In this week's edition of our recurring series of interviews, Gonçalo Pessa Costa, a PhD student at The Graduate Center, interviews Ellora Derenoncourt, a recently Harvard graduated scholar and a Postdoctoral research Associate at Princeton University.
The two discuss Ellora's recent research on the effects of the Great Migration and talk about Ellora's work methods. In the end of the conversation there was still time for a short chat on the challenges that the Economics discipline faces so as to be more plural and inclusive towards underrepresented social groups.
Read their conversation below.

Gonçalo Pessa Costa - Hi Ellora. Thank you so much for sharing with us your work in our seminar series. While I was reading the paper that you presented today, my mind kept coming back to James Baldwin's first novel. *Go Tell it on the Mountains* is a semi-autobiographical novel, but it is also a study of the perceptions and narratives around the Great Migration by the black migrant families. There is this passage from that book that I wanted to highlight, because I believe it speaks directly to the work you introduced us to today*:*

There was not, after all, a great difference between the world of the North and that of the South which she had fled; there was only this difference: the North promised more. And this similarity: what it promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand, it took back with the other.

Would you say that your *Can you move to opportunity? Evidence from the Great Migration* provides evidence to what Baldwin was hinting at in this piece almost 70 years ago?

Ellora Derenoncourt - That's a beautiful passage. Yes, I think that resonates very much with what are the broad patterns and lessons from this project. Indeed, the way that I'd describe it in a nutshell is that the Great Migration was the largest natural experiment of moving to opportunity in US history. You had millions of African Americans leaving the south, which was a low opportunity region with severe limitations on their social, economic and political freedoms. They left the south for places like Detroit, Chicago, Baltimore, in the early to mid-20th century at their economic heyday. And if you look now to those places, you see that these are some of the worst places to grow up as a black person in America today. So, I was interested in understanding why and what role the Migration itself might have had in this reversal of fortune in the northern destination locations. And what I found was that something happened in terms of the urban environment over the following 50 years or so, where there were two key phenomena. One was rising residential racial segregation in response to black migration. That means white flight to the suburbs, but also a white flight into excludable public goods, such as private schools, whereas black families were in the public-school system. The other phenomenon was a sharp decline in the quality of the urban environment, which meant higher urban crime rates, higher investment in police and higher incarceration rates in these locations, a response that dates back to the 1960s. So, when you see the rise of mass incarceration in the 1990s across the US, these locations in the North already had the infrastructure to take up that policy. That means that in the 1990s, this historical legacy of the Great Migration really shows up in extremely high incarceration rates of

the grandchildren of the original migrants. So, yes, Baldwin's passage does resonate with this broader story of how these receiving locations changed in response to the Great Migration.

GPC – So, would you say that, looking at the effects of the Great Migration in the schooling system and the incarceration rates, you find a possible driver of the School-to-Prison-Pipeline problem that affects mainly ethnic minorities in the US.

ED - What I show in the paper is that, historically, black migration is associated with higher incarceration rates, especially in the 90s. And if you simply look at the share of individuals incarcerated who grew up in those locations, you see that this share is also higher for black men from low income families. So, that exactly suggests the Great Migration predicts not only lower income as an adult, but also a greater probability of ending up incarcerated for this group.

GPC – Ok, and would you say that is one of the main messages of this piece of research?

ED - Well, when I am asked that question, I sometimes hesitate and say I need to write another paper to really make that point. So, I would say the most important takeaway is that, in response to the Great Migration, these receiving locations changed in terms of the gains people get from growing up in these locations. Meaning, I can drop a random kid there and they're going to a have lower income as an adult if they are dropped in a former Great Migration city, regardless of the composition of the families.

GPC - Okay. That's the main message…

ED - That's the message. That's the first and most important message. And, based on that key result, I then sought to understand how these locations changed. To do so, I collected data on residential patterns, on local government spending, and on schooling from 1920 to 2015. At that point, the causal chain fans out. I mean, I noticed greater segregation, I noticed worsened urban environments, but it's very hard to say, actually, it is the increase in police spending and not so much segregation that is driving this change, and vice-versa. And the reason is that I only have one instrument, whereas I would need additional natural experiments to tease out the contribution of these different channels. For example, I could look at locations that exogenously did not expand the prison system or police, and see how much the effects of the Great Migration were muted there. This is something that I'm looking into now. For example, there is variation in sentencing by geographic area in the US driven by judge discretion. This is closer to something that's potentially less tied to the crime rate in a particular location, but instead the idiosyncrasies of the criminal justice system in a given location. As a result, if you're growing up in these places, you're more likely to be exposed to punitive criminal justice policies, and I can see how that punitiveness varies with the Great Migration. So, that's an example of how I would try to tease those apart even further.

GPC – I see… You also talked about the data that you collected from the CCDB, the City and County Data Books. It seems that implied a lot of hard data work, like looking into physical files. Was that part of your research, like going to a basement of, say, a public institution, where…

ED – I wish it were that adventurous, but the CCDB is actually, especially for the 1940 to 1970 period, available in a very clean format from a data consortium site called ICPSR. So, you can download it in a clean format. But I wanted to understand what happened before and what happened after the Great Migration, something that required going through hundreds of different sources in a variety of formats. There's an amazing resource, called Hathi Trust, where you can find all these historical reports. I could type in 'biennial statistics of education 1920' and pull up the report where I have a list of every single private school in the US in 1920, and the number of students enrolled versus the number that would be enrolled in the public-school system. So, a lot of the work of this project was harmonizing data on schools, data on local government spending across all these different sources and data on murder rates and on incarcerations.

GPC – That was a lot of data work…

ED – Yes. All the files are now on my website so that people can do even more with it than I could.

GPC – OK, OK. And, in that data hunting process, did you face challenges? Were there moments that you, say, after working one or two weeks to get some data, just ended up realizing that, OK, maybe this is not going to be possible? I'd say that comes up a lot in this kind of dialectical interaction between data and theory. Sometimes we do have a good story that we want to test, and we think we are going to have data for that and in the end we don't. So, my question is, how did you overcome these challenges? Do you have an example on how you move forward after hitting such a roadblock?

ED – So, one thing I wanted to avoid was to kind of cherry picking what mechanisms I looked at. I mean, when I set out on this process of understanding how great migration destinations changed in the 20th century, I definitely bit off more than I could chew. So, I said, OK, what does the historical and sociological literature suggest in terms of mechanisms behind these changes? And, broadly, the things that popped up as things to look into were housing and residential factors, neighborhood composition, local government spending, jobs, crime, schools. So, I started out just trying to get as much data as I could on all those things. And then, as I mentioned briefly in the talk, I had written this model that predicted that if you have an influx of a poor group, one potential response with very minimal assumptions is that incumbents will vote to lower the tax rate, because they're getting less for every dollar spent on public services, because now there's more people in the community using more of those services. That prediction was not borne out in the data, and, if anything, I saw an increase in spending, but only in police spending. Which, as we know from other literature, has potentially negative externalities on, especially, black men. That was a moment where the data just said something different than the toy model I wrote down and I had to grapple with that. Then, I had huge challenges in harmonizing data and also going through hundreds of data sources because of data quality issues. So, I hired a couple of research assistants during this process, who would perform basic data quality checks. For example, it turns out that New York City didn't report its murders in 1950. In that case, we had to go with 1940 data instead.

GPC – Still in this topic of data hunt, let's say you're looking for data for a given research project. After searching on Google and finding no satisfactory answers, what is your next step?

ED - I think one of the most important things to do is to first see what other work has been done on the topic in economics. That will give you a path to data. And, even better, sometimes authors post their replication files. If you just want to get a rough sense of something, one of the best ways to do that is to find a paper that's on a related topic that will then have the data that you might need. This was important both in starting my job market paper and in other work I have done. Other times, you try to find the data, and you just can't. I'm kind of struggling with that in one of my projects about black suburbanization after 1970. I am not able to drill down and see where families have specifically relocated from because fine geographies are not disclosed for privacy protection.

GPC – Going back to you work on the Great Migration, when did you start working on this piece of research? Was it the first topic that captured your interest during your PhD or were you working on other areas?

ED - I would say one of the really fascinating things to me about the PhD process is just how much of it happens in the last year and a half. When I was in my second year, I had no idea what my job market paper was going to be, I was doing fields in theory and public finance, and then I ended up being a labor economist and economic historian. I always had an interest in economic history, but my first project was on the Atlantic slave trade and how it affected the European cities that were participating. That is still an ongoing project because of the data—talk about data hurdles, we're talking about 18th century trade manuscripts.
So, I started working on this project that became my job market paper in my fourth year and did not think it would be my job market paper until the fifth year.

GPC – And how did you get the idea, did you stumble on it? Or was it something that you were thinking about for a long time?

ED - I did have training as an economic historian and had done a lot of reading in this area, such as Leah Boustan's work on the Great Migration. When I was in my fourth year of grad school, that was around the time that Raj Chetty and his research team put out these local mobility statistics and their maps on upward mobility were all over the New York Times. I looked at those maps and noticed two things. The South was this concentrated region of low upward mobility. And then there were these pockets in the rest of the country, cities with really low upward mobility. And I looked at those spots, and I realized that those were the Great Migration destinations. You could see Chicago, New York, LA, Detroit and Baltimore always ranking near the bottom of these statistics. As opposed to Salt Lake City, a homogenously white city in the west, which these statistics indicated was the number one place for upward mobility. So, just by putting those two facts together, I thought how tragic that was, because the Great Migration was all about this movement to opportunity for African Americans. What happened? This was the question for me. And that pattern that being a Great Migration destination was associated with lower mobility today, that emerged in my fourth year with just looking at the patterns and creating those correlational estimates. After spotting that pattern, my research was then focused in finding the instrument and then the mechanisms behind these events, and that filled up the time for the remaining two years.

GPC – Something that some PhD candidates struggle with is about work methods. I mean, how to keep track of ideas, how to pick one and move forward with it, how to make the most out of the literature you review. So, in a short form, my question is how do you work?

ED – Well, that's a hard question and something I am still learning! But I'm a firm believer that knowledge is socially produced. So, getting feedback on ideas is one of the best ways to figure out how that idea can be improved. One thing I did a lot in grad school was submitting proposals to fellowships or grants. The process of putting an idea down in a form that could convince someone that that idea was worth funding and having it go through a reviewing process was very helpful. I was denied funding plenty of times, but then sometimes I would get comments and feedback and that process, to me, was one of the best ways to push an idea forward. I would also try to use field courses that had a paper requirement to force myself to push a big idea forward, even if that meant only getting through the literature review and some descriptive statistics. This is opposed to "writing to the class" or focusing on writing a complete paper of limited scope and ambition just to meet the course deadline.

GPC – Before finishing, I would like us to depart slightly from the regular script and talk shortly about the economics field in general and about misogyny and racism in academia. Today, in our seminar room, there were 15 men and five women and a clear majority of white people. Three to one is actually not the worst gender ratio one can find in spaces across the discipline. What are your thoughts on that and on what we should do as economists, especially as young economist, to work under the compromise of gender equality and of getting the discipline rid of racial and other sorts of discrimination?

ED - So, I would say that one of the most important things that we can do in our field is to just actually change the demographics of who is an economist. Obviously, of course, there are things we can do about the culture in terms of how we run seminars, in terms of setting up some ground rules, and we can also think about the terminology that we use. For example, as someone who identifies as Black and works on race, I am very conscious of the language that's used to describe black people. In my own research, for example, I never use the term "black," and I ask coauthors to adhere to the same. I always use it as an adjective, as it should be used, like in the expression "black people" or "black individuals", or when appropriate, the term "African Americans." These are habits we can adopt that in some small way make sure people are not dehumanized. And it is something I hope will spread to other researchers as well. But I do think that these measures will still not make much ground if we don't dramatically change the demographics of who economists are, and there are many points along the pipeline where you could work on that. I'll give you my example, I actually didn't major in economics myself, I majored in gender studies and molecular biology. I was drawn to scientific thinking and methods and to issues of social inequality. And throughout all of undergrad, I never thought of economics as a discipline where I could combine those interests. After graduating, I thankfully met some mentors who were economists that were doing really inspiring work that piqued my interest, like Leah Boustan or Suresh Naidu. And my interactions with them made me see economics differently, as a toolkit that can be applied to almost any question. And as long as the question you're asking is interesting and you are rigorous in terms of methodology, this field is open to that. So, I would argue that, even if you don't catch people in undergrad, we should talk to students who are interested in social science and inequality, who typically do come from more

diverse backgrounds, and show them that there's this thing called economics they should look into. I see a lot of students from underrepresented backgrounds who care about social and economic justice and inequality who go into sociology, or social policy, and I feel that part of my task as someone also coming from an underrepresented background is to reach out to those students and tell them "Look, you need to look into this economic thing. The questions you care about, the field actually does care about as well, as long as you are answering it in a rigorous way."

GPC – Ok, I see you do have some points about our individual action as economists. And what about collective action, what departments should do, what current students worried about this lack of diversity should fight for. Would you be in favor of imposing quotas across the discipline, do you think that students should take action of some form, do you have any opinion on that?

ED - I'm someone that believes that you should use all the tools at your disposal. So, in the program that I graduated from, there are now all these awesome student groups that didn't exist when I was there, such as *Harvard Grad Women in Econ*, and they're doing a whole range of things. For example, in the economics department there's this stairwell, that runs four stories high, that had images of people historically associated with the Harvard economics department, for example, former faculty. And it consists entirely of pictures of white men, maybe around 40 or so counting all the floors. And when I was a student there, I definitely noticed that. But now, there's a student organization that actually lobbied and said that we should really try to think about what message this sends to people who are from different backgrounds. So, they're going to redecorate completely and maybe have different themes, and have female economists and people from other backgrounds represented. I think all those measures actually do matter and having student groups organizing around these issues is very important. So, I really think we should use all the tools we have.

GPC – Great. That is great story of how students can engage in changing the discipline. Ellora, thank you so much for sharing with us your research, your work methods and also your thoughts on how we can contribute to a more plural and representative field. This was great, I really enjoyed our conversation and am sure our readers will do so too.