



# Affirmative Actions for Indigenous Peoples in Brazilian Universities and Ethnology Studies from a Dialogical Perspective: An Interview with Clarice Cohn

Katucha Bento and James Beresford

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Clarice Cohn is the coordinator of the Observatory of Indigenous School Education at Federal University of Sao Carlos (Universidade Federal de São Carlos, UFSCar) and the Laboratory of Studies and Research in Child Anthropology (LEPAC). She was also a member of the Affirmative Action Committee and later the Affirmative Action Program Management Group at UFSCar.

Clarice accepted the invitation to be one of the keynotes in the event 'Challenging Academic Debates on Womanhood: A Decolonial Approach on Caribbean and Latin American Identities' to discuss 'Indigenous Women in Brazilian Universities: Deconstructing Gender and Scientific Knowledges'. In order to organise a series of contributions for this special edition of the Graduate Journal of Social Science, we considered that it would be important to introduce the topic of Affirmative Action (AA) in Brazil from the perspective of someone who researches with indigenous groups, teaches and is present actively in the affirmative actions from inside the university.

We organised a set of questions about issues related to AA and ethnology in the Brazilian context to which Clarice responded through email. This was our solution to facing the distance and divergences in our agendas to have a face to face interview (even through digital means). What is presented here is the start of a conversation that urges to have a continuity with a critical perspective about possible alternatives of reparations, decolonial positionalities acknowledging privi-



leges and the struggles of racialised groups, along with other topics that may be raised from this interview. We believe that the dialogue is constant in search for decolonised spaces of knowledge and constant growth.

**1) Could you begin by telling us briefly the history of indigenous populations in Brazil, and the various oppressions and colonial violences they have endured?**

To begin with, we can get a good image of it by considering that the Indigenous population in the Brazilian territory is thought to have numbered four or five million before the arrival of European colonizers, and there are around 800.000 Indigenous persons living in Brazil today. So, we have been witnessing in Brazilian history a real genocide, which, unfortunately, has not yet finished.

Brazilian Indigenous Peoples are from many ethnic and linguistic families, and as far as it is known there are around 300 Indigenous languages spoken today, and something of around 200 ethnic affiliations. These peoples live all around the country, from north to south, in many different situations, in Indigenous Lands, in rural areas, in cities. They have met the Non-Indigenous differently, and if some of them had to live with them for 516 years, some are still living in what the State nowadays calls “voluntary isolation”. This means having no regular contact with the non-Indigenous. It is worth mentioning that all these situations have their vulnerabilities, but they must be seen as a product of both the history of the nation, with the peoples from the coast having had to cope with colonizers for longer, as well as with the wishes and strategies of those peoples themselves, many of them having used strategies to not have to live with the colonizers, such as going to live inland, running away from missions, etc.

Colonial violences are multiple. From the beginning, Portuguese, French and some Dutch colonizers used Indigenous enemies with each other to get control of the territories. So, they would make themselves allies of a group and fight against their enemies. The result was a complex system combining National (Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch) and the many Indigenous groups alliances, with a history of war – but a different war, which directed European control over what had been Indigenous lands. Those Europeans also used Indigenous work to exploit Pau-Brazil [tree], the wood from which is used to dye tissues red (this is the wood that named the country: *brasa* means ember in Portuguese).

Colonizers would also colonize souls, and many missions were built, to where Indigenous Peoples were taken from many different places (the “descimentos”) to live together, where they were taught Catholicism and Portuguese. Many of these missions would also congregate Indigenous children taken from their families and communities to learn religion, Portuguese and European techniques of agriculture (as if the indigenous ones were not good enough), and then the children would go back to their communities and teach the others what they learned – sort of making these children colonizers of their own peoples.

It is a complex history, as the national history changed so much between national control (Portuguese, Spanish), the power of the church in each moment (strong for many centuries; was weakened at some points), territorial control, and the production and use of resources. Indigenous Peoples were used as slaves in some points of this history, and they were even used to enslave other Indigenous Peoples, but they were substituted by African slavery (in a complex historical movement, in which for many years and in many places both slaveries co-existed, as the Indigenous Peoples were even called the “Negroes from the land”).

We could not forget the continuous violences made by those non-Indigenous residents that aimed Indigenous Peoples as workers and their land. That is a continuing violence, and many Indigenous Peoples, specially their leaders, are still nowadays killed to get control of their land.

Women were a specific target of these violences, having had their bodies violated by colonizers. They were made wives and procreators in many different ways and in many parts of the country – as “pegar a laço”, been taken by force, is a well-known expression in Brazil. In many places where there are conflicts over the land, colonizers would violate Indigenous women and kill them as a mark of their force and power.

In the 20th Century, the State would address issues of Indigenous well-being with a specific Service, which in some points protected them of the continuing violence, but not always. Indigenous lands were created and many Peoples had their right to the territory recognized. The Constitution from 1988 recognized their rights for land, for their different cultures and languages, for keeping their social and political organization, and for specific services of schooling and health care.

But violences are ongoing. Nowadays there are many evangelical churches among Indigenous Peoples, even in Indigenous lands, which, like the Catholic

Church in the past, aim to control their souls; there are many conflicts for land that could even make some populations disappear; there have been many community leaders killed in recent years; many indigenous lands are a sort of oasis in monocultural plantations, which make these lands poor in resources and often contaminated by the products used on the farms; projects of dams and roads made by the State itself impact indigenous lives and lands; and State services catering for the indigenous are not really as specialized as they should be. This means that their schooling is really poor, as well as the health attention, the biggest rate of children's mortality in the country being among Indigenous Peoples.

**2) In these years researching and coexisting with indigenous groups, tell us about your experience with activism and the moments you take part in it.**

Indigenous Peoples have been mobilizing themselves and Indigenous Movements have gained strength in the last decades, with many organizations and unified movements developing. They have also gained space in the media and recognition, a very important thing, as for many centuries Brazil thought of these Peoples are ending. They have been struggling also against another stereotype that would say how indigenous a person is by the language s/he spoke, the way s/he looked, where s/he came from .... they have been successful to show the country that it is possible to be Indigenous and living in the cities, etc. (and Brazil has signed Convention 169, which makes it legal).

I have been working for 25 years with an Indigenous People from Amazonia called Xikrin. We have been facing together many threats for their land, from miners and timber exploitation. But it became very difficult in the beginning of this century with the building of Belo Monte Dam near their land. As well as taking their land resources, there was pressure on the entire population that goes there to build the dam, because they would soon see themselves with no work, the risk of alcoholism and prostitution, etc., will take also their river. The dam makes a deviation in the natural course of the Xingu River, taking its water from many Indigenous lands, as well as putting at risk the Bacaja River where the Xikrin live in, which runs to the Xingu exactly where it will be dry (and it is commencing, as the dam is beginning to function).

I was called by them and by FUNAI, the federal service for Indigenous Peoples,

to take part in the studies of the social, economic and ecological impacts made by technicians on the dam. That was a very difficult task, since, as an anthropologist, I was not seen as a technician by them, and would talk in name of the Xikrin and their interests. This was not the way technicians saw things, and sometimes it was very difficult to explain to them. I collaborated as well in meetings and the studies the Public Ministry had made to evaluate the dam and its impacts. I therefore worked in the interface between the Xikrin, the builders, the State (FUNAI) and the Public Ministry (MPF). It was a very uncomfortable situation, especially regarding anthropology as a discipline, which doesn't have much of an idea of what should be public and political action of academic researchers like me. Many would say that I worked "for the builders." As I put it, I was beside the Xikrin trying to negotiate their situation in case the dam was built, and trying to make them heard using my knowledge of their language and culture, as well as my expertise. I was really very afraid, as I was aware of the limits of my action and influence, but the Xikrin was helping I would be able to work with them to avoid the building of the dam. I thought many times I was going to lose the friends who had for many years, as they put it, seen me grow older, just as I had seen their children grow up.

Of my two big worries, one happened – the dam was built, so we lost our war. But the other worry didn't happen, and we keep all the love we feel for each other – me and the Xikrin. This also means I will be still by their side to see for the real impacts the dam have and how to cope with them, working still with them, with FUNAI and MPF.

I have written extensively about schooling, having done researches as well as consultancies. I collaborated on the formulation of the Federal politics for schooling of the younger Indigenous children, as one of my specialties is Anthropology of children and the research of Indigenous childhood, and – along with representatives on Indigenous Peoples, FUNAI and the Ministry of Education – we proposed a policy which was promulgated. It allowed families that needed to take their young children to schools, such as those who lived in cities or worked in farms, to have special schools to take them, and that these would be culturally responsible institutions. It also guaranteed that the families who would rather take care of their younger children themselves would not to be forced to put them in schools. That was a difficult balance to make, between the needs of some (but not all) Indigenous Peoples for childcare and the needs of the State.

For 10 years now, I have been working on the program for the inclusion of Indigenous students in our University, and I have been working as a teacher, teaching them in classrooms as well as supervising research made by them. That is taking part in a movement, and we have many meetings and have organized two big national events at the University. They discussed such programs around the country, including the issue of how science could dialogue with traditional and indigenous languages, both bringing the Indigenous from all over the country and non-indigenous research and politics. The first was in 2013 (I ENEI, cf site), and the second in 2015 (II SBPC Indígena).

**3) There has been a lot of discussion in recent times about positionality in social science research, and how researchers negotiate the differences from those they are researching. Given your experience with indigenous communities, starting as a researcher and now as a friend, how do you consider your positionality in your work with indigenous populations in Brazil?**

That is a very important and difficult issue, and I think I have answered some of it in the previous question. As I put it, working with people means creating a bond, which is also affective. We should never think of social sciences as objective and emotion-proof. I was really kept from sleeping due to worries about the impacts of the dam on the Xikrin, as well as worries about how our relationship (our friendship, our commitment) would be when those impacts became unbearable.

I would say also that all my work from since I graduated has been around *taking their side*. Not only politically – since I have worked towards a better future both on the issue of lands and resources from Xikrin land, as well as on the issue of indigenous schools – but also as an anthropologist, since doing anthropology is to see the world from their point of view. We are specializing in that as academics, but not really as persons and political actors, and there are many resistances when we act politically in taking their point of view, as I could feel for myself in the dam situation. Also, as I said before, we are put in a difficult situation in what concerns our relationship with the Indigenous peoples themselves when we act politically, since we all have limits, both as persons as well as on the scope of our political participation.

But I am myself very proud to say that even if I haven't won all my battles,

I could keep a relation of commitment and responsible research both with the Xikrin and with those Indigenous persons dealing with the education politics concerning Indigenous schooling and the Indigenous students from our University. I would like to make an homage to my teachers who have taught me all of these things at university; they are many strong anthropologists that fought at their time or continue to fight these fights. The late Aracy Lopes da Silva, Lux Vidal, my supervisor who took me to the Xikrin, and Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, both strong women who are part of a strong heritage or committed anthropologists in Brazil. As a teacher, I am concerned with keeping this heritage alive, and many of my students are fighting with me and the Xikrin to minimize the impacts they are suffering due to the construction of the dam, for example.

**4) In terms of indigenous activism in Brazil, part of its success is the Affirmative Action (AA) as quotas in public universities. What kind of process do indigenous people need to face in order to be profiled as genuine candidates?**

I would like to give a two-fold answer. First of all, I speak for my University. It has been recognized as having both a program with one of the largest scopes of what concerns access to higher education (we receive Indigenous students from all over the country to all courses) as well as the biggest programs for their retention, with services concerning financial issues (housing, grants) and pedagogical issues (taking the star point of their very different and culturally responsive schooling biographies). We take as candidates all Indigenous persons who declare themselves as being Indigenous, who send along with the candidate form a letter written by themselves and a legitimation by a leader who stipulates that they take part of the community, as well as a document from the State that confirms the recognition of this same community and leadership. This is formulated to be responsive to the 169 Convention.

These initiatives were taken by the diverse universities themselves (but some would receive only Indigenous Peoples from their region, some to only some courses that they would reckon as useful for them, as Health courses or Pedagogy or Social Sciences) until 2012. Then a Federal Law passed stipulating that all Federal Universities should have 1% of their students originate from Indigenous Peoples (a rate calculated from the number of Indigenous Peoples in the Brazilian

Population); these candidates have to state their belonging to Indigenous communities with a letter that has a certification by FUNAI.

As I see it, we are still not responding fully to the 169 Convention, as we all still ask for the certificate by FUNAI. We should ask just for the letter where the candidate would state they are Indigenous through self-declaration. But that is still a complex issue, as the Universities want to protect themselves from frauds, but, more complexly, the very Indigenous movements think the certificate from FUNAI is a protection against fraud. I would be willing to fight against the University system to make the Convention be fully taken, but it makes things more complicated when Civil Movements from Indigenous Peoples say they want this fraud protection as they think some would take advantage from the AA Programs stating an Indigenous identity they might not have.

#### **5) How has Sao Carlos Federal University (UFSCar) been experiencing the AA in the classroom?**

The AA at UFSCar is not only for Indigenous students, but also for Black ones and for those that do their studies in public schools (we have an asymmetry in Brazil, where public schools are worse than most private ones). These students experience university life in different ways, and some, such as Black and Indigenous students, would suffer more from institutional racism. I would say that the University itself is not racist, but that, unfortunately, some teachers, staff, and students are.

On what concerns Indigenous students, I was quite surprised to see that some teachers would say they can't properly learn the scientific and technical theses they teach for having a different culture. That is, as I reckon it, a new form of racism, which says that they are not racially inferior, but rather limited by their culture. That is why we have been organizing academic events that are aimed at showing how sophisticated Indigenous knowledges are, fighting against this prejudice. We also have been working as an institution to work with these teachers to show them that culture has never been a limitation to learning.

But I would like to emphasize the important participation of these students – both to make visible their differences in their university life, promoting their culture differences – and also as researchers. They have been combining their knowledges and what they learn at the University in very different research projects, on



all areas, be they health studies, social sciences, agronomic studies, or linguistic and pedagogical studies. I am quite sure the University as a whole is gaining much with that, but I also reckon it is still not fully recognized.

**6) In terms of Ethnology Studies in Brazil, how have womanhood and indigeneity intersected in the discussions?**

As in most places, women have not been a focus of interest in Ethnology Studies for many years. That changed in Brazil in the 1980s, when feminism met Anthropology. Anthropologists started not only focusing on women in their studies, but also seeing the world from their point of view. That was a very important change, as it showed both that Indigenous women were important economic and political actors, and that making new studies talking to them and observing their world through their eyes could demonstrate other views of social and political organizations.

But it was not only a change in the academic and anthropological world; it was also a huge political change, whereby Indigenous women have become more and more national political actors in Brazil. Despite a traditional view kept for many years that in Indigenous worlds it was the men who would deal with “external” facts and actors – be it in war, in politics, or through shamanism – they are showing that women are not only capable of but also important in dealing with that. Nowadays, they act not only as shamans, but also as political leaders, be it in the villages or communities, or in political movements. They also act in political instances in the State dealing with legislations and politics on health and school services.

So, I would say that since the 1980s, anthropologists were more capable of looking at women’s issues, since Indigenous women have made themselves known through their political actions, which made it inevitable that good anthropological work about any Indigenous issue would have to see women as important actors and thinkers.

**7) What contributions do you think decoloniality could bring to studies of Brazilian Ethnology?**

Nowadays, there are many Indigenous persons searching for a place in Anthropology. They see it as an important tool for talking to the non-indigenous, and

to show them their ways of being and thinking about the world. It is not an easy and direct path, as we always have to face the issue of how meaningful Anthropology itself is to these Peoples. Furthermore, it is not evident that, being themselves anthropologists, they will be able to keep talking to their own people. Like everything else, Anthropology is a social and historical construction, and we could not suppose it to be universal, i.e., meaningful to all peoples. So, Indigenous anthropologists sometimes have to deal with the cost of being taken as “external” or colonizers themselves. Nonetheless, I find their discussion of Anthropology and of the studies previously made by non-indigenous anthropologists about their world very fruitful and intriguing for Anthropology itself. What is less clear to me is how anthropology could help those Indigenous persons to act as “mediators” between their worlds and that of the non-indigenous, as it would depend on a very difficult process of, let us say, double certification, which is being recognized as a good anthropologist by academia and as a good “translator of worlds” (to use Joanna Overing’s expression that links the philosopher and the shaman) in the point of view of their own people.

Speaking in other terms, I am quite sure anthropology has much to gain when the Indigenous Peoples themselves debate and practice it, and with all debates about decolonizing it, but I am not so sure about how this will or could be constructed as a meaningful effort by Indigenous Peoples themselves. That is a history in the making, and we will have to wait to see how it goes.

#### **8) Any message to future ethnologists in Brazil?**

When I began doing Anthropology, it was just after the promulgation of the Brazilian Constitution in 1988. This recognized the right of Indigenous Peoples to their land, to their culture, to their languages, social and political organizations, and to culturally and linguistically respectful services provided by the State. I was being taught by anthropologists who had been at the side of the Indigenous Peoples in Brazil fighting for this recognition of their rights both in the Congress and also “in the field” via public debates. The latter often meant fighting at their sides for elementary rights not respected during the long and crude Dictatorship. I was taught by these strong women (they were all women) to celebrate the recognitions of these rights and to keep fighting to implement them. So, my generation worked to

create and evaluate state policies and land rights. We had a huge debate as to how academic anthropological studies would deal with these more “terrain” issues (which are so compromised with reality), in order to make those rights come true.

I was always on the side of those who say that good academic anthropology and fighting “on the ground” are not incompatible. And that was what I always did, and that is what I teach and train my students to do.

But the new generation will have to face a different moment of this national history concerning Indigenous rights, which is, as Sonia Guajajara – a very important national indigenous leader, who acts both in Brazilian lands and in international instances and meetings – says the dismount of the rights. So, if my teachers had to fight to help Indigenous Peoples to have their rights recognized by the State, and my generation to make them come true in state politics, programs, and in the villages, communities, and the university, my students’ generation (which is, Just for us to remember, both Indigenous and non-indigenous students of Anthropology) will have to pave their way in this new situation. They will find themselves on a new battlefield, on which I doubt I am of much help. Another history in the making, and my message is for them to make it good!

Another aspect of the new context in which future ethnologists in Brazil will construct upon is this new dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous in the academia, in the universities, in the villages and communities, and in politics. This requires that Anthropology itself be decolonized and not taken as a unified universalist truth, but as a construct of this very dialogue. It is not now that Anthropology discovers the value of dialogue to the building up of the results of its studies. The so-called post-modern anthropologists have criticized the voice of authority of the ethnographical works, making us recognize that every work in anthropology is dialogical. Even then, however, there was the anthropologist – the universalist scientist – on one side, and the native on the other. Borders have been blurred, as natives and anthropologists combine to make different compositions. So, in finishing, I would say that future ethnologists will have to make the best of it and to rethink Anthropology itself as a horizontal construction that is, then, truly dialogic.