

'Living at the limit'

Sociotechnical affordances and unlearning colonial gender and sexuality

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Abstract *This chapter examines how sociotechnical affordances of activist education and digital interaction enabled a pedagogical practice aimed at disentangling learners from colonial legacies of gender, sexuality, and race. Specifically, I focus on a 2021 Faveladoc class, a documentary-making workshop held via Google Meet for young favela residents in Rio de Janeiro, organised by the grassroots NGO Raízes em Movimento. Led by Joice Lima, a Black social scientist and activist, the class explored what it means to inhabit a gendered, racialised body shaped by desire within a peripheral space. The interactions among the instructor, the young participants, and the digital and discursive affordances at play gave rise to a situated collective that actively resists (in)securitisation—that is, the process of framing certain populations as existential threats. As territories predominantly inhabited by Black working-class communities, favelas have been key targets of Brazil's (in)securitisation, subjected to intensified policing and the persistent 'crossfire' between the state and organised crime. Against this backdrop, this chapter analyses how this dialogical digital setting fostered unlearning of patriarchy, racism, and LGBTQI-phobia—ultimately repositioning language as hope.*

Keywords *Unlearning; Sociotechnical Affordances; (In)securitisation; Digital Activism; Gender and Sexuality*

1. Introduction

It was a Thursday morning, 13 May 2021. Joice Lima sat in front of her computer, addressing a group of young residents of Complexo do Alemão, a group of fave-

las (neighbourhoods built by residents) in Rio de Janeiro.¹ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the class she was teaching—part of Faveladoc, a documentary-making workshop—was being held online. Her words carried a sense of urgency. “I don’t think I remember a time in my life when I didn’t live at the limit”, Joice told her students, referring to the ongoing struggle for survival they all shared.² She spoke about the daily precariousness that defined their lives—fragile access to education, food, and basic sanitation. She added:

It’s the limit of education, always precarious. You’re always there, trying, or completely unmotivated to keep trying in a space that doesn’t offer many possibilities. It’s the problem of access to dignified food, access to basic sanitation—things we all see in our daily lives.

A few minutes later, Joice elaborated on the shared experience of ‘favelados’ (favela residents), who live in areas disproportionately affected by harsh policing and the territorial conflicts between ‘crime’ and the state (Cavalcanti, 2008; Machado da Silva & Menezes, 2019; Menezes et al., 2024). She presented to the class an image that photographer Mauro Pimentel had shared on *Twitter* (now *X*) of women protesting in the Jacarezinho favela just days earlier, following a violent police raid that left 28 male residents dead (Lyra et al., 2021; see Figure 1, ahead). Her reflections on Brazil’s necropolitics—what Achille Mbembe (2003, p. 11) describes as “the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die”—became a crucial part of the affective and epistemic stance that took shape in the class. It was an acknowledgment of living at the limit but also a refusal to be defined by it.

Since 2012, I have conducted linguistic-ethnographic research in Complexo do Alemão, a group of twelve favelas in Rio de Janeiro, home to approximately 80,000 residents. I attended this Faveladoc class—and the entire workshop—both as an ethnographer and an allied linguist (Borba, 2022). Organised by the grassroots NGO *Raízes em Movimento* and funded by a federal

1 Joice Lima, a publicly recognised activist, social scientist, and member of the collective *Raízes em Movimento*, is identified by name and image in this chapter due to her public visibility (as are fellow activists Alan Brum Pinheiro and David Amen). A Black woman born in the Amazon state of Pará and raised in the Complexo do Alemão favelas, she has long been engaged in grassroots initiatives. In contrast, other workshop participants are identified by pseudonyms—a decision discussed and approved by them.

2 The Faveladoc workshop was conducted in Portuguese. For conciseness, I provide participants’ speech excerpts only in English, translated by me.

cultural grant, the workshop ran from February to December 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, sessions were held online from February to July and transitioned to in-person meetings (essential for the filming practice) from August to December. The initiative was structured around two key pillars: an introduction to film language, covering both theoretical and practical aspects, and a social and political education module, which included classes on local history, memory production, and citizenship-related topics (Instituto Raízes em Movimento, 2022; Silva et al., 2024).

Seventeen young residents of Complexo do Alemão participated in the 2021 edition of Faveladoc. The majority of them were Black,³ and their motivations for joining the project were diverse. Some saw the audiovisual training as an opportunity to develop skills relevant to Rio's vibrant cultural and artistic industries, while others, particularly those with backgrounds in theatre or acting, sought to deepen their understanding of filmmaking as a complementary practice. A number of participants were especially drawn to the project's sociopolitical education component, recognising its potential to engage critically with their lived experiences and the realities of their community.

Previous editions of Faveladoc resulted in two full-length documentaries. In its first iteration, twelve young participants underwent technical training and co-produced *Copa pra Alemão Ver*, or 'Worldcup for the Gaze of Germans/Foreigners', which explored local perspectives on the 2014 FIFA World Cup (Instituto Raízes em Movimento, 2016). The second edition, released in 2017 (Raízes em Movimento, 2021), engaged fifteen participants in the making of *Quando Você Chegou, Meu Santo já Estava*, or 'When you arrived, my saint was already here', a documentary focused on Afro-Brazilian religious practices in Complexo do Alemão (Raízes em Movimento, 2021). *Dona Josefa*, the short documentary produced in the 2021 edition, resulted from the classes I attended

3 The capitalisation of 'Black' in this text follows a widely adopted convention that recognises 'Black' not merely as a descriptor of skin colour but as an identity rooted in shared histories, cultures, and struggles. Major journalistic institutions, including *The New York Times* and *The Associated Press*, have formalised this usage in their style guides, citing the term's sociopolitical significance and its role in affirming collective identity (see Coleman, 2020; Meir, 2020). This decision aligns with historical advocacy, such as W.E.B. Du Bois's (1899/2010, p. 1) campaign to capitalise 'Negro' in the late 19th century, which was ultimately recognised as an act of racial self-respect. The distinction between 'Black' (as an identity) and 'black' (as a colour) reflects a broader linguistic shift in acknowledging racialised experiences and resisting the erasure of Black communities in public discourse.

(Mostra Memórias Faveladas, 2021a). The three films were screened at film festivals for community-driven storytelling.

The workshop sessions were audio- and video-recorded and later transcribed by me. I am currently working with *Raízes em Movimento* activists Alan Brum Pinheiro and David Amen—whose efforts made the workshop possible—on these transcribed materials for the book *Language, (In)security, and Activist Education* (in press). Figure 1 captures the virtual environment of Google Meet, where the first six months of Faveladoc took place. At this moment, Joice was projecting the opening slide of the class ‘Gender, Segregation, and Culture’, which is the focus of my discussion in this text. The slide features the photograph by photojournalist Mauro Pimentel, which I described earlier. Notably, the choice of this image served as a strategy to highlight the predominant role of women at the forefront of caregiving. The apparent gender of most protesters is female, in stark contrast to the exclusively male group of residents who were killed and for whom these women were protesting.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the Google Meet digital space of Faveladoc



My argument in this chapter is that this class was an instance of unlearning. As in other moments of the workshop and my fieldwork, unlearning here involved reframing precarious conditions, disengaging from ideologies detrimental to marginalised communities (including racism and patriarchy), and nurturing ethical forms of collective flourishing. Beyond Joice, fifteen young

residents of Complexo do Alemão participated in this session, connecting remotely via *Google Meet*. Following scholars in cybernetics, digital anthropology, and sociolinguistics (Bateson, 1972; Blommaert, 2019; Cesarino, 2022; Horst & Miller, 2012; Maly, 2023), I approach digital interaction not as a mere technical mediation of offline relationships but as part of a sociotechnical infrastructure in which human and non-human agents interact, shaping possibilities for action and understanding. These infrastructures are complex systems where agents co-emerge through interaction, and where digital media afford specific forms of engagement. In this chapter, I explore how these affordances were strategically mobilised by participants to resist patriarchy and racism in favelas. Online environments do not merely replicate face-to-face encounters but reconfigure them (Blommaert, 2019; Jacquemet, 2019; Maly, 2023; Silva & Maia, 2022), generating new communicative, epistemic, and affective conditions (Conti & Lenehan, 2024). Although sociotechnical infrastructures have been strategically co-opted by a constellation of far-right actors—including political figures, corporate agents, and influencers—who engineer digital technologies to deepen divisions and incite violence (Cesarino, 2022; Maly, 2023; Silva, 2020), I argue in this chapter that this emerging collective of workshop participants instead reconfigured the affordances of digitalisation and language to challenge dominant ideologies and cultivate alternative modes of knowledge production and solidarity.⁴

This chapter examines some forms of affect, positioning, and identification that emerged among participants through their interaction with Faveladoc's sociotechnical infrastructures, as well as with Joice's discourse—particularly the substrates she offers as the session's instructor and as a social scientist. As I will discuss below, Charles Goodwin (2018) defines substrates as any semiotic or linguistic material introduced by a participant and subsequently transformed by others. The participants' uptake of Joice's conversational contributions reveals reorientations—or instances of unlearning—in the ways they understand gendered Black bodies in a society as unequal and

4 My interpretation of educational activism in the Faveladoc workshop is an ongoing endeavour. In this regard, I have previously examined Joice Lima's class as an instance of the flourishing of the seeds of Marielle Franco, a Black Rio de Janeiro councillor who was brutally murdered in 2018 (see Silva & Lopes, 2023). I have also conducted an initial analysis of this class as a process of collective unlearning, particularly addressing the attempt to heal the introjection of racism and colonialism (see Silva, 2025). Although drawing from the same dataset, this chapter differs in both focus and form from my previous discussions of this session.

authoritarian as Brazil (Nobre, 2022). Since reorienting knowledge is a way of producing hope (Miyazaki, 2004)—not as escapism or naïve optimism, but as practical reason (Bloch, 1986)—the practice of unlearning that I describe below is also an emergent and situated method of hope (Silva & Borba, 2024; Silva & Lee, 2024).

In what follows, Section 2 contextualises Faveladoc within broader processes of (in)securitisation in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, outlining how activist education can resist systemic violence. It also presents my ethnographic approach and theoretical framework, drawing on scholarship on unlearning, interculturality, and sociotechnical affordances—concepts that will help me analyse the workshop as a digital ecology. Sections 3–5 are empirical ones. The first of these sections examines Joice Lima's discourse as a substrate, focusing on how she frames gender, race, and militarisation to foster critical engagement. The second section explores how heterosexual male participants take up her discourse to question essentialised notions of masculinity, particularly in relation to caregiving and vulnerability. The third section turns to queer participants, analysing how they rework Joice's insights to interrogate heteronormative ideologies and reclaim agency over their sexual identities. The conclusion elaborates on digital mediation as a possible catalyst for ideological reorientations, positioning unlearning in Faveladoc as a practice of hope that mobilises language and technology to challenge colonial legacies and foster collective flourishing.

2. Unlearning amid (in)securitisation

To better explain the joint unlearning that took place in the workshop session, a few words on my fieldwork are in place. Originally, my research, conducted with colleagues Adriana Facina and Adriana Lopes, centred on literacy practices, especially as fostered by the grassroots collective *Raízes em Movimento* (see Silva et al., 2015). However, our focus shifted as we became more aware of the dynamics of (in)securitisation affecting everyday life in favelas. Favelas emerged at the end of the 19th century, as former enslaved people and their descendants settled on available hillsides due to a lack of policies offering possibilities of housing and labour for these groups. In the 1980s, following the establishment of drug factions in Brazil, these spaces became targets of systemic racism and heavy-handed policing. This history has not only shaped the physical landscape but also reinforced an association of favelas with crime

and insecurity, stigmatising their residents in both public discourse and government policies (Machado da Silva & Menezes, 2019; Souza, 2020).

My early fieldwork underscored the complexity of (in)security in this context, where even seemingly ordinary activities were punctuated by the surveillance of armed groups. For instance, during an interview with Raphael Calazans, a *Raízes em Movimento* activist and funk musician, we were monitored first by a drug trafficking lookout and then by local police, who patrolled the area in an intimidating display of force (Silva, 2023, pp. 8–9). This experience illustrates how two different regimes of control coexist within favelas, each staking a claim to authority through surveillance, and sometimes through force. These experiences underscored how the residents of Complexo do Alemão face overlapping systems of (in)securitisation that challenge any singular notion of “security” (Rampton et al., 2024, pp. 300–304). Residents of middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods may support policing initiatives as a means of creating ‘safe’ zones in urban areas, viewing harsh repression of peripheral areas and those who look like ‘criminals’ as positive security measures. In contrast, for favela residents, these same interventions often represent extensions of state repression, enacted in an environment already under the constant vigilance of both law enforcement and local crime factions.

To capture the nuanced realities of security in favelas, I engage with sociolinguists and critical security scholars’ notion of (in)securitisation (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018). Rather than taking security as a universal condition, (in)security signals a process where certain populations—especially racialised and marginalised communities—are identified as existential threats and subsequently subjected to ‘exceptional measures’ under the guise of protection. As McCluskey et al. (2021) note, these measures often suspend conventional political rights and rules, producing a governance predicated on constant surveillance, militarised control, and selective protection. In Brazil’s favelas, this form of (in)securitisation emerges through both visible policing tactics and broader discursive constructions that portray favela residents as threats to national security (Machado da Silva & Menezes, 2019). This framing legitimises exceptional measures, including heavy police presence and militarised raids, yet fails to account for the socio-political claims of residents.

The data I will discuss in the next empirical sections is an example of unlearning such entrenched militarised ideologies in Brazil. I use the term unlearning in a basic sense as “(moments in) educational practices aimed at disengaging students from particular ideologies, embodied dispositions, and forms of talk” (Silva, 2025, p. 1). Further, my perspective of unlearning

resembles efforts in critical education (Windle & de Araujo Rosa, 2023), linguistic anthropology (Briggs, 2021), and applied linguistics (Fabricio, 2006) towards repurposing and transforming received ideologies. Yet the analysis of unlearning in the Faveladoc seminar that I will discuss ahead builds more closely on the ethnographies of Muzna Awayed-Bishara (2023) and Rodrigo Borba (2016), which I summarise below.

Awayed-Bishara (2023) examines how Palestinian students in Israel “learn to unlearn colonial fear” (p. 16). Her ethnography of ‘colonised education’ documents how schools function as extensions of state surveillance, compelling teachers to depoliticise discussions of Palestinian identity and history. For instance, Israeli educational directives prohibit mention of ‘al-Nakba’, the Arabic term for the 1948 Palestinian displacement (Awayed-Bishara et al., 2022, p. 1056). They describe how a teacher, rather than engaging with a student’s remark on political oppression, redirects the lesson to apolitical topics (pp. 1058–1065). Such moments, though subtle, reinforce a broader policy of de-Palestinisation, mirroring the surveillance and restrictions students face beyond the classroom.

Yet Awayed-Bishara’s research also highlights how teachers and students push back, reframing education as an act of “unlearning colonial practices of *de-Palestinisation*” (Awayed-Bishara, 2023, p. 16, emphasis in original). In one case, a teacher fosters discussion around ‘*tawra*’ (revolution), allowing students to articulate experiences of occupation and oppression. Unlike the previous example, this approach positions English as a tool for voicing Palestinian realities on a global stage (Awayed-Bishara et al., 2022, pp. 1065–1068). Unlearning in this context means not only rejecting colonial metapragmatic constraints but also forging new avenues for political expression. As Awayed-Bishara (2023) argues, this pedagogy of unlearning—what she calls ‘sumud’ (‘steadfastness’) pedagogy—reclaims language as a means of resistance rather than domination.

Borba’s (2016, 2019) work on the transsexualising process in Brazil highlights the complexities of unlearning within oppressive institutional frameworks. His ethnography of trans individuals navigating the Brazilian health-care system reveals how unlearning operates as a contextual, adaptive process. Borba (2019) shows that those seeking hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgery must ‘unlearn’ their personal understandings of gender to conform to a rigid medicalised model of ‘true transsexuality’. Rooted in international psychiatric and medical discourses, this model imposes narrow behavioural expectations. For instance, under the medical notion of gender dysphoria

(Newman, 2000), individuals are expected to express aversion to their birth-assigned genitalia, though this is not always the case. They are also presumed to exhibit stereotypical traits associated with their identified gender, an assumption that often does not align with lived experiences. In this context, unlearning is less an emancipatory act than a survival strategy—requiring individuals to suppress or strategically perform aspects of their identity to meet institutional expectations.

Borba's research further illustrates the situational nature of unlearning. Some trans individuals modify their appearance and behaviour only during medical appointments, aligning with the medical model temporarily to secure treatment. Outside the clinical setting, they often revert to self-expressions that feel more authentic, highlighting the selective adaptation involved. Borba thus frames unlearning as a tactical, context-dependent process—one that responds to institutional power while preserving elements of personal agency. His ethnography underscores the need to view unlearning within its sociopolitical context, particularly when institutional structures impose pathologising standards that shape marginalised communities' access to identity and resources.

In addition to drawing on Awayed-Bishara and Borba's perspectives on unlearning, I examine its role in Faveladoc as a practice of developing intercultural competence within a digital space (Oliveira & Tuccillo, 2024). Scholars in intercultural communication build on Jürgen Bolten's (2015) pioneering distinction between culturality and interculturality (see Conti, 2024; Oliveira & Tuccillo, 2024). Bolten (2015, p. 118) defines cultural encounters as engagements with the 'familiar'—culturality, for him, refers to the "familiar multiplicity" that emerges in interactions among members who share relatively common ways of thinking and acting (see Oliveira & Tuccillo, 2024, pp. 57–61). By contrast, Bolten (2015, p. 118) defines interculturality as "unfamiliar multiplicity". Expanding on this idea, Conti (2024, p. 20) explains that "interculturality signifies encounters with the unfamiliar, which can occur not only in unfamiliar contexts but increasingly within familiar contexts, due to the intensifying dynamics of change". Interculturality is thus characterised by the uncertainty we experience when engaging with difference—an uncertainty that, over time, can evolve into an expanded form of culturality, fostering a habituation to new ways of being and relating.

I see the process of unlearning in the data below as one in which deeply rooted certainties about gender, sexuality, and race—colonial modes of perceiving the racialised, gendered, and sexualised body in the periphery—are

reframed as ‘uncertain’ by the instructor. In line with Bateson’s (1972) formulations on cybernetics and systems theory, the Faveladoc class constitutes an ecology. Within this online setting, the group’s engagement with digital and discursive affordances entails navigating the epistemology of the sociotechnical system that takes shape through their interactions—both among themselves and with the system’s resources. Through the interplay of digital and discursive affordances—most notably, the online mediation of educational interaction in a context of physical distancing and Joice’s metapragmatic discourse—participants interrogate a culturality anchored in colonial modes of sensing and understanding the world. Through intercultural friction, they transform the culturality embedded in colonialism and project more expansive modalities of identification and belonging. The next section turns to the analysis of this intercultural dynamic in practice.

3. Transforming past action

In this section, I examine how students engage with Joice’s authoritative discourse. Before doing so, I first outline a diachronic view of semiosis that helps illuminate the dialogical dynamics of the workshop. As we know, Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1986), in his *Course in General Linguistics*, distanced himself from the dominant diachronic approach to language, instead emphasising its structured, synchronic nature. He argued that focusing on the relationships between linguistic elements at a given moment, rather than their historical transformations, better reveals language’s internal structure. This view has been widely critiqued (e.g., Blommaert, 2010; Derrida, 1977; Jakobson, 1980; Silverstein & Urban, 1996). In linguistic anthropology, for instance, Bauman and Briggs (1990, p. 73) propose that producing discourse is not merely a matter of contextualising but an act of decontextualising textual units from past interactions and recontextualising them into novel texts—a process they call entextualisation. Every utterance thus carries elements of its history.

Similarly, Goodwin (2018, p. 1) suggests that “[n]ew action is built by decomposing, and reusing with transformation, the resources made available by the earlier actions of others”. While Bakhtin (1981) emphasised the dialogical nature of language, Goodwin (2018) and others (e.g., Bauman, 2004; Enfield & Sidnell, 2017) expand this notion, showing that human action is shaped by the adaptation and transformation of prior semiotic material. Goodwin illustrates this with an example generated by Marjorie Goodwin in her fieldwork

with African-American children. Tony and Chopper are playing in the street and produce the following dialogue:

Tony: Why don't you get out of my yard?
 Chopper: Why don't you make me get out of the yard?
 (Goodwin, 2018, p. 3)

In the conflict that emerges between the two children, Chopper “us[es] resources provided by his opponent [and] *transforms* them into something new and quite different” (Goodwin, 2018, p. 3, his emphasis). Chopper makes a few simple syntagmatic alterations to Tony’s statement, such as replacing ‘my yard’ with ‘the yard’ and adding the verb ‘to make’, creating a new combination of elements in the utterance that functions as a challenge to his opponent. Goodwin points out that reusing and transforming past sign complexes are ubiquitous in human action and extend beyond verbal signs. This principle aligns with Charles S. Peirce’s (1955) concept of semiosis, where the interpretant—the translator of meaning between sign and object—incorporates earlier signs and subsequently becomes the substrate for future ones (see Parmentier, 1994).

This perspective of human action as both dialogical and transformative informs my analysis of unlearning in Faveladoc. In the workshop on gender, segregation, and culture, students collectively recycled and transformed Joice Lima’s discourse on inhabiting a gendered and racialised body in a militarised context. Her initial discussion functioned as a substrate—a term Goodwin (2018, p. 32) defines as “whatever utterance, or other public source, [that is] being used as the point of departure for the operations used to build a subsequent action”. He draws from earlier notions of substrates in sociolinguistics (where the ‘substrate language’ is the language that provides the base for creolised mixtures) and biochemistry (which defines “substrate [as] a molecule upon which an enzyme acts”, p. 39). Within the collective unfolding of interaction, actors are constantly drawing on previous textual or semiotic units to produce their present utterances—and the latter may well serve as substrates for future utterances, in a constrained yet open-ended process. However, as Goodwin warns, a substrate is not a blank or uniform structure; rather, it is a “semiotic landscape with quite diverse resources” that enables “transformative sequences of action” (Goodwin, 2018, p. 39).

A defining aspect of Joice’s substrate in Faveladoc was her effort to frame gender through an intersectional lens. As Díaz-Benitez and Mattos (2019) note,

intersectionality emerged in Black feminism during the 1990s, highlighting the interplay of social categories historically treated in isolation—such as gender, race, and class. While Kimberlé Crenshaw (1994) coined the term, its core concerns date back to figures like Olympia de Gouges (1791/2016) and Sojourner Truth (1851), who articulated the interwoven nature of oppression. Joice's approach deliberately distanced itself from what she termed a “European matrix” in gender and sexuality discourse—that is, she embraced a discussion of gender more attentive to the local realities of the favela. She emphasised:

Joice: It's essential for us to start discussing gender within a context of militarisation. In academia, we've commonly approached gender through European concepts, right? But for those of us from the periphery, many of those ideas simply don't align with our reality. And when I talk about gender, I'm not just referring to female or feminised bodies. Gender is a broad discussion, and in the favela, there's no way to address it without also considering male and masculinised bodies in this process.

Aligning with debates that reject essentialist notions of gender (e.g., Borba, 2014; Butler, 2019; Sabsay, 2023), Joice avoids treating categories like ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as fixed. Her lexical choices—such as female and feminised bodies and male and masculinised bodies—underscore the distinct ways gender and sexuality are expressed and perceived in the favela.

To illustrate the stakes of gendered and racialised violence, Joice invoked the case of Claudia Ferreira, a Black woman whose masculinised body rendered her a target of state violence—an extension of the lethal policing disproportionately affecting Black male bodies in Brazil (Carvalho, 2020). Claudia was shot by police in 2014 while buying bread, allegedly mistaken for a trafficker because, as officers later claimed, she was holding a coffee cup that “would have been mistaken for a gun” (Carvalho, 2020, p. 6). Her body was then dragged nearly 300 metres by a police vehicle, an act recorded by residents and widely circulated in the media. Yet, rather than being remembered by name, she was frequently reduced to the label ‘mulher arrastada’ (‘the dragged woman’), a dehumanising erasure that compounded the violence against her (see Duncan, 2020).

As Joice explained, masculine and masculinised bodies are the easiest targets for bullets, while feminine and feminised bodies are subjected to different forms of violence, often linked to caregiving and sacrifice. She underscored how gendered expectations persist within the favela, recalling an encounter

with 'Mães de Manguinhos', or 'Mothers of Manguinhos,' a collective of mothers seeking justice for their sons killed by police (Araújo et al., 2020):

Joice: I was with the 'Mães de Manguinhos', and one of them told me: "When my son died, of course, I was devastated. But after a while, I started taking care of myself again, going out, having a beer, dancing with my friends. And then the neighbourhood started judging me. People said, 'How could she? Maybe she's actually relieved her son is gone'". That's what she told me. But when it's a man: "Poor guy, he's just drowning his sorrows at the bar, trying to clear his mind from the pain".

Joice's observations highlight the gendered burden of grief. While men are granted public expressions of mourning, women who reclaim moments of joy after loss are harshly judged. 'Mães de Manguinhos' embodies resistance to these constraints, challenging the expectation that their grief must remain endless and invisible. By exposing these contradictions, Joice prompts students to question who has the right to mourn, heal, and experience pleasure.

Her discourse offered the class an intersectional lens on gender and race amid (in)securitisation. By rejecting Eurocentric gender frameworks and insisting on locally rooted perspectives, she foregrounds how militarisation disproportionately targets bodies in distinct yet interrelated ways.⁵ Through cases like Claudia Ferreira, she reveals how race and gender intersect to determine whose bodies are killable and whose are subject to erasure and abuse.

4. Unlearning essentialised gender norms

In this section, I examine how two Black male participants, Manu (early 20s) and Ricardo (early 40s), responded to Joice's substrate, demonstrating how they reused and transformed her discourse in their unlearning of internalised social scripts. Their engagement unfolded within the ecology of the workshop

5 Joice's point about avoiding the "approach [of] gender through European concepts" seems tied, in her discourse, to the tendency in former colonies like Brazil to take theories from former metropolises at face value. These theories sometimes overlook racialised and marginalised bodies. As Xhercis Mendez (2015, p. 42) reminds us, in many liberal (read: Western and Anglo-European) frameworks, "gender" and its concomitant 'Man' and 'Woman' function to obscure the histories and bodies of those who bear the historical mark of slavery and colonisation, whether intentionally or not".

(Bateson, 1972), where the sociotechnical assemblage—the online setting, digital affordances, and group interactions—enabled new forms of knowledge production and unlearning.

Consider the following interaction, in which Manu demonstrates an emerging awareness shaped by Joice's substrate:

Joice: Moving away from that context to another type of violence—the fight for food, right? We know this is part of a slow-death project that gradually deteriorates people. It's not a quick death, like a bullet. It's the slow degeneration of the peripheral body. In Raízes, we organised an aid and prevention effort for COVID. Manu was with us at times. And we distributed food baskets. So, who were the main figures in this effort?

Manu: Now I've realised that most of the people interviewed by the social workers were women. And the person assisting them was also a woman, right?

Joice: Yes, the majority were predominantly women. And when I talk about men's roles in this space, I'm referring to the broader context of patriarchy. Men will never be in a position where they feel diminished.

In her substrate, Joice reflects on an experience she and Manu shared—working in the *Complexo do Alemão* Crisis Committee, created by residents and activists to support those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Responding to Joice, Manu uses the phrase “Now I've realised” (originally ‘*agora eu percebi*’ in Portuguese), signalling an emerging awareness. His realisation foregrounds the often-invisible burden of care disproportionately carried by women, who create interdependent networks of support, while men largely remain absent—stepping in only when aiding their partners. Joice then situates Manu's observation within a broader critique of masculine privilege, explaining that even in contexts of struggle, men are not expected to “occupy a place of subjugation”. She points out that rigid societal constructs dictate that “the man has a place of privilege in relation to the woman [...] even if, in this struggle for food, in seeking donations, it's not a place of subjugation”. This framing highlights how patriarchal expectations limit men's ability to assume roles associated with vulnerability and caregiving, further entrenching gendered inequalities.

Manu extends this reflection to Black masculinity, recalling a conversation with a friend in the military:

Manu: He was a big Black guy, and in the army, they have this thing where the Black man can't be fragile; he has to withstand everything. When he felt sad or tired, people would say, 'No, man, you're a Black man, you can't be like that'. It's double the pressure on us.

Through this example, Manu illustrates how Black men are systematically discouraged from displaying vulnerability, intensifying the physical and emotional toll of these demands. Joice expands on this by connecting masculine ideals to health disparities, noting that societal expectations discourage men from seeking medical care:

Joice: The man doesn't go to the doctor; he doesn't put himself in that place. But the woman who neglects gynaecological exams is labelled 'dirty', a woman who doesn't take care of herself.

This contrast reveals a gendered double standard: While men's detachment from healthcare is normalised, women are judged harshly for the same neglect. Ricardo builds on this discussion by linking Black masculinity to broader structures of precarity, questioning the impact of social pressures on men's well-being:

Ricardo: I think it might be worth looking into research on suicide rates or men abandoning their homes. The killable body, the relationship with Blackness... there's a lot of social pressure to keep working. I live that.

In the excerpt above, Ricardo inquires Joice about academic studies on the rates of suicide or abandonment of homes by men, given their identification as killable bodies in Joice's previous words, and the prevalence of coping mechanisms like alcoholism. For Ricardo, these patterns reveal the toll that sustained social pressure takes on Black men, both in terms of physical safety and psychological health. He points to his own experiences, sharing how "the social pressure to keep working" has also shaped his life, highlighting how these pressures reinforce cycles of vulnerability.

Joice's reply opens up the discussion to reflect on how gendered expectations are not easily challenged, especially within patriarchal structures that serve the interests of "white men and the broader context of patriarchy". She notes that such frameworks use "gender asymmetry", especially in the form of physical strength, to subjugate women. At the same time, Joice warns against

the trap of “discussing gender from a closed concept” that cannot fully account for the realities of the periphery. She emphasises,

Joice: I’m not saying that these [concepts] are disposable [...] but we need to keep our feet on the ground and observe our surroundings attentively.

Through this situated perspective, Joice suggests that reflecting on local realities can give rise to new understandings of gender and vulnerability, rather than relying on universalised concepts (see Mahmood, 2005; Mendez, 2015; Sabsay, 2016).

The bits of interaction I mobilised in this section display how Joice’s discourse on intersectionality—shaped by the sociotechnical assemblage of the workshop—prompted Manu and Ricardo to interrogate deeply embedded social scripts surrounding Black masculinity. By situating these expectations within the broader dynamics of patriarchy, militarisation, and racialised vulnerability, Joice fostered an ecology of unlearning, where students engaged critically with the pressures shaping gendered lives in the favela.

5. Unlearning LGBTQI-phobia

In this section, I analyse the responses of three queer participants—Flavia, Manolo, and Marina—who build on Joice’s critique of hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality. Manolo and Flavia are young Black participants in their early 20s, and Marina is a white participant in her early 30s. Each of them articulates modes of disengaging from ingrained societal judgements around LGBTQI+ identities. Their perspectives not only echo Joice’s substrate but also reveal how they engage in a re-evaluation of prior beliefs. Flavia is the first to intervene:

Flavia: I was that child who bullied others because I learned right and wrong only later. I think I made a lot of people feel bad at one time in my life. Until I discovered that my sexual orientation was okay, but for society, for the world, it was something bad. At home, they said it was the devil in my body. And then I started to see how much I made others feel bad and how people made me feel bad for judging me as a demon for liking women.

Flavia identifies herself as having once bullied others, a behaviour she later recognises as rooted in her own attempts to conform to societal norms that demonise LGBTQI+ identities. She acknowledges that her past actions were a way of shielding herself from being judged as a “demon” for “liking women”. Flavia draws on Joice’s discourse to illustrate how she unlearned lesbophobic norms that, as she puts it, “made others feel bad and [...] made me feel bad”. Interactionally, she offers an example of how deeply ingrained gender and sexuality norms—what can be understood as a colonial culturality—cause harm, aligning with Joice’s critical discourse. Yet, the fact that she spontaneously shared this reflection—just as Manolo and Marina would, as we will see—suggests that unlearning was also taking place within the digital space of *Google Meet*, where the class was held. In articulating her experience of coming to terms with her own sexual orientation, Flavia was not only constructing knowledge but also making it public to the group watching and listening to her through their screens.

Manolo’s reflection extends Flavia’s discussion, revisiting his own childhood experiences with a non-conforming gender expression:

Manolo: That was a great comment, Flavia. When I was a kid, I didn’t fit into that fixed place, you know? I was a boy who talked a lot, liked poetry—so I was always branded ‘viadinho do grupo’ [the little faggot of the group]. And I didn’t even fully understand what that meant yet. Then, when I realised I could like boys and that was fine—or that I could like girls too—it was like a switch flipped in my head. Like, dude, I don’t have to choose; it doesn’t have to be one way or the other. Sexual orientation is fluid, way more natural than people make it seem. Over time, I understood that better, but it’s also tied to where I’ve lived. Just like leisure—around here, men stop at the bar because that’s all there is, you know? We’re cut off; we don’t have access to the city, to other places, other ways of being. So that’s it—the bar is the only way to socialise, and because of that, we miss out on a lot.

The switch metaphor—“a switch flipped in my head”—is telling in Manolo’s narrative. In his account, the chance to socialise in spaces where sexuality is viewed in more alternative ways enabled him to flip this switch. That is, it allowed him to unlearn rigid norms surrounding the expression of sexuality and desire. When Manolo speaks about socialising at the bar as one of the few leisure options for men in the favela, he is actually echoing Joice’s previous comments. Circulating through the city and other social spaces provides him

with choices to “switch” between discourses. Of course, unlearning certain social norms and overcoming the trauma of injurious words is not as simple as the switch metaphor might suggest. Nonetheless, Manolo’s narrative (like Flavia’s) points to the performative power of practices like bullying, which function to ‘put’ children and teenagers “in their place” (Hahn, 2021). Given the violence of these practices—as signalled by insults used against Flavia and Manolo, such as “demon” and ‘viadinho do grupo’—this ‘place’ can also be a non-place (Butler, 1997), that is, it can be a space of epistemic disorientation and psychic suffering (Silva, 2017).

A few minutes later, Marina revisits the intrusive path of bullying into an individual’s psyche as she reflects on the discomfort she felt toward her mother’s homosexuality:

Marina: Yes, it’s funny because when I found out that my mother was homosexual, I started to feel a lot of anger toward lesbian women. I [was closeted] as a lesbian myself because I felt those things. I didn’t understand why I fell in love with female teachers and not male teachers. And then I was like, ‘this is absurd’, because society always did that to my mother, and so I did it to her and to myself, right? That’s why I say that nobody had to accept me. I was the one who had to accept myself. People have to respect me.

In the flow of semiosis, the students’ interpretants (Peirce, 1955)—their translations of the meaning relations proposed by Joice and the Faveladoc team—closely resemble one another. Marina’s response follows a similarly introspective path as Flavia’s and Manolo’s. She recalls that her discomfort with her mother’s non-hegemonic sexual orientation was, to a large extent, a negative projection of her own repressed attraction to women. In reflecting on this, Marina unpacks a complex process of internalised lesbophobia shaped by societal prejudice against LGBTQI+ individuals. Her ‘switching off’ of internalised repression is particularly revealing. Marina emphasises: “Nobody had to accept me. I was the one who had to accept myself. People have to respect me”. In other words, unlearning for Marina meant that, when it came to her sexuality, she no longer needed external validation to be who she wanted to be—a lesbian woman. While she expects others to respect her identity, the authority over it (i.e., the acceptance) rests with her alone.

Joice responds to the participants’ reflections by emphasising “the power of language” as a fundamental resource for unlearning. For her, the ability to

question deeply embedded norms around gender, sexuality, and race begins with understanding language as performative (Austin, 1962). Joice highlights:

Joice: I think I mentioned several important things, right? But one more important thing is the power of language, right? And then, the multiple forms of language, the access to that language, and the ability to decipher these codes, right? When we don't have even basic education that allows us to decipher some codes, we're only going to reproduce them. And the basic education I'm talking about? I'm not talking about going to college, no, I'm not. Because we know countless people, including those in power, who went to college and did courses that should have given them a sharper and more coherent critical sense. So, university isn't always going to be the place that awakens a true and coherent critical sense in people or dismantles the world's ills. Not necessarily. [...] Instead, we need to develop astuteness and power to read these languages [...]. We know we just had an election that was heavily based on fake news, right? And this is an important point that shows the power of language, right? And when you can't decode that language, you just swallow it.

Joice's reflections echo Paulo Freire's (1968/1970) critique of banking education, a linguistic ideology that posits language as simply a medium of communication. As in a bank, the teacher only deposits meanings in the minds of students, who will later withdraw these units. She points out that this ideology had great traction in Brazil's 2018 national elections, when Jair Bolsonaro was elected. In her view, many people just 'swallowed' fake news. Instead, Joice suggests seeing language as a resource for building critical awareness. Her critique is grounded in an ideology of language as inherently performative and flexible—able to reinforce dominant structures but equally capable of being repurposed for self-liberation.

Joice also points out that formal schooling or university does not necessarily provide a critical perspective. As she puts it: "Because we know countless people, including those in power, who went to college and did courses that should have given them a sharper and more coherent critical sense". It is worth noting that aspirations are shaped not within a single institution but across multiple social contexts (see Agha, 2007; Borba, 2016; Silva, 2020; Wortham & Reyes, 2020). Moreover, the rise of conservative ideologies in Brazil, despite state-led inclusion policies and efforts at critical education, demonstrates that ideological orientations often exceed the progressivist direction of formal policy design, including educational policy (see Cesarino, 2022; Nobre, 2022).

At the same time, the availability of sociotechnical affordances and varied participation frameworks is fundamental for individuals to be socialised into interrogating the semiotic details of particular ideologies—or, in Joice’s terms, “deciphering the codes”. In this sense, Faveladoc, as an activist-led educational initiative, provided precisely such participation frameworks, immersing students in alternative discourses not only on filmmaking and artistic practice but also on broader social issues such as gender, sexuality, and racial inequality. Importantly, the digital environment was not merely a conduit for these discussions but an active component of the pedagogical process. Digital and discursive affordances shaped the very conditions under which students could engage in unlearning, fostering a space where meaning-making practices were refracted through the sociotechnical assemblage of the workshop.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I examined a situated experience of unlearning, facilitated by a Black woman, social scientist, and resident of a Brazilian periphery. This participation framework was embedded in broader chains of interaction, including other Faveladoc classes and everyday speech events. As seen in Awayed-Bishara’s (2023) and Borba’s (2019) ethnographies, spaces where individuals learn to decipher the codes—to navigate layers of oppression and inequality—rely on speech chains that gradually lead subjects into shifting perspectives. Through tailoring the affordances of *Google Meet* and other digital resources, Joice Lima deployed multimodal strategies—such as an image of women protesting a police massacre (cf. Figure 1)—and a critical, intersectional view of gender, race, sexuality, and militarisation. In line with a dialogic view of human action (Bauman, 2004; Goodwin, 2018), these elements served as a substrate—a public source for new forms of engagement. Participants’ responses indexed their unlearning of essentialist views on race, gender, and sexuality.

Following Bolten’s (2015) conceptualisation of interculturality as an engagement with the unfamiliar, the digital format of the workshop catalysed intercultural friction. The unfamiliar emerged not only in the reworking of old assumptions but also in the modes of interaction enabled by the online setting. The digital classroom fostered new relational configurations, decentring conventional ways of engaging with knowledge and demonstrating that unlearning extends beyond the rigid structures of institutionalised education.

Digital affordances thus played a key role in this epistemic transformation, creating new forms of participation that exposed the ideological foundations of gendered and racialised oppression. Moreover, a practical result of the Faveladoc—community-driven documentaries—are available as digital media on *YouTube*, which can potentially spread the messages and the unlearning processes further (see Instituto Raízes em Movimento, 2016; Mostra Memórias Faveladas, 2021, 2022).

While sociotechnical infrastructures have been weaponised for hegemonic and extremist ideological projects (Cesarino, 2022; Maly, 2023; Silva, 2020), this workshop exemplified how digital and discursive affordances can also be repurposed for counter-hegemonic knowledge production. Faveladoc's digital ecology thus provided an alternative space of knowledge-making—one in which students actively reworked and transformed Joice's critical discourse.

To conclude, while participants in this workshop navigate systemic racism and (in)securitisation, they are not defined by 'living at the limit'. Instead, they project practical action, ethical engagement, and moral positioning that transcend constraints that might otherwise seem insurmountable. This kind of agency has been explored as a practice of hope—not as naïve optimism but as practical action, where individuals mobilise communicative and semiotic resources, networks of solidarity, and knowledge practices oriented towards collective flourishing (Bloch, 1986; Borba, 2019; Miyazaki, 2004; Silva & Borba, 2024; Silva & Lee, 2024). In this sense, the collective unlearning in this digital space was also an act of projecting hope—hope for a possible and more just world, despite the staggering political conditions we have witnessed both locally and globally.

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