

# African feminist uprisings: Getting our knickers in knots

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Imperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind.

– Gayatri Spivak (1988: 299)

The power politics of daily life that find expression in practices of inclusion and exclusion, participation and marginalisation (classed, gendered and raced, among others) that define our lived realities often seamlessly transfer into online spaces as our contemporaneous continuum. As feminists and largely herstorically colonised peoples, we have learnt to be wary and to question how and who documents our (her)stories (translating them into “truths”) and from what perspectives; and the power politics inherent in how we (or others) may write, record or claim attribution, authorship or ownership of (our) words, actions and bodies.

The power dynamics of who authors and “owns” feminist knowledge vis-à-vis those who give voice and content to what is known as feminist knowledge; who speaks and who is spoken for in feminist research and knowledge production processes, and how all of these factors so powerfully came together in this organic African feminist encounter, entirely facilitated by online spaces and tools – has made this standpoint contribution a difficult one to write.

Late in 2012, a private company, Nectar Lingerie, based in Canada – acting on the misguided notion (at best) that wearing underwear improves African women’s social status and protects us from rape and disease – initiated their “Undies for Africa” marketing campaign. Customers were encouraged to drop off their used underwear at Nectar Lingerie in exchange for discounts on new purchases. The used underwear would be shipped to “Africa,” allowing the women who donated their used underwear and bought new underwear

to make a contribution to improving the lives of African women, including preventing rape and disease transmission through this consumptive act.

A counter-campaign emerged as a simultaneous outpouring of outrage as soon as online African feminists and their allies became aware of the “Undies for Africa” campaign. Enabled by the immediacy of internet access, social networks and feminist mailing lists, feminists and their allies voiced their strongly held objections to the campaign.

Nectar Lingerie was slated for trivialising (and attempting to profit from) structural sexual violence, asserting colonial “civilising” and paternalistic relations between the global North and South, evoking enduring representations of “savage” African masculinity, and the continuous association of Africa and African women with disease-ridden bodies, casting the citizens of the global North as our knowing saviours – even in the underwear department.

Discussions about taking issue with the “Undies for Africa” campaign organically shifted between individual conversations and across and between online spaces, including via individual postings on “newer” technology – social media sites – and the Gender and Women’s Studies (GWS) in Africa mailing list (used by academics, researchers and activists involved in feminist, women’s and gender studies to share and exchange information and opportunities), an “older” and robust email-based technology medium.

The catalytic power of the GWS mailing list with its broad, yet specific reach, emerged as the fulcrum of counter-campaign voices and mobilisation among African feminists and their allies. The campaign elicited a deep well of responses, in many instances from heretofore silent voices on the GWS list, that on *this* topic found it necessary to break their silences and make their voices heard.

The multiplicity of voices, actions and responses generated by African, diaspora and other feminists in solidarity, proved central to making (positive) change happen – the withdrawal of the campaign following the direct engagement of African women (and their allies) with the company and its campaign – by asserting our rights and responsibilities to make our voices heard on matters that affect us transnationally. Vocally asserting our rights to define and speak for ourselves, using our collective and individual agencies to reject negative stereotypes that define us in homogeneous portrayals and re/presentations, and challenging shop-soiled, meaning-laden uses of our bodies as feel-good marketing tool for (private) financial gain formed some

of the content of our multiple acts of subversive silence-breaking through the counter-campaign.

The simultaneity and multiplicity of responses that the online spaces so speedily enabled, and the multiple non-linear actions of individuals and groups of individuals across disparate locations and time zones highlighted the messiness of definitively recording a chronology or timeline – and by extension, authorship and ownership – of the multi-layered counter-campaign’s efforts (and other similar forms of online activism).

The danger of creating a singular “timeline” of events was that it would risk excluding so many of the prior, simultaneous and multiple voices and actions that took place in several spaces, in the process of capturing (wittingly or unwittingly) one particular version of a herstory, timeline or chronology. This realisation was a powerful reminder of the subjectiveness inherent in pronouncing a chronology or chain of events involving many people – and in our era – events that involve simultaneous, technology-supported or enhanced social mobilisation.

Reflecting on my responses to efforts to record this particular chain of events, and trying to make sense of all of the elements of the campaign and counter-campaign that contributed to so deeply unsettling me, I recalled the experience of being taught history during my apartheid-era schooling experience. I was reminded of the authoritative perspective from which histories (including chains of events resulting in specific outcomes) were portrayed; the “facts” and “truths” of our school curriculum, from the perspective of the “victor” (oppressor) versus our diametrically opposed daily, lived realities of being black under apartheid.

Subjected to apartheid’s versions of history and its limited engagement with a broader world, through a curriculum whose ideology was rife with crafty inclusions and visibilities and exclusions and invisibilities, supported by state-controlled propaganda media, Bob Marley’s dictum that “half the story has never been told” held currency. Similarly, Marley’s words apply to the “Undies for Africa” campaign and the need for its counter-campaign.

The outcomes of the campaign – both in the deeply engaged feminist responses and in that of Nectar Lingerie (withdrawing their campaign) – had barely unfolded when it was evident that this transnational African feminist “story” would be documented.

In navigating this reality I was concerned (and shared my concerns) about attribution and authorship of the counter-campaign, the people involved,

their words and their actions, and the erasures that (can) take place when a collective and organic effort whose success lay in its multiplicity, is written up, inevitably by one, or a few people.

My concerns were about the danger of singular versions of events and what is or can be excluded in efforts to document, record, author and re/write herstories, and the complexities of creating timelines and herstories that will inevitably exclude parts; fragments, of a whole and complex story (even when attempting to include).

The discussions on the GWS list prompted me to return to and deepen my reflection on the politics of feminist research in relation to feminist activism; the relationship/s between the researcher and the researched; who writes or records what, for whom, from what perspective/s, and the potent inherent power dynamics, not unique to online spaces. It got me thinking about what “the most respectful or ideal feminist way” would be to record such an uprising.

Discussions profiled the complex tensions between feminist activism and feminist research; the politics of location and the spaces and places from which we speak (as diaspora, “Northern” or “Southern” feminists); the power dynamics inherent in being the researcher – no matter how sensitive and committed to inclusion, participation and making herstorically silenced voices heard – and uncomfortably for me, be(com)ing the researched.

Realising that in the instance of “Undies for Africa” I was part of the “researched” (not a position I have much direct experience occupying) led to a fair amount of discomfort and reflection on my feminist politics and ways of being and becoming – reflections that are always in process, and necessarily, incomplete.

It also surfaced structural and postcolonial discomforts and dilemmas embedded in being a feminist of colour – located in the global South – armed with ease in the most commonly used language of globalisation and unfettered access to online media.

Accustomed to thinking about issues of inclusion and exclusion, participation and marginalisation in my engagements with the worlds I find myself in, I was keenly aware throughout that the voices of the recipients of the used underwear, and women who lacked easy access to connectivity were not part of our engagement. I was also very much aware that the spaces in which we engaged, certainly the GWS list, by virtue of its purpose, included

women like me – (largely) women of colour who had either transcended class boundaries through our education and skills, or had entered the world with the accoutrements and privileges of being born middle-class.

Given all of the complexities and the power issues inherent in this process, how *does* one document a feminist uprising such as this one? How does one “do it right” and respectfully?

Feminist standpoint approaches, in being able to capture and validate personal experience, position and responses to an event or situation, and acknowledging that it is indeed subjective – one standpoint among many – from which to understand and analyse a situation, provide a way to understand one contribution, or perspective, towards a greater whole. We can therefore claim to have participated, but the activism (and its outcomes) cannot be claimed by any one person or group. This is the strength and beauty of the parts contributing to a whole, revealing collective ownership in and through individual stories. It also reminds me of the moral responsibility we have, as feminists, to create and sustain spaces for making herstorically marginal voices heard.

This approach enables a grappling with the power differentials embedded in each of our positions – influenced by class, location, sexuality, age, colour, education, caste, ethnicity and more – and what they mean and imply for how we practice feminism.

Grappling and navigating daily with the politics of power, knowledge and ownership and how this triumvirate complexly functions in all aspects of our lives means a feminist’s work is never done. It is always in process.

The Undies for Africa counter-campaign eloquently reflects how positive change is possible. It is one victory. Many struggles remain.

Aluta continua.

## References

- Spivak, G. C. 1988. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.