

live in misery and have no economic independence.

For all the women at the conference, one thing was clear: in spite of the gains made throughout the world, no country treats women the same way men are treated. In no society do women enjoy the same opportunities as men. Seventy percent of poor people in the world are women, and over two-thirds of the world's illiterate are women. Women still earn less than men, and they continue to be the last hired and the first fired. The world over, women still have less access to political and economic decision-making.

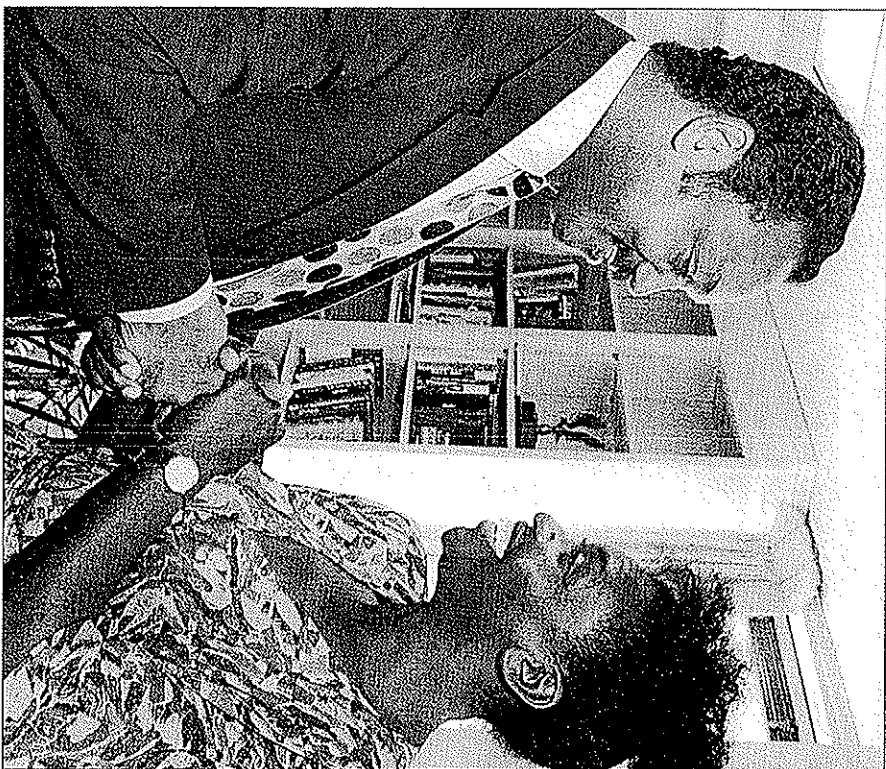
Even the nations that define themselves as advanced democracies have not eliminated sex discrimination. Looking at the world from a woman's perspective, no country in the world is democratic.

That's why whoever we are, wherever we live, we women can't let down our guard. We must keep on fighting to gain new ground. And at the same time we organize women, we can't forget our responsibility to educate men. Because the fight for women's rights is not a war between the sexes, but a struggle to create a true partnership with men. I'm convinced that the more rights we gain as women, the freer men will be. Equality between the sexes is the key to a better world for all of us.

I feel full of hope when I look at my granddaughter and remember the day she was born. On March 8, 1985, International Women's Day, I was speaking at a women's rally. Somehow, as I spoke, I had a premonition that my daughter Nilceia was going to give birth to a baby girl. I told the crowd: "Another Benedita is coming into the world. I know that she and many others will keep our struggle alive!" After that, Nilceia didn't have a choice but to name her daughter after me. Her name is Ana Benedita. She, as well as my other grandchildren, is a great inspiration in my life.

Chapter Six

Exploding the Myth of Racial Harmony



*Benedita, on a visit to the United States, met with
Reverend Jesse Jackson*

Photo by Rick Reinhard

Miscegenação, que maravilha
 garante a presença de todas as etnias
 reservou para cada
 uma função
 Nas matas vivas, verdes cabocla
 vivem os povos da floresta
 nas favelas a negrada
 nas penitenciárias abarrotadas
 nas ruas famintos pedintes
 Miscegenação, que maravilha
 me esmero
 me quero
 gerente de banco,
 general,
 governador,
 presidente, prefeito, senador.
 Vêja que beleza
 não há racismo, não há
 Universidade aberta para toda gente
 capa de revista
 manchete de primeira página
 sucesso no jornal nacional
 me vejo toda na televisão.
 Imaginem se nessa terra há
 discriminação!

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Miscegenation, how marvelous
 it guaranteed the presence of all
 ethnicities
 it reserved a special role
 for each one.
 In the living green jungle
 live the cabocla, the people of the
 forest
 The blacks in the favelas
 in the overcrowded jails
 in the streets hungry beggars.
 Miscegenation, how marvelous
 I primp
 I delight myself
 I love myself
 bank manager,
 general,
 governor,
 president, mayor, senator.
 Look how great
 there's no racism, none at all.
 Open university for everyone
 magazine cover
 front page headline
 sensation in the national news
 I see myself on TV.
 How can you say there's
 discrimination here!
 —Benedita da Silva

A foreign visitor coming to Brazil for the first time might ask herself: Where are all the black people?

Starting with the plane, it would be difficult for our visitor to find black passengers or even crew members. In the airport she'll see few blacks, perhaps some porters and taxi drivers. Arriving at the hotel, she'll have a hard time finding blacks eating in the restaurant or relaxing by the pool.

If she starts flipping through a magazine in her room, she won't see any black models in the ads. If she switches on the television, she probably won't see a single black performer. It's even more unlikely that she'll see blacks in the commercials.

But as soon as she steps outside and starts to walk around, she's certain to see more blacks. Her first encounter will probably be with black street children, who will ask her for spare change, or for the leftovers on her plate.

So how can people say that Brazil is the world's largest racial democracy? Many white people insist there's no racism here. You'll hear them say, "I have a black friend who comes over the house all the time." But in the homes of whites, blacks are usually present only as servants or gardeners.

The truth is that racial democracy in Brazil only exists in school books and official speeches. The elites in Brazil have promoted this myth of racial harmony to make people accept certain forms of discrimination and to deny the need for affirmative action.

Of course, if we compare racism in Brazil to racism in the United

States or South Africa, we'll find major differences. These countries forced blacks into separate ghettos, they created segregated schools for black children, they made blacks ride on separate busses or in the back of the bus, and so on. In Brazil, none of these mechanisms of segregation were imposed by law. But if we compare the color of the residents in the *favela* Mangueira with the color of the residents in well-to-do Ipanema, or the color of the passengers in the crowded trains from the poor suburbs with the color of the passengers on the downtown subway, we find virtually the same segregation.

Many Brazilians argue that this separation reflects class differences, not racism. Even some people on the left think that we shouldn't focus on the issue of race because the major issue is one of class. They say that if we built a society with a fair distribution of wealth, the position of blacks would automatically improve. But I disagree. Blacks suffer because they are poor, but they are poor because they are black.

I remember one time when I was participating in a debate on race. All the other panelists were white, middle class women who insisted that there was no racism in Brazil. The debate became very heated and emotional. At one point, one of the women accused me of promoting reverse racism because I said we needed affirmative action for blacks. While this woman was going on and on, I started writing a poem. When she finished talking, I read the poem out loud. I said:

<i>Nasci mulher negra</i>	I was born a black woman
<i>me fizeram homem e branco</i>	They turned me into a white man
<i>me castraram, me impediram</i>	They castrated me, they wouldn't
<i>de ir</i>	let me go
<i>mas não vou compactuar-me</i>	But I'm not going to
<i>com isso</i>	accept this
<i>vou gritar, soltar minha voz e</i>	I'm going to shout, let my voice
<i>me fazer livre</i>	cry out and make myself free
<i>para continuar a ser, mulher</i>	So I can continue to be a black
<i>negra.</i>	woman.

I was born black and female, but this racist society so excluded me that at one point in my life I really wanted to be a white man. When I was a child, I would go to the homes of the rich to deliver my mother's laundry, and people would say, "You can't come in this door, you have to go around to the back door." I was always taught that my place was with the poor, the blacks, the marginalized. It made it very hard for me to appreciate my own self-worth.

Throughout my youth, I felt the color of my skin was the color of evil. I remember once I wanted to be an angel in the school procession, and the teachers said I couldn't be an angel because there were no black angels. Black represented everything dark, ugly, and sinful, while light represented everything pretty and virtuous. That's the way things were portrayed to me.

According to the media, beautiful women were light-skinned. I could never hope to fit this standard. When I was in school the other kids would call me *negra maluca* — an ugly nigger. I was big and black and had "hard hair." I longed to have straight hair. I felt so ugly and rejected. I'd try to hide my hair under a scarf.

When I was in elementary school, I was a very dedicated student. I had very neat handwriting and I took such good care of my notebooks. I would take pieces of newspaper and cover the notebooks carefully so they would be tidy and pretty. I'd sit up front and pay close attention to the teacher. One day, at the end of the year, the teacher told me that I had received the best grade in the class. I went home all excited and invited my mother to go to our graduation party. She was so proud and on the day of the party, we got all dressed up and went to school. When we got there, the teacher said that there had been a mistake and that I wasn't the best student after all. From then on, I felt rejected and discriminated against. I went from sitting in the first row, to the second, third, and fourth, and finally I ended up sitting way in the back. My handwriting got smaller and smaller, and it became so small that the teacher could hardly read it.

I hated being a black girl and dreamed of being something that I wasn't. One day, I was so distraught that I took a tub that my mother used to wash clothes, filled it with bleach and water, and took a bath in it to see if I could make my skin lighter.

People who reject their blackness are like the *jabuticaba*, which is a native Brazilian fruit that is black on the outside and white on the inside. Racism is so internalized that many blacks refuse to call themselves black. That's why there are literally dozens and dozens of terms for describing someone with dark skin—*mulato*, *feijãozinho*, *criolo*, *pardo*, *café com leite*, *marrom*, *bombom*.

This mentality affects the way people respond to surveys on race and makes it hard to get an accurate picture of just how large the black population in Brazil really is. The government census says that blacks make up 44 percent of the population, but many black groups and academics dispute this and say the figure is much higher. A UNESCO study says blacks make up 70 percent of the population, which is probably closer to the truth.

There are other reasons why the definition of race is so complex in Brazil. In the United States, anyone who has black blood is considered black, even if they have light skin and light hair. But in Brazil, a person's race is not determined solely by their origin. A person with black ancestry who has light skin may be considered white, particularly if he has a good job, lives in a middle or upper-class neighborhood and is well-educated.

For example, my stepdaughter Camilla Pitanga is certainly black in terms of her roots—both her father and mother are black. But she's light-skinned, middle class and has a good job, so people don't consider her black. But if a person with the same physical characteristics was poor and illiterate, lived in the *favela*, danced samba and was a believer in Umbanda, she would be considered black. So people are "lighter" or "darker" depending on their economic and social status.

It's ironic that despite the pervasive discrimination against blacks,

all Brazilians identify with black culture. Daily life in Brazil is infused with "*africanidade*"—African-ness. The African influence is the seasoning that gives special life, color, and flavor to our national soul.

We see this not only in religion and in Carnival, but in the shape of our bodies and the gestures we make. These characteristics are so strong that white Brazilian women are totally different from white European women. African culture has an influence on the way white Brazilians look and act, too; it influences their entire physical being.

Whites in Brazil—both men and women—have adopted many aspects of black culture. They eat African-based dishes, enjoy black music and find comfort in black religion. But it's curious how black culture maintains its black identity no matter how many whites participate. The Portela samba school, for example, is said to have more whites than blacks, but Carnival is still considered part of black culture. There are many Umbanda groups whose members are mainly white, but Umbanda remains a black religion.

It's impossible to understand the complexity of race in Brazil today without looking back at the historical and social roots of race relations. People aren't racist because they're evil; they're racist because they've inherited a legacy of racism that comes from centuries of slavery.

I'll never forget the moment when I visited Gorée Island in Senegal. It was in 1992, when I was invited to an international meeting organized by the Gorée Memorial Foundation. Gorée is the island where slaves from all over Africa were gathered and separated according to their age, beauty, strength, and health, before being put on slave ships headed for the Americas.

I felt such anguish when the guides told me how families were torn apart—men from women, children from their parents. I thought of my own ancestors. I saw the tiny cells where the slaves were crowded together like animals. Imagine a big person like me,

who is five feet nine inches tall, held in a cell that was only two feet high and filled with 20 other slaves! And can you believe that on top of the prison was a restaurant, a bar and a clubroom? So white people would be sitting around having a grand, old time while in the cells down below black women and men were trembling with pain, hunger, shame, and fear.

The Portuguese colonized Brazil and then used black and indigenous slaves to build their fortunes. For more than three centuries blacks produced the wealth of this country, working on the sugarcane, coffee, and cotton plantations, and in the gold, diamond, and silver mines.

Black women worked in the plantations and in the master's house as maids and wet nurses. Many were sexually abused by their masters and their lives were marred by violence. When they got pregnant, they often aborted because they didn't want to bring their children into slavery.

By the nineteenth century, there were about three million black slaves. In fact, Brazil was the country that received the greatest number of slaves—some 35 percent of all the slaves in the New World landed in Brazil. Today, we have the second largest black population in the world, surpassed only by Nigeria.

The white elite was deathly afraid of a slave uprising. They feared that blacks in Brazil would follow the example of the uprisings in Haiti or Cuba, where blacks were influenced by the revolutionary ideals of the French Revolution—the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. That's why for years after the abolition of slavery, the Brazilian Constitution contained a clause that explicitly prohibited black immigration.

Brazil was the last nation in the West to abolish slavery. The first step was in 1871, with the declaration of the *Lei do Ventre Livre*, the Law of the Free Womb. This determined that all children born after that time would be free. Since the children were free, but their parents were not, these "free" children were separated from their

families, thrown out on the streets and forced to fend for themselves. The street children of today are the legacy of this law.

In 1888, Princess Isabel signed the law that finally abolished slavery. But contrary to what official textbooks say, that process did not occur peacefully. Our schoolbooks glorify the white colonists and explorers, but say little about Brazil's long history of slave revolts and the creation of *quilombos*, or townships made up of runaway slaves. Palmares in northeast Brazil, the best-known *quilombo*, was a multiracial society where runaway slaves, as well as poor Indians and whites, lived together in harmony. They built a thriving community with their own agriculture and through trade with neighboring villages. They had a strict moral code and their own justice system.

The Portuguese Crown was intent on destroying Palmares, since its reputation was spreading throughout the country and inspiring other slaves to organize. The colonizers sent 17 military expeditions to Palmares, but all of them failed. The people resisted heroically for almost a century. The Portuguese also tried repeatedly to co-opt their leader Zumbi, offering him land, freedom, and other benefits if he would dismantle the *quilombo*. But Zumbi was incorruptible.

It was only in 1696, with the use of cannons, that the mercenaries sent by the Portuguese finally managed to destroy Palmares. Zumbi was captured and executed. As a warning to others, his head was placed in the center of Recife until it decomposed. But Zumbi's stature only grew in the eyes of the people, and he became a legend. Zumbi is today considered a hero of the black movement.

Today we also recognize the role of black women in resisting slavery. Black women played a major role in the slave rebellions and in building the *quilombos*. In the eighteenth century, for example, Rainha Tereza was the queen of the *quilombo* Quariterê for two decades. Born in Angola and forced into slavery in Brazil, she led a group of Indians and blacks to run away and start a *quilombo* near the border of Bolivia. During her rule, she organized a well-devel-

oped defense and agricultural system. The Portuguese destroyed the *quilombo* in 1770, murdering and imprisoning its inhabitants. Tereza was captured, and she killed herself by taking poison.

Even after the abolition of slavery, blacks continued to live in miserable conditions. The majority had no access to education. The few who were lucky enough to get a piece of land had no resources to work the land. The landless were unable to find decent jobs because they couldn't compete with the more educated workers coming from Europe. Many families fell apart, and women often became the sole support of the family, usually working as domestic servants.

This disadvantaged position continues today. Blacks get less education, earn less, eat more poorly, and die earlier than whites. Life expectancy for blacks is eight years shorter than for whites. Illiteracy for blacks is 37 percent compared to 15 percent for whites. Even during the days of apartheid in South Africa, there were more blacks in South African universities than in Brazilian ones.

Blacks are virtually absent from senior government. There is one Cabinet minister of mixed descent, and none of the country's 23 state governors are black. Of the 559 members of Congress, only 7 consider themselves black. In the Armed Forces, you'll find few or no blacks among the generals, admirals, and colonels. In the business world, 82 percent of businessmen and high-level administrators are white.

While blacks make up the poorest sector of the population, black women are at the bottom of the ladder. Ninety percent of black women have only completed elementary school and their presence in the university is negligible. While black women have always been in the workforce, we are seen as ignorant and only capable of the most menial jobs. Our role is to clean the houses of white people and take care of their children.

Few people recognize how the labor of black women has contributed to the emancipation of white women. When white

women began to integrate themselves into the workforce, it was black women—working as maids, cooks, and nannies—who made this possible.

Despite the fact that black women entered the workforce long before white women, they earn 48 percent less than white women in the same professions. Only two percent of black women have professional jobs; the majority are employed in agricultural labor or services. Eighty percent of domestic workers are black.

Even as nannies, we're discriminated against. It wasn't long ago that people would put ads in the papers saying: "Looking for a white nanny." The black movement fought to make this type of language illegal. Now the ads say "good appearance necessary," which is a euphemism for light skin.

When blacks do manage to move up the social and economic ladder, they still can't escape racism. Successful blacks are considered arrogant and uppity. That's why blacks still don't feel comfortable in roles traditionally occupied by whites. The idea persists that blacks should know their place—that they should stick to the *favelas* and the poorest paying jobs.

There are exceptions, of course, like the great soccer player Pelé. Pelé says he never felt discriminated against. But he's a millionaire and his life is totally different from the lives of the vast majority of black Brazilians. Pelé was educated and trained by the white elite. His social circle is mostly white, which is not the case for the majority of blacks. So naturally he doesn't feel the same kind of discrimination that most blacks do.

Sometimes this discrimination is totally blatant, as when blacks are abused by the police. This happened to my own son, who was arrested and beaten simply because the police mistook him for someone else. They didn't believe him when he said he was my son, because a black couldn't possibly be the son of a congressperson.

I encounter this mentality all the time. Once, Pitanga and I were driving in Brasília in a car with official license plates when the

police stopped us and made us get out of the car with our hands on our heads. They were suspicious of us because we were two blacks driving around in an official car.

When people don't know who I am and see me in my car with the driver, they think that I'm a maid out doing chores for my boss. Sometimes when I open the door to my apartment in Brazil, people ask me to call the owner, Benedita da Silva. One time a government driver rang the bell and said, "Tell your boss that I'm waiting downstairs for her."

When I was first elected to Congress, I would get in the congressional elevator and the guards would stop me and say, "Sorry, this is only for congresspeople." And I'd answer, "Oh, what a coincidence. I'm a congresswoman." They would get so embarrassed and apologize. The same thing would happen with my black friends. One day, Hermogenes came to visit me in Brasília and the security guard was shocked when he saw this big, black guy with dreadlocks coming in. I think he must have been even more startled when I told him that Hermogenes was my political advisor.

The other day, I went to a store to buy my grandchild a birthday present and the security guard stopped me to check my bag. I noticed that plenty of white customers walked in and out carrying big bags, but nobody checked them. It was embarrassing because everyone was staring at me like I was a thief.

I've lost count of the times I've been stopped before entering a building and asked for identification. One time our party president Lula and I had a meeting at the office of one of our supporters. I got there early and the doorman stopped me in the lobby. It was only after the arrival of Lula, who's white, that the doorman allowed me to go up.

The racist nature of our society became really clear during my campaign for mayor of Rio. Once the elites of Rio understood that there was a real possibility that a black woman could become mayor, they panicked. They felt so threatened by the idea that their

city would be run by someone who came from the ranks of the poor, black community that they cast aside the myth of racial democracy and began their racist attacks. I started to get nasty letters and threatening phone calls. White men on the street would yell at me and make obscene gestures. They'd shout things like, "Your place is in the *favela*," "Get back to the kitchen," or "Hey monkey, go back to your tree." People joked that if I was elected, I'd change the big statue of Christ that overlooks the city for a statue of King Kong.

The same kind of racism surfaced during my 1994 senate race. I received anonymous threatening phone calls and dozens of letters saying disgusting things like: "We should go back to the time of the slaves when we could whip the niggers to keep them in their place."

Some of these threats are probably coming from racist, neo-Nazi groups. There are so-called skinhead groups in São Paulo, for example, that have been threatening anti-racist human rights groups. People tell me I should be more careful because some of these guys are really crazy. They say I shouldn't walk around the streets and in the *favelas* by myself, that I should ask the government for protection. But I never wanted to have a bodyguard, and although I must admit that sometimes the attacks scare me, I refuse to be intimidated.

It's always frustrating to go to the police to report a racist incident, because they don't take it seriously. Before I was a politician, they'd say to me, "My advice is that you just forget about it. You're a poor woman, and this will never go anywhere." Now they tell me, "Oh, don't make a big deal about it. You're an important public official. You shouldn't lower yourself for such a small thing."

Sometimes the racism is subtle, but it still hurts. I remember the day I took office as a newly elected senator. All of us senators were in the Congress building, celebrating the momentous occasion with our families. A group of people passed by my office and I heard them say, "Look, this is going to be the office of Benedita da Silva.

There'll be all kinds of goings on here, they'll even be making offerings to the gods and dancing samba." They all had a good laugh.

Their comments didn't just mock black culture, but mocked me as a senator. I doubt someone would go by the office of a white senator and say, "I bet there'll be all kinds of classical music and opera coming out of here." If they did, they certainly wouldn't say it in a pejorative way. Unfortunately, black culture is still considered second class.

This kind of mentality is also reflected in the press. In January 1997, the magazine *Veja* published an article accusing me of "*exibicionismo descarado e oportunismo sem rodaios*"—shameless exhibitionism and blatant opportunism. They said that the fact that I had appeared in the popular TV show *O Rei do Gado*—the Cartle King—showed a lack of respect for my constituents and said that I had appeared as a witness in the murder trial of the famous TV star Daniela Peres only so that I could be in the spotlight. They chided me for abusing official privileges, like using the VIP room in the airport, spending a weekend in the beach resort Angra dos Reis, and taking trips abroad. They also chastised me for having translated my resumé into English, French, and Spanish.

The article was so nasty that it elicited a public outcry, like this letter that says, "All politicians are self-promoters, some spend fortunes on this. So singling out Benedita da Silva is simply gross racism. The article implies that because the senator is black and comes from the *favela*, that's where she should stay. The senator, in my opinion, is an example to poor blacks that they, too, should have access to places usually reserved for whites. So what if she appeared in a TV show. You consider this disrespectful to her constituents, but I haven't talked to anyone who feels that way. You also say that she asked to be a witness at Daniela's murder trial, but any fool knows that people don't become witnesses simply because they want to—they must be summoned by the court. And if the senator spent a weekend at Angra dos Reis with socialites and

artists, so what? You think she should only go there to do the socialites' laundry? And this comment about using the VIP room and porters at the airport. How absurd! Do you think she should carry her bags on her head? When other politicians travel abroad, it's considered a benefit for our country. Why isn't that true for Benedita da Silva?"

To fight against the racism that still permeates our society, we've been trying to build a strong black movement. But due to the complexities of race issues in Brazil and the reluctance of many blacks to embrace their own identity, this has been difficult. It was particularly difficult during the dictatorship, because the 1967 Law of National Security prohibited even the discussion of racism. After the dictatorship, groups promoting black culture and black rights began to crop up all over the country. Today there are hundreds of these groups. Some organizations focus primarily on cultural identity—music groups, dance ensembles, religious organizations. Others focus more on research and advocacy in order to influence policy. And there are a number of wonderful black women's groups around the country that work on a range of issues from health to political representation to education.

One of the issues the black movement successfully organized around was ensuring that the 1988 Constitution protected our rights. We managed to pass an amendment that made racial prejudice a crime without bail and with no statute of limitation. This law hasn't modified people's behavior, but at least it gives us legal support. For the first time, we have the possibility of punishing those who commit racist acts.

We also managed to get lands that were once *quilombos* turned into national historical sites. And high schools must now include a curriculum on black culture, slavery, and the history of Africa. But we have not been successful in our efforts to win recognition for the principle of affirmative action, which is something we must continue to fight for.

I've been working with the black movement to push for legislation that would require that 40 percent of the actors in both the TV shows and the commercials be black. When you watch TV in Brazil, you'd think we were a European country, full of people who look like Scandinavians. In the commercials, you see pretty white men and women eating yogurt, driving shiny new cars, opening savings accounts, and dousing themselves with perfume and deodorant. Have you ever seen a black person sipping whiskey in a TV commercial? You'd think that blacks only drink moonshine. Have you ever seen a black child in an ad for children's toys? The only time you see blacks in commercials is when there's a family planning campaign and they're trying to convince us to have less children.

In TV shows blacks are rarely the main characters. They usually appear as waiters, criminals, security guards or maids. You rarely see black doctors, lawyers, poets or philosophers. The TV executives say that blacks are not good for ratings, but the soap opera *Próxima Vítima*, the Next Victim, portrayed a black family and was very popular. This helped us gain more support for our proposal to increase the visibility of blacks in the media. But we've encountered strong resistance from the TV networks and we still don't have enough strength in Congress to pass legislation.

The networks say that if they accept a quota for blacks, then Japanese, Italians, and every other ethnic group are going to want a quota, too. Our response is that we're not a small minority—we're more than half the population. And these other ethnic groups did not come here on slave ships. That's why I think it's totally justified to have affirmative action measures for the black community. We're now introducing affirmative action measures for women within our political parties and we must do the same with respect to blacks. These measures will give us more access to educational and job opportunities, and will better reflect the ethnic plurality of our society.

Look at the United States. Although the black population there

is a minority, I think that blacks in the U.S. have struggled and achieved more. This is true not only from an economic standpoint but from an organizational standpoint as well. American blacks have been more successful than we have in gaining access to all levels of education. Proportionally, the number of illiterate blacks in the United States is much lower, and the number of blacks in the university is much higher. Blacks in the U.S. are better represented in the media and in cultural institutions. There are more politicians who represent the black community—from Jesse Jackson to the Congressional Black Caucus to mayors and local officials. And there is a black middle class—even a black elite—that has race consciousness and supports the black movement.

On the other hand, I think that the deepest wound in the United States continues to be the racial division. In the United States, even with its advanced economy and technology, the black population is extremely marginalized. This marginalization leads to racial violence, like the uprisings in Los Angeles after the incident in which the police who beat Rodney King were absolved of wrongdoing. The racial conflicts in the United States should be a warning to all of us. When marginalized people perceive their government institutions, particularly the justice system, as biased, they will rise up against them.

Take the case of Mumia Abu Jamal, a black man in the United States who is on death row, accused of killing a police officer. Many people in the United States and all over the world think that racism is at the heart of his case. There were so many inconsistencies in the trial, but the government has refused to call a new one. Mumia says that all black prisoners are prisoners of a political system based on the devaluation of black people. His case also reflects the discriminatory way in which the death penalty is applied to people of color in the United States.

Both Brazil and the United States live in constant racial conflict. It doesn't help to try to sweep these problems under the rug. Both

countries are like powder kegs ready to explode and the responsibility lies with the politicians who shut their doors on the poor, refusing to help them get access to the minimum conditions of housing, work, food, and education. We must change our priorities. Instead of investing enormous sums of money building prisons, we should invest in supporting the marginalized minorities and in reactivating our economies.

Given the similarities between both countries, it's critical to build relations between blacks in the United States and Brazil. I'm very interested in understanding the achievements of the American blacks, what they have gained through affirmative action, and also understanding the current backlash against affirmative action. We must search together for forms of resistance based in our African cultural roots. We must exchange experiences that can strengthen our struggles and search for ways to unify blacks in the Americas.

White people start to feel threatened when they hear blacks talk about unity. When we question the dominant structures and demand greater participation, they accuse us of reverse racism. My opponent in the Rio mayoral race used to accuse me of polarizing society between rich and poor, white and black. But I didn't invent this polarization. Come on now. It's ridiculous to label blacks as racists because we want more opportunities in the workplace. It's ridiculous to label blacks as racists because we want to earn a livable wage, or because we want our culture respected.

I'm not trying to be divisive. On the contrary, fighting racism is a way to unify us. For this is not a problem that just affects blacks, it affects the whole society we live in. The struggle against racism is not a struggle against whites; it's a struggle to build a society where the different cultures live in harmony.

My great-grandmother Maria Rosa understood this. Every May 13, the day we celebrated the abolition of slavery, my mother would have a big reunion in our house with all the relatives. My great-

grandmother would remind us how our family had been torn apart by slavery—some of her children had been sold and she never found out what happened to them. She'd tell us how important it was for the rest of us to stay together and fight for our rights. "Blacks must have pride and self-respect," she'd say. "Blacks must resist!"

She didn't say these things with a feeling of hatred against whites, but with love and warmth. How could she hate whites? Black women like my great-grandmother nursed many white babies and cared for them like their own children. No, my great-grandmother never preached hatred. Even though we were brought here on slave ships, she taught us to love this country and all its people.