

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Blackening Careers Beyond Barriers: Intersectional Experiences of Black Women in Imperial Careers

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how Black Brazilian women navigate and transform careers in the fields of medicine, law, and engineering, professions historically characterized by elitism, racism, and sexism. Employing intersectionality as a theoretical framework, methodological approach, and activist tool, the study analyses personal narratives to demonstrate how these women confront systemic oppression, develop racial and gender consciousness, and challenge the exclusionary norms within their respective fields. The analysis is guided by three principal dimensions: (1) the awareness of occupying spaces historically denied to them, (2) encounters with elite, White, and male-dominated environments and their associated controlling images, and (3) collective resistance and the redefinition of professional trajectories. The concept of Blackening Careers is introduced to depict how these women resist marginalization and redefine career meanings through social justice efforts and collective action. These findings contribute to feminist and decolonial perspectives on careers within contexts shaped by racialized and colonial legacies.

1 | Introduction

Research concerning gender, race, and employment has progressively acknowledged the influence of intersecting systems of inequality in shaping careers (Carangio 2023; Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023). Studies have examined how race, gender, and migration intersect to shape unequal career progression among racialized women in both elite and low-paid professions (Carangio 2023; Kele et al. 2022). However, the position of Black women within historically prestigious and influential professions remains insufficiently examined, especially in the Global South. This gap holds significance because these professions continue to delineate what is regarded as legitimate within organizational and professional spheres, concurrently perpetuating hierarchies of exclusion.

In Brazil, the careers of law, medicine, and engineering, frequently characterized as “imperial careers” (Coelho 1999), were historically established to reinforce the privileges of White

male elites and continue to be profoundly influenced by elitism, racism, and sexism. This paper employs these professions as an analytical framework to examine how intersectionality affects the career development of Black Brazilian women. In doing so, we adhere to recent calls for intersectional research that not only documents inequalities but also challenges entrenched privileges and promotes inclusion through critical, context-aware analysis (Rodriguez et al. 2025). Their career trajectories exemplify both the obstacles posed by imperial legacies and the strategies of resistance and re-signification that emerge in response to these legacies.

Although this study is rooted in the Brazilian context, its contributions extend beyond national borders. Professions characterized by imperial and colonial histories perpetuate exclusionary practices across various national and organizational settings (Öztürk et al. 2015). By examining how Black Brazilian women navigate and redefine “imperial careers,” this paper contributes to broader discourses on inequality (Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023),

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career development, and the persistent impact of imperialism within professional domains of life.

In Brazil, specifically, the presence of Black women (referred to as *pretas* and *pardas*) has increased within university environments, leading to greater representation in skilled occupations. Nonetheless, ongoing inequalities within the labor market (IPEA 2020) continue to restrict their ability to develop and maintain satisfying careers. Although statistical data highlight these disparities, there remains a paucity of research concerning the lived career trajectories of Black women striving to establish themselves in historically prestigious professions.

Against this background, our research question is as follows: How do Black Brazilian women construct and transform their careers within? Building on intersectionality as theory, methodology, and activism, we introduce the concept of Blackening Careers (Carneiro 2015). This concept highlights how Black Brazilian women re-signify imperial careers through resistance, collective action, and intersectional awareness, thereby redefining them as meaningful and empowering. By advancing Blackening Careers, the paper contributes to feminist, intersectional, and decolonial debates in career studies, offering a framework that territorializes intersectionality in Brazil while also extending its analytical reach to other contexts marked by imperial and colonial legacies. The article proceeds as follows: First, we develop the theoretical framing of intersectionality and imperial careers; second, we outline our methodology; third, we present the empirical narratives; and finally, we discuss the implications of Blackening Careers for organizational studies and career theory.

2 | Intersectionality, Black Women, and Imperial Careers

To delve into the discussion surrounding the living and working circumstances of Black women within Brazilian society is to embark on an exploration of the intricate process of slave colonization, a pivotal force in shaping the social hierarchy that has systematically pushed Black women to the fringes of Brazilian societal structures (Gonzalez 1984). The historical framework of racism has effectively underpinned the structure of Brazilian society, affording symbolic and tangible advantages to individuals identified as White (Cardoso 2010).

Hence, both White and Black women and men are historically entwined by multidimensional axes of race, gender, and class (Akotirene 2019). In Brazil, the myth of racial democracy not only silenced critical discourses but also fostered racialized spaces by dictating the presence of certain subjects in specific professions, thereby circumscribing career possibilities (Machado Júnior et al. 2018). Engaging in the discourse on careers involves examining the complex interplay of socioeconomic structures, labor market dynamics, cultural values, and historical contexts that influence organizational functioning and interpersonal relations. This raises the need to examine how racialized and gendered structures are reconfigured when Black women move beyond the roles historically assigned to them and enter professional spaces built to exclude them.

It is essential to acknowledge that as these arrangements change, the context itself also transforms (Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Because careers develop within specific milieus (Mayrhofer et al. 2007), understanding the elements that define the analytical landscapes they occupy and the trajectories they follow is crucial. This requires avoiding the view of careers as isolated individual actions within a vocational vacuum (Sullivan and Baruch 2009) and instead focusing on the historical dimension of career development, which is intrinsically connected to individuals' life experiences over time (Hall 2002).

This relational perspective on careers is particularly pertinent for understanding how race, gender, and class shape not only access to professional environments but also the perceptions, constraints, and possibilities associated with career progression across different contexts. As Kele et al. (2022) illustrate, ethnic minority women in the retail industry face complex, intersectional obstacles stemming from organizational cultures, racialized stereotypes, and limited mobility opportunities, even within sectors that are often regarded as more accessible or inclusive.

These findings align with broader conceptualizations of career development as a dynamic process influenced by the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions (de Pádua Carvalho 2015). Acknowledging the subjective aspects of career trajectories does not negate their objective restrictions (Hall 2002; Moore et al. 2007). Instead, both perspectives are interconnected and mutually enlightening. Subjective experiences, such as perceptions of belonging, identity negotiation, and resistance, serve to enhance our understanding of how structural forces shape tangible opportunities and limitations.

Accordingly, we adopt a comprehensive perspective on career development that transcends linear progression within organizational hierarchies (de Pádua Carvalho 2015), as well as the static positioning of individuals in social environments. Instead, we emphasize how systemic inequalities, particularly the intersections of racism, sexism, and elitism, shape both the symbolic and material aspects of career progression (Edeh et al. 2022). These forces, alongside other social markers such as disability, nationality, and religion, highlight the significance of employing an intersectional framework to analyze career mobility and professional inclusion (Fraga and Rocha-de-Oliveira 2020).

This significance is magnified when considering professions that have historically been associated with imperial connotations. By "imperial careers," we refer to roles that exert influence both symbolically and materially, elevating individuals occupying such positions (Coelho 1999). Professions such as those in medicine, law, and engineering (Coelho 1999) have traditionally been dominated by elites, notably White men of high social status and standing. Such elites have not only sustained these professions but have also been elevated by them, thereby reinforcing the dominance of a particular social group. Aspiring candidates who deviated from these standards faced barriers to entry, barriers carefully designed to limit access to those who did not conform to the established norm.

Coelho (1999) offers the contextual background for the development of these professions within Brazilian society, demonstrating how professional groups, through the complex process of establishing their identities and social positions, became integral to shaping the dominant pattern of White social dynamics in Brazil (Coelho 1999). The domain of imperial careers, hence, provides a valuable platform for examining the barriers that promote social injustices, both in objective and subjective aspects, within the career advancement of marginalized groups. In response, this study explicitly concentrates on Black women, who face access restrictions that are deeply rooted in social and historical constructs.

As delineated by C. Bento (2022), the ascent of Black individuals into esteemed roles brimming with power and authority is often perceived as a disruption of White-dominated spaces. Black women, however, frequently find themselves in undervalued and undercompensated roles. In media portrayals, for instance, Black women have been systematically relegated to depictions as samba school dancers and domestic workers in hypersexualized contexts, rarely portrayed as protagonists or intellectuals (Gonzalez 1993).

Hence, Black women are situated outside the influential domains of imperial careers. The establishment of controlling images effectively determines which professions or career trajectories are considered “typical” for Black women, thereby perpetuating both symbolic and tangible forms of exclusion (Collins 2019). The material reflection of this subordination, predominantly experienced by Black women, is evident in their disproportionate representation in domestic roles (Teixeira 2021; Teixeira et al. 2020), media portrayals, and incidents of everyday violence. This starkly highlights the persistent endurance of ongoing subjugation that has its origins in the era of slavery (Teixeira 2021).

Embedded within the complex fabric of Brazilian society, characterized by its historical, cultural, and social complexities, Black women have encountered a triad of challenges: racism and sexism from White men, sexism from Black men, and racism from White women (Gonzalez 2018). The dimension of class further complicates the intersectional analysis and understanding of the subjugation experienced by Black women. Constituting the foundation of the societal hierarchy, Black women occupy a position at the confluence of poverty, racism, and sexism (Akotirene 2019; Crenshaw 2002a, 2002b). Consequently, unveiling the apex of this hierarchy, constructed by and for men, White individuals, and cisheteropatriarchy, becomes an essential engagement. Such an act reveals the material and symbolic mechanisms that have vested members of society's upper echelons as both beneficiaries and perpetrators of this complex system, which is intricately woven with the dimensions of gender, race, and class.

Although intersectionality was legitimized by its nomination in the United States (Crenshaw 2002a, 2002b), it originates from the theorizing and struggles of Black women who have historically been excluded from hegemonic positions of power. Even within an imperialist country, Black women are not a part of the dominant axis. In this sense, their knowledge is produced from marginalized locations. In this paper, we territorialize

intersectionality in Brazil, situating it in the lived experiences of pretas and pardas who face specific racialized and gendered exclusions in their pursuit of careers in imperial careers. In doing so, we also resist colonial binaries of North and South, treating them not as fixed geographies, nevertheless as relations of power (Connell 2007; Lugones 2014). This framing ensures that intersectionality is not applied as a framework imported from elsewhere, nevertheless as one re-signified through the context of Brazilian Black women's struggles.

The designation of Black women as a distinct category holds profound importance; as articulated by Bairros (1995), this category is constructed through the synthesis of experiences as Black individuals (perceived through the lens of race) and as women (perceived through the lens of gender). Carneiro (2003) emphasizes that racism significantly influences the formation of gender hierarchies within the Brazilian society. Black feminism arises as a response to this circumstance, aiming to resist the fragmentation of hierarchical dynamics that have historically marginalized Black women.

Recognizing the importance of understanding the lived experiences of Black women within the contexts of racism, elitism, and patriarchy (Gonzalez 1982), our research investigates their efforts to establish careers in imperial careers. This perspective represents an advancement in redefining issues of race and intersectionality within social and occupational interactions (Carneiro 2003; Akotirene 2019). By examining the detailed narratives of Black women as they confront these complex challenges, we contribute to the ongoing discourse on empowerment and social transformation, thereby promoting discussions on equality, representation, and the reconfiguration of systems of power.

3 | Methodologies

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative, deliberately avoiding any tendency to stereotype or quantify the narratives provided by the research subjects. Instead, we emphasize the inherent subjective elements within their individual trajectories (Rodrigues and Menezes 2013). The foundation of this research is intricately linked to intersectional feminist research methodologies (Ratts and Rios 2010). Within our methodology and subsequent analysis, a personalized approach has been adopted, presenting the interviewees' narratives in their own words. This strategy highly values the nuances of pauses, punctuation, and grammar, all aimed at collaboratively crafting this document.

In adopting this approach, we deliberately abstain from imposing a singular narrative interpretation, acknowledging the existence of multiple valid perspectives. In doing so, we respect the diversity of viewpoints and facilitate the unfolding of narratives from both the researchers' and participants' unique vantage points. This approach ensures that the narrative remains comprehensive and genuine, accurately reflecting the lived experiences and voices of those integral to our study.

Conducted amid the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, this study encompassed interviews with a cohort of three lawyers, three doctors, and three engineers. The focal

participants of this research were Black women who had attained degrees in professions traditionally constructed with an imperial connotation, namely medicine, law, and engineering. The subjects were selected through a nonprobability sampling approach, specifically utilizing the “snowball” technique (Heckathorn and Cameron 2017). Our initial contact with the medical professionals was initiated via Instagram, following the identification of relevant groups to which they belonged. Subsequently, each contacted informant directed us to another potential participant. In the case of lawyers and engineers, the initial interview contacts were established based on personal recommendations from participants within the research group, including two of the authors. Once again, those who agreed to participate further indicated additional potential participants.

The number of interviews conducted was determined based on the scope of the subject matter and the complexity of the study at hand (Minayo 2015). While this constitutes a small sample, it is consistent with qualitative approaches that prioritize depth over breadth (Ozturk et al. 2020). The focus of our research is not on statistical generalization, nevertheless on generating rich, contextualized accounts that reveal how structural inequalities and intersecting identities shape career trajectories. Such an approach aligns with intersectional qualitative research, which emphasizes the value of lived experiences and their capacity to illuminate broader social dynamics (Crenshaw 2002a, 2002b; Collins and Bilge 2020).

Narrative interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format that aimed to delve deeply into specific aspects. These interviews were designed to encourage participants to openly share significant aspects of their lives and the contextual dynamics that have influenced them (Bauer and Gaskell 2017). All interviews were conducted online via Google Meet, recorded, and transcribed after obtaining informed consent from the interviewees, who signed an informed consent form. To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, pseudonyms that represent Brazilian Black women and are considered by the authors to be honorary and memorable were utilized: Lélia, Sueli, and Dandara (doctors); Carolina Maria, Maria Felipa, and Conceição (engineers); and Tereza, Beatriz, and Anastacia (lawyers).

The transcripts of the interviews were subjected to a meticulous process of organization, coding, and analysis through an intersectional perspective, involving the following steps: (a) a critical examination of the analytical categories employed to explore social issues, (b) an investigation of the interconnections established among social categories, (c) an acknowledgment of the invisibility of certain realities or social problems, and (d) an integration of the situated perspective of researchers who investigate and construct the analyzed reality (the researchers themselves). Through intersectional analysis, we actively counteract the tendency to essentialize the multifaceted aspects of Brazilian Black women by emphasizing the nuances related to dates, locations, histories, and contexts (C. Nogueira 2013).

Furthermore, we customized the intersectionality analytical approach, acknowledging that this methodological instrument for understanding the interaction of identity aspects is neither inflexible nor restrictive in its considerations of gender, race, and class markers (Collins and Bilge 2020). The intersectional

analysis revealed three significant interpretive patterns and interpersonal career development processes. Essentially, these three patterns appeared with distinct themes and dimensions about the progression of the interviewees' careers and professional trajectories. Accordingly, we emphasize the following key findings: (1) the acknowledgment of being a Black woman within a space traditionally denied to them, (2) the encounter with a White, male, and elite (imperial) environment characterized by racist and sexist manifestations of control, and (3) the function of collective resistance as a mechanism for coexistence within the racist, sexist, and elitist framework while concurrently redefining imperial careers to incorporate Black identity.

In conducting this study, we acknowledge that our positionalities impacted access, interpretation, and analysis (Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023). The interviews were performed by a Black woman researcher who herself is part of one of the imperial careers under investigation, which facilitated rapport and trust with participants as they shared experiences of racism and sexism within these professional domains. As the primary author, she also directed the analytical process, shaping the research framework and interpretation through her situated experience. The second and third authors contributed through supervision before fieldwork and through collaborative reflexivity during data analysis and manuscript preparation. The sequence of authorship reflects the respective levels of contribution across all stages of the study.

These reflections were collectively undertaken, drawing on each author's expertise, whether related to lived experience, engagement with decolonial and intersectional scholarship, or academic seniority. Following Black feminist epistemologies (Collins and Bilge 2020; Akotirene 2019; Carneiro 2003), and in line with calls to foreground intersectional reflexivity and researcher positionality in fieldwork (Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023), we understand knowledge as situated and co-constructed among researchers and participants, rather than emerging from a neutral standpoint. This reflexive stance underscores that the methodological contribution of this study lies both in the narratives collected and in how they were interpreted through the intersection of academic expertise and lived experience.

4 | Empirical Findings: Blackening the Careers of Black Women

The narratives central to this study offer an intersectional portrayal of how Black women confront and navigate structural barriers in their pursuit of careers within fields that have historically been characterized as imperial. Our analysis is anchored in an intersectional analytical framework, informed by a Black feminist perspective on processes of career transformation and empowerment, often referred to as “Blackening” (Carneiro 2003). This framework engages in a constructive dialogue with Hall's (2002) insights, who conceptualizes a career as extending beyond mere work, encompassing an experiential journey across various facets of life.

Throughout the course of our study, the central narratives presented by Black women reveal the complex interactions within the Brazilian societal landscape, characterized by the

widespread influences of racism and sexism. These influences transcend the domains of work and career, permeating the very fabric of these women's lives. The narratives expose the profound ways in which the Brazilian context influences and shapes their experiences, encapsulating both the challenges they face and their resilience.

4.1 | The Awareness of Being a Black Woman in a Historically Denied Space

During this segment, we explore the narratives shared by our interviewees, Black Brazilian women, who articulately describe their personal journeys through the development of their racial awareness. The recognition that Black women experience a process of racial awakening, thereby embracing their Black identity within this context, significantly challenges the illusion of racial democracy that obscures the true nature of racism in Brazil (O. Nogueira 2007). This moment of recognition marks the starting point of what we conceptualize as Blackening Careers: a process through which exclusion is resisted, and professional spaces are re-signified.

In our initial example, as demonstrated by Tereza's account, we observe the convergence of class, gender, and race. Tereza's articulation reveals that her commitment to pursuing legal education, subsequent entry into a law firm, and even her choice of attire reflect a significant perception: The legal profession is frequently not regarded as an appropriate domain for Black individuals. Her narrative encapsulates the complex interaction of systemic barriers rooted in race and class that hinder her progress within this professional sphere.

I think it is, it is challenging in relation to these professions that are considered elite. They are not for Black people because the cost is very high, right? Is it beyond the investment we need to make in college, which is no longer easy, that the dedication required in that extremely hostile environment is proper? Then, you go to the labour market, even worse, right? So, for Black people, as it is not an environment of Black people, the Black person who frequents that environment is already something different there in that environment, right? Environment with only White, only White specks, you don't like Blacks there. The only one there draws a lot of attention, and it requires much more of your clothes to be able to discuss it again.

(TEREZA)

Throughout this passage, Tereza highlights the striking absence of Black people in her professional life. This stark observation highlights the complex interplay of gender, race, and class, which collectively contribute to the creation of marginalized roles for Black women. Conversely, White women are afforded greater opportunities and pathways within the formal labor market (Carneiro 2003), particularly in career trajectories symbolically and tangibly associated with positions of authority. In this sense, Tereza's experience exemplifies the first movement of

Blackening Careers: resisting structural exclusion while insisting on presence in imperial careers.

Throughout the narratives, a recurring theme emerges: the presence of multifaceted oppressions that pervade various spheres of the interviewees' lives. Lélia's account of her experiences within the field of medicine serves as a poignant example. She highlights the profound hardships she has endured throughout her journey. Gonzalez (1993) analyzes the symbiosis between sexism and racism, showing how these factors operate as symbolic agents that shape the perception and treatment of Black women within Brazil. For Gonzalez, this fusion culminates in violence against Black women, a phenomenon that elucidates why even middle-class Black women, despite their socioeconomic standing, become targets of discrimination, as expressed in Lélia's narrative:

Medical school lasted six years, and it was six years of a lot of suffering because when it was not something directly with me, it was an environment that perceived me as very bad, you know? When you understand what medicine proposes, what medicine does, and understand that you are just another vulnerable body in the middle of that thing. That thing can make you sick, and that made me sick, right? I got sick seeing the patients who had the same colour as me. I got sick listening to the comments of the medical professors. I got sick seeing how people treated patients in medicine until I reached the point where I formed like this without knowing if I truly wanted that for me. Because I thought it was nonsense, I saw a lot of nonsense in college, especially regarding the last two years; but we only live the practice, right? I saw a lot of nonsense, much nonsense, but that was it, and it wasn't one, it wasn't an easy trajectory. It wasn't, no. I don't think a Black person survives easily in medicine; I think she adapts, right? Who can? (...) I learned to like it a lot, right? Because I was able to find myself more in this more social side of medicine. Yes, I couldn't find myself. There's a lot in medicine; there's a lot of that phrase, "Ah, do medicine for love". There is no such thing because no one enters medicine because they love it.

(LÉLIA)

Through Lélia's narrative, we observe the pervasive violence ingrained within the lives of Black women. Her experience exemplifies how the medical field, despite its social prestige, perpetuates exclusionary practices that continually position Black women as hyper-vulnerable bodies. Witnessing the mistreatment of patients sharing her racial identity and anticipating the possibility that her own body could be subjected to similar treatment underscores the constant precariousness characterizing Black women's interactions with institutional settings. By recognizing herself as both a patient and a professional, Lélia reveals the instability of belonging within an imperial

profession. Her account demonstrates that Blackening Careers is not about romanticizing resilience, nevertheless about how Black women navigate systemic violence while re-establishing their roles within professions historically denied to them.

I am a great researcher. I write, and I write very well; I also find it easy to write articles. (...) Therefore, this is something I excel at, and I want to keep doing it. However, I often think about returning to the clinic. I need to face this fear. I'm afraid of the clinic. It's like I've somehow internalized that I don't belong there, that it's not for me, or that I'm not good enough for it. I can't quite explain it, but I need to resolve this issue better if I want to continue with this project. Part of my choice to teach is related to my experiences with medicine, you know? Both training experiences and later moments when I lacked confidence in myself and my ability to work in the clinic, you know? I'm terrified; I panic, I feel like I'm doing everything wrong, and I'm aware that I'm capable of what I do because I plan to do it, you know? But there's one thing that undermines me, and that is myself. This kind of thinking weighs heavily on me. God, I don't know how to do this, I don't know, you know? That was an overwhelming burden, spending forty hours serving thousands of people a day, and I kept thinking, Oh my God, what if I prescribed something wrong? I'd review everything I prescribed and reread my medical records at the end of each workday. It was a weighty burden to carry, you know? I believe that, in some way, this influenced my decision. I miss the clinic; I miss it very much because I truly enjoy caring for people.

(DANDARA)

Dandara's account highlights her struggle with self-confidence in relation to her professional responsibilities. Yet, this is not merely an individual issue: It reflects a broader historical and structural framework of racism and sexism that undermines the emotional well-being of Black women in imperial careers. Her description of meticulously reviewing medical records outside working hours illustrates how systemic doubt is internalized as self-surveillance, producing exhaustion and fear of failure. Rather than reading this as a personal deficit, we interpret it as evidence of how the process of Blackening Careers operates: Women like Dandara carry the double burden of professional competence and structural disbelief. Her narrative exemplifies how Black women simultaneously resist and re-signify their careers, making visible the tension between individual agency and institutionalized violence.

Anastacia's account evidences her determination to persist in law despite recurring experiences of exclusion. Her narrative conveys how moments of hesitancy and self-doubt are countered by memories of diligent study and persistent dedication, affirming her right to occupy spaces that have been historically

denied to Black women. Rather than interpreting this resilience as an individual triumph alone, we see it as part of the process of Blackening Careers: Anastacia's assertion that "I studied, I know as much as he does, and I will join this battle" exemplifies both resistance to structural disbelief and the re-signification of what it means for a Black woman to belong in an imperial profession. Her account makes visible the tension between individual agency and systemic violence, showing how career trajectories are forged through negotiation with the enduring legacies of racism, sexism, and elitism.

For certain interviewees, a fundamental recalibration of their perceptions of imperial careers became necessary. Initially regarded as domains of professional and personal fulfillment, financial success, and social respect, these career paths revealed themselves to be hostile environments that compelled them to explore alternative directions. Dandara's trajectory exemplifies this: After practising within medicine, she confronted cumulative frustrations rooted in racism, sexism, and elitism that led her to transition into academia, expecting a more progressive and supportive environment. Yet, her narrative makes clear that oppression did not vanish; rather, it re-emerged in new forms, demonstrating the fluidity of its manifestations.

In this regard, Dandara's account illustrates how Blackening Careers involves both resistance to exclusion and the redefinition of professional belonging. Her disillusionment with academia, ostensibly a more inclusive space, demonstrates that even spaces regarded as progressive remain influenced by Whiteness and elitism. Simultaneously, her perseverance in continuing to operate within these professions underscores the dialectic between individual agency and structural violence. While her resilience challenges marginalization, it remains intertwined with the unequal institutional conditions that consistently attempt to displace Black women from positions of authority.

In a university, you might expect to find a progressive environment, right? For instance, the people who are there have a worldview, yes, with class consciousness as a theme, right? Like a certain one, whatever. A certain, certain reflection on issues such as racism, right? Machismo and such. (...) There are often times when you think like this: "My God, I'm here dedicating my life to this". So, you know, and that is it. Still, inside the university, there is something that is sometimes even more difficult than outside it, you are debating the people who are sure that they are free from any racism. Consequently, nothing from that debate is for them. So, it's very exhausting to be inside. Because people are sure that they are the most progressive people in the world, antiracists, Black Lives Matter, you know? Like hashtags on Instagram, people are sure that they are the most left-wing people in the world, and then these same people are xenophobic, racist, sexist people daily, you know? And you can't dialogue with them, you know?

(DANDARA)

Carolina Maria's journey offers another compelling illustration. Even as an engineering student, she recognized the pressures of a curriculum shaped by market logics that prioritized organizational profit over worker well-being. Confronted with these constraints, she made the pivotal decision to redirect her path toward academic pursuits in administration, motivated by a desire to generate knowledge that could contribute to social welfare rather than reproduce technical expertise. As she explains,

I found it quite challenging to fit in and find my place in the master's program... because I came from an engineering background, with certain expectations that I needed a specific subject, I realised it wasn't exactly what I wanted.

Her narrative demonstrates how Blackening Careers involves re-signifying professional pathways: transforming the meaning of success from narrow, elite definitions of engineering prestige into trajectories oriented toward collective care. By doing so, she unsettles the assumed neutrality of imperial careers, exposing how their very structures channel Black women into limited boxes and how refusing these boxes becomes a political act of career making.

Drawing a connection between Dandara's disappointment with academia and Carolina Maria's redirection of her career, a clear pattern emerges: Blackening Careers involves re-signifying professional trajectories when imperial careers fail to deliver on their promises of stability, fulfillment, or recognition. These accounts demonstrate that the challenges Black women face are not confined to a single profession but instead are embedded in the wider institutional logics that continually attempt to constrain their possibilities.

Anastácia's career path contributes an additional dimension to this narrative. After dedicating 15 years to the legal profession without attaining the anticipated financial stability, she transitioned to social work in pursuit of security, only to encounter new forms of precarity. Her testimony illustrates how the structures of imperial careers perpetuate exclusion not solely through explicit racism and sexism but at the same time, via economic marginalization. As she remarks, "My salary is not particularly high... but I have a certain stability that I didn't have in law school... I truly liked being a lawyer, but I had the opportunity to pursue a career in social work."

Collectively, these accounts demonstrate that Blackening Careers does not represent a straightforward story of resilience or individual triumph. Instead, it signifies a continuous process of confronting, resisting, and re-signifying professions that have historically been denied to Black women. This process exposes how agency is invariably intertwined with structural violence: Black women forge spaces for themselves within imperial careers; however, in doing so, they also highlight the persistence of racialized and gendered exclusions. In response, Blackening Careers embodies both an act of survival and a political reconfiguration of what it means to pursue a career in contexts marked by colonial legacies.

4.2 | The Encounter With a White, Male, and Elite (Imperial) Space and the Racist and Sexist Images of Control

This segment concentrates on uncovering narratives that underscore the journeys of Black women navigating academic and professional environments that are not designed to include them. Their encounters with Whiteness, elitism, and sexism have become fundamental aspects of their career development. Lélia's account exemplifies the rigid structures embedded within professions that have historically been inaccessible to Black women. In the medical field, her presence was not recognized as that of a future medical professional; nevertheless, it was diminished to a racialized and sexualized image. As she recalls,

When I arrived in the North, I became the sexualised *Globeleza* [a hypersexualised Carnival muse portrayed on Brazilian national television] to all the men in college, and it bothered me because older people did not respect me. I heard terrible things like, "Oh, you must be very hot in bed."

This narrative highlights how Black women are subjected to what Collins (2019) refers to as "controlling images," which serve to discipline and confine their presence in elite spaces. For Lélia, hypersexualization functioned as a mechanism of disqualification, reinforcing the perception that she did not belong to the medical profession. Such dynamics exemplify how imperial careers are maintained not only through barriers of access, but at the same time, through the daily reproduction of racist and sexist stereotypes that seek to exclude Black women even after their entry. Simultaneously, Blackening Careers involves resisting these images of control and asserting professional belonging in spaces structured to deny it. Instead of viewing Lélia's account solely as a story of resilience, it should be interpreted as a confrontation with the structural violence rooted in whiteness, sexism, and elitism that organize imperial careers.

Consequently, Black women often face a persistent lack of recognition that extends beyond the traditional association with caregiving and domestic roles (Teixeira 2021; Teixeira et al. 2020). Even when they enter professions symbolically tied to prestige and authority, their presence is continually called into question. Dandara's account captures this dynamic, as she recalls being repeatedly asked whether she was a doctor, an interrogation that produced profound anxiety and revealed how professional belonging is systematically denied.

While White women may also encounter sexism, their trajectories are mediated by the racial and socioeconomic privileges associated with Whiteness (M. A. S. Bento 2002; C. Bento 2022). These privileges often ensure that their authority is recognized more readily, even in elite professions. By contrast, Black women's authority is persistently undermined. Dandara's account makes this contrast clear: "The patients left their consultation asking if I was a doctor [which was not the case with the White female interns] ... I spent many months living it every day... just thinking about opening the door for the next patient already made me want to cry."

Here, Whiteness secures the presumption of competence for White women interns, while Black women must continuously prove themselves. This asymmetry generates an additional emotional burden and anxiety, making the very act of occupying professional space precarious. These dynamics demonstrate how imperial careers sustain exclusion not only through over barriers but at the same time through everyday practices of disqualification. Within this context, Blackening Careers involves resisting these mechanisms of erasure while re-signifying professional legitimacy on terms that affirm Black women's presence.

Dandara's narrative compellingly illustrates the significant impact of violence inflicted through racism, sexism, and classism. The convergence of these intersecting identities, such as race, gender, and class, constitutes a complex web of oppression that profoundly affects the daily lives of these women. Within this framework of experiences, the intersectionality of these axes underscores the social disparities they encounter.

Beatriz, a legal professional, exemplifies another instance of how racialized dynamics influence access to recognition and value. She articulates that in contrast to her White counterparts, she is unable to charge consultation fees, as clients systematically undervalue her work: "I was never able to charge for consultations... many [lawyers] do, but our office cannot do this." Her observation that "most who succeed" are situated in White offices highlights that the core issue extends beyond professional competence to include racialized assumptions of legitimacy. Accordingly, Whiteness functions as an economic asset that ensures authority and client trust, whereas the work of Black women is persistently devalued.

Tereza's account similarly reveals how Black women remain unrecognized even after years of professional practice. Despite a decade of participation in the same legal forum, she was repeatedly asked for identification by the doorman, a demand not imposed on White colleagues entering alongside her. This everyday policing illustrates the intersection of racism, sexism, and elitism, producing ongoing attempts to disqualify Black women's professional identities. As she recounts, "A couple came in front of me... they did not present their ID cards, but when I went in, he asked me for my wallet, even though I was a lawyer." The contrast is stark: For White lawyers, professional legitimacy is presumed; for Black women, it is continuously questioned.

Maria Felipa, an engineer-turned-banker, adds another dimension by highlighting invisibility as a survival strategy. After repeated experiences of direct racism in customer-facing roles, she deliberately moved to a position with no public contact: "At my previous workplace... when I worked more with face-to-face service, there was a lot of tagging. Now, they don't see me, so it doesn't influence much." Her account underscores the paradox Black women face in imperial careers: Visibility often invites discrimination, while invisibility protects at the cost of erasure.

Together, these narratives illustrate how Blackening Careers entails negotiating recognition, legitimacy, and survival within spaces that persistently structure themselves around Whiteness. Whether through the denial of economic value, the routine

questioning of professional authority, or the compelled choice of invisibility, Black women's presence destabilizes the taken-for-granted privileges of imperial careers while simultaneously exposing the enduring violence inherent in their racialized logics. This process is not solely descriptive of exclusion, but at the same time constitutive of re-signification: By asserting their presence and authority, these women actively challenge the symbolic boundaries of professions traditionally reserved for White elites.

A comprehensive analysis of their narratives uncovers the profound influence of racism, sexism, and elitism, which leave enduring marks while shaping both objective opportunities and subjective career experiences (Hall 2002). However, through the act of identifying and challenging these exclusions, Black women create new dimensions of professional belonging and authority. In this context, Blackening Careers is not merely about resilience but about transforming the fundamental concepts through which careers are conceptualized and valued, thereby promoting a decolonial and intersectional redefinition of professional life.

4.3 | The Collective Fracture as a Way of Existing in the Racist, Sexist, and Elitist System

In this session, our focus was on presenting narratives wherein the protagonists embrace their collective identity as Black women. These accounts illuminate instances where these women transcend individualistic perspectives, recognizing the significance of collective existence. As they grapple with oppression and dismantle its taken-for-granted nature, they continually find themselves engaged in a shared endeavor. Navigating these challenges often requires swift, personal actions, as Lélia has articulated. Yet, the effectiveness of such individual strategies is intrinsically linked to collective support and shared resources. While individual approaches have value, they are not in opposition to communal efforts (Collins 1998, 2015). Lélia's narrative underscores this duality. Her account of surviving medical school highlights how the search for a support network was fundamental to sustaining her trajectory:

I don't think you can get into a college like Medicine. I believe that this is also true for universities in general, as well as for those who are primarily White and elitist, right? You must be prepared. As you are about to go through many things that will make you feel lost, being prepared helps us get through it all, right? So, if you don't have a support network, look for it, seek support wherever it may be. I was able to strengthen myself as I drew closer to the Black movement, and then I gained a deeper understanding of where I came from. I had no idea of anything like that; I had no concept of race or anything like that. So, that's what made me stronger, but for other people, it may be something else. I don't know; some people support themselves through religion or family, and it is super important. For no one, the course is easy, but because it is very exhausting, it takes a long time, and

it's a lot of work. There's also the culture of humiliation, right? In Medicine, where it is still strong, you must be supported, right?

(LÉLIA)

According to Lélia, navigating the oppressive realities faced by Black women within elitist academic environments is nearly impossible without the support of robust networks. Such collectives provide a platform for addressing the inequalities that marginalize Black women and, crucially, for reframing how they perceive themselves. By recognizing that the problem lies not within them, but nevertheless in the structural logics of racism and sexism, they gain renewed clarity to persist in spaces historically reserved for White elites.

Sueli's reflections reinforce this point. For her, support networks are indispensable to counter isolation and enable resilience: "Don't fight alone; reach out for people who can help you. There is no doubt at all that it is essential. We are wrong when we think we are going to do any revolution or action alone." Her words demonstrate that resistance is not only about individual effort, but at the same time about collective strategies of survival, political consciousness, and coalition-building. Together, these accounts demonstrate that Blackening Careers requires more than individual navigation of hostile spaces: It depends on shared practices of solidarity and care that destabilize the isolation imposed by imperial careers. In this way, collective fracture becomes a mode of existence that re-signifies careers and challenges the elitist structures in which they unfold.

Sueli's narrative also underscores the ongoing burden of being perpetually expected to articulate issues of racism during symbolic occasions such as Black Consciousness Day. As she states, "On November 20th, I want to sit, drink my coconut water, and enjoy my holiday... Call the White people to do it, they will talk about whiteness, they'll talk about the role of White people in this society. It's not me who has to keep talking." Her remarks highlight a recurring pattern wherein Black women are frequently tasked with educating others, while the onus of addressing Whiteness is often evaded by those who possess privilege.

The significance of networks, collectives, and movements resides in their ability to transcend individual survival, thereby promoting structural transformation. As Holvino (2010) and Collins and Bilge (2020) highlight, identity politics is constructed through the dynamic interaction between personal experiences and systemic power structures. Sueli's narrative exemplifies how eschewing the obligation of perpetual explanation enables Black women to redirect their energy toward coalition-building, aligning with Lugones's (2014) concept of feminist alliance across differences. In this context, Blackening Careers pertains not only to navigating hostile environments individually, but at the same time to reinterpreting them through collective effort. By forging alliances, rejecting imposed roles, and affirming the legitimacy of their presence, Black women transform imperial careers into arenas where political awareness and solidarity are integral to career development.

Racial consciousness fosters a heightened awareness of the experiences of those with whom individuals interact. This is

exemplified in Sueli's narrative, where she extends her concern beyond the boundaries of her medical expertise to include the living conditions of her Black patients. Such an approach surpasses mere technical competence and becomes a means of fostering racial awareness. Through these proactive efforts, individuals like Sueli to make a constructive impact not only on the lives of individuals but at the same time within the broader societal framework.

Sueli's reflection exemplifies the intersection of professional practice with broader social realities in Brazil. By linking patients' illnesses to structural racism and inequality, she delineates the limitations of attributing adverse health outcomes solely to "lifestyle." Her observation that "the Black population has one of the worst health indices... yet for you to take care of yourself, you need to know that you are someone who can be taken care of" underscores how racism undermines fundamental rights to health. This narrative elucidates the contradictions inherent in a country with a universal health system (SUS) that, in practice, perpetuates racialized exclusions. Consequently, Sueli demonstrates that embracing her Black identity constitutes both a matter of personal resilience and a political stance that reconceptualizes medical care as a domain for racial awareness and empowerment.

Maria Felipa emphasizes an additional dimension: the symbolic and material importance of occupying esteemed professions. For her, representation extends beyond individual achievement to encompass the visibility of Black women in domains that have historically been designated for White elites. As she states, "working in the market is essential... Black people occupy these spaces to change their social positions... when I think about Black women, I think about representativeness, about what we can do to promote our community." Her narrative also reveals the paradox inherent in professional valuation: Although imperial careers are regarded as "appreciated" as avenues for mobility and influence, other sectors are systematically undervalued, reflecting Brazil's colonial hierarchy of knowledge and labor.

Together, Sueli and Maria Felipa demonstrate how Blackening Careers operates at the nexus of personal aspiration, collective empowerment, and structural critique. Their narratives illustrate that navigating imperial careers in Brazil involves not only survival within elitist and exclusionary environments but also transforming these environments into platforms for collective progress. By repositioning care and representation as fundamental practices, these women emphasize how the pursuit of recognition within careers is intrinsically linked to Brazil's broader racial divisions, encompassing public health disparities and the symbolic economy of professional prestige. From this perspective, their stories exemplify how careers can serve as domains of both vulnerability and resistance, where Black women challenge the boundaries of belonging, success, and transformation within imperial careers.

5 | Discussions

We propose a transformation in the understanding of Black women's professional experiences not solely as narratives of adversity, but also as venues for re-signification, alliance-

building, and political imagination. When examined alongside the trajectories of our participants, this framework encourages us to interpret careers not merely as consequences of structural constraints, but also as dynamic processes wherein Black Brazilian women actively negotiate, contest, and redefine their sense of professional belonging. This interpretive shift aligns with recent scholarly calls in career studies to transcend deficit narratives and to investigate how racialized women navigate structural violence and construct meaning within hostile professional environments (Carangio 2023; Kele et al. 2022). Their trajectories highlight that even upon entering professional spaces, racialized and gendered subjects continue to face inequalities manifested through symbolic and material exclusions.

First, we expand career studies by applying an intersectional, Black feminist perspective to careers as life trajectories. Building on the idea that careers are rooted in social structures rather than solely individual pursuits (Hall 2002; Sullivan and Baruch 2009), our analysis reveals how racism, sexism, and elitism infiltrate both the objective and subjective aspects of careers. Recognizing oneself as a Black woman in historically exclusionary spaces (Section 4.1) is not merely a personal realization but a political act that exposes exclusionary structures and initiates career making as a form of critique. Stories like Tereza's and Lélia's demonstrate how access, legitimacy, and belonging are continually negotiated in the context of structural violence, precisely where Black feminist thought generates knowledge (Gonzalez 1984, 1993; Carneiro 2003; Akotirene 2019; Collins and Bilge 2020).

Secondly, we contextualize intersectionality within the Brazilian context. Instead of importing a preexisting framework from the Global North, we anchor it in the historical and social fault lines that shape Brazilian professional life, most notably the persistent myth of racial democracy (O. Nogueira 2007) and the hierarchy of prestige that continues to influence entry, recognition, and reward. The cases examined, medicine, law, and engineering, illustrate how interconnected oppressions manifest in daily practices: the denial of professional recognition to Black women that is routinely accorded to White women; the "controlling images" that sexualize or infantilize Black women in elite environments; and the unequal allocation of risk, surveillance, and care.

In this manner, we respond to the calls within GWO to situate debates on equality, diversity, and inclusion within local contexts, rather than perceiving them as universally transferable (Öztürk et al. 2015). This position also aligns with recent scholarship that emphasizes intersectionality as situated praxis, grounded in the sociohistorical specificities of each context (Rodriguez and Ridgway 2023; Rodriguez et al. 2025).

Third, we clarify and consolidate the central concept of this paper: Blackening Careers. By "Blackening," we do not refer to a romanticized narrative of resilience, nor to mere rhetoric of resistance. We theorize Blackening Careers as a dual movement of resistance and re-signification, through which Black women expose and contest structures that deny their belonging, while also transforming the meaning of careers. The narratives of Dandara and Anastácia illustrate how structural disbelief is internalized as self-surveillance and doubt, yet countered with

claims to expertise and the reframing of professional pathways. Carolina Maria's redirection from engineering to administration highlights a shift from prestige to community-oriented knowledge. Maria Felipa's strategic invisibility demonstrates how survival tactics challenge the optics of recognition itself. In each instance, agency is enacted both within and against institutionalized violence.

Fourth, we revisit the very concept of imperial careers (Coelho 1999). These fields are not deemed "imperial" solely due to colonial genealogies; instead, they continue to uphold imperial characteristics today as they perpetuate Whiteness, masculinism, and elitism as standards of value and legitimacy. Our research identifies three interconnected mechanisms: (a) economic devaluation, whereby the labor of Black women is valued and trusted differently (Beatriz), (b) epistemic and institutional disqualification, where credentials and authority are consistently questioned (Dandara and Tereza), and (c) visibility/invisibility dilemmas, in which visibility entails surveillance and potential harm, while invisibility may offer protection at the expense of erasure (Maria Felipa). These mechanisms demonstrate that the boundaries of imperial careers are regulated not only at the point of initial entry but also through quotidian practices that seek to expel Black women even following their admission.

Fifth, we demonstrate that the transformation of careers is inseparable from collective practices. Section 4.3 elucidates how networks, movements, and solidarities counteract isolation, redistribute emotional labor, and uphold political consciousness (Lélia and Sueli). Coalition and collective care, fundamental to Black feminist traditions (Collins and Bilge 2020; Lugones 2014), are not marginal to individual success; instead, they constitute the framework through which careers become sustainable and meaningful. In Brazil, where institutional spaces frequently delegate anti-racist "education" to Black women themselves, our participants' refusal to bear this burden alone constitutes a career practice that conserves energy for community-centered work and re-signification.

Bringing these strands together, our discussion advances ongoing conversations in GWO on race, gender, and careers in five interconnected ways. We (1) anchor careers in intersectional structures and Black feminist epistemologies, (2) specify how intersectionality is territorialized in Brazil's racial formation and prestige economies, (3) theorize Blackening Careers as resistance and re-signification, avoiding the romanticization of oppression, (4) update the relevance of imperial careers by showing their contemporary modes of exclusion, and (5) foreground collective fracture, solidarity, care, and coalition, as a mode of transforming professional life.

Taken together, these contributions show that careers are neither linear nor merely individual achievements; they are relational and political processes shaped by histories, institutions, and collective action. This perspective builds on and extends recent efforts to reconceptualize career as a contested and racialized terrain (Carangio 2023; Kele et al. 2022), emphasizing that career advancement for marginalized groups cannot be separated from the logics of power, coloniality, and structural exclusion that organize professional life globally.

Finally, our findings carry implications for organizations and professional bodies. Recognition practices, evaluation criteria, and client-facing protocols in law, medicine, and engineering require intersectional redesign; the invisible labor expected of Black women must be acknowledged and redistributed; and support for Black women's collectives should be understood as core infrastructure for equity rather than as peripheral initiatives. We revisit these implications, along with their limitations and directions for future research, in the conclusion.

5.1 | Final Considerations

This paper has demonstrated how Black Brazilian women engage with imperial careers, such as medicine, law, and engineering, by negotiating recognition, resisting exclusion, and re-signifying the meaning of professional life. We conceptualized this process as Blackening Careers, a framework that emphasizes both the structural violence embedded within professional trajectories and the potential for transformation when careers are rooted in racial awareness, collective action, and feminist solidarity.

For universities, firms, and professional bodies, the findings underscore the urgent necessity to address the ongoing influence of Whiteness on legitimacy, evaluation, and authority. Institutional commitments to diversity should extend beyond mere inclusion rhetoric and pursue substantive structural reforms, including acknowledging the expertise of Black women, addressing racialized obstacles to career advancement, and reevaluating mentorship and assessment practices.

Theoretically, Blackening Careers advances feminist and decolonial career studies by offering a locally grounded but globally relevant contribution. It reframes careers not only as individual pathways but as political practices that destabilize the racialized and gendered foundations of professional life. Future research may extend this framework to other national and professional contexts, examining how coalitional practices and racial consciousness reshape the very notion of what it means to have a career.

In doing so, this paper asserts that careers cannot be fully understood without considering colonial histories, intersectional inequalities, and resistance practices. "Blackening Careers" hence advances the decolonization of career and organizational studies by highlighting the lived experiences of Black women, who persist in transforming imperial careers from within.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the support of CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel), whose funding was essential to the development of this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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