

# América Ladina: The Conceptual Legacy of Lélia Gonzalez (1935–1994)

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Lélia Gonzalez's thinking is paradigmatic in Latin America. Her work stands out among the theory and praxis of the plurality of feminism and black and indigenous women, the Western Marxist tradition, and international and national studies on racism. In addition, as an autonomous agent and the protagonist of collective action, Gonzalez was fundamental for the construction of the Brazilian black women's movement that sought to confront sexism, racism, and class inequalities. Her trajectory and production, however, do not obscure the biographies and voices of the *quilombolas* and poor black women who organized and campaigned during the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in Brazil. Lélia Gonzalez interpreted not only the national environment but also the great transformations of feminism and race relations around the world. In her theory, experiences involve national and transnational networks; Lélia Gonzalez's thinking offers an Afro-Latin-American and Amerindian perspective of Latin America, which she called *América Ladina*. In this way, her concept provides a new historical, cultural and political direction for the continent.

For a long time, Lélia Gonzalez was influenced only by a small circle of Brazilian black and white feminists of her generation and dialogue with North American specialists in Brazilian race relations. Noteworthy are her two articles published in English: "The Black Movement Unified: A New Phase of Black Political Mobilization," a chapter in the book *Race, Class, and Power in Brazil* (1985), and "The Black Woman in Brazil" that was included in the book *African Presence in the Americas* (1995), a collection organized by Carlos Moore. In Portuguese, she wrote several articles and coauthored three books. One of her most influential articles is "Racismo e sexism na cultura

brasileira" (1983) and her most read book is *Lugar de negro* (1982), written in partnership with the Argentine Carlos Hasenbalg.

In the year 2000, her production and trajectory were revisited and interpretations of these were intensified in order to highlight their relevance. The most significant mark of the broader critical reception of Gonzalez's production is directly connected to the establishment of the intersectional paradigm in the humanities, as well as the search for new epistemologies questioning the Euro-Western paradigm. In this sense, the recent translation of her article "La catégorie politico culturelle d'amefricanité," in the journal *Intersectionnalité et colonialité; Contemporary Debates* (2015) is noteworthy.

The renewed production on Lélia Gonzalez's thought has been based on new readings of her work. Some approach it with Afrocentric or diasporic perspectives, others prefer to emphasize its decolonial character, in particular, its criticism of the Eurocentric emphasis of the social sciences. Another line of research revisited the author's works by showing her intersectional perspective on the dimensions of sexual domination, class and race articulated within the forms of oppression and social hierarchy, as well as the formation of an identity of collective affirmation, thereby providing intellectual bases for black feminism. It is true that these different interpretations are very promising in terms of the contextualization of Lélia Gonzalez's intellectual production, as well as her national and international interlocution. However, I would like to highlight the originality and potential in her thinking, especially regarding her intellectual ambition to reimagine Latin America beyond an exclusively European influence.

At present, Lélia Gonzalez is a source of inspiration and creativity for collective and feminist organizations in Brazil. Both her textual legacy and her biographical accounts become objects of interest for research on her trajectory. In the last decade, feminists and anti-racists have also engaged in the dissemination of Lélia Gonzalez's works. An example of this is the project *Lélia Gonzalez: Black Feminism on the Stage of History*, written by Sueli Carneiro, and organized by Schuma Schumacher and Antônia Ceva (2014). In 2018, a complete collection of her work was published, put together by União dos Coletivos Pan-Africanistas, under the expert coordination of Raquel Barreto.

There are some elements of Lélia Gonzalez's biography that were fundamental for the development of her thought and for the creation of new categories and concepts. Born in 1935 in Minas Gerais to a poor family, her mother was of indigenous descent and her father was black. However, when Gonzalez entered high school she had to deny her origins to be accepted by teachers and white colleagues. Indeed, she experienced cultural whitening, a common process in Latin America. Later, that painful memory became a positive reflection about her family's cultural heritage.

As a university professor, Lélia Gonzalez engaged in the struggle for the re-democratization of Brazil. She was noted for her visceral involvement with social movements opposed to the military regime and the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS), a state body for the control and repression of anti-regime elements. As an activist, Lélia Gonzalez belonged to one of the most influential anti-racist Carioca organizations, the Black Cultures Research Institute (IPCN); she also founded the Unified Black Movement Against Racial Discrimination in 1978; organized one of the first groups of Brazilian black women, Nzinga; and collaborated with the "Quilombo Samba School," an important space of cultural resistance against the commercialization and alienation of black culture. Aside from her many contributions to the alternative press, to theatrical groups, and to "blocos afro," Lélia Gonzalez advised filmmaker Cacá Diegues for his film *Quilombo* and

playwright Hilton Cobra for his play *Candances*. In short, Lélia Gonzalez sought to operate at the interface between culture and politics. Indeed, for Gonzalez, cultural language had to be subverted, since sexism, classism, and racism were the deep marks of the culture of colonial domination. For this reason, she chose to put a particular emphasis on language, calling the language spoken in Brazil *pretuguês* to emphasize its African influences, especially Bantu language.

Her membership in political organizations directly opposed to the military dictatorship is worth noting. Although she was never elected to the Brazilian Congress, she fought patriarchal and socioeconomic obstacles in Brazilian electoral competition. Gonzalez, as well as a significant number of women and black people, sought in the then new political parties a means of gaining access to the state, hoping to demonstrate the importance of racial and gender issues within the scope of institutional policy. In this sense, her vision in the context of the dismantling of the military regime was in the establishment of a participatory democracy that could express the diversity of the Brazilian population. Because of this, she became an advisor to Benedita da Silva in her first legislative term in Rio de Janeiro and collaborated with a caucus of black deputies during the process of writing a new Brazilian constitution (1986-1988), a "Carta Magna" which criminalized racism and guaranteed territorial rights to communities founded by escaped and former slaves (*quilombos*).

Therefore, Lélia Gonzalez's simultaneous social-movement and political-party activism was not only a personal project but, above all, an understanding that the collective demands and social claims of the movements of which she was a part should gain visibility in the sphere of power. Given Brazil's diminutive black and female political representation, Gonzalez and her generation also had a stake in the formation of participatory councils, serving on the national women's council, which was fundamental to the questioning of gender in the interaction between state and civil society. It was, therefore, part of the search for representation and participation on the political playing field of the state public sphere in the democratization of the country.

In this political context, which included the passage from an authoritarian regime to democracy, Gonzalez was intensely involved in national networks of political activists, while she systematically reflected on the forms of colonial and patriarchal domination still prevailing and operative in the cultures of the Americas. A specialist and a critic of Brazil's social sciences studies tradition, Gonzalez was part of that generation of alternative intellectuals that constructed different routes and networks to reflect upon the national reality, in particular, the constitution of a new political regime that would bring the years of state authoritarianism to an end.

In the second section of this short article, I will focus on the resonant Afro-Latin American, African, and Amerindian dimension in Lélia Gonzalez's intellectual production and in the formal and informal activism networks in which she worked. I will show the vitality and timeliness of the author's arguments in defense of a transnational horizon that encompasses the voices and experiences of lower socio-cultural and economic groups. Far from limiting herself to linguistic and national boundaries, Gonzalez, by characterizing the colonial legacy rooted in Latin American culture, sought to overcome these forms of oppression by proposing a collective identity on an ethno-racial and feminist basis in the Latin American continent, which became *América Ladina*.

### Why América Ladina?

For analytical purposes, I divide Gonzalez's thought into two phases. In the first, she dedicated herself to analyzing the cultural, historical and economical processes that caused black people, especially black women, to feel inferior. Between 1978 and 1985, most of her writings are on the legacy of slavery and the effects of capitalism on the periphery of Brazil, focusing on issues of race and gender in society. Her paper, titled "Culture, Ethnicity, and Work: Linguistic and Political Effects on the Exploration of Women," presented at LASA in April 1979 in Pittsburgh is a good example of her academic leanings at that moment. Nonetheless, she did not focus solely on the oppression and exploitation of the Brazilian black woman. Her reflections also dealt with their

forms of resistance and, above all, their ways of subverting the dominant groups. In this way, she studied the "mãe preta" case: "In my view, 'Mãe Preta' and 'Pai João', with their stories, created a sort of 'family romance' which had fundamental importance in the formation of people's values and beliefs, of our 'Volkgeist'. Consciously or not, they passed on elements of African cultures that they represented to the white Brazilian. More precisely, it was the 'Mãe Preta', as subject-supposed-to-know, the africanization of Portuguese spoken in Brazil ('pretuguês' as Lusophone Africans say) and, consequently, the africanization of Brazilian Culture" (Gonzalez and Hasenbalg, 1982, 93-94).

In the second half of the 1980s, Gonzalez expanded her vision. Her international perspective and the intensification of her readings— especially of psychoanalysis, anthropology and history, promoted significant changes in her intellectual production. In her article "Por un feminismo afrolatinoamericano," published in 1988, she showed her critical standpoint on feminism: "For all these reasons, Latin American feminism loses much of its force by dismissing a fact of reality of the greatest importance: the multi-racial and pluricultural character of the region's societies. To deal with, for example, the sexual division of labor, without articulating it with its corresponding racial component, is to fall back on a kind of abstract universal rationalism, typical of a white, masculinizing discourse" (Gonzalez 1988b, 135).

These ideas were presented by Gonzalez during a presentation in Bolivia in 1987, with this article being one of the best examples of the transnational shift of the author. In it, Gonzalez is already making mature reflections about her experience as an Afro-Latin-American feminist. Although Gonzalez did not abandon a Latin American horizon for feminism, she offered an alternative way. Gonzalez understood that the kind of domination that subordinates women and black and indigenous peoples could be classified as a racist and patriarchal system. The articulation between feminism and anti-racism is a central weapon for combating the forms of domination that used biological arguments for the naturalization of the subaltern spaces occupied by women, black and indigenous peoples in Latin American societies.

For that reason, she defended the organization of indigenous women, black people, campesinas, quilombolas, and so on.

A fundamental political force for feminism would be the incorporation of voices, forms of traditional resistance, political experiences, and narratives of indigenous and black women, which Gonzalez called *amefricanas*. She developed this category to account for the collective identity formed by the groups from the different societies in the region. Taking into consideration this ethnic plurality and, at the same time, seeking solidarity on common ground, she wrote an article titled “A categoria político-cultural de amefricanidade,” which was published in the same year that “Por un feminismo afrolatinoamericano” appeared.

The first intellectual to realize that América Ladina was a powerful concept was Luiza Bairros, a Brazilian black feminist who directed the Secretary of Public Policies for Equality between 2011 and 2014. In one of her articles, Bairros wrote in Gonzalez’s memory by claiming that her definition for *Amefricanidade* was a particular version of diasporic thought. Bairros wrote: “Lélia denied the latinity of the Americas. Considering, on the one hand, the preponderance of Amerindian and African elements. And on the other hand, the historical formation of Spain and Portugal, which can only be understood by taking the long domination of the Iberian Peninsula by the Moors as a starting point” (Bairros 2000, 350).

In 2015, Jules Falquet and Azadeh Kian translated Gonzalez’s article into French, introducing the term *Amefricanidade* to the Francophone world and emphasizing the decolonializing character of the Brazilian author: “The concept of amefricanidade that she develops here is, indeed, not anything other than a critique of Latin America’s ‘Latinity’ as a form of Eurocentrism, which neglects the African, as well as the Indian, roots of the contemporary cultures of the continent” (Falquet and Kian 2015, 3).

For Gonzalez, to think of América Ladina, and not América Latina, is/was a multiple subversion. First, it foregrounds the groups subordinated by the patriarchal and colonial system on the continent. Secondly, because it emphasizes this reality,

the notion also highlights the experiences and the forms of resistance of black and indigenous woman. Thirdly, it seeks transnational solidarity without denying the pluralities of the territorial, cultural and demographic formations of each country. Fourthly, the idea of América Ladina problematizes the categories and languages created within colonial thought. Lastly, it represents an anti-imperialist approach to North America, especially against “the political purpose of the imperialistically dominant power of the region: the United States” (1988a, 75). For Gonzalez, *Amefricanidade* can be defined thusly: “In addition to its purely geographic character, the category of amefricanidade incorporates a whole historical process of immense cultural dynamics (adaptation, resistance, reinterpretation and creation of new forms). Its methodological value in my view is that it allows the possibility of rescuing a specific unit, historically forged within different societies, which have formed in a certain part of the world. Therefore, America, as an ethnogeographic reference system, is our creation, and our ancestors” (Gonzalez 1988a, 77).

She concludes that amefricanidade refers not only to “the Africans brought by the slave trade, but also those who arrived in America long before Columbus [não só a dos africanos trazidos pelo tráfico negreiro, como daqueles que chegaram à AMÉRICA muito antes de Colombo]” (Gonzalez 1988a, 77). Finally, it is important to state that Gonzalez did not invent the term “América Ladina,” although she realized its potential as no one else had, as she sought to project a collective identity—beyond the national state, outside territorial and colonial linguistic barriers and categorical essentialisms—and the possibility of imagining the overcoming of the cultural, political and economic inferiority of the continent. And most importantly, for her, no transformational project that wants to be radical can disregard the political and cultural resistance of the amefricanas, because: “If we are committed to a social transformation project, we cannot be compromised by ideological postures of exclusion, that, for us, only favor one aspect of reality. As we claim our difference as black women, as amefricanas, we know well how much the exploitation of economic, racial and sexual

subordination has marked us. Therefore, we bring the mark of the liberation of one and all with us. (Gonzalez 1988c, 2).

More than renaming Latin America, Gonzalez's reflections on América Latina are an excellent invitation to think about other perspectives for the continent. Through her intellectual provocations and robust reflections, Gonzalez's ideas still help us to think about the region's past, present and future beyond the colonial paradigm.

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