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"I AM THE FLOWER": DECOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article is grounded in a pedagogical experience that developed over three English lessons in a Brazilian public school, where a student named Malu, a transgender and autistic girl, resisted the colonialities of being, knowledge, ability, and gender. Based on critical language education (Pennycook, 2021) and the praxiological framework of decoloniality, especially the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), intersected with the colonialities of gender (Lugones, 2023), ability (Dirth & Adams, 2019), and knowledge (Mignolo, 2009), this critical/decolonial research analyzes how Malu redefined the lesson through her personal engagement with a poem. Drawing from classroom observations and Malu's own productions, the study shows how her actions constituted a decolonial pedagogical biopraxis (Ortiz Ocaña et al., 2021), revealing possibilities for transforming the language classroom into a space of recognition and life affirmation.

Keywords: critical English language education; decoloniality; colonialities of being, knowledge, ability, and gender; pedagogical biopraxis.

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1. Introduction

This article[1] is grounded in a pedagogical experience that developed over three onsite English lessons given by the second author in a high school group in Brazil. It was the beginning of the first semester of 2022, soon after two suffocating pandemic years. Everybody needed air, so the semester started with the discussion of the poem "Nausea and the Flower," by the Brazilian poet and writer Carlos Drummond de Andrade, about a flower "that broke the asphalt, tedium, disgust, and hatred." It drew the attention of a student – Malu[2] – who was eager to breathe and to express herself in English about her process of building subjectivities that are on the other side of the colonial difference. Listening to her or to the damnés, as Maldonado-Torres (2007) calls those who were subjected to the process of coloniality of being, is a way of opposing the paradigm of war, which has driven modernity for more than five hundred years, and promoting a world oriented by the ideals of human generosity and understanding.

This study was conducted at a *Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia de Goiás* (Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Goiás), where high school is integrated with vocational courses in various fields, enabling students to pursue both technical/professional training and the standard national high school curriculum. The study focused exclusively on Malu, and the consent to use her empirical material was obtained after the course had ended. She was part of a group of 18 teenage students in their final year of a high school vocational program. According to the Course Plan, the main goal of English in the curriculum is to "develop and improve basic-level communicative competence in the English language, taking into account the improvement of the four communicative skills and the development of critical awareness in relation to the language and its social functions" (Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia de Goiás, 2022).

The lessons examined in this paper were delivered in English, and students were given opportunities to interact with the language by reading and listening to a poem, speaking and writing about the poem, playing a game, and producing oral and written texts about their lives. While students were able to follow the lessons in English, not all of them could communicate fluently, so translanguaging occurred in most classes.

The English lessons were grounded in critical language education, which seeks to problematize significant life issues, fostering an understanding of social inequalities and encouraging action towards their transformation (Pennycook, 2021). We view language as a form of praxis that should be humanized in the classroom, enabling people to express who they are and to stand up for themselves. It was through language that Malu challenged colonialities during class. In 2022, Malu was 19 years old, a transgender girl who had recently received a confirmed diagnosis of autism.

The development of the lessons invited us to address the colonialities of knowledge, ability, and gender. That is why our starting point is the coloniality of being, which is the basis of this discussion, as the three colonialities concern aspects of Malu's subjectivities. Thus, in addition to this introduction, the article is structured into four main sections. The first examines the concept of coloniality of being, offering the praxiological grounding for the discussion. The second focuses on how the three English lessons unfolded, focusing on Malu's actions. The third section explores how Malu challenges the colonialities of knowledge, ability, and gender. The final section presents our concluding reflections.

2. "On coloniality of being"

In the article "On the coloniality of being," the Puerto Rican philosopher and professor Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) discusses the development of this concept, which was referred to for the first time by Walter D. Mignolo in 1995. When he heard it from Mignolo in 2000, it caught his attention since he was reading philosophers on the question of being, but it was with the Lithuanian Jewish thinker Emmanuel Lévinas that he woke up from what he called his "phenomenological and ontological slumber" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 240). He affirms he found in him "a more radical subversion of Western philosophy," as Lévinas, a survivor of the Jewish Holocaust, became a major opponent of Heidegger, not only because he had been a supporter of the Nazi regime but also because this affiliation in some way involved his philosophical project (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 241). By making the link between ontology and power, Lévinas inspired other authors in Latin America, who examined the implications of the colonial relations of power in the areas of authority, sexuality, knowledge, and the economy, but also on the general understanding of being. For Mignolo (*apud* Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242), "the coloniality of being would make primary reference to the lived experience of colonization and its impact on language," and it was this idea that deeply touched Maldonado-Torres. Another crucial author who grounds Maldonado-Torres's discussion is Fanon, who, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, provides "the basis for an alternative depiction of the master/slave dialectic, but also contributes to a more general rethinking of ontology in light of coloniality and the search for decolonization" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242). This is the context of Maldonado-Torres's article, which aims at responding to the challenge posed by the coloniality of being: "connecting the genetic, the existential, and the historical dimensions where Being shows most evidently its colonial side and its fractures" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243).

According to Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 246), "the conquest of the Americas was no less than an ontological event with many implications." Quijano (2000) had already argued that the colonial matrix of power laid the foundation for exploitation in multiple dimensions beyond the economic, encompassing

gender, sexuality, knowledge, religion, and language. This matrix was based on a biologically invented idea of race, which established the European colonizer as superior to the indigenous and African peoples and endorsed the constitution of a new model of organization and labor control – based on serfdom, slavery, small independent commodity production, and reciprocity – that configured capitalism on a global and worldwide scale. Thus, capitalism was tied with other forms of domination and subordination, that is, with coloniality, which, according to Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243)

> [...] refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and every day.

Even more radically, Maldonado-Torres (2007) affirms that coloniality naturalized war practices such as slavery, murder, genocide, rape, and this naturalization reached its climax when natural science validated racism in the nineteenth century. If in the Ancient world and the Middle Ages, some people could legitimately be enslaved, particularly prisoners of war and the vanquished (ethics of war), in modern/colonial times, racialized people live constantly on a battlefield. That's why Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 248) argues that the emerging modernity has been shaped by "a paradigm of war." This is the backdrop of Maldonado-Torres' (2007) discussion on the coloniality of being.

Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues that the *ego cogito* (I think) was built upon the foundations of the *ego conquiro* (I conquer), and Descartes' formulation "I think, therefore I am" presupposes the coloniality of knowledge (others do not think) and the coloniality of Being (others are not). From Descartes, Maldonado-Torres (2007) moves to Fanon because the black and the colonized become the radical points of departure for any reflection on the coloniality of Being. While Mignolo's notion of *colonial difference* was primarily epistemic (referring to the coloniality of knowledge), Maldonado-Torres underlines a(n) (sub-) ontological colonial difference (referring to the coloniality of being). It means that the colonized person "perceives life not as a flowering or a development of an essential productiveness, but as a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 254). The condemned (*damné*) is a non-being (non-human) or invisible, and these two, dehumanization and invisibility, are the primary expressions of the coloniality of Being.

Coloniality of being refers to a process whereby exceptions to ethical relationships become the norm, and it indicates the emergence of a world "in which

lordship and supremacy rather than generous interaction define social dynamics in society" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 259). The fight against the paradigm of war and the promotion of a world oriented by the ideals of human generosity and receptivity is the precise meaning of decolonization. For Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 261), though decoloniality is as old as colonization itself, it becomes a project in the twentieth century of confrontation with "the racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies that were put in place or strengthened by European modernity as it colonized and enslaved populations throughout the planet."

From Du Bois' (1999) discussion that the problem of the twentieth-century is the color-line, at the end of his text, Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 262) argues that the decolonial attitude or turn "demands responsibility and the willingness to take many perspectives, particularly the perspectives and points of view of those whose very existence is questioned and produced as insignificant," marking "the definitive entry of enslaved and colonized subjectivities into the realm of thought at institutional levels." For him, the *damné* have the potential of transforming the modern/colonial into a transmodern world – a world where war is not the norm, but the exception (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

As discussed, Maldonado-Torres (2007) not only extends the concept of coloniality beyond economic and political dimensions to the very essence of being and existence, including how gender identities and roles have been shaped by colonial perspectives, but also argues for a decolonial turn that defies colonial legacies such as the Eurocentric and patriarchal conceptions of gender. In the discussion that follows, it becomes evident that Malu challenges the colonialities of knowledge, ability, and gender in interconnected ways throughout the research material. We understand that hierarchies of gender, norms of ability, and the regulation of legitimate knowledge are not isolated mechanisms, but rather interrelated expressions of how colonial power structures shape subjectivities. Malu's experience, therefore, is not only a personal or emotional reaction but a political gesture that interrupts these intersecting colonialities.

3. Disrupting the flow: Malu's pedagogical acts

As mentioned, two very difficult years of the Covid-19 pandemic had passed, and the teacher (the second author of this article) started her first lesson of the year 2022 with an excerpt of the poem "Nausea and the flower" by Carlos Drummond de Andrade (2012):

Table 1. Excerpt of the poem "Nausea and the flower."

A flower has sprouted in the street! Buses, streetcars, steel stream of traffic: steer clear! A flower, still pale, has fooled the police, it's breaking through the asphalt. Let's have complete silence, halt all business in the shops, I swear that a flower has been born. [...] It is ugly. But it is a flower. It broke the asphalt, tedium, disgust, and hatred.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade (2012)

Then, the students were encouraged to speak about their feelings regarding learning English. Next, a pre-reading activity was carried out using images of flowers breaking through the asphalt to elicit comments and impressions. After talking about the pictures, the students watched a short video of a scene from the 2016 Olympic Games opening ceremony in Rio de Janeiro, in which a boy finds a small plant growing through hard soil while the Brazilian actress Fernanda Montenegro recites the excerpt of the poem shown in Table 1, in Portuguese. The recitation was followed by an English translation delivered by the British actress Judi Dench. Students were invited to share their impressions of both the poem excerpt and the video. Afterward, they read the full poem in English, discussed some comprehension questions, and, in groups, created a visual representation (e.g., drawing, collage, etc.) inspired by the poem. In the second lesson, the students played a game in which they pretended the flower had been stolen and had to solve the mystery. The third lesson focused on conversations about personal information, emotions, and students' biographies.

During the first lesson, however, Malu engaged with the activities in a very different way than planned. While she participated in the pre-reading activity with images of flowers, she chose to read the full poem on her own, googling it as the rest of the class watched the video. This marked the first moment when Malu diverged from the group's actions and created her own path – not out of defiance, but because she was genuinely moved by the text. Feeling overwhelmed, she suddenly exclaimed, "I am the flower!" and left the classroom. This became the second moment when her emotions overtook the structure of the lesson and led her to design her own activity. At the end of the class, she returned and shared a two-minute and forty-five-second video she had recorded of herself reciting part of the poem with assertiveness at the school's portico, an important historical landmark in our city, as the following image illustrates:

Figure 1. Malu reciting the poem at the school portico

Source: Teacher archive

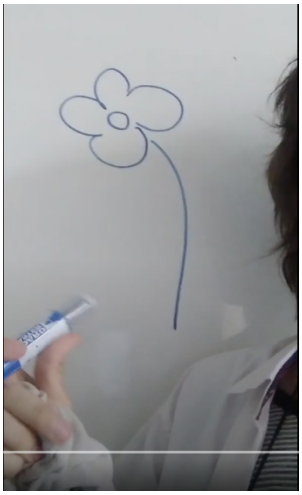
In the second class, Malu played the detective game, which started with this scene:

Figure 2. First slide of the detective game

Source: Teacher archive

She played the game with another colleague and completed all the assigned activities. However, after the class ended, she carried out another task aligned with her own personal lesson or life plan: she drew a flower on the whiteboard and recorded a forty-two-second video of herself next to the drawing. Later, she shared the video with the teacher. Below are the drawing and the video transcript:

Figure 3. Video scene



Source: Teacher archive

Table 2. Video transcript

Hello, my name's Malu and I have recorded a video a few weeks ago about the video I made of me speaking the poem and it was very fun. I enjoyed a lot. Unfortunately, I couldn't read the entire poem, but it was a good experience for my first time reading a poem in my life. I draw this [showing the drawing of the flower], this is a drawing I made. I like drawing. Yes [making a thumbs-up gesture], it is me. Good bye. I have autism [pointing the marker to the screen]. Autism is good. Study. Bye.

Source: Teacher archive

In the third class, she engaged in the group conversation about personal information and feelings. Students were supposed to say their names and talk about when and where they had been born, their family, the places they had lived in, their school experiences, their likes and dislikes, important events in their lives, and their plans for the future. Malu talked about herself and her school experiences until she got the autism diagnosis. She also talked openly for the first time about being a transgender girl and how she was dealing with the transition. After the lesson, she completed the written assignment and then decided to record what she called "Malu's podcast," reinforcing the information she had written about herself. Once again, the podcast had not been requested by the teacher, but it seemed she felt a strong need to express herself – and was clearly enjoying doing so in English.

Table 3. Podcast transcript

Hi, my name is Malu and I'm 19 years old. I live in Goiânia. I was born also in Goiânia, May 10th, 2003. I lived with my mother and my grandmother until 2014, 2012, 2013 [showing uncertainty]. Then my mother married with [name], which is my stepfather till this day. I lived in Goiânia, Goiás, Faina, and Aparecida de Goiânia. I studied in many different schools but none of them were actually fitted me for my special disabilities and my special education that I actually needed at the time until IFG, but until then, it was very painful. I have many dislikes, many likes, BUT most of my dislikes come from not being recognized or understood by the people I expect to understand me. I found out I had a niece, I got into a cool school with a cool library, got into IFG, after dealing with several life hardships that I don't want to shift blame to anyone. I got a real solid diagnosis of autism. I found my sexuality and sexual orientation. Got a Skirt, yes, this skirt, and I was so happy. Completed my collection of monster energy, and I plan to get closer to my best friend Gustavo, he's autistic like me. I plan to study something related to computing and programming. That's all that I have to say. Thanks for the patience.

Source: Teacher archive

Concerning the three lessons, Malu makes very strong and compelling personal affirmations, which we perceive as entangling with the colonialities of being, knowledge, ability, and gender as we will discuss in the next section. As such, we do not see Malu's entanglement fitting into a language learning method, but, instead, as "knowledge that offers us possibilities of meaning in the face of existence" and expresses the "insurgent wisdoms or wisdoms of the heart and of existence" – *sabidurías insurgentes o sabidurías del corazón y la existencia* – of *peoples* subjected to coloniality (Guerrero Arias, 2012, p. 201-202). However, Malu's experience raises the question of whether it can be considered an example of such wisdom. In other words, our concern is not with "the theorization of reality" but rather with "the struggle for its transformation" (Guerrero Arias, 2012, p. 203). Our lens is a critical and/or decolonial one because it draws on classroom observations and the student's own productions, which include oral and written texts created during and after the lessons. Our paper moves beyond simply describing or understanding Malu's experiences if understood as engaging with issues of power, inequality, injustice, and invisibility in English language education.

4. Resisting colonialities of knowledge, ability, and gender: the right to be the flower

There is a consensus among decolonial authors that education reproduces the colonial matrix of power even after colonial administrations ended. According to Ortiz Ocaña et al. (2021), one way this has been happening is by not accepting or reprimanding marginalized students and not allowing them to speak. In the authors' words: "[t]eachers must recognize the plurality and diversity of students' ways of living, being, existing, and thinking" (Ortiz Ocaña et al., 2021, p. 119).

It echoes Maldonado-Torres' (2007) assertion that the colonized subjectivity should be part of institutional ways of thinking. In the three lessons, students were expected to take on a protagonist role, as the main activities included: sharing feelings about learning English; commenting on images of flowers breaking through asphalt; discussing a poem excerpt and then the full poem; creating visual representations; participating in a role-playing game involving a "stolen flower" mystery; and talking about personal information, emotions, and biographies.

Even though the students could speak freely about their feelings, the content and the pedagogical strategies did not fulfill Malu's expectations as she had a different subjectivity shaped by trajectories that had been unrecognized, denied, or made invisible by the educational contexts to which she had been subjected: "I studied in many different schools but none of them were actually fitted me for my special disabilities and my special education that I actually needed at the time […] most of my dislikes come from not being recognized or understood by the people I expect to understand me." That is why she transgressed. We wonder if Malu's transgressions concerning the lessons are related to the fact that she is autistic, because in the video, she reports what she did outside the classroom and concluded it by acknowledging she was autistic.

However, we can affirm she was confronting the coloniality of knowledge, which refers to the modern-colonial logic that ranks certain forms of knowing above others, privileging those produced through Eurocentric rationality while silencing non-Western, oral, embodied, affective, or community-based epistemologies (Mignolo, 2009). This logic defines what counts as valid, objective, and scientific, often erasing other ways of knowing and being. In foreign language classrooms, this coloniality appears both in the selection of content, typically centered on hegemonic Anglophone cultures, and in pedagogical approaches that prioritize language norms and disembodied ideals of fluency, detached from students' lived realities. Malu challenged these colonialities by creating meaning through her body, voice, emotions, and spatial interventions in school. By refusing the linearity of the lesson and asserting her singular experience as a legitimate source of knowledge, she disrupted the curriculum and teacher authority, questioning traditional ways of teaching and learning languages. Her gesture was a refusal of dominant epistemologies and an affirmation of other ways of knowing and being within school.

At the same time, she was also challenging the coloniality of ability, since she tries to affirm and naturalize her identity as an autistic being. Her attitude countered traditional psychological approaches to disability, which have their foundations in this ongoing disciplinary enterprise – the Enlightenment Project – of identifying departures from the Male Eurocentric standards of normality and intervening upon such differences in the direction of a normate standard (Dirth & Adams, 2019). The authors argue that the contemporary medical model of disability

> positions disability within the body or mind of the affected individual, and pathologizes disability as a manifestation of disease or illness (Bickenbach, 1993). From this lens, disability is a "...biological inferiority, malfunction, pathology, and deviance when compared with (or normed on) individuals without disabilities" (Smart & Smart, 2006, p. 30). (Dirth & Adams, 2019, p. 262).

While Malu might perceive autism as affecting her individuality, she did not appear to view it as a biological inferiority or a pathology. She connected her performance of reciting the poem outside the classroom with her neurological condition as an explanation for the fact that she wanted to learn English her own way. Malu's assertive attitude resonates with Dirth and Adams' (2019) characterization of positive psychology, in which researchers and practitioners advocate for education and public health interventions to develop character strengths, such as wisdom, courage, and justice, to help people cope with disabilities. For them, this approach shifts the focus from viewing disabled individuals as helpless victims to recognizing their strengths and capacities, challenging traditional, stigmatizing perspectives on disability.

On the other hand, in the podcast, Malu highlighted the importance of context as it can exclude or welcome people with "special disabilities," shifting the focus from the individual to the environment. She argued IFG was the only school that welcomed her and offered her the special education that she needed. She used the word "painful" to describe her school experiences before IFG. This understanding defies the medical model that privileges the analysis of disability as a result of individual bodies or minds that differ from the norm, underlining it as a product of social, political, economic, and structural factors that selectively disable or enable individuals based on their physical or mental differences (Dirth & Adams, 2019). IFG was the only institution that enabled her to be who she was. She highlighted it was a "cool school with a cool library," but she was also assisted by the school psychologist, doctor, social worker, and specialized educators (a multidisciplinary team) who helped her and her family get the medical assistance she needed for the autism diagnosis. IFG seems to be the place where she became aware of the oppression – "life hardships" – she had suffered in other schools, and where she realized her subjectivities were not invisibilized even if she set limits to the teaching strategies devised by the teacher.

It echoes the social model of disability, which, according to Dirth and Adams (2019), is based on the marginalized subjectivity of disabled people. From this viewpoint, disability is not seen as a problem or something to fix, but as a valid and valuable way of living. It locates disability in environmental constraints – ecological, economic, political, and cultural – that prevent a person from performing desired actions. By focusing on environmental constraints rather than individual impairments, this strategy redistributes responsibility for addressing the disability gap from the disabled person to the society that the person inhabits (Smart & Smart, 2006, cited in Dirth & Adams, 2019). This model contributes

to a decolonial analysis by treating disability as a normal experience rather than celebrating people who conform to normate standards and perform ability despite limitations. Thus, the social model reveals more suitable ways of understanding people and their actions, and, by helping to develop disability identities, this model has introduced new perspectives that benefit everyone. Although we may say that this model is still a far cry from hegemonic understandings of ability in Brazil, we believe Malu recognized how the environment was decisive in building her identity as an autistic person.

Besides, it was also the school psychologist who gave her the skirt she mentions in the podcast and in the written assignment. The skirt made her so happy that she registered in her text: "omfg I was so happy ^^ >~<." It is the skirt she wears every day, as shown in Figure 1. The skirt usually operates as a symbol of coloniality of gender[3] (a female item), but in this case, it worked as a powerful symbol of decoloniality of gender, as an object and subject of acceptance and welcoming, of recognition of her subjectivity as a transgender girl.

In the first lesson, after reading the full poem, Malu declared, "I am the flower." One particular verse resonated deeply with her, encouraging her to read it aloud to the teacher before leaving the room: "Can I, without weapons, rebel?" We believe this line touched her due to the "life hardships" she had been through and because being a transgender person in Brazil, especially under the conservative political climate of 2022, can itself be an act of defiance. Choosing to wear a skirt at school, stepping away from the group to pursue her own path of understanding the poem, and identifying herself with the flower that breaks through the asphalt are all ways Malu actively resisted dominant norms around gender and language teaching.

Her experience powerfully echoes Lugones' (2023) concept of the coloniality of gender, which explains how colonialism introduced strict, binary, and hierarchical definitions of gender. Malu, by asserting a gender identity that resists these colonial norms, especially the violent "dark side" that erases non-binary and non-normative existences, disrupts the system and reclaims space for other possibilities of being. As Lugones (2023) reminds us, such ways of being were once embraced by many pre-colonial societies.

In Brazil, although feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements have made legislative advances, such as the criminalization of feminicide in 2015 and homophobia in 2019, violence against these communities remains alarmingly high. In 2022, 273 LGBTQIA+ people were killed, with trans women, transvestites, and gay men being the most targeted (Brasil, 2023a). From January to August 2023 alone, over 5,000 violations of rights against lesbians were reported, making up nearly 24% of attacks against the LGBTQIA+ population (Brasil, 2023b). Additionally, 1,463 women were victims of feminicide in 2023. This is the highest number recorded since the law was passed, averaging one case every six hours (Nicoceli, 2024).

These numbers exemplify the violent persistence of what Lugones (2023) calls the modern/colonial gender system, a structure that not only enforces rigid binaries but also punishes resistance. Malu's actions took place within this hostile

reality, yet her expression, through language and presence, challenged the very foundations of this system. Her response was not only personal but political, reclaiming voice, space, visibility, and humanity in the face of silencing.

We wonder if the "life hardships" Malu mentions in her podcast and essay have to do with homophobia and the many difficulties of the gender transition process, besides the autism diagnosis. The urge she felt to flee the confined space of the classroom to freely read the poem in the first class seems to us as an index of a greater urge to free herself from other forms of confinement and oppression and to pursue her own agenda, to rebel without weapons.

The fact that Malu chose the school portico to record her video reading the poem is also relevant in our analysis. Built in 1942, the portico symbolized the Cultural Inauguration of the city of Goiânia – the newly founded capital of the state of Goiás. Located at IFG, the portico is very important and symbolical for the school community, as it represents the cultural birth of the modern city and marks IFG as the leading educational institution in town at that time. An emblem of culture and sophistication, the portico is an Art Deco monument officially recognized as part of the city's cultural and architectural heritage. In other words, it stands as a powerful symbol of a Eurocentric perspective on culture and knowledge. The portico was restored in 2020, during the pandemic, when IFG was closed and all classes were given online. When onsite classes resumed at the beginning of 2022, the school community had its first opportunity to see the restored portico, captured in the image below:

Figure 4. Restored portico

Source: IFG Goiânia Instagram account (Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia de Goiás, 2025)

The portico is, in itself, a symbol of Eurocentric culture, and Malu confronts the colonialities of being, ability, and gender by rebelling against the coloniality of knowledge represented here by the standard curriculum and lesson plan, the physical space assigned to the class, and the teacher's assumed authority. She created and performed her cultural and educational activities, choosing a location that reinforces the power of Eurocentric culture to read a poem out loud for the first time in her life. It was a poem she had actively searched for and chosen to read: a poem about a rebel flower that "is ugly" (that does not conform to the norms). "But it is a flower." A flower that "breaks asphalt, tedium, disgust, and hatred." A poem about herself.

Malu's gesture resonates with a broader critique of formal schooling, in which educational institutions are often so focused on structure and certification that students come to mistake knowledge for teaching, equate competence with accreditation, and confuse education with advancement in the system or fluency in a language (Illich, 1974). Her choice to go beyond the boundaries of the planned lesson and engage with the poem in a personal and embodied way challenges the dominant logic of schooling, which tends to prioritize uniformity, control, and quantifiable outcomes. By choosing to express her learning through performance, emotion, and spatial intervention, Malu challenges the idea that meaningful education only happens inside the classroom or by following a fixed plan. Instead, she shows that learning can be a space of agency, affect, and identity negotiation, reminding us that real education often happens at the edges of the system, where students are allowed to speak, feel, and act beyond what is expected or prescribed.

A curious tension emerges when we juxtapose Maldonado-Torres's (2007) concept of the coloniality of being with Malu's experience in the English classroom. For him, the colonized subject does not perceive life as flowering or as the unfolding of inner vitality, but rather as "a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death" (p. 254). This condition of non-being – the *damné* – manifests through dehumanization and invisibility, the primary expressions of the coloniality of being. Yet, what we witnessed through Malu's actions seems to contradict this grim ontology. Despite the weight of systemic silencing and personal hardship, Malu experiences the poem and the English class as a moment of affirmation and creation. Her exclamation, "I am the flower!," marks not just resistance but blossoming, even if that flowering emerges through struggle. In her case, the experience was not merely about surviving within coloniality but about enacting life, asserting visibility, and cultivating joy. This paradox of flowering within the terrain of oppression does not negate Maldonado-Torres's analysis but suggests that decolonial cracks may open precisely when the most silenced subjects begin to speak, move, and bloom on their own terms.

As we can see, decolonial confrontation consists of "dreams that are outlined in the daily biopraxis of colonized human beings" (Ortiz Ocaña et al., 2021, p. 128). According to the authors, insurgency is an ongoing process that is never completely realized. By persisting in the struggle for insurgency across all spheres,

decoloniality "becomes effective in this very process of seeking, of resisting imposition, of rebelling against what represses us, binds us and alienates us from ourselves and our origins" (Ortiz Ocaña et al., 2021, p. 128).

Ortiz Ocaña et al. (2021) understand decolonial pedagogical biopraxis as a set of critical and transformative actions – often rebellious, liberating, and resistant – that arise throughout the learning process. These actions can take place both within and beyond the classroom, across academic and non-academic spaces, with the purpose of bringing decolonial perspectives into these environments and envisioning new possibilities that challenge and go beyond colonial systems of thought. They also affirm that our decolonial pedagogical biopraxis does not take place specifically in, with, by, or for Indigenous populations or Afro-descendant communities, but rather unfolds primarily in the classroom, in dialogue with students of different age groups, learning rhythms, and styles, with varied levels of schooling and diverse educational trajectories.

Interestingly, it is not the teacher who actively develops a decolonial pedagogical biopraxis in the three lessons, although she creates the conditions for it to emerge, but rather Malu, who disobeys the classroom flow by embracing the flower, which is an epitome of her desire to live fully as an autistic and a transgender woman. In doing so, she challenges colonial narratives of normativity, ability, gender, and knowledge that are often embedded in traditional educational spaces. Malu's response is not merely an emotional reaction; it is a political and pedagogical act, which embodies resistance, re-signification, and self-definition. Through her action, she performs a decolonial biopraxis that reclaims space, voice, and identity on her own terms.

5. Final thoughts

This article is grounded in a pedagogical experience that developed over three English lessons in a Brazilian public school, in which a student named Malu confronted the colonialities of being, knowledge, ability, and gender, through creative and affective engagement with the English language. Drawing on the concept of coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), we examined how her actions resisted the imposed structures of schooling and challenged normative expectations tied to language learning, behavioral patterns, and gender identity.

The work focused on how Malu appropriated the lesson's content – the poem *"Nausea and the Flower"* – to express her own subjectivity, not only through verbal participation but also by moving her body, occupying symbolic spaces in the school, and producing media beyond what was requested. Her gestures – reading the poem at the school's portico, recording a podcast, affirming her identity as an autistic and transgender girl – constitute what Ortiz Ocaña et al. (2021) call a *decolonial pedagogical biopraxis*: disobedient, transformative, and

situated actions that emerge in both academic and extra-academic contexts as forms of resistance and self-definition.

Malu's experience shows that English lessons can become spaces of being, that is, of existence and recognition for students whose lives defy colonial norms. Her insurgencies were not acts of disrespect, but rather life affirmation – particularly in a country like Brazil, where people like Malu are still routinely silenced, excluded, or subjected to violence even by close and dear people. Through her performance and presence, Malu reclaimed the classroom and the school as spaces where she could exist on her own terms. In this sense, she enacted what Mignolo (2003) describes as the decolonial potential of language: using it as a means of producing knowledge, affirming identity, and resisting coloniality.

Ultimately, the article suggests that education committed to decoloniality must create the conditions for students like Malu – or the damné – to speak, act, and exist beyond imposed structures. As Maldonado-Torres (2007) proposes, the decolonial project is not just about rethinking content, but about reimagining education itself as a space where many worlds and many ways of being can coexist. Malu's lesson, therefore, is not only about English, but about the possibility of a school that breathes with and for its students, and where language, body, and voice become tools for resisting invisibility and affirming life.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT: Datasets related to this research will be available upon contact with the corresponding author.

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End notes

1. A preliminary version of this article was presented by the two authors at the AILA World Congress 2024 (Symposium "Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Sustainability: EME, VE and Multilingualism"), held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from August 11 to 16, 2024.
2. This is a fictitious name chosen by her. Consent was obtained following IRB approval. CAAE: 32905420.2.0000.5083. Scientific Review: 6.950.311.
3. Maria Lugones, an Argentinian philosopher, expanded Aníbal Quijano's concept of coloniality of power to develop the idea of coloniality of gender.

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