

The whiteness pact: will we white people know how to break it?

Rosana Onocko-Campos
(<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0469-5447>)¹

¹ *Departamento de Saúde Coletiva, Universidade Estadual de Campinas. Campinas SP Brasil.*

In her latest book (*O Pacto da Branquitude*, Companhia das Letras, 2022), Cida Bento denounces and questions whiteness and its harmful effects on social relations in Brazil.

Having witnessed numerous black people rejected in job selection processes, Cida Bento identified a pattern: no matter how qualified they were, they were always passed over for vacancies. She found this rejection happen to herself, too, in her professional experience as a corporate psychologist working in human resources and with close family members. Although black people were often many times better capacitated, whiteness – through its silent pact to perpetuate privileges – exercised its power to maintain the *status quo*.

Twenty years later, Bento has returned to delve deeper into a subject already addressed in her doctoral thesis, *“Narcissistic pacts in racism: whiteness and power in business organisations and public authorities”*, defended at the Universidade de São Paulo in 2002. In that study, she investigated the pact, with a view to demystifying the fallacy of meritocratic discourse. It is impossible not to make an association, in political time, between 2002 and 2022. In 2002, for the first time, Brazilians chose a worker as president, then in 2022 (20 years later!) what was perhaps the most dramatic election in contemporary history took place – one in which the very existence of democracy in Brazil was at stake.

Released before the election, Bento’s potent, powerful and provocative book shone a beacon in the dark days of the waning Bolsonaro government. With Cida Bento for support, we will fall to us to denounce the “narcissistic pact of whiteness” that, the whole time, was behind and upholding a philofascist government. This unspoken agreement for self-preservation, which serves the interests of certain groups and perpetuates the power of white people, needs to be demolished urgently.

In our organisations, many of us supposedly well-intentioned white people have great difficulty discussing the need for institutional measures to

ensure justice and reparation. It is only ten years since Law No. 12.711/2012 guaranteed that 50% of all places in federal universities and institutes would be reserved for students from public schools and that, among those 50%, places would also be destined to black, brown and indigenous candidates. A reparation policy needed for centuries has existed for only ten years! Bento devotes a whole chapter to institutional racism.

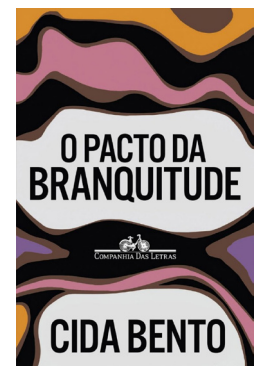
She rightly highlights how a history mistold to hide the violent past of the slavery period has left legacies that are reincarnated today – and enjoyed by new generations of whites as merits of their group... *“as if this had nothing to do with the anti-humanitarian acts committed during the slavery period, which accounts for 4/5 of Brazil’s history”* (p. 24).

Cida supports this thinking very interestingly with the concepts of psychoanalyst René Kaës¹, especially his “pact of denial”. In Kaës¹, the pact of denial comprises all that is unspeakable in whatever constitutes and maintains a bond. Such pacts thus include, for example, all the unanalysed or unanalysable issues in family histories that come together and help sustain a conjugal bond. Bento extends the concept to have it operate in relation to legacies inscribed in collective subjectivity.

Reading Bento – health practitioner and psychoanalyst that I am, currently working with people exposed to violence – it is impossible for me not to think of the contributions of another psychoanalyst, Pierre Benghozi², who deals very powerfully with the effects of violence when it traverses generations without proper elaboration. Benghozi suggests that this kind of transmission, which he calls transgenerational transmission, lies behind the repeating circle of violence that plagues not only families, but also societies marred by unelaborated anti-humanitarian violence.

A brief exercise in thinking will permit allow us to draw on this aspect of psychoanalytic theory in understanding why the circuit of violence continues to operate so strongly in Brazil. To take just the first few weeks of 2023, one has rioters rampaging through the buildings of the three powers in Brasília, the appalling realisation that the Yanomami had been subjected to conditions of extermination during the outgoing far-right government and the extremely kindly tolerance of the armed forces towards the white protesters encamped outside military barracks.

I feel it is no exaggeration to say that Cida Bento’s book offers compelling explanations for understanding the Brazil of today that is so frightening. These



are not ghosts, but transgenerational transmissions that must be interrupted urgently. The question is: how?

Bento argues that: “it is urgent to make the silence speak out, to reflect on and debate this heritage marred by expropriation, violence and brutality, so as not to condemn society to repeating similar anti-humanitarian acts indefinitely” (p. 24).

This “making silence speak” also means bringing black and indigenous struggles and resistances into official historiography. Collective memory cannot be inscribed on a ground of collective amnesia. Bento then recalls Charles Mills’³ contribution, the concept of “white ignorance”, to remind us that societies choose what to remember and what to forget.

To Cida Bento, memory is a territory where symbols are constructed – and thus a living territory that reveals the values against which past experiences are interpreted and which influences the kind of values that prevail in a given society.

What would these values be in Brazilian society today? What strategies and actions might white people deploy to help demolish this pact of whiteness? Bento invites us to shift our gaze to those who, in order to remain at the centre, push everyone else out to the edges.

Another author who can help at this point, I think, is Homi Bhabha. “The Location of Culture” tells us: “as literary creatures and political animals, we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when **something is beyond control, but it is not beyond accommodation**” (2013, p. 36, emphasis added).

Bhabha sees the idea of contiguity as offering a way out of the traps of binary modernism without abdicating from “postmodernist” theorisation.

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an ‘in-between’ temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history (2013, p. 38).

How can we think of shattering the pact of whiteness if we continue to inhabit a segregated society with no place for social and cultural shared existence to allow hybridisation and experimentation with cultural difference (rather than its pasteurised version as “cultural diversity”)? asks Bhabha.

In order to undo this maleficent pact of whiteness, it is up to us whites to move, in time and place, to be close, as radically as that term requires – the same neighbourhoods, the same schools, the same squares – working for unprecedented action, “out of control”, but not beyond accommodation: through groups, collectives and movements, let the silence shout: Enough!

May we rise to the challenge. Let us strive with all our strength to break the pact of whiteness. A good start is to read Cida Bento’s book.

References

1. Kaes R. *Transmissão da vida psíquica entre gerações*. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo; 2001.
2. Benghozi P. *Malhagem, filiação e afiliação: psicanálise dos vínculos casal, família, grupo, instituição e campo social*. São Paulo: Editora Vetor; 2010.
3. Mills C. Ignorância branca. *Griot Rev Filosofia* 2018; 17(1):413-438.
4. Bhabha H. *O local da cultura*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG; 2013.