Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2025, e025015
https://doi.org/10.21814/rlec.6567

Teaching and Learning with Clay: Stories From an Educator's Journey

Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva
Departamento de Artes Plásticas, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

"Teaching and Learning with Clay" is an autobiographical essay that traces my trajectory as an educator and ceramist, reflecting on formative processes in ceramics while observing the practices and knowledge of traditional communities. This text offers a critical reflection on access to ceramic practice in Brazil, considering the differences between practices developed in urban centres and those proposed by communities that have historically produced this medium as a form of livelihood and resistance. To interrogate this field of teaching and learning through the sharing and collective construction of knowledge, I engage in dialogue with Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Muniz Sodré, Nego Bispo, and other theorists to subvert the colonial logics that structure both the fields of art and education. The fire arts, through clay and ceramic production, can serve as a site of confluence, carrying the cosmological memories of diverse peoples. Stories of class sessions, courses, and workshops emerge as a shared spark of methodological guidance, aiming to inspire and encourage other educators who, like me, seek pathways in the present through the observation of ancestrality and practices. Clay constitutes a mythical, collective, and historical materiality.

Keywords

ceramics, education, traditional knowledge, autonomy

Ensinar e Aprender com o Barro: Relatos de uma Educadora em Travessia

Resumo

"Ensinar e Aprender com o Barro" é um ensaio em tom de relato autobiográfico, que percorre a minha trajetória como educadora e ceramista, refletindo sobre processos formativos na cerâmica, observando práticas e saberes de povos tradicionais. Neste texto, propõe-se uma reflexão crítica sobre o acesso à prática cerâmica no Brasil, pensando sobre diferenças entre a prática que desenvolvemos nos centros urbanos e as propostas pelas comunidades que tradicionalmente produzem esta linguagem como forma de sustento e resistência. A fim de tensionar este campo de ensino e aprendizagem, no compartilhamento e na construção coletiva de conhecimento, dialogamos com Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Muniz Sodré, Nego Bispo e outros pensadores, a fim de subverter lógicas coloniais que estruturam tanto o campo da arte quanto o da educação. As artes do fogo, por meio do barro e da produção de cerâmica, podem ser território de confluência, por carregarem as memórias cosmológicas de diversos povos. Os relatos das propostas de aulas, cursos e encontros surgem como faísca compartilhada de orientações metodológicas, a fim de instigar e esperançar outros educadores que, assim como eu, buscam caminhos no presente através da observação de saberes e práticas ancestrais. O barro é uma materialidade mítica, coletiva e histórica.

Palavras-chave

cerâmica, educação, saberes tradicionais, autonomia

1. Introduction

This essay takes as its starting point my experience as an educator and ceramist, built at the intersection of artistic practice and the teaching of ceramics, drawing on practices developed in both formal and non-formal educational contexts. Throughout this trajectory, I have woven connections between ancestral knowledge, processes of knowledge sharing, and the sociocultural dynamics that permeate ceramics in Brazil. This path is marked by challenges and tensions surrounding access to, continuity in, and recognition of traditional knowledge. I use the terms "traditional" or "of tradition" to refer to the ceramic culture of Brazil's traditional peoples — that is, Indigenous peoples, quilombola communities, riverine communities, *sertanejo* (rural) communities, and other populations whose knowledge is intimately linked to their territories, considering both biodiversity and cultural belonging. In this way, it is essential to observe the intersections that emerge from encounters and separations across the different contexts in which this practice takes place.

By sharing these experiences, I aim to reflect on the forces shaping the teaching and learning practices of ceramics that I develop, considering the material, symbolic, historical, and affective dimensions interwoven in this practice. I propose opening dialogues and pathways to explore how ceramic knowledge — particularly that rooted in community and ancestral practices — can engage with contemporary pedagogical practices, challenging hegemonic epistemologies and affirming multiple possibilities for existence, creation, and knowledge sharing. The community and ancestral practices mentioned have been shared organically over ten years of engagement with traditional ceramist communities. This includes "doing together"; work that involves the entire community surrounding the ceramists; and an extended production time that does not follow the clock but unfolds in the crevices of the day, pausing to eat and feed the children, for example. This way of producing ceramics continues in the present, yet it was learned from mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who themselves learned from their elders; in the case of men, such as traditional male ceramists, the craft was also learned from their elders.

From the Saramenha ceramics[1] in Ouro Branco, Minas Gerais, under master Leonardo, to Macuxi ceramists in the Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous Territory, Roraima, I have worked with Indigenous communities, quilombola communities, riverine populations, and traditional ceramists. These ways of living and making ceramics are embedded in my practice, so that I see myself as both a custodian and disseminator of this knowledge. I enact the concept of ancestrality in ceramic practice as articulated by professor Leda Maria Martins (2021) regarding the structure of Afro-diasporic cosmoperceptions[2]:

[1] Saramenha ceramics originated in the Ouro Preto region, Minas Gerais, during the colonial period. Their main characteristic is a yellowish glaze/enamel, a technique imported from Portugal for the first porcelain and earthenware factories established in Brazil. Master Leonardo is a custodian of this ancient technique and of the knowledge passed down by his own teacher in ceramics, master Bitinho (Silva, 2015).

[2] The term derives from studies of modes of perceiving and being in the world among people in Africa and the African diaspora. Martins (2021) observes: "the sacredness of beings pervades all thought established by cognitive systems that shape the cosmoperception of ancestrality. According to [Congolese anthropologist Kimbwandènde Kia Bunseki] Fu-Kiau, 'we are 'sacred' because our natural world is sacred. Our dwellings and our belongings are sacred because they are made from raw materials drawn from the natural world, the sacred world'" (p. 45).

> ancestrality can be conceived both as a philosophical principle of African civilising thought and as a channel through which vital force — the dynamo and repository of moving energy, the original sacred movement — spreads throughout the cosmos, constantly expanding and catalysing. (...) Ancestrality is cleaved by a curved, recurring, ringed time; a spiral time that returns, restores, and also transforms, and which affects everything. It is ontologically experienced as contiguous and simultaneous movements of feedback, prospection, and reversibility, dilation, expansion and containment, contraction and relaxation, a synchrony of instances composed of present, past, and future. It is through ancestrality that vital force, the universe's dynamo, one of its gifts, spreads. (p. 50–53)

Guided by the notion that we are "Amefrican", as proposed by Lélia Gonzalez (1988), I embrace this understanding of ancestrality that intertwines time, space, and materiality. "Ancestrality", therefore, is alive, grounded in our perception that the world is filled with the vital energy of all beings, human and non-human, who coexist here.

2. Formative Processes Through Clay

A ceramics class begins long before the educator and students meet. Days in advance — especially if it is the first in a series of sessions — I review the prepared list of materials, carefully consider how to begin the course, outline the main points I wish to convey, and determine what will be essential to request from students at that moment. I can say that the class truly begins when I am washing the fabrics that will support the pieces in progress or varnishing the wooden modelling tools[3]. While organising the materials, I reflect on the experience I intend to offer the students, mindful that, for many, this may be the first time in their lives that they engage with clay in a structured lesson.

I recall my first encounter with clay as a student. I was introduced to ceramics at the end of my adolescence, when I visited a friend whose father was a ceramist. At some point, I realised that Bernardo Ilg's[4] ceramic practice had crafted everything we used in that house. At the time, I could not articulate it clearly. Still, today I understand that my fascination stemmed from the idea of imparting aesthetic sensibility to everyday objects through intimate, artisanal work. The little cups and plates we used in his home were the product of an "aesthetic and material-chemical" investigation, in which his father possessed complete knowledge — from the primary transformation of the material to its everyday use.

I carried that feeling and those ideas for several years. At the start of the Visual Arts course at São Paulo State University Júlio de Mesquita Filho (UNESP), we had our

[3] Tools used for working with and sculpting clay and other malleable materials.

[4] Bernardo Ilg (Rio de Janeiro, 1970–) began working with ceramics in 1989 alongside the sculptor Paulo De Paula. He trained under the ceramist Iochi Hashimoto and has been producing high-temperature utilitarian ceramics since 1995. He lives and works in São Lourenço, Minas Gerais.

first Three-Dimensional Language class with the late Professor Agnus Valente[5]. I felt my heart beat faster at the opportunity to work with clay; studying it and understanding its properties to transform a cold, damp mass into an object was one of the most significant insights of my training. In the following years, I became fully involved with the fire arts. I often say that I spent almost my entire undergraduate Visual Arts degree in the ceramics laboratory. I wanted to understand everything about modelling, finishing, wheel-throwing, moulds, slips, glazes, and firings. I also attended non-degree courses at the National Industrial Apprenticeship Service (SENAI) Mario Amato[6] in São Bernardo do Campo, São Paulo, which at the time still offered technical courses in the field.

The undergraduate degree was fundamental in bringing me closer to the conversations taking place within the field of Education. Professors Rejane Coutinho and Rita Berti Bredariolli opened paths for my colleagues and me to view the teaching and learning of Art as something both possible and powerful. Beyond that, as something with which we would want to engage. Our first references concerning art and education emerged from the exchanges that took place in those classes. Although we had already been in a Visual Arts programme for nearly four years, it was the classes in the teaching degree that showed us what it meant to share the sensible. These lecturers were the first to share with us the idea of *esperançar* (hoping actively):

> as an ontological need, hope requires practice to become historical concreteness. (...) Without a minimum of hope, we cannot even begin the struggle. However, without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, uproots itself, loses direction, and becomes hopelessness, which, at times, extends into tragic despair. Hence, a need for a certain education of hope. The point is that it has such importance in our existence, both individual and social, that we should not experience it wrongly, allowing it to slip into hopelessness and despair. (...) One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through serious and accurate political analysis, is to unveil possibilities, regardless of obstacles, for hope, without which we can do little, because we hardly fight. When we do fight, while hopeless or desperate, ours is a suicidal struggle, a purely vindictive hand-to-hand combat. (Freire, 1992/2013, pp. 12–13)

Upon completing the degree, I became not only a ceramist but also a researcher. I began engaging with traditional ceramicist communities: the workshop of master Leonardo in Ouro Branco, Minas Gerais (Silva, 2015; Figure 1); the Kariri-Xocó potters from Alagoas, during a trip to Campinas, São Paulo (Silva, 2017); the village of Ráquira in

[5] aGNuS VaLeNTe, the artistic name of Agnaldo Valente Germano da Silva (São Simão, SP, unknown date – São Paulo, SP, 2021), was a hybrid artist, university professor, and researcher in the field of Visual Arts.

[6] The Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial (SENAI) is a Brazilian private institution of public interest, non-profit, with private legal personality, and not part of the public administration. For more than eighty years, SENAI has had the mission of promoting the country's sustainable development through professional education, innovation, and technology.

Boyacá, Colombia (Silva, 2017); and the potters of Barra, Bahia (Silva, 2019). From these encounters, I came to understand what kind of ceramics I wanted to make and study. My interests, perspectives, and desires were entirely directed towards community ceramics, predominantly made by women of tradition — daughters and granddaughters of other masters of the craft.

Figure 1. *Geraldo Brasil, Rosângela, and Willian: participants in the Cerâmica Saramenha workshop of master Leonardo, in Ouro Branco, Minas Gerais, painting clay pieces they produced — September 2015*

Credits. Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva

It is essential to note that I only became a ceramist through the facilitated access to firings provided by the public university. We were encouraged to experiment with materials, and in the ceramics laboratory, coordinated by Professor Lalada Dalglish, we had a great ally in the technician of the space, Vera Cozani. Vera taught me — as she did so many other students — numerous processes. My first independent firing was with her. One afternoon, we assembled the small gas kiln that we mainly used for reduction firings in techniques such as *raku* and *obvara*[7], and Vera taught me how to fire. I made my first batch of glazed pieces with the low-temperature glazes formulated in the course at SENAI.

Ceramics taught me what it means to be a body produced in a given time-space. This production begins when, in excavating buried histories of this territory — concealed in the womb of the earth as clay comes into being — we realise that each fragment is a vast time of material, story, practice, and people layered upon one another. These histories know that their very potential lies precisely in being disturbed and reworked.

3. Practice, Freedom, and Autonomy

Professor Paulo Freire (1996/2014) tells us: "we construct qualities or virtues in the effort we impose on ourselves to reduce the distance between what we say and what we

[7] *Raku* and *obvara* are firing effect techniques. In both, access to oxygen is reduced at the moment when the pieces come out of the kiln incandescent. In *raku*, of Asian origin, the incandescent piece is glazed; in *obvara*, of European origin, the piece is not glazed and is immersed in a flour mash.

do" (p. 63). hooks (2003/2021), also an advocate for an education rooted in hope, encourages us to cultivate a sense of community through progressive education as a practice of freedom, so that we may overcome disbelief and the lack of connection between us. Paulo Freire and bell hooks are educators who inspire other educators, creating space for exercises of freedom that constitute practices of re-enchantment in our work.

One of the central questions we face in a ceramics classroom committed to a counter-colonial practice is: how can an ancestral making, developed by peoples of tradition with such restricted access to specific resources, become an activity — or a hobby — so expensive and inaccessible in large cities? Nego Bispo offers us a form of wisdom as provocation:

> and what does it mean to counter-colonise? It is to reissue our trajectories based on our matrices. And who is capable of doing this? Ourselves! (...) For us, quilombolas and indigenous peoples, this is the agenda. To counter-colonise. On the day universities learn that they do not know, on the day universities agree to learn indigenous languages — instead of teaching them — on the day universities agree to learn indigenous architecture and agree to learn what the plants of the *caatinga* [a semi-arid biome in north-eastern Brazil] are for, on the day they are willing to learn from us as we once learned from them, then we will have a confluence. A confluence between knowledges. A process of balance between the diverse civilisations of this place. A counter-colonisation. (Bispo dos Santos, 2018, p. 51)

When these disparities are raised in classroom discussions, I seek to guide students through a critical analysis of the Brazilian social context. Who are the ceramicists owning or managing urban ceramic studios? Which social class do they belong to? What is their colour or ethnicity? How do these characteristics paint a portrait of Brazil within the context of ceramicists? Adding to the chorus of Freire and hooks, Muniz Sodré asks:

> why not then politically override the bastions of unequal differentiation? In principle, because the perspective of an ecology of knowledges compels participants to engage critically not only with the technical behaviours linked to their respective knowledges, but also with the attitudes that justify or value them communally. (Sodré, 2012, p. 51)

Sodré invites us to question the purely technical vein when engaging with knowledge and systematises how Occidentalist discourse captures us by creating a "complete man", that is, a European. This forms the basis for our judgements of beauty, taste, identification, and aversion (Descola, 2016). It is not enough to want to connect on an aesthetic, pleasurable level with the language of the earth. The earth, in our territory, informs us about who, on one side, has the privilege of reflecting on the uses and meanings of this polysemous word, and on the other side, who experiences it as a fundamental material of life and death — either through the necessity of building and inhabiting with

resources provided by nature, or through the fate of seeing their life and place buried by the mud of environmental crimes committed by large mining companies[8]. Those who practice ceramics as a livelihood, collecting raw clay, processing it, shaping pieces, and firing them in kilns built by the same hands that make these pieces, generally do not belong to the same social class or ethnoracial group as those accessing ceramics through the exclusive studios of urban centres. Thus, there is an abyss between the types of ceramics valued by one group and another, with the elite group seeking to distance itself from what is considered "rustic", "primitive", or "popular" (Gonzalez, 1988; Silva, 2023).

I often comment in class that we learn ceramics from an Orientalist perspective, that is, looking at Asia through European or North American eyes — in other words, through colonial eyes. "Traditional" ceramics without a glaze layer, also known as enamel, are considered lower in quality than high-temperature glazed pieces. Compared with Asian or European pieces, they end up occupying the niche of so-called popular art, and often appear to be worth even less. What is a reasonable justification for this hierarchy? When comparing types of pieces within the same category of so-called "utilitarian" objects, why is a *lamenbati*[9] or a *bowl*[10] valued more than a clay basin[11]? This discussion is not about the quality or durability of ceramic pieces. In reality, it highlights how some knowledges are privileged while others are sidelined (Prado et al., 2024), exposing the colonialist epistemicide of the practices and understanding of non-white peoples, or of those not captured and exotified within a white-European logic (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Pieces by student Erika Kobayashi produced in the course Cerâmica e Ancestralidade (Ceramics and Ancestrality), offered at SESC*[12] *Pompeia, São Paulo, second semester 2024*

Credits. Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva

[8] Vale, which currently operates in over thirty countries, was responsible for two major environmental crimes in Brazil: the collapse of the Mariana dam in 2015, which killed 19 people, and the collapse of the Brumadinho dam in 2019, which killed 270 people. Both events mark a trajectory of serious environmental and human rights violations.

[9] Japanese bowl used for serving ramen.

[10] Generic term.

[11] In Brazil, it is a vessel traditionally made of clay and fired at low temperature, around 800–900 °C, commonly used in the rituals of Afro-Brazilian religions.

[12] The Social Service of Commerce (SESC) is a private, non-profit Brazilian institution, funded by entrepreneurs in the commerce of goods, services, and tourism. It promotes cultural, educational, sports, and leisure activities primarily aimed at workers in this sector and their families, but open to the general public.

To observe a ceramic work, I need to move around the space. Turning shifts us from a familiar referential axis, placing us in a new space-time. To make ceramics, it is also necessary to find an axis. The hands must work together, like a spider weaving its web. The form of a ceramic object is the affirmative materialisation of the sense of "caring" and "preserving" of the human groups who came before us; or, as archaeologist Helena Lima highlights, it is "a vehicle for rewriting history" (Prado et al., 2024, pp. 177–185). A body that explains the world, guided by its own founding cosmologies.

4. The Language of the Earth

A recurring aspect of my learning process with all the teachers and master ceramists I have worked with is the understanding that "ceramics is learned by doing together" (Figure 3). This "doing together" can even include touching the student's piece, subtly adjusting the form, allowing them to closely observe the gestures and movements of the hands that transform the clay.

Figure 3. *Workshop Gestos do Cerrado at SESC Franca, January 2025. The image shows a moment in which I assist a participant in shaping the form she wished to create in clay*

Credits. Vitor Barão

I began offering occasional classes in the ceramics laboratory at the UNESP during my undergraduate studies, focusing on the wheel and modelling techniques. Between 2016 and 2017, I set up a home studio and started offering regular short courses and occasional workshops. In-person classes lasted three hours, I provided all materials, and also carried out firings in a low-temperature gas kiln. I continued teaching in this studio, which was also my home, until 2019, when I decided to leave São Paulo.

The first ceramics course in which I observed a systematisation of practices derived from a developed methodology and reflective thought over time occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, in July 2021. We were experiencing the initial reopening after lockdowns, with the arrival of vaccines. In this context, I offered an online course with four sessions, aiming to model, paint, finish, fire ceramics, and learn more about the ceramic practices of traditional Brazilian communities. I named the course Cerâmica: Prática e Liberdade (Ceramics: Practice and Freedom), and each session was given a suggestive title corresponding to the type of investigation we would explore in that meeting. For this reason, in "Úmida" (Wet), we learned modelling techniques; in "Pintada" (Painted), painting and finishing techniques; in "Queimada" (Fired), we discussed firing and I provided a step-by-step guide for constructing a gas- or wood-fired kiln; in "Ancestral", we worked on more theoretical topics based on my research with traditional communities. Participants could take the full course or select individual sessions, depending on the subject they wished to study. The overall objective of the course was to enable participants to design and implement a simple, financially accessible, and functional studio in which anyone could produce ceramics. The classes were structured according to the programme described in Table 1.

Class 1 – ÚMIDA	Contents: • Modelling bowls using pinch and slab techniques + moulds[13]; • Clay recycling; • Clay drying points; • Materials required: – thick cloth to cover the table (e.g., cotton canvas); – small pot of water; – modelling tools (if available) or fork, knife (preferably with a smooth blade), and spoon; – thin cloth (e.g., t-shirt fabric); – pot or bowl (plastic, metal, ceramic, or wood), circular, small to medium size; – rolling pin (can be substituted with a bottle or broom handle); – clay; – note-taking materials.

[13] Manual clay modelling techniques.

Class 2 – PINTADA	Contents: • Traditional painting and finishing techniques (slip[14], burnishing[15], vegetable resins, wax, fat); • Production of "simple" slip; • Burnishing; • Post-firing finishes (fat, wax, resin); • Materials required: – thick cloth to cover the table (e.g., cotton canvas); – small pot of water; – soft-bristle brush; – spoons; – transparent glass container; – 2 litres of filtered water; – thin cloth (e.g., t-shirt fabric); – polished stone or smooth, polished glass (e.g., marble) or smooth seeds (e.g., horse-eye bean); – some oil (coconut, sunflower, soybean, etc.); – one piece at the leather-hard stage, one at the bone-dry stage, and one bisque-fired piece[16] (whole or fragments for testing); – sponge, cleaning cloths, a pot of water for cleaning; – clays of various colours; – note-taking materials.
Class 3 – QUEIMADA	Contents: • Types of firing and kilns; • Brick gas kiln; • Gas firing in a brick kiln; • Materials required: note-taking materials.
Class 4 – ANCESTRAL	Contents: • "Traditional" ceramics?; • Artisan communities and the maintenance of traditional ways of life; • Community ceramics and its intersections with so-called popular art; • Materials required: note-taking materials.

Table 1. *Course program "Cerâmica: Prática e Liberdade"*

The course offered two different fee levels: full and reduced, the latter intended for Black, Indigenous, trans people, and single mothers. I also provided some bursaries, aimed at the same groups. The idea behind establishing these two fee levels was to cultivate a new audience of interest and study in a context I perceived as highly elite and distant from the "people". Enrolment was conducted online via a form, through which I

[14] A type of clay-based paint used in ceramic processes, applied before firing.

[15] Polishing.

[16] The drying of a clay piece is slow and gradual. As soon as we finish modelling, we say that the piece is "wet". As the piece loses water to the environment, it begins to take on a texture similar to that of a chocolate bar. At this stage, we call it "leather-hard". When it is scorched, but not yet fired, we call it "bone-dry". The so-called "bisque" is the name given to a piece after a first firing at low temperature (around 800–900°C), when a subsequent firing at a higher temperature is intended.

provided all necessary information. There were 28 enrolments: four full bursaries, fifteen paying the full fee, and nine paying the reduced cost. In this way, nearly half of the course was composed of Black, trans, and single-mother participants.

The classes took place online via videoconference on Saturdays, each lasting two hours. Over the course of the month-long series, having already taught ceramics online since the beginning of the pandemic, I refined the tools and strategies for teaching such a tactile, sensitive subject through the "cold" medium of computer or phone screens (Figure 4 and Figure 5). In fact, new technologies allow us to broaden access to teaching and learning processes. Although not everyone can engage closely with these methods, which can sometimes seem "cold" and distant, for many others, they offer the opportunity to learn about procedures, concepts, and educators to whom they do not have physical access, and with whom contact would otherwise be impossible (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

Figure 4. *Pieces produced and fired by Bel Falleiros in the United States, as part of the online classes in 2021*
Credits. Bel Falleiros

Figure 5. *Pieces produced and fired by Bel Falleiros in the United States, as part of the online classes in 2021*
Credits. Bel Falleiros

Figure 6. *Handmade kilns I built during the pandemic in 2020*
Credits. Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva

Figure 7. *Handmade kilns I built during the pandemic in 2020*
Crédits. Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva

Through the course "Cerâmica: Prática e Liberdade", I gained insight into important issues. I confirmed that it was possible to make ceramic practice knowledge more accessible by establishing social fees and bursaries. Following this course, audiences of Black, Indigenous, trans, or socially vulnerable participants increasingly sought the classes. I heard from several students that the bursaries created a sense of belonging to ceramic practice, previously seen by these participants as unattainable. Often, these groups are excluded from artistic practices pursued simply for the pleasure of developing their poetic language, due to multiple social, financial, and emotional demands. As an educator, I realised I was seeking autonomy in my own practice. Without access to a personal electric kiln, I researched so-called "alternative firings", looking for solutions to my resource scarcity. Similarly, I wanted my students to understand that it is possible to make ceramics without a kiln, which costs as much as a car. More importantly, I wanted

students to become aware of the processes they were developing, so they could choose which techniques to use, how to source raw materials from nature, and how to fire their pieces with accessible resources.

In *Pedagogia da Autonomia* (Pedagogy of Autonomy), Paulo Freire (1996/2014) states: "(...) teaching is not transferring knowledge, but creating the possibilities for its own production or construction" (p. 47). Practising the "critical creativity" Freire proposes in the field of the arts of fire became foundational for me: first, as a researcher-student of the processes of transforming earth and the ways of living and making of traditional peoples; and second, as an educator consciously seeking to create space for people historically excluded from their own ancestral knowledge in urban contexts to access and relate to it, demystifying practices and emphasising the idea that earth is an accessible, abundant material, rich in possibilities.

After "Cerâmica: Prática e Liberdade", I collaborated with psychologist and ceramist Raphaela Prado to develop a follow-up project entitled "O que há entre nós?" (What Lies Between Us?), investigating the "self" and the experiences of alterity that surround us. In a group of three, we conducted "grounding exercises" and modelled presence. We fired the pieces in two different locations, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, during a session at the studio where I worked at the time in the west zone of São Paulo. Throughout the project, we held online meetings lasting two hours each, during which we discussed and modelled the materiality of clay as an investigative process based on lived experience.

Since then, I have offered clay modelling workshops at Quilombo do Carmo[17], São Roque; Ilé Ìyá Ódò Àse Aláàfin Òyó[18], east zone of São Paulo; Escola Municipal de Ensino Fundamental Enzo Antonio Silvestrin[19] and Escola Lumiar[20], São Paulo; SESC units in Jundiaí, Pinheiros, Pompeia, Bom Retiro, Osasco, Franca, and Ipiranga; Instituto Tomie Ohtake[21]; Caixa Cultural São Paulo[22]; and the Department of Education of Ubatuba, São Paulo. Although each of these initiatives differs from the others, critical creativity and the exercise of autonomy, combined with recognition of traditional knowledge, have remained central (Figure 8, Figure 9 and Figure 10).

[17] The Quilombo do Carmo is a remnant quilombo community located in the rural district of Carmo, in São Roque (São Paulo), officially recognised by the Fundação Cultural Palmares since 2000. The community is currently advocating for the definitive titling of their lands.

[18] The Ilé Ìyá Ódò Àse Aláàfin Òyó is an African-rooted terreiro (religious centre) located in São Paulo, in Vila Ré. Founded in 1991, it is also the origin of the Coletivo Acaçá, which seeks to preserve Afro-Brazilian culture and traditional African-rooted communities through cultural workshops such as percussion, *capoeira*, visual arts, and music. On this occasion, we conducted a workshop on *moringas* (traditional clay water jugs) and *alguidares* (low-fired clay bowls), everyday objects used in the practices of a terreiro. The workshop was made possible through a partnership between the Ilé Ìyá Ódò Àse Aláàfin Òyó and the Instituto Omó Nanã, also located in the eastern zone of São Paulo.

[19] A state public school, is located in Jardim Pirituba, western São Paulo.

[20] The Escola Lumiar, a private school, is situated in Vila Olímpia, southern São Paulo.

[21] The Instituto Tomie Ohtake is a cultural centre founded in 2001 in São Paulo, dedicated to visual arts, architecture, and design, in homage to the Japanese-Brazilian artist Tomie Ohtake (1913–2015).

[22] The Caixa Cultural São Paulo space was inaugurated in 1989 and is maintained by Caixa Econômica Federal. It is located in the historic centre of the city, offering programming focused on visual and performing arts, music, and educational activities.

Figure 8. *Course "Narrativas do Barro: Ferramentas na Educação para as Relações Étnico-raciais" (Narratives of Clay: Tools in Education for Ethnoracial Relations), offered at the Secretaria Municipal de Educação de Ubatuba, São Paulo, between June and July 2025*

Credits. Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva

Figure 9. *Course "Narrativas do Barro: Ferramentas na Educação para as Relações Étnico-raciais, offered at the Secretaria Municipal de Educação de Ubatuba, São Paulo, between June and July 2025*

Credits. Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva

Figure 10. *Course "Narrativas do Barro: Ferramentas na Educação para as Relações Étnico-raciais", offered at the Secretaria Municipal de Educação de Ubatuba, São Paulo, between June and July 2025*

Credits. Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva

One resource I like to use in classes is audiovisual material. Alongside the practical materials, I usually select books on Black and/or Indigenous traditional ceramics (here I also include the theme of so-called popular art) and videos that help students connect with the subject matter of the course. Videos create a relationship between those engaged in the learning process and the artists or communities being studied. By observing traditional artists at work, students can attempt to understand their gestures, working conditions, and life contexts. We can think of this as an exercise in "empathetic imagination":

> (...) it is not just about learning the way of existence or the culture of another human group, nor simply reflecting on the barriers to understanding, but educationally stimulating what could be called "empathetic imagination", that is, the dynamic of affective resources that allows consciousness to place itself in the Other's position, to approach difference sensibly. (Sodré, 2012, p. 184)

Approaching sensitively to investigate what lies between "self" and "other" requires careful dialogue, exercises in shifting perspective, and deliberate empathy. These are not simple tasks. Educators, too, must repeat the same paths multiple times for methodologies to become clear and embodied.

Our classes are usually spaces of progressive discussion, where students feel comfortable debating political and social issues. We aim to intersect ethnoracial dynamics with classroom practice. Life is inseparable from artistic and craft practices, and this stance reinforces the type of ceramics and classes we seek to exercise.

> It is in the incompleteness of being, knowing oneself as such, that education is founded as a permanent process. Women and men become educable as they recognise themselves as unfinished. It was not education that made them educable, but awareness of their incompleteness that generated their educability. It is also through this incompleteness that we become conscious and are inserted into the ongoing search that underpins hope. I am not hopeful, I once said, out of mere stubbornness, but out of ontological necessity. (Freire, 1996/2014, p. 57)

It is important to note that the courses and workshops mentioned here are both theoretical and practical, with a fundamental theoretical basis. The first purely theoretical experience took place between September and October 2019, with the course "Feito à Mão: A Prática Artesã de Artistas Populares Brasileiros" (Handmade: The Craft Practice of Brazilian Popular Artists) at SESC Pompeia, São Paulo. We discussed texts by authors addressing so-called popular art, observing the work of artists similarly described as popular beyond ceramics, including textiles, plant fibres, leather, and wood. This course was an opportunity to broaden the discussions from my master's dissertation, completed a few months earlier with a focus on ceramics, to include other materialities.

Another notable experience in this theoretical context was the Ceramics Laboratory "Ancestral Future", in which I participated in January 2022. According to the group's own material, the laboratory was:

> a guidance and mentoring programme for artists or individuals interested in creating with clay, approached from a perspective connected to ancestrality. The intention was to revisit aesthetic and visual experiences of peoples from the Joinville region, Santa Catarina, and other parts of the national territory, proposing an investigation of the history of art and ceramics from a non-hegemonic perspective. (Bandeira et al., 2024, p. 9)

Conceived by researchers and ceramists Paula Delai Riedi and Isabela Terranova, the project was supported by the Joinville City Council, Santa Catarina, via the 2021 Aldir Blanc Law[23]. Both in-person and online meetings took place from January to March 2022, resulting in a book whose sales now support various projects within the Guarani Ka'aguy Mirim Porã Village, located in the Tarumã Indigenous Land in Araquari, Santa Catarina.

I offered a class entitled "Saberes da Cerâmica Ancestral, Indígena e Afrodiaspórica de Comunidades Artesãs Latino-americanas" (Knowledge of Ancestral, Indigenous, and Afro-Diasporic Ceramics from Latin American Artisan Communities), in which we discussed terms such as "territory" and "ancestrality". We articulated how, in Brazil and Latin America, these ideas complement each other and create valuable knowledge complexes maintained generation after generation through the work of traditional ceramists.

More recently, I participated in another laboratory, again at SESC Pompeia, São Paulo, addressing these and other issues in which I am currently engaged as part of my doctoral research (Figure 11). At the invitation of professor and artist Larissa Macêdo, we explored "the language of the earth" as an ancestral technology in dialogue with time. The Laboratory of Technologies and Arts: Perspectives for Decolonising Thought produced a publication available online (https://www.projetoater.com/desdobramentos?lightbox=dataItem-m8w627ve).

Figure 11. *Class from the course "Cerâmica e Ancestralidade" (Ceramics and Ancestrality) working at SESC Pompeia in 2025*

Credits. Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva

[23] The Lei Aldir Blanc (2021) is a federal law aimed at promoting culture in Brazil, established as an emergency policy to support cultural workers and spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our sessions are grounded in presence, that is, with materials previously planned and organised for that specific experience, and with the observation of images in books and videos shared in class. The open and attentive dialogue, nourished by the care that Yasmin Saracho, educator and partner in the more recent practical courses, and I devoted to the students in their creations, shaped the modelling of a counter-colonial care methodology. Following bell hooks (1994/2013), we aim to establish classrooms as "places of enthusiasm" (p. 16), and from there, cultivate learning communities of ceramists committed to maintaining ancestral knowledge — not only through the reproduction of techniques (Figure 12), but also understanding the importance of accessing and continuing the traditions of master artisans from indigenous, *quilombola*, riverside, *sertanejo* (rural), and *caiçara* communities — the peoples of the forests, the sertões (hinterlands), and the waters (Bispo dos Santos, 2018).

Figure 12. *Finishing clay pots under the supervision of master Joana Fidelix*[24]*, Macuxi ceramist, at Raposa Serra do Sol, an indigenous territory in the state of Roraima, November 2024*

Credits. Dayana Soares Paes

5. Final Considerations

Ceramics and clay crafts carry meanings far beyond the object being produced, embodying skills and gestures peculiar to shaping a pot or pan. Far more than mere products, these objects possess immateriality, a subjectivity that carries symbolic values. Each clay piece carries a part of the territory — not only as a dwelling for the body but also as a sacred space for the soul (Xakriabá, 2020).

Throughout my trajectory as an educator and ceramist, I have learned that teaching ceramics is, above all, an exercise in listening to the material. This exercise unfolds in the time each person needs while accessing the stories that emerge from digging into the

[24] Master Joana Fidelix is an Indigenous woman of the Macuxi people and lives between the Raposa Serra do Sol territory and Boa Vista, the capital of the state of Roraima. The cultural heritage and practice of master Joana and other Macuxi ceramists were documented in the doctoral research of Dayana Paes, professor at the Federal University of Roraima (Paes, 2022).

earth, recalling what is intimate to the memory of the hands. Clay invites us to presence and care, and within this invitation lies a dialogical potential.

More than a technique in itself, ceramics is a living, ancestral language that dances through time. While simultaneously acting as a document of our ancestors, it also allows us to construct learning experiences deeply connected to the body, the territory, and memory. Perhaps the fundamental basis of teaching ceramics is the ability to create welcoming and experimental spaces, in which each person can approach clay from their own experiences and imagine other ways of existing and acting in the world (Freire, 1968/2016; Prado et al., 2024). Valuing ancestral knowledge, respecting the time of the material and the people, and recognising in ceramics the culture of traditional communities enhances this educational practice as a political and counter-colonial act.

The transformative power of clay may lie in its capacity to bring together aesthetics, culture, and education in a single gesture. We learn patience, listening, and sharing as we are invited to create with our hands. Beyond accessing this creative potential — which is already considerable — we aim to activate a re-enchantment with this materiality that is simultaneously mythical, collective, and historical. Therefore, this represents both an attitude and a political thought about this making and its knowledge. I approach the idea of teaching and learning with clay as "a sphere of self-knowledge, responsibility, freedom, hope, and healing" (Rufino, 2021, p. 12). We are subjects affected by the world and also producers of it; therefore, by touching a materiality that carries the cosmological memories of peoples, we also have the opportunity to engage with knowledge transmitted among bodies, communities, and territories throughout the ages. Clay, in its careful and patient creation, preserves traces of life's journey: animals, plants, minerals; everything washed, blown, and rolled down the mountain over time. Thus, our primary educational task is to practise Nego Bispo's idea of "beginning-middle-beginning" (Bispo dos Santos, 2018), and as a grandchild generation, care for the knowledge that converges and reaches us.

Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado

References

Bandeira, D. R., Iarsen, N., Oliveira, D. R, Riedi, P. D., & Terranova, I. (2024). *Um barro lançado ao futuro: Laboratório de cerâmica futuro ancestral*. Ed. das Autoras.

Bispo dos Santos, A. (2018). Somos da terra. *PISEAGRAMA*, (12), p. 44–51.

Descola, P. (2016). *Outras naturezas, outras culturas* (C. Ciscato, Trans.). Editora 34.

Freire, P. (2016). *Pedagogia do oprimido* (62nd ed.). Paz e Terra. (Original work published 1968)

Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogia da autonomia: Saberes necessários à prática educativa* (25th ed.). Paz e Terra. (Original work published 1996)

Freire. P. (2013). *Pedagogia da esperança: Um reencontro com a pedagogia do oprimido*. Paz e Terra. (Original work published 1992)

Gonzalez, L. (1988). A categoria político-cultural de amefricanidade. *Tempo Brasileiro*, (92/93), 69–82.

hooks, b. (2013). *Ensinando a transgredir: A educação como prática da liberdade* (M. B. Cipolla, Trans.). Wmf Martins Fontes. (Original work published 1994)

hooks, b. (2021). *Ensinando comunidade: Uma pedagogia da esperança* (K. Cardoso, Trans.). Elefante. (Original work published 2003)

Martins, L. M. (2021). *Performance do tempo espiralar: Poéticas do corpo-tela*. Cobogó.

Paes, D. S. A. (2022). *Vovó barro (ko'ko Non): Cerâmica Macuxi em terras de Makunaimî – Roraima* [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho]. Repositório Institucional da Unesp. http://hdl.handle.net/11449/238112

Prado, D., Carnevalli, F., & Moulin, G. (Eds.). (2024). *Barro — Caderno-ensaio 1*. Instituto Tomie Ohtake.

Rufino, L. (2021). *Vence-demanda: Educação e descolonização*. Mórula.

Silva, M. A. A. da. (2023). Cerâmica e as artes do povo no Brasil. *Revista Noctua, II*(8), p. 23–35. http://dx.doi.org/10.26892/noctua.v2i8p23-35

Silva, M. A. A. da. (2019). *O encontro dos rios: A Associação de Cerâmica da Barra (BA) no contexto da arte popular* [Master's thesis, Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho]. Repositório Institucional da Unesp. http://hdl.handle.net/11449/183212

Silva, M. A. A. da. (2017). *O tempo é um só: Procedimentos de investigação na cerâmica e na arte popular* [Final course project, Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho]. Repositório Institucional da Unesp. http://hdl.handle.net/11449/203957

Silva, M. A. A. da. (2015). *Cultura local na arte/educação: A oficina artesanal da cerâmica saramenha* [Final course project, Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho].

Sodré, M. (2012). *Reinventando a educação: Diversidade, descolonização e redes*. Vozes.

Xakriabá, C. (2020). Amansar o giz. *PISEAGRAMA*, (14), p. 110–117.

Biographical Note

Mariana de Araujo Alves da Silva is a doctoral candidate in Foundations of Art Teaching and Learning at the School of Communications and Arts, Universidade de São Paulo, supported by a scholarship from the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico. She holds a master's degree in Arts and a bachelor's and licentiate degree in Visual Arts from Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho. She is a member of the Multidisciplinary Group for Study and Research in Art and Education. Her research focuses on artisan communities, traditional ceramics, and popular art, emphasising social aspects within Brazilian and Latin American contexts. She teaches courses on art, ceramics, and the temporality of artisanal practices,

and her artistic work is oriented towards the body–territory concept from a counter-colonial perspective.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7475-7683

E-mail: mariana.araujo.silva@usp.br

Address: Programa de Pós-graduação em Artes Visuais, Departamento de Artes Plásticas, ECA/USP, Av. Prof. Lúcio Martins Rodrigues, 443 – Prédio 5 – Butantã, São Paulo–SP, 05508-010, Brasil

Submitted: 23/05/2025 | Accepted: 11/07/2025