

You are here: [Home](#) > [UFRGS](#) > [News and Information](#) > Whiteness: the white privilege and the roots of racism

Whiteness: the white privilege and the roots of racism

During the Black November, the program UFRGS Science discusses whiteness and invites you to be self-critical. Being white is having privileges, and this complex theme has been the object of scientific research at UFRGS

First published: November 26, 2020

By Nicole Trevisol

I will invite you to a mental exercise. If you are at work or in class, look around you. If you are at home, think about your work environment and your classroom. How many of your co-workers or classmates are black? Can you remember how many black classmates were part of your academic and professional trajectory? My experience is shocking! None in my entire academic journey, none from high school to university. In my professional field, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of black professionals who worked with me in an editorial department.

While thinking about it, we are faced with a cruel reality: besides being racially segregated, black people in Brazil are socially, economically, educationally, and professionally excluded. Here, if you are born white, you have privileges. The color of your skin can give you opportunities and protect you from prejudice, harassment, police brutality, and sexual violence.

In the Black November, the program UFRGS Science invites the academic community to discuss whiteness through a challenge: let us exercise self-criticism? Let us think about whether slavery, instituted by whites, gave rise to the prejudices still experienced today by the black, indigenous, and quilombola population? Let us look at our reflections in the mirror and think about the fact that being white gives us privileges?

At UFRGS, some research projects have already started to debate and to pay attention to 'whiteness'. What is that? [Cleber Teixeira Leão](#), a History teacher working for the state school system, and holding a master's in history teaching from UFRGS responds. Cleber is a black man from the ghetto (as he self-defines) who presented his dissertation, entitled "[Between the visible and the invisible: whiteness and racial relations in the History subjects in the teaching curriculum, in 2020.](#)" For him, whiteness is the place of white privileges: "Whiteness is to have power, it is to define white people racially through their privileges. From the perspective of history, the white and their racial identity are historically constructed while they become invisible as a race and start to racialize the other. Thus, white is not a race, it is not color; the Other one is the one who is black, mestizo, aboriginal, indigenous".

By becoming broadly ordinary due to their social construction over the years, white people got a superpower: being invisible. [Bruna Moraes Battistelli](#), psychologist who holds a master's degree, Ph.D. student in Social and Institutional Psychology at UFRGS, does not research whiteness, but, as a white woman from the outskirts, she considers the issue essential to debates. Bruna, who has been attending classes at the Institute of Psychology for 13 years as a student, points out that changing the narcissistic pact of whiteness is like removing the "comfortable pillows" from white people, quoting Robin Diangelo's *White Fragility* text. "We need to unveil what the whites put under the rug. Is talking about it uncomfortable and risky? Yes, but I'm not subject to the same violations indigenous or black women are. If I do not take the blame to be part of the problem, I remain inside the comfortable zone of whiteness. When we avoid racial conflicts or keep silent about someone's racist attitude, we are sustaining whiteness.

Whiteness and academy

Bruna and Cleber represent a wave of researchers that are provoking debates and confrontation about whiteness in the academy. While writing her thesis, Bruna sees the silencing of black scientific production. Even though this is not her research theme, she means to resist the white supremacy – by carefully and meaningfully choosing the authors to pick her way among the many texts in her field of study – and how the academy still values white-centered intellectual production. "The University is a place of privileges, of whiteness, of strengthening and using European and North American narratives. We protect and reproduce works by French and American intellectuals to the detriment of black and Brazilian intellectuals," she stresses, quoting something she has heard in the academy. "You need to decolonize your work, so read (Gilles) Deleuze, (Michel) Foucault and (Giorgio) Agamben".

This is as if Latin Americans, Africans, the Caribbean thinkers did not exist. They were deliberately erased or had their scientific and intellectual production reduced due to the color of their skin. In this oppressive model of construction of what is valid knowledge and what is not, the black and the indigenous remain in the field of the folklore, the exotic, the cultural, failing to transcend the barrier of "lack of a white quality seal" to produce intellectual knowledge. "It is noticeable that, in most graduate programs, 80% of the authors studied are European. We forget that there are wonderful works in the Caribbean, in Africa, and they are not used because dominating discourse has been for centuries spreading that the European school, especially the French one, is still the most important," says Cleber.

It is the University's role to identify and study this white-centered space as well as the production of knowledge in such privileged place, still dominated by whites. Cleber's dissertation is about the History teaching curriculum in the state elementary school. Bringing this theme into UFRGS makes the academic community think about how their knowledge is produced. "Education is white because it was spread first all over Europe and then to the United States, places that form the core social and cultural attributes of class and race. Today, society's long-established pattern makes us want to be European or American because whiteness is there. This is reflected at the University, whose curricula is predominantly based on European and or North American authors. This is something we need to deconstruct," emphasizes Cleber.

Bruna confirms undergraduate programs in Psychology do keep the same elitist, white, and racist – as well as homophobic, transphobic, and sexist – patterns described by Cleber: "My Ph.D. research at UFRGS is about research and care policies, but I see that it is fundamental to critically think about white supremacy and the recurring authors used in the academy to inform my decision-making. If I do not do this, my knowledge will keep spinning this wheel that turns and grinds lives".

The Ph.D. student quotes [Bell Hooks](#), who encourages the reader to see white supremacy as a place of privileges, as a support for the whole apparatus of society (education, university, public policies, media); a necessary reflection for the breaking of the epistemic privilege existing within the academy. University will remain as a colonizing, white, male, and cis-heteronormative production field if things keep being the same. "We chose to ally with French men with complicated speeches that make us feel dazzled. Of course, they have things to say, the problem is this to be taken as the only possible epistemology."

An example of Bruna's claim is when Cleber says Lourenço Cardoso has less speech place than [Lia Vainer Schucman](#) just because he is black. "Lia has a crucial job, which is a reference in this field. But we realized that the fact that she is white makes her a reference in the whiteness theme, which was better defined by Cardoso. The black researching the white, that is, the object now observing the observer, is a problem and causes stress. It is natural when white people research blacks and indigenous people, but the reverse seems to be a kind of revanchism. Academically speaking, the researcher should move to other perspectives."

It is necessary to debate whiteness in science in the Black November. Thinking about whiteness goes beyond thinking about it only from the black's perspective whether in intellectual production, resistance, or equality. It is necessary to broaden the perspective and analyze who has privileges, which ones they are, and who has the power to change that. "Discussing whiteness is to broaden and deepen the debate so it is not linked only to the issues of blacks and indigenous people. It has to have one more element, which, for me, is the main one: the white," says Cleber.

The criticism here is to talk about black people, racial prejudice, and privileges only in the Black November. Why don't we bring the discussion of whiteness and of all the structural problems that it has been causing throughout our history as a society in academic texts, with authors beyond the axis Europe-United States? Why don't we value the production of knowledge made by black, indigenous, or Brazilian quilombola intellectuals? Why don't we include other points of view in the curriculum? Bruna remembers a situation during the occupation at the Institute of Psychology, in which black students requested the reading of Maria Aparecida Bento (psychologist, director of the **CEERT [Center for the Study of Labor Relations and Inequalities; in Portuguese, Centro de Estudos das Relações de Trabalho e Desigualdades]** and Brazilian activist) in all undergraduate courses. "It is not by studying race once a semester that we are going to take the whiteness out of their comfort zone, that we are going to change/overcome white supremacy. What those students wanted was for white people to look at what they produce when they agree with each other narcissistically. They wanted the changes to begin in classroom relationships. Reading Maria Aparecida Bento means looking at the white supremacist who lives in us: who lives in me, who lives in you, who lives in our actions, in our texts; it means reading her beyond the concept of whiteness, but at the same time is to rethink how we look institutions and organizations. Maria Aparecida Bento is a reference for understanding how institutions are organized".

Stop, look, read, think!

Deconstructing racial prejudice

Society was built on prejudice, and it shapes itself according to the speeches. But that does not mean that all people are taking prejudiced positions. The speeches, the humor, the writing, and the gestures are full of expressions of an identity socially sustained by prejudicial pillars. This is rooted in our society, and to break this paradigm self-criticism and the daily exercise of reflection are fundamental.

"Racism and, consequently, the narcissistic pact of whiteness shape society. If you are white, you take advantage of the racism that prevails in our country. And that does not mean that you are a bad person. Thinking about what Lourenço Cardoso says, having a public opinion against racism is not enough, it is necessary that other daily counter-measures be constituted," Bruna says.

The University is a suitable place for this debate, because it produces diverse innovative knowledge that makes us rethink the long-lasting behaviors and thoughts. It is also up to it broadening its horizons, investigating new thinkers and scientists, reflecting on the inclusion and permanence policies of black, indigenous, and **quilombola** students.

Rethink and see, stress, and criticize, face and deepen the debate. Look at yourself and think collectively. These are the main challenges in times of polarization and individualism. You are not the one to blame for slavery, but you reap the rewards of a world built from the perspective of racial prejudice. This is whiteness! Your privilege needs to be questioned. To what extent are you, white, willing to think about racial equity and to give up certain comforts you have? Now, more than ever, we need to rethink these privileges.

See the full article here: <https://www.ufrgs.br/ciencia/branquitude-privilegio-branco-e-a-raiz-do-preconceito-racial/>.

Translated into English by Júlia Corrêa Mitidieri, under the supervision and translation revision of Elizamari R. Becker (PhD) – IL/UFRGS.



Foto: Gustavo Diehl/UFRGS

