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**Les marges créatrices : intellectuel.le.s afro-
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siècle**

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Creative margins: Afro-descendant and indigenous intellectuals in the Americas of the 19th and 20th centuries

Silvia Capanema, Véronique Hébrard, Fatma Ramdani and Claire Parfait

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- 1 This issue of *IdeAs* derives from a workshop entitled “The emergence of Black and mixed race intellectuals in the Americas (19th and 20th centuries)”, that took place as part of the 2019 Institut des Amériques congress. This workshop was itself an extension of previous work on the creative power of margins carried out as the result of a call for projects launched by Paris Sorbonne Cité university under the title “Writing history from the margins: the case of African Americans”¹. Initiated by Claire Parfait (Paris Nord University), Marie-Jeanne Rossignol (Paris University) and Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry (Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3 University), the project demonstrated that African-American historians in the 19th and early 20th centuries situated on the margins of their society, scholarly institutions and publishing networks were able to mobilize wonderful reserves of imagination and ingeniousness. They were innovative both in source research and in their recourse to alternative means of publishing and disseminating their work so that their marginal position proved creative.
- 2 The present collection takes this topic into other geographic and cultural spaces and invokes other margins. It covers the Americas as a whole, Latin America, West Indies and North America so as to explore the rich potentiality in a comparative approach; it considers actors who are Black, “mixed race” or autochthonous, according the terminologies proper to the various countries or spaces discussed². It also takes into account the question of gender but though several contributions are concerned with male or female historians, it deals more generally with the processes of creation and dissemination from marginal positions. The term “intellectual” will thus be taken in the broadest manner to include scholars (such as historians), artists and writers³ but

also activists and the self-taught. It is not necessarily so much a question of experts but rather, paraphrasing the definition given by Pascal Ory and Jean-François Sirinelli, of men and women of the cultural sphere, creators and mediators⁴. This issue has no claim to exhaustivity in as much as it presents a series of case studies and pays more attention to certain countries such as Brazil. Its aim is to suggest avenues of exploration of the creative power of margins. Like the debate-ridden concept of intellectual itself, the notion of what a margin is needs qualifying. Marginality can involve gender, race, ethnicity, it can be social, spatial, economic, professional, political, cultural, academic. It may be considered as a negative, synonymous with exclusion or relegation, but it may also be perceived as a locus of creation. As Michel Wieviorka notes:

The social sciences have long evinced ambivalent or contradictory approaches to margins and marginality. The most classic ones detect a nexus of problems and difficulties affecting certain persons or groups and constituting a threat to society. They study the origin, production or sources of these problems and difficulties. Other approaches, however, see margins and marginality in a very different light and carry out an almost inverse study of their contribution to society or even the world at large, to its norms and creativity, its vitality and dynamism⁵.

- 3 North American experience in the US and Canada around contributions from Black historians constitutes an initial approach combining marginality with originality or creation as a way of obviating margins but also of responding differently to societal questions, from a different site of experience. However, looking at margins also leads to a consideration of the existence of double, even triple, situations of marginality: for example, belonging to a marginal society with reference to the western world order (Latin America being such a one) and being marginal in that very society for reasons to do with race, gender or social condition.
- 4 A shifting of attention from center to margin is a core element of postcolonial studies as developed in the English speaking world⁶, but also of decolonial currents of thought that have mostly emerged in Latin America or Canada. The appearance of these intellectuals of the margins in different periods and environments throughout the Americas enables their various perspectives, represented more or less strongly in the studies published in this issue, to enter into dialogue. Central to them is an articulation between gender, race and class. Intellectual creation, whether it is literary, scientific or artistic, is the enabling factor for a shift from the center and the production of a new written history of the previously forgotten, or at the very least, history and writings informed by experience undergone on the margins or marginal in itself. Hence the very plasticity of the notion of margin, not exclusively geographical, determined territorially or by a frontier, but also symbolic. Intellectuals on the margins are “cultural transmitters” bringing about this transfiguration of the senses in terms of an actual experience of the phenomena of creolization⁷ described in the study by Maud Delevaux of the Afro-Peruvian poet Nicomedes Santa-Cruz.
- 5 Amerindians, writing their history and becoming by design thereby “Indian intellectuals”, not only produce excellent work, but also become the inceptors of a new epistemology, as shown by Stéphanie Boitevin in her writings on the autochthonous perspective in Canada or by Lionel Larré analyzing the reconquest of Indian intellectual sovereignty in the US. Indigenous intellectuals are to be found at the source of innovative projects in cultural and educative practice, as described by Elena Nava Morales in her article on the creation of the “communalidad”, an experiment set up by

indigenous intellectuals in the Mexican state of Oaxaca in the 1980s and reiterated by contemporary actors in university and cultural contexts. Luiz Henrique Eloy Amado, himself an “Indian intellectual”, examines the profound changes that occur in the human sciences when Indians sign on in universities and carry out research in the field. No longer are Indians mere “subjects of study”, but they become the authors of scientific knowledge while, at the same time, altering contemporary modes of thought. Something similar happens with Black intellectuals, as Claire Parfait shows in her evocation of the long “forgotten” story of Joel Augustus Roger, a Black North-American historian in the first half of the 20th century, who belonged to, while distancing himself from, a long tradition of Black historians. In her study, Fatma Ramdani examines the case of Mary Church Terrell, a late 19th and early 20th century African American historian, who produced essays and an autobiography with the aim of establishing a basis for the voice of Black women in the story of segregated America.

- 6 Women, often in a position of double or triple marginality (stigmatized by their gender, their race and by poverty) may become agents of literary or political transgression. Gregory Bekhtari describes how they both give rise to a new aesthetics and demonstrate a transformative engagement with society in his article on the political and trade union action of Black domestic employees in mid 20th century USA, a struggle taken up by the *Black Left Feminism* movement. These women turned their marginal condition into an avant-garde political and cultural dynamic.
- 7 Black women intellectuals are now writing their own history while becoming primary sources for another history; they are also producing new literary aesthetics, as Silvia Capanema shows in her comparative study of texts by Carolina Maria de Jesus and Conceição Evaristo on their experience of living in Brazilian favelas in the 20th century. The article by Laura Lema Silva shows that the relationship between new literary aesthetics and new source of history is also apparent in the writing of Estercilia Simanca Pushaina describing negotiation strategies amongst the Wayuu people living on the Guajiri peninsula between Venezuela and Colombia. The deliberate choice of Spanish as the dominant language reflects a desire both for dialogue with Colombian society as a whole and for cultural transmission.
- 8 Similarly, indigenous women intellectuals employ writing to mark their engagement with, and transmission of, their traditions as described by Fabrice Le Corguillé in his study of the work of Sarah Winnemucca in 19th century USA.
- 9 The contribution by Nádia Maria Cardoso looks at the strategies of negotiation and affirmation used by two “invisibilized” Black Brazilian intellectuals, Virginia Leone Bicudo and Guerreiro Ramos. By virtue of their marginalized situation, both are precursors of decolonial thinking. Likewise, in his Caribbean youth, the writer C.L.R. James broke with colonial logic and, in the 1920s, proposed what amounted to a “provincializing” reading of Europe, to borrow an expression coined by the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty in 2000⁸.
- 10 Valmir Luis Saldanha da Silva carries out a long term analysis of literary creation by Afro-descendants in Brazil from established writers – such as Machado de Assis and Gonçalves Dias – to the rap group Racionais Mc. He shows how the creative power of the margins lies essentially in the process of decentralization, the transformation of periphery into center. The same shift from periphery to center is also a key element in the work of Kabengele Munanga, an African academic living in Brazil (the article by Reinaldo José de Oliveira and Regina Marques de Souza Oliveira).

- 11 The decentering of both place and gaze is ultimately a shift enabling an intellectual to question the world anew, as appears in the study forming a coda to this issue by Françoise Palleau-Papin of the writing of Ben Fountain, a North American author who uses Haiti as a mirror for the United States.
- 12 These different instances of creation happening in multiple guises from the margins throughout the Americas are, then, the subject of this issue of *IdeAs*. Because all the intellectuals studied here are observers of, and committed actors in, society, these articles call for a reflection on the links between marginality and activism. They call also into question the very usefulness of the concepts of center and periphery. What meaning can the concept of margins retain at a time when the notions of *histoire croisée*, of connected history and of circulation are replacing those of national history and transfer, surely rendering “center” and “margin” oppositions less and less relevant.

NOTES

1. See <https://hdlm.hypotheses.org/> and associated publications: *Writing History from the Margins: African Americans and the Quest for Freedom*, eds Claire Parfait, Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry et Claire Bourhis-Mariotti (New York: Routledge, 2017); *Ecrire l'histoire depuis les marges : une anthologie d'historiens africains-américains 1855-1865*, in the Terra-HN editions SHS collection, 2018: [2. In the words of Pap N'Diaye, “Races have no existence in themselves but as imaginary categories constructed historically... the notion of ‘mixed race’ is no more valid than that of race because it presupposes the existence of pure races. It is used here in a historical and social sense.” Pap N ‘Diaye, “Controverse, Pour une histoire des populations noires en France : préalables théoriques” \[Polemic, Towards a History of Black Populations in France: Theoretical Preliminaries\], *Le Mouvement Social* n° 213, October-December 2005: 91-108; see also on this subject Magali Bessone, *Sans distinction de race ? Une analyse critique du concept de race et de ses effets pratiques* \[No Racial Distinction? A Critical Analysis of the Concept of Race and its Practical Effects\], Paris, Vrin, “Philosophie concrète”, 2013.](http://www.shs.terra-hn-editions.org/Collection/?-Historiens-africains-americains-; Histoire en marges. Les périphéries de l'histoire globale, eds Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry, Matthieu Renault, Marie-Jeanne Rossignol and Pauline Vermeren, Tours, Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2018.</p>
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3. This is the definition of intellectuals given by Vincent Duclert though he notes it is a limited one; see Vincent Duclert, “Les intellectuels, un problème pour l’histoire culturelle [Intellectuals, a Problem for Cultural History]”, *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* [on line], 31 | 2003, published on line September 15 2008, consulted September 2 2020. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ccrh/293>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ccrh.293>. It should be remembered that the definition of the word intellectual varies with time and place, as noted by François Dosse: “It can be stated then, that the notion intellectual is a polysemic one and covers conceptions that differ according to period and civilizational area”: François Dosse “Introduction” *La marche des idées : Histoire des intellectuels, histoire intellectuelle* [“Introduction” The Movement of Ideas. The History of Intellectuals, an Intellectual History], Paris, La Découverte, 2012.

4. Pascal Ory and Jean-François Sirinelli, *Les intellectuels en France. De l'affaire Dreyfus à nos jours* [Intellectuals in France. From the Dreyfus Affair to the Present Day], Paris, Armand Colin, 1986, p.

5. They add that this “man of the cultural sphere” is “cast as a politician, a creator and consumer of ideology” (*Ibid*).

5. Michel Wieviorka, “Ce que sont les marges aux sciences sociales” [What Margins are to the Social Sciences], inaugural lecture for the international symposium “La reconnaissance des marges, au cœur des dynamiques sociales en France et au Japon” [Reconnoitering Margins, at the Core of Social Dynamics in France and Japan], July 1, 2016, Maison française de Tokyo: <https://wieviorka.hypotheses.org/706>.

6. See: Achille Mbembe, “Qu’est-ce que la pensée postcoloniale ? [What is postcolonial thinking?]” (Interview), *Esprit* [on line], March 2019, consulted September 27, 2020. See also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books, c. 1978; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London, Verso, 1993.

7. Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du Divers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996 [Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity, trans Celia Britton, Liverpool University Press, 2020].

8. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2000.

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Presses Universitaires François Rabelais, 2018.

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