

**Global Feminisms  
Comparative Case Studies of  
Women's Activism and Scholarship**

**BRAZIL**

**Elizabeth Viana and Giovana Xavier**

**Interviewer: Sueann Caulfield**

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**Elizabeth Viana** was born on December 4, 1954 in Rio de Janeiro, the eldest of seven children born to Georgina do Espírito Santo Viana (1930-1978) and Oswaldo Sadock Viana (1927-2016). Her parents were married in Salvador, Bahia, but soon after their marriage they moved to Rio, the former capital of Brazil, in search of better living conditions. Her father was a mechanical worker, and her mother stayed at home, although like many black women, she contributed to the household budget by producing and selling Bahian delicacies. After a brief stay at the house of Elizabeth's godmother and paternal aunt, Perolina Costa Santos, they settled in Nilópolis, in Baixada Fluminense.<sup>1</sup> It was in this city that Elizabeth, during the period of the dictatorship, began her activism. In the mid-1970s, she helped to found Black Action of Nilópolis (Ação Negra de Nilópolis), a group that sought to improve both the material and immaterial conditions of life, but above all, to denounce the myth of Brazilian racial democracy. In 1979, Elizabeth enrolled in the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in the department of Social Sciences at the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences (UFRJ/IFCS).

In response to a racist act of a professor at the Institute – there were two black students in the class, and she had told one that he would make an excellent mechanic and the other that she would make a wonderful cook – a group of students protested. As a result, Elizabeth was elected as one of nine representatives of the student body at the Council of the Institute, during the so-called "political reopening." In addition, Elizabeth, along with Lélia Gonzalez (1935 -1994), was part of the five students who founded the Group Lima Barreto. Elizabeth actively participated in the democratization process of the country while studying and also working as an administrative assistant at Globex Utilidades. In 1983, under the leadership and coordination of Lélia Gonzalez, she took part in creating the Nzinga Collective of Women, a pioneering organization in the fight against sexism, racism, and social inequalities. She was also involved in the Unified Black Movement (Movimento Negro Unificado, or MNU). For thirty-three years she has been the Legislative Assistant at the Municipal Chamber of Rio de Janeiro, where she has advised the councilors Benedita da Silva and Jurema Batista. Elizabeth is a Sociologist with a Master's Degree in Comparative History (UFRJ/IFCS). Her thesis was entitled "Race relations, Gender, and Social Movements: The Thought of Lélia Gonzalez, 1970-1990," supervised by Professor Flávio dos Santos Gomes; she is also a postgraduate in Urban Sociology from the State University of Rio de Janeiro-UERJ, supervised by Professor Myrian Sepulveda.

**Giovana Xavier** was born on April 8, 1979 in the neighborhood of Irajá, a northern suburb in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro. She studied history at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), and went on to get a master's degree at the Federal Fluminense University and a doctorate at the University of Campinas (in the state of São Paulo). She focused on gender relations, with emphases on the experiences of black women in the post-abolition period, the teaching of the history of black populations, and connections between universities, schools, and social movements. Currently, Giovana is a professor of the Teaching of History at UFRJ. As a black intersectional feminist, Giovana situates her activism in the academy, especially through her work with black students at the university.

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<sup>1</sup> The Baixada Fluminense (meaning the "lowlands of the State of Rio de Janeiro") is a region in southeastern Brazil. Nilópolis is a town in this region, approximately 25 miles northwest of Rio.

She is currently involved in the project, “Black Professors in the First Person: History Teaching and Activist Research,” in which she looks at connections between activist research, writings of the self, and intersectionality.

**Sueann Caulfield** is Associate Professor of History at the University of Michigan, where she was the former director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and currently heads the Brazil Initiative Social Sciences Cluster. She specializes in the history of modern Brazil, with emphasis on gender and sexuality. She has won awards and fellowships from the Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Humanities, and American Council of Learned Societies. Her publications include *In Defense of Honor: Morality, Modernity, And Nation In Early Twentieth-Century Brazil*, the co-edited volume *Honor, Status, and Law in Modern Latin American History*, and various articles on gender and historiography, family law, race, and sexuality in Brazil. Her current research focuses on family history with a focus on paternity and legitimacy in twentieth-century Brazil. She is particularly interested in questions of human rights in Latin America, and has participated in a number of workshops, cross-country teaching projects, and exchanges around topics of social justice and social action.

**The Global Feminisms Project** is a collaborative international oral history project that examines feminist activism, women's movements, and academic women's studies in sites around the world. Housed at the University of Michigan, the project was started in 2002 with a grant from the Rackham Graduate School. The virtual archive includes interviews from women activists and scholars from Brazil, China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States.

Our collaborators in Brazil are at the Laboratório de História Oral e Imagem - UFF (the Laboratory of Oral History and Images at the Federal Fluminense University in Rio de Janeiro, [LABHOI](#)) and Núcleo de História, Memória e Documento (the Center for History, Memory, and Documentation at the Federal State University in Rio de Janeiro, [NUMEM](#)). The Brazil interviews were conducted with support from the Third Century Learning Initiative and the Brazil Initiative (Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies), both at the University of Michigan, FAPERJ (The Research Support Fund in Rio de Janeiro), and CNPq (The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development in Brazil).

This interview was translated by Lucas Limonic and Kristin McGuire.

**Sueann Caulfield: We are here today with Elizabeth Viana and Giovana Xavier, two women who are active in the black movement, specifically on issues related to women's rights and feminism. We're going to talk about how they interpret and understand this concept and the work they've been doing inside the academy, in their intellectual work, and also in their activist work in the movement. So starting with you, Elizabeth, what do you consider the most important things in the work you do, both inside the academy in your intellectual work, and in your activist work. How do you describe the work you do and what are you most proud of? What do you think is most important?**

Elizabeth Viana: Sorry for my hoarse voice. It's sounded like this since Friday, so I'll try not to push too hard, and to speak clearly. First I'd like to clarify something. My path in academia was through studies, but my work – and all work leads to certain intellectual questions and reflection and thinking – my work was in the City Council of Rio de Janeiro. I was a parliamentary assistant to Council Woman Jurema Batista,<sup>2</sup> and that was an intense period of formation for me.

**SC: And when was that?**

EV: It was from... let's see, from '92 to 2000, to 2004. It was a long period. We had the opportunity to bring the things we had been working on into the public, our thinking about women's issues, about blacks and human rights; and to work so [these ideas] could be turned into laws. We made it possible for people to get into the House, which is a very impressive building. People look at it with a lot of respect. There are people who pass by, sometimes for years, and they've never gone in, never seen what a legislator is... what a legislator does, to see a debate. So this was a very enriching moment, because we were able to practice everything we were working on and bring it to the street. I played a part in the country's democratization, in this struggle. My own development as a black woman happened through this activism. I was born in a time when people did not call themselves feminists. And now, people even talk about black feminism, which is not really a consolidated thing, right? And there's also feminism as such, but that was always through the white women, even though we were all in the women's movement, both white and black, but –

**SC: And that was back in the 80s?**

EV: Yes, exactly, and we –

**SC: You were with a specific group, or you worked with a variety of groups?**

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<sup>2</sup> Jurema Batista (born in 1958) began her political career in 1979 when she became president of the Andaraí Residents Association (a neighborhood in north Rio). She is a teacher of Portuguese and literature, and participated in the creation of the Workers Party (PT) in Rio in the early 1980s. Starting in 1992, she served three times as the party's councilor and was elected state representative in 2002. During her tenure at the Legislative Assembly, she chaired the Commission to Combat Discrimination based on Ethnicity, Religion and National Origin.

EV: No, first we started in the black movement, in the housing movement. I say “housing,” but it’s more often called a popular movement, in the southern part of the Baixada, The Baixada Fluminense, specifically Nilópolis.<sup>3</sup>

**SC: You are from there? You used to live there?**

EV: I used to live there. And I would say that I’m still from there because my family’s from there. This past weekend I spent in Caxias,<sup>4</sup> and this coming weekend I’ll be right there in Nilópolis, because I live alone here in Vila Isabel.<sup>5</sup> I’m the oldest of seven siblings, and I live alone because I want to. When I started studying, once I could afford something here, it got easier. The only way to get to work in twenty minutes or so was to live here. [Before] it would take an hour and half or two hours [to get to work]. So that made this change worth it, coming to live here by myself and all. But I had started [being active] in my community, there was the MAB,<sup>6</sup> a neighborhood association movement, that encompassed all of the Baixada, and sometime gathered. Nilópolis was a place that had – and still does – one political family. They dominated the city and of course they were associated with the dictatorship,<sup>7</sup> so it was difficult to be active there. We had something stronger in Nova Iguaçu and Caxias – Dom Adriano Hypólito,<sup>8</sup> the Bishop [of Iguaçu], oversaw the whole area, including Nilópolis. There were only two parties, so being active in the church was a sort of umbrella that you could embrace. In this context, I, Leila, Leonardo, we founded the Black Action of Nilópolis.

**SC: What are their full names?**

EV: Leila Nicolau, Leonardo... I can’t really remember his last name right now. That’s something! I remember the women’s names, but not the men’s. We were closer. Haroldo. No, not that Haroldo. That was another Haroldo who had died already. He used to work in

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<sup>3</sup> The Baixada Fluminense (meaning the “lowlands of the State of Rio de Janeiro”) is a region in southeastern Brazil. Nilópolis is a town in this region, approximately 25 miles northwest of Rio.

<sup>4</sup> Caxias is a city in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in southern Brazil, situated in the mountainous Serra Gaúcha region, about 900 miles southwest of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>5</sup> Vila Isabel is a middle-class neighborhood in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>6</sup> Movimento de Associações de Bairro, or Movement of Neighborhood Associations. “Started with support from the Catholic Church in 1976, the MAB was an experiment in establishing a permanent forum for the discussion of urban needs, which brought together representatives of several neighborhood associations in the district. At MAB meetings members sought ways to organize these various associations in the district (Jacobi, 1987).” Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Patrick Heller, and Marcelo Silver, *Bootstrapping Democracy: Transforming Local Governance and Civil Society in Brazil* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011): 42.

<sup>7</sup> The dictatorship refers to the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil for 20 years, from 1964 to 1985. It began with a coup d’état led by the Armed Forces against President João Goulart of the National Labour Party. Especially in the context of the Cold War, conservatives viewed Goulart as too far to the left; the United States supported the coup against him.

<sup>8</sup> Adriano Hypolito served for 28 years as the Bishop of Nova Iguaçu, a slum outside of Rio de Janeiro where over a million people lived. He was a devoted follower of liberation theology, and persecuted during Brazil’s military rule for criticizing the oppression of the poor. He continued to live in Nova Iguaçu after his retirement. See his obituary in the *New York Times*, “Bishop Adriano Hypolito, 78, Ally of Brazil’s Poor, Is Dead,” August 13, 1996. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/13/world/bishop-adriano-hypolito-78-ally-of-brazil-s-poor-is-dead.html> [accessed 5/4/16].

security. This is what it is to be black in Brazil, you pay a very high price. And it was at the university, the student movement, but I wasn't in the student movement, I wasn't part of that debate.

**SC: What university did you go to?**

EV: I went to UFRJ,<sup>9</sup> to the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences, which is my school.

**SC: And from the Baixada Fluminense, only very few people are able to attend the university, is that right?**

EV: Yes, of course.

**SC: And how do you explain how you managed?**

EV: When I think about it, I don't really have a word for it. Nonconformity? Because this whole activist thing, I think it's something inside of you, when you want to change all the conditions. For me, throughout my whole life I wanted to be a lawyer, to fight against injustice, you know? But then, I started university when I was 23. I was done with high school before I was 19, but I thought I had to go straight to work. And so I went to work. I first wanted stability, a job, and only then I would go to the university, to study at night. Of course a worker's daughter is going to study like that. At night. I always thought it was natural for me to study at a university, it was a given. And then you turn 13, 14, 15, 16 and there comes a moment when you see that it's not a given, it's not like that. In my case, my parents always encouraged me to study, but it was clear you had to be in the public university. But then by coincidence I went to a private high school. My mom and dad had to sacrifice a lot for that. I still believe that I should have gone to a public school. But my dad knew the guy who founded this school and so it was one of those stories of knowing someone... I suffered a lot in that school, a lot, from racism. Even still today, if you go to a private school, you're going to be among the Maria Brancas,<sup>10</sup> a lot of white people, and you suffer. Now in Brazil we've incorporated the term bullying. My dad had seven children – seven children who are all alive, and I'm the oldest one. And he worked for Petrobras.<sup>11</sup>

**SC: And he managed to... Oh, he worked at Petrobras. And he managed to pay for school for seven children?**

EV: Yes, seven.

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<sup>9</sup> Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>10</sup> Literally, "Maria Whites," a generic term for white people.

<sup>11</sup> Petrobras is a Brazilian semi-public multinational oil company, which is the largest company in Latin America. Members of the governing party in Brazil are facing corruption charges due to accepting bribes from the company, which has also led to impeachment calls for Dilma Rousseff as she headed Petrobras for seven years before becoming President. "Brazil: Thousands Back Dilma Rousseff over Petrobras." BBC.com. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-31880325> [accessed 3/13/15]. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrobras> [3/13/15].

**SC: And how many boys and how many girls?**

EV: We are five girls and two boys.

**SC: So there were no differences between them, the girls went to school too?**

EV: No, no. In my house it was the opposite. All of the girls went to the university, the boys didn't.

**SC: And your mom was at home, or she also worked?**

EV: My mom was at home, but my mom is from Bahia,<sup>12</sup> and she's a black woman who always had to do everything for herself. She used to cook and sell cocada<sup>13</sup> and things like that. So it was a little bit of a struggle. But they were a couple who always encouraged us to study a lot. My dad is 88 now. He's a man who went to school only through fourth grade, after fourth grade he had to go to work. When he was 11, he was out of school. When he was 12, he was working. And that's something that my grandpa, who was already... my grandpa was also a worker, he wasn't –

**SC: He was from Rio?**

EV: No, my grandpa was from Bahia too.

**SC: Oh, your mother's father?**

EV: No, my dad's dad. I always like to look at my grandfather's papers because it says he was an artist. And he was a shoemaker. My grandpa was something... And back then – let's see, my dad is from the 20s. He was born in the late 20s, 1927 or '26. So let's assume this was in the mid-'30s. To be a worker in Bahia, which was just a province then, it was really something, he worked at a workshop. My grandpa, my dad's dad, he always said that he was a worker, and my grandpa was a shoemaker. I also liked to see the papers of my maternal grandfather, Francisco. I was talking about Genésio, that's my dad's dad. Francisco was a shoemaker, he used to make shoes and that kind of stuff. And he used to work in the house. My grandpa worked until he was 83, until he lost his sight.

**SC: And he had a workshop?**

EV: It wasn't a workshop. It wasn't a shop because it was in the house, in the living room. And later, when I was older, when I was participating in the movement, I learned that I had the privilege of my mother's parents being married. So I had a picture of my grandma in her wedding gown. My dad, no. He was the son, my great-grandpa didn't marry my great-grandma and my dad lost his mom when he was six.

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<sup>12</sup> Bahia is a Brazilian state, located in the northeast on the Atlantic coast.

<sup>13</sup> Cocada is a popular sweet made from coconut and often sold in the streets.

**SC: But they were together?**

EV: No, he lost his mom when he was six. I had six aunts and uncles from my dad's family, on each side – I had six on my mom's side. My grandma had seven children. And my grandpa also had seven children. But in my grandpa's case, it was my dad, and he had him out of wedlock, no, that's a lie – he was living with Das Neves, in a house with Das Neves. And Das Neves arranged for him to be the best man at a friend's wedding, but little did he know that [my grandfather] would marry that friend's daughter. So I have an uncle from that, and he's only six months older than one of his sisters.

**SC: Oh, okay.**

EV: And from this marriage, my grandpa had five children. Of these five children, I am only younger than three. There were two younger than me. And I have an aunt who is young enough to be my daughter. So that's my story, sort of.

**SC: What I understand is that your family is very big, and everyone is right there, so you know everyone.**

EV: Exactly, which I later realized was a privilege.

**SC: And everyone was living in the same neighborhood?**

EV: It's well-organized, you know?

**SC: It's a family of workers?**

EV: Workers, yes. My mom always said: "My dad would only allow a child to be married if he was able to have his own house." A guy could only go out with his daughter... if he had his own house, tidy and furnished and everything. So I come from this background. We moved to the Baixada because my dad came to Rio de Janeiro to work. If you look at the early '50s, even up to the '60s, the domestic migration from the north and northeast to the south happened, it's been recorded historically. And my dad was part of that. My parents, my mom and dad, they came to the south of Brazil to seek a better quality of life, and I so was born here.

**SC: When I interrupted to ask a question, you were talking about activism when you were in the university.**

EV: Yes.

**SC: But first, to finish this part about your family and your childhood in the Baixada, I would like to ask what you mean when you say this activism is inside of you.**

EV: That's why I ended up telling you my story. Because you have to look back [to that time], it's the non-conformity, my activism comes from that non-conformity. So I was basically responding to your question with one word.

**SC: Yes, and you come from this family that has a very strong structure, something that gave you strength to move forward with your life, and to go to the university and get a job and be an activist. But your parents were also activists. Did they teach you about this injustice, or was it that you learned through other –**

EV: I learned that from other places, but as I was telling you, I was already... Well, one thing is that my mom always used to say that I was very smart, and my dad always thought that I, and also my sisters and brothers, should study. This was something that was nurtured at home – we're black, so we need to know a lot more to be able to work. Because for example, in my dad's head, the way he sees it, completing high school was already having a profession. I had a technical degree, I studied technical accounting. In those days, the school had a ring [you could buy], and I never got the ring because my father never had the money for such luxuries, not for that, the money was for school, to buy books, that's how it was in my family. So I studied, and went further than my father. My mom only went to school through the eighth grade and was only semi-literate, she had trouble reading, and I was always ashamed by that. I never saw my mother read, she never just picked something up and read it, and I knew she had a hard time reading. She read, "university and such," but she never... When we started to put letters together, as we used to say, she pushed us off to my dad. As soon as we got beyond ABC, when we were past "bag" or "knife," when it got a bit more complicated, she couldn't help.... During the whole time we were learning to read and write, we went to school and my mom worked on this with us at home. But after that, reading fluently, reading a whole text, or doing a reading comprehension lesson or an essay, my mother didn't feel secure in this. So this was something... You know... I remember, I remember when I realized that I never saw my mom reading, never reading anything out loud, always silent, and she would write a note. If my mom had to go out to buy something, she would write a note for herself. But if we went out to get something, we had to write for ourselves. I never knew my mom's handwriting. Sometimes she would leave a note for my dad, but for us, when we reached a certain point.... When I was able to read and write, and I knew what the university was, what college was, knew how to read books, all those things, I thought it was natural, it was totally natural to me. And when I turned 13 or 14, I realized it wasn't like that at all.

**SC: So this familial structure and the activism of the black movement in your neighborhood in the Baixada Fluminense, that is what led you to activism in the '80s?**

EC: Yes.

**SC: And then you went to the university?**

EV: '78. Actually, that's when I started my activism. But I started in '77. In the Baixada, there was something very basic... Why do I say basic? We lacked water, we lacked light, you know? Our streets weren't paved, because the Baixada only paved the streets in the city

center, these types of things. Even if you go to the Baixada now, you see a bunch of streets that are said to be paved, but there's no pavement.

**SC: And during this period, before you went to the university, when you were still in the Baixada, were you already interested in activism that specifically aimed to improve women's lives and to fight against gender injustice, or did this come later?**

EV: I'd say it was a bit later that I developed this consciousness, I started to realize some things bothered me, and I didn't know what it was exactly. So when I was a teenager, I looked at different kinds of activism – I found it inside the church – to get –

**SC: The Catholic Church?**

EV: Yes, and I'm not Catholic, I wasn't Catholic.

**SC: Do you have a religion?**

EV: Now I do. But that only came when I was older. Now I'm an old lady. I'm a candomblecista.<sup>14</sup> So you go [to the service], and the president of the association is a man, but the people doing the work... when you gather, there are five or six men, and thirty or forty women. We really ran things, you know? You saw why Lélia [Gonzalez]<sup>15</sup> was important because people would translate that for me, and for others. I'm from a time when there was still a women's section, there was the women's section in the Baixada, so you would come to the favelas and there was a women's section, and you saw groups of black people, groups like this, and there was the women's section. And you would see what the women's section would do – cooking and things like that. And when I started in the women's movement I said so much [about this] that at the CN<sup>16</sup> that a person stood up and almost tried to punch me in the face, right in the meeting. So you can see what point I reached, for women to be beaten up because of their political positions. I witnessed this.

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<sup>14</sup> Candomblé is an African-Brazilian religion based on the worship of Yoruba deities. Its roots go back to the Africans who arrived during the slave trade and sought to follow their religious beliefs. It is a combination of beliefs, incorporating African gods and also elements of Christianity. The word Candomblé means "dance in honor of the gods," and dance and music play important roles in the religion. See <http://www.typesofreligion.com/candomble.html> [accessed 5/5/16].

<sup>15</sup> Lélia Gonzalez (1935-1944) was an important activist, intellectual, and politician in Brazil. The daughter of a black railway worker and an indigenous mother who worked as a maid, she studied history and philosophy and taught public schools for some years. She went on to get her doctorate in anthropology. Her work was on the relationship between gender and ethnicity, and she taught at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. She helped to found a number of important organizations, such as the Research Institute of Black Cultures and the Black Women's Collective, N'Zinga. Gonzalez is a legend in the history of the Black feminist movement in Brazil. See <https://blackwomenofbrazil.co/2012/02/01/happy-birthday-lelia-gonzalez/> [accessed 5/5/16].

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth is referring to the IPCN, the Instituto de Pesquisa das Culturas Negras (Research Institute of Black Cultures), which was founded in 1975 as a Black political organization to raise Black consciousness and mobilize Blacks against racial discrimination. Here, she is talking about the dissatisfaction of many women when they were relegated to "women's tasks" in these movements; she references the work of Lélia Gonzalez as helping them to be aware of this dynamic.

**SC: By a man?**

EV: Yes, by a man, at IPCN, among others... It was because the women decided to leave the kitchen, the women's section. And then you have those like Beatriz,<sup>17</sup> Lélia, Pedrina<sup>18</sup> who were my predecessors, people who were already activists when I got there. They were already powerful women, and they were using their power. They said they didn't want to be in the women's section. Lélia, Beatriz, Pedrina...

**SC: They are older than you?**

EV: Yes. They are older.

**SC: And what did you hear or see?**

EV: Yes, I heard and saw, exactly. That's how the women's movement began inside the black movement.

**SC: And during that time, when you were developing that awareness, is that when you went to the university and came to the city?**

EV: Yes, it was. Because it was the time that... how can I say that? It was a very important year for me. It was the same year that I lost my mom.

**SC: What year was that?**

EV. That was '78. I started the university in '78, and she passed away the December before – in December, and I went to the university in March. So my mom saw us preparing to go to the university and my dad used to say, "Now we're going to finish this house." My house was always under construction, because "the girls want to [study]," because me and my sister, "they want to study, to go to the university." Even today, going to the university is something huge for a worker's family, a black family, poor, even white. Because even if you go to a public university, there's transportation and other costs. And it's also money that's not coming into the family. People forget it about that. They think that these boys and girls have scholarships, and they don't know what it means to a black family because a boy who is 20 years old or so, or a girl who is 20 or so, or 19, –

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<sup>17</sup> Beatriz Nascimento (1942-1995) was an intellectual, activist, and poet, and a key figure in the Black movement in Brazil. In the 1970s, she helped found the André Rebouças Working Group, a student group that sought to address racial issues. She was particularly well-known for her research on the Quilombo communities in Brazil and her writings about the experiences of Black in the diaspora. Her personal journey to search for her African identity was turned into a widely-circulated documentary entitled "Ori" (meaning "head" in Yoruba) in 1989. She was working on a Master's Degree in media when, in January 1995, she killed by five gun shots. Some say her murder was because of her work in the Black Movement, and some that it was because she had tried to intervene on behalf of a friend in a violent relationship. See <https://blackwomenofbrazil.co/2013/03/26/maria-beatriz-nascimento-1942-1995-intellectual-militant-of-the-movimento-negro-poet-and-historian-of-quilombos-brazils-runaway-slave-societies/> [accessed 5/5/16].

<sup>18</sup> Pedrina de Deus is a black feminist activist in Brazil, who was involved in the social movements of the 1970s such as IPCN, and she remains an active presence in Black women's activist movements.

Giovanna Xavier: They contribute to the budget.

EV: Yes, they contribute to the budget. And there are people, the middle class, the idiot bourgeoisie who can't see beyond their own belly buttons. And I'm talking about the bourgeoisie, the old concept of the petite bourgeoisie that I'm using now in a talk I'm giving. Those are people who have no clue, they don't know what it's like. Sometimes for a black family, it's a loss, it's a loss, it's a loss. I remember my mom saying, "When you go to work, that's less money we'll have to spend, and that's already a lot." I grew up hearing this. It means they don't have to buy shoes anymore, imagine buying shoes for seven children. And of course it goes like this – this month it's your turn, and I don't know how many months later, it's another one's turn, and then another one. And then you have to start over and buy a pair of shoes for the same one who doesn't have a pair anymore. Even with my dad working for Petrobras, I'm from a generation of people who didn't make it, that's my sadness now... This thing about activism that you want to talk about, it hasn't changed a lot. Yesterday I was very disappointed to hear that a guy who is in his 5<sup>th</sup> term is going to have to leave the university, we knew he was leaving.

**SC: Who is he?**

EV: A son of my –

**SC: A son of a friend of yours?**

EV: Yes.

**SC: He left because he wasn't able to finish?**

EV: Yes, when you're 21, and you have to help your mother to have a home, that's wrong. For a 21 year old who is at the university, to be worried about supporting his home.

**SC: For his mom?**

EV: No, for him, for his mom.

**SC: For his family.**

EV: Yes, that's the thing. [While he's studying,] he's not contributing to the [family] budget. You think it's a man, that it's an emergency, something. There was a discussion about this, and I was saying, "There's something missing in this story. This story is missing something." It's rough, the Baixada Fluminense.

**SC: You talked about arriving at the university as a turning point because you became involved in a new kind of activism, different from what you had been doing before.**

EV: Yes, it's very different from what I used to do. I met new people, I learned new strategies. Because you have the difficulty of... you're going to encounter certain things. I came to the movement with certain criticisms and you end up hearing... it's like what we heard in the meeting we had this morning: Someone saying they spent 20 reais to get here, and they took I don't know how many hours to get to this place so we could discuss things, and it's the same for me. So you really have to go out and look for possibilities, because you're going to find an organized movement there, and people are realizing – not everyone gets this – there is a theoretical construction in those movements, there's a theoretical construction. And I'm not saying these are contributions just because that person has a master's or the other one has a doctorate. No, no. I'm saying those people, I understand that intellectuality is a reflection about your life, about a problem you are seeking to solve. So what is the university? Just yesterday I was listening, talking, having a conversation with a guy about how Socrates used to teach on the streets, it wasn't organized or tidy. This is a topic of mine right now. I'm also from a generation when the university used to be our enemy.

**SC: Your what?**

EV: Our enemy.

**SC: The university? But what were you studying at the university, you were in the sociology department?**

EV: Sociology and social sciences.

**SC: At UFRJ?**

EV: Yes, at UFRJ, at IFCS.<sup>19</sup> But I'm saying it's a little bit of this, because when...

GX: Even today, it's still a bit like that. Sorry – I'm talking, but I don't want to interrupt you.

**SC: Of course! Speak, please.**

GX: I was saying even today, because when she says something like that, there's a 30 year difference, more than 30.

**SC: How old are you?**

GX: I'm 35.

EV: No, it's less than 30 years. I'm 59. You start thinking you're just an object. I know a lot of capable people, a lot of people that I thought... I learned recently that those people don't have university degrees, but they are very capable at accomplishing things. One of the things that used to be said about being in the movement was that these new people, they

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<sup>19</sup> The Institute for Philosophy and Social Sciences at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

went to the university and were lost because they absorbed white people's values. They wanted to come live in the South Zone,<sup>20</sup> have a mixed marriage, in the case of men, and so that black family lost that person.

**SC: And that's not the case with women?**

EV: It's not exactly the same story for women. But Giovana wanted to talk about this issue of a place –

GX: No, I was going to say there's this ambiguity, the story of... I think this story of the black movement and the university is characterized by an ambiguous relationship of love and hate.

EV: Hate.

GX: Hate, I don't know if that's the best word to describe it. But it has to do with the idea that the university is a way of whitening black people. That's very polemical and it generates a lot of resentment from the black movement, especially the movement in its plurality. We're really can't talk about only one movement.

**SC: The black movement is like an umbrella?**

GX: Right, of people in the black movements. But I think that this ambiguity also has a lot to do with our individual stories and how we grow up always hearing, sometimes not even directly, but we hear in various subliminal ways that the university is not for us, which is the example she's giving. The black guy who's 21 and should be worrying about his studies is instead leaving the university because it's his job to build a house for his family to live in. This is a way of saying that socially the university is not for you. I think this feeds this relationship between the black social movements and the university that I'm calling love-hate. That's what Beth was talking about, it's something that is discussed, but I think not enough. It's about what happens after you're there, because our battle has been very focused on getting to the university. Of course in the universities there's a whole discussion about permanence, there are policies of permanence associated with quotas,<sup>21</sup> but I think the process from the point of view of subjectivity and emotions is discussed very little, and the consequences too.... the consequences that racism generates for black people in the

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<sup>20</sup> The Zona Sul (South Zone) in Rio de Janeiro is the southern part of the city along the coast, which includes the famous beaches such as Copacabana and Ipanema. It is the wealthiest part of the city.

<sup>21</sup> In 2012, a law was passed to put in place a system of quotas at all of the Federal universities, reserving a certain percentage of spots (based on the racial make-up of each state) for low-income families of African or Indigenous descent. So-called Permanence Programs at the universities are meant to support these students and their academic needs with the goal of helping students stay in college until graduation. See Julia Carmeiro, "Brazil's Universities Take Affirmative Action," BBC News, August 28, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-23862676> [accessed 5/5/16]. And Simon Romero, "Brazil Enacts Affirmative Action Laws for Universities," *New York Times*, August 30, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/31/world/americas/brazil-enacts-affirmative-action-law-for-universities.html? r=0> [accessed 5/5/16].

university who face racism every day. A lot of people think, “I managed to get in, and I managed to get out with my diploma.” But in the daily life, this process of seeing one’s otherness, to see oneself in relation to the other in an otherness that is unequal all the time, or if not all the time, most of the time. I think this contributes to what I’m calling this ambiguous relationship of love and hate. And I always like to historicize this because if not, it seems like something we hear a lot, “Oh, black people are spiteful, black people victimize themselves, black people have a persecution complex, and it’s not like this, don’t you see? You’re at the university.” But people think very little about the time you are actually there. And I think it has a lot to do with these things. Don’t you think, Beth?

EV: Yes.

**SC: So this is interesting because you’re talking about 1978 and into the early ‘80s. And you went to the university in...?**

GX: I first went in ‘96, when I went in ‘97, I did a year at the Faculty of Letters at the UFF, the Universidade Federal Fluminense.<sup>22</sup> And then I had to stop because I had to work in the late ‘90s. And then I went back, I took the entrance exams again in ‘98, and I went to UFRJ, to the IFCS, the same place Beth went, only two floors below in history.

EV: History.

GX: The second floor is history, the third floor is philosophy, and the fourth floor is social sciences, so we hung out on two floors. So you see for someone who is a historian, well I mean Beth is a sociologist but she knows a lot about history. It’s hard to say, it’s hard to think in such a linear line, to think only about continuities. You also see how the ruptures are marked by continuities. We’re talking about... you entered in ‘78?

EV: Yes, ‘78.

GX: I got in in ‘99, 21 years later, 20 years later. And there are so many times when you’re talking about things and I don’t even need to say anything, because it’s as if you’re telling my story too.

**SC: Well, since we’re talking about your story, I wanted to ask you, because you suggested that we have this joint interview, you named Elizabeth as a person whom you admire a lot and who was like a mentor to you, specifically thinking about this topic of black women in the university, and in social movements, and academic life. So can you tell me a little bit about this relationship? Where did the two of you meet? Why do you consider her a mentor? And what has this generation of twenty years before yours taught you?**

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<sup>22</sup> The Fluminense Federal University is one of the four federally funded public universities in the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and one of the Brazilian centers of excellence in teaching and research.

GX: Well, first of all I think it's wonderful, this possibility of us... we've been friends for a long time, but we talk very little about all of this, and the contributions of one and the other. So I think it's very cool that we're here and able to talk about that. I met Beth, we met in a class of Flávio's, we took a class with Flávio Gomes.<sup>23</sup>

**SC: When you both were getting master's degrees?**

GX: Yes, we were getting our master's degrees at the time. And Beth was at the UFRJ in the post-graduate program of comparative history, and I was at the UFF in the post-graduate program for social history with Rachel Soihet<sup>24</sup> who was my master's advisor. And we took a class, and there was one other student, Kelly Amaral, who was at UFF with Martha [Abreu],<sup>25</sup> and we met then, and it was a very interesting time because Flávio is also a great example for us. It was a class that only Flávio taught, a man, a professor, a black intellectual, and three black master's students, and it was an encounter... It was a very interesting subject, I can't remember the name. That was what, in 2003 or 2004?

EV: 2003, '04. Yeah, '03 or '04.

GX: Yes, 2003 or '04 because I got my master's degree in 2005 and you in 2006, so I think it was 2004 then.

EV: '04, yeah.

GX: I don't remember the exact name of the class, but we discussed history and Afro-Brazilian culture. We read a lot of American authors, and Caribbean too.

**SC: But it wasn't about gender?**

GX: We discussed gender issues, and we read one of the chapters of your book. We also read bell hooks,<sup>26</sup> I remember that, her article about black women intellectuals. But it wasn't a class about gender. For me, I was already in the master's program so I had a certain amount of knowledge, as I had studied in college. But it was very remarkable to me, to meet Beth, because –

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<sup>23</sup> Flávio Gomes is Associate Professor of History at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). He is an expert on Quilombo communities and on pre- and post-emancipation history in Brazil.

<sup>24</sup> Rachel Soihet, born in Bahia in 1938, has been a professor of women's and gender history at the Federal Fluminense University since 1974. She has written numerous books and articles about gender in Brazilian society, and in particular on questions of gender and poverty.

<sup>25</sup> Martha Abreu is a historian at the Federal Fluminense University and her main field is the history as well as the present-day status of quilombo communities. She has been involved in a public history project entitled "Pasados Presentes," which seeks to honor victims of the slave trade and bring more awareness to the quilombo communities with tourist routes and information. See <http://passadospresentes.com.br/ppresentes-hotsite/index.php/> [accessed 5/5/16].

<sup>26</sup> bell hooks is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins (born in 1952), an American writer, feminist, and social activist who has focused on the intersectionality of race, gender, and capitalism. See <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/> [accessed 5/5/16].

EV: Flávio too, when Flávio arrived... I was in the movement and I hadn't met Flávio, but he knew me, he said. He was studying black intellectuals and the black movement, so I knew personally the people he was studying. I was an activist with them, and this gave a great richness to our meeting each other. There was Giovanna, already connected to this and who brought so much, and doing what she loves, staying and creating new relations with deep roots. And there was Flávio, with his experience as a student and as a professor. So in fact we were three generations, and –

GX: Yes, we were three generations. Kelly was about my age, and then there was Beth and Flávio.

EV: And as a theme, it was the university and the production of knowledge.

GX: Yes, I thought it was incredible. For me, even until this day, for us to be taking a post-graduate course with a black professor and three black women students, it was something, [it would be] atypical even today. It was a totally surreal scene, and I've never experienced anything quite like it again. It was very interesting. I remember on the first day – and this has to do with how we met – [Flávio] introduced Beth by saying, "This is Elizabeth, she's an activist, and a contemporary of Lélia Gonzalez, and she played an extremely important part of her story." And I was like, "Damn." And when I got home I called my friends and said, "I'm studying with an activist who knew Lélia Gonzales, and she is very cool." So there was this thing – and it was very good – that we respected each other a lot. It was a class in which we built friendships, and we had this ideal of respect, there was an acknowledgment that whoever comes now will respect what is already there. Kelly and I, we really felt this, we were the youngest ones, we really had this experience. A number of times during the course, Beth would put us in our place. Because we came full of our ideas, saying "No, because that guy's concept and *The Black Atlantic* by Paul Gilroy<sup>27</sup>..." and Beth would say, "But the Black Atlantic is not like that, because in practical terms, the Black Atlantic doesn't tell you much, I'll tell you..." So we really had great exchanges.

EV: Yes, but she stood her ground. It was very rich.

GX: I'm stubborn. We used to discuss a lot during the class. It was three hours of us, really debating and discussing.

**SC: It's interesting that this is what you were talking about before, that it's not only theory. There are the authors the master's students are reading, but also the theory that people who are not in the university bring, from their day to day experiences. They bring questions of daily life, so they build a theory based on that, on their reality, on what it means to be an activist.**

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). His study reconceptualized ideas of the Black diaspora and proposed a different theoretical and geographic framework for understanding race.

EV: That's what Giovanna... I'm very glad to be listening to Giovanna and I can even use the same words that Giovanna used. I can say that my activism was respected, and we reached such a degree of intimacy that I used to say, "Girl, what we're reading is one thing, and I understand it perfectly..." I remember even, Flávio –

GX: There were times when we drove Flávio crazy, a bunch of women, talking their heads off.

EV: Because until I was... When I arrived, I wanted to work with Little Africa,<sup>28</sup> the Bahia thing, the samba, and I was talking about that.... The proposal, Flávio's theoretical understanding is something else, it's not something you can bring from outside.... This thing about the Black Atlantic... There's a route you can follow that shows how many arrived here, what ships they were in, they brought them [to this place], and took them from here.<sup>29</sup> So there was this exchange, there was this whole atmosphere that existed around us. So this class really was very good. And I realized that my experience was very rich because many of the theories that I see inside the university, that I saw, they were brought in, as we used to say back then, from the streets. For instance, today I have difficulties, even today of course... "Black movements," I've had a number of clashes over this, I don't see it that way. Then I give the contrast, and say, "Does anyone say 'feminist movements.' Why is the feminist movement 'the' feminist movement with all its diversity and inequality, and why can't we black people have the same diversity and the same inequality?" People can't talk about the black movement, it's always black movements. And then there are the guys who say this is just an academic thing. The movement has a lot of this type of thing, even today, and Giovanna remembers it well, and it's still like that, "Oh, this is something from the academy. You're in the academy." People think there is this co-optation and that this co-optation in the movement means the whitening of black people. So we discussed all of this in our debates, and she brought her experience, her activism. Kelly isn't someone who has so much experience, Giovanna brought that experience.

GX: Yes, Kelly was a history teacher in elementary school.

EV: And then there were the political parties, and all kinds of things, blah blah blah. All of that was in our class.

GX: Yes, I also came with a history. I was in the student movement, so I also already had this activism thing rooted in me. And I was, I'm not anymore, but I was active in the current workers party (PT)<sup>30</sup> of the Social Democrats.

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<sup>28</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, groups of people of African descent migrated south from Bahia to Rio de Janeiro, which was then the capital of Brazil. Bahians created their own community in the center of the city, which came to be known as "Pequena África," or Little Africa.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth is referring to a research project that documents the routes of enslaved Africans, "Slave voyages." See <http://slavevoyages.org/> [accessed 5/4/2016].

<sup>30</sup> The *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Worker's Party) is one of the largest left-wing parties in Latin America. Launched in 1980 in Brazil in opposition to military dictatorships, it follows the democratic socialist trend, which differs from communism by embracing socialist economics but maintaining a democratic political system.

## **SC: PSOL? <sup>31</sup>**

GX: No, DS,<sup>32</sup> it's a Trotsky current in the Worker's Party, Social Democrats. So I joined the student movement, and for a while I was independent in the movement without being in any party. Then in the first or second year of my studies I followed this trend. When I got to my master's in 2003/2004, I was already no longer with the Social Democrats, but I had all this [experience]... I graduated in history as an activist, as an activist in the student movement. So I already had the sensibility, the skill and the experience, and this thing of reconciling interpretations, and the obligations of academic life with activism. I was always thinking about trying to find the balance, because I knew that for me, just being there in the university meant something very different than for my activist friends from the student movement, who were white, middle class, from the South Zone. I think today it's a little different in the student movement, but in my time, the racial question was not the main issue. So you see I was an activist... but today, for example, in the IFCS [the Institute for Philosophy and Social Sciences], you have the black collective, Carolina Maria de Jesus, black students who... There are student activists from political parties, but there are also independent students who understand that it was important to fund a black collective, Carolina Maria de Jesus.

## **SC: Within the university itself?**

GX: There at the IFCS. This wasn't around when I was at school there. Some black students tried to organize something, but it didn't work and it fizzled out. So I already had this sense that... I think in general, black people learn from the time they are little how to deal with inequality, and how you're going to deal with inequality in everyday life.

EV: You have to learn to navigate it.

GX: What I realized in the student movement, I was like, "Damn, there's only me here and one or two other black people. That's not what we're talking about here." And every time we tried to discuss [race], it wasn't a very welcome theme. It was too far from topics like FHC<sup>33</sup> and the IMF,<sup>34</sup> and not paying the foreign debt. So I was there, but I felt out of place. So it was very interesting to meet Beth a bit later. Of course throughout my studies I already had... I mean my childhood and as a teenager, as a black woman, I had concrete experiences of being a black person. But my first direct contact with activism, the first person was Beth. The first direct contact with the black movement, that there even was a black movement, in the singular, a black movement that I was directly connected with. It was interesting because she embodied everything, activism, the black movement, being a black woman from the Baixada Fluminense, a person who rose herself up in her social and

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<sup>31</sup> Partido Socialismo e Liberdade, the Socialism and Freedom Party, a party founded in 2004 in opposition to the PT.

<sup>32</sup> Democracia Socialista, the Socialist Democracy Party, was founded in 1979 as a Trotskyist group in Brazil and became affiliated with the PT when it was formed in 1980.

<sup>33</sup> Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a sociologist and professor who was president of Brazil from 1995-2003.

<sup>34</sup> The International Monetary Fund.

economic life through the university. It's like a mirror. I said, "Wow, I'm here, and I can almost see myself." And that was very remarkable for me. We even, recently we've had more contact, but we've gone years without talking, months, but she is someone I always remember, she is extraordinary. If there is anything, she will be there. She was there for my dissertation, there during the defense, she was in it, she was in the acknowledgments of my thesis. She is someone I will always remember. She is a black woman, and for me she is my muse.

**SC: So, two things. We ended up not getting to the question of how your personal life led you to being an activist, because you started talking about meeting [Beth] during the master's program, and your experiences at the university and in politics that led you to value what Beth offered in terms of a model, or a mentor for you. But could you talk a little bit about your life, because you mentioned that your personal life led you to have a certain perspective that you brought with you when you went to various meetings, to the different types of student activism. Could you talk a little about this? What do you see in your personal path that led you to want to be an activist and to search for a way to be an activist inside the academy?**

GX: Well, I think it's many things. I think this thing of wanting to be an activist, I don't see any other way. I think people who are black are being activists every day. But of course I understand that there is also a dimension of activism that is organic, right? But I come from a family of black women. So when I look at what I study – black feminism – and why it's so important to me, gender studies as well, I think it has everything to do with being raised in a black family headed by women.

**SC: Your mom?**

GX: My mom, my grandma, my aunt. There was my grandpa, too. He was the man of our family. But poor thing. We never used to listen to him. We always decided everything. My grandma was very, you know, "Everyone has to pray from my book." So my grandpa used to just go with the flow, poor thing.

**SC: And there were other girls, or was it just you?**

GX: It was me and my two cousins, the smallest part of the family, the strict nuclear family. Because my family was a lot bigger, but the people I lived with were my mom, my aunt, my grandma, my grandpa, me, Leonardo, and Gustavo, who are my two cousins, and we were raised like siblings. There was always this thing: if one moves out, the other will have to move to the same building, or the same villa, one will live above and one below, one opens the refrigerator of the other, one scolds the child of the other. The boundaries between mother and aunt are very fluid, and grandma too –

**SC: And where was that, here in Rio de Janeiro?**

GX: Yes, it was in Rio de Janeiro, in the neighborhood of Méier, on the outskirts of Central [Station]. My mom was the first black woman, the first woman of the family, to get a higher

education. She went through high school at Carmela Dutra, a K-12 school in Madureira, which is also a traditional suburb where there are samba schools, Portela, Império Serrano.<sup>35</sup> My family was in Madureira during this time when my mom studied. She was the youngest daughter, because there was my mother, my aunt Lena, and my uncle Luca. My mom was the youngest, and there was already this understanding in the family that... My mother graduated in '77 so she was a student in the end of the 60s, or early 70s, and it was the family's investment in the youngest ones, you know. "Look, we can't afford studies for everyone. So we are going to organize ourselves and make a united front to send" – my grandmother called my mother "Little One" – "for Little One to study." And Little One grew up, and she went to school.

**SC: But she was picked and not her brothers?**

GX: Yes, my mom was chosen. I think my aunt and uncle had an understanding, I'm not sure, but I think my mom was seen as the most intelligent. She always liked to read. She was always more dedicated and she liked to study more. My aunt, when she was twelve –

**SC: I just think it's interesting that in that time, they would pick a girl and not the boys.**

GX: Yes, my aunt was a hairdresser already when she was twelve years old. She said, "Look I don't want to study, I want to be a hairdresser, it's what I like." And my uncle back then, he used to work at a lot of different things, he was like a small entrepreneur. Then at a certain moment, he became a very big business man, but he lost everything under the Collor government.<sup>36</sup> He had a medium to large size company that used to produce bags for designer labels. When you go to the mall and buy clothes, they put your clothes in a bag, and many of those bags were made by my uncle's company. But he lost everything under Collor, and he could never reestablish himself. It was something very, well he had risen up and of course he didn't go back to being poor, but he was in this middle class, middle-lower, and he had been in the upper-middle class. But going back to the '60s and '70s. My mother attended the teachers' school at Carmela Dutra, and then she entered UERJ.<sup>37</sup> UERJ wasn't even at Maracanã then, it was still located on Avenida Chile. She began a course in literature. Then she left that major and started studying history. So she graduated in '77.

**SC: And then she worked as a teacher?**

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<sup>35</sup> Madureira is a neighborhood in the North Zone of Rio, with middle- and lower-class families as well as some favelas. It is famous for being the home of samba schools Portela and Império Serrano, two of the most traditional samba schools of Rio. The samba schools play a very important role in the neighborhoods. They have a strong community basis and are usually connected to a particular neighborhood, and they are similar to a sports team in terms of people identifying with them. During the whole year, in addition to holding various events, they practice for the annual competition at the carnival parade, which involves thousands of people and requires significant preparation for the music, dance, and elaborate costumes.

<sup>36</sup> Fernando Collor de Mello was president of Brazil from 1990-1992, when he resigned after failing to stop an impeachment trial on charges of corruption. He was the first president elected by the people after the end of military rule. His time in office was characterized by hyper-inflation and his attempts to manage that through policies such as wage and prize freezes.

<sup>37</sup> Rio de Janeiro State University.

GX: She chose to work as an elementary school teacher. She worked her whole life, like thirty years in the same school, a school in Realengo, in Vila Vintém.<sup>38</sup> I mean, a school near Villa Vintém, in Realengo, but whose students for the most part come from Vila Vintém, close by also to Padre Miguel. So my whole life I had this experience of being educated by an educator, which was a paradox for me, because my mom worked all day at school. We lived in Méier, and she taught in Realengo, so this meant that she left the house at 5:30 in the morning, and returned home at 8:00 at night.<sup>39</sup> So the person who educated me, the person who helped me put letters together – that’s what my grandmother called it – was my grandmother, who was only partly literate herself. Imagine that she was so proud to say that she learned to read and write and tell the time by herself, because she was a woman who.... Today, we study about the time after abolition, these things. My grandma was born in 1919. She lost her mom when she was 11, she lost her mom in 1930. And then for a while she lived in different houses as if she were a slave, a common destiny for many black people back then. She always defended her honor, my grandmother was very much this way. But there was this thing, you see, that at home you never had any doubt that you were black, there was never any [doubt]. Sometimes people would say, “Oh, I’ve become [black], or I found out that I’m black.” At home, we always knew that, but it was something that was like “Look, for those of us who are black, we can’t wear stained clothes or wrinkled clothes, and you have to talk quietly. They have to be perfectly ironed and we have to speak very low.” If we turn the sound up high, we’ll take a beating, we’ll get it.

**SC: It’s the same story that you told about your family at the Baixada.**

GX: You always have to speak low, you always have to get the best grades. It’s a very intense and perverse way to build your racial identity. The hair thing. I remember my grandma would comb my hair and my eyes would be like that [pulled tight]. She tied it up tight, she made a knot here for... you know? And then, my mom, well – the one who really educated me was my grandma, Leonor, so much so that in my thesis – I dedicated my thesis to the women in my family and to my husband, Álvaro. But I put my grandmother first, my braider, of hair and of ideas. Because until today I remember how she used to comb my hair, in her own way, and it was a type of love and care. Once I was an adult, I understood this, that it was about protecting me from the world outside, from racism. My mom, she was at work all day, but she had a sense, a very keen sense, that education was the way for us. So my mom put me in a private school in the neighborhood, which was a very expensive school at the time, and I went there. So in my family’s head, I think everything was all set. “This one, this little one, is going to school and everything will be fine.” Only when I got there, it was gruesome because for black students, it was only me and one other guy who was the son of the lady who sold snacks at the school cafeteria. So there was a difference between me and him. I was there as a paying black student, and he was there as a black student with a scholarship, which wasn’t called a scholarship back then. And I think people

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<sup>38</sup> Vila Vintém is a favela located between the neighborhoods of Realengo and Padre Miguel, in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>39</sup> Méier, which is on the outskirts of Rio, is approximately twelve miles from Realengo, and takes about 45 minutes to travel from one to the other by bus.

must have thought they were doing a great favor, I really think that's what people said. So you see, I went to this school when I was 11. But before, I had been part of the time in a public school, and part in a Catholic school, which was also a horrifying experience. You realize that you are different without being able to express why you feel different, but in truth it's not about being different, it's that you are an unequal there. So I think this contributed a lot to my activism. My home life [contributed] as well, because my grandma was very, she used to say, "Let's talk." And that "let's talk" meant that you were in for it, because she would put things in her terms, say it like it was, and pity the person who had to "have a talk" with her, because she would lay you bare, so she was this... I think this really made an impression on me, and on my sense of activism. And always in this school where I studied I felt uncomfortable, because I couldn't understand. I used to say, "I always get good grades, I'm an educated student, I behave well, and yet I'm never chosen to be the class leader, I'm never chosen to carry the Brazilian flag." Today I'm grateful that I wasn't chosen to carry the Brazilian flag, I was never in the front to sing the national anthem. And so you learn to build your identity like that, by being looked over, and I could never understand why. I remember when I was in the Catholic school I once asked my teacher, "Why is that girl going to carry the flag when I get better grades than her?" So then I was thinking, "Damn, I asked her that. Woah." And she responded with something like, "Okay class, who wants Giovanna to carry the flag." She put the question to the class, "Who wants Giovanna to carry the flag?" And then no one raised their hand. Imagine that situation, and I constructed my racial identity in those terms, really being that thing from the book of Florestan [Fernandes] and Roger Bastide,<sup>40</sup> a black person in a white world. It's a way of developing your black identity that can trigger an aggressive streak, which is the survival instinct. You have to survive there, you have to go to school every day, you have to pass each year, you have to get good grades. You have to swim. I remember when I had swimming lessons, it was a horror for me. I used to keep my hair well brushed, but when I got in the water, my hair would frizz out, and I had to endure people "making jokes." The racism of my classmates. So I think my school life pushed me into figuring out how to find answers to inequality. So that's me, all my life. My family, no one was an activist in the black movement. There was no history of that in my family. But still I went.

**SC: Are we at 90 minutes? 60 minutes? No, it's fine. It's just that when we're talking, the time goes by very fast.**

GX: Yes, we get excited. So the Catholic school was hideous. I hate passing by there, even nowadays.

EV: Coração de Maria?

GX: Educandário Madre Guell.

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<sup>40</sup> Florestan Fernandes (1920-1995) was a Brazilian sociologist and politician. Roger Bastide (1989-1974) was a French sociologist and anthropologist who specialized in Brazilian literature. He is most known for his contributions in the study of Afro-Brazilian religions in the late 1950s. The two scholars co-authored a book in 1955 entitled *Whites and Blacks in São Paulo*.

EV: I think Coração de Maria Coraco is in Bonsucesso. But you see, what you're saying about your experience in school, it was the same for me, when I was saying that I went to a private school and not a public one, and that it was a mistake. When I was talking, I was saying, you're the minority, even today. We were a "pair of black birds," my friend Dulcília and I, we were considered a "pair of black birds" because we were the most black. But I was not a black girl who was going to carry some other girl's bag. There were two other girls who did everything for the other girls, everything. And now you see that as a 9 year old or a 10 year old, I realized they were carrying things for others.... I had the same thing at home, my mother would say the same thing, you have to be very well behaved. My mother's white clothes were always very white, something like –

GX: Yes, I still have that, a kind of obsession. If I'm wearing white clothes they have to be –

EV: White and all. Myself, from time to time, I look at white clothing to be sure it's not grimy. On the other hand, how about name calling? People aren't supposed to call each other bad names at school. And my brother got in trouble several times because people called him a bad name. And my sister, Rosário, she had very big lips – today she would be called Angelina Jolie. Until this day, she doesn't like having pictures taken, which she did then. I don't take them. I had a trauma of picture taking. And my mother didn't like having taking pictures.

GX: Yeah, me neither. Taking pictures, I don't even know if there is still this thing of taking class pictures, but I think there is, of course there is, there was for my son's class, Peri. I didn't like having them taken either, because —

**SC: Because you see the differences?**

GX: No, because of the jokes. "No, teacher, she can't be in it because she'll stain the photo."

EV: "It will make everything dark."

GX: Yes, I cried to not go to school. "Mom, I don't want to go, I don't want to go."

EV: And the teachers, they didn't understand. Sometimes they would take the class picture. But it was this embarrassment, and if you refused, if you didn't want to take the picture, the teacher would say "stay there, stay there."

GX: Right, and I think the life, the socialization of black students in the school—

**SC: You're talking about the '80s, right?**

GX: Yes, we're talking about the '80s. I think the socialization of black people in school is decisive for what comes next, because school can be bad. Even today I hear from my students, I work with interns, with undergraduates in history, and the stories they tell me are similar to what I experienced. Of course many things have changed, but a lot of things remain the same, and I think all of that pushed me. I was always very, I always had to say

what I was thinking, to speak my mind. And I think it has a lot to do with that, with being a minority, this condition of being a minority in your daily life. I didn't have anyone to do the talking for me. It was me, or it was me. So today I have this very keen sense and there are people who say, "Wow, that's one sassy black girl." So I think this was decisive. And I got to the university, and I already knew my path. I wanted to be in the student movement. I went to school and got involved in the "Academic Center," and then the DCE, which is the Central Directorate of Students. I got involved in all of that. And when I entered UFRJ to study history, I already knew what I wanted to do, my master's, my doctorate, my post-doctorate. I didn't know if I'd make it, but I knew I wanted it. I was looking at possibilities for research, and that's when I met Flávio Gomes. I had already heard there was a black professor there, and I was looking for him, and he was the first to welcome me. He was the first person who took me to the [National] Archives, he took me to the National Library so I could see how to work the microfilm. Every time I load a roll of microfilm at the National Library, I have an image of Flávio in my head. And he was, Flávio was and still is today, I tell people, "This guy has researched everything. No matter what subject I talk to him about, he knows something." So he was essential, because I think activism is about this as well, that I'm not... I'm not in any organized social movement, but today I understand and I say that I'm involved in academic activism. I understand my professional activity as a type of activism because we professors work, this is very criticized, in history especially, this issue of transmitting content, because we are working to construct knowledge. And I think that when I'm constructing knowledge with my students – valuing what they bring from the outside, listening to their stories, mediating them with mine – it's a form of activism. When one of my students tells a joke or makes a racist or sexist comment, and I intervene, then that's me being an activist. As a black Brazilian woman, when I write a thesis on post-abolition African Americans, I think a lot about the activism within this. Today I define myself as an independent black feminist woman and an activist in the academy. I see all of my activity in the academy as a form of activism.

**SC: It's interesting that you mention Flávio Gomes from UFRJ as your mentor who introduced you to history and research. But when you went to do your master's, you chose a feminist to be your advisor, Rachel Soihet, right? I wanted to finish the interview by talking about... because it's interesting, I'm pulling out the topic of women, and you both say that it's not possible to, or you don't want to, separate studying or being conscious of gender from the situation of black people in Brazilian society. Right? So let's talk a bit about these choices that both of you made. You started talking about your role in the local movement and then inside the university where you had contact with feminists who were a little older than you, who were already in the black movement and who were questioning the male leadership that wouldn't make room for women. Could you tell us more about how you understand your role inside the movement in terms of feminism. Do you consider yourself a feminist?**

EV: Yes, I consider myself a feminist.

**SC: What is feminism? How do you see your role inside the feminist movement? And also, how do you see this as part of the history of feminism in Brazil.**

EV: Wow.

GX: Yes, it's a big topic.

EV: Yes, as I said, in the popular movement – back then we called it the popular movement, I called it a neighborhood [movement] because the movement was very... people were active in the surrounding areas, for instance the favela movement was focused on the favelas, the Baixada movement was active in the Baixada, and so on. When I went to the university, it was a much broader thing. And what was this broader thing for me? It wasn't the issue of class, it was the issue of race. And then I met Lélia Gonzalez. The first time I saw Lélia Gonzalez was in the university as a professor, because she used to teach at IFCS.

**SC: So you were her student?**

EV: No, I wasn't able to be her student because she left when I was in my first year. She taught political science, political science and anthropology, sociology. At the end we studied the classics, and Lélia was teaching a political science class, it was a specific one, but she didn't stay long because she was like a "migrant worker"<sup>41</sup> [a "boia fria"] within the education system. My story is full of these little tangents because I am embedded in Brazilian history. There was [decree] number 477,<sup>42</sup> which was the students, and 478 or 79, which was the professors. They had evacuated the university, they shut down the university. They mutilated, in 1968, 1967, 1969, it was a mutilation that cut off the head of the university. There was a lack of professors, and the university lost its autonomy. There was no hiring, the military didn't hire anyone, they couldn't, so there were professors who had to go and teach but who had no rights. They were called "boia fria da educação," they didn't have any rights and Lélia was one of the "boias frias da educação." She taught without any contract with the school. She had to teach because the university couldn't just stop, but it was really something. There's a saying, "When a poor person falls, they will always break a foot." And at that time I had contact with the black movement, because there was an event that Lélia participated in. So the type of exchange I was able to have with Giovanna, I had then with Lélia in an event on racism inside the university. And there I was, already with many years of being active in the movement, and in the movement, let's put it this way, there's a moment when the black women rebelled. Because inside the movements – which today we talk about as mixed movements or mixed activism – when you're inside the organization and active, it's shocking. Of course the men, well, no one says, "It's my turn, get out, it's me who's talking, give me the power, I'll be secretary." It's not like that. But look at the history of IPCN, how many women were presidents? Only in a moment of intervention. The IPCN is the Institute of Research of Black Culture, it's an organization and it's very old. Because there's always been a black movement, historically they were the black clubs. We couldn't talk about politics, so we figured out a different way to do it. And there's a milestone moment when it reorganized as an openly political

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth uses the term "boia fria," which usually refers to a migrant worker. Here she means that within the university system, Lélia bounced around from place to place with no contract.

<sup>42</sup> A decree in 1974 that curbed the political activity of students.

movement, open on the outside and the inside. People thought they were there doing the feminine work, taking care of culture, of children, of abandoned minors. It wasn't called politics. There was a rupture, and I participated in the foundation of N'Zinga,<sup>43</sup> a collective of black women.

**SC: And when was that?**

EV: In '83. It's the founding of the movement, as Sueli Carneiro<sup>44</sup> says, of we feminists, we black scholars, this was the first black feminist group in Brazil, which was unapologetically feminist.

**SC: Here in Rio?**

EV: Here in Rio, and in Brazil, with the mission of fighting racism and sexism. Other groups didn't have this goal, of stopping to think about what machismo is, what sexism is. This is when I really started as an activist to think about and act on the word sexism as a thing, a concept. Lélia worked with us on this. So that's how I got into feminist activism, and I do consider myself a feminist. Not in the beginning, no. We didn't get it. So much so that it's only now that we say that N'Zinga was feminist. Lélia used to say she was a feminist, but we didn't think she was. We were in the women's movement because the feminine movement was worried about the tap water or the lack of light, and there are no black women who cannot talk about that. Giovanna is now teaching at the university, and she can't stop seeing the difficulties her students bring to her, it's everywhere. Someone is living I don't know where, with a child. As she was saying, it's a different structure of rising socially and politically, because it's thrown in her face the whole time... A black woman doesn't give herself... Like this discussion where we started to build a feminism that was a black feminism, but I can't talk about my body because we're talking about tap water. Why am I saying this here? Because we participated in meetings in apartments, and here I am, on the Avenida Atlântica.<sup>45</sup> When we used to go to these meetings with women – who were in the women's movement, and who long after still called themselves feminists –

GX: The white ones.

EV: [Do you think] feminism got to Brazil and it was like, "Oh, I'm a feminist"? No. It was unpopular. It was a political demand, it was an intense political fight for you to stand your ground as a feminist. So when we met these women who were in the women's movement – I don't like to say names, because you end up forgetting someone or other and then it's bad – but I can talk, for example, about Rose Marie Muraro,<sup>46</sup> who recently passed away. She

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<sup>43</sup> Founded in 1983 in Rio, N'Zinga was one of the first black women's organizations. During the mid- and late 1980s, a number of black women's collectives and groups were formed throughout Brazil.

<sup>44</sup> Sueli Carneiro is a professor of Education at São Paulo University and director of the Geledés Institute of the Black Woman.

<sup>45</sup> Avenida Atlântica is the main boulevard that lines the beach of Copacabana, and is a chic and expensive area.

<sup>46</sup> Rose Marie Muraro (1930-2014) was a Brazilian sociologist, feminist, writer. She is considered a pioneer of the feminist movement in Brazil.

gave an interview, a very beautiful interview about Lélia and her activism and everything. But when we came, it was like that, I'm here on the Avenida Atlântica, right by the sea. Often we went to these meetings and there was a black girl serving water, and I was... That was the picture of us. I remember once we went to a meeting there, I'm not going to say the name of the person, but it was at the Fountain of Saudades, you could see the lake, it was a beautiful thing. This room here is so tiny compared to that person's apartment, her brother has an island. Can you imagine that? So there we were in that meeting, and then this thing that... It wasn't for nothing that our parents used to say "Be polite, speak in a low voice, you're black, so don't spread your legs." It was like, "Watch your hands." Now we see a lot of videos on YouTube that open the world and you see black men and black women dancing, and it's my culture, you know? My mom used to say that. My mom was from Bahia and I have that in me too, you know? My mother would put her hand on her hips and do this, and I can do it too. But we're losing that. It's only when you see someone slip up, and you do it too, any black person does this instantly.

GX: I do it. Remember, Friday? I'm good at it.

EV: That's right, we do it, and I also talk about it. Yesterday my colleague was saying that the body speaks, because it's communicating, it's a form of communication. You see after my studies, I became rather intense in these things. When I talk about the bourgeoisie, really it's that I'm a witness, I am a witness to history. That's the word. We have to say it, we have to make this digression because we don't say it anymore. I know we don't talk about that nowadays. Or when we talk about it, it's not in a tone about the past. I'm going to describe how confusing the situation can be – we were all in that room, sitting like that, and it was a campaign about the freedom of our bodies – you know, my body belongs to me. Perfect. We understand that and all. Jurema<sup>47</sup> was one of those.

**SC: Just for me to understand, how many were there?**

EV: I think there must have been around thirty of us.

**SC: Thirty? And it was very divided between white feminists and black women, it was very noticeable?**

EV: Oh yes, it was, very noticeable. Because we already had the N'Zinga and soon after there was the CEMUFP, which was the Center for Women from the Favelas and the Periphery. Because there were people there who had a lot of, you know... Lélia was a university teacher. Another one was married to a Dutch man and she had been tortured. A black woman tortured, and she came to Brazil. So it's nothing, this thing about being a black student. So in fact we weren't really behind the movement. There was no way for the movement, no way. Mira, who studied in Europe and I don't know what. There were

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<sup>47</sup> Jurema Werneck was born in Morro dos Cabritos, a favela in Rio de Janeiro. She was the first in her family to attend university, where she became active in the student movement. In 1992, she co-founded Criola, a black women's organization seeking to combat racism and social injustice. See <http://criola.org.br/> [accessed 5/5/16].

women from the favelas, women from the Baixada. But to account for all of this.... Because I wasn't fighting anymore. I was living in Nilópolis and my issue was no longer tap water, it was the lack of water completely. In the hills there was no water in the whole neighborhood. People had to go and get their own water and carry it on their heads and take it home. We didn't even have that. We would go to the waterfall once a week. It was the same thing, just the waterspout... I'm from a time when the favela had its own commission for power because Light [the power company] wasn't doing anything, the electricity was down all the time. They didn't give us sufficient power. We needed a commission, for so many hours of light you had to be on a certain side [of the street]. So there was a group of people from there who coordinated the light for these people, people in the Baixada. If you go to get it, it's just a little water, there's a cistern, a well. The Baixada has this, but not the hill. So there were all these women, and me too, there in this fantastic apartment.

GX: What a scene.

EV: Wow, it really was. I don't remember exactly what it was all about, we actually wanted.... because people are democratic, they try. So you are in this bitch of an apartment, if I can use that expression, to discuss things. But that doesn't mean there won't be some mark on your piece of paper. We were talking about returning to democracy, about things that were important in Brazil, I don't know exactly what. The women were talking about sexual freedom, about liberating themselves. I don't know, I think I already had... I don't really recall if during that period women needed their husband's permission to go out shopping, even when the women worked outside the home. I don't recall this law. I don't remember if in our discussion we were still talking about this, because after this [meeting], I didn't go anymore. I wasn't going to be discussing with white women any more. So I think it was Jurema or Adécia who said something about this, "Look, all is well, all this is great, but we have to talk about the question of work, we need daycares. We need to enhance the quality of life in the favelas. There's no water. There's no this, there's no that." And people from the Baixada – sometimes when we were talking about the Baixada, I was the only one from there, because I came there from the Baixada. Oh, girl, a round of water. Here we are talking about these things, and in comes a woman with a tray, a black woman... When I say, "I'm going shopping," instead I say, "I'm going to cook something," because otherwise they'll think I have money. But it doesn't matter these days because people are killing each other for ten reais. So, the woman is serving the water, and that was just too much, and we just started to exchange glances... The girl. There's something that people see, this look that we're embarrassed. I felt ashamed to be in this place, discussing these themes, and then this person who is like a slave arrives and serves the water. I don't know who planned such a misplaced meeting, and that we weren't there to discuss those things that had to be talked about. We didn't understand why we were discussing democratic freedom when these people didn't know what repression was, or police killing, or dead bodies. I know what it's like to leave the house and pass the dead body of a boy I had just talked to... We didn't fight, but it was quite a debate. When everyone started talking, we stopped them. Everyone got very red, and people started looking at each other and thinking about who was wrong. Later I said, "I'm not going anymore. There's no use being in these places." And then Lélia. It's what I had been talking to her about, and I was talking to Giovanna. This is

what sharpens the historian. I was saying that for the first time, in an organized way, a group of women came together around a certain theme, in this case the sluts [The Slutwalk],<sup>48</sup> and they met to discuss a racial theme, I said –

G: Yes, we talked these days, and you went there on the Friday that we organized.

**SC: Okay, this talk that happened last week, and that we are linking to this group that was in 1980 something?**

EV: '84, '85.

**SC: The constituency.**

EV: Yes, the constituency, the discussion of the constituency, which in theory is not in the constitution. You say there has to be infrastructure, childcare. But it doesn't work, even though it's in there. This is the result of our work and it's to no avail, that every company with more than 500 employees has to have a preschool. This is the law, in my country we do it that way. But it takes or it doesn't take, and this is a law that didn't take. So we were discussing that, but I was saying, to discuss something that specific – a matter specific to black women – it was the first time. And I said, Giovanna, I think this is the first time this has ever happened. We put a lot into this. What do you call it, when someone does something for the first time?

GX: Pioneering.

EV: Pioneering. In 2014, can you believe it?

GX: Almost 30 years.

EV: It's really a place of non-dialogue. It's a non-dialogue, because what happens so often?

GX: It's an asymmetrical dialogue.

EV: When we sit with feminist women, anti racist, from parties, and such, so you make a list of claims. But you don't draft a document or a platform where these questions are laid out in some kind of logical way. There is no rational context. In my country we haven't managed to do that and even today women – women working in production activities – being a woman doesn't have the slightest... You don't have that. The country doesn't recognize this, the women make up more than 50% of the economy of the country, but it's not something paternalist, it's not considered a paternalist thing. This matter of having a preschool, this issue of respect. Today we talk about TPM [Total Performance Management], but in its uniqueness. We weren't talking about uniqueness, it was

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<sup>48</sup> The Slutwalk is an international movement of protest marches against rape, specifically protesting when a woman's appearance is referenced to explain or excuse a rape. In Brazil, they were called "Marcha das Vadias," or Walk of the Bitches. 2015 marked the 5<sup>th</sup> annual Marcha das Vadias in Brazil.

something else. It was the specificity of being a woman, of the need for a preschool so she can go to work and feel comfortable. These things.

GX: Yes, to be able to work better.

EV: Yes, to be able to work. There was no idea of this concept, gender. We know this was very recent, this concept that takes into account not only women, but men and women and this relationship in society. So sometimes, for example, Giovanna gives me opportunities, because I'm in a period now, how am I going to put this? It's not bad, but it's a moment of reflection. I didn't have any problems in my 40s or 50s, but since I've turned 60 I have this feeling, like, "I'm 60 and I have hypertension." And then I remember that Lélia didn't make it to this point, Beatriz not even close, and others too.

**SC: She died when she was how old?**

EV: Lélia was 59, and Beatriz when she was 52.

GX: Beatriz Nascimento.

EV: To honor these women, I have to mention their names. There's Jorgina, which is my mom's name, and my dad, Osvaldo. I didn't call them mom and dad, which was good. The image I have of my mother, Jorgina, and also of her mother, my grandmother Almerinda, these black women, is that they were the supporters. When their husbands are unemployed, they go out and sell snacks or take in laundry. They help the guy out, you know? My dad doesn't drink, but I know some cases of black women who had to put up with alcoholic husbands and the men feel like they are defeated. It's something.

GX: And not losing the children to crime. Usually when you live in poor neighborhoods, you have to work outside of your house and leave your children –

EV: The ones who still have a husband in their house, or like many say, "you know how it is," that the son or daughter will be raised like that, and this is another thing that can cause terrible damage. You go to the Baixada or to the neighborhoods in the suburbs, and the bars are always full, because the guy goes to work, and then on Sunday, which is the day he can be with his family, he goes to have a beer and he doesn't want to be disturbed. But the black woman has to prepare food and all of those things. This is often the time they have to clean up the house, put things away, take care of the children's clothes –

GX: Get ready for the week.

EV: Yes, prepare for the week. And then what do you find? A mother, a woman who is very stressed, very tired. Does it stop? No, it goes on like this, and there is a lot of this, a lot.

**SC: And you, Giovanna. You are agreeing, but do you see a difference between your perception of feminism [compared to Elizabeth's], and your choice to enter**

**academia, and to be an activist specifically around questions of gender concerning black women?**

GX: I think that feminism... you were asking me about moving from the UFRJ to the UFF, from Flávio to Rachel. Flávio, by the way, was actually one of my greatest encouragers. At that time I was developing research on the image of black women in Brazilian literature, that was my master's thesis that I did in history and literature. And Flávio said, "Look, judging by the research you've been doing and by who you are, it would be good to continue your academic life with a feminist historian. It's very important." So in that way too, he was a great supporter. He didn't say anything like, "You have to be my student because I'm the one who got you where you are." We know that this happens in academia. So I went to UFF with Rachel Soihet. I already knew who she was, I had read her and she was this great feminist. I thought she was wonderful. And when I went to her for guidance, she was amazing. She had so much generosity, humility, brilliance. And she said to me, "I'm going to learn from you, because I know very little about black feminism." But my thesis was not a work on black feminism. I was studying the image of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, using literature as a historic source. I gave the work a feminist slant because what I did was try to read between the lines of the documents to notice possibilities of agency in these characters. So I approached some of my documents as criminal proceedings, and not only literature. And I think Rachel was a great inspiration for that, she really encouraged me and she was crucial. My master's was fundamental for me to comprehend what I was doing, to consolidate, I don't like the word, but it did form me.

EV: As a historian.

GX: As a historian of black women. A black feminist historian. And I say black feminist because I am very critical of the discussion in the historiography of the difference between women's history and the history of gender relations. I was already totally grounded in the history of gender relations, because I wanted to study inequality, and what made we want to study inequality wasn't the fact that I was a woman or the fact that I was black. It was the fact of being a black woman. That's why I can't understand a feminism that is not intersectional. Feminism for me, the word is very bad, especially to discuss gender. But from my point of view, it's obviously intersectional. I think this more formal unfolding was fundamental for me to see myself as a black feminist. Since then, everything I've done in terms of research, thinking about this question of academic activism, has been from the perspective of black feminism. Feminism, at least to me, has to do with positionality, with lifestyle, and it's a lifestyle in which you look for strategies to deal with oppression. So I don't think feminism is the fight of women for equality in relation to men. I think that's a very simply definition. It's a very reductionist idea of being a feminist. I think being a feminist, for me being a black feminist, it's indistinguishable, right?

EV: Yes.

GX: And we who are black always have to be talking about being black, because the normal is to be white. So I think being a black feminist, when I talk about positionality, it has to do with the ways you choose not to accept inequality. It's to criticize, to think and act critically

against the inequality that confronts you every day. And I think the legacy of feminism, especially of black feminism, in this fight against inequality is very big. So I think the black feminist movement is above all a movement for humanity, a fight for recognition, a process of struggling for the humanizing of the subject. That's how I see it. And when we talk about the humanity of all, that includes respecting the knowledge of a woman who doesn't have running water in her community, and also respecting the knowledge of a woman like I am today, a black professor who is writing a book, preparing a paper, advising students. As you see, we're sitting here with a gap of twenty something years since entering the university and our histories have crossed. Often I was silent because I was in full agreement with everything she was saying, and vice versa. So I think we have... I like Du Bois<sup>49</sup> a lot, where he says that the black race has a message, for humanity I think. And I think we black women in our diversity, who go beyond the Black Atlantic, I think we carry that message of humanization and of a daily struggle that is articulated in both the public and the private. We are very good at that.

EV: Sorry, I just want to say something.

GX: So I think for me, just to finish what I'm thinking, I think black feminism has to do with claiming this humanization through knowledge, respect, dignity. These things are very important to us. You see we were discussing the impossibility of calling ourselves sluts, how impossible it is, given our history, when we were thinking about the Slutwalk, and that black women did not go to it. So I think for us today, respectability – regardless of all the conservatism that went into constructing this category – still, for us, talking about respect and honor can be transgressive, because we are talking about a past in which these categories were denied to us. So I think that even today, when we think about continuities, this remains a continuity. I think black feminism for me is connected to how I position myself in the world as a black woman and what stories I can tell. I really like the Nigerian, Chimamanda Adichie,<sup>50</sup> when she says “many stories matter.” So I think that black feminism for me is a little bit of that, it's the many stories that matter. And these stories that matter are told by women, and especially for black women they can make a very big difference. So I see things in this way.

EV: I wanted to say two things. About humanization, she spoke very well about humanization, and it's this – the human being in me and in you has to be respected. And we have a lot to teach each other, teach, exchange, give... At the same time, I connect it to something that I've heard her say. For most blacks there's always this story of “Watch out for your hands, watch out for those things.” Even our mothers, our fathers, our aunts and our grandmas do this, they do it and it's because in fact... often, my mother would be like, “Look, Bethina, I know if you get married, I'm not going to live near you, because there will

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<sup>49</sup> W.E.B Du Bois (1868-1963) was a sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist. He completed his graduate work at Harvard, and was the first African American to receive a doctorate. He became a professor at Atlanta University, and worked relentlessly to pursue civil rights.

<sup>50</sup> Chimamanda Adichie (born in 1977) is a Nigerian writer of fiction and non-fiction, and a recipient of a MacArthur Genius Grant. In 2009 she recorded a widely-circulated TED talk entitled “The Danger of a Single Story.” See [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en) [accessed 5/5/16].

be pots flying every day. And when you're there working with the white people, you're going to throw everything on me." My mom used to think she was very argumentative because she thought she was a clever and feisty girl, so she thought I had to be a well-behaved girl. Something like that. But it doesn't work that way. It doesn't work that way because you have to experiment. Because when she says we can pass this experience on to non-whites, this experience, this humanity, there is something inside us that is possible. Why not? Why can't we be who we are? Talking. Singing. Why can't we have that? My body belongs to me. But I remember we would argue, we'd say we want to see another black woman dancing samba, or another guy with a tambourine. We said this with a lot of expression. And it's not to say that, because as Lélia Gonzalez said well, "that mulatto." I'm using the word she used. You know what mulatta means, I don't have to translate. But it's a black woman, meaning that mulatto there who is dancing the samba, all powerful, like a queen, a princess, gathering the words all around her. And it's the same one who was there to serve the water, you know. The guy who's the cop, the guy in the car, the guy who's sweeping the street, whoever he is, it's the same one who is dancing with that levity with the [carnival] flag. We don't compromise on this, because it's our dignity. It's something that is branded. It's what we see, you know? When you see us, it's dancing the samba. But that's not all we are. Because for a black woman, she doesn't know, but to samba, you have to let go of your body, and that's something we learn at home. And one of the things, something that was good for Giovanna, she and Flávio thought, was for her to continue her studies, to write, to discuss, to put her ideas out there, that organized whirlwind of ideas, a lot of ideas get left out when we write.

GX: Yes.

EV: Any of us, we get about a tenth, I got maybe half.

**SC: And when you speak too.**

EV: Yes. The men were important for me, because we all have this issue of essentialism, and this pushes us to the edge, even though with men –

GX: Challenging us to think more sharply.

EV: Remember that at first I thought it was bad. But then Giovanna said, "I think it's very good that we're discussing this with a man, because it stimulates you" do you remember? Sometimes he had things to say, some things we would say, "Ahh. Because we women..."

GX: I think too, there's one thing... I've been thinking, and this interview has been making me relive many things. And thinking about the relationship with Flávio, I think he brought something very interesting, because we black women, the price for the hypersexualization of our bodies is that it becomes impossible to see yourself as an intellectual, as someone who will develop academic work. And I think for me, it's interesting that you're remarking on the fact it was a man, because Flávio was actually a guy who saw me with more complexity. He turned to me and said, "You can be a lot more than the queen of the Bateria

da Portela,<sup>51</sup> you know. Come and I'll show you." So I think that was very important. I think that's why the whole network thing is very important. Because we often build a network with black women and black men... here in Brazil not so much, but it's very common for us to collaborate only with black authors to strengthen the network. And I think this was key. So in a given moment, imagine, now I'm a professor, a Ph.D., with a postdoc at the UFRJ, and back when I was at school, my "friends" said I couldn't be in the picture because I would stain the photo. It was impossible then for me to picture myself in this place. It's a very interesting experience to have because human beings are full of contradictions, so nowadays I bump into many of these white friends who are in horrible situations because they never really made it, they literally didn't leave that place, they stayed right where they were. And then when I say, "Oh what do you do?" and then, "I'm a professor at the Federal University." "You!?" I feel abused in this situation, and I say, "Sure, why? Black people can teach too." And then there is this embarrassing situation for a few seconds. So I think feminism is in this too, especially black feminism. To show you can choose. This question of positionality, you can choose where you want to be. It's not an easy choice, like I want blue or I want pink. It's not like that. But you have the tools to build, you have your own tool box to build your path. So I think that's a very important thing too. Don't you think, Beth?

EV: Of course, it's fundamental. When I wrote "Lugar De Negro," [The Place of the Black Person] where I say that in fact society says where black people belong, in the kitchen and such, it's a very important thing to say, to write because [by recognizing this] we actually create a movement. This is how it starts – we were supposed to be this and that, but thank God I took a different path. Then people say, "No, forget this, I don't want this, I don't want that," which is also what a political movement is. What do we want? Does that help you formulate what's best? I can say so. So for me it's very important. Yesterday I was saying that a black person's place is wherever a black person wants to be.

GX: Exactly.

EV: To know how to make the right choices, for me this is...

**SC: One last question, to finish.**

GX: Yes, we talk a lot.

EV: Yes.

**SC: Feminism, the black movement, activism, it's still trying to reach its goals?**

EV: To reach something.

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<sup>51</sup> The Queen of the Bateria of Portella refers to the Drum Queen for the carnival parade. It is the highest position that a woman can achieve in the samba school, and involves wearing lavish costumes and opening the way for the drums in the parade.

**SC: Looking at Brazil since the time you've been talking about – 1978, the beginning of the '80s, the end of the dictatorship – until today, do you think we're getting there, or that there's still a long way to go, or that we've already come a long way on this path, a significant way.**

GX: I think we've come far on important things, but it's hard to say we've arrived, because our final destination will change and grow. So for example, when I get to the university to teach, the first thing I do is look to see how many black students are in my class, just automatically. These days, it takes me a moment to count, it's not just one or two, there are five or six. This semester I had a class with fifty students and there were like fifteen or eighteen [black students]. So I took a few moments to count. So thinking about when I was studying, when I was an undergraduate, we would count two, three, four at most. And I was thinking, okay. But on the other hand, it's a two-way street, because whenever you see someone on the streets in a vulnerable situation, begging for money, doing drugs, in particular in Rio de Janeiro, it's almost always black people.

EV: Almost 100%.

GX: So I think we've come a long way particularly in the field of education. Don't you think, Beth?

EV: Yes.

GX: I think we've accomplished significant achievements. But I think there's still a lot to be done. A lot.

EV: Yes. It really affected me at a recent meeting when people actually started talking again about revolution, actual revolution. It's been a long time since people have talked about that, with a certain satisfaction, especially the young people who arrive and have to face things. For example with Giovanna, I liked it that she read the situation as she did, suddenly saying, "Oh my God, in twenty years I'm going to be here. She's going to be here. And there's people analyzing that." And while we're still measuring, the fight is going to grow. And what I realize, something that we have to pay attention to, is that the topic of race and the complexity of these matters has increased in Brazil.

GX: Yes.

EV: It's been increasing, and getting more complicated.

**SC: And also gender.**

GX: Gender too.

EV: Yes, we can say that there's a clear reaction because many say, "Let's do it like in the United States." When we go to the university and we're in the university doing our studies, for example, if we compare [Brazil] with the United States and the end of slavery, the

general conditions of black people in Brazil were better than the ones in the United States. It's hard, but on the other hand, history shows that there needed to be some intervention.

GX: I don't know if that's quite right.

EV: How so?

GX: That the condition of black people in Brazil was better.

EV: Yes, it was. I forget the American author who has this comparative study, that showed which one...

**SC: Degler?**

EV: Yes, Degler. He did a study that compares Brazil and the United States in the period before emancipation, American emancipation in the United States, which Brazil already had. For example, you had a regular black press in the last century that you don't have anymore today. There's no black press today, and there was one in the colonial period. In terms of racial democracy, there's clearly a resistance today so that we don't say it's racism. But it's the white people, not the black people who see these reactions against the quotas. I don't know, I don't know. Not that quotas are the solution, no one thinks they are the solution. But this reaction triggered a racism that lots of people, not only black people, say is a racist position. So that's a kind of improvement, a historical process. Because if I want to measure what you just formulated as your question, apparently I could have misunderstood it, so I don't know. Because this might even hit a younger girl than I am. You see because we get in a prison. We see the death of the black youth. We still use that word the genocide of the black people. We still say it this way, because it's not only a term of speech, you have statistic data to prove it.

GX: Yes, it's a process. It pertains to the death rates of mothers in public health care,<sup>52</sup> and domestic violence, and so on.

EV: But then, on the other hand, there's not only – she's talking about her field, which is inside the university, inside the classroom. I can talk about the city council, which had some councilors who brought up the racial matter, but now there are some who... for example the next councilors they can't say they are not black, and they're not going to hear, as Lélia and others did, when they looked for a senator for being black and the senators would say, "Yeah, it's your problem." And then Lélia would say, "Our problem is very serious." And he would just walk away because he didn't come from this place. And today you don't see that anymore. And you know, I'm talking about something collective. But when a black person or a group has this recognition it's a very big step for us. So to be honest, for the state to recognize that at least gives us some hope to keep fighting. And then we can solve whatever comes up. I think that if each of us starts to worry and leave a trail that other black or white people, because this is our dream, because actually if you take the first documents of the

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<sup>52</sup> Serviço Único de Saúde, SUS, Brazil's publicly funded health care system.

black movement, we would go out on the streets and talk about racism and build a real racial democracy. It's incredible to look at the older documents. So you can take some from the period before the end of slavery and try to educate, we need to educate the black people you know colored people because they were in a lower level than the white people. But through education we can reach that same level. So here we are. We already have a Ph.D. here, and I'm a master with a lot of honors. And I didn't get a doctorate by choice. I didn't want that. I wanted to travel, and I said, I'm going to do something else. I'm here and inside my profession I'm not going anywhere anymore because I'm already retired. My wish was to teach in the university and to do what she's doing. I'm going to grab all my knowledge and that I have a ruler, a compass. But then I said, oh I can't do that. Then I found out to leave my job, what I'm going to leave and stop earning, I'm going to earn to be a university professor. So I'm not going to try a federal level career and have to work until I'm 70 years old. I don't want that.

GX: And that's why I like Candeia. There's a very beautiful samba by Antonio Candeia Filho, where he says, "Sing a samba at the university and you'll see your son is a real prince. And then, you will never return to the slums."<sup>53</sup> And I think that sums up our journey very well.

EV: Yes.

**SC: Thank you very much. We're actually over the time, but this was extremely...**

EV: You're going to edit, right?

**SC: No.**

EV: Oh, no?

**SC: No, it's going to be like this.**

GX: Oh, that's so fancy, I was already lying down.

EV: Oh, that's great then.

**SC: Thank you very much. I'm just going to turn this off.**

GX: Thank you.

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<sup>53</sup> Known as Candeia, Antônio Candeia Filho (1935-1978) was a samba songwriter and singer. The song is "Dia de Graça," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smNRvdAayAg> [accessed 5/4/16].