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**Akotirene, Carla. *Interseccionalidade*, Coleção Feminismos Plurais (org. Djamila Ribeiro). São Paulo: Selo Sueli Carneiro; Pólen. 2019. 152 pp. ISBN 978-85-98349-69-5<sup>1</sup>**

Challenging the hegemonic episteme and evoking the ancestral wisdom of the afro-diaspora, Carla Akotirene writes *Interseccionalidade*; a timely book that discusses the matter of genealogy, criticisms, authorship, and political roots of the concept that entitles the work. Intersectionality is a relatively new analytical prism born in the black feminist thought from the perception that the experiences lived by black women were being neglected by both the Western feminist and anti-racist movements. As an example of those experiences, Akotirene calls forth compulsory motherhood, which is one of the topics in the feminist agenda, questioning what was once believed to be the biological destiny of all women; disregarding from the category Woman, the Black women whose children were sold and enslaved, which deprived them from mothering. The work is part of a book collection entitled “Feminismos Plurais” [Plural Feminisms], devised by Djamila Ribeiro – writer and philosopher who signs the preface of the book that carries the editorial stamp *Selo Sueli Carneiro*<sup>2</sup>. Djamila explains that the collection, launched in 2019, was created for the general public, aiming to promote the intellectual production of historically marginalized groups and dismantle the dominant narrative by addressing essential

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<sup>1</sup> All the translated quotations from Akotirene’s book *Interseccionalidade* are mine, since the book has not been translated yet.

<sup>2</sup> *Selo Sueli Carneiro* is an editorial stamp authored and coordinated by Djamila Ribeiro in honour of Professor Sueli Carneiro who pioneered the Black feminism movement in Brazil. The stamp aims to publish the literary and scientific production written by black national and international authors, indigenous women, LGBTQ+, as well as Latin and Caribbean women.

and contemporary themes that entitle the eight books of the collection: *Lugar de Fala* by Djamila Ribeiro, *Interseccionalidade* by Carla Akotirene, *Racismo Recreativo* by Adilson Moreira, *Empoderamento* by Joice Berth, *Encarceramento em Massa* by Juliana Borges, *Racismo Estrutural* by Silvio Almeida, *Intolerância Religiosa* by Sidnei Nogueira, and *Apropriação Cultural* by Rodney William.

The term Intersectionality, coined in 1989, received the attention of the scholarship with the paper: “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics”, in which the Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw draws on the notion of intersectionality to analyse a case on the experience of black women in the U.S. legal system, namely *DeGraffenreid vs General Motors*, highlighting structural inequalities and elucidating that gender and race can function as systems that are simultaneously oppressive. However, it was only after the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR), held in South Africa in 2001, that the term became popular in academia and started travelling to other disciplines and fields of research.

Akotirene is a social worker, Ph.D. student and assistant professor at Universidade Federal da Bahia; her research focuses on institutional racism and sexism in women’s prisons – a topic which Akotirene talks about in this book and further develops it in her second book: *Ó Pa í, Prezada* (2020). The author begins *Interseccionalidade* by establishing the book’s dialogical *locus*: the Atlantic; and positioning herself as a decolonialist, militant, black feminist, and an academic who writes recoilless of her African ancestry. *Interseccionalidade* is divided into five parts aiming to: introduce and acknowledge the works that preconize Intersectionality; discuss the birth of the concept in dialogue with the experience of black women also illustrated by the Brazilian scenario; address the critiques Intersectionality has received; present Angela Davis’ critique regarding the contradiction inherent in the analytical prism; and suggest practical possibilities to exercise Intersectionality beyond its theoretical-analytical perspective.

The first part, “Cruzando o Atlântico em memória da interseccionalidade”, discusses the works that preconized the term.

Akotirene believes the Atlantic to be a “*locus* of crossed oppression” that translates “the history and forced migration of the African people” (p.15). When crossing the Atlantic, Akotirene calls up on Sojourner Truth – who in her well-known manifest *Ain’t I a woman?* (1851) demands recognition and exposes the erasure of black women in the US society – and Lélia Gonzalez, a Brazilian intellectual who was one of the pioneers in the critique of hegemonic feminism and coloniality of knowledge by coining the terms *Amefricana* and *Pretoguês*. Akotirene develops this chapter articulating the many intellectual contributions from national and international women who acted as *outsiders within*, as defined by Collins (1986), challenging power relations by occupying spaces rarely “populated” by black women, such as academia.

Playing with words, the title of the second part of the book, “*Vamos pensar direito: interseccionalidade e as mulheres negras*”, anticipates the relationship between the concept of intersectionality and the discipline of Law – the context in which the concept was born. In this chapter, the author also draws a parallel between the intersectional prism, as Crenshaw devised it, and the Brazilian penal system with examples of how the modern colonial structures put black women in situations of vulnerability; thus, applying the intersectional thinking to the Brazilian context.

The third and longest chapter of the book carries the title “*Atlântico e diferenças entre irmãs: Críticas ao conceito de interseccionalidade*”; here Akotirene focuses on the academic debates about intersectionality, approaching the main criticisms received and positioning herself in relation to them. The author builds a dialogue of critical inquiry and critical praxis, but remains within the examples and cases set mostly in Criminal Law. Akotirene also discusses the matter of how the concept has travelled across disciplines and territories, and expands on the misuses of the term – referring to works that self-denominate as part of the field of intersectional scholarship and yet fail to address the premises of the intersectional thinking. Akotirene claims that “to articulate race, class and gender does not always show concern for the oppressed ones” (p. 54). By highlighting the danger of reducing the concept to mapping identities – thus, distancing intersectionality from its black feminist root – the author adverts how counterproductive the articulations are, hence

moving away from the decolonial perspective. As for the criticisms, Akotirene brings to the debate the counterpoints made by African womanists, Chicanas, African-American feminists, and the European feminist Danièle Kergoart (2017). The author positions herself very strongly against Kergoart's perspective. The French academic proposes a class-centred approach named Consubstantiality, bringing the Marxist' historic materiality to the fore and neglecting the African-American feminist approach that pioneered the intersectional concept.

Akotirene meets Collins' and Audre Lorde's thought by refusing hierarchy of oppression: "intersectionality averts hierarchical or comparative mathematical aphorisms" (p.27). Although the author is very successful when addressing and positioning herself on each criticism, I feel that Akotirene misses the opportunity to develop concepts often oversimplified as "categories"; one of those is the notion of black womanhood. Nira Yuval-Davis has already expressed her concerns on the matter as "the construction of 'black woman' is automatically assumed, unless otherwise specified, to be of a minority black woman living in western societies. The majority of black women in today's world are black women in black societies" (p.162). This statement highlights the need to localize intersectional research, for concepts such as race and gender can be conceived differently depending on the culture, as well as to look at social stratification not only from the perspective of oppression but also privilege. While Akotirene brings forth the concerns raised by other scholars and activists, the author does not problematize the applicability of the concept in non-western black societies.

The fourth part of the book, "A crítica de Angela Davis" is dedicated, as the title suggests, to Davis' contribution and criticism towards Intersectionality. The renowned philosopher and prison abolitionist has identified a controversy in the concept, as it is born in criminal law – a modern discipline that focuses on a punitive system which was built under laws that are essentially blind to "minorities" and were devised in ways that only maintain the privilege of the white elite, also condoning a punitivist discourse. Here, Davis' perception shows that the neoliberal vein of Intersectionality, the one that at first concentrates on individual victims, removes from the state the responsibility to tackle the social problems that produce the aggressor. It is only in the following chapter

that Akotirene gives her opinion regarding the fact that Crenshaw coined the term within the discipline of Law. While the author praises Crenshaw's courage, arguing that by doing so she works as an *outsider within*, she does not provide an answer as to whether it may reinforce hegemonic powers of oppression. Therefore, when presenting this paradigm in the conception of intersectionality, Davis puts into question the effectiveness of the analytical prism for the purposes in which it has been proposed.

In the last chapter of the book, "Cruzar o atlantico nem sempre encerra a travessia", Akotirene aligns herself with Collins and Crenshaw by expressing the belief that Intersectionality is a tool that can be used to analyse and identify the collision of structures, recognizing the inseparability of racism, capitalism and cisheteropatriarchy. The book, which begins with a poem paying homage to Marielle Franco, ends by highlighting the relevance of the black feminist thought to analyse cases of women who, like Marielle Franco, have had their lives silenced and interrupted by the racist capitalist cisheteropatriarchal system.

As a final account of the book, I remark that Akotirene writes in a thought-provoking way and with theoretical sophistication, making reference to works and concepts that are extremely relevant and present in the current debates on intersectionality, black feminism, power relations, gender studies, African womanism, and Decolonization. The book, however, fails to fulfil the promise of a writing aimed at the general public – as it is stated both in the preface by Djamila Ribeiro as well as in the first chapter by Akotirene – which compromises the reach of the work and the possibilities of dialogue. A few more footnotes to explain academic jargon, and concepts often oversimplified<sup>3</sup>, could have been enough to make the book more accessible; after all, one of the objectives stated is to equip society for the debate.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>3</sup> As race and gender are considered a social construct, Akotirene could have provided her understanding of race in relation to Brazilian society, since the process of colonial domination is founded on the erasure of natives' body and knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> I should state that despite the language of the book being still very academic, during the COVID-19 pandemic Djamila Ribeiro organised many debates and ways to promote the collection *Feminismos Plurais* using social media and streaming platforms, which very successfully reached a greater public.

it should be noted that, Akotirene's writing is also the practice of a decolonial perspective introducing to the reader who is unfamiliar with the lexicon and cosmology of the afro-diaspora the epistemic turn<sup>5</sup> that marks the contemporary academic and fictional production in the Brazilian scenario. In addition, while the book lacks cohesive structure, as the last two chapters are inconclusive and out of proportion, I recommend Akotirene's book *Interseccionalidade* mostly to graduate students and aspiring researchers interested in decolonization, black feminism, and gender studies.

Finally, even though the book, to some extent, creates a dialogue between theory and praxis, examples outside the field of Criminal Law would have enriched the debate. I believe Intersectionality can travel to other disciplines and yet keep its roots in the black feminist movements without wasting its political potential. Literature, for instance, can be a powerful tool to analyse power structures, identities, as well as hegemonic narratives; and thus, it is also a vehicle for relating to otherness, accessing and reconstructing memory – as *outsiders within* – challenging the many possibilities of narrating life.

### **Works Cited**

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<sup>5</sup> See: Ana Maria Veiga, “Uma virada epistêmica feminista (negra): conceitos e debates”, *Tempo e Argumento*, Florianópolis, v. 12, n. 29, e0101, jan./abr. 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5965/2175180312292020e0101>