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Has the Brazilian University Color? Black Women, Affirmative Action, and Afro-Diasporic Knowledge Production

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Abstract

Framed within the mission of the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE) and the 2025 conference theme, Breaking Boundaries, this article examines Brazilian higher education through the intersections of race, gender, and affirmative action. Drawing on bibliographic and documentary analysis alongside experience reports from Black Brazilian women doctoral students supported by the Abdias do Nascimento Academic Development Program, the study explores access, persistence, and international academic mobility. Findings demonstrate that affirmative action policies function not only as access mechanisms but also as epistemic interventions that expand Black intellectual leadership, Afro-diasporic identity, and

transnational knowledge production across the Global South and Global North. The Brazilian case offers critical insights for global Black higher education communities committed to equity, mobility, and institutional transformation.

Keywords: race relations; higher education; Brazil; affirmative action; Black women; Afro-diaspora.

Introduction

Brazil is considered to have the largest number of Black people outside the African continent, with 56% of its population self-declared as Black (Blacks and browns¹) (IBGE, 2024). However, the percentage of Black people does not manifest itself in universities and decision-making spaces. This phenomenon expresses the racism that affects the Black population in objective and subjective ways, contradicting the false idea of racial democracy that has historically been widespread.

Against this backdrop, this article asks, “Has the Brazilian University color?”, examining Black access and permanence in higher education through social indicators, academic production, and the experiences of Black women.

The article presents an overview of higher education, contextualizing race relations and affirmative action in undergraduate and graduate programs, discussing progress and challenges, and presenting knowledge production and reports from Black Brazilian researchers at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and visiting scholars at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) under the Abdias do Nascimento academic mobility program of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) of the Brazilian federal government. .

Although previous studies have examined higher education and affirmative action policies, important gaps remain in comparative international research on their impacts for Afro-diasporic populations. In particular, few investigations address how Global South countries design policies that secure access to high-quality public higher education, enabling Black populations to reflect on their social condition—both in our case, as Brazilian and Latin

¹ Black people in Brazilian classification include “pretos”(Black) and “pardos” (Brown).

American women, and globally—in comparison with North America, where we carried out our exchange program. This gap limits understanding of which public policies have proved effective in the lives of Black people and how to sustain investment in them. This study seeks to address this gap through a practice-based narrative.

Women from diverse fields (Anthropology, Pedagogy, Psychology, Social Sciences and others) contribute, giving the analysis of ethnic-racial relations an interdisciplinary character. In Brazil, this discussion was forged by the struggles of the organized Black movement within and beyond educational and governmental institutions, what is consolidated in research, teaching, and extension actions (Gomes, 2017). Despite its importance, ethnic-racial studies and affirmative policies remain vulnerable to shifting political contexts, particularly the rise of the global far right, which discredits counter-hegemonic knowledge. Strengthening and expanding our academic production internationally is therefore essential.

Literature Review

Studies on race and gender relations in Brazil and their inequalities go back a long way, but in recent years these ideas have become more widespread both inside and outside the academic context. The so-called racism and sexism as an element that structures Brazilian society, reproducing itself in institutions, relationships, politics and the economy, has prevented Black people and women from having the same opportunities and access as white men (Almeida, 2019; Gonzalez, 2020). These inequalities can be seen in national surveys and social indicators, which show that the Black racial group has lower income, schooling, political representation and access to managerial positions. On the other hand, among the rates of violence against women and genocide of young Black people, the Black racial group has the highest numbers, which reveals the profound racial inequalities (IBGE, 2024).

Even in the face of these inequalities, due to the fact that Brazil has not had a process of racial segregation as explicit as in the USA, and that there has been an intense process of interracial relationships in the country since the Portuguese colonization process, the idea of a pseudo harmony between the races that would characterize a "racial democracy" has been widespread. However, this racial democracy is considered a myth, a false idea that hides profound violence and inequalities, including the rape of Black and indigenous women by white men, which began the process of miscegenation in Brazil. For this reason, Lélia Gonzalez (2020, p. 84) points out that "the conditions of material existence of the Black community refer to psychological conditioning that has to be attacked and unmasked".

Indicators from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) show that racial inequalities in education are present in both entry to and completion of higher education:

Around 70.6% of Black and brown people aged 18 to 24 did not attend school and did not complete higher education, while among whites in this age group, the rate was 57.0%. Among Whites aged 18 to 24, 36.5% were studying, while among Black and brown young people this rate was 26.5%. Around 29.5% of white students aged 18 to 24 were in higher education, compared to 16.4% of Black or brown students in the same age group. A degree had already been obtained by 6.5% of whites aged 18 to 24, while among Blacks and browns in the same age group, this proportion was less than half: 2.9%" (IBGE, 2024, online).

Gender, Race, and Access to Higher Education

When it comes to gender, Roza (2021), based on the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP) of the Ministry of Education (MEC), reveals that 57% of enrollments in 2019 in higher education were women, within this percentage we had 23% White and 22% black; he also points out that there is a greater dropout of the Black public, due to institutional racism.

Focusing a little more on the gender category, according to the study by Ribeiro; Alves and Soligo (2025) on graduate studies, that is, taking as a sample the scientific production of the

DIS Studies group, from the Faculty of Education at UNICAMP. Between 2005 and 2024, the DIS group had 144 studies carried out by women, of which only 19 were carried out by Black women.

Among undergraduate teachers, there is also a predominance of white teachers, as identified in the research by Ferreira, Teixeira and Ferreira (2022) on the racial and gender composition of teachers in higher education in Brazil: 41.07% White men, 35.60% White women, 12.72% Black women and 10.61% Black men.

Another phenomenon that reveals inequality is the machismo and epistemicide present at this level of education, which is due to the predominance of white male theories and authors to the detriment of Black female authors. This reflects an overvaluation of European and North-American knowledge to the detriment of other African, Latin American and Eastern knowledge, which has been called colonization in the construction and application of scientific knowledge (Carneiro, 2023).

Higher education in Brazil is made up of two sectors: public and private. The public sector represents 12% of higher education institutions in the country, offers totally free education and is made up of federal, state and municipal institutions that are responsible for most of the development of research, science and stricto sensu graduate programs (master's and doctorate) in Brazil. The private sector, on the other hand, accounts for 88% of higher education institutions, charges tuition fees and focuses more on undergraduate and graduate lato sensu education. This sector is also responsible for most of the distance education courses on offer (Neves & Martins, 2016; Brasil, 2022).

Public higher education is mostly made up of white students who attended basic education (understood as regular education in Brazilian schools from the age of 4 to 17 in Brazil) in private schools, these being fee-paying schools, which consequently tend to offer education with greater possibilities of later insertion into quality education compared to public education (Rodrigues & Wolter, 2022).

The problems surrounding Black schooling in Brazil are not recent, but they are still reflected in education today. It is mostly disconnected from teaching that has an African epistemological basis, and as a result, there is a predominance of Eurocentric content (Grosfoguel, 2016) whose main focus is to direct these young people towards the labor market, limiting the possibility of accessing public universities, centered on research and development of Brazilian science (Escobar, 2019).

Given this context, it is important to note that there has always been a process of resistance and political organization by Black men and women to confront and combat racial inequalities. After the country's re-democratization process in 1988, representatives of these movements began to integrate government bodies and with this the organized Black movement of women and men inside and outside the sphere of the State has driven the creation of various laws, policies and actions to promote racial equality in the country (Gomes, 2017).

The Legal Framework for Ethnic-Racial Education in Brazil

Federal Laws 10639/2003 and 11645/2008 amended the Brazilian Education Guidelines and Bases Law, guaranteeing that all basic education establishments in the country are committed to teaching African and Indigenous History and Culture. Anchored in this legislation, Brazil has the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture (CNE, 2004). This guideline

guides the implementation of the law in basic education and stipulates that higher education institutions should encourage greater discussion of the subject in undergraduate courses.

In 2012, the quota law was enacted by President Dilma Rousseff. Law No. 12.711 provides for low-income students, those from public schools, Black students (Afro-descendants with different shades of skin, known as pardos in the country) indigenous students, and students with disabilities (included in 2016 in this law), to have reserved places on undergraduate courses at federal universities (public universities). And the results show that, in recent years after the quota law, there has been an increase in the number of Black students at federal (public) universities (INEP, 2023). However, our education system still lacks content, teaching plans and school curricula (regulatory documents for basic education in Brazil) that value Black culture, experience and experiences, even after Laws 10.639 and 11.645.

Law 12711 provides for quotas only in undergraduate courses at federal institutions, however, in Brazil, a large part of higher education is concentrated in private institutions, where there is no specific regulation for the implementation of affirmative action, which means that in general there is still a prevalence of white people in higher education in general (Ribeiro & Soligo, 2025).

Expansion of Affirmative Policies in Graduate Programs Studies

Regarding graduate programs, these also lack national regulations for the implementation of affirmative action, however, several graduate programs have adhered to vacancy reservations for Black people, people with disabilities and LGBTQIA+, showing an evolution of these minority groups in these programs. Affirmative action for Black people has also led to the creation of affirmative action for other minority groups (Venturini, 2022). Affirmative action

policies in Brazil, such as the quota law, are not a new phenomenon; since 1968 there have been mobilizations by technicians from the Ministry of Labor and the Superior Labor Court. of Labor and the Superior Labor Court who were in favor of creating a percentage reserved for "people of color", to address the issue of racial discrimination in the labor market (Moehlecke, 2002). However, the law was not passed. On the other hand, the same year saw the creation of Law 5.465, which created quotas for the children of farmers to access veterinary and agricultural courses (TRF, 2023).

The mobilizations of Black collectives in the country are intense, so that the debate on racial inequality takes place in the country. And the actions of federal deputy Abdias do Nascimento created law n. 1.332, of 1983, which proposed reserving 20% of vacancies for both Black men and women, for selection into the public service. But unfortunately, the National Congress (the power in Brazil mainly responsible for proposing, drafting and monitoring laws) did not approve the bill (Moehlecke, 2002). Subsequently, in 2014, Law No. 12.990 was passed, which provides for the reservation of vacancies for Black people in federal public examinations. This law was reformulated in 2025 by Law No. 15.142, which extends the 30% reservation of vacancies offered in public tenders to Black, brown, indigenous and quilombola people (Brasil, 2025).

Abdias do Nascimento was an artist, writer, federal deputy, poet, educator, university professor, among other roles he took on throughout his history. In Brazil, when we talk about Black Egypt, we use Abdias's perspective, as he had the centrality of Africa in his search for the memory of Black Brazilians (Vieira & Correa, 2022). His works feature Black people as protagonists. His indignation at seeing the play "Emperor Jones" in Argentina, in which white

people played Black people, mobilized him to create the Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN). A political, transformative and revolutionary action for Black Brazilians.

Quilombismo is a concept of political action coined by Abdias, which refers to the associative organizations carried out by Blacks in the quilombos, economic and social organizations that fulfilled the social function for Black communities of supporting the continuity of the African root. These networks create culturally and ethically structured communities, thus developing an Afro-Brazilian praxis (Chagas, 2017).

Abdias believed that education and literacy were necessary to understand racism in the Brazilian reality. The TEN had this political, educational and mobilizing role. Its actors and actresses were domestic workers, common laborers, even prisoners, who, when they couldn't read, went through a literacy process (Nascimento, 2004) designed by him and, along with regular literacy, were racially literate in the performance of plays that debated Brazil's social and racial reality.

Abdias was honored by the Secretariat for Continuing Education, Literacy, Diversity and Inclusion - SECADI (an organ of the Ministry of Education, which is the Brazilian national administration responsible for the nation's education), and his name was used in the Abdias Nascimento Academic Development Program, structured to promote the internationalization of students who preferably declare themselves Black, indigenous and people with disabilities in graduate programs at Brazilian universities of higher education (Brazil, 2014).

The program made it possible for us Black students to participate in the Annual Conference 2025 - Breaking Boundaries; promoted by the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE), with the following presentations: "Has the Brazilian university color? Black women and affirmative action" and "The promotion of knowledge in

Afroperspectives at a Brazilian university". As an affirmative action, it guaranteed our participation and stay in Baltimore (Maryland), a majority Black city (Arnold-Garza & Gadsby, 2017). In this environment, with 14 Brazilian students, also beneficiaries of the affirmative action policy, we were able to share Black experiences from countries in the global south, while being in the north. Affirmative action policies benefit plurality and diversity, reducing racial, social, cultural and economic inequalities, providing access and guaranteeing citizenship.

Methodology

This work is based on qualitative research, which, according to Minayo (1994), is concerned with understanding social phenomena such as values, knowledge and beliefs, i.e. how people relate to themselves, others and the world around them. Thus, qualitative research allows for the creation of various methodologies to study these social events.

Based on this understanding and focusing on our proposal to reflect on Brazilian higher education at the intersection of race and gender in affirmative action, we initially sought to do a literature review in which we could critically explain the scenario of higher education in Brazil and how racism operates in this space. In addition, we demonstrated the resistance and protagonism of Black people in the development of inclusive processes for the Black population.

After the theoretical discussion, we concentrated on recounting our experiences during the six-month exchange at UMBC, by means of an experience report with the intention of promoting reflections and learning by the three Black Brazilian women covered by the affirmative policy of academic mobility in the Abdias do Nascimento Program. According to Mussi; Flores and Almeida (2021), the experience report is a form of writing widely used in the human sciences and especially in the field of education, in which the subject himself tells his

stories. The reports can be written in a variety of ways and can be descriptive, bringing references, dialoguing and criticizing. This type of writing also values different life experiences.

For this work, we organized our experience reports into three thematic blocks: 1) the Black experience and higher education in Brazil; 2) the importance of affirmative policies; 3) the experiences of third-world Blacks in a first-world country.

This organization was necessary to select which experiences would be relevant to tell, reflect on and discuss with the authors and academic colleagues. And in these blocks we sought to preserve the singularities of the same time and space, since the experience is not lived in the same way by the subjects, although we are all Black women, each one experienced the exchange according to her own lens of crossings: racial, gender, socio-cultural and expectations, strangeness and approaches to the Black American universe.

Findings

Building on the historical, policy, and theoretical context outlined above, the findings present the lived experiences of three Black Brazilian women navigating higher education through affirmative action. Organized thematically, these narratives illuminate how race, gender, and policy intersect to shape access, persistence, and identity formation across national and institutional contexts.

Theme One: Black experience and higher education in Brazil

Bruna Ribeiro

"Public higher education is scarce for the majority of Black families from favelas, academically known as peripheral areas. And that's where I grew up, in a neighborhood known

as Arariba. I was born in 1997 and the university I study at today was frequented by my mother for medical appointments. To this day she's surprised when she says I study at UNICAMP".

"My sister was the first person in our family to go to a private university, and this was not a source of joy for our extended family (cousins and uncles). It was a mostly Black family, of which she heard criticism and that she got in because it was easier because we lived in the interior of Campinas, since we moved from the capital of São Paulo to Campinas. My sister got into university through an affirmative action policy that uses the marks from the final exams in basic education to rank students nationally according to the courses and universities they have chosen.

In these moments, when I remember the words of the family when they found out that my sister was attending university, I remember the importance of Abdias (1980), because as he said, it is necessary not only to be literate, but to be racially conscious, to organize ourselves into quilombos, to understand who we are. And only then will we have an Afro-Brazilian policy, because it was through the loss of the memory of our collective consciousness that our lack of recognition in others, who suffer the same racial discrimination and oppression that we do, became possible."

Elizabeth Alves

"I'm a Black woman, an elementary school teacher in a public school on the outskirts of the cities of Campinas and Hortolândia (in the interior of the state of São Paulo). I went to private university late, finishing my degree in pedagogy in 2005. In a family of twelve children, I was the second to graduate, and when I think about it I see that my siblings, like so many others, were pushed into the job market at a very young age".

Maisa Ribeiro

"I'm a Black woman, a psychologist and a teacher in private higher education. I was the first person in my maternal family to go to university and the first woman in my paternal family. Being at university always represented a certain feeling of loneliness, as there were few people like me in that environment. I joined the undergraduate program in 2004, at which time affirmative action was not yet consolidated in the country, so the presence of Black people was very scarce. On the other hand, it was through the university context and social movements that I came into contact with reading and sharing experiences on race relations, which strengthened my racial identity as a Black woman, as well as the centrality of race relations in my research and professional work.

Theme Two: The importance of affirmative action policies

Bruna Ribeiro

"Affirmative action and student permanence policies kept me on my degree course. And today, they're what keep me in my graduate program. The possibility of getting to know other countries, of paying for the expenses of my younger sister who is also studying at a private university through affirmative action policies. This was only made possible by the very policy I enjoy.

These rights that we enjoy can lead to more people enjoying these rights in a cascade. Consequently, it generates income and possibilities for agency in society, because a beneficiary from the same family not only manages to contribute to others, but also makes it possible to improve their own quality of life, as well as that of family members. These are rights being effectively enjoyed by all".

Elizabeth Alves

"I was the first in my family to access graduate program through affirmative policies, the Quota Law. The world of graduate studies allowed me to take time off work, to have exclusive time to think about the racial problems that affect public schools, and are not always noticeable in the day-to-day running of the institution. It also gave me the opportunity to take part in the academic mobility program. In this way, I understand that affirmative action policies are extremely important because they allow marginalized subjects, students and workers to experience other layers of the university, in fact democratizing the university and its intricacies, when they break down the meritocratic and exclusionary barriers that exchange notices impose when they demand that students from working class backgrounds have fluency in a foreign language, or impose an age limit".

Maisa Ribeiro

"I was able to experience affirmative action in the public and private spheres of higher education in different ways, and this makes me think that if I am writing this chapter today, it is the result of a lot of struggle on the part of my family and other Black people who came before me and who opened this path for me, especially the organized Black movements that drove the creation of affirmative action in Brazil (Gomes, 2017). In graduate school, at a public university, I had the opportunity to meet other Black women who reduced my loneliness in that space. In the private context, as a teacher, I had few Black professors, and my interlocution was greater with the also few Black students who approached the ethnic-racial nucleus that I coordinated. The meetings with Black people in the academic context fostered various discussions, reflections and productions that reflect our difficulties as Black people in that predominantly white context in bodies and theories. On the other hand, the meetings were also spaces of great welcome,

affection, recognition of our potential and processes of resistance, allowing us to experience the importance of *aquilombamento* (Nascimento, 2004). Being with other people, especially Black women, producing knowledge makes me realize the urgency of our presence in these spaces, because historically, we are the ones who have driven change in these racist contexts permeated by tensions and disputes. It is our views and productions that have denounced the need for class, race and gender to be central to the construction of scientific knowledge (Ribeiro, 2025; Ribeiro Alves, Soligo, 2025).

Theme Three: Being Black from the global south in the global north

Bruna Ribeiro

"The strategic possibility of developing our racial consciousness in line with the indigenous ethnic groups in the country gives us contact with the land that makes a difference to us when we are outside our land. Without land to plant, harvest or cultivate, we feel homeless. Our Black and indigenous racial matrices are constitutive of our Black identity and this is clear when we come into contact with other Black people outside our country. In this context, we have become and resumed being Afro-Brazilian. This term has a different meaning when we are not in our own country. Because as Brazilians, we are black".

Elizabeth Alves

"It was six months of exchange, trying to understand that Black universe, often close, sometimes so far away. At times we saw each other in music and art, at others we drifted apart due to the crossing of territoriality, but we found each other again in the historical and current discussions in the fight against racism and in the different ways of living blackness. We also had the opportunity to take part in discussions at Confere AABHE, where researchers and teachers raised concerns about the education of Black children and young people. This is something that

also concerns us in Brazil. In the US because of racial integration, and in our country because Black students are subtly invited to withdraw from school; in addition, the literacy of our students is below what it should be.

Maisa Ribeiro

"In the US I had the opportunity to learn more about the history of segregation of the Black population, and within the university the diversity and inclusion programs for students, staff and professors, as well as the constant attacks that these programs suffer. It was a challenging experience of 6 intense months, of many anxieties, fears, discoveries and learning, mainly due to the language and culture issue. However, it's something I wanted very much and I'm sure it will bear a lot of fruit and keep me breaking down external and internal barriers. Among the aspects of higher education that caught my attention was the fact that the Black people I met at university did not represent the first generation of their family to access higher education, something different from Brazil. Another factor that really moved me was getting to know the Black universities, the potential for resistance and strengthening that these universities have politically and scientifically in the USA is something to be admired.

Something I was very proud of as a Brazilian is the quality and free access of our public universities. When I said that in Brazil access to public universities is totally free, it was something that caused astonishment, since in the US even at public institutions some kind of payment is required, which often creates a lot of debt for young Americans."

These stories show that affirmative action policies affect both individuals and groups. So, just as the Black movement is an educator, we can say that affirmative policies are also educational (Gomes, 2017). In the individual sphere, they act in the reworking of identities, in

the strengthening of becoming Black (Souza, 2021); in the collective sphere, they boost the quality of life of the family, envisioning other possibilities for living.

As for the first theme, it's important to remember that the education designed for the working class was technical, basic, with the aim of training cheap labor. In Brazil, then, we experience a systematic and structural ghettoization that places Black people in the precarious spaces of education and work explained in Elizabeth Alves' account, and as described by Lélia Gonzalez & Hasenbalg (1983), "black people's places". These racial traps are not just physical, they are also symbolic, and stick to Black families, as Bruna Ribeiro described in her account, delegitimizing young Black women's efforts to gain access to private universities.

The second and third themes concern the organization, access and permanence of Black people not only as students, but also as teachers and administrators in North American higher education; and also the historical exclusive universities for Black people. However, Maisa Ribeiro's account shows the political tensions that these spaces face in order to maintain themselves. Another highlight is Bruna Ribeiro's account of the recognition in foreign lands of being Afro-Brazilian and the strengthening of identity with our indigenous matrices and belonging as Afro-Brazilian. Elizabeth Alves highlights the concerns of Blacks in the Americas about the basic education provided for their children.

Discussion

Three Black women who were visiting researchers in the USA set out to present an overview of higher education in Brazil and contextualize affirmative action for the Black population at undergraduate and graduate level, reflecting on the advances and challenges for access and permanence of Black people and theories at this level of education. Their experiences point to the specificity of Brazilian higher education, with emphasis on the totally free offer at

public universities and the affirmative actions that have boosted the increase of Black people at this level of education. However, even with this increase, there is still a lack of representation of Black students and teachers, in relation to the proportion of this racial group in the Brazilian population, which indicates the need to expand and strengthen these affirmative actions for Black people in public and private higher education.

A recent discussion and achievement is racial quotas for professors, which is also an urgent demand to make universities more diverse and equitable. Although significant progress has been made in the representation of Black people in Brazilian universities, this number is still not enough, given the large proportion of Black people in the country. Another aspect that has been discussed is the urgency of decolonizing the university, since it still shows resistance to recognizing knowledge and the production of non-white knowledge, prevailing epistemicide (Carneiro, 2023), which is the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge, to the detriment of African, indigenous and Latin American knowledge.

This resistance to change and the expansion of racial diversity in institutional contexts has been explained by Cida Bento (2021) by the pact of whiteness, which refers to the sometimes explicit, sometimes veiled pact by white people to maintain the power and supra-representativeness of their racial group. The importance of Black Brazilian intellectuals such as Lelia Gozales (2020), Abdias do Nascimento (2004), Nilma Lino Gomes (2017), Cida Bento (2021), Sueli Carneiro (2023) who are national and international references in denouncing racism inside and outside institutions and society in general. And also in building effective proposals and actions for a society, university and science that are truly democratic.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that affirmative action policies in Brazil have played a decisive role in expanding the presence of Black students, researchers, and epistemologies within higher education, while also revealing the persistent effects of institutionalized racism and epistemicide. Grounded in the lived experiences of Black Brazilian women, the findings highlight how access, permanence, and international mobility operate together to reshape academic trajectories and collective futures.

Aligned with the mission of the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education, this research underscores the importance of Black-led scholarly exchange, global solidarity, and policy advocacy in breaking structural and epistemic boundaries. Brazilian affirmative action initiatives—particularly the Abdias do Nascimento Program—offer a powerful model for Afro-diasporic collaboration, demonstrating how Global South perspectives can inform international efforts to advance equity, belonging, and transformative knowledge production in higher education.

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