From 1877 to 1879, a combination of four record climate incidents drastically affected weather conditions in different regions around the globe. In

that period, one of the harshest *El Niño* to date was followed by a temperature decrease in the tropical Pacific Ocean, along with the warming of the waters of the North Atlantic Ocean and an oscillation of temperatures in the Indian Ocean (A TRAGÉDIA..., 2021). With the abrupt climate change that followed, especially in the north of Brazil, India, Northeast China, south of Africa, and the Mediterranean, approximately 50 million people perished. According to historians, there were at least 500 thousand deaths related to the Great Drought in north Brazil. The country's population was around 9.930.478 by that time (A TRAGÉDIA..., 2021), representing approximately 5% of Brazil's inhabitants.

The impacts of the Great Drought in northern Brazil had ample repercussions in the country, especially through the press in the south. With the news of devastated land, many representatives from the provinces of the North used this scenario in the Brazilian parliament to justify the demand for an equal distribution of federal funds between North and South. This increasing political pressure contributed to the commitment of Brazil's first Republican government towards supporting states affected by the humanitarian crisis. Article 5 of the 1891 Constitution, for instance, compelled the federal government to "provide assistance to the State that, in case of public calamity, requests it", including droughts.

The repercussion of the Great Drought, and the political debate regarding the federal assistance to the north, outlined the Northeast as a barren territory. In the early 20th century, the opposition between "North" and "South" gradually "[gave] way to an artificial space, to a new region, the Northeast" (ALBUQUERQUE JÚNIOR, 2012, p. 51). During this process, the association between Northeast Brazil and the semi-arid droughts was widely disseminated through Brazilian media and academia. The word "Nordeste", meaning Northeast, for example, was first officially used in 1919 to indicate the area where the Federal Inspectorate of Works Against Droughts (IFOCS), a governmental agency aimed at addressing the issue, would act. In this context, "the Northeast emerges as the portion of the North subject to droughts and, for that reason, deserving of special attention from the federal government"

(ALBUQUERQUE JÚNIOR, 2012, p. 81). Such direct linking between environment and poverty led to the proliferation of a “geographic determinism” (RIBEIRO, 1999, p. 61) towards the Northeast, which persists in today’s Brazil.

Such rationale implies that semi-arid droughts are almost exclusively responsible for famine in the region. It is also a recurring argument that this scenario could only be reverted by overcoming water scarcity to feed robust agricultural production (RIBEIRO, 1999). Thus, federal and regional investments have focused mainly on making water available through reservoirs and water trucks, aiming at the so-called “hydraulic solution” to the Northeast (CARVALHO, 1988). As part of this policy, the *açudes* (dams) and the *caminhões pipa* (water tanker trucks) have also become recurring images in the depiction of Northeast Brazil. In Bacurau, for instance, in addition to the local dam, Erivaldo’s water tanker truck is representative of the ongoing dispute over water distribution to the region.

At a certain moment in the film, Erivaldo arrives at the village driving his truck. Other villagers immediately warn him that water is leaking from bullet holes in the tank. Pacote, one of Bacurau’s villagers, asks him what happened to the truck, but Erivaldo does not know where the gunshots came from. Then, in a close-up shot, Pacote looks inside the truck and sees Brasil do Sul’s wanted poster for Lunga being broadcasted on the car stereo LCD screen. In this way, the film associates the water scarcity in the region not exclusively to the semi-arid weather. With no direct mentions of the arid aspect of the caatinga ecoregion in the film, Brasil do Sul’s actions are repeatedly portrayed as the main causes behind Bacurau’s water crisis. However, besides the institutional aspects of the Southeast/Northeast divide, represented in the film by Brasil do Sul’s interference in the region, the film also portrays how interpersonal interactions continuously reflect the racially biased historical construction of São Paulo’s economic superiority over the Northeast.

3 Racial Bias Within the Southeast/Northeast Divide

Within the Southeast/Northeast Brazil divide, for instance, the state of São Paulo is “not coincidentally represented as ‘the most developed region’, [but] is also deemed one of the ‘whitest’ in Brazilian common sense” (SANTANA PINHO, 2009, p. 50). On the other hand, North/Northeast Brazil is often linked to indigeneity and blackness due to the country’s colonial past of slavery. The state of Bahia, for example, is popularly represented as the “blackest of all Brazilian states” (SANTANA PINHO, 2009, p. 50). Between 1514 and 1822, 46,44% of the enslaved Africans taken to Brazil disembarked in Bahia — a total of 1,054,830 people⁴. During this period, blackness, indigeneity and racial mixture were stereotypically associated with “unhealthiness, laziness, and criminality” (SANTANA PINHO, 2009, p. 43). Reflecting the perpetuation of such prejudice, the Northeast region is still often regarded by the paulista economic elite as a symbol of regress and an obstacle to the country’s economic growth.

Along with the development of a regionally based notion of whiteness, São Paulo’s political influence and economic growth during the Old Republic years promoted the image of the state as “*o Brasil que deu certo*” (the successful Brazil) (WEINSTEIN, 2003, p. 243). São Paulo was known by then as “the country’s locomotive” and the assumption was that, without the “weight” of other wagons or states, it could thrive as an independent, wealthy nation. Such misleading expression is still widely used in today’s Brazil, reflecting the persistence of an “internal Orientalism” (WEINSTEIN, 2015, p. 11) within the country, based on the idea that São Paulo is asymmetrically responsible for the nation’s progress. The development of such a racially biased sense of superiority towards the rest of the country is essential to reflect upon “what it meant to be Paulista” (WEINSTEIN, 2003, p. 239) and its implications for other regional identities.

Such a racialised social hierarchy is portrayed in *Bacurau* through the interactions between the economically privileged southeastern couple, João and Maria, and the low-income northeastern villagers.

⁴ According to SlaveVoyages.org database. Accessed in November 2022.

For instance, in one of the couple's support tasks for foreigners, their goal is to stealthily plant a mobile phone signal jammer in the village's bodega, a typical local store, to impede their communication. In this scene, a series of reactions by southeasters gradually reveal their disdain towards the local community. If analysed as isolated cases, these reactions do not necessarily seem to be demonstrations of prejudice. There are no explicit displays of racial or ethnic bias from the couple towards the clerk. However, this scene is studied here as the portrayal of repeated "microaggressions", defined as "brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities... often automatically and unintentionally" (SUE; CAPODILUPO; HOLDER, 2008, p. 329). From this perspective, the scene exposes the existence of an "insidious racism" (SARDAR, 1999), where politeness and respectability mask the perpetuation of long-standing stereotypes, including the common and incorrect notion that Northeast Brazil constitutes a culturally homogeneous region.

The first stereotype subtly portrayed in the scene is the biased notion that Northeast Brazil, in its totality, is a precarious place. From the moment the couple enters the bodega, for example, Maria repeatedly waves her motorcycle gloves in the air, as if trying to avoid flies or a possible stench. Such a gesture reveals Maria's biased expectations of a typical northeastern bodega. Her excessive awareness of the place's cleanliness can be read as a of such internalised prejudice, based on the stereotype of Northeast Brazil as an unsanitary region. The couple's perception of precariousness extends throughout the scene to different aspects of the village region, including local products.

For example, while looking around the store and trying to find a spot to plant the signal jammer, Maria asks Luciene, the store's clerk, if they sell any beer. Luciene starts listing the things they sell, "Beer, *cachaça*⁵...", when Maria interrupts her right after she mentions *cachaça* ("Oh, no, one beer, please..."). As a product that originated in Northeast Brazil during the colonial period and is

5 A traditional Brazilian distilled spirit made from sugar cane, arguably the most popular spirit in the country.

widely popular in the region, cachaça is primarily known as the drink of the enslaved and the impoverished. Those with a history of alcohol abuse, particularly individuals from lower classes, are still commonly addressed in Brazil by the derogatory expression “*cachaceiro*”, meaning one who drinks cachaça (ABRAMSON et al., 2006, p. 103). Maria’s immediate rejection of cachaça can be interpreted as both a discredit towards the quality of northeastern products and a refusal to be associated with lower classes. Such reading is further supported by João’s reaction to a local soda brand. When he asks Luciene what a green bottle on the shelf is, the clerk replies that it is a local soda and asks if he would like to try it. Instead, João orders a bottle of sparkling water, carefully sniffing it as if he was checking the quality of the water.

The second stereotype depicted through the southeastern couple’s actions is the assumption that Northeast Brazil was “populated mainly by primitive or degenerate peoples” (WEINSTEIN, 2003, p. 245). Such view has its origin in the process of construction of the paulista identity, when Northeast’s “largely non-white and impoverished population figured as backward, illiterate, and semicivilised” (WEINSTEIN, 2003, p. 245). At the same time, São Paulo was presented as “the most civilised, [and] the most cultured” of all Brazilian states (WEINSTEIN, 2003, p. 255). This cultural polarisation led to the nourishment of a sense of “epistemic arrogance” by some paulistas towards northeastern culture, that is, the “unwillingness to regard [their] worldview (or some aspect of it) as capable of epistemic improvement from... [the northeasters’] knowledge or experience” (LYNCH, 2018, p. 8). In *Bacurau*, scepticism about the worth of a local museum can also be read as an unintentional and subtle display of belittlement of Northeastern culture by the couple.

After planting the signal jammer, João and Maria engaged in small talk with the clerk to avoid suspicions regarding their brief visit. Luciene asks if the couple was in Bacurau for the museum. Both southeasters looked at each other before replying to Luciene, expressing their surprise (“Museum? Museum of what?”). The clerk proudly insists that “it is a good museum”, but the couple ignores it, not demonstrating any interest. Within the Southeast/Northeast

social divide, and given João and Maria's consecutive microaggressions throughout the scene, their disbelief towards the existence of a museum in the area can be further read as an indication of their sense of cultural superiority over the villagers. By subtly and gradually depicting a series of microaggressions commonly suffered by northeasters, this scene mirrors the sense of normality that permeates racially and ethnically biased interactions in Brazilian society. That is, at first glance, these interactions seem to reflect "the 'normal' way in which political, economic, legal, and even family relations are constituted" (ALMEIDA, 2019, p. 50). However, given its regional nuances, US-American and German foreigners do not seem aware of such a divide and its opposing identities.

4 Local and Global: Contrasting Notions of Whiteness

The interactions between foreigners and the southeastern couple reflect the group's indifference towards Brazil's regional conceptions of whiteness. For the group of white foreigners, all Brazilians are non-white, regardless of their regional identities. For instance, João and Maria do not seem to realise that foreign invaders use them to plant the signal jammer to avoid raising any further suspicions in the village, since they simply perceive them as Brazilian locals. While João sees himself as white, the foreigner Julia clearly states he is a "handsome Latino guy", to which Kate agrees ("Yeah, Latino-like"). Therefore, the couple's claim of being white is not regarded as such by white characters themselves. In the same way, the southeastern couple gradually perpetrates microaggressions towards Luciene and the village in the bodega scene, João and Maria are also progressively victimised as Brazilians, or "Latinos", by the foreigners.

After visiting the village's bodega, for instance, the southeastern couple heads back to the foreigners' base, discussing the arrangements for the final invasion. At first, the white foreigners seem to acknowledge João and Maria as fellow participants, even cheerfully calling them "cowboys" for their murder of two villagers. However, as the scene advances, the couple's pride as southeasters gives place to an experience of rejection. As this scene follows

the microaggressions in the bodega scene, João and Maria are depicted as gradually displacing from a position of social privilege within the Southeast/Northeast divide into one of oppression in the Global North/South divide.

The first topic of the conversation is Jake and Terry's recent mass murder at a local farm. Michael, the German leader of the group, has difficulties pronouncing the farm's name, saying "Hacienda Taraiu". João quickly corrects him, "Tarairú", to which Michael replies, "Ah, whatever". Michael's mispronunciation could pass as an honest mistake if not immersed in a systematic context of stereotype reproduction towards Brazilians and "Latinos". The assumption that every Latin American country speaks Spanish is a common misconception, hence "Hacienda" and not "Fazenda". The indigenous name "Tarairu" may also be difficult to pronounce. However, such a lack of interest and accuracy in the language is not equally applied by white foreigners when Maria speaks English. In the same dialogue, Maria says "The road is blocked because of the people we are paying to do it", being immediately corrected by Kate, "local contractors". Maria's reaction is also distinct from Michael's indifference, as she passively agrees ("Yeah, sorry, the local contractors"). These microaggressions against the southeastern couple rapidly escalated to include explicit racial offences and stereotypes. While microaggressions of southeasters towards the northeasters reflect racial bias within Brazil's pigmentocracy, the white foreigners' insults towards the couple are representative of the divide between the Global North and Global South. These notions do not refer to specific geographic locations; they are commonly used to group countries according to their political and socioeconomic characteristics.

Briefly, countries and populations of low-income countries, once associated with the "Third World", belong to the "Global South". On the other hand, the "Global North" is comprised of wealthy nations, also often referred to as the "First World". However, differently from the three-world model, the use of the Global North and South terminology is associated with the pursuit of a "political and epistemological project", including the "re-orientation of knowledge production from the universalism and eurocentrism in the

North and a valorisation of a multiplicity of knowing practices as found in the Global South” (MÜLLER, 2020, p. 735). As such, the Global South is not used merely to label “underdeveloped and emerging economies” but as a way to refer to “epistemic places where global futures are being forged delinking from the colonial matrix of power” (MIGNOLO, 2011, p. 183–184). From a decolonial standpoint, as home to plural cultural traditions and ways of life, the Global South could have the potential to provide alternatives to dominant models of knowledge production, including Eurocentrism. Approaching the interaction between the south-eastern couple through the lens of the Global North/South divide puts the southeastern couple’s sense of superiority in perspective, revealing contradictions in their regionally based notion of whiteness.

The conversation with the white foreigners reveals that the racially biased arguments behind the couple’s sense of superiority as southeasters, namely European heritage and whiteness, are similar to the ones that support João and Maria’s inferiority in the eyes of the US-Americans and German. Such similarity reflects how “the forces that uphold and reproduce the superiority of whiteness in Brazil are the very same ones that destabilise whiteness and fill it with incoherencies and incongruities” (SANTANA PINHO, 2009, p. 2). Such a reading is reinforced by consecutive mentions of the Latino stereotype, which is based on similar premises of the south-eastern couple stereotypes towards northeasters. When Willy asks the couple if the villagers they shot were “friends” of theirs, the biased notion that all Latin Americans speak the same language is extended to the unrealistic scenario where all of them potentially know or are related to each other. Therefore, the “Latino” stereotype, from the point of view of white foreigners, does not distinguish southeastern from northeastern Brazilians.

The dehumanising facet of the racially biased stereotypes perpetuated by the white foreigners frames Brazilians’ lives in Bacurau as disposable. Accused of “killing two of their own people” and “stealing” the foreigners’ kills, João and Maria are executed by the group with multiple gunshots after the foreign hunters receive a message via earbuds. Despite the message not being audible

to the audience, the group argue over who shot first to claim the points for their deaths as part of the hunt.

The southeastern couple's lives add to the score in the same way as the villagers, reinforcing their equal value, or lack thereof, when confronted with white foreigners. As such, the dehumanising process that led to João and Maria's demise can be read as the reenactment of the couple's own lack of regard for the villagers' lives, displaced in the context of the Global North/South divide.

The portrayal of the progression of racial and ethnic microaggressions through the lens of distinct social divides reveals that each veiled prejudice in Bacurau is supported by insidious and structural forms of racism. The apparently incidental and often unintentional displays of racial and ethnic bias in the scenes analysed are supported by both local and global conceptions of whiteness and racial hierarchies. In this context, the villagers of Bacurau, who are subject to bias at both divisions, are forced to adapt their social organisation to resist the human hunt's incidental threat, while facing the structures that support the existence of such massacres.

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