

Coming Out and Being Proudly Threatening: Feminist Activists and African Academies[1]

Pumla Dineo Gqola

A colleague once expressed particular disbelief at the colonialist mentality of a certain professor in the humanities she had recently encountered. Her distress stemmed from her inability to comprehend how a learned and "otherwise kind" man could exhibit such "ignorance". The professor's behaviour could only be surprising because my colleague assumed an inverse relationship between degree of education and domineering behaviour. She is not alone. Indeed, education is the preferred modus operandi of many individuals and organisations involved with fighting bigotry. Proponents of this view, however, cannot account for the central role of academics historically in legitimising hierarchies which locate Western European Christian heterosexual men at the apex and serve to devalue, demonise and exploit all Others.

African feminists know that networks of oppression are not exclusive to the academy. Indeed, the insidious networks of oppression present within academia are linked to their equally comprehensive manifestations in our broader societies. Their epidemic proportions present enormous challenges for our stated goal of transforming society. Because of the extent to which transformation of institutions of higher learning teams with other processes of change in society, the public face of African academic feminism must play a crucial role. When attempts to alter the structures and operations of these tertiary institutions are pursued as an isolated project carrying numerous internal contradictions, these attempts are doomed to fail. What is required, as many contributions to the launch issue of *Feminist Africa* suggest, is a re-sharpening of our interpretative lenses accompanied by a refining of the tools we use to demolish the status quo. It is not possible to proceed along this path unless part of the activism suggested by African feminism takes on an increasingly public face; what leads to failure are exclusionist, private or piecemeal tactics, since equitable relations within universities can neither be achieved nor maintained when the surrounding societies contradict these premises. In other words, the project of transforming African institutions of higher learning is one which cannot be taken in isolation from similar projects targeted at transforming the broader societies we are part of.

The terrain of knowledge production, which after all is the business of all academics, needs to permeate public discussion. As a minority within academia, we are well aware of the value of subversive role models and mentors. Most of us know first hand the frustration of our invisibility and/or isolation. This makes it our responsibility to be visible to girl-children who are in desperate need of alternative possibilities. Our demonstrable, vocal presence should work to offer options which deviate from the patriarchal agenda available to African children. In this way, we participate in raising feminist men and women for the future.

While few would openly dispute the seriousness of race/colonial oppression, gender equity remains a lesser matter. African feminist activists have long recognised this as a direct consequence of the position of feminist politics within liberation movements. We have noticed that even in societies with progressive gender legislation, misogyny and gender inequity are rife. New battles over information continue to be fought and won in all manner of public forums, yet for the most part, feminist voices are missing from these discussions.

There are several ways in which academic activists need to go public. *Feminist Africa* explores one such avenue by contributing to the growing research on the politics of knowledge production in relation to Africa(ns). In its format as an e-journal, it makes this business public, thereby contesting the hierarchies of access and circulation both in content

and in form. It is at the cutting edge, along with the e-journal initiatives of Nzewgwu Nkiru[2] (and other African studies e-journals), of increasing the visibility of African knowledge production. It also forces academic activists with a feminist consciousness to re-evaluate the tools we use to make gender and women's studies work accessible within the institutions we inhabit. A forum which highlights discussions at a continent-wide level facilitates much more multi-layered dialogue among ourselves than is usually the case. It clears space both for a celebration of past successes and for necessary cross-pollination. In the former category are the lessons we can all learn from the triumphs of WOUGNET, the African Gender Institute, Women's Net, WORDOC, the Makerere Women's and Gender Studies initiatives, as well as the groundbreaking work of Nzewgwu Nkiru in the dissemination of African intellectual activity.

It becomes important, then, to move beyond simply identifying what the problems are to identifying ways in which we can address them. Activism requires more than the mere theorisation of the problem and the multiple ways of making sense of it. If the business of African feminist academics is the generation of knowledge, then that wisdom needs to spread beyond the classroom and the accredited journal. We need to think, for example, about the way the innovative tone of the research produced by African academic feminists should go hand in hand with refusing the absolute containment of accredited journals and endless committee meetings. Furthermore, when we participate in the structuring of courses, or when we consult research and "expert" work, it is crucial that we emphasise thinking by feminist scholars. We need to make it the norm that, in Shereen Essof's words, "[w]ithin our courses, Amina Mama, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Pat McFadden and Dzodzi Tsikata often sit next to Frantz Fanon, Claude Ake, Steve Biko and Mahmood Mamdani". The task of de-centering white and/or male sources as repositories of expert knowledge is an urgent part of this. We need to redefine what constitutes expert knowledge to always include feminist knowledge and approaches, and so walk our gender mainstreaming talk. When we teach introductory African literature courses where early novelists like Flora Nwapa are absent, we are doing anti-feminist work. When, in courses on African philosophy or political thought, we teach Negritude or Black Consciousness as though they are gender-neutral, we are complicit with patriarchy. This recognition is necessary in order to guard against the fallacy that the feminist papers we publish, as essential as they are, absolve us from further responsibility.

In her discussion of Makerere's academic feminist politics in this issue, Deborah Kasente asks the very necessary and difficult question of "[w]hether the knowledge acquired will be applied practically to transform unequal power relations" in the broader society. It is an invitation to move further than identifying problems that are immediately apparent when we consider the relationship between feminist action and the academy in African countries. Integrated approaches to gender activism within and beyond the academy are paramount.

The urgency of this becomes evident when we look at the dynamics in the higher education sector in southern Africa. For example, prescriptions on female attire are public at the University of Zimbabwe, and threats of rape addressed to lesbian and bisexual women students at campuses like the University of the Free State should matter more than just theoretically. It should not be enough to only write academic articles about them, as important as that remains. When we make the links between our theories and practice, coping and responding to such crises should be part of what we generate.

Our critiques should move further still. Indeed, we should heed the call of poet, Roshila Nair when she writes:

let's say it loud
about the other day
how we were talking
about that Comrade X

who went home
and gave his wife
a blue eye,
after we'd all clapped
an hour before
for the liberation
speech he gave
with such conviction (Nair, 2001: 128).

Part of what the activism alluded to here requires is an unqualified condemnation of the contradictions which are everywhere around us. When injustices such as those alluded to in the poem above arise, part of our commitment requires that we be attentive and vocal in challenging them publicly, and that we "say it loud". The public overtime work that I am proposing will make the champions of misogyny unsafe. It is not enough to limit critiques to our safe spaces, be they professional organisations or groupings of like-minded colleagues. While we should be unwavering in the creation and maintenance of such affirming spaces, we should also use them as a place from which to garner strength for our other, more public forms of activism. They are necessary for the strength-gathering required to proceed with any kind of public activist work and as such are a necessary part of our project[3]. However, they should not be an end in themselves.

There also needs to be a more audible criticism of the new opportunistic "gender work" industry, partly evident in what Desiree Lewis calls "the deluge of writing on masculinity in the West" (Lewis, 2001: 8). Transformative feminist work is especially urgent in light of a conservative onslaught whose effects are the commodification and depoliticisation of gender work, as Paul Zeleza argues in this issue. When we are attentive to the myriad of meanings which attach to the popularity of short gender non-certificate courses and specialist postgraduate gender courses, further contradictions emerge. Depending on how we look at this, it may be cause for celebration or a source of concern when the non-degree certificates create the impression of GWS as a "soft" option within the university setting. This remains a concern even while, as feminist and womanist academics, we are committed to altering the logic which informs the academy altogether. Equally striking are the inconsistencies between the stated commitments of our universities and their practice (Mabokela and King, 2001 & Mabokela and Magubane forthcoming).

It is by now a maxim within most feminist schools that oppression thrives when unexposed and unchallenged. Part of our responsibility in partaking in unrelenting public activity is to ensure its dismantling of the networks of oppression at play. Finally, supporting other feminist activists is crucial to transformation and achieving successful change. The cases dealt with in this issue of *Feminist Africa* demonstrate this beyond a doubt. Most feminist activists are aware of the value of support from like-minded comrades. What flows from this support is the ability to achieve more since several voices are always infinitely more audible than one. It also decreases the risks of burn-out and personalised attacks on individual activists when the soldiers of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy know that there are several feminist activists to contend with. Margaret Asalele Mbilizi's revolutionary work within the Malawian educational context and Molaria Ogundipe's multifaceted labours demonstrate what determined African feminist academics can achieve. Is it not remarkable to imagine what a hundred Mbilizis could accomplish? Isn't it about time that we took our safe spaces to the streets, rather than continue to live under siege? The time for us to threaten the complacency and security of those who work to maintain inequity is long overdue.

References

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Footnotes

[1] I am grateful for the insights and discussions with my friend and colleague, Bangladeshi feminist activist and journalist, Rumana Hashem, as well as to Desiree Lewis for her detailed astute feedback on articulating some of the ideas expressed herein. I bear sole responsibility for the manner of their expression.

[2] Nzegwu Nkiru is an art historian who has been part of the initiative to establish several refereed e-journals. See *Ijele: Art eJournal of the African World*, *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, *West Africa Review*, *African Philosophy*, and *Proudflesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and Consciousness* as well as the database for African scholarship housed at Africa Resource Centre Online.

[3] Spaces where transgressive women meet and (re)affirm each other are necessary in and of themselves as well. Their very conceptualisation and creation are a feminist act given that under white supremacist patriarchy women are not intended to be safe.

Pumla Dineo Gqola, womanist scholar and writer, teaches at the Department of English and Classical Culture of the University of the Free State, South Africa. She is co-editor of Discourses on Difference, Discourses on Oppression (Cape Town: Centre for Advanced Studies on African Societies, 2002).