



## **Conversation with Vitor Del Rey**

*Translated from Portuguese*

**Priscila Pacheco**

**November 6, 2024**

**Priscila Pacheco:** Vitor, please introduce yourself and share your background and what led you to the work you do today at Instituto Guetto.

**Vitor Del Rey:** I was born into what we call extreme poverty in Brazil. In other words, we lived on less than R\$150 per month. I am the fifth of six children, and my mother, a Black woman, raised us on her own. She worked as a seamstress to support the family.

I grew up in a Christian tradition, within the Church, learning religious values. I often say that the fear of hell kept me out of trouble because, afraid of ending up there, I never drank or tried drugs.

**Priscila Pacheco:** Were you part of an Evangelical Church or Catholic?

**Vitor Del Rey:** It was an Evangelical Church, specifically Baptist. There was something that happened there, which I can now recognize as anxiety. Every time a church member got accepted into a university, they and their family would stand in front of the altar, and we would all pray, thanking God for that achievement.

My mother never saw any of her children up there because of university. We would finish high school and go straight to work to contribute to the household income. We didn't have the right to study. I was the first in my family to go to university. Today, three more of us have graduated. I completed a master's degree and plan to pursue a Ph.D.

Before entering university, I was part of a Black empowerment organization called Educafro. It was there that I went through the process of "becoming Black." Until I was 26 years old, I didn't like being Black because, to me, it was associated with poverty and slavery.

At school, I was the target of many racist jokes, especially during history lessons about slavery. At the time, I couldn't recognize it as racism. But after joining the Black empowerment movement, I began to understand racial issues and identify important figures in the fight against racism. I started liking being Black and finding Black skin beautiful. I came to realize that there was nothing wrong with my nose, my hair, or my skin color. And that made me very happy.

Educafro was what led me to university. I started to study Social Sciences and History at Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV). There, I met many people, and of course, most of them were white.

I started working at a place called FGV Projetos. I was eager to be there because they had a department where people conducted research, wrote projects, and sent them to other sectors for execution in different states. The coordinator was a sociologist with a PhD from the University of Brasília (UNB) who led a diverse team of economists, geographers, statisticians, technology experts, and even PhDs in mathematics.

I thought: *"Wow, I want to work in this place!"* I was tired of studying so much without seeing practical applications for what I was learning. I managed to get in and worked on a project about urban mobility in Maranhão.

During that time, I met professor José Henrique Paim, who had previously served as Brazil's Minister of Education. I approached him to ask if he would supervise my master's thesis. We started working together, but I began feeling uneasy. I was surrounded by very competent people in the field of education, but I noticed that racial issues never appeared in the data they analyzed. Everything was filtered only by social class.

**Priscila Pacheco: Is that when the idea for the Institute came about?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** Not exactly, but the Institute has a project connected to that. Before that, I created a project called *Aplicativo Quilombo* (Quilombo App), which was born out of a Facebook community I founded called *Ponte Para Pretos* (Bridge for Blacks). It was a group exclusively for Black people, with over 50,000 members. People in the group wanted to buy and sell among themselves, but there wasn't an organized platform to facilitate those exchanges.

I developed the app and ended up gaining some recognition on the Brazilian internet. I gave interviews, and from that, we created another project: *Escola da Ponte Para Pretos*. Its goal was to train Black individuals for the job market, which often demands qualifications inaccessible to most, such as Brand Storytelling, Power BI, and Business Analytics.

GUETTO doesn't refer to a place but is an acronym: *Gestão Urbana de Empreendedorismo, Trabalho e Tecnologia Organizada* (Urban Management of Entrepreneurship, Work, and Organized Technology).

- Gestão (Management), because I learned that management is fundamental in the business world, and there's a stigma that Black people aren't good at managing.
- Urbana (Urban), because our work began in the city, although today we also have projects in quilombola communities (settlements in Brazil founded by descendants of enslaved Africans who escaped slavery).
- Empreendedorismo (Entrepreneurship), because during the pandemic, many Black people started businesses to survive due to a lack of formal jobs.
- Trabalho (Work), because employment is essential for the Black community.
- Tecnologia (Technology), because we live in a world driven by it.
- Organizada (Organized), because without management and organization—two different things—we can't accomplish everything necessary.

**Priscila Pacheco: What do you think sets your work apart?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** The key difference is that we're Black people taking care of Black people. When we engage in this relationship, we already understand the challenges these individuals face. For instance, in our online school, we know that many participants don't have access to a computer or must share an internet package with six or seven people in the same house, which can slow down their connection.

We also acknowledge cultural specificities: some Black people follow Candomblé or Umbanda, so their Fridays have a different rhythm. At the same time, many are evangelicals and hold roles within their churches. Because we understand these dynamics, we can communicate better and propose solutions that truly fit their lives.

**Priscila Pacheco: What insights or lessons have you learned through your journey with Instituto GUETTO that could benefit others?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** One thing we've learned is the importance of evidence. Although evidence often confirms the obvious, we place a strong focus on data. However, we don't necessarily use the data to decide what to do because we already know what it will show. Instead, we use it to mobilize potential financial supporters, especially white individuals, who often need evidence to engage.

Through evidence, we've found that we can always tackle challenges by pulling the thread of education. That's why our priority is education. We have a school that prepares people for the job market because we know they won't go back to primary education, get a quality education, and then seek a job at age 50. We try to address problems the State hasn't solved.

At the same time, we've created a dashboard called *Mapa Preto da Educação* (Black Education Map), which generates data for advocacy, aiming for structural changes in Brazil's educational system. All research shows that salaries are directly linked to years of education. Therefore, providing quality education is essential to transforming the job market and increasing incomes.

Another project we have is the *Quilombo Educacional* (Educational Quilombo), a community of practice aimed at school administrators. We brought together 27 administrators to discuss how racism manifests in schools and how to address it. As a result, they are developing a manual of best practices and a framework for handling these situations.

For instance, if a student reports experiencing racism, what should the principal do? What is the appropriate procedure? Balancing support for the victim and guidance for the person who committed the racist act is critical, especially in a school setting where everyone is a minor. It's not about labeling someone a criminal or aggressor but recognizing that they, too, are shaped by a racist structure. Often, they don't even realize that calling someone a "monkey" is racism; they think it's just a joke or teasing.

We view education as the key thread that unlocks various issues, including employment and even environmental concerns. For example, how can we include more Black economists in discussions about a welfare economy?

Recently, I attended an event in Costa Rica. Participants shared the realities of their countries: New Zealand, England, and Sweden. At one point, someone said we should pause and listen to the birds.

My immediate thought was, *"If I say that in the favela, people will respond: 'Vitor, we can't hear the birds because the police helicopter is flying overhead all the time. The armored police vehicle is driving up the hill, and there's no silence to hear birds. Our reality is hearing gunshots and violence, not birds.'"*

**Priscila Pacheco: The valuable aspect of your work is precisely this emphasis on education.**

**Vitor Del Rey:** Exactly. We focus on Black people, on their experiences in school, to help them learn and subvert this system. Education is the way. Many studies show that Black children receive less care and attention from teachers compared to white children. They end up learning less because they don't feel supported.

I was one of those children in school. I was never the one holding the teacher's bag; it was always a white girl or boy. The racial violence within the school prevented me from doing simple things, like raising my hand to say, "I didn't understand, can you repeat that?" If I did, I would face so much abuse that I preferred to fail math rather than be called a monkey, stupid, or a slave.

**Priscila Pacheco: It's such an oppressive process.**

**Vitor Del Rey:** Constantly. It happens in school, in college, and even in the workplace.

**Priscila Pacheco: You've already touched on this when discussing differences among communities, but what gaps in collective wellbeing would you like to see filled?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** It's very tempting to talk about universal basic income—ensuring that poor people, Black people, Asians, and members of traditional communities have access to it. But I want to emphasize education. Brazil performs poorly in the PISA rankings.

**Priscila Pacheco: Brazil isn't doing well at all.**

**Vitor Del Rey:** No, it's not. How can you build a strong community or have a sustainable economy if we don't have a quality education that addresses all these intersections? If that existed, I wouldn't need to talk to my son about the violence he might face for choosing to date a trans girl. Or better yet, he wouldn't have experienced the racism he did at daycare when he was just three years old, which forced us to transfer him to another school.

**Priscila Pacheco: Was it a public school?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** No, it was a private school. When his father was born, he was the son of a seamstress. When my son was born, he became the son of a university professor with a master's degree and a mother who's a landscape architect with a postgraduate degree. It's not that "the game changed." It only changed for me, in my family. The needle hasn't moved. If we could move the needle through education, then maybe it would make sense to start discussing a wellbeing economy.

**Priscila Pacheco: What challenges are you facing today at Instituto GUETTO, and how are you addressing them?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** We face a problem of racism. It's structural, systemic, and deeply embedded in people's habits. This affects our work, making it harder to secure financial resources and have our data taken seriously. There's always someone questioning whether our data is accurate, because many still think, "Black people don't know how to do statistics."

Another challenge is accessing resources to sustain our projects. Racism structures not only how funding is distributed but also the credibility of what we do. That's why it's much easier for us to get foreign funding than Brazilian funding.

**Priscila Pacheco: How do you measure the progress of the Institute's goals and mission?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** The main indicator is the number of Black individuals we can place in the job market. First, we prepare these individuals at school, and then we focus on their market readiness. But it's important to remember that entering the job market is a variable we cannot control.

These individuals may be very well-prepared, attend an interview, and still be turned away due to the recruiter's racial bias. What we can control is ensuring they are ready: that their English is strong, that they've completed the socio-emotional skills training, and that they become confident and self-assured individuals.

Another metric is the number of white people we can influence. For example, through the Quilombo Educacional, which resulted from a cooperation agreement with the Department of Education. We managed to enter the Department, convince them that the program was relevant, and implement it. That is also an impact indicator: our ability to influence powerful white individuals. Of course, we are a young organization, just five years old. We don't have rich heirs funding our projects, nor do we curry favor with anyone. What we achieve comes from a lot of hard work.

Another interesting measure for our organization is the number of highly knowledgeable Black individuals we attract to work with us. Additionally, the level of psychological safety we provide to those who work here is an important metric to assess if we are on the right track. I can guarantee that, at least from Monday to Friday, during working hours, these individuals do not experience racism.

**Priscila Pacheco: Based on what you've shared, partnerships seem fundamental to your work. What strategies do you use to cultivate and maintain these partnerships so that they are mutually beneficial?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** The main thing is to deliver work with the same quality as an above-average white person would. Because if we deliver something equivalent to that of a mediocre white person, they won't renew the partnership. Doing a good job is essential.

For example, the Quilombo Educacional is funded by the Instituto Unibanco, and the Black Map of Education is supported by the Lemann Foundation. We also receive resources from the Public Prosecutor's Office. Recently, we participated in a grant process with the Tide Setubal Foundation, which was interested in supporting our organization.

The challenge, however, is that funding is often tied to specific projects. When the project ends, the funding ends as well, but the organization still needs to operate. That's why we work hard to deliver on our projects while also sustaining our team.

**Priscila Pacheco: Diversifying funding sources is crucial.**

**Vitor Del Rey:** Yes, and it's important to seek funding for the organization as a whole. This is what we call "unrestricted funding," which isn't tied to a specific project. It's a resource we can use for general organizational expenses.

**Priscila Pacheco: What do you think leaders and decision-makers can do to improve collaboration and advance progress in the field of wellbeing?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** Invest money. We need resources for organizations that take care of people. Isn't that what wellbeing is? Taking care of people and ensuring everyone is okay? Leaders should identify serious organizations, provide financial support, and, of course, monitor accountability. This support is essential for them to continue their activities.

Another piece of advice I'd give, especially to foreign leaders looking at Brazil, is to avoid interpreting the country through their lenses. They need to understand Brazil as it truly is, and for that, they should look at the data. My suggestion: work with historical series. This helps to grasp the contexts and changes over time.

**Priscila Pacheco: With proper support, which programs or initiatives would you like to see replicated? If you had everything you need to replicate them—money, infrastructure...**

**Vitor Del Rey:** If I had money and infrastructure, I would replicate the *Coletivo Negro nas Escolas*. It's a program that helps elementary and high school students affirm their identity as Black individuals. It's a project I'd love to see replicated in all its aspects because I deeply believe in education. Countless studies are showing that members of ethnic groups who feel good about who they are perform better in school because they are more self-assured.

**Priscila Pacheco: What do you think is necessary to demonstrate the value of the work you do? How do you approach your sector in a world where everything seems urgent?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** If you want to show the world, you need to be on TV, in newspapers—in other words, you need the media. Getting more visibility on television, for example, would be important, but it's essential to know your target audience. If you speak on GloboNews, for instance, you're not reaching



poor Black people because they're watching Globo's soap operas, RJTV, or Record. You need to understand who your audience is.

Now, if you don't talk to those with money, the work stops. That's why it's crucial to engage with both select groups and the general public to communicate what we aim to achieve.

Moreover, being present in spaces like the COPs [climate conferences], the World Economic Forum, the G20, and the G7 is also important. The problem is that the messages we have and want to deliver aren't always appealing to these spaces. Often, it's not what these audiences want to hear.

Money accelerates change. If you want change, if you want people to experience well-being, you need to invest. After all, those who already have well-being should contribute to ensuring that others have it too.

**Priscila Pacheco: The definition of collective wellbeing often used is: social justice on a healthy planet. How would you define collective wellbeing, and what does that expression mean to you?**

**Vitor Del Rey:** Collective wellbeing is being in a place where the concept of justice, as I understand it, is fully realized. Justice means being in an environment where I have everything I need to live, be happy, and feel safe—and everyone around me has the same.

However, what we have here, in Rio, is Black and poor people losing their children. In a place where children are shot on their way to school, there is no room to discuss well-being, let alone justice. I believe a well-being economy, an equitable and just economy, would be one where people at least have the security to pursue happiness and to search for what happiness means to them.

But if, in my pursuit of happiness—of working—I receive a call telling me to rush home because my son was shot, and as far as I knew, he was at home with his mother before heading to school, how can I even think about happiness?

I can't answer that question. I've never experienced it. As a Black man, even imagining or dreaming of it is difficult. Honestly, I have no idea. I'm unable to answer because I never experienced it, and I don't know anyone who has.

**Priscila Pacheco: These are completely different realities, as you explained earlier, using the example of hearing birds. I think that metaphor—hearing birds versus hearing the police armored vehicle coming up the street—illustrates it well.**

**Vitor Del Rey:** Exactly. Imagine a child amid emotional development. They become a teenager, a phase already filled with a whirlwind of emotions. Now, imagine that on top of all those emotions,



they live with the tension of hearing gunfire, and the sound of the police armored vehicle coming up the street at 4:00, 5:00, and 6:00 in the morning.

Research shows that children living in favelas where there are conflicts can miss up to 100 school days a year. If there's a shooting, they can't go to school. We grow up learning to speak loudly because we live in noisy places—people talking, loud music, police driving by. If you don't speak loudly, no one hears you.

How can this wellbeing economy engage with people who don't even have present parents, or with children growing up amidst violence? If this economy can't step onto that ground, it's not concerned with humanity. It's focused on solving white people's problems.

Honestly, I don't even know what else to say. I live in the reality of the outskirts, dealing with people who, in our terms, "sell lunch to buy dinner".

**Priscila Pacheco: Thank you!**

*Priscila Pacheco is a Brazilian journalist. She has won awards and is the co-author of the book *Unbias the News: Why Diversity Matters for Journalism* and the graphic novel *Minas da Várzea* (about women's soccer in the outskirts). She conducts workshops on solutions journalism in Brazil. She is based in São Paulo.*

*\*\*This conversation has been edited and condensed.*