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Translations across Black Feminist Diasporas

As anthropologist Christen Smith contends in her contribution to this issue, “Because of the tendency to over-emphasize the experiences of English-speaking Black women” within the global project of Black feminist studies, Afro-Latin American women’s voices have been “muted,” despite the fact that they “have made significant theoretical and philosophical interventions that could potentially change the way that we think about gendered racial politics transnationally.” Cognizant that feminist academics and activists in the United States and the global North, including many U.S.-African Americans and other feminists of color, often lack access to the critical insights and innovations developed by Black feminist theories and practices emergent in the “South” of the Américas, we organized this two-volume guest-edited issue of *Meridians* as a work of political and cultural translation.

Beyond language barriers and cultural distinctiveness, we maintain that translation is politically and theoretically indispensable to forging feminist, pro-social justice, antiracist, postcolonial/decolonial, and anti-imperial political alliances and epistemologies. This is particularly the case among Afro-descendant feminisms and all who embrace anti-racist politics; the “intertwined diasporas” that forged Blackness in the Américas make it “imperative that the vernacular wisdoms and feminist political epistemic lenses of Afro-Latin@ women travel and get valorized as equal partners

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from South to North, to pluralize and enrich feminist cultures, to foster decolonial projects of liberation, grounded in Afro-diasporic reciprocity and solidarity” (Lao-Montes and Buggs 2014, 398).

As many newer generations of Afro-Latin American feminist scholar-activists, like contributors Aurora Vergara and Katherine Hurtado insist, in the 21st century “Black/Afrodescendant women need to conspire . . . to guarantee access to education, health care to Black/Afrodescendant women living with HIV, employment to millions of Black/Afrodescendant women, and to preserve the land of deracinated women . . . to invert the course of the history of marginality and oppression.” Such life-affirming conspiracies, we argue, necessitate multi-layered translations. Indeed, if Afro-American feminists, North and South, share a “common context of struggle,” then “their encounters with the ‘scattered hegemonies’ represented by states, development industries, global markets,” and transnational forces promoting patriarchal, trans- and lesbophobic racist violence “create powerful (if only partially overlapping) interests and identities that make the project of translation among them both more possible and all the more pressing” (Thayer 2014, 404). It is with the objective of fomenting more effective translations, dialogues, and resistances among intertwined Black feminist diasporas and their (*mestiza* and white) Latin@ and other anti-racist allies that we assembled (and, in several cases, literally translated) the essays presented here and those in Part I, “African Descendant Feminisms in Latin America: Brazil” (Vol. 14, No. 1).

Co-editor Agustín Lao-Montes opens the present volume with a comprehensive overview—historical, comparative, and conceptual—of Afro-descendant feminisms in the South of the Americas. He weaves together a number of critical analytical strands to assemble a complex tapestry that vividly conveys the central issues animating decolonial Black feminist politics and cultures in diverse countries and regional contexts. By focusing on the transnational dissemination of a powerful poem, *Rotundamente Negra*, by Black feminist Costa Rican poet Shirley Campbell Barr, feminist cultural critic Dorothy Mosby offers a similarly panoramic view of Afro-descendant feminisms, this time through the specific lens of cultural politics. Mosby shows that Black women in various parts of the Americas have collectively used the poem in exceptionally creative ways, not only as a tool of self-expression, but also as a point of departure for

consciousness-raising, identity formation, and collective action—thereby demonstrating the political potential of popular culture as a powerful force for Black feminisms in the North Atlantic diaspora.

The pair of essays that follow, by two influential activist-intellectuals who are among the foundational thinkers of contemporary Black feminist thought in Latin America—Ana Irma Rivera Lassen from Puerto Rico and Ochy Curiel, from the Dominican Republic, now based in Colombia—offer keen insights into some of the major issues and challenges shaping Afro-Latin American feminist theory and politics. Based in part on autobiographical reflections, Rivera Lassen analyzes feminist currents most active in Red de Mujeres Afrolatinoamericanas y del Caribe (RMAAD), the network of Black feminist rights advocates founded in 1992, and on-going efforts to have the region's hegemonic feminist movements incorporate race and racism more centrally into their politics, as reflected in periodic regional *Encuentros* and the UN process. Summarizing the contributions of Afrodescendant Latin American and Caribbean feminists in exposing the effects of *mestizaje* as nationalist ideology and confronting “economic, political and human crises, increasingly expressed as extreme poverty and social insecurity,” Curiel outlines a political and epistemic politics, a kind of contemporary “marronage” grounded in radical decolonial thought, to overcome what she views as the “disarticulation [of Black feminist movements in the region], the weakening of their political proposals, and the institutionalization of their trajectory.”

Christen Smith's essay analyzes the manifold philosophical contributions of pioneer Afro-Brazilian activist-intellectual Beatriz de Nascimento, who she considers to be a “protofeminist,” “who preshadowed contemporary Black feminist radicalism, provided models and strategies for resistance that rejected strict black female adherence to middle-class norms.” Highlighting Nascimento's theorizations of *quilombo*—“escape from slavery, resistance to slavery and the establishment of autonomous spaces”—as “at once a transcendental (spiritual) and territorial (anchored primordially in the body and the space of the Americas and Africa simultaneously),” Smith shows how the political thought of Afro-Latin American women like Nascimento contributes substantively to the Black radical tradition and deserves to be further analyzed and researched. In keeping with the quest to retrace/recover “protofeminist” contributions to

that tradition, Kym Morrison’s essay analyzes the work of Brazilians Maria Firmina dos Reis and Carolina Maria de Jesus and Cubans Irma Pedroso and Daisy Rubiera Castillo, as “intellectual vanguardists who theorized race, anti-racism, patriarchy, and even the colorism internal to their black communities from Afro-Latin American, feminist perspectives.” Our final essay by young Afro-Colombian feminists Vergara and Hurtado, as noted above, calls for a (re)new(ed) “Afro-diasporic feminist conspiracy,” which draws on many of the traditions and innovations discussed elsewhere in this volume. With this special issue, we hardily endorse that conspiracy, as “an act of love, caring, search for equity, equality, valuing our beauty, guaranteeing food, health care, a home and a place of dignity in the world’s history.”

This two-part special issue was originally inspired by an April 2010 international Symposium on Black/Afro-descendant Feminisms in the Americas, organized by the Afro-Latino Diasporas: Black Politics and Racial Cultures Research Group at the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies (CLACLS) at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. CLACLS director, Sonia E. Alvarez, along with the research group’s co-coordinator, Professor Agustín Lao-Montes, planned and organized that event, along with Visiting Researcher at CLACLS and former Minister of Brazil’s Secretariat for Policies for the Promotion of Racial Equality (SEPPPIR), Matilde Ribeiro, and (then) graduate students Aurora Vergara Figueroa, Carlos Alberto Valderama, Cruz Caridad Bueno, Flávia Araújo, and Carmen Cosme. Figueroa and Bueno also were involved in the early stages of soliciting and assembling essays to be submitted for publication. We are indebted to them, the contributors to Parts I and II of “Afro-descendant Feminisms in Latin America,” and to others who presented papers or served as discussants in the Symposium, including Kiran Asher, Whitney Battle-Baptiste, Mirangela Buggs, Odette Casamayor, Alexandrina Deschamps, Anilyn Díaz, Vicenta Moreno Hurtado, Manuela Picq, and Kimberly Simmons. Still other contributors to our two-part special issue participated in a highly productive two-panel session on “Black/Afro-descendant Feminisms,” which Caldwell and Alvarez co-organized for the XXXI International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in 2013.

Finally, we wish to extend our gratitude to Alissa Maraj Grahame and Martha Balaguera for their assistance in the preparation of essays in Parts I and II for submission to *Meridians* and to Manuela Borzone and Alexander Ponomareff for their translations from the Spanish for this volume. We thank CLACLS for essential infra-structural support for this project, the Horwitz Endowment for underwriting RAs and translations, and Paula Giddings and the *Meridians* staff for their original encouragement of this publication project.

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