

# **Decolonial Perspectives: Transformative examples of education and practice**

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## **Abstract**

What is the impact of an education that seeks to subvert power relations and make us reflect on the various types of violences that Western society has brought to us through colonization? This article will not be able to fully answer this complex question, but it may indicate some paths that can be further explored by future researchers. This work reflects the effort to bring together references originally written in Portuguese and sometimes in Spanish. It constitutes a single reflection on the role that the decolonial perspective can have in the formation of empowered individuals who are aware of the inequalities to which they are subjected and to which they bear witness from their own personal and social transformative role. It also presents a social movement alternative, inspired by indigenous cosmologies, which combines the struggle for environmental preservation and social justice.

## Introduction

This article is a part of the master's thesis "Decolonial Education in the Brazilian Amazon: a case study of its role in the formation of an activist youth"<sup>1</sup>. The present part is the literature review, which brings together authors who think about Brazil, the Amazon, and Latin America from the perspectives of peoples who were subalternized by coloniality. Some of them, black and indigenous intellectuals who denounce the impact of the colonial heritage, have themselves experienced hardships throughout their lives. They share through their work how they, in a simultaneously painful and liberating process, took over and re-signified their existence and history.

I consider decoloniality as a spectrum of voices, from individuals such as the authors just mentioned, to collective movements such as the socio-environmental movement which is presented at the end of the article. This movement is inspired by the indigenous peoples' cosmologies and it is responsible for social and environmental preservation public policies that impacted Brazil and serve as inspiration internationally.

It is a reflection of how decolonial education and practice as activism can: rewrite individuals' views of themselves, their understanding of history, and the social and power relations that build societies; inspire collaboration and organization for a common goal to overcome misery and structural violence; and from that, result in the formulation of public policies that impact different societies from the forest to global.

This work is also a reflection of the recognition of the author's own identity formation. This researcher is a young woman born and raised in Acre, of black descent, and the first in her family to join an academic journey in search of understanding of our own concerns and solutions to the inequalities experienced and observed.

In a personal effort to put decoloniality into practice in this study as well, the literature review is composed primarily of Brazilian references or other references from Latin American countries written in Portuguese and sometimes in Spanish. These references are not yet translated

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<sup>1</sup> This research was a case study that investigated the impact of decolonial education on socio-environmental engagement in a group of 41 young people, volunteers aged between 18 and 29 years from Acre, a state located in the extreme west of the Brazilian Amazon. At the end of the study, the conclusion was that the research question could not be answered accurately with this project alone. However, unique results were found. Data analysis suggested that contact with decolonial education, inside and outside the school system, was relevant for the socio-environmental engagement of most of the participants in this study. In addition, decolonial education outside of school had a clear impact on the respondents.

into English and for this study were translated by the researcher with the intention of also propagating them. For easy identification, the translations are referenced in the footnotes.

## **Inventing Brazil**

“Brazil didn't exist, Brazil is an invention”, these are the opening words of the indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak in the documentary *Guerras do Brasil.doc* (Brazil Wars.doc). The first episode of this documentary series, entitled “The Wars of Conquest”, discusses the past and present of disputes over land and for the right to exist of the native peoples of Brazil. Throughout the documentary, Krenak and other Brazilian anthropologists and historians such as Carlos Fausto and João Pacheco de Oliveira explain that more than one thousand different peoples inhabited Brazil before the arrival of the European invaders. These peoples lived in complex and diverse societies, which were connected to each other; they had different languages and cultures and together numbered between 8 and 40 million people. Ailton Krenak defends the recognition that there was no founding event in Brazil, and that the official story, which is still told today, that there was a heroic discovery by the Europeans, is only an origin myth.

The documentary shows that, unlike what is taught in schools, the arrival of the Portuguese in the territory was nothing pompous or heroic because the navigators were hungry, exhausted, diseased, with scarce resources and did not know those lands. It is explained then that the European conquest of the peoples who lived in Brazil occurred strategically, manipulating and deceiving these peoples, and not exclusively with military conquest. And in addition to repositioning Europeans from discoverers to invaders of Brazil, Krenak continues the deconstruction of myths by questioning one of the greatest stories about Brazil, the worldwide perception that Brazil is a welcoming, tolerant and peaceful country. At one point, Krenak provokes those behind the camera, in a move that can also be interpreted as a provocation for the viewer:

We are at war. I don't know why you're looking at me with such a nice face. We are at war. Your world and my world are at war. Our worlds are all at war. The ideological falsification that suggests we have peace is for us to keep it going. There is no peace anywhere. It's war everywhere all the time. (Bolognesi, 2019, 14:13)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

A challenge for those who study peace in the context of Brazil is to consider the effects of what has been told by official history, and especially what has not been told. The narrative that proposes that Brazil be a model country of cultural diversity, a dream of racial democracy, hides historical and violent oppressions that perpetuate the country's structural and cultural violence. According to the 2010 Census of the Brazilian Institute of Statistical Geography (IBGE), less than 900,000<sup>3</sup> indigenous people inhabit Brazil, a number much lower than estimates 521 years ago, before the colonial invasion. On the resistance of indigenous peoples, Krenak comments in the special TV Globo special "Earth Speeches": "The fact that we were the first inhabitants did not guarantee us anything, on the contrary, it launched us into an incessant struggle for the rights of our culture, our mother tongue, and our territory"<sup>4</sup> (Boni & Vergueiro, 2021).

Lilia Schwarcz (2019) highlights that since the appearance of the first historical records in the new world, it is possible to perceive efforts to create Brazil's history. One of these efforts was the first competition held by the Instituto Histórico Geográfico Brasileiro (IHGB) in 1844. Candidates should discuss how Brazilian history should be told. She states: "The constitutional amendment was straightforward, leaving no room for doubt. It was about inventing a history of and for Brazil" (p.7).<sup>5</sup> For Schwarcz, the construction of an official history plays a strategic role in State policies, magnifying certain events and easing out problems that the nation has experienced in the past, but prefers to forget, and whose roots still find repercussions in the present time.

## Decolonial Perspectives

According to Bicalho and Feijo (2020), "Despite the discourse of neutrality, modernity's epistemology was utilized as a mechanism for colonial and subsequently scientific domination"<sup>6</sup>. For the authors, the intrinsic bond between science and "what is considered valid" knowledge, conveyed through formal education in its different phases, is part of a process of expansion of power of the Global North (understood as Western Europe and, subsequently, the United States), and aims to exclude the social and political aspects in the formation of epistemologies.

Offering a different narrative, the decolonial perspective refers to the possibility of critical thinking from those subalternized by capitalist modernity. This perspective has been adopted by

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<sup>3</sup> Brazilian Institute of Geography Statistics. 2010.  
[https://indigenas.ibge.gov.br/images/pdf/indigenas/folder\\_indigenas\\_web.pdf](https://indigenas.ibge.gov.br/images/pdf/indigenas/folder_indigenas_web.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>5</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>6</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

Latin American theorists from different areas of the social sciences, and strongly inspired by the cosmologies of the original peoples, with research focused mainly on the impact of this domination in the area of education, with the questioning of the geopolitics of knowledge. Authors such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo, Catherine Walsh, and many others describe how European thought spread around the world using methods of colonial domination, and later establishing norms for the production of scientific knowledge.

Regarding the geopolitics of knowledge, Dignolo (2002) defines a way of conceiving, producing and transmitting knowledge in modernity-coloniality that acquires the character of rationalistic, neutral and universal knowledge, but is in fact Eurocentric, erasing other knowledge. A formal education in these terms, according to Bicalho and Feijo (2020) ends up being a replicator of theories that do not offer answers to the most important and urgent demands of the various social groups that live in societies, which are also multiple.

## **Decolonial Pedagogies**

Catherine Walsh, who coined the concept "Decolonial Pedagogies", argues that decoloniality is not just a theoretical perspective, but a practice of building alternative experiences, spaces and perceptions about oneself and the world. In the book *Decolonial Pedagogies*, Walsh (2017) proposes a dialogue between two major figures in the discussion of power inequalities: the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon<sup>7</sup>. While Paulo Freire questions various types of oppression that subjugate and dehumanize the poorest and most excluded classes, and develops pedagogies of liberation of the oppressed, Fanon's starting point is the colonial problem, addressing not only the economic and political character of this domination, but addressing the problems of the colonizing mentality and how it dehumanizes the subject, creating conditions of non-existence. For her, both Freire and Fanon, in addition to developing theories, defend practical actions and pedagogies of learning, unlearning and relearning capable of leading the individual to a process of decolonization. Freire, Fanon and pioneers such as Poma de Alaya<sup>8</sup> make up the political, social and theoretical foundation that lead Walsh to formulate the

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<sup>7</sup> For Walsh (2017), Freire was, in the 20th century, the intellectual who most supported debates about an inseparable political and educational action, proposing a critical reading of the world involving the active participation of popular classes. Fanon was a psychiatrist and also a revolutionary against colonial rule, and he was in his brief life an intellectual committed to the problematic of the racialized and colonized individual.

<sup>8</sup> The Andean writer Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala (1551 - 1615) wrote the work *Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno [First New Chronicle and Good Governance]* which shows the indigenous vision of the Andean world, detailing in 1180 pages various aspects of the Peruvian society, and the violence committed by Spanish colonizers against the Andean peoples. Lessa (2009, p. 1) explains that Poma de Ayala acted as an indigenous

concept of “Decolonial Pedagogies”. She describes these pedagogies as plural, which at the same time question Western Modernity and open paths to other possibilities and conditions of thought, rationalities, knowledge and practices. Walsh also states:

Obviously, the pedagogy and the pedagogical here are not thought of in the instrumentalist sense of teaching and transmission of knowledge, nor are they limited to the field of education or school spaces. Rather, and as Paulo Freire once said, pedagogy is understood as an essential methodology within and for social, political, ontological and epistemic liberation struggles. (p. 29)<sup>9</sup>

If, as Galeano (2010) wrote, “the first condition to change reality is to know it”<sup>10</sup> (p. 353), an education far from the dilemmas, challenges and potential of these multiple societies is limited and limiting. In the case of Brazil, and especially in the Amazon region, a place of resistance of the country's traditional native peoples, an education that does not promote the questioning of the processes of domination and exploitation to which its peoples were subjected, perpetuates a legacy of submission, misery and deprivation.

## **Decolonial Education**

In addition to an awareness of inequality, decolonial education, as explained by Oliveira (2016), manifests itself as purposeful education, which not only denounces colonial ties, but proposes the “creation and construction of new social, political, cultural, and thought conditions”<sup>11</sup> (p. 3). According to him, decolonial education's aim and strategy is to build other pedagogies besides the hegemonic one, involving not only formal educational spaces, but also organizations and social movements. “Decolonizing, would mean then, in the field of education, a praxis based on a purposeful educational insurgency”(p. 3)<sup>12</sup>, he points out.

And how does decolonial education happen in a practical way? Once again, we turn to Oliveira (2016) who talks about the power of intersection with social movements and their

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interpreter of the foreign invasion, claiming justice for the violence committed against indigenous peoples through a critical discourse that brought together legal and Christian aspects, inserting in the work more than ten native languages, and drawings illustrating Christian values (used by the Spaniards to justify violence against the natives) and also Quechua iconography. The document is an important milestone of anti-colonial resistance. In Lessa, G. (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>10</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>11</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>12</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

pedagogical formulations and theorizations aimed at transforming oppressive colonial conditions, and the construction of dialogue between different educational realities with policies and social movements that constitute a thinking, being, doing and feeling differently from praxis and the rhetoric of modernity. In this synergy, the knowledge production must be considered as plural processes under construction that are not only forged in academic or institutionalized spaces.

According to Reinaldo Fleuri (2020) the search for the construction of educational processes that rethink pedagogical practices and curricular structures through dialogue and interaction with popular communities constitutes a set of practices. They allow the deconstruction of processes of exclusion and subordination historically rooted in the processes of colonization that are manifested through the coloniality of power, knowledge, being and living. As for the way in which these initiatives are manifested, for Jaramillo and Carreon (2014) “There is clearly no one-way to sustain or enact the vision of revolutionary and decolonial social movements. The vision is pluriversal” (p.16). The authors argue that emancipatory philosophies and subaltern epistemologies offer the opportunity for reflection and inspiration so that initiatives can reconcile social needs and formulate viable and sustainable economic structures.

### **Identity formation through decolonial education**

Here I will present two examples that demonstrate the potential of decolonial education outside institutionalized spaces, and the influence of this education on identity formation. The first story is that of the black feminist philosopher, writer and activist Djamila Ribeiro. She is currently one of the most influential personalities in debates about race and gender in Brazil, and the author of *Place of Speeches*, *Who's Afraid of Black Feminism?* and *The Little Anti-racist Manual*. The latter was *the* best-selling book in Brazil in 2020. Ribeiro's contribution has become an important theoretical framework for the discussion of racial issues. In addition, through the collection of publications organized under the title “Plural Feminisms” that she directed, a new generation of black intellectuals had their works published and made available at an affordable price.

In the book *Who's Afraid Of Black Feminism?*, Ribeiro (2018) talks about the path of discovering one's own blackness. In the introduction, she reports episodes from her childhood in which she faced racism. Ribeiro shares her memories and says that as a girl, at school, she was the target of jokes every day because of her dark skin and frizzy hair. The author recalls the rejection, and the seclusion that she used as a strategy to make herself invisible to avoid the jokes, which kept her silent even when she knew the answers to the teacher's questions just because she

didn't want to attract attention. According to her, history classes related to slavery in Brazil were classes that reduced people's experience to only being slaves. She writes:

When the figure of an enslaved woman appeared in the schoolbook, I knew there would be comments such as 'Look at Djamila's mother there'. I hated these classes or any mention of the slave past - I huddled in the chair trying to hide. (p. 7)<sup>13</sup>

Years later, already out of the classroom, Ribeiro met and began to attend the “Black Women's House of Culture” in Santos (São Paulo), where she also worked for four years. The NGO founded in 1990 offers legal assistance to black women and men in cases of racism and legal support to women and children who are victims of domestic and sexual violence. About this experience, she says that it was there that she first connected with narratives produced by black intellectuals, and that the encounter with these authors generated a new encounter with herself. She states: "I learned to speak through other voices, to see myself through other perspectives"<sup>14</sup> (p. 13). From the contact with these authors, she says that she rediscovered her own strength and began to see herself through other lenses. She says that from that moment on, she started to transform her worldview about herself, about her experiences and roots.

The second example is from Ywmonyry Mywtymanety, which was commented upon by João de Souza (2017) in his book *Seringality<sup>15</sup>: The State of Coloniality In The Amazon And The Condemned Of The Forest*. Mywtymanety is an indigenous person of the Apurinã people, who live in the Brazilian Amazon. In his master's thesis in Sustainable Development at the University of Brasília (UnB), he dedicates the first chapter to his own journey. Born in the Camicuã indigenous land, he tells how his trajectory was marked by conflicting feelings about himself and his origins: “The fact that I was a victim of prejudice generated antagonistic feelings: at the same time, I wanted to be with my family in the village, and I started to feel ashamed of being indigenous”<sup>16</sup> (p. 18).

Baptized as Ywmonyry Mywtymanety by his family, and as Francisco de Moura Cândido in a registry in the municipality of Boca do Acre (Amazonas), he tells how he had his first education in the indigenous village, learning mainly from his father about how to live harmoniously in the forest and how to be wise and resilient. His educational experience changed completely when he

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<sup>13</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>14</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>15</sup> *Seringality* for Souza (2017) is a manifestation of the global non-local coloniality of the seringais [rubber estate] of the Amazon.

<sup>16</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.



became ten years old, and was invited by his older sister to live with her in the city so that he could attend the “white man's school” (p. 19). From then on, he says that he experienced a sudden rupture with the world he knew, and that he was thrown into a society that treated him as inferior.

The teachers based their classes on those books that said that Christopher Columbus and Pedro Álvares Cabral had been the great heroes of the discovery of Brazil and that the indigenous people were synonymous with inferiority and obstacles to the development of the country. This prompted my classmates to call me “smelly *caboco*”<sup>17</sup> and to defer several questions directed at me, such as: “do you bathe, *caboco*?” “Is it true that you eat people?” They still made some statements like: “the indigenous people are lazy”. My answer was always silence. (Cândido, p. 20)<sup>18</sup>

He also recalls that numerous times he came home from school crying, asking his family not to make him go to school anymore. Whereas in the “white man's school” he learned that indigenous people were lazy, his memories of life in the indigenous village were of work, and cultural pride. Like Ribeiro, who tried to hide, Mywtymanety says that in the week before “Indian Day”, celebrated on April 19, he sat in the back of the room with the intention of not being noticed. The strategy, however, did not work and he was always the target of jokes, and an “attraction” at the center of a celebration that reinforced stereotypes about indigenous peoples, starting with the name of the date. After finishing high school he spent 10 years away from the classroom until he felt the need to reconnect with his origins. Mywtymanety then returned to the indigenous village where he was born and began to live intensely with the *pajés* (shamans), and according to him, resumed the learning he had benefited from before going to the “white school”. He writes:

That's when I realized that I was in a classroom again. The difference now was that the teachings would not be learned from the outside in, as is the case with scientific knowledge, but from the inside out. My teachers had the mission of making me access my most essential nature, that I would seek, from the knowledge of my people, my traditional wisdom. (Cândido, p. 20)<sup>19</sup>

It is intriguing to note that for both Djamila Ribeiro, who was born and raised in southeastern Brazil, and Ywmonyry Mywtymanety, from the Amazon, school did not provide an

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<sup>17</sup> The word “caboco” is a variation of “caboclo”, used to designate a person of mixed Indigenous Brazilian and European ancestry. In this context used pejoratively.

<sup>18</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>19</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

experience capable of contributing significantly to the discovery of their own identity, blackness and indigenous heritage. Both experienced the feeling of inadequacy that was unraveled with the deconstruction of colonial logics. It is also important to note that the Academy, responsible for teacher training, significantly contributed to the formulation of racist “scientific” theories and the invisibility of knowledge produced by non-white and native peoples, contributing to colonial rule.

Boaventura de Souza Santos exposes that in the last two centuries a single dominant epistemology eliminated the cultural and political context of the production and reproduction of knowledge, sustaining a discourse of universality and neutrality, but being promoted by political, economic and military interventions of colonialism and of modern capitalism. For him, the intervention of Western philosophy and theology suppressed and reduced the epistemological, cultural and political diversity of the world: “With this, a lot of social experience was wasted and the epistemological, cultural and political diversity of the world was reduced” (Souza & Meneses, 2009, p.8)<sup>20</sup>.

In the book *Indigenous Decolonialism* by the jurist Álvaro de Azevedo Gonzaga (2021), myths<sup>21</sup> are listed that reflect the common sense perception of Brazilians about their native peoples. He presents historical and cultural aspects that illustrate that in many ways Brazilians remain colonized because the cultural values are measured by the ingrained standards of the colonizer. Although Gonzaga speaks specifically about the issue of indigenous stereotyping, which relates them to Brazil's colonial past, it is possible to expand this reflection also to black people, whose existence is also limited in the present by the colonial heritage of the slavery past.

A few years after Ribeiro and Francisco left high school, legislative achievements promised to transform the educational experiences of Brazilian youth. Currently in Brazil, affirmative actions in the form of laws require the inclusion in classrooms of themes related to indigenous and black histories and cultures. In 2003, Law No. 10.639<sup>22</sup> of January 9, included the mandatory theme “Afro-Brazilian History and Culture” in the Education Network's official curriculum, changing the Law that establishes the guidelines and bases of national education, the Law No.

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<sup>20</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>21</sup> The author addresses the invalidation of the identity of “acculturated” indigenous, the non-recognition of indigenous socio-diversity, and also the issue of myths that present indigenous people as lazy, cannibals, violent, child eaters, and land owners and exploiters.

<sup>22</sup> *Altera a Lei nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996, que estabelece as diretrizes e bases da educação nacional, para incluir no currículo oficial da Rede de Ensino a obrigatoriedade da temática "História e Cultura Afro-Brasileira", e dá outras providências.* 2003. (Presidência da República). 10.639. (Bra).

9.394<sup>23</sup> of December 20, 1996. Five years later, on March 10, 2008, Law No. 11.645<sup>24</sup> was enacted, which also included in the curriculum the obligatory inclusion of indigenous themes together with the already existing Afro-Brazilian ones. And in 2013, the Law that established the guidelines and bases of national education had in its Article 3<sup>25</sup>, which provides for the bases of education, the inclusion of consideration for ethnic-racial diversity.

Despite the undeniable importance of these legislative achievements in a country that has historically neglected indigenous peoples and black peoples, it is possible to draw some criticism regarding the application of these laws. Clovis Brighenti (2015) for example, notes that the existence of Law No. 11,645 does not guarantee its application. For him, the lack of enforcement of the law contributes not only to not creating control mechanisms for compliance with the norm, but also to “institutional racism”. Brighenti argues that there are few pedagogy courses that offer the disciplines and have hired specific teachers to train teachers, and that few schools are even aware of the existence of these laws. He still questions and suggests:

In a multicultural country, interculturality must be part of the educational process. Why doesn't Brazil do it? Why until today is the theme of diversity not part of the school curriculum? Why is the indigenous theme still not a basic theme in schools? Why do we need a law to include this theme in the school curriculum? I venture an answer: it is due to the positivist conception and the colonialist process of our school education. (p. 3)<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the failure in the applicability of laws, a pervasive national challenge not only limited to the field of education, it is also interesting to note that in the second article of the text of Law No. 11,645, which provides for the mandatory inclusion of the theme “History and Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous Culture”, it is highlighted that the content must be present especially in the areas of artistic education, literature and Brazilian histories, which may subliminally suggest a distance between these peoples and other areas of knowledge, which is a colonial narrative. It is true that the contributions of indigenous peoples and black peoples are not limited to the human sciences, and therefore decoloniality can and should be applied in all areas of knowledge.

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<sup>23</sup> *Estabelece as diretrizes e bases da educação nacional. 1996.* (Presidência da República). 9.394. (Bra).

<sup>24</sup> *Altera a Lei nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996, modificada pela Lei nº 10.639, de 9 de janeiro de 2003, que estabelece as diretrizes e bases da educação nacional, para incluir no currículo oficial da rede de ensino a obrigatoriedade da temática “História e Cultura Afro-Brasileira e Indígena”.* 2008. (Presidência da República). 11.645. (Bra).

<sup>25</sup> *Altera a Lei nº 9.394, de 20 de dezembro de 1996, que estabelece as diretrizes e bases da educação nacional, para dispor sobre a formação dos profissionais da educação e dar outras providências.* 2013. (Presidência da República). 12.796. (Bra).

<sup>26</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro

## Socio-environmentalism: a decolonial form of activism

Science predicts that the climate crisis is in essence the beginning of the most severe and sweeping humanitarian crisis to come. Environmentalists and scientists argue that today's youth will be the last<sup>27</sup> with a chance to reverse this catastrophic scenario. In this sense, nothing threatens peace more than the climate crisis. From the *buen vivir* practice of the native peoples of Latin America, the Ubuntu philosophy of the African continent, to the theories of peace developed in the global north, to the most recent formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) by the United Nations (UN), all these efforts for the sake of peace warn us that an awareness of the inseparability between human beings and the environment is crucial to ensure the survival of humanity.

In his book *Tomorrow Is Not For Sale*, Ailton Krenak (2020) points out the fallacy of what we were taught, that the earth and humanity can be separated, as if we could live dissociated from nature. Socio-environmental activism, then, is activism inspired by the indigenous peoples' conception that the environmental struggle is not disassociated from human beings because human beings are part of nature: "I don't observe that there is anything that is not nature. Everything is nature. The cosmos is nature. All I can think of is nature," writes Krenak. Socio-environmentalism can then be understood as a decolonial practice of environmentalism.

In Acre, in the Brazilian Amazon, resistance against the colonial heritage of exploitation and development arises strongly from the social movement of *seringueiros* (rubber tappers) due to its model of autonomous subsistence and subsequently, of environmental protection. According to Mary Allegretti (2008), the confrontations with the military model of exploration of the Amazon, outlined from 1967 with Operation Amazon, encountered resistance throughout the region, but "nowhere else, however, was the reaction so strong and had consequences as profound as in Acre"<sup>28</sup> (p. 44). This popular movement, which generated a national and international mobilization, generated two main legacies. One is the creation of Extractive Reserves (Resex)<sup>29</sup> in Brazil, a model

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<sup>27</sup> Guardian News and Media. (2018, December 3). 'we are the last generation that can stop climate change' – UN summit. The Guardian. Retrieved November 28, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/03/we-are-last-generation-that-can-stop-climate-change-un-summit>.

<sup>28</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>29</sup> With the concept inspired by the Indigenous Reserves model, the Extractive Reserves (RESEX) are territorial spaces protected by law to ensure the livelihoods and culture of traditional populations, and the sustainable use of the area's natural resources. The RESEX areas belong to the domain of public power, with use granted to traditional extractive populations (rubber tappers – who extract latex from rubber trees, chestnut trees – who collect Brazil nuts, babassu coconut breakers, fishing community, etc.). This specific model of conservation

of socio-environmentalism; and later, the formulation of a different concept of citizenship that extends citizenship, a status linked to the city, to the forest and to the native and traditional peoples who live in it.

Socio-environmentalism was born in a Brazil that was taking its first steps towards re-democratization after 21 years of Military Dictatorship<sup>30</sup>, and from strategic political articulations between indigenous entities, social movements and the environmental movement. According to Juliana Santillin (2005), with the end of the regime, more spaces for mobilization and articulation were opened in the country, and a new model of activism emerged from the Amazon: "In the Brazilian Amazon, the articulation between native peoples and traditional populations, with the support from national and international allies, led to the emergence of the Forest Peoples Alliance<sup>31</sup>, the landmark of socio-environmentalism"<sup>32</sup>.

Santilli (2005) states that the Forest Peoples Alliance defended the way of life of traditional Amazonian populations, as a counterpoint to the predatory developmental model, a way of life that not only considered the existence of the peoples of the forest, but that was built, and is built continuously<sup>33</sup> by these peoples. Through a large local and international articulation, the socio-environmentalism movement has conquered territorial land, has ensured the demarcation of natives' lands and the creation of Extractive Reserves, and it has also become a model of social participation in environmental management. The author explains:

Socio-environmentalism was built on the idea that public environmental policies must include and involve local communities, which have knowledge and environmental management practices. More than that, it developed based on the concept that, in a poor

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unit and agrarian reform was formulated by traditional populations - under the leadership of the rubber tapper and environmentalist from Acre, Chico Mendes - and the result of an intense process of social mobilization that took place in the Amazon in the last decades of the 20th century. In Allegretti, M. (2008).

<sup>30</sup> The Military Dictatorship in Brazil lasted 21 years, and in addition to affecting democracy with authoritarianism and nationalism, it had a major impact on freedom of the press and expression, education, and human rights violations (including the ethnocide of indigenous peoples). The coup and maintenance of the regime had direct support from the United States, and from the Brazilian business elite.

<sup>31</sup> The Forest Peoples Alliance emerged in the mid-1980s when important indigenous leaders and *seringueiros* (rubber tappers) gathered to demand the demarcation of indigenous lands and the creation of Extractive Reserves (Resex). The meeting represented the union of historical enemies (indigenous and rubber tappers) who were having their livelihoods threatened by the expansion of agriculture in the Amazon, strongly encouraged by the civilian-military government. This alliance of indigenous people and rubber tappers was fundamental for the achievement of rights such as the demarcation of indigenous lands, creation of Extractive Reserves and inclusion of indigenous peoples' rights, and environmental protection in the 1988 Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, a fundamental and supreme law of Brazil. In Pimenta, J. (2007).

<sup>32</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>33</sup> In the indigenous peoples' conception, the forest is like a "garden" that is constantly cultivated by them and by other animals.

country with so many social inequalities, a new development paradigm must promote not only strictly environmental sustainability — that is, the sustainability of species, ecosystems and processes ecological — but also social sustainability — that is, it must also contribute to the reduction of poverty and social inequalities and promote values such as social justice and equity. (Santilli, p.9)<sup>34</sup>

It was through contact with the forest and the cosmology of indigenous peoples that social movements in Acre and the Amazon created new ways of living and organizing as a society. Clear examples of this were: the formulation of public policies for agrarian reform and cultural and environmental protection such as Extractive Reserves; the understanding of socio-environmentalism as a form of activism; and the formulation of *florestania*<sup>35</sup> as a concept of citizenship connected to living in the forest.

The *Seringueiro* Project is an adult literacy project initiated by Chico Mendes in 1981, with the aim of organizing and strengthening the foundations of the social movement against deforestation. According to Allegretti (2008), it “broke a tradition of the absence of social policies in the region of rubber trees and was the embryo of more profound changes that emerged later” (p. 46). This experience connects to one of the important statements of the patron of Brazilian education, the educator Paulo Freire (2013):

Who, better than the oppressed, will be prepared to understand the terrible meaning of an oppressive society? Who will feel, better than they, the effects of oppression? Who, more than them, will understand the need for liberation? They will not arrive by chance, but by the praxis of their search, by the knowledge and recognition of the need to fight for it. (p. 41)<sup>36</sup>

Freire dedicated his life to formulating pedagogies that would contribute to the oppressed being able to elevate their own condition and assume the role of protagonist. And as we could see

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<sup>34</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to socio-environmentalism, a new concept of citizenship was also born in the State of Acre. As João de Souza (2017) explains, *florestania*, a neologism combining the two words *floresta* (forest) and *cidadania* (citizenship), was a concept coined by the journalist Antônio Alves and the cultural producer Jorge Nazaré, inspired by the emancipatory struggles of the forest peoples at the end of 20th century. This concept, which constitutes an Amazonian view on being and living in the world, guided in Acre the formulation of emancipatory public policies in ethical commitment to the environment during the Government of the Forest (1999-2003). Anailton Salgado (2011) exposes that *florestania* involves not only a concept, but “a set of relationships that involve individuals among themselves, and also the cultural manifestations that, in a way, make the identity of these people transcend the forest towards other frontiers, including the frontier of knowledge.” (p.20) <sup>ln</sup> Salgado, A. (2011) and Souza, J. (2017).

<sup>36</sup> Unofficial translation by Anaís Cordeiro.

in the trajectories of Djamila Ribeiro, Ywmonyry Mywtymanety, and in the achievements of Chico Mendes and the rubber tappers of Acre, it is inevitable, during this emancipation process, that one should come to question the current systems of oppression, and to claim space, equity, and decision-making power. With regard to discussions on the climate crisis, these claims are expressed through agendas such as Environmental Racism<sup>37</sup> and Climate Justice<sup>38</sup>, for example.

In 2021, Brazil had the largest<sup>39</sup> delegation in its history made up of indigenous peoples at the United Nations Conference on Climate Change, COP 26. On that occasion, the young indigenous leader of the Suruí people and Brazilian activist, Txai Suruí, broke a historical silence, being the first Brazilian indigenous person to speak at the opening of the conference. In an interview with BBC News Brasil, she spoke about the moment: “It was a great honor, a great privilege to be opening the COP and to be able to take the voice of indigenous peoples to everyone, but we don't have to be just in the opening. That is still the minimum.” (BBC News Brasil, 2021, 0:29). In her speech on COP 26, she claimed: “Indigenous peoples are in the frontline of the emergency climate, and we must be at the center of the decisions happening here” (Amazônia Real, 2021,1:28).

The statement of Txai Suruí not only calls for the inclusion of indigenous peoples at the center of the debate but shows that this movement can provide the articulation of new solutions formulated in diversity. This idea was defended by another representative of the indigenous peoples but in this case the Quiche peoples branch of the Mayan culture from Guatemala, almost 30 years ago. Winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, the year that marked the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in what would become known as America, indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum chose to state the following in her speech: “If the indigenous civilization and the European civilizations could have made exchanges in a peaceful and harmonious manner, without

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<sup>37</sup> Environmental Racism is the concept that discusses the meeting of racial and environmental injustices. It is the understanding that groups that contribute least to the structure that lead to climate collapse are also the most affected by the impacts of these events. More information available here <https://www.conectas.org/noticias/entrevista-como-o-racismo-ambiental-afeta-a-vida-das-pessoas-negras-e-indigenas/>

<sup>38</sup> The global movement for Climate Justice makes a connection between human rights and the climate crisis. It is an agenda that advocates the recognition of the participation of traditional and peripheral communities, mostly formed by social minorities, in the perspectives of the future and solutions for the impacts of climate change. More information available here <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/climate-justice/>

<sup>39</sup> Noberto, C. (2021). *40 Lideranças Indígenas desembarcam Na cop 26*. Correio Braziliense . Retrieved November 28, 2021, from <https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/brasil/2021/11/4959633-40-liderancas-indigenas-desembarcam-na-cop-26.html>.

destruction, exploitation, discrimination and poverty, they could, no doubt, have achieved greater and more valuable conquests for Humanity” (Tum, 1992, para. 28).

## Conclusion

From the narratives presented here, one can conclude that decolonial education can be a path that helps the individual to overcome their discomfort caused by stereotyping and prejudice, and contributes to the formation of critical thinking and of a proactive attitude that allows for social and environmental commitment. Decolonial education can also be experienced in different ways, not limited to classroom experience, and have an impact on the learners.

This expansion of narratives in educational environments, whether formal or informal, can contribute to positive learning experiences and success for non-white students and not only for them. The whole society will benefit not only from greater representation and diversity, but will also learn from different ways of knowing, how to resolve impasses, overcome difficulties and live in community.

By considering and including decolonial perspectives in the curriculum, schools and universities can open a space for the formation of thinkers and researchers connected with structural and cultural violence such as exploitation, oppression, racism and discrimination. Intellectuals like Djamila Ribeiro and Ywmonyry Mywtymanety produce works that contribute to the expansion of solutions and to the relevance of the Academy.

The participation of local communities in decision-making spaces, jointly formulating public policies that directly impact their reality, which happened with the rubber tapper and socio-environmental movement, is an experience that can inspire other communities. It can serve as an example of cooperation, social participation and also as an initiative that subverted exploitative values created and strengthened by coloniality.

In addition, despite the effort made in the search for references and in their translations into English, it was interesting for this researcher to progressively come across the existence of works that reflect on decoloniality, even when they do not use the term clearly. This may indicate the existence of many more focused and varied efforts in studies on the subject.

Certainly much can still be learned if there is a greater investment in research that measures the impact of decolonial education and practice among learners and in communities. It



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is expected that this type of research will emerge from non-privileged spaces, from researchers who, while traveling on this research journey, will experience processes of recognition of their own identity. It is up to educational institutions, foundations and teachers to encourage and support these processes as a collective effort towards a more diverse, anti-racist and transformative social science. This will hopefully lead to a broadening and deepening of the decolonial perspective in Brazil and in the world, for the benefit of the whole human community.

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