

# Introduction

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Born on February 1, 1935, Lélia de Almeida later adopted the name of her husband, Luiz Carlos Gonzalez. The importance of this white man in her life is highlighted by many authors dedicated to understanding the complex trajectory of Lélia Gonzalez and the successive changes and displacements that shaped her political position, crossed by the contradictions and challenges of an increasingly hemispheric, diasporic, and insurgent subjectivity.

The transition from Minas Gerais to Rio de Janeiro in 1942, due to the success of her brother's career as a professional soccer player; the presence of her parents, her father, Acacio, a railroad worker, and her mother Urcinda, an illiterate woman of indigenous origin; the careful academic study at Pedro II High School and at the State University of Guanabara, currently University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ); and her transit between intellectual and economic elites in Rio de Janeiro as a translator and teacher, are some of the features that seem to have paved the way for her turn toward the affirmation of a black and diasporic identity and consciousness that took place beginning in the 1970s (as described by Ratts and Rios 2010; Carneiro 2014; and discussed in this dossier by Keisha-Khan Perry and Flavia Rios).

In this context, disquieted by the Cold War and the recrudescence of the military dictatorship in Brazil, Lélia's thinking took place at the confluence of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and candomblé, laying the foundations for her original work. Her work, so unjustly neglected in the Brazilian academic context, is immersed in the coloniality of knowledge, in epistemic racism, and in the obstinacy that denies voice, place, and protagonism to the black subject in the interpretation of their own history and social position (Pinho and Figueiredo 2002). It is not for any other reason that in "Racism and Sexism in Brazilian Culture"

Lélia confronted and provoked the elite of the Brazilian social sciences at the Congress of ANPOCS (National Association of Graduate Studies in Social Sciences) in 1980: "O lixo vai falar: E numa boa" ([1984] 2018).

In the 1980s Gonzalez was already one of the main activists of the Brazilian black movement. The strength of her militant and political activity was combined with the originality and density of her critical thinking. When she ran for state representative of the House for the Democratic Labor Party in 1986, she presented a résumé that included numerous accomplishments: founder of the Unified Black Movement, member of the board of the Zumbi dos Palmares Memorial, member of the National Council of Women's Rights, vice president of two UN Seminars on "Women and Apartheid," and much more. I briefly outline these biographical milestones to emphasize how the trajectory of Lélia, who crossed countless racial, geographical, and class frontiers, formed her rich and dense point of view, effectively diasporic and pan-African, as pointed out by Keisha-Khan Perry, Edilza Sotero, Augustin Lao-Montes, and Juliana Goes in this dossier. Lélia's writings and life were dismissed as "escrivência," even before the concept was coined by Conceição Evaristo, who pointed out how personal and collective memory were articulated in the production of an Afro-Brazilian poetics and politics (Evaristo 2008).

In this dossier, motivated by the foresight and courage of the new LASA president—with whom I have the responsibility and honor to cooperate as a program co-chair—we go beyond the biographical narrative, without neglecting it, to present Lélia's work, notably the concept of *América Ladina*. This was developed through intense exchanges and dialogue with intellectuals and activists such as Angela Davis, Carlos Moore, and Molefi Asante in the United States, Latin America, and Africa,

but fundamentally in connection with working class and black cultures and their reinvention, as in the “bloco Afro” Ilê Aiyê in Bahia, and, above all, in contact and communication with black women in the various spaces and contexts in which she circulated. Lélia Gonzalez finds a place alongside diasporic or pan-African black female freedom fighters and thinkers, as Lao-Montes and Goes suggest here: “Lélia Gonzalez trasciende a Martí, al establecer la diferencia específica de las Américas Negras [Lélia Gonzalez transcends Martí, establishing the specific difference of the Black Americas].” In the same sense, Diana Gómez Correal points out in this dossier the innovative agency of the Amefrican women like Lélia in how they “depatriarchalize and decolonize [depatriarcalizar y descolonizar].”

The present Amefricanity in the Americas reveals itself as a way of looking at social and subjective processes and sociocultural landscapes as fundamentally stressed and fractured “from below [desde abajo].” The institutional and ideological superstructure of Latin America is deceit and violence, which is confronted and deformed by the agency of countless individuals and institutions who throughout history have constructed conscious and unconscious ways of resisting. Notably, this resistance is also thanks to the position occupied by the black woman as the “black mother,” protagonist of an unconscious civilizational process that precisely allows Africanity and indigeneity to become *amefricanidade*, subverting the structure of the assimilationist argument as “*nêga ativa*” present in Gilberto Freyre. As Lélia says: “the black mother is the mother. And when we talk about a maternal role, we are saying that the black mother, in exercising it, passed all the values that were relevant to her for the Brazilian child” (Gonzalez [1984] 2018, 205, my translation). We can also see this concept in Claudia Pons Cardoso’s essay in this dossier, which presents Lélia’s thinking as a “decolonial black feminist theoretical-political formulation of agency, contributing to the construction of another civilizing project.”

It is also necessary to consider the “ladino” aspect of Lélia Gonzalez’s theorizing. In Portuguese, *ladino* means “smart; expressing a lot of intelligence, cleverness, sharpness of mind. Smart-aleck; to

describe the astute person who acts dishonestly.”<sup>11</sup> And again: “intellectually sophisticated, sly, clever, finicky . . . to describe the slave or the Indian who already spoke Portuguese” (*Novo Dicionário Aurélio da Língua Portuguesa*). In the context of Brazilian slavery, ladinos would be relatively acculturated slaves, fluent in colonial cultural codes. From among this group, rebels were recruited for the numerous slave rebellions that occurred in Brazil. The ladinos were opposed to the so-called “*boçais*” Africans who had recently arrived and were not qualified in the culture of their masters (Schwarcz and Gomes 2018). The word also resonated on the medieval Iberian Peninsula, since “Ladino” also refers to Sephardic Jews and their language in that context. We are also aware that in other Latin American countries, the word has other meanings and political uses, as in Guatemala, where the policy of miscegenation/whitening and distancing of the indigenous population is concerned (Adams 1994).

However, for Lélia, the word seems to mean this transitory and insurgent connection of a subject in movement and transformation, that recolonizes from within, and as a strategy of subversion, the colonial structures of Latin America. The example of the Catholic brotherhoods in Brazil is paradigmatic, like the Sisterhood of the Good Death in Bahia, mentioned in my essay in this dossier. In this case, black, African, freed, ladino women used the structure and cover of Catholic Marian devotion to ensure continuity of worship to the *orixás* and ancestors, just as I myself tried to assume an Amefrican perspective to address social death and structural antiblackness. Or in the case of *pretuguês* (“blackguese”), the subversion of the Portuguese language carried out by the ladino blacks, who, when learning the language of Camões, transformed it into something else, in the slave quarters and streets, as discussed in this dossier by Thula Pires. Ladinity in this sense is precisely this capacity of the enslaved and their descendants to manipulate codes to simulate adherence, when in fact they produced dissent. This is relevant in Pires’s article, where she describes the possible contributions of a Latin American perspective to human rights, questioning the colonial and racist legal order from Fanon’s nonbeing zone.

It is in this way, at this moment, under the advance of neofascist policies that stun the Americas—"proyectos de negación y muerte," as Diana Gómez Correal puts it—that Lélia's thinking and the *ladinidade* of our ancestors summon us to bind worlds and knowledge—indigenous, African, violated and resistant, working class and campesino—to build hope and solidarity, inspired by the courage of generations of women who, over the centuries, have faced dehumanization and poverty, shame and extermination.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> *Dicionário Online de Português*, <https://www.dicio.com.br/ladino/> (accessed June 4, 2019).

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