

## Black women's voices reach out to the world

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Djamila Ribeiro, *Il luogo della parola*, translated from Portuguese by Monica Paes.  
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### ABSTRACT

The enduring struggle of black feminism to make the voice of marginalized groups matter is developed in this book by Djamila Ribeiro, a Black Brazilian feminist philosopher and journalist, through the notion of “the place of the word” and the issue of the accessibility of knowledge. In her work *Lugar de Fala* (The Place of the Word, 2019), she comes across the longstanding history of black women's fights and resistance, challenging the universal epistemology that constantly misreads some voices instead of others. This book, recently translated into Italian, French, and Spanish, is aimed at producing a tool for political action by crossing geographical, political, and social borders and supporting black women's empowerment and self-awareness. According to the radical idea of accessibility of knowledge, Ribeiro speaks to everyone, democratizing the access to certain concepts and tools. This political task has been taken on by an independent Italian publishing house, which carried on Ribeiro's effort in the European context.

### Keywords

feminism, intersectionality, translation, decoloniality, Brazil

In the introduction to their cornerstone work on Black Women Studies called *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith state that “like any politically disenfranchised group, Black women could not exist consciously until we began to name ourselves” (Hull and Smith 1982, xvii). We might argue that Djamila Ribeiro's essay goes exactly in this direction: naming herself, and so naming – and changing – black women's conditions in Brazil through an effort of positionality and radical critical pedagogy. The book – in the original version *O que é lugar de fala?* (Ribeiro 2019) – is not merely an essay or a philosophical speculation, but a tool for political action.

Born in 1980 in Santos, Brazil, Ribeiro grew up surrounded by politics, due to her father's commitment to communist fights and, later, to the encounter with black feminist writers at the House of Black Woman's Culture (Casa de Cultura da Mulher Negra). Currently engaged as a writer, philosopher, Black feminist and antiracist activist, she has endeavored to produce a tool for Black women's empowerment well beyond the academic field (Affricot 2020). In a context strongly influenced by its colonial past and history of slavery, Brazil keeps reproducing

structural inequalities and social orders, which today are even stronger due to the rise of a right-wing government. Black women's conditions are still addressed by scholars, activists and politicians, not without consequences. Just two years ago, in 2018, Marielle Franco – a feminist, LGBT activist, and councilwoman – was murdered in circumstances yet to be clarified. Ribeiro's work is situated in this social and political setting. Hence the idea of publishing a series called "Feminismos Plurais," which she actually managed to do, in order to encourage and diffuse the voices of marginalized groups, and then the publication of her own book on Black feminist thought, the first of a series.

'Voice' is the core of Ribeiro's reflections, both as a need and as a repertoire of contention. Drawing on a vast literature, *Lugar de Fala* is intended to "clarify the main concepts [of Black feminism] and definitely break with the idea that this discussion wouldn't be oriented to realize goals. [...] Reflecting on Black feminism properly means to interrupt the split produced in an unequal society. It means creating projects, new civilizing goals, in order to think about a new model of society" (2020, 15-16; my translation). Subjects are considered as the "core elements" in the rupture of the dominant narrative: as such, speaking "in our own name" (Hall 1990, 222) is a way to "becom[e] a subject" (Kilomba 2012, 13).

Ribeiro situates her overview of Black women's voices through a historical lens. In the first chapter "A little bit of history" ("Un po' di storia"), she identifies in the abolitionist and activist for Black women's rights, Sojourner Truth, the critical juncture in the development of Black women's thoughts and fights. Truth's outcry "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851), already questioned the universality of the category of woman. Despite the idea of a homogenous first wave of feminism, Truth's testimony shows a fragmented landscape where Black women challenged white women's prejudice and racism. Rather than a lack of history, Ribeiro points out a lack of visibility of these stories, because of a hierarchization of knowledge along lines of gender, class, and race (Gonzalez 1984). By controlling the history and the voices that 'can be heard,' language becomes a vehicle of reproduction of power, especially in those countries such as Brazil where a plurality of marginalized groups has been historically silenced. This consideration leads us to challenge a universal epistemology that keeps silencing cultural specificity and popular knowledge, which are considered less legitimate and less authoritative. Through the agenda of 'identity politics,' mainstream academics have divested Black women and third world women's thoughts, ignoring their effort to address identities not as biological axes but as social sites of power, privileges, and oppressions.

The challenge towards a hegemonic production of knowledge also regards feminist literature, as Ribeiro outlines in the second chapter "The black woman: the other of the other" ("La donna nera: l'altro dell'altro"). While in her foundational writings Simone de Beauvoir focuses on women as "the other" of men, she nonetheless reproduces a vacuum, excluding Black women who, according to Kilomba, occupy a 'third' space and keep existing in the silence of academic thinking (Kilomba 2012). Hence, another angle of understanding is need-

ed: intersectionality. Axes of domination do not follow a hierarchical order, but dynamically define people's position in the social setting. Race, gender, class, religion, age, and so on are dimensions that produce certain possibilities rather than others. Unveiling these dimensions means naming lines of power that always shape and define the social world.

But then, why is it important to talk about “the place” of speech? The answer is rooted in the enduring feminist reflection on positionality and the empirical dimensions of life. Feminist standpoint theory (Collins 1997; Haraway 1988) already unveiled the place from where people speak as a determining factor in shaping what people can see and can say. However, Ribeiro develops the concept further. The issue of location and positionality is not merely about individuals, but it is about the intersection between the social condition of the social group the individual belongs to, and the specific experience of the individual. As such, people pertaining to the same social group are usually incurring in a common matrix of domination (Collins 1990). However, they also have a peculiar experience depending on their unique way of inhabiting everyday life. These two dimensions are always interwoven and play with each other, and neither exists without the other. Answering her famous question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 1988), Spivak seems to come to a negative conclusion. The history of colonialism and dispossession makes Black and third world women unable to raise their own voice. Other scholars, such as Ribeiro, reject this denial and claim that these women must break “the mask of speechlessness” (Kilomba 2012). Through slots and cracks in the wall, Black women are challenging their starting point of domination and dispossession, telling their story and changing their biographical and collective trajectories.

As Ribeiro argues in the last chapter “Everyone has a place of speech” (“Tutti hanno un luogo di parola”), whoever speaks is speaking from a social location. In contemporary debates, learning to acknowledge the social location from where everyone is speaking is the only way to become aware of the dynamic identities, conditions and lines of power crossing the field. Ribeiro orients her work politically rather than academically. She constantly stresses the importance of language, words, and communication. Collecting the main concepts of Black feminism is a conscious political work, aimed at transmitting these concepts to the largest possible audience, especially in terms of black Brazilian women, Latinas, and people belonging to marginalized groups. Ribeiro chooses to take the reader by the hand and lead her through the history of Black feminist thought and contemporary challenges, engaging in a constant effort of relation with the reader. Language and knowledge are vehicles of power and spreading knowledge, that is, making it accessible beyond the mere academic field, is a wide empowering project. To this effect, Ribeiro's task is an exercise of pedagogy of the oppressed, where liberation is “not a gift, not a self-achievement, but a mutual process” (Freire 1971, 53).

Ribeiro's book is a political work for three reasons. Firstly, because it aims at guaranteeing a wide understanding among Black women that is oriented to their empowerment. Secondly, it is a political work because of the translation in several other countries. Finally, because

through the choices of an understandable language and translation, it spreads Black women's voices beyond the thick blanket of silence.

Translating can be a feminist task, as in this case. In the Italian context, translating helps to spread the words of black scholars, as recently occurred with other important works, such as the ones of Angela Davis (2018) and Audre Lorde (2014). Translating concepts and words from one language to another requires an effort of relation (both with the text and with the author) based on a feminist understanding of the circulation of knowledge and mutual acknowledgement. Moreover, the project of translation comes from a newborn independent, self-financed, and feminist publishing house, called Capovolte, which aims at dispersing feminist words beyond the strict neoliberal rules of the mainstream editorial market. Daring to make a comparison, it seems to resonate with the 1980 project Kitchen Tables: Women of Color Press, which was cofounded by Beverly and Barbara Smith in order to help the work of feminist and lesbian of colour writers be published despite the white, male-dominated commercial publishing system.

Heeding Ribeiro's call for positionality and self-awareness, I would like to conclude this review by starting a dialogue. I am a young, white, cis, and queer Sardinian woman. According to my positionality, or my "place of speech," I started by going through the colonial background that strongly influenced my island's history and present time, and also my own experience as a displaced Sardinian woman. Going beyond the idea of a "hierarchy of oppressions" regarding identities, I learned to understand the oppressions and privileges that come with this background, and how they change in the different contexts of my everyday life. Indeed, despite the colonial legacy of my insular roots, I am a white and cis woman, who certainly enjoys the privilege of whiteness and gender conformity. I read Ribeiro as a dialogue from a Southern Italian perspective, where she was teaching me new words, and I discovered a new way of naming my experience. Her work is an invitation to reflect on our own locations, on our bodies, and the possible transformative steps we can take. Last but not least, Ribeiro's work is also an invitation to listen. Black women's decision to speak and to break the silence of hegemonic narratives requires those who are in a position of social power to start listening to their words. As such, raising one's voice is always a relational endeavour.

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