



# Conversations in the course Topics in ethnic-racial relations: teachings of bell hooks in nursing education

*Conversações na disciplina Tópicos nas relações étnico-raciais: ensinamentos de bell hooks na educação em Enfermagem*

*Conversaciones en la disciplina Temas en las relaciones étnico-raciales: enseñanzas de bell hooks en la educación en Enfermería*

Maria da Soledade Simeão dos Santos<sup>1</sup>

Cecília Maria Izidoro Pinto<sup>2</sup>

Verônica Caé da Silva Moura<sup>3</sup>

Giselle Natalina Sousa da Silva<sup>4</sup>

Renata Pereira Laurindo<sup>5</sup>

1. Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Centro de Ciências da Saúde. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.

2. Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Superintendência-Geral de Ações Afirmativas, Diversidade e Acessibilidade. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.

3. Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Escola de Enfermagem Anna Nery. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.

4. Escola Superior de Ciências da Saúde do Distrito Federal. Brasília, DF, Brasil.

5. Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Instituto Nacional de Infectologia, Laboratório de Pesquisa Clínica em DST e Aids. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.

#### Corresponding author:

Maria da Soledade Simeão dos Santos.  
E-mail: mariadasoledade@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To present the experience of the construction and implementation of the course "Topics in ethnic-racial Relations in the Context of Health" to students of the undergraduate Nursing degree based on the principles proposed by bell hooks' engaged pedagogy. **Method:** The territory of doing in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic was developed in the Virtual Learning Environment and in the collective construction of a Padlet®. The study goes through the lives of professors and monitors of the discipline, all black, and members of the Academic League of Health Nursing in the Black Population/UFRJ. The study took place from July to October 2021. The presentation of the results was based on hooks' thirty-two teachings. **Result:** At the end of the course, the 26 enrolled students had the opportunity to reflect on where and how the experience of the conversations took place. **Conclusions and implications for practice:** The course has become a legitimate device for confronting racism and prejudice, adding to the ongoing struggles for a discrimination-free approach to the multiple human groups that make up Brazilian society.

**Keywords:** Universities; Nursing; Teaching; Racism; Population Health.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** apresentar a experiência da construção e efetivação da disciplina "Tópicos nas relações étnico-raciais no contexto da saúde" para estudantes do curso de graduação em Enfermagem assentada nos postulados propostos pela *pedagogia engajada* de bell hooks. **Método:** o território do fazer face à pandemia da COVID-19 foi desenvolvido no Ambiente Virtual de Aprendizagem e na construção coletiva de um *Padlet*®. O estudo atravessa a vida de docentes e monitoras da disciplina, todas negras e integrantes da Liga Acadêmica de Enfermagem em Saúde na População Negra/UFRJ. O período da realização ocorreu de julho a outubro de 2021. A apresentação dos resultados tomou por base os 32 ensinamentos de bell hooks. **Resultado:** ao final da disciplina, os 26 estudantes inscritos tiveram a oportunidade de refletir onde e como se deu a experiência das conversações. **Conclusões e implicações para a prática:** a disciplina se tornou um dispositivo legítimo de enfrentamento ao racismo e ao preconceito, somando-se às lutas em curso por uma abordagem livre de discriminação, em relação aos múltiplos grupos humanos que formam a sociedade brasileira.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação Superior; Enfermagem; Ensino; Racismo; Saúde da População.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** presentar la experiencia de la construcción e implementación de la disciplina "Temas de relaciones étnico-raciales en el contexto de la salud" a los estudiantes del curso de graduación en enfermería a partir de la *pedagogía comprometida* de bell hooks. **Método:** el territorio de enfrentamiento a la pandemia de COVID-19 se desarrolló en el Entorno Virtual de Aprendizaje y en la construcción colectiva de un *Padlet*®. El estudio recorre la vida de profesores y monitores de la disciplina, todos negros y miembros de la Liga Académica de Enfermería de la Salud en la Población Negra/UFRJ. El período de realización tuvo lugar de julio a octubre de 2021. La presentación de los resultados se basó en las treinta y dos enseñanzas de hooks. **Resultado:** al final del curso, los 26 estudiantes matriculados tuvieron la oportunidad de reflexionar sobre dónde y cómo tuvo lugar la experiencia de las conversaciones. **Conclusiones e implicaciones para la práctica:** la disciplina se ha convertido en un dispositivo legítimo para enfrentar el racismo y los prejuicios, sumándose a las luchas en curso por un enfoque libre de discriminación para los múltiples grupos humanos que componen la sociedad brasileña.

**Palabras clave:** Universidades; Enfermería; Enseñanza; Racismo; Salud de la Población.

## INTRODUCTION

This study takes us back to the ways of teaching critical thinking with a view to an anti-colonial and anti-racist understanding, based on the main affective and pedagogical elements postulated by bell hooks<sup>a</sup> in her reflections on how we can move forward in the classroom, beyond the space of education, which reproduces the dominant and hegemonic white system. In this context, hooks' teaching and learning have discussed how to denaturalize education and the colonizing culture that has basically transformed the classroom into an instrument of silencing and erasure, by limiting other ways of seeing and living in the world.

The inclusion of ethnic and racial-Brazilian themes in curricula aims to meet the emerging demands of pluriversity and the discussion of equity, which are urgent and necessary for culturally competent health care.

In health, the Pedagogical Degree Project (PDP) requires incorporating the reality of Brazilian populations and their ethnic-racial relations into the structure, organization, and intentions demonstrated in the contents that include the ethnic-racial discussion. Thinking about how to transgress the rule that imprints the legacy on science and health, presenting epistemologies that talk about race and seeking the inclusion of ethnic-racial relations from a black population and other ethnic peoples' perspective.

bell hooks' teachings guide the search for a pedagogical practice that invites students to think in an interactive, imaginative, and engaged way, "*seeing things from a different point of view*", ours - teachers and students.<sup>1</sup>

Displacing and estranging where knowledge is produced is the intellectual task to be carried out by nurses in the production of knowledge from an anti-racist and anti-colonial perspective. In intersectional hope, too, there is much to be produced about race, class, gender, and the multi-diversification of the clinical and epidemiological aspects of health problems in individuals, families, and communities. Intersectionality is understood as an "interconnected system of oppression"<sup>2</sup> that surrounds the lives of black women in the encounter of identity avenues.

The premise is to understand that race and ethnicity do not determine illness without it being combined with life in a constant state of social inequality, racism, and lack of access to basic services. It is significant to bring into the conversations, conceptualized here by bell hooks as the *sharing of power and knowledge, an initiative of cooperation with an intersectional and ethnic lens*, capable of arriving at care in health units and giving bodies the subjectivity they deserve.<sup>3</sup>

Ethnic-racial differences in contemporary times have become an emergency in the field of health. Race and ethnicity have thus become some of the most significant concepts for expressing the nature of relations between human groups and re-signifying ways of interacting and caring for health.

The teaching and learning process on the subject of ethnic-racial relations is indispensable for higher education courses in the area of health, in all areas, and in nursing, it has become a requirement based on the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Education of Ethnic-Racial Relations and the Resolution

of the National Council of Education (NCE) no. 1/2004.<sup>4</sup> Both regulations outline the principles and other developments, of which article 26 covers from basic education to higher education on the re-education of ethnic-racial relations and the teaching of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture.

To this end, the problem focuses on reparation and recognizing the knowledge and practices of the black population and other ethnic-racial populations in Brazil, using innovative epistemologies and pedagogies that are critical and open to multiracial and multiethnic dialogues.

The COVID-19<sup>5</sup> pandemic has accelerated the need to include this content in the health curriculum, as the health emergency has exposed the conditions of inequality to which a portion of the population is subjected, especially the black and Indigenous populations and a large part of the Romani/Gypsy population.

Suppose the pandemic was considered a lived experience in collective bodies and sensibilities. What subjective elements do we need to reveal about the experience of subalternized peoples and call for other ways of thinking about our care practices in health? How can education and critical thinking strengthen the fight against racism and ethnic-racial discrimination, reducing health inequalities?

In this context of uncertainty, the course "Topics in ethnic-racial Relations in the Context of Health" was created and began its activities in the first academic term of 2021. The adinkra symbol *NEA ONNIM NĀO A SUA OHU* represents the proverb "he who does not know can learn" and is the ancestral mark of the proposal. More than an African symbol, it refers to the need for a continuous discovery of knowledge, collectivizing wisdom and cultures in their diversity.

The subject, with three credits, totals 45 theoretical hours and was inaugurated for undergraduate nursing students as an optional academic activity of conditional choice. It is based on Laws No. 10.639/2003<sup>6</sup> and No. 11.645/2008,<sup>7</sup> which establish the compulsory inclusion of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in school curricula, favoring multicultural and multiethnic reflections. Students, monitors, and teachers shared stories, memories, and conflicts, revealing that "he who does not know can learn" (adinkra<sup>b</sup> that represents knowledge, the search for knowledge and learning throughout life), in this space of affection and collaboration during the course.

The aim was to present the experience of building and implementing the subject "Topics in ethnic-racial relations in the context of health" for students on an undergraduate nursing course based on bell hooks' engaged pedagogy.

## METHOD

This is a descriptive experience report about the construction of doing, collaborating, and sharing with undergraduate nursing students, learning strategies in the (con)formation of the first course in the Nursing Course of a Higher Education Institution focused on ethnic-racial discussion.

The theoretical methodological path of this experience was built in dialog with the teachings proposed by bell hooks to achieve engaged pedagogy, which can increase the liberating potential of

education. Her teaching trilogy: *Teaching to Transgress*,<sup>1</sup> *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*,<sup>3</sup> and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*<sup>9</sup> offers us the opportunity to reflect on and prepare for the challenges facing teachers who are effectively interested in collaborating with an anti-racist education that breaks down the paradigms of Eurocentric domination.

bell hooks' experience has a consensus and proximity to Paulo Freire's ideas and constructs, since by getting to know his ideas of a liberating education, bell hooks was able to think about the ways of living of a large part of the American population, where the use of the theoretical support found in the work "Education as the Practice of Freedom" stands out.<sup>10</sup> The author proposes short texts called "teachings" and in many of them, Freire is present. As such, we drank deeply from this source in our willingness to broaden awareness and critical engagement with the students.

The experience took place in the online environment of the teaching-learning process, due to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the Undergraduate Program at the Escola de Enfermagem Anna Nery of the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (EEAN/UFRJ), crossed by the teaching lives of three black women, permanent professors at EEAN.

Other women, all black and members of the Academic League of Nursing in Health in the Black Population (LAESPNE/UFRJ), mobilized their bodies, knowledge, and affections, actively participating in this safe learning space. The experience of learning and teaching took place from July to October 2021, after the course was approved by the main bodies at UFRJ.

The territory of doing in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic was developed by recording the activities carried out by the students, through the tool recognized as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and in the collective construction of a knowledge mural called Padlet®.

Padlet® is a tool that allows you to create virtual boards to organize your work and study routine. The resource has various templates for creating timetables, which can be shared with other users, and makes it easier to visualize tasks in work teams or educational institutions. In it, individual narratives, cultural interests, and family singularities were put into *conversation* with readings, experiences, and experiences offered in the virtual classroom.

The criteria used for analysis were observation and notes on the students' perceptions; class attendance; qualitative interactions between students, staff, and guests at the course meetings and; consultation of the record of what was built at the end with the support of Mentimeter® - an application that creates presentations in real-time with answers to the actions developed, in the form of an evaluation.

The presentation of the celebration essays, as proposed by bell hooks in her work, and which served as the basis for this study, was structured based on the categories outlined by the author.<sup>1,3</sup> These categories, in turn, are permeated by terms that evoke the experiences of native peoples, whose sources of knowledge lie in orality and the sharing of experiences.

Even though this was not a field study, the secrecy and confidentiality of the participants were respected, in accordance with Resolution 466/2012<sup>11</sup> of the National Health Council (NHC).

## RESULTS

The syllabus that brings together the contents of the course is based on the 32 teachings set out by hooks in *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*<sup>3</sup> and proposes an engaged journey towards decolonization.

bell hooks' concept of engaged pedagogy is useful and welcoming, as it emphasizes well-being, sharing in the classroom, valuing the student's expression, and sharing personal experiences, stories, and a lot of knowledge with them. It is not only cognition that is most important in learning, but also spiritual aspects and individual desires.

In this context, transgression<sup>3</sup> is therefore the act of breaking away from plaster casts, allowing everyone to listen and speak, which is precious learning for the future nurses of the Unified Health System (UHS), in other words, transgressing for bell hooks is breaking down the boundaries that limit students to thinking and learning like a production line. Teaching is therefore an act of resistance against the boredom, disinterest, and apathy that are often omnipresent in the classroom.<sup>1</sup>

Each meeting brought with it the proposal to put into practice the desire to understand how life works, regain self-esteem, and achieve self-realization. To this end, teachers and students are responsible for creating a learning community together, in a circular movement of celebration.

Most of the students were at the end of their training - the first period of the course. This is extremely important, considering that they can be voices that strengthen the anti-racist struggle by taking the ethnic-racial discussion to other courses, especially those with theoretical and practical dimensions, during their course in the Nursing degree.

The mural or Padlet®, as experiences of a virtual quilombo, were articulated in three groups stimulated and organized by the monitors. We chose to call them quilombos. This concept dealt with by Beatriz Nascimento has evolved over time and movements. It refers to a territory of freedom, not just an escape, but a search for a time/space of peace: *Quilombo* is a story. This word has a history. The earth is my *quilombo*. My space is my *quilombo*. Where I am, I am. When I am, I am.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the course, the 26 students enrolled had the opportunity to reflect, pointing out where and how the conversation experience took place. The Mentimeter® platform was used for the evaluative record when the students were encouraged in one word to bring up the meaning of this (co) experience. The image generated by Mentimeter® expressed the well-being and connections produced in students and teachers about what had been felt during the sharing of experiences in the course.

## DISCUSSION

The classroom experiments sought to integrate the concepts of bell hooks and Paulo Freire, celebrating the encounter between the propositions presented in engaged pedagogy, which runs through hooks' critical thinking, and Freire's

methodology, to promote awareness, social transformation and formulate a pedagogy where all students are perceived as subjects of knowledge.

Hooks' celebratory essays aim to honor her struggle for a liberating education that challenges social norms and promotes equality. Through this approach, we seek to comply with the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (GBL),<sup>13</sup> in its demand for the study of ethnic-racial relations and the recognition of Brazilian cultural diversity in higher education.

In health, it means understanding that it is urgent to prepare professionals to recognize the contexts of racial discrimination. Not just recognizing, but confronting the effects of racism on the lives of those being cared for. The talks in the classroom call on everyone present to engage more and more in learning, opening their minds and hearts to a movement that seeks to promote the health of all peoples, breaking with exclusionary practices and knowledge.

The conversations, the fruit of remote encounters between the black women and the guests (activists, religious people, teachers, and postgraduate students engaged in the anti-racist struggle) called for a discussion on the teachings of bell hooks<sup>1,3</sup> as the guiding thread in arranging the themes in the classroom.

Experiencing eight of the 32 teachings brought new meanings to everyday life in the classroom. With them, we reflected on the real purposes of teaching in a context where a conservative, racist, and sexist reality imposes itself on health training, articulating other ways of life, and living well.

*Storytelling and sharing stories* included the contents of the Health of Black, Indigenous, and Romani Peoples. Thus, conversations close to your ear, knowledge of healing and care, images, poems, and songs were lively exchanges in new constructions of knowledge.

The social and emotional wounds caused by everyday oppression are discussed. Telling stories and laughing and crying with them is very powerful because, for bell hooks, when tears are made possible, an "*insurrection of subjugated knowledge can occur*".<sup>1:134</sup> It is with feelings of hope that hatred is resisted, but not without first recognizing it - within oneself and in one's communities - and then consciously choosing love as a practice of freedom. *The time to cry, beyond race and gender, and the learning that overcomes hatred*, were the lessons of this moment.

Initial and specific concepts about race, ethnicity, and the formation of the Brazilian people, including their ethnic-racial roots and cultural experiences, were covered. These contents shouted out the voices of the untold history of the African diaspora, presenting all its intersectional nuances that impact black women's bodies, a subject of interest to Nursing where they are the majority, caring for and being cared for.

To lecture or not to lecture and black, woman and academic represented the experience of three black women, teachers, and researchers, meeting in dialog with concepts of *aquilombamento* ("*quilombing*", the building of a *quilombo*) and intersectionality. Narratives of faith, religiosity, and ancestral territory made up

the conversations. The commitment is to transmit knowledge, using pedagogical strategies and references that contain the accumulated experience of black people in the diaspora.<sup>14</sup>

When discussions on social movements, anti-racist policies, and actions were called for, with a focus on the health of population groups, with an emphasis on the struggles for public policies, the teachings proposed in the feminist revolution, decolonization, and critical thinking were used as a source capable of directing the meetings and discussions. It was time to present the guidelines that give constitutionality to the care of these populations in health settings.

In this space of cultural freedom, the students were able to present their families, their ways of life and their local culture, proposing books, articles and videos on all the teachings/content presented in the classroom.

And, in this democratic space for learning, they came up with a response to the learning process they had experienced, taking specific health legislation as their starting point: the National Policy for Comprehensive Health Care for the Black Population (PNSIPN);<sup>15</sup> the National Policy for Health Care for Indigenous Peoples (PNASPI)<sup>16</sup> and; the National Policy for Comprehensive Health Care for the Gypsy/Romani People.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, there was recognition of the panorama of the health situation of these peoples, the territories they inhabit, their distinct socio-cultural identities, and how to act in favor of improving their health conditions.

During the development of an activity by class, multiculturalism, ancestry, the discovery of others, and cultural richness were noted, which brought to light elements valued in the critical construction of content. It evokes the need for a pedagogy of promise and possibilities. Learning from each other and shifting the white capitalist patriarchal logic towards new safe spaces of being and knowing, based on diversity and shared in the encounter with their own origins.

Spaces of knowledge should foster practices free of all types of discrimination, combating inequalities and enabling the right of the other to be both equal and different.<sup>18</sup> Thus, undergraduate courses in nursing and the wider health area need to devise "*policies aimed at respecting and recognizing differences*", centered on the formation of a new citizenship through multicultural pedagogy. *It is believed that this new pedagogy can contribute to building a culture of peace*".<sup>18:117</sup>

The exchange, affection, partnership, and experience given as unique were other elements highlighted by the students. For bell hooks<sup>3</sup> listening to experience broadens the ways of knowing. She emphasizes that teachers and students, in their mutual search for knowledge, create the conditions for optimal learning, and through love can reunite and rebuild broken worlds.

The power of writing is insurgent power, the tool used to communicate knowledge. Poetry and prose offered the students the possibility of writing as a political act. By writing their own stories and reflections on each theme, without fear, they brought home the power that is in their lives. It is writing as a search for an understanding of life, as Conceição Evaristo taught.<sup>19</sup>

It is the life of the other, shared in the classroom, bringing a new and powerful energy that makes those most willing to build a learning community capable of incorporating the knowledge and care practices of native peoples, diasporans, nomads, and refugees into health settings.

During a hopeless time during the COVID-19 pandemic, the desire was to stimulate enthusiasm for ideas and the will to learn. So, it was with bell hooks, in college in the United States.<sup>1</sup> She waged an intense struggle against racism and teaching-learning methods based on sexist and racist models that insisted on silencing social, racial, and gender inequalities.

The discipline was strengthened to give black women a voice and to encourage learning as an act of transgression - to create an open learning community. This was the process of self-actualization.<sup>1</sup> The students were able to discuss the themes that were essential to their education, based on individual awareness and collective critical engagement, a vision of liberating education that links the will to know with the will to become.

Students and teachers embraced each other as integral human beings, seeking not only the knowledge that is in books but also the knowledge of life in the very and its various ways of coexisting/living from an insurgent intellectual practice. It's about wanting life's experiences to make sense through the power of meaningful knowledge.

We took on the promise of challenging the values born of Eurocentric thinking because they do not respond to the real needs and demands of the majority of the population served by the UHS. For us, this was the way to meet the principles of equity and humanization, starting from welcoming and listening, and valuing original and ancestral knowledge and practices.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The relationship between teaching, research and extension takes place to the extent that, to construct a narrative on ethnic-racial issues, it was necessary to start thinking about the training of nurses in the direction of ethnic-racial discussions.

The study suggests that interactions with collectives (Academic Leagues, Black Collectives, Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous Studies Centers, Hetero-identification Commissions, and other structures involved in the fight for affirmative action) within and outside institutional walls represent an important field of articulation between the University and society, essential in building data for future studies and in incorporating methodologies that dialogue with the epistemes of black and indigenous thought.

By proposing transgression, we agree with bell hooks in breaking down the boundaries imposed by systems of domination - such as patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and colonialism - and we propose creating spaces where freedom, affection, and critical thinking can flourish.

Based on this experience, the discipline has become a legitimate means of confronting racism and ignorance of cultures considered to be on the margins of those produced by the Eurocentric

universe. Added to the ongoing struggles is an approach free of discrimination towards the multiple human groups that make up Brazil's diverse and plural society.

With joy, music, poetry, writing, and collective movement on Friday afternoons, in the academic year experienced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have contributed to the possibility of collective construction, actively participating in the training of future nurses who are citizens, critical and sensitive to issues that address anti-racist and welcoming care for users, which implies a commitment to transforming the practices developed in the different health production scenarios.

The study is a portrait of the discipline in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its limitation was the impossibility of developing the pedagogical activities in person, without jeopardizing the repercussions of the meeting provided by the discussions surrounding ethnic-racial issues.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY RESEARCH

The underlying content of the research text is contained in the article.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest.

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## AUTHOR’S CONTRIBUTIONS

Design of the experience report. Maria da Soledade Simeão dos Santos. Cecília Maria Izidoro Pinto. Verônica Caé da Silva Moura. Giselle Natalina Sousa da Silva. Renata Pereira Laurindo. Information collection. Maria da Soledade Simeão dos Santos. Cecília Maria Izidoro Pinto. Verônica Caé da Silva Moura. Giselle Natalina Sousa da Silva. Renata Pereira Laurindo.

Data analysis and interpretation of results. Maria da Soledade Simeão dos Santos. Cecília Maria Izidoro Pinto. Verônica Caé da Silva Moura. Giselle Natalina Sousa da Silva. Renata Pereira Laurindo.

Writing and critical revision of the manuscript. Maria da Soledade Simeão dos Santos. Cecília Maria Izidoro Pinto. Verônica Caé da Silva Moura. Giselle Natalina Sousa da Silva. Renata Pereira Laurindo.

Approval of the final version of the article. Maria da Soledade Simeão dos Santos. Cecília Maria Izidoro Pinto. Verônica Caé da Silva Moura. Giselle Natalina Sousa da Silva. Renata Pereira Laurindo.

Responsibility for all aspects of the content and integrity of the published article. Maria da Soledade Simeão dos Santos. Cecília Maria Izidoro Pinto. Verônica Caé da Silva Moura. Giselle Natalina Sousa da Silva. Renata Pereira Laurindo.

## ASSOCIATED EDITOR

Fábio da Costa Carbogim 

## SCIENTIFIC EDITOR

Marcelle Miranda da Silva 

<sup>a</sup> hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins but adopted her stage name in honor of her great-grandmother. The lowercase spelling of her name is explained by the author’s desire to transfer attention from her personality to her ideas, emphasizing, in her words, “the substance of her books, not who I am”.

<sup>b</sup> The Adinkra script, a gift from the Ashanti people, represents a set of symbols that are ancestral African knowledge and technology, in the field of language. The ideograms express traditional values, philosophical ideas, codes of conduct and social norms.<sup>8</sup>