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Afrodescendant Women: A Race and Gender Intersectional Spiderweb

Abstract

Since the beginnings of 1970s activism in Puerto Rico, like in other countries, there have been tensions between dialogues about race and feminism. Tensions between feminisms and Afrodescendant women's movements persist. As part of a cross-sectional analysis, it is necessary to recognize the wide range of subject positions that combine to create the identities of Afrodescendant women.

Often I weave into my writing my own life experiences in different activist movements to which I have dedicated my life. This allows me to refer to anecdotes and develop allegories which, to my mind, make my retellings and analyses of various subjects more interesting. Not only has the topic of the struggle for women's rights been central to my life but the fight against racism and discrimination toward the LGBTQI community has also been central. In this essay, I will be discussing the intersections between those two identities as well as the consequences and exclusions that they carry within themselves. I will start this paper with a personal story:

Promise

I am 58 years old; I look at myself in the mirror, see my short graying hair, and I still cannot believe that so much time has passed so quickly

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since the day I told myself that I would fight to prove to everyone that we women can do whatever we want to do. I made that promise to myself one day on the balcony of my house, a balcony too high for a four-year-old girl to see over. I used to look through the spaces at the bottom of the balcony wall, barely seeing the legs and feet of people passing by. My mother had told me that the tricycle I wanted could not be mine because I was a girl. Those words stabbed me in the center of my being. I knew there was something wrong with that, something that pushed me to make myself that promise.

The memories of my childhood feminism intertwine with my memories of the mirror, the ever-present mirror. In this mirror is the image of the black little girl I was, starting to grow up with the pressures of a white aesthetics and of the traditional upbringing for girls, but at the same time with a certain amount of free will and privileged access to books and information. The day when we see our visage in the mirror with the awareness that we are people, we see a face, eyes, mouth, hair, and skin, and we judge it, either we like what we see or not. We would want it to be different or not, we feel that either people like it or not, either we accept this countenance or not, and in the end, we love it or we do not, as we love ourselves. In the case of a black person, this narcissistic experience—without offering psychological analyses—carries with it the acceptance or the refusal of a reflection charged with social valorization. How obviously black is your skin, how curly is your hair, how wide is your nose or thick are your lips are valorizations with not only an aesthetic weight but also economic, political, and social consequences.

As we grow older, the intersections between our racial, gendered, and other identities become more evident. The identity of black womanhood is taught to us, as a social stigma, from an early age, and if that identity is tied to other non-privileged identities, then the social landscape is even more complicated and the exclusions deepen. Mariluz Franco Ortiz, María Reinat Pumarejo, Hilda Lloréns, and Isar Godreau write about racist violence toward school-aged boys and girls in Puerto Rico in the following terms:

[...] it is assumed that far from being a problem of self-esteem at the individual level, the ethnic-racial conflict must be understood as a problem of the emergence of social stigmas as a consequence of ethnic-racial prejudice and discrimination coexisting alongside sexism

and economic inequalities. Goffman defines stigma as “a profoundly discreditable attribute which makes a person almost inhuman.” According to the author, the three kinds of stigma are as follows: a) corporeal abomination or physical deformities; b) character traits such as addiction or unemployment; c) tribal identities such as race, sex, or religion. From our perspective, these social categorizations become internalized and transform self-esteem into “self-stigma.” This concept is meant to highlight the social nature and the institutional entrenchment of the negative attributes which racialized peoples internalize thus altering their sense of self-worth as members of a social group. (Franco et al 2009, 38)

Additionally, the authors draw attention to the fact that “at a macro-social level, institutional racism in Puerto Rico tends to render invisible the contributions of *negritude* and stigmatize its representations, occlude the denunciation of white supremacy, highlight *hispanidad*, promote the myth of diversity, and legitimate cultural degradation by folklorizing Afro-Caribbean roots.” (Franco et al 2009, 38)

Through which paths do identities and differences travel?

I shall approach this part of my essay by sharing an allegory I developed to talk about identities:

The Transgendered Faun

This topic always reverberates in my ears like a rhetorical question, like a path intertwined with other paths and that fades into the horizon. It is not a straightforward path, it turns, and sometimes it can seem like a labyrinth inhabited by a transgendered faun which looks like me or my reflection. Perhaps at last, I will realize that the labyrinth ends where it begins: on my own path, I create it and I undo it as I walk, I will never escape the labyrinth because it does not really exist, it is the illusion of seeing my identities multiplied in the mirrors of my intersections.

Not recognizing our own identities as part of our own self makes us artificially lost in a search that is like a mirage, we are many people and we are only one person. Like the allegorical faun, we believe that there are different paths that will take us to the end of the search for our identity,

towards the exit of the labyrinth. But our identities multiply themselves, and at the same time we remain singular, we can have some identities that are stronger than others, ones that are more excluded and ones that are more accepted, but they are all together on our path. The figure of the faun evokes the image of a hybrid identity—part human, part animal—and, unequivocally, it presupposes heteronormative masculine privileges. A transgendered faun transgresses these images and allows for a more sexually diverse imaginary. Which identities compose these hybrid identities and how they intersect is perhaps the central question ahead of us. In order to do this, we need a cross-sectional analysis and we need to recognize the wide range of identities which combine to create our identities as Afrodescendant women, for instance.

One of the tensions that first came to public attention with the appearance of so-called second-wave feminism in Puerto Rico was the topic of a singular representation of women. In my own case, I had begun working as the spokesperson for the organization *Mujer Intégrate Ahora* (MIA). One of the first times representation became an issue had to do with an instance of racial prejudice. One of my classmates at the University of Puerto Rico mentioned in passing that his mother had seen me on television, and she had said that I did not represent her when I spoke in favor of women's rights. When her son asked her what made her say that, she replied that I did not represent her because I am black. On the one hand, she was right since no one should pretend to represent all women. But on the other hand, she was expressing a racist thought that prevented her from seeing past the color of my skin. Then I understood that what we call intersectionality is always present; there is no such thing as a "neutral" female figure.

In the 1970s in Puerto Rico, few people spoke about the need to bring together discussions about the prejudices against women and racism. Journalist and writer Eneid Routté Gomez was one of those voices calling attention to racial prejudice in Puerto Rico, and specifically its effects on women. Likewise, it is worth noting the important contributions to the discussions of racism in Isabelo Zenón Cruz's work *Narciso descubre su trasero* [Narciso discovers his behind].

Theoretically, in the early 1970s, MIA and the publication *El Tacón de la Chandleta* [The Heel of the Slipper] had already proposed to examine race,

social position or class, sexual orientation, and other subject positions that led to prejudice and discrimination from a feminist perspective. However, the organizations faced these intersections with difficulty. For example, lesbophobia was a constant cause of tension during these years. Class issues were combined with tensions produced by activists from political party organizations. In the case of racism, it was portrayed as a personal issue, not as an agenda of the organization. All of these issues were related to the question of the status of Puerto Rico. I belonged to MIA, an organization that positioned itself outside the most conservative and exclusionary nationalist points of view on the status of Puerto Rico. As feminists, we were accused of having foreign ideas, of not truly being Puerto Rican, and belonging to an organization such as MIA only made matters worse. That was precisely our biggest point of contention; who was the truest embodiment, or which organization best represented, true feminism in its singular form, since back then no one talked about feminisms in the plural.¹

By the 1980s, voices such as Marie Ramos Rosado's emerged to denounce racial prejudice with a specific focus on Afrodescendant/black women. In the 1990s, several organizations, such as *Unión de Mujeres Puertorriqueñas Negras* (UMUPUEN or Union of Black Puerto Rican Women) and *Grupo Identidad de la Mujer Negra* (Black Women's Identity Group), were created focusing on Afrodescendant/black women. These two—as well as *Colectivo Ilé*, even though it appeared later on—were kept on the periphery of the activities of feminist organizations. As feminists, many of us participated in the creation of the *Red de Mujeres Afrocaribeñas y Afrolatinoamericanas* (Network of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Women)—which now also includes 'of the Diaspora'—(RMAAD) but the subject of feminisms does not necessarily attract all women who identify as Afrodescendant. Feminist organizations, for their part—to a greater or lesser degree—have begun to add race as a category of analysis in their actions and agendas. The tensions between feminisms and Afrodescendant movements are still present; they are tensions or knots that we must all work on.

Part of the task of any intersectional analysis that we have yet to undertake is recognizing the multiplicity of identities that, in turn, form our identity as women. We are at once all of these identities and the intersections of all of them. We are people with a nationality, race, ethnic group, sexual orientation, and any other identity marker all at the same

time. Analyses which do not employ a transversal approach privilege some of these identities over others. Our position, instead, is that these categories are not fixed; neither the racial categories nor those pertaining to women, and that we must understand there is not a single way to observe, comprehend, or live these categories. They do not manifest themselves in any single way that can express their complexity and their intersectional positions. People move between, through, in, and out of these different categories, therefore it is important to carry out an intersectional analysis, to question the categories themselves, and not to view them as fixed identities.

At a regional level, and for a variety of reasons including the strengthening of RMAAD and very strong voices of leaders and activists, work on issues pertaining to Afrodescendant women has gained prominence. Moreover, feminist organizations have recognized the need to incorporate intersectional analyses. In Puerto Rico, and in other countries, RMAAD has had a very important role, as one of its recent report shows:

The mapping of the women and the organizations that work for the rights of Afrodescendant women confirms the internal strengthening of RMAAD. This mapping is a vital tool for any entity wanting to learn not only the number of people who compose RMAAD but also their profiles. This is also a necessary tool for institutional planning. The main results of this mapping are:

RMAAD is composed of 472 individuals and organizations from 24 countries, of which 365 participate as individuals and 107 on behalf of organizations.

Subregionally: 53% are located in Central America, 17% in the Andean region, 12% in the Southern Cone, 12% in the Caribbean, and 6% in the Diaspora.

Age groups: 18% are 20–30 years old, 19% are 31–40 years old, 24% are 41–50 years old, and 29% are 51 years old or older.

Education level: 45% possess a technical or college degree, 40% possess a Masters or PhD, and 14% only primary education.

Core focus of individuals and organizations: 74% focus on Women's Rights, 72% on Racial Discrimination, 61% on Education, 55% on Violence Against Women, 48% on Health, 48% on Culture, 41% on

Sexual Rights, 36% on Socioeconomic Rights, 33% on Political Rights, 30% on HIV/AIDS, 26% on the Environment, and 17% on Labor Rights (RMAAD 2012, 27).

This data presents challenges for the organization and it is my hope that it can both maintain its rate of growth and its autonomous profile as a network of people and organizations from civil society. For example, it should keep its own agenda beyond the United Nations proposals.

The year 2011 was proclaimed by the United Nations and the Organization of American States as the “International Year of People of African Descent”. Those of us who are involved in RMAAD celebrated the visibly strong presence of Afro-women from the region at the Twelfth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Conference in Colombia. At the event, there was recognition of the importance of taking up the discussion on pluriculturalism and multiple identities; furthermore, a transversal methodology was developed for the entire conference, termed “the knots of diversity”:

The various feminisms in Latin America, as well as the contexts in which they develop, are undergoing an intense process of change marked by a multiple and paradigmatic crisis which, in turn, produces uncertainty. This uncertainty is related to their development in relation to their political and theoretical referents and their own composition. This is due to the presence of new scenarios, new perspectives, and new critical outlooks on feminist activism from those of the previous decades. [...]

Even though one of the main characteristics of the feminisms of the region has been the radical critique of the perspective of universality which located all women as equal—therefore rendering invisible differences of class, race, ethnic group, sex, and age—in practice they have also carried with them the conceptions, discourses, empty spaces, and invisibilizing practices of these differences and inequalities which obviate the political, paradigmatic, and subjective consequences, and occlude the multiple and persistent forms of exclusions related to race, ethnic group, class, sexual orientation, and generation. (12th Feminist Conference, 2011)

The challenge of developing a cross-sectional approach that had a pluricultural and multiethnic point of departure enabled us to structure the conference focused on the diversity of women. It was not just a matter of having a workshop or a panel on these issues, the aim was to view everything through plural and diverse optics that broke away from singular representations of women. It is not enough to simply recognize that we come from different cultures. We must move from multiple identities—gender, sex, gender identity, age, race, ethnic group, economic position, diverse physical and sensorial capacities—to their intersections and to their valorization in political, social, and cultural orders. In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, it is also equally important to locate these concerns acknowledging the diverse geopolitics of the region, which include plurinational states, autonomous regions, non-independent countries, and any other definition of state, nation, or identity, without overlooking the diaspora. In order to accomplish a cross-sectional analysis, we must always acknowledge all of these levels.

RMAAD was tasked with discussing patriarchal racism and the intersections that traverse the identities of Afrodescendant women. Patriarchy, here, is understood as the base over which the social, political, and economic organization of our societies lie. It operates under the premise of the supremacy or dominance of the masculine over the feminine. Racism, in turn, establishes categories among humans based on the concept of race, which, even as a social construction, produces categories which imply that some beings are superior or worth more than others. In this manner, patriarchal racism makes visible the intersections of exclusion between both concepts (see hooks 1981, among others). We, Afrodescendant peoples, rescue the notion of “race” as an identity, and thus we transform it into a platform against racism. As for the interconnection between races, ethnic groups, women, and genders, RMAAD pushes for intersectional and transversal methodologies.

In her discussion of intersectionality, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw explains that:

To use a metaphor of an intersection, we first analogize the various axes of power, i.e., for instance, race, ethnicity, gender or class, as constituting the thoroughfares which structure the social, economic

or political terrain. It is through these avenues that disempowering dynamics travel. These thoroughfares are generally framed as distinctive and mutually exclusive axes of power: for example, racism is distinct from patriarchy, which is in turn distinct from patriarchy which is in turn distinct from class oppression. In fact, the systems often overlap and cross each other, creating complex intersections at which two, or three or more of these axes may meet. Indeed, racialized women are often positioned in the space where racism or xenophobia, class and gender meet. (Crenshaw 2001, 72).

Crenshaw's position suggests a linear path. For our purposes, in this paper, we understand the intersections of identities as non-linear. We affirm that the intersections traverse one another in diverse ways, as diverse are their forms and the ways in which they meet. As mentioned above, people move and transverse between and through different categories, sometimes they enter them and sometimes they leave them. This is why we believe that the categories themselves also have to be questioned and they should never be seen as fixed identities. In the allegory of the faun, the faun did not realize that the labyrinth of identities did not exist but was actually a reflection of itself. These roads are within each person. We cannot have a linear image of a static being crossing or being crossed by intersections; instead, the image put forth should be of a being moving with their identities, in a diverse manner. Later on, we will delve deeper into this through other texts and through the allegory of the spiderweb and what happens when we accept the multiplicity of our identities as our identity.

Denunciations of differences and the need to incorporate intersectionality in discussions of discrimination against Afro-women have been present in one form or another when we look at the histories of the struggles for women's rights. From the beginning of the so-called "second wave" of feminisms, the critiques for the need to recognize these intersections have been a constant, a tension, a challenge and an agenda always in construction.

I think we are more familiar with the names of black women from other countries who have spoken out about this than those of our own countries. As an exercise, I would like to recuperate those voices that are our own. The

foundation of RMAAD in 1992 was meant to be a step in that direction. In one of the founding documents of its first conference, we find that:

For about 20 years in Latin America, there has been a feminist movement which grows stronger and stronger every day because it has opened its space to the participation of black women. The issue of ethnic groups has been a part of its agenda since 1981. It is from within the feminist movement that black women have started to reflect on the intersections of gender and ethnicity, and it was in that same space where the idea arose to create a network and the first conference of black women.

Contrary to any anti-racist, political, or other organizations that took too long to consider the specific situation of black women, the feminist movement has opened meaningful spaces where a situation denied for centuries has been brought to light. However, even though *negritude* has been established as a socio-political, and not as a biological, problematic, intersectional discussions about gender and ethnic groups have not permeated all spheres of feminist movements and differ from country to country.

Yet, recognizing plurality in the movement is not synonymous with denying the work still ahead of us. At the Fifth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentro, held in Argentina in 1990, the “forgotten” space of the issue of gender and ethnic groups was added last minute. On a personal level, there are still fellow members who continue to have “black domestic workers,” a practice that establishes a relationship similar to the one with any boss.

Racial prejudices are entrenched in many social movements. Within these movements, black women experience problems of class, gender and ethnicity; racism multiplies the personal efforts that they must make in order to participate politically. (Unnumbered mimeographed document)

As we have shown in this present work, there is still a lot to do both from the perspective of feminist organizations and Afro-women’s organizations. Recovering the voices of black women fighting for our rights as women and as Afrodescendant people is part of the reconstruction of our histories. As part of my own critical thought, I will share another allegory about

intersections, a work in progress which, similar to the transgendered faun, seeks to provoke analysis.

The Spiderweb

The complexity of the challenge lies in our perspective on the intersections of the categories of gender, women, ethnicity and race. For Afrodescendant women, and for all women in the region, the exercise must include such a perspective to provide the most inclusive results for all women in their diversity.

Our aim is to construct inclusive discourses, as well as inclusive responses. It is no longer enough to merely recognize the existence of hegemonic norms and canons, which are found in the social as well as the political, cultural and economic spheres. Instead, new social, political, cultural and economic connections must be devised; links which recognize our forms of citizenship as equal and rooted in the full range of women's diversity. Beyond merely noting the challenges posed by discrimination and exclusion, the complex effects of these behaviors must be considered in the lives of flesh-and-bone people with faces, skin and feelings.

Discrimination against women, more than an aggravating effect of racism towards afrodescendant women, is the expression of a complex spiderweb of intersections which bear exclusions. We become trapped in the web if we see ourselves as a fly, stuck in the web, rather than a spider that spun the web itself and skillfully manages to live in it. We are not remotely insinuating that the blame for suffering exclusion falls on those who are excluded. Rather, we are drawing attention to the complicity with hegemonic structures that occurs when identities are considered as "otherness", strangeness, abnormality. This complexity leads to us to spin the web as a trap, not the house that shelters us with all our identities, the house that protects and gives us strength to challenge exclusions.

What we call "exclusions" are in fact non-privileged identities, they are the "other", those identities that do not enjoy the hegemonic benefits of social norms. The dominant discourse posits a kind of equality between the dominant and dominated sectors by trying to make us believe that the

formal recognition of equality automatically places everyone in the same sphere of opportunities and rights.

Afrodescendant women and all excluded people spin their web as if it were someone else's home; they don't see their multiple identities as actually identifying them and providing a center from which they can move anywhere and everywhere. It is necessary to recognize the full array of identities that in turn shape the identity of Afrodescendant women. Clearly this is complex, and does not only depend on the desire of the person suffering exclusion.

Those excluded are not responsible for their exclusion, but when we assume the discourse that stigmatizes us as the other, then we cannot see our different identities as strengths. In order not to be the fly stuck in the web, we must recognize our strengths, see ourselves like the spider skillfully lives in the web made of our multiple identities. If the spider is who spins the web because it is her home, she will make it in a way that sustains her. The spider walks in the beauty and weave of her home, a home that defines her, nourishes and protects her. The spider moves, she is not still, she walks with and through her multiple identities.

Sometimes we are spiders trapped in our own webs or maybe we are transgendered fauns searching for a way out leading toward our own selves. In order to make progress, we have to confront the challenges present in the constant (re)construction of our own image and identity. To conclude, I will share another allegory about the heritage of slavery in my search for ways to challenge the vision that presents afrodescendants from the perspective of exclusion and in this way construct a vision informed by the strength of our nature and our human dignity.

The Heritage That Is Not Ours

We are Afrodescendants; this is a term that recognizes our ancestry. We are descendants of the people of African origin who were brought to Latin America and the Caribbean enslaved. We are descendants of the people who came deprived of their freedom, people with culture, traditions, languages, customs and dreams. From these people we descend, not from slavery itself. The inheritance of slavery is not ours—it belongs to slave

owners and their descendants. Slavery is the inheritance of those who trade in human pain and treated human beings as merchandise; they believed that by breaking their bodies they could bend their souls. But they were not successful, because human beings arrived in Latin America and the Caribbean, human beings with personal and collective histories—people landed here. Although in the gaze of every captain, in the gaze of every slave buyer, they were seen as merchandise, people arrived in Latin America and the Caribbean; people who were enslaved, but above all else, the one thing that defined them was that they were people, human beings whose very humanity was denied.

The inheritance we reclaim is the history of the African peoples who arrived in America, a history we recognize by naming where we come from. That is why we are not descendants of slaves, we are descendants of African people.

The complexity of the transgendered faun which I narrated at the beginning of this paper is reflected in my mirror of an afro-Puerto-Rican and Caribbean woman because I am all my complexities and diversities at once, and, just like the spider, I am the maker of my web home; I am multiple and I am only one.

NOTES

1. For a more comprehensive discussion on these issues, see Elizabeth Crespo-Kebler's 2001 essay.

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