INTERSECTIONALITIES AND ALLIANCES

# Being a black woman in Catalonia

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Following the recent protests on the National Day of Catalonia (known as *La Diada* in Catalan) on 11 September, I ask myself what it means to be a black woman in Catalonia. This comes a little over a year after the publication of my book *Ser mujer negra en España* (Plan B, 2018), a work that has made many white people ask me just that: what it means to be a black woman in Spain (black people already know what it means to be black in Spain). At the same time, they ask me what it means to be black in Catalonia, in the belief that there are significant differences.

I return to 11 September, or rather the day after, when it was time to analyse *La Diada*. There was talk of smaller numbers than recent years, raising questions as to why public participation had dropped. That night on the programme Més 324, Anna Simó, former secretary of the Parliament of Catalonia, said that although everyone should do as they see fit on *La Diada*, the most important thing is for people to take to the streets rather than stay home.

In a speech to the Congress of Deputies in Madrid, acting President of Spain Pedro Sánchez said that “I hope one day *La Diada* will become a day for all, not just some, Catalans”. He was clearly referring to the independence movement, but I’d like to broaden the context to offer another perspective and ask the following question: who are *the Catalans*?

## La Diada for all citizens?

When I heard Anna Simó talking about the importance of taking to the streets to protest during *La Diada*, it didn't feel like she was talking to me. I'm one of those people who stays at home. I have never taken to the streets on *La Diada*. I feel it has nothing to do with me. I was born, grew up and studied in Catalonia, but I am a woman of African descent, which means that many of the people I meet seem to be quite sure, even without asking, that I'm not from here.

In a reflection on cohesion and coexistence in Catalonia, former President of the Government of Catalonia, Jordi Pujol, made the famous claim that "a Catalan is anyone who lives and works in Catalonia, and wants to be Catalan". In theory, this statement answers my previous question. If only it were true. The fact is that many people live and work in Catalonia and want to feel Catalan, but they have given up, like me. I'll not dwell on this question here, but will return to it at the end of this text.

## Is Catalonia a racist country?

I know that most Catalan citizens would answer this question in the negative. And the answer would probably be automatic, defensive, with no room for reflection. I know because I often hear it. I've often thought about this, about this negation after being asked if Catalonia is racist. Because the most common reaction is one of denying that the country is racist. And people then reinforce this, looking outwards: "but Spain is, it's really racist!", they say. And Spain looks abroad as well: "but France is, it's really racist", they exclaim. And so I imagine in France they also deny they are racist and kick the ball to some other European country, so the ball bounces from country to country in an eternal loop of mutual accusation, while no one looks inwards to their own country to see the dynamics, discrimination and established mechanisms of racism within it. Eventually, they kick the ball into so-called *third world countries*, where there really *is* racism, *because blacks are even more racist than most whites*.

My opinion on this reaction is that being a racist is considered one of the worst things you can be in this life. And this idea stems from the simplified, mistaken logic that identifies racism with its most extreme expression: aggression, either physical or verbal.

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It seems to me that this correlation normally works something like this: racism makes you a very bad person, because those who insult or harm others are bad people. Racism is related to this manifest expression of hate towards a racialised person, i.e. anyone who is not

white. And most people do not consider themselves bad people and would never, therefore, hurt or insult a racialised person, hence they cannot be racist. Then there are always people who back this up by saying they have a friend/cousin/in-law/colleague who is black, which automatically frees them from the charge of being racist. This is where the problem lies: there is so much more to racism than this.

Physical and verbal aggression is the tip of an enormous iceberg which, in the micro context, comprises the prejudices and stereotypes we believe define black people and the discriminatory behaviour exhibited towards them. But it is also language, jokes and, in the age of social media, memes and GIFs. On the macro scale, beneath the tip of the iceberg lies a variety of dynamics permitted by the nation state (any of them), which perpetuate discrimination against Africans, Afro-descendants and people of other origins, whether they are foreigners or natives (yes, born in Catalonia). Unfortunately racism goes far beyond its more violent manifestations.

In daily life it appears as deeply rooted, and therefore undetected, behaviours. Thus, when a black person says to someone “what you just said is racist”, that person screams blue murder, feeling deeply insulted. I suggest that we start to understand such comments more along the lines of “you spell that word with an ‘h’”. You didn’t realise this and now that you do you can correct the mistake. Of course the issue is not nearly so simple, but I don’t think anyone feels that bad about having their spelling corrected.

Having racist behaviour corrected should be accepted less aggressively, especially if we remember that Europe was built on colonisation, as a racist system. Because racism is a structure, like the patriarchy or sexism, although much more progress has been made in socially accepting the idea that sexism should be eradicated than is the case with racism. We are just beginning the conversation on racism, and this should encourage us to talk about it, learn to examine ourselves and unlearn other things.

## Catalonia vs Spain

No one sees the beam in their own eye. So Catalonia kicks the accusation of racism into Spain and leaves it at that. This is where the historic and well-seasoned conflict between Catalonia and Spain comes into play.

In this context, some sectors of the Catalan population attribute racism to Spain. A nation that has been systematically ill-treated by another sees itself as a victim and thus cannot itself be an oppressor.

But one thing is to suffer oppression, the other is to compare the conflict between Catalonia and Spain to the slave trade. During the recent Catalan struggle for independence, I have had to steal myself against comments from certain sectors comparing it to the Afro-American struggle for human rights.

I have had to witness Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech being used as an analogy of the

Catalan struggle against Spanish oppression, and keep quiet so as not to hear the rejections of my disagreement and the claims that I have no idea what I'm talking about. Yet the comparison cannot be that straightforward if the director of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University (California, United States) has asked Quim Torra to stop comparing the independence movement to Afro-Americans' struggle for civil rights. Indeed, in a country where the most basic human rights of many black people are not respected, making use of an Afro-American leader's fight to defend human and civil rights for black people is, to say the least, contradictory

## Catalonia in History

Self-criticism is not easy. I know what I'm about to say will be controversial, but I insist on the importance of self-examination, and Catalonia needs to do this when we talk about racism.

One gets the impression that some people believe racism does not and cannot exist in Catalonia, although this is far from the truth. The fact is that only recently has it been pointed out; and now that it has, it's causing unease, as one can imagine. More precisely, it had not been pointed out by people affected by racism. There have been associations and bodies in Catalonia fighting racism for many years, but they are traditionally very white organisations.

But now people who suffer the negative consequences of racism are raising our voices and pointing out the problem. Historically, we have occupied subordinate positions, sheltered and silenced by paternalist attitudes that allowed us to appear in the photo (for the sake of diversity and all that) and that justified speaking about us in terms of defending people with no voice; yet we have always had a voice and the capacity to represent ourselves, although we have generally been silenced. That is what's happening now: we are calling for an end to claims that we have no voice and demanding that the microphone be passed on to us. Clearly, holding the microphone and thus having the chance to represent ourselves is a threat, because we can now express our demands and point out those things we feel must change. So we are seen as a nuisance, because no one likes being called to order.

Returning to the need for self-criticism, I believe Catalan society suffers from selective amnesia, allowing it to raise shameful episodes in Spanish history without revising or questioning Catalonia's relation to and active role in colonialism. The beam in our own eye.

There is much talk about (and demands for) reparations and historical memory. Many cities and towns are changing the names of their streets, removing the names of Spanish military leaders and replacing them with those of great Catalan men (as always, very few women). This brings them closer to us. But I wonder if, in this exercise of reparation, anyone has bothered to review the history of these men and their families. Because, if we are demanding reparations and historical memory, let's do so properly.

If we focus on the need for reparations, we need to start by rethinking the role of the

*indianos* [1]. We need to conduct an exercise in historical memory and understand how these men made their fortunes, enabling them to return to Catalonia, their pockets stuffed with money, and build palaces and mansions and found companies and businesses. We need to bear in mind that many of these entrepreneurs returning from *the Indies* after making their fortune were the start of a new social class: the Catalan Bourgeoisie.

All this accumulated wealth was obtained through the exploitation and trade of enslaved human beings. These fortunes were then strengthened through marriages between wealthy families, thus facilitating the Catalan industrial revolution. For more information, I recommend the walking tour *Barcelona, ciutat de negrers?* (Barcelona, city of slavers?) organised by the association Antropologies, which uncovers these links between the Catalan Bourgeoisie and the slave trade, despite efforts to erase them.

These chapters are also part of Catalan history. A history that links Catalonia to colonialism. So maybe we need to look again at the twinning of towns in Catalonia with towns, above all, in Cuba, a reminder that Catalonia and Cuba were the motor of the economy of the Spanish empire in the 18th and 19th centuries. Similarly, maybe we need to stop commemorating the figure of the *indianos* in festivals throughout the country and celebrate other figures who demanded the abolition of slavery, as the Peruvian artist and activist Daniela Ortiz suggests. It is an invitation to remember and make amends for this shame, instead of denying it.

## Catalonia in everyday life

Having reached this point, some of you might say that all this belongs to the past and that (once again) racism no longer exists. The reason for this exposition is that I believe we need to provide historical context if we are to understand what is happening today in most western societies, like Catalonia.

I feel like a wet blanket right now, but I think it is necessary to reiterate: racism is alive and well. Racism, colonialism and the exploitation of racialised bodies and territories are the foundations on which Europe built its capitalist wealth. The plundering of parts of Africa, Asia and Abya Yala (the territory known as South America) has forced them into extreme poverty, while the borders of Europe are being reinforced, turning it into a fortress to ensure the inhabitants of those impoverished countries stay *over there* and don’t come *here*. The metropolis abandons the occupied territories but tries to prevent people from those territories seeking opportunities in the *mother country*.

I mention all this to explain that racism is a living mechanism which, far from disappearing, is evolving and becoming more sophisticated, as do societies. Today, racism takes more subtle forms than before, but they still establish differences between white people and all the rest. These differences are expressed not just through the existence of racist laws, such as the law on immigration, or foreigner internment centres, but through many other obstacles imposed at the administrative, legal, political, educational and social levels, creating what is termed institutional racism.

It is an illusion to think we live in post-racial societies and that the scourge of racism be eradicated in the near future. This is not pessimism, it is honesty. Since the early days of colonialism, European societies have created structures to ensure the workings of their capitalist system of wealth creation and progress, and these structures have remained in place for centuries. Little time has passed since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s and the independence of the last occupied territories (not forgetting that non-autonomous territories still exist). Thus we are talking about very recent phenomena of resistance and struggle, only five decades ago. And in historical terms, what are five decades compared to centuries and centuries of exploitation and plunder? Not a lot.

Institutional racism is mirrored on a more basic level where discrimination is present in day-to-day life.

I often feel like I'm being used. I meet people who feel proud of the fact that I speak Catalan, as if I were a rarity and this were not the natural, inseparable consequence of being born and raised, studying, living and working in Catalonia. Such people congratulate me, seeing me as an example of *integration*. What sort of integration process have I been through, if I have been educated in a western system, sharing all the same references as a white person? Where is the merit in that? There is none, yet it often seems that the extra dose of melanin in bodies such as mine produces discomfort and, once again, we see the belief that a non-white person *cannot* be Catalan.

Many a time I've entered a shop and the assistant, having been speaking in Catalan, addresses me in Spanish, supposedly as an act of kindness which, once again, assumes I wouldn't understand Catalan.

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It is also common for people to feel the need to ask me where I'm from, as clearly, being black… and when I answer that I'm from here, they question me with their eyes because they don't quite understand. "Of course, now, you're from here. But *before*?", as if there must be a before. Before what? Before I was born? This question sometimes goes deeper, because saying I'm from here is not generally enough and some people then feel they have right to start researching my family tree. What about your parents? Your grandparents? Questions which, once again, clearly show if I'm black I must be from *there*, not *here*.

It goes without saying that my answers must be neutral, if not friendly. I'm not allowed to get angry, although I am sure they don't usually ask white people these questions, at least not right after meeting them. I'm supposed to understand their curiosity, even though it makes me uncomfortable, as if my right to privacy comes second to their desire to find out

about me, even if I don't want them to know. "Come on, don't be like that! It's just curiosity. You're so thin skinned!" The burden and guilt are on me, not on the person who doesn't understand that, in fact, they have no right to ask whatever they want just to confirm or rule out their prejudices. But I cannot mention the forbidden word. It is never racism. It is always something else, but never racism. How can someone who has never suffered what I have be capable of determining what it is I suffer? What right do they have to decide whether I can be offended? It is never racism. And certainly not in Catalonia.

I don't want these situations I describe to be seen as isolated anecdotes; they are part of the daily existence of many Afro-descendant people born in Catalonia. It is not anecdotal: it is the result of a racist system.

The belief that Catalonia is a territory that has been historically oppressed by the Spain and is therefore incapable of oppressing other peoples is as absurd as the fact that white feminists do not understand that experiencing sexism does not free them from being racist towards Afro-descendent women such as I, or Muslim, Latin American and Romani women.

This is why it never ceases to amaze me that when I talk about racism, some people feel I am not referring to them and look to Spain, thereby denying my experiences as a black woman who was born and has lived her whole life in a town on the Catalan coast. In fact, it is the place where the experiences I describe in my book take place, in my immediate environment.

As I said before, it is very common for people to deny experiences that are alien to them. It shouldn't be, but it is. And it stems from lack of awareness. It is easy to question experiences that are completely different from our own. It is more daring to disparage them, but this also happens, and this is where problems arise.

In such a situation, I have difficulty in constructing an identity. For many years I have called myself Spanish or Catalan, more out of stubbornness than anything else. The more I felt I was being denied my identity ("you can't be from here"), the more I defended it. But maintaining this position is exhausting, at least for me.

At a time when Catalan and other flags around the country have become a sign of identity, I, as a black woman, feel as if I am caught between two identities that have systematically excluded or used me. On some occasions they reject me, on others they play the card of integration, multiculturalism and diversity, so they can pin a medal on their chest thanks to my participation. Yet rarely am I the person given the right to decide who, what and where I feel.

For me, this is what it means to be a black woman in Catalonia.

NOTICES SECTION

1 — *Indiano* was the colloquial denomination of the Spanish emigrant in America who returned rich at home.



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