

“I CONSIDER MYSELF AN ANTI-RACIST ENVIRONMENTALIST”: INTERVIEW WITH ANA SANCHES ON BLACK ACTIVISM, ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM, AND THE REINVENTION OF THE FIGHT FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE IN BRAZIL

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Pedro Henrique Campello TORRES¹
e-mail: ph.torres@unesp.br



Gabriel Pires de ARAÚJO²
e-mail: gabrielparaujoga@gmail.com



Isabela Carmo CAVACO³
e-mail: ph.torres@unesp.br

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¹ São Paulo State University (UNESP) – Campus Litoral – Santos – SP – Brazil. Professor (RDIDP) in Environmental Sciences at the Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Institute of Biosciences (UNESP); affiliated with the Graduate Program in Coastal Environment Biodiversity (PPGBAC, UNESP); also Professor and supervisor in the Graduate Program in Environmental Sciences (PROCAM), University of São Paulo (USP).

² Institute of Energy and Environment, University of São Paulo (PROCAM – IEE/USP), São Paulo – SP – Brazil. Ph.D. candidate in Environmental Science, with a sandwich period at the University of Surrey (UoS, UK).

³ Institute of Energy and Environment, University of São Paulo (IEE/USP), São Paulo – SP – Brazil. Master’s student in Environmental Science (PROCAM), Bachelor in Environmental Management (EACH/USP), conducting research on climate justice since 2021.

"I consider myself an anti-racist environmentalist": interview with Ana Sanches on black activism, environmental racism, and the reinvention of the fight for climate justice in Brazil

Prof. Me. Luana Estela Di Pires
Prof. Me. Lucas Barbosa de Santana
Prof. Me. Maurício Miotti

ABSTRACT: The interview with Ana Sanches highlights the intersection between black activism, environmental racism, and climate justice in Brazil. She emphasizes that environmental racism is an expression of structural racism, manifesting itself in the disproportionate environmental and climate impacts on black, indigenous, and peripheral populations. The interviewee also discusses the importance of including racialized voices in decision-making spaces and the need for public policies that integrate climate justice and anti-racism. Finally, she highlights the role of black youth in reinventing the environmental struggle and the importance of rest as a political act of resistance.

KEYWORDS: Environmental racism. Climate justice. Black activism. Intersectionality.

RESUMO: *A entrevista com Ana Sanches destaca a interseção entre ativismo negro, racismo ambiental e justiça climática no Brasil. Ela enfatiza que o racismo ambiental é uma expressão do racismo estrutural, manifestando-se na desproporcionalidade dos impactos ambientais e climáticos sobre populações negras, indígenas e periféricas. Ana também discute a importância de incluir vozes racializadas nos espaços de decisão e a necessidade de políticas públicas que integrem justiça climática e antirracismo. Por fim, ressalta o papel da juventude negra na reinvenção da luta ambiental e a importância do descanso como ato político de resistência.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Racismo ambiental. Justiça climática. Ativismo negro. Interseccionalidade.*

RESUMEN: *La entrevista con Ana Sanches destaca la intersección entre el activismo negro, el racismo ambiental y la justicia climática en Brasil. Ella enfatiza que el racismo ambiental es una expresión del racismo estructural, que se manifiesta en la desproporcionalidad de los impactos ambientales y climáticos sobre las poblaciones negras, indígenas y periféricas. La entrevistada también discute la importancia de incluir voces racializadas en los espacios de decisión y la necesidad de políticas públicas que integren la justicia climática y el antirracismo. Por último, destaca el papel de la juventud negra en la reinención de la lucha ambiental y la importancia del descanso como acto político de resistencia.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Racismo ambiental. Justicia climática. Activismo negro. Interseccionalidad.*

Introduction

Contextualization

Conducted by Pedro Henrique Campello Torres (UNESP-CLP) and Gabriel Pires de Araújo (USP), with the collaboration of Isabela Carmo Cavaco (USP), on March 6, 2025.



Interviewee Presentation

Ana Sanches is a Black woman from a peripheral background and an activist in the Black-environmental movement. She is a Ph.D. candidate in Social Change and Political Participation at EACH/USP and holds a Master's degree in Public Health Sciences from the University of São Paulo – FSP/USP. She works as an equity consultant in the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Surveillance at the Ministry of Health.

First, I want to thank you for being here with us. To begin, I would like you to share a bit about your journey—how you arrived at this point, combining academic training and activism. Your activism is deeply connected to study, skill-building, and engagement with

complex and critical theories that often have limited space in academia. At the same time, you represent a generation that asserts the need to occupy spaces of voice and influence. If you could share this trajectory, I think it would be an excellent starting point for our conversation.

Thank you, Pedro, for the invitation. It is both a pleasure and an honor to participate in the special dossier on Environmental Racism and Climate Justice that you are organizing. I am already eager to see how the final edition will turn out. I believe that initiatives like this are extremely important intellectually and for disseminating environmental, climate, and racial issues in Brazil, so I am grateful for the opportunity. Regarding my trajectory, it is actually something I am writing about in the first chapter of my thesis. I frame it as *escrevivência*⁴ rather than autoethnography. I chose *escrevivência* because autoethnography often centers on individual experience, while *escrevivência* emphasizes how our experiences as Black individuals are embedded in broader social contexts of struggle and collective histories. This is why I reference Conceição Evaristo's concept of *escrevivência*—to convey that my experiences within racial and environmental issues are not solely personal; they are part of a collective history of struggle and resistance. In my thesis, I also adopt a philosophical and poetic lens to ensure that this trajectory is not just a narrative of pain and resistance, but an exploration of the complexities of lived experience.

One of the first points I began writing about concerns the timing of my activism. My engagement as an activist and organizer started relatively late, only after completing my undergraduate studies. However, my experience with environmental inequalities dates back to childhood. Growing up in peripheral areas, often in degraded environments, I constantly questioned, for example, why we could not access the river. I lived in a city called Jacareí (São Paulo state), along the Paraíba River, which was highly polluted and perceived as a problem due to its foul smell and contamination. These experiences shaped my perception of environmental injustice long before I formally engaged in activism. The violence and degradation faced by urban peripheries were part of my lived reality from an early age, and I have countless stories I am attempting to systematize in my thesis to reflect on this journey.

⁴ *Escrevivência*: a term coined by writer Conceição Evaristo to define writing that arises from the experiences of black women, their bodies, memories, and territories, transforming collective experience into political narrative. It is not just writing about life, but writing from it, as a form of resistance, denunciation, and affirmation of silenced existences.

For example, one of the first topics I began researching when entering the environmental discussion was access to water. I recall a professor—though I do not remember his name—saying that we never study something purely for the sake of research; there is always an emotional connection, often unconscious, that guides our choices. During the course of my thesis, I began to understand why I had chosen to study water access. Beyond the issues with the river, I remember experiences of deprivation, such as having the water supply to my home cut off, forcing us to rush to fill jugs, basins, and buckets just to survive until the service was restored and the bill paid. This connection between water access and inability to pay remains a reality for many people today.

I am speaking of experiences that occurred over thirty years ago, yet still persist, and that have unconsciously driven me to continue this research agenda. My concern is not only with quantity, but also with quality, and not only for consumption but also for leisure, life, celebration, and spiritual practices. For example, in rivers, people can engage in spiritual rituals. In evangelical churches, I co-authored an article with Gisele Moura discussing water used for baptisms, where individuals are immersed in rivers. In Candomblé and Umbanda, the phrase “without leaves, there is no Orixá” emphasizes the ritual importance of water, such as for worshipping Oxum⁵. Water is essential for life across diverse cultural and spiritual contexts.

Providing this overview, I would say that in a somewhat more systematic way, when I entered my Master’s program around 2013–2014, I gained a deeper awareness of the environmental agenda. This happened while I was working on a public health project at the Faculty of Public Health (University of São Paulo) as a special student under Professor Leandro Giatti⁶. During this time, we began to analyze and discuss issues related to the peak of the water crisis in Southeast Brazil, which was worsening progressively.

This allowed us to examine inequalities across the Americas, involving diverse populations. However, I recall that near the end of my dissertation, I pointed out to Professor Leandro: “Leandro, have you noticed that all our interviewees are white men?” Most were engineers—environmental, civil... He acknowledged, “You’re right.” We had interviewed managers handling the water crisis from agencies such as ANA and Sabesp, and nearly all were white men. In parallel, we conducted interviews with members of the Aliança pela Água, and

⁵ Oxum is a deity from the Yoruba pantheon, worshipped in Afro-Brazilian religions as the orisha of fresh waters—rivers, waterfalls, springs, and lakes. Associated with fertility, care, beauty, and love, her power is linked to the flow of life, the protection of women, and the continuity of communities.

⁶ Professor Leandro Giatti: <https://bv.fapesp.br/pt/pesquisador/105579/leandro-luiz-giatti/>. Accessed on: Nov. 17, 2025.

while social movements often included women—typically white—the Black population remained largely inaccessible. I was unable to address this issue adequately in my dissertation.

This was around 2016–2017, and it was at this point, within the academic environment, that I began engaging more directly with social movements. I became more familiar with the MST, student movements, and political organizations such as PSOL. At the time, Rede Sustentabilidade had not yet established a strong presence in São Paulo. PSOL had an eco-socialist sector that explored Marxist and socialist perspectives on environmental preservation. This space was crucial for my learning trajectory, as it connected my academic work with access to key texts and discussions, such as those from the Brazilian Network for Environmental Justice, Henri Acselrad’s *O que é Justiça Ambiental*, and Joan Martinez-Alier’s *The Ecology of the Poor*. Reaching the discussion of racism took longer.

Initially, I focused on injustice and the ecology of the poor, and only later did I encounter the works of Robert Bullard⁷ addressing environmental racism. I also found, for example, texts by Diosmar Filho, which approached racism in the Southeast Brazilian context, although access was difficult. When I engaged with environmental racism, I realized: this is not just inequality. Inequality exists, but it is the product of a structural process. This led me to works such as Lélia Gonzalez’s⁸ *Lugar do Negro*, which distinguishes between spaces considered “Black spaces” and those that are not. Territorial issues, as Carolina Maria de Jesus⁹ also pointed out, were not merely matters of poverty but of people impoverished by a racialized and colonial structure.

Throughout my trajectory as an intellectual and self-identified environmentalist, I continually questioned: “Am I just an environmentalist? Does this truly make sense?” This reflection occurred during my Master’s studies.

⁷ Robert D. Bullard is widely regarded as the father of the environmental justice concept in the United States. His research demonstrated how Black and low-income communities are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards and polluting facilities, showing that environmental inequalities are a direct expression of institutional racism. His pioneering work—particularly the analysis of environmental conflicts in Houston—established the connection between race, territory, and power in public policy.

⁸ Lélia Gonzalez (1935–1994) was an intellectual, anthropologist, and a central activist in Brazilian Black thought. In *O Lugar do Negro* (co-authored with Carlos Hasenbalg, 1982), she exposed how racism structures Brazil’s social formation, producing racial hierarchies evident in urban spaces, the labor market, and institutions. Her work demonstrates that the “place of the Black person” is not natural but the outcome of unequal power distribution organizing Brazilian society.

⁹ Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914–1977) was a writer, poet, and one of the most influential voices in twentieth-century Brazilian literature. Living in the Canindé favela in São Paulo, she documented a daily life marked by hunger, racism, and social inequalities in her diaries, which became *Quarto de Despejo* (1960). Her writing functions as both social testimony and denunciation, making visible the citizenship denied to marginalized populations.

Completing the *Bluegrass*¹⁰, project was particularly important for highlighting inequalities in water access across the Americas. However, in retrospect, we did not sufficiently address race—a crucial discussion that needed to take place. Nevertheless, this learning process enabled me to reflect critically and opened doors to international debates, including those by Robert Bullard and Julian Agyeman¹¹. Agyeman has published extensively on urban planning and racism, and co-authored works with Bullard on just sustainability. These moments, and elements of this trajectory, illustrate the evolution of my understanding and engagement with environmental justice.

Very well, Ana. You mentioned this process of self-discovery, which is part of the journey. It reminded me—and I know you are familiar with it—of Bianca Santana’s book *Quando me descobri negra (When I Discovered I Was Black)*, in which she narrates this recognition of oneself, which is not simple: it results from experiences marked by barriers and challenges.

After all, it is a political project designed to prevent us from accessing these spaces. Most people only recognize themselves as Black very late, and the impacts of racism—especially in academia—are presented in a sophisticated way. Racism becomes “sophisticated.” Recognizing racism within one’s own practice and gaining the empowerment to speak about our origins is crucial. It is a construction, like any intellectual process—it is not given. When I first encountered the issues of sexism and environmental racism, I thought, “Wow, this seems strange,” because we are taught that: “Ah, you keep putting racism into everything... recreational racism... structural racism...” and so on. Today, developing the knowledge that allows me to speak about environmental racism is a process shaped by extensive debate, reading, lived experience, and dialogue with others. Listening and sharing are central. I even have critiques regarding the use of the term “environmental racism,”¹² which is important to

¹⁰ Regarding the Bluegrass FAPESP Project, see more at: <https://bv.fapesp.br/pt/auxilios/84711/the-invention-of-blue-gold-from-grassroots-mobilizations-for-water-to-the-internationalization-of-en/>. Accessed: November 17, 2025.

¹¹ For more information on Professor Julian Agyeman, see: <https://julianagyeman.com/bio/>. Accessed: November 17, 2025.

¹² Environmental racism is the concept that describes how racialized, poor, and marginalized populations are disproportionately exposed to environmental risks, inadequate sanitation, pollution, and the socio-environmental impacts of development. These inequalities are not accidental; they result from political and economic decisions

acknowledge. This is why, in my thesis, I decided to study the genealogy of environmental racism—it is a concept under dispute and constantly being constructed, like everything in life.

Excellent, Ana. That brings us to another point we prepared: how would you define the term “environmental racism” considering the Brazilian context? We know the concept originated in the United States—with Bullard and Reverend Chavis¹³— but here it gains other dimensions, incorporating different social groups and historical contexts. How have you understood this concept based on your research on its genealogy in Brazil?

This is crucial. I think it is important to say for any context—whether the United States, Europe, Brazil, or Latin America—that Environmental Racism is racism. Period. We are talking about an expression of racism that manifests through environmental issues. Environmental racism is racism, and it is also what we might call a branch of structural and institutional racism in which we live. We cannot forget that when I speak of environmental racism, I am speaking of racism as a whole and of one of its manifestations—structural racism as institutional racism, embedded in institutions.

When Robert Bullard conceptualized environmental racism alongside Professor and activist Benjamin Chavis, they highlighted that environmental racism is reinforced by institutions—political, governmental, military, and legal—because these institutions either protect or fail to protect, punish or fail to punish those who cause environmental harm, and compensate or fail to compensate those harmed, as in the case of the Rio Doce disaster. This is critical. Environmental racism manifests in the disproportionate effects of environmental and climate degradation on ethnic and racialized peoples. I prefer the term “racialized” because, in a global context, white people are not racialized. Racialized always refers to “the other”—Black, Indigenous, Asian—while white is considered the universal subject, not a racial identity.

Environmental racism also manifests in what we were discussing: the absence of responsibility among white actors in addressing racial issues within the environmental sphere. This is not about asserting expertise in racism; it is about the lack of ethical and committed

that hierarchize territories and lives. The term was widely disseminated by Robert D. Bullard in the United States in the 1980s, linking environment, race, and power.

¹³ Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. is a reverend, civil rights activist, and one of the pioneering leaders of the environmental justice movement in the United States. He coined the term “environmental racism” in 1982 when denouncing the placement of toxic waste sites near Black communities in North Carolina. His work established the direct connection between environmental inequalities and racial discrimination in public policy.

engagement. White individuals have a significant responsibility and role because there are spaces that Black people cannot access. Thus, environmental racism is evident in the failure of white environmental actors to engage in racial discussions ethically and responsibly, for example, within preservationist movements.

We have people who care about “green” spaces but disregard the lives of affected populations. They prioritize economic development without considering these populations. Which populations are we talking about? Riverine communities, Caiçara peoples, Black peripheral communities, poor white communities, and Indigenous peoples. Finally, environmental racism manifests in mainstream decision-making about environmental policy. Looking at governments, who makes the decisions? In meetings about fire management, IBAMA, or the Ministry of Environment, the leadership remains predominantly white, avoiding racial issues as a central concern. This exclusion makes meaningful participation impossible for marginalized communities.

Environmental racism, in my view, also manifests in the absence of racialized people—especially Black and Indigenous individuals—in spaces where they could discuss issues that directly affect their lives and territories. Environmental racism, therefore, is this disproportionate impact of environmental degradation. It is not only the absence of Black people but the active obstruction of their presence—alongside Indigenous, quilombola, and peripheral populations—in positions of power and decision-making. White people consistently dominate these discussions, controlling decision-making and influence. It is a complex and multifaceted issue.

You have already touched on this, but it is worth emphasizing: in your perception, what are the climate change impacts that most affect racialized populations in Brazil—particularly Black communities, traditional peoples, and poor populations—given the increase in extreme climatic events?

I would frame it as the top three climate-related impacts that most affect Black populations, especially Black and Indigenous communities. Some people even resist distinguishing between climate racism and environmental racism, but I find it important to mark the difference. For instance, the Brumadinho issue is primarily environmental: it involves environmental liabilities, degradation, and contamination. These issues are further aggravated

by climate factors—for example, heavy rainfall increases runoff, carrying all that environmental liability into rivers and other areas. In other words, climate crises amplify environmental racism, which can also be called climate racism.

So, how do climate change and extreme weather events disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous populations? One issue that is still undervalued, though people are beginning to notice, is heat waves¹⁴. Despite the public health system lacking sufficient tools to diagnose and record that hospitalizations and deaths are due to heat waves—such as cardiovascular problems, strokes, respiratory or cardiac arrest, or dehydration—relevant studies already exist. For example, Djacinto Santos (UFRJ) demonstrates this relationship between heat waves and health impacts. Heat waves represent a very serious problem, often associated with periods of drought, which amplify various vulnerabilities: they intensify wildfires—whether accidental or deliberate—harm crop production, and consequently increase hunger. This hunger is not only due to reduced agricultural output but also to economic difficulties in accessing quality food.

The issue of agrochemicals also worsens the scenario, although it is more broadly related to the environment and not specifically to climate. I would say that heat waves are currently the main climatic factor that most affects and kills Black populations in Brazil. This occurs for multiple reasons: limited access to healthcare, greater difficulty in diagnosis, and above all, lack of infrastructure to cope with extreme temperatures. Who can stay properly hydrated, have a climate-controlled home, or work in safe conditions during a heat wave? Certainly not waste pickers, street sweepers, bus drivers—who have only recently started to have air-conditioned vehicles—and many other exposed urban workers, especially those in informal employment. It is worth remembering that most waste pickers are Black women. This impact is not limited to cities: in rural areas, quilombola communities, female farmers, and fisherfolk who rely directly on planting, harvesting, and fishing also suffer profoundly from the effects of high temperatures and drought. Therefore, heat waves not only increase mortality but also significantly deteriorate the quality of life of Black populations across different territories.

The second impact, for me, is landslides caused by heavy rains. I do not have exact figures here, but we have very high records, especially after what happened in Rio Grande do Sul. This involves material infrastructure: many people were affected by the heavy rains, and many died, became ill, or are dealing with emotional and structural consequences. Landslides

¹⁴ Heat waves are prolonged periods of abnormally high temperatures for a given region, accompanied or not by high humidity, which exceed historical climate limits and pose a risk to human health, ecosystems, and urban infrastructure. Their impacts tend to be more severe in areas with less access to green spaces, adequate housing, and public services, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations.

caused by heavy rains have enormous material devastation; we have more media visibility to discuss them, but I would place this as the second most impactful problem. It is important to remember that the problem is not just heavy rainfall, but that cities are not adapted and not well-structured, especially in peripheral areas, and they need to be able to manage runoff. We lack proper drainage in cities because everything has been cemented, rivers destroyed, so we lack both permeability and drainage—two essential elements to cope, at least partially, with increasing rainfall. This does not solve the issue; heavy rains will not stop, so mitigation and adaptation are necessary.

For example, in São Sebastião, the contrast is very clear in the photograph taken by Alessandro Liseiro (GEO-Panoramas) showing the separation between houses by the seaside (Praia da Baleia, Barra do Sahy) and other houses on the hillside. During the same rainfall, some hillside houses—where poor, caçara, and quilombola residents live—collapsed, burying people. Meanwhile, those experiencing the same rain by the coast did not have their homes destroyed; at most, some minor water damage occurred, and some residents were able to leave using helicopters or 4x4 vehicles. Therefore, these extreme weather events are extremely significant in people's lives: some experience them in a drastic, rapid, and overwhelming way, while others experience them in a slower, quieter, but equally serious manner.

When the same rain fell, some houses on the hillside—where poor, caçara, and quilombola communities live—collapsed, burying residents. Meanwhile, those experiencing the same rainfall elsewhere did not have their homes destroyed; at most, they had minor water damage. Some were able to leave using helicopters, others with 4x4 vehicles. Thus, these extreme weather events are profoundly significant in people's lives, albeit experienced differently: one in a drastic, rapid, and overwhelming manner, the other in a slower, quieter, yet equally serious way.

In this context, how can public policies address the climate emergency while incorporating the lens of environmental racism and climate justice, which still do not guide decision-making? It is not enough for these principles to be written in a plan—they require praxis. What are the possibilities and pathways to make this happen?

Public policies, within a system that considers itself democratic, are one key avenue of action. Governments bear responsibility, and this social responsibility entails such a role. It is essential to consider public adaptation policies. Implementing these policies requires

commitment from governments across all levels—federal, state, and municipal—particularly in the allocation of funds. Currently, during COP discussions¹⁵, funding mechanisms for climate issues are being considered, as well as the implementation of agreements like the Paris Accord¹⁶. While such initiatives are important, it is equally crucial for municipalities and states to prioritize both adaptation and mitigation measures.

Examples include reforestation, river revitalization, riparian forest restoration, and reducing urban impervious surfaces. In São Paulo, there is a saying: “São Paulo is Indigenous land, São Paulo is black soil, São Paulo is riverside land,” referencing how rivers were paved over. There is a persistent illusion that urban cement has always existed, but producing it—from the ground to buildings—worsens climate issues, as the construction industry is one of the most polluting sectors in Brazil.

Public policies must integrate mitigation and adaptation, revising regulations for construction, reforestation—particularly riparian forests—and housing. Many people already live in high-risk areas, and housing policies can function as climate adaptation strategies by placing populations in safe locations. Importantly, this is not about eviction; the long-used excuse of “removing people from risk areas” is insufficient. Removal alone does not solve the problem. Residents must be relocated to safe spaces determined collaboratively with affected communities. Policies such as those implemented by the MST, as well as quilombola and Indigenous land demarcation initiatives, require proper validation. Ensuring access to a dignified life in safe spaces facilitates a dialogue between human well-being and environmental preservation.

You highlighted public policy as one avenue of response, but not the only one. In this regard, how do you perceive the interaction between environmental racism and climate justice—both within academia and social movements? How are these linkages unfolding in other spheres of action?

¹⁵ COP stands for Conference of the Parties, the highest decision-making body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). COPs bring together representatives from governments, civil society, and international organizations every year to negotiate global agreements and strategies to tackle the climate crisis, such as the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015).

¹⁶ The Paris Agreement is the international climate treaty adopted in 2015 during COP 21, in which signatory countries committed to limiting the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels — striving to limit the increase to 1.5°C. The agreement establishes national emission reduction targets (NDCs), adaptation, climate finance, and intergenerational justice as guiding principles for global climate action.

I cannot speak with complete authority, but I can offer my perspective on access. Racial and social quotas play a critical role in disseminating discussions of racism. In various contexts—even among research groups that do not yet explicitly identify or vocalize environmental racism—these issues are being debated academically, particularly regarding human rights violations, access to land, and food security.

I think this is an important point. We had Carolina Maria de Jesus back in the 1940s, who did not speak in terms of environmental racism, but when she described the periphery—the favela—as the “dumping room” and the city center as the “living room,” she was highlighting a territorial division in which one area had open sewage, as she described, with a foul smell, while the other was well-maintained, clean, and orderly. So, there were already voices pointing this out. Today, within academia, largely due to racial quotas, more and more people are discussing these issues, linking their activism outside the university to these debates. This has significantly increased visibility.

I cannot precisely state the overall scope of the current scenario, but today, undergraduate students can attend classes on environmental racism—an opportunity we did not have. Currently, there are Black and Indigenous professors, albeit still few, introducing alternative epistemologies and addressing environmental racism in the classroom. This fosters a greater sense of belonging and adequacy, even within a space as hostile as the university. Consequently, this has improved representation and opened doors for younger students, while also promoting the renewal of White professors more committed to social, racial, and gender justice, alongside an increasing number of Black professors active in undergraduate and graduate programs.

This allows other forms of intellectual entry, demonstrating that intellectual authority is not defined solely by titles. I cite Nego Bispo¹⁷ as an example. We organized an event¹⁸ at FFLCH [USP] with him, which continues to be referenced and utilized to this day. He attended the university not to conform, but to critique it and highlight its colonial inconsistencies.

I recall that when I began graduate studies—master’s and doctoral programs—the environment was unwelcoming to Black students from poorer backgrounds, or from coastal or

¹⁷ Nêgo Bispo (Antônio Bispo do Rosário) was a thinker, writer, and quilombo leader from Piauí. His works and political activism denounce the forms of colonialism that affect traditional territories and populations, defending quilombo autonomy and counter-hegemonic knowledge produced from oral tradition, community experience, and the relationship with the land. In *Colonização, Quilombos: modos e significados* (Colonization, Quilombos: modes and meanings) (2019), he formulates the distinction between colonial modes of “development” and quilombola modes of “coexistence,” becoming a reference in studies of decoloniality and the struggle for territorial justice in Brazil.

¹⁸ For the full event, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RCuzE6b83k>. Accessed on: Nov. 17, 2025.

rural regions. Many of us felt ashamed of our origins and tried to conform to the prevailing university norms. As Krenak notes¹⁹, one of the most colonizing institutions is the university itself.

This began to change when I attended classes with Black professors who expressed pride in their origins and ancestry, refusing to conceal it. Figures like Nego Bispo continually remind us of this. I highly recommend watching the discussions we had with Nego Bispo, Malcolm Ferdinand, and Kabengele Munanga.

It is important to note that Nego Bispo was invited by a Black professor, Guilherme Moura Fagundes²⁰, who also supervised my thesis. At an environmental racism event I organized at USP, I invited Professor Dennis de Oliveira²¹, Diego Pereira from AGU (now in the Presidential Office), and Professor Marcelo Firpo from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation. Professor Dennis de Oliveira remarked: “I have over thirty years at USP, yet I have never been invited to step into the IEA [Institute of Advanced Studies]. This is my first time here,” highlighting the barriers Black professors face in accessing elite academic spaces.

Thus, we see that Black individuals opening doors, alongside antiracist allies from other ethnic backgrounds, is crucial. This approach does not grant voice to others; rather, it enables them to speak in spaces from which they were previously excluded. This is vital, especially for Black scholars like myself and many colleagues. I emphasize Black voices because my thesis specifically addresses this. Indigenous communities were granted the right to engage in environmental discourse because they were perceived as “forest dwellers.” Conversely, Black populations, even quilombolas, were denied this right and could not claim the title of environmentalist. Historically, the Black movement did not frame itself as environmentalist.

This is changing with the concept of environmental racism, which I consider highly significant. It allows Black individuals to recognize that environmental issues concern them, whether they reside in urban, rural, forested, or aquatic spaces.

¹⁹ Ailton Krenak (1953–) is an indigenous leader, environmentalist, and writer from the Krenak people. His work is marked by the defense of indigenous territories and criticism of the development model based on the exploitation of nature and bodies. In works such as *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo* (Ideas to Postpone the End of the World, 2019), he proposes reconnecting with the Earth as an ethical and political foundation, emphasizing that there is no possible future without recognizing the diversity of worlds and ways of life.

²⁰ For more information on Professor Guilherme Moura Fernandes, see: <https://antropologia.fflch.usp.br/node/1473>. Accessed on: Nov. 17, 2025.

²¹ For more information on Professor Dennis de Oliveira, see: <https://www.dennisoliveira.info>. Accessed on: Nov. 17, 2025.

We have discussed academia extensively, but also social movements. I would like to hear your perspective on youth activism: how do you perceive young people's engagement with climate and antiracist agendas today?

Let me see... Who are the climate justice leaders in Brazil? Oh my...

In general terms, how do you view youth activism for climate justice in Brazil, given that much of this debate is influenced by international references—often led by White figures like Greta Thunberg and transnational NGOs? Considering events like Glasgow, which saw increased participation from the Brazilian Black movement, do you perceive a transformation underway? How has this presence grown and consolidated locally?

Wow, well, I think there are many leaders—so many. I am a woman from the Southeast, so I naturally have more access to what is being debated in this region of Brazil. Therefore, I am more familiar with some individuals advocating for environmental and climate issues, which I find very interesting. When I think about youth, there are several people who stand out as important references in this debate, and they are not defined solely by this, which is also remarkable.

For example, Thuane²², from Perifa Connection is a young leader who has become a major reference for discussing territory, racial issues, and climate adaptation in Brazil. Similarly, Andréia Coutinho Louback²³, a Carioca, is a major reference for me. She approaches the issues as a researcher but has also become an international activist and founded a Brazilian Center for Climate Justice²⁴ extending her impact beyond the Southeast. Many of these young leaders are active on social media. For instance, Ecofada, from Natal, highlights food-related perspectives.

There is also Karina, who uses the codename Kata-Flor and is a collaborator of Thuane from Perifa Connection. She represents the Northern perspective; she is from Maranhão, if I recall correctly, and her work strongly references the Amazon region. Amanda Costa, also from São Paulo, engages with these discussions and is continually expanding her expertise and depth.

²² See more at: <https://www.instagram.com/thuxthuane/>. Accessed on: Nov. 17, 2025.

²³ See more at: <https://www.instagram.com/andriacoutinho.l/>. Accessed on: Nov. 17, 2025.

²⁴ About CBJC <https://cbjc.com.br/pt/>. Accessed on: Nov. 17, 2025.

The climate justice these Black women advocate emphasizes addressing environmental racism, which is a crucial point. There are many other names I could mention. Regarding your earlier question about the predominance of White activists in the Southeast, yes, this remains a relevant issue. Environmental justice and climate justice often intersect closely.

Often, people come to me saying, “I want to invite this person to the debate.” I always ask, “Why not invite XYZYWK?” I provide a list of highly capable Black and Indigenous activists. Alice Pataxó²⁵, for example, from Bahia, communicates environmental and climate issues exceptionally well. Victor de Jesus, a sociologist and public health researcher, focuses on environmental racism and justice; he is a reference because he works within a larger organizational structure, alongside Diosmar, discussing racism and its environmental implications. Marina Marçal is another outstanding reference.

Victor de Jesus, who is a researcher, is not specifically focused on climate; he is a sociologist and public health specialist who studies environmental racism, environmental justice, specifically environmental racism, and health issues. He is a reference for me because he operates within a somewhat larger organizational structure—he and Diosmar, for example, discuss racism and its implications in environmental matters. Marina Marçal²⁶, herself, for instance, is also an outstanding reference.

Two young women from Instituto Palmares, Kim and Vitória, a trans youth. So, apart from Diosmar, Marina Marçal, and Victor, the rest of this group consists entirely of youth.

In other words, there is reason for hope. A strong group is emerging with full energy.

Yes, and they understand the importance and role of social media. I believe this is a strategic insight and a significant opportunity they are seizing.

²⁵ For more information about Alice Pataxó, see: @alice_pataxo.

²⁶ For more information about Marina Marçal, see: @marinamarcal.

Amanda Costa and Gabriela Alves also work extensively from this perspective?

Gabriela, absolutely—Gabriela²⁷ is someone I recommend for everything. I recommend her, Mahayan, the women from “Perifa Sustentável”—all of them—I recommend them widely; I admire their work. But I think that is it. My perspective is very Southeast-centric because these are my references, the people I interact with, the ones I am in dialogue with, and those I discuss these matters with. I also think that the concept of climate justice is relatively new. How can we say that Marina Silva is a reference for climate justice? Perhaps, depending on our interpretation, we could say yes, as she is the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. However, she does not exactly represent the youth perspective we were discussing. Yet, for me, if we speak about environmental and, more specifically, climate issues in Brazil, Marina Silva is an important reference, as she has increasingly demonstrated a strong ethical commitment to combating environmental degradation, environmental racism, and addressing climate change, including extreme climate events.

Even thinking about climate justice itself, it is a concept. Considering climate justice leadership in Brazil is a small slice, because we need to relate a person to how they define and present themselves. I would say that I do not usually identify strongly as an environmentalist, though sometimes as an antiracist environmentalist.

Thus, we risk falling into what you mentioned: thinking it is possible to discuss the environment without addressing inequality and racism. In other words, speaking of climate justice without considering environmental racism. This erasure is also a risk we observe?

Exactly. And in Brazil, there are important figures advocating for the defense of life, well-being, and antiracism who are crucial, even if they do not fit neatly into the concept of climate justice. Ailton Krenak, Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Nego Bispo, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Abdias do Nascimento, Lélia Gonzalez, and Milton Santos are individuals who highlight the importance of addressing inequality. Hélio Santos, for example—one of the interviewees for my doctoral research—pointed out that the discourse often focused on the precarization of life and territorial inequality. For instance, stating that Black households flood during rains is

²⁷ For more information about Gabriela Alves, see: @gotadoceano.

something long acknowledged in the periphery by many people. Historically, when elders spoke of these issues, they were not considered environmentalists. And when discussing education, I think an important point of my thesis emerges: when Black individuals spoke about sanitation or flooding, they were primarily addressing social issues, and at most racism; they were not framed as discussing environmental issues.

But I think there is indeed a distancing from the agenda because it is also a hostile space. A place that still is, in fact, but where environmental laws were racist and, in general, often still are. So, how could they consider themselves environmentalists when environmental production in Brazil is racist and violent toward these bodies? Until recently, there were people opposed to the demarcation of quilombos. For example, the project by Niède Guidon in Serra da Capivara—she arrived intending to preserve the rock art, and the preservation approach expelled all the quilombolas from the region. It took years; indeed, Nego Bispo had strong criticisms of Niède Guidon, because family and friends were removed from that area. It took years for them to gain recognition as an extractivist community, for instance, and to argue that the place was only as it was when Niède Guidon arrived because people had been caring for it. Even without knowing its immense historical and scientific value, people already maintained a relationship of balance with that place.

There are many aspects, but I would place Marina Silva at the top of my climate justice ranking because she was there when it was “all wilderness,” you understand? It was her and Chico Mendes who were discussing these issues, and she is also someone who never remains static—she constantly reinvents herself to speak on what needs to be said, but also in a way that people understand. I don’t know how this woman is not still the president of Brazil, honestly.

Ana, moving toward the conclusion: could you recommend three readings for those who want to deepen their understanding of environmental racism and climate justice—or works that inspire you and open new pathways? And, to close, a final message about the challenges and necessary utopias: how to stay motivated and find time for activism and self-care in such a harsh context, in this society of exhaustion?

Okay, look, three is difficult. But I think the best way to learn about environmental racism is to understand society. And sometimes it doesn’t even need to be explicitly labeled as environmental racism. For example, we can read *A Terra Dá, a Terra Quer* by Nego Bispo, which does not explicitly discuss environmental racism, but it allows us to understand and

deepen the debate. To understand environmental racism, I recommend that people study society through multiple forms of art, understanding literature and science as artistic modes of knowledge production.

I also recommend reading Nego Bispo's other works, particularly his books on quilombos, which are extremely important. And then, well, it's difficult to recommend only three. I would also mention Malcom Ferdinand, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon—the three are Martiniquais.

So, read Martiniquais authors as a whole, because we share strong connections with the Caribbean and Latin America. For instance, studying the coloniality framework that Aimé Césaire presents is crucial for understanding social structures. By understanding structure, we understand how racism manifests in environmental issues.

Finally, considering the Brazilian intellectual context, and providing examples that sometimes require digging to find—because they are not always online or widely circulated—for example, the book produced by Peregum on environmental and climate racism is excellent and highly referenced. The notebook from the Federal University of ABC that we produced on environmental racism is also an excellent read, focusing on very specific environmental racism topics. This is very valuable. But I would also say that people need to know our griôs²⁸, our elders. Read Lélia Gonzalez, read Abdias Nascimento. Abdias, perhaps, in relation to quilombismo; Lélia, regarding the place of Black people. I could mention another, but Lélia and Abdias are already helpful. I really cannot recommend only three—it is very difficult.

And finally, what message would you leave about the challenges and utopias that help us move forward in such harsh times?

Yes, I strongly agree with Krenak. Krenak has a phrase he uses: we must not surrender to this narrative of the end of the world. This narrative of the end of the world causes us to lose hope, especially those of us who want to change something.

I think that, to... you ask here how we stay motivated in dark times, the answer is by resting. There is no better way to reenergize than by resting, by preserving our mental and

²⁸ Griots (from the French griot) are guardians of memory, storytellers, poets, musicians, and traditional educators in African and Afro-diasporic communities. Through oral tradition, they transmit stories, ancestral knowledge, cosmologies, and collective values, preserving identities and strengthening community ties. In Brazil, the term has also come to refer to masters of popular and traditional cultures, recognizing oral tradition as a legitimate form of knowledge production and circulation.

physical health. Rest is essential within our means. We cannot fight if we do not know how to rest and celebrate.

In a generation experiencing so much exhaustion, so much burnout, I believe the greatest lesson I have learned recently is to rest without excessive guilt—to celebrate a holiday, Carnival, to rest and create our small world of peace within our possibilities, because we do not live in peace. The challenges are immense.

If we do not have a rested body, even minimally happy and minimally strengthened, we will not be able to face the challenges around us, which are national, but also global. They are local, national, and global. We are living in a wave of rising far-right extremism. So, my final message also recalls Nego Bispo, who in that USP lecture says that work is a punishment. We have been colonized to the point of believing that only work can dignify us. And now we live in a tired society.

We can do many things, but we can also idle. Loaf. And this is a concept that has been used against us. There was even a law against idleness that penalized Black people who played capoeira, who were dancing and moving in the *rodas*... and there is also jongo, among many other circular dances. I think we need to learn to rest, to idle, to relax a little, because without rest there is no fight. There is even a phrase in that church in Liberdade that says: “Only those who know how to celebrate can fight.” So, I would add rest. We will rest. We must not lose our youth, our good moments—with family, with friends, in the small worlds we have. It is very easy to fall into the trap of social media, fame, pseudo-fame, certain projections, certain likes.

At the same time that this youth is excelling in communication, they also need to remember that a network, a space, a rest, are equally important. I think this is basic—it’s simpler matters; there are no special suggestions or tips, but this is it: read poetry, understand? Sing, lose yourself—that is simple. It took me years in therapy to reconnect with Nego Bispo’s idea: it is necessary to learn to return home. To return within ourselves, understanding that the idea of achieving great things, of many things, of a single hero, the example, leadership—that is a colonial idea. Our idea must be to counter-colonize. To truly counter-colonize is to resist the pressure to be famous, to be the best, to be the ultimate reference. So, I think we can be more collective, more rested, and perhaps a little happier.

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