

# Migrant Women's Bodies Between Coloniality, Racialization, and Resistance. Queer, Black, and Decolonial Pedagogical Perspectives

## Corpi di donne migranti tra colonialità, razzializzazione e resistenza. Prospettive pedagogiche queer, black e decoloniali

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CORPI, POTERE, DISCIPLINAMENTO E AGENCY

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the representations and lived experiences of migrant women's bodies through the lenses of Black and decolonial feminisms, as well as queer pedagogies. Grounded in a theoretical framework that intertwines the coloniality of power, the racialization of bodies, and situated practices of resistance, the article examines how educational dispositifs may either reproduce processes of racialization and marginalization or, conversely, foster spaces of subjectivation, care, and epistemic justice. Adopting a theoretical and critical approach, the contribution develops an interpretive framework that brings feminist and pedagogical perspectives into tension in order to rethink educational processes in migratory contexts. The analysis highlights the transformative potential of intersectional, embodied, and relational pedagogical orientations, capable of re-signifying migrant women's bodies as sites of knowledge production and regeneration, as well as of agency and political possibility.

Questo articolo esplora le rappresentazioni e le esperienze dei corpi femminili in migrazione alla luce dei femminismi black e decoloniali e delle pedagogie queer. Muovendo da un quadro teorico che intreccia colonialità del potere, razzializzazione dei corpi e pratiche di resistenza situata, l'articolo analizza come i dispositivi educativi possano contribuire sia alla riproduzione di processi di razzializzazione e marginalizzazione, sia alla costruzione di spazi di soggettivazione, cura e giustizia epistemica. Attraverso un approccio teorico-critico, il contributo costruisce un quadro interpretativo che mette in tensione prospettive femministe e pedagogiche, per rileggere i processi educativi nei contesti migratori. L'analisi evidenzia il potenziale trasformativo di orientamenti pedagogici intersezionali, corporei e relazionali, capaci di ri-significare i corpi delle donne migranti come luoghi di produzione e rigenerazione di sapere, di agency e di possibilità politiche.

### KEYWORDS

Migrant Women's Bodies; Black and Decolonial Feminisms; Queer Pedagogies; Embodiment; Epistemic Justice  
Corpi di donne migranti; Femminismi black e decoloniali; Pedagogie queer; Corporeità; Giustizia epistemica

OPEN  ACCESS Double blind peer review

Volume 4 | n. 1 | giugno 2026

**Citation:** Chiappelli, T. (2026). Migrant Women's Bodies Between Coloniality, Racialization, and Resistance. Queer, Black, and Decolonial Pedagogical Perspectives. *Cultura pedagogica e scenari educativi*, 4(1), 18-26. <https://doi.org/10.7347/spgs-01-2026-03>.

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**Journal Homepage:** <https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/sipeges>

**Pensa MultiMedia:** ISSN: 2975-0113 • DOI: 10.7347/spgs-01-2026-03

**Received:** 13/04/2026 | **Accepted:** 05/06/2026 | **Published:** 30/06/2026

## Introduction

Migrant women's bodies<sup>1</sup> do not simply occupy space: they often *disturb it*. As dissonant presences, they unsettle what Nirmal Puwar describes as the "somatic norm" – that unmarked standard which renders some bodies invisible while marking others as hyper-visible (Puwar, 2004). In this sense, they are read as *space invaders*: bodies whose presence exposes the boundaries of sites that were never meant for them. Under the weight of what Frantz Fanon described as the racializing gaze (Fanon, 1967), such bodies risk being fixed, scrutinized, and reduced to objects of perception rather than recognized as subjects. It is within this tension that recent pedagogical scholarship has increasingly turned its attention to the intersections of migration, gender, and race (Crenshaw, 1989), highlighting how bodies are constructed and governed in educational contexts (Fiorucci, 2020; Zoletto, 2012; Burgio, 2020, 2022; Portera, 2022; Barone, 2025). In particular, migrant women's corporeity, understood as embodied and situated experience, emerges as a privileged site for observing the entanglements of coloniality, racialization, and gendered power relations (Collins, 2000; Lugones, 2008; Puwar, 2004).

This article adopts a critical lens to explore these dynamics, drawing on Black and decolonial feminisms alongside queer pedagogies. Rather than presenting original empirical research, the contribution develops a conceptual framework that places these traditions in dialogue, with the aim of rethinking the role of education in shaping embodied subjectivities in migratory contexts. More specifically, the article proposes a pedagogical reading of migrant women's bodies as sites where coloniality, epistemic injustice, and educational subjectivation intersect. In doing so, it seeks to bring into conversation theoretical perspectives that, while sharing important concerns regarding power, embodiment, and social justice, have often developed along partially distinct intellectual trajectories.

The theoretical framework is grounded in the notion of the *coloniality of power* (Quijano, 2000), which highlights how colonial logics continue to structure contemporary social hierarchies, including those related to race, gender, and knowledge production. According to this theoretical frame, processes of racialization are understood not as incidental phenomena, but as constitutive mechanisms through which bodies are classified, ranked, and rendered intelligible within dominant epistemic regimes. Migrant women's bodies, in particular, are often positioned within these regimes as objects of control, care, or intervention, rather than as subjects of knowledge and agency.

Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000; bell hooks, 1994) and decolonial feminist traditions (Lugones, 2008) provide analytical tools to challenge these dynamics, foregrounding the embodied and situated nature of knowledge<sup>2</sup>, as well as the intersectional character of oppression. These lines of thought emphasize how gender, race, class, and migration status are not separate axes of analysis, but mutually constitutive dimensions that shape lived experiences and social positioning (Collins, 2000; bell hooks, 1994; Lugones, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Campani, 2000; Coccia et al., 2023).

To unsettle the normative frameworks that regulate bodies, identities, and desires within educational institutions, queer pedagogies offer a strategic analytical and pedagogical resource (Britzman, 1995; Butler,

1 Throughout this article, the expression "migrant women" is employed as an analytical and heuristic category and not as a homogeneous social subject. Its use should not be understood as implying a unified experience of migration, gender, or racialization, but rather as referring to a plurality of situated trajectories, positionalities, and forms of agency that exceed any single representation (Spivak, 1988; Collins, 2000; Lugones, 2008).

2 While this article primarily draws on Black, decolonial, and queer feminist frameworks, it is important to acknowledge the broader constellation of feminist thought that has critically engaged the relationship between bodies, difference, and knowledge. In the Italian context, the tradition of *femminismo della differenza* has long emphasized sexual difference as a site of symbolic and political elaboration (Muraro, 1991; Cavarero, 1995), foregrounding relationality and embodiment in ways that resonate – albeit from different premises – with contemporary intersectional and decolonial approaches. Francophone feminist and anthropological debates have likewise explored the body as a locus of subjectivation, language, and symbolic order (Cixous, 1975; Irigaray, 1977; H  ritier, 1996), highlighting how sexual difference is culturally and structurally organized. More recent posthuman and nomadic perspectives have further reconfigured the relationship between bodies, subjectivity, and mobility, emphasizing processes of becoming, relationality, and transformation (Braidotti, 2013).



1990; Halberstam, 2011). By questioning the naturalization of categories such as gender, sexuality, and normality, queer theorists open up possibilities for rethinking education as a space of critical reflection, relationality, and transformation.

Within this combined framework, educational dispositifs are conceptualized as ambivalent sites: on the one hand, they may reproduce processes of objectification, normalization, and marginalization (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bhabha, 1994), on the other, they may enable practices of subjectivation, care, and epistemic justice (Tronto, 2006; Dello Preite, 2017). This ambivalence calls for a critical re-examination of pedagogical practices, not only in terms of inclusion, but in relation to the deeper epistemological and political assumptions that underpin them.

The aim of this article is therefore not to provide prescriptive models or generalizable findings, but to critically reframe migrant women's bodies as epistemic and political subjects, and to explore how pedagogy informed by intersectional, embodied, and relational perspectives can contribute to this process. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on social justice in education, by foregrounding the transformative potential of decolonial, Black feminist, and queer pedagogical imaginaries.

## 1. Coloniality, embodiment, and migrant women's bodies

The body has long been a central site of inscription of power, where social hierarchies are materialized and made visible. In contemporary societies shaped by the legacy of colonialism, bodies do not exist as mere biological entities; they are produced through epistemic and political regimes that define their value, legitimacy, and intelligibility. The concept of the colonality of power offers a key lens for understanding how these regimes continue to structure social and educational systems beyond the formal end of colonialism (Quijano, 2000).

Coloniality operates through the classification and hierarchization of human populations along racial, gendered, and cultural lines, establishing a global order in which certain bodies are normalized while others are marked as deviant, inferior, or in need of control. Racialization plays a central role in this process: it does not simply describe difference, but actively produces it, often through narratives that naturalize inequality and erase its historical and political conditions (Ahmed, 2000). As Mignolo reminds us, modernity cannot be disentangled from these operations: its claims to universality have always relied on the silencing of other ways of knowing, revealing how modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin (Mignolo, 2007). The production of universal knowledge has historically depended on the erasure and marginalization of other epistemologies. In this sense, racialization operates not only as a social but also as an epistemic process, through which certain forms of knowledge are legitimized while others are dismissed or rendered unintelligible – a dynamic that can be understood as a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Lopez, 2018), whereby subjects are systematically discredited as knowers or deprived of the interpretive resources necessary to make sense of their own experiences. What is at stake is not only representation, but the very conditions under which knowledge becomes possible, as well as the terms under which subjects are recognized as legitimate and livable beings (Butler, 2004), pointing toward what may be understood as a question of ontological justice.

Migrant bodies – and particularly those of women – occupy a specific position in these dynamics. They are frequently framed in dominant discourses as vulnerable, passive, or problematic subjects. At the same time, these bodies are subjected to forms of hyper-visibility (as objects of surveillance and regulation, often framed as a matter of humanitarian concern) and invisibility (in terms of agency, voice, and epistemic authority) (Puwar, 2004; Pozzebon, 2020; Prisco, 2021; Bernacchi & Chiappelli, 2026). This ambivalent positioning reflects a tension between control and care, where inclusion often operates through disciplinary and normative frameworks rather than through recognition. Within educational contexts, these dynamics are reproduced through curricula, pedagogical practices, and institutional norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Banks, 2008), which often reflect Eurocentric and heteronormative assumptions, even in contexts



formally oriented toward inclusion. Bodies that do not conform to these norms are positioned as “lacking,” “at risk,” or “in need of integration,” reinforcing deficit-based narratives that obscure structural inequalities. However, education becomes a key site where these classifications are naturalized and reinforced, yet can also be contested. Understanding migrant women’s bodies requires moving beyond reductive representations and recognizing them as sites of complex negotiations, where power, identity, and resistance intersect. Rather than passive recipients of educational interventions, these embodied subjectivities can be understood as active loci of meaning-making, capable of challenging dominant narratives and reconfiguring the terms through which they are perceived.

Black feminist thought and decolonial feminisms together allow us to reorient the gaze, foregrounding the embodied and situated nature of experience. Both these approaches challenge the abstraction and universalism that characterize dominant epistemologies, revealing how ways of knowing are always generated from specific social and historical positions. Black feminist thought, in particular, has emphasized the centrality of lived experience as a source of knowledge, highlighting how marginalized subjects develop critical insights and forms of understanding precisely through their positioning within intersecting systems of oppression (Collins, 2000). This perspective disrupts the traditional separation between subject and object of knowledge, asserting that those who are most affected by structures of domination are also uniquely positioned to critique them.

A similar move is at work in decolonial feminist thought, which draws attention to the ways in which coloniality has shaped not only racial hierarchies but also gender systems, producing what Lugones (2008) conceptualizes as the *coloniality of gender*. Gender, in this sense, is neither neutral nor universal, but historically situated and deeply entangled with colonial power. For migrant women, this means inhabiting bodies that are read through multiple, overlapping grids of interpretation – racial, gendered, cultural – each contributing to their positioning at the margins (bell hooks, 1994; 1998).

And yet, such bodies cannot be reduced to sites of domination. They are also spaces of negotiation, refusal, and re-signification. Resistance to dominant narratives does not necessarily take spectacular forms; rather, it unfolds through everyday practices – ways of narrating oneself, inhabiting the body, or alternative forms of belonging and knowledge production. These gestures may appear minor, yet they unsettle the categories through which bodies are fixed and made legible, giving rise to a situated and ongoing practice that operates within and against structures of domination. Such practices take multiple forms, including acts of self-definition, narrative reappropriation, and the creation of alternative spaces of belonging and knowledge. In this way, the body becomes not only a site of oppression, but also the source of agency and political possibility. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that no theoretical account can fully capture the heterogeneity of migrant women’s experiences. The category “migrant women” is employed here as a strategic analytical construct rather than as a homogeneous social subject, while recognizing the plurality of biographies, positionalities, and forms of agency that exceed any singular representation (Bernacchi & Chiappelli, 2021).

Importantly, both Black and decolonial feminisms challenge deficit-oriented representations of marginalized subjects, proposing instead to recognize their epistemic contributions. This implies a reconfiguration of educational paradigms, moving from models that seek to “include” or “integrate” racialized subjectivities into pre-existing frameworks, toward models that question and transform those very frameworks (Freire, 1970; Lopez, 2018).

In dialogue with these theoretical traditions, it becomes possible to challenge the conceptualization of migrant women as objects to be managed, and to recognize their active role as subjects capable of producing knowledge, articulating alternative narratives, and reshaping pedagogical spaces. This shift requires not only a change in representation but also a deeper epistemological transformation – one that acknowledges the plurality of meaning- and interpretation-making processes, as well as the value of embodied, situated experiences.



## 2. Queer pedagogies and educational dispositifs: disrupting normativity

Queer pedagogies offer a further critical lens through which to interrogate the normative frameworks that regulate bodies, identities, and knowledge within educational contexts. Rather than constituting a unified theoretical frame, queer pedagogies can be understood as a field of tensions and possibilities that seek to unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions about gender, sexuality, normality, and the very processes through which knowledge is produced and transmitted (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1990).

At their core, queer theories challenge the naturalization of identity categories, emphasizing instead their performative, relational, and historically situated character. In doing so, they expose how educational institutions participate in the reproduction of normative regimes that define which bodies are intelligible, legitimate, and worthy of recognition, and which are rendered deviant, excessive, or invisible. These regimes operate not only through explicit curricula but also through implicit norms, disciplinary practices, and everyday interactions that configure the possibilities of being and becoming within educational spaces (Foucault, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Puar, 2007).

The concept of educational dispositifs is particularly useful in this regard, as it allows for an analysis of education as a complex assemblage of discourses, practices, and institutional arrangements that regulate subjectivity (Foucault, 1977; Agamben, 2009). Education functions as a mechanism of power that produces specific forms of subjectivation, shaping how individuals understand themselves and are understood by others (Butler, 1990). From a queer standpoint, these dispositifs are deeply embedded in heteronormative, cisnormative, and often Eurocentric assumptions that regulate the legibility of bodies and delimit the boundaries of acceptable identities (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1977). At the same time, subjects do not simply internalize these norms, but may negotiate, resist, and rework them through practices of what Muñoz defines as *disidentification* – strategies that neither fully assimilate to nor completely reject dominant frameworks, but instead transform them from within (Muñoz, 1999).

However, queer pedagogies do not limit themselves to critique. They also open up possibilities for reimagining education as a space of disruption, experimentation, and transformation. By foregrounding ambiguity, fluidity, and relationality, queer approaches invite a rethinking of pedagogical practices beyond rigid classifications and fixed identities. This involves questioning what is taught, how knowledge is organized, who is authorized to speak, and which forms of experience are considered valid.

In this regard, queer pedagogies resonate with Black and decolonial feminist analysis: they share an emphasis on the non-neutrality and instability of dominant categories, as well as on the need to create alternative epistemic spaces. This dialogue should not be understood as free from tensions. Postcolonial and decolonial scholars have highlighted how some strands of queer theory, particularly in their earlier Euro-American formulations, may risk universalizing assumptions about identity, sexuality, and emancipation that do not always align with the situated realities of migration, race, and coloniality (Lugones, 2008; Gopinath, 2005; Puar, 2007). Attending to these frictions is therefore essential if the encounter between queer and decolonial perspectives is to remain critically productive rather than theoretically reconciliatory. They also bring a specific attention to the affective, relational, and performative dimensions of learning, highlighting how education is not only a cognitive process, but also an embodied and emotional experience (Gopinath, 2005; Ahmed, 2000). When brought into dialogue with the life trajectories of migrant women, queer pedagogies allow for a further destabilization of fixed representations. Migrant bodies are often constructed through intersecting normative frameworks that regulate gender, sexuality, race, and cultural belonging. A queer perspective makes it possible to question these frameworks, revealing how categories such as “woman”, “migrant”, or “other” are neither stable nor homogeneous, but are continuously negotiated and rearticulated within specific contexts (Bhabha, 1994; Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Puar, 2007).

Moreover, queer pedagogies emphasize the importance of spaces where alternative narratives and forms of self-representation can emerge. These spaces are not simply “inclusive” in a liberal sense, but are oriented



toward transforming the conditions under which epistemic credibility becomes possible. This entails moving beyond an additive logic – where marginalized subjects are incorporated into existing structures—toward a transformative one, in which the structures themselves are reconfigured.

Education itself can be reimagined as a site of potential disidentification, where individuals are not compelled to conform to predefined categories but are enabled to explore and articulate more complex and fluid forms of subjectivity. Such a reconfiguration requires a critical engagement with the power relations that underpin educational systems, as well as a willingness to embrace uncertainty, contradiction, and openness as constitutive elements of the pedagogical process.

### 3. Re-signifying bodies in educational contexts: dialogical and participatory practices

Within the theoretical framework outlined so far, the question of how bodies may be re-signified in educational contexts becomes central. If migrant women's bodies are constructed within dominant dispositifs as objects of intervention, control, or integration, it becomes necessary to explore the conditions under which they may instead emerge as subjects of knowledge, relation, and political agency.

Dialogical and participatory practices offer a crucial entry point. Drawing on traditions of critical pedagogy and participatory action research, they challenge the hierarchical distinction between researcher and researched, teacher and learner, expert and subject. Rather than positioning participants as objects of analysis, they foreground them as active co-producers of knowledge, capable of defining the problems that concern them and contributing to the processes through which they are understood and addressed (Freire, 1970; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

For migrant women, this reconfiguration is particularly significant: it disrupts the tendency to *speak about them* and repositions them as *knowledge-producing subjects*, whose voices emerge from situated experience – grounded in their positioning in the world rather than being reduced to objects of discourse or personal narratives. At the same time, intersectional lenses remind us that participation is never neutral. Access to voice, recognition, and legitimacy is regulated by power relations linked to gender, race, migration status, and sexuality: they configure the conditions under which voices are heard, recognized, or silenced (Crenshaw, 1989; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013). For this reason, participation cannot be assumed as automatically emancipatory, but must be critically examined and intentionally constructed.

Decolonial studies deepen this critique. By disrupting the epistemic hierarchy that traditionally privileges the researcher's voice over that of participants, they contribute to processes of epistemic justice, in which marginalized subjects are recognized as legitimate knowers. This shift also entails valuing diasporic, embodied, and community-based knowledges, often excluded from formal educational settings, and creating spaces in which these knowledges can be expressed, shared, and transformed (Smith, 2021; Burgio, 2022).

Within educational contexts, these principles can be translated into practice through a range of dialogical strategies that, while diverse in form, share a common orientation toward relationality, reflexivity, and collective meaning-making. For instance, intersectional discussion groups may provide spaces in which participants can articulate and reflect upon their lived experiences across multiple axes of identity, fostering both individual awareness and collective understanding. Similarly, pedagogical standpoints oriented toward the creation of “safe” or “brave” spaces seek to negotiate the tension between protection and exposure, allowing for the emergence of difficult conversations while maintaining attention to care and mutual respect (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Other practices, such as non-heteronormative affective education or peer mentoring among migrant and LGBTQIA+ individuals, further expand the possibilities of pedagogical engagement. These approaches challenge dominant narratives that frame certain bodies as deficient or problematic, instead emphasizing relationality, solidarity, and the co-construction of meaning and situated knowledge (Guerrini, 2023; Lo-



renzini, 2017). In doing so, they contribute to build educational environments that are not merely inclusive in a formal sense, but actively engaged in transforming the conditions under which inclusion is defined.

## Conclusions

What emerges from this excursus is not only a shift in how bodies are represented within education, but a more profound reconfiguration of how they are recognized, interpreted, and valued as sites of knowledge. Migrant women's bodies are not only shaped by processes of coloniality, racialization, and gender regulation, but are also systematically positioned within regimes that limit their epistemic credibility and intelligibility. The issue at stake is not only pedagogical, but epistemological and political. The marginalization of migrant bodies can be read as a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), in which subjects are denied recognition as knowers or lack access to the interpretive frameworks necessary to articulate their own experiences. Educational contexts play a fundamental role in either reproducing or challenging these dynamics.

Re-signifying migrant women's bodies within education therefore requires moving beyond the theoretical and methodological horizons of inclusion, calling for a transformation of the conditions under which knowledge is produced and whose voices are recognized as legitimate, credible, and intelligible. These frameworks are dialogical, participatory, and explicitly oriented toward epistemic justice – capable of recognizing embodied, situated, and diasporic knowledges as legitimate. This shift also entails what may be defined as a form of ontological justice. Beyond the question of who can speak and be heard, it involves recognizing the legitimacy of different ways of being, inhabiting the body, and existing in the world. Migrant women's bodies, too often constructed as deficient, vulnerable, or “in need of integration,” must instead be understood as sites of agency, relation, and political possibility. As a consequence, it is crucial to rethink education not as a neutral space of transmission, but as a field in which power operates through norms of intelligibility, visibility, and legitimacy. It also requires embracing the tensions and contradictions that such a transformation entails. As a theoretical contribution, this article does not seek to substitute for the situated voices and lived experiences of migrant women themselves. Rather, it aims to offer a conceptual framework that may support future empirical, dialogical, and participatory research capable of engaging more directly with those voices and with the plurality of experiences they express. Dialogical and participatory practices, while promising, remain embedded in institutional contexts that may limit their radical potential. Yet, it is precisely within these tensions that the possibility of transformation emerges. When grounded in decolonial, Black feminist, and queer perspectives, educational practices can begin to unsettle dominant regimes of knowledge and open up space for alternative ways of knowing and being. In doing so, they contribute not only to more inclusive forms of education, but to a broader reconfiguration of the relationship between bodies, knowledge, and power.

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