

Lélia Gonzalez (author)

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The black intellectual and Brazilian activist Lélia de Almeida Gonzalez (1935-1994) stood out for her academic work and intense political campaigning against **racism** and **sexism**. The discussions she proposed on questions of identity, and race and gender relations in Brazil have influenced diverse fields of knowledge, finding a strong echo in cultural studies and anthropology. The daughter of a domestic worker of Indigenous origin and a black railway worker from an extensive working-class family, Gonzalez migrated from Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, to Rio de Janeiro in 1942, where she trained in history and philosophy, becoming a teacher in the primary and secondary education system, teaching in public and private schools. She completed a master's degree in social communication and a doctorate in anthropology, becoming a professor and researcher at the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC) of Rio de Janeiro between 1978 and 1994.

The civil rights movement in the United States, historically situated between the 1950s and 1970s, had a strong impact in Brazil, invigorating the social struggles for equality and against racial discrimination. Rio de Janeiro, in particular, was the setting for an intense artistic and political mobilization around racial issues throughout the 1970s, one of the principal manifestations being *Movimento Black Rio*, harshly suppressed by the military dictatorship. The movement was primarily expressed through a musical production influenced by American soul music, which became the soundtrack for parties and dances, accompanied by the adoption of a new look: colourful clothes and black power hair. This context of mobilizations against the subaltern position of black people in Brazilian society led to the creation of new spaces of reflection and debate, for example, the 'Afro-Brazilian Weeks' promoted by the Centro de Estudos Afro-Asiáticos [Centre for Afro-Asian Studies]

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(CEAA) in Rio de Janeiro and by the Sociedade de Estudos da Cultura Negra no Brasil [Society for the Study of Black Culture in Brazil] (SECNEB) in Bahia. Lélia Gonzalez founded the Instituto de Pesquisas das Culturas Negras [Black Cultures Research Institute] (IPCN) at Cândido Mendes University in Rio de Janeiro in 1976. During the same period, she started teaching the first course in black culture in Brazil at the Visual Arts School (EAV) at Lage Park – a public park on the site of an old colonial sugar mill. Frequented by numerous artists and intellectuals, the course proposed to analyse the African contribution to Brazil’s cultural formation in a broader form. Alongside this work, she also took part in the resistance struggle against the dictatorship with the origin of the Movimento Negro Unificado [Unified Black Movement] (MNU), while also acting to strengthen the organization of women within the movement, as shown, for example, by her work at the Centro de Luta Maria Felipa e Luiza Mahin [Maria Felipa and Luiza Mahin Centre for Struggle] and later at the Nzinga Coletivo de Mulheres Negras [Nzinga Black Women’s Collective]. In the 1980s, Lélia Gonzalez was appointed to the Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Mulher [National Council of Women’s Rights] (CNDM) (1986-1989); in the elections of 1982, she ran for a seat in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies as a candidate for the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the Workers’ Party, and, in 1986, for the Democratic Labour Party (PDT), selected as a proxy on both occasions.

Gonzalez is responsible for a series of contributions to academic and political debates. She authored the books *Lugar do negro* [The place of the black] (1982) – written with the Argentine sociologist Carlos Hasenbalg (1942-2014) – and *Popular festivals in Brazil* (1987), as well as many articles such as “A importância da organização de mulheres negras no processo de transformação social” [The importance of black women's organization in the process of social transformation] (1980), “Por um feminismo afrolatinoamericano” [For an Afro-Latin American feminism] (1988) and “Racismo e sexismo na sociedade brasileira” [Racism and sexism in Brazilian society] (1989). One of her main themes has been the study of how Brazil’s colonial period has been depicted and analyzed, vehemently criticizing the kind of interpretations of Brazilian society predominant in classic works like 1933

*Casa-grande & senzala (The Masters and the Slaves)* by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987). In “Racismo e sexismo na sociedade brasileira” [Racism and sexism in Brazilian society] (1989), Gonzalez specifically questions the myth of racial democracy, consolidated through Freyre’s writings, highlighting its symbolic violence against black women, associated with a particular imaginary of the *mulata*, the ‘help’ or “maid’ of African descent and the ‘black mother.’

The question of language is another controversial theme critiqued by González. She formulated the term *Pretuguês* (a mixture of *preto*, black, and *português*, Black-tuguese) to refer to the African tradition present in the Portuguese language spoken in Brazil; the tonal and rhythmic characteristics of Brazilian Portuguese are, she argued, a legacy of the languages of African peoples who arrived in the country enslaved. As well as the African contribution, she sought to demonstrate the Indigenous influence on the national language, considering both to be formative sources disqualified for failing to conform to the language’s ‘educated standard.’ In this sense, she aimed to show how the language contains forms of racial discrimination and social exclusion, emphasizing that the presence of ‘r’ in place of ‘l’ (when people refer to the soccer team ‘*Framengo*’ instead of *Flamengo*, for example) may relate to the absence of the letter ‘l’ in some African idioms from the Bantu linguistic family. Along the same lines, when ‘r’ is removed from verbal infinitives or when ‘*você*’ (you) is converted into ‘*cê*,’ or again when ‘*está*’ (is) becomes ‘*tá*,’ people are speaking *Pretuguês*. Since the era of colonization, she contends, there has not been any passive acceptance of the dominant language but a creative appropriation that continues to transform today.

Lélia Gonzalez made important political and academic contributions, both to the black movement in general and to its feminist current, dialoguing closely with American authors like Angela Davis (1944- ). In Brazil, she is considered one of the pioneers in the dissemination of the academic debate on the intersectionality of race and gender. Gonzalez’s interpretations had an impact on subsequent generations of Brazilian thinkers, including [Sueli Carneiro \(1950-\)](#), Luiza Bairros (1953-2016), Djamila Ribeiro (1980-) and Giovana Xavier, among others.

**Editor's note:** Her book *Popular Festivals in Brazil* was printed in Brazil in 1987 with photos and texts in Portuguese and English, but it was never commercially released until a new edition in Portuguese was published in 2024 by Boitempo. In the 1980s, she presented lectures in the United States, and some of her essays were published in English, such as “The Brazilian Support to the Namibian Cause: Difficulties and Possibilities” (1983), “The Unified Black Movement: A New Stage in Black Political Mobilization” (1985), “For an Afro-Latin Feminism” (1988), “The Black Woman Place in the Brazilian Society” (1985), and “The Black Woman in Brazil” (1995). In 2019, *LASA Forum*, the online journal of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), published a special issue on the thought and legacy of Lélia Gonzalez, organized by Brazilian professor Osmundo Pinho, with articles in English, Spanish and Portuguese. In 2022, *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* published the English translation of an interview with the author, “Lélia talks about Lélia: a tribute to Lélia Gonzalez”, organized and translated by Ana Gretel Echazú Böschemeier, Carine de Jesus Santos, Giovana Acacia Tempesta, and Rosamaria Giatti Carneiro.

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## KEYWORDS

black diaspora; black feminism; black intellectuals; Brazilian social sciences; colonialism; decolonial studies; gender; intersectionality; race

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