

NAMING THE UNSPEAKABLE: THE WRITING/LIVING OF BLACK WOMEN IN POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

Nomeando o indizível: o escrever/viver de mulheres negras na pós-graduação

Nombrar lo Indecible: la escritura/vida de las mujeres negras en los estudios de posgrado

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Resumo: Objetivo: Narrar coletivamente as vivências a partir do ingresso de nove mulheres negras na primeira turma majoritariamente autodeclarada negra na pós-graduação em terapia ocupacional. **Síntese dos elementos do estudo:** o trabalho transcorreu em três encontros, produzindo-se cartas sobre a chegada, permanência e construção deste coletivo. Destas, discutiu-se: o não pertencimento e acesso à educação e pesquisa como mudança. **Conclusão:** É importante compreender como mulheres negras percebem o ingresso e permanência no âmbito da pesquisa, bem como, o espaço coletivo como fator de proteção.

Palavras-chave: Racismo. Terapia Ocupacional. Pós-Graduação. Pertencimento.

Abstract: Objective: To collectively narrate the experiences from the admission of nine black women in the first class mostly self-declared black in the graduate program in occupational therapy. **Synthesis of the elements of the study:** the work took place in three meetings, producing letters about the arrival, permanence and construction of this collective. Of these, the following were discussed: the lack of belonging and access to education and research as change. **Conclusion:** It is important to understand how black women perceive the entry and permanence in the scope of research, as well as the collective space as a protective factor.

Keywords: Racism. Occupational therapy. Postgraduate. Belonging.

Resumen: Objetivo: Narrar colectivamente las experiencias de ingreso de nueve mujeres negras en la primera promoción, en su mayoría autodeclaradas negras, en el programa de posgrado en terapia ocupacional. **Síntesis de los elementos del estudio:** el trabajo se desarrolló en tres encuentros, produciendo cartas sobre la llegada, permanencia y construcción de este colectivo. De estos, se discutieron los siguientes: la falta de pertenencia y acceso a la educación y la investigación como cambio. **Conclusión:** Es importante entender cómo las mujeres negras perciben la entrada y permanencia en el ámbito de la investigación, así como el espacio colectivo como factor protector.

Palabras-clave: Racismo. Terapia Ocupacional. Postgrado. Pertenencia.

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Introduction

According to a survey conducted by the Brazilian League of Black Science, in 2020, among graduate students, 2.7% are Black, 12.7% are Brown, 2% are Yellow, less than 0.5% are Indigenous, and 82.7% are White (Lima & Dutra, 2020). Although the majority of people born in Brazil are Black or Brown, there is a desire for whitening that makes it difficult for these people to be present in spaces of power, including research. Furthermore, this population predominantly appears as the target of research, rather than as its producers.

Brazilian science, even today, is based on a Eurocentric scope, and its developments have color and address, mainly those deemed White with higher purchasing power. As a result, the majority of productions are based on a single perspective. However, we must think about democratizing access to research and graduate programs as important tools for Black people to speak about and from themselves, as well as their people, since to speak is to exist and to claim a culture (Fanon, 2008; Gaia, 2021).

In this context, this article aims to address the experiences of nine Black women, six of whom entered through affirmative actions¹ and three through open competition, in the Graduate Program in Occupational Therapy at the Federal University of São Carlos (PPGTO-UFSCar). The discussed aspects will narrate the impact felt in their bodies, as perceived by those living through it, representing the first graduate cohort of the program with the largest number of Black entrants.

To this end, the process of writing this article began with the creation of a collective of Black women who joined the master's cohort in 2023. Currently, the collective, named "Queridas" (Dear Ones), is composed of women in the three research lines that make up the program's structure: 1) Promotion of Child Development in Everyday Life Contexts; 2) Social Networks and Vulnerabilities; and 3) Care, Social Emancipation, and Mental Health.

Drawing from the diversity not only of academic affiliations and research groups but also of the territories of origin and residence, digital platforms were used for the creation of this article. In the first remote meeting, held on Google Meet, the group discussed the path to follow to begin the production of this piece. At that moment, the collective was tasked with writing a letter in the first person, narrating the experiences of the researchers as Black women in graduate school, presenting themselves as the first cohort predominantly self-declared as Black, to date.

Following a script developed for a final assignment in a program course, a deadline of seven days was set for writing the letter, which was then uploaded to a shared cloud folder so that everyone could read the texts. No instructions were given for reading; the intention was for the letter to resonate freely with each researcher. After reading the texts, a second meeting took place, which was filled with sensitive

¹ Affirmative action: these are public and private policies that aim to guarantee rights historically denied to minority groups. An example is Federal Law 12.711/2012, also known as the Quota Law (Gaspar and Barbosa, 2013).

sharing, much pain, but also great resilience, allowing the identification of the impacts that access to graduate school, in the company of other Black women, caused each one.

While very diverse stories were woven, with different pains and paths, there was much in common in terms of points that converged across all narratives. Based on this understanding, three lived elements were synthesized, which will be explored in greater depth in the following writings. They are: I. From not belonging to quilombamento: a path of affections; II. Research as a possibility for social change; and III. Access to higher education as a means of emancipation for the Black population.

To present excerpts from the letters written by the group, the participants of the collective were identified using pseudonyms of Black women who were important figures in the history of Brazil.

From not belonging to quilombamento²: a path of affections

Look at me as a black canvas, by a single painter

Only I can make my art

Only I can describe myself

You do not have this right

BB King - Baco Exu do Blues, 2018

Colonization meant a process of domination of Western culture at the expense of other cultures, as well as the domination of the colonized imagination (Quijano, 1992 cited by Matta & Machado, 2021). This led to the repression of beliefs, symbols, values, and ancestral knowledge, since these did not serve the economic interests of the colonial system. This reality contributed to a scenario where the dominant patterns of expression suppressed other expressions and operated through social and cultural regulators.

The academy, within the construction of imperialist, Western, and colonial science, presents itself as a reflection of society, exposing the racial violence faced daily by Black bodies, especially Black women (Grosfoguel, 2016; Kilomba, 2019). In this sense, one of the powerful arms of racism revolves around the social and psychic organization of whiteness, placing racialized populations, particularly Black women, as the "other," embodying roles that the White population does not wish to see in itself. In this way, at times, they lose their individuality and become the "other" of whiteness (Kilomba, 2019).

Discourses place me as the "Other" when they say I can't belong here because I am Black. Images place me as the "Other" when I walk down the street and find myself surrounded by advertisements with Black faces and derogatory words like "Help." Gestures position me as the "Other" when, at the bakery, the White woman next to me tries to be served before me. Actions

² Quilombamento refers to a safe space of care, sharing, and acceptance among Black people (Nascimento, 1981).

place me as the "Other" when I am monitored by the police as soon as I arrive at a train station. Looks place me as the "Other" when people stare at me. Every time I am placed as the "Other," I am experiencing racism, because I am not the "other." I am myself. (Kilomba, 2019, p. 80; emphasis added).

Adichie (2019) in her book *The Danger of a Single Story* highlights the power of rewriting stories from the perspective of those who live them, so that a narrative used for exploitation and defamation can be reconstructed, recovering a shattered dignity.

In this sense, it is understood that the encounter of this collective allows the reconstruction of a scenario of expropriation and silencing of Black narratives, where the body, stripped of its territory of origin, comes to operate as memory. The memory embodied in the Black body continues to pulse the affections, values, and traditions of that lost territory. In this perspective, according to Beatriz Nascimento (Reis, 2020), the body, carrying the memory of this place, becomes the Black territory itself, a living and dynamic body-territory.

Thus, the meeting of the Queridas collective in an academic environment that exercises its mechanisms of power and racial silencing constitutes "[...] the individual and collective identity of the Black population through a narrative [...]" (Reis, 2020) and quilombamento, which is grounded in the conception of body-territory, understanding that "[...] these are the narratives of a complex subject who carries with them the quilombo and the slave quarters, and their body may be [...] imprisoned or [...] in the freedom of escape" (Reis, 2020).

It can be affirmed that the power of the meeting between Black body-territories is the return to the homeland, a quilombo that is built by all, presenting itself as a moment when the scattered pieces in diasporas come together, generating identification, belonging, and welcoming, as can be appreciated in the following excerpts from the letters.

Excerpts body-territory Orí

[...] I arrive at the Graduate Program in Occupational Therapy with a lot of fear of rejection and lack of welcoming, stepping carefully in this space based on the stories of my own. When I meet my cohort, I see belonging echoed in the color of people's skin. Wow, for the first time, we are the majority in a space! [...] Each one with their own story of loves and pains. [...] In that, I realized that a space for safe exchange was being created, where all of us, from a collective security, could be, exist, and remain. Spaces where even reprimands came with tenderness and dialogue. I, who was used to spaces full of violence [...] now, I was no longer the one who was afraid, I already had a sense of belonging because I knew that if anything happened to me in front of these women, I would have defense and resistance. (Almerinda Farias Gama)

Sitting down to write now, the first day of class comes fresh to my memory, and the anxiety of not wanting to be, once again, the only racialized person in the space. This place that they gave/placed me in has always been very uncomfortable, with a sense of feeling exposed, far from

my own, feeling like an imposter most of the time. The foreigner. It was always unpleasant [...] (Celie)

To build this knowledge, weaving wisdom has never been so beautiful since I found my quilombo. When I felt other women of great strength, courage, and wisdom in that room. A room that used to make me freeze, literally. I felt a room full of many ancestral stories like the one I tell, committed to our heritage, to the struggles that came before. I felt empowered to move forward, despite all the obstacles I imagined would come [...] (Tia Ciata)

[...] I need to say that I found what I did not expect in this place. Already in the first class, I noticed that I was not the only Black person, and we were not few [...] I was not alone! This recognition and belonging gave me comfort, I had somewhere to look, I had someone who would understand my words, I had affection. (Antonieta de Barros)

I grew stronger, seeing the strength of the girls, I nourished myself seeing the affirmations that this place was also ours. I am grateful to have had this opportunity. (Maria Felipa)

Research as a possibility for social change

*They want a Black man with a gun up
In a clip in the favela, shouting
cocaine
They want our skin to be the skin of
crime
That Black Panther o only be a movie*

Bluesman – Baco Exu do Blues, 2018.

The intellectual is not distant from their people; they need to be implicated with and in society, without adopting a neutral stance on the issues. However, when considering the context of socio-racial apartheid, this thought is not valid for the intellectual elite that was built in Brazil, which distances itself from its object of study, the people. The same segment of society that resists changing its position of power and denies access and permanence for Black people to enter universities, whether as students or faculty (Nascimento, 2016; Gaia, 2021).

According to Akotirene (2018), the process of decolonizing the imagination and practices related to combating racism in the construction of societies is conflicting. In this path, education presents itself as a space where tensions are laid bare due to historical and epistemological erasures present in curricula, educational practices, and proposals, whether in basic education or at the higher education level. This reality can only be overcome if scientific spaces understand the need to decolonize themselves. Research

for the Black population is a space to exercise intellectuality, beyond what exists in the university; it is a possibility to seek real change (hooks³, 2019).

Regarding traditional intellectuality, understood as following the logic of Western science and its recognized subjects, Black women face persecution in universities. This leads to questioning their intellectual capacity, as well as the reliability of their research, especially those focused on identity issues, creating a perception that undermines the importance of studies produced simply because they are not Eurocentric (hooks, 2019). This perspective can be understood from the following account.

The construction of knowledge for me comes from this history. From the knowledge of my grandparents with the dynamism of nature, from understanding with time, the knowledge of vegetables, fruits, and harvest. It comes from those who honored this knowledge but who thirsted for more. Knowledge comes from a history of generations in struggle, of generations with great courage to break through large voids (Tia Ciata).

In this sense, traditional knowledge suffers processes of silencing as a result of colonization. What once was an iron mask is now the erasure of Black production, that is, a way of denying and repressing knowledge produced by Black intellectuals (Kilomba, 2019).

Thus, education as a political and intellectual space acts as one of the pillars of the Black Movement's struggle, contributing against racial discrimination, not as the solution to the evils, but as a place for the production and discussion of knowledge about oneself (Santos & Backes, 2023).

The science that will sustain my productions will be accessible, easy to understand, and aimed at altering the reality of "my people," so that racialized bodies can feel they belong in any space, especially in academia. Because it was this experience of building this quilombo with you that has allowed me to access it (Maria Bonita).

In this sense, it is understood that for a change in academic hegemony, it is necessary to transgress languages, decentralize knowledge from the prevailing logic, and raise racial awareness within the university, through debates and discussions. According to Gomes (2021), this effective entry of Black men and women into the university is only possible through this search for relationships, where Black bodies/territories, carrying their own knowledge, re-educate the university.

I, as a researcher, share the same life context as the women who will collaborate with the study. I live in the same community, I interact and work with them in other spaces beyond the research, such as the community group, the women's income generation group, in different municipal councils, such as Health and Black Person, among others, which brings me closer to their realities, their life stories, and struggles, being, in fact, what fueled the desire to research. I became a researcher with them to think together about transformations in the reality we live (Carolina Maria de Jesus).

³ The chosen name, written in lowercase, is a political stance of intellectual egoic rejection. hooks wanted us to pay attention to her works, her words, and not to her person.

Therefore, research for Black women is a path to write and express the struggle and reality. Although each experience is diverse, what is recognized in this complex and conflicting path, which stretches in Higher Education, is that, being women-daughters-mothers, it speaks to the same emergency: to transform the circumstances that were imposed on us.

The Black movement in Brazil has been an educator of Brazilian society by consolidating the knowledge built by the Black population throughout its historical, cultural, social, and political trajectory, and acting as a producer of knowledge in the anti-racist struggle.

Gomes et al. (2021) affirm that it was the political and formative profile of the Black movement, combined with its strong advocacy, that made access policies possible. In this way, it is one of the main contributors to the construction of affirmative action policies in education, since it has always focused on democratic access to education as a combative strategy against racism.

Through struggles and resistance spread across the country, the Black movement highlights the prevailing racism in Brazilian society and demands public policies aimed at overcoming ethnic-racial inequalities, a demand that has been present for many decades. It is recent the affirmation that we are a racist country, which can be considered a historical achievement of political activism (Silva, 2017).

Gomes et al. (2021) reiterate that affirmative action policies propose a critique of the privileges of social groups, considering the intersectionalities of class and race, which are supported by a structural and epistemic bias, expanding pathways for questioning and presenting the existence of the coloniality of knowledge⁴.

This means that democratizing access for poor, Indigenous, Black students, and people with disabilities in higher education is to enable the formation of a diverse cadre of professionals, intellectuals, politicians, and artists in society. In other words, affirmative actions take on a primary political character in the fight for racial equality and diversity not only in higher education but also in society at large.

Felipe & Carvalho (2021) affirm the relevance of the quota law policy due to the mobilization of the Brazilian Black population in the fight for rights and to occupy spaces that, in other historical moments, were difficult or denied to them. In honor of the historical memory of Black men and women, it is essential to remember that when they arrived in Brazil from the 16th century, as enslaved people, they always fought for rights through individual or collective actions, which even led to the Abolition of Slavery in 1888.

⁴ According to Quijano (2005), coloniality is transferred from the sphere of power to the field of knowledge, based on the notion that there is a unique and superior knowledge, from a Eurocentric perspective, which must be considered to the detriment of others.

Rascke, Santos & Alencar (2021) point out that racial-ethnic quotas for higher education are, in essence, the result of intense mobilization by social movements in favor of a reparative action for the historical debt the Brazilian state owes to the Black and Indigenous populations.

Access to Higher Education as a Form of Emancipation for the Black Population

Education plays a transformative role in people's concrete reality, being able to expand dreams and perspectives, to be and occupy different places, experiencing multiple life experiences. The quota law improves the collective struggle for democracy, and questions public institutions that do not depict Brazilian diversity in an equitable and equal manner, and do not fulfill their public mission. With the inclusion of Black, peripheral, queer, quilombola, rural and Indigenous youth, knowledges, narratives, and epistemologies have expanded in Institutions of Higher Education, bringing a multiplicity in corporeality, body/territories and aesthetic experience. A reality that makes the university rethink its relationship with knowledge (Gomes et al., 2021).

So it is essential to discuss what project of country we want; Felipe & Silva (2022) ask us that affirmative action policies benefit everyone. Racial quotas have the potential to question the colonial design marked in the daily lives of Brazilian women and people who identify as Brazilian.

According to Felipe & Silva (2022), the Black population proposes to occupy spaces to talk about the pain caused by racism, as well as the struggles carried out by racialized students and faculty. In teaching, a collective ethical-political commitment is assumed, despite the small number, in order to raise the voice to build the anti-racist struggle, respecting those who came before.

Still, there is emphasis on the importance of breaking the hegemonic structures of knowledge and power, in order to end racism in its many facets, especially regarding epistemic and anti-Black racism. Thus, the aim is to transform anguish, pain and concerns into languages and actions, since silence cannot protect us (Felipe & Silva, 2022).

Considering the account of the trajectories of the Black students of PPGTO and authors of this article, it was evident the importance of formal, public Education in the process of constructing and strengthening identities and an expanded worldview. As highlighted in some letters:

The public university made possible the experience of spaces of connection, which meet the feeling of belonging as a movement of escape from oppression. Which strengthens the "voice" of defense during the internal and mental struggle we make every day, especially in the face of new challenges (Dandara).

Today, I think about how access to higher education of quality and as reflective as the one I was exposed to in the undergraduate course in occupational therapy, as well as the spaces I circulated since that experience, were essential for my embodied territory to be constituted. If I would only

be tolerated as the one who stands out for intelligence, then it was through it that I would choose to walk my foreign path. (Celie).

[...] being part of the first master's cohort that is majority Black is not by chance. It is a reflection of struggles, demands and achievements of various social actors and Black movements in the implementation of affirmative action policies. It is historic! That we can write-live our experiences, without mediators, that we will be authors/researchers creating other narratives from Black perspectives, presenting that higher education institutions and *Stricto Sensu* graduate programs must be plural, diverse and inclusive, and that there is no turning back (Anastácia).

Notably the letters were connected,

Vehemently recognizing the policy of reserved spots with social and ethnic criteria as my entrance door to undergraduate, master's and now doctorate (Dandara).

Even though the experiences in these spaces have not always been positive when it comes to racial issues, it was through educational processes that desires were nurtured, and lives were planned.

In general, I think that our presence may inhibit some behaviors and speech, which did not prevent us from hearing violence from people who rely on their lack of racial literacy [...] (Almerinda Farias Gama).

Access to higher education for women is already emblematic. For Black and/or peripheral women it presents even more delicate layers. Being able to count on the quota policy in the access process was a differential in this journey, and those who did not have it, felt that they had to readjust plans and dreams to what was possible to be done.

Many of these women are the first or among the first to enter a university, perhaps even into a Graduate Program. They are women who are rewriting not only their own story, are opening paths for those who will come next and honoring those who struggled for their arrival in these spaces.

The first, in my family, this was never framed by color issue, by the way, I started thinking about skin color only at university. I was never led to think about being the first Black woman to have done something, I was only told that I would be the first to have higher education, and it was in that victory that I should focus (Tereza de Benguela).

These women did not have educational opportunities, lived their whole lives in the countryside, working at home, or outside it, fostering dreams and wishes of the younger ones. Among them, I place the greatest highlight on my mother, who believes in my dreams more than I do and, even in difficulties, cultivated my wings so that I could take flights that were not granted to her. It is in this way that I arrive in this space, bringing dreams that are mine, but which are also theirs (Almerinda Farias Gama).

[...] in our core I am the first graduate. Of course, I have two uncles on my mother's side who are graduates and two on my father's side, men. I am the first woman in the family with a degree,

the first to get a driver's license and the first to do graduate studies. I entered graduate school for myself, but also for them, because I carry their name with me (Maria Felipa).

Education showed me better worlds, possible worlds, less violent, with other beauties, it gave me a return to what is mine, but on the other hand it also undermined dreams, built me hardinesses, uncertainties, and non-places. From the researcher who is born, since Manelão's story, I understand myself as someone who fulfills my ancestors' dreams, who lives and occupies places opened and built by them with much sweat, blood and resistance (Tia Ciata).

Final considerations

To narrate experiences, from a body-territory, in the common collective construction among Black women makes questions arise about the way these women's permanence in graduate school has been. Entering this universe is often imbued with feelings of uncertainty, sensations of non-belonging and difficulties of access to spaces. It would even be utopian to say that permanence is guaranteed simply by entry, given that processes of silencing and exclusion are lived daily, even if in subtle form.

However, this writing shows a horizon to aspire to, a space of safe exchange, a space in which individualities were and are respected and welcomed. Such are the spaces built by Black women who exist, resist, and live graduate school. Also, the construction of *aquilombamento*, is a proposal of real meaning for the permanence of Black female students in university, since however much there is tension, the quilombo translates into care and healing. In this way, it may stand as a protective factor for permanence in these spaces.

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