

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S AND GENDER ACTIVISM  
AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: BRAZIL**

**Transcript of Fernanda Thomaz  
Interviewer: Martha Abreu**

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**Fernanda Thomaz** is a professor of African History at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Her books include: *History of colonialism, justice, and African agencies in Mozambique*; *A brief journey through African history and cultures*; and *Africas: histories, cultures, and education*; and an edited volume on gender and identity. She has also published numerous articles on colonialism, race, law, women's movements, and memory in Nigeria and Mozambique. Professor Thomaz has coordinated public history projects that document Brazil's African heritage. She is a vocal advocate for the acknowledgment of Brazil's ties to Africa through educational and public policy and for racial and gender rights in Brazil.

In 2023, in recognition of her scholarly and public advocacy work, Professor Thomaz was named head of Brazil's first government commission to investigate the Memory and Truth of Slavery and Transatlantic Trafficking of Enslaved People, created by the federal Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship. In this capacity, she has worked to achieve justice, recognition, and reparation for the systematic historical and continuing human rights violations against Black Brazilians.

**Martha Campos Abreu** is a professor at the History Institute of the Federal Fluminense University, Brazil. She is author of 3 books and editor or co-editor of 19 collected works on the Atlantic traffic in enslaved people, race and gender in post-abolition Brazil, and Brazilian popular culture, music and performance. Prof. Abreu combines scholarship with public history and advocacy for descendants of enslaved Africans. This includes documenting the nonmaterial culture of *quilombos*, or Afro-Brazilian communities claiming ancestral rights to land and other resources and promoting and curating various Afro-Brazilian heritage sites and exhibits. She has supported legal reparations and rights through the Public Ministry of Rio de Janeiro and the Truth Commission for Slavery, of the Organization of Brazilian Attorneys.

*Keywords: Racial Identity, Intersectionality, and Education*

**Martha Abreu: We are here having a conversation with Fernanda Thomaz, and I am deeply honored to be conducting this interview. I'll start by asking Fernanda to introduce herself and tell us how she presents herself to the audience.**

Fernanda Thomaz: I think the first thing I could mention, since Martha Abreu is the one interviewing me, is that I was a student of hers.

**MA: It's true.**

FT: First of all, I am Fernanda Thomaz, as Martha Abreu already introduced me. I am a historian and a professor of African History. I've been working on the history of Mozambique<sup>1</sup> for some time, and currently, I am working at the Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship<sup>2</sup>, in a division called the General Coordination for the Memory and Truth of Slavery.

Beyond that, I think that the most important introduction would be that I am a Black woman from Baixada Fluminense<sup>3</sup>, from a working-class family. I completed my undergraduate, master's<sup>4</sup>, and doctoral<sup>5</sup> degrees at a time when Brazil<sup>6</sup> had public policies that enabled people from low-income backgrounds to achieve, for example, a doctorate in a country like ours.

**MA: Great. Exactly. Let's talk a bit about that first. How did you manage to get where you are, as a university professor and doctor? Before you reached that point, how were the early stages of your schooling? Because you know that most of the Brazilian population doesn't finish high school. How was this journey for you, coming from a working-class background, going to college?**

FT: I think I come from a family—or rather, I do come from a family with limited resources, but where education was important. My parents had only studied up to fourth grade. It was

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<sup>1</sup> Mozambique is a country on the coast of southeastern Africa. It is surrounded by the Indian Ocean to the east and is also referred to as the Republic of Mozambique. ("Mozambique." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mozambique>. Accessed 27 February 2025.)

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship is a subdivision of the Brazil government that is dedicated to ensuring and defending the rights of citizens. ("Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry\\_of\\_Human\\_Rights\\_and\\_Citizenship#:~:text=The%20Ministry%20of%20Human%20Rights,to%20the%20Presidency%20of%20Brazil..](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Human_Rights_and_Citizenship#:~:text=The%20Ministry%20of%20Human%20Rights,to%20the%20Presidency%20of%20Brazil..) Accessed 27 February 2025.)

<sup>3</sup> Baixada Fluminense is a region part of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. ("Baixada Fluminense." Wikipedia. [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baixada\\_Fluminense](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baixada_Fluminense). Accessed 27 February 2025.)

<sup>4</sup> A master's degree is given to an individual from a higher education institution after additional study in a field after a bachelor's degree has already been completed. ("Master's degree." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master%27s\\_degree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master%27s_degree). Accessed 21 March 2025.)

<sup>5</sup> A doctoral degree, or a doctorate, is usually the highest degree an individual can receive. It is given to individuals after completion of many years of additional study in a specific field after already having received a Bachelor's degree. ("Doctorate." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctorate>. Accessed 21 March 2025.)

<sup>6</sup> Brazil is a country located in South America. It is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and is one of the largest countries in continent and the world. ("Brazil." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazil>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

only when I was in graduate school that my mother finished high school; she completed elementary school and then finished high school. My father had only studied up to the fourth or fifth grade when I was a student in the public school system.

I studied practically my whole life in public schools, except for high school, when I attended a private school. My father was the eldest of eight children from my grandmother, so he had to start working very early, at 13 or 14 years old, to help his parents support the family. He began working very young, starting as a bus fare collector.

He always wanted to study at the best school in Nova Iguaçu<sup>7</sup>, in Baixada Fluminense, but he couldn't afford it. He saw the children, the people studying there, and he wanted to be there. I think this had a big impact on him, because within our family both my parents valued education. Despite the lack of resources, they thought it was important. My mother was very strict.

She used to say: "We work to support the household, and you have the obligation to study. I won't tolerate you failing or needing remedial classes." This had a strong impact on us, on me and my sisters, because we knew that what we had to do was study. I had some issues because I had cerebral dysrhythmia<sup>8</sup> and seizures<sup>9</sup>. I was a very hyperactive child.

I was on various types of sedatives, like Phenobarbital<sup>10</sup>. My mother found this out when I was about a year and a half old because she noticed that my behavior and the way I moved were extremely agitated. I began to get regular medical care. One of the things that the doctor noticed was that I had an ease for learning things, for truly understanding.

I had various issues that required my mother's attention. According to the doctor, if she hadn't discovered it early on, I would have had lasting effects and would have been dependent. I had medical follow-ups throughout my childhood, but I had an ease with learning. I learned a lot and even taught myself to read. My mother tells the story that when we were walking down the street, there was a sign that said "Deputado" ("Deputy"), and I read it. My mother started crying. She said, "How does this girl do it?"

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<sup>7</sup> Nova Iguaçu is a region within Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. ("Nova Iguaçu." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nova\\_Igua%C3%A7u](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nova_Igua%C3%A7u). Accessed 12 March 2025.)

<sup>8</sup> Cerebral dysrhythmia is defined as differing or unusual rhythms within the cerebral cortex region in the brain. ("Epilepsy: a paroxysmal cerebral dysrhythmia." ScienceDirect. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1525505002000501>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

<sup>9</sup> A seizure is defined as a sudden bundle of electrical activity that is unrestrained in brain cells. This can cause muscle stiffness, twitching, or other unusual behaviors. ("Types of Seizures." Johns Hopkins Medicine. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/epilepsy/types-of-seizures#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20seizure%3F,Seizures%20are%20not%20all%20alike>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

<sup>10</sup> Phenobarbital is a medication that is typically prescribed to help control seizures. Less commonly, it is used for anxiety. ("Phenobarbital." MedlinePlus. <https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a682007.html#:~:text=Collapse%20Section,to%20stop%20taking%20the%20medication>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

I think I was about 4 years old, maybe 3, I don't know, 4 years old. When my mother saw me read the sign, she started crying: "How did this child read that?" At school, there was a neighborhood school where I was always the standout student. For my mother, this created a mindset in my family that I was the intelligent child. I remember that at 7 years old, I would say to myself, "Guys, the only good thing I have is that I am intelligent." When I was 7, because my mother would complain—I was very mischievous and very restless, I would run away from home, I would fight with the boys because of the hyperactivity. My sisters were always very quiet.

I'm the middle sister. The oldest and the youngest were both quiet, and I stood out in that sense. I thought the only thing I had was my intelligence. What do I mean by that? A mindset developed in my family, not just in my immediate family but also extended family, that I was the intelligent child. Of course, over time, that stopped. What I stood out for gradually became less pronounced, and I became a typical child, especially after I was released from treatment, making things seem—like I became an ordinary child.

My family saw me as intelligent, so there was encouragement for us, my sisters and me, to study, but there was something different with me. You know how when you empower someone, you tell them what they are, and they start to believe it? I carried that belief throughout my entire childhood, thinking I was a smart kid. In fact, this continued into my teenage years as well. My greatest impact—I always liked studying because it was the thing I had; it was the capital I possessed.

When I entered college, it was a big problem for me because I came from a very low-quality, bad educational background. I spent most of my life in public schools. I wrote poorly, had no access to reading, and little access to cultural experiences as well. My classmates went to the theater and visited libraries. I lived in Baixada Fluminense, with limited access to certain cultural activities and habits. My parents didn't have those opportunities or the background.

When I entered university, I was confronted by the fact that I hadn't done certain readings, and my writing skills were poor. I went on to study History at UFF [Universidade Federal Fluminense]<sup>11</sup>, which had this reputation of being considered the best or one of the best in Brazil. There were people from abroad, people who had money, because they had attended good schools their whole lives. For me, it was a huge shock.

Actually, I think—I didn't fall into depression, but my self-esteem really took a hit because my intelligence was the only "capital" I felt I had. My entire life, I was seen as a smart kid, and then you get there, and you realize, "Wow, I can't—." It's not even that I couldn't keep up; I just had so much to overcome. Being a Black woman, a Black girl from Baixada

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<sup>11</sup> Fluminense Federal University is a higher education institution in Rio de Janeiro. It was founded in 1960 and is considered one of the best universities in the country. ("Fluminense Federal University." Wikipedia. [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universidade\\_Federal\\_Fluminense](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universidade_Federal_Fluminense). Accessed 12 March 2025.)

Fluminense, because I moved from Nova Iguaçu to Niterói<sup>12</sup>. I was the only Black woman, the only Black girl in the classroom. And this was in 2001. You know what I mean?

**MA: There really weren't [a lot of Black students].**

FT: Even the racial debate, I didn't have it back then, and there wasn't a significant racial debate. There just wasn't a racial debate. It's different from what our students experience a decade later, my students, later on. That's when I think I started to feel imposter syndrome, and it really affected my self-esteem. That's when I truly started to feel like a Black woman, because racism hit me head-on. The racism was very clear to me.

In college, I was able to realize this intersection of what it means to be a Black woman, because it's not just about being a woman, or just about being Black—it's about being a Black woman. And this involves— in Brazil, race and class are interconnected. A Black woman, from a lower class, who also comes from the periphery. I encountered this a lot. It really affected me throughout college, I think. That's where it triggered a lot of things for me. Emotionally and psychologically, the History course was kind of traumatic. It was traumatic. I didn't have any references. I didn't have Black professors, for example.

The only Black professor I had was [inaudible], who wasn't really a professor. There was also Iolanda, Professor Iolanda de Oliveira<sup>13</sup>, but she was in [the school of] education, and it was actually through her that I started to develop a racial awareness. In a way, the university wore me out. When it comes to this intersection of gender and race, it was very harsh for me. It felt like I was thrown into the lion's den, and I had to figure things out on my own— figure out how to study, how to overcome the gaps, but also deal with the aspects of sociability itself.

**MA: How did you manage? How did you make it through?**

FT: I don't know, Martha. I'm not sure. There were moments when I felt I was on the verge of depression because I had this overwhelming sense that I needed therapy; my self-esteem was incredibly low. But here's the thing—my parents raised me to be strong, so I believed I had to push through. First, I think an important part of my journey was the PENESBI program<sup>14</sup>, which was the *Programa de Educação para os Negros da Sociedade Brasileira* (Education Program for Black People in Brazilian Society).

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<sup>12</sup> Niterói is a region in the state of Rio de Janeiro. It is located close to the city of Rio de Janeiro and is therefore considered a part of the metropolitan area. ("Niterói." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niter%C3%B3i>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

<sup>13</sup> Professor Iolanda Oliveira is currently part of the faculty at Fluminense Federal University. She specializes in the education of Black and Indigenous peoples. Much of the focus of Professor Oliveira has been on the relationship between different races, education, and teaching. ("Yolanda de Oliveira." Escavador. <https://www.escavador.com/sobre/1894605/iolanda-de-oliveira>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

<sup>14</sup> The PENESBI program was started at Fluminense Federal University for the purpose of researching black people in the field of education as well as educating the general public about them. Originally the project only focused on black people, but has now branched out to indigenous peoples since 2018. ("About PENESBI." Universidade Federal Fluminense. <http://penesbi.uff.br/sobre-o-penesb/>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

## MA: How did you get involved with PENESBI?

FT: Actually, I got involved with PENESBI because of Professor Iolanda, who was the program coordinator. She had funding from the Ford Foundation<sup>15</sup> and was leading a project related to affirmative action. The initiative provided scholarships to Black students—20, to be precise. It was a pilot program. There were 20 Black students from various fields, and I was the only one from History. The program offered scholarships, and in return, we conducted research, participated in Portuguese language courses, and engaged in other similar activities. Within the field of History, the person associated with PENESBI was Hebe [Mattos]<sup>16</sup>. That's also when I first met her.

I think it was a pathway for me to start understanding certain things and to work on overcoming challenges. It also helped me develop an academic social network and find support because navigating that space wasn't simple. Through PENESBI, we formed a group—those 20 students—and we are still very close. One of my best friends from that group is now a Public Defender in Rondônia<sup>17</sup>. He was the only one studying Law, so we connected and became very good friends. Another friend from the program is now a social worker in São Paulo<sup>18</sup>. We were very close during that project.

PENESBI was a space where I began to develop a sense of racial awareness and understand my place in that context. The discussions, especially in History, were very shallow. It was difficult to talk about these issues because they were often dismissed as “overreacting” or “complaining.” Even within the student movement, these topics weren't well-received, which was frustrating. But PENESBI gave me a chance to reflect on myself and catch my breath. It was through conversations with Hebe that I began to engage in research—specifically researching the memory of slavery. That's how the project on the *Comunidade de São José da Serra* [community of São José da Serra<sup>19</sup>] came about, and we even made a video about it. In the History program, Hebe was one of my biggest sources of support.

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<sup>15</sup> The Ford Foundation was founded 80 years ago for the purpose of fighting against injustice while advocating for democracy and social justice. (“About the Ford Foundation.” Ford Foundation. <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/about-the-ford-foundation/>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

<sup>16</sup> Professor Hebe Mattos teaches at Fluminense Federal University. Much of her work, including her published books, focus on the slavery of Brazilians as well as society during this time. (“Hebe Mattos.” Columbia Center for the Study of Social Difference. <https://www.socialdifference.columbia.edu/faculty/-hebe-mattos>. Accessed 12 March 2025.)

<sup>17</sup> Rondônia is a state in Brazil located in the western region of the country. It is one of the least populated states in the country. (“Rondônia.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rond%C3%B4nia>. Accessed 13 March 2025.)

<sup>18</sup> São Paulo is the capital of the state of São Paulo in Brazil. It is located in the southeastern region of the country and is regarded as one of the most populated cities in the country. (“São Paulo.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%A3o\\_Paulo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%A3o_Paulo). Accessed 13 March 2025.)

<sup>19</sup> São José da Serra is a town located in the Morro da Pedreira Environmental Protection Area in southeastern Brazil. (“Saint Joseph of the Serra.” Bem vindos a Jaboticatubas. <https://www.jaboticatubas.com.br/saojosedaserra.html>. Accessed 28 March 2025.)



Then [inaudible], a professor from Benin<sup>20</sup>, came to teach an intensive course in collaboration with Marisa Soares. It was a nearly year-long course on African History, and that's when I fell in love with the subject. I thought to myself, "I want to study African History." The following year, Marcelo Bittencourt joined the program, and I believe he became one of my greatest sources of support. Both he and the opportunities they provided were fundamental for me.

That's when I connected directly with you, with the project Hebe had, and with Marcelo, with African History. I realized that I had options—options that made sense to me politically. I could have studied anything else. When I started the History program, I thought, "I'm going to study the Military Dictatorship." I could have studied that or many other issues, even ones I identified with, but I think it made a lot of sense for me to go through this process of memory, to delve into Africa, which I think was incredibly empowering for me.

Even so, when I look back at the History program, I think it was a very traumatic experience for me. I think about the impact of racism<sup>21</sup> and sexism<sup>22</sup>, not just because of my background, but also because of how people saw me. I had many classmates at college who I was certain didn't believe I could get to where I am today. I see it now, actually. Sometimes I even get emotional when I meet people who say, "Wow." But it's the same people who didn't believe in me.

**MA: I can imagine.**

FT: Not even I believed it. I didn't believe it. I saw, for example, the things my classmates did on the weekends—they would do all kinds of things together, but they didn't invite me to join them. They already looked at me in a way that said, "She won't be able to go. I don't want to hang out with her. She's not interesting." It wasn't just about being "interesting" because I had something to offer; it was because of racism. That's how I saw myself. Today, I remember that when I started teaching, I observed the social interactions of my students. I see it now, too—people who still have groups from their university days.

My relationships are very specific, and look, I'm someone who, wherever I go, I make friends, I build connections. But from my undergraduate days, I've only reconnected with a few people now. That's because today, people have much more racial awareness. Today, I've reached a level of education and expertise that many people admire—and sometimes, if I'm honest, those same people probably thought they would be in my position and not me. They

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<sup>20</sup> Benin, or the Republic of Benin, refers to a country located in western Africa. It is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean. ("Benin." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin>. Accessed 13 March 2025.)

<sup>21</sup> Racism is defined as prejudice towards other individuals on the basis of their race. ("RACISM Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>. Accessed 13 March 2025.)

<sup>22</sup> Sexism is defined as prejudice towards other individuals due to their sex. ("SEXISM Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexism#:~:text=%3A%20prejudice%20or%20discrimination%20based%20on,sexi>. Accessed 13 March 2025.)



admire me now. They want to get closer to me, but back then, I doubt it. Back then, I felt very sidelined. Most of my connections were with people from other programs who shared similar experiences and backgrounds to mine.

**MA: How important it is not to be alone, right? To find that network within the university, to survive against racism.**

FT: Exactly.

**MA: Your testimony is incredible—it was your connection with other Black students that gave you that support, that confidence. Why did you choose to study History?**

FT: Why did I choose to study History? Well, when I finished high school, I enrolled in a preparatory course for the university entrance exam. It was a community-based program at the time of Frei Davi<sup>23</sup>. It was called PVNC, *Pré-Vestibular para Negros e Carentes* (Preparatory Course for Black and Underprivileged Students)<sup>24</sup>, and it was held at a church in Nova Iguaçu. We had classes in some subjects, but not in others—like Physics and Biology, for example. What did we do? All the instructors were volunteers, university students who taught us. We formed a study group with other students in the program and came together to try to study the subjects we didn't have classes for. We helped each other—those who had less difficulty in one subject helped those who struggled more. And we managed to make it work.

I passed on my first try, but I wanted to study Social Work. I thought Social Work was the more political program for me, where I could go into a community and speak freely, where I could foster political awareness in people and enable them to develop that awareness. But when I started the program, I realized it was something else entirely. Social Work often ends up being very dependent on either the State or private companies, and there's a whole dynamic of class conflict—but, in the end, the social worker is employed by someone and ends up benefiting someone else.

I started to feel discouraged, and that's when I thought, "Man—" I did two semesters. "I don't want to stay here because I can't waste my time on this." Because, Martha, I've been supporting myself since I was 19. When I got into university, I left Nova Iguaçu and moved to Niterói. I had saved up money six months in advance, working at a pet food store for six months. I had been accepted, I got into [inaudible], saved up, and moved to Niterói. I supported myself. I found a telemarketing job, worked in telemarketing, and got that

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<sup>23</sup> Frei Davi is a catholic priest in Brazil. He is known for his his activism on behalf of the Black community. ("Santos, David Raimundo "Frei David"". Oxford African American Studies Center. <https://oxfordaasc.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-75063>. Accessed 13 March 2025.)

<sup>24</sup> PVNC was started in 1993 in Rio de Janeiro to help mainly black students become accustomed to public universities in Brazil. ("Pre-University Course for Black and Underprivileged People (PNVC)." UOL. <https://vestibular.brasilecola.uol.com.br/cursinhos-comunitarios/prevestibular-para-negros-carentes-pvnc.htm>. Accessed 21 March 2025.)

PENESBI scholarship. But the scholarship was very small, so it was a combination of the telemarketing job and the scholarship.

Later, things got really tight financially, and I was able to get a scholarship from CNPq [National Council for Scientific and Technological Development]<sup>25</sup> through Hebe. That's when I quit my job to focus solely on History, solely on studying History. Going back to that time, I was studying Social Work, supporting myself, and working in telemarketing, and I thought, "Since I'm not happy, I moved here to Niterói, and I want this for myself. I want to study. I think this is the path—the path for me to achieve social mobility." Because I had a very bad experience—I'll talk about it in a moment—that I didn't want to have in my life. That's when I said, "I think I want to work by telling people that they—"

I said, "I'm going to study History." Because I was considering both History and Geography, but Geography included Physical Geography so on, and I thought, "I'm not going to like that." History is where I have space in the classroom, where I can say what I want, and where people can leave with a different worldview. What motivated me the most, Martha, is that my father was a factory worker; he worked at a pen factory, and my mother always worked in various jobs, always very independent. There was a period when they owned a store, but we lived with a lot of sacrifice. We often had to rely on my father's salary. My father retired very young, and his income ended up supporting the store and everything else.

Toward the end of that period, at the end of the store's run, I used to go with my mother to the fairs in Itaipava<sup>26</sup>. Do you remember those fairs? I lost count of how many times we'd arrive at Vila São João<sup>27</sup> right after a shootout had just happened. We'd turn back home, set up the stall. But sometimes, we'd go to festivals, like in Saquarema<sup>28</sup>. There were festivals where we'd set up the store's goods—mostly toys, as it was a toy store. I was 14 years old, and I'd see young people enjoying the festivals while I was working. I'd tell myself, "I don't want this for me. I'm going to study." My parents encouraged me, of course. "I'm going to study because I don't want to spend nights selling things. I want to be able to enjoy life."

That was very clear to me—I didn't want to go through that, and I believed that the way out of it was through education. My parents told me that, too, that education was the way. It was something very strong for me. That belief gave me strength, a bit of power, a bit of fuel

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<sup>25</sup> The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, or CNPq, is a department within the Brazil government that is responsible for furthering science and technology research. The department was created in 1951 and is a part of the Ministry of Science and Technology. ("National Council for Scientific and Technological Development." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Council\\_for\\_Scientific\\_and\\_Technological\\_Development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Council_for_Scientific_and_Technological_Development). Accessed 21 March 2025.)

<sup>26</sup> Itaipava is an affluent neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro. It is home to many influential and wealthy individuals. ("Itaipava." Riotur. [https://riotur.rio/en/que\\_fazer/itaipava-2/](https://riotur.rio/en/que_fazer/itaipava-2/). Accessed 13 March 2025.)

<sup>27</sup> Vila Sao Joao is a village located in the Barao Geraldo district in the city of Campinas in Brazil. ("List of neighborhoods in Campinas." Wikipedia. [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista\\_de\\_bairros\\_de\\_Campinas](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_de_bairros_de_Campinas). Accessed 13 March 2025.)

<sup>28</sup> Saquarema is a region in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It is regarded as a well-known surfing destination. ("Saquarema." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saquarema>. Accessed 13 March 2025.)

to keep studying and to face all the racism. And it was hard, you know? My mom used to tell me during my time in the History program: “My daughter, you used to be so much happier.” Can you believe that? My mom always encouraged me to study, but she would say: “My daughter, you were so much happier before you started the History program.”

**MA: Wow, and it was supposed to be the highlight of your life.**

FT: It’s racism. My mom was super proud, but it affected her because she could really see it—I was feeling like nothing in that program. Even so, I felt like I had to do it. It’s so crazy.

**MA: You didn’t give up.**

FT: No. Today, when I look back, I’ve completed my undergraduate degree, my master’s, and my doctorate, and I’ve overcome so much during my graduate studies as well.

**MA: An inner strength, right, Fernanda?**

FT: That’s it, that’s it.

**MA: That made you carry on.**

FT: I don’t know what it was. I was married for 13 years. My partner—when I went to Bahia<sup>29</sup> for my master’s, we met, and we lived together for a long time. I finished my master’s, my doctorate, and we were together through it all. I passed the civil service exam, and we were still together, but then we separated. One day, we met again, and he said to me, “Fernanda, you’re one of the people I know who, even when you’re broken, even in pieces, you keep moving forward.” Because he saw me in so many situations due to—

**MA: The difficulties.**

FT: Of the academic world.

**MA: Before starting university, what was your experience with racism like? In your family, in your school. Did you have any discussions about it, or any awareness of it?**

FT: I did. Actually, my parents always acknowledged our racial identity. “We are Black people, and we face certain difficulties,” they would say. But they didn’t have a deep racial awareness. Racism was very evident in my family. Society itself is racist. At school, it was very common, of course—especially as a Black teenage girl in Brazil—to be the one who was overlooked, the one the boys were least interested in being with.

When the list of the prettiest girls came out, we would get so anxious because we were always at the bottom of the list. The only time we were at the top of the list was when it was

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<sup>29</sup> Bahia is a state located in northeastern Brazil. It is known for being one of the most populated states in the country. (“Bahia.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bahia>. Accessed 13 March 2025.)

about the “ugliest girls.” School exposed us to all of that. There were those jokes—“Black girl with rough hair who doesn’t like to comb it.” All of that was part of the experience. I think the place where I started to develop a slightly more critical awareness was in the pre-college preparatory course.

In the prep course, we sometimes had conversations with some social groups, social movements. We also did volunteer work in the communities, and that’s when I started wanting to study Social Work. In one community, we did a theater project with children’s groups, and I thought, “No, I think this is the way.” That’s when I started to see myself a little more as a Black woman. But even so, I don’t think it was— The hardest blow came in college because, up until then, I was mostly surrounded by other Black people in the spaces I was in. At the university, that wasn’t the case.

**MA: No.**

FT: There was a connection between race and class. And also gender, which was very strong, and people didn’t want to acknowledge it. It affected everything—from social interactions to knowledge itself, to education. The university is a very elitist and harsh place. For me, that was the big— Well, the PENESBI, as a political space, was very important in raising awareness and fostering discussions. We formed groups and started thinking about and discussing racial issues. For me, the PENESBI was a space that offered the greatest opportunity for self-awareness.

**MA: A place of real education.**

FT: Yes, of education.

**MA: After your doctorate, tell me a bit about what you did and what you’re doing now in government policies.**

FT: I completed my doctorate, and it was also traumatic. It was really difficult, mainly because of— I think sociability was one aspect, but also overcoming my insecurities, obviously, and the triggers that were created during my undergraduate years, which I carried throughout my graduate studies. But even so, I didn’t stop. I completed my undergraduate degree, and by the time I was finishing it, in the final semester, I had already been accepted into the master’s program.

When I was finishing my master’s degree, I had already been accepted into the doctoral program. It was something like that. The postdoctoral period was quite—well, it was a time of transition. The following year, I passed the exam to join UFJF [Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora]<sup>30</sup>. The good thing about the doctoral program was that I also had other

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<sup>30</sup> The Federal University of Juiz de Fora is a public higher institution located in Brazil. The university was established in 1960. (“Federal University of Juiz de Fora.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_University\\_of\\_Juiz\\_de\\_Fora](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_University_of_Juiz_de_Fora). Accessed 14 March 2025.)

experiences. I spent time in Mozambique, traveling back and forth between Mozambique and Portugal<sup>31</sup> for two years, which gave me different experiences and perspectives as well.

That was very important—being exposed to other cultures. I finished my doctorate in 2012. This is actually an important point to talk about as well. In 2013, I passed the exam to join UFJF, and it was great because I arrived there and said to myself: “I want to do things differently so that other women don’t have to go through what I went through, so they can find open doors.” That’s when I started to think about my political role as a professor—a political role as a social agent in that space.

That the academic space can also be a space for activism, because activism is present in all our actions. It can take an organized form, as part of civil society, but it never leaves us—it will always be present in every place. That’s when I began to think about various initiatives and realized that my work needed to go beyond the university itself. But there was one thing I couldn’t overcome, for example: the dissertation.

I went 10 years without looking at my dissertation. Well, almost 10, 8 years. When the pandemic hit—I finished it in 2012—I wouldn’t look at it; I thought it was terrible. But people would say, “Wow, what a beautiful work. I’m discussing it in a graduate course I’m teaching,” or things like that. Some people were shocked: “You haven’t published it?” My advisor would tell me, “Fernanda, you need to publish it.”

I thought I would have to almost redo the entire work, but I couldn’t bring myself to read it in its entirety—not once. I only published articles. I had even received proposals to publish it. When the pandemic came, I told myself, “I’m going to read it.” Martha, that’s when it hit me—how much we become a product of racism, of sexism. How we also self-sabotage, that whole concept from Fanon<sup>32</sup>.

One thing is external—the “psychopathology of being.” Another thing... I think the greatest danger of racism is when we internalize it against ourselves, we as Black people, because it becomes an internal violence directed at ourselves. That’s the greatest cruelty, I think—the peak of... how do you say it? Not defeat, but the success, the ultimate success of racism, which is when you self-destruct, because that’s what it does. When I started reading my dissertation, I remember putting it into book format and everything, and I was shocked. I’d say to myself, “Wait, I did this? Wow, that’s incredible. How did I do this? This is amazing, how incredible.”

**MA: You didn’t recognize it at the time.**

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<sup>31</sup> Portugal is a country located in the southwest region of Europe. It is bordered by Spain and the Atlantic Ocean. (“Portugal.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portugal>. Accessed 14 March 2025.)

<sup>32</sup> Frantz Fanon was a philosopher from France in the 1900s. Much of his work focused on the impact that colonization and decolonization had on society and psychopathology. (“Frantz Fanon.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frantz\\_Fanon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frantz_Fanon). Accessed 15 March 2025.)

FT: No, I was afraid to look. I spent all those years, years and years. That's when I said, "I can never do this to myself again." I know I'm a product of racism, but I can be a reverse product—not reverse racism, but a product that resists and goes in the opposite direction of that. I found myself admiring the work, and I thought, "Wow, eight years during which I could have done so many other things here, I could have published it." That's it. You see how this impacts, how it affects your entire life. That's it.

I think it was a job—at UFJF, to be honest with you, I feel a lot of happiness and pride about my experience there because it was when I engaged in dialogue with social movements, with Black women's movements, and the Black movement in Juiz de Fora. People from the Black movement also became part of the group we created, *Áfricas*, which was a group where students and engaged in discussions. I think it was very important.

**MA: And the guidance you provided.**

FT: And the guidance. And this dialogue outside the university space, within the university space. I think I had an experience there of extreme importance both for me and for the students, a political significance of academic engagement, the academic importance, or the role of academia there, and then African History as a path. That, for me, was the high point, up until the moment when—I wanted a graduate program in African History. It was great because the MEC [Ministry of Education]<sup>33</sup> funded it; it was even during the time when—

As soon as the course began, the [2016] coup happened, and I was worried the course wouldn't continue, that it wouldn't exist anymore. But afterward, the MEC— Once the course, which was for basic education teachers on African History, ended, it was very successful; people were eager for it. In a year and a half, the course that started with 83 participants ended with about 58, so there was minimal dropout. Then, in 2018, Hebe arrived, along with LABHOI [Laboratório de História Oral e Imagem]<sup>34</sup>, which was very positive for me in terms of dialogue and having someone to work with, because it's a very lonely endeavor. The networks I built were with people outside my department, so when Hebe arrived, it was like a meeting point for me, and that's when I really started to feel part of the university.

**MA: Such a good coincidence.**

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<sup>33</sup> The Ministry of Education is a subdivision of the federal government in Brazil. It is responsible for all matters relating to education across the country and across all levels. ("Ministry of Education (Brazil)." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry\\_of\\_Education\\_\(Brazil\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Education_(Brazil)). Accessed 15 March 2025.)

<sup>34</sup> The Laboratory of Oral History and Image is a part of the UFF in Brazil. The Laboratory was started in 2012 for the purposed of incorporating groups into the documentation of their own histories. As a result, the LABHOI has created a large database of histories of various geographic and ethnographic groups in Brazil. ("Digital Resources: The Laboratory of Oral History and Image (LABHOI-UFF), Brazil." Latin American History. <https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-9?p=emailAq0ETKPwdCoEg&d=/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-9>. Accessed 15 March 2025.)



FT: I haven't fully rationalized it yet, honestly, I'm just sharing with you. Hebe arrived at a moment when I was a university professor. It was really good. Then the pandemic hit, and after it passed, I left for my post-doc. I spent six months in Germany<sup>35</sup> and almost three months in Nigeria<sup>36</sup>—I couldn't stay the full six months there. When I returned, I was invited to work at the Ministry of Human Rights, focusing on memory. Imagine that—memory of slavery, which ties back to my initial project. Now I'm at the Ministry of Human Rights, and we're working on creating and consolidating a coordination effort, which I believe is extremely important for advancing the racial justice movement. That's it. I've been talking a lot already!

**MA: No, it's great. It's impressive how loneliness, when you're isolated, makes racism amplify that sense of being alone, weak, and incompetent. Whiteness, on the other hand, does the opposite. Whiteness makes the white student feel stronger, more capable, and that the space belongs to them.**

FT: Exactly.

**MA: What does feminism mean to you, and how do you see the discussion of gender within this antiracist struggle and from a perspective of intersectionality<sup>37</sup>? Class, race, and gender—how do you view that?**

FT: Martha, feminism, for me, is a struggle, obviously—it's a fight against sexism and the violences that women, in the plural, face. But feminism, for me, is not singular; it is plural because it takes diverse forms and shapes itself not only according to each intersectionality, each relationship within systems of oppression, but also according to each culture. It's also not unanimous because sometimes we present feminism as a path for struggle—the only necessary path for a fight toward gender equality.

But it's not. For example, in my study on Africa, African women often view feminism as something that comes from the West, and they recognize other ways of identifying and naming their local political struggles that don't need to be imported from the West. This is a major debate. When we engage in discussions about racialization, they aren't talking about racialization—they're talking about imperialism. This movement back and forth makes me reflect, but it also leads me to think about my own culture, where political struggles sometimes don't resonate much with the realities of women who, for instance, have lost their children to drug trafficking.

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<sup>35</sup> Germany is a country located in Europe. It is bordered by the Baltic and North Sea and the Alps. It is the most populated country that is part of the European Union. ("Germany." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germany>. Accessed 15 March 2025.)

<sup>36</sup> Nigeria is a country located in western Africa. It is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Sahel region. It is the most populated country on the continent and one of the most populated countries in the world. ("Nigeria." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigeria>. Accessed 16 March 2025.)

<sup>37</sup> Intersectionality is defined as how certain identities and aspects of an individual, such as race and socioeconomic status, can interact. ("Intersectionality." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersectionality>. Accessed 16 March 2025.)



It doesn't resonate much, for example, with a woman who comes home after working all day only to find her shack has collapsed in the rain or was flooded. Or with the single mother struggling to provide for her children, whose basic needs like healthcare, housing, and food are unmet. This reminds me a lot of Lélia González<sup>38</sup>. What middle-class women might want—sometimes discussions about abortion or equal working conditions with men—are not the same issues that many working-class women face. Often, they are just seeking basic conditions like access to education and healthcare.

I don't see feminism as something unanimous. Feminism is one of the possibilities for a political struggle toward gender equality. I use the concept of gender here because, when I talk about women, I'm talking about women who might be Black women—let's bring in the racial aspect. Black women, which already combines two intersectionalities: Black and female; Black and poor; Black, poor, and disabled; Black, poor, and living on the periphery; Black, poor, and living in rural areas.

In other words, these women will face multiple layers of challenges. If I want to think about a struggle against sexism, a fight for equality where these women have the conditions, the full conditions, to exist, I must address intersectionality. Intersectionality becomes an obligation if I want to envision a different society. A transformative society that truly ensures social justice for all women.

For example, we don't often talk about the transgender issue—how does racism intersect with that? If I consider a woman with a disability, as we've already discussed, the majority of people with disabilities are Black. It's a woman with a disability, a woman—let me give some examples—a woman from a lower social class, and a woman... let me think.

**MA: From the periphery.**

FT: Transgender<sup>39</sup>.

**MA: Transgender.**

FT: I am talking about women. Transgender women, women with disabilities, and low-income women. If they are white, they have one set of life conditions and opportunities. If they are Black, they face others. I am intersecting various aspects. Even for a transgender woman, for example, being a white woman is one thing; being a Black woman is another. The same applies to a woman with a disability. I am going beyond the triad of gender, class, and race.

**MA: I understand.**

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<sup>38</sup> Lelia Gonzalez was a politician from Brazil during the 1900s. She is known for her work on women's rights, with a focus on black women specifically. ("Lelia Gonzalez." Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%A9lia\\_Gonzalez](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%A9lia_Gonzalez). Accessed 16 March 2025.)

<sup>39</sup> Transgender refers to individuals whose gender identity is not the same as their sex given at birth. ("Transgender." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transgender>. Accessed 17 March 2025.)

FT: So there's no way. If I'm thinking—

**MA: It's a lot of intersections.**

FT: That's right. The feminism I understand, even if it comes from the West or we incorporate it with other elements and reflect on it, I think it is an important tool, a path for achieving social justice for all women. For all women. Now, in this sense, if it is for all women, intersectionality is mandatory. Because if you fail to see this, you are only looking at one group, reproducing inequalities in relation to others, and also committing violence.

Because, Martha, there was a time—this thing about feminism and sexism, about the struggle with Black women—it was heavily motivated by my interactions with my students, us working together. But that period from 2010 to 2020 was a time when Black feminism reached a peak. The rise of social media was really impactful. I think it was great that many young women got involved through social media. But at the same time, I also saw a process of a lot of dilution, like this: “Empowerment.” Empowerment is something that just floats in the air.

Empowerment is sometimes associated with bloggers who focus on aesthetics. Is empowerment tied to self-esteem? Yes, it is. Is representation important? Yes, it is. But if these things aren't collective, politicized, and inclusive of other women, they remain hollow, because the forms of empowerment can vary. While I might be discussing self-esteem and the need to feel confident, this could apply to many aspects of my life, but it often intersects with beauty standards as well.

But is that really urgent? Is it what those women I mentioned earlier, the ones I spoke about before, actually need? No. Empowerment—what type, in what context? If I know that the women who suffer the most from obstetric violence are Black women, for example, is it just about empowerment? Is that the focus? Or is it just about representation for representation's sake? I want to see a woman in a certain position in politics, sure. But if that doesn't bring about a path for political transformation, then it's hollow.

That's why I say “feminisms,” in the plural, because, first, there are different groups that intersect. I think we need to include everyone, but we also need to be careful about what we advocate for. Because even as a Black woman, I can reproduce violence. I can outsource, as Nancy Fraser<sup>40</sup> says, the oppression.

Because someone may think, “Oh, I've made it because I'm the CEO of a company.” But at the same time, the person who takes care of my children, my house, and cleans it, I pay them a lousy salary. I think that's the point—we need it, and it's important to see that feminism is important. It's an important instrument, but it's not the only one. It's also

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<sup>40</sup> Nancy Fraser is a feminist and philosophy professor. She is known for her criticism on liberal feminism. She has previously taught at Northwestern and now teaches at The New School in New York. (“Nancy Fraser.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nancy\\_Fraser](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nancy_Fraser). Accessed 17 March 2025.)

important to recognize other forms of mobilization and ways of looking at the struggle—not just formal mobilization—ways of looking at the struggle that work toward social justice for all women.

**MA: Wow, amazing. I really liked that reflection. Let's think about this—how does your mother see you today? No longer sad.**

FT: My mother is very proud. She is a very strong and intelligent woman. My father passed away when I was 17, so she held us together. They were married all that time, and she felt his absence very deeply and missed him a lot. But she raised us—my sisters and I are four years apart, and we were teenagers at the time. My mother kept us going. She's an incredible, brilliant, and beautiful woman. She's very proud because she always believed in education. I'm a historian, my sister is a nurse, the oldest, and the youngest studied statistics at UERJ<sup>41</sup>, but now she works in the Air Force<sup>42</sup>. In a way, the four of us have managed to rise.

**MA: All women.**

FT: Only women. And very independent, very independent, all three of us. That, too, makes her very proud. Proud because that's it. We are the product and, in fact, we are the example for the family. I also notice that my family has taken a different path in this sense of valuing education, not just within my immediate household but beyond. My 15-year-old niece, for example, made a social media post on Teacher's Day and wrote: "Auntie, congratulations on your day; you're the best teacher there is." I thought that was so sweet.

**MA: The best there is. And as an example.**

FT: She's 15 years old. If she were still a child, okay, but at her age, as a teenager who is starting to shape her worldview—she's in adolescence now but will soon transition to adulthood, with the choices she has to make today—I was really happy.

**MA: Wow, congratulations. What a beautiful, beautiful journey. And it's the example. I think it's the example that mobilizes other stories—a family that transforms, that creates a ripple effect, a huge wave.**

FT: A huge wave, because in my neighborhood, people talk about it.

**MA: Exactly. You are proof that it's possible, despite everything—though, of course, that doesn't mean it should have to be this way. On the contrary.**

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<sup>41</sup> The State University of Rio de Janeiro is a public institution of higher education in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It is one of the most reputable and largest universities in the country. ("State University of Rio de Janeiro." Wikipedia. [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universidade\\_do\\_Estado\\_do\\_Rio\\_de\\_Janeiro](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universidade_do_Estado_do_Rio_de_Janeiro). Accessed 18 March 2025.)

<sup>42</sup> The Air Force is a part of the Armed Forces of Brazil. This branch was started in 1941 and is one of the largest air forces in the world. ("Brazilian Air Force." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazilian\\_Air\\_Force](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazilian_Air_Force). Accessed 18 March 2025.)

FT: But there's something that drives me, Martha. I think it's tied to my family history, to the women in my family. Because I've talked about my mom, but there's also my father's side of the family, to which we're very close. Even my mom is close to my dad's family. My sisters and I are especially close because we grew up in the same yard as my uncles, my grandmother, and my godmother. My aunt passed away this year, but my grandmother passed away the same year I defended my doctorate, in 2012.

**MA: Wow.**

FT: My grandmother was born in 1919. She was from Vale do Paraíba<sup>43</sup>, from—what's the name again? Let me remember. Três Ilhas<sup>44</sup>. Três Ilhas. Do you know Três Ilhas? It's right on the border, toward Minas<sup>45</sup>.

**MA: Toward Minas.**

FT: I found out that Thomaz—with TH and Z at the end—comes from that region. I've always thought I ended up in Minas for a reason, but I've been lazy and haven't done the research yet.

**MA: You really should have.**

FT: I really should have. It's clear that the name Thomaz likely has ties to a slave owner and the enslaved people from that area.

**MA: Of course. Did she come alone?**

FT: No, what happened was—

**MA: No one comes alone.**

FT: No. My grandmother's story is very heavy because when she was eight years old—

**MA: She came to work.**

FT: Her parents moved to the Baixada Fluminense because of the orange groves and left her with a family in Três Ilhas.

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<sup>43</sup> Paraíba Valley is located between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in Brazil. The region is known for its agricultural activity. ("Paraíba Valley." Wikipedia. [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vale do Para%C3%ADba](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vale_do_Para%C3%ADba). Accessed 18 March 2025.)

<sup>44</sup> Três Ilhas is an archipelago situated off the coast of Brazil. ("Três Ilhas." Wikipedia. [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tr%C3%AAs Ilhas](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tr%C3%AAs_Ilhas). Accessed 28 March 2025.)

<sup>45</sup> Minas refers to a state in Brazil. It is located in the southeastern region of the country and is one of the largest states in the country as well. ("Minas Gerais." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minas Gerais](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minas_Gerais). Accessed 19 March 2025.)

## **MA: That's the story of so many.**

FT: She suffered every kind of violence, Martha. Every kind. My grandmother used to tell me stories—I loved listening to her stories—but there were some details she never shared. I only learned about those after she passed away. I remember it was around 2020 or 2021. My aunts were sitting in the living room—it had been nearly ten years since my grandmother had passed away—and they started sharing her stories. One of my cousins left the room, another stayed, and I just sat there, listening, feeling devastated.

I remember it was the eve of International Women's Day<sup>46</sup>—March 7. The next day would be the 8th. That moment made me think. My grandmother suffered every kind of violence imaginable. She worked under conditions of enslaved labor—truly enslaved. Her parents had left, and she was left behind to work. They claimed to have opened a savings account for her in Juiz de Fora<sup>47</sup>, which was the nearest city with a bank, saying they were saving her money there. It was all a lie. She worked in every possible way. And she was just a child. She used to tell me she had a tiny room where she'd hear noises in the middle of the night. As a child, she was terrified, thinking they were ghosts. You know that kind of thing?

She worked and did everything in the house. She suffered sexual violence—she went through it all. In the past, I couldn't even talk about it; it's something that deeply affected me. When my aunts told me about it, it really hit me hard. I kept thinking to myself—this was in 2021, so it was quite recent—I kept saying, "This has to be my fuel." My grandmother was incredible. She was such a sweet person. She passed away in 2012, and I grew up with her. Despite all the brutality of her life, she was an absolute sweetheart. She had seven children, and all of them stayed close to her. My dad was the eldest. They were all around her. When my grandmother passed away, she was surrounded by her children, full of love.

Even today, our family is very close, very loving. But when I found out about everything she went through, I thought, "How could she be so loving and bring such goodness into the world?" Yet I believe the strength my grandmother showed, despite all she suffered, became fuel. She endured so much. She lived in her employers' house from when she was 8 until she was around 12 or 14. Her parents eventually came to get her, but I think someone must have told them about her situation, prompting them to act and bring her back.

She had no life of her own. I remember a story my aunts used to tell about a white boy who fell in love with her. My grandmother was very beautiful. He fell in love with her, but it was forbidden because he couldn't date a Black girl. The boy ended up taking his own life because of it. That was something that deeply marked her. They were both very young. There were so many stories like that. I think my grandmother—she was such a strong

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<sup>46</sup> International Women's Day was started in 1911 to advocate for gender equality and bring awareness to the issues women face on a daily basis. ("International Women's Day." International Women's Day. <https://www.internationalwomensday.com/>. Accessed 19 March 2025.)

<sup>47</sup> Juiz de Fora is a city located in the state of Minas in Brazil. The city is connected to 3 major cities in Brazil via a series of highways, which has been critical for the economic development of Juiz de Fora. ("Juiz de Fora." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juiz\\_de\\_Fora](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juiz_de_Fora). Accessed 19 March 2025.)

person, but her strength didn't come from brutality. It came from how much she transformed things and how much she could transform the people around her.

**MA: A survival strategy.**

FT: My grandmother, do you know what she used to say?

**MA: Wise.**

FT: That she used to wash clothes for the maid of Getúlio Vargas<sup>48</sup>. She was proud to say that—that she was the washerwoman for Getúlio Vargas's maid. I always thought that was her way of inserting herself into Brazil's history, into this narrative that's told from the perspective of white men and the political structure. It was her way of being part of Brazil's history. She worked in orange groves. She washed clothes. My grandmother would leave the Baixada and go all the way to Zona Sul<sup>49</sup> to clean houses, but she also washed and ironed clothes. She would carry bundles of clothes on her head, taking the train to get there. One day, she fell into that gap between the train and the platform.

Her mobility changed, it was different after that, and my grandmother faced many issues. She could still walk, but it became more difficult for her. This woman, I feel, truly shaped me, along with my parents and my uncles and aunts. It's just as people often say—that the Black family is much more extensive. I see that in my own family. It was my father and my mother, but we—my sisters and I—were raised somewhat differently than my cousins. Yet we all had this shared upbringing. Shared.

**MA: Protection, right? Solidarity, protection.**

FT: A lot. Remember I told you I was hyperactive? My mom used to beat me at night because I did so much, and my grandmother would protect me: "Don't hit her; she's sick." And my mom would reply, "No, she's not sick because if she grows up, she'll end up hitting me. She needs to learn that she can't do that. She can't run off, she can't go around beating other kids."

**MA: You have to write this story. About your grandmother and the story of this family. This grandmother—you have to do this. You owe it to her.**

FT: But my grandmother was—

**MA: This story so powerful, Fernanda.**

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<sup>48</sup> Getulio Vargas was a politician from Brazil during the beginning of the 1900s. He was the 17<sup>th</sup> president of the country and his political career has generally been considered controversial. ("Getulio Vargas." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Get%C3%BAlio\\_Vargas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Get%C3%BAlio_Vargas). Accessed 20 March 2025.)

<sup>49</sup> Zona Sul, or the South Zone, is a region located on the coast of Rio de Janeiro. This area is home to many hotels and beaches and is a major tourist destination in the country. ("South Zone (Rio de Janeiro)." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Zone\\_\(Rio\\_de\\_Janeiro\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Zone_(Rio_de_Janeiro)). Accessed 20 March 2025.)

FT: My grandmother is truly incredible.

**MA: And it's so important for you to be where you are today. That you can truly be an example. But not an example of being some idealized figure—an example of a possible experience, one that involved pain but also a series of accomplishments.**

FT: Exactly.

**MA: I'm very happy to hear this story. Would you like to say anything else?**

FT: There was something I was talking about regarding experience, something I was going to say but forgot, and it feels important to mention now. Martha, there's something I've been thinking about a lot lately, especially after I took on this job. It feels like a realization of things I need to see in life. It's that none of this happened by chance. Out of nowhere, I ended up working in this coordination for the memory of slavery. I feel things that I don't even know where they come from.

And at the same time, this entire journey, this connection with the past, what my grandmother brings, but also what she represents from that past. I don't know, Martha, something tells me today, after I took on this role, I feel like nothing I've done has been in vain or without purpose. There's some kind of point in all of this. Whether it's telling the story you're talking about, whether it's telling the story of my family or of others, or for my family or for others. But there's something about this mission in life.

**MA: I think so too. I think there's something that places us where we are.**

FT: Right? And we draw strength we don't even realize we have.

**MA: What's interesting is that you went to Africa, but it seems like Minas [Gerais] pulls you. Of course, you're a professor of African History, but—**

FT: I work in Minas.

**MA: You're not working in International Relations; you're talking about the memory of slavery in Brazil.**

FT: Exactly.

**MA: But I think that's it, this dialogue with Africa too.**

FT: Maybe going there was part of the path.

**MA: For you, even to establish yourself as an intellectual in African History. Your journey is fantastic. I think that, at the same time as you're remarkable—you are remarkable—you speak about everything, and you have so much generosity in**



**dealing with people. I mean, maybe a little like your grandmother. Even with all the experience of pain, it's possible to build and not just destroy.**

FT: Exactly.

**MA: She built a beautiful family, despite all the traumas she always carried. I don't know how she managed to deal with it. Because I also think that no one truly overcomes these things. I think we learn to cope. We even adapt to those pains, but we learn—we learn to handle them. I think this optimism of yours, this drive you have, is more than—it's exactly that. It makes perfect sense for you to be where you are.**

FT: Thank you, Martha, for helping me relive all of this. There are things that have been tucked away. There are things I think I've never shared with anyone and never even reflected on before.

**MA: No, these opportunities are good.**

FT: Exactly. I didn't even talk about my studies or anything, but—no, it's not even about that, it's really about the life journey.

**MA: It was great, it was beautiful. I think it was just as beautiful as the other one. Wow, we're finished.**