Three Afro-Brazilian Thinkers of Global Significance

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ABSTRACT: Carolina Maria de Jesus, Abdias Nascimento, and Lélia Gonzalez are presented in this essay as Afro-Brazilian existentialist thinkers, whose global significance lies in their outlining philosophical interpretations of Brazil that center racial relations in the formation of the nation. By combining accounts of the lives and intellectual contributions of these thinkers, one can understand the core of each of their projects, whether in philosophical literature, sociological study of ethnic-racial relations, or philosophical anthropology. Part of a line of thought in which the terms “black” and “existence” are put together, Jesus, Nascimento, and Gonzalez exemplarily proposed practices of decolonial knowledge production based on the notion that it is possible with the struggle for freedom and justice to reverse power structures that hierarchize human beings.

KEYWORDS: Carolina Maria de Jesus, Abdias Nascimento, Lélia Gonzalez, Afro-Brazilian existentialist thinkers, miscegenation, racial democracy

I offer in this essay discussion of three Afro-Brazilian thinkers—Carolina Maria de Jesus, Abdias Nascimento, and Lélia Gonzalez—whose lives and thought on existence, gender, poverty, and race are of contemporary relevance as many of the challenges and problems they faced remain among most of the African diaspora and are thus worthy of continued study.

Carolina Maria de Jesus: A Thinker beyond Her Time

Carolina Maria de Jesus was born in Sacramento, Minas Gerais, on March 14, 1914. Her early life was marked by signs of exactly what she was to become: a writer. Despite a childhood of extreme poverty and its attendant problems,
from a very early age she manifested a determined will to make her social conditions the object of her thought, the basis for her elaboration of complex questions. A granddaughter of victims of enslavement, Jesus was one of the eight children of João Candido and Dona Cota, who, while illiterate, migrated to Sacramento to participate in agricultural activities in the region. While Jesus did not have the opportunity to attend school at the age of other children, nothing passed her observations or was spared her critical questioning. Her penchant for inquiry was atypical for her age. Most of the time, it even embarrassed her elders.

In 1923, at the age of nine, Jesus was enrolled in Allan Kardec, the first Spiritist school in Brazil. Sponsored by local wealthy families, the school was originally named after Liceu Sacramento at its founding by Eurípedes Barsanulfo in 1907. Jesus studied for two years at that institution. Her studies were sponsored by Senhora Maria Leite Monteiro de Barros, for whom Jesus’s mother worked. The school experience was not great. Jesus found the environment strange in ways that were disappointing. Despite her expressed discontent with being there, she took advantage of the opportunity to read the many textbooks and other materials. She became a lifelong voracious reader.

Concerned about her dissatisfaction and restlessness, Jesus’s mother decided to take her to see a “spiritual doctor” to understand what was affecting her. The doctor, whose name was Barsanulfo, replied that Jesus’s “problem” was an unmet desire to deal with her thoughts by expressing them. Doctor Barsanulfo was certain when he stated to Dona Cota that Jesus would one day be a poet.

Jesus’s passion for books was bolstered by her intense desire to learn and her curiosity to know more about stories she had heard. Reading and encountering fictionalized lives of featured characters was like a balm, which helped her not to fall hostage to the abundant human misery she would face. From when she first learned to read, books were her primary place of refuge, a meeting place with dreams and ways of seeing the differences in the world. While still very young, she was driven by the desire to teach herself what reading offered the imagination. Her discovery of the world of varied books temporarily projected her out of daily struggles to survive, those shared by Africans and their descendants even after legal abolition.

Jesus’s generation lived through struggles over how the post-abolitionist period in Brazil would break from or remain intrinsically linked to the immediate past of enslavement. After formal abolition in Brazil on May 13, 1888, brought about by popular pressure combined with the resistance of enslaved people, many freed persons ended up returning to the African continent.
Given the difficulties they encountered, according to historian Walter Fraga, others moved from the places where they were enslaved in search of relatives and better living conditions. The formerly enslaved no longer accepted the degrading work conditions that existed until prior to their manumission. This angered the former enslavers. There was a lot of pressure on authorities, especially from dissatisfied landowners, to crack down on the formerly enslaved’s movement through prosecuting them for vagrancy.

Even recently freed people who were not necessarily involved in acts considered offensive or dangerous to society were victims of persecution. Jesus was one such victim. Her devotion to reading led her to be accused of identifying herself as a reader of the writings of São Cipriano, which were considered “harmful to whites” or “witchcraft.” The accusation resulted in the arrest of Jesus and her mother, who had tried to intercede for her daughter. While incarcerated, they were brutally beaten. Dona Cota’s arm was broken in her eagerness to defend her daughter from police violence. In response, Jesus decided in 1937 to move to São Paulo.

In 1930, São Paulo was undergoing the beginning of its processes of modernization and urbanization. The growth of the city was a consequence of the expansion of coffee farms and the replacement of slave labor by wage labor. In addition, the introduction of mechanized agriculture in the countryside rendered many people’s labor obsolete and propelled the exodus of some of the population to urban centers. Upon arriving in São Paulo, Jesus first worked as a maid at the home of Doctor Euryclides de Jesus Zerbini. She preferred to stay at her employer’s home on weekends, which enabled her to take advantage of her rest time to read, with her boss’s permission, in his library. When she became pregnant, her employers no longer wanted her in their home. This would mark the end of her domestic work and her move from the center of the city to peripheral areas known as “favelas.”

Jesus would end up in the Canindê favela along with other indigents. Although she had three children, João José de Jesus, José Carlos de Jesus, and Vera Eunice de Jesus Lima, she never married. She hated the idea of submission to or dependence on others.

Jesus’s spirit was reflected in her physical presence. She was a tall Black woman with a strong personality and a conviction for freedom. She faced challenges with courage imbued with a commitment to conveying who she was and what her daily life represented. Born to speak, to tell, and to write, she began to collect papers as a source of income. In the garbage, she found everything, from food, usually spoiled, to clothes, shoes, objects, notebooks, and books.
In the favela, Jesus knew people who, like her, had been forced to live there. She got along well with some but was not loved by all. She didn’t “mind her tongue.” Known as the “tongue of fire,” she refused to sugarcoat her words. She decided to start registering the details of her life through the daily habit of writing. The books found in the garbage formed Jesus’s literary “collection” and her notebooks, written in the form of a diary, reflected her existence in the “dumping room.” The expression “dumping room” later became the title of Jesus’s first book. It was a metaphor for the inhumane, agglomerated space to which poor families were subjected through forced displacement to the outskirts of the city due to exponential urban growth.

Jesus wanted to be a published writer. Her work first appeared in the Folha do Amanhã newspaper, alongside journalist Willy Aureli. The newspaper reproduced the photo of the two and a poem by Jesus entitled “Carolina Maria, black poet.” In May 1958, another journalist, Audálio Dantas, wanted to spend a week writing an article for the newspaper about the daily lives of residents of a favela on the outskirts of São Paulo. When he decided to visit Canindé, he called attention to children who destroyed some toys placed in the favela by the city hall. In response, Jesus screamed: “I’m going to put your name in my book!” This was enough for Dantas to become interested in this woman and in the story of a book written by a favelada. Dantas was fascinated by the material Jesus presented to him. As he carefully checked the contents of the diaries, he realized that, in a pathbreaking way, Jesus’s text represented the drama of life in Canindé.

Dantas told the story of Jesus to the readers of the Folha da Noite newspaper on May 9, 1958. The article entitled “The Drama of the Favela Written by a Favelada” was published with a selection of the writings from her notebooks and four photographs by Gil Passarelli. The article, considered by Dantas as the most important of his career, catalyzed the curiosity of the newspaper’s readers and stimulated the interest of potential publishers. Jesus’s life was transformed. The astonishment of the literary environment was so great that critic Wilson Martins explicitly suggested that Jesus was an “invention” of Audálio Dantas. In 1960, two years after Dantas’s original article, Jesus’s Quarto de Despejo: diário de uma favelada [The Trash Room: The Diary of A Favelada] was published. Making record sales, two thousand five hundred copies were purchased per day and the book became a bestseller in eleven out of the forty-six countries where it was available. The text was translated into sixteen different languages and the focus of an explosion of global literary criticism.

What did Quarto de Despejo represent in the literary scene? A dose of subjectively informed and philosophically rich reality of the daily misery, hunger,
violence, and marginalization in the life of a poor Black woman in the *favela*. Carefully chronicling the intricacies of extreme deprivation, Jesus writes as a human being from within the experience of imposed non-human conditions. On the edge of the intense precariousness of dehumanization caused by the inability to recognize and value the social importance of the less favored, the diary is a lesson on how hunger operates in the body, making it difficult for human beings to advance in the logic of their existence. And more, the work critically shows the racist and exclusionary social structure of Brazilian and similar societies and how it prevents the mobility of poor people, particularly Black people.

Jesus narrates how she managed to survive laboring as a paper picker in Canindé, even as she lacked money and basic living conditions. As such, Jesus's narrative is an existential philosophical, autobiographical testimonial that centers the social drama of the *favela* residents, people who were otherwise considered marginal. Amid her accounts of their indignation, revolt, and anguish, one of the most striking passages concerns her flirtation with suicide and moments of considering taking the lives of her children. The work is a portrait of how the poor in Brazil ascribe meaning and purpose to their existence while living with rampant racism and de facto and symbolic violence.

The language of *Quarto de Despejo* employs forms of popular speech. However, Jesus also uses more elaborate language, mixing them with simpler textual constructions. The resulting text is blunt and marked by the spontaneous modes of expression of the protagonist narrator. Covering the period from July 15, 1955, to January 1, 1960, with some cuts made by Dantas for length, the book captures how Canindé residents, as they appear in Jesus's daily life, express the profound experience of existential hunger through unmasking social hypocrisy regarding inequalities in Brazilian society.

With the publication of *Quarto de Despejo*, Jesus left Canindé to live in an upper-middle class neighborhood in São Paulo. While her exit from the *favela* was accompanied by applause and boos, her arrival at the house in the Santana neighborhood provoked discomfort among her new neighbors. Jesus's dream was to have a masonry house instead of her shack in the *favela*, but her presence in that space demonstrated how incompatible her figure, habits, and even generosity were with the those of the local elite. Her impetus to help the people with the most need, receiving beggars at home and people who came asking at the door, made Jesus *persona non grata* in the neighborhood to which she moved. Dissatisfaction with her treatment by neighbors led to her decision to buy a piece of land in a rural area in Parelheiros in 1970. Unfortunately, by that time, literary attention to her had declined.

In 1960, from her humble life in the *favela*, Jesus had emerged through her courage to speak truthfully about the reality of her life. Everyone wanted to meet the writer of *Quarto de Despejo*, to learn more about the life of the Black woman writer and slum dweller who piqued the curiosity of publishers, critics, and other authors. Jesus began to frequent places where other prestigious writers had access. For instance, she shared the same publisher, Livraria Francisco Alves Editora, with Clarice Lispector. Lispector proved to be a fan of Jesus. In an August 1961 article in *Revista Manchete* written by Paulo Mendes Campos, he recounted that Jesus told Lispector her writing was “elegant,” and Lispector replied that Jesus's writing was “truthful.” Jesus and Lispector had completely different trajectories, but they were protagonists of equal weight in the Brazilian literary world of the time.

As would be expected, the Military Dictatorship that came to power in 1964 considered *Quarto de Despejo* subversive. Jesus and other intellectuals, artists, politicians, and activists were repressed by the regime. While copies of *Quarto de Despejo* were seized by the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS), Jesus continued as a resistant voice, denouncing Brazilian leaders through centering the realities of the country’s poorest members. For example, among many other politicians, Juscelino Kubitschek, President of Brazil from 1956–1961, was a target of Jesus’s sharp criticism and charges of electoral co-option and disregard for the most disadvantaged.

The Brazilian intelligentsia already viewed Jesus with distrust. The media denounced the originality of the discussions in *Quarto de Despejo*. The combined results were effective: after the book’s initial success, Jesus fell into relative oblivion. Forgotten by publishers, the media, and critics, she had no support in the literary world and was forced to try to publish her texts with her own resources. Brazilian society and, by extension, the institutions that guard what could emerge as authoritative and sanctioned knowledge had difficulties accepting that a Black writer from the slums should be given a major platform as
she catalogued the existential reality of thousands of people left socially adrift. In addition, Jesus was quite acidulous in criticizing politicians and other important people who, if in a disguised way, did not prioritize attending to social problems. Finally, Jesus embodied the intersection of racial, class, and gender cleavages that strengthened a peripheral counterculture averse to authoritarianism and in favor of democracy. She was censored in every way.

When she decided to move to the piece of land in a rural area in Parelheiros in 1970, Jesus was aware of the difficulties in maintaining herself as a writer if her writings were no longer in circulation. Despite this, she did not stop writing. Until her early death on February 13, 1977, at the age of sixty-two, from an asthma attack, she wrote and kept a collection of about thirty-seven notebooks containing more than five thousand pages.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a full-fledged revival of Jesus’s work. With renewed interest in her writings among major publishers, she is now rightly framed as one of the precursors of Afro-Brazilian literature and an important voice of the Black movement and the Black feminist movement. Her work is now studied in Brazilian schools and universities, and her writing is seen to have inaugurated a form of literary analysis entitled “the writing of oneself.” Her intellectual contributions have also been the subject of theses and dissertations in different graduate programs in the country. Carolina Maria de Jesus projected herself as a writer beyond her time. As such, she collided with and broke the obstacles that interfered with her flourishing by embracing the political responsibility of telling the truth about herself and others.

**Abdias Nascimento: An Intellectual Legacy of Struggle and Resistance**

Abdias Nascimento is one of the most expressive intellectual representatives of Brazilian Black culture in the twentieth century. He was born in the city of Franca, São Paulo, on March 14, 1914, the same date of Carolina Maria de Jesus’s birth. Also from humble beginnings, Nascimento learned at an early age from his parents, Georgina Ferreira do Nascimento and José Ferreira do Nascimento, the value of fighting for life. Nothing, absolutely nothing, would be easy for him, whether at the beginning of his childhood, still without much idea of what lay ahead, through the difficulties of adolescence, up to the decisions he faced in adulthood. He lived a life of total dedication to the causes he chose to represent.

The grandson of enslaved Africans, Nascimento’s father was a shoemaker and violinist. His mother was a pastry chef and wet nurse. Although his father
knew how to make shoes, he had no shoes to wear. Both his maternal grandmother Francelina, who was interned in the Juquery asylum, and his paternal grandmother Ismênia, raped by a Portuguese man, suffered the traumas and consequences of slavery arduously. From his grandmother Ismênia, Nascimento learned about his ancestors in stories marked by the violent diasporic experiences of enslaved Africans in Brazil. Abdias started working early to help his parents financially. At the age of seven, and then again at nine, he delivered milk and meat to the homes of the city’s wealthiest residents.

At the age of eleven, Nascimento entered the Atheneu Francano School of Commerce with a scholarship obtained by his mother from the mayor of the city. At the same institution, at the age of fifteen, he completed high school in Accounting. The following year, in 1929, he enlisted in the army and headed to the capital of São Paulo, participating in the Frente Negra in the 1930s. The Frente Negra Brasileira (FNB), under the coordination of Arlindo Veiga dos Santos, José Correia Leite, and others, was considered one of the first organizations to demand the equal participation of Black people in Brazilian society.

The FNB played a fundamental political role in Brazilian social life by emphasizing the necessity of Brazilian Black people exiting their condition of subalternity. In addition to encouraging Black candidates to run for political office, it organized and led political, cultural, and educational discussions through a variety of lectures, seminars, courses, workshops, and festivals that were accessible to all who wanted to participate. The organization even established itself as a political party, but it was forced to shut down its activities for nineteen years by the Estado Novo (1937–1945) in the third and final phase of Brazil’s first dictator, Getúlio Vargas. (In 1951, Vargas would return to power, winning the popular vote.) Nascimento described his participation in the FNB as “symbolic and spiritual,” since, as a military man, he was prevented from more formally active membership.

Nascimento fully participated in the Ação Integralista Brasileira (ABI), a political organization created by Plínio Salgado in 1932, believing in the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggle of the movement against the bourgeoisie. Soon realizing the racist character of the Ação Integralista, Abdias withdrew from it, arguing that integralist ideas were incompatible with the cause of formerly enslaved Black peoples in Brazil. In 1936, with the ascendance of the Black movements in São Paulo and their clashes with the police, Nascimento was accused of insubordination and expelled from the army. He then decided to migrate to and live in the city of Duque de Caxias, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, where he began to have more significant contact with religions of African origin. In 1938, he graduated in Economics from the Federal Univer-
Nascimento was openly critical of the Estado Novo, the previously mentioned dictatorial regime installed in Brazil by Vargas in 1937 after a coup d’état. Campaigning hard in movements against centralization and authoritarianism, oppression, and imperialism, Nascimento was arrested by the National Security Court and spent two years in the Carandiru penitentiary, where he founded the Teatro do Sentenciado (1941–1944). This theatrical group, organized by and consisting of prisoners, was Nascimento’s “first theatrical initiative.” Its shows, “O dia de Colombo,” “Revista Penitenciária,” “Patrocínio e a República,” “Defensor Perpétuo do Brasil,” “Zé Bacoco,” and “O preguiçoso,” focused on the invisibility of the prisoner and the process of erasing the sentenced person. In 1944, Nascimento founded the Teatro Experimental do Negro (The Black Experimental Theater) in Rio de Janeiro. It would significantly mark the history of Brazilian dramaturgy.

The Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN) explicitly linked Black struggles for civil and human rights to cultivating appreciation of the stories and memories of Afro-Brazilians. The pieces it presented sought to create central roles for Black performers in the Brazilian artistic scene and to denounce the practice of “black face,” or of painting the faces of white actors black rather than hiring Black actors to play Black characters. TEN was constituted as a school for domestic workers, the unemployed, factory workers, and public servants who received direct literacy and cultural instruction through its programs. TEN played a central role in the political formation of its members, starting with its first generation of actors and actresses. Major names, such as Inezia de Abreu, Manoel Antonio, Iamar Bastos, Haroldo Costa, Manoel Claudiano Filho, Léa Garcia, José Maria Monteiro, Zeni Pereira, Ruth de Souza, and Tião, underwent the alternative educational work of the theater, strengthening their Black identities and appreciation of Black cultural heritage in Brazil. The TEN theater company paved the way for major Black actors in the performing arts by rejecting the secondary and grotesque roles for Afro-Brazilians on the stages of large cities, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. One of its main objectives was to generate reflection about the situation of Black people in post-slavery Brazilian society, questioning ubiquitous, anti-Black stereotypes. TEN worked with both Brazilian and foreign texts, bringing ideas of freedom to the center of anti-racist struggle.

*The Emperor Jones*, written by Eugene O’Neil, was the company’s debut show. At that time (1945), no Black actor had set foot on the stage of the Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro. The story, set in Haiti, reflects the life of a Black man,
exploited by the United States, who flees after an assassination. Becoming an emperor in the Antilles, he is cruel to the native people until they revolt. At psychological, the text takes readers through the protagonist’s fear and hallucination, until his death by the executioners. Brazilian intellectuals of the time, such as the writer Ascendino Leite, were surprised by the quality of the company’s critical work and choice for a premiere of a play of such dramatic complexity. TEN regarded themselves as vehemently combatting practices of racism and racial discrimination reinforced by the myth of “racial democracy” by highlighting and questioning structures of power and domination through Afro-Brazilian art. TEN organized highly significant meetings of the Afro-Brazilian population, among them the National Black Convention in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in 1945 and 1946, respectively, the National Black Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1949, and the 1st Congress of the Brazilian Negro in Rio de Janeiro in 1950. The 1st Congress of the Brazilian Negro brought together theses, testimonials, and contributions by Black Brazilians intended to provoke discussions in and beyond the academic environment.

A central aim of the 1st Congress of the Brazilian Negro was to affirm Black people as producers of knowledge in multiple spheres in part by demystifying and denouncing common misconceptions in Afro-Brazilian studies by centering accounts of Black people themselves about their continued structural exclusion in post-abolition Brazilian society. Prominent scholars of race relations in Brazil, such as Luiz de Aguiar Costa Pinto, Roger Bastide, Aguinaldo Camargo, Édison Carneiro, Oraci Nogueira, Guerreiro Ramos, and Darcy Ribeiro, among others, were present and carried out fruitful exchanges and debates about the nature of the cultural and social problems that affected Afro-Brazilians. Despite disagreements about concepts of blackness and race from the different points of view of actors, anthropologists, ethnologists, journalists, and sociologists, those present started to consider more seriously the relevance of nuances of the social construction of Brazilian society.

The controversy over the concept of race generated in the Congress divided into two main approaches. One framed race as a biological determination used to define superiority and inferiority while the second argued for defining race sociologically through investigating differences created between whites and Blacks in post-abolition Brazilian society. The insertion of the sociology of race into the intellectual debate introduced the articulated difference between racial identity and national identity. How could national identity be built without attending to racial differences as fundamental parts of the Brazilian social mosaic? The Brazilian Black intelligentsia led the resistance against the idea of not considering race in the study of differences caused by social inequali-
ties and denounced the myth of “racial democracy” as an attempt to erase the basis for making legitimate arguments against ongoing racism. In this sense, the discussions carried out by the Black movements in Brazil completely challenged the veracity of the achievement or existence of a racial democracy in the Brazilian context.

In 1948, Nascimento founded the newspaper Quilombo: vida, problemas e aspirações do negro (Quilombo [a community organized by fugitive slaves]: Life, Problems, and Aspirations of Black People) through TEN. The newspaper sought to integrate TEN into twentieth-century Brazilian society by enlarging the relevance and impact of the unique political and cultural space it had fostered. Published in ten editions from December 1948 to July 1950, the periodical became an important vehicle for the antiracist struggle, knowledge of Black aspirations, denunciation of social inequalities, and debate regarding Black culture, with particular emphasis on the political character of Black and female representation among actresses, dancers, educators, maids, painters, singers, and girl candidates in Black beauty contests. While affirming the urgent need to combat racism on several fronts, Quilombo was also open to divergent ideas. For instance, in the inauguration of the column entitled “Racial Democracy,” Gilberto Freyre was invited to contribute, although he was totally in favor of ethnic democracy. Like Freyre, other intellectuals, such as Roger Bastide Edison Carneiro, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Péricles Leal, Orígenes Lessa, Murilo Mendes, Rachel de Queiroz, Arthur Ramos, Guerreiro Ramos, Ironides Rodrigos, Nelson Rodrigues, Solano Trindade, also participated in the discussions provoked by the periodical.

In contact with active participants in the African liberation struggles and civil rights movements in the United States, Nascimento and the TEN artists and intellectuals were politically supportive of Négritude, a literary current catalyzed by Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Léopold Senghor that sought appreciation in African countries and with members of the African diaspora, including significant Afro-Brazilian populations, who were victims of colonial domination and its legacies of oppression. When in 1966, the 1st World Festival of Black Arts (FESMAN) took place in Dakar, Senegal, in defense of Négritude, African independence, and the idea of the power of Black culture globally, Nascimento and the TEN artists were excluded from the foreign delegation under censorship by the Brazilian government. The episode led to Nascimento denouncing the reasons for their exclusion in an open letter to Dakar that was later published in the magazine Présence Africaine. The letter is widely considered one of Nascimento’s first international political acts of protest criticizing racial discrimination in Brazil.
Although TEN continued until 1968, Nascimento was forced to go into exile under pressure from the Brazilian military regime. Moving to the U.S., he established important links with civil rights activists and taught as a visiting professor, sharing his analysis with U.S. students and colleagues of the social situation of the Black population in Brazil and the meanings of the struggle for rights and freedom in the African diaspora. During his exile, Nascimento also painted works featuring religious themes of African diasporic culture that were exhibited in museums, galleries, and cultural centers. When he left the U.S., his artistic output became a continued reference to the work and intellectual and political relations he had inaugurated.

In 1978, Nascimento returned to Brazil and participated in a series of protests, public actions, and meetings that led to the founding of the Unified Black Movement against Racism and Racial Discrimination (MNUCDR), which took place with a large crowd on the steps of the Municipal Theater of São Paulo. The decision to create the movement resulted from a series of acts of violence against Black people in Brazil. First, there was the arrest, torture, and murder of Robson Silveira da Luz, a worker accused of stealing fruit at his workplace. Then there was discrimination against four young volleyball players at the Clube Regatas do Tietê. That was followed by the killing of worker Nilton Lourenço by the police in the Lapa district of São Paulo. The movement called for an end to police violence, racism in the labor market and in the media, and the implementation of guidelines to address the situation of Black people in the country. The Unified Black Movement (MNU) contributed significantly to the demands formulated at the 1988 Constituent Assembly and obtained important achievements, such as the demarcation of quilombola lands and the implementation of Law 10.639/2003, which established the guidelines and bases for inclusion in the official curriculum of the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian History and African Culture, updated five years later by Law 11.645/2008, which now also includes Indigenous History and Culture.

In 1983, Nascimento engaged in party politics for the Democratic Labor Party (PDT), led by Leonel Brizola, and won the substitute position as Federal Deputy (1983–1987) in the race for the Chamber of Deputies. Nascimento is considered the first Black deputy to defend the cause of the Afro-Brazilian population in the plenary of the Brazilian parliament. During his term as deputy, he participated in several projects of national and international relevance to the history and memory of Afro-Brazilians, with emphasis on the creation of the Palmares Cultural Foundation, an agency of the Ministry of Culture for Afro-Brazilian matters. In 1991, Nascimento became the first Black Senator in charge of the Secretariat for the Defense and Promotion of Afro-Brazilian Pop-
ulations and, later, upon ending his term as Senator of the Republic in 1999, he
assumed the Secretariat for Human Rights and Citizenship of Rio de Janeiro.
Among the various coordinated projects and events in which it participated,
the 3rd World Conference of the United Nations (UN) against Racism, Xenopho-
bia, and Other Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa in 2001,
marked the admission by participating countries of the persistence of racism
and need to recognize historical inequalities in education, health, housing,
and socioeconomic conditions available to minoritized populations.

The life and intellectual work of Nascimento lasted until May 23, 2011,
when he died at the age of ninety-seven due to complications arising from di-
abetes. Nascimento enacted his intellectual capacities on multiple fronts, in
academic life, activism, art, public life, and politics, establishing dialogues
and producing exemplary ideas that consistently reflected the relevance of his
work to Brazil and for Afro-Brazilians. Among his main publications are Drama
para negros e prólogo para brancos [Drama for Blacks and Prologue for Whites] (1961), O
genocídio do negro brasileiro [Black Brazilian Genocide] (1978), O quilombismo: docu-
mentos de uma militância panafricanista [The Quilombismo: Documents of a Panafri-
[The Angry Black] (1982), Brazil: mixture or massacre? Essays in the Genocide of Black
Brazil (1989), and, co-authored with Éle Semog, Abdias do Nascimento, o griot e as

To encounter the intertwined nature of Nascimento’s life and intellectual
projects is to see how far Brazil still needs to advance toward the development
and implementation of policies for the inclusion of minorities in the different
segments that make up the Brazilian social structure. Abdias Nascimento
was an intellectual committed to the Black cause, with a sense of responsibility
for telling the truth about the problems caused by racism, exclusion, and dis-
crimination against Afro-Brazilians. He faced political censorship and farcical
colonial accounts of the history and memory of African-descended people. He
insisted on the total logical incompatibility of such fallacies with the strategies
Black people had used never to give up advancing the deep desire for justice.
His was an essential voice for building a more truly human world.

Lélia Gonzalez: Black and Indigenous Women’s Insurgency

Twenty-one years after the birth of Carolina Maria de Jesus and Abdias Nasci-
mento, Lélia Almeida was born on February 1, 1935, in Belo Horizonte, Minas
Gerais, the penultimate of eighteen siblings of Accacio Joaquim de Almeida
and Urcinda Serafim de Almeida, an Indigenous domestic worker. In 1942 at
the age of eight, Almeida migrated with her family to Rio de Janeiro. Initially
with the support of her older brother Jaime Almeida, a soccer player for the Flamengo team, the city of Rio de Janeiro became the place where she, as a writer, would work on multiple fronts. Her story is one of the most fascinating to be told about the foundation-setting intellectuals exploring Black culture in Brazil. Her trajectory began very early and in a distinct way for a girl of her background. The steps she took were driven by conviction and a spirit fighting for change.

Almeida studied at Colégio Pedro II, a traditional federal public education institution founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1837. Many important figures in Brazilian political and literary life were students from that school, including, Capistrano de Abreu, Gonçalves Dias, Coelho Neto, Euclides da Cunha, and Presidents of the Republic Rodrigues Alves, Hermes da Fonseca, and Washington Luís. While studying, Lélia worked as a maid and nanny, as she revealed to the newspaper *The Pasquim* in 1986. Despite these difficulties, she graduated in Philosophy in 1960 and in History and Geography in 1963 at the current Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). She received a master’s degree in Social Communication and then a doctorate in Political Anthropology, researching on gender and ethnic relations. She worked as a teacher in several schools and universities, among them, Faculdades Integradas Estácio de Sá, Universidade Gama Filho, and the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

In 1965, a year after the death of her husband, the philosopher Luiz Carlos Gonzalez, Lélia adopted the surname Gonzalez. Luiz Carlos had died by suicide thought to be caused by constant disagreements with his family, of Spanish and white origin, due to his relationship with Almeida (hereafter referred to as Gonzalez). The family did not accept a Black woman as their son’s wife. Earlier in her life, Gonzalez used to say that to face racism she had to deny her racial condition, creating ideological distance from the Black community. Racism from her in-laws intervened significantly in the couple’s marriage, propelling Gonzalez to consider tensions caused by racial relations in Brazil drawing insight from her personal life. Luiz Carlos had been the first person to question her about an attempt to whiten herself. Contrary to what Gilberto Freyre claimed, racism had not disappeared with the widespread processes of miscegenation in Brazil. Later, after more sustained incursions into racial discussion through *candomblé* and psychoanalysis, Gonzalez’s understanding changed radically. She came to think that the idea of racial democracy was propagated by an elite intellectual class to mask continued racial discrimination in the daily lives of Afro-Brazilians.
In 1970, Gonzalez’s activities became more forceful. As she participated in meetings on Marxism, she began to be monitored by the Military Dictatorship, who registered her in the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) as “subversive.” Brazilian presidents during the military regime, which lasted from 1964 to 1985, were ultraconservative, authoritarian military generals. On April 1, 1964, in what came to be called a “civil-military coup of 64,” the military seized power and overthrew the government of João Goulart. Under the Military Dictatorship, censorship of the media was relentless; political prisoners were tortured, killed, or simply abducted from social life. Opposition movements, especially those led by trade unionists and students, were repressed by military operations and the most active militants were arrested. At the end of 1968, the Institutional Act (AI5) paved the way for a regime that could persecute, imprison, impeach, exile, and “disappear” its opponents.

In 1974, Gonzalez started to participate in meetings with Black groups in Rio de Janeiro. With activists linked to the Teatro de Opinião and the Center for Afro-Asian Studies at Universidade Cândido Mendes, she tried to find ways through academic, cultural, and political action to respond to the violence used against Black people. The discussions sought to analyze the history of oppression of Afro-Brazilians and the political effects of the military dictatorship on specifically student and Black social organizations committed to confronting the dictatorial regime.

When teaching the course “Black Culture in Brazil” in 1976 at Parque Lage School of Visual Arts, Gonzalez worked with themes that defined the matrices of Brazilian culture from Black perspectives. One of the objectives of the course was to equip participants with concepts for combating racism. These included the African diaspora, Black people in literature and themes related to African cultures in Brazil, Brazilian culture, Black people in Brazil, and the discourse of racism as exclusion. Through an anthropological theoretical framework, the course also intended to promote critical reflection on the place of Black people in Brazilian culture, not only as social subjects, but also as outstanding citizens of Brazilian cultural reality.

Gonzalez was critical of the idea of Black submission during colonial domination, the folklorization of Black culture, and the stereotypes created and attributed to the Black population as a means of discrimination and exclusion. For the anthropologist, it was relevant to question the extent to which Black people resisted processes of acculturation and being subjected to the violence of enslavement and how Black identity was marked by African contributions to the new cultural reality of post-abolition Brazil. She had political and intellectual stakes in deconstructing the myth of racial democracy to strengthen Black
struggle through analysis of racial inequalities. Gonzalez highlighted the desire of non-white people to whiten as one of the obstacles to the advancement of racial relations in Brazil.

In 1978, along with other militants, including Nascimento, Gonzalez helped found the previously mentioned MNUCDR, later renamed MNU. Gonzalez was a member of the National Executive Committee of the MNUCDR, and her texts would serve to raise deeper questions about the condition of Black women in the movement. Gonzalez played a decisive role in discussions related to denouncing the myth of racial democracy, sexism, and the racist character of hegemonic feminism, problematizing the role of Black women in Brazilian society. Gonzalez was even critical within the Black Movement itself about the “place of speech” of Black women and the ideas defended by them. She commented on this issue: “the movement companions reproduce the sexist practices of the dominant patriarchy and try to exclude us from decision-making spaces” (Gonzalez, 2018, 315; my translation).

The Black Movement would spread to the main capitals of the country through local organizations. Although founded in São Paulo, Black militants worked for the movement to be disseminated nationally. Statements of support from non-Black organizations and groups helped connect protests with the need for political organizing. In this context, it is important to highlight the actions of Black and non-Black intellectuals in the organizational structure of the movement and its means of action. For example, they created the basic operational groups, the Municipal and Regional Coordination Committees and the National Executive Committee. According to Gonzalez, the MNU defined itself as a political movement with claims made without distinctions of race, sex, education, political, or religious belief. Its main objective was the struggle for political, social, economic, and cultural emancipation, denouncing the main forms of oppression and exploitation of the Brazilian population (Gonzalez, 1982).

The reproduction of sexist practices in the Black Movement awakened Black women to the need for their more effective participation in the feminist movement. However, in the feminist movement, Gonzalez encountered what she called a “Eurocentric cosmovision and neocolonialism.” Rooted in the position of white women, it made it extremely difficult to advance propositions and debates over more efficient measures in the fight against racism, discrimination, and exclusions of Black women. Gonzalez defended a multicultural and multiracial character in Latin America. Despite not using the terms at the time, Gonzalez’s account of the triple process of social discrimination, involving the categories of race, gender, and other problems derived from the class struggle,
was an intersectional feminism, a way of understanding that when advancing decolonial thought, there are other forms of oppression imposed on subaltern peoples, in addition to gender.

Gonzalez’s writings were widely read among Black intellectuals and militants. She had a forceful approach to theoretical considerations of being Black in Brazil, with particular focus on the situation of Black and Indigenous women. In 1982, she co-authored with the Argentine sociologist Carlos Hasenbalg, *Lugar de negro* [*Place of the Black*] and in 1987 she published *Festas populares no Brasil* [*Popular Festivals in Brazil*]. In addition to these two works, Gonzalez produced a series of articles and interviews that would later be organized in two editions: *Lélia Gonzalez: primavera para as rosas negras* [*Lélia Gonzalez: The Spring of Black Roses*], a collection edited by the União dos Coletivos Pan-Africanistas (UCPA), published in 2018, and *Por um Feminismo Afro-Latino-Americano* [*Toward an Afro-Latin American Feminism*], a volume organized and published by Flávia Rios and Márcia Lima in 2020.

*Lugar de negro*, reissued in 2022 by Zahar, is an essential reference for the study of racial relations in Brazil because it discusses the overlapping of race, class, and gender in the context of the Military Dictatorship. The status of the work as authoritative was also directly related to how the discussion was presented, accompanied by a concise and statistically well-founded overview of the structural dimensions of inequalities in Brazil. Gonzalez and Hasenbalg discussed how, based on its colonial heritage, Brazil pushed the Black population into a marginal condition, worsened by the Dictatorial Military Regime. In the first part of the book, Gonzalez states without equivocation that the 1964 coup consolidated a new capitalist economic model with worse conditions for the material existence of the Black population and the total dismantling of the Black intellectual elites. From there, Gonzalez touches on the complexities of the formation of the Black movement, on the experiences and attempts to organize the Black population to resist the dictatorial regime, and the political-ideological resumption to denounce Brazilian racism by Black leaders.

In the edited volumes of Gonzalez’s writings, two important concepts stand out. The first, “pretuguês,” is a term she coined to name the racial mixing that contributed to a profoundly Africanized Brazilian Portuguese. Refuting the lack of recognition of African heritage in the language spoken in Brazil, for her the Africanization of spoken Portuguese was a form of resistance, which influenced ways of being and acting in Brazil. According to Jane Anna Gordon, in some instances, European language contact with native languages produced creolization. In the case of African peoples in the Americas, the mixture involved neither a total loss of previous cultures nor frozen slivers of cultural re-
tention. According to Gordon, instead, in the midst of rampant brutality and hostility, people changed one another. From this point of view, if unequally and in unpredictable ways, both colonizers and colonized were modified in ways that contradict the idea of a complete racial separation with unilateral cultural impositions from the colonizers. Portuguese language “was transformed thanks to the presence in society of Black women,” explained Gonzalez (Gonzalez, 2020, 249; my translation). Black women, as highlighted by the author, were the main agents in the linguistic transit established between different communities, first between the main house and the slave quarters, then between the countryside and the city, and, finally, between the city and the favela, as they engaged in domestic service for the maintenance of families in the colonial period, in the Empire, in the Republic, and in the New Republic.

The second relevant concept of Gonzalez is that of “Americanity.” Through discussing the terms “Afro-American” or “African American,” Gonzalez argues that the idea of “America,” in geographical terms, is based on the existence of Black people only in the United States and not in the entire hemisphere. She also highlights the U.S. imperialist position reflected by claiming to be “America,” without proper references to Canada, Mexico, South and Central America, and the Caribbean.

In contrast to the quoted terms, Gonzalez proposes “Americans” (“Americans”) to designate all Africans in the Americas. What would the political and cultural implications of the category Americanity then be? According to Gonzalez, Americanity is a democratic term that makes it possible to overcome territorial, linguistic, and ideological limitations. In addition to its geographical character, Americanity is an expression of historical political Afrocentric cultural work tied to Pan-Africanism and to Négritude. For Gonzalez, the methodological value of the category consists of rescuing specific units forged within and across certain societies that contributed to the formation of a part of the world. Specifically, Americans/Americans names a hemispheric lineage of Africans brought to the Americas through the slave trade and those who arrived in these lands before Christopher Columbus.

For Gonzalez, Americans from different countries have contributed significantly to the elaboration of Americanity. For example, Americanity is also a feature of cross-cultural and Afro-Latin American feminist thought. Gonzalez points out that, although we belong to different societies on the American continent, racism, as a system of domination, is present in all of them, establishing racial and cultural continuities. In this sense, the she states that the works of Yosef A. A. Ben-Jochannan, Amilcar Cabral, Cheikh Anta Diop, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, George G. M. James, Abdias Nascimento, Kwame Nkrumah,
Three Afro-Brazilian Thinkers of Global Significance

Theóphile Obenga, Walter Rodney, Ivan Van Sertima, Chancellor Williams, and others are fundamental to “knowing how much the violence of racism and its practices has stripped us of our historical legacy, our dignity, our history and our contribution to the advancement of humanity at the philosophical, artistic and religious levels” (Gonzalez 2020, 136; my translation).

Gonzalez was an intellectual totally committed to the cause of Black and Indigenous women. She manifested her political commitments based in her radical activism throughout her writings, highlighting insights born of Black and Indigenous diasporic female experiences as fundamental to the knowledge of and advocacy for freedom. Gonzalez later reflected that she had undergone a process of denying her own identity by how she went about marrying a white man. However, her experiences in an interracial relationship enabled her to move forward in search of an affirmatory identity that broke with white and Eurocentric discourses. Unfortunately, her life ended prematurely at the age of fifty-nine on July 11, 1994. She suffered a heart attack at her home in Cosme Velho in the city of Rio de Janeiro. However the ideas of Lélia Gonzalez remain a guiding reference to the interpretation of Brazil through the resources of Afro-Brazilian intellectual thought.

The Interpretation of Brazil by Afro-Brazilian Existentialist Thinkers

When I decided to study the intellectual lives of Abdias Nascimento and Milton Santos in my doctoral dissertation entitled, *Trajetórias de Dois Intelectuais Negros: Abdias Nascimento e Milton Santos* [“Trajectories of Two Black Brazilian Intellectuals: Abdias do Nascimento and Milton Santos”], I aimed to contribute to intellectual discussion by increasing the visibility of the way Nascimento and Santos chose to problematize social issues in Brazil. I was also sure that the framework of the thesis could inform critical approaches to the intellectual investigation of other historic Afro-Brazilian thinkers who unflinchingly examined problems rooted in the social formation of Brazil.

I therefore sought to consider two distinct approaches to living as a Black intellectual: Nascimento, as a thinker and activist, and Santos, as a thinker and academic. Their trajectories revealed convergences and divergences essential to understanding the concept of Black intellectuals in Brazil and demonstrated how much both contributed to the construction of an intellectual framework to expand theoretical understandings of race relations, the affirmation of the value of progressive social movements, and the creation and strengthening of institutions for a racially democratic country.

Through the course of my studies, I encountered much intellectual reflection about how to interpret Brazil, drawing on views rooted in different fields.
that comprise the human and social sciences. Committed to discerning a path to an efficient democracy in Brazil, many actively considered what they called a re-democratization process (1974–1985) in response to the hard years of the Military Regime. Among these intellectuals were Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Josué de Castro, Euclides da Cunha, Raimundo Faro, Florestan Fernandes, Paulo Freire, Gilberto Freyre, Celso Furtado, Caio Prado Júnior, Inácio Rangel, Darcy Ribeiro, and Oliveira Viana.

The Brazilian intellectual elite active during the first half of the twentieth century was primarily concerned with constituting a Brazilian tradition of social thought, pointing out how the country’s cultural, economic, and social inequalities were constituted over centuries, and embracing their own intellectual responsibility for the second half of the century. They were united in the idea of generating a philosophical-scientific discourse that would detach Brazil from its supposedly characteristic “backwardness” and project the country toward modernity. A surprising and glaring absence among those who invested in telling the truth about the country’s unequal roots were names explicitly linked to the Afro-Brazilian tradition.

The list of Afro-Brazilian intellectuals who thought about Brazilian social problems is long. With a few exceptions, they are names that were ignored by a hegemonic tradition that excluded the ideas of Black men and women as having epistemological relevance. It is almost a sine qua non of visits to research archives in Brazil that we find abundant references to the presence and actions of Afro-Brazilian intellectuals in many fields of knowledge. The list becomes even more robust when we go back to the nineteenth century and realize how essential the strategies of Black intellectuals were to the movements for political advancement and democratic resistance both in the Old Republic and in the New Republic.

Key to the intellectual trajectories of Afro-Brazilian thinkers who lived and worked at the end of the first and beginning of the second half of the twentieth century were their birth into Black families who still faced great difficulties as Black subjects, even after the abolition of slavery. Whether in biographies, stories narrated in diaries, letters, interviews, or testimonials, many Afro-Brazilian thinkers reflected on experiences of suffering, abandonment, and mental ill-health among members of their families and communities. In their own lives and intellectual histories, they revealed total commitment to addressing the dehumanization that most disturbed them.

I constantly asked when encountering the writings and biographies of these intellectuals: how did Afro-Brazilian thinkers resist a world bent on denying Black existence? First, they resisted by problematizing Brazilian history
and conditions of human existence based on racial relations. If the dehumanization of colonial exploitation translated into practices of enslavement that imposed inhuman conditions on human beings, it failed to uproot firm connections with an African ancestral past of value and respect for Black humanity and human relationships. Second, these intellectuals were able to subvert expectations of failure through collective stories foregrounding exemplary ideas and actions developed together with their communities.

A resource for them was the thought of Frantz Fanon. In my 2021 chapter, “The Influence of Fanon’s Thought on Black Female Intellectual Production in Brazil,” published in Fanon Today: Reason and Revolt of the Wretched of the Earth, edited by Nigel C. Gibson, I show how Fanon’s writing arrived in Brazil and influenced Neusa Souza Santos and Gonzalez, both intellectuals in the Black movement and in academia. Santos, through psychiatry and psychoanalysis, contributed to critical discussion of the emotional life of Black people in Brazil, with a study of the vicissitudes of the identity of socially ascendant Black people while Gonzalez’s personal life, as previously discussed, exemplified the experience of being Black and brilliant in Brazilian society while facing the sheer weight of whitening discourse.

Like Gonzalez, Beatriz Nascimento and Conceição Evaristo also responded to the historical and continued exclusion faced by Black women intellectuals in Brazilian society. In my 2022 chapter entitled “Intelectuais Negras na Ciências Humanas: as Contribuições de Lélia Gonzalez, Beatriz Nascimento e Conceição Evaristo,” published in Leituras de Etnicidades, edited by Florentina da Silva Souza, I explore how all three figures shared similar intersectional problems that not only concerned the empowerment of Black female individuals, but also the liberation of their critical thinking as necessary for the developments, meanings, and effects of knowledge for Afro-descendant people in the past, present, and future.

In both chapters, I emphasized the work of these intellectuals as indispensable to the understanding of the Brazilian social sphere. Conceição Evaristo, Gonzalez, Beatriz Nascimento, and Santos Souza, show that Brazil cannot be read or interpreted without due attention to Black thought. Arguably, through the combination of multiple aspects of intellectual life, these thinkers boosted Brazilian critical social thinking by illuminating racism and sexism as they challenged it.

Similarly, the intellectual work of Jesus, Nascimento, and Gonzalez stand out for the counterhegemonic contributions they made to the interpretation of Brazil. In contrast with the hegemonic intellectual elites of the twentieth century, when they produced ideas about the advancement of Brazilian society,
they centered confronting domination and exploitation that took the form of racism, sexism, and social inequalities. Their account of Brazil could include what the hegemonic thinkers addressed and central insights of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous traditions.

Still, Jesus, Nascimento, and Gonzalez marked Brazilian intellectual history in distinct ways. Jesus is considered a forerunner of Afro-Brazilian literature whose work, rich with philosophical dimensions, provoked existential questions, including those focused on being Black in a world made for whites. Nascimento dedicated himself to creating an intellectual framework to expand the conditions of being Black by responding to failures in the ethnic and racial formation of the Brazilian social system. Gonzalez broke new ground in intertwining discussions of race and gender in the Brazilian academic environment, creating a more adequate methodology for assessing the potentialities, limitations, and distortions in Brazilian race relations. All were deeply committed to expanding the depth and breadth of freedom.

But what kind of modernity are we dealing with when we highlight the thinking of Afro-Brazilian intellectuals? For Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães (2003), modernity was conceptualized as a way to think about the West and can only be understood based on orienting notions of what is traditional or classical, and, above all, the idea of civilization as moving away from aristocratic society and the continuation of traditional subordinate classes. When referring to Black modernity, Guimarães defines it as “process of cultural and symbolic inclusion of Black people in western society” (Guimarães 2003, 42; my translation). For him, Black modernity therefore only began with the abolition of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century.

If the processes of inclusion were effectively undertaken beginning in the nineteenth century, as Guimarães explains, why would Afro-Brazilian thinkers face difficulties advancing debates on racial relations in Brazil from a position of positively affirming being Black? Was the insistent defense of miscegenation by intellectual elites, as an approach to national constitution, the problem? As sociologist Guerreiro Ramos (1995) stated, by understanding miscegenation as a way out of Brazilian social backwardness, many hegemonic intellectuals ignored miscegenation as the “social pathology of white Brazilians.”

In response, we should not forget two plausible and important arguments relevant to the debate on miscegenation in Brazil: W.E.B. Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness and Fanon’s account of the pathology of the Black. Double consciousness, as discussed by Du Bois, describes the internal conflicts experienced by subordinated or colonized groups in an oppressive society. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois describes the African American as “always
look[ing] at [themselves] through the eyes” of racist, and specifically anti-Black, members of their society. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon majestically applies clinical, historical, literary, philosophical, and political criticism to the complex ways in which identity, particularly blackness, is constructed and produced.

Du Bois and Fanon demonstrated how thoroughly the psychological side of being Black was affected by colonial societies around the world. The so-called “pathological” state of being Black must always be read through an honest accounting of the manifold effects of racism on Black identity. Absent this, according to Lewis R. Gordon (2000), it is practically impossible to offer a coherent analysis of how Black people navigate freedom and degradation, whether in personal or public dimensions of their lives. In Brazil, the emphatic interpretation of the positive side of cultural miscegenation hid racial problems and negatively affected the affirmation of Black identity in relation to the way Afro-Brazilians saw themselves and were represented.

Jesus, Nascimento and Gonzalez are also important examples of this line of thought in which, as Lewis R. Gordon puts it, “black” and “existence” are put together by members of groups that Euromodernity tried to erase. Their collective response was to question what it is to be human. They affirmed Gordon’s (2020) claim that human beings are not abject things but are connected to realities which need to be contrasted with the lies told by colonialism.

For Carolina Maria de Jesus, Abdias do Nascimento, Lélia Gonzalez, and other Afro-Brazilian existentialist thinkers, it is possible to undo or reverse the structures of colonial power. Doing so requires profoundly questioning Eurocentrism, through criticism of modernity and capitalism and organizing knowledge pedagogically to challenge epistemologies that hierarchize human beings, affecting how the story about them is told. Undoubtedly, the ideas of these thinkers transgress time, projecting into the future as they articulate and illustrate the never-ending quest for freedom and justice.

**Final Considerations**

There is still much to research and write about Jesus, Nascimento, and Gonzalez, considering their fundamental importance for the visibility of Black thought in the African diaspora. I have shared details of their lives both to convey accounts of their circumstances, which were typically completely absent, and because their decisions were rich with political-intellectual implications. To state that Jesus, Nascimento, and Gonzalez were Afro-Brazilian existentialist thinkers is to say that they were dissonant voices in a hegemonic interpretive project that excluded Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous ideas and experiences.
Like lighthouses, these thinkers engaged in profound questioning of Eurocentrism, capitalism, colonialism, slavery, racism, and sexism as they tried to convey the truthful reality of Brazil as they and those around them lived it. They confronted the hierarchicization and dehumanization of subaltern groups in Brazil in their efforts to contribute to new political directions for the re-democratization of their country. As such, they produced critical knowledge rooted in political commitments to social transformation with implications beyond their time and place.

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**NOTES**

1. The Carolina Maria de Jesus collection in the city of Sacramento, in Minas Gerais, now occupies the cell where the writer was imprisoned. Carolina left five thousand eight hundred handwritten pages. Check the information in the biography of Carolina Maria de Jesus, written by Tom Farias and published in 2018.

2. For the issue numbers of the newspaper, see the Instituto de Pesquisa e Estudos Afro-Brasileiros, IPEAFRO: https://ipeafro.org.br/acervo-digital/leituras/ten-publicacoes/jornal-quilombo-no-01/.
3. According to Petrônio Domingues (2007), the political movement for Black racial mobilization should be divided into three phases: the first from 1889–1937 reaches from the First Republic to the Estado Novo; the second, from 1945–1964, corresponds to the period from the Second Republic to the civil-military dictatorship; and the third, between 1978–2000, stretches from the process of re-democratization to the New Republic.

4. Lélia Gonzalez was on the editorial board of the newspaper *Mulherio* (1981–1988), one of the most important publications of the Brazilian feminist movement. Gonzalez contributed by highlighting the action of Black women in the construction of a plural feminism. The complete collection of the newspaper can be found on the Carlos Chagas Foundation website: https://www.fcc.org.br/fcc/mulherio-home/.


7. Like Gonzalez, Nascimento became aware of the actions of Du Bois and Fanon and encountered his work through texts that circulated among militants of the Black movement in Brazil. Movement participants dialogued about and were influenced by them because they were aware of the political movements for the decolonization of African countries. With Carolina Maria de Jesus, there are no explicit references to Du Bois and Fanon, although her writing shared their antiracist ideas.

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