

## TRANSLATION STUDIES & BLACK WOMEN IN THE LIGHT OF FEMINISM<sup>1</sup>

Black feminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s from a revision of feminist critique as a whole, and, consequently, the conclusion that in the category “woman” the representation of the group in question was predominantly white. The situation of the invisibility of black women was striking, particularly in the university world, where academic feminism ignored the thinking of black feminism. Hegemonic feminism – white and cisgender<sup>2</sup> – somehow excluded other feminisms. Even after identifying the existence of other feminisms, such as black feminism, it must be emphasized that the category “black woman” is not univocal and universal. This category is heterogeneous and contains differences and contradictions in the time and space in which these female bodies of colour exist or have existed. Thomas Bonnici (2007), when analysing the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, affirms that black women are always presented as a depository of collective memory (ancestry and slavery), with specific skills (midwife, medicinal herbs, among others) and doubly abused by men (father and husband).

Susan Willis (1990), in turn, mentions that what strongly differentiates black women from white women is the constant reconciliation that the former continually tries to make with the present in three aspects: community (a quest for the restoration of identity of her ethnic group); the passage (the recognition that there is a collective path travelled by all black women from Africa to the New World); and sexuality (the distortion of black women’s sexual experience due to hetero-patriarchal patterns and white hegemonic cisgender feminism). The analytical and reflexive recognition of the various types of black feminism, with the premise of the characteristics pointed out by Susan Willis (1990), was and still is a motive of positioning and also of imposition of the voice of black women. The echoing of the voice of black women, beyond the demarcation of a place of speech, is a mode of resistance – understood by bell hooks (1989) as a form of opposition to white hegemonic cisgender feminism.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally written in Brazilian Portuguese as an introduction to the Dossier “Translation and Black Feminisms”. The text was translated into English by Dr. John Milton, professor at FFLCH-USP.

<sup>2</sup> A term that refers to the sexual identity agreeing with the individual’s genitals and the hormonal configuration at birth.

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The non-recognition of the differences between the female bodies of white women and black women leads to what Adrienne Rich (1976) calls *color blindness*, in which there is the suppression of the individual reality for the construction of a total hegemony. Therefore, it is urgent to think about the issues of colourism in stories of black women and their discursive, cultural, political and social representations – all that represents the plurality of the category “black woman”. And it is in this sense that translation, in its various modalities, is employed as a micropolitics (Foucault, 2003) of black feminist power.

With the advances in sociolinguistics (Bagno, 2017), which prove the existence of a difference between male writing and female writing, it is equally clear that there is a difference in the writing (and also in the translation of the writings) of black women. The categories of gender and race are not only social but also categories of linguistic-cultural analysis. As no use of a word is neutral, and a kind of performance is always implied (Carlson, 2010), the reading of texts (and later their translations) is a moment of utterance and voicing. The texts of black women are the staging of their speeches, actual linguistic performances of their bodies and experiences. Therefore, translating is not just a transposition of linguistic material from one language to another, but rather a *transvivência*<sup>3</sup>.

The importance of translation is fundamental to the construction and circulation of feminist, antiracist and decolonial thinking and epistemologies in a world where a white-Eurocentric, patriarchal, cisgender and (neo)colonialist hegemony prevails in the most diverse fields of knowledge. In this scenario, specifically with regard to Latin America, the characteristic miscegenation of its peoples derives from colonial violence against black and indigenous women. Sueli Carneiro (2011: 1), Brazilian intellectual and black feminist, clarifies that such miscegenation “is at the origin of all constructions of our national identity, structuring the decanted myth of Latin American racial democracy, which in Brazil reached its final consequences”. On the myth of Brazilian racial democracy, Lélia Gonzalez (1984: 224), a fundamental reference for black feminism in Brazil, affirms that it affects black Brazilian women, who are daily faced by the double oppression constituted by the link between racism and sexism, which “produces violent effects on black women in particular”. Thus, since colonization, the place of black women has been violently forged on the lowest step of the social structure, and they are, in terms of their race, below white men and women, and, in relation to their gender, below black men.

In this context, black women becomes the Other of the Other, insofar as they are situated in a third space: “a debate on racism in which the subject is the black man; a gender discourse in which the subject is the white woman; and a class discourse in which ‘race’ has no place at all” (Kilomba, 2012: 56). This place of structural, racial and gender subalternity has guided and continues to guide, as new and updated contours and functions, current social organization in Latin America, even in areas such as hegemonic feminism, since in this scenario the realities experienced by black

<sup>3</sup> The term is based on “*escrevivência*”, coined by Conceição Evaristo.

and indigenous women have historically been left in the margin. It is at this point that the Brazilian black women's movement undertook the much-needed project of blackening the feminist movement in Brazil. In the words of Carneiro (2003: 118):

[and] blackening feminism is the expression we have been using to designate the trajectory of black women within the Brazilian feminist movement. Thus we seek to emphasize the white and Western identity of the classical feminist formulation, on the one hand; and, on the other, reveal the theoretical and political insufficiency to integrate the different expressions of the feminine constructed in multiracial and multicultural societies. With these initiatives, a specific agenda could be created that simultaneously combated gender and intra-gender inequalities; we affirm and visualize a black feminist perspective that emerges from the specific condition of being a woman who is black, and, in general, poor. Finally, we outline the role that this perspective has in the anti-racist struggle in Brazil.

In addition to Sueli Carneiro, Lélia Gonzalez has warned of the importance of forming an Afro-Latin American feminism, based not only on the experiences of black and indigenous women related to racism, sexism and colonialism, but also on their resistance to social systems marked by the suppression of their voices and claims. In her work, Gonzalez also emphasizes the importance of the process of subversion of the standard language, a mechanism that is configured as a form of power. In her view, the recognition that the “*pretuguês*”<sup>4</sup> is the language that constitutes Brazilian culture is part of the process of breaking barriers in the dominant social paradigms:

It's funny how they make fun of us when we say it's *Framengo*. They call us ignorant saying that we speak wrong. And suddenly they ignore that the presence of this *r* in the place of the *l* is nothing more than the linguistic mark of an African language, in which the *l* does not exist. So who is ignorant? They also laugh at Brazilian speech, which cuts the *rs* off the infinitives of verbs, which shortens *você* into *cê*, *está* into *tá*, and so on. They don't understand that they are speaking *pretuguês* (Gonzalez, 1984: 238, author's emphasis).

Currently, this specificity of the language or awareness of the Portuguese language's Africanness (Lucchesi, Baxter, Ribeiro, 2009; Bagno, 2019), to which Gonzalez drew attention already in the 1980s by using the term *pretuguês*, is highlighted in studies of language education through the concept of *linguistic racial ideology*. For Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa (2015: 150-151):

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<sup>4</sup> *pretuguês*: preto (black) + português (Portuguese).

[...] the ideological construction and value of standardized language practices are anchored in what we term raciolinguistic ideologies that conflate certain racialized bodies with linguistic deficiency unrelated to any objective linguistic practices. That is, raciolinguistic ideologies produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects.

This raciolinguistic perspective builds on the critique of the white gaze – a perspective that privileges dominant white perspectives on the linguistic and cultural practices of racialized communities – that is central to calls for enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy (Flores, Rosa, 2015: 150-151).

Once recognizing that social linguistic practices are racialized and also intersected by gender, generation and sexuality, it can be seen that translation, as a linguistic-cultural practice, is also an important part of this core. In addition, in dealing specifically with the reverberations of the performance of the Brazilian black feminist movement in the media, Carneiro (2003) highlights the frequent predominance of symbolic exclusion, non-representation and distortions of black women's image in mass communication. Conceição Evaristo (2009) also denounces the non-representation or negative representation of black people in general, and especially black women, in the Brazilian literary canon. The effects of symbolic exclusion or negativized representation of black women in both the media and literature are nefarious.

From the point of view of translation, the situation is no different. Literary works and different foreign cultural products (such as songs, films, serials, soap operas) translated into Brazilian Portuguese, mainly by large publishers, with a view to being received by the Brazilian public, as well as Brazilian literary works and cultural products translated into foreign languages, in order to be received in other cultures, do not present, in general, black female characters, except secondary ones, occupying stereotyped social roles. In this sense, the choice of the work to be translated can balance the range of female representations, restoring to the black woman the right to recognize herself positively in the literature and in the cultural products she consumes from childhood. As examples of this, in the area of translations of foreign works in Brazil, we can cite the publications by Companhia das Letras of works by the African American writer Toni Morrison, such as *A Mercy* (2009), *Beloved* (2007/2011/2018), among others, and the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2014) and *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2017), to mention only two.

Beyond the symbolic representation of black women, their epistemic contributions are also the subject of a process of a translational silencing that hampers dialogue, the sharing of experiences, and solidarity between ethnic minority women's

groups around the world, and they face similar local intersectional conflicts. In this sense, we can echo Spivak's (2010) question about the subalternized subject, asking: can black women be translated? In an attempt to respond positively to this question, there has been a political-ideological movement of academic publishers and journals towards the translation of texts by black women writers and feminists. In Brazil, for example, Boitempo has published translated works by the African American feminist intellectual Angela Davis, and academic journals such as *Estudos Feministas* and *Cadernos Pagu* have published translations of texts not only by Davis but also by bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Grada Kilomba. In terms of the circulation of works by Brazilian feminist black women outside Brazil, the examples of *Chroniques sur le féminisme noir* and *La place de la parole noire*, by Djamila Ribeiro, have recently been published in France by Anacaona. It is important to note that although there is a movement of black feminisms via translation in the contemporary world, it is still limited and restricted to specific spaces.

In view of this situation, in a similar way to what has happened in the field of the reversal of the logic of female representation in mass media, a new range of fronts has emerged in which black female translators have been engaged. Among these movements of resistance, which are aimed at breaking editorial barriers, is the so-called cyberfeminism<sup>5</sup>. One of the purposes of such a movement is to circulate, through the Internet, the intellectual production of black women, both of non-Brazilians in Brazil, and Brazilian women abroad. Of a number of cases where the answer to the above question was yes – black women could be translated by the positioning and the politically engaged action of conscientious translators acting as cultural mediators – we can mention the translations of texts by the African-American feminist Audre Lorde such as “As ferramentas do sinhô nunca vão derrubar a casa-grande” (The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House), translated by Tatiana Nascimento and published on the site “Traduzidas” (“Translated”)<sup>6</sup>. Although the translating issues of cyberfeminism are increasingly appearing in Brazil, and in Latin America as a whole, it should be said that it is only a link in the translational mode of the new generation of translations of black texts and black female translators. This means that thinking on translation and black feminisms is also related to racialized issues of generation, sexuality, geography and symbolism, as we shall now discuss.

When we mention the issue of generations (forefathers and ancestry) of black women, we are dealing with both the history and the behaviours of this category of feminism. In fact, new historical studies on black women have brought to the fore names of black women important to world and local history. In the history of translation in Brazil, for example, it is known that Maria Firmina do Reis, Lélia Gonzalez and Ruth Guimarães were translators. However, the work of these black

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<sup>5</sup> A concept that refers to the feminist use of cyberspace and tries to free the internet from the bonds of gender construction, as well as a way of uniting the body and the machine in the contemporary world. It is one of the ways of using technology that deals with issues of discrimination, sexuality and gender whether racialized or not (Nakamura, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://traduzidas.wordpress.com/about/>.

women has been invisible until recently. It is from this new, not to say incomplete, history of translation that the new generations of black male and female researchers, but also of racialized researchers, propose a new look at the history of black male and female translators. And through this historical awareness new academic and non-academic behaviours arise in activist form of black feminism. For example, the *Abrates Afro* project, developed by conference interpreter Rane Souza, is currently underway at ABRATES (Brazilian Association of Translators), whose aim is to “encourage the entry, permanence and representation of black professionals in translation and conference interpretation in Brazil” (Souza, 2018: 22).

With regard to sexuality, it is necessary not to qualify the concept “black woman” only within the cisgender scope. The sexuality of black women is diverse, as is that of non-black women. And this is also linked to translation, since discourses of different black women travel to the different localities and are, somehow, reappropriated. For example, in Brazil, a collection of African Queer Studies entitled *Traduzindo a África Queer* (Translating Africa Queer) (Devires, 2018) was recently launched. The book was organized by Caterina Rea, Clarissa Goulart Paradis and Izzie Madalena Santos Amancio, all professors and researchers at the Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira (UNILAB). The collection was originally written in English, published in 2013 in Dakar, Senegal, and organized by African feminists Sokari Ekiné and Hakima Abbas. It has been partially translated in Brazil precisely because it is a book that presents “texts written by African authors who openly declare themselves as queer or who are in solidarity with the pattern of sexual dissent” (Rea, Paradis, Amancio, 2018: 7). In addition, the organizers of the collection in Portuguese mention in the introduction to the volume that the purpose of the translation of these texts is to cooperate to end the myth that in Africa there is no (male and female) homosexuality. And they add:

We believe that with these translations of the Queer African Reader it is possible to strengthen the South-South dialogue from the perspective of Gender Studies, Feminists Studies and Studies on Sexualities, allowing a decolonized re-reading of this field. Many questions, however, remain open and need further study, including the choice of the authors in the Reader to use terms such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’ or ‘trans’, which refer to the Western history of sexual and gender identities. What would the so-called ‘alphabet soup’ sound like if, instead of Western categories, the African expressions that marked sexual and gender dissent were placed in the different contexts of this continent? (Rea, Paradis, Amancio, 2018: 22).

Indeed, translation is a micropolitics of exposition, reflection, and diffusion on the cisgender, antipatriarchal, and colonialist thinking of the sexuality of black women. Translation projects like this have begun to gain more and more visibility. The *Grupo Latinoamericano de Formación y Acción Feminista* (Latin American Group

of Formation and Feminist Action – GLEFAS) translated into Spanish in 2017 the work *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, by the Nigerian sociologist Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí. This work is of great importance to demystify West African thought colonizing the hierarchy of gender and, in particular, black women. These kinds of translations have a deep relationship with the geography or the location where they were carried out. For Latin America and Brazil, texts such as those presented above have a meaning in being translated due to the close historical and ethnic relationship that black Brazilian and Latin American women have with black African women. Even though geographical situations are culturally circumscribed and localized, the sorority between black women diffused via translation sounds like literacy, testimony, and black feminist cultural politics – a sort of politics of the relation between black women. And it is because of this politics of the relationship, or of that openness to the other black women, that the question of symbolism arises.

If on the one hand the bodies of black women are in themselves a concrete symbol of anti-racism, feminist resistance and representativeness, analogically, language and the practices of languages are symbolic capital of the relation between black feminisms and translation. This is clearly seen when: 1) this is discussed and reflected in a given text or a certain black production of an author, artist, thinker (How to translate? What did she mean?); 2) we try to reach a satisfactory translation solution that respects the concept of a community of black women (as in the case of *womanism*); 3) a translation project is carried out aiming at the exchange of communities of black women.

Translation, as a decolonizing tool of hegemonic feminism and a regulating movement of black feminisms, can be conceived, in terms of Postcolonial Studies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2013), as: cartography, threshold, synergy and transculturation. Cartography is a graphic representation which is a result of the observation of the earth. Translation as a cartography is a way of discovering the other, reinforcing its existence, symbolic mastery and literacy, that is, a translation is not only a process of production and availability of a given thought in Portuguese. It also means the dominance of certain knowledge, a symbolic capital of literacy for a particular audience, and the symbolic existence of speech and voices consonant with those of local black women in the vernacular.

Translation as a threshold serves as both a tool for transculturation of knowledge as an element of identity and ethnic discovery. If it is a fact that a translation contributes to the sharing of knowledge between black women of the most diverse cultures, it can also be verified that the knowledge of the other helps in the process of self-knowledge. Therefore, once knowing points black women have in common, the points of differentiation and individuality between them are also discovered. This is because the speech, the forms of communication, and the ways of being of the communities of black women of a certain geographical area are not the same. And because of this, there are transculturations of knowledge and information in which contact with translated texts referring to all spheres – political, social and

cultural – which are a way to help, ratify and broaden the feminist positioning, thinking and attitudes of a given locality. In the form of a device of forces, translation is seen as synergy by being able to bring together in its act and in its product the union of voices and the co-presence of discourses. Once the translation is made by black translators or for black women, the translation choices and the design of the translation project are strong indications of polyphony and synergy of voices and consequently of the vernacular material existence of a black feminist enunciation – since the act of reading is an event that puts in the presence of the reader the voice and ideas of the author of the text (Marcuschi, 2008).

Even if the translation made by and for black women has significant backing and a positive reception, it seems to be necessary to warn that the use of the same source of discourse translated in a given place may lead to a temptation to homogenize black feminist thinking. And, as is known, every black feminism is unique, singular and localized. If, on the one hand, the translations help in the construction of an emancipation of local feminist thinking, on the other, the excess of the same source can induce the abandonment of the dialogue with other local or neighbouring black feminists. Hence the questions: To what extent does the translation of only one language/author contribute to the emancipation of feminist thinking of black women? Why is little known about the discourse of Latin American and Caribbean black women (the neighbours of Brazil)? What feminist translation agendas would be required for a plurality of knowledge and the formation of an independent, emancipatory, and identitary feminist thinking? Do the current translations of black women carried out in Latin America, and particularly in Brazil, corroborate for the true emancipation of black-Brazilian feminist thinking?

We would certainly need more time to analyse the impact of these translations and try to respond more accurately to the above questions. However, Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) proposal on *nego-feminism* seems coherent. In the author's formulation:

First, nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation; second, nego-feminism stands for “no ego” feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance. Here, negotiation has the double meaning of “give and take/exchange” and “cope with successfully/go around.” African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise.

It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal landmines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the

stability and reification of a construct, a framework. My use of space—the third space— provides the terrain for the unfolding of the dynamic process. Furthermore, nego-feminism is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by evershifting local and global exigencies (Nnaemeka, 2004: 377-378).

Feminism in both translation and among black women needs to be negotiable and negotiated. On the one hand, there can be no egos, and, on the other, black feminisms need to constantly dialogue and translate one another for a better understanding and reception of each one, considering the cultural imperatives and the global and local demands involved. As Nnaemeka (2004) proposes, the crossing of frontiers, made possible by translation, in the context of black feminisms, must be guided by the *walk of the chameleon*, that is, “[...] goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views” (Nnaemeka, 2004: 382).

By way of a conclusion, from what has been said, we emphasize that the “Translation and Black Feminisms” Dossier, made up of different contributions from the most varied localities and areas of knowledge, constitutes an initial attempt to bring together some thoughts in the interdisciplinary field of Translation Studies with the palpable reality of the existence of black feminisms. We are grateful to the editors of the *Revista Artemis*, Dr. Loreley Gomes Garcia and Dr. Liane Schneider, for their availability, attention and understanding throughout the work developed. We are also grateful to the more than thirty referees who helped to ensure the quality of this Dossier through giving their time, and making careful readings and valuable suggestions. We are also grateful to the translators who have dedicated themselves to the selection and translation of pertinent texts that greatly enhance the proposed discussion. And, finally, our thanks go to the researchers who have made important contributions to the Dossier through their original and unpublished texts. Without the commitment of each one of you, publishers, referees, translators and researchers, this publication would not be possible.

And we hope you, our interlocutors, will enjoy and be provoked by the reading of the Dossier!

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