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Special Issue: Afro-Diasporic Protest: Black Women & LGBTQIA+ Resistance in Cali/Colombia and Santo Domingo/Dominican Republic

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This special issue came out of a few conversations among ourselves, interactions with activists in Cali, Colombia, and a strong desire to tell the stories of our African descended sisters and trans-siblings of the territory. Aurora Vergara Figueroa was Director of the AfroDiasporic Studies Center (CEAF) at ICESI University in Cali Colombia, Melissa Gómez Hernández co-conspired with her as Project Coordinator, and I, Sarah Soanirina Ohmer was an Assistant Professor at CUNY – Lehman College, in the Bronx, NYC. We were all working virtually, as the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown ensued in the Bronx as much as in Cali. I was planning to travel down to Cali on a Fulbright, to work with a 36-year-old organization - the Cultural House of Chontaduro, and to mentor graduate students at the CEAF-ICESI. At the time when our conversations turned into a more concrete project, in the Spring of 2021, it made sense to us that while I was there, we would present PALARA with a call for papers for a special issue. We wanted to carve a space for scholars, activists, and artists to share their work with the international academic audience of PALARA.

Two weeks before my trip, the largest strike in national history took place in Colombia, with a strikingly violent impact on our sisters and trans-siblings of African descent in Cali. I heard their voices, shaken up, and we would get notifications

of people of African descent, activists, young adults, disappearing. Communal graves. Torture. Power outages. Internet black outs to prevent any coverage of the violence. Then, interminable whatsapp updates with videos and voice note updates, while local and international news remained vague, or silent. I was teaching a Black Feminisms course at the time, for the CEAF, on Zoom. We considered canceling class during the strike, then decided to use the space for students to process how the strike was affecting them personally, emotionally, physically, and to check in to see how everyone was coping. This was also a strategy to, just like during the lockdown at the beginning of the outbreak of Covid, keep track of students' wellbeing and quite frankly, to see who was making it out alive.

The state-mandated violence that occurred during the national strike¹ came during one of the darkest periods for people of African descent in Colombia: three years into the Duque administration; 7 years into a peace agreement that arguably protected international investments²; decades of drug and arms trafficking; years of Black activists being targets of assassination, death threats, and other forms of oppression, after eighteen months of a COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown that disproportionately

1 See Olujari & Cuero, "500 años luchando en Primera Línea por la dignidad humana," 2021.

2 The impact of the Peace Agreement has been interpreted in various ways. The complexity of its implementation is available here: <https://keough.nd.edu/es/instituto-kroc-publica-sexto-informe-sobre-implementacion-del-acuerdo-de-paz-en-colombia/>

affected people of African descent in urban areas. Increased unemployment, no access to food, domestic violence, and sexual abuse³ were some of the many afflictions that especially affected Black women, Black girls and Black LGBTQIA+ folx.⁴

We paused on this project as the committed CEAF faculty created a dossier to document the strike, presented in an appendix in the back of this issue. We collaborated with activists and activist-scholars to translate as many articles focused on people of African descent as possible, and to disseminate information across social media to raise awareness of the horrific events of May and June 2021.

At the time that we write this introduction, Aurora is working with the first Black woman Vice President who has a strong record of grassroots activism with Black movements and Black women in Colombia, Francia Márquez, and Aurora has recently become Minister of Education. Melissa is now the director of the Center for African Diaspora Studies (CEAF) at the University of ICESI in Cali, Colombia, and I am a tenured Associate Professor at Lehman College. The amount of work to be done in the struggle remains massive, and in the positions we have now, it feels paradoxically harder to achieve – our responsibilities are greater, our schedules are more dense, and the urgent concerns that came to national and transnational surface in 2020 and 2021 remain to be addressed. It seems with each initiative we barely scratch the surface. We share the essays in this journal with a message of hope and perseverance that we gain from the

3 On the history of sexual abuse and sexual abuse during the national strike protests, see Moreno Hurtado, V. & Balanta Jaramillo, “Estx Cuerpx es Mix” video-dance, available on YouTube: https://youtu.be/WEK-cm_UeS3M

4 See the short documentary, “Marcha de las Madres del Oriente de Cali,” directed by Mauri Balanta Jaramillo, May 2021, available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uO3AqC6EHWA>

LGBTQIA+, women, and girls that we are honored to publish in this special issue; this keeps us going. We encourage others to continue to feature the work of activists and emerging scholars in their scholarship, conferences, social media, in their communities, courses, and in their work. And we hope that with this issue, more transnational-in-person-and-on-the-ground collaborations will ensue. ¡Sigamos!

The year twenty-twenty-one marked the seventh year since the United Nations’ International Decade for People of African descent, 10 years since the Afro-Diasporic Conspiracy Manifesto of Black Women in Cali Colombia (2011), 44 years since the Combahee Collective Manifesto (1977), and one of the most violent years of violence against Afro-Colombians, especially in Cali, against black women and LGBTQIA+ people.⁵

From the militancy of Nanny, Akotirene, and Sojourner Truth to the scholarship and activism of Carla Akotirene, Ochy Curiel, Tanya Saunders, Marielle Franco, Francia Márquez, and the Mujeres del Oriente, to name a select few, the references of black women and black queer work in the Americas are numerous, yet widely understudied. This issue complements the *Meridians* (2016 & 2017) and *Journal of International Women’s Studies* (2018) Special Issues on Latin American and Afro-Latin American Feminisms, the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies Journal* “KuirLombo Epistemologies” Issue (2020), and *Women’s Studies Quarterly* “Solidão” Issue, with the aim to provide yet another facet of Afro-Diasporic resistance by women and LGBTQIA+ folx in Pacific and Caribbean coasts of Colombia, with parallels of the work of Black women in the

5 See Olujari & Cuero, “Racismo y violencia sistémica en la protesta social en Cali,” 2021.

Dominican Republic.

In Latin America, Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, a community of scholars has been steadily publishing on State repression of Afro-Latinx communities, and the movements of resistance against it; though seldom focused on the resistance of Black women outside of Brazil and the Caribbean. The militancy of Black women and LGBTQIA+ groups deserve further scholarly attention. This special issue presents essays, poetry, short stories, art, and a manifesto, from underrepresented artists, activists, and scholars, focused on the activism, political actions, political theory, activist scholarship of Black women and LGBTQIA+ folx, which was produced outside of Cuba and Brazil, and specifically on the Pacific Coast of Colombia.

Since the 1970s, Afro-Latin American Studies and Black Resistance has grown into a transnational scholarly community of queer, trans, femmes, and women focused on the liberation and rights of Black LGBTQIA+ girls, trans or cisgendered women, and non-binary individuals. Their work contributes to Black feminist, Black Radical, and decolonial thought. We encourage readers of this Special Issue to bridge the experiences and theory presented here in relation to Afro-Diasporic Feminisms, to Decolonial Anti-Racist Feminist work by people of African descent, and to Black Queer Thought and militancy. We invite you to further this agenda in your work – whether it be activism, art, pedagogy, or scholarship.

This special issue showcases examples of and case studies of “Afrodiasporic Feminist Conspiracy” (Vergara & Arboleda Hurtado, 2016). Written in 2011 at the Cultural House of Chontaduro in Cali, Colombia,

“Afrodiasporic Feminist Conspiracy: Motivations and Paths forward from the First International Seminar,” outlines the work of Black women in the Black Pacific (*Meridians* 14-2, 2016). As they describe the International Seminar, Aurora Vergara and Katherine Arboleda Hurtado coin the term Afrodiasporic Feminist Conspiracy to label the knowledge production enacted via performance, community-organizing, story-telling, individual and collective scholarship, wherein women of African descent counter the imperialist and capitalist forces that dehumanize, objectify, and make invisible the lives and knowledges of women of African descent. One example of such conspiratorial work is the “Uramba Cultural,” documented on YouTube thanks to the Cultural House of Chontaduro, where women of African descent showcased various forms of cultural and artistic expression to pay homage to the Black communities of Cali. This cultural, historical and political moment, as one of the performers explained in the video, was “not a party (no es una rumba),” not merely a concert.⁶ The groups performed to proclaim life, respect, peace and reconciliation in the East of Cali, at one of the main “occupy” blocks of protest (“punto de resistencia”), the “AfroResistencia Point” (“Punto AfroResistencia, Espacio Ampliado de Convergencia de las Distintas Formas Organizativas del Pueblo AfroColombiano en el Marco del Paro Nacional”). Each essay in this special issue presents cases or offers experiences of practices of solidarity, case studies of occupation in order to dignify life, make scholarly claims for reparative justice, and/or outline strategies of social mobilization.

Each contribution in this issue contributes to a long history of intersectional feminisms in Latin America and the Caribbean, both in action and in scholarly inquiries. In her genealogy of

⁶ “Uramba Cultural En Punto Afroresistencia,” produced by Casa Cultural El Chontaduro, May 19, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxsC0PtKFRw>

intersectional feminisms, Mara Viveros presents the beginnings of intersectionality in the Americas with Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech in the United States, Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Aves sin nido* in Peru, and Brazilian cubist painting *A negra* by Tarsilia do Amaral (40). Though the latter two are not of African descent, Viveros highlights the contributions of African-descended women in Latin America in the 20th century, namely Black women intellectuals who participated in the Communist Party in Brazil: Thereza Santos, Lélia Gonzalez, Beatriz Maria do Nascimento, Sueli Carneiro, Luiza Bairros, Jurema Werneck, among others, in the 1960s (41). This era marks a defining moment in which the racist tendencies of Latin American feminism are clearly called out and a shift occurs in Latin American gender studies, as well as Black movements in Latin America, which culminates in 1983, at the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Congress in Lima, Peru (Viveros 41). Since then, contributions from Yuderkis Espinosa, Ochy Curiel, and Breny Mendoza from the Caribbean remind us of the limitations of heteronormativity and heretosexuality, while women from Chiapas recall that self-determination and land rights as well as gender and sexual equity make up one joint struggle in their "feminist" work (Viveros 42). Finally, feminism as a label is not embraced by intersectional "feminists" who distance themselves from the academic origins of the "feminist" label. In Colombia, the intersection of race, gender and class is tied to territory, as well. As Viveros explains, being from the Pacific Coast or Caribbean implies blackness, the center of the country is associated with upper-class mixed race (mestizo), while lowlands of the Amazon assume indigeneity (47). And yet, she concludes, it is most productive to look for the destabilization of such broad strokes, to find the gray areas and sift through the more murky experiences of intersectionality, especially in local

studies of contemporary Colombian society and culture (51). At the end of the essay, Viveros challenges us to look for the voices, experiences, and knowledge production that comes out of the asymmetrical production and diffusion of knowledge and political participation (52). This special issue aims to offer just that - a window into the experiences, voices, and knowledge of Black women from Colombia in order to destabilize our approaches to feminisms, to Black Feminism, and to decolonial anti-racist gender and sexuality studies.

To mirror the multilayered work of Black women, and the various ways that they contribute to protest in the Black Pacific, this special issue intertwines poetry, short story, non-fiction prose/ essays, and articles, and unfolds in four thematic parts. In Part I, "Denounce and Create," we open the issue with four texts: a poem by Yaribeth España, a nonfiction essay by Ana María Belique, Mauri Balanta's article, and a poem by Angie Melissa González Chaverra

. The second part of this special issue, titled "Memory and Agency," opens with a poem by María Elvira Solís, a short story by Andrea Moreno Hurtado, followed by Dr. Mesi Bakari Walton's article, Ele Vergara's non-fiction essay, and a poem by Alicia Arrechea. "Collective Struggles and Voices" is the title of the third part of the issue, which starts with a short story by Raquel Almeida, followed by two scholarly articles, and ends with María Elvira Solís' poem, dedicated to María Virginia Moreno Hurtado, titled "Mujer candente." We close out the issue with Part IV on "Collective Healing" and a second short story by Raquel Almeida, an article by Edna Gonzalez, and María Elvira Solís' infamous poem, "Mujer Negra."

In her nonfiction essay, Ana María Belique, founding member of re-conocidos, outlines a manifesto on creating Black Feminist scholarship as an activist, and contributing to scholarship

as an activist. Rather than foreigners or academics writing about their work, they get to write for themselves: “Por lo general, son otros quienes escriben sobre nosotros: académicos, extranjeros, personas que vienen y van, y que, al final, uno no sabe dónde quedaron esos escritos.” (5)

Balanta’s article, “‘Unx marica con las güevas bien puestas’: La demanda racializada y sexo-género disidente dentro del paro nacional en Cali,” Balanta analyzes the correlations between anti-black violence and transphobia, in LGBTQIA+ mobilizations during the national strike as it took place in Cali, through the lens of Black Feminist, Black queer, and Black trans theory, and with testimonies from participants of the protest. Balanta’s study of three foundational members of a Trans Collective underscores the urgent need to make visible the bodies, voices, knowledge production, and liberatory practices of our trans siblings in Cali, in order to secure a sustainable future in social movements. Interviews with trans women who participated in the national strike protests in Cali reveal how unsafe social movements continue to be: “En esos espacios una se encuentra con muchos hombres que, difícilmente, se repiensen su masculinidad y nos pueden atacar. El primer día iba en mi bici y no alcancé a llegar al punto por todos los comentarios transfóbicos que me encontré en el camino.” (24) “Unx marica con las güevas bien puestas” aims to call attention to how much patriarchal and colonial power pervades “popular culture” by taking away the agency of racialized sexo-género-disidentes in social movements, with, for example, her analysis of the transphobic and homophobic lyrics of popular protest chants such as: “*el que no salte es uribista y maricón*”. Supported by the theoretical contributions of Riley Snorton, Mara Viveros Vigoya, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillers, Balanta’s

essay offers an indispensable study of the national strike as it unfolded in Cali grounded in the intersectional critique of *caleñidad*, a violent narrative and organization of a city built on anti-black and anti-indigenous violence, disguised as liberal multiculturalism. At a historical moment of protest, they are clearly suppressed and violently prevented from affirming their identities politically. Despite being in the midst of a national and a Black movement’s struggle for fair participation and representation, the possibility of achieving a truly equitable agenda remains murky.

Dr Mesi Bakari-Walton’s article is anchored in the experiences of Black women, and she refers to various interviews in her study on the functions of art in the Caribbean coast of Columbia. Art, she argues, serves as a tool for therapy, community-building, expression, and revenue, and overall empowers Black women as stewards of their communities. Walton makes use of data from interviews to link current-day practices back to ancestral memories, and “to show how the application of women’s work and societal traditions support community survival from the period of enslavement to current times of harsh injustices.” (38) Her essay presents how art functions as therapy, as a unifier, as a messenger, and as a form of income that allows Black women to accomplish their goals and dreams, and how working in unison allows Black women to become agents of change for themselves and others.

In the second nonfiction essay in this issue, “El buen amor y la juntanza entre mujeres negras: un camino para la resiliencia y la preservación de la memoria colectiva,” Ele Vergara writes from personal experience in order to shed light on the healing and reconciliation practices of Black women as they care for themselves. She explores the political aspect of the practices, the shaping and strengthening of specific tools, how

artistic processes are designed from the collective, the ways in which knowledge is transmitted in such spaces of healing and care: her elders, the collective “Cimarroneando el Verbo,” and the LGBTQIA+ group “Somos Identidad” at Universidad del Valle and the Center for Diaspora Studies at ICESI University, as well as venues in Cali such as Posa Suto and BlackGround. For example, she outlines the ways in which her grandmother and great-grandmother taught her to weave and crochet, which is tied to cultivating memory: “Mi abuela me dió y me enseñó a construir memoria. Me enseñó a tejer.” (59) She goes on to explain how the Foundation for social and sexual diversities of African descent “Somos Identidad” has played a similar role in Cali, Colombia, where she found a sense of belonging among Black LGBTQIA+ people who had families and embodied real-life role models for her:

“Ahí dejé de sentirme mal por mis propios deseos de compartirme sexual y afectivamente con otras mujeres negras, porque no solo lo vi posible, sino también como algo bueno, algo que no me hacía menos mujer, o menos negra. Estar rodeada por estas mujeres me concedió el trabajar en amarme, en perdonarme por odiarme, en insistir en conocerme y reconocer cuando actué equivocada; me concedió ser capaz de comprender que no hay una sola forma de ser una mujer negra, que no hay una sola forma de habitar la universidad y que no hay una razón por la que deba enfrentarme sola a las dificultades.” (62)

Like Walton’s parallel between community building, revenue, and quilting, Vergara concludes on the various functions of Black women’s collective spaces, and the importance of creating and nurturing (and sharing the knowledge that comes through in) such spaces.

Valeria Angulo’s article, “Batea Sí, Retros No,” presents our readers with a comprehensive overview of the ways in

which Black women “co-conspire” in order to resist the neoliberal violence against Black women and their land. The essay is grounded in the concept of “AfroDiasporic Feminist Conspiracy,” coined by a group of activists and scholars in Cali, Colombia, and penned by Aurora Vergara Figueroa and Katherine Arboleda in “Feminismo afrodiaspórico. Una agenda emergente del feminismo negro en Colombia” (2014). Angulo outlines the model of AfroDiasporic Feminist Conspiracy for readers to compare it with other studies of Black Feminism as a comprehensive framework, such as Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought*. In so doing, this essay provides a framework with which to further analyze Black women’s activism and knowledge production in Latin America and the Caribbean. With the case study of ASOMUAFROYO (the Association of African Descended Women of Yolombó), Angulo outlines various types of collective action and how they resist the material destruction of mining and of Black women: the birth of the Center for Sociocultural Innovation and Ancestral Medicine, the La Toma Community Council of African Descent, and the participation in the *Ready for Impact* project - a networking system to protect the lives of Black women community organizers through mentorship and strengthening of personal, organizational, social, and community-building skills. In this rigorous study, you will find models to care for and guarantee dignity of life in neoliberal contexts that will to annihilate black lives through extractivist actions. The case study is set in the community of La Toma, which has been the focus of various scholars to demonstrate how private corporations and multinational companies appropriate the land of people of African descent and endanger Black lives. In this context, with the co-conspiring work of Valeria Angulo, we witness the enactment of a collectively woven belief that “land is life and life is not for sale, it is to be loved, and defended” (Angulo 77).

Dr. Javiela Evangelista's "A Snapshot of Statelessness in the Western Hemisphere: Denationalization in Modern Day Dominican Republic," brings our conversation on Afro-Diasporic Feminist Protest in the Black Pacific over to the Caribbean. With this contribution, we encourage our readers to make parallels between the research and activism being done by Black women on the ground of the Pacific Coast of Colombia and other parts of the American Hemisphere. Evangelista's research in Santo Domingo is particularly resonant with Angulo's work in La Toma. The Dominican Republic's Constitutional Tribunal 168/13 ruling turned the longstanding, racialized and clandestine practice of converting Dominican citizens of Haitian descent into foreigners, into a legalized practice of annihilating Black lives, similar to extractivist mining promoted by neoliberal practices in La Toma. From this abhorrent violence, Black women come together to resist and advocate for dignity of life. Evangelista's intersectional focus corrects omissions and common misrepresentations of denationalization in the Dominican Republic, which continue to be a highly underreported topic in mainstream global media. With testimonials of Dominican women of Haitian descent impacted by statelessness in the Dominican Republic, Evangelista makes clear that the nature of denationalization is multilayered and has a long history in the DR, and that the time has come to focus on its impact on Black women, and on how Black women respond to it, is long overdue.

In "Los rituales de sanación de la diáspora africana-mujeres negras dentro del contexto del paro nacional del 28 abril: Versión Cali," Edna Carolina González Barona walks us through the protests of the national strike in Cali, as she reflects on the rituals and anti-domination practices of black women and LGBTQIA+ of African descent who actively resist State power and the

material violence of colonization. González Barona turns to people's testimonies as part of her data collected for ethnographic research, making use of the framework of "etnografía viva," a methodology that has become popular among scholar-activists in Cali, Colombia, based on the work of Vicenta Moreno Hurtado and the Mujeres Investigadoras group of the Casa Cultural El Chontaduro.

As a whole, this special issue can serve as a teaching tool, a manifesto, and a reflective space for healing and inspiring ourselves, and each other, to continue to move forward in our co-conspirations, to carry on in the centuries-long project of dignifying our lives. We look forward to co-conspiring with you all, in writing and in action, and to witness our victories.

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