Foreword

Reconfiguring the Politics of Knowledge: Writing Transnational Black Feminism from the South

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Collective vision for liberation is necessarily transnational—our struggles are inherently connected. We are heartened that the world has been moved by Marielle’s death. This show of international solidarity is a turning point. But we call on all of us to maintain this watchful eye for the months and years to come. Marielle’s assassination was not the first, and unfortunately, it is most likely not the last bellicose act in this global struggle. The fight for black life requires us to remain vigilant at home and abroad. Justice for Marielle means justice for us all.

On the evening of March 13, 2018, the shocking news of the death of Marielle Franco started to reverberate across Twitter and informal networks among Black feminists living in the Americas. When I first heard the news, I was simply overwhelmed. Pain, anger, fear, and disbelief hit me like a wave, and I immediately reached out to Keisha-Khan Y. Perry to process all of the emotions that were hitting us like a wave. As Black feminist anthropologists working in Brazil, we had been engaging with the Black feminist community in Brazil together since the early 2000s (Keisha-Khan Y. Perry has been doing the same work since the late 1990s). We were overtaken by the urgent need to say something in the face of such brazen and terrible misogynoir.

I began a group chat on Twitter with Erica Williams, Wendi Muse, Tianna Paschal, and Kia Caldwell and called on the group to pen a collective statement. The group represented North American Black women who critically engage with the politics of gender, race, and violence in Brazil. For the next ten days and nights (while also balancing childcare and work responsibilities) we crafted a collective statement in response to the egregious tragedy and in the spirit of transnational Black feminist solidarity. At the heart of our charge was a simple acknowledgment: that at this moment more than ever it was our responsibility as U.S. Black women to stand up and speak out in solidarity with our sisters in Brazil who were under attack and who had suffered a great loss. We acknowledged the key role that U.S. imperialist politics and transnational, gendered anti-Blackness played in Marielle Franco and Anderson Gomes’s deaths and also acknowledged the responsibility that we had (and have) as Black women living in the United States and carrying a U.S. passport: we must fight and refuse to be silent. On March 23, 2018 we published that statement, “On the Imperative of Transnational Solidarity: A U.S. Black Feminist Statement on the Assassination of Marielle Franco,” on the online portal of The Black Scholar. The statement circulated widely—one additional voice in a global chorus of outrage. Transnational Black feminism is precisely this: an insistence on witnessing Black women’s struggles in solidarity and sisterhood, and a refusal to be silent in the face of whatever injustice we encounter there. It is also the courage to speak up and speak out against the violence that faces Black women anywhere, recognizing that transnational solidarity is by definition an acknowledgment of the uneven power dynamics between “nations” that are a continued legacy of colonialism/slavery/Conquest and late capitalism/neoliberalism.

It is our responsibility as Black women living in the North to harness our (economic, national, imperialist) privilege in order to create pequeñas brechas/small openings in the veneer of patriarchal white supremacy and anti-Blackness.

Our lives as Black women are necessarily, globally intertwined, and there is no path toward our collective liberation that does not include dismantling hegemonic structures of imperialistic, patriarchal white supremacy. One critical aspect of this process is a radical Black feminist praxis of citational
politics—engaging seriously with Black women’s transnational intellectual contributions by centering our ideas about the world. This is especially the case in the plantation Americas, where imperialism, neoliberalism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy have defined Black women as disposable natural resources to be extracted, used, exploited, and discarded. This demarcation of violability includes our ideas and our innovations.

What does it look like to dismantle the patriarchal, white supremacist, heterosexist, imperialist impetus of the neoliberal university (and its accomplices) by centering Black women’s ideas and intellectual contributions? Embedded within this question we also find our response.

—“Cite Black Women: A Critical Practice (A Statement)” (Smith et al. 2021)

In 2021, Erica Williams, Imani Wadud, Whitney Pirtle, and I published the “Cite Black Women Collective Statement on behalf of the Cite Black Women Collective” (Smith et al. 2021). In it, we make the assertion that the project of dismantling the heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, heterosexist, imperialist impetus of the neoliberal university (and its accomplices) must necessarily center Black women’s ideas and intellectual contributions. Fundamental to our assertion is the project of epistemic disruption: the necessary radical politics of citation. Citation in this sense is not merely mounting a bibliography. Rather, it is a Black feminist practice that reconfigures the politics of knowledge production by situating Black women’s thought as the center of intellectual gravity. One of the very insidious dimensions of the legacy of colonialism/slavery/Conquest is the marking of Black women as violable. This violability is not only physical (characterized by the historical sexual and physical abuse of Black women’s bodies) but also epistemic—the strip mining, appropriation, and colonization of Black women’s ideas as part of the broader project of diminishment and erasure. This epistemic erasure has persisted through time and space. It is one of the colonial legacies of our world and one of the markers of late racial capitalism. Imperialism compounds this process. Not only do Black women’s ideas continue to be marginalized and obfuscated, but Black women writing, researching, thinking, and living in Portuguese and Spanish are almost invisible in the Northern academy. To cite and engage Black women’s ideas with respect and care—especially ideas from Latin America and the Caribbean—is one antidote for this legacy of epistemic erasure, a gravity shift. Black Women in Latin America and the Caribbean is part of this gravity shift.

As Keisha-Khan Y. Perry and Melanie A. Medeiros note in the introduction to this book, “we see this volume, Black Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: Critical Research and Perspectives, as playing a key discursive role in challenging damaging misconceptions of Black womanhood.” Indeed, it is.
Here we find Black women seriously engaging with Black women’s experiences with politics and the fight for citizenship, rights, and representation across the Caribbean and Latin America. As Perry and Medeiros note, the recent election of Francia Márquez as vice president of Colombia is one such example of the kinds of radical change that Black women are forging in the region. It is important to note, as Perry and Medeiros also do, that these struggles for political representation are necessarily collective: they are the product of years of nonhierarchical, anti-individualist movement organizing. When Francia Márquez came to the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) in 2016 to participate on the “The Gendered Dimensions of Anti-Black State Violence” panel that I organized as part of the Black Matters Conference run by the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies, she directly challenged all of us to move away from the white supremacist, neoliberal tendency to reduce movements to one charismatic leader. Instead, she noted that her victories in the struggle for Black territorial rights and representation in Colombia and around the region have been the fruit of generations of collective struggle. I heard this assertion echoed repeatedly when I traveled to Colombia in May 2022 to serve as an international election observer with the Misión de Observación Electoral, a branch of the United Nations. I was part of a delegation of Black women, femmes, and nonbinary people from the United States organized by AfroResistance, a movement of Black women, femmes, and girls from Latin America who focus on promoting human rights, democracy, and racial justice throughout the Americas. Our delegation’s mission was to protect the democratic process by ensuring all Colombians were able to vote without hindrance. However, at the heart of our desire to protect democracy was a deeper sense of purpose as well. For the months leading up to the election, Francia Márquez suffered intense attacks on her campaign, including serious death threats. As we gathered, we were reminded of Marielle Franco’s story and the dangerous stakes of Black women’s political leadership in the region. To protect democracy as Black women signifies putting our bodies and our communities on the line. We are never safe. As a North American Black woman from the United States, I am well aware of the sacrifices that women like Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Shirley Chisholm made for the right to be considered for political leadership. For these women, like Francia Márquez and Marielle Franco, the fight for democracy and representation was about the very urgent need to protect Black life, not the neoliberal impetus to harness individual political power. Chronicling our collective and regional political struggles is also part of this broader fight for the preservation of Black life.

In her book Escritos de Uma Vida, Black Brazilian feminist scholar and organizer Sueli Carneiro writes of Brazil, “It is an ethical requirement, a presupposition for the consolidation of democracy and a condition for the country’s reconciliation with its history, in the sense of building a more just and
equitable future for all” (Carneiro and Evaristo 2018, 138). Her words are applicable to Black women’s national struggles across the region, however. The consolidation of democracy is a prerequisite for the elimination of inequality across the Americas. The contributions to this volume, in varying registers, demarcate the contours of this process of consolidation through Black women’s experiences with community organizing, political struggles, and struggles for survival. As Perry and Medeiros note in the introduction to this book, “Writing from the crucial standpoint of Black women in Latin America and the Caribbean globalizes and engenders the political and social justice problems of Black people while also forging gendered diasporic politics.” Diasporic politics build from our collective, transnational legacies of Black struggle toward a more just and inclusive world. And as the Combahee River Collective notes in its 1977 statement, “If Black women were free, it would mean that every one else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective 1977).

What Melanie A. Medeiros and Keisha-Khan Y. Perry accomplish in this volume is nothing less than a radical intervention of tremendous importance. As they note in their introduction, this text adds to the growing literature being published in English on and by Black women from the Caribbean and Latin America that focuses on the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking experiences (e.g., Caldwell 2007; Figueroa-Vásquez 2020; Perry 2013; Rivera-Rideu, Jones, and Paschel 2016; Smith and Leu forthcoming). It is a part of a quiet revolution that transnational Black feminists are engaging across the region: a movement that involves breaking down the barriers of language by engaging in radical, dialogic acts of translation (e.g., Alvarez, Caldwell, and Lao-Montes 2016; Machado and Perry 2021; Smith, Davies, and Gomes 2021; Smith and Leu 2023); refusing the frontiers of national borders in order to organize in solidarity with one another; creating the space for one another to speak; bonding together to denounce oppression in all of its forms; and reclaiming our intellectual histories one story at a time.

In February 2020, Lorraine Leu and I organized the Lozano Long Conference at the Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies at UT Austin. The conference, “Black Women’s Intellectual Contributions: Perspectives from the Global South,” gathered Black women scholar/activists/artists (nonhierarchically) in order to draw attention to the ways that Black women from Latin America have largely been excluded from contemporary debates in Black and Latin American studies. Race, gender/sexuality, and regional origin (which is inherently a classed categorization) compound to mute voices in unique ways. The duality of racism and sexism rampant in the Latin American academy erases Black women from Latin American studies. Black women are erased from Black studies because of its traditionally patriarchal structure. And Black
women from Latin America have been overlooked in the canon of Black women's studies because of the tendency to overemphasize the experiences of English-speaking Black women within this global project. As a result, there is a need to radically diversify the discourses of each of these fields and to foreground Black women's contributions from Latin America to philosophical and political thought in the Americas.

The conference sought to address that need by engaging with Black women's intellectual contributions to the Americas from the perspective of the South: Latin America. We used the term “South” as a way to put Latin America in conversation with the Circum-Caribbean (a region conceptualized from coastal South America northward to the U.S. South). This conceptual zone has historically been marginalized in the public imagination as exotic, backward, out of the way, and specifically, Black. We also imagined the South to be a frame that allows us to push back against the coloniality of modern nation-state and regional formations that are both racialized and gendered. National borders and boundaries are not innocent configurations; rather, they are political land divisions steeped in the coloniality of power and designed to create arbitrary divisions on what is in fact Indigenous land. By centering Spanish-, Portuguese-, Indigenous-, and African-language speaking experiences from Latin America, we also sought to shift our interpretation of the South from an imperialistic North perspective to a decolonial non-anglophone perspective. This project was not an isolated one. What Melanie A. Medeiros and Keisha-Khan Y. Perry do here is part of that broader movement. We must acknowledge the significant theoretical and philosophical interventions that Black women have made and continue to make across the Caribbean and Latin America. Employing a multidisciplinary, transnational perspective, this movement rethinks the role that Black women’s thought and praxis have played in defining the sociopolitical and cultural landscape of the Americas for the past 400 years, centering the experiences of Black women in Latin America and the movement of Black women throughout the Americas: movement, transit, and cultural flows. Part of the political struggle to redress Black women’s erasure in the Caribbean and Latin American—especially in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Americas—is to insist on reading and engaging with Black women’s intellectual contributions from the southern Americas. We must critically engage with Black women’s transnationalism, resonance, cosmopolitanism, and agency by locating Black women as agents of theory, movement, politics, and culture. This work recasts Black women as theorizers and transnational agents of change, and this is exactly what *Black Women in Latin America and the Caribbean* does here.

There is something refreshing about the project of gathering Black women’s scholarship together into one volume—the way that the words feel on the page, the sense of community and belonging, the life of it all. I invite you to
read and engage the contributions here with that open and refreshing spirit as your guide. We are writing our histories. We are chronicling our struggles. We are refusing to be silenced.

Notes

1 Moya Bailey and Trudy (2018) developed the term “misogynoir” to describe uniqueness of anti-Black women hatred.

2 M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty contend that that transnational examines the relationship between “the politics of knowledge, and the spaces, places and locations that we occupy.” They also note, “The transnational is connected to neoliberal economics and theories of globalization—it is used to distinguish between the global as a universal system, and the cross-national, as a way to engage the interconnections between particular nations” (Nagar and Swarr 2010, 25).

3 Coeditor Keisha-Khan Perry is also part of the Cite Black Women Collective.

4 I would be remiss not to thank Janvieve Williams Comrie, Marcia Olivo, and Charo Mina-Rojas for inviting me to join this delegation and be part of this historic moment. For more information about the organization, see AfroResistance, www.afroresistance.org/.

5 Author’s translation from the original Portuguese: “É uma exigencia ética, um presuposto para a consolidação da democracia e condição de reconciliação do país com sua história, no sentido da construção de um futuro mais justo e igualitario para todos.”

References


Black Women in Latin America and the Caribbean