

**A Brazilian Intellectual Exiled in the Cold War:
Emília Viotti da Costa's Trajectory in the United States (1968–1999)**

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Extended Abstract

When the Brazilian military government issued Institutional Act Number Five in December 1968, it forced dozens of accomplished academics out of the country. Among those displaced was Emília Viotti da Costa (1928–2017), one of the most influential historians of slavery studies. After brief appointments at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and other U.S. institutions in the early 1970s, Costa secured a tenured position at Yale University. In Yale's Department of History, she remained until her retirement in 1999 and was for many years the sole woman professor. She described her experience in U.S. academia as a period marked by personal struggles, given her status as a woman and an immigrant. Her trajectory raises a question that the scholarship on political exile and intellectual history has yet to fully address: how did the experience of political displacement — compounded by the gender-based structural exclusions within North American academia — transform the intellectual perspectives Costa brought to the study of Brazilian history, slavery, and race?

The existing scholarship on Brazilian political exile has reconstructed the emotional and political dimensions of displacement, but it has concentrated primarily on militants and artists exiled in Latin America and Europe rather than on university scholars in the United States (Rollemberg, 1999; Cruz, 2010). The standard account of intellectuals under the dictatorship emphasises censorship, the dismantling of research programs, and the silencing of critical voices inside Brazil (Green, 2010; Napolitano, 2014; Motta, 2020). That account is accurate but analytically incomplete: it captures what was repressed within Brazil without accounting for

what was generated beyond its borders. Costa's case demands an alternative analytical frame — one that shifts from repression to circulation, asking not only what was silenced inside Brazil, but what was produced in exile (Burke, 2016; Berger and Müller, 2022). This paper proposes precisely that shift, treating Costa's U.S. career as a site of knowledge production in its own right.

The paper argues that Costa's exile was not a biographical interruption but an intellectual catalyst. Forced to engage new audiences, to rebuild her scholarly authority within a foreign and competitive academic system, and to rethink Brazilian history from a structurally peripheral position, Costa produced work that reconceived the categories through which Brazilian slavery and social inequality had previously been understood. Her landmark 1966 study, *Da Senzala à Colônia*, was substantially revised and expanded for the English-speaking audience as *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (1985), a transformation that reflected not mere translation but a genuine reworking of interpretive frameworks shaped by her institutional trajectory in the United States. The paper will map those transformations sociologically, drawing on Bourdieu's sociology of knowledge to show that what Costa produced cannot be separated from the social position she occupied and the institutional constraints that simultaneously marginalized and challenged her.

The analysis rests on a combination of archival and interview-based sources. The key institutional repositories include the Werner Baer Papers and the History Department Records at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign — where Baer played a decisive role in securing Costa's initial U.S. appointment in the early 1970s — and Yale's Department of History records, which document her hiring, promotion, and departmental correspondence over a quarter-century. These archival materials will be supplemented by Costa's published memoirs, her published

interviews, and a preliminary interview conducted for this project with her former doctoral student, Barbara Weinstein, who provided a complementary account of Costa's personal struggles within U.S. academia. Costa herself acknowledged that exile was a period compounded not only by cultural challenges but by gendered institutional hostility: "Here I discovered that the brain has a sex," she recalled. "For a woman to earn the respect of her peers is quite difficult. In fact, she needs to be better than the men to be accepted as an equal" (Costa et al., 1980: 393). Such testimony, placed in dialogue with institutional records, allows the paper to move beyond biographical narrative toward a structural analysis of how gender and political displacement jointly conditioned scholarly production.

Conceptually, the paper situates Costa's trajectory within the growing literature on the transnational circulation of knowledge and the sociology of exiled intellectuals. Berger and Müller (2022) have shown that emigration frequently generates intellectual reorientation rather than rupture; the present paper tests and extends that claim through a non-European, gendered case. It also draws on Faye Harrison's (2008, 2010) frameworks for analyzing the position of "outsiders within" academic institutions — scholars whose marginality is simultaneously a source of analytical distance and institutional precarity. Costa's position as a Latin American woman in the overwhelmingly male and Anglo-dominated world of U.S. history departments in the 1970s exemplifies that dynamic with particular force. The paper will show how that position structured the research questions she pursued, the methodological choices she made, and the audiences she addressed — not as a constraint that limited her work, but as a condition that, paradoxically, sharpened it.

The paper contributes to three intersecting fields: the history of U.S.–Brazil academic exchange, the broader literature on exile and intellectual displacement, and scholarly debates

about how gender and geopolitical position condition the production and circulation of knowledge across national borders. It will be submitted as a peer-reviewed article and will build on the author's forthcoming book, *Trajectories of Brazilian Historiography* (Cancioneiro, 2026), which examines the gender and class dilemmas faced by Brazilian historians who remained in the country during the dictatorship years. While the book focuses on those who stayed, this article advances the project by recovering the complementary story of what displacement made possible.

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