

BLACK WOMEN'S THOUGHTS AND BLACK LESBIANISM IN A PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING CONTEXT¹

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ABSTRACT

The first part of this paper presents the thoughts of black women regarding feminism, taking into consideration that the fight for black and lesbian visibility is closely linked to the (re)formulation of intersectional feminism, carried out by intellectual black women. Later on, we attempt to discuss the invisibility of the black LGBT community, especially the absence of black lesbian women in the Portuguese-speaking context. It is believed that, with further theoretical study on black lesbianism, it is possible to think about elaborating new concepts for lesbian, feminist, post-colonial and lusophone theories and, most importantly, for the field of Cultural Studies.

KEYWORDS

Black lesbianism; identity; invisibility; black women's thoughts; post-colonial thinking.

Black women's thoughts and intersectionalities

Issues like the right to vote, to work, to maternity, of body integrity, the fight against domestic violence, and others, have brought important advances in the improvement of quality of life for many women, mainly for heterosexual white women. Even though numerous feminist movements have come up, throughout the centuries, dealing with the protection of human rights, women's participation in politics, specific legislation for that subordinate group, neither of these social movements was able to reflect on the situation of black lesbians.

Besides reflecting on the purposeful neglect of lesbian identities, this paper also takes into account the issue of lesbian's color/race which becomes an added focus of discrimination.

In this preliminary work we focus on the state of the art⁴ and on the first exploratory approach of the field. This paper is part of some recent research conducted in the field and it aims to highlight the author's point of view as a race, gender and sexuality relationships' researcher. In addition to reflecting upon the influence of black women's thoughts as a driving force for the discussion about intersectionalities and black lesbianism in a Portuguese-speaking context.

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⁴ "State of the art" refers to one of the fundamental stages of scientific work. It refers to the careful reading/analysis of what has been achieved/discovered in a field at a particular time. It is considered a meticulous and difficult activity, given that it prompts the researcher to do some in-depth analysis and critiques, this way avoiding the repetition of data already published too many times or unnecessary research. The state of the art of something is particularly helpful when improving theories, paradigms and concepts.

According to Alex Ratts (2007), in his paper “Between personas and black gay and african-lgbt groups”, most of the studies conducted in Brazil, address the male homosexual and bisexual universe. The issue of lesbianism is addressed in a non-racialized way and the focus is on white women from a middle or upper social class (Ratts, 2007, p. 1). The author even states that “among the intellectual black activists, only a few people have been writing for and standing for the visibility and emancipation of black lesbians, gays and bisexuals.” (Ratts, 2007, p. 4). As a result, the author mentions three intellectual African-American women who have publicly proclaimed their lesbianism: playwright Lorraine Hansberry, poet Audre Lorde and historian Angela Davis.

The history of the struggle of black women that drive the reformulation of feminisms and have fought for intersectional feminism and decolonizing politics, for a long time, is briefly reviewed.

The emerging of Intersectional Feminism has black authors Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde and Bell Hooks as some of its most important intellectuals. Intersectional Feminism primarily assists in the organization of the agendas of black women, taking into account their actual needs, given that they are subject to several kinds of oppression that go far beyond their gender. They suffer more violently with a variety of types of discrimination.

It's important to mention the African-American literature which has reached an incredible number of readers, by making and bringing up relevant questions, mainly regarding racial oppression. At the same time, the books about intersectional feminism, already published worldwide, are able to therefore bring together, in addition to racism, segregation, capitalism, social class discrimination, and also connect the discussions around lesbophobia, misogyny, male-supremacism, resisting imperialism, heterosexuality and eurocentrism in the United States.

Author Mariana Jafet Cestari (2013), in her research, approaches historical facts on the struggle of black women who militate in national (Brazil) and international political meetings and, in a peculiar way, in feminist meetings. The author cites an idea by Lélia Gonzalez, in which she states that it was in the black movement that black women found a space for political discussions on the racist structure and its everyday practices (Cestari, 2013, p. 01). However, besides issues directly related to racism, black women experienced white and black men's misogyny. This symbolic violence was also the subject of meetings by black women, even before the creating of an organized black women's movement. This invisibilization and exclusion black women suffered also took place in the universal feminist movement:

According to Sueli Carneiro, the black women's movement is characterized by the need to establish a political identity regarding the feminist and black social movements, which, ultimately, determine their existence and ambiguities. Projecting different parties, Brazilian black women who kept both a rejected and close relationship with feminism – separating in their statements, for example, by using the adjectives “Western” and “black” – exposing their silent and invisible position in Brazilian society and history. Thus, in the feminist's field, as subjects of their own opinions/statements, the distinction made in regard to mostly white women, paradoxically made these women visible and heard. (Cestari, 2013, p. 13 as cited in Carneiro, 1993, pp. 14-18)⁵

⁵ Carneiro, S. (1993). “The National Organization of Black Women and Political Perspectives”, *Cadernos Geledés*, Nº 4 (pp.14-18).

It is clear that the different resistance strategies in the thinking defined by black women is strengthened by the demarcation of black feminism.

In the paper "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," by intellectual Bell Hooks, one can reflect more deeply on exclusionary practices by many white women that dominate feminist discourse that in various ways silence black women. Leaving no room for any overture or the birth of new theories and the broadening of feminist ideas.

"White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state." (Hooks, p. 207)

Bell Hooks also brings up another issue that is pertinent to a construction of black women's thinking as participants in a wide organized social movement: "Black male sexism has undermined struggles to eradicate racism just as white female racism undermines feminist struggle" (Hooks, p. 207). So, black men's misogyny within the black movement is the largest limiting factor in discussions that address issues specifically related to black women. And the barrier of racism within the feminist movement creates the biggest limitation in broadening feminist ideas.

In the paper "*Our Feminisms Revisited*", written by Luiza Bairros, for *Revista Estudos Feministas*, nº2\95 - vol.3, 1995, the author states:

The experience of oppression is given by the position we occupy in a matrix of domination where race, gender and class intersect at different points. Thus, a working black woman is not triply oppressed or more oppressed than a white woman in the same social class, but experiences oppression from a place that provides a different view on what is to be a woman in an unequal, racist and sexist society. (Bairros, 1995, p. 461)

This way, race, social rank and sexual orientation are categories that can only be understood in their multidimensionality and perplexity. According to Luiza Bairros, "from a feminist point of view there is no single identity, because the experience of being a woman happens in a socially and historically determined way". In this sense, Lélia Gonzalez questions Simone de Beauvoir: "[...] when she [Simone de Beauvoir] states that we are not born a woman, but we become one (I usually go back to this line of thought regarding the racial issue: one is born a nigger, a spook, colored, etc.; but becoming black is a victory)." (Cardoso, 2014, p. 973).

"Becoming black" is a social process of identity construction, of political resistance, because it starts with the rejection of allowing someone else's point of view to define oneself and the breaking away from "becoming white"; it means self-definition, the appreciation and recovery of black history and cultural legacy, which reflects a political position of existing in this world in order to perform the lead role of a historical development committed to tackling racism. Unlike Frantz Fanon, the references to Beauvoir are far from revealing a strong theoretical influence in Lélia Gonzalez's thinking, particularly because Beauvoir's wife is white. Lélia Gonzalez refuses the concept of generalization and rescues the "Amefrican" woman. (Cardoso, 2014, p. 973)

Following this line of thought, it is evident that “if you’re not born a woman, you become one,” then you’re not born black, you become black, so the processes of construction of the black and feminist identities, for example, are different for each woman, especially those that have to face sexism, misogyny, social and racial stigmas e all the history of exploitation/colonization of the black, African and indigenous body, that in many ways still exists today.

Note that these ideas are part of the (re)formulations that help understand different feminisms and perspectives of black women and lesbians on politics.

Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power. As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become “other,” the outsider whose experience and tradition is too “alien” to comprehend. (Lorde, 2011, p. 5)

Audre Lorde, in this quote, brings about a discussion on age, race, class and gender. It is understood that “failing to recognize the differences, prevents us from seeing the diverse problems and dangers we all face, as women.” (Lorde, 2011, p. 6). With this statement, the author calls attention to the undeniable importance of recognizing the differences and the diverse problems that all women face, not only white women, inviting us to intensely reflect on the intersectional debate.

It is important to remember that during the colonial slave-trading period, the black population did not have the right to dignity or humanity and was considered “soulless” by the Church. Black men and women, in an animal way, were used as “slave reproducers,” that slave-traders free merchandise. There was no black family. Every black person was born as property of a slave owner. They could be rented, sold, lashed, used until their strength gave out. They were simply things, animals, less than people. And black women were used as sexual objects since their infancy, rape and every kind of sexual violence were common, when it came to black women’s bodies. All this context should or should have been discussed in the scope of feminist theories.

It is in this sense that the formulation of Black Feminism occurred in Brazil in the 1980s. Black women started attending universities and having contact with political, cultural, racial, anthropological and sociological theories and concepts. Besides that, the Black Women’s Movement in Brazil was organized by black women who were already a part of different social movement organizations, mainly the Black Movement and the Feminist Movement. And the trigger for the black women’s movement happens as a response to the incorrect perception of universal feminism that didn’t consider, and in part still doesn’t consider, the specificities of black women in the diaspora.

The Portuguese-speaking context and black lesbianism

Portugal has a growing population of black African immigrants and residents, black Brazilian immigrants and residents and a big number of black people born in the country. Racism, xenophobia, symbolic violence and police violence are present in all these commu-

nities. Consequently, in Portugal, irrespective of nationality, the entire black community suffers with the same discriminatory practices based on the color of their skin.

According to Lélia Gonzalez, racism may strategically have two ways of keeping “exploitation/oppression”: the open racism and disguised racism. The first version is found mainly in countries of Anglo-Saxon origin, and the second is prominent in societies of Latin origin. Within disguised racism, “the ‘theories’ of miscegenation, assimilation and ‘racial democracy’ prevail”: this way of expression, the author claims, while thinking of Brazil, prevents “the objective awareness of that undisguised racism and the direct knowledge of its cruel practices”, given that the historically built belief about miscegenation created the myth of the absence of racism in our country. (Cardoso, 2014, p. 969)

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This exploitation/oppression, that Lélia Gonzalez explains, is very present in the Portuguese-speaking context. A big part of the Portuguese black community is exploited in precarious employment, devalued and stigmatized and not acknowledging these people's existence as citizens with equal rights is considered normal. Thus, institutional racism⁶ becomes a daily occurrence. This reality becomes apparent when one realizes that, even if the black person is educated, has a technical or university degree, the chances for academic and professional growth are minimal, almost nonexistent, in Portugal. Besides that, the Portuguese government repeatedly makes things difficult for black immigrants to acquire a residence permit.

This happens with the entire black population, regardless of gender or sexuality. However, when it comes to problems faced mainly by black, lesbian and butch⁷ women, we will evidently find specificities that further amplify discrimination already faced in these women's social condition, who are either frequently mistaken for a man or are publicly humiliated for being “masculine”.

Meanwhile, it is believed that these women are not alone. They belong to a community that is totally helpless and overlooked by the Government, the justice system, the media, academia and by the associative movements presided mostly by white cisgendered, heteronormative people who don't trouble themselves with the total lack of black presence in the places of political cultural and teaching decisions. Thus, it is clear that the black lesbian community is more vulnerable and suffers more with the high unemployment rates, the jobs with no labor rights or guarantees and the lack of opportunities.

And when a black and lesbian woman, comes out to society and to her family, that individual's risk of physical or psychological assault is multiplied numerous times. However, very little is mentioned about data on violence on black LGBT people, and less even about sexual violence suffered by black lesbian women. In the paper called “Trajectories of black lesbian women: communication broke its contract and silence vanished”, author Sandra Regina de Souza Marcelino (2011) states that:

⁶ Institutional racism — consists of the strategy used by racism in order to guarantee appropriation of the positive results that come from the generating of wealth by the privileged racial groups in society, all the while helping to keep the fragmentation of the distribution of these results, in its core. Educational or systemic racism works to induce, keep or condition the State's organization and actions, its public institutions and policies, while also operating in private institutions, creating and replicating racial hierarchies. Source: WERNECK, Jurema. (2013). Institutional Racism: a conceptual approach. Geledés – Black Women Institute. Sao Paulo.

⁷ Butch – a stereotypically masculine or masculine-acting lesbian, who stands out for dressing in a mannish style.

In South Africa, for example, lesbianism is abhorred, and with it, the constant practices of corrective rape⁸ often remain in a state of impunity. In the case of women, according to reports, a quarter of them has been raped before completing 16 years of age. This situation has its roots in “machismo”, poverty, densely populated occupations, unemployment, marginalized men and community indifference. In South Africa, a girl is more likely to be raped than to learn how to read. In Brazil, every two days a homosexual man is murdered. Although the data released by the Gay Group of Bahia (GGB) have very expressive statistics, there is still a major barrier to this type of statement, which leads us to question the invisible numbers of violence. (Marcelino, 2011, p. 6)

These invisible numbers of violence enhance the absence and resistance of black lesbian women around the world, which allows many crimes to still take place in Brazil, Portugal or in African countries.

When the debate is broadened on racism, sexism, lesbophobia and finally reflection on feminist, lesbian, gender, race and class theories, we start to explore a delicate and extremely complex territory, in that the specificities of invisibility and, at the same time types of violence are intensified. Marcelino (2011) reflects on this invisibility of lesbianism:

The fact of being lesbian makes heterosexual women even more vulnerable to the numerous forms of violence against women. The “myth of silence” gains strength from the moment this opposition, normal and unnatural, in the field of sexuality dictates a regularization of sexual practices. Thus, the heterosexualization imposed on the lesbian body is this invisibility and silence, coming from instruments so powerful that they enter body domestication, educational practices and punishment. Fear is a common element and so it is comprehensible to recognize the gulf between violence reports and the visibility of homosexuality. If silence makes data invisible, exposure often punishes. And in this dual tension, the “other” can eventually become the guardian of other people’s moves. (Marcelino, 2011, p. 6)

According to the quote above, it is understood that the “myth of silence” reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is mandatory and that the speech of heteronormativity is something natural while lesbianism is unnatural, much like a disease. Additionally, it ignores the explicit demands against lesbophobia and, through fear, prevents lesbian women from individually and/or collectively revealing their relationships and showing affection in public. This fear also prevents people from exposing violent and discriminatory practices, such as corrective rapes and daily humiliations.

Therefore, it is evident that if a white or non-black lesbian woman is affected by numerous social stigmas, a black lesbian woman carries with her a history of oppression, which differentiates her, as an individual who had their body enslaved for centuries.

The black lesbian is truly outraged with the stigma of a “fine piece of meat” that is only good for pleasuring the opposite sex and lives in constant danger for loving another woman, besides suffering from the total exclusion/invisibility by not having the privilege of whiteness. The black lesbian, especially the butch black lesbian faces, on a daily basis, people’s looks of disdain, wherever she goes and learns not to be surprised by explicit racism and lesbophobia,

⁸ Lesbophobic practice, whereby one or more men rape women who are or seem to be lesbians, supposedly as a way to “cure” them of their sexual orientation.

by hearing “What do you want? Besides being black/a nigger, you’re also a butch/dyke/lesbo?” Black lesbianism is endurance. Every day, black lesbians endure eurocentric-supremacy, heterosexist-supremacy, e misogynistic-supremacy.

Being lesbian in such a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic and imperialistic culture like the one in the United States is an act of resistance – a resistance which should be welcomed throughout the world by all progressive forces. It doesn’t matter how women live their lesbianism – in the closet, in the legislature or in their bedrooms. They have rebelled against their prostitution by their slaving masters, which corresponds to the heterosexual female who depends on the man. This rebellion is dangerous business within the patriarchy. Men from all privileged levels, from all social statuses and ethnicities have the power to act legally, morally and/or violently when they can’t colonize women, when they can’t limit their sexual, productive, reproductive prerogatives and their energy. The lesbian – that woman who “made another woman her lover”¹ - managed to resist the imperialism of her master in the sphere of her life. Lesbians have decolonized their body. They have averted a life of servitude which is inherent in western heterosexist/heterosexual relationships and have accepted the potential of the mutuality of a lesbian relationship – nevertheless. (Clarke, 1988, p. 1)

This decolonization of body and thought, explored in black and lesbian literature points to the paper “Women in Movement” by Sueli Carneiro (2003, p. 3), who says “While politicizing gender inequality, feminism turns women into new political actors.” Only then does the debate become wider and focused on improving all women’s situation.

According to Audre Lorde (1984, p. 5), female black authors are not used in schools or universities in the United States. This refusal is often justified by white feminist women who say only black women can teach that literature and/or that it is hard to understand. That is, those women cannot understand the discussions that cross race, gender and class relations, having no issues in analyzing and teaching extensive lectures on authors such as “Shakespeare, Molière, Dostoyevsky and Aristophanes.”

This lack of interest is not exclusive to the United States. In Brazil, Portugal and African countries, a great deal of university students cannot quote even one female black author, much less a black lesbian one. Furthermore, there is a total lack of interest from social and human sciences researchers towards the subject of lesbianism in relation to blackness. Therefore, this research aims to approach a subject that is considered obscure and irrelevant by most researchers. Based on the opposite principle, one cannot deny the fact that lesbian studies connected to color/race greatly help in deepening intersectional theories.

Thus, within the universal feminist movement, lesbianity has historically not had space for problematization, mainly in the political arena. In the black women’s movement, based on intersectional feminism, lesbianism became a more debated subject, even if superficially. In the LGBT movement, black lesbians are still faced with total disregard, especially from gays, lesbians and white bisexuals, in the face of alarming data that demonstrate the multiplicity of physical and psychological violence suffered by black lesbians.

This entire framework negatively affects the process of construction of a positive identity for black lesbians. In this way, endurance, most of the time, happens in being (Clarke, 1988).

A black lesbian, like any other lesbian in the United States, can be found anywhere: at home, in the streets, receiving government assistance, social security benefits, standing in the unemployment lines, raising children, working in a factory, in the military, in television, in the public school system in all occupations, in the state's Chamber of Deputies, in the Capitol, attending classes at university or continuing their studies at a graduate school, working in administration, etc. Black lesbians, like any other non-white, working-class and poor woman in the United States, did not suffer the luxury, privilege, or oppression of being dependent on a man. (Clarke, 1988, p. 5)

There are numerous methods of erasing black lesbian women identities and trajectories. But, although never remembered, black lesbian women are everywhere, like the author Cheryl Clarke states (1988). It is believed that the presence of the black masculine lesbian, butch; that of the one who identifies herself as more feminine, lady, femme; or of the one who doesn't identify with binarism or normativity, who likes to dress based on a mix of what is considered feminine and masculine, queer, confronts society with their existence.

When they are assumed, they face conservative reactions, family disapproval, repudiation of coworkers, job demission, church expulsion, lack of understanding from friends. This confrontation and audacity, of wanting to be as a person that deserves respect and equality of opportunity like everyone else, shows that whether it wants to or not, society will have to see and live with this diversity of black identities, lesbians, queers, marginalized and mostly peripheral.

To be a black women or a black man, gay, lesbian, a crossdresser, bisexual, transgender, are all plural socio-cultural constructions. However, a place of speaking and activism is being built by black people and personas who identify with and are identified with the LBTT scene, without necessarily exposing their privacy and by using a variety of lingos and sources to amplify their voices (Ratts, 2007, p. 12).

In support thereof, it is possible to consider that the fight for black lesbian visibility is not limited to explicit complaints or street activism. One can recognize that the vast majority of black lesbians cannot or are not able to "come out" for religious, cultural or family reasons (not including all the kinds of oppressions already mentioned), Regarding that, we understand that there are different resistance strategies and, at the same time, a complexity in the experiences of these women, which requires further theoretical study.

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