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***Notes on the Future Possibilities of Engaged Anthropological Research:
Why Decolonizing Anthropology Needs Black Diasporic Feminist
Theory and Methodologies***

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ABSTRACT

While in the past decade there have been more ethnographic accounts that shed light on minoritized stories and demystify the specific challenges that women and femmes² experience during their research, much is desired to prepare students and junior scholars from marginalized identities for fieldwork research. Reflecting on a moment of precarity in the context of pre-impeachment São Paulo, I explain why the integration of Black diasporic feminist thought, method, and praxis is critical to further decolonizing efforts in anthropology. Beyond reflection, this narrative calls for sustained politically active engagement to establish an anthropology of liberation.

KEY WORDS Anthropological Research; Black Diasporic Feminist Thought; Decolonizing; Brazil; Ethnographic Fieldwork Research

“*Fica ali, fica ali!*” Nelson³ tells me at the sight of a doorway. It is late in the afternoon on January 12, 2016. We are just a few city blocks east of Avenida Paulista and less than a block away from Rua da Consolação in São Paulo, Brazil. These are highly trafficked streets that have historically served as sites of popular protests for democratic rights. They also mark the starting point of São Paulo’s financial and commercial hubs. Normally, we would have access to the yellow line of the *metrô* (subway), but today is different. Considering the militarized police’s forceful response to civilian protests, cafes and other businesses that are typically opened until late have brought down their metal gates to protect their windows and merchandise. Upon encountering a bloodied white protester, we approach them to see if they need help. They decline and, along with their friends, explain

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to us that the military police (MP) were throwing stun grenades and tear gas and closing off passage to streets. Moments later, we hear rocks hitting the pavement and see a stone, brick-size, pound the street just a few feet from us. We both shriek. Nelson spots a closed shop and instructs me to stand there for cover against the frame of a doorway. We hear more rocks, and I instinctively hold on to his arm.

We stand there for a few minutes before Nelson approaches an MP walking by. Nelson explains that we are not protesters but rather are on our way home from the museum and simply trying to reach the subway. The MP sizes us up and tells Nelson to be careful because we could easily be mistaken for protesters. It seems odd to me that he warns us about future misidentification by other MPs yet does little to ensure our safety. Additionally, the fumes from the tear gas that MPs have thrown have already begun to sting our eyes and scratch our throats. The MP, who is still standing nearby and is himself holding a tear gas bomb, turns to us and gives us instructions on how to best cover our faces before walking away.

Moments later, a second set of young male-presenting protesters approaches our street with their hands up, and to our dismay, a handful of MPs respond by drawing weapons. A wave of fear comes over me. Nelson and I exchange words—though I cannot now remember what was said—and he tries to calm me down because I am becoming visibly agitated. We both crouch down. Additionally, my ordinarily very cool and relaxed friend is starting to show signs of panic, and as I feel his distress and my own, I think, *Shit, really? This is how it ends?* I freeze while the police shout and walk toward the protesters, who have stopped moving and still have their hands raised above their heads in surrender. The police eventually march the protesters further east and out of sight.

After another hour of waiting, taking cover underground in a parking garage, listening to the sounds of helicopters overhead and the weapons of war used against peaceful protesters, we finally do make it home, and we debrief over dinner with Nelson's partner, Rogério. We speak about how lucky we have been to make it back home in one piece and how *foolish* we have been to have walked in the direction of the heart of the demonstration. We had completely forgotten that Movimento Passe Livre (MPL) had called for a peaceful assembly that day to protest the recent increase in public transit fares, in addition to other austerity measures that were further choking both the working and middle classes who rely on public transportation to get to work and move about in a city of more than 7 million cars. MPL is an anti-capitalist, autonomous, people-centered nationwide social movement that has been growing in hundreds of cities throughout Brazil since 1999. Through collective action, MPL labors for the right to free, non-privatized, publicly funded, high-quality mass transportation for all. Although we both would ordinarily attend such an event, that day, we had decided to take a break from our usual routine and spent the afternoon at the Museum of Art in São Paulo—another popular site where Leftist activists often congregate.

When I get home that night, I turn to my field notebook to reflect on a lot of things. I wonder what would have happened to me—a jeans-and-t-shirt- and sneaker-wearing female-presenting Black Dominican American with typical African phenotypes⁴—had I not been accompanied by a light-skinned middle-class Brazilian man. I certainly would not have had the gall to approach the police for help during a

protest. What would it be like to share Nelson's conviction that we had a right to walk on the streets, peacefully assemble, and dare to approach law enforcement without reason to fear?⁵ In general, it is no secret that the MPs are notorious for usually targeting dark-skinned and/or poor people typically of African descent. Historically, the Left-leaning white middle classes experienced a similar type of violence during Brazil's last military dictatorship era. The MPs' excessive use of force, including the use of torture, often results in death and at times the dismemberment and disappearance of those in their custody (Amparo Alves 2014; Caldeira 2000; Conectas Direitos Humanos 2017; Costa Vargas 2008; Goldstein 2013; Holston 2008; Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbaro 2002; Smith 2021; Wacquant 2003). For nonlethal police crimes, the MP also have a record of sexually assaulting transgender and cisgender women they apprehend—a reality that mirrors the record of our own police in the United States. (Davis 2000; Ritchie 2017). In that regard, while a different cultural, political, and geographical context, the commonalities with the experiences of Black and Brown people in police interactions in the United States are eerily similar.⁶ The incidents of that afternoon also reassured me that though I had shifted the focus of my research from more-visible forms of social protests and activism in defense of Black lives to less-visible types of social protest—specifically, prisoners' rights activism—it was ultimately the right choice for me to make. As in the United States, Brazil's incarcerated women and gender nonconforming individuals are the Other victims and survivors of anti-Black police violence—a population that continues to grow steadily despite reforms and regardless of what political party is in power, as I explain in my doctoral thesis (Mena 2018).

I had witnessed numerous protests during my fieldwork, organized by both the Left and the Right. I was grateful that I had not encountered the protest alone as I had previously done. Although social protests are a sign of a healthy democracy, some of the more visible protests I observed shortly after my arrival in February 2015 left me ill at ease, as they included calls to impeach then Workers' Party president Dilma Rousseff, to jail then-former Workers' Party president Inácio "Lula" da Silva, and to bring back military rule. This trifecta of political maneuvering was nearly entirely successful. In April 2016, members of the Brazilian senate—many of whom were themselves under investigation for corruption and money laundering—illegally impeached President Rousseff. Then, beginning in April 2018, former president Lula was imprisoned for 580 days on trumped-up charges of corruption, to pave the way for the October 2018 election of far-right pro-military politician Jair Bolsonaro. A confluence of factors, including a gross mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, led to Bolsonaro's defeat in his bid for reelection in October 2022 to President Lula.

In 2016, the excessive displays of military power at prodemocracy protests created a chaotic atmosphere that was deeply unnerving. In addition to the pungent fumes from tear gas, the frequency and noise produced by stun grenades released by the MP added to the sense of danger imposed upon protesters and passersby. Tear gas is a chemical agent prohibited from being used in war by the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1997.⁷ Via the police, the government created a state of emergency because of the imagined threat of a collective organizing to expose the real threats that socioeconomic injustices create for an already exploited lower class. Under a truly democratic state, is it

possible to imagine how that protest may have played out if participants had held their rallies and marched for a few hours without the presence of police? Or, at minimum, rather than be targeted by the police, what if participants had been protected by the police? What if they had been able to hold the protest without any bloodshed, intimidation, or exposure to toxic chemicals?

These same questions can be asked of protesters in the United States. Indeed, if we briefly reflect on the past 10 years of social protest in the United States, a similar pattern emerges of repressive anti-democratic tactics—whether under an openly fascist administration or not. In 2014, under the Democratic Party’s administration, for instance, the police in Ferguson also bombarded protesters with tear gas and pepper spray during their public demonstrations against police violence. Police also used excessive force during the anti-police brutality protests of 2020, some of which were documented by protesters on social media and in news outlets that dared to discuss why yet another Black death during another public health nightmare had brought so many people to the streets.

In addition to asking why these similar tactics are being used to disperse crowds—often before any actual “riot” ensues—anthropologists in particular, and academics more broadly, must be part of the political conversations and actions to impede these measures from being used in the United States and elsewhere. In the spring of 2024, we once again witnessed the trampling of democratic rights of protests on college campuses, but at a much grander scale than we had experienced previously in this century. In New York City, college administrators at Columbia University and at City College at the City University of New York, for example, not only used campus police on peaceful students gathered in support of a cease-fire in Palestine but also worked with the city’s mayor to deploy militarized police against students. In an interview with journalist Amy Goodman (2024), the Palestinian anthropologist Nadia Abu El-Haj, along with other Columbia faculty, showcased a powerful example of this intervention by showing up for their students in the aftermath of violent police repression that left many students physically injured, including Jewish student organizers in the encampment. When Goodman asked about students who claim to feel unsafe in response to the presence of peaceful encampments, Dr. Abu El-Haj makes a clear distinction between *feeling* and *being* unsafe and, in doing so, engages in the critical care work that attends to the needs of all Columbia students. Showing up for students in this way reflects an intersectional decolonial feminist praxis that centers the needs of the collective beyond the boundaries of a classroom and exposes the myth of hallowed academic halls.

In what follows, I draw attention to my subject position in the city of São Paulo, where I conducted research from February 2015 through March 2017 on the policing, criminalizing, and incarceration of women and gender nonconforming individuals. Though São Paulo is not a majority-Black city, the demographics of the prison population are overwhelmingly *preto, pobre, e periférico*: Black, poor, and from the peripheral neighborhoods in and outside the city. I make the case for the need for Black diasporic feminist thought (Perry 2009), method, praxis, and the citing of Black women/femme (Smith and Garrett-Scott 2021) scholars for an “anthropology of liberation” (Harrison 1997). These theoretical and methodological approaches attend to the risks that Black ethnographers manage in spaces marked with socioeconomic inequalities that are linked to

anti-Black violence. I submit that academic discourse on the condition of racially marginalized populations must necessarily recognize the limits of fieldwork, specifically the ways in which institutional violence are interconnected to the everyday violence that ethnographers are also subjected to, both at home and in their research sites.⁷

This article contributes to existing calls to action that build on the work of anthropologists and activists, often on the margins, who have long argued for critical research and civic engagement rather than the still-problematic cannibal research that defines U.S. American anthropology and which scholars and interlocutors from the Global South rightly point out as opportunistic at best and another manifestation of neocolonial/settler colonialism at worst. I draw from Black diasporic feminist thought (BDFT)⁸ to critically reflect on our role in the production of knowledge and in the representation of people directly affected by violence, including anthropologists who are members of marginalized populations. BDFT is a set of interdisciplinary theoretical critical race, gender, and sexuality studies and civically engaged tools in service to the complex experiences of the Black diaspora within and outside the borders of the United States. To this end, my analysis is in conversation with other scholars who integrate BDFT and praxis in ethnographic methods. Finally, I briefly revisit decolonial research methods to contend that engaging anthropology through these lenses reimagines the possibilities of a discipline committed to decolonial theory and praxis while upholding Black liberation as a requirement for that process.

TO BE BLACK, FEMALE, AND RELATIVELY CONSCIOUS IN PUBLICLY CONTESTED SPACES

Writing about her field experiences in Jamaica, where structural and everyday violence are also a reality, the Black Jamaican American anthropologist Bianca Williams (2009:158) explains that for women ethnographers,

our stories are silenced too often. The struggles and trials that women anthropologists must endure and overcome to get access to some of the same field sites and data as our male counterparts are almost never discussed, leaving our graduate students unprepared to deal with these issues as they arise while on the frontlines of research.

While in the last two decades there have been more ethnographic accounts that shed light on our stories and demystify the specific challenges that women and femmes experience during their research,⁹ much is desired to prepare graduate students and junior scholars from marginalized identities for fieldwork research. We often get these stories long after we have completed our data collection and analysis, not only because of conventions of what is acceptable knowledge to disseminate but also because the assembly line from fieldwork to employment (precarious or otherwise) does not allow for the necessary pause, reflection, and exchange that would actually require us to come to address in community, and with culturally appropriate resources, the harm we have come to learn about.

In São Paulo, a city of 11 million people, women of African descent, dark-skinned people in particular, and other marginalized populations have a fraught relationship with the militarized police that typically patrol the streets. For instance, according to Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transexuais (ANTRA), because of high rates of unemployment, 90% of transgender women, a majority of whom are Black, engage in sex work to make ends meet (Benevides and Nogueira 2020).¹⁰ Despite sex work being decriminalized in Brazil, one of their main perpetrators is the military police. Police are not a source of security and protection, much less agents of justice.

Grassroots activists, such as the Coletivo Mães de Maio—Mothers of May Collective—led by Afro-Brazilian activist Débora da Silva, are another case in point of people from marginalized identities who repeatedly denounce police violence and the failure of the state to protect their communities. The Mães have been laboring hard since 2007 to expose and end the excessive and lethal use of force by the police in São Paulo and throughout Brazil (Amparo Alves 2018; Amparo Alves and Silva 2018; Global Network of Mothers in Resistance 2018; González 2021). In May 2006, along with dozens of families, da Silva lost her adult son as part of a police massacre that claimed the lives of four hundred youths from the periphery of Santos, a coastal city in the state of São Paulo. While da Silva and the other mothers have not received the international attention that the Black Lives Matter (BLM) or #SayHerName movements in the United States have, their experience of surviving police abuse, and their public mourning to call for justice are legible to other Black mothers in the diaspora and Indigenous people in Latin America and the United States who have experienced similar forms of police violence. In collaboration with mothers from Colombia, Chicago, and Anaheim, for instance, the mothers have organized to support each other and to call for justice in these respective international communities where anti-Blackness, anti-Indigenous, and white supremacy still dictate whose life has value. Knowledge of these social movements is facilitated through traditional modes of activism as well as through social media, where the visibility of protests and other acts of resistance in support of Black life—whether on Brazilian soil or elsewhere around the globe—has been nothing short of transformative for directly affected populations.

It was the public activism of these mourning mothers from Brazil that led me to conduct fieldwork in São Paulo in 2015. I had learned about the Mães from working-class Leftist activists in 2012 when I conducted preliminary research in São Paulo on former political prisoners of the dictatorship era in Brazil (1964–1985). The fact that the dictatorship had not ended for Brazil's Black and impoverished population¹¹ and that it was underreported in international news disturbed me profoundly. Over the next couple of years, I learned more about how pervasive anti-Black state violence was in present-day Brazil, and the critical role that social movements played in shedding light on the realities for Black folks in this so-called racial democracy. When I returned to Brazil in 2015 for dissertation research, I initially followed the social movements led by the Mães around this very question of the excessive use of police force and violence in working-class communities in São Paulo (both in the periphery and in the city center). After participating in a handful of protests, however, I realized that a project of this sort, in which I was attending protests as an individual and not a member of an activist collective or participatory research team, would put me at considerable personal risk. Even in protests

that had more of a carnivalesque atmosphere, such as the presence of children and people playing live samba music, dancing, wearing costumes, sharing food, and more, the unpredictability of MP behavior was not something I could easily ignore.

Throughout the 20th century, Brazil experienced a series of periods of military dictatorships. Its most recent and arguably most pernicious iteration was from 1964 to 1985, with hundreds of Brazilians disappeared and murdered by the state, and thousands detained and tortured, for espousing Leftist beliefs. Former president Rouseff, for instance, was in custody and tortured for three years when she was a college student. Under Lula's (2003–2010) and Rouseff's (2011–2016) Workers' Party (Partido do Trabalhador, PT) administrations, there were national projects, including the establishing of truth commissions, to recover the official history and memory of the military era. Additionally, there had been an acknowledgment of the state's role in perpetuating violence—the ramifications of which could still be felt in many sectors of Brazilian civil society, especially the militarized police. Official narratives of the military era and Brazil often make visible the targeting of white middle-class political dissidents. Among Leftist organizations, this representation is then juxtaposed to highlight the present-day prisoners—a vast majority of whom are of African descent or are Indigenous—as political, too. Black Brazilian feminists (Carneiro 2016; Gonzalez 1995; Nascimento in Smith 2016) have argued, however, that the policing and criminalizing of Black people in Brazil did not begin in the post-military dictatorship era but rather is part of the backbone of nation-building projects in Brazil dating back to the mass transatlantic enslavement of people from western and southern Africa. Stated differently, whether part of official narratives or not, Black bodies in Brazil have always been subjected to state violence.

As I became familiar with São Paulo's urban landscape, I noticed, as well, the color line of these nationalist protests. I soon learned to avoid these crowds mainly constituted by white and light-skinned Brazilians wearing the colors of the flag—green, yellow, and dark blue—particularly if I wore red, which would easily identify me as a supporter of the PT¹² regardless of my actual political leanings. Beyond observing the obvious racial-class-color lines, I noted, as well, the presence of heavily armed military police and their vehicles, including military tanks unabashedly supporting nationalist protesters.¹³ In contrast, when the MP show up at prodemocracy protests, they generally intimidate, prohibit movement, or enact violence against protesters regardless of their race, coloring, gender, or age, though, as I noted above, they typically mistreat Brazilians of African descent or those who reveal their social class through their clothing.

The fact that President Rouseff was impeached in April 2016 and that Lula was detained in April 2018, both without sufficient evidence of wrongdoing, marked politically charged and volatile moves that the ultra-Right parties were able to achieve within a relatively short time frame.¹⁴ Within this period as well, it is important to note the assassination of the lesbian Afro-Brazilian sociologist and council member Marielle Franco, who had been elected in October 2017 and started her term in January 2018 in the state of Rio de Janeiro for the Party for Socialism and Liberation. Along with her driver, Anderson Pedro Gomes, Franco was shot and killed on March 14, 2018. Her death matters for numerous reasons,¹⁵ including that she was investigating and denouncing recent government-ordered MP operations in Rio de Janeiro's shantytowns where civilians were

often caught in the crosshairs of police and gang shootings. Although her assassins—both former members of the military police—were arrested in 2019 and have direct links to former president Bolsonaro, the mishandling of evidence by the authorities has been ignored and questions surrounding *who* ordered her murder persist. Not unlike our own election of the fascist presidency of the Trump administration in 2016, the election of Bolsonaro in October 2018 marked Brazil's ultra-Right's rise to power. Given his open bigotry and disdain for anything that is not cisgender, heteronormative, white, male, and rich, many Brazilians refer to Bolsonaro, an ex-military officer, as "Trump, but with guns." With good reason, Brazilians were also concerned with his resultant policies to put more guns into the hands of Brazilian citizens.

Prior to President Rousseff's illegal impeachment, there were already signs of social unrest linked to austerity measures. In 2015 and 2016, calls for social protests and *atos*—actions—from the organized Left circulated via social media among grassroots activists, independent journalists, and their supporters. In addition to the MPL action this article opens with, another poignant example occurred in December 2015, when high school students in São Paulo led protests in response to then-Governor Alckmin's closure of hundreds of high schools throughout the state. Some of these young protesters were met by a brutal police force. While a few daily papers published images of police repression, some of the most vivid reporting was documented on Facebook. Two examples of police misconduct against Black female-presenting individuals that stand out from this time were the sexual assault and use of racial epithets during the arrest of a Black student protester¹⁶ and the violent arrest of a Black woman who was passing by the site of an occupied school in the middle-class neighborhood of Pinheiros and was thus assumed to be a protester.¹⁷ The relative silence in the media about how Black Brazilians experienced these state-sponsored acts of violence is precisely why anthropological engagement with current events as they are happening is critical to the communities we are embedded in as part of our ethnographic research. Approaching our work in this way would provide an invaluable resource to the communities we connect with in the field and to the communities we interpret for back at home. In an era when misinformation is rampant, at minimum, disseminating a cogent analysis of public events or collaborating with independent journalists is both critical and responsible scholarship.¹⁸ The moral imperative to share factual information to the broader public should not have to wait until academic work published in an academic platform shows up on more-visible and -accessible spaces years after the fact. I am not presenting anything new to U.S. anthropologists who self-describe as activists or public intellectuals; indeed, in the past two decades, social media has been instrumental in sharing our work and activism and in exchanging knowledge beyond the academy.¹⁹ I am certainly not presenting anything novel to scholars in the Global South who have long since worn multiple hats as scholars who also serve the public in other tangible ways. What I am calling for, though, is more widespread engagement and citational practices with methodological tools informed by Black diasporic feminist thought, and the use of accessible media platforms to make anthropological knowledge available to wider audiences. I will develop this point further in the next section.

BLACK DIASPORIC FEMINIST THOUGHT AND DECOLONIZED RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

As Faye Harrison (1991:88) astutely argued more than 30 years ago, the “construction of an ‘anthropology of liberation’ to subvert the established discipline and lay the foundation for a new field of inquiry must be based on conscious political choices about standing on the side of struggle and transformation.” Here, she builds on the work of Magubane and Faris (1985), who call for the destruction of a “rationalist and intellectual tradition” inextricably linked with (neo)colonialism that, contrary to liberal beliefs, could not simply excise its problematic elements (Harris 1991:88). Harrison (1991) identifies decolonizing efforts in anthropology as beginning in the late 1960s, when scholars began to center discussions on the politics of domination that shaped the discipline. Building on the scholarship of Delmos Jones (1970) and Diane Lewis (1973), she also underscores why the unique epistemologies of “native” scholars from the Global North and Global South could contribute to decolonizing anthropological knowledge—critical steps for a larger project of liberation in anthropology (Harrison 1991:88).²⁰

In her keynote address at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) annual meeting in 2021, Harrison returned to this point, providing a rich and textured pronouncement of the critical work from scholars in the Global South, including the geographical areas where she has focused her research during the span of her multidecade career: Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. While it is about damn time Harrison is given her flowers,²¹ the fact that it has taken three decades for the AAA to acknowledge what was once a trailblazing approach that has now become ubiquitous within and outside of academia should give us pause. This, indeed, is a moment of reckoning among anthropologists who have benefited from the silencing of Black feminist theories and the scholarship of other minoritized Indigenous perspectives. As Dani Merriman (2021) notes in her reflections of the state of the discipline:

Anthropology—like many other disciplines, institutions, and individuals—started to shake itself awake from its academic slumber. For decades, critiques within anthropology have theorized the need to dismantle colonial pasts and present. But the culmination of social, political, and climatic crises in the past year has demanded that anthropologists—especially white anthropologists—confront the deadly gaps between our theoretical frameworks and the world we inhabit.

I want to push this important critique further to say there is also a need to reflect on what that silencing or trivializing²² of marginalized voices has meant for anthropology. This is a moment to awaken but also to grieve and to consider what we, as a discipline, lose in the wake of disregarding minoritized perspectives and, by extension, the lives of Black and Indigenous peoples in particular. Merriman’s analysis also helps answer the question, Why among the social sciences is anthropology—the study of humankind—so white? Within the harms these exclusionary practices have engendered are the myriad missed

opportunities to, as Black feminism suggests, cocreate with our interlocutors equitable and sustainable solutions to social issues that result from the enduring effects of colonialism, such as anti-Blackness, and racial capitalism more broadly.

Though Harrison (1991:90) does not identify Black feminist standpoint as such in this work, she advocates its main tenets when she states that “anthropologists with *multiple consciousness* and vision have a strategic role to play in the struggle for a decolonized science of humankind” (emphasis in the original). For Harrison, a decolonized discipline would also signify a democratic one that recognizes the central roles that marginalized anthropologists play in the production of knowledge. She calls for “responsible” field research, which entails self-awareness as well as being conscious of the political situation in which one does fieldwork and the political currency that ethnographic data can have. Indeed, since Harrison’s call to decolonize the discipline, scholars utilizing feminist and decolonized anthropological methodologies have encouraged ethnographers to reflect on their research motivations and goals and their larger institutional implications. Take, for instance, Deborah Gordon’s (1995) description of “oppositional research” in the classic anthology *Women Writing Culture*. Oppositional research is an approach that she sees as “traveling along an alternate route” that works against the corporatization of the academy through its specific inclusion of “cultural studies, queer theory, science and technology studies, anthropology at home, and mass-media studies” (Gordon 1995:430). At its core, decolonized anthropology is informed by Black feminist thought (Allen and Jobson 2016), critical of various institutions of power in the West, including the neoliberalization of the academy (Navarro 2017). For the Māori scholar Linda T. Smith (1999), part of the decolonizing project is precisely to decenter the dominant Western academy, and, rather than write about Indigenous knowledge systems, to make space so Indigenous voices are neither marginalized nor discredited. These frameworks are *still* important for those of us from marginalized identities who are involved in research where the political and social stakes are high and who are linked to institutions teaching anthropology or leveraging anthropological theory and praxis in applied settings.

This critical self-reflection is precisely what scholars from subordinated communities in the United States have written about, especially because at times we find parallel institutional and cultural mechanisms of power governing the marginalized communities whose lives we document. For many Black anthropologists like me who study the effects of institutional violence on Black folks, there is little to no distinction between fieldwork and the issues we grapple with in our home communities. For instance, although I have no familial ties to Brazil, I have direct links to the carceral state as the family member of several formerly detained individuals²³ and as someone who survived public high school in New York City where an Administration for Children Services (ACS)-appointed social worker with a white savior complex²⁴ and no real understanding of the lives of Black, Afro- and Indigenous Latinx, and South Asian first-generation kids sought to assimilate my peers and me to the white middle-class dominant culture, especially as we transitioned to majority-white universities in New York. In this white supremacist framing disguised as self-help and upward mobility, eschewing our BIPOC cultural identities, and at times breaking relational ties with our families, was presented as the only way we would be able to succeed in college, escape the violence of poverty, and hold stable white-collar, long-

term employment.²⁵ As I have written elsewhere (2024), I echo Black Dominican sociologist Jomaira Salas Pujols (2020) when I say that I mourn the years of my late adolescence and early adulthood: the Black Dominican carefree girl I could have been, and the relationships I lost along the way. My experiences are not unique, but rather part of larger systemic issues that affect Black communities and communities of color in so-called diverse and liberal cities, such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.²⁶ Salas Pujols, who is also a member of the Black Latinas Know Collective (BLKC), examines the intersections of school injustice and Black girlhood in the United States. In her powerful essay published on BLKC's website, she reflects on her growing-up experiences as an immigrant from the Dominican Republic in the United States. She discusses how school served as the site where she and other select assimilable minoritized people were groomed to perform for white liberal fantasies to save (and culturally whiten) the children. Being "chosen" under these parameters protected us from the alternative—being criminalized *and* punished—yet resulted in profound loss and trauma nonetheless.

To be clear, the alternative is extremely grim. Full stop. In the context of Brazil, when I carried out research, the more I engaged with incarcerated women and gender nonconforming people—many of whom were youth experiencing social death—the more I understood that I could have easily been behind bars in the United States rather than in the privileged position of studying these issues. This insight shaped my fieldwork experience and indelibly informed how I approached the remainder of my time in Brazil, my choice to publish in Brazilian Portuguese first for Instituto Terra, Trabalho, e Cidadania²⁷—an organization that is committed to ending incarceration and supporting people detained in female penitentiaries in Brazil—and how I wrote my dissertation. First-time long-term researchers might learn a thing or two about themselves during fieldwork, but the realization that in the eyes of their home communities/country of origin, they are rendered as disposable is not typically part of the narratives we read about in ethnographic accounts. Despite my adverse young adulthood experiences, conducting research in female penitentiaries was never part of my original proposal or intention in carrying out fieldwork in Brazil. Rather, I was made aware of the need for visitors to provide support to women detained in prisons where there were high rates of suicide and depression, including among the population detained with their newborn children.²⁸

While I was attending the rallies and town halls where members of Mães de Maio were present and spoke, Débora da Silva specifically would mention the fact that people imprisoned were on the other side of the same coin of police violence. Though scholarly and activist attention was rightly focused on the victims of police violence, detainees were not necessarily being framed as victims or survivors of police violence.²⁹ In Brazil, attention to the experiences of incarcerated women, gender nonconforming individuals, and transgender men was also growing as prisoners' rights activists, including formerly detained individuals, labored in service for their communities: participating in daylong seminars to educate law students, scholars, and the public on the realities of prison life. In Brazil, as in the United States, prisoners' rights activists and scholars, such as the former political prisoner and world-renowned Black feminist philosopher Angela Davis, have pointed to the need for more focused scholarship and abolitionist action,³⁰ not only for the sake of these overpoliced and punished communities but also because a police state is not

bound to prison walls. Indeed, it spills over to other aspects of civic and personal life, such as in schools and universities, and how we interact with and regard or “police” each other.³¹ Considering that the race to incarcerate a largely Black, impoverished, female/femme, and/or queer population shows no signs of slowing down in Brazil and around the globe, I support and cannot amplify enough calls for abolition and an anthropology that attends to these issues. I suggest that civic engagement through sustained mobilization and organizing among academics to defund police³² (including campus police) follow the lead of and cocreate with affected communities liberatory policies that respect Black and Brown life. Additionally, this would necessarily require providing oversight to implementation of regulations that protect Black liberation. I evoke the Combahee River Collective ([1977] 2001) when I say that in the 21st century, an anthropology that wants liberation for all will have to recognize that if “Black [transgender] women are free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”³³

In short, research that engages with institutional violence at home and in our research sites will further the aims of decolonizing anthropology, yet there is a need to recognize that a decolonizing framework does not, as Smith (1999) argued, prevent someone from dying. As Dána-Ain Davis (2019) notes in her ethnography on the racism driving premature births and high infant and maternal morbidity rates in the United States, decolonial research—informed by Black feminist thought—needs to be reconstituted with active, radical, theoretical, and methodological approaches. I build on this to say that a Black diasporic feminist decolonizing framework is not static. It is a process that, when social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, #SayHerName, or *Mães de Maio* emerge, provides U.S. anthropologists in the 2020s with an opportunity to work diligently to mitigate the suffering of Others affected by the confluence of anti-Black and anti-women/femme continuum of violence that ranges from institutional to everyday, to police, to interpersonal. To be sure, I am not suggesting all anthropologists become activists in the service of Black communities around the globe.³⁴ I am stating, however, that anti-oppression movements happening at home and in our research sites *should* be an extension of the research and pedagogical approaches of all anthropologists. Beyond Black populations, this would include other communities that have been and continue to be devalored in the aftermath of settler colonialism and the colonality of gender (Lugones 2007; Mendez 2015).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The experiences of Black women ethnographers in the field shed light on the significance of attending to an intersectionality of identities, including the researcher’s social identities, skin color, and other racialized phenotypes.³⁵ I contend that these identity-based situations could also mobilize anthropologists in positions of privilege to further efforts towards decolonizing anthropology as conceptualized by scholars, such as Faye Harrison, who understand that this mobilization would be a critical part of efforts to create an anthropology of liberation.

As Ruth Behar (1996:5) eloquently expresses, “Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them.” To which I would add this: And nothing is stranger than writing about the endangered lives of humans in our research sites (which we should absolutely continue to do) without an engagement of parallel social and political conditions taking place at home that pose a threat to marginalized people, including colleagues who share those social identities. One of the first things I was taught as a graduate student at CU Boulder is that, in addition to the plethora of ethnographic tools we have available to us, we, too, are our method.³⁶ Anthropologists will yield distinct data because we have different subjectivities. This fact is a strength in anthropology; however, it is striking to see how trivialized nonnormative subjectivities are within our discipline, particularly in departments where we might be the only individual from a marginalized social identity.³⁷

A decade ago, Tami Navarro, Bianca Williams, and Attiya Ahmad (2013) made recommendations to make space for women of color anthropologists at the proverbial anthropological table to engage in these difficult yet critical conversations around marginalization, privilege, and access. Although their incisive article focused on the experiences of junior faculty, I want to extend that conversation to include students because, as many of us who share a marginalized social identity know, these systemic forms of discrimination within the academy do not begin after we have obtained a PhD (Duhé 2019). There needs to be more conversation around privilege and access within our discipline that includes the voices of marginalized individuals related to their academic and fieldwork experiences and that furthermore connects social and economic issues taking place globally to our present identity politics in the United States, such as multiethnic student-led encampments in support of a ceasefire in Palestine and Israel, and other life-affirming social movements.

I want to close with the provocation gaining momentum in decolonial intersectional feminists spaces: that we Black womxn and members of other Othered identities abandon the proverbial anthropological table. For those who have been Othered: Take up space where our liberation and our whole selves are welcomed. For those of us who are Black, let’s unabashedly continue to commune with the *Orixás*, our ancestors, and the other Undrowned.³⁸ Let’s create spaces of liberation (Azor 2017) and knowledge exchange that are life-affirming. And let’s resist the grind culture (Hersey 2022) inherent in the capitalistic logics that also shape the neoliberal academy.

NOTES

1. In this article I turn to AfroIndigenous (Zapotec) poet Dr. Alán Pelaez López’s (2018) articulation of women and femmes:

By women, I am referring to those who are identified as women by Western society (not just self-identified women), which includes cisgender women, trans women, trans men experiencing intentional targeted violence from transphobic cultures, gender nonconforming people who

have their nonconformity questioned and erased and identifies [*sic*] as “women,” butch women who some families—like the one I grew up in—will violently identify as “women who don’t want to grow up,” and third, fourth and fifth gendered NDNs who the state will not recognize. By *femmes*, I am referring to the sissies, the cry babies, those of us who chose adornment as a reminder that we are worthy, the quiet ones whose introvertness is taken as “passive” and therefore feminine, those who perform taken-for-granted labor, those of us who must hold the world before we can hold ourselves, and those of us whose gender is just that: *femme*.

2. Nelson is a biologist and human ecologist who has collaborated on projects with fishing communities in the Amazon and with Quilombolas and Indigenous communities throughout Brazil. Over the past several years, he has worked to document the socioeconomic impacts and human rights violations of the Samarco mine tailing collapse in 2015, the worst socio-environmental disaster in Brazilian history. See the report Nelson organized and coauthored with a team of researchers: Fundação Getúlio Vargas (2020).
3. As Dr. Bailey Duhé (2022) argues in her dissertation about racial mixture in the United States among Creoles of Louisiana, race is fluid. I am a mixed-race Black Dominican with light brown skin in the northern colder climates. As with other melanated humans of the African Diaspora, my skin is never just one color. Indeed, when I lived in the more-than-a-mile-high town of Boulder, Colorado, prior to fieldwork in Brazil, I had a permanent tan that deepened to a brown-red as I approached the equator or when I was exposed to prolonged sunlight in the summer months. Beyond skin color, I have dark brown eyes and kinky dark brown hair that I typically wear natural in a simple updo or in braids. My choice to wear my hair naturally often excludes me from being identified as a Black Dominican American/Latinx in the United States. In São Paulo, however, unless I spoke Portuguese, regardless of how I wore my hair, I was assumed to be a local.
4. I recall one antiwar protest in New York City many years ago where police descended on a group of African American men who were participating in civil disobedience. I was not part of their group but rather was in proximity, simply observing what was going on and trying to locate the rallying point along with a friend of mine, a woman of South Asian descent. Once again, we were lucky that two fellow protesters, Minnie Bruce Pratt and the late Leslie Feinberg, quickly stepped in front of us, allowing us to move away from what was becoming a tense situation between police and Black protestors and protesters of color. Neither Pratt nor Feinberg knew who we were—but as I was familiar with their work, I was both moved by the fearlessness and kindness they showed to us and in awe that the politics in their writings matched their activism in real life. Rest in power, Leslie!

5. This is in no small part because of our shared European colonial histories, including systematic genocide against Indigenous peoples of the Americas and the slow death through chattel slavery of the Indigenous peoples of Africa.
6. See Haar et al. (2017). See also Feigenbaum (2017).
7. See also Curiel (2016).
8. See, for example, Huggins and Glebbeek (2009).
9. The National Association of *Travestis* and Transsexuals.
10. See Wacquant (2003).
11. Though in large part because of my racial features and coloring, most Brazilians would assume that I am a *petista*, as PT supporters are called.
12. Images abound of MP protecting and conversing with, and holding babies of, nationalist protesters.
13. See the Oscar-nominated film *The Edge of Democracy*, by Petra Costa, which details the events leading up to the fall of the Workers' Party and the weakening of the democratic state in Brazil.
14. See Mena (2019).
15. See Mena (2019).
16. A quick Google search from this period highlights the obscenity of the excessive use of force from the military police in Brazil against urban youth there.
17. Recent initiatives at the American Anthropological Association (AAA), such as partnering with the OpEd Project to provide AAA members scholarships to participate in workshops to learn how to write or to improve op-ed writing skills, further underscore the significance of increasing the number of anthropologists participating in this form of civic engagement and responsibility.
18. The brilliant podcast *Zora's Daughters*, created by two Black women anthropology graduate students, Brendane Tynes and Alyssa A. L. James, is part of the growing public anthropology content in service of knowledge dissemination beyond academia. Increasingly, too, calls for "flash ethnography" are being normalized. My gratitude to Dr. Ritu Khanduri for introducing me to the term.
19. These authors not only preceded the "interpretive turn" in our discipline but also show us an example of the type of allyship that our discipline still desperately needs. (See also Deloria [1944] 1998 and Hurston [1938] 1990.)
20. Black transgender women from the United States rightly argue that they should be given their flowers while still living.
21. Here, I invoke the late Michel-Rolph Trouillot's critiques of the silences that inform official accounts of history, its links to power, and the production of knowledge. See Trouillot (1995).
22. As prison activists around the globe argue, when one family member is incarcerated, the entire family is incarcerated, which must make us consider what the terrorizing, policing, and detaining of Black, Latinx, Muslim, and other undesirable people do for their respective communities.
23. Think Michelle Pfeiffer's character in *Dangerous Minds* or Savannah Shange's real-life depiction of the white liberal teacher in her brilliant ethnography *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*. Excerpts from

- this section have been published in the anthology *Harmonizing Latina Visions and Voices: Cultural Explorations of Entornos* (Estrella and Maldonado-Salcedo 2024).
24. In a perverse liberal logic, additionally, if we did not conform and contort to these prescribed ideas, our refusal would be evidence that we had deep-seated self-destructive patterns linked to internalized racism, sexism, and other social ills; thus, becoming an assimilable body was the only healthy and sane choice for becoming an even-keeled adult.
 25. A number of scholars have written about the school-to-prison pipeline, the foster care-to-prison pipeline, and the surveillance and criminalization of Black and Brown youth (Rios 2011; Shange 2019), the adultification of Black girls (Halliday 2019; Cox 2015; Zamora 2020), and excess surveillance through different channels, including public schools of BIPOC and white working-class mothers who are often assumed to be inherently unfit to carry out their roles (Tsing 1990; Roberts 2017).
 26. The Institute of Land, Work, and Citizenship. See de Souza Dantas and Mena (2017).
 27. Unlike men, in general, women in Brazil are abandoned by their partners and/or family members once they enter the criminal justice system—a phenomenon that is also observed in the context of the United States.
 28. Despite understanding that structural and everyday violence had severely curtailed the freedom and agency of my system-involved family and community members long before incarceration, I had not thought of them as survivors of police and state violence.
 29. I would be remiss, as well, if I did not share that while I struggled to identify with white middle-class Brazilians I interacted with at universities and in the middle-class neighborhoods I lived in, I felt at ease among the Black and Brown working-class individuals I encountered in the service industry and incarcerated. Women’s prisons in São Paulo are a quintessential example of state and racialized gender violence: The demographic is overwhelmingly poor, is uneducated (that is to say, they possess little formal schooling by western standards and historically have been deprived of their ancestral knowing), has experienced some level of psychological, sexual, and/or physical trauma by authorities or by family members, and is of African and/or Indigenous descent. Moreover, the inhumane conditions and further abuses that *re-educandas*—re-educating—women and gender nonconforming individuals and their families suffer at the hands of the state prison staff are also revealing of the many layers of oppression and violence that marginalized people endure. “Reeducating” refers to the process of being reeducated—resocialized into society.
 30. As Black transgender woman, abolitionist, and filmmaker Tourmaline (2020) says, “When we say abolish police. We also mean the cop in your head and in your heart.” See also Boal and Epstein (1990).
 31. See Amparo Alves 2021.
 32. Here, I invoke the Combahee River Collective Statement ([1977] 2021) to draw attention to Black transgender women’s particular oppression.
 33. Although, truth be told, such an outlandish idea would result in the liberation of all, if we take the Combahee River Collective Statement seriously. See also Saira Mehmood’s (2023) essay in which she attends to the value of anthropology in and

outside academia, the need for critical approaches to knowledge-making and circulation, and why anthropologists should “examine the inequalities and inequities that exist within our discipline.”

34. A case in point is the experience L. K. Roland (2011) discusses about her reception in Cuba as a dark-skinned African American woman and ethnographer. Cuba has a sizable population of mixed-race individuals and operates through a similar racial hierarchy found throughout Latin America. To obtain customer service in areas that attracted tourists and to not be misidentified as a sex worker, Roland had to perform her foreign identity as a U.S. American. This remains a critical and courageous ethnography to teach about the vulnerabilities that Black anthropologists endure and how what appears as overt racism in Latin America plagues the United States too.
35. Hat tip to Dr. Carole McGranahan.
36. For more on how the politics of exclusion in the academy directly affects Black women anthropologists, see Bolles (2013).
37. See Gumbs (2021).

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