

# The Feminist and Decolonial Pedagogy of Lélia Gonzalez and Sueli Carneiro

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Lélia Gonzalez and Sueli Carneiro are two Black feminists and intellectuals whose productions are fundamental to understanding gender and racial relations in Brazil and beyond. Lélia Gonzalez, who passed away in 1994, and Sueli Carneiro, who still writes, are fundamental references for Black feminism and activism in Brazil. The scope of their contributions is multifaceted and too ample to be fully covered in the scope of this review. Therefore, I situate Carneiro and Gonzalez' thought as a feminist and decolonial pedagogy reflected through political, methodological, and epistemological practices that guide knowledge production and correspond to an engaged and critical feminist praxis. For this purpose, I resort to the “decolonial feminist pedagogy” framework proposed by Yuderkys Espinosa-Miñoso, Diana Gómez, María Lugones, and Karina Ochoa as a method that refers to a specific type of feminist engaged thinking. This method theorizes and illustrates a feminism that produces knowledge in combination with territories and communities, emerging from political struggles and activism (Espinosa et al. 2013). Moreover, this practice aims to create in-subordination tools, effectively transform realities, and develop interpretative approaches to understand the worlds one lives in.

## Doing, Thinking, and Engaging in Intersectional Dialogues

To start this reflection, I combine three layers of feminist decolonial pedagogy that highlight: (i) a knowledge emerging from political and social engagement; (ii) the construction of bridges and dialogues among movements; and (iii) the consideration of intersecting and overlapping modes of oppressions. Here, I discuss some of the instances in which these principles reverberate in the intel-

lectual trajectories of Lélia Gonzalez and Sueli Carneiro in an integrated manner.

Firstly, I would like to highlight that Gonzalez and Carneiro are both recognized as activists and intellectuals, vocations which are reflected in their productions and the way they conduct their critiques and analysis. Their life trajectories are marked by active participation in Black and feminist circles, social movements, government bodies, associations of Black cultural resistance and political parties (Perry/Sotero 2019; Santana 2021; Ratts/Rios 2010). Lélia Gonzalez was one of the founders of the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (Unified Black Movement - MNU) and together with other Black women, created the Black women's collective Nzinga in 1983 (Ratts/Rios 2010). Since 1983, Sueli Carneiro was engaged in the construction of spaces for Black women to participate in advisory councils on the condition of women. In 1988, she founded Geledés – *Instituto da Mulher Negra* (Black Women's Institute), an organization in the defense of Black women's rights in Brazil for which she currently serves as director (Santana 2021).

Transcending regional boundaries, both women engaged in building a dialogue between Latin American and Caribbean feminisms, recognizing how the exchange of similar experiences – colonialization and slavery – supports the formation of transnational feminist solidarities. Gonzalez particularly stressed the need for building an Afro-Latin American feminism, arising from the mutual recognition of women who are embedded in similar historical and structural contexts (Gonzalez 1988, 2020a; Perry/Sotero 2019; Rios 2019). In this strategic direction, they propose a break with the hegemony of White feminism in the region and incorporate a Black feminist critique in the constitution of a feminist approach that accounts for the specificities of Latin America (Santana 2021; Ratts/Rios 2010).

Within the Brazilian context, Gonzalez and Carneiro are committed to understanding and exposing the complex realities of Black women and producing political diagnoses about them. What stands out at this point is their critical assessment of the very oppositional movements in which they were active. They sought to understand what is hindering or missing from a political agenda for the emancipation of Black women and consequently of the Black population in Brazil. Carneiro coined the expression “Blackening feminism”, which served to demonstrate the White feminist movement's failure to incorporate the issues of Black women into its agenda, and also demanded a feminist critique that accounted for the condition and experiences of the Black woman (Carneiro 2003). At the same time, they perceive the absence of racial debates in the progressive

and left circles on the Brazilian political scene. Gonzalez calls this phenomenon “racism by omission”, which renders racism secondary and suppresses a qualified discussion over class and racial exploitation, which is essential to grasp the larger nature of structural oppression (Gonzalez 2020b).

Carneiro and Gonzalez’ active engagement becomes a method for observing and developing interpretative categories of the social and the political. The chronicles of this engagement demonstrate their capacity to build dialogues and cross borders that open new paths towards thinking and developing collective and intersectional strategies.

### **Of the Capacity to Act as Historical Subjects**

Decolonial feminist pedagogy focuses on those methods of knowledge production that privilege local experiences, especially those emerging from the margins (Spinosa et al. 2013). Gonzalez and Carneiro’s work fits into this methodological frame as they make Black women’s agency and experience central to understanding and expressing the specificities and particularities of their condition.

The intellectual trajectory of Carneiro and Gonzalez is marked by intense and diverse political participation in which they gain proximity to the lived experiences of Black women. It is noteworthy that both of them share a peripheral and underprivileged origin. However, they shift from a subordinated condition and occupy spaces and positions not necessarily thought or reserved for them in the context of the Brazilian social and racial divide. In the background lies the recognition that their path does not reflect the typical stories of other Black women of similar status. In such a way, a substantive understanding of Black women’s condition in Brazilian society requires a (re)approximation towards the women who remained in their territories, women who, unlike them, could not participate in spaces reserved for historically privileged groups (Gonzalez 2020a; Vieira/Almeida/Carneiro 2020; Santana 2021).

This does not mean that their trajectories were not relevant to their propositions; after all, exceptions can be used as a method to comprehend and apprehend the rule. Gonzalez and Carneiro often employed the method of self-referencing, incorporating some of their personal experiences to describe the condition of Black women and the peculiarities and subtle details of racial relations in Brazil. In alluding to anecdotes from their life stories, they demonstrate how ordinary, everyday facts that portray the empirical reality of gender

and racial inequalities, are part of experiences shared by other Black women and derived from similar structures of oppression. Notwithstanding, this is a resource frequently used by other Black and decolonial feminists, indicating synergy between non-White feminist projects (Moraga/Anzaldúa 2015; Lugones 2003; Lorde ([1984] 2019).

## Constructing and Fomenting a Critical Capacity

This dimension envisages a possible rupture with the colonial discursive order of gender and race that imposes and naturalizes beliefs supporting domination structures. In this instance, decolonial and feminist pedagogy postulates the need for a (de)naturalization of old beliefs and to create alternative ways of representing and interpreting realities (Spinosa et al. 2013: 412). At this stage, this pedagogy questions established knowledges, relating them to oppression systems. Additionally, it underlines the relationship between symbolic and material realities. I highlight here some occasions in which Gonzalez and Carneiro have suggested other ways of telling stories, interrogated established truths, and facilitated the creation of alternative representations to position Black women *vis a vis* a system of racial classification.

In a dialogue with the psychoanalytic field, Gonzalez coined the concept of “Brazilian cultural neurosis”, which is characterized by modes of concealment from reality (Gonzalez 2019: 241). In this specific articulation, Gonzalez seeks to review the centrality of Black women to Brazilian identity and, in this way, demonstrates how racism is ignored and dismissed in the most astute manners. For instance, Gonzalez retrieves the figure of the Black Mammy, that is, the Black domestic worker who, in the master’s house, was responsible for the household chores and especially for the children. This ‘other’ mother cared for the children, bathed them, told stories, and played, thus exercising functions traditionally taken as maternal. In exercising these responsibilities, these women transmitted their way of speaking, beliefs, and values, thus influencing the socialization of the master’s children. By denouncing the omission of this influence in accounts of social relations and classical sociological interpretations of Brazil’s formation, Gonzalez emphasizes how the cover-up of historical facts is a manifestation of racism. Concomitantly, she calls attention to the leading role Black women have had in forming Brazilian society and its sociability (Gonzalez 2019). Thereby, Lélia Gonzalez demonstrates that it is impossible to think about Brazilian culture and identity without acknowledging

the profound participation of Black women, which is concrete, symbolic, and affective. For her, the celebration and explicit admission of this heritage are essential in overcoming racism and breaking the cycles of (de)humanization and devaluation of Black women.

Sueli Carneiro also contributed to recalling the existence of structural racism, exposing the myth that Brazil was/is a racial paradise. She pioneered studies containing data about inequalities among women, publishing a cutting-edge article in 1985 that analyzed the socioeconomic condition of Black women in Brazil (Carneiro [1985]2019). This was one way to evidence how racial and sexual inequalities produce discrepant effects on women's material condition, demonstrating the impact of racial differences on the status of women (Cardoso 2016). However, Carneiro was also concerned with relating material vulnerabilities to the demeaning stereotypes associated with Blacks and Black women. In this regard, she turns to African cosmology and the cult of the *Orixás* to rethink and (re)signify the social representations of Black women. The objective here is to demonstrate the varying feminine archetypes existing in this cosmology, which assigns characteristics to Black women that differ from the commonsensical image of the subordinate and suffering body. The female entities in this cosmology are women who do not fit in dichotomous categories, such as good/bad and sacred/profane, but are rather complex beings viewed in their multiplicity. When analyzing cosmologies of African religions, Carneiro contemplates this belief system beyond its notional value, regarding it as a social organization method that seeks to reassemble elements from the life that people in diaspora no longer had access to, a life from which they have been strapped (Carneiro/Cury 2019). Carneiro discusses how African mythical thought brings to the surface another system of social representations and beliefs that repositions the Black woman and releases her from a stereotypical place of subservience and inferiority. The possibility of (re)signifying this woman, in her value, and potency, as a pole of resistance is made possible through the principles of a non-Western thought and epistemic approach.

In different ways, Gonzalez and Carneiro establish a connection between the past, the present, and the future, retelling stories and revisiting Brazilian history from other angles. While doing that, they pave the way for developing alternative narratives and imaginations about Black women to be diffused and incorporated into the public and private spheres.

## The Healing Power of this Pedagogy

Spinosa et al. (2013: 416) ascribe a therapeutic and healing function to feminist decolonial pedagogy, besides being a code of resistance. In the engaged thought of Gonzalez and Carneiro, we can identify how making sense of their trajectories yields a (re)interpretation of their individualities, identities, and affections and how this shapes their political activity.

Lélia Gonzalez reports some of the ways in which she was exposed to processes of Whitening and brainwashing while occupying spaces not meant for Blacks, here more specifically in reference to her high educational level and intense participation in intellectual circles. As she moves away from her origins, her insecurity grows, and the 'Whitening' ideology is consequently internalized (Ratts/Rios 2010). In retrieving this piece of her history, Gonzalez recalls having constructed a persona that concealed and erased her Blackness in aesthetic and cultural forms. And it is in the reconnection with her Black and peripheral consciousness that Gonzalez understands the internalization of the Whitening ideology and begins to change her self-presentation to the world. In going back to her roots, she recognizes the importance of her indigenous and illiterate mother for her intellectual development and acknowledges the lived experiences of other Black women as central tools for understanding the complexity of racial and gendered relations. In this same period, Lélia Gonzalez changed her style and fully embodied her African heritage, opting for warmer colors and wearing her hair in its natural form. Gonzalez also adopted a particular way of speaking and writing, a colloquial style that deviated from the more classic patterns of academic writing and is closer to spoken language by employing popular expressions and slang. She coined the term "*pretuguês*" to indicate a Blackened Portuguese that does not obscure its African roots in its linguistic development. Like other traits of the country's culture, Brazilian Portuguese has a profound African influence, and Gonzalez made sure to make that visible and present in her production (Ratts/Rios 2010).

For Sueli Carneiro, this healing and transformative power of decolonization is most evident in the path taken for her political activity, especially in the founding of *Geledés – Instituto da Mulher Negra* (Black Women's Institute). As an organization unplugged from both the White feminist and Black movements, this step can be considered a bold move by Carneiro and her fellow activists. It was a political decision and strategy to form a space where Black women would be positioned as central political subjects and protagonists of their own struggles, a space where issues intersected by racial, gendered, and territo-

rial axis could be confronted, and where a public agenda of organized Black women could be formulated and forwarded to the public sphere. The name *Geledés* also holds a special symbolic meaning, as it was chosen as a reference to traditional *Yorùbá* secret organizations that worship feminine power. Moving away from White, hegemonic, and colonial connections, Carneiro and her partners bridged African culture and ancestry to an organized Black feminist political association (Vieira/Almeida/Carneiro 2020; Santana 2021: 156). The institutional assimilation of Afro-Brazilian culture might as well symbolize a breach with a system of references that produces demeaning representations of Black women and the African diasporic heritage and memory. Such ruptures with White and Western patterns are instruments of insubordination and acknowledgement of the power within and among Black women, especially when they are assembled. Such appeal to ancestry embodies individual and collective empowerment and sabotages a system that seeks to discipline and limit their agency and creative capacities.

Leaving their positions of subordination and invisibility and refusing the suppression of their own identity and culture are some of the articulations that Sueli Carneiro and Lélia Gonzalez have voiced throughout their careers. These accounts show how these two Black feminists shaped their intellectual production, political activities, and identities to detach themselves from a colonial, racialized, and gendered gaze and reasoning. They rejected the demeaning representations of Black women and refused the burden of misrepresentation. They arrange the ancestry, culture, strength, and value of the Black woman in a visible and honored position in their performances. As anticipated by Spinosa et al. (2013), this demonstrates the political vigor of this feminist pedagogical practice. Indeed, the thought of these two pioneers is a central reference for Critical Race Theories and feminist studies in Brazil, and the celebration of these intellectual and activist trajectories has been a recurrent repertoire for the Black feminism movement and the integrated anti-racist struggle in the country (Paschel 2016; Rios 2019).

## Final Remarks

I have composed this text to illustrate the ways in which a decolonial feminist pedagogy manifests itself, offering narratives of the journeys and ideas of Lélia Gonzalez and Sueli Carneiro. Through these tales, we can explore some paths

through which knowledge can be weaved and material and symbolic realities can be altered.

The lifeworks of Lélia Gonzalez and Sueli Carneiro are sensitively integrated within a decolonial and feminist pedagogy, forming a knowledge that, anchored in political articulations, intersectional dialogue, and a commitment to the emancipation of Black women, has contributed to fundamental tools for overcoming the oppressive condition of Black women. They demonstrate that it is necessary to occupy various fronts of thought and action to include a Black feminist agenda and a decolonial perspective in the public sphere as part of resistance and democratic strategies. They also show how the relationship between social representations and the discourses that articulate realities have a relevant role in shaping material precariousness and inequality in the distribution of resources.

Demonstrating the similarity between the thought of two historical Black feminists in the Brazilian context and the imaginations proposed by feminists in the Americas uncovers the need to build bridges of mutual recognition. This carries the potential of opening roadways to forge bonds of solidarity between women living and interacting in territories and communities where the colonicity of power has a structural and structuring influence on their existences.

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