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Ephemeral Elsewheres: Locating Narratives of Resignation, Resistance, and Refusal in the Poetry of Black Cuban and Black Brazilian Women

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Ephemeral Elsewheres: Locating Narratives of Resignation, Resistance, and Refusal in the
Poetry of Black Cuban and Black Brazilian Women

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COLT 103

Dr. Gerd Gemunden

15 May 2022

“MULHER”

Esmeralda Ribeiro

MU

MU

MU

MU

É

LHER

LHER

LHER

LHER

DO

SEM

HEMISFÉRIO NEGRO

DEFINIÇÃO

AO

SEM

HEMISFÉRIO SUL

LIMITAÇÃO

MU

É

MU

LHER

LHER

FORÇA

GUERREIRA

NA

LUTA AFRICANA

Esmeralda Ribeiro's "MULHER" appears as a smattering of letters on a page. When read vertically, "MULHER" bifurcates, as if to project an inner divide within womanhood. On the third through sixth lines, one interprets two readings. "DO/HEMISFÉRIO NEGRO/ AO/ HÉMISFERIO SUL" and "SEM/DEFINIÇÃO/SEM/LIMITAÇÃO." Arguably, the interpretation of the whole poem hinges on these lines, as the word "HEMISFÉRIO" locates womanhood—especially Black womanhood, within material geography. From this geographical lens, the poem mirrors the triangular shape of both the Americas and Africa. The repetition of "HEMISFÉRIO" and the qualifiers "NEGRO" and "SUL" locate Ribeiro's Black womanhood within a "Black" and "southern hemisphere." When read horizontally, the "HEMISFÉRIO NEGRO" corresponds to a "DEFINIÇÃO" and "HEMISFÉRIO SUL" aligns with "LIMITAÇÃO." Ribeiro suggests that the Americas, from which she originates, and Africa, the continent of her ancestors, comprise the "Black hemisphere," recalling Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic,³ in which the history of the transatlantic slave trade maps geographic territory. It is in this allied Black identity of the Americas and Africa that Ribeiro locates the definition of her womanhood. However, it appears that the Southern hemisphere is secondary to the Black hemisphere. Horizontally aligning with "LIMITAÇÃO," the "HEMISFÉRIO SUL" invokes Ribeiro's nation of Brazil, whose legacy of transatlantic enslavement sanctioned extreme violence against Black women. The "HEMISFÉRIO NEGRO" is an explicit claim to another kind of geography beyond nationalism and colonial limits.

³ Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* was first published in 1995, 11 years after the publication of "MULHER."

Crucially, Ribeiro's "MULHER" was first published in 1984, a year before the termination of the Military Dictatorship of Brazil (1964-1985), and six years after the 1978 unification of the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU), a collective of distinct Black organizations. Like "MULHER," the MNU addresses Black survival amid the myths of racial democracy, the colonial idea that Latin America is inherently egalitarian because of its mixed-race population⁴. Racial mixing served as a rhetoric to justify the Spanish and Portuguese assault of Indigenous and Black women. Because of the colonial cover of racial democracy, discrimination against Black Brazilians was implicitly inscribed in the law. By contrast, many campaigns of the Military Dictatorship, explicitly violated the rights of Black-Brazilians, and as such, provided a somewhat contradictory opening for Black mobilization. David Covin writes that under this regime, "... Black *leaders* were specifically targeted for serious sanctions... But for most Afro-Brazilians, their life was no more perilous than ever" (42). In this way, the Military Dictatorship served as a violent confirmation of the generations of state sanctioned violence against which Black Brazilians could not clearly claim. I reserve that in "MULHER," the expansive geography of the "LUTA AFRICANA" is mobilized by both urgent national and racial politics.

"MULHER" further articulates the aims of the journal in which it was published, *Cadernos Negros*, a project began in 1982 as the literary arm of the MNU and compiled protest poetry of Black Brazilians. Through these projects, many Black Brazilians experimented with the limits of language to discover new paths to unified Black identities. Responding to the increasing literary interests of those involved in the journal, the leaders of *Cadernos Negros*, including

⁴ (Racial) mixing translates to *mestiçagem* in Portuguese and *mestizaje* in Spanish.

Ribeiro and her husband Márcio Barbosa, Sônia Fátima, Conceição Evaristo, Miriam Alves, Cuti, Jamu Minka, among others, formed Quilombhoje⁵ a literary group committed to challenging the whiteness of the Brazilian Canon⁶. In this regard, the “FORÇA/GUERREIRA/NA LUTA AFRICANA” to which “MULHER” funnels addresses the contemporary aims of the Quilombhoje, an organization whose name refers to the quilombos, colonial-era settlements of formerly enslaved, and “hoje,” the Portuguese word for “today.” The triangular structure of “MULHER” may suggest that the unification of Black organizations assembles the fractured Black woman; however, such an assertion would falsely suppose that the vestiges of colonialism and patriarchy do not exist in Black spaces. Although many poems published by male authors, such as Cuti’s “É Tempo da Mulher,” speak of the power of Black women, they often consider Black women only within sexual contexts, reducing them to the historical image of the hyper-sexualized *negra* (negress) or *mulata*. At the same time, the men of Quilombhoje disregarded women’s explicit claims to feminism as divisive. Famously, Alves departed Quilombhoje in 1994 after feminism-related schisms with her male colleagues (Oliveira 168). Ribeiro has since stayed. Still, “MULHER” manages to appropriate the forceful protest aesthetics of Quilombhoje to claim space for Black women within the African struggle.

The broader hemispheric context of “MULHER” illuminates a central question of the role of Black women in radical movements. If the Black woman exists to service a (Black) national resistance, how might she discuss the violence she faces within that struggle? In this essay, I

⁶ The fractured form of “MULHER,” for instance, responds to the *concretismo* movement of Brazil, which played with linguistic forms.

engage this question in the works of Black Brazilian poets, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Sônia Fátima, and Cuti. I intervene their poems with the works of Black Cubans, Nancy Morejón, Georgina Herrera, and Nicolás Guillén, who write about Blackness amid the largely white masculine imagery of the Cuban Revolution. Although I work roughly within a ten-year publishing frame—1979-1989, I am more interested in the trajectory of two seemingly incommensurate Latin American revolutionary periods: the nationwide governmental upheaval of the Cuban Revolution (1952-1959) and the community-based nationwide radicalism of the MNU (1979-). While the former has achieved a governmental redefinition for all Cubans, the latter is concentrated in Black communities. To complicate matters further, both radical movements maintained opposing attitudes towards racial democracy. In contrast to the MNU's rejection of racial democracy, the Communist Party of Cuba embraced it, outlawing expressions of Black pride, including Afro-diasporic religions in which Afro-descendants had grounded their identities. Morejón and Herrera, for example, began their careers as young writers for *Ediciones El Puente*, a post-revolutionary literary organization that published works of racial, gender, and sexual liberation in the early 60s. Many members of *Ediciones El Puente* were sent to labor camps in the wake of their writing, and in 1965, the government terminated the organization because of the perceived threat of its content. In the aftermath of the shutdown, Morejón did not publish her work for another 12 years (Luis 91). After her hiatus, she published *Parajes de Una Época/ Sites of an Era*, which contains her most famous poem "Mujer Negra," whose last stanza triumphantly alludes to the Cuban Revolution. In either instance, the Black poet becomes marginal, spectral, her image repressed for a revolutionary cause.

Carole Boyce Davies locates this kind of marginalization at an "elsewhere." In the introduction of her 1994 monograph, *Black Women: Migrations of the Subject*, Boyce Davies

indicates that the oppressions that Black women face along class, racial, and gender lines do not only form the grounds of their solidarity but act as markers of resistance. Across the Americas,⁷ Black women forge connections that reject the colonial geographical frameworks that map the intersections of capitalism, racism, patriarchy, sexism, and heterosexism. Divisions of nation pale in comparison to trans-(and pre-)national experiences of the transatlantic slave trade. Boyce Davies locates this geography of solidarity at an “elsewhere.”⁸ The elsewhere describes the removal of Black women from the locus of power that national boundaries entitle white men while indicating that Black women witness the legacies of structural injustice that marginalize them. The documentation of this witness in the form of writing must be interpreted as serious challenges to imperialism, nationalism, patriarchy, and other socioeconomic systems of exclusion. Boyce Davies writes, “...Black women/’s writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of the discussion” (26). In this respect, they define the boundaries of the elsewhere for themselves, transforming a site of systemic marginalization to one of resistance. Poetry is a compelling site to explore the elsewhere because of its connections to trans-Atlantic Black traditions of literacy and orality. Its covert operation of language documents and transcends temporal, geographic, and ephemeral locations.

⁷ This essay defines racial Blackness and gender within the historical context of the transatlantic trade. It is important to note that Boyce Davies’s “elsewhere” describes solidarity between all Black women of the Black diaspora and its geographical locations.

Accordingly, the sections of this essay address these poetic elsewheres and the Black archetypes that correspond to them. In the first section, “On ‘Revolutionary Black Womanhood: Locating Cuban Black Women Poets,” I frame María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo’s approach to Che Guevara’s *foco* theory within a Black feminist context to observe the instrumentalization of the Black mother in revolutionary contexts. Then, I read “Un Son Para Niños Antillanos” by Nicolás Guillén, Morejón’s mentor, in dialogue with Morejón’s “Mujer Negra” to complicate how the Black mother might be appropriated within a Black context. The next section “Mujer Negra Revisited” expounds upon these findings. I employ “Temporal Elsewheres” to transition to Brazilian poets and establish a common historical ground, particularly through the images of the Black mother and the sexualized *mulata*. The final section, “Materializing the Ephemeral Elsewhere: Locating ‘MULHER’” compares a portrait of a sexualized Black woman to one self-defined. I buttress my analysis with literary theories, such as those of U.S.-Trinidadian and U.S. Granadian scholars Boyce Davies and Audre Lorde, respectively; cultural criticism, referencing U.S. academic Saldaña-Portillo and Cuban Antonio Benitez-Rojo alongside Morejón; history, employing the language of U.S. scholar Saidiya Hartman; and finally, anthropology, quoting Brazilian feminist, Lélia Gonzalez.⁹ The achronological structure and inter-disciplinary citation of this essay recreates the temporal, and geographic elsewheres, illuminating the scope of violence against Black women in nation and revolution, and, more importantly, the ways Black women resist that violence.

⁹ I reserve that essay regarding national-belonging, race, and gender must be aware of its citations. I deliberately cite Black Brazilian and Black Cuban feminists; the U.S. Black women I cite are interested in transatlantic, anti-imperial conceptions of Blackness.

On “Revolutionary” Black Womanhood: Locating Cuban Black Women Poets

Mujer Negra/Black Woman (final Stanza)

Bajé de la Sierra	I came down the Sierra
Para acabar con capitales y usureros, con generales y burgueses.	To do away with capitals and usurers with generals and the bourgeoisie
Ahora soy: sólo hoy tenemos y creamos.	I am now: We only have and create today.
Nada nos es ajeno.	Nothing is foreign to us.
Nuestra la tierra.	Ours, the land.
Nuestros el mar y el cielo.	Ours, the sea and the sky.
Nuestras la magia y la quimera.	Ours, the magic and the fantasy.
Iguales míos, aquí los veo bailar alrededor del árbol que plantamos para el	My equals, I see them dance here. around the tree that we planted for
comunismo	communism
Su pródiga madera ya resuena	Its wooden progeny already resounds.

Morejón’s 1979 poem “Mujer Negra” is arguably the most well known poem of her extensive catalog. In the text, there is no mention of “América” or “Cuba;” yet one can infer from the first line, in which she details the “espuma” of the Ocean, and the fourth line, in which she describes the uncertainty of her origin, that she is either an enslaved woman or the descendant of enslaved woman near the sea. Accordingly, one infers that the poem details the journey of a Black woman through geographies and time. The last stanza, copied above, marks a switch from the first person narration of the earlier stanzas to a collective “we.” Notably, the

“we” of this poetry is not gendered or racialized; it would be inaccurate to suggest that the collective to which the speaker refers is one of Black women. The allusion of “bajé la Sierra” and the subsequent line of “para acabar con capitales y usureros” may here reference the victory of the Cuban rebels against Batista in the 1959 culmination of the Cuban Revolution. This choice is curious: even in a poem titled after a Black woman, Black female identity is subsumed in the collective Cuban national identity. Morejón appears to subscribe to the myths of racial democracy and equalization of race upon which the Cuban rebels built the nation, or, from another perspective, attempting to conform her writing to adhere to the demands of the Cuban administration. Morejón argues two entangled ideas: first, that the seed of communism might alleviate the generations of suffering that Black women have historically endured; and, second, that communism might finally incorporate the abused Black woman into the nation. Still, as Morejón’s writing demonstrates, the process of incorporating the Black woman into *cubanidad* requires that she sheds the inherited trauma of her ancestors. Her identity becomes folklorized, able to be appropriated for the means of the state.

María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo argues in her 2013 book, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, that the grammars of revolution and nation-building are gendered and exclusionary. Consider Che Guevara’s *foco* theory, first explained in *Guerilla Warfare* (1961): he writes that a successful upheaval of capitalist governments occurs when guerillas organize in fringe, proletariat, and rural areas, such as mountains, before encroaching the city. Saldaña Portillo argues that this theory is at once invested in the maintenance of patriarchal gender roles and upheaval of imperialist discourse that feminizes Third World Nations. If Guevara’s all-male guerrilla troop represents the ideal nation post-revolution, then it also illustrates an idealized country that subsumes traditional women’s gender

roles—principally, the mother-caretaker—into those of men. While such an approach to gendered structures may appear egalitarian, Saldaña Portillo writes that the absorption of gender roles into the male revolutionary subject creates a new hierarchy. Guevara rebirths himself from the feminized subject of a feminized geopolitical space, to a masculinized savior figure.

“Meanwhile the centrality of the revolutionary subject is solidified as he remains the masculine hero who must, in either case, discipline the peasants’ underdeveloped consciousness, drawing them forward toward revolutionary subjectivity,” she explains (84). A white Argentine who likens himself to the white American protagonist of a Jack London novel, Guevara is not necessarily committed to the restructuring of white supremacist, patriarchal ideals; rather, the revolutionary subjectivity that he outlines is one that perpetuates those structures, entangled in a politics of individual exceptionalism.

Since Guevara’s revolutionary subjectivity is racialized and gendered, so too are the gender dynamics he critiques. In other words, the gender roles that the guerilla subjects absorb are not without racial implications. I argue that because of its legacy of indigenous genocide 20th century Latin American conceptions of gender are racialized, regardless of nation, because of its colonial legacy of indigenous subjugation and trans-Atlantic enslavement of Black peoples. Since Guevara distances himself from feminized subjectivity, I posit that these roles, too, might encompass the racialized expectations of women. Further, since Saldaña-Portillo presents a theory that analyzes Guevara conceptions of masculinity and whiteness within a binary structure, then I argue that without the foil of the implicit image of the Black woman, Guevara might not be able to prop himself as a white male revolutionary savior: I question if the “tender” and “loving” revolutionary, trapped in a process of gender subversion and subject to the demands of

the revolutionary leader, mirrors the Black Mother figure, whose maternal disposition is compulsory for her survival.

Within pre-revolutionary literature, male writers and poets concerned with Latin American identity and Cuban nationhood have appropriated the image of the Black mother to subvert existing politics. The Negrista poetry movement of 1920 to 1935 contrasted the aims of the 1959 Revolution because of its concerns with celebrating racial Blackness; notwithstanding, the Negrista poetry movement imagined a racial democracy akin to that which Fidel Castro attempted to implement post-revolution. Nicolás Guillén, who would mentor Morejón, emerged as one of the most celebrated Negrista poets. Guillén, a *mulato*, produces a poetry that is polyrhythmic in form, an homage to the African roots on which he produces a Cuban identity. The Black mother that he constructs functions as the harbinger or protector of Cuba's Africanity.

In "Un Son ¹⁰Para Niños Antillanos," Guillén idealizes the racial mixing of the Caribbean to teach children about their Antillean identity. On one boat, a Black woman and a Spaniard coexist, as if to entrust the peace they enjoy into the children to whom Guillén dedicates the poem.

¹⁰ The English translation is that of Langston Hughes, the celebrated African American poet. His translation of the title, "A Song for Children of the Antilles," while accurate, possibly overlooks the connection of "Son" to the Afro-Cuban musical genre of *Son cubano*.

Un Son Para Niños Antillanos/ A Song for the Children of the Antilles (first 3 stanzas)

Por el Mar de las Antillas	On the sea of the Antilles
anda un barco de papel:	floats a boat of paper;
Anda y anda el barco barco,	floats and floats the boat boat
sin timonel.	without a pilot.
De La Habana a Portobelo,	From Havana to Portobelo,
de Jamaica a Trinidad,	from Jamaica to Trinidad,
anda y anda el barco barco	floats and floats the same boat boat
sin capitán.	without a captain.
Una negra va en la popa,	A Black girl in the stern
va en la proa un español:	and in the prow a Spaniard:
anda y anda el barco barco,	floats and floats the boat boat
con ellos dos.	with those two.

Here, the racial imaginary that Guillén envisions evokes the transnational imaginary of Guevara's *foco* theory; however, Guillén aligns Cuba with islands of the Antilles with explicit Black majorities. In this regard, Guillén's vision is in some ways incompatible with that of Guevara because of its racialized imagination. The "barco" that Guevara outlines is "sin capitán," again, contrasting the masculinized, exceptional individual that Guevara constructs.

From this perspective, the peasant class or proletariat from whom Guevara contrasts himself consists of the conjoined “negra” and “español.”

Still, such an egalitarian reading of the supposed racial democracy of Cuba is, like Guevara’s writing, exclusionary of non-masculine and non-white identities. The repetition of “barco” not only evokes the importance of water in networking the Caribbean, but the transatlantic slave trade that resulted in the Black relationship between Cuba, Jamaica, and Trinidad. While the futility of the “barco de papel” might suggest that the racial democracy is a sinking ship, the context of the poem as a song for children indicates that the paper boat is more likely a fantastical image. In this regard, racially charged space of the sea and the boat is stripped of its violent history: the Black African woman, whose ancestors were enslaved, sexually abused, and murdered upon the slave ship now, as a Black *cubana* serves to reconfigure the boat into the image of progress. In this regard, the appropriation of the image of the Black woman as an image of equality stands to erase the trauma of her ancestry: peace on the boat (and the idealized future) is dependent on her compliance. Unlike Guevara, Guillén inserts the image of the Black woman into his present vision of egalitarianism, like Guevara, the expression of this woman is conditional; she is a subject of an idealized future.

As in Guevara’s writing, Guillén subsumes the voice of the Black woman into both the collective identity of peasantry and the ideal of revolution. Notably, both the popular figures of the Revolution and Negrista movement are men. In either case, the humanity of the Black woman is reduced to an image. I question the utility of the Black woman as the voice of the national revolution. Dawn Duke argues in *Literary Passion, Ideological Commitment: Toward a Legacy of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian Women Writers*, that the poetry of Morejón, Herrera, and Excilia Saldaña “exalt the revolutionary capabilities of these women by confirming that

leadership qualities, combativeness, and armed resistance are female attributes” (140). This assertion, while powerful in some respects, in some ways assumes that the construction of revolutionary ideology that Guevara and Castro developed allowed space for the voice of the Black woman. Moreover, Duke’s word choice of aggressive markers overlooks the tenderness and love that Saldaña-Portillo outlines in her close reading of Guevara. The result is that while feminine qualities are revolutionary, they are appropriated for the gains of white men. A productive reading of Black women’s poetry as a “voicing” would not necessarily insert the Black woman within the narrative of the revolution, but critique how idealism and revolutionary ideology have abused and ignored her voice. In this regard, the poetry of Morejón and Herrera provide modes by which to counter the aims of the revolution and the poetics before them. Their poetry, I argue, is not necessarily in service of a national or racial revolution, but self-conscious texts that dialogue with the image of Black women in Cuban literary history.

Mujer Negra Revisited

Since the self-actualization of Black womanhood is excluded from the construction of Cuban national identity, I consider how Black women poets define Black womanhood for themselves. In the case of “Mujer Negra,” Morejón plays with the archetypes of Black womanhood in order to construct a composite Cuban identity. I question how her construction of Black womanhood may be read as threatening to the aims of the Cuban Revolution. While the previous section might have implied that the Black feminism of Black Cuban poets is limited to conform to a narrative of the state, here, I nuance that argument to identify sites of literary resistance and “elsewhereness.”

complicates the time. The speaker is in touch with her senses: she is at the coast of the water just as an enslaved woman might be. As Boyce Davies has written, Black women's writing extends beyond the bounds of time, and exists in a realm of memory. Consider the "espuma" of the "mar," a subtle detail to mark the memory of the Black woman's journey in the atmosphere of the land on which she arrives. To invoke the distance of the speaker's forgotten coast across the sea, "hicieron travesar" is indented. Notably, "ni mi lengua ancestral" is also indented; as if to resignify the distance of one's "ancestral language" from the Spanish in which the poem is written. At the same time, the singularity of this line may imply that the speaker is speaking her ancestral language through the invocation of memory. Although the speaker cannot remember the ocean she crossed or her language, she remembers what she smells and sees ("divisé" occupies a single line, indented, reflecting the flight of the "alcatraz"). Her senses ground her in the present tense through which the poem is told. One can then read the poem as a search for the identity that she lost in a journey. In this way, Morejón grounds her Black female identity in memory precisely because of the pain of its forced erasure.

Although the replication of trauma in "Mujer Negra" might reproduce notions of Black suffering, from a Black feminist perspective, Morejón's writing also exhibits the complexities of Black female identity. The various identities that the speaker assumes nuance the archetypes of the Black woman in relation to a Cuban national narrative. The speaker of "Mujer Negra," who presumably speaks from the present of post-revolutionary Cuba, assumes a voice of her ancestor who, historically, would not have the tools to record it. In "Mujer Negra," Morejón reproduces the experience of an enslaved woman to uncover a hidden source of power. In the same way, the subtleties of Morejón's language humanize the archetypal image of the Black Woman that is appropriated to become national identity. The phrase "recurrir" evokes the rebirth of the enslaved

woman, removed from her land of origin, on the new land. Morejón not only comments on the repeated self-definition of Black women through generations, but the way in which Black female suffering is a repeated act at the center of the construction of a new nation.

Morejón invokes Cuban scholar Antony Benitez Rojo's *The Repeating Island*, a monograph that was released after the publication of "Mujer Negra," in 1992. Benitez Rojo argues that transatlantic slavery is a machine that ripples out to the islands of the Caribbean Sea, repeating itself as different iterations into contemporary times. One may argue that Morejón's work echoes the "repeating island" because the repetition of the speaker's identity hinges on her descentance from the transatlantic slave trade. Although Benitez Rojo's concept of the "repeating island" is productive in its ostensible opposition to Cuban myths of racial democracy, which disregards the terror of slavery, it also reproduces the archetypes that make those myths possible. Benitez Rojo writes, that Caribbean culture is a kind of performance, "but performance not only in terms of scenic interpretation but also in terms of the execution of a ritual, that is, that 'certain way' in which the two Negro women who conjured away the apocalypse were walking. In this 'certain kind of way' there is expressed the mystic or magical (if you like) loam of the civilizations that contributed to the formation of Caribbean culture" (11). Benitez Rojo reproduces the archetype of the Strong Black Woman, whose body is in service of the salvation of all peoples. He does not necessarily appear to consider the corporeal toll of "conjur[ing] away an apocalypse. As such, Benitez Rojo mythologizes Black female identity (Tinsley 197). The "Negro women" of his passage are passive, almost magical. The speaker of "Mujer Negra" rejects this characterization: here, the Black woman is in tune with her body and able to voice the abuse she endures. She is not a cog in a machine, but a full, capable human being.

While the last stanza could indicate a desire to conform within the aims of the state, it can also be read as a reprieve from the machine of suffering. The speaker, alienated in her repeated suffering, finds a reprieve in the aspirations of a new Cuba. In the same vein, the penultimate stanza indicates that the communism of the new Cuba is, in part, founded on the politics of the maroon communities of formerly enslaved peoples.

Mujer Negra (stanza 5)

<p style="text-align: center;">Me fui al monte</p> <p>Mi real independencia fue el palenque y cabalgué entre las tropas de Maceo.</p> <p>Sólo un siglo más tarde, junto a mis descendientes, desde una azul montaña,</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">I went to the hill</p> <p>My real independence was the <i>Palenque</i> and I rode between the troops of Maceo.</p> <p>Only a century later alongside my descendants from a blue mountain,</p>
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The mountain of the ultimate stanza, which alludes to the Cuban revolution, is introduced as the site of the “palenque,” a maroon community. From this perspective, Morejón does not necessarily suggest that Black people are the bearers of an original revolution, but that their values of collectivity and resistance embody the aims of the present revolution. Morejón undermines the racial democracy of the revolution, for, among the collective “descendientes” of those who claim Blackness, she finds “real independencia.”

The embrace of Blackness that the penultimate verse of “Mujer Negra” suggests is curious in conversation with Morejón’s essays. In, “Cuba y Su Profunda Africanía,”/ “Cuba and

Its Deep Africanity,” Morejón defines Africanity as a trace of African heritage at the center of Cuban culture. Morejón’s attempts to locate Blackness within a mosaic of Cuba’s races. For Morejón, the idea of a pure Africanity is inaccessible, an ahistorical reproach to the legacy of *mestizaje* that has come to define the country. She writes, “...pues nuestra cultura pertenece a los vaivenes de un universo marcado por la justicia social y impostergable liberación de nuestra alma, profundamente cubana, nueva, diversa, y, sobre todo, como quiso el poeta de *Sóngoro Consongo*¹¹, ‘libre como el aire’” /“as such our culture belongs to the ups and downs of a universe marked by social justice and the unpostponable liberation of our soul, deeply Cuban, new, diverse, and, above all, as the poet of *Sóngoro Consongo* wished, ‘free like the air’” (182). The imperative of accepting African cultures derives from the same origin of the logic of *mestizaje*: Africanity must be accepted because it is the foundation of the all-encompassing Cuban culture. Applying a linear logic, I conclude that Morejón’s self-identification as a “Black woman” may be read as a limited resistance to the oppression of the state. She declares herself as a Black woman not necessarily opposed or at an elsewhere to Cuba, but as a contributor to the national picture of *cubanidad*.

I argue that “Mujer Negra” demonstrates a strong resistance—or elsewhere—most strongly in its geography of memory. Not only does the speaker journey through the origins of transatlantic slavery in the 16th century to the 1959 victory of the Cuban Revolution, but her voyage is nonlinear. The preservation of African heritage is a resistance to linear notions of “progress” that distance the Afro-descendant from her culture in search of a de-racialized,

¹¹ Reference to Nicolás Guillén.

communist Cubanidad. The strength that the speaker sources from the Palenque, where she is carried into “solo un siglo más tarde,” is located at an elsewhere of time.

“Mujer Negra” is therefore a circular poem. In order to establish oneself as a “Mujer Negra,” grounded in strength and independence, one must engage with the ancestors. The longevity of the ancestors determines the longevity of their progeny: the past and present act exist in the same plane and the same instance, repeating in a loop rather than a straight arrow. It is this elsewhere of temporalities that mobilizes the elsewhere of geographies. Interestingly, in “Cuba y Su Profunda Africanía,” Morejón writes that the most unadulterated Africanity is present in Afro-Cuban religions, who share their origins with Afro-religions of Brazil and Haiti: these religions, too, are syncretized, qualified by the languages and icons of the colonizing Spanish, Portuguese, and French. Morejón mentions Brazil and Haiti because of the similarities of Santería to Candomblé and Vodun and the ways these religions carry origins of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the present. What results is the idea that the temporal elsewhere gives way to the geographic elsewhere of Ribeiro’s “Black hemisphere.”

Temporal Elsewheres

The discrepancy of the apparent interests of Morejón’s poetry and essays recall the utility of poetic form. In her essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” poet Audre Lorde asserts that for (Black) women, poetry allows for a kind of freedom-making. In regard to Boyce Davies’s “elsewhereness,” I conclude that the resistance that poetry provides is rooted in a transcendence of time and space, which, as Lorde expounds, are racialized and gendered: “The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the Black mothers in each of us-the poet whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free” (127). Her poetic language (consider the subtle positioning

of “poet” and “whisperers”) demonstrates the capability of poetics to transcend the boundaries of colonial language and its grammars. Lorde anchors her poetic freedom in the image of the Black mother, transformed from a static nationalist figure to a transtemporal symbol of resistance and refusal.

“Retrato Oral de la Victoria”/ “Oral Potrait of Miss Victoria”

Georgina Herrera

Qué bisabuela mía esa Victoria.	That great-grandmother of mine, Victoria.
Cimarroneandose y en bocabajos	<i>Cimarroneandose</i> and in beatings
pasó la vida.	she spent her life.
Dicen	They say
que me parezco a ella.	that I look like her.

One observes the transtemporality of the Black Mother in Cuban poet Georgina Herrera’s “Retrato Oral de la Victoria,” published ten years after “Mujer Negra,” in 1979. The poem immediately distinguishes itself from the quiet universality of the nameless speaker of “Mujer Negra.” A tribute to Herrera’s great-grandmother, “Retrato Oral de la Victoria” instead echoes the penultimate stanza of “Mujer Negra,” reflecting on the resistance and independence of Cuba’s Black maroon communities. “Qué bisabuela mía esa Victoria,” the poem begins emphatically, locating the reader within the personal domain of the speaker. The immediate naming of la Victoria serves to honor the life of the great-grandmother of the speaker and establish the reader within the temporal elsewhere of memory; as one gathers from the next line,

la Victoria is an enslaved person, as the verb “cimarroneándose¹²” specifically refers to the act of escaping bondage and “bocabajos” is a distinctive Cuban term for whipping¹³. Subtly, the enjambment of “cimarroneándose y en bocabajos/ pasó la vida” separates the violence that la Victoria endured and the mention of her life; however, the proximity of these lines indicates that displays of resistance carry with them the trauma of violence. The brevity of the poem, too, may allude to an irretrievable resistance, the undocumented ways that la Victoria lived her life outside of the boundaries of enslavement.

The last lines “Dicen/que me parezco a ella” resuscitate the life of la Victoria in her great-granddaughter, as if to complete a circle of time. The implication that the speaker looks like la Victoria may contain a hint of pride: the reader infers that like her great-grandmother, the speaker resists the hardships she faces. Still, the gaps between “cimarroneándose y en bocabajos/pasó la vida” and “Dicen/que me parezco a ella,” reveal a fractured sense of time: though the speaker looks like la Victoria, the “retrato” that she outlines for the reader is written and the portrait itself is an oral relic, possibly modified through generations. Further, just as the life outside of slavery that la Victoria might have found as a *cimarrón* is lost from the text, the speaker comes to be defined by physical characteristics unknown to the reader and possibly unknown to her. This poem is as much about lost time as recurring, or cyclical, time; time is a fractured, incomplete circle.

¹² Observe that the term for escaping enslavement, “cimarroneándose,” contains the word “cimarrón,” or maroon, a member of the *palenque*.

¹³ More specifically, the term refers to the position one would assume when whipped. “Boca,” or “mouth,” facing below, or “below.”

Another implication of the speaker's resemblance to her enslaved ancestor is that the mechanisms of transatlantic slavery that subjected la Victoria to "cimarronear" endure to the present at which the speaker writes. Such an implication would subvert the image of the Black woman mother-figure from Guillen's benevolent participant in *mestizaje* to a symbol of Black resistance: a resurfacing of a figure from the past to uncover the injustices that endure in the present. The naming of "la Victoria," or "victory," both elegizes the great-grandmother's spirit and commemorates the generational survival of her memory.

"Passado Histórico"/ "Historic Past"

Sônia Fátima¹⁴

Do açoite	Of the whip
da mulata erótica	of the erotic <i>mulata</i>
da negra boa de eito e de cama	of the good negress in bed
(nenhum registro)	(no record)

It is at the intersection of temporal and geographical resistances that I locate Black Brazilian poets. The idea of lost time reverberating in the present is reminiscent of the Brazilian poet Sônia Fátima's "Passado Histórico." Bereft of verbs, "Passado Histórico" tells of the history of Black woman through image, unearthing the violence that symbolic Black womanhood enacts

¹⁴ I am unable to find the original year in which this poem was published, but certain it predates a 1998 publication in the anthology, *Cadernos Negros: Os Melhores Poemas*.

on living Black women. Unlike “Mujer Negra,” this poem rejects the myths of *mestizaje*. Fátima creates a kind of circle of violence: the “negra boa de eito e de cama” produces the “mulata erotica,” who is first introduced through the violence she endures. The açoite of Brazil quickly mirrors the bocabajo of Cuba. The last line, “(nenhum registro),” may refer to the mother of the “negra,” an African woman whom Morejón invokes in the first stanza of *Mujer Negra* and of whom there is little recorded information beyond numbers in ledgers or diagrams of a slave ship. Thus, the lost record addresses the ways in which the violence enacted on the Black Woman is that which is recorded in the archive, not her humanity, consciousness, or witness. Consider that that which survives in the record of “Passado Histórico” is the colonial perception of the “mulata erotica,” not just the sexual violence she faced. The absence of verbs therefore reflects an idea that violence is not just an action, but an existence. One reading of “Passado Histórico” supposes that the violent verbs such as “assault” and “beat” are absorbed in the very bodies of the violated.

Fátima’s poetry prompts the reader to ask then how the elsewhere might be located if the body itself is without a record. How does one mark one’s place if one’s body is spectral? Might the elsewhere encompass this ephemeral location? Fatima’s poem is reminiscent of Saidiyah Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts,” in which Hartman indicates that the archive of transatlantic slavery is necessarily one of violence. She locates the Black woman body as the very site of extreme violence and neglect. The implication of this location is that the Black woman embodies both trauma of Black body and the forced oblivion of collective national memory. Referring to

the Black woman as Venus¹⁵, Hartman writes, “The libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past. What has been said and what can be said about Venus take for granted the traffic between fact, fantasy, desire, and violence” (5). The body of Venus is therefore a contradictory pointer on the map of history. Although the body serves to document the abuses of transatlantic slavery that may be overwritten or ignored in the national archive, the official documentation of that body erases the person who inhabits it. Still, Hartman attempts to locate Venus and her psyche, to reconstruct a narrative of Venus’s life outside the violence that defines it.

Materializing the Ephemeral Elsewhere: Locating “MULHER”

In the final pages of “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman concludes that the search for a non-violent archive of transatlantic slavery is a futile effort: to sketch a speculative life of Venus from various ledgers, accounts, and margins is to negate the violence that silenced that life. It is to ask Venus to present her body in the construction of a new archive, to exhaust her body in another way. I employ this argument to further question the utilities of violence and the body of the Black woman in the context of Black resistance. Hartman’s project of reconciling the silence of the archive may be read as a resistance to the Grand Narrative of transatlantic slavery within the historical archives of the Americas. Crucially, Hartman suggests that the Black female body is the critical site of violence no matter the context. I intervene Hartman’s work within a context of

¹⁵ The term Venus at once connotes the sexualized Black female body, the tradition of naming enslaved people after Latin and Greek Gods, and the “terrible beauty” of enslavement, a term coined by Fred Moten, who Hartman credits in the essay.

Black radicalism. In the section “On ‘Revolutionary’ Black Womanhood: Locating Cuban Black Women Poets,” I posited that the violence of a masculine revolution, as Hartman writes, reduces the Black woman to an image to be used to justify that violence. Indeed, the poetry of Black Brazilian men has repeated this kind of violence in service of a masculinized resistance to the narratives of the nation-state.

Excerpt from “*É Tempo da Mulher*,”/ “*It Is Time for Woman*”

*Cuti*¹⁶

em sua ilha de mãos	in her island of no’s
e arremessos	and heavings
exercitando batalhões oníricos	exercising dream battalions
o relógio com suas obrigações e rugas	the clock with its obligations and wrinkles
questiona eros	questions eros
homo	homo
hetero	hetero
o útero e seu mistério	the uterus and her mystery
sapado de salto	high heels
batom	lipstick
rouge	rouge
e este inadiável instante etéreo	and this unavoidable ethereal moment

¹⁶ I was not able to find the original year in which this poem was published.

de saltar	to rise
para	in
dentro	to
de	the
.....si][yes (or if).....
na conquista do espaço além da moda	in the conquest of the space beyond the conventional
é tempo de mulher	it is time for woman
é tempo de colher	it is time of the harvest

Cuti's¹⁷ “É Tempo da Mulher” balances a delicate elsewhere of Black Womanhood. A call for action— “É Tempo da Mulher” may be interpreted as an imperative for women to be involved in the Black struggle—it balances the aesthetics of femininity, such as lipstick and high heels, with the masculinized violence of “batalhões.” Cuti may establish that the “Tempo da Mulher” is located at an elsewhere in which colonial binaries of masculinity and femininity do not apply to the “ephemeral” existence of Black womanhood. At the same time, the resistance to heteropatriarchy that Cuti outlines is necessarily sexual. “Rouge” and “sapatos de salto” are preceded by “eros,” suggesting that the aesthetic choices of the Black woman are sexual in nature. Though this sexuality may be a reclamation of self in firm opposition to a history of violation and sexual assault, here, Cuti repeats the sexualized image of the Black woman in his bid for a “space beyond the conventional.” Such a contradictory resistance is reminiscent of

¹⁷ Cuti is widely credited as one of the original editors of *Cadernos Negros*. He began the project in 1982.

Hartman's questions of utility. In order to engage in a refusal of colonialist oppressions, he is bound to enact them and the violence that they carry. For instance, the ellipses before "si" in the line that precedes "é tempo de mulher" at once recall an orgasmic "yes" and the word "se"/ "if." In this way, the sexual Black woman's body is a site for possibilities. Still, Cuti locates these possibilities in the "útero," requiring that the Black woman service her body as a reproductive future for her people. Recalling the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, one supposes that the reproductive future that the Black woman embodies is already appropriated within Latin American nationalist discourse: the consent of the Black woman in the creation of the racially mixed racial democracy is disregarded. Though Cuti locates the Black woman on an "isla de não," implying her choice in a sexual context, the Black woman is still embroiled in reproductive futurist demands that take advantage of her consent. In this regard, the Black woman, though located at an elsewhere of refusal, is still firmly planted in the locus of colonial oppressions that abuse, sexualize, and objectify her body.

The special elsewhere that Black women occupy—a taut relation between inhabiting the body, servicing others, and maintaining an image, is one that Brazilian feminist Lélia González writes in her ethnography, "Retrato da Mulher Negra"/ "Portrait of the Black Woman." González's portrait illuminates that the expectations of the Black woman to lend her body to a reproductive future is to continue colonialist violence. González's Black woman is, for most of her essay, without a name, working to take care of her many children and rarely resting. At school, the teachers worry about her daughter. "Agora, pede pra ela cantar o samba do bloco aqui do morro que ela canta direitinho a primeira e a segunda parte. musiquinha desse tamaninho?"/ "If she memorized the long song lyrics of the samba right away, how could she not learn this very short song? Just laziness, right?" (Khan-Perry & Machado 44, 48). Within this question, one

observes the ways that the labor of Black women is taken for granted. The labor that the Black woman endures to ensure the survival of her children is questioned in relation to the generalized image of the happy, dancing Black samba queen. The insult of “laziness,” is twofold: not only does it disregard her reality, it suggests that the female progeny of the Black woman must also offer themselves to the labor of image maintenance, recalling the cycle of the sexualized *negra* and *mulata* of “Passado Histórico.” González’s written portrait slides from the internal monologue of the woman to third-person descriptions. The final line reads, “É a resposta não era difícil de ser encontrada: a mulher-sentada-na-porta-da-barroca era a própria Solidão”/“And the answer was not hard to find: the woman-sitting-at-the-door-of-the-shack was Solitude herself” (46, 49). Therefore, the Black woman—graduated from the sexual negress to the Black mother—endures a cycle of violence that fractures her into an existential solitude, elsewhere.

I suggest that Cuti’s maleness might contribute to the oversight of his vision of the “tempo da mulher;” however, I do not suggest that women writers, because they are women, might engage a deeper degree of analysis of Black womanhood. Such an assertion might be naïve because it discounts the coloniality of internal misogyny, racism, and other kinds of oppression. The elsewhere of Black womanhood is created because of the reality of western colonialism. Bearing in mind this contradiction, however, I suggest that the poetry of Black women contains a sensitive corporeality that is not necessarily present in the poetry of Black men. In the case of the Black Brazilians of the Quilombhoje collective, for instance, a movement created out of an imperative for Black equity, many Black women members were already attuned to the racism that they faced. Once involved in a circle of Black men, however, Black women found themselves removed to an elsewhere, wherein Black men ignored and devalued their

claims to Black feminism. Black women write from the elsewhere of literature, the Black community, the community of other women, and time.

“MULHER”

Esmeralda Ribeiro

MU		MU		MU		MU
	É					
LHER		LHER		LHER		LHER
	DO					SEM
	HEMISFÉRIO NEGRO					DEFINIÇÃO
	AO					SEM
	HEMISFÉRIO SUL					LIMITAÇÃO
	MU		É			MU
	LHER					LHER
			FORÇA			
			GUERREIRA			
			NA			
			LUTA AFRICANA			

Consider the fractured solitude of “MULHER.” A poem about unity, “MULHER” itself is divided. It dismantles the Portuguese word for “woman,” a colonial sign for gender, into a literary abstraction. Might the contradictions of solitude and unity encompass the “unavoidable ethereal moment” overlooked in the poetry of Cuti? “MULHER” simultaneously evokes the

image of a pubis, a geographic territory, and the symbol of Venus. It is a literary and political vision of elsewhere. This way, Ribeiro transforms the archive. Instead of just conveying a singular narrative of the violence that Black women endure, the poem projects a multiplicity of resistances. In capital letters, the repetitive and fractured “MU” and “LHER” evoke the forceful chant of protest (MU may refer to the MNU). The only present verb in “MULHER” is “É,” reflecting that the most powerful show of Black female resistance is her existence itself. Its omission from the vertical reading “MU/LHER/SEM/DEFINIÇÃO” rejects an inner triangular formation between “É,” as if to suggest that the borders of Black women’s existence are at once indefinite and self-defined.

Given this multiplicity of experiences, I argue that the lack of verbs conveys that the separation of “MU” and “LHER” is not necessarily the active shattering of a whole. Rather, the division of “MU” and “LHER” are presented as pre-existing conditions of Black womanhood, perhaps reflecting the historical bone- and spirit-breaking violence against Venus. Interestingly, while the title “MULHER” connotes the woman’s struggle, the poem funnels into the singular “LUTA AFRICANA.” I contend that, here, Ribeiro locates Black womanhood within Blackness and Blackness within womanhood, because the historical experience of Black womanhood renders both elements of her identity inseparable. Such an assertion rejects the myths of racial democracy because the Venus of “MULHER” establishes herself within the explicit Black origins.

Still, Ribeiro enlists herself in a Black cause despite the history of sexist and patriarchal expectations of Black men within Quilombhoje. I argue that “MULHER” contends with this contradictory bid for Black women’s resistance by rejecting colonialist gender binaries. The contrast of the word choice of “GUERREIRA,” finds the Black woman at a gendered elsewhere

in which conventional femininity and masculinity are infused. Unlike the reproductive future that Cuti presents, Ribeiro's Black woman embodies a "FORÇA GUERREIRA" that does not explicitly service her body. While the word "GUERREIRA" qualifies the feminine "FORÇA," its singularity evokes the feminine form of "warrior," suggesting that the Black woman is a soldier enlisting herself in the violence of revolution. Still, Ribeiro omits the violence from her narrative. Whereas the blank space of "Retrato Oral de la Victoria" and "Passado Histórico" mourn the loss of collective memory, in "MULHER," the omissions between the words create space for possible interpretations. In this way, Ribeiro addresses the archive of Black women implicitly: she constructs an urgency for revolution that does not replicate violence against her.

If Black women's resistance rejects the careless incorporation of their bodies in a singular vision of masculinized resistance, then their visions of resistance exercise critical solidarity with other Black women. Though "MULHER" reflects a geographic sensibility, the location of the "LUTA AFRICANA" is undefined. The body of "MU/LHER" that Ribeiro outlines is, in many ways, too disjointed to be assembled for any kind of nationalist discourse. Her imperative for the "LUTA AFRICANA" searches outside the nation for that which threatens the balance of racial democracy: Blackness. In this way, the "FORÇA" of the Black woman stems from collective action with, not for, others. "MULHER" transforms the violence of the archive into an elsewhere for a Black woman "SEM/LIMITAÇÃO."

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