

Amefricanity

The black feminism of Lélia Gonzalez

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Though a quarter of the total population, black women represent just 2% of the legislative body of Brazil's federal government, the National Congress. Yet their visibility in public debate has grown radically in recent years with younger activists beginning to occupy spaces in media, academia and the arts. Lélia Gonzalez (1935-1994) has become a major point of reference for this new generation, and not only because of her pioneering position as a black woman intellectual in the 70s and 80s, or the example set by her political commitments and engagements. It is also because her thought foreshadowed contemporary debates concerning race relations in Brazil and beyond. Bolsonaro's Brazil is in many ways stuck at a crossroads between such processes of social transformation and political forces determined to stop them at all costs.

Gonzalez took the experience of black people in Brazil as the point from which to articulate an original perspective on the country's formation that both contested and resituated official accounts. She drew both from Marxism, in order to understand the implantation and development of capitalism in the colonial Americas, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, to interpret a national unconscious revealed in cultural and linguistic elements imprinted by colonialism and the disavowal of African and indigenous origins. She brought together the disavowed experiences of African descendants and indigenous into a single category – *Amefricanity* – which questioned the 'Latin' identity that suppressed both, thereby offering a contribution *avant la lettre* to the conversation on decoloniality taking place today. In her insistence on always thinking race, class and gender in relation, she not only was an early practitioner of what would become known as 'intersectionality', but she laid the basis for a black feminism in Brazil – a facet of her work so influential now as to risk overshadowing the rest. It is as a tribute to

Gonzalez's ongoing relevance and her rediscovery today that this paper uses her trajectory to comment on the continuities and discontinuities between two disparate moments in the history of Brazil and the struggle for social and racial justice.

Trouble in paradise

Born Lélia Almeida on 1 February 1935 in Belo Horizonte, capital of the state of Minas Gerais, she was the penultimate daughter of a large family with few economic resources. Her father died when she was a child; her mother, of indigenous descent, was a domestic worker. Brazilian society imposes a marked racial and sexual division of domestic labour: not only do women perform it almost exclusively, but poor black women often do it in the homes of wealthier white families.¹ Like many in her position, Gonzalez began her professional life as a nanny, though she managed to break with the path laid out for her by finishing her studies and attending university. As she would later recall: 'The only way I found to overcome these problems was to be the first student in the class. We all know the story: "she's black but she's smart"'.² She studied History and Geography and then Philosophy at what is today the State University of Rio de Janeiro, teaching at several colleges and higher education institutions. In the late 1970s, Gonzales became one of the few black lecturers at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), where she worked until the end of her life.

Gonzalez's trajectory personified several of the changes taking place in the political, academic, artistic and cultural circuits of the 1970s and 80s. The spaces in which she circulated and the encounters she had encapsulate the period. In the late 70s, while the military dictatorship began a slow thaw, the political and cultural

fields in Brazil started opening up to a plurality of new ideas. It was during this period that indigenous, feminist, black and gay movements began to emerge, each contesting the centrality of the working class as the subject of social transformation.

Examples of the effervescence of that moment were the creation of the Parque Lage School of Visual Arts in 1975, an epoch-making experimental art school at which Gonzalez taught the country's first institutional course on black culture; and the Freudian School of Rio de Janeiro, one of the first institutions in Brazil to popularise Lacanian psychoanalysis. From Lacan she would take concepts such as 'disavowal' and 'cultural neurosis', and give them her own distinctive elaboration. Gonzalez, also in 1975, participated in the foundation of the Quilombo Samba School, initiated by important artists from the world of samba as a way to contest the growing commercialisation of Carnival and return the popular festival to a more political, popular and black perspective.³ Her respect for and interest in popular culture would result in a book, *Festas Populares no Brasil* (1987).⁴

Gonzalez played a significant role in the reorganisation of the Left in later years, participating in the formation of the Workers' Party (PT) and joining its National Directorate from 1981 to 1984. She ran for a federal congressional seat in 1982 and received enough votes to place her as an alternate. She would soon leave PT, however, for what she saw as a lack of commitment to the antiracist struggle, accusing the party of 'racism by omission' in an open letter that became well-known.⁵ Instead she joined the Democratic Labour Party (PDT), for which she ran for state legislature in 1986, once again becoming an alternate.⁶ She explained her commitment to institutional politics by saying: 'It is a space that we have to conquer. ... It is necessary to fight and guarantee our places, which, of course, have never been ceded to us.'⁷

Among all of Gonzalez's engagements, the most significant was undoubtedly with the black movement, just as it was going through its process of reorganisation after the 1964 military coup that dismantled all social movements and opened a gap between political generations.⁸ The dictatorship not only restricted freedom of association and persecuted leaders, but also banned the debate on racism through a legal trap in the National Security Act of September 1969 which prescribed the crime of

'incitement to hatred or racial discrimination'. It might seem anti-racist, but this would be used to criminalise anyone who proposed to discuss race at all, since any accusation of racism could be interpreted as a subversion of the 'paradise of racial democracy'.⁹



Although it began to be elaborated as a foundational ideology during the Imperial period (1822-1889), the discourse of 'racial democracy' received its canonical formulation in 1933 with the publication of Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves* [*Casa Grande e Senzala*].¹⁰ In the country that received the largest contingent of enslaved Africans (around 4 million, or 40% of the transatlantic traffic between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries) and was the last in the Americas to abolish slavery, this discourse played a major role in minimising the centrality of racial domination and exploitation in the formation of Brazil, constructing the notion of a supposedly more benevolent Portuguese colonisation and a miscegenated country in which racism had no place. One of Gonzalez's contributions to this debate was to point out that the romanticisation of miscegenation was effectively a way of covering up the trauma of colonial rape.

Yet the Brazilian elite were not the only ones to repress the racial question. In the context of the Cold War, the racial question was eschewed both by the Right and the Left. If for the military it was a subversive topic that the Left used to sow division, for the latter it was a US import that threatened the centrality of class struggle. Although this did not prevent the black movement from building alliances with others in the struggle for re-democratisation, it forced them to stress that full democracy would not exist so long as blacks were excluded. To end that exclusion it would be necessary for

them to have distinct organisations of their own.

The reorganisation of the black movement began in 1971 with the creation of the Palmares Group in Porto Alegre, one of the whitest and most racist regions in the country – nowadays part of Bolsonaro's heartland. In the following years, other groups would spring up in capitals like Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte and Salvador. Gonzalez took part in the foundation of one of these, the Institute for Research on Black Cultures (IPCN) in 1974. The main reference points for this new black movement were the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States and the anticolonial struggles taking place in Portuguese colonies like Angola, Cape Verde and Mozambique. Extremely popular soul music parties in working-class neighbourhoods at the time spread the cultural influence of North American black culture and ideas of ethnic pride and belonging. These elements – plus a Marxist influence that was embraced by some and rejected by others – led this new movement to break with the emphasis on respectability and integration that had been characteristic of the organisational efforts of previous generations.¹¹ This process would culminate in 1978 with the creation of the first national organisation to coordinate anti-racist struggle, the Unified Black Movement (MNU); Gonzalez would be a member of its national leadership until 1982. And she would found the N'Zinga Black Women Collective in which anti-racist, anti-sexist and popular struggles were further combined.

The Amefricanity category

In Brazil as elsewhere, the circulation of intellectual production is organised according to a gendered, racialised logic that renders invisible the work of black women. On the few occasions when their names are inscribed in the canon of intellectual thought, that inscription is in the margins, a 'peripheral place at the centre'¹² which acts as an exception that confirms the rule. To this structural exclusion is added another, deliberate, exclusion derivative of the fact that in many situations their narratives confront hegemonic assumptions in their field. This is a fate that befell Gonzalez, as her dissident account of race in Brazil contested two pillars of national identity: the myths of racial democracy and miscegenation.

Like other black intellectuals of her generation who

had a dual affiliation to the black movement and academia, she stood out for her efforts to de-centre Eurocentric hegemony in the production of knowledge, and this also led her to subvert the impersonality of academic language. In an attempt to create a style of writing that incorporated features of speech, she impregnated some of her academic texts with Afro-Brazilian orality, incorporating other rationalities in academic discourse, without abandoning rigour and seriousness. Besides, her analysis of the relation between capital, labour and race in Brazil was deeply rooted in a Latin American reality and took a rather critical position on the work of US-based African-American intellectuals, partly because, like many in her generation, she shared a certain anti-imperialist rejection of the role of the US in the world. This is an important difference to the current generation, in which an often uncritical and decontextualised reception of the North American debate is noticeable. Today's discussion of colourism, for example, more or less directly imported from the United States, runs against the grain of the Brazilian black movement's struggle in the 1970s to educate black people to recognise and take pride in their African ancestry regardless of the tone of their skin.

The originality of Gonzalez's contribution resides in her formulation of an alternative perspective on the social and cultural formation of Brazil that moves black people from the margins to the centre. In doing so, she makes protagonists of black women, something unheard of at the time.

If we pay close attention to some aspects of so-called Brazilian culture, we'll notice right away that, in its more or less conscious manifestations, it hides, while simultaneously reveals, the marks of the Africanity that constitute it. ... From there, we can also spot the place of black women in this process of cultural formation, as well as the different modes of rejection/integration of their role.¹³

In this process, she mobilises the psychoanalytic concept of *Verneinung* ('disavowal' or 'denial') to address the way in which the recognition of racism is repressed. For Gonzalez, racism is integral to the unconscious structures of Brazilian society, and disavowing that, as well as the African roots of its culture, is precisely the purpose that the myth of racial democracy serves.

To better understand the tricks that racism plays ... it is worth remembering the Freudian category of denial

(*Verneinung*): 'a process through which the individual, although formulating one of his desires, thoughts or feelings that were until then repressed, continues to defend themselves from it, denying that it belongs to them'. As a disavowal of our *Latinamefricanidade* [*ladinoamefricanos*], 'Brazilian' racism turns precisely against those who are its living witnesses (black people) whilst claiming not to do so (Brazilian 'racial democracy').¹⁴

In this text we find the concept of *Amefricanidade* [*amefricanidade*], which Gonzalez proposed as a key with which to think the specificity of the experience of Africans and African descendants as it was historically constituted in American soil.

Beyond its purely geographic character, [*Amefricanidade*] designates a historical process of intense cultural dynamics (resistance, accommodation, reinterpretation, creation of new forms) referenced in African models but referring to the construction of a whole ethnic identity.¹⁵

Amefricanidade not only proposes to think the black experience in the Americas in a unified way, but also brings to light what is, alongside the contribution of indigenous culture, silenced and disavowed in the notion of a shared 'Latin' identity. It refuses the idealisation of the African continent for a perspective in which diasporic displacement is essential to the formation of a black identity. Finally, it challenges the centrality and hegemony of the United States in the creation of models of analysis and conceptualisations of blackness.

Double trouble

Gonzalez's work from the 1970s is also concerned with the function and structure of Brazilian capitalism from the perspective of race relations. That is the moment when she was in close dialogue with Marxist thought, particularly Louis Althusser, a dialogue that would cease in the following decades when her main points of reference became psychoanalysis and Afrocentrism.¹⁶ An important debate in which Gonzalez became involved in this period, responding in part to dependency theory, was that of the 'unequal and combined development' of Brazilian capitalism. Referring to W.E.B. Du Bois, Gonzalez depicted how blacks, post-slavery, had been driven by 'a long process of marginalisation ... to the condition of the most oppressed and exploited sector of the Brazilian population', coming to constitute an industrial reserve

army in a context where remnants of pre-capitalist productive formations coexisted with neocolonial dependency.¹⁷

Gonzalez kept touch with black intellectuals and activists from around the world, such that in her 1982 campaign she could present herself as the first black woman to represent the Brazilian black movement abroad – a reference to her participation in the fourth meeting of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) at UCLA in 1979. She held exchanges with Angela Davis, Aimé Césaire, Molefi Asante and Carlos Moore, a staunch critic of the Cuban Revolution's failure to address racism.

Her pioneering role in the formation of Brazilian black feminism is due in large to the way she disturbed a hegemonic feminism based on the universalisation of the experience of middle-class white women – a feminism incapable of contemplating the complexity of gender and class relations in a racist society built on slavery. Years before the African-American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's reflections on intersectionality, she had already discussed the impact of raciality on gender relations, the racial and sexual division of labour, as well as the triple discrimination and economic overexploitation to which the interconnection of race, class and gender exposed black women.¹⁸

There is a double discrimination against non-white women in the continent, African and Amerindian. The double character of their biological – or racial and sexual – condition makes them more oppressed and exploited in a region dependent on a patriarchal-racist capitalism. Precisely because this system transforms differences into inequalities, the discrimination they suffer takes on a triple character, given their class position: Amerindians and African Americans are part, for the most part, of the immense Afrolatinoamerican proletariat.¹⁹

Looking at the statistics of the 'Brazilian miracle' of the 1970s, which produced rapid economic growth without affecting the nation's concentration of wealth, Gonzalez observed that the greatest distributive disparity occurred between whites and blacks and not between men and women. This questioned a pillar of white feminism, which conceived of patriarchal domination in a one-dimensional way. Not only were different types of masculinity shaped by variables such as class, race and sexual orientation, but the mediation between race and gender placed black men simultaneously in the peculiar

position of dominant subjects (in relation to women in their own community) and subordinate subjects (in relation to white power). On the other hand, and this was certainly one of the thorniest issues she raised within the feminist movement of her time, the economic and social emancipation of white women could also be understood as being based on the exploitation of black women as domestic workers:

There is an unmistakeable political backwardness in Brazilian feminist movements, as they are led by middle-class white women. Here too one can see the need to disavow racism. ... Here too one can see the need to hide from the scene the crucial issue: the liberation of white women has been done at the expense of the exploitation of black women.²⁰

‘Everyone knew their place’

The black movement that Gonzalez helped constitute in Brazil in the 1970s distinguished itself from that of previous generations by openly confronting the myth of racial democracy, proposing an alternative account of national formation and reclaiming an identity specific to black Brazilians. The movement vigorously denounced racial discrimination and its socio-political consequences, as well as political violence, proposing an alternative project for the country as a whole (at least as far as the Unified Black Movement was concerned), and demanding historical reparations for the black population in Brazil. The latter would bear fruit over the last decade, particularly with the establishment of affirmative action for poor, black and indigenous students at federal universities in 2012.²¹ The effects have been remarkable: between 2010 and 2018, the number of black and brown undergraduates at public universities went up by 10.5%, and for the first time in history they are now the majority (51.2%); 41.9% of undergraduates in 2018 had used the quota system to get into university.²²

Yet it is precisely such long-term victories of the black movement which have sparked responses in the opposite direction. A case in point is the Constitutional Amendment of 2012 which lifted domestic workers out of informal labour agreements and granted them basic rights such as retirement and paid holidays. This was a cause of the black movement since the 1940s, when a group of black women instituted the Association of

Domestic Workers in Rio de Janeiro with the support of Abdias do Nascimento’s Black Experimental Theatre company. To many upper- and middle-class employers, however, the Amendment amounted to an attack on their right to have cheap household labour and created a rift with Dilma Rousseff’s PT government. Partly, it was in this context that the mentality which led to Bolsonaro’s victory began brewing. Rights for the black population were perceived as privileges that should be restricted to a small class; demands for equality were perceived as claims for special treatment. Thus, even though the actual balance sheet of the PT years is ambiguous – the same period saw a sharp rise in mortality rates among black youth, and the 2006 Drug Law has hit the black community disproportionately and increased incarceration²³ – policies like affirmative action lit the fuse for a *politics of resentment* that would explode when a sharp economic downturn began in 2014.

The crossroads at which Brazil finds itself now is the opposite of the one that Lélia Gonzalez experienced. The late 70s and early 80s were filled with the promise of the end of the dictatorship and a new constitution, as if the dam which the military regime erected could no longer hold and demands long ignored were to burst forth irresistibly. Today, it feels as though old Brazil has judged that even the modest victories which the historically-excluded have won were too much and the clock must be set back to a past in which ‘everyone knew their place’. Symptomatically, Bolsonaro has closed the Special Secretariat for the Advancement of Racial Equality created in 2003, and he has appointed as head of an institution for the promotion of African-Brazilian culture a black man who denies the existence of racism in Brazil and describes the black movement as ‘scum’. (A good reminder, if one was needed, of the limits of tokenism.) Yet the rediscovery of Gonzalez’ thought is a consequence of precisely the kind of transformation that these forces are resisting: the democratisation of education and the rise of a new generation of black activists and intellectuals. While the conflict in which Gonzalez fought has come out in the open once again, her thought and trajectory can be a weapon and a compass for those who continue the fight.

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Notes

1. In Brazil it is common for middle class families to employ domestic workers and for them to sleep at their job – a legacy of slavery.
2. Lélia Gonzalez, 'Entrevista', *O Pasquim*, 871 (20-26 March 1986), 9.
3. Samba Schools are the associations that organise carnival parades. They are organised by neighbourhoods or communities and maintain a strong territorial, social and cultural identity. *Quilombo* (maroon community), with its connotations of organisation, freedom, resistance and equality, is a central idea for the black movement in Brazil.
4. Lélia Gonzalez, *Festas Populares no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Índex, 1987).
5. Lélia Gonzalez, 'Racismo por omissão', *Folha de São Paulo* (13 August 1983).
6. During the process of restructuring the Brazilian party system following the dictatorship, PDT was the heir of a Left populism (*trabalhismo* or 'labourism') whose origins date back to Getúlio Vargas in the 1930s. In the period in which Gonzalez was affiliated to it, PDT boasted a sizeable popular base and important black leaders as members, among whom was Abdias do Nascimento, a pioneering figure in the 1940s. Its social and political composition is starkly different today.
7. The platform of her two campaigns was similar, featuring demands that were radical for the time and remain relevant today. These include the depathologisation of homosexuality (which eventually took place in 1985), giving land titles to slum-dwellers, and the decriminalisation of abortion, still illegal today except in a few circumstances.
8. Michael George Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
9. Gonzalez was surveilled but never arrested or tortured, both common at the time. She was first investigated in 1972 under suspicion of 'recruitment of adherents to the Marxist doctrine'. No evidence was found. Subsequent mentions in reports made by the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) are related to her activities in the black movement and, later, in PT. The documentation is available at the Rio de Janeiro State Public Archive. Sector: Comunismo, Folder 112, Sheets 211-217

- (Fundo de Políticas Políticas no Rio de Janeiro, DOPS Archives).
10. Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilisation*, trans. Samuel Putnam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).
 11. See Paulina Alberto, *Terms of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
 12. I take this concept from Fernanda Miranda's work on the place of black authors in the Brazilian canon. Fernanda Miranda, *Silêncios Prescritos. Estudos de Romances de Autoras Negras Brasileiras, 1859-2006* (Rio de Janeiro: Malê, 2019).
 13. Lélia Gonzalez, 'Racismo e Sexismo na Cultura Brasileira', *Movimentos Sociais Urbanos, Minorias Étnicas e Outros Estudos* (Brasília: ANPOCS, 1983), 226.
 14. Lélia Gonzalez, 'Categoria político-cultural da amefricanidade', *Primavera Para as Rosas Negras: Lélia Gonzalez em Primeira Pessoa* (São Paulo: Diáspora Africana, 2018), 321–322.
 15. Lélia Gonzalez, 'Nany', *Primavera Para as Rosas Negras*, 336.
 16. The reception of the debate on Afrocentricity in Brazil was still incipient at the time. Most references to it in Gonzalez's work are taken from Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988).
 17. Lélia Gonzalez, 'Mulher Negra', *Jornal Mulherio* 3 (October–September 1981).
 18. What Crenshaw gave a name to was of course already present in such forerunners as the black feminism that had developed within the Communist Party of the United States of America (out of which emerged Angela Davis), the Third World Women's Alliance and the Combahee River Collective.
 19. Lélia Gonzalez, 'Por um feminismo Afro-latino-americano', *Primavera Para as Rosas Negras*, 314.
 20. Lélia Gonzalez. 'Cultura, etnicidade, trabalho: efeitos linguísticos e políticos da exploração da mulher', presented at the 7th Conference of the Latin American Studies Association. Pittsburgh, (5–7 April 1979), 20.
 21. Although the Brazilian system is similar to the North American, public universities in Brazil are entirely free. Curiously, the first university in Brazil to autonomously implement a quota system was Gonzalez' *alma mater*, the State University of Rio de Janeiro, in 2003.
 22. Associação Nacional dos Diretores de Institutos Federais de Educação Superior, 'V Pesquisa Nacional de Perfil Sociocultural dos/as Graduandos/as das IFES' (2018), 210–12, <http://www.andifes.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/V-Pesquisa-Nacional-de-Perfil-Socioecon%C3%B4mico-e-Cultural-dos-as-Graduandos-as-das-IFES-2018.pdf>.
 23. The problematic law leaves it to judges to decide the circumstances that distinguish users from dealers, leaving room for racist interpretation.