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Transnational pedagogy of affections: the experience of black women in transforming the academic space

Pedagogia transnacional dos afetos: a experiência de mulheres negras na transformação do espaço acadêmico

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Abstract

This article discusses the decolonization of Latin American studies from the lens of Black intellectuals. As a case study, I analyze the course I created and taught as a visiting professor at Columbia University's Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) in 2021. The course explored the role of race in the construction of Latin America and the alternative modes of existence and resistance elaborated by intellectuals, artists and activists of color. The central axis was the concept of *amefricanidade* (Gonzalez, 1988). Based on interdisciplinary, multimedia, and mostly Black references, the course developed a decolonial approach that: incorporated emotions into the teaching and learning relation; encouraged us to reflect on our positions in power structures; and loosened the hierarchy between those who learn and those who teach. Thus, the course took on decoloniality not only in the content, but also in the way the classes were held. This work employs autoethnography as both a research method and writing genre.

Keywords: Black feminism; Latin America; emotion; autoethnography

Resumo

Este artigo discute a descolonização dos estudos latino-americanos a partir de intelectuais negras. Como estudo de caso, analiso a disciplina que criei e ministrei como professora visitante no Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) da universidade de Columbia em 2021. A disciplina debateu o papel da raça na construção da América Latina e as alternativas de existência e resistência elaboradas por intelectuais, artistas e ativistas negativamente racializados. O eixo central foi o conceito de *amefricanidade* (Gonzalez, 1988). A partir de uma bibliografia interdisciplinar, multimídia e majoritariamente negra, a disciplina desenvolveu uma abordagem decolonial que: incorporou as emoções na relação ensino e aprendizado; estimulou a autorreflexão coletiva sobre nossas posições nas estruturas de poder e flexibilizou a hierarquia entre quem aprende e quem ensina. Assim, a disciplina assumiu a decolonialidade não apenas no conteúdo, mas também na forma como as aulas foram realizadas. Este trabalho se baseia na autoetnografia como método de pesquisa e gênero de escrita.

Palavras-chave: feminismo negro; América Latina; emoção; autoetnografia

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Introduction

In 2019, a Brazilian anthropologist was at New York University presenting her postdoctoral research, conducted in 2016. The study analyzed the process of racialization of Peruvian immigrants in Brazil and in the United States: how they negotiated the racial categories into which they were classified by local people in comparison to their self-identification. Most Peruvian men and women self-identified as "mestizos". While centralizing miscegenation in the formation of a *peruanidad*, this racial category sidesteps the racism that structures Peruvian life, including within the context of immigration (Daniel, 2020; 2021).

When explaining the research path, the anthropologist commented that a major challenge was the discrepancy between what she experienced during ethnographic fieldwork and what Peruvians said. They usually denied racism and spoke about race in a celebratory tone. These statements were very different from what she experienced as a Black woman. Although she was not Peruvian, she herself suffered racism in Peruvian spaces. Jaime, an Afro-Peruvian activist living in the United States who became her friend, was one of the few Peruvians she met who acknowledged the (re)production of anti-Black racism within the Peruvian community abroad (Daniel, 2021).

The researcher explained that an important part of the study was to analyze how she was treated in Peruvian spaces and how she felt during and after the fieldwork. She usually received looks of mistrust and contempt that made her feel deeply uncomfortable emotions. These repeated episodes "affected" her in the field (Favret-Saada, 2005). Thus, she sought to understand the micropolitics of these emotions (Díaz-Benítez; Gadelha; Rangel, 2021) as an expression of anti-Black racism in the Peruvian community, intersected with other social markers such as gender, nationality and class.

The researcher's presentation lasted about 40 minutes. Afterward, the session was opened for comments from the audience. A man, seemingly in his 50s, with brownish skin, straight dark hair streaked with gray, speaking English with a recognizable Spanish accent, made the first intervention. With a professorial tone, arms and hands moving in sync with his arguments, he told the researcher that, in order to understand Peru, she had to begin by studying its history: she should learn Quechua language and understand cultural manifestations of syncretism, such as the devotion to Señor de los Milagros. A subtle harshness wrapped his voice and body. Occupying the space and time of speech, the man concluded his intervention eight minutes later, asserting that the research lacked foundation. Later, a white woman, asked to speak, self-identifying as Peruvian from Arequipa, southern Peru. In her statement, she said that there was no anti-Black racism in Peru. The proof was that she had never witnessed it.

In 2016, the Black Brazilian anthropologist had already heard something quite similar when she was in the United States conducting this research. She was presenting partial analyses of her work at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC), to a group of researchers from the Department of Intercultural Communication. At the end of her presentation, a white Latin American woman professor at the institution, rushed to speak. During the presentation, the woman had moved uncomfortably in her seat. Her movements caught Brazilian anthropologist's attention, who got concerned, thinking the woman was experiencing health issues. Upon speaking, the Argentine professor let her discomfort, already communicated through her body, echo in her voice. In an irritable tone, she argued that the research was very problematic. According

to her, race was not a central issue among Latin American immigrants in the United States, a fact she was evident in her own experience as a long-term US resident. The central issue among them was class. This argument implied that the Black Brazilian anthropologist could not possibly know this, since she was a newcomer to the country.

These are three among many negative reactions the Black Brazilian anthropologist received transnationally in academic spaces. Such reactions indicate at least two phenomena. First, a resistance, both in common sense and in academia, to recognizing race as a category to analyze Latin American experiences and those of Latinos in the United States, often based on comparisons between racial hierarchies in Latin America and in the United States (Moreno, 2020). This position obscures the fact that, despite particularities, both in Latin America and in the United States, whiteness is the racial identity of power, functioning as the standard of humanity (Bento, 2022). Second, the discomfort in dealing with the presence of a Black woman occupying the role of university professor and researcher. Academic debate is a fundamental element in the construction of scientific knowledge. However, the appeals to authority in the interventions of the three individuals suggest that it was not only the research that was being criticized, but the anthropologist herself. In the two scenes, both the research and the researcher occupied a space that was not supposed to belong to them.

This article aims to reflect on the possibilities for decolonizing teaching and learning processes in Latin American studies through the presence of Black intellectuals in the transnational academic space. As a case study, I analyze the construction of the course "Race and decolonial dialogues in the Americas[2]", that I created and taught as a visiting professor at Columbia University's the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS)[3]. The course was held from September to December 2021. It discussed the centrality of race in the construction of Latin America and the alternatives of existence and resistance that intellectuals, artists, and activists of color elaborated. The course developed a decolonial approach that incorporated emotions as a core element in the teaching and learning relationship, encouraged students to reflect on their positions within structures of power, and softened the hierarchy between those who teach and those who learn, based on interdisciplinary predominantly Black references. Despite Columbia University concentrates mostly white students from the global elite, the course brought together mostly students of color. Together, we made the classroom an affective space for critical (self-)reflection and mutual support. We transformed our experiences into a source of creative power, dialogue and affirmation of our subjectivities. Thus, the course embodied decoloniality not only in the content taught, a reflection of the curriculum, but also in the way the classes were didactically conducted.

This article is based on autoethnographic work, analyzing the process of construction and implementation of the course together with my trajectory as a Black intellectual. Autoethnography has been explored by Black intellectuals as a research method and writing genre to uncover the social structures of power and oppression manifested in their life experiences, as well as the emotions they provoke (McClaurin, 2001; Araújo, 2019; Silva; Euclides, 2019; Daniel, 2019; Dias, 2019). Autoethnography challenges the boundaries between reason, body and emotion that structure modern science. I wrote the first version of this paper in the third person, replacing my name with a pseudonym to meet the anonymity requirements of academic journals's and

[2] See: https://peqod.com/course/PORT-GU4467/2021-Fall.
[3] The visiting professor program was supported by the Tinker Foundation.

peer review system. I decided to keep the original writing to share the process of constructing the text and the challenges of developing new possibilities for academic methods and writing with the readers. This is a necessary debate, though it lies outside the scope of the present work.

Black, Latin American and Brazilian woman as an epistemic position

For the first time in thirteen editions, the 2019's *Reunião de Antropologia do Mercosul* (RAM) featured a working group (WG) focused on Black feminism. Four professors – two Black Brazilian women and two non-Black Argentine women – submitted the WG, that brought together papers discussing Black women's knowledge production in different fields and approaches. Cecília, the Black Brazilian anthropologist who had experienced the two episodes recounted above, submitted a paper to discuss the harsh lessons she had learned when she suffered racism in the United States, in 2016. At that time, she was conducting participant observation research at a party held by a Peruvian woman in Paterson, New Jersey. The city has the largest Peruvian population outside Peru (Altamirano, 2000).

During her presentation, Cecília shared that she had not managed to write the full article for the event. Not due to lack of time or organization, as often happens with intellectuals. She was unable to write because being alone with the screen, the keyboard, and her memories meant revisiting a pain that she had silenced. Or rather, a pain that had silenced her. Since experiencing that episode of racism while conducting her work as an anthropologist (Daniel, 2019), Cecília has found it very difficult to write. After her presentation, Luciana de Oliveira Dias, the WG coordinator, told Cecília, with a powerful gentleness, that she understood her pain. She herself had gone through a similar experience in Mexico. She was also systematically questioned about whether she was truly an anthropologist when doing fieldwork. Luciana concluded by emphasizing the importance of spaces like that one, where we could not only analyze such cases, but also offer and receive care within academia.

Cecília had already attempted to present the reflections generated by this racist episode at the 2017's Latin American Anthropology Association meeting, held in Colombia. When presenting her work, Cecília faced the pain she had felt on the day of the incident. Her voice faltered. She felt exposed once again—not by a Peruvian immigrant at a party hall in Paterson, but now by anthropologists in a university classroom in Bogotá. In addition to receiving no support for the pain that had resurfaced, Cecília was also questioned about the validity of her work. In the "*Black and decolonial feminism*" WG at RAM, Cecília and the other participants did not need to hide their teary eyes, trembling legs or hesitant voices caused by the emotions that overtook many of them while lecturing. Luciana closed her comments on Cecília's presentation by affirming that she was not alone: "If you need help writing, you can come to me, and I will hold your hand."

Fulfilling her promise, shortly after the event, Luciana invited Cecília to write an article for the dossier she was organizing. The dossier brought together works that explored Black feminism as a field that challenges traditional epistemological limits which, under the guise of neutrality, reproduce Eurocentric, white and male standards. A total of nineteen articles were published. In the dossier, Luciana published the article "Almost part of the family: bodies and fields marked by racism and sexism". The

anthropologist offers a transcreation of Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "outsider within" to discuss her place as a Black anthropologist in Brazilian academia. The article is a result of the Black anthropologists's committee started in 2018's Brazilian Anthropology Meeting. The committee's starting point was the event's opening session, in which the only Black person on stage was a waiter serving water to the white academics. One outcome of the Black articulation in Anthropology was the roundtable "Racialized bodies and fields: doing Anthropology from a Black perspective," held at 2019's RAM, in which Luciana participated presenting the paper mentioned above.

Analyzing the experiences of African American women in U.S. history, Collins (1986) observes that many of them were engaged in domestic work in white families' homes. In the intimacy of these households, Black domestic workers developed a distinct perception of white people and the reality of racial relations. They attested that the superior status of white people stemmed not from their superior intellect or talent, but from racism. On the other hand, white people often recounted the affection they had for black maids and nannies. Nevertheless, such affection did not erase the subaltern position of these workers. Collins analyzes this as a space of ambiguity, where Black women are both inside white families and yet outside them. They will never be fully integrated nor enjoy the privileges of these families.

Collins defines this space as that of the "outsider within," an ambiguous status in which one is simultaneously inside and outside, often translated into Portuguese as "estrangeira de dentro". This liminal position occupied by Black domestic workers allowed them to develop a unique perception of racial relations, one that even Black men could not access, as they did not enter white private spaces in the same way. Thus, Collins addresses the position of domestic workers in U.S. social life as an epistemic position also experienced by Black intellectual women. Inside the academia, Black women access a space of power where they learn theories and concepts that make them part of that community. However, they also witness the reproduction of racism within academia, for instance, through concepts based on racist stereotypes that inform public policies, which often deepen racial inequality. While inhabiting multiple marginalities, Black women — inside and outside the academia — develop their own forms of knowledge production, exploring creativity and multidisciplinarity, often revealing "aspects of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches" (Collins, 1986, p. s15).

By the concept of "outsider within," Collins compares the position of Black domestic workers and intellectuals to that of the stranger, as developed in the classic essay by German sociologist Georg Simmel. Simmel describes the stranger as an individual who develops a unique perspective on the society they enter. They are momentarily inside, but also outside it; close, yet distant. The author approaches the stranger as a sociological position that shapes social relations. This ambiguous positioning allows them to denaturalize patterns of behavior that locals often cannot perceive. Because of their inside-outside stance, the stranger maintains a certain degree of objectivity, which inspires trust among locals (Simmel, 1971).

Dias (2019) mobilizes the concept of the "outsider within" to analyze the position of Black anthropologists in Brazilian anthropology. Using autoethnography as both a research method and writing genre, she examines her own biography as a Black woman in anthropology. She understands her experiences not as isolated phenomena, but as connected to those of other Black women intellectuals. This shared experience generates pain which reveal the hidden structures of racial and gender

discrimination reproduced in Anthropology but also foster the connection among Black women anthropologists. Thus, emotion, in addition to manifesting itself in the subjectivity of each Black anthropologist, also fosters the construction of intersubjective affective connections that have led to a reassessment of the discipline from the perspective of these Black women.

Dias confides that she has faced the constant refusal of her colleagues in anthropology to recognize her as a peer throughout her career. As a result, entering anthropology has produced a feeling of loneliness, of being inside and outside. Reinterpreting the concept of "outsider within," she analyzes the position imposed upon her by anthropology as being "almost part of the family." This expression is commonly used in Brazil to refer to domestic workers who, due to their dedication and care, are said to have such a close bond with their employers that they are almost incorporated into the family. In this popular expression, the power asymmetry between employers and employees is masked by the affectivity of family ties, a very similar dynamic to that experienced by Black intellectuals within the anthropological field.

It is also worth noting that this epistemic space is understood by Luciana de Oliveira Dias through Black feminist thought, including that of Patricia Hill Collins and Brazilian thinkers such as Lélia Gonzalez. Many years before Collins, Gonzalez had already emphasized the importance of Black women engaged in domestic labor in the historical and social construction of Brazilian society. From a multidisciplinary perspective, Gonzalez developed an analytical framework that challenged sociological explanations restricted to the economic dimension of slavery. Lélia discussed the limitations of dominant sociological analyses on Black women, which ignored the reproduction of domination patterns that exceed material dimensions of life. For instance, she pointed out that during Brazilian slavery, slave owners often engaged in behaviors that ran counter to economic logic, motivated by sexual desire toward an enslaved Black woman, a *mucama*, forced to alternate between domestic and sexual labor.

Lélia explained that Black women were foundational to Brazilian society, transmitting their culture to the elites and ensuring the (re)production of African values in the diaspora since the period of slavery and even under conditions of oppression. However, veiled racism of Brazilian society assigned Black women historical roles — such as the wet-nurse and the *mucama*— that continue to undergird Brazilian social imaginaries today. Thus, Black Brazilian women remain expected to perform subaltern roles in which labor and sexual exploitation are intertwined, updating the figure of the *mucama* into the present even when they achieve upward social mobility.

Lélia Gonzalez's participation in transnational networks played a crucial role, both building alliances and shaping her analyses. In the work "*Racismo e sexismo na sociedade…*", Lélia recounts having participated in the 1979 Latin American Studies Association (LASA) conference and in a symposium in Los Angeles at the same year, where she discussed the notion of the *mulata* not as an ethnic category but as a profession. In "*A categoria político-cultural de Amefricanidade*", which unmasks the racism hidden within Latin American miscegenation, Lélia starts from her experience engaging with other Black cultures across the continent to propose *amefricanity*, a notion that recognizes the formation of a hemispheric bond through Black cultural creations that resist whitening.

In *"Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano"* (2018a), Lélia critiques the supposed universality of the category "woman" dominant in the feminist movement. Indeed, it has systematically ignored racism in the gendered experience of Black women. Lélia discusses the importance of recognizing the oppressions faced by Black women from a transnational perspective, citing a letter written in 1987 by Afro-Peruvian activists denouncing gender discrimination within the Peruvian Black movement as an example. We can therefore conclude that Lélia explored transnational exchanges to construct a body of knowledge and practice that challenges national, disciplinary, and political boundaries.

Lélia also situates her intellectual reflection in her involvement with the *Grêmio Recreativo de Arte Negra and Quilombo Samba School*, as well as in her political activism within the Brazilian Unified Black Movement (2018b). These experiences allowed her to construct a critical perception of herself and Brazilian society. Her perspective was rejected by the social sciences tradition, which confined Black men and women to the place of object. Luciana's critique of Brazilian anthropology, decades after Lélia, indicates that Black feminism continues to be a crucial counter-hegemonic epistemology for unveiling current forms of oppression and for serving as a space of self-definition and self-evaluation (Collins, 2000), sustaining the resistance of Black women. Black intellectuals such as Luciana, Patricia and Lélia refused to accept subalternity. They open and pave the path that unmasks the power structures reproduced transnationally through science. It is within this context that Cecília takes part.

The paths of Cecília[4]

The New York summer warmed Cecília's arrival. This season, which already tends to draw people out of their homes and into the streets, parks, plazas, and gardens, became even more effervescent with the COVID-19 vaccine. While New York was reopening with the vaccine, Brazil was still agonizing over the slow vaccination process and its political use by the federal government. Cecília spent her quarantine alone, the same period during which she participated in the entire selection process and prepared for the trip. In previous times she had lived in the United States with funding – 2003, 2016, and 2019 – she had performed a series of farewell rituals with her friends and family, sharing her joy with them while also preparing herself for the longing. This time was different. Cecília had to deal with all the preparations – both practical and emotional – on her own.

At the end of the first year of the pandemic, Cecília moved from Lapa to Copacabana. She wanted to be close to nature, to the sea. Living in the famous Rio de Janeiro neighborhood, Cecília dove into a sea of anguish. She began to doubt. Alone, she questioned herself. Why teach at an Ivy League university? "I have already been a university professor for more than ten years. I don't need this", the anthropologist thought. Alongside her thoughts, bureaucratic difficulties seemed to corroborate her insecurities. Everything conspired against her. It was much harder to obtain a leave from her Brazilian university this time. It was also a challenge to obtain the visa. Cecília received subtly hostile reactions from white academic colleagues. They seemed to indicate that the anthropologist was going too far. Cecília was becoming an "uppity Black woman" who, like Araújo (2019), had made anthropology a theoretical and practical path to challenge the submissive roles assigned to Black women.

[4] Pseudonym.

It all seemed like the universe warning her that she would be better off staying in Brazil, in her home, confined within four walls. Giving up seemed the safest course of action. When she told a friend that she was considering giving up, the friend did not allow it. The friend was a Black woman master's student from Rio de Janeiro who had been living in New York since 2019. Her husband, a Black Brazilian man, was pursuing a master's degree at Columbia University. The three had grown closer in 2019, when Cecília lived in New York with a Fulbright grant. "You are not going to give up. We are here waiting for you", her friend declared. She helped Cecília with the bureaucratic procedures for the visa and providing emotional support. The friend advised the intellectual to invest in new clothes that would help her feel good and comfortable in the classroom. Cecília accepted the help and the advice. She did not give up.

Cecília had her first experience in the United States still as an undergraduate student. She obtained a scholarship for a program in environmental studies at a university in Connecticut. The year was 2003. Cecília was only 18 years old. In 2016, she returned to the United States, supported by a CAPES scholarship, to conduct a postdoctoral fellowship in Baltimore. In 2019, she worked as a visiting researcher at New York University, supported by Fulbright. On all these occasions, Cecília sharpened her anthropological sensibility and research acuity. However, she also experienced moments of emotional instability that, at times, made her stay abroad painful and lonely. Being outside Brazil and encountering other ways of life fascinated Cecília. She had dreamed of traveling abroad since childhood. This is something that had seemed unattainable for a Black girl from a working-class family in the Rio de Janeiro outskirt. Cecília's travel plans provoked incredulous smiles from those around her. Unshaken, the girl devised a meticulous escape route, began with learning how to speak English and Spanish between the ages of 11 and 16.

Each time she lived in the United States, Cecília felt alone, misfit, displaced. Being a woman, Black, and Brazilian researching Peruvian immigration placed Cecília at a complex crossroads beyond her condition as a foreigner. She had already learned the challenges of being a Black foreigner during her first time in the United States, in 2003. At the university where she studied, there were few Black students. Upon her arrival, they showed a willingness to socialize with her. This willingness ended once they realized Cecília was Black, but not an African American. More than a decade later, in 2016, Cecília went through a very similar experience during her postdoctoral fellowship in Baltimore, a majority Black city.

On the other hand, Cecília did not feel comfortable in the social spaces where Brazilians predominated, because most of them where white. Several of them were aligned with conservative political thought. Brazilians in the areas where Cecília lived usually chose not to identify as "Latino[5]". Complex issues permeated the rejection of such a category by Brazilian men and women, such as denying the stereotype that defines all Latinos as Spanish-speakers, but also a desire to distinguish themselves from the negative racialization that Latinos undergo.

[5] As a native category, "Latino" can refer to Americans of Latin American descent, often interchangeably with the category "Hispanic". Using both categories as synonyms brings with it one of the problems of categorizing Brazilian people, since we would fit into the first category but not in the second one. These categories are also commonly used to refer to Latin American immigrants living in the United States. Both "Latino" and "Hispanic" refer to ethnic categories that are socially activated as racial categories. (Alcoff, 2000; Oboler, 2000).

The transnational pedagogy of affections

On a sunny September morning in New York, Cecília made her way to her first class. She was nervous. Although she had previously delivered lectures and participated in classes abroad, she had never taught an entire course on her own. In the United States. In English. The university had informed her that other visiting professors from Latin America had taught in their native languages. She could have done the same but chose to embrace the challenge of teaching in English. The anthropologist wanted to attract a more diverse group of students and test her own capacity to teach in a foreign language. Even before the first class, Cecília was informed that her course had not only reached its maximum number of subscribers – 15. It also had a waitlist. The department told her she could accept additional students. And so she did. She was thrilled by the high demand for her class. Not wanting to exclude anyone, she admitted three more students, filling the classroom's capacity.

During the selection process for the visiting professor position, Cecília had to present summary and syllabus for two courses. In "Amefrican Dialogues: Black decolonial perspectives on Latin America", the goal would be understanding Latin American cultures and histories from an Afrodiasporic perspective that confronts power structures. The course would center the analytical concept of *amefricanity*, developed by Lélia Gonzalez. The second proposed course, "Decolonial Epistemologies: Democratizing knowledge, power and being from an interracial perspective in the Americas", would explore decoloniality as an epistemology that challenges Cartesian conceptions of science and modern ideas of politics, nationality, humanity, and the arts, through the work of intellectuals, artists, and activists —all of them *people of color*[6].

Cecília had the freedom to choose which course to teach after being selected for the position. She decided to create a third course, blending themes and readings from her two course proposals. The new course, titled "Race and Decolonial Dialogues in the Americas", was created to explore the work of intellectuals, artists and activists of color who develop counter-hegemonic and transformative analyses, political actions and narratives. In the course, "decolonial" was understood as embodied processes of knowledge, art, politics, and self-consciousness that decenters whiteness. In this perspective, knowledge is situated, and rational thought emerges from practices in dialogue with the body and emotion.

The course began from the premise that bodies navigate multiple layers of power underlying in modern ideas of neutrality and universality. Among these layers, there is race. Despite the specificities both in Latin America and in the US, whiteness is the standard of power that grants white people ontological privilege. Although non-white individuals are forced to "whiten" their bodies, cultures, knowledge, histories, and experiences to be "integrated," they do not accept this process passively. Actually, they develop various strategies to nurture their humanity on their own terms. These

[6] This category "people of color", which is widely used in the art and activism spaces where Cecília circulates in the United States, refers to racially and/or ethnically non-white people, such as blacks, Latinos, and Asians, who suffer different types of discrimination in the face of whiteness. This category and its uses by social movements in the United States explore the multiple ways in which racism structures capitalist society transnationally, seeking to build interracial political projects against whiteness, while also seeking to recognize the internal particularities in each experience of negative racialization. It is important to emphasize the importance of understanding racial categories within their social and historical contexts. (Segato, 2005).

strategies of humanization developed by individuals of color in different disciplines and social fields were the focus of the course, with the concept of *amefricanity* (Gonzalez, 1988) serving as a central axis.

During the course, decoloniality was approached as disruptive processes of thinking, acting, feeling and existing; as embodied epistemologies grounded in lived experiences, critical reflection, and the actions of individuals of color. In class, Cecília created a space where students could explore possible dialogues among Black feminisms, Chicano and Latin American studies, performance studies, as well as narratives produced in multiple social arenas such as academia, art and activism. The course drew from various materials— in both written and audiovisual formats —to analyze intersections between theory and practice, emotion and politics; the subjective and the collective; the local and the global. Some key concepts explored in the course included "activist research," "escrevivência", and *amefricanity*, encouraging students to uncover social realities, recognize the creative work of individuals of color, and reflect on their own positions within power structures.

The course ran from September to December 2021, with meetings twice a week for 14 weeks. Cecília's strategy of adopting English as the main language of instruction generated positive results. The class had a remarkably diverse demographics, including undergraduate and graduate students from two different universities and from disciplines such as Comparative Literature, Human Rights, International Studies, Latin American Studies, Visual Arts, and Political Science. Students were from the U.S., Brazil, South Korea, Colombia, Haiti, Mexico, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica and Southeast Asia.

The course was organized into 14 thematic sessions. Each one was based on a bibliography that included academic texts and other forms of media produced throughout the Americas. One example was the fifth session, titled "Ethnicity, Blackness, and Diaspora". The session focused on Black identity formation in the Americas, based on: the documentary "Nana Dijo", directed by the Mexican multidisciplinary artist Bocafloja (2016), which discusses the specificities of becoming Black in Mexico, Honduras, Uruguay, Argentina, and the U.S.; Cecília's digital story, produced by the research group *Latinas en Baltimore*; an article written by Pinho (2006), which questions the U.S.-centric approach to studying Blackness in Brazil; and Oro's (2016) paper, which examines the construction of Garifuna identity between Central America and the United States. The session placed academic and non-academic works on equal analytical footing, while challenging methodological nationalism.

The course followed a seminar format, encouraging active participation and valuing students' prior knowledge and lived experience, in dialogue with each session's analytical frameworks. Every class started with a student presenting a work from the bibliography, highlighting the main aspects that caught their attention. After the presentation, discussion was opened to the entire class. Cecília acted as a facilitator, contextualizing each work politically, historically and philosophically. The course employed diverse pedagogical and evaluative approaches. In addition to the oral presentation (15% of the final grade), students were assessed on their attendance and class participation (15%). They also submitted a critical review of two extracurricular events Cecília organized, worth 20%. Assessment also included a final project, titled "Embodying Decoloniality". It required each student to produce a creative work based on a concept learned in class, connected to a biographical element. The final

class took the form of a performance showcase of the pieces they created. Students presented works in digital collage, spoken word, zines, music, digital storytelling, podcast, and crochet.

A chill ran through her body; a cold feeling settled in her stomach when Cecília entered the classroom for the first time. She greeted the students and gave a brief overview of her professional background and the course structure. She then invited the students to introduce themselves: name, place of origin, field of study, level of study and reason for enrolling in the course. This ritual was one Cecília practiced in every class she had taught since beginning her university teaching career in 2009. This practice helped her to break the ice and get to know her students. It was a fundamental part of her pedagogy, allowing her to position both her own and the students' standpoint.

After the students introduced themselves, Cecília explained the course structure. Before doing so, she asked how many people spoke Spanish. Many hands went up. When she asked who spoke Portuguese, three or four hands were raised. Cecília shared that she was nervous and insecure about teaching an entire course in English, justifying her question. She explained that, even though she was fluent in English, she felt more confident speaking Spanish and Portuguese. Furthermore, the course would discuss many concepts she was unfamiliar with in English. The attentive, focused, and sympathetic looks from the students gave Cecília the feedback she needed. She felt embraced by the class.

Already on the first meetings, Cecília enacted what she had proposed in the syllabus. The class gave the students the opportunity to discuss the racial foundations of Latin America and counter-hegemonic projects developed by intellectuals, activists and artists of color. The class was also rooted in decoloniality under Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000) to foster cooperation, active listening, dialogue, self-consciousness and creativity. By sharing her insecurity about speaking English, Cecília broke with the traditional role of the professor as the sole holder of knowledge. She publicly expressed her vulnerability, acknowledging that she did not have full command of knowledge. She took a risk, exposing a sensitive aspect of herself. In doing so, Cecília enacted exactly what she had written into her syllabus:

> Vulnerability may arise in the classes. We encourage you to embrace it as part of the learning process, engaging with our potential as producers of knowledge, while strengthening our roles as agents for social change in the classroom and in larger communities.[7]

In nearly every class, Cecília would encounter a word in Portuguese she wished to say but could not translate into either English or Spanish. Despite the frustration of having her arguments interrupted by linguistic barriers, she did not give in. She acknowledged her limitations, asking the class for help. One of the students she most often turned to was Paulo, who is Brazilian. The young man would kindly assist Cecília with her language-related doubts, translating directly from Portuguese to English. Paulo also helped Cecília when she asked for support in pronouncing words which she knew how to write but not how to say in English. His help became so

[7] Excerpt taken from the course syllabus. Available at: https://peqod.com/course/PORT-GU4467/2021-Fall.

consistent that he devised a support system for Cecília. At the end of each class, he would send her an email titled "Vocabulary of the Day." It included all the words for which Cecília had asked assistance. The professor was deeply moved by the student's generosity, which became one of the most powerful examples of the care and support she received from her students at the prestigious university.

Cecília and the class engaged in discussions about sensitive topics and processed difficult emotions, which were met with collective care several other times throughout the semester. In one of the last classes, Cecília decided to conduct a creative writing exercise she had learned from a veteran activist in Brazil's women's movement. At the end of the writing activity, she invited the class to share what they had written. Before beginning the readings, she asked the group how the experience had felt for them. A Haitian American master's student in Latin American Studies asked to speak. She was consistently engaged in the classes. With a tone of distress, she revealed that the exercise had triggered anxiety. Writing in a collective setting was a painful experience for her. She confessed to feeling pressured. As a result, I was unable to write anything. Another student, an African American woman enrolled in the Diplomacy program and a regular contributor to class discussions, echoed the sentiment. Both were Black women graduate students who maintained an open and candid relationship with Cecília and the whole group. Their contributions to the class were often intellectually rich and critical, making the learning environment more demanding, but also more honest, sincere, and profound.

Attentive to her students' feedback, Cecília apologized. She explained that it had never been her intention to evoke difficult emotions, especially among Black women in relation to writing, an issue she herself had long struggled with. Indeed, she had learned this methodology from another Black woman. The professor told the class that the next step in the activity would have involved voluntary sharing of the written texts, but she considered whether it might be best to pause the exercise entirely. At that moment, a Costa Rican American student, the youngest in the class, raised his hand. Cecília assumed he would support her decision to stop the activity, so as not to cause further discomfort. But he did not. Instead, the student asked to read the poem he had written during the exercise. The room fell silent as the group listened intently to each word he read. This freshman, often quiet and reserved, always paid close attention during class discussions, although he constantly remained silent. In such a diverse classroom, Cecília often worried whether he was managing to follow the complex conversations, especially while more senior or graduate students spoke.

In the final minutes of one of the last classes, this quiet freshman became the master. His poem served as a balm for the tension that had surfaced. Cecília, the two previously mentioned students and the rest of the class were visibly moved. Then, a Haitian American student, in her junior year of Comparative Literature, asked to read her poem. Written in English, French and Haitian Creole, her poem cultivated a shared sense of solidarity within the group. With striking intelligence and sensitivity, this student used her poem to claim and reinterpret her own social locations — daughter of Haitian immigrants, raised in Brooklyn, and now studying at an elite university. She transformed them into a source of empowerment and care. Her performance embraced not only the first classmate who had spoken—also a Haitian American woman from Brooklyn—but also the professor, also a Black woman, and the entire class.

Final remarks

The approval of Law 10.639/2003 and the implementation of the National Affirmative Action Policy in Brazilian federal universities are two examples of initiatives that have advanced anti-racist education in Brazil. As a professor since 2009, I have personally witnessed the significant increase in the number of Black students entering universities. Although Law 10.639/2003 is primarily directed at elementary and secondary education, its approval created a front of struggle for activists and intellectuals engaged in education on ethnic-racial relations within higher education, who have since demanded greater visibility, space, and resources for this field. Despite the growing presence of Black students in Brazilian universities, studies indicated that an affirmative action policy aimed at combating racism should not be restricted to merely increasing the number of Black and Indigenous students. It must also include concrete measures to ensure their stay (Costa; Picanço, 2020; Costa; Vieira, 2014). Beyond access to higher education and student assistance programs, policies that directly confront the symbolic violence experienced by many Black students within the university setting are necessary. Numerous studies have examined the tensions faced by Black men and women in academic spaces, as well as the multiple strategies of resistance they develop to occupy these institutions and produce knowledge (Ratts, 2011; Dias, 2019; Silva; Euclides, 2022).

The course I developed and taught as a visiting professor at Columbia University's Institute of Latin American Studies is deeply situated within this context. Witnessing the increasing number of Black students in my classrooms in Brazil prompted me to reflect more critically on my own pedagogical practices, as well as on the challenges I face as a Black anthropologist. Thus, "Race and decolonial dialogues" is a course with a trajectory, briefly examined here, that includes both individual and collective processes of producing counter-hegemonic epistemologies.

Aligned with a Black feminist epistemology, this course encouraged horizontality, mutual support, active listening, dialogue, self-consciouness and creativity. Decoloniality was not only incorporated into the curriculum but also into the didactic itself. Hence, the inclusion of the term "dialogues" in the course title was intentional. Dialogue presupposes mutual recognition – where participants speak and listen in turn. It establishes a relationship of reciprocity in which the roles of speaker and listener are shared. In the day-to-day practices of the course, dialogue constituted an ethical foundation for teaching and learning, grounded in the idea that self-knowledge is a critical step toward understanding the world.

This approach forged a spirit of cooperation among the students that extended beyond the confines of the classroom. For instance, the Black American student who had initially voiced criticism of the creative writing exercise later participated in the final project of the youngest student in the class. His final project was a podcast in which he interviewed Columbia students about the racist experiences they had encountered on campus. In this way, the course explored the centrality of race in shaping Latin America not only as a lens to expose racism but also as a site of creative potential from which alternative projects of existence emerge. "Race and decolonial dialogues" transformed an elite university from a space often experienced as hostile into one of care and affective exchange, humanizing both the professor and the students.

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[It should be noted that the English translation does not encompass the full content of the original Brazilian edition; some excerpts have been intentionally omitted by the author.]

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