

# CONSIDERATIONS OF AMEFRICANITY

Djamila Ribeiro

“The risk we take here is that of speaking out with all its implications. Precisely because others have spoken for us, infantilized us (an infant is one who can’t speak for herself, a child who speaks of herself in the third person, because adults speak on her behalf), so in this work we claim our own speech. In other words, the trash will talk, and it will be fine”.<sup>2</sup>

This text begins with the words of Lélia Gonzalez (1935 – 1994), one of the great thinkers of Brazilian black feminism. A professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Gonzalez, as we shall see, is the author of founding texts of concepts and perspectives of international feminist thought and has opened pathways for many of us in Brazil to follow in the dispute for our existence, knowledge and new possibilities. The contributions of black feminists as a whole have come to question man, both white and European, as the universal subject, as well as to question the universalization of the category of woman. If on the one hand, Simone de Beauvoir, in her work *The Second Sex*, when thinking about the condition of woman, defined her as being “the other” in relation to man, one who is not considered in her own right, but only as an adjunct of man, Grada Kilomba, an interdisciplinary thinker rooted in Germany, *2 Racism and Sexism in Brazilian Society. In Pensamento Feminista Brasileiro: formation and context* by Lélia Gonzalez. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, (2019).

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goes even further with the analysis to think of a black woman as “the other of the other”, since she is the double antithesis of both whiteness and masculinity. These differences in the starting point with regard to social position produce totally different perspectives and experiences in common with the group. In this sense, questioning the universalization of the category of woman, in *Blackening Feminism*, the Brazilian philosopher Sueli Carneiro, a memorable black feminist, asks the key question:

“When we talk about the myth of women’s fragility, which has historically justified men’s paternalistic protection of women, which women are we talking about? We black women are part of a contingent of women, probably in the majority, who have never recognized this myth in themselves, because we have never been treated as fragile. We are part of a group of women who have worked for centuries as slaves on the plantations or on the streets, as saleswomen, greengrocers, prostitutes... Women who understood nothing when the feminists said that women should take over the streets and work! We are part of a group of women who are regarded as objects. Yesterday, in the service of frail little pimps and perverted, well-off lords. (...)

Racism establishes the social inferiority of black segments of the population in general and of black women in particular, operating moreover as a factor of division in the struggle of women for the privileges that are instituted for white women. In this perspective, the fight of black women against the oppression of gender and race has been drawing new contours for feminist and anti-racist political action, enriching both the discussion of the racial question and the question of gender in Brazilian society.<sup>3</sup>”

Historically, movements of black men and women from different intellectual and political perspectives have worked to deconstruct the myth of racial democracy in the last Western country to abolish slavery in 1888. The abolition, merely formal, did not come with any public policy of integration into society, while the Brazilian state encouraged the arrival

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3 *Blackening Feminism: The Situation of Black Women in Latin America from a Gender Perspective* by Sueli Carneiro. In *Pensamento Feminista Brasileiro: conceitos fundamentais*, org. Heloisa Buarque de Almeida. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo.

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of immigrants – Germans, Italians, Portuguese, among others – with the distribution of land and other affirmative policies. While the first Brazilian Constitution prohibited black people from studying, the country's Land Law conditioned the acquisition of land through purchase – with the exception of welcome immigrants, of course – as well as crimes which were created with the specific objective of imprisoning the unemployed for the crime of “loitering”, affecting mainly black men, the Brazilian State officially instituted what was called a “whitening policy”, aimed at erasing the black population that was associated with backwardness. The official whitening project included the forced sterilization of black women, a practice which was denounced in 1992 by the notable Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry of the Brazilian National Congress that was established after a broad struggle by the black women's movement in the 1980s. This commission concluded that, one hundred years after the formal end of slavery, black women in the North and Northeast, the most impoverished regions of the country, were still being sterilized without their knowledge.

Despite all the tricks and violence of the whitening project, the policy did not have the desired effect, since today 56% of the Brazilian population is black, being the largest black country outside of Africa. However, institutionalized racism has caused and continues to cause the abysmal difference between black and white people in terms of living conditions and opportunity.

According to Amnesty International data, every 23 minutes a young black man is murdered in Brazil. When they are not killed, these young people are imprisoned, making up more than two thirds of the 700,000 prisoners in the country. The intersections make the scenario even more complex in a country which is ranked 5th in the world for its child marriage and femicide.

In the last fifteen years, the imprisonment of women has increased by 567.4%, most of them black (68%) and mostly for drug trafficking (62%). In the field of work, women are an absolute minority in management positions, and when they occupy the same job as a man, they receive a lower salary. In the geography of the cities, the areas which are considered

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up-market are the white neighborhoods, while the infamous “favelas” are inhabited mostly by black people.

Another harsh reality for the black population, is the stereotypical way that the Brazilian media monopolies belonging to white families, and composed mostly of white people, have historically passed off racial hatred in the form of humour and it is evidenced by the constant deprecation of black characters in comedies in order to make white people laugh.

On a visit to São Paulo, Angela Davis said that when she turned on Brazilian television, she thought she was in Finland, there was such a massive white representation in the media. Soap operas that take place in Bahia (a state where almost 90% of the population is black) employ only white actors, many of them from the Southeast who simply put on a Bahia accent. It is because of this widespread lack of representation for the black population, that studies claim that racial democracy in Brazil is a myth which is promulgated by the white elites to maintain their ongoing project of racial domination.

Under the current government, the data is even more worrying. The President's election was marked by hate speech towards minority populations and by the support of Christian religious groups, mainly neo-Pentecostal. Jair Bolsonaro had a clear run, when his opponent Lula was imprisoned on corruption and money laundering charges, upheld by judge Sergio Moro in a legal process that was contested worldwide. Who was surprised when Moro was later promoted to be the Minister for Justice in Bolsinaro's government? His election came after Dilma Rousseff, of the Workers' Party, resigned from the presidency, without having been convicted of any crime. Despite all the limitations, Dilma and Lula, both from the Workers' Party, had implemented important public policies to help people access higher education, benefiting the black population, something rare in the country's history and enough for them to be considered a major national nuisance.

In contrast to what had been achieved, the current government is undoing the good work of his predecessors and is bringing in new measures, such as imposing austerity reforms for the population, as well as labour and social security legislation which would be unthinkable in

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countries of the global North. It goes without saying that these reforms disproportionately affect the black and indigenous people in the country. This is an ongoing project of regression and neo-colonization. In Europe, leaders and “enlightened” people are often horrified, openly condemning what is happening in Brazilian politics. Although it is shocking to see the Amazon on fire, I think that if they knew about the policies being implemented for the black and indigenous communities, their shock would be even greater. The governor of Rio de Janeiro, for example, in the president’s base, was elected by saying on stage that the police would “aim at the head” and shoot young people from dangerous communities. He has kept his promise. I understand that this shocks anyone with humanity, but it is worth saying that the neoliberal project that is underway in the country has put up for sale Brazilian state-owned aviation, oil wells, airports, energy companies, mining, among many other assets that are being privatized. And who is buying? Precisely those consortiums, multinationals, state companies and other organizations backed by capital from the global North, the same parties that clash with the current president on one side but happily fill the government’s pockets through their sell-off of state assets on the other. Are those “enlightened” Europeans outraged by this too?

I once went to Berlin to attend the Book Fair. The invitation was to participate in a panel discussion that would explore issues under the current government in Brazil. I went to the Berlin Book Fair as a best-selling author of three books, but without any invitation to discuss the translation of my books there. If it had not been for an invitation to go on to Italy which I took advantage of during the trip, it would have amounted to a transatlantic flight, one brief panel discussion then a transatlantic flight back the next day with no real thought given to what this meant for a black woman attending a literary event.

On the panel with me, there were four white men. I am not decrying the right of the other members of the panel to be there – one of them even has my deep affection – but I could not have felt more “at home”. In Brazil it is a regular occurrence that a prominent panel will generate a certain embarrassment due to the lack of black people included there. This offers a beautiful excuse for the male white confraternity to continue to go

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on as before. Anyway, we were allotted only one hour for the panel, so each speaker would have only a short time to speak. First, the panel facilitator introduced the participants at the table one by one, and guess who he forgot to include? Embarrassed, he tried to improvise, showing that he knew little or nothing about me, in contrast to the respect shown for the men on the panel. So, I had to wait for the others to parade their arguments, each going over their allotted time, and then use the short time left to introduce myself as well as speak. Afterwards, there was a long queue of people lining up for me to autograph their copies of my books, even though nobody was interested in translating them into German.

Influential black rights activist Lélia Gonzalez has written that a black woman has to have both a first name and a surname, otherwise a racist will give her the name he wants to, so I spoke out about who I am. I said that I am a bestselling author in my home country, that I manage an independent publisher which in one year published eight black authors, and that I have been recognized as one of the 100 most influential women in the world, as well as being named a laureate in the Prince Claus Awards and so on. At the end, fellow Africans applauded, I think some white women found me arrogant, but I don't mind, because at a certain point in your life, coming from South America, you are no longer willing to eat crumbs for your dignity.

Being a black woman in Brazil you learn to deal with all the usual challenges that arise, but outside the borders of the country you face even higher barriers to progress due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of what happens north of Equador. In Brazil, black feminists are in a certain isolation due to language barriers - it is the only country in the Americas where Portuguese is the official language - to this is added the neo-colonial attitude that only what is produced in Europe or in the United States has any real worth, including, ironically, everything to do with decolonialization. In short, because of our position in the global geopolitical arrangement, the production of black Brazilian intellectuals tends to be much less widespread, causing delays in debates that could be much more advanced, especially if we think of countries that have a certain similarity to the historical construction of Brazilian racism.

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After spending some time in France, Holland and Germany as well as in other countries, I could perceive a system at work to develop the foundations of racial democracy. If on the one hand, Brazil exported its particular brand of racist ideology, on the other hand some countries imported it. Who said that Brazil could only sell its state-owned companies?

Racism also occurs in micro-aggressions, in the “unsaid,” as Kabengele Munanga, an important Congolese intellectual living in Brazil, defines it. The other day, I was in the airport of São Paulo, waiting to board my flight. A black woman there evokes surprise and some indignant looks. Sometimes people can’t help themselves, as happened that day, when a woman sat next to me and started trying to hold a conversation. I wear headphones precisely to avoid this misfortune but that day it was no good. I took my headphones off and the first question she asked me was, “Are you going on board? Well, I thought, I’m in the airport lounge, what else could I be doing there? Taking a break from cleaning, maybe? “Yes,” I answered, monosyllabic. She wasn’t satisfied and continued: “You’re going to do what you’ve been doing abroad. Are you going dancing?” I said, “I’m not, why? Are you?” She was a bit taken aback and said, “Not me.” “Well, neither am I.”

Actually, I was on my way to Frankfurt to teach a class at Goethe University’s Angela Davis college, but that wasn’t likely to be the case for that poor woman. You see, there is no problem in going abroad to dance, there are various ways of expressing yourself and dance is certainly one of the most powerful and magnetic, especially in the Afro-Brazilian tradition, where dance is a way of speaking, celebrating and praying. I’m mentioning this because that woman thought that I could only be on my way to some country in the Northern Hemisphere if I were going there to dance. This is an illustrative example of the fixation of black women in places where the colonial gaze tolerates their existence. As a black Brazilian woman, I have to constantly deal with the stereotype of “export mulatto”. It is even common when I am in Europe, alone, and come across a European man who at a certain moment in the conversation asks me where I am from, to which I answer Brazil, and I receive the animated reaction “Ah, Brazil!”, as if I was going to sambar for him at that exact moment.

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In that class at Goethe University I introduced Lélia Gonzalez's reflections on the idea of Amefricanity, proposing an identity for the peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean. Even back in the 1980s, she was articulating the transnational struggle of the fellowship of black and indigenous women, questioning the imperialist parameters of black denominations in the American continent, in order to achieve a horizontal line of struggle.

It's interesting to see someone who leaves Brazil, for example, saying they are going to "America". And that all of us, from any region of the continent, have repeated the same notion, perpetuating the imperialism of the United States, calling its inhabitants "Americans". And we, what are we, Asians? <sup>4</sup>

As for us blacks, how can we achieve an effective awareness of ourselves as descendants of Africans if we remain prisoners, "captives of a racist language"? That is why I propose that we use the term Amefricans to designate us all.

Although we belong to different societies on the continent, we know that the system of domination is the same in all of them, that is: racism, this cold and extreme elaboration at all levels of thought, as well as part and parcel of the most different institutions of these societies. The political and cultural implications of the category of *Amefricanidade* (Amefricanity), are, in fact, democratic; precisely because the term itself allows us to overcome the limitations of territorial, linguistic and ideological character, opening new perspectives for a deeper understanding of that part of the world where it manifests itself: America as a whole (South, Central, North and Island)".<sup>5</sup>

Following in the footsteps of Lélia Gonzalez, I join with the Amefrican sisters to claim our identity in the American continent, so plundered over the years and whose violence continues to this day; a continent where within its borders, the violence arising from the capitalist, patriarchal,

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4&5 Lélia Gonzalez. *The political-cultural category of Amefricanity*. In *Pensamento Feminista: conceitos fundamentais*, org. Heloisa Buarque de Almeida. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, (2019)

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African and Afro-European women dance in a circle, among so many others moved by the feeling of transformation. I conclude with the words of Lélia Gonzalez, whose reading has encouraged me so much: “we not only share pain, but also the legacy of struggle.”

### Djamila Ribeiro

Brazilian human rights activist and author Djamila Ribeiro was born in the port city of Santos. She went on to study political philosophy at UNIFESP, one of the best universities in Brazil. Djamila is now one of the most popular writers and public figures in the Afro-Brazilian women's rights movement. Her blog has hundreds of thousands of followers and she regularly makes public appearances to discuss the lives of women in Brazil, a country in which people of colour experience exceptional levels of violence and prejudice. Her most recent book is *A Little Anti-racist Handbook*.

Ribeiro was awarded a Master in Political Philosophy from the Federal University of São Paulo. She is the author of *Lugar de Fala, Quem tem medo do Feminismo Negro?* and *Pequeno Manual Antirracista*, (still without translation into German). She is the Coordinator of the Plural Feminisms Collection, which fosters titles written by black people at an affordable price. A Laureate of the Prince Claus Award 2019 she was named one of the 100 most influential women in the world by the BBC.