

# Diálogos



# Black women's activism:

## A transnational and intergenerational dialogue

ANA PEREIRA\* | BRUNA PEREIRA\*\* | PATRICIA COLLINS\*\*\*

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The world as we knew it at the end of the twentieth century has gone through major changes. At that time, we did see a whole set of challenges emerging on the horizon, while problems we had been familiar experienced greater or lesser degrees of transformation. The climate crises, extreme ideologies, the gig economy, inequality, shrinking civic spaces, digital platforms, and human migration, among others, have increasingly become part of our lives – and activism, for that matter.

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- \* Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Políticos  
22260-100 – Rio de Janeiro, Brasil  
[anaclaudiapereira@gmail.com](mailto:anaclaudiapereira@gmail.com)  
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/1627292739768773>
- \*\* Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM), Departamento de Ciencia Política y de la Administración  
28224 – Madrid, Espanha  
[brunacjpereira@gmail.com](mailto:brunacjpereira@gmail.com)  
ORCID 0000-0003-3213-8672
- \*\*\* University of Maryland (UMD), College Park, Department of Sociology  
MD 20742-1315, United State  
[collinph@umd.edu](mailto:collinph@umd.edu)  
<https://socy.umd.edu/facultyprofile/collins/patricia-hill>

Throughout the African diaspora, Black women recreate traditional modalities of action and invent strategies to tackle the forms in which racism, patriarchy, and related systems of oppression now present themselves. The following dialogue starts with the pressing issue of the rise of the far-right to reflect on the status of Black women's activism. Therefore, Brazilian Black feminists Bruna Cristina Jaquette Pereira and Ana Claudia Jaquette Pereira engage in a transnational and intergenerational conversation with prominent sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, the author of the groundbreaking *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* and many other thought-provoking works.

**Bruna:** Patricia, it is an honor to have the opportunity to engage in this conversation. You have been a major inspiration as an academic and also as a human being since I met you personally in 2014 at Festival Latinidades [The biggest Black women's festival in Latin America, which takes place annually in Brazil]. I find your "let's fight back" attitude crucial in this gloomy political scenario we are now facing.

I am also very glad to hold this conversation with my sister, number one supporter, and most important interlocutor, Ana Claudia. It is a pleasure to further develop and publicly share some of the concerns and thoughts we have exchanged for the past few years.

**Ana:** I am also very happy to join you both in this conversation. Patricia, when I first read *Black Feminist Thought*, I saw a new universe of possibilities emerge before me. Your approach shines a light into the often-overlooked Black women's collective standpoint and shared experiences galvanized in the search for social justice, putting them at the center of social theory. Black women were no longer limited to the role of objects to be analyzed by social scientists: we became agents of social knowledge. Sitting in your graduate classes at the University of Maryland, I learned how we can move beyond critique of the canon by taking advantage of the tools provided by social theory while also scrutinizing and building on the strategies deployed by oppressed groups to produce new knowledge. This framework shapes my investigation of the tenets of Black women's political thought in Brazil, as well as my work in international development.

Thanks for agreeing to this continuation of the intergenerational and transnational dialogue on Black feminism.

Bruna, I am very happy we have the opportunity to translate some of the conversations we have had for years, as sisters and social scientists, to this more structured debate. Our exchanges helped me navigate daily life, discover interesting books, hone ideas and reflect on how to apply them inside and outside of the academy.

**Patricia:** It is wonderful to talk with both of you again about such an important topic. Each of you has contributed so much to my thinking about Black women's activism. I definitely brought my "let's fight back" spirit to *Latinidades*. But *Latinidades* brought its own fighting spirit about Black women's activism, both in what it said and what it did. Several things stood out for me at *Latinidades* that I see as being essential for Black women's activism now and into the future.

First and foremost, the energy and enthusiasm of the Black women who attended *Latinidades* was infectious. I hadn't realized how dispirited I had become after decades of laboring in American academia. *Latinidades* was a festival that centered on Black women issues and dreams – everyone was excited to be there. We were all thirsty for ideas, including me. *Latinidades* showed me the face of a Black women's activist community that was organized, intellectually rigorous, beautiful, and fun.

Second, the structure of the conference drew together women from activist, academic and artistic realms. For me, this was a breath of fresh air because it was so different than anything I had encountered in the U.S. where these three areas of intellectual activism have been separated from one another. Because *Latinidades* centered on the issues that confronted all Black women in some way, nobody had all the answers. I felt at home, because I consider Black women's ideas to be central to activism and that means partnerships among people working in activist, academic and artistic settings.

But what really stood out for me was the vision of the conference. *Latinidades* pointed toward a different future for everyone at the festival, with Black women leading the way. I was and remain impressed by the leadership of the next generation of Black women intellectual activists. I consider both of you to be part of this vital group in Brazil. I came away from

Latinidades with a new sense of what was possible. I clearly recognize the roadblocks that lie ahead. The emergence of far-right ideological projects within democratic societies like Brazil and the US is alarming. But it is far from unprecedented.

**Bruna:** The far-right has used several strategies to make their ideas more acceptable and even popular. Far-right leaders recur to fundamentalist readings of traditional religions; to extreme ideas of ethnic and racial superiority that, if not extinct, had mostly become fringe; and to the imposition of conservative views on gender. Promising security in times of uncertainty, they have boosted this ideology by employing simplistic and fraudulent narratives, predominantly through social media. And they operate with the complicity of giant tech corporations – and other corporations, such as the arms industry.

The rise of the far-right has greatly impacted Black women. To me, they have managed to authorize open forms of discursive and physical violence against Black women. It is not that widespread racism and misogyny had not hindered Black women before, but it is now encouraged and applauded. For instance, the brutal murder of city councilwoman Marielle Franco in Brazil in 2018 was publicly celebrated by the then-presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro and some of his supporters.

What are other ways that the rise of the far-right has impacted Black women's lives? And how are they reacting to it? How has it transformed Black women's activism? What is the importance of Black women's activism in this scenario?

**Patricia:** In the US, the effects of the far-right have been increasingly clear since the 2016 national election. Since then, the social consequences of the covid-19 have also had an important effect on Black women's lives. These two things are related but one did not cause the other.

When it comes to Black women's activism, there is no vacation. They may take different forms, but each generation of Black women faces the same challenges earlier generations. Right now, the US is in a period of retrenchment. The chipping away at the rights of Black women, for example, current restrictions on reproductive rights, falls far more heavily on women who are Black, young, poor and who live in states that are controlled

far-right elected officials. The US has experienced a shocking erosion of democratic institutions on local, state and federal level that is rarely recognized as such as long as it affects just Black women.

This is not a new situation. In the early twentieth century, Black women faced a pervasive discourse of eugenics, a scientific field and that fueled public policies that laid the foundation for today's far-right. The contemporary far-right is dangerous, but it is not invincible. Bruna, your summary of the core values and institutional structures of the far-right is on point. We can build on this critique to fine-tune an oppositional agenda. For each of the core values that you list above I ask, what alternative core values are useful for Black women's collective empowerment? We know what we are fighting against, but what are we fighting for?

When it comes to Black women's activism, I see the continuation of a two-pronged, intergenerational strategy, one immediate and the other long term. First, Black women's activism should focus on the immediate protection of Black women and girls by strengthening and or building community organizations for that purpose. If you don't survive, you don't live to fight another day. The seeming success of integration as a public policy (which ironically is the catalyst that the far-right so hates) has offered empty promises to young Black women that, because they have rights under democracies, that such democracies will protect them. Not so.

The second strategy is for Black women to continue exerting important leadership both outside and inside social institutions. Grassroots organizing and social protest outside formal institutions is essential. The Black Lives Matter movement, started by Black women, illustrates the power of Black women's activism. But such activism also needs well-placed people inside institutions who are committed to participatory democracy and human rights. We need to strengthen the network of Black women insiders who can serve as watchdogs and leaders within social institutions of education, health, government, finance and the media. After decades of organizing, Kamala Harris was elected Vice President of the US in 2020, and in 2022, after a bruising confirmation hearing, Ketanji Brown Jackson became the first African American woman to sit on the US Supreme Court. Their accomplishments are unprecedented, but we cannot mistake visibility for real power. This two-pronged, intergenerational strategy marries short-term, nimble strategies of community organization with the long-term strategy of institutional change.

**Ana:** I couldn't agree more. I see the twofold strategy you describe also taking place in Brazil. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we saw Black women's collectives prioritize immediate relief to communities. We can look at the example of Odara – Instituto da Mulher Negra, a Black feminist non-governmental organization in Salvador, Bahia. For years, Odara centered efforts on supporting the mobilization of grassroots groups and advocating for Black women's human rights, but when the pandemic struck, the organization started to distribute food and hygiene supplies to families in need.

Fortunately, many non-Black organizations did the same, we know. Odara, however, focused on providing assistance to recyclable waste pickers, African diaspora religious groups, and transgender shelters – groups that are often neglected by the public power. The organization acquired most of the produce for distribution from local small farmers who also saw a drop in income during the pandemic. Odara's deep roots in the community yielded a unique knowledge of the groups most affected by the pandemic, their needs, the processes that need to be in place to ensure adequate distribution of donations, and the likelihood that government assistance would arrive too late. Like Odara, many other Black feminist groups/collectives/organizations quickly adapted to the new challenges and played a key role in helping keep people alive.

At the same time, I see a continuation in the struggle to unveil and confront less evident devices that perpetuate the unequal social structure. I am thinking particularly about the claims that Black feminists direct to the state. In Brazil and the US, Black women are overrepresented among those lacking access to housing, healthcare, income, education, food security. So, many social policies have a large impact on Black women's lives, and Black women's groups play a key role in denouncing public policies that rely on stereotypes and prejudices or just ignore them altogether, rather than treating them as citizens, rights bearers, human beings.

The language and strategies used in each country draw on unsimilar political traditions. However, Black feminists have not ceased to denounce the poor quality of health care, reclaim more rights for domestic and hospitality workers or take part in community-level decisions. Questioning the way those policies are designed (do Black women get to participate in decision-making?), the distribution of public funding (are funds



redressing inequalities or aggravating them?), whether policies are functioning properly (do they really reach those in need and are the effects transformative?), activists make visible the ways in racism and sexism have been ingrained in democratic regimes.

**Bruna:** Despite its defense of nationalism, the far-right operates globally. Far-right organizations such as HazteOir and CitizenGo associate with and fund extremist local groups around the world, being funded by religious groups and oligarchs from the US, Russia, and Europe (Agência Pública, 2021).

However, transnational solidarity and international collaboration have been an important pillar of mobilization and source of energy and insights for Black women's activism for decades. For instance, Martinicans Paulette and Alice Nardal unquestionably left their mark on the Negritude intellectual movement in 1940s France; visits to Panama, France, Italy, the US, and West Africa influenced Brazilian Black Feminist Lélia Gonzalez ideas on *Amefricanas* [Amefrican women] in the 1980s; in the 1990s, Audre Lorde<sup>(1)</sup>'s encounters in Germany and the Netherlands impacted both local Black feminist collectives and the author's work. It has also proved relevant in the mobilization around the killing of George Floyd by the police in the US in 2020 when Black Lives Matter – founded by Black women – inspired Black anti-racist activism and action throughout the world.

What are your thoughts on the potential of Black women's transnational solidarity and international cooperation at current times? Why is it important?

**Ana:** The transnational solidarity and perspective allow us to zoom out of our immediate reality and see how tied it is to complex and long-lasting structures. I was once talking to a Brazilian Black feminist who told me that, in the civil society events leading up to the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, activists from around the globe faced the challenge to come up with a common language to describe vastly different struggles. While Brazilian activists denounced security forces violence, some women claimed the

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For a sample of Audre Lorde's work, see, for instance, *Sister Outside* (1984).

return of sacred mummies that had been stolen from their territories. The activists ended up concluding that what their struggles had in common was the resistance to race, gender and class oppression, and they found that the term “intersectionality” adequately entailed all these dimensions.

I love the way this story illustrates the challenges and the benefits of fostering transnational ties. There are no readily available concepts or ideas shared by African women, women of African-descent and in the diaspora. But if we take the time to listen, read and learn about each other's history, cultural traits, and political agenda, we can better understand the structure we are opposing and what we stand for.

As you said, Bruna, this requires time, funding, and exposure to ideas that are far from hegemonic – scarce resources that Black women can't take for granted. In that sense, elites will always be better positioned to turn solidarity into cooperation. At the same time, this has been done by oppressed people in the past with far fewer resources. Our generation is lucky to rely on their examples.

**Patricia:** New communications technologies provide a powerful set of tools for intellectual activism, regardless of content. Black women with cell phones are everywhere, and many use their phones as citizen journalists. For example, George Floyd's death was recorded by an African American teenager on her cell phone. When she posted it, it went viral. WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, among others, are tools to foster transnational solidarity across contested national boundaries, as well as places for intergenerational collaboration for activist, academic and artistic political projects. The far-right recognizes the power of these tools and uses them effectively. But here, the danger lies not in the endless rebuttal process of challenging far-right discourse. Someone must do this, but always being reactionary means that they basically set your agenda. Rather, we should worry when we lose access to these tools. This is the building community capacity for reasons of protecting the individual and capturing positions of power and authority within social institutions that I mentioned earlier. The tools of media are essential for both aspects of Black women's activism.

I see so many new possibilities for Black women's transnational and intergenerational activism. But I'm also a pragmatist. I remain suspicious that we will ever arrive at a place of peace, social justice, and democracy

within contemporary global geopolitics. This caution keeps me on my toes. But I don't want my skepticism or despair from hearing bad news on any given day to cultivate nihilism in me or in people around me. This is our responsibility as intellectual leaders. But I am also an optimist. I try to remain focused on these aspirational concepts as touchstone for where we are trying to go. That said, transnational solidarity and intergenerational solidarity are essential strategies. Because they are essential to Black women's survival, it's not a question of whether to do them, but rather *how* to do them, using the tools that we have at hand.

In the US, Black women's intellectual activism occurs in this context, one of building community capacity to house Black intellectual production, and the continuing fight to desegregate mainstream institutions and to not sell-out once you get inside.

**Bruna:** You characterize the intellectual work of Black women as a form of activism whenever it is committed to social justice. This argument has allowed you to shed light on unacknowledged (non-academic) types of intellectual work, which you regard as valid, valuable, and potentially transformative. Simultaneously, it has supported Black women in traditional knowledge institutions in their claims for change, recognition, and participation.

At present, Black women in such institutions face distinct challenges in different regions. In Europe, they face colorblindness ideologies and the invisibility of the Black communities. In Brazil, more Blacks have had access to universities as students since the 2000s, but the curricula and faculty hiring policies that exclude Black women remains mostly unchanged. As for the US, where Black universities ensured early access to higher education, Black women struggle with student debt and similar forms of institutional racism.

With the rise of the far-right, we see the growth of a certain kind of anti-intellectualism or manipulation of the truth: historical negationism and revisionism, the enforcement of religious dogmas, distortion or denial of science. Occupy decision-making positions in institutions, particularly knowledge institutions, is another of their strategies.

In this context, I would like to ask: How does Black women's intellectual activism challenge traditional knowledge institutions? Have Black women been able to promote change? If so, which, and to what extent?

**Patricia:** I think that we are all starting to write the stories of how that looks within our national contexts. I have learned so much from both of you about Black feminism in Brazil. Black people in the US are actively involved in changing knowledge-production in the US. White supremacy is an ideology whose power rests on the manipulation of the truth. Black women have resisted anti-Black racism during every phase of US history. Black women wielding the weapon of oppositional knowledge is especially threatening to the far-right. Historically, African Americans have had a very clear sense of the history, scope and depth of anti-Black racism. And this recognition fosters suspicion of people who aim to withhold literacy and education from us. Because far-right anti-intellectualism is nothing new, Black people clearly reject it, choosing instead to respect a long list of artists, activists, and academics whose work challenges the core tenets of the far-right.

We have struggled to understand our own history in the US. We know that the far-right is nothing new, including its ability to thrive within democratic institutions of government. We've had far-right Presidents (Woodrow Wilson), state senators, governors and local officials (local sheriffs) before. But what we have also had is rich history of Black intellectual production that has countered this anti-Black racism. For example, Black women have drawn upon religious faith as a source of inspiration for their activism. Rejecting religious dogma that counsels them to just follow the rules, they have long demonstrated what it means to think for yourself.

**Ana:** I learned a lot about this with Patricia! There is this chapter in *Fighting Words* entitled "Coming to Voice, Coming to Power: Black Feminist Thought as Critical Social Theory" that offers a blueprint for looking at the Black women's intellectual work. It changed the way I approached my own work, as I understood I didn't have to limit my research to academic sources when the academy had so little to say about Black women's lives and ideas. What I did instead was to focus on the knowledge produced by activists.

I was amazed to see how Brazilian activists evoke representations of Afro-Brazilian religious entities (mainly *orixás*) and domestic workers to challenge traditional notions of the feminine and assert political values and aspirations. The fact that knowledge institutions mostly dismiss Black women's intellectual work doesn't mean they haven't been active agents of social and political changes.

**Bruna:** Nowadays, we are striving to defend the very ideas of democracy and human rights, as well as some of the institutions they have inspired, against the anti-rights agenda of the far-right that essentially targets women, people of color, migrants, and the LGBTQIA+ community.

On the one hand, the concepts and values that these ideas encompass have never been able to fully protect Black people's (particularly Black women's) lives, rights, and dignity. In fact, they have been occasionally used against Black populations based on (open or covert) beliefs that Blacks were not fit to take part in democratic regimes. We observe that in the US or South Africa, with official segregation, and also in Brazil, with very low numbers of Black women representatives.

On the other hand, Black Women have clung to the notions of democracy and human rights to reclaim rights and dignity. To provide just two of many possible examples, we can mention Tarana Burke in the fight against sexual violence against women in the US or Black feminist organizations Geledés and Criola in Brazil, who in 2016 produced the report *The Human Rights of Black Women in Brazil: Violence and Abuse*.

How do you think Black women's activism has influenced the public debate on Human Rights and democracy?

**Ana:** For Black women, human rights and democracy have been evocative, aspirational concepts. Being a group subject to structural oppression means being subject to systemic human rights violations and little saying in decision-making in formal and even most informal institutions. And yet, Black women's groups continue to rely on these notions in the pursuit of social justice.

Positioning Black women at the center of the public debate, social movements have broadened notions of democracy, rights and social justice by pointing out how discrimination and pervasive inequalities undermine those. In Brazil, for example, organizations and collectives as the *Articulação Nacional de Organizações de Mulheres Negras* and *Mulheres Negras Decidem* are invested in promoting the access of Black women to elective positions in Brazil. In doing so, they seek to erode elitist, sexist and racist notions of political representation that simultaneously exclude non-white people and women from democratic decision-making spheres.

Even if we remain underrepresented in political institutions, we are seeing part of the political elites recognizing, for the first time, that the chronic marginalization of Black women in decision-making, whether at the local level or the national level, is in contradiction with the notion of democracy.

In the US, the emergence of *Black Lives Matter* gave way to discussions on Police Reform acts, still unravelling. Bearing in mind that America's policing was institutionalized to a large degree to dominate enslaved people and other oppressed groups, we can see how powerful this movement is when it opposes systematic oppression and succeeds in making police violence a theme on the national agenda.

In sum, Black feminists remind our societies that the promises entailed in concepts such as rule of law, democracy and human rights are in contradiction with the actual inequalities and systemic violence experienced by non-white groups. In doing so, Black women craft an underlying political thought in which democracy is infused with social justice and propose concrete measures to turn it into reality.

**Patricia:** The far-right does not want to be reminded of this disconnect between the ideals of democracy and the denial of equal citizenship to Black women. I suspect that the emergence of the far-right in the US context can be traced in part to the growing visibility and success of Black people generally, and with growing unease that power was no longer white, male, straight, rich, and Christian. For the far-right, the visible success of Black women symbolizes all that is wrong with America. The 2008 election of Barack Obama set an entire chain of events in action, one of which was the immediate vow to remove him from office. What a shock it must have been to those who held fast to the core values of the far-right to see a Black woman in the White House, not polishing the silver, but as First Lady. Black women's activism within electoral politics has been pivotal in expanding the meaning of participatory democracy.

I don't see a visible, vocal, unified, national Black women's movement in the US with the energy that permeated Latinidades. But I do see decentralized, networked Black women's activism. There are some visible spokespersons, yet leadership occurs through the doing of Black women's activism, not primarily through being recognized as such in mainstream press.

In the US, national politics gets the lion's share of media attention, but contemporary struggles are local and regional. American politics is like a game of chess where you position your pieces and perhaps sacrifice in the short term (lose) to gain a victory down the road. This has been the political strategy of the far-right for several decades and, as the erosion of voting rights, access to health care, and attacks on non-binary and trans youth suggest, it is yielding result for them. We need to learn from their playbook, not just criticize the moral and ethical limitations of far-right ideology. This is a long game of capturing squares piece-by-piece, of getting Black women to run for local school boards, or city council, or the governors of one of the 50 states.

Black women have been front line actors in breathing life to the ideal of participatory democracy. Certainly, there are some projects where Black women's activism on the national level is more visible than others. But the real action lies in decentralized, local projects that both address local concerns but that also are networked, often through the leadership of Black women. Take for example, the centrality of Black women organizers to the Black Lives Matter Movement. The politics that touch the lives of everyday Black women are situated in the nooks and crannies of numerous local initiatives that take up issues of homelessness, education, health care and employment. Rather than creating organizations that are exclusively for Black women, the Black Lives Matter movement builds networks among local projects in a transnational context that reflect the ideas of Black women's intellectual activism.

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