

REVIEW

Beatriz Nascimento, *The Dialectic Is in the Sea: The Black Radical Thought of Beatriz Nascimento*, edited and translated by Christen A. Smith, Bethânia N. F. Gomes and Archie Davies

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Cassie Osei

Bucknell University

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In Brazil, Black feminist theory from the United States has helped transform conversations about race, gender and class in both popular discourse and the academy. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory is assigned reading in the social sciences. Many bookstores now carry translations of bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis. Crenshaw, Collins and Davis have all visited Brazil to great fanfare, where their speaking engagements are often sold out or exceed seating capacity.

Much slower and smaller, however, has been the reception of Brazilian Black feminist theory in the United States. Writers and thinkers such as Lélia Gonzalez, Sueli Carneiro, Thereza Santos and Luiza Bairros are not cited, or under-represented, even in works engaging Brazilian studies. While the international outcry surrounding the assassination of Rio de Janeiro councilwoman and Black feminist Marielle Franco has been loud, her name is not well known in the United States or Canada. In contrast to Brazil – where translations are abundant, in print and ever growing – in the United States, Black feminist texts from Brazil are limited to rare translations in academic journals, or academics who already read Portuguese and have access to the original texts in that language.

It is from this context that *The Dialectic Is in the Sea: The Black Radical Thought of Beatriz Nascimento* exists. This volume excavates the written corpus of Maria Beatriz Nascimento (1942–95), a Black Brazilian writer, theorist, activist and artist. Nascimento, born in the Northeastern state of Sergipe, came of political consciousness as a college student during Brazil's military dictatorship. As an activist and critic, she spearheaded debates that challenged both leftist and right-wing investments in racial democracy discourses and gender hierarchies. She was an early theorist on the history of *quilombos*, Brazil's maroon settlements. Nascimento's forays into visual art and poetry demonstrate a mind that did not separate culture and politics but saw them as necessary composites towards a social movement

for Black autonomy, self-determination and global liberation against racism, colonialism and capitalism.

As editors Christen A. Smith, Bethânia Gomes and Archie Davies argue in the introduction, Nascimento, whose intellectual work innovates the methodological and theoretical approaches of several disciplines all at once, is fundamental to engaging ‘the Black radical tradition’ (p. 17). *The Dialectic Is in the Sea* is organised across four sections: (i) race in Brazilian society, (ii) Black women, (iii) historiography and theorisation of *quilombos*, and (iv) Black aesthetics and spirituality. Each section includes a contextualising scholarly essay for readers. Biographical essays, scholarly reflections from Nascimento’s biographer Alex Ratts and renowned theorist Muniz Sodré, a glossary of terminology, and a roundtable led by Gomes, Nascimento’s only child, foreground Nascimento’s critical thinking, and writing on knowledge production, capitalism, colonialism and white supremacy are easily in conversation with Black radical thought of the twentieth century.

‘For a History of Black People’, an essay that articulates Black marginalisation and objectification within traditional narratives of Brazilian history, will remind readers of W. E. B. Du Bois’ expansive thinking and strategies in *Black Reconstruction*, first published in 1935. In ‘The Black Women in the Labor Market’, Nascimento’s critiques of Brazil’s modern capitalist economy and its colonial and slaveocratic roots are resonant with the works of Walter Rodney and Kwame Nkrumah, as well as the ever-expanding field of racial capitalism. Her early research on *quilombos*, particularly their continuities and discontinuities with socio-political systems in precolonial Angola and Congo, foreshadow later scholarship by Brazilian historians of slavery. Nascimento’s work on *quilombos* and Black women’s use of space are highlighted as innovative interventions in geography (pp. 20–3), which should be in conversation with the likes of Milton Santos and Katherine McKittrick.

The Dialectic Is in the Sea not only elevates Nascimento from margin to centre for an English-speaking audience but also attempts to completely reconfigure knowledge production and the form of translation itself. Smith, Gomes and Davies collectively organised, translated and edited Nascimento’s text. As they noted in both the introduction and Davies’ essay on the subject, translation is often ground zero for the politics of knowledge production. ‘Power relations’ are ‘embedded in how texts circulate’ (p. 43), and for writers hailing from the Global South who do not write in English, these hierarchies are crystal clear. It matters *which authors* are prioritised for translation, who *chooses* to publish a translation, and who is *chosen* to translate. This is especially apt for Afro-Latin American women intellectuals and writers, whose visibility is overshadowed by translations prioritising white men already embedded in the national canon (Gilberto Freyre, Caio Prado Jr. or Mário de Andrade) or Black male intellectuals whose work already has an established legacy or is being recovered (Abdias do Nascimento – no relation, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis). While Freyre frequently occupies space on syllabi and reading lists in the anglophone world of Brazilian studies, pairing a reading of his work with Nascimento’s criticism would open up new space for students and scholars to see how frequently Black women challenged his rendering of slavery and sexual relations. Likewise, reading Abdias do Nascimento alongside Beatriz Nascimento would elevate critical

questions on Black intra-gender relations, which are largely absent from Abdias do Nascimento's writings on Black social movements, aside from cursory acknowledgement of women in his organisation Teatro Experimental do Negro. *The Dialectic Is in the Sea* points to directions specialists of Brazilian studies can take when it comes to representing its socio-political histories and representations.

Translation, therefore, is not a passive process but an active one with infinite consequences for eliminating or engendering inequality. The publication of a translation often determines whether a scholarly debate will reach new heights or remain an intellectual ghetto incapable of imagining otherwise. A translation can transform a writer and propel them forward into a canon. While Smith, Gomes and Davies challenge the notion of a canon, they do contend that their endeavour will begin to shift how Black Brazilian feminist theory will be regarded in the next several decades. With the publication of this volume and other forthcoming releases, a sea change is surely underway.