

# Amefricanidade: The Black Diaspora Feminism of Lélia Gonzalez

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On September 30, 2015, the United Nations in Brazil celebrated the opening of its newest building, in Brasília, which now houses representatives of the UN Population Fund, UN Women, UN Environmental Programme, and UNAIDS. This new building was named after Lélia Gonzalez, iconic Brazilian activist of the black and black women's movements of the 1970s and 1980s in Brazil. This recognition of a black feminist scholar-activist came on the 70th anniversary of the creation of the UN in 1945, the 20th anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Fourth International Conference on Women, and in the framework of the UN's International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024). The year 2015 also marked the 40th anniversary of the UN's Decade for Women. During the period from 1975 to 1985, Lélia Gonzalez was a frequent participant in conferences and meetings organized as part of or separate from official UN events (Carneiro 2014). It was precisely during this time that she became a leader in a burgeoning transnational network of women's activists and intellectuals who organized themselves in social movements, cultural groups, and political collectives.

Between 1979 and 1981, Gonzalez traveled around the world to participate in academic and political events and meet with black leaders in several countries. In April 1979, she traveled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the US, to attend the LASA annual meeting and present a paper titled "Culture, Ethnicity and Work: Linguistic and Political Effects on the Exploitation of Black Women" (Gonzalez 1979a). That same year, she presented "Brazilian Black Youth and Unemployment" at the African Heritage Studies Association meeting, which she attended regularly (Fierce 2000). In May, she presented "A mulher negra na sociedade brasileira" (Gonzalez 1979b) at the Center for African American

Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. This is one of her most cited texts, which she later expanded and published as a book titled *Lugar de negro* with Carlos Hasenbalg (1982). In a visit to the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at SUNY Buffalo, Gonzalez spoke extensively with Molefi Kete Asante about the ideas he was developing for his book *Afrocentricity* (1980). Gonzalez returned often to the US, including to UCLA in 1980 to present "The United Black Movement," now a classic essay published in Pierre Fontaine's anthology *Race, Class and Power in Brazil* (1985). Gonzalez traveled within the US and to Panama, France, Italy, Switzerland, Finland, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Mali. She describes her journeys abroad during the Brazilian dictatorship and the struggle for democracy as an opportunity to "breathe new air."

This article situates Gonzalez as a critical thinker in the black radical and feminist traditions who should be known and taken more seriously in North America. Her life and legacy teach us that in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, national narratives and policies of whitening and multiculturalism operate in stark contrast to the reality that the black population in the region forms the largest segment of the African diaspora outside Africa, with an estimated one hundred million people. Vibrant struggles for cultural recognition, citizenship, and human rights, oftentimes founded and led by black women, have always been occurring. What would it mean, then, for African diaspora studies and black feminist studies to decenter the Caribbean and North America and give more attention to Afro-Latin America?

To expand our assertion that African diaspora and Latin American studies need to refocus on the social, intellectual, and political experiences

of black women, we provide a description of Gonzalez's diasporic travels and experiences and the impact on her formulation of *amefricanidade* and black diaspora feminism, concluding with a reflection on the politics of a black feminist diaspora as an anti-imperialist and decolonial project in Africana and black feminist studies. Like Davies's recent work on Claudia Jones (2008), this ongoing research on black women in Latin America follows in this black left feminist intellectual tradition of resisting the erasure of black women as key social, economic, cultural, and political actors. In analyzing Gonzalez's travels, we assert that black women in Brazil should be centered as producers of knowledge, not just objects of study (and desire) in the region.

### A Remarkable Life

The following brief biography of Lélia Gonzalez will help us to fully understand her formation as a global black radical female subject in black feminist and black diaspora studies.

Gonzalez's travels began in 1942 with her family's move to Rio de Janeiro. The second to last of 18 children, she attended the traditional Colégio Pedro II in Rio, still known as one of the best public high schools in Brazil, and completed her bachelor's degree in history and geography in 1959 at the State University of Guanabara (now the State University of Rio de Janeiro) and another bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1962. Before the recent implementation of affirmative action programs for poor black students in public universities, blacks made up less than 10 percent of Brazilian university students, and in some fields of study, like philosophy, less than 5 percent. It would still be remarkable today for any black woman raised in the poorest neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro to complete a bachelor's degree, a professional studies course in Lacanian thought, and a master's degree in communication at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, while founding the Institute of Research on Black Culture and the School of Freudian Thought, and to begin a doctorate in anthropology.

In 1976, Gonzalez joined the Instituto de Pesquisas das Culturas Negras (IPCN), which brought together students, scholars, and activists doing research and organizing against racism in Rio de Janeiro. In 1978 Gonzalez, along with other black activists including Abdias Nascimento, founded the Movimento Negro Unificado Contra a Discriminação Racial (MNU) in São Paulo. She attended gatherings in Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Belo Horizonte, and other major cities throughout Brazil to disseminate the work of the MNU, which would prompt the diasporic view of black consciousness she later espoused. The importance of Gonzalez's travels was not limited to her work educating young Afro-Brazilian students and activists. Through her travels she witnessed firsthand how black people lived and articulated politics across Brazil. She saw her activism as evolving alongside emergent black social movements, and that these movements had become spaces for the circulation of political pedagogies.

On one of her trips to Europe, she stopped in Dakar, Senegal, where she met exiled Cuban activist and intellectual Carlos Moore. Their friendship reflected the diasporic encounter between two Afro-Latin intellectuals outside their home countries, connecting around shared political ideologies of critiquing the racial conditions of the Americas. Gonzalez traveled throughout the interior of Africa, from Senegal to Burkina Faso. She was particularly interested in the social transformation of African-descendant women's lives, assuming the beginning of her role as an anthropologist.

Gonzalez joined the Workers Party in 1981 and ran for political office in 1982. A few years later she joined the Democratic Labour Party and once more sought a position in the House of Representatives of Rio de Janeiro. In 1983, after much discussion and critique of sexism in black movement organizations, she and other women founded the Nzinga Coletivo de Mulheres Negras in Rio de Janeiro, one of the first black women's organizations in the country (Gonzalez 1983; Santos 2010).

In 1984, as a Ford Foundation fellow, she traveled to the US and met with black women leaders such as Angela Davis in a seminar at Morgan State

University in Baltimore. The period between 1974 and 1988 was the most intense period of Gonzalez's political life, defined by her MNU and Nzinga activism, work as a professor, and commitment to diasporic travel, thought, and solidarity. Her last two trips, to Panama and Bolivia, deeply impacted her black diaspora feminist ideas, but her work in North America, Europe, and Africa were crucial for disseminating information about racial injustices in Brazil and dispelling the myth of racial democracy (Bairros 1999b; Carneiro 2014).

In 1990, Lélia traveled again throughout Africa. In early 1994 she became the head of the Department of Sociology and Politics at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. On July 10 of that year she died suddenly of a heart attack. Her death was tragic for the black and black feminist movements.

Gonzalez's life reveals how her travels throughout Brazil, the Americas, and Africa shaped her intellectual formation and political consciousness. Her travels throughout the black diaspora made centering black people and culture and eradicating antiblack racism her core mission. Gonzalez's life exemplified the diasporic consciousness of a hemispheric blackness and interconnected struggles against gendered and class-based racism.

The impact of Gonzalez's work as an activist and intellectual can be seen in the celebration of her life, scholarship, and political work (Carneiro 2014; Barreto 2005; Cardoso 2014; Gonzalez 2018; Ratts and Rios 2010; Viana 2006). She is still remembered by a generation of scholars and activists who worked alongside her in the national black movement and those who forged solidarity with that struggle from black communities around the world (Bairros 1999a). Gonzalez has been a key reference for a new generation of activists driven by her original standpoint within the black feminism prism.

In the US, Gonzalez was one of few Afro-Brazilians actively participating in black academic circles, impacting the development of global perspectives and the centering of Brazil in Africana studies (Fierce 2000). Twenty-five years after her untimely death, we are struck by Gonzalez's intellectual erasure from Africana and black feminist studies in

North America. Her key ideas, like *amefricanidade* and Afro-Latin feminism, should be read alongside the theorization of Afrocentricity, hemispheric blackness, decoloniality, and the globalization of black feminist thought.

### The Formulation of Hemispheric Blackness (*Amefricanidade*)

Much of Gonzalez's travels focused on her political work connecting the Brazilian struggle against racism with struggles in other American contexts, and she espoused a hemispheric and diasporic approach to black liberation. In Panama, Gonzalez observed that the discussions and analyses taking place helped to tear down barriers between disenfranchised women, such as some feminists' racism, and the antifeminism of American Indians and *amefricanas* (American Africans). In Bolivia, Gonzalez identified the significance of the *amef리카na* voice recognizing the racism and sexism that black women face. Drawing from psychoanalysts, specifically Magno's *América Ladina* (1980), she synthesized a conception of the African diaspora and coined the term *amefricanidade* to describe the common experiences of blacks in the Americas. She negated the idea of a "latinidade das Americas," arguing for recognition of Amerindian and African elements in the cultures. She argued that "latinidade" stems from colonizers' long and violent domination of the Iberian Peninsula. She defines *amefricanidade* as follows: "A historic process of intense cultural dynamic (resistance, accommodation, reinterpretation, creation of new forms) referenced in African models that shape the construction of an ethnic identity. The value of this category is in fact to rescue a specific unity, historically forged in the interior of different societies that are formed in a certain part of the world" (Gonzalez 1988a, 77; our translation).

Sterling (2012) argues that this new culture formed outside Africa does not erase the centrality of Africanness in the formulation of blackness. At the center of *amefricanidade* is black culture, shaping all of Brazilian culture, expressed in the everyday "speech, gestures, movements and ways of being that manifest in ways that we are not even conscious of them" (Gonzalez 1988a, 70). *Pretuguês*

(black Portuguese) was one such example, tied to African linguistic survivals, and African religions were key dimensions of black cultural life in the Americas.

Gonzalez identified some founding figures in African ancestry in the Americas, including maroon societies, namely Zumbi dos Palmares and Nanny of the Maroons. For Gonzalez (1988b), Nanny was significant in rescuing the history of black women's strength in the struggle against slavery and oppression and reestablishing the black woman as a founder of amefrican nations. Nanny reminded her of the forgotten black women heroines of Brazil such as Akotirene, Dandara, Maria Filipa, and Luiza Mahim. During her trips to Martinique in 1991, Gonzalez came to see amefricanidade as the cultural resistance to Eurocentric sociocultural standards and systems and the inheritance of a black/Afro ancestral past.

Understanding this perspective on defining a collective black identity that is hemispheric, Gonzalez calls for the transnational organization of African-descendant women in Latin America in her 1988 essay, "For an Afro-Latin American Feminism." The ideas in her writings resemble those ideas of Claudia Jones (Davies 2008, 2011), who understood black women as having a distinct subjectivity and militancy and thus envisioned a diasporic response to their exploitation. Gonzalez (1988c, 96) writes:

When I speak of my own experience, I am talking about a long process of learning which occurred in my search for an identity as a black woman, within a society which oppresses me and discriminates against me because I am black. But a question of an ethical and political nature arises immediately. I cannot speak in the first person singular of something which is painfully common to millions of women who live in the region, those "Amerindians" and "Amefricans" who are oppressed by a "latinness" which legitimizes their "inferiority."

Gonzalez's account reveals the unsurprising reality that black women throughout Latin America developed their militancy within the black movement rather than within the women's movements. Black women in Latin America

had to defend the need to develop their own political identities, and they claimed the right to organize autonomously within anti-black racism movements. Gonzalez's travels intensified her notions of blackness and feminism, and many credit her with the diasporization of black feminist activism in Brazil (Bairros 1999). As Bairros (1999, 355) wrote, Gonzalez articulated "other ways of thinking the African diaspora synthesized in the category 'amefricanidade', to define the common experience of black people in the Americas."

### **The Feminist Decolonial Project in Africana Studies**

We have provided some key details of Lélia Gonzalez's life and political work in response to Camp and Thomas's (2008, 1) question, "What does it mean to theorize diaspora through an explicitly feminist frame?" A full answer requires that we excavate the contributions of black women in Latin America and the Hispanophone Caribbean.

Gonzalez's black diaspora feminist politics reminds us that bringing black women's intellectual work and ideas to the forefront necessarily contributes to significant shifts in representations of black subjectivity and the internationalization of antiracism and antisexism politics. Engaging black women's experiences and actions seriously in African diasporic research expands notions of how black people experience and politicize race, gender, class, and nation across multiple geographic communities. If we read more about women such as Claudia Jones, Eslanda Robeson, Angela Davis, Sueli Carneiro, Nilma Lino Gomes, Beatriz Nascimento, and Luiza Bairros, if we unearth the archives of knowledge that emerge from their intellectual and social justice work, then scholars of Latin America never have to question the validity of blackness or black womanhood as a category of humanistic or social scientific inquiry. Lélia Gonzalez's theorization of amefricanidade challenges the antiblackness foundational in the construction of the Americas, and the story of her life should inspire a more global commitment to eradicating imperialism, gendered racism, and all forms of subjugation at the core of our intellectual mission.

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