

## Whiteness and Education: Initial Notes for an Antiracist Pedagogy

### ARTICLE

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### Abstract

This article offers a critical reflection on whiteness as a social and historical construct, considering the following question: what are the effects of whiteness on the formulation of education, history, curriculum, and the constitution of the white subject itself in Brazil? The general objective was to analyze whiteness as a structuring element of social norms and national projects, questioning its invisibility and the false notion of racial neutrality. The research is theoretical in nature, with a qualitative approach, and based on dialogue between different authors. The results of this reflection demonstrate that whiteness, by maintaining itself as a universal reference, impacts the way knowledge is organized and transmitted, naturalizing racial privileges and hierarchies. Consequently, the urgent need to develop anti-racist pedagogical perspectives that contribute to broadening the understanding of racial dynamics and fostering strategies aimed at promoting racial equality and social justice is highlighted.

**Keywords:** Whiteness studies. Ethnic and racial relations. Anti-racist pedagogy.

### Branquitude e educação: apontamentos iniciais para uma pedagogia antirracista

### Resumo

O presente artigo realiza uma reflexão crítica sobre a branquitude como construção social e histórica, levando em consideração a seguinte problemática: quais são os efeitos da branquitude na formulação da educação, da história, do currículo e na constituição do próprio sujeito branco no Brasil? Estabeleceu-se como objetivo geral analisar a branquitude como elemento estruturante das normas sociais e dos projetos de nação, questionando sua invisibilidade e a falsa ideia de neutralidade racial. A pesquisa é de natureza teórica, de abordagem qualitativa e fundamentada no diálogo entre diferentes autores. Os resultados da reflexão permitem evidenciar que a branquitude, ao se manter como referência universal, impacta a forma como os conhecimentos são organizados e transmitidos, naturalizando privilégios e hierarquias raciais. Em consequência, aponta-se a urgência de construir perspectivas pedagógicas antirracistas que contribuam para ampliar a compreensão das dinâmicas raciais e para fomentar estratégias voltadas à promoção da igualdade racial e da justiça social.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudos da Branquitude. Relações étnico-raciais. Pedagogia Antirracista.

## 1 Introduction

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At present, we're experiencing a unique period in knowledge production, where the humanities and social sciences are taking a protagonist role in debates about theoretical and epistemological diversity in contemporary societies. This prominence is mainly expressed in the field of education, which, as Nilma Lino Gomes (2012) and Marco Antônio B. da Silva (2023) remind us, is a privileged space for the articulation between theory and practice. This articulation involves both scientific knowledge and the knowledge constructed by subjects through their social, cultural, historical, and political experiences. However, not all forms of knowledge production, nor the bodies that produce them, have received recognition and valuation. This gap leads us to ask to what extent the expansion of the anti-racist agenda has truly impacted academic cultures and the curricula of public educational institutions in Brazil, promoting effective changes in their structures and practices.

With few exceptions, educational institutions have reproduced hegemonic discourses that reinforce stereotypes about certain ethnic groups. This practice sustains ideologies such as “whitening race” (Bento, 2005) and the myth of racial democracy, contributing to the invisibilization of the diversity and specificities of Black and Indigenous populations.

We consider here the fact that discussions about race in Brazil have concentrated on the experiences of Black and Indigenous groups, while whiteness remains falsely invisible, implicit, and unquestioned. Understanding whiteness as a social construction that has historically benefited from the fiction of superiority and integrated a national project is fundamental to dismantling power structures based on race.

The purpose of this article is to offer a contribution to broaden the understanding of racial dynamics in Brazil and their relationship with education, recognizing that the analysis of whiteness is a fundamental dimension in confronting racism. This isn't intended as a conclusive reflection but as a contribution that aims to tension the idea of racial neutrality and the bases that sustain privileges and inequalities.

## 2 Metodologia

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This article stems from the author's concerns and perceptions as a teacher, researcher, and beneficiary of the affirmative action quota policy in higher education. My academic journey at the Federal University of Minas Gerais began between 2005 and 2009, a period prior to the implementation of quotas. I returned to the same institution in 2017 as a doctoral student and quota beneficiary, and the transformation the university had undergone in that interval was evident. Students in the social sciences and anthropology courses, from which I graduated, strongly questioned the absence of Black and Indigenous authors in the bibliographies, among other gaps, prompting significant changes in the curricula and pedagogical practices implemented.

Despite advancements in the racial debate, whiteness (*branquitude*) remained untouched, protected by a silence that disguised its privilege of not being named. During my doctorate, even in disciplines focused on racial issues, there was no initiative from the professors, who were mostly white, to rethink themselves as racialized subjects, nor to include this topic in the course content. Whiteness, in this context, persisted as a “glass wall” (Piza, 2002), invisible yet structural, shaping what is considered legitimate knowledge and who produces it.

In this regard, this text intends to elaborate initial notes that contribute to problematizing false racial neutrality and the invisibility of whiteness in the educational field, opening pathways for a possible practical approach. As a methodological strategy, I articulate contributions from sociological, anthropological, and educational frameworks, mobilizing them in a reading that demonstrates how whiteness is historically constituted and how it impacts the construction of history, curriculum, and the very idea of education.

## 3 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Whiteness and the problem of the black person in Brazil

Recurrently, analyses regarding the racial question have focused on the experiences of marginalized groups, while whiteness (*branquitude*) remains erroneously invisible, implicit, and unquestioned. However, the exclusive focus on the subaltern, although it plays an indisputable role in revealing nuances and complexities, as well as generating knowledge about existing practices and meanings outside the center, has the counterproductive effect of perpetuating the sense of difference, strangeness, and exceptionality. This emphasizes the perception that such groups represent deviations from the norm. Thus, the presumed “norm carried on, as if it were the natural, inevitable and common way of human beings” (Dyer, 1988 *apud* Vainer, 2012, p.44). Between the center and the margin, the focus is placed only on one of the poles, the racialized pole, and not on the network that constitutes the relationship between the two.

According to Steyn (2004), cited by Lia Vainer (2012), studies on race marked by the transference of the gaze from the margin to the center can be considered a logical analogue of feminist studies, which relocated the issue into different parameters. The proposal is to shift the focus from historically marginalized identities to a critical analysis of what has been conventionally established as the center: whiteness. It is about revealing and interrogating the contents and assumptions of this place of power, which for too long remained exempt from questioning, maintaining the privilege of producing knowledge about others without being an object of reflection.

One of the political projects carried out by whiteness, as a national project, presupposed a project of “whitening” Brazilian people. “Whitening” is a theory that, as the name suggests, aimed to devise strategies and processes to “whiten” the Brazilian population, eliminating the Black and Indigenous segments that would supposedly doom national development to failure. This theory was part of a project created by the Brazilian elite in the 19th and mid-20th centuries upon realizing that the large portion of the Brazilian population composed of Black and Indigenous people would “blacken” society, which was considered negative, since the colonizers only considered people of European origin “normal”.

This proposal was based on evolutionist and eugenic studies concerning human races, understood as biologically and intellectually distinct. Craniometry, physiognomy, and other pseudosciences were used to support the idea that some races were intrinsically superior to others. Eugenics focused on the “improvement” of human genetic characteristics through selective reproductive practices and played a relevant role in the construction of whitening theories in Brazil. One of the expressive authors in this regard was João Baptista Lacerda, then director of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, who presented a paper entitled “*Sur les Mêtis in Brésil*” (On the mixed-race people of Brazil, 1911) at the first Universal Races Congress in 1911. This Congress, held in London, England, brought together representatives from various countries to discuss the future of newly colonized countries.

According to Lacerda, a strategy for the whitening of Brazil lay in encouraging the process of sexual selection (a term adapted from Charles Darwin), achieved through the promotion of European immigration and interracial marriages. He further emphasized that within a period of three decades, Brazil would be an entirely white country. The then director of the National Museum used the artwork “The Redemption of Ham” (1895), by Modesto Brocos, as a representation of the future Brazil to substantiate his whitening model.

In the artwork in question, we see in the left corner a dark-skinned Black woman, possibly the grandmother of the child represented in the center, with her hands raised as if giving thanks. In the center, the Black daughter is already represented with a less dark skin tone than her mother, hence, whitened. She is next to a seated white man, who looks satisfied while gazing at the child the woman in the middle of the canvas holds in her lap. The child is a white baby with straight hair and blue eyes, holding an orange in its hands; that is, it is the fruit of miscegenation that would “free” Brazil from its destiny, the result of more than centuries of African slavery.

The same thesis of sexual selection had already been explored by Silvio Romero some years earlier, in *History of Brazilian Literature* (1888), who urged the assembled white people of the South to mix in order to assert their supremacy. The white race would be the “strong race,” and it would tend to prevail through interracial relationships.

Another defender of eugenics in Brazil was Renato Kehl, from the Rio de Janeiro School of Medicine. In addition to praising South Africa's apartheid model, he advocated measures such as the sterilization of degenerates, matrimonial control, immigrant selection, and other policies of racial purification.

Despite presenting nuances and distinct focuses, the various authors who defended whitening strategies in Brazil shared the common premise of defending the white individual as being endowed with the best moral and cognitive capacities, and the Black person, at the opposite pole, as a degenerate, endowed with lower intelligence and destined to perform rudimentary labor activities. Often used to legitimize racial domination, this perspective suggests that the white population was at a more advanced stage of development and should, therefore, be responsible for carrying out a specific development project.

The notion of intrinsic superiority inherent in whiteness would be one of the main constitutive characteristics of whiteness as a racial identity socially and historically constructed through the fiction of superiority and normality. In this way, whitening can be understood as a national project that was defended, and which defends whiteness as a particular racial category that falsely presents itself as neutral and invisible, which often leads to it being unmarked.

The fear of miscegenation, understood as degeneration, would be a demonstration of what sociologist Alberto Guerreiro Ramos called the “Social Pathology of the White,” a theory present in his work published in 1957. An exponent of whiteness studies in Brazil, Ramos argues that due to racism and an ideal of white beauty and aesthetics, the Brazilian population produced positive meanings for whiteness, and negative ones for the Black segment. The pathology lies in the fact that the Brazilian white considers their Black ancestry shameful. Consequently, there is a reiterated process of extolling white European culture, of which the Brazilian white would not be entirely a part.

As a consequence of the construction of white identity as a symbol of superiority in the Brazilian imaginary, the author points out that racial classification in the country tends to be guided by the ideal of whitening. In this process, individuals seek to distance



themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with Blackness, reinforcing a logic of exclusion and erasure.

Another point made by the author was to show how Brazilian racial relations were being studied and interpreted exclusively by white intellectuals, as if only Black people had race. The author thus highlights the theme of the Black person in Brazilian society:

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There is the theme of the Black person and there is the life of the Black person. As a theme, the Black person has been, among us, an object of scalpel-like dissection perpetrated by literati and by the so-called 'anthropologists' and 'sociologists.' As life or effective reality, the Black person has been assuming their destiny, has been making themselves, according to the particular conditions of Brazilian society that have allowed it. But the Black person-as-theme is one thing; the Black person-as-life, another (Ramos, 1995, p. 171).

The white person has had the privilege of producing knowledge about other racial segments and social problems, while absenting themselves from the central production of inequalities, and this practice would have crystallized socio-racial problems in Brazil as a sociology of the Brazilian Black person. In his words:

One might say that in Brazilian culture, the white person is the ideal, the norm, the value *par excellence*. And indeed, Brazilian culture has clear connotations. This aspect is only seemingly insignificant. In truth, it deserves special attention for understanding what has been called the "problem of the Black person" (Ramos, 1995, p. 150).

In this way, Guerreiro Ramos promotes a displacement of the Brazilian socio-racial question by perceiving the white person as a racialized subject, paving the way for studies on ethno-racial relations that involve both the oppressed pole and the pole causing the oppression, which also experiences the consequences of racism in the formation of its subjectivity.

Frantz Fanon, a Martinican philosopher and psychiatrist trained in France, is one of the authors who conceptualizes the notion of white racial identity. In his influential 1952 work, titled "Black Skin, White Masks", the author addresses various themes related to

racial relations and the dynamics between the colonized and the colonizer, highlighting these categories as fundamental for understanding the formation of the subjectivities of interacting white and Black individuals.

The formation of the so-called "white masks," according to Fanon, begins with self-rejection on the part of Black people and an attempt to escape the negative stereotypes associated with non-whites in Western society. The author argues that the same racism internalized by Black people is appropriated by white people, albeit in an asymmetrical dynamic, contributing to the construction of white racial identities. In this process, a feeling of superiority regarding the functioning of race develops. For him, racialization is harmful to both.

However, it is important to take into account that in defining what whiteness is and who white subjects are, as Vainer (2012, p. 59) points out, the sociological categories of ethnicity, color, gender, regionality, and class intersect, stick, and detach from one another. Thus, various authors point to the diversity existing within whiteness and the diverse ways subjects experience being white in different societies.

W.E.B. Du Bois, who is, in the opinion of most consulting researchers for the preparation of this text, one of the precursors in the studies on whiteness in the United States, analyzed the American white working class in the 19th century in comparison to the Black worker, demonstrating that the acceptance of racism by the white working class of that era was a way of appropriating benefits, which Du Bois named the "public and psychological wage," which resulted in access to material and symbolic goods that Black people could not access. The work exposes the mechanisms that sustain whiteness as a system of material and symbolic privileges.

As the author states, "the white worker, even the poorest, has the right to hate the Negro, because he knows that, no matter how low he falls, there will always be a class below him—a class that cannot vote, cannot sue, cannot educate its children (Du Bois, 2021, p. 150).

Du Bois further highlights the internalization of cultural domination by observing that "The Negro is taught to admire white culture, to copy its ways, to accept its standards of



beauty, but never to share its privileges" (Du Bois, 2021, p. 120). Contrary to the Marxist conception that proposes union among the proletariat, regardless of ethnic/racial origin, Du Bois argues that white supremacy was formed by the white working class of the United States and by the constitution of a worker identity that placed itself in opposition to Black workers. That is, these subjects absorbed privileges by identifying themselves as non-slaves and non-Black. "Despite the low monetary remuneration, they [white workers] received the public consideration of being white" (Du Bois, 2021).

Also, W.E.B. Du Bois, in his book *Darkwater* (1920), published the essay "The Souls of White Folk," which can be considered an initial landmark in the critical reflection on whiteness. By addressing the white subject from the theoretical perspective of a Black intellectual, Du Bois anticipates discussions that today comprise the field of whiteness studies, offering elements to consider its historical, political, and epistemological implications.

In Brazil, complicating the relationship between race and class, the contemporary thinker Maria Aparecida Bento (2002) argues that white people in our society act through a mechanism she calls the narcissistic pact: unconscious, inter-group alliances characterized by ambiguity and, regarding racism, by the denial of the racial problem. The author argues that white people, regardless of social class, tend to be solidary when they feel discriminated against (Bento, 2002, p. 141), such as by affirmative action policies aimed at Black people. In this example, upper and middle-class white people seek to denounce this supposed injustice being practiced against the poor white person. In her words:

The pact of whiteness (*branquitude*) is a tacit agreement among white people to preserve their places of privilege, even if it means the systematic denial of rights to non-white people. This pact does not need to be declared; it is sustained by the naturalization of white superiority and the invisibilization of racism (Bento, 2022, p. 45).

However, this union and solidarity of whiteness, independent of its differences, would have a common objective: the maintenance of the *status quo*, that is, the conservation of the privileges that the white group obtains, even when in a condition of

poverty. Thus, Black poverty is very different from white poverty, as we already pointed out regarding Du Bois's study.

If the common point among the various white groups is the obtaining of privileges, it is natural that the advantages obtained are diverse among themselves. Understanding the multiple characteristic aspects of whiteness can lead to a greater complexification of the different forms of privileges obtained by white people through sometimes subtle racist practices.

Lourenço Cardoso (2008) elaborates a distinction between critical and uncritical whiteness. This distinction made by Cardoso is important for understanding that there is a segment of white people who obtain privileges from their racial identity not by consciously practicing racism, nor by agreeing with it, but rather by being inserted into a racially structured society, while another group (uncritical whiteness) directly or indirectly propagates white superiority and racial purity. I consider it important to include here, in his words, both definitions:

Uncritical whiteness is that which does not perceive itself as racialized, understanding itself as universal and neutral. The uncritical white subject does not see themselves as part of a privileged racial group, but rather as the human standard against which others are measured and, often, inferiorized. This invisibility of the racial position is precisely what sustains whiteness as the norm (Cardoso, 2010, p. 612).

The uncritical white person reproduces racism even unintentionally, because they operate from a cultural repertoire that naturalizes their position of superiority. They do not question why their historical, aesthetic, and cultural references are hegemonic, nor why they occupy spaces of power disproportionately (Cardoso, 2010, p. 615).

These passages highlight how both uncritical and critical whiteness are sustained by the naturalization of white privileges, avoiding any self-reflection on race. If both hide behind the myth of racial democracy, masking inequalities under a veil of false equality, critical whiteness must assume the uncomfortable task of exposing the mechanisms of racial domination. Such a transformation demands more than good intentions: it requires a constant practice of self-analysis, a willingness to renounce privileges, and concrete engagement in the deconstruction of racist structures. As Cardoso (2010) points out, the

passivity of uncritical whiteness perpetuates the system, while the interrogative attitude of critical whiteness opens up real possibilities for change, even within the limits imposed by its own racial position.

As Frantz Fanon rightly emphasized, the descendants of the slave traders, the masters of yesterday, do not have to assume guilt today for the inhumanities caused by their ancestors. However, they do have the moral and political responsibility to combat racism and discrimination and, together with those who have been kept at the margin—Black people—to build healthy racial and social relations in which everyone can grow and fulfill themselves as human beings and citizens. Were it not for these reasons, they would still have to assume it, due to the fact that they benefit from the wealth that slave labor made possible for the country.

## 3.2 Whiteness and Antiracist Pedagogy

The pursuit of establishing an antiracist pedagogy in Brazil stems from a context of important achievements, following the creation of legal frameworks that ensure the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous history and culture in schools. This includes Laws No. 10.639/2003 and No. 11.645/2008, in addition to the National Curricular Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and for the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture (DCNERR). These regulations, widely referenced in academic production, evidence the recognition of the historical and cultural contribution of Indigenous peoples and the Black population in the formation of Brazil.

However, as Nilma Lino Gomes (2012) argues, more than ten years later, the implementation of these policies still faces numerous challenges, especially when confronted with day-to-day pedagogical practices that often continue to reproduce racism and the invisibility of the contributions of historically subalternized peoples.

In Brazilian higher education, education focused on ethnic-racial relations is crossed by institutional and epistemological dimensions that have historically operated as spaces for the reproduction of whiteness. In this context, building an antiracist pedagogy requires

considering multiple dimensions of the educational process. In this sense, Catherine Walsh (2009) contributes by asserting that the decolonization of education requires not only the inclusion of content about diversity but the radical transformation of the frameworks that sustain the production and transmission of knowledge.

Higher Education, in this context, must be understood as a space of dispute. As Dávila (2006) points out, it can either reinforce the "diploma of whiteness" or assume an emancipatory function, engaged in the fight against racism. This task requires an ethical-political commitment from teachers that goes beyond the mere inclusion of content, encompassing the critical review of didactic materials, pedagogical practices, and daily interactions.

In this scenario, we agree with Silva (2023) in emphasizing the role of Black collectives in universities, as they constitute spaces for mobilization, exchange of experiences, and the production of political and academic resistance. They are not merely social groups but instances that question the naturalization of Eurocentric knowledge, the absence of Black and Indigenous references in curricula, and the daily inequalities experienced in the university environment. At the same time, these collectives pressure higher education institutions for concrete changes, such as the creation of student retention policies, the inclusion of ethnic-racial content in disciplines, and the recognition of the legitimacy of other epistemologies, stemming from Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous traditions.

As pointed out at the beginning of this article, my own academic trajectory highlights this transformation: when I entered the social sciences course in 2005, there were still no institutionalized affirmative actions, and the presence of Black students was extremely limited, often marked by loneliness and the silencing of racial issues in the academic debate. By 2017, returning to the university as a quota-holding doctoral student, I noticed a distinct scenario, in which Black and Indigenous collectives had achieved greater visibility and political strength, changing the institutional climate and shifting the debate to the centrality of ethnic-racial relations.

One of the expressive signs of this transformation was the 2022 change in the name of the academic center of the anthropology and archaeology course at UFMG, which

stopped using the reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss to adopt the name Lélia González Academic Center. This gesture reflects not only a demand for representation but also the epistemological displacements that the growing Black presence provokes in the academic environment. Questioning the centrality of whiteness as a reference for a discipline with a colonialist history like anthropology can be read as part of a broader movement of knowledge reconfiguration where not only bodies but also theoretical references and ways of producing knowledge are placed in dispute.

The student mobilization articulated by the Black collectives of the Faculty of Philosophy and Human Sciences at UFMG advanced to the field of demands for faculty representation, requiring the presence of Black professors in the anthropology and archaeology departments, which until 2017 had no Black faculty members in their staff. The pressure from the academic community resulted in the realization of three public entrance exams with reserved slots, and currently, the program has two tenured Black professors, in addition to three others approved in the reserve list. This achievement represents an important step in the deconstruction of the exclusionary logics that historically marked the university space, reaffirming that the fight for an antiracist pedagogy also involves the transformation of institutional structures and the valuation of historically marginalized knowledge and bodies. Furthermore, an articulated movement is necessary that involves the reformulation of curricula, the recognition of professional trajectories, and the implementation of retention policies that ensure equitable conditions for Black faculty members to act.

Denise Carreira (2018) points to the need for greater engagement from the academic community in the antiracist struggle, especially regarding the critical reflection and deconstruction of whiteness as a position of material, symbolic, and subjective privilege that sustains and reproduces racism in Brazilian society. The author emphasizes that this debate requires a process of re-education of institutional discourses and practices, capable of questioning the myth of racial democracy and denaturalizing the inequalities that are often simplistically attributed to the legacy of slavery. It is necessary to understand how these inequalities were reinforced by whitening projects in the transition from the 19th

to the 20th century, by the condescending attitude of elites regarding social hierarchies, and by the persistence of structural racism as an organizing axis of social life in Brazil.

## 4 Final Considerations

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Contemporary scholars such as Aparecida Bento, Nilma Lino Gomes, Frantz Fanon, Lia Vainer Schucman, among many others, have offered important contributions toward deconstructing the idea of a racial neutrality of whiteness, highlighting how privileges operate as a social norm. These authors show us how such dynamics operate as structuring processes of Brazilian historical and social formation, impacting diverse ethnic-racial groups, including the white subject themselves.

What we have done in this text is to contribute to the important tensioning provoked by the discussion of whiteness (*branquitude*), broadening the understanding of the dynamics that structure the Brazilian educational field. This is not intended as a conclusive reflection, but as an invitation to critically review the paradigms that naturalize racial neutrality and exclude plural forms of knowledge production.

Re-educating for ethnic-racial relations in Brazil implies bringing to the surface the pain, fears, and tensions historically generated by racial inequalities. It is fundamental to recognize that the success of some groups was built at the expense of the marginalization of others, especially the Black population. In this context, antiracist pedagogies and proposals for education in ethnic-racial relations should aim to strengthen the presence and knowledge of Black and Indigenous peoples, while also awakening, among white people, a critical consciousness about racial privileges and the structures of exclusion that sustain whiteness as the norm.

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