

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

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NILA

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1. Being a black woman

I identify as a black woman and racism is what made me one. In school, that's where they told me I wasn't white. I've had this scene very clear in my mind since the day it happened. I went to the Polivalente School, with my straightened hair, crisply ironed uniform, and all that. I was in the sixth grade. In the Polivalente, the seats were placed in groups. It was Portuguese class, the teacher was this ultra-fragile woman – physically, in posture, in her presentation as a teacher. Her name was Graça. This entitled kid named Marcílio got up from his chair and headed for my group. He touched me, my hair; lifted my hair, as if I were nothing. Then Marcílio said, "Who do you think you are? You're never going to be one of us!". And he was pointing at white people. He then continued, "You're just like her!" And he pointed at Rose, my friend. "You're black! There's no point in you straightening that

hair, no. You're just like Rose." I got scared and started bawling. But I cried a lot: I wet my whole face, my shirt, tears fell on the table. So that's when the penny dropped. Never again, in that school, was I a white girl.

The people who were sitting in my group were gobsmacked. But in general, people laughed, laughed out loud, at what Marcílio did to me. I was crying, crying, looked at the teacher, and she didn't do anything! She stood there, staring too, awkward. I thought, "Guys, is no one going to save me from this situation?" Because I didn't know how to deal with it. Then my friend Rose stood up and said, "Marcílio, get it through your head: I'm not the black you say I am, I'm black because I'm burnt by the sun's rays; and you have no color!" Then he stopped and went back to his place. It was Rose who took me to the bathroom, helped me get myself back together and told me, "Don't worry about it. It always happens to me. It happens every day."

When I arrived at university in 1984, I fell in love with a wonderful poet, a student from the Languages department who did the Introduction semesters with me. And I thought because I fell in love, I had to ignore that, visibly, he was gay. I fell in love with this beautiful person, who made poetry and romantic songs, including for me. We started talking a lot. When he said he was a poet, I said, "Oh, I want to read everything!" He was happy. I think everything he wrote, he brought for me to read. He made music and poetry for me. My infatuation just grew, obviously. He introduced me to the university restaurants. The place where I worked at that time, a pool shop on Professor Moraes Avenue, had another wide exit to the closed block of Cláudio Manuel Street. The poet was an office boy. He'd sit on the floor in front of the Cláudio Manuel door, and he'd sit there and wait for me to go out for lunch. That beauty sat there, looking at me, waiting for me to go out for lunch. Why am I talking about this guy? Soon you'll understand.

Cidinha da Silva, also a student in the History department at FAFICH¹, got a research scholarship in a project at Nepem², coordinated by Silvana Coser. Cidinha called me then, said she wanted to talk to me, if she could go where I worked. I was already working at the City Hall at the time. I asked my boss; he said ok. Talking to Cidinha, she told me that the conversation was about black women in university. Then I said, "Hey, Cidinha, I'm not black. What do I have to do with that?" She said, "Okay, Nila, you're not black, but can I do an interview with you? I need to do the interviews." I said okay then. She set me up, of course, right? Cidinha saw me as a black woman, and I didn't. At the end of the day, that was it. She asked the questions. She asked about the family, asked the color. I said, "My dad's white, my mom's white, everybody's white." Then it got to my grandfather. There's no way I could say he was white. My maternal grandfather was not white; he

¹ Faculty of Philosophy and Human Sciences at the Federal University of Minas Gerais.

² Women's Studies and Research Center – UFMG.

was black. Cidinha: "Ah, ok. So, are there some black people in the family?" Me: "Yes, of course there are!".

Later, Cidinha asked me, "Have you ever fallen in love with someone?" I said, "Sure, Cidinha! Of course, I have! Back in university, you know, I fell in love with the poet, from the moment I met him." Cidinha: "Do you think he's a white person?". I said, "Yes, he's a white person." Because he was really white. Cidinha: "Why do you think you never dated him?". I went, "I don't think I dated him at first because he's a little undecided." Cidinha: "But have you ever gone out with the poet to somewhere?". Me: "No." Cidinha: "Any bars, these things, have you ever been out with him?" Me: "No." We'd leave university, walk to the city center, and take our own buses. We'd walk around Savassi, after we left FAFICH, grab a burger in trailers that still existed in Savassi at the time, and we'd leave. Cidinha: "But he never asked you out? Doesn't he go out?" Me: "He's mentioned a birthday party, at a club." Cidinha: "So why do you think he never asked you out? Would you think that maybe he never invited you to go because the places where he goes are not frequented by black people?" Then came the scene of Marcílio, back in school, saying that I was not white. Of course, she saw the change in my face. I was like, "No, I never thought about it. But he's very much my friend!" Cidinha: "Friends go out, have fun." Really, he'd never been out with me anywhere, and he was talking about the outings with his friends, the parties. I said, "I can't answer that." Cidinha said: "I know. And that's the last question." Then she said, "Look, you're a black woman. You need to live with that. It's not bad to be a black person. It's simply hard." It was Cidinha who spoke in a kind, loving, supportive, and feminist way, that everything I was, the things I did, how much I studied, how hard I've worked since I was 14, all these things, were because I'm black. Because my conditions weren't the same, they were worse. It was very difficult for her too, as it must have been for Rose, my friend from school.

Of course, we had one or two conversations about it again. And I talked to her, and I realized, with no crisis, no violence, that I could look at myself in the mirror and see myself as a beautiful person. That Rose, my friend from school, always had. She wasn't a doormat, she held her head high. Even when she had nothing to say, her answer shut white people up. She knew what she was and lived what she was, but that wasn't my case – until then. From then on, I really started to face this issue of being a black woman, with its mishaps.

So I'm a black woman. But who is this black woman? It's that non-white woman, raised by her family as being white, but who's not treated as white, by white people.

2. Parents and sister

I was born on February 12th, 1961. I'm 59 years old. I'm the daughter of a bricklayer named Nicanor Rodrigues Barbosa, who died about four years ago, and Nilza Alves Barbosa. I consider them black, but they've never positioned themselves as such. My mom and dad, actually, didn't think they were black. Worse, they were racist. The hair, for example, I couldn't convince my mother that I didn't want to straighten it. So, I stayed quiet, the hair was straightened, and I got those bruises on my head.

That's why, when I was perceived as black at school, I didn't have the tools to assume that identity. It was racism that made me a black woman. The mother I had, the one who kept me apart from black people, preventing me from establishing more intimate relationships with black people, obviously, she was going to straighten my hair, she was going to make me the most beautiful clothes, and she was going to try to buy me expensive shoes, specifically to differentiate me from black people, by distancing me from something that identified with them at that time: poverty.

My parents lived in Belo Horizonte, but almost on the border with Contagem, in the neighborhood called Indústrias, next to Mannesmann. It was a working-class neighborhood that was starting out, on the outskirts of the city. It was a tiny little slum. Most of the people who lived there initially worked on the construction of the Mannesmann factory. They were masons, carpenters, etc. Then it became the neighborhood of the people who worked at Mannesmann: mechanics, electricians, the people who worked the dumpsters, who worked with the ovens. My dad managed to buy land in this neighborhood and build the house. When I was born, they already had the land, the house had been started, it was a three-room shed.

I always found that place a gray neighborhood. I never wanted to work there or go on living there. I always wanted to get out of that place. And I finally did, but when I was 38. My mother designed a study plan for her daughters, but she didn't plan our way out of the Indústrias, although neither me nor my sister fulfilled our destiny of staying there. Because that's my mother's place, so much that she still lives there. She doesn't want to get out of there, and she's never going to want that. After all, it's her house. She faced a line to get a loan for the construction. My father built the house, and she helped build it.

My father worked too hard, really hard. It was 14, 15 hours of work a day, Monday through Sunday. My mother worked hard as well to help him. There was a time in my father's life when he had to be everything within his abilities. So, he was a bricklayer, carpenter, worked on cisterns, plumber. He didn't like finishing jobs, but when he needed extra money, he'd take that kind of service. And my mother helped with everything. My dad was always dying to stop working for

someone else and work for himself. In the early 1980s, he did it, he became a builder. Before my sister and I started working, we lived off the money he made as a bricklayer.

In my family, I'm the firstborn and I have a younger sister. Needless to say, I'm the angry, insubordinate, selfish daughter of the family. I've always been very difficult, but it's nice to be this way. My sister's a year younger than me. She is a successful lawyer, works in the Belo Horizonte city hall. She's a very good person. Everybody likes her. She suffered a lot of prejudice, real prejudice, because she was born with a cleft palate. Living in the 60s and 70s as a girl and young woman from the periphery was difficult. We grew up very close. I'd even say: we're partners. Today, she still helps out me a lot with my kids.

3. Former partner and children

By the time I got out of the Indústrias neighborhood, I was already 38. I was able to move because I got pregnant within four months of dating. I managed to get away from that bond of love that held me there when I caught a glimpse of something else. I got married. I mean, actually, I usually say I didn't get married, you know? Because we lived together. A union always unstable, but eventually very loving. I have been able to count on the solidarity of my children's father many times.

I'm single today. But the marriage actually lasted a long time. This wasn't a marriage that was going to last. I orchestrated this marriage as a way to get out of the house and change my life. So, it's understandable that it didn't last long. It lasted too long, actually, because when we broke up, my son was already 18 and my daughter was 14. That's good, right? It wasn't a relationship my children's father chose to have. I'm a woman who's older than him, and more mischievous. First of all, he didn't choose to have a baby. Then he did not choose to marry, live together, whatever; and he didn't choose to leave the house.

The guy I married was an office boy and I worked at the park Lagoa do Nado. It had a board and two managers, one who worked with a focus inward towards the Lagoa do Nado and the other, outwards. This was at the time when the decentralization of culture in Belo Horizonte took place in areas outside the downtown region, areas recognized for cultural activity, in the Patrus Ananias government. It was through Lagoa do Nado, for example, that the São Bernardo Cultural Center and the Pampulha Cultural Center were born. I started working for decentralization in Lagoa do Nado at some point. So, I worked on the creation of the Pampulha Cultural Center, when it began to be an idea for Participatory Budgeting. During this construction process, we conducted workshops. Someone who was an expert in doll-making gave one of these workshops and I accompanied him. I went twice a week to this workshop at night. We left the Lagoa do Nado and went to the Urca

neighborhood, near Gate 2 of the Zoo. The workshop lasted three months and when it was over, we went out to celebrate. A neighborhood leader, who did the workshop with us, invited me and this man to have a beer and eat something. We went with this leader, his fiancée, me and the guy from the workshop. Sometime later, a person walks by with a backpack on his back. He was this beautiful black guy. I thought so. He was walking up the street, looking low when the fiancée looks and says, "It's Preto!". The leader stood up and shouted, "Preto, come here! Come and have a beer with us?" The guy was his brother. The conversation went on and a short time later, we started dating. Time passes by, I was pregnant four months later.

Then I had to bring him round. I didn't want to do it, I wanted everything to be between us, but I got pregnant, so that was my chance to get out of my family's house. My parents couldn't go against their own principles. After all, they were very Catholic. But I wasn't going to get married, was I? I never thought about getting married. I just thought about being with him, not just because he was very handsome, because he was 12 years younger and because we had a remarkably interesting sexual relationship. I know it wasn't unusual for my family, the fact that I started talking about leaving home and all that, since I was expecting a child. That was a moment when the father of my children was really helpful. I talked to him, "I need to get out of my family's house. This is a great chance! I don't want to stop working and I don't want my mom to take care of my kids. What's my idea? I'm going to tell my parents that we're moving in together, I'm going to find a place, we go and that's it. If you don't want to stay, it's okay, I'll stay alone." It was a bond of love. How was I supposed to leave my mother, this woman who prepared me to be an independent woman, but for me to be with her in that place? So, me untangling that bond of love was the greatest journey of my life. And I owe it to two people: my son and his father. This black man, who even had the nickname Preto ("Black" in Portuguese) – because he is the darkest in his family.

The only place I could get and afford rent was in Jaraguá. It was one of those weird buildings back in the neighborhood and are gone now. So, it was an ugly building; this was Jaraguá's ugliest building. There was a bar underneath the apartment, which was open until the middle of the night. He painted the floor of the apartment egg yellow. I bought the furniture and paid the rent. He stayed! Sandro was growing up and Preto was being a father. Then I wanted to move from Jaraguá, I wanted to have my own house. My sister lent me the money. Then we went to look for a house. He thought it was a drag and that the place we lived in was good enough. But I didn't like it there. I know I was lucky to find something close to where I worked, near Lagoa do Nado. So, we came to live where I still live now, but we weren't doing too well. I've always acted much like my mother in that relationship. I bossed around, decided, never asked. I never discussed things and he went with the flow. That isn't good for a long-term relationship.

But motherhood was something I had always desired. I always found mothers interesting, that motherhood was cool. So, I always had it in my head that I was going to be a mother. But it never happened until that moment. There had never been a sexual intimacy before I met the father of my children. So, the sexual relationship happened with this black guy, and four months later I got pregnant. I have two children, Sandro and Luiza. Luiza, my youngest daughter, is a woman who knows, since she was born, that she can be a boss if she wants to. And Sandro, my boy, knows since he was born too, that freedom is essential.

4. School and academic trajectory

My mother never taught me how to wash, iron, cook, and she didn't teach me one thing she did very well: sew. But she always said, "You have to study!". She made it such a point, so much that she took over everything else on her own. And it was a time when studying was difficult, especially in a working-class neighborhood. So, my mother is one of those who left home at one o'clock in the morning to get in line until morning, to get a place in a good public school and enroll us. She was always looking for the best school. Then, if she couldn't, she'd look for the second best, lowering the school level. My mother always faced these things for us to study.

My father, on the other hand, never cared so much about our schooling. There was a moment when he said to my mother: "If these girls become anything, it is to your credit; but if these girls are nothing, it is your responsibility as well." My dad thought I could get married or start ironing clothes for others early. But when my sister was admitted to the Law School of the Catholic University, my father's position changed. He came to find the studies something especially important too. After all, a bricklayer with a lawyer for a daughter? He thought he was something else! He kept working and did what he could so she would graduate.

I started studying at the Dom Bosco school. It was a school run by nuns. I stayed there a short time, I'm not sure if a whole year. Then, I studied at the Diogo de Vasconcelos state school until I finished the 4th grade. Then I went to the Polivalente school, over in the Barreiro region. Then, in high school, I attended a school called AEC³, a private school on Curitiba Street. We paid something, but there was a scholarship. Finally, already working in Lojas Americanas, I finished high school at Colégio Brasileiro, on Paraná Avenue. It was also a private school, and we also didn't pay full tuition because of a scholarship.

With the intention of entering higher education, I went to a prep course at Promove, on São Paulo Street. When my sister and I did this, some people said, "Look, this isn't for people like us,

³ School by the Association of Commerce Employees.

who were born in this neighborhood. We have to work. That person earns very well, at the bakery. I stopped studying. You're going to take the university entrance exam?" When they said that to my mother, I don't think she even listened, actually. But I thought, "Why isn't it for us? What are you talking about? I'm not like these people, and I'm getting out of here." We got a scholarship. My mom heard about this prep course. There was a test and we took it. We got a 60% discount. We had to work to pay the other 40%.

I did not know which major to pick and went to talk with Rubinho, who was, at the time, the director of Promove. Seeing my discomfort in the face of people's resistance towards my project to go to university, he told me about the History and Sociology majors. I chose History. When I talked to my parents that I was going to take the entrance exam for this, they made such a face! They said, "But History? What's that major? Are you going to tell stories to other people?" And concluded, "Nila is hopeless!". I'm the angry, evil daughter who has no respect for her parents and her elders, right? Recently, when I released the book on quilombolas, my mom said, "Cool". But my father died thinking, "She got a History degree, she works in culture". When they asked him, he said, "She works at the Culture Secretariat, she has a History degree." The important one has always been the daughter who is a lawyer. My mother has some pride. She has my two books over at her house: "I'm going to read your book! It's very interesting!" She says she's going to read it, but it's been a long time since they've been there.

I took the entrance exam for History at UFMG⁴ and got in the second group. I passed the first exam I did, after having done a year of prep school. I looked at the approval list posted there in the Dean's Building about ten times, to see if I had passed, and I had really done it. And I wasn't going to pay anything. So I was going to get my degree. I was already working in the pool shop. I was going to give notice, I was about to become unemployed, but I didn't care because I really wanted to go to university.

I need to say that my first degree is the bachelor's degree. Guys, it was a mess for me and Marcelina, my colleague and friend, to get this bachelor's degree. A disgusting fight! We wanted to do the bachelor's degree and we went to enroll. Then they said, "You can't do it." I said, "What do you mean, we can't do it?" And they said, "You can't do it because you entered in second group. The ones who enter the second entry will be teachers; the ones who enter the first entry will be researchers". I asked again, "Where is it written that whoever enters in the second group cannot get a bachelor's degree?". And they said, "It's not written, but it's like that." Marcelina then said, "If it's not written, it's not like that! You'll register us now or I'll call the police!" Result: they registered, but the teachers asked, "Why are you attending this discipline? Aren't you in the evening class?"

⁴ Federal University of Minas Gerais.

We would say, "Yes, we are, but we want to be researchers." There were people who said to me, for example: "Oh, but you can't be a researcher. Because you didn't have a science initiation scholarship, you weren't teaching." I'm from a time when universities were still populated by elites, and these people were the ones who got tutoring positions, scholarships, etc. So much that when I started working at the city hall, I asked to be in the afternoon shift in order to be able to study in the morning and join that system. But still, I tried, I tried, and I got nothing.

After completing undergrad, I didn't study for a time, working in the area of heritage and history. Then, I got a postgraduate degree in African and Afro-Brazilian studies at PUC Minas⁵, where I received a scholarship. Then I tried the master's degree at UFBA⁶, I got second place and did it. Now, it's just the doctorate left!

My master's degree was done in a difficult context. I was married, with small children, I was approved by UFBA and said, "Oh, I'm going to do it!". My kids' father said, "No, it's okay, you can go." But I didn't ask if I could go, did I? I just told him I was going, and that my mom was going to help. From then on, our relationship was no longer the same. I was there in Salvador, alone, coming here when I could. So, it was very difficult to stay there without the kids, and it was so difficult for him to stay here with the kids too. My mother helped a lot during my master's degree. She'd leave the house every day and come to my house to be with the kids. And she wouldn't leave here until the kids' father was back from work. He worked eight hours a day, Tuesday through Sunday. He was a doorman at the Zoo at the time. Over the weekend, my sister and my friend picked up the kids too. So, the children were getting tossed around. To this day, they speak as if they had been abandoned by their mother. They seem to have been traumatized, even though they're fine now.

5. Ethnic-Racial Formation

I didn't learn anything about Africa in school, not even in high school. I don't remember Africa being even mentioned, not even Egypt. So, I started building my knowledge about Africa only at university.

First came the Ancient History discipline, I do not remember whether in the first or second semester. I was Daniel Vale Ribeiro's student. That's when I first heard about Egypt. I think that in Contemporary History 2, already at the end of the History degree, with Professor Vera⁷, I resumed the study of Africa. This professor also had an elective class focused on Africa and Asia. In this case,

⁵ Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais.

⁶ Federal University of Bahia.

⁷ Nila does not remember this professor's last name.

the class was on Saturday and had very few students, from 8 to 12 people. Because the content was too large, part of it was working on a research activity. She directed us to choose between Africa and Asia. I obviously chose Africa because I wanted to study the issue of slave trafficking. When this subject appeared in the course, it was in Economic History, and I did not like the theoretical perspective used. It was the late 1980s, an exceptionally large theoretical-methodological change was underway. We were beginning to talk here about the History of the Vanquished, History of Mentalities, and I was very interested in these new perspectives. I had also attended the History of Minas discipline, with Professor Maria Auxiliadora de Faria. So, I weighted that I had to take that elective course, because there was a piece missing from my puzzle. The question of the Congados and the Reinados, which permeate the history of Minas Gerais and Belo Horizonte, speaks of the protagonism of enslaved people. I needed to examine it; I had seen it only in passing.

I remember that there wasn't anything very interesting about Africa in FAFICH's library at the time. Professor Vera suggested that I interview an African who was studying at the Instituto Santo Ignácio. It was in Pampulha, I lived in Indústrias and studied in Santo Antônio, both very far from there, but I went. This person introduced me to several books. But they were books in English, in French; they weren't even translated to Spanish yet. Since I could read something of French, I wrote the paper making use of part of what he introduced me to. It was in this discipline, writing this paper, that I understood the connection between Africa and Brazil overall, and with Minas Gerais specifically. That's when I realized there was a possible way of research that wasn't the issue of trafficking humans as goods. I could understand that these Africans did something coming here, but I still couldn't systematize what these people actually did, at that time.

Some people and some authors were especially important in my ethnic-racial background. I didn't work directly with Professor Lígia Estanislau, but she was the first person in my life who wrote to a wider audience, from her place as a black woman. When Lígia faced the culture of Belo Horizonte from a black perspective, she opened my eyes to my own questions, throughout my education, throughout my life. It was with her that I understood that I could work with that. She's a sociologist, professor at UFMG, who went to work at The City Hall, in Belo Horizonte. And she exposes the black Belo Horizonte cultural heritage to everyone. Belo Horizonte was founded by black people. When the state says to do anything, black people come to build it. Then city planning imploded. The black people who built Belo Horizonte went to live in the outskirts, but came to build the city, sell vegetables, do various jobs, visit. And they did not come to build the city for white people and leave; they left marks in the city, and they stayed here. I read the reports that Lygia wrote about it.

I remember speeches and conversations by Marcos Cardoso, within the Municipal Culture Secretariat itself, when he went to work there in the 1990s. Jorge dos Anjos is an artist I first saw through the eyes of Marcos Cardoso. Congado I think it's very important to cite. I feel a very great affection for Dona Isabel Casemira. She said some remarkably interesting things when we organized the Tricentenary of Zumbi. She highlighted the importance of Our Lady of the Rosary, and I realized how much the Saint was ours, of the Reinado, of Congado. "That's our saint, of black people!" How can a white virgin be spoken of like that?

Another person who was very important: Erisvaldo Santos. In the postgraduate degree I got at PUC, I began to systematically read black authors, and also found black authors. Erisvaldo was my teacher. He's babalorixá. He was the one who told me that the presence of black people in the history of Brazil should be seen from the perspective of reinvention. What do you mean, reinvention?! They came here with nothing. They came here and had to reinvent themselves. And they keep reinventing themselves every time one is born. Then I started reading Erisvaldo Santos.

I found Joseph Ki-Zerbo in that project I did in university, through the African person who was at ISI⁸ and I had interviewed in the 1980s. But after completing the paper, I put that author aside. In this course, I found him again as well as other very interesting authors. There is a text from Ki-Zerbo that works on what History of Africa should be told, and by whom this story should be told. When you elaborate the black history of Belo Horizonte or give a black perspective to the history of Belo Horizonte, which is what I do, as much as you work with Western and white authors, you begin from of your perspective, that is, from your reinvention as a black person.

I was raised as a white girl. My dolls were blonde. At the time, there weren't any black dolls, and if there were, my parents wouldn't have bought them. When I faced racism, I began to distrust all of it. When I stopped straightening my hair, it was because I had enough self-esteem to face racism. What I understood from what Erisvaldo stands for is that if you don't reinvent yourself as a black person, you're not going to leave the place of subalternity, you're always going to be a sad little thing to yourself. So we shouldn't just stand around, racism is meant to be fought. "And how will you (in this case, I) face racism?" Erisvaldo made me understand this from myself, from my experience, from my reinvention and from my production. I'm not one of those people who lived in Africa. I am from this place of violence, of devaluing the humanity of black people, which is racism.



Lori Figueiró's book release in Belo Horizonte, in the auditorium of the Design School of the State University of Minas Gerais.

By: Lori Figueiró

Another thing I discovered in that course: Conceição Evaristo. *Becos da Memória* is the history of Belo Horizonte in the 1960s, 1970s. She talks about white women who didn't wash their dirty sanitary towels. No wonder my mother never taught me how to do laundry, even though she was a racist. When I read this book, I think, "Wow, I'm so glad my mom didn't teach me how to wash and iron!". They are the minutiae of racism, something that is ingrained in our lives, in our veins.

And I discovered Conceição Evaristo at the time I was working at the Abílio Barreto Museum, discussing cultural heritage with José Neves Bittencourt. That is, at the moment that I was discussing the truth in cultural heritage, which is what José Neves represented. He was open to dialogue. Is it possible that I was the only person who saw that Abílio Barreto was a racist? Nobody mentions that, anyways.

6. Professional trajectory in Belo Horizonte

I worked for 30 years in Belo Horizonte's city hall. When I was hired, I was already at university – and I knew full well I was going to be a historian.

I started working at the Planning Secretariat in 1987, thanking God that I did not end up in the Administration or in the Finance Secretariats. The Planning Secretariat was tiny at the time with many leadership positions. I worked with the municipal budget, which was under the responsibility of an even tinier department. I was the only person who didn't have a senior position there. Before the probationary internship was over, I had already left the Planning Secretariat. I stayed for less than two years.

I put things in motion and managed to be placed by the city hall in the Tancredo Neves Foundation, where I was already an intern. In my position in the city administration, I had to work for six hours. So, I worked part-time. On the counter-shift, I interned at the Tancredo Neves Foundation. In fact, I had been selected for an internship position at the João Pinheiro Foundation, but the FJP let me work for the Tancredo Neves Foundation, under a state government agreement. As the Tancredo Neves Foundation also had an agreement with the city hall for personnel assignment, getting authorization from the City hall meant I could work there all day, part time as an intern and part-time as a transferee. This ended up happening. I worked there for about two years. Even after I completed the internship, I continued working there, under the city hall's payroll.

At the Tancredo Neves Foundation, in reality, I was a research assistant. I worked with the newspaper collection, the fax and telex collection, I organized a lot. At that time, the Tancredo Neves Memorial was created in São João del Rey. I also worked on sorting the collection for the inauguration of this memorial. With the end of the agreement between the Foundation and the City Hall, I returned there.

Because I'd worked with the municipal budget, I looked for the person who worked with the budget of the Culture Secretariat, in an attempt to work there. That's how I found out they were creating the Belo Horizonte City Archive and looking for people to work there. I spoke with Norma de Góes Monteiro, who was heading the initiative. It was the beginning of the Public Archive of the City of Belo Horizonte (APCBH): the archive occupied a room, barely had desks for everyone; it was just two computers, one for the director and one for everyone else. When Norma read my résumé and saw my training, she noticed my training and that I had worked at the Tancredo Neves Foundation. She said: "It's a shame you got here just now. If not, I would've given you the Head of Research and Information Service position. Because the person who held the position doesn't have the training you have. So, you're going to take over the Head of the Research Section". I went back

to the City Hall as Section Chief. Above me, was the Head of Service, and after them, the Archive Director.

In 1997, Belo Horizonte had no systematized history, other than the one written by Abílio Barreto. It was the city's centenary. At the Federal University of Minas Gerais, they were developing several studies about Belo Horizonte. At the archive, we were trying to get the documentation to reconstruct the city's history.

At the same time, it was the Patrus Ananias government. In terms of preserving cultural heritage, until then, even if something was preserved, what wasn't taken over by businesspeople, was occupied by people oriented to do no harm to businesses. That's changed. This is the time when Cultural Heritage was directed by Lígia Estanislau and the Culture Secretariat was under the management of Antonieta Cunha. Marcos Cardoso, a person who is a reference for the black movement in Belo Horizonte, worked at the Culture Secretariat, at that time, with the Cultural Action Department. It was the Cultural Action Department, from the Culture Secretariat, together with the Lagoa do Nado Cultural Center, that promoted cultural decentralization. That's when a perspective of the city that included black people emerged.

In the newly created City Archive, initially, the idea was to make an administrative archive in a larger conception, covering the entire history of the city, but from the point of view of the official administration. For this, it was necessary to build a timeline from the perspective of the city's historical-administrative process. I was in charge of thinking about a project for the archive that tried to build this timeline for Belo Horizonte.

When Norma assembled the first APCBH team, she brought people from the National Archive to teach us. Theoretically, this place was of importance to me. We worked with the most up-to-date archive theory. From the point of view of training, it was remarkably interesting. I even took a graduate course in archive organization. This course took place at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. It was every weekend, Friday to Saturday. It was a course paid by the City Hall.

I left the Archive because I didn't get along with a person Norma brought over to work there. When that happened, Lígia Estanislau was already ill and outside Municipal Heritage. It then was occupied by Leonardo Castriota, who was working on the dossiers for some regions of the city, and we were doing that. The Lagoinha Dossier, for example, is from that time. And who are those people from Lagoinha? What are those carnival blocks? What is the culture of that place? When the Lagoinha Dossier was under development was around the same time I left the Archive.

When I decided to leave, a geographer who worked with me told me about a vacancy in Lagoa do Nado park. He put me in touch with the director at the time, Abilde Carneiro. And I ended up

going to work there, occupying a position at the same level as the one I occupied in the Archive: Section Head for Cultural Training. I took care of the Lagoa do Nado's cultural activity – concerts, workshops, exhibitions. I was responsible for all of it. The Lagoa do Nado parties lasted three days and were delicious. There was an Association that represented the place's preservation movement, the people who oversaw the City Hall's performance. I also took care of this relationship with the community. Then, when the person who was Head of Service left, that is, when the person who was my direct boss left, I became Head of Service. Then I started working for the cultural decentralization of the city, in the creation of the Pampulha Cultural Center. The São Bernardo Cultural Center had already been created at that time. Let's face it, it's one thing to talk to the people and listen to what people's demands are for municipal management. It's another thing to theoretically build this path, because you have to subsidize public policy.

What is Lagoa do Nado? It arose from a middle-class youth movement who wanted to preserve an old farm that belonged to one of the mayors of Belo Horizonte, Américo Renné Gianetti. These young people had an extraordinarily strong movement. So much so that they made the park happen; a municipal space in the Northern Region of Belo Horizonte, with 300,000 square meters. When the Lagoa do Nado was turned into a municipal park, it had to be opened up to the community. Administratively, alongside the park, the Lagoa do Nado Interregional Cultural Center is created. I arrived when this happened. The two are situated in the North Zone but have exchanges with other regions of the city. With Alto Vera Cruz and Barreiro, for example. With São Bernardo, which had been a policing unit. People were tortured there; they made people confess. When São Bernardo ceased to be this, it was singers and storytellers who occupied the space. The overwhelming majority of whom were black people.

There was an Administrative Reform in the City Hall in the year 2000. This closed several positions; one of them was mine. That's when I left Lagoa do Nado and I felt terrible. In fact, there was a change in government. It meant, on the one hand, an ideological change and on the other, a structural change. During this process, in my assessment, it was not only the staff that was negotiated, it was also the policy. The city's cultural decentralization policy, for example, was drastically negotiated. Lagoa do Nado continued to work, with difficulty, and the Cultural Action Department in the Culture Secretariat, which worked together with Lagoa do Nado, lost status and survived by the skin of the teeth of those who worked there. Sustaining cultural decentralization after 2000 was tough. I left Lagoa do Nado then, in a very sad moment, really depressive.

I went to the Pampulha Regional Administration without a commissioned position, as an administrative assistant, which was the position that I held in the City Hall originally. I was working

in the newly created Regional Culture Secretariat, which came about with this administrative reform that I mentioned. This secretariat was short-lived.

At that time, a person with whom I had worked with at the Tancredo Neves Foundation and the Belo Horizonte City Archive was a teacher at the municipal level at Belo Horizonte and had been transferred to the Abílio Barreto Historical Museum. She referred me to Thaís Pimentel, who ran the museum. I went to work at Abílio Barreto and I stayed there for a long time. It was at the museum that I met Marina Amorim, José Neves Bittencourt, Thiago Costa, a lot of people. There was a movement of formation, much like the one I had experienced at the City Archive.

José Neves provided a lot of reading and discussion. It was fundamental for me to be the historian that I am. Who's José? He's a museologist from the National History Museum, who was working at the Abílio Barreto Museum. He wrote and published. He is a reference in the field. I owe him the training in museology and an improvement of my training in the area of history and heritage. It was from this encounter that I started publishing theoretical texts. I understand that this learning process, from my time at Abílio, crowned my public policy training, which occurred within the City Hall as well. So, in fact, the meeting with José Neves was very important to me. He made me read and argue a lot. Of each fight of ours, and we fought a lot, I left with at least two books. He gave books from his library to me. It was this process that made me a person with a good theoretical ability. And I started writing and I haven't stopped since. We wrote a lot within the museum and for certain magazines, such as the National History Museum Annals.

I got José Neves' attention because I disagreed with him. He was placed there to bring the best of museum theory to Abílio Barreto. But once he said, "These things you say have no meaning. Belo Horizonte is a republican city, and this black issue does not exist here." I said, "Of course there's this black issue in Belo Horizonte! Leave the Museum and walk around downtown. What you'll see are black women coming out of their bosses' homes to go home. I see them all, some talk to me like I'm also someone who had worked in one of these houses, in one of those apartments. Of course, there's the black question in this city! Of course, there's this black question!" That happened and a little later he was able to give me support in setting up the exhibition *A Matter of Race: black people in the City Museum*. So, I got José's attention because I disagreed with him. And I convinced him that what I was thinking was right or, at least, that it deserved theoretical investigation.

My exhibition fostered a lot of discussion, including inside the museum itself. There was a lot of trouble, as a matter of fact. Nowadays, some people are starting to digest what I presented to them. This was when Thaís Pimentel was still the director. But I was the one who was different, you know? I was aware that I was a black woman. And I was aware that I was a black woman

historian. The museum hadn't brought up the issue of representation of black people in the city. The exhibition I did exposed that. And it was a black woman who did that.

I left Abílio Barreto because I was approved for the master's degree. Well, actually, at the time, I was coordinating the group responsible for designing a new permanent exhibition for the museum's main house. The idea was to work on the advent of the new capital of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, bringing the narratives of the place during the time of construction and the founding of the city, but also the contradictions of these narratives. I had problems with the institution's director back then, serious conflicts that I don't even like to remember. That way, I left because I had been approved for the master's degree in Bahia. I had premium vacations and accumulated annual vacations, plus I had a surplus of hours banked. I put it all together and went to Salvador to do my master's degree. But I was going through a very difficult situation at that moment, professionally. I even lost a 25-year friendship because of what happened. It was tragic. When I was approved for the master's degree, I was really lucky. If not, I think I'd have been out of the City Hall. Returning from Bahia, this director of the Abílio Barreto Museum, with whom I had become ill-disposed with, had become President of the Municipal Culture Foundation. So, I went back to the museum, but I couldn't stay there. In fact, it was not possible to stay anywhere within the Foundation. I ended up in the Human Resources Department of Pampulha Regional. Leaving culture was horrible, I cried a lot.

When I worked at Pampulha Regional Administration, the Coordination of Racial Equality was created at the Secretariat of Social Policies. And this coordination created the Racial Equality Management Group in each regional. Each regional had a person responsible for that. In the Pampulha Regional, each department had to have one person in this group, coordinated by Rosane Pires. I was appointed to be the Human Resources Department representative. This Racial Equality Management Group of Regional Pampulha, that I participated in, was particularly good. We were able to have discussions and do interesting things. It was terrible to work with human resources, I didn't like it – I took care of the transportation vouchers for public servants, etc. But the meetings and activities of the Management Group were great.

The Pampulha Regional Director of Human Resources told me about a selection of the Municipal Culture Foundation for the Venda Nova Cultural Center: "There are some management meetings in the City Hall, and there is a person from the Culture Foundation that I like very much. This person knows you, and she said that she's having a selection process for cultural center management and that it would be interesting for you to apply. Looks like they're looking for someone for the Venda Nova Cultural Center now. They're receiving CVs." By then, the Foundation was already under new

management, that guy I didn't get along with had already left. And they were looking for someone to work in Venda Nova. The story of Venda Nova is very dear to me!

Sílvia Esteves, Lena's⁹ partner, was the director of cultural centers. And Edilaine Carneiro, who I met as a researcher in the collection of the Minas Gerais Public Archive, also had a position in Planning at the Municipal Culture Foundation. I applied for the position of manager of the Cultural Center of Venda Nova, and they were the ones who interviewed me. They did an interview, a tough one, about my career at the City Hall, the issue of history and planning. A week later, they said I had been selected, that it rested on my boss allowing me to take over. She did and I went to work as a manager in Venda Nova in January 2012. And it was awesome, super interesting!

Of course, I had a lot of problems. With the team, for starters. There was one person who thought she had to be the coordinator, because had a tenured position with the Foundation, art educator, and played capoeira. With her, I faced very serious problems. There was also a theft. They took a lot of equipment from the Arena of Culture Project. I had to file a police report, had depositions at the City Hall, all that stuff. But still, it was remarkably interesting. When that former director of the Abílio Barreto Museum came back to the Municipal Culture Foundation, I lost my position and left the Venda Nova Cultural Center.

Back at the City Hall, as administrative assistant in Human Resources, now in the central area of the municipal administration, I did general service for public servants, opened claims and processes. All the city officials passed through there at some point. That service was my job, over my six hours. I went to this place thinking it was the worst in the world. And it wasn't, because you could do a lot for the people, people who didn't have anything, no access to anything. Most of them were black people who worked as a service assistant, administrative assistant, that is, in the worst positions at the City Hall, and needed to improve their salary a little, but didn't have the slightest information about their rights as a civil servant. It was very interesting after all.

Then I went to the Coordination of Racial Equality Promotion as an administrative assistant. Someone from the Department of Education's Management of Ethnic-Racial Relations heard about me when I was still working at the Abílio Barreto Museum. She knew about my degree in African and Afro-Brazilian Studies because she knew Erisvaldo, and he had been my supervisor. He's the one who told to her that I worked at the City Hall. Then, this person referred me to the coordination, considering that, being in education, I would be someone with whom she could have a dialogue there, in addition to the coordinator herself.

⁹ Regina Helena Alves da Silva, retired professor from FAFICH/UFMG's Department of History.

Coincidentally, that's when my book *Quilombolas* was ready. The publishers said, “we can hand you the book downtown”. So, they delivered it to the Coordination for Promotion of Racial Equality, and I eventually took it home. When the director saw the book, she was interested in me. The deputy, who was also from the Municipal Council for the Promotion of Racial Equality, had a health problem. I took over. First, the position was management, Manager 2; then, the position became advisor, Advisor 1, also due to an administrative reform.

This woman I worked with, when I went to the coordination, suffered with explicit racism, in the secretariat that housed the coordination, to begin with. And, obviously, when it came to budget cuts, they always cut into her portfolio. She had to play politics with the Education Secretariat, with the others. She had to support this policy, often without any budget, being present at events, lectures, discussions. In addition, she was placed in the post by Márcio Lacerda, after having passed through the Government Secretariat of his administration. On the one hand, she had to face the Kick Lacerda Out movement and, on the other, deal with the distancing of the black movement itself. Because the movement did not participate in this administration and few dialogued with it. The people who were there, managing the coordination, actually had the respect of the movement, but didn't have its support. So much so that the Municipal Council for the Promotion of Racial Equality, during this period, was its fierce combatant.

Then, despite the change in government, I continued in the Coordination for Promotion of Racial Equality without an official position, until I became a civil servant in the council. At the City Council for the Promotion of Racial Equality, I stayed until I retired. At that time, it was in bad shape. I kept it going by the skin of my teeth, to be honest. There was an election, and I was the one who welcomed and maintained direct contact with the new councilors so that they would support the policy, when there was no policy at the coordination level, because it took time for the new manager to be appointed. So, activities, seminars, everything this council promoted, I backed with the support of the new advisors, because the policy had to keep going.

7. A reading of the history of municipal administration in Belo Horizonte

When the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, in Portuguese) takes over the presidency, the party had the support of black people in the country as a whole. There was, then, a commitment from Lula, since the election campaign and he could not fail to fulfill that commitment. When he created the Special Secretariat for Policies to Promote Racial Equality (SEPPIR), it was incredibly important. But all this was already happening in Belo Horizonte, since 1998. It was in the Célio de Castro government, after Patrus Ananias, that the Special Secretariat Black Community Affairs was put in place. Diva Moreira ran that office. Marcos Cardoso went to work there, other black militants in the city too. When Lula assumes the commitment and honors it, what he does in the federal sphere was already happening in Belo Horizonte. BH is a pioneer in a policy of promoting racial equality. This Secretariat, in fact, became more like an idea. Because after the mayor's death, it became a section; then it became a coordination; and now it's back to being a section. So, the secretariat dropped in importance, but in addition to black people, it also came to include indigenous people and gypsy¹⁰ communities.

I didn't get to work in this office when I arrived at the secretariat because, in my view, it had to do with the black movement that acted in the city. And I was never in the movement. My profile has always been different. I never leaned towards political action. And I didn't have the political background that these people had in the daily struggle. Because I'm not a black person. So, for example, I didn't go through much of what I saw Marcos Cardoso go through, in the Philosophy major, when I was studying at FAFICH. The marginalization he suffered was certainly much greater than the one I suffered. He was a poor black man. When I went to work at Lagoa do Nado, the policy of promoting racial equality was on the agenda, but the focus was the construction of a cultural public policy. The truth is that when the promotion of racial equality happens, you have to create the conditions for it to take effect at all levels of government. And that's what we did too, at Lagoa do Nado.

Similarly, when Law 10.639/2003 and Law 11.645/2008 took place at the federal level, the Municipal Education Secretariat already had some experience. That is why Belo Horizonte is one of the cities in which this law disseminated well, even with all the problems. What I mean is that this city already had a policy of racial equality, long before the federal policy existed. It was pioneering and incentivized the Workers' Party administration in Brasília, on the one hand; and on the other, that's why federal initiatives have been successful here.

¹⁰ Gypsy (cigano) is an accepted umbrella term including peoples such as the Rom, Calon, and Sinti ethnicities.

In education, specifically, did it have to be heroic? It did. Did it have to rely a lot on the municipal racial equality agency? It did. Because when managers are at low ranking, it is not easy to afford a policy for all levels of government. That was the reality at the Municipal Education Secretariat. To get there at the ground-level, that is, the black student in the municipal public school, it was a heroic act and that happened with institutional articulation. I arrived at the Coordination for Promotion of Racial Equality, in the Márcio Lacerda government. I worked with a black woman who suffered explicit racism – there was nothing implied. And the coordinator acted in a very articulate manner with the person in the ethnic-racial nucleus of the Education Secretariat. I also followed that motion then.



I did not have an education that allowed me to understand that it was the struggle of the black movement that ensured that I could be able to take over without being lynched, without being cursed and belittled. I had a hard time understanding that. Because if I had enough self-esteem to face racism, it is thanks to the struggle of the black movement, including of this city, which I did not participate in. So, I enjoy some of the victories of this militancy. Similarly, if, when the laws 10.639/03 and 11645/08 were passed, Belo Horizonte had the framework for it, it's because of the black movement. The black movement was formed in the city and occupied the government. The Diva's secretariat, for example, it's true, had its problems, critiques can always be made. But it happened and implemented the policy, that's undeniable. Even with all the issues that this policy has suffered from and suffers still, it persisted and persists. That's central. Another point: the laws I mentioned came late for me,

Nila Rodrigues's book release in Araçuaí/MG.

By: Lori Figueiró

but they were not late for my children nor for the other children I saw by the bunch in the cultural centers of Belo Horizonte.

In conclusion, cultural centers, in a way, need to be seen as the support of this policy, because that is what they are. The kids who attended these centers back then were public school students. When the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture becomes mandatory in schools, they were already, at least, completing elementary school. So, the new legislation came late for them too, but they lived the cultural centers, they could strengthen their ethnic-racial identity there. The cultural centers' boom started in 1999 and, before that, there was already cultural action in the city, promoted by the City Hall, to value black culture. Cultural policy in Belo Horizonte, in this way, can be considered as the origin of racial equality policy in the city. Because here, the popular culture of the black city is very black. And popular culture is the focus of cultural policy, which was built in Belo Horizonte in the 1990s.