

**Global Feminisms
Comparative Case Studies of
Women's Activism and Scholarship**

BRAZIL

Marilda de Souza Francisco

Interviewed by Sueann Caulfield

**Angra dos Reis, Brazil
July 17, 2014**

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Marilda de Souza was born in 1962 in Bracuí, in Angra dos Reis, a municipality located in the southern part of the state of Rio de Janeiro. She grew up in the Quilombo community of Santa Ria de Bracuí in Angra and, after teaching herself to read and write, she attended school through high school. She has been active in community organizing (neighborhood associations, for example) all of her life and she has worked in the schools of Angra for many years. Marilda is currently one of the main leaders of the Quilombo do Bracuí. She lives in Angra with her husband and two children.

Sueann Caulfield is Associate Professor of History at the University of Michigan, where she was the former director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and currently heads the Brazil Initiative Social Sciences Cluster. She specializes in the history of modern Brazil, with emphasis on gender and sexuality. She has won awards and fellowships from the Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Humanities, and American Council of Learned Societies. Her publications include *In Defense of Honor: Morality, Modernity, And Nation In Early Twentieth-Century Brazil*, the co-edited volume *Honor, Status, and Law in Modern Latin American History*, and various articles on gender and historiography, family law, race, and sexuality in Brazil. Her current research focuses on family history with a focus on paternity and legitimacy in twentieth-century Brazil. She is particularly interested in questions of human rights in Latin America, and has participated in a number of workshops, cross-country teaching projects, and exchanges around topics of social justice and social action.

The Global Feminisms Project is a collaborative international oral history project that examines feminist activism, women's movements, and academic women's studies in sites around the world. Housed at the University of Michigan, the project was started in 2002 with a grant from the Rackham Graduate School. The virtual archive includes interviews from women activists and scholars from Brazil, China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States.

Our collaborators in Brazil are at the Laboratório de História Oral e Imagem - UFF (the Laboratory of Oral History and Images at the Federal Fluminense University in Rio de Janeiro, [LABHOI](#)) and Núcleo de História, Memória e Documento (the Center for History, Memory, and Documentation at the Federal State University in Rio de Janeiro, [NUMEM](#)). The Brazil interviews were conducted with support from the Third Century Learning Initiative and the Brazil Initiative (Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies), both at the University of Michigan, FAPERJ (The Research Support Fund in Rio de Janeiro), and CNPq (The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development in Brazil).

Key words: slavery, education, land, rural, literacy, race, black, land reclamation

Sueann Caulfield: I am talking with Marilda de Souza, who is the Coordinator of Education at the “Associação Remanescente Quilombola”¹ (the Association of a Territory Originating from a Quilombo Community)² of Santa Ria de Bracuí, which is where we are meeting today.

Marilda de Souza Francisco: Angra dos Reis.³

SC: Angra dos Reis, Brazil. So, to start, I would like to ask you, or ask you to explain a bit, what this movement is about, and how long you’ve been working in this movement.

MSF: Well, even though we are descendants of enslaved blacks,⁴ before, we would consider ourselves just a black rural community, right? Then, after 2000, 1999 more or less, those communities came to be seen as quilombola communities, as quilombos⁵ – every community that was left by slave owners, if there are still people living in those places, if there are any signs of remains, which means those old buildings, so then, those communities would be called quilombos. So, then we were contacted by people from Rio, by the federal government, about if we wanted to create a quilombo here. In the beginning, there were some people representing us in Rio, and then it stopped for a bit, and then we created the association. So I have been president since the beginning of the association, I don't remember the date exactly, but I think it was 2000 more or less. Then, and always actually, I was very interested in education, and I've always been in the education sector, the education world. Education is everything. So I've always been active in education, because I act as a bridge. Schools that come to visit, the colleges and all, usually they look for me because I share things I know. And I've always been able to talk, to tell stories, this kind of thing, so I'm very sought out because I'm telling those

¹ During centuries of slavery in Brazil, which was only abolished in 1888, over four million African captives were brought to Brazil. Over the years, thousands of slaves escaped the harsh conditions in mines and plantations and joined with indigenous people in rural areas. Together, they created hybrid settlements known as maroon communities (after the Spanish term *cimarrón*, or runaway). These communities, hidden in the interior of the country, came to be called quilombos, the word for settlement in the Angolan language of Kimbundu. Today, they are winning their rights to land and becoming a central site for slavery reparations programs in Brazil. See “Maroon People,” National Geographic, April 2012. <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/04/maroon-people/mann-hecht-text> (accessed 03/30/15). Also Planas, Roque. “Brazil’s ‘Quilombo’ Movement May be the World’s Largest Slavery Reparations Program.” Huffington Post. August 26, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/10/brazil-quilombos_n_5572236.html (accessed 4/15/15).

² The Association of a Territory Originating from a Quilombo Community aims to get legal land status for quilombola communities. The organization aims to enforce federal rights to land established in 2003 and the protection of culture statutes. There are more than 2,000 quilombo communities in Brazil today. Find out more at: <http://uc.socioambiental.org/en/territ%C3%B3rios-de-ocupa%C3%A7%C3%A3o-tradicional/territories-of-descendants-of-quilombos> (accessed 03/31/15).

³ Angra dos Reis is the name of the municipality, located in the southern part of the state of Rio de Janeiro, and Santa Ria de Bracuí is the name of the quilombo community.

⁴ Slavery in Brazil occurred from 1532 until its abolishment in 1888. Brazil was the last nation in the Western hemisphere to abolish slavery, after over four million slaves were shipped from Africa to Brazil, accounting for 40% of all slavery to the Americas. Today, the second largest population of people of African descent is in Brazil. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_Brazil (accessed 3/31/15).

stories that happened here, that through my dad, he would tell, oral history, this kind of thing. So as I say, I would tell because I have the memory of an elephant, because I remember things. So I started to tell those stories, and then people liked to hear, right? Stories are like that. You have to have the person who likes to tell and the person who likes to hear. (Laughs.) If you don't have the two of them, it doesn't work.

SC: So, you say that you started to work with the quilombola movement in 2003.

MSF: Yes, 2002, 2003, more or less

SC: And you say you have to put together the person who wants to tell the story and the person who wants to hear. So these local histories that you know, from you dad, and having this talent – did it start to be valued with the creation of the movement, or were you already a storyteller?

MSF: Both. Yes, in truth I started to find out that those stories had some value for education because I worked in a school – I am the caretaker of the school, in that school down there, in Aurea Pires da Gama, since '92. So, there was a project in the school, "Discovering Local Histories." So the director came to me and said – the director Elisa, it's not a problem to mention her name – she asked me if I knew someone who knows the history of the place, who would like to talk about it, because sometimes people know but they don't like to tell. So I said, "I know," and we went around to the houses, especially the houses of the older people that we call here *grio*,⁶ to hear those stories, to pass them on to the children, right, for the children to hear. And this story was going to be transformed in a book.

SC: When was it published?

MSF: Oh, I don't know if it was in '96, '97, something like that.

SC: Do you have the book?

MSF: Someone borrowed it. (Laughs.) My book is lent to a person who hasn't returned it yet. So she [the director] came and we started to walk around, to look for people who would tell stories. So we went to seu Adriano,⁷ to seu Manuel Moraes, older people, Dona Joana, who has already died. And then I said, "But I know how to tell those stories. My dad, even though he had already passed, I said something like, my dad would tell all those stories too and I always liked to hear them, sitting by the oven at night, there is no electricity, there is no TV, there was nothing here. And my dad would tell those stories. So I started to tell them too, at school. So that's when I realized that I also remember many things from the various stories that my dad would tell, and my older sister, even my mom - my mom didn't like it that much, but she would tell them too. And then we were putting all of that together and were making this into a book, called *Bracuí, Its Struggle and Its History*.⁸ That was the title of the book. Then there was a second book, *Bracuí, Know It to Love It*,⁹ and that's where –

⁶ *Grio* is an African word that refers to older people.

⁷ *Seu* is a form of *Senor*, or *Mr.*

⁸ *Bracuí, sua luta e sua história.*

⁹ *Bracuí, conhecer para amar.*

SC: When did the book come out? In which year? This was the end of the '90s?

MSF: I'm bad, right? '97, '96, more or less, '96, '97, '98 something like that. And it's after that that the association was created.

SC: And you were still working as the caretaker?

MSF: I am still there. So that's how I realized that many of the stories my dad would tell, I thought it was - my dad was very, nowadays they say that my dad, if he had worked in theater, in telenovelas,¹⁰ he would be great at it. My dad, he was very theatrical. (Laughs.) I thought that this was all from his mind, you know? I thought that he just created it all, but he didn't, it was real stories that happened locally, because many people would tell the same story with different words or in different ways, but it was the same story. But going back -

SC: So, people started to organize themselves, and the state, public servants from the state, came here to talk with people who lived here, and they decided to make this association, in the beginning of 2000? And then they called you?

MSF: Yes, in the beginning it wasn't me, it was Joao, and Leandro, my nephew, who was very young. It was just some people to represent all of us, they went to Rio and everything. But it wasn't an association.

SC: There were men, older.

MSF: Yes, yes, they would go to represent the community, but then we thought, we really had to create an association, to get stronger, right? Then people came, I forgot their names, (laughs) they came and rescued it all, and we organized a big meeting, and that was when it [the association] started.

SC: Who came? Public servants from the state? Anthropologists?

MSF: No. They were from the Ilha Grande Bay,¹¹ a group from the Ilha Grande Bay. They had this project to inventory how many associations had been created, women's groups, because there had been some women's groups, but for some reason they no longer existed. There were many places that had groups of moms, sometimes from the church, sometimes not, but these groups sometimes didn't last. So this group from Ilha Grande made an inventory of all that, and doing this, they found out that here there was this thing, like the beginning of an association, or some people who wanted to create an association. But it wasn't really working, the association of the quilombo. So they came, they talked to us, they called some people, then it was me, Joao, Walmir and some other

¹⁰ Telenovelas in Brazil are popular serial dramas on television, often referred to as soap operas but different from the soap opera genre in the U.S. Airing during prime time and running for less than a year, the shows are often popular throughout the entire country and spark national conversations.

¹¹ Ilha Grande is a largely undeveloped island off the coast of Rio de Janeiro, and a municipality of Angra dos Reis. It is now a highly popular tourist destination, after having been closed for decades when it housed a leper colony and a high security prison, which was closed in 1994.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilha_Grande (accessed 3/30/15).

people, I think Rita too, lots of people, and they talked to us. And we decided, "So, we are going to found this, to make this association of quilombos." So we organized a big meeting at the church, lots of people came, right, and they explained how it would be. People gave their names to become members of the association, some others signed the minutes, confirming that there was this association being born. And after that it started to get easier. Then we had to learn how to run an association, make a diagnosis, everything, we really had lots of meetings, right, to be able to register the association, to have the federal ID number, things like that, everything legal, all those things.

SC: So what is the main goal of the association?

MSF: To reclaim, to get the land title.

SC: The collective title of the whole community, all this land.

MSF: Quilombola.

SC: Yes, that was left in the will in the 19th century. So, trying to reclaim all this land.

MSF: All this area. So the focus really is to get the title. Now we are just certified, we have the certification that those lands, that the owner left the lands to the blacks who were not enslaved anymore, who were free, and to their descendants. But as the real estate speculators are buying everything, right, so our challenge is still to win the land from them, still, right, and the strengthening of the community, of the people – education, self-esteem. Because we blacks, we have very low self-esteem, from everything that happened in the past. So the low self-esteem... and then there is college, blacks being able to graduate and everything. So it's really to raise our self-esteem and get the land back.

SC: So, related to self-esteem, this brings us to the other theme of you as a woman inside the community – you reached this position because you were recognized as someone who is knowledgeable, because of what you know about the local stories, and your activism in the association. Do you feel any differentiation between you as a woman from the other women and men in this association. Is there any difference as time passes in the participation of women and leadership, and the leadership of men?

MSF: Oh, yes. Because here we were considered like this: women just have to know how to wash, iron, take care of the kids, take care of the house. You didn't need more, that was enough for the woman. Or also be a maid, go work in the house of people who have more money, and that's it. Why study? People, I would see this while I was growing up, I saw a lot of people talk about that. Study for what? If you are going to work as a maid, or going to marry, have kids, stay home just doing things, you don't need to study, right? So generally families would put their sons in school but not the women. That happened with my mom. My mom wasn't married, but she said I had to study to write letters to her [other] daughter who lived in Rio. So I had to learn how to read and write, because she had to send, write letters, because my mom was illiterate. Her dad didn't put her in

school, and here there was no school either. It was very hard. And when there was school, only the boys would go.

SC: So this was when? Your childhood, this was the '70s? '80s?

MSF: Oh, I was born in '62, so during [the time] of my mom, it was before that, but in '62, '65, that's almost the '70s, right? I would have been 8 years old, more or less, or 12, so those are the things we would hear, right? That women were just to work, get married, have kids, and learn the things to do at home, so the husbands don't hit us in the face, don't call us pigs because of not knowing how to do things, cook, (laughs). Nowadays, I even find this funny. So, they were very much like this, like they would think that women were just for that and this was good. So many women accepted this, and things continued this way.

SC: So after you became literate, to write letters for your mom, you continued to study?

MSF: Well, then I stopped. I finished half of high school, but it wasn't because my mom told me to stop or anything like that. This was because by necessity itself we had either to study or to work,¹² because here it was very hard to go to school. Today there are buses, the children go by bus, but before there wasn't, you see. School was only downtown, especially the high school, that wasn't called high school, it was *segundo grau* (2nd level), so the 2nd level was downtown. So you couldn't work during the day and study at night, unless you stayed there. If you did that, you'd have to stay downtown because after [school], it was difficult to get all the way back up here by yourself. It didn't work, so the majority of people wouldn't study any more. And also transportation at that time, there were not that many buses from here to there, there were very few, so you had to choose. You either continued to study and you had to stay downtown at someone's home, someone you knew, something like that, or you stopped and would just work, right? So in my case, I did half of high school.

SC: So you were 15, 16?

MSF: No, I was 18.

SC: Oh, 18.

MSF: I was already 18, so I became literate when I was 10, and from there I didn't stop anymore. I was never held back. I went there to become literate and I went straight until I stopped. I wasn't that kind of person that would stay back.

SC: So then what kind of work did you do, when you stopped?

MSF: Maid.

SC: Where?

¹² Marilde means that it was not possible to study while working, and most of the people in the community needed to work because of their family's financial situation.

MSF: In Angra.

SC: In Angra?

MSF: Yes, but when I was there I didn't have time to stop and study, because besides working as a maid in the kitchen and cleaning the house, I also took care of the children, so there was no time to study. But I have always been a person like that, paying attention to things around me, I have always enjoyed going to those meetings of neighborhood associations, I –

SC: There was a neighborhood association here?

MSF: Yes, there was a neighborhood association. It wasn't the quilombo association. So I always liked to be in the association, listening. I was also part of the church, of the Catholic Church. I participated in the meetings of the youth group, I would go to another state, oh not another state, always in the state of Rio, but to other cities, always representing the youth here, sometimes somewhere representing the church itself. And I was a leader, sometimes, for some things in the church. So sometimes I say, I keep thinking, there are so many people that are so, just looking at their own bellybutton.¹³ (Laughs.) Sometimes... I want to tell you something, I don't want to boast, but sometimes I get upset when I'm talking about something that is happening in the world or even just here in the area, and I'm talking with this person, "Did you see?" And the person says, "Umm, what?" "Gee, you don't know that this is happening, like this or that, with this or that person, or in the world, or in the state of Rio, or in Angra." "Oh, really, huh?" And then I say, "Where are you? What planet are you on?".... "No, no I didn't know that." And then if you start to talk about clothes, because I bought these pants, did you see this new fashion, this and that, have you seen this, I don't know what, look this person bought this thing... and then it's me who is like, "Huh? He did?" (Laughs.) So they say, "Did you see? This person bought a motorcycle. This person bought a car. Did you see the toaster that this person bought? It's the latest model, my girl." (Laughs.) Because I think like this, people have to, I mean not everyone, but there are people who are just like that. And then I say, "Did you see that there is a new teacher at the school for your son?" And, "Oh, really?" "Did you see that there was a meeting to fix the health clinic?" "There was? It really needs to be fixed." (Laughs.) So, it's just crazy, right? Because they aren't interested. But then they say, "Oh, people do nothing, the mayor does nothing, the city council member does nothing." But if you invite them, "There's going to be a meeting to discuss this and that, are you going?" "Oh, I don't like meetings. Why should I go there just to see all these people talking!? Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. I don't like it." And then I say, "People, we have to participate. We have to be together. We have to go there and look for what we want and try to get what we want. The government or no matter who, they are not coming here if we don't organize ourselves and go there. And I think that this is, this is the big difference with the ones who think... I don't know, there are times that I think my mind flies too much.

SC: (Laughs.) But that's how it is.

¹³ "Só olhando para o próprio umbigo" is a Portuguese expression meaning people are only thinking about themselves.

MSF: Because I, I'm telling you, if I want things to get better, I don't want the improvement just for myself, I want this improvement for everyone.

SC: But you started by saying, when I asked if you think the situation has changed, the status of women as leaders in the movement, you said that you think yes, because before everyone thought that women would only be useful staying at home, cooking. But now this has changed. Why do you think this has changed, and how?

MSF: Well, it changed because many women didn't just sit around with our arms crossed, right? Just thinking that the dad or the husband would boss them around, whoever would boss them, demanding things, or waiting for them to bring things, right? Women are seeking also, they are moving forward. Does it have a cost for us? It does, because then we stay with this triple responsibility. We have the responsibility to study, to work, to take care of the kids, to take care of the house, and even to take care of the husband, right? Everything. So sometimes one thing is just hanging there [not done] among all of those things. But things get done more or less, but even so we don't just stay sitting around at home, we are not waiting, I say that. My sister, my older sister, Celina, wow, she is a fighter too, she when she saw the –

SC: In the same organization as you?

MSF: Yes, my sister was the *capeloa* from here, *capeloa* is this person at the church who prays, who does those things. And she is a cradle of culture too, so she would say: people, we can't stay seated, waiting for things to fall from the sky. No, we have to fight. We have to seek, we have to claim. So I learned a lot from her, right? With my mom, too. My mom had us, but she worked in the fields, she worked for one person, for another, she was illiterate, but she worked. She would gather things in the woods to give to us to eat. So she would say, the person who doesn't move is a stone. And even the stone, when the water comes, is moved from its place. So we can't stay still. And you can see, if you look around, if you're paying attention to the meetings, if it's a quilombo or the one before, the neighborhood association, there is always a woman president, no?

SC: Since when?

MSF: I am talking about well before the association – there was Terezinha, another cousin of mine from the association, there were many women who were in the forefront of something here in Bracuí, so.

SC: And how do you explain why there are so many prominent women in this movement? Why do you think there were so many women?

MSF: Well, because men would leave to work, right? They would go to their stations – in Furnas [energy company],¹⁴ Verolme [port],¹⁵ so who is going to solve the problems

¹⁴ Furnas is one of the country's largest electric companies.

¹⁵ She is referring to the Verolme shipyard which was closed in 1997, but then later re-developed by Kappel Fels. Rich, Jennifer. "A Revival for Brazilian Shipyards," *The New York Times*.

here in the neighborhood? The women, right? Women had to take the lead to solve the problems in the neighborhood. But now I'm going to tell you, when we go to the political realm, then there are no women, very few.

SC: But I mean, this is political, this work with the association, the neighborhood stuff.

MSF: Yes, yes, this is politics, but when it comes to political parties, then very few women would go and be accepted. Because here's what I see, many women would be candidates to be a politician, but people would say, "I'm not going to vote for a woman."

SC: So, Dilma¹⁶ probably didn't get many votes from the men here.

MSF: Exactly, I don't think so, many people say, "I'm not going to vote for a woman."

SC: Even if they like the party?

MSF: Yeah, well, people, the men are like, "Why would I vote for a woman? Women will spend all the money in the city, with shoes, clothes." (Laughs.) And then I said, "*Santa ignorância*,¹⁷ for God's sake." (Laughs.) "Women don't know how to solve anything," and then when they vote, like our mayor, right, was a Portuguese teacher, many people, men here, would say something like "I'm going to vote for her because Leandro Silva is her vice mayor."¹⁸

SC: Thinking more about that, when you say lots of people, it's many men, or is it that many men and also women think like that?

MSF: Many men and some women, too. I say that because that is what I see: I accept the strength of women, I know that women are strong, that women fight, that they are even less scared than men, that they speak out when they need to, they don't beat around the bush, if they have to call names, they do. If they have to speak. But even though they think like that, when it comes to acting, they think that women don't act. I don't know. Sometimes I think about that. Am I talking too much?

SC: (Laughs.) But when you say, when I asked why things have changed, why women have left this position of submission, of just staying at home, you said that they went to fight, to be leaders of the neighborhood movements, of that association that you are involved in, and also many other women, leaders. And this is changing many women's perspective on women's roles. So you also think

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/01/business/a-revival-for-brazilian-shipyards.html> (accessed 4/10/15).

¹⁶ Dilma Rousseff is the current President of Brazil (2011-), now in her second term. She is also a member of the Worker's Party and was formerly Lula de Silva's Chief of Staff; she is the first female president of Brazil. She was reelected for a second term in 2014, but with significant controversy around economic issues and corruption. People typically refer to everyone, including political leaders, by their first name.

¹⁷ "Santa Ignorância," literally translated "St. Ignorance," is a common expression that means what idiots.

¹⁸ Maria da Conceição Caldas Rabha, from the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), was elected in 2012. Information on her, in Portuguese, can be found at the Angra website:

http://www.angra.rj.gov.br/secretaria_perfil.asp?IndexSigla=PMAR&vNomeLink=A%20Prefeita#.VVzPeVVVikp (accessed 5/20/15).

that women are, you for example, women who are in the association, when they are trying to raise their self-esteem, as you mentioned about blacks and other people in your community, does that include talking about the role of women, subjects that are related specifically to the relationships between women and men, or no? I mean, does part of the fight have to do with the specific oppression suffered by women? Or is this much more general?

MSF: No, I don't think there is oppression, I think that women.... it's because women also devote themselves more to learning, right? Women are going to seek to learn more. So, I'm going to tell you, like this, men – and here I pay attention – men in the quilombo, it's like they are stuck. I mean, in the goal of learning, really, but yes, it seems they're stuck, while women are going up and up, learning more and more. So when the woman seeks to study more, and looks for more knowledge, usually, as I said, she has to do everything at the same time - take care of the house, or else the house will be abandoned, and man doesn't understand that, right? Because they are stuck, it seems. They don't understand this search by women, they don't understand why women think that way. I'm not sure if I am really answering what you asked directly.

SC: You are.

MSF: So sometimes the children suffer, or something does, but I observed that all of this is seeking to affirm the self, a woman, know where you want to be, know how to comport yourself, how to talk, right? And men, they almost stayed in the same place, still crushing stones with a sledgehammer.

SC: And you, as a person responsible for education, for developing new leadership, I imagine that as the Coordinator of Education of the Association, you talk about this aspect of self-esteem? That aspect of the woman being respected and woman being able to study and rise, this is part of the job?

MSF: This is part of the job. Today I see it like this. Look, as you said, three girls and one boy graduated from here and went to the Rural Federal University.¹⁹ It was Angelica, Fabiana, and Luciana, who studied in college, and the only boy was my son.²⁰

SC: Oh, I didn't know that was your son.

MSF: Yes, only my son as a boy. The other boys, we went there, we tried to get information about who had finished high school, most boys didn't. Many girls didn't go to college because they didn't want to, because they were working, they didn't want to stop working. Others because even after becoming teachers, they had kids, at that time they couldn't come home [from college], they couldn't leave the kids. But we found many more women finishing high school than boys. Those boys who we thought had finished high school, they hadn't. They had taken a break, or they stopped, like in my case, they stopped in order to work. So there are not many boys going to college. Well,

¹⁹ The Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, founded in 1910, has the largest campus of Latin American universities and was the first university to offer agriculture classes in Brazil.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universidade_Federal_Rural_do_Rio_de_Janeiro (accessed 3/31/15).

²⁰ Angelica Souza Pinheiro and Luciano Adriano da Silva were both interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project Archive.

before that, we had a course here, that Martha [Abreu]²¹ was organizing, it was a *pré-vestibular* [equivalent to the pre-SAT]²² course for us. Teachers from all areas would come to teach about college entrance exams to the quilombos. And here I am back to this story, I go to look for people who want to take that course, but you have at least to have completed the elementary and middle school, right? Or high school, or be enrolled in high school. We found very few people, very few, so those people. I said, “Martha, I want to be in this course, and as I want to and some people do, let’s open it to other people. Let’s make it not just for quilombolas, let’s do it for everyone, for whoever wants to take the course. And then Martha agreed, and we opened this for everyone who wanted to take the course.” Then, people were coming, even from the historic area of Mambucaba,²³ people we knew from Angra, to do this course for free, right? But then there was a problem, the course died, because at that time I had to hand the leadership over to someone else because my daughter got sick, then I put another person in my place, and this person didn’t pursue this.

SC: Oh that is a shame, such a shame.

MSF: So, yes, we are here, we are doing this, another thing, the Brazil Foundation,²⁴ in 2011, 2010, no it was 2012, they asked us to do a survey of people who hadn’t finished middle school yet, people who didn’t finish, I mean, didn’t finish high school, and illiterate people, or who wanted to finish middle school, things like that. Then I said, “No, we don’t have illiterate people here in Bracuí anymore. How? We have school, and schools have classes night and day. There is EJA.”²⁵ And then we left to look for people, me and Sandra, who is my sister in law, who is a teacher, she was going to be the teacher of those people, of the elementary and middle school, and then we found many illiterate, many illiterate persons. “How come you don’t know how to read and write? Nowadays, classes are free for everyone.” “Well, but I’m not going to a classroom, start in first grade, at my age, for other people to be saying that I don’t know how to read and write.” But people! We were like, “Huh?” “No, I’m not going.” And then there is the person who only went through the third grade, third series, that now is called 2nd year, but before it was 3rd grade, that person who had only the 3rd grade, “You don’t want to finish?” “No, I am not going to finish. I’m not going to a classroom where there are people who are already in 5th grade, and I’m going to enter in 3rd grade.” And then we tried to form a group here at the Santa Rica church of persons who only knew how to write their names, or people who were totally illiterate. Then we went and people, we were giving everything, the materials, but they didn’t want to. They found it very difficult to come to school to study, things like that. So the other group was from people who were already, who had been through the 8th grade, 6th grade, but that person

²¹ Martha Abreu is a historian at the Universidade Federal Fluminense and her main field of activity is around the history as well as the present-day status of quilombo communities.

²² The SAT is a standardized test used for college admissions at most universities in the United States. Pre-SAT courses prepare students for this entry exam.

²³ Mambucaba is a district of Angra dos Reis, Brazil.

²⁴ The Brazil Foundation is a non-profit created in 2000 that provides resources for organizations that work on social challenges such as health issues and human rights in Brazilian communities. See <http://www.brazilfoundation.org/english/index.php> (accessed 3/30/15).

²⁵ EJA stands for *Educação Jovens e Adultos*, or Education for Youth and Adults. This is a national program of continuing education that aims to address questions of access and diversity. See, in Portuguese, http://portal.mec.gov.br/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=17429&Itemid=817 (accessed 5/20/15).

would have a course on Saturdays, or people could take a course on rural business, or agriculture, or craft, or I forgot the name.

SC: Technical work?

MSF: Yes, something like that, they didn't want it, because of their work. I don't know, they had to work, so it didn't happen. Then what I know is that Sandra was teaching here just for around two months and people were leaving, they were dropping out, so she had to stop. We found people who knew how to read and we would think, you know, maybe they will have finished 8th grade, 9th grade, high school. But no, they just finished 1st grade. But they read wonderfully well, everything right. "Oh, because I practice." "But son,²⁶ why don't you want to finish?" "No, I am not entering a classroom." But they practice so they learn and they go on. So you see, who is in the forefront of all of this? Seeking all of this? Women. We are the women who are going to pursue things, we go to the houses, knock on the doors. "You, do you want to study?" If you want, if you don't want. In this campaign we even had reading glasses for free. My sister did, I think she went just to get her glasses, and left.

SC: Oh, she would go and study to get the glasses? (Laughs.)

MSF: (Laughs.) So for people of that age, who needed reading glasses, they had glasses for free, to take to the eye doctor, and make the glasses. Or people who had glasses and could make new ones. I don't know, things like that. So who was in the front of that movement? Women!

SC: So I know we need to finish. But I had this last question that I told you about, if you are a feminist, and what you understand by feminism.

MSF: For us, feminism when it arrived here, in our area, we were like, wow, this was a horrible thing. The feminist was that woman who didn't want to take care of the house, was just there carrying flags, and "Out of I don't know what" and just wanted to be in a movement. And the man would say, "A feminist would even hit a man, a woman feminist." So we would see that thing, a very strong woman, right, who didn't like men. So this was the image of feminism in Brazil. Not in Brazil, I don't know if in all of Brazil. But here it was. They would tear apart bras, throw the bras away, "I don't use a bra anymore." I don't know what. The bra is the symbol of women. So yeah, that is how people would see it. People would even say, "Hey you, if you go on like this, you're going to end up like all of those women." Oh, it's a feminist who leaves and abandons the home, the family, goes to those fights. But then, we were already engaged in the movement, right? All of the movements were already there, we were like "Get out mayor." (Laughs.)

SC: This was when?

MSF: Oh, I participated a lot when I was young, so maybe, it was in the '80s, the beginning of the '80s. We would just walk around like this. So I saw that feminism wasn't really that. So I'm a feminist because I fight for what I want. I go get it. So I am

²⁶ *Filho*, meaning "son," is used as a caring form of address.

from a different feminism than the image they told me about the feminists, it doesn't look like that. I would go there if we had to be in a meeting because the mayor wasn't doing something, I was there. If we wanted something like, "Oh, the mayor has to do this," so I'm going. When the electricity came, we wanted electricity, so we went there to fight because we wanted electricity, right? And then there was electricity. And then, the opposite, they wanted to pave the roads. I didn't go because I had another problem at home, but I was there also wanting to beat the drum for the road not to be paved. We were different, right? So if the word feminist is from making claims, to seek the common good from everyone, so I am a feminist because what I want for myself I want for the others. And because we, for ourselves we only desire good things, so I am going to want good things for other people too, right? Even though sometimes the way I see something that is good for me, the others don't see that way. Some people say that a good thing is the place where you live, to have your house walled, the sewers in the street. But if your house is fine, with your fence, all tiled, you don't care if there are open sewers in the street. It's good. Not me, I like this: not having a wall, everyone enters, when they pass they look, "Oh you, you got my cocoa." That is how it is. Sometimes we're here fighting with the kids, "They got my orange." But I'm interacting with people. But now if the person is hidden behind a wall, if they make a wall higher than this avocado tree right here – so that we don't like. That we fight against. I like my house with no walls, no fences. We only put fences because of horses around here. But this is my way to live. I like nature. But I also like to go to the city. Well, if I go to the city, I come back.

SC: Marilda, many many thanks. I loved it. It was great.

MSF: I don't know if I answered all that you wanted.

SC: Yes, you answered many things. Thank you very much.

MSF: You are welcome.