Beyond Determinism: The Phenomenology of African Female Existence
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Introduction

African feminism requires a theoretical account of embodied gender differences that is grounded in the complex realities of African women's everyday experiences. This theory must specify and analyse how our lives intersect with a plurality of power formations, historical encounters and blockages that shape our experiences across time and space. This account must also recognise the concrete specificity of individual gendered experience, and how this connects to and is different from the experiences of others. We need a framework that enables us to examine what it means to be who we are, and at the same time encourages us to realise who we want to become. These requirements will provide the means to theorise the changing modalities of African women's existence, even as we recognise the different traditions and cultures that bind contemporary African women to other women in other times and other places. From this perspective, "culture" and "tradition" can be seen as unfinished projects that are continuously being transformed by cultural actors. In this way, we will be able to move away from deterministic propositions, Cartesian oppositionality and reductive notions of African exceptionalism.
As a theory which avoids making absolute claims about the world and social relations prior to its investigation, existential phenomenology meets many of the requirements for a theoretical exploration into African female existence. Phenomenology is, of course, not the only theory capable of furnishing rich and complex accounts of gendered experiences in Africa. But its emphasis on a situated and embodied theory of knowledge and experience, together with its rejection of dualisms, including the privileging of the mental over the physical, subject over object, and culture over nature, makes it useful for exploring how particular social subjectivities are constructed, as well as for liberating possibilities of existence.

Because phenomenology is a philosophy of beginnings, I want to turn to some of the questions Simone de Beauvoir poses in the opening pages of her seminal work, The Second Sex. She asks: "What is a woman?" and "How does one become one?" Here, I do not intend to repeat de Beauvoir's responses to these questions, or deal with the shortcomings in her arguments (see Heinamaa, 1996; Moi, 1992; Mackenzie, 1986). Instead, I recast the questions she asks in the light of lived African experiences, with a view to investigating the meanings of sexually differentiated bodies and clarifying how "embodiment" produces and affects our experience of the world. I am aware that some have argued that the current interest in de Beauvoir is unwarranted and has little relevance for African women (see Arnfred, 2002). Yet, de Beauvoir's existential philosophy of women's incarnated, situated experience is more relevant now than ever before, given the tremendous social changes and cultural fluidity characterising African societies. Returning to de Beauvoir's questions does not mean becoming locked into uncritical, metaphysical essentialism or universal humanism; rather, it involves understanding and articulating the complex ways in which African women have been subjugated and have struggled to discover new identities and viable modes of existence.

Before investigating how phenomenology can provide an alternative to existing accounts, I critically outline some of the ways in which African and Africanist women theorists have analysed women's identities. Over the last twenty years, a variety of approaches have sought to address the political implications of sex difference in Africa. For simplicity's sake, I will distinguish between those approaches that draw attention to hierarchical differences between men and women, and those that stress their socially equivalent and complementary status. In the case of the former, African women are sometimes seen as defined only by the

dominance of male subjects in patriarchal systems. In contrast, theorists who argue that the positions of men and women are complementary challenge the relevance of the concept of "patriarchy" in African contexts, and stress that men and women have different but equal experiences.

African Women and Patriarchy

Many theorists have used the term "patriarchy" in African contexts to refer to the organisation of social life and institutional structures in which men have ultimate control over most aspects of women's lives and actions. For example, men have access to and benefit from women's labour more than the reverse. Male authority and power is located in and exercised through the extended family, a pre-capitalist unit of production which continues into the present time (Gordon, 1996: 7). Historically, the sexual division of labour was organised in such a way that women were (and still are) the primary caregivers, and were responsible for the bulk of food cultivation and/or processing. Women thus played central but emphatically socially subordinate roles in African society. Some claim that this central but inferior role is currently reinforced through the valorisation of motherhood. For theorists critical of patriarchy, women - both now and in the past - play pivotal reproductive and productive roles that facilitate patriarchal economic and political dominance.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1985) makes this point when she focuses on Yoruba society, and argues that it is through the institution of marriage that women, who become properties in their husbands' lineages, lose all personal rights and self-identity. Women's loss is men's gain, as the institutions of marriage and motherhood further invest men's existing powerful positions in the kinship system and interpersonal relationships with wider political and economic meaning. For April Gordon, "formal political institutions and cultural norms typically accorded more authority, status, and control of wealth and other resources (including women) to men" (1996: 5). Thus, according to many who focus on patriarchy, African women are seen as instruments in overwhelmingly constricting systems of male dominance.

These theorists are not unaware of the abundant evidence of women's power and authority in pre-colonial religious, political, economic and domestic spheres. They often argue, however, that such power was highly circumscribed and subsumed by male authority (Afonja, 1990). Celebrated women of power and means, such as the Dahomey Amazons or the Iyalodes described by the Nigerian historian Bolane Awe, "were few and recognised … for a short time only" (Afonja, 1990: 204). The argument is that when female authority was celebrated, it was tokenistic, with some writers interpreting this as "an expression of inequality rather than equality" (Afonja, 1990: 204).

Despite the contributions to understanding oppressive power relations made by theorists who focus emphatically on patriarchal dominance, there are problems with some of their underlying assumptions. By equating sexual difference with male domination, some of these writers collapse two distinct categories into one. According to Iris Young, we need to make a distinction between sexual differentiation, as "a phenomenon of individual psychology and experience, as well as of cultural categorisation", and male domination, as "structural relations of genders and institutional forms that determine those structures" (1997: 26). Male domination may require sexual difference; however, sexual difference does not in itself lead to male domination. By collapsing this distinction, there is a danger of ontologising male power, and assuming that human relationships are inevitably moulded by tyrannical power relations. Moreover, equating sexual difference with male dominance can also obscure the ways in which both men and women help to reproduce and maintain oppressive gendered institutions. As Young astutely notes, "most institutions relevant to the theory of male domination are productions of interactions between men and women" (1997: 32). As a case in point, we only have to think of the pernicious institution of female genital mutilation, which

is both defended and practised by many women.

An emphasis on crushing patriarchal dominance can also lead us to ignore women's power and active roles within particular systems of social organisation. For example, Llewellyn Hendrix and Zakir Hossain (1988) suggest that writers such as Ogundipe-Leslie can make their claims about women's inevitable economic and political disempowerment within their husbands' lineages only by drawing examples from patrilineal societies. In matrilineal or bilineal societies, women have more complex subject positions, as their productive and reproductive capacity is geared towards their natal clans, despite the fact that they are married to outsiders. Careful investigation could uncover the scope that women in these societies have for negotiating individual economic and political freedoms in relation to different families or lineages. Nevertheless, theorists such as Afonja (1990) claim that matrilineal systems provide little more than organising principles for connecting men across generations and space; any apparent power or authority women may have within matrilineal systems is merely symbolic and tangential to the formal power of men.

If we assume that women are automatically victims and men victimisers, we fall into the trap of confirming the very systems we set out to critique. We fail to acknowledge how social agents can challenge their ascribed positions and identities in complex ways, and indirectly, we help to reify or totalise oppressive institutions and relationships. Rather than viewing patriarchy as a fixed and monolithic system, it would be more helpful to show how patriarchy is constantly contested and reconstituted. As Christine Battersby (1998) suggests, patriarchy should be viewed as a dissipative system, with no central organising principle or dominant logic. Viewing patriarchy in this way allows us to appreciate how institutional power structures restrict and limit women's capacity for action and agency without wholly constraining or determining this capacity. By conceptualising patriarchy as a changing and unstable system of power, we can move towards an account of African gendered experience that does not assume fixed positions in inevitable hierarchies, but stresses transformation and productive forms of contestation.

"Dual Sex-Role" Systems

Theorists such as Niara Sudarkasa, Oyeronke Oyewumi and Nkiru Nzegwu have argued that, while African societies may well have their own forms of inequality and stratification, it is wrong to suggest that sexual asymmetry is internal to African societies, or that gender, prior to European invasion, was an organising principle in these societies (see Sudarkasa, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997; Nzegwu, 2001). Claiming that the organisation of social life in pre-colonial Africa was based on a "dual sex" system, they associate this system with complementary forms of power in the activities and roles of women and men. These often involved parallel rituals, monarchic structures, age-sets, secret societies and associations for the two sexes. For example, among the Igbo, women farmers grew different crops from men; and among the Yoruba, female and male weavers worked on different looms to avoid duplication (Sudarkasa, 1987; Nzegwu, 2001).

According to Nzegwu, separate but parallel spheres allow each sex to control activities and address issues in ways that are beneficial to the entire community: "Women and men are equivalent, namely equal, in terms of what they do in the maintenance and survival of the community" (2001: 19). She therefore claims that power is distributed equally between the sexes, and that "women's sexual and reproductive capacities [do not] determine their second-class status" (2001: 20). For writers such as Nzegwu, therefore, equating sexual difference with sexual inequality amounts to a misreading of African social structures and the importance of the dual-sex organisation. The notion of "patriarchy" is consequently seen as an imported and imposed concept.

Those who explore the identities of African men and women in terms of the dual-sex system argue that the identification of hierarchical differences in such systems involves imposing European social categorisations on African contexts. They focus especially on the inapplicability to Africa of the public/private dichotomy as a basis of inequality between the sexes. In Western contexts, men's mobility and authority in the public realm, and women's subordination in the private, have led feminists to identify this dichotomy as a crucial basis for hierarchical organisation. For Oyewumi and Nzegwu, however, African contexts manifest little evidence of this dichotomy, as women's roles and activities (which might include, for example, long-distance trading, hunting or divination) encourage them to inhabit both spheres simultaneously.

Many have also stressed that the private and public spheres and the practices taking place in both spheres are not socially unequal or not seen as separate. Filomina Steady, for example, has stated that "the question of differential valuation between production and reproduction was not an issue" (1987: 7) because pre-colonial Africa was primarily a subsistence economy. For Steady, the social valuation associated with sex difference was based less on material power than on metaphysical and symbolic meanings. And like many others who have explored dual sex-role systems, Steady suggests that the symbolic basis for social valuation explains the supreme role accorded to motherhood in many African societies. The woman as mother is seen as an embodiment of the generative aspect of society, and is "equated with the life force itself" (1987: 7).

For such theorists, then, African women's affirming identities revolve around their designation as "mothers". According to the Nigerian anthropologist, Ifi Amadiume, African female power is "derived from the sacred and almost divine importance accorded to motherhood", with the veneration of motherhood constituting "the main difference between the historical experiences of African women and those of European women" (1997: 146). For Oyewumi, "'Mother' is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African woman" (2000: 1096), while Catherine Acholonu, in her book, Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism (1995), proposes the concept of "motherism" as a conceptual framework for investigating African women's unique experiences. "Motherism" therefore provides a response to "feminism", which Acholonu sees as being grounded in Euro-American cultural experience.

In similar vein to Acholonu, Amadiume and Oyewumi emphasise African women's powers under the rubric of motherhood as an alternative to ideas about women's agency associated with Western feminists. Amadiume calls for a focus on "the motherhood paradigm" to allow for "a shift of focus from man at the centre and in control, to the primacy of the role of the mother/sister in the economic, social, political and religious institutions" (1997: 152). Oyewumi claims that "the model of motherhood is absolutely natural … because [it] binds women together in collective experience, it is childbearing and the mothering of children, and consequently the nurturing of community" (2000: 5). For these theorists, motherhood is seen to constitute the symbolic core of a powerful female subject position, which contests what they see as the Western feminist view of women's social disempowerment and symbolic lack.

For many theorists who focus on dual sex-role systems, the category "woman" is seen as having no theoretical or existential purchase in African societies. This is the position of Oyewumi (1997; 2000), Amadiume (1997) and many who have contributed to the online journal, JENDA: A Journal of Culture and African Women's Studies (http://www.jendajournal.com). Oyewumi notes that, prior to European contact, there was no "pre-existing group characterised by shared interests, desires, or social position in Yoruba society called 'woman'" (1997: ix). She argues that, unlike the situation in Euro-American societies, sex differences were not the basis for social classification, hierarchy and human

worth in the case of the Yoruba. Rather, social organisation and hierarchy was (and still is) determined largely through seniority. She therefore writes: "Seniority as the foundation of Yoruba social intercourse is relational and dynamic; unlike gender, it is not focused on the body" (1997: 14).

The absence of what Oyewumi calls "body-reasoning" in Yoruba society is reinforced in language. In Yoruba, as in many African languages, gender is not linguistically coded, although seniority is linguistically marked [1] . Oyewumi claims that the absence of gender in language shows the relative unimportance of sex-based differences and therefore sex-based inequality. From her perspective, then, the question "What is an African woman?" is a red herring, and has no relevance beyond revealing the hegemony of Western concepts and analytical frameworks.

One salient problem with the dual sex-role version of identity is that it assumes innate differences between the sexes. Nzegwu, for example, claims that "women are different from men and men are different from women. As women, sometimes we see the world differently from men" (2001: 7). Statements such as these imply that the perceptual, emotional, intellectual and social universes of men and women are naturally determined, and that "essential" differences lie outside of culture and society. However, there is no explanation of how these differences develop, even though they beg analytical questions about their cultural, symbolic and social origins.

Another obvious problem with the dual sex-role system theory is its privileging of motherhood as the paradigmatic self-identity of African women. Here, these theorists assume that the potential for reproduction becomes the "natural" basis for particular social realities and institutional frameworks. Commenting on the difference between biological mothering and the social meanings of mothering in a different context, Anglo-American feminist Adrienne Rich separates motherhood as "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children" from motherhood as "the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential - and all women - shall remain under male control" (1977: 13). According to Rich, there is a difference between a woman's decision to actualise the potential presented by her body and that decision being taken within a patriarchal context. It is the institution of motherhood that most feminists seek to question or challenge. Accepting that maternity is an experience potentially open to all women does not bind or reduce women to that experience or identity. However, proponents of the dual-sex theory fail to recognise that mothering occurs within contexts shaped by socially unequal roles and identities for men and women. Only a theory that is deeply complicit with patriarchal power, therefore, can reduce female identity to its maternal aspect.

Identifying the dangers in many African women scholars' celebration of motherhood, Patricia McFadden observes that a potentially positive female experience of nurturing "can easily become a trap [and] we need to understand the limits of [female] nurturing" (1997: 2). According to Desiree Lewis (2002), the inability to acknowledge how women's nurturing is embedded within social institutions generates an uncritical celebration of the motherhood paradigm, as well as a failure to investigate the regimes of power that condition the choice of whether to have children or not. A detailed critical examination of the ideological apparatus that reduces African women to the status of "mother" is beyond the scope of this article. Such a project would require an analysis of how the patriarchal construction of maternity valorises paternity and tacitly elevates male subject positions. The danger of venerating maternity while failing to investigate the meaning of paternity leads to the positioning of African men as the norm, the natural category that requires no explication. What is needed is a genealogical investigation into the relations of power, representational regimes, and religious, political and philosophical structures that shape the discourses and experiences of maternity and paternity in Africa, both in the present and in the past. Such a project need not

deny that maternity and birth could provide an ontological framework for thinking through women's identities beyond patriarchal domination. However, the envisaging of liberating identities for women must be based on a thorough and critical analysis of institutional frameworks and social relationships that constrain and prescribe women's actions and social freedoms.

Philosophy of African Female Embodied Existence

The two approaches reviewed above suggest diametrically opposed views about African gendered experience. While they are rooted in divergent political perspectives, each relies on generalisation, determinism and a tendency to reduce complex identities and social systems to simplified concepts and dogmatic paradigms. In what follows, I suggest that by combining the contrasting approaches to power in each perspective, we can develop more detailed and nuanced ways of theorising African women's identities. This fusion would provide a theory of power, both as capacity (power to) and as limitation (power over). Power to refers to the capacity to act and bring about changes in the world. In contrast, power over imposes a limit on power as capacity. By exploring power to and power over simultaneously, we are able to move beyond generalisation and determinism towards richly detailed accounts of African women's identities and lived experiences, and to invigorate our theoretical frameworks and discourses for exploring what it means to be an African woman.

In demonstrating the value of detailed accounts, I turn to the phenomenology of embodied existence developed by the French philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Existential phenomenology offers a valuable methodology because it does not assume a metaphysical framework within which all subsequent operations must take place. In other words, it begins by avoiding the assumption of a subject and an object and by addressing itself to the nature and meaning of the phenomenon to be studied. The phenomenon is simply "that which appears" and is yet to be explained [2] . Phenomenology therefore attempts to turn away from the "natural attitude" or commonsensical or normative modes of description. Instead, it seeks to analyse existence and lived experience outside of the distorting influence of normative patterns of description. One of the main accusations levelled at Western feminism is that it imposes Western experiential and historical frameworks onto other societies and cultures. It is precisely because phenomenology consistently seeks to avoid making prior assumptions [3] that it is a useful methodology for investigating the specificity of African embodied existence.

For both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, any account of existence must be approached from a variety of angles simultaneously. These would include cultural patternings, biological factors, historical forces, aesthetic patterns, ethical considerations, biographical details and all other perspectives that impinge on the nature of the phenomenon in the context of existence. That being said, the primary entry point for phenomenological analysis is always lived experience. When I wake up in the morning, there is a background of recognition, certain forms of discourses, cultural traditions, specific histories, both personal and collective connections and disconnections, capacities and limitations that confront me and work through me. I neither define myself, nor am I defined simply in terms of broad macro-level forces. Rather, it is through my lived experience in concrete situations that I come to understand the context that constitutes my identity as an African woman. The existential phenomenology of my life as it unfolds therefore alludes to the complex layers of socio-historical and cultural context that constitute my being an African woman. My existence as an African woman precedes any possible notion of essence; one simply cannot posit an essence to African womanhood that comes prior to the analysis of specific forms of lived experience, in all its complex and often contradictory subtlety.

Of course, the kinds of experiences I have and how I make sense of these, depend on my

specific form of embodiment. At a simple physical level, the kind of body I have shapes how I inhabit, engage with and interpret the world. The way I receive and negotiate the world will vary according to whether, for example, my body bleeds every month; I become pregnant or sick; I am black or white; old or young. The world will also offer itself to me differently. In Black Skin, White Masks (1967), Frantz Fanon demonstrates with celebrated force the enormous power of the discursive and political effects of responses to the black body. In a parallel fashion, de Beauvoir, in The Second Sex (1949), focuses on female embodiment and shows how childbirth, lactation, menstruation and menopause lead to women's experiences being onerous, demanding, fatiguing and fraught with danger, in ways that men's experiences are not [4] . But how each woman experiences her body will be modulated by her specific situation and the value that the world places on that body. A poor urban woman in a Lagos or Kinshasa slum will have very different experiences of pregnancy and childbirth from those of her educated and moneyed counterparts.

On an ontological level, our lived embodied experience is therefore the basis of our perception, cognition and intentional interaction with the world. Questioning the Cartesian disembodied subject that states, "I think, therefore I am", Merleau-Ponty claims that intentionality is "in the first place, not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'" (1962: 137). This incarnated intentionality refers to the body's capacity to act in the world prior to conscious or reflective thinking. In this sense, the body is not that which can be known (as it is in biological discourse), or that which simply knows. Rather, it is that which allows us to know. For both Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, the body is the existential ground of experience and perception: "I apprehend my body as subject-object" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 95).

At this point, it is important to raise and respond to two common criticisms of phenomenological theory: that it is a form of subjectivism; and that it over-emphasises the role of the body. In responding to both criticisms, existential phenomenologists argue that they see the body as being fundamental to experiencing the world, but recognise that it only acquires significance when placed in a bio-cultural and historical context. De Beauvoir therefore writes that "it is not upon physiology that values can be based; rather, the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them" (1949: 68-69). Therefore, the body is neither a pure physical entity nor is it a passive receptacle of cultural forces. Rather, it is the fundamental synthesising agency that weaves the world into meaning, and the source for the emergence of knowledge, value and signification (Heinamaa, 1996). This allows us to make a distinction between the body as a physical entity and embodiment, as an active occupation of the body in the world, a pre-cognitive creatively transformative mode of being and communication with the world.

One of Merleau-Ponty's key insights is that the world and the embodied being renew each other in perpetual interaction and exchange. This means that we cannot posit an absolute origin or set of causal effects for any specific event. Instead of cause A or cause B (whether in the world or through an embodied action), there is a ceaseless ongoing movement between body and world. It is in the light of this view of human existence that we can investigate what it means to be an African woman. As embodied agent, my actions and projects are constituted, limited, and yet also empowered by the interactions between changing historical, social, environmental and biological factors. This interaction will have to include the ways in which various colonial encounters, together with changing African cultural patterns in the context of global capitalism, continuously alter definitions of African womanhood. Our bodily situation in the world is thus already marked by others; it is already imbued with values, traces and significance that precede our entry and occupation. And yet, the world only has significance when embodied agents take up their accumulated values and transmit them into everyday practice. The capacity of both body and world to assimilate and renew each other continuously is what Merleau-Ponty describes as "a communication with the world more ancient than thought" (1962: 254); and de Beauvoir refers to as the

"becoming" of woman.

The implication of this processual account of embodied experience is that identity, agency and experience are not fixed or given in advance. Rather, they are part of my lived situation, continuously being re-constituted and open to changing contexts. This account of embodied agency means that my identity as an African woman is not pre-determined by biology, social norms or regulative practices. Who I am and who I become are shaped by my actions and choices to resist, rework or acquiesce to bio-cultural normativity (Allen, 1989). From this perspective, the body is understood as a situation, with this implying both freedom and constraint in the ongoing dialogue between world and embodied agent. The meaning of "African woman" becomes material, embodied, multiple and generative, rather than a disembodied abstraction.

Significantly, for Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, embodied intentionality cannot be understood as individualistic or voluntaristic. Instead, the body's intentionality requires a situation from which to begin, and a community from whom to acquire resources. Specific expressions of intentional behaviour can be disrupted or affected by the world. A woman is able to imprint her own image and actions on the world; yet this is possible precisely because the world can be receptive to that imprint at a particular moment.

The ontological implications of an existential phenomenological account of agency demand that we rethink the notion that hegemonic power structures such as patriarchy and white supremacy imprint themselves upon passive bodies. Rather than viewing these systems as revolving around a master plan or closed hierarchical system that is imposed from above, it is more productive to look at how groups and individuals shape autonomous patterns of being, producing sites of struggle, contestation, complicity and transformation in the process.

Drawing on existential phenomenology leads us to realise that the definition of an African woman cannot be determined outside of the specific context of a cultural-historical horizon. Of course, this does not deny that "oppression is a concrete historical situation" (Moi, 1992: 58), one which conditions African women's identities; nor does it deny that the biological body imposes certain constraints. Rather, the continuous interaction between world and embodied being suggests that through lived experience, a woman is always involved in the process of determining her project: discovering who she is, and what she will become.

Existential phenomenology therefore does not begin with conclusions about women's experiences and identities. Rather, it is concerned with what each culture and historical context makes of the biological body, and what this body makes of the culture and historical context in turn. A phenomenologically-inspired account begins by asking: What is the lived experience of having a particular kind of body? How does bodily being affect and shape the kind of experience we can have? Why are the bodily beings of women and men used to demarcate social difference? What limitations and liberties does a woman face on account of her encounter with the world as a female? The task of a phenomenological focus on sex difference is therefore "to discover how the nature of woman has been affected through the course of history; … to find out what humanity has made of the human female" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 69).

In the light of this phenomenological account, we are now in a position to revisit the question: What is an African woman? In the first instance, she is a person with a female body, and therefore shares certain experiences with women across the world. Whether Asante or Bakongo, hetero/homo/bi-sexual, infertile, menopausal or childless, all African women share with other women across different space and time the potential for giving birth. This bodily capacity cannot be denied or viewed as a secondary order that has insignificant impact on social relations and how African women experience their worlds. Although female subject

positions cannot be reduced to biology, the female body does provide the basis for a common horizon of experience.

This basis of biological bodily experience plays "a part of the first rank and constitutes an essential element in [women's] situation" (de Beauvoir, 1949: 65). Yet de Beauvoir is quick to point out that this is not enough to determine the identity of a woman: "But I deny that [biology and bodily capacity] establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role for ever" (1949: 65). For de Beauvoir, to understand the meaning of "woman", biological difference must be viewed "in the light of an ontological, economic, social, and psychological context" (1949: 69).

The importance that existential phenomenologists attach to the context of the body requires that we must also acknowledge the nebulousness of the idea of "Africa". Whether to treat the continent as a geographical entity or a homogenous cultural reality continues to be a source of debate among African scholars (see, for example, Hountondji, 1976). Africa is a diverse continent, with thousands of cultural traditions and linguistic groupings that dwarf all the different European cultural traditions and languages combined. This plurality makes any generalisations about the configuration(s) of gendered existence on the continent problematic.

This is not to say that generalisations (whether about gender or Africa) cannot or should not be made. Rather, we must be cautious and always specify the divergences orchestrated by the different socio-cultural frameworks, historical developments and their changing constellations. For example, contemporary African gendered experience must be located at the intersection of two overarching, interdependent and yet conflicting historical encounters. One involves the incorporation of different African societies into a world economy, which began with the Arab Muslim invasion in the seventh century, followed by European colonialism and occupation beginning in the fifteenth century, and enduring into the present in the form of contemporary neo-colonial administrations (see Ekwe-Ekwe, 1993). The other is based on an indigenous, pre-conquest African socio-cultural and metaphysical horizon, in which social identities and relations are implicated and embedded. These external impositions and internal historical processes have combined to distort, modify and transform African gender relations in a way that makes it difficult to speak in absolute terms about the meaning and experience of gendered existence, without retrospectively projecting our present ideals and anxieties onto the past.

In dealing with specific patterns within broad historical trajectories, our investigations must recognise that the "national" culture of each African country is inflected by religious, regional, class and ethnic specificity. Sensitivity to each African cultural context allows us to acknowledge the power of ethnicity (which lies beneath the more superficial boundaries of different national identities) in shaping people's lives. As Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe has argued, despite the promotion of nation-states in Africa, "the overwhelming majority of Africans still do not live their everyday normal lives as Senegalese, Nigerians, Zaireans, Kenyans .... Instead, they live their lives as Wolof, Yoruba, Igbo, Ijo, Nupe, Bakong, Baluba, Baganda, Kikuyu, Asante, and so on" (1993: 95). Consequently, the general characteristics of a specific "culture" (whether at the macro-level of Africa, the intermediate level of nation-states, or the microcosmic level of a particular ethnic group) are always plural. Similarly, even as we speak about an African woman, we must understand that this identity is necessarily connected to very specific gender configurations, forms of access to and control over means of production, participation in civic and spiritual life, inheritance rights, individual choices and so on, all taking place in particular African locations.

In order to avoid defining "the African woman" in terms of a unitary and closed identity, a

range of elements need to be specified within the terms of each culture. It is only after sifting through these initial cautionary steps that we can begin a meaningful cross-cultural dialogue among African women, and then eventually extend this to other cultural groupings in order to create productive and liberating exchanges within a global community.

With Africa understood as a fragmented plurality, it is nonetheless possible to point to the outlines of a common project for African feminists. Wherever African women find themselves, biological limitations and freedoms combine with socio-historical factors, not in the form of a pre-determined path, but as open possibilities. Existential phenomenology teaches us to focus on existence rather than pre-determined essence. In this sense, what binds African women together is not a metaphysical yoke, but rather a complex web of material, historical and cultural strands that invite continuation, adaptation or transformation. Whether our futures take the form of repetition or difference or both, is, in part, up to us.

In many ways, our existential potential can be unlocked only when we begin to question the restrictive and deterministic language at work in much current scholarship on African women. What is needed is a move away from monolithic constructs, towards efforts to grapple with lived experience in its entire existential ramifications. If we remain too focused on either generalisations or specificities, our insights will remain "thin" in the sense that Clifford Geertz (1973) gave to the term. Our theories and vision will be constricted by the centrality of abstract concepts and sterile dichotomies. Opportunities for opening up African feminist thought and action arise from focusing on lived experiences and the intricacies, nuances, contradictions and potentialities of everyday life. Only once we begin to move in this direction (whether under an existential phenomenological rubric or not), can we begin to furnish "thick" descriptions that analyse African women's identities in all their rich complexity. The task ahead is to develop and extend the work of researching into and analysing what it means to be an African woman.

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Footnotes

[1] For a critique of Oyewumi's linguistic determinism, see Bibi Bakare-Yusuf "Yorubas Don't Do Gender: A Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses" in *African Identities* 1, 1, 2003 (forthcoming).

[2] A detailed account of the nature of phenomenological method is offered in the preface to Merleau-Ponty's book, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962).

[3] Phenomenology has been rightly accused of sexual neutrality (Young, 1990; Butler, 1989), but this does not detract from phenomenology's emphasis on change and the embodied agent's capacity to transform and to be transformed by each historico-cultural horizon.

[4] De Beauvoir's lengthy description of the facticity of the female body is based on a physiological perspective. In the footnote to the section, "The Data of Biology", de Beauvoir is conscious of the psychological benefits maternity may have for women.

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