



*To Exist is
to Resist*

**BLACK FEMINISM
IN EUROPE**

**EDITED BY
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Introduction: On the Problems and Possibilities of European Black Feminism and Afrofeminism

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How might we theorise and practise Black feminism and Afrofeminism in Europe today? This is a provocative question for Black women, as our politics are too often erased from or misrecognised in the European imagination.¹ We define Black feminism as a praxis that identifies women racialised as Black as knowing agents for social change. Black feminism is both a theory and a politics of affirmation and liberation. Black feminism names and valorises the knowledge production and lived experiences of different Black women derived from our class, gender identity, legal status and sexuality, for example. This insistence on Black women as human, as agents and as knowers is critical to any kind of Black feminist thought. It radically dissents from and subverts the hegemonic constructions of Black women as either irrelevant and invisible objects or alien Others who disrupt the taken for granted racialised and gendered social and economic order. Crucially, Black feminism is also a politics of liberation. Our struggle for our humanity is revolutionary political action that imagines another world is possible beyond the plunder, exploitation and expropriation that are the bedrock of liberal democracies. It is important to stress that Black feminism does not merely operate against violence and exclusion but creates and fosters a different way of seeing and being in this world. Black feminism is always a creative and dynamic production of thinking and living otherwise.

We can trace Black feminism back to the earliest days of slavery and colonialism. Where the historical record survives, we find the narratives of displaced and enslaved Black women analysing the violence of their everyday lives and resisting those forces of dehumanisation to assert their belonging in humanity. From abolition to anti-colonial movements,

Black women have been at the forefront of liberation struggles and have made clear that no emancipatory movement is to be taken seriously unless the specific oppression faced by Black women – based on race, class, gender and sexuality – are addressed. This enduring lesson from Sojourner Truth to Jeanne and Paulette Nardal to Claudia Jones to May Ayim has yet to be learned.

Feminism has always been an uncomfortable coalition between Black and white women. Because white women benefit from white supremacy, they can be, at best, unreliable actors for liberation and at worst, active and willing agents for Black women's oppression. Black feminism is oftentimes positioned as a reaction to white-dominated feminism but this is a gross misreading of Black feminist history and theory. In fact, Black women have always been leaders of women's liberation and have had to struggle against and defeat white women so that everyone – and not just white men and women – can be free. Any honest history of white women's roles in abolition, for example, and how their experiences in this movement radicalised them to demand the vote – ahead of Black men and Black women – demonstrates the point. Black feminism is in no way an afterthought or a derivative of white feminism but rather a radical praxis for the liberation of everyone – starting with Black women.

However, Black feminism is too often limited in how it conceives of itself and Black women. Black women in Europe must struggle for our humanity while simultaneously negotiating the dominant discourses of racial, gender and intersectional politics of North American Black feminists that make it difficult to name and take action on our particular racialised, gendered and classed experiences in a European context. Because the United States is the global hegemonic power, it imposes and transmits its values and culture across the world. Much of what we understand as American culture is actually Black American culture popularised through social movements and social media. Black American culture is a key way the United States exercises its soft power. In the Black diaspora, Black American culture looms large and has a tendency to crowd out and misunderstand other histories and understandings of Blackness and resistance. For example, pretty much everyone knows the basic story of the American Civil Rights Movement and some of its key players from Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King Jr. However, the same popular knowledge does not exist about liberation struggles outside (and against) the United States and from which American activists drew inspiration. So, there is a constant tension within the Black diaspora of having

Black American politics and culture dominate, with little reciprocal knowledge about the long history of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles in Europe and against various European empires. Thus we read Angela Davis and Kwame Turé but less so Aimé Césaire and Gail Lewis. This lacuna matters greatly to how we think about Blackness, solidarity and resistance. These dynamics are re-enforced by the domination of the English language, which further preferences American, and to a lesser extent, British texts.

Black feminism is also entangled in these power relations. Too often, when we think about Black feminist theory and activism, we look to the particular Black American experience and seek to universalise and apply it to Europe. This is a mistake on two levels. First, by trying to import American race politics to Europe, this signals that race and racialisation is somehow fundamentally foreign and outside the European experience. This is all too convenient and robs European Black feminists of a key analytical tool to name and act on our oppression. If racial injustice is understood on American terms and as an American export, there is no incentive to dismantle the distinct European racialised social order. Second, this importation of the American experience silences the actually existing experiences and histories of European Black feminists resisting racist and sexist domination. These dynamics also erase the long histories of anti-imperialist struggles of Black feminists located across various European empires.

Further, the linguistic divides between English-speaking Black feminists of Britain and North America drown out the perspectives and experiences of Black women in Continental Europe. In parallel to Black feminism, Afrofeminism – particularly in francophone Europe – has been the space for many Continental European Black women to collectively learn, organise and mobilise for their interests. There are many similarities between Black feminism and Afrofeminism but Afrofeminism insists on grounding analysis and action in the particular and specific histories of colonialism, racial formation and gender hierarchy of the various European nation-states in which Black women live. Thus, when we speak of European Black feminism, we must ensure that the lived experiences and theorising of Black women on the continent and across different countries and languages is at the forefront of our work. We are, of course, in no way devaluing or disrespecting Black American feminist theorists who have shaped our praxis such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and the Combahee River Collective. Rather, this book attempts

to talk back against both American domination and European silence about Black feminism and create a space for a different kind of dialogue – one that this is led by and for Black women in Europe.

Locating Black feminist and Afrofeminist politics in Europe is provocative because it is radical counter-storytelling about whose knowledge counts, whose politics matter and who gets to be part of the ‘European story’. European Black feminist and Afrofeminist politics are nothing new. Indeed, they refract the story of the Enlightenment, colonialism and modernity. The ‘Europe’ of secular liberalism is not possible without the subjugation of colonised people. European Black feminist and Afrofeminist politics has been at the heart of anti-slavery, anti-colonial and socialist politics on the continent. This book helps to correct the record and place Black feminism and Afrofeminism firmly within contemporary European politics.

Black feminism and Afrofeminism have been so influential that they have helped to inspire the thinking and politics of non-Black women of colour in Europe. For this edited volume, we wanted to bring together the best writing about Black feminism and Afrofeminism as a way to showcase the creativity of resistance and demonstrate the possibilities of intersectional solidarity across race, class, gender, legal status and language. To be clear, we do not use ‘women of colour’ as a synonym for Black women nor are we engaging in the politics of ‘political Blackness’ in this text. Rather, we are attempting to demonstrate that solidarity is possible despite anti-Blackness. We do not reify or fetishise the category of ‘women of colour’. Solidarity between different racialised women can never be taken for granted – it must be fought for and in this creative tension exists the possibilities for new insights. In this text we wanted to demonstrate that there are patterns of experiences and analyses that create the conditions for fruitful coalitions. These coalitions might falter but we think the struggle for solidarity across difference is central to any Black feminist politics. As such, this edited volume brings together activists, artists and scholars to explore how Black women and other women of colour from across Europe:

- theorise Black feminism and Afrofeminism from European perspectives
- build and sustain activist spaces for survival and resistance
- challenge, subvert and transform hegemonic socialist, feminist, populist and/or anarchist politics

- develop transnational alliances and intersectional and intergenerational coalitions for equality and social justice
- engage with creative practice as a means of activism and self-preservation.

Black women and women of colour in Europe have always maintained critical spaces of analysis and activism based on our race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, legal status and other categories of difference. This edited collection fills an important gap in knowledge about how Black women and women of colour, as active agents and authors of our lives, conceive our differing social positionings in various European countries, how we organise and mobilise for our shared interests and how we might collectively imagine a Black feminist Europe.

Part II, *Resistance, Solidarity and Coalition-Building*, explores how women of colour in five different countries undertake their Black feminist and Afrofeminist activism for social change. Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi explores the creative strategies African migrant women activists undertake to assert their inclusion in Greek society. Staying in southern Europe, Nadia Nadesan examines the struggles for recognition and solidarity of newly formed queer and Afrofeminist activist networks in Spain. Cyn Awori Othieno and Annette Davis on behalf of Mwasi Collectif, the premier Afrofeminist activist network in France and perhaps in Europe, engage in the classic Black feminist practice of counter-storytelling to recount the history of French Afrofeminist activism since the early twentieth century. Connected to Mwasi's struggles, we move to Belgium where Nicole Grégoire and Modi Ntambwe explore the changing strategies of younger Afrofeminist activists as they shift away from older activists' integrationist approaches. Part II concludes with a view from Scotland from Claire Heuchan in which she discusses her writing, her well-trafficked blog and how Black feminist activism transforms in digital spaces.

In Part III, *Emotions, Affect and Intimate Relations*, we shift our Black feminist and Afrofeminist gaze from public to private space. Gabriella Beckles-Raymond discusses the multiple meanings of home for the Black British women of the Caribbean diaspora. In a dispatch from Switzerland, Pamela Ohene-Nyako explores how her founding of Afrolitt', a platform for literature lovers, helps build community, solidarity and critical cultural knowledge among women of colour. Johanna Lukate examines the fraught politics of Black women's hair in Germany and

how Black women's hair is oftentimes used as a proxy for belonging and inclusion. Writing from a British perspective, Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski and Nazmia Jamal discuss what love, friendship and allyship might mean for women of colour. Another contributor from Belgium, but this time from a Flemish standpoint, Lubumbe Van de Velde explores the violent cultural practices of *Zwarte Piet* and how Black motherhood must be mobilised against it. Part III concludes with an interview that France-based Alecia McKenzie conducted with the late Eartha Kitt and explores what Kitt and her art represented in McKenzie's childhood home.

Part IV, *Surviving the Academy*, reflects challenges and expressions of Black feminist resistance in relation to life in academia. Writing from a British perspective, Yesim Deveci, inspired by Audre Lorde, discusses the risks and resistance involved in daring to speak and act otherwise as a woman of colour in academia. This radical practice of 'talking back' is continued by the Cruel Ironies Collective where they explore the implications of exclusion and misrecognition in the Dutch academy. Melody Howse offers incisive analysis of the formation of new and resistant spaces that emerge from an initial sense of feeling out of place and time in German academia. Part IV's spirit of survival is also evident in the words of Sadiya Qureshi, inspired by trailblazing Black feminist theorists, who provides a manifesto for navigating academia as a woman of colour. Extending this part's examination of institutional whiteness, Oda-Kange Diallo discusses such issues and their particularities in Danish academia. Part IV concludes with Chijioke Obasi's critique of the potential limitations of Black feminism when outlining the ingredients of an Africanist Sista-hood in Britain.

In Part V, *Digital and Creative Labour*, Kesiena Boom writes about tensions between the self-empowering nature of personal online essays and their capacity to perpetuate the commodification of Black women's pain. Continuing the commentary concerning creative labour and resistance, Tia-Monique Uzor explores the role of dance in the collective movements of African diasporic women in Britain. In addition, Dorett Jones documents past and present ways that Black women are filming their resistance and taking control of the lens, through which their lives are viewed. Part V concludes with Stacie CC Graham's account of the varied healing and activist creative practices of Black women across Europe.

In reading this edited volume, we hope that you reflect on the similarities of experiences across linguistic, cultural and national borders,

as well as the nuanced differences that are documented. We urge you to consider how the various local contexts produce specific kinds of violence – and resistances. It is in that space between the particularity of difference and the similarity of experience that a new world can be born, and that Black feminism and Afrofeminism can continue to evolve and tell another story about Europe.

NOTE

1. L. Bassel and A. Emejulu, 2017. *Minority Women and Austerity: Survival and Resistance in France and Britain*. Policy Press, Bristol. B. Bryan, S. Dadzie and S. Scafe (eds), 1985. *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*. Virago, London. C. Boyce Davies, 2007. *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. Duke University Press, Durham. K. Oguntoye, M. Opitz and D. Schultz (eds), 1992. *Showing Our Colours: Afro-German Women Speak Out*. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst. T.D. Sharpley-Whiting, 2000. 'Femme Négritude: Jane Nardal, *La Dépêche Africaine*, and the francophone New Negro'. *Souls: Critical Journal of Black Politics & Culture* 2(4), pp. 8–17. F. Sobande, forthcoming 2020. *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. G. Wekker, 2016. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Duke University Press, Durham.