

**BLACK WOMEN  
MANAGERS: A  
REQUIRED PRESENCE!**

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*English version*

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My wish was that, in fact, we would be able to break the silence of this discussion in schools and offices, break epistemic racism, that this bibliographical reference would be available to everyone, and we would be able to critically read all of them. The signs of erasure black production are evident. It's rare that bibliographies indicate women or black people.

That we could read beyond the writings, as Paulo Freire<sup>16</sup> says. That people could perceive the nuances created by racism. As an educator, it's trying to deconstruct the training of these people. And convincing is a more difficult process, because we need to have substantial elements for this.

A legacy that I would like to leave would be an education that truly respects and understands diversity. To have more black and non-black people, defending the anti-racist struggle, with scientific arguments, to unveil a pedagogy of absences and thus, introjecting all this as an emancipatory political act. And, finally, to paraphrase an excerpt from Cristiane Sobral 's poem<sup>17</sup>, I want to leave provocations, reflections for our young women, with latent screams of “no more washing your dishes!”. The longing for freedom has to be paradigmatic, reporting class oppression, race and gender. In the same way that we are rejected every time we take on roles that were not thought of for us, I wish that this naturalization be swept away and that more black girls and women occupy the places of power.

In the social and affective field, I wish to have my family socially built. It is legally legitimized. We have a marriage certificate, a certificate for our daughter Ayala Vitória Pires Viana and Àile Pires, with the two mothers, my name and the name of my wife, the maternal grandparents; that record was very meaningful for our children. So, I think verbalizing this right and publicizing it as we did - it even became a film, Encontro das Águas<sup>18</sup> - it was and is fundamental.

16 Paulo Freire, educator, philosopher, and Patron of the Brazilian Education. Author of Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968), he is considered one of the most notable thinkers in the history of world pedagogy, having influenced the movement called critical pedagogy.

17 Theatrologist and black poet, she was the first black actress graduated in Theater Interpretation at the University of Brasília. She studied theater at SESC in Rio de Janeiro, in 1989; edited the play Acorda Brasil, in 1990. She performed in several theatrical and cinema shows. She is a Master of Arts (UnB), having published numerous articles and books. She was a theater critic for Tablado magazine and is a member of the Academia de Letras do Brasil - DF section.

18 The documentary Encontro das Águas was directed by Mestre Negroativo, directed by Flávia dos Santos and Zaira Pires, produced by Divindade Cultural and sponsored by Avon

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## MARIA DO CARMO FERREIRA DA SILVA

Maria do Carmo Ferreira da Silva  
Leticia Godinho  
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### 1. Origins: a family of migrants

My origins are in the north of Minas Gerais, Montes Claros, known in the 1950s as the little princess from the north of Minas Gerais. I spent my early childhood there, until I was 4 years old. My father is from Coração de Jesus, close to Montes Claros, and my mother from Pirapora, also in the north of Minas.

Some of my grandparents worked on farms in Pirapora, in the Montes Claros region. I remember that most of these farms belonged to the Paculdinos and that one of them was even godfather to my older brother. We have pictures of my grandmother when she was still working on these farms, with stylized scarves on her head. It was those scarves that were tied in the African style, and she was very black, bluish, dark green eyes.

According to some of our ancestors, the people closest to my grandmother came from Africa. In the past, people used to walk around barefoot. And I remember her also working the pestle and mortar, we also have photos. I learned from her how to mill rice. Still on my grandma's side – I don't know if my great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather – we called him Grandpa Felipe; he came from Portugal and that's why we have the surname Silva.

On my father's side, the origins are indigenous; my great grandmother was “caught by the noose”<sup>1</sup> and, there in the region, they were all seen as bugres<sup>2</sup>. My cousins who live in Montes Claros are black, brown, with straight hair. In Pirapora, many were known as or called “purplish”. Now, in the fifth generation, some have with lighter or darker skin, with straight hair and, sometimes, with lighter-colored eyes. It's miscegenation, which was and has always been very common, especially in this region of Bahia and northern Minas.

My family moved to Belo Horizonte in the 1950s, much as a result, at that time, of you going to a big city to try your luck and get out of the drought period. At the time, I was 4 years old. But I still have relatives in both Pirapora and Montes Claros, and in the surrounding region, close to the Francisco Sá and Grão Mogol region, and also in São Paulo, Brasília, and Portugal. We try to maintain a good family relationship, despite the physical distance. I have uncles still alive on my father's side.

On my mother's side, I no longer have living uncles or aunts, just cousins. There might be, but that's the thing; sometimes people left to try their luck elsewhere. Like my aunt, my mother's older sister, who went to Brasília, and we never heard from her again. I have another aunt, who was reported missing, had dry leaf-colored eyes, and was called Aunt Preta. So, my family is a bit of that: the old people were



*Maria on the day of her first inauguration as City Mayor, with her mother, Lucy. Nazareth School in Araçuaí, January 1997.*  
By: Personal Archive

mostly rural and some farmworkers and migrants; on the younger end, today, some have gone to university, like me. And some cousins and nephews, nieces are dentists, doctors, geographers, teachers, biologists, mathematicians, and historians and human relations.

My father worked for a long time, showing films. He was a cinematographic operator, so he traveled a lot in these regions of Minas Gerais, mainly north and northeast of Minas. I learned from him how to repair the films; in the past, films, to be shown, had to have two, three machines, because when one cut the tape, we had to sequence it. I remember that this operation was done with razor and clear tape. At that time, it was no longer silent cinema, it already had sound, recorded. I learned that from him, and then, I took a liking for cinematography. We also started to enjoy cinema a little together, with my father. Living in Belo Horizonte, sometimes, when my mother had to do something, he would take us to work. My mother had always been a homemaker, she washed a lot of clothes for other people, made prepared meals, and always took us too.

At the time, we were three brothers born in Montes Claros and two sisters born in Belo Horizonte. Then, in Belo Horizonte, we started to study. That's where I went to primary school.

### **The capital Belo Horizonte, childhood stage, and the first years of studies**

When we came from Montes Claros to Belo Horizonte, my father worked at a film company. As he was considered a businessman, so I went to kindergarten at Sesc<sup>3</sup>. Our kindergarten was up there on Padre Rolim Street, near Brasil Avenue. My older brother and I went to primary school at the Dom Pedro II School Group, in front of the Faculty of Medical Sciences. I still remember the name of our religion teacher at the time, Mrs. Esperança.

During this time, we needed to help the family, so each one of us had a job. I helped to take care of a baby, the son of my first elementary school teacher, who was our neighbor, and the family was from Raul Soares<sup>4</sup>. So, I helped take care of my elementary school teacher's son. I was already about seven or eight years-old; kindergarten, I remember, was when I was five, six years-old.

I went to catechism at the Church Santa Efigênia, near the headquarters of the BG<sup>5</sup>. Where today is the healthcare area<sup>6</sup>, there was a large square, 13 de Maio Square, where we went every day to play. When we didn't go there, we went to the BG square, where there were swings for us to

<sup>3</sup> Commerce Social Services.

<sup>4</sup> Town in the Zona da Mata region of Minas Gerais.

<sup>5</sup> War Battalion, unit in the Brazilian army.

<sup>6</sup> Informal area in Belo Horizonte where most healthcare services, particularly public ones, are focused around.

<sup>1</sup> Practice of kidnapping indigenous women and forcing them to marry.

<sup>2</sup> Bugre is a derogatory term given to indigenous people, as they are considered non-Christian, not civilized by European colonists.

play; we went also in the Municipal Park. My first communion<sup>7</sup> was in the Church Boa Viagem. My childhood, until 1960, 1965, I spent there, in this region.

When we left Montes Claros to go to BH, we lived for a while in the São Lucas neighborhood, also, in the Santa Casa region, with my brother's godmother. She was a pharmacist and a civil servant and housed us for a long time in Belo Horizonte. Then we moved to a shed that was ours. In the rainy season, everyone had to huddle in one bed, to escape the leaks. But in the hot weather it was good, because you could look up at the moon and the stars. From 1965, we were able to buy the house where the family lives until today, which is there between the Glória and Alípio de Melo neighborhoods, in the São Salvador neighborhood. It has been renovated several times.

Even in Belo Horizonte, we had to fetch water from a mine. Where Alípio de Melo is today, at the time it was a large farm, where we used to gather firewood. I remember that I knew how to make a bundle of firewood, but when it came to tying it, I wasn't strong enough. There, where the Contagem Mall is, it was all a cattle ranch, Contagem das Abóboras. There were many *congadeira* families<sup>8</sup> in the region and *folias de reis*<sup>9</sup>.

The mine where we used to get water to drink and wash our clothes was in the Ressaca region, almost ten km from where we lived. And that moment was just a big party, the whole neighborhood got together, there was a certain day for women to go and wash clothes. Then you made the *rodia*<sup>10</sup>. With the basins on their heads, they went with the bundle of clothes; we had to bring food, water, and it was just a huge party. I say party because everything for children is a reason to have fun! Eating was the best part. I've eaten a lot of prepared food, and I think sharing that is the best thing to do, because one eats some of the other's food. When we were small, we had *gamelas*<sup>11</sup>, from our African and indigenous heritage; food was put in the bowls and the grandmothers made *captain*<sup>12</sup>. There were people who said: oh, how disgusting! But the grandmothers made captain to give to us

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7 Religious rite in Catholic Church.

8 Congadeiras are people who dance and organize the cultural festivities of Congado. It is a mixture of the celebrations brought by enslaved Africans with colonial Christian religiosity. Its origins date back to an African rite, in which the subjects held a procession (or cortejo) in honor of the Congo Kings, to thank their rulers.

9 The Folia de Reis or Reisada (revelry of kings) is a festive, catholic celebration commemorating the religious feast of the Epiphany of the Lord, which celebrates the Adoration of the Wise Men at the birth of Jesus. In this celebration, the participants visit the houses door to door while singing, remembering the journey of the Wise Men to the baby Jesus. Its historical origin is Egyptian and was adopted in Europe by the Romans.

10 Support made from fabric or vines for the head, supporting bundles of firewood or basin with clothes.

11 Type of elongated bowl, shaped out of wood, present in both indigenous and African cultures.

12 Way to knead the food with your hands in the shape of a small cake, which was given to the children to eat

and when we already knew how to eat ourselves, we had spoons; the mothers gave a spoon to each one and shared the food in the bowl.

In the same neighborhood, our “church” was under a tree, it was our little chapel of Saint Anthony, where we did everything: bingo, a contest to be able to get money to build the church and such. And it was a neighborhood where everyone knew each other, at least the older families. When Holy Week and Christmas arrived, even the meals were exchanged, divided. What one made differently, they always took to the other, and even purchases were collective. When CEASA<sup>13</sup> was created, we took that Ressaca bus; I kept looking at the time that the bus was going to go up there on highway, where we lived, and said: “Here comes the bus!”. Then everyone would run around with bags, a cart, like a bricklayer cart, which we took – because, as it was all extremely far, very difficult, you made a purchase for the month. And then you put it together, to make it cheaper for everyone. For example, we would buy an orange bag, then we would come and do the divisions, each one would pay for what they would actually consume. So, there was a lot of good things, but also a lot of suffering, like the water issue, which we didn't have, nor sewage. Because sometimes they say: “I live in the capital”. But people in the capital suffer a lot. We see this, even in the news. There are still many people who suffer from the lack of water, the lack of sewage, sanitation, despite all the advances.

We no longer have our father and mother. Our family, today, is formed of only three siblings, my youngest brother, my youngest sister, who is also 60 years-old, who is the “capitalense”<sup>14</sup> in the family, and me; and two more nieces. My sister and my older brother were married, and each has one daughter. Me and my middle brother are the single ones. And the house has been the same since the 1960s. The youngest of the family God took too early, only three days old. My mother used to wash clothes for other people and was out in the cold a lot at the time of pregnancy.

### **School life and racism: *childhood dreams that suffered retaliation***

I finished high school in the São Salvador School Group, in the Glória neighborhood, where my younger brother also studied. My youngest sister got to go to Colégio Polivalente. At that time, we took an admission test; the poor had to go through this process, and you had to study hard, because otherwise you wouldn't get scholarships. So since then, we've had to prove that we were good. And sometimes, we didn't have the money to be able to take the tests. Sometimes, there were teachers who, when you stood out a little, helped you in that direction. I remember my little brother wanting to take the test and crying, because there was no way for us to pay. I did it, after

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13 Supply Centers of Minas Gerais SA (CEASA, in Portuguese).

14 Born in Belo Horizonte, capital of the State of Minas Gerais.

high school, with the help of a teacher, who we called Gugu, Maria de Lourdes, who lived in the house across from ours; a black teacher, who was a pianist at that time, in the 1960s. It was thanks to her that I was able to take my admission's test, and then kept going.

There's always a story like this, of helping one another, someone finds a way to help you. And I remember that, when I switched to regular high school, when I took the technical course on commercial practices, I used to go to radio stations a lot to ask for books, on Inconfidência and on Itatiaia stations. Wow, how expansive was Beatriz Alvarenga's physics book! There were those books that you never could afford to buy; so, I went there to second-hand shops, Amadeu, there on Tamoios Street, or at the Galeria do Ouvidor, to buy them. And we always did group work, gathered the least able to and bought the books. Each one gave a little. When the end of the year came, we raffled the book, for those who got it, got it. But it was a way for us to help ourselves study.

I was never one to be very quiet, I always struggled, like so many classmates from my time, we took things head on, we were literally compensating as we went along. If you wanted to win, you had to have someone took a liking to you or someone who discovered you were talented, so to speak. That question of empathy. And we needed a lot of help to be able to study. So much so that only I, among my siblings, managed to go to university.

My experience of racism in these spaces is not much different. We were already bullied back then. Where the human being is, the relationships are mixed up. Which school kid who goes quiet when he sees that another one is different? It's also a lot of what they live at home. I often came home crying, but you had to learn, and parents were educators in the literal sense of the word. We were educated at that time to not to take anything home that was not yours, to not to accept the bullying. So, we also helped to bully others. They said we had "saracura legs"<sup>15</sup>, because the legs were very thin; or "cricket", "little black doll", "get out of here, mosquito!", "nappy hair", and so on. Then, sometimes, at mealtime, when there were soups and they were white, we used to say that it was "pasta from Santa Casa"<sup>16</sup>. It was famous, for those who ate at school, who were poor – those who could afford it didn't need the school lunch, they brought their own snacks. Then, when there was a white colleague, the people kept saying: "look at the 'pasta from Santa Casa'".

We were immensely proud when we ate bread with ground meat, bread with "mortandela"<sup>17</sup>, drank Crush<sup>18</sup>. It was fancy, they were things you didn't have every day at home, only when it was

15 The slaty-breasted wood rail (Aramides saracura) is medium-sized bird, with a heavy-set body and thin legs.

16 The Holy House of Mercy is a Catholic charity hospital and used to be the main source of care for low-income families before the creation of the Unified Healthcare System.

17 Baloney.

18 Soda brand around that the time.

someone's birthday. These childish things that we have a good memory of. In this sense, it was like that also in the matter of racism, because it was a very pure thing, a child's thing; but when you grow up, you see that it's not like that, it's different.

It's only after you realize that this way of being treated has a meaning. For example, I was crazy to learn ballet and play the piano. I received every reason for giving up: because I was too small, or because my hands were small, that I couldn't play the piano, that the piano was expensive, and that ballet was only for the children of those who could afford it. They were things like that, that you talk about they're childhood dreams that later, throughout life, you see the meaning of those dreams or actions; that you've been retaliated against throughout your life. When things are said by children, they are "just kids", it's easy. The question is when it comes from the oldest to the youngest, without the slightest concern, to put you in your place, telling you: "look, you don't belong here". That's when see you have childhood friends who are rich and white, poor and black friends. And then you seek to conquer, or you will prove that, yeah, you can be in that place.

## 2. University trajectory: two higher education courses, working on the side, and other experiences

Through my father's job, who was also a street vendor for Diário de Minas for many years, I got a scholarship to go to an integrated high school. I went to take a course at the Vila Rica School, in the Sion neighborhood, where there was already a preparatory course for the university entrance exam, which was Promove. Right after that, I passed the entrance exam, did a year of Mathematics at FAFI-BH<sup>19</sup> and then I went to PUC Minas<sup>20</sup>, formerly the Catholic University of Minas Gerais.

By the way, I got two higher education degrees. Here in Vale do Jequitinhonha<sup>21</sup>, I went to Law School in Teófilo Otoni. It was this epic journey, leaving Araçuaí on the weekend to Teófilo Otoni in the middle of the week, and returning on Saturday. I went to Law School much due this need, already in the 70s, to understand that whole process of "deconstructing citizenship", of our people. That was when the effervescence of the Basic Ecclesial Communities began and to fight for rights, to ensure the rights of people, mainly the most excluded, and especially from the rural area. So, we needed to know a little more. So, Law, at the time with this intention, to know a little more about reality, to know how to deal with the laws, and discuss the problems we were experiencing a little more deeply. I love the profession I chose, which is Social Work. No matter how conflicting it is and how it doesn't make you "rich", you fulfill yourself as a human being, as a person, as a citizen.

19 Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters (FAFI-BH).

20 Pontifical Catholic University (PUC Minas or PUC-MG).

21 Low-income area in the north of Minas Gerais.

How did I pay for university at that time? Everything was paid for. We had some aid, which PUC always had, to serve the neediest most needy student. But my income was so low, so low, that it didn't even fit the criteria for receiving support. So, how could I study? by taking a loan from the bank. Our colleagues also helped me a lot, several of them were references so I could get a loan from the bank, because they already knew our history.

What I learned at FAFI-BH served foundation for PUC. We also met people there who helped us. Even helped with clothes: I've worn a lot of hand me downs, with no embarrassment. The clothes I had were what I got from them to be able to go to college. Sometimes I shared a snack. Then, they found me going on foot, and said: "no, we will help you take the bus". In my transfer to PUC, I had also gone through a selection process at the state, and those people helped me. I got a degree in Social Work, and, at the time, I was the only black woman in the class.

### 3. Professional trajectory and the path taken in political militancy

Before I went to college, out of necessity, I was determined to go cane-cutting in São Paulo, where we have several acquaintances. While I was figuring this out, I ended up going through a selective process for the state, in the former for Labor, Social Action, and Sports Secretariat. Everything functioned there, in Praça da Liberdade. An aunt of mine worked there and she said: "A position is opening up; you could do it. Don't go to São Paulo". And I ended up passing. The exam included typing, so I took typing at UMES - BH, the Secondary Students Municipal Union of Belo Horizonte, which had a typing school that worked out of the Maletta Building<sup>22</sup>. When I took the admission's exam in the 70s, I came in first place. Then I worked at the completion of degree course Champagnat, on Curitiba Street. I became one of the typists at the State Secretariat. With to this job in the Secretariat, due to my selection, I already started in the Secretary's office, helping the Chief of Staff. And when there was classified work, it always came to us. Sometimes, we worked so hard, that I worked through the night and went straight to class in the morning. When the secretary needed someone to help, and there was no help, I volunteered to stay and learned the job. I remember that later I went to work as coordinator of the Social and Urban Centers, within the Social Assistance Directorate, dealing with exactly these issues of the people included from the communities. So, my experience with social work begins in the early 1970s.

When I had to get an internship, that was a problem: how could someone work eight hours a day and still get an internship? The internship was not always paid, so we chose to do it on

<sup>22</sup> The building complex Conjunto Arcângelo Maletta is a historic building located in the center of Belo Horizonte, built on the Grande Hotel, in 1957.

Saturdays, but those who offered it on Saturday, were usually hospitals, as on-call shifts. So, it's an area that I identify with a lot, healthcare.

That's when it fit like a glove for us who worked and studied the Rondon Project<sup>23</sup>, because we took a month off from work and went to do the internship. It was a way we had to keep our jobs and the fulfill the mandatory internship hours. So, as nothing happens by chance, I ended up here in the Vale do Jequitinhonha, working with the Rondon Project.

That's when I received the proposal from the Cáritas Diocesan<sup>24</sup> to work here in the Vale do Jequitinhonha. So, once again, in coming here, these same co-workers from the Urban Social Services Coordination, helped me to get the things I needed to come. To this day I still have things from those gifts. With that, I want to talk about things that happen in our lives: you aren't alone, or the "I alone", he can, but he can do very little. Now, collectively speaking, we can do much more.

We always worked with that conviction that you didn't just perform a service, you "worked with and for people", in certain situations. We took theories very seriously; so there was this Gramsci<sup>25</sup> that messed with people's heads, and the thing about the "organic intellectual" was important. So, I started working with the issue of rural community associations, with neighborhood associations. Since I worked closely with the church, with the Cáritas, we also worked a lot on the issue of youth, women and children, clubs for mothers, and daycare centers. At the time, the church had opted for the poor, so it had the whole issue of rural communities, that's when the CPT, the Land Pastoral Commission, the Youth Commission, the Child's Pastoral begin to appear. And we also supported union movements.

By the way, the church played a very significant role in the lives of our people, in Brazil as a whole, but especially in this region. And, especially, when the first organizations start to form the unions, it is also through the action of the church. So, we advised the union, and in a way, in the

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Defense extension project for higher education institutions. The participants developed actions to produce benefits for the communities, mainly related to the improvement of the social well-being and the qualification of the public management. It also aimed to consolidate in the Brazilian university student a sense of social and collective responsibility, citizenship, development and defense of national interests, and to provide them with knowledge about the Brazilian reality.

<sup>24</sup> The Cáritas Brasileira was founded in 1956, following the actions of Dom Helder Câmara, then Secretary-General of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB). It promotes solidarity actions aimed at serving communities affected by socio-environmental disasters or in situations of vulnerability.

<sup>25</sup> Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian philosopher and founding member of the Communist Party of Italy. He was arrested by the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. He is mainly recognized for his theory of cultural hegemony, which describes how the state uses cultural institutions to conserve power.

1970s, 1980s, the PT<sup>26</sup> started to appear. We helped in this construction, like any good organic intellectual, who saw the need and the importance of transforming people, and who saw the situation that the people lived at that time. But we did this more for the cause, not only because of the enthusiasm, but because of the will and need of the population, which lived in extreme poverty and social injustice (many aggregated families that when they left their lands, left without any rights and were sick). It was a commitment for you to help, and without that concern of being a protagonist.

When someone had an internship, they had it for 30 days; then they could sign up again, and I kept coming here more often. Because right after that, I made chair<sup>27</sup> to oversee the Social Service Department here. So, I came here practically once a month with our classmates, also interns. This connection grew stronger, and because of the church, which has always played a significant role in the social field everywhere, whether with the issue of the first daycare centers, the first hospitals, or the first training schools.

So, with these projects, when I was a part of the Cáritas, 113 projects were carried out, most of them focused on the issue of agriculture, especially on the issue of water in the region. At that time, I didn't see myself living here permanently and that's why until the 1990s, I didn't worry about changing my title. There was always a reason to come home to Belo Horizonte to see friends, to see relatives. You don't leave a part of you overnight. But there comes a time when you have to leave a part of yourself. And talking to people, people were saying: "You have to apply, you have to help us with this". But, until the 1980s, I still managed to make some refusals.

In the 1980s, made our first big move, we had our first councilor for the Workers' Party in Padre Paraíso, Zé Gomes. Later, here in Araçuaí, Manoel Pinheiro, from the Tesouras Community, who left as legacy our people's tribune, which still exists in the chamber. Then Itinga, which was our first city to have a mayor from the party, my co-worker Solano de Barros, who worked with me here at the school.

## 4. Professional rise and overcoming adversity

### The first run for mayor of Araçuaí (MG)

In 1990 I launched myself as a candidate for mayor here in Araçuaí. A history very rich with meanings. We didn't have a party fund as we do today, we sold pigs, eggs, there were people who gave two or three dozen eggs for the fund. We the entire militancy participated. Who were the

26 The Workers' Party.

27 Term used, at the time, to refer to an undergraduate course discipline.

militants? They were workers, like teachers; there were the people from the cultural sector, who at that time, supported us with cultural movements, shows, and forró<sup>28</sup> at rallies. And we really enjoyed all of this, and each one who helped didn't think about what they'd get later on, they just always thought about improvements for everyone in the community.

Then, that moment comes when you stand between a rock and a hard place, and you have to give in to the yearnings of the moment. When it came to sealing an identity with the local people, with the local people, working on the commitments, there was had that rhetoric: "you aren't from this place, you're an outsider". Then we also start to have to reconstruct that thinking, the way of being, doing and seeing the world, and begin to perceive ourselves not as a citizen of a place, but of the world. And it's where you are during those moments, then you realize that you have the right to choose, and to be where you please. You realize that, even if you don't have a geographical birth, you have the identity that was built. And you begin to want to understand what it means to be Brazilian. That's it. So, when they come to talk to me that I'm not from here, I say: I'm in Brazil, I'm Brazilian, and the Brazilian territory is immense, and if it's here in this place that I settle my life, that I pay my taxes, that's where I relate to as a rightful citizen and in fact... Today I have the title of honorary citizen, which was granted to me – but would I need that to prove that I have the right to have rights? So, this generates a whole philosophizing and remaking of thoughts, concepts, and prejudices. But instead of instilling in me a feeling of inertia, of not belonging, we worked on the positive side, and called people on to start having another look, another thought, another way of seeing. There are so many people who act as if they aren't from the place, and who use the place for their own benefit ...!

In 1992, we ran for mayor, with 4 candidates and we weren't elected. However, there are those who say that we did win the elections, we just didn't get the office because of coronelismo<sup>29</sup> and the particularistic deals that still prevailed at the time, and we didn't have much experience of control in the elections. We had news of ballot boxes that went up and down by ropes in the forum building, of electoral IDs retained for people to pick up after the elections and agreed benefits, votes were switched at counting, right when they were being checked. We lived with jagunços<sup>30</sup> at the time, things that we don't even hear about anymore; there was a shooting in the city, to intimidate us, not to mention the bombs that were thrown in our backyards.

28 Forró is a style of music and dance, typical in the Northeast of Brazil and in the north of Minas Gerais.

29 Cultural political form in Brazil, where a local leader, known as "colonel", carries the votes of the people who are dependent on him. This political arrangement was the informal norm for centuries, and while it is still present, it is less prevalent and takes on different presentations than just the all-powerful landowner.

30 Men who fulfilled the criminal activities of colonels, including death threats and homicide.

## The first black woman mayor, in the *little princess of the Vale do Jequitinhonha*: the faces of racism and sexism in public life

The second time we ran for mayor, we had already a little more experience. So, the control over the inspectors was tough, and the parties had representatives who took turns day and night while they were there. On the day of counting the votes, the judge made the following observation: "Any attempt to change the will of the people, I send you, from here, to jail". The place was packed with people wanting to know the result. With every ballot box tallied, people cheered! Near the end, I was practically consecrated, the judge advised me to go out with the police, because there was no way to contain the people. During this entire period, we suffered many attempts at physical aggression, but the moral and psychological aggression was worse and constant. We responded with work, which was collective, and seeking as much transparency as possible. We adopted the participatory budget, we adopted a "literal" accountability method - we put it in the public square,

*Entry to the Solemn Session with Banda Marista of Araçuaí. Maria do Carmo in the center, flanked by President Lula on the right; by the Deputy-Mayor of Angra dos Reis, José Antônio Martins Santana, on the left; and by Mayor Luiz Sérgio, at the back.*  
By: Personal Archive



we used the Market wall to do this. That bureaucratic accountability was also of no use to those who couldn't read and write. So, we tried to show that which is technical in the language of the people.

I was sued by the opposition ten times, irresponsible, that dragged on for a long time. Because of the symbols, of Brazil's own political culture, black people aren't found in politics, especially women, who come from the people, from the church movement, and mainly from left-wing party. We denounced it. We opened racism suits; but, at the time, the authorities' "perception" was that it wasn't racism. Then it was easier to put it as a slander, or set it aside, let it go. But there was even the incitement of children to stone us. There was a lot of "black people belong in slave quarters", "a woman's place is in the bed, in the kitchen". All these concepts and prejudices rooted in our society, emerged during this period and, mainly, by traditional families, with exceptions. They always asked: "where's the mayor?" And when they looked, it was a "black stump", as they said. They also said that I'd only take office if there were no men in the city - it was necessary to call for police reinforcement.

I remember a rally that was even historic, in the market square, I think it was one of the last. I used the image of Our Lady Aparecida<sup>31</sup>: "I didn't come here because I wanted to; we black people aren't here because we want to, we were brought here after all! If a black person's place is in the slave quarters, here in Brazil we can't say that. I know of a black woman that many white people, during time of the crisis, appeal to her, Our Lady Aparecida", as a way to neutralize that violence, due to her symbolization as a black sanctity. The point is to occupy spaces that aren't traditionally destined for us, whether we are women, black, indigenous people, believers of a certain faith. This makes us bigger and stronger.

### The Boys of Araçuaí win the country over

The fact that Araçuaí is in the center of the Vale do Jequitinhonha, in the polygon of drought and is the city of greatest expression, put the spotlight on us. At the time of one of the great droughts, we needed some Basic Food Baskets<sup>32</sup>. One of the important partnerships that we had here, at first, was with Natura. We had the *Ser Criança* project, with Tião Rocha as coordinator. With Natura's support, we rehearsed some songs with the boys, and at Christmas, we went to São

<sup>31</sup> Patroness Saint of Brazil, the story of Our Lady Aparecida is that in 1717 some fishermen found an image of Our Lady of Conceição, darkened by the mud of the river. After finding the image, the fish, that before were scarce, were plentiful. She's called "Aparecida" due to having "appeared" in the river.

<sup>32</sup> Cestas básicas, or basic food baskets, are the essential food items for every Brazilian household for a month. The concept was first designed by the Getúlio Vargas administration in 1938 and today is calculated by the Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE). Most supermarkets carry a ready-made selection available for purchase.

Paulo, to the company's factory, to thank them. It was so impactful that the Meninos de Araçuaí choir was born, traveling around Brazil, and they have been around for over 20 years. Today they're totally independent of the local government but are partners. We always believed in these projects, where people take ownership of what is offered to them, and then become protagonists in their own history. Today the project is already in its seventh generation and through its resources, the Meninos de Araçuaí cinema and the Dedo de Gente Cooperative were created, where they produce a lot in the media and crafts area.

Once the two terms in Araçuaí were completed, we helped in the electing our deputy for succession. I dedicated myself to regional and political projects at the federal level that were taking place in the region. I have always been present as an affiliate and companion in all electoral disputes in the region during these more than 30 years in the Workers' Party.

### Experience in the Federal Government

I was invited by our first Minister of Racial Equality, Matilde Ribeiro, to be a part of the SEPPIR's staff, the Special Secretariat for Policies to Promote Racial Equality. It was a unique experience for me to be able to contribute, at the national level, with achieving respect and the rights for our Afro-Brazilian population. So, there were unique moments, such as the approval of the Racial Equality Statute, which was paralyzed for more than 10 years in Congress, as well as the issue of the Indigenous Statute, also without progress for more than 20 years. The emblematic issue of our domestic workers: the majority of our female population is in this category, and they weren't recognized as legal and de facto workers. These were arduous struggles, even though we're aware there's still resistance, to the registration of our workers. But also, their insertion in the political life of our Brazil, participation in associations, unions; integration with universities, which at that time was also opening up to their children. But mainly through the recognition of their dignity as workers who have worked a lifetime helping to build many families, not having a place to live, a school, or daycare for their children. Not having the same labor rights as other workers; that is, not being recognized as professionals.

There was the moment of the Maria da Penha Law, how it affects each one of us! We know the stories of our grandmothers, our great grandmas, our mothers and aunts, nieces, friends, colleagues, and anonymous women. And we also know the meaning of that. I was there, face to face, with Maria da Penha on the day Lula signed the law, so much emotion and pride. Another very important moment that I keep was when we worked on the project that recognized our traditional midwives, as a profession, and the resistance of even part of academia! It impacts us to know that, for example, here in the Vale do Jequitinhonha, we have midwives who, with their knowledge, have brought thousands of living beings to the world. How can this person not be considered as wise, as

a rightful citizen and, who in fact contributes to Brazilian society, even more so in a country in need of medical care? These people are working and have been meeting the needs of the population, which is actually the duty of the state.

I'm remembering these projects, because they have great significance throughout Brazil. When we arrive at our places, then the concern is how to make this a reality in our small and medium-sized cities, which is the reality of most Brazilian municipalities. These are projects that were important to me in terms of moving me as a human being, as a person, as a citizen, as a public agent. Because we don't separate these things.

The great challenge of being a woman in politics is to remain yourself, living all this, without losing your essence. Positive and negative external influences interfere with your daily life. But in what way can you remain a woman?

### Quotas in the affirmative action policy

It was really the boom within public policies regarding to affirmative action. The quotas are there today to lead us to reflect even on our recent past in Brazil, in which quotas existed; but they weren't for black people and the excluded. And were always naturally accepted. Which were the quotas for the children of farmers, including in universities, in the main posts, for being considered as such. And that some places were reserved for them, and nobody ever complained about it. And it was according to the number of cattle.

Quotas put our academic and professional world in check. Our academia, which has always been considered a space of excellence, starts being questioned. Because if this place is of excellence and is universal, where are most Brazilians? Academia also has the constant challenge of contributing with its thinking, with its science, to create quality life for the people. So, is academia's production actually going to be applicable in the construction of dignified life for people? Or to get people out of difficult situations? Then we change the question: Is academia prepared for this? Who are the people in academia? So, this is a discussion that has to go through the issue of public management.

Those who always defended white supremacy, say quotas are a negative thing, a stain in the most noble space of academia. And it started to generate contrarian, controversial, and confusing discussions in people's heads. That's what goes for society. The important thing is that you see that quotas are an instrument that is being made available to people in society to match conditions. And also, to correct distortions. Whether in the offer of products, in the offer of benefits, which were always channeled to the same individuals. Quotas exist to try and create a balance, including in the workplace. Is there black and social representation at the scale of command of large companies and industries and even state-owned companies? And in the political world?

Now, as this is not politically convenient, because it touches on privileges, it was camouflaged and always placed as an offer, but it is actually an achievement.

I understood our senator Benedita da Silva<sup>33</sup> very much, when, years ago, she was one of the first to come out in defense of quotas. She knew what she was talking about. It is not ideal, but at this moment in Brazil, with the political conditions we have, in these structuring conditions, there must be a way out of this situation. So, quotas are a necessary and temporary instrument. And I don't mean that it will end soon, no. Because there are walks that we walk a lifetime until we reach the ideal. The ideal is what is just.

It's the law today in Brazil, Law 10.639/2003, Law 11.645/2003, the various UN resolutions, we have ILO Convention 169, that deal with the issues of traditional communities. Why is it so difficult for people to understand that there is jurisprudence on this? Why can't they really happen?

Who is the old politics? The old politics is them, who don't want to let the Brazilian people take over its history. And history is dynamic. Today is you, tomorrow is another, respectfully. And our young people, academia has a responsibility in that, schools have a responsibility in that too. When I say responsibility, it is in the sense that, since childhood, as in traditional communities, knowledge must be passed on from the oldest to the youngest. In order to show our youngest that they should not be ashamed of being who they are today, of their past, and that they continue defending causes.

### Back to Araçuaí and to politics

I retired in 2012, through the INSS<sup>34</sup>. During that period, I was in Brasília, and then I returned to the Vale again. I'm not retired politically speaking, because for me politics is not a profession, but it's a provision of services to the population, a mission. So, even though I spent eight years in the city hall of Araçuaí, I found myself entitled not to do the so-called "old politics", but to be and remain political, in the literal sense of the word, to be a political agent. Not retiring through the job.

So, I ended up here, where I am today, when I thought I would come back only to take care of myself and my family. There are people who talk like this, who are even mean: "Oh, because you aren't married, you don't have children, so this is all you do!". No, this isn't all we do, we also have the right to exist and be happy. When we came from the university, it came with all that fire that made you think: "I'm going to marry the community". So, my marriage to the community was like

33 Benedita da Silva is a black woman career politician from the Workers' Party. She started out as a domestic worker, and eventually was a deputy in the Constituent Assembly and the first woman and black governor of Rio de Janeiro. She is currently a federal deputy for Rio de Janeiro.

34 Brazilian Social Security Institute.

that, it lasted longer than I thought. When I realized, I already had more than 30 years of life in the midst of this people, which is not by chance, neither for me, nor surely for the people with whom we are in everyday life.

### Religion and ancestry

My family is Catholic, especially when we were already living in the city; when we lived in the countryside, not so much. But in my family, today we have some who are evangelical (plus the people who live in São Paulo), a some who are spiritists, and the majority is Catholic. We have a very peaceful coexistence in this sense, including strengthening ourselves with each other in our respective religions, when necessary - it's a harmonious issue. We loved to follow the Folia de Reis!

But we also had the opportunity to get to know other religions, my godmother was of French descent, her name was Sophia, mother of Godmother Minerva who was a Kardecist. Then we had contacted with another side of spirituality. And my relationship with religions of African origin is natural. My family, for example, has a Montes Claros custom that we still remember a lot, we'd go like this: "the caboclinhos, where are the caboclinhos?". There's a neighborhood where some caboclinhos<sup>35</sup> live, it's a group that parades with indigenous clothes, to the sound of guitar, viola, and fiddle.

The first store I worked at was Abre Gira, a shop selling religious articles in Belo Horizonte, geared towards low-income people, there on Caetés Street, close to Praça da Estação. Then for a while, I was secretary at the Spiritist Umbandista Federation of Minas Gerais. Godmother Minerva was a secretary there voluntarily. When she got older, she took me to help with the work, and I kept the minutes of the meetings. Because at that time there was a great deal of strictness with religions of African origin; today, despite the so-called "democracy", the openness, there's a prejudice, which sometimes happens with more intensity and with a lot of violence. So, there was a rigor from the state itself. For example, Umbanda houses or temples were required to keep monthly reports or minutes of activities, and you had to send this to the police. So, I helped, I made kept several minutes for that, each temple, each *terreiro* had to have its book of minutes and that had to be inspected by the police, at the time, by the Federal Police, if I'm not mistaken. You had to have the police chief's authorization to function, this was a condition.

So, there are's all this knowledge that I acquired and this connection, that later on, when on 2005 onwards, when I was part of SEPPIR, the Special Secretariat for Policies to Promote Racial Equality of the Lula government, as Director for Traditional Communities. Later, as Deputy-Secretary and

35 Indigenous folklore present in the Northeast of Brazil and the north of Minas Gerais. Also known as Caiporas, caboclinhos protect the forests by tricking those who want to harm it.

Manager of the FIPIR - Intergovernmental Forum on Racial Equality Policies - I learned even more. I met several people who were part of the National Council for the Promotion of Racial Equality, and there were all religions of African origin and all the traditional communities represented, especially indigenous, gypsies<sup>36</sup>, quilombolas, arabic, jewish, and several representations.

## 6. Black feminism and the confrontations of black women

I believe that our daily life is marked by this daily confrontation. Every time you're in front of a mirror, you'll see your image as it is. Sometimes you won't be able to show how you are on the inside, not on that day and time, but depending on the day, you can see it clearly. When looking in the mirror, you have to try to see if the image you see in the mirror is really you, what you would like to see. Of course, today at 66, I have the peace of mind for that; I wouldn't say the same thing if I were 15 years-old, which is when this whole fight starts, not just because of blackness or the fact that you're a woman, but the culture that's already starting to act on you.

I remember once, between eight and ten years-old, when you started to change your body, I was playing with my brothers on our street block, and then an older boy passed by and said: "You know you have a jewel? I want this little jewel for me". Then, during this other time, we started to realize these were the famous pick-up lines, to put it into today's language. Then we remember other moments, when I was already doing the basics, once I even put it to my mother: "Mom, I don't want you to ask me to go to that place and talk to that person anymore". Because I had a negative experience with this person in my pre-adolescence. When a child or teenager is afraid, they're often capable of various actions and reactions. I remember that we took a taxi, we were going in the same direction, I had some bags in my hand, there was space in the car and the person came and didn't stay in the space that fit him. And the taxi driver, seeing everything and didn't do anything. And when the person realized that I wanted to get out of the car, they gave me, as if it were compensation, a packet of fruit. Every time I eat this fruit, I make this association and I don't really like that fruit anymore.

And this continues to happen today with all women, mainly because it's historically accepted that every black woman has an obligation to be available to everyone. So, many times the look we get is not that of a companion; the first impression is this, that we are objects of bed and table. We can observe this, both in relation to the people who are closest to you, even in the same party, or distant.

36 Gypsy (cigano) is an accepted umbrella term including peoples such as the Rom, Calon, and Sinti ethnicities.

There are also colleagues of ours who sometimes out their sexist views: "it's the male who is saying, the superior who is saying". We have this in our daily lives. That is why we embraced this cause of combating violence against women, children, the most vulnerable, because these are situations that involve defenseless people, who are in our daily lives.

In our case, black women, who live with the issue of domestic violence, we know of terrible cases. Women won't always come forward, for various reasons, whether it's due to access, of where she lives, due to finances, and the fact that her partner is often also black and therefore will be more exposed to violence as well. It often seems quite simple to us, but for those who live this situation it isn't. She leaves, and half a meter later she is already bumping into the people or the person who abused her. In the big city, with the instruments that exist such as the women's police station, the Casa Benvinda<sup>37</sup> in Belo Horizonte, we have more opportunities, including of preserving people, offering a guarantee of leaving their home, with their children and elderly. But in a small town, where does she go? Because there everyone knows, everyone knows the name, surname, and address.

And in the pandemic, has it increased? It increased in terms of statistical numbers, but in fact, it's not only that it increased, it's that it became evident, statistically speaking. Another issue is that of violence against black men, it's public and notorious.

I also remember a friend, we became friends due to a circumstance in life, in the 1980s. We went to a meeting of Christian women in politics, which was in Guayaquil, Ecuador. I remember that she spoke about the situation of black women in Maranhão: "I know black women who today are afraid of becoming pregnant and don't want to get pregnant, so as not to suffer, so as not to see their children suffer, because she sees others suffering or they've gone through it themselves".

And there is also the issue of our acculturation, which has always been seen as a policy to destroy our identity, in the sense of saying that black people are ugly. I look in the mirror and I don't see it in me, nor in several people in my family, and colleagues. But there's the global standard of beauty, of this phenotypical beauty. So really people who are deprived of this beauty, does it take away from them the right to the dignity of being happy, to live with dignity among people?

So, I believe that the one thing that we have to work hard for not to lose is the sense that diversity exists, and that it has its purpose. And what is your relationship or your responsibility in all of this? All these issues, such as that of femicide, prostitution, early pregnancy, when we start looking, if you don't focus on things, you just go insane. So, I think that these issues cannot be left out of the daily discussions. We cannot deny them.

37 Women's entry point for shelter from domestic violence. Shelters are in secret locations.

## The strength of the black woman

The woman's strength comes from this ability that the woman has to see the world in a very particular way. And to rebuild, here comes the example of the phoenix. Just like a phoenix, through all tribulations and hardships that she's subjected to, she will always rebuild herself. This vision that we have, facing forwards, based on what our ancestors lived.

You have an origin. You know your origin. And there are scholars who say that, of course, it's not you who choose where to come from, where to be, there is a whole arrangement. In our composition, we are mystics too. So, I think that we get strength from that. And nothing better than tough love to learn how you position yourself. That is, these punches you take, these punches, this negative energy that they try to put you on. With that you learn and comprehend. And then it's up to you to seek that insight, on your own.

## 7. How would you like to be remembered

I would like to be remembered as a person who knows that, because of the profession I have chosen, the circumstances I have in life, be it family life, be it social life, the opportunities I have had, those I haven't, and I could choose what to do, what to carry on. The person who perceives every day, already said the philosopher, the great Socrates, who little knows. I'm one of those people who knows I still have a lot to learn. And as long as I have energy, I'll have this willingness to learn more. And if they let me, I want to continue contributing.

I never want to impose anything on anyone because life is not made of imposition. We know the history of everything that was imposed. And the results of that imposition..



*Maria evaluating and discussing with a municipal worker at a construction site. Araçuaí, 1998.*

*By: Personal Archive*

Cleide Barcelos  
Sérgio Luiz Felix da Silva  
Rosânia Sousa

# 9 CLEIDE BARCELOS

## 1. Childhood and Adolescence: upbringing

I'm Cleide, lieutenant colonel in the Minas Gerais Military Police. I have three siblings, two women and one man. I'm the eldest. My father is a sergeant in the Minas Gerais Military Police and has been in the reserve for over ten years. My mother was trained as a teacher. She worked for a while, but as soon as she married my father and stopped working, she started to dedicate herself to the house.

Teaching is a priesthood. Today, I teach and I've realized that so much from us stay in the people with whom we have contact, especially with those who really want to learn. Throughout my trajectory, I had countless teachers who really left a big mark in my life, people who were dedicated, committed, who tried to teach us in the best possible way, not only the subjects for which they were responsible, but also about other aspects of life.

My childhood and that of my siblings were incredibly happy, despite the financial difficulties. Several times my mother had to cook on the wood-burning stove because she had no money to buy gas. Sometimes, even to go