

FEMINISM IN TRANSLATION

The Contributions of Afro-descendant Women to Feminist Theory and Practice: Deuniversalizing the Subject “Women”¹

Ochy Curiel

Anthropology Department, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Carrera 45 #26-46, Bogotá, Colombia
Corresponding author. Email: ochycuriel@gmail.com

Translated by Ruth Pión

Instituto Caribeño de Pensamiento e Investigación Decolonial (INCAPID), Calle 4 48 Las Américas,
Santo Domingo Este, Santo Domingo, República Dominicana, 11606

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The 1960s and the '70s were, without a doubt, decades of high theoretical production and of new political practices in feminism in many countries. At that time, feminist claims and demands were not the right to suffrage nor only entering into masculinized institutions. Other logics and political proposals enriched feminism: Afro-descendants, lesbians, postcolonialists, multiculturalists, among others, had opened a variety of analyses with new perspectives regarding the subordination of women.

Questioning the category “women,” due to its assumption of universality, Afro-descendant or Black women² have made significant contributions by relating categories like “race”³ to that of gender. And they have demonstrated how patriarchy has different effects on women when they encounter these categories in their social relations.

In what follows, I will present hypotheses from Afro-descendant women in three different contexts: the United States, Great Britain, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Fundamentally, I attest their political, theoretical, and strategic stances will be accounted for. In doing so, I seek to avoid any essentialist biases concerning the category *Black woman* as something unitary and homogeneous. And at the same time, I seek to identify the common points that can help to create a transnational political struggle against sexism and racism.

This article is part of the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research project “Political Strategies of Afro-descendant Women in Brazil, Dominican Republic, and Honduras,” which is in the process of being published. Carried out from 2003 to 2005, the research recovers the story of this political current as a means of showing its contributions while discarding any victimizing bias against Black or Afro-descendant women, as is often done in academic spaces.

I address the experiences of Afro-American and British women understanding they were pioneers in the development of Black feminism, which has nourished Latin America and the Caribbean politically and theoretically. I then proceed to describe

the political foundations of the Afro-Latino-American and Afro-Caribbean women's movement, of which I have formed a part. Therefore, the analyses I present here originate from my political experience in this movement and the theoretical reflections feminist theory offers me.

The Postulates of Black feminism: The Experience in the United States

The historic suppression of the ideas of Black women has had a marked influence in feminist theory. Viewed from a closer perspective, theories presented as universally applicable to women as a group turn out to be, in good measure, limited by the white and middle-class origins of those who proposed them. (Collins 1998, 259)

This is how the African American Patricia Hill Collins exemplified the sentiment of many African American women when they came up against an incomplete and incorrect theory within the feminist endeavor, that hid its own racism under the veil of generality of the category "women." The same logic of exclusion that Afro-descendant women had experienced since the time of slavery marked feminist practice. Afro-descendant women were the great absentees of women's history, along with Indigenous women, lesbians, migrants, and so on. When it came to inequalities with men, feminism was marked by liberal, bourgeois, and universalistic characteristics that the pioneers fought against during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. A universality that neither considered the historical context nor the individual and collective experiences of many women that, while being victims of sexism, were also attacked by the effects of other systems of domination such as racism, classism, and heterosexism.

The concept of patriarchy, fundamental for feminist theory, was challenged for being considered as an undifferentiated, masculine domination without examining how it became concrete in particular experiences where race, class, and sexuality played a crucial role in social reproduction.

One of the main gains of contemporary feminism, based on the analysis of the sexual division of work and the differentiation between feminine and masculine roles, was the right to salaried work outside of the household, which enabled women to have financial autonomy and at the same time helped them to achieve social recognition. bell hooks based her critique on Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which became a theoretical and political point of reference for contemporary feminism in the 1960s in the United States. hooks criticized the racist and classist views of feminism during those times, arguing that what Friedan proposed about women freeing themselves from domestic labor to become professionals, as White men did, failed to consider Afro-descendant women who, as an inheritance of slavery, have always worked outside of the household as workforce in the streets and in the homes of White people (hooks 2004). The division into public and private spheres where the sexual division of labor becomes evident became nonsensical when it came to the experience of many women for whom both spheres were spaces of economic exploitation, construction of stereotypes, and sexualized and racialized roles. These women were always located in labor spheres that were undervalued and underpaid, such as, among others, domestic labor (Collins 1998; hooks 2004). Audre Lorde, Afro-American feminist poet and lesbian, asked, regarding the differences between feminisms:

If American feminist theory doesn't need to explain the differences that exist between us, nor the resulting differences in our oppression, then how do you

explain the fact that the women who clean the house and take care of your children while you attend congresses about feminist theory are mostly poor women and women of color? What theory supports racist feminism? (Lorde 2003, 118)

The classist and racist view of feminism did not reveal the reproduction of these domination systems among women.

Afro-descendant women also questioned the analysis of violence because it was limited to the domestic and intrafamilial sphere. Although Afro-descendant women suffer violence from men in the domestic, private, and public spheres in the same way as other women, contemporary feminism did not specify how this issue was related to institutionalized racism, especially when it showcases the sexual representation of Afro-descendant women as “good and hot in bed,” hypersexual, and aggressive. These preconceived views added to the poverty levels in which these women live and had led them to represent the highest percentages in sex work and pornography. Furthermore, feminism didn’t approach how this racial violence manifests itself in the public sphere: in the street and in workspaces (Collins 1998; hooks 2004).

Feminist analysis surrounding family, conceived as an institution that supports women’s exploitation based in defined and differentiated sexual roles and sustained by normalized heterosexuality, did not encompass the particular experiences of Afro-descendant women. Afro-descendant people are always associated with crime, perversion, and disorder. Additionally, their extreme marginality condemns them to high levels of drug addiction, alcohol abuse, and violence, which, in turn, have justified policies of control and violence from the state and the police. The daily and institutional racism that they experience in the public sphere turns families, in whichever form they come, into sorts of shelters that foster emotional survival and provide collective support (Bhavnani and Coulson 2004; Brah 2004).

The topic of reproduction was also complex. Although many feminists claimed the right to abortion, including Afro-descendant women who have always been present in these ranks, they also raised the right to reproduction under good health conditions, given limited and deplorable public health services, and they have struggled against forced sterilization. These eugenicist and racist state policies were always aimed at poor, indigenous, and Afro-descendant women (Roland 2000; hooks 2004; Carneiro 2005; Werneck 2005).

Afro-descendant women also criticized “sisterhood” as solidarity, a principle that sustained White feminism, considering it a myth that rendered invisible the relationships of inequality, exploitation, and domination between Afro-descendant women and White feminists, particularly those that took place in the domestic space. “The word sisterhood implies a supposed homogeneity of experiences that in fact/reality doesn’t exist” (Lorde 2003, 124). Sisterhood between women was a myth that, despite aiming to weave ties of complicity among women in the face of patriarchy and sexism, did not show the extent to which racism was being reproduced in feminist practice.

These new views of Afro-descendant feminists led to the development of Black feminism in the United States, thus opening the theoretical and conceptual gaps linking diverse systems of oppression, and becoming concrete in various collective political practices, creating a high impact, antiracist, and antisexist movement.

Black feminism was born under the concept of “women of color” in the United States in the early 1970s, with two purposes: the reconstruction of feminism, dominated by a Eurocentric and racist vision that rendered the experiences of non-White women invisible in its theoretical and analytical propositions and in its own practice, and the

denunciation of sexism by Black men within the 1960s civil rights movement. “Women of color,” more than a biological category, was assumed as a political category that questioned the predominance of white supremacy (hooks 2004), and the patriarchal practices that occurred both in North American society and within these social movements.

The National Black Feminist Organization, founded in New York, was the first Afro-descendant feminist organization. The Combahee River Collective, formed by lesbian and feminist women with radical politics, and many other movements in the 1970s (Moraga and Castillo 1988) were among the first and most significant organizations of those years.

By linking multiple oppressions, Afro-descendant women seek a social transformation starting from the historical experiences of women. “Race,” like class and sex, has been conceived as a social category of power, based on the ideology of phenotypical difference. The structures of class, race, gender, and sexuality are conceived as “dependent variables” because each one of them is subsumed in the others and is constituted by them (Brah 2004).

Black feminism in the United States appropriates feminist theories but imbues them with its own *standpoint* (Collins 1998). The “Black” in feminism differentiates it from a feminism that was legitimized only from the perspective of White, middle-class, and bourgeois women, and at the same time questioned the “natural” “fraternity and black racial solidarity” *per se* promoted by Black nationalism. Considering the multiple oppressions of women in which race, class, gender, and sexuality are interdependent variables constitutes what Collins calls a “matrix of domination” (Collins 2000, 273) is what gives a radical perspective to this feminist project. In this political thinking, the concept of difference, rather than being conceived as essentialist, is seen as the result of historical experiences framed in social relations of power and domination, as a consequence of colonialism and slavery.

Collins defines the thought of this feminism:

In order to develop adequate definitions of Black feminist thought, it’s necessary to address the complex knot of relations that bind biological classification, the social construct of race, and gender as categories of analysis, the material conditions that accompany these ever-changing social constructs and the conscience of Black women about these topics. One way to position oneself before the tensions of definition in Black feminist thought is specified in the relation between the location of Black women—those experiences and ideas shared by Afro-American women that grant them a singular approach to themselves, to the community and the society and the theories that interpret those experiences. . . . Black feminist thought comprehends interpretations of the reality of Black women made by Black women. The struggle for a feminist, Afrocentric, self-defined consciousness is achieved through a fusion of thought and action. (Collins 1998, 289)

For Collins, building a Black femininity involves forging individual expressions to enhance them jointly within the collective, but always from an *Afrocentric* perspective, that is, according to the ancient African systems of belief that serve as keys to resistance against racial oppression and as part of a conscious struggle (Collins 1998).

What are the implications of building a Black femininity? How can we solve the tension of, on the one hand, leaving the logic of the socially constructed femininity/masculinity dichotomy and, at the same time, build a “Black” femininity necessary for political action as feminists?

The answer is not simple, since, on the one hand, feminist policies must deconstruct a conception of femininity that comes from a concept of “woman” bound to sexualized naturalism, which justifies the creation of inequalities and stereotypes between the sexes. On the other hand, the categories “Afro-descendant women,” “Black women,” or “women of color” have been necessary to recover a shared experience of domination that enables the undertaking of a joint political struggle. It is a tension that does not have an easy way out other than “doubleness.” It is a tension in which a to-and-fro is necessary in order to make us leave the binary, heterosexist logic of femininity behind, thereby undermining its significance. On the other hand, it also requires understanding how a sexualized and racialized “Black femininity” has been constructed, thus creating new meanings through discursive and theoretical practices and political action. Because, what is it to be a Black woman but that which has been represented by dominant racist and male sectors?

This reconstruction of a positively redefined Black femininity is where an antiracist and antisexist political practice that values the contributions of Black women to a history in which they have been made invisible and acknowledges other nonracialized and sexualized values that enable them to undertake political solidarity by becoming political subjects capable of making social transformations from their own perspective, should mainly lie.

That is why, in the face of accusations regarding the existence of an essentialist bias in Black feminism for containing a biological category (Black woman), Collins responds with the concept of *centrality*, meaning the need for Black women to develop a feminist thinking centered on the experiences of race, class, and gender, as well as on concrete historical experiences bound to Africanity and the aftermath of slavery. This generates a unique perspective on the world and enables the definition of a “Black self-defined femininity,” with the consciousness of an oppressed group, and an approach constructed by those who experience those oppressions, therefore constituting specialized knowledge (Collins 1998). In this sense, “Black” is not a biological category, but a historical one. This new approach offers an independent theoretical body from a concrete experience of oppression and a particular consciousness about that oppression.

Although the proposal to focus on Afrocentrism involves valuing an African heritage that has been undervalued in its culture as well as its history and that builds an Africanity in a diaspora seeking to fight Eurocentrism, it also risks not understanding how this diaspora was constructed in current social and historical contexts and in the societies that we inhabit. With this I do not mean in any way to overlook the importance of defining who we are, from the history of a continent from which our African ancestors, men and women, were forcibly taken during the enslavement process. The aim is to draw attention to the fact that there have been processes of adaptation and re-adaptation to new socioeconomic conditions, as well as to processes of cultural, discursive, and practical creation and recreation, that have generated new and differentiated cultures. The authenticity of the Afrocentric is nothing but a myth, and it can only help partly in the political struggle. Demystifying Afrocentrism means to consider that part of who we are is denied and undervalued. It also means acknowledging all that we are that comes from other cultures that were constructed or are in process of construction, and how we are spawned based on the varied social relations that comprise us, where class, gender, and sexuality are present, but also regional and local contexts and specific experiences in which all of what constitutes us intertwines.

Despite concurring with Collins's political assumptions regarding the meaning of Black feminism, calling this feminism "Black" entails, in my view, an essentialist bias that, albeit conscious of the need for a touch of essentialism in antiracist politics in societies where White supremacy and White cultural hegemony are well defined and positioned, creating mechanisms of power for their own perpetuation, can make us lose sight of the real causes of racism and sexism within globalized, neoliberal capitalism.

Although Afro-descendants have framed negritude in a political project of resistance and transformation, reconceptualizing and resymbolizing its content and changing its negative meaning into a positive one, and despite "Blackness" being considered as a category built by the historical processes of colonization and slavery, it is still a representation that shows how "Blackness" has been imagined in racist and postcolonial societies. Referring to "Blackness" as something authentic means to assume that the lived experiences are void of representation. "Blackness" is generally considered in contraposition to "Whiteness" in a logic of binary opposition that has a phenotypical category as reference. Moreover, it tends to generalize and homogenize the experience of the Afro-descendant diaspora and with it, its culture. These hazards affect our political struggles and strategies. This is why calling a political practice that seeks to consider how "race, the sex/gender system, class, and sexuality" are interrelated as categories of power, "Black feminism" limits the progression that a radical feminist politics must sustain. In that sense, Blackness as a sign of identity is never enough.

Some Afro-descendant women in the United States prefer to embrace the concept of "womanism," as proposed by the African American writer Alice Walker, as a way to express an affirmation of a Black femininity, as opposed to a White one. This is also a way of claiming the solidarity and necessary and urgent complicity proposed by the Black liberation movement and Black nationalism. This concept takes up the struggles of Black women, before feminism appeared as a theory against sexism, racism, poverty, and international capitalism. It gives a sense of collectiveness, of Black genealogy, and it questions White feminist analysis for its racist and elitist bias (Sudbury 2003). For Walker, a womanist woman "is committed to the survival and integrity of all of the people, male and female. A womanist isn't separatist except periodically for health reasons" and "is traditionally universalist," always fighting for the whole of humanity (Walker cited by Collins 1998, 302).

In face of this proposal it's worth asking: what is the difference between womanism and feminism? Feminism, as claimed by Afro-descendants, proposes the same principles that womanism claims to have. The fact that feminism was a political and theoretical approach marked by racism and ethnocentrism does not negate it as a valid, questioning, revolutionary, and transformative proposal for women. The contributions of Black feminism, or the perspective of Afro-descendant women, third-world women, postcolonialists, and so-called "popular women," has effectively completed and reconceptualized a feminist theory and practice, estranging it more and more from ethnocentrism and racism. The pending task is that all feminists, whether racialized or not, from diverse classes and social positions, approach all systems of oppression that affect all women. Only thus can feminism be a complete and transformative proposal for all of humanity. In my view, the womanist proposal contains an antifeminist and contradictory bias, since it does not acknowledge those contributions referred above, nor does it acknowledge the contributions feminism has made for all women as a proposal for transformation, practice, ethics, and politics in the world.

The Black feminist approach was undoubtedly a great positive leap for feminism because of its various contributions. It especially showed how "race," class, and sex

are interrelated, as already stated. However, the issue of heterosexism as another form of domination linked to these others has not been sufficiently addressed.

Lesbians have struggled to position this perspective by finding a link between political lesbianism and feminism as theoretical and political possibilities to confront sexist and racist domination. Cheryl Clarke, an African American lesbian feminist, points out how feminist lesbianism is capable of subverting heterosexuality as one of the systems of oppression of women, “as long as it comes from an anti-racist and anti-class vision” (Clarke 1988, 100).

Despite the effort of many lesbians to position this political perspective, they have had to endure criticism, being made invisible, and rejection from both the Afro-descendant heterosexual women’s movement and from Afro-descendant men who conceive lesbianism as a threat to the antiracist and antisexist struggle. As a feminist lesbian, Lorde responded to this:

The attacks against Black lesbians by both Black men and Black heterosexual women have increased. But just like self-defined women exist without being a threat to Black men who do the same, Black lesbians only represent an emotional threat for those Black women who experience their feelings of camaraderie and love for their sisters as a problem. (Lorde 2003)

For Lorde, lesbianism is defining oneself and embracing freedom before men; it involves defining one’s own destiny and developing mutual aid and solidarity among women, concurring with the concept of a *lesbian continuum*, proposed by Adriene Rich (Rich 1998).

Since the 1970s the experience of the Combahee River Collective has been one of the most interesting examples in the US regarding the interrelation of all systems of oppression. This political perspective was displayed in their Statement of 1978, that was later published:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (Combahee River Collective 1988, 179)

Black feminism in the US has been a fundamental reference for Afro-descendant women of many latitudes because of its organizational experience dating from the 1970s, but also because of its theoretical contributions from the academy and from feminist activism.

Linked by Political Color: Black Women in Great Britain

In Great Britain, the Black women’s movement started in the 1970s from an anti-imperialist, anticolonialist struggle against racism, class inequality, and patriarchal practices with the OWAAD (Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent). This was the first national organization, along with Brixton’s Black Women’s Group (BWG),

although there were already other organizations; subsequently dozens more emerged incorporating the term “Black women” (Sudbury 2003; Brah 2004).

“Black women” has been a diverse category referring to issues of class, race, and migration, and includes women who have migrated from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. In those places, “Blackness” has been far from an essentialist connotation, insofar as it is a differentiated category that implies a multitude of diasporic experiences (Brah 2004). This has posed a challenge to the antiracist struggle grounded on political color and questions the category of Black women as a unitary category. The concept of negritude for British women is not a notion related to nonwhiteness; it has become a strategic political identity formed against institutionalized racism expressed in police brutality, public services, and the effects of migration, placing women in conditions of material, social, and cultural inequality.

The concept of Blackness “is an act of opposition that declares the supremacy of stories of resistance and oppression over the divisive tactics of the ‘scientific’ classification” (Sudbury 2003, 288). This Afro-Asian union is descended from the Black Power movement of the 1960s, and it gathered men and women of African and Asian descent against the racism and violence unleashed in those days in Great Britain. Notwithstanding the participation of women in this huge movement, they were not sufficiently acknowledged as active political subjects within the various organizations involved. This situation made them struggle against the machismo and androcentrism of their partners in struggle, and at the same time question the hegemonic vision of political participation, such as parties and unions, considering them alienating and exclusive, and thus leading them to create more autonomous organizations (Sudbury 2003).

Julia Sudbury, an English womanist of Jamaican origin, who conducted an interesting study on Black women’s organizations in Great Britain between 1970 and 1990, proposes the concepts of gender racism and racialized sexism, meaning that it is not possible to separate systems of domination, racism, and sexism when it comes to the experience of Black women (Sudbury 2003). She identifies six areas of political action in which Afro-descendant women act: those within Black communities—the individual, the family, and the community—and those developed against the devices of power—local, national, and international. The “individual” area encompasses three approaches: the self-confidence that grants women autonomy when facing violence and dependence on men and discriminatory structures; a vision of alternative education to fight off negative representations of Black femininity and that enable them to identify the racialized barriers of gender, recover a history, and achieve critical awareness training; and economic development as a way to achieve independence from their violent partners and as personal reaffirmation.

The family becomes a place of affirmation and resistance against racism. So, for example, beyond being a socialization process linked to gender roles, raising children is a political process, since women developed processes of instilling consciousness in their sons and daughters, providing them with tools to face racism. Many times, this upbringing is carried out in communal ways because it represents an intersection between the community and the individual and it’s assumed as a shared responsibility. For this reason, women seek collective solutions as in the case of safe and antiracist daycare. The relationship with men is also very particular. There is a tendency to prioritize racism over sexism, given the shared experience of racism with Black men, which often leads them to put aside male violence by Black men (Sudbury 2003).

The third area is community, understood as diverse, collective experiences. Because of their condition as Black women, many of whom are migrants from various countries, the idea of community is broad. A reference point of “community” could be women’s organizations, another could be sharing experiences with Afro-descendants or Asian-descendants or as migrants. In some cases, for many women of African descent, the concept of community becomes more homogeneous based on Black femininity of African descent. However, this has often brought them into conflict, causing them to be accused of separatism and dividing the antiracist struggle.

Regarding political action directed at the spheres of power, Sudbury points out the relations with the state and with the municipal government. Political action has been aimed primarily at achieving the distribution of funds and grants for Black women’s organizations, and achieving representation and economic and social improvements for Black organizations and communities. Although this has enabled them to position themselves as a recognized group and community with rights, it has also led them to depend financially on state and municipal institutions. Many organizations that seek to raise resources through consultancies and the sponsorship of Black companies “are becoming more sophisticated and are more actively concerned with planning their financial funding. . . . Many of them have moved from political activism to service provision” (Sudbury 2003, 296).

At the international level, many organizations define a solidarity policy with women from other countries to achieve an “international agenda” for transformation in the face of the global economy that brings social, political, and cultural exclusion along with it. These solidarities have not been able to develop in the best way due to women’s organizations’ scarce resources. Only at world conferences, such as the Women’s Conference held in Beijing, were actions made concrete.

In Great Britain, the concepts of family, patriarchy, and reproduction were also rethought from a new, broader, and more particularized political vision, according to the experiences of Black women.

Just as in the United States, Black women questioned the supposed homogeneous sisterhood that White feminism posed that didn’t recognize women’s diversity, conceiving them as passive victims.

“The personal is political,” a slogan that enabled feminists to politicize the intimate and the private spheres, also politicized personal self-affirmation that acquires a different look when it comes to Afro-descendant women’s experiences. Here the personal meets the collective without giving way to the dichotomy of self-realization and collective action.

Like many African American women, Black British women assumed themselves to be part of Black feminism, distancing themselves from White feminism by invoking the struggle against racism and patriarchal violence. Brah assumes that British “Black feminism” doesn’t come from essentialist categories, but entails questionings generated from processes, discourses, and material situations. For Brah, Black feminism has meant a political struggle to change meanings, theoretical concepts, and the relation between theory, practice, and subjective experience. It means forms of mobilization and the definition of political priorities (Brah 2004). Many other Black British intellectuals, such as Hazel Carby, Pratibha Parmar, Kum-Kum Bhavnani, and Valerie Amos, among others, significantly helped to forge that critical thinking.

Just as in the United States, heterosexism has been addressed little by Black women’s organizations. In Great Britain it was also a point of conflict. Heterosexuality was the fundamental legitimized model. In OWAAD, in the early 1980s when lesbians wanted

to have a political space and visibility, heterosexuality caused one of the organization's greatest crises. Many of the heterosexuals expressed that homosexuality was a disease and that it was of European origin: "Lesbianism was intertwined with White feminism, which in turn became an 'other' outrage" (Sudbury 2003, 146).

Despite the ruptures and fragmentations, the Black women's movement in Great Britain continues to be an important referent for the antiracist and antisexist political struggle that links different levels and forms of oppression according to particular historical contexts. As Brah points out:

As a result of our position in the diasporas shaped by the history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, black feminists have consistently advocated against the provincial mentality and have stressed the need for a feminism that is conscious of international relations of power. (Brah 2004, 110)

Black or Afro-descendant Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: Making Racism Visible and Reaffirming Identity

Latin America and the Caribbean have been marked by colonialism and economic dependence, inserted in free-market capitalism, but with weak markets and with little capacity to compete on an international scale, which keeps the area in widespread poverty. Although many revolutions have occurred, they have happened in the political sphere, not so much in social and economic ones.

Nation-states were imposed by political and economic elites, which in the period prior to the twentieth century regulated and expropriated local wealth and imposed the idea of a nationalism that was only the reflection of the ideology of the elites: racist, patriarchal, segregationist, and classist. This ideology relies on the economic, social, and political exclusion of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations.

Latin American and Caribbean political thinking has been framed in this context, determined by colonization and conquest that condemned Indigenous and African people to slavery, which spread and affected the lives of a great majority of the population, particularly women.

Women's political action has occurred in the face of economically and socially discriminatory policies, dictatorships and *caudillismo*, machismo, and racism. The construction of a critical political subject has been achieved under the idea of liberation regarding these phenomena.

Although Latin American and Caribbean feminism, as opposed to European, and partially to North American feminism, has been marked by a perspective of class, it was not without a classist and racist bias due to the different social, economic, and cultural positions that women occupied. Afro-descendance or Indigenous-descendance, although present in all of the Latin American and Caribbean population, behaves differently for those who are more racialized than others who have been denied and undervalued throughout history. The same is true of feminism. It has been Afro-descendants and Indigenous women who highlighted these differences among women, denouncing racism in a feminism built upon an elitist and classist base. This feminism did not consider, within its theoretical principles and its political actions, the multiple levels of oppression that most women experience.

Just as class was a fundamental trigger in the tensions of the movement, so was "race." Since the 1970s, and more fundamentally the 1980s, insult was added to injury. It was in 1983, at the Segundo Encuentro Feminista de América Latina y El Caribe,

when the topic of racism was brought up collectively as the great absence in political debates. And even when this topic was raised shyly and with a certain essentialist vision of identity, Afro-descendant women, and later Indigenous women, began to organize spaces for debate within the meetings.

Because of the same material and educational precariousness in which most Afro-descendant women find themselves, given the absence of the subject of racism in women's studies centers and in academia, and because of the same lack of perspective on multiple oppressions in feminism, the body of theory that has supported political action in the Latin American and Caribbean antiracist and antisexist struggle remains weak. This is so even though more and more women produce publications, systematizing critical feminist thought capable of engaging various levels of oppressions affecting women within the Latin American and Caribbean context.

Already organized into groups and organizations, Afro-descendant women point to the need to address racism in feminism and sexism in the antiracist struggle sustained by the mixed Black movement. In other words, as defined by Sueli Carneiro, Blacken feminism and feminize the anti-racist struggle (Carneiro 2005). On the other hand, there's the need to build a collective political subject capable of incorporating these perspectives in both movements, but also to keep the internal constructions and points of view of Afro-descendant women.

Thus we find our own political thoughts coinciding with those of Afro-Brazilian feminist Lélia Gonzalez. In her internationalist vision of the antiracist struggle, she creates a proposal to define the common experience of Afro-descendants in the Americas: *Amefricanity*, based on the denial of the Americas' *Latinidad*, while considering the preponderance of Indigenous and Black cultural elements and, on the other hand, the historical formation of Spain and Portugal, which can only be understood by taking as a starting point the long domination of the Iberian Peninsula by the Moors. She argues that the process of *Latinidad* was a form of Eurocentrism because it underestimates or dismisses the Indigenous and Black dimensions in the construction of the Americas (Bairros 2000, 54–55; see also Gonzalez 1983). Lélia understands *Amefricanity* as a historical process of resistance, reinterpretation, and creation of new cultural forms that have references in African models, but that rescued other historical and cultural experiences, leading to a construction of a particular identity, a mixture of many things at once.

Lélia, self-identified as a feminist, was among the first to position the importance of the interrelation between racism, sexism, and classism in the lives of Black women. Luiza Bairros, a researcher from Salvador, Bahia, analyzing Lélia's political thought, points out:

On the one hand, Lélia recognizes the contribution made by feminist theory and practice at the international level and its pioneer role in the discussion of homosexuality, from the debate on sexuality in general.⁴ On the other hand, she warned that the absence of the racial dimension indicated, at minimum, a lack of reciprocity, considering that in the United States, for example, the homosexual and feminist movements were largely driven by Blacks' struggle for civil rights. From this perspective, sexism and racism would be variations of the same and more general topic that has its starting point in biological differences (real or imagined) for the establishment of the ideology of domination. Lélia used to say: "Forgetting the racial issue can be interpreted as a case of racism by omission, originated from

Eurocentric and neocolonialist perspectives of Latin American reality.” (Bairros 2000, 55)

Many voices, such as that of Lélia Gonzalez, emerged throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, adding content to that self-owned thought, and at the same time undertaking a collective political struggle.

The Afrocentric perspective has been very present in this political thought, expressed in the rescue and revaluation of African cultural heritages: culinary, aesthetic, and especially religious, which tries to go back to the African ancestors and the recovery of mythologies that explain the continuity of the political force of Afro-descendants, which has enabled them to historicize and relativize the very concept of politics. Jurema Werneck, for example, recovers the history of *Ialodês*,⁵ African women leaders who resisted any pretense of dominance and submission, an inheritance recognized in the women of the diaspora. This rescue has involved the positioning of the political struggle long before feminist theory was born as a theory (Werneck 2005).

The presence of Afro-descendant feminist activists in religions such as Candomblé, Umbanda, and Voodoo, or other syncretic religious practices with a strong African presence, has fostered the incorporation of a cosmogony that affects political practice. In Brazil, for example, in the health field, Afro-descendant women have assumed a new concept: *popular medicine of African matrix*, defined as a set of knowledge, medicines, and powers sustained by a mystical and religious cosmovision. Women in these roles as healers, midwives, or priestesses (*mae de santos*) are indispensable.

In aesthetics, the Afrocentric vision is evident in the colorful clothes and patterns and African hairstyles. This gradually build an alternative discourse and practice to “White Western” beauty, the only legitimized and valued one in our societies.

All this has shaped a Black femininity based on identity practices that, although tending to be essentialized and stereotyped, have promoted the positioning of a necessary “Blackness” for the subjective reaffirmation of women (Curiel 2005).

Making racism visible in Latin American and Caribbean societies has been an arduous task that Afro-descendant women’s organizations have had to assume. Because of the ideology of miscegenation, racism is associated with experiences linked to apartheid or to segregation such as that in the United States and South Africa. It is assumed that the marginalization and socioeconomic exclusion experienced by Afro-descendant and Indigenous peoples is due more to their class situation than to racism itself, which established the *classism-more-than-racism* model. This supports the idea that if higher and better socioeconomic levels were reached, there would be no barriers to social mobility and therefore they would not be victims of racism (Lovell 1991). The ideology of racial democracy, which makes invisible the various forms in which racism expresses itself in underhanded and yet devastating ways was created on this basis.

Thus Afro-descendant women have denounced the absence of segregation for racial reasons, which renders invisible the situation of the Afro-descendant population, especially women, in official statistics that provide this type of data and information (Mateo 2002).

The need for statistics segregated by racial groups creates, in itself, a great tension: Who is and who is not Afro-descendant in societies like ours? Where does Black begin and end? It is difficult to answer these questions for several reasons. First, the demand for producing statistics by “race” in some way continues conceiving the existence of race as a category of human classification. This can give more tools to the racism that we want to eradicate. Second, miscegenation, whether a cultural and social reality or the imposition of an ideology, causes two situations. On the one hand,

most of the “conspicuously Black” people do not recognize themselves in this category because of the self-denial imposed by racist ideology. On the other hand, how can we define Black or Afro-descendant? By levels of skin-color degradation? By direct descent? The latter poses another problem: The genealogy of kinship has been lost as a result of racist mechanisms imposed since colonization through the separation of African men and women belonging to the same nations, to avoid uprisings and rebellions. Subsequently, free African men and women (in formal terms) found themselves forced to migrate to different places in search of better work conditions due to the precarious economic situation, a situation that continues to this day. Thus, the denial of a history that has strong African heritage was denied in both documents and memory as a product of the same racism.

Despite this situation, Afro-descendant women have demonstrated the effects of racism for women in demographic policies through the racial nature of violence against women. This ranges from showing the stereotypical image of their bodies in the media (where they appear hyper-erotized or in sexed roles as servants), up to the daily police violence in the public sphere. In the health field, they have pointed out diseases of the Afro-descendant population as a consequence of poverty. They have denounced the forced sterilization carried out by states and governments whose main victims have been poor Afro-descendants and Indigenous people. They have emphasized the analysis of the racial and sexual division of labor that places them in labor spheres that are paid and valued less, such as domestic work, free-trade zones, and informal labor. These jobs have been a continuation of slavery with a modern character today, but with the same discriminatory logics as in colonial times. They have also denounced selection mechanisms in the labor market, and the use of the criteria of “*buena presencia*” (of good appearance) as a mechanism that maintains inequalities with men as well as non-Black women (Campbell and Careaga 2002).

Latin American and Caribbean Afro-descendant women questioned the essentialist and monocausal vision of the separation of the public and private sphere of feminist theory and with it the conception of work. Afro-Brazilian philosopher Sueli Carneiro makes this racist vision evident:

When we talk about the myth of female frailty that historically justified the paternalistic protection of men over women, which women are we talking about? We —black women—are part of a contingent of women, probably the majority, who never recognized themselves in this myth, because they were never treated as fragile. We are part of a contingent of women who worked as slaves for centuries farming the land or in the streets as vendors or prostitutes. Women who did not understand anything when feminists said that women should win the streets and work.

We are part of a contingent of women with object identity. Yesterday, at the service of fragile young ladies and noble moronic lords. Today, domestic employees of the liberated women. (Carneiro 2005, 22)

To a lesser extent, just as it happened in the United States and Great Britain, they have shown how heterosexism has been a power system when normalized heterosexual sexuality is imposed. They have also shown how, when this is added to other systems of oppression, they place Afro-descendant lesbians in difficult and distressing situations (Curiel 2005). However, with or without statistical data, they have been able to articulate a critical discourse around how racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism are bonded in the lives of many Afro-descendant women throughout Latin America and the Caribbean and beyond.

Latin American and Caribbean Afro-descendant women have begun to assume a political identity under the term “Black,” and more recently, “Afro-descendant.” Assuming oneself as a Black woman has been one of the political priorities of the movement. This is due to the need to forge a reaffirmed femininity in the face of racism and its effects on women. Therefore, Blackness was, and continues to be, the starting point for political engagement. This Blackness has been homogenized to a great extent, creating an undifferentiated “Black woman” subject, according to historical contexts, whose relevant indicator is skin color, which is actually a political color (Brah 2004), but it also comes from social and political construction, racialized and therefore undervalued. Hence, it is a biological classification that does not rid itself of its essentialism. “Black” in Latin America and the Caribbean, different from in Great Britain, does refer to a group whose phenotypical characteristics are shared to a greater or lesser extent, and under this category, their histories are contextualized: racist, sexist, and classist. In that sense, most of the actions that define the movement revolve around culture, emphasizing “Black culture” to make it visible and thereby value it. However, I continue to wonder: Does that end racism? I keep giving myself the same answer: “it just recreates culture, but it doesn’t end the economic, social, and political inequalities that are the product of racism and exploitation” (Curiel 2005, 9).

Notes

- 1 This article was first published as: Ochy Curiel. 2007. Los aportes de las afrodescendientes a la teoría Femenias y la práctica feminista. Desuniversalizando el sujeto “Mujeres.” In *Perfiles del Feminismo Iberoamericano*, vol. III. ed. Maria Luisa. Buenos Aires: Catálogos.
- 2 The concepts *Afro-descendant women* or *Black women* are employed here because these political identities are used depending on the context. This essay uses *Afro-descendant*, considering that this category refers to historical facts linked to colonization and also to avoid any biological bias that the term *Black woman* contains.
- 3 This text uses quotation marks for the word “race,” based on the premise that race doesn’t exist as a classifier of human groups. The quotation marks refer to its cultural and political constructions above all, and it is a category of power from which racism is built.
- 4 In Brazil they commonly use the term *homosexuality* to refer to sexual relations between people of the same sex, be they men or women. The concept *lesbic* refers more to lesbian activists, whereas *lesbian* is used in the rest of the Spanish-speaking countries.
- 5 *Lalodê* is the Brazilian form of the word in the iorubá Ìyalóòde tongue. According to some African traditions transplanted to Brazil, *Ialodê* is one the given titles of Oxun, a divinity of Nigerian origin. In Ijexá e Ijebu, *Ialodê* also refers to the representative of women and to some kinds of emblematic women, female political leaders mostly in urban contexts. As we say, “the representative of the women who talks for all of them and participates in spaces of power” (Werneck 2005, 12).

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Ochy Curiel was born in the Dominican Republic and currently lives in Colombia. She has her PhD and Master's in social anthropology from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. She also studied at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD), Santiago, Dominican Republic, and the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (PUCMM). She's a teacher and researcher at the Universidad Nacional and the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. She's a member of the Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios, Formación y Acción Feminista (GLEFAS) and of the Tremenda Revoltosa, feminist *batucada*. She's also a songwriter, lesbic-feminist, antiracist, and decolonial activist. She has published several of her works, *La nación heterosexual, Análisis del discurso jurídico y el régimen heterosexual desde la antropología de la dominación* (2013) among them. She has been co-editor of several books and articles in which she approaches racism analysis, heterosexism, classism, and all systems of domination from a decolonial perspective.

Ruth Pión is an Afro-Caribbean woman, social researcher, and antiracist and decolonial activist from the Dominican Republic who has studied anthropology and has a Master's degree in gender equality. She co-founded the Junta de Prietas collective, aimed at denouncing and dismantling all systems of oppression through the dissemination of a decolonial and antiracist perspective on the island and in the region by fostering political action and formation. She has also developed research projects in the cultural and educational fields, and she is currently working on research projects with a decolonial and antiracist approach that revolve around preserving local memories of resistance. Ruth is the creator of the AfrohistoriaRD project, which seeks to connect with the history of enslaved African people of Ayiti (La Hispaniola) through immersive and educational experiences such as historical tours, workshops, and various training and interactive programs designed for all audiences. In the past few years, Ruth has participated as a speaker on various national and international platforms to discuss issues regarding racism, antiracism, feminism, gender, black history, and social movements.

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