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The cultural-political utopia of Amefricanity

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The cultural-political utopia of Amefricanity

Abstract: This paper is a reflection on amefricanity, a cultural-political category created by Brazilian intellectual and activist Lélia Gonzalez in the 1980s. Considering that Latin American is one of the most significant cultural identities in US today, this reflection stemmed from the question: what is the political potential of this cultural identity? To answer this question, the paper revisited Gonzalez's theory and actions to arrive at a redefinition of amefricanity as a utopia. Like all utopias, amefricanity can be a force that moves us, providing a new imagery that draws the lines of an imagined Black and Indigenous transnational diasporic community that could serve as base for political action.

Keywords: Amefricanity. Lélia Gonzalez. Latin America. Culture. Politics.

Resumo: Este artigo é uma reflexão sobre a amefricanidade, uma categoria cultural e política criada pela intelectual e ativista brasileira Lélia Gonzalez na década de 1980. Considerando que a identidade latino-americana é uma das identidades culturais mais significativas nos Estados Unidos atualmente, esta reflexão surgiu da seguinte pergunta: qual é o potencial político dessa identidade cultural? Para responder a essa pergunta, o artigo revisitou a teoria e as ações de Gonzalez, chegando a uma redefinição da amefricanidade como uma utopia. Como todas as utopias, a amefricanidade pode ser uma força motriz, fornecendo um novo imaginário que delinea uma comunidade negra e indígena diaspórica transnacional imaginada, que poderia servir de base para a ação política.

Palavras-chave: Amefricanidade. Lélia Gonzalez. América Latina. Cultura. Política.

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Introduction

Although the number of immigrants coming from Latin America to United States decreased in the last years, due to the aggressive immigration policies implemented by the current federal administration, the Latin American diaspora has been the main immigration driver to this country since the 1970s. According to the Migration Policy Institute, in 2023, nearly 45 per cent of immigrants in US (21.5 million people) reported having Hispanic or Latino origins². These facts alone have made Latin American one of the most significant cultural identities in US today. The decisive Latino vote in the last presidential election has come to reinforce this argument.

In US, Latin America is often understood as a merely geographical, cultural, or ethnic category, which prevents us from reflecting on it as also political. I would like to start this reflection by asking: what is the political potential of Latin America in US today? As a sociologist who is interested in intersections between culture and politics, and an immigrant from Latin America in US, this very question keeps coming back to me. In this text, I would like to address it.

There are several perspectives from which I could answer this question. A common one, especially in US today, is a celebrative multicultural perspective, which emphasizes cultural diversity and assimilation. Although valid, this perspective reveals little of the political dimension and potential of Latin America. So, in this text, I would like to take a different perspective. My reflection is constructed in dialogue with the theorization and political action of Brazilian intellectual and activist Lélia Gonzalez (figure 1), especially regarding her vision for Latin America.

² The Institute defines Hispanic and Latino individuals who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the decennial census and American Community Survey questionnaire – “Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano, Puerto Rican, or Cuban” – as well as those who indicate that they are “other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino origin”.



Fig. 1: Lélia Gonzalez, Rio de Janeiro, 1977. Photo: A. Jacob/O Globo, Lélia Gonzalez Memory Project.

Challenging the idea of Latin America

In the last decades, Gonzalez, who was also an anthropologist interested in psychoanalysis, has emerged as an important intellectual and activist in humanities and social sciences. Her most significant work was carried out from the 1970s to 1980s, during military dictatorships and transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic ones in Latin America. As openly opposed to any kind of oppression, Gonzalez stood up for politically engaged academic work, and her scholarship was deeply political. She fought for the return of democracy in Latin America and the extension of the notion of democracy, advocating for a democratic system that would include experiences, voices, and narratives of those oppressed not only by authoritarian regimes, but also by structural inequalities and injustices on the basis of race, class, and gender. Her academic work was a platform for those experiences, voices, and narratives.

Gonzalez's vision for Latin America challenged what Argentine scholar Walter Mignolo (2005) named "the idea of Latin America". In the book with the same name, Mignolo explained that this idea is a European invention tied to the colonial history of the region. It is worthy to remember that the term Latin America was coined in the 19th century by French intellectuals. The aim was to differentiate territories in the American continent where romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese,

and French) were the official languages in opposition to territories where there was an anglo-saxon tradition and English was the official language. These French intellectuals argued for an automatic alliance between Latin America and Latin Europe. The term was coined as a political tool to foster a collective imagery of European cultural heritage, which would help Europeans to strengthen ties with and influence local elites in Latin America, after recent independence movements in the region.

Gonzalez argued that the alleged latinity of America would refer exclusively to its historical and cultural European and white formation, neglecting the African and Indigenous heritage that shaped the region's history and culture. It is this eurocentric idea of Latin America that Gonzalez challenged.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Gonzalez constantly travelled throughout the American, European, and African continents. In Latin America, she observed that its alleged latinity was not strongly present in the everyday life of the people. On the other hand, she witnessed firsthand the strong influence of African and Indigenous heritage, manifested in everyday life through language, gestures, movements, and ways of being. Based on her findings, she argued for a new idea of and vision for Latin America, one that would recognize an empiric socio-cultural reality: that what we call Latin American culture is mostly an amalgam of African and Indigenous cultures.

As a daughter of a Black man and an Indigenous woman, Gonzalez herself was subjected to what she called the whitening ideology, and for a long time she did not recognize her own cultural heritage. It was only during her travels and exposure to different ways African and Indigenous cultures have taken form throughout the Black diaspora that she became conscious of her own and Latin American cultural roots. Influenced by psychoanalysis, she argued that these roots are often not conscious to us, and she claimed urgent recognition of them as a way to become conscious of and reclaim the part of us that has been repressed and silenced.

Gonzalez' cultural and political consciousness led her to embrace the Black identity and engage with the Black movement. In Brazil, this social movement has worked hard throughout the decades on redefining blackness as a positive identity trait, which has resulted in the increasing number of people who self-identify as Black (figure 2).

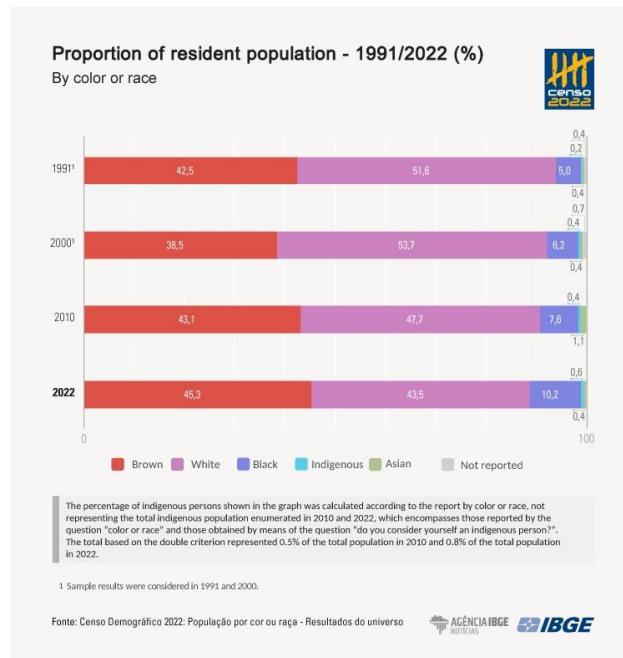


Fig. 2: Graphic showing that, since the beginning of the 1990s, an increasing number of people have identified themselves as Black in Brazil, according to the 2022 Demographic Census. Source: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) news agency.

To Gonzalez, the strong presence of African and Indigenous cultural roots in the everyday life of the people in Latin America were outstanding resistances to colonialism, racism, and imperialism. The African and Indigenous amalgam we call Brazilian or Caribbean culture testify to the struggles of Black and Indigenous peoples. This argument was linguistically performed. To honor these people's resistances, we had to resist the imposition of a term that does not represent their cultural identity. So, the name had to change. Regarding the first part, the T had to be replaced by D, converting Latin to “LaDin”. In the second part, instead of America, the addition of an F in the middle of the word converted it to “AmeFrIca”. As a result, the name of the region would be Ladin Amefrica.

Instead of latinity, Gonzalez proposed amefricanity. This proposal was presented in the 1988 article, “The cultural-political category of amefricanity”. In this article, she defined amefricanity as “a historic process of intense cultural dynamic (resistance, accommodation, reinterpretation, creation of new forms) referenced in African [and Indigenous] models that shape the construction of an ethnic

identity" (De Souza Lima, L., 2024, p. 5). At the center of her proposal was the act to bring African and Indigenous cultures up to the surface. However, it was not an attempt to rescue an erased or forgotten past or memory, but the political act to make visible new cultural forms that came to exist from the intertwined experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples. Amefricanity "rescues a specific unity, historically forged in the interior of different societies that are formed in a certain part of the world" (De Souza Lima, L., 2024, p. 7).

Gonzalez argued that Latin America alleged latinidad has been a dominant eurocentric narrative that has concealed the africanity and indigeneity of the region. As US scholar Keisha-Khan Perry and Brazilian scholar Edilza Sotero (2019) observed, Gonzalez's theorization [and political action, I would add] challenged not only the idea of Latin America, but, more fundamentally, the "anti-blackness foundational in the construction of the Americas" (Perry and Sotero, 2019, p. 63).

"After all, who is ignorant?"

Amefricanity shed light on a social and cultural reality, especially in Brazil and the Caribbean, where not only there are strong African and Indigenous cultural roots, but also most of the population is Black or Brown, with an estimated more than one hundred million people today. It is worth remembering the major role Brazil and the Caribbean played in the transatlantic slave trade as territories that imported more enslaved people from Africa (figure 3). In this sense, Perry and Sotero (2019) pointed out that the national dominant narratives and policies of whitening and multiculturalism in Latin America operate in evident contrast to an undeniable social and cultural reality.



Fig. 3: Graphic showing that the number of enslaved African arriving in Brazil from 1514 to 1866 was more than 3 million people. In the Caribbean it was almost 5 million. Source: Statista.com.

The blackness of Latin American culture was noted by Gonzalez especially in the language. She offered a concrete example in the 1984 article “Racism and Sexism in Brazilian Society”, in which she wrote:

“It is funny how they make fun of us when we say we’re Framengo³. They call us ignorant, saying that we speak wrong. And suddenly they ignore that the presence of this R in place of the L is nothing more than the linguistic mark of an African language, in which the L does not exist. After all, who is ignorant?” (Gonzalez, L., Barros, B., Oliveira, J. and Reis, L., 2021, p. 156).

³ Brazilian soccer club. In standard Portuguese, the name of the club is spelled Flamengo (with L, not R).

Pretoguês is the term created by Gonzalez to name the influence of African languages, especially the Bantu, in the Portuguese spoken in Brazil. The creation of the term is evidence of the importance of language in Gonzalez's theorization. By giving Portuguese a new name, she was, one more time, using language with the political intention to bring public attention to a social injustice and make visible a cultural reality concealed by power dynamics. This strategic use of the language has been common by the Brazilian Black movement, which has not only promoted a positive re-significance of the category Black, but has also proposed the inclusion of the Brown population (or, "pardo", in Portuguese) under that category as a way to empower the Black population.

Although Gonzalez's early work focused on Brazilian Black women, later she moved beyond the Brazilian context towards a transnational perspective. Her work became mostly comparative of places like Brazil, the Caribbean, and US. For instance, she talked about similarities between the Pretoguês spoken in Brazil and the English, Spanish, and French spoken in the Caribbean, which are strongly influenced by African languages as well, especially regarding the tone, rhythm, and absence of consonants such as the L. She also saw similarities even more evident in the music, dances, and belief systems present in these places.

Building up on this transnational and comparative approach, we could point out the similar africanization of the language in what is known as African American English (AAE) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics, which is remarkably described in US anthropologist Zora Hurston's work. Gonzalez noticed that the transnational africanization of languages spoken in the American continent has been misinterpreted as wrong uses of these languages and the africanization of the culture in general has been overlooked, covered by the whitening ideological veil, and minimized by European classifications such as "popular culture" or "national folklore".

Amefricanity is for everyone

As Brazilian scholar Flavia Rios (2020) defined, Gonzalez's amefricanity is an umbrella-category that tell us about the author's ambition to reimagine Latin America beyond an exclusively European [and white, I would add] influence. With this in mind, I want to reformulate my initial question: what is the political potential of Ladin Amefrica? I argue that Gonzalez teaches us a few lessons.

First, Gonzalez's life and work are one and the same thing. Throughout her life, she became conscious of who she was and where she came from. This self-awareness came about as she moved throughout the world without forgetting her personal and local experiences. Redoing her ancestor's route in contact with people of her time made it possible for her to create theoretical ideas not only to describe and

understand an oppressive personal and social reality, but also to transform them. Therefore, amefricanity means liberation and justice.

Second, to Gonzalez, amefricans was a cultural and political identity not only for Blacks and Browns in Brazil or Latin America, but for all people in the continent. This collective identity takes into consideration the cultural diversity of the region and focuses on the shared experiences of its people. This includes not only the strong presence and influence of Black and Indigenous peoples and cultures, but also other experiences, such as the Black transatlantic diaspora, colonialist and imperialist violences, and racism.

Finally, Gonzalez was committed to circulating her ideas, establishing networks through which solidarities could emerge. In this sense, amefricanity can also be read as a utopia, especially useful in authoritarian political contexts. Like all utopias, Ladin Amefrica does not have to exist to be a force that moves us, providing a new cultural and political imagery that draws the lines of an imagined Black and Indigenous transnational diasporic community that could serve as a base for political action.

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