Precarity in and through Black Bodies:
A Response from a Transnational Perspective

Across the African diaspora, both the individuality and sociality of the lives of black people have always been politicized by the violent intrusions of race as a regime of social order and control.[1] The essays in this volume of *PLCS* 32 take several important steps forward in thinking through what I would call "Precarity in and through black bodies." The contributors, feminist scholars, Patricia Schor, Damares Barbosa, and anti-racist activist, Mamadou Ba, grapple with and reflect on the meaning of black life in Europe and Brazil in the present moment. Concerned with how black bodies are marked as "the privileged victims of racism" (Mamadou Ba), the ways that black subjects, especially black women, in European academic spaces are considered to be "bodies out of place" (Patricia Schor), and question of race in Brazilian universities, these contributors underscore the illegibility and "foreignness" of blackness and black politics in Portugal, the Netherlands, and Brazil. By focusing on anti-blackness within and outside academic and political spaces, these contributors argue that the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy has historically and still continues to construct the black body as a space of absolute Othering. Or as literary theorist Darieck Scott cogently observes, "blackness is produced through humiliation and degradation."[2]

This idea of the process of "humiliation and degradation" speaks very strongly to the fact that blackness as a category cannot be delinked from the notion of precariousness. Precariousness, thus, becomes a shared condition that connects people African descent wherever they may be. In my use of precarity, I draw from Judith Butler's framing of precarity as an acknowledgement of dependency, needs, exposure, and vulnerability.[3] Precarity, therefore, is understood here as a social positioning of insecurity and is linked to processes of racial Othering. It is, indeed, well known that due to the violent institution of slavery, the barbarity of colonialism, and the economic anxieties in the global South as a result of structural adjustment programs, the identity of black people transnationally has always been that of a people-at-risk. In fact, the decolonization era in Africa and

the Civil Rights Act in the U.S did not put an end to this vulnerability. This condition of precarity has continued, unabated, in the age of neoliberalism with the ever-expanding penal and policing systems acting as the vehicles for the denial of basic rights to black people in the U.S and elsewhere in the African diaspora.

To this end, given that the "fact of blackness"—to borrow a Fanonian phrase—also means living a precarious life, anti-blackness can then be seen as an instrument of governmentality that confiscates the body and lifeworld of blacks and distorts it for the purposes of capitalist accumulation and exploitation.[4] For instance, current global trends in the policing deaths and anti-policing protests of blacks: from the recent assassination of Brazilian scholar-activist, Marielle Franco, on March 23, 2018, the killing of African immigrants in Italy, the forced deportation of African immigrants living in camps in Israel, to the numerous black deaths in the U.S at the hands of the security state; serve as clear reminders of the various quotidian dangers of living as a racialized Other in a world that renders black bodies as killable, disposable, and deportable.

Legal scholar Tayyab Mahmud notes that while precarity is an unavoidable historical and structural feature of capitalism, neoliberalism has resulted in the "hyper-precarious" status of a population whose labor pool is "large, flexible, super-controlled and super-exploited."[5] Precarity in the neoliberal capitalist world, especially in the present moment of tougher immigrations laws and hyper militarized border control, is therefore worth addressing. Mamadou Ba does an excellent job in his essay by reminding us that in the ongoing European debates over immigration reform the situation of African immigrants in Portugal remains precarious as most of them are not counted citizens or the are seen as a threat to the nation-state. African diaspora theorist, Carole Davies Boyce has rightfully pointed out that deportation as a result of one being considered to be "out of place"/"foreign" and incarceration have historically been connected to regimes of dispossession used to punish, control, criminalize, and render stateless "alien" dissidents.[6] The above cases and many more highlight not only the precarity of black lives but also of the ways that contemporary forms of state racial violence in Western capitalist and liberal democratic polities continue to subordinate and repress disruptive and radical forms of black protest.

The question of the "whitening" academic spaces, disciplines, and national histories in Portugal, the Netherlands, and in Brazil, as the contributors have shown, leads to another equally important point about precarity in and through black bodies. Using examples from institutions of higher learning in Portugal

and the Netherlands, Schor demonstrates how academic institutions actively participate in deciding which population of workers is allowed in these spaces and which is not. In Brazil, Barbosa's reflection reveals the challenges that black students and teaching staff go through in various institutions of learning. She highlights the lower rates of graduation of black students in different levels of schooling, a problem that is compounded by the fact fewer black students are admitted in universities. The marginalization, and in some cases near absence, of black faculty members in many of these academic institutions is a manifestation of these universities' interest in maintaining a racial hierarchy by securing the interests of white academics even when it means the exclusion, dispossession, and precarization of the racialized Others. As bodies that are deemed "out of place", black academics in predominantly white disciplines have to contend with the difficulties they face in reconciling their personal experiences, identities, values, and perspectives with those that dominate academia, or what Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the "outsider within" position.[7] I, therefore, argue that paying attention to the precarity of black bodies within the academia can also be revealing of the ways that these neoliberal and democratic spaces of higher learning become sites that reproduce and rigidify racial and class hierarchies through punitive and exclusionary processes.

What then is the way forward? Taking a cue from Anibal Quijano who explicitly linked coloniality of power—that is the ways that coloniality as a concept opens up the possibility of reconstructing silenced and repressed histories—with the coloniality of knowledge,[8] Patricia Schor, Damares Barbosa, and Mamadou Ba push us to take seriously the marginal place of blacks in the academia in Europe and Brazil, and their precarious conditions of work in order to critically engage with the project of decolonizing knowledge. Decolonizing knowledge, pedagogies, and various institutions of learning is not a trivial issue. Achille Mbembe rightfully reminds us that the project of decolonizing spaces is a democratic process and it is not about "tinkering with the margins."[9] By putting the question of race at the center, rather than on the periphery of their analyses, the essays in this issue accomplish much necessary and overdue work.

These essays necessarily respond to two crucial demands: first, what is the most productive way to address the question of race and racism in the neoliberal era when the racial inequalities in socioeconomic, political, education, and other outcomes persist?; second, given that the Black Lives Matter movement continues to resonate with racially minorized groups transnationally, how do

we create alternative avenues for productive, meaningful, radical approaches to global anti-racist activism? These are both legitimate and essential projects that are worth pursuing, even though they produce inevitable ongoing tensions in black politics transnationally.

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NOTES

1. Since as Alexander Weheliye (2014) points out that "blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot," I use "Black" and "People of African descent" synonymously.

2. Scott, Darieck. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power and Sexuality in African American Literary Imagination,* NYU Press, 2010. pp. 108.

3. Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2014.

4. For a detailed analysis of anti-blackness, see: Burden-Stelly, Charisse. "Constructing Deportable Subjectivity: Anti-foreignness, Antiradicalism, and Antiblackness during the McCarthyist Structure of Feeling." *Souls*, vol. 19 no. 3, 2017, pp. 342-358.

5. Mahmud Tayyab. "Precarious Existence and Capitalism: A Permanent State of Exception." *Southwestern University Law Review* vol. 44, 2015, pp. 699–726.

6. Davies, Carole Boyce. "Deportable Subjects: U.S. Immigration Laws and the Criminalization of Communism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 100, 2001, pp. 949-966.

7. Collins, Patricia H. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* vol. 33, no. 6, 1986 pp. 14-32.

8. Quijano, Anibal. "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad." 1989. Reprinted in *Los conquistados. 1492 y la población indígena de las Américas.*

9. Mbembe, Achille. "Decolonizing the university: New directions." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, vol 15, no. 1, 2016, pp. 29-45.