

Standpoint

Intellectual Politics and Radical Feminist Praxis

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Writing a piece on the politics of becoming intellectual - something that so many African women are terrified of - made me realise what a rare opportunity I had been presented with to say some of the things that I have thought and felt passionately about, lived through and marvelled at for the past three decades of activist politics - as a nationalist and later as a radical feminist - within the context of anti-colonial and now anti-patriarchal global feminist resistance. All sorts of experiences and anecdotes came to mind as I searched for an entry into the exceptional adventure of actually writing about what it feels like (in an abstract and emotional sense) - to think and act as an African female person who has positioned herself within a radical political tradition that does not compromise on the inalienable principles of dignity, personal integrity and justice.

There are so many possible ways of entering into a conversation about the politics of being intellectual, of being situated in a thinking politics, of making theory and putting that theory into practice - a deeply controversial and heavily contested positioning that invariably elicits a swift reaction from those who may have assumed that they have a monopoly over the contouring and production of knowledge. And in our world as it is - a world structured and mediated by race, class, age, gender and social location - there are individuals and groups of people who firmly believe that they have absolute power in terms of knowing and the articulation of that knowledge. Let me use a brief but very significant vignette as a stepping stone into this very volatile arena of contestation and self-definition.

A few years after the independence of South Africa, I attended a seminar in Cape Town, the hub of colonial knowing and privilege, at which I encountered the blatant assumption that African women could not possibly be intellectuals. This had been a recurring claim within colonial and anti-colonial historiography, an assertion that was born out by the pervasive representations of African women (here I mean women of African heritage) as mothers/wives or prostitutes, and in rare cases, as spirit mediums, healers and/or doomsday soothsayers - but never as thinkers and crafters of theory. In this instance, after I had made my presentation, a woman^[1] shouted at me across the conference room: "Pat McFadden, who do you think you are?" - and for a moment I felt myself thrust into a vacuum. I had never considered asking myself that question, because for the preceding twenty years I had struggled almost intuitively for the realisation of a vision of justice and dignity that encompassed anyone and everyone who was exploited and excluded by settler colonialism on the African continent.

My initial reaction was to reel at the hostility of her spoken anger, and while my senses told me that this - the insistence that I was worthless and stupid as an African person - was a deeply political spectacle, one that had been played out many times before in my life, I was repelled by the arrogance of her deeply racist stance, expressed within a context that I had believed aspired to transcending the ideology and structures that so many had struggled against for so long. As I watched her prance back and forth across the room, expounding her "critique" of my ideas and what she considered unfounded claims about African women, I realised that what was really happening was a drama of resistance against the intellectual incursions of an African woman into the academy, a space seen to belong primarily to white men, some white women, a few black men and certain "Others" - with the exception of radical African feminists. Clearly, I had crossed the boundaries of a sacred intellectual terrain and had ruffled some feathers. The surprise was in realising that "birds of a feather" did not imply racial and/or gendered homogeneity in this particular context. One needs to remind oneself of the claim that the apartheid regime often made in comparisons between Africans

in the laager and those poor "natives" up north...

It was an astounding revelation that left me shaken to the core, and several years later I am still wrestling with the immensity of the task of debunking entrenched colonial myths and exclusionary practices that mark African women as persons who dare not imagine themselves as intellectuals and makers of theory - the very stuff that informs both policy and access to critical resources in our societies. Clearly the intellectual agency of African feminists in particular is causing a dis-ease within the systems that apartheid and colonialism so carefully laid down as the foundations of our societies. As Toni Morrison succinctly puts it, "one has the feeling that nights are becoming sleepless in some quarters" (2000: 26).

The imperative of debunking the fabricated divide between theory and practice has become even more urgent in the emergent post-colonial societies of the continent. The claims abounding in academic and media circles in the region that "race no longer matters" are vacuous yet dangerous un-truths that cannot be sustained with reference to a miniscule black middle class, which is relentlessly thrust in our faces as an indisputable testament of "social transformation". One only has to take a drive along the Cape coast to be reminded that the matter of race steadfastly persists as a fact even more deliberately in Southern Africa today than ever before.

However, unless we step completely outside the box of conventional claims and hegemonic discourses regarding the character and orientations of African societies at the present time, we cannot begin to rebuff such seemingly indisputable claims. Not only are we confronted with the "requirement" of maintaining loyalty to a rhetoric that so effectively mobilised and rallied multitudes of us into the seemingly impossible struggle against colonial imposition, we are currently presented with newly-invented nationalist imperatives that conflate the viability of the neo-colonial state with the preservation of old systems of supremacist privilege. The demand that African intellectuals distinguish themselves by being "forward looking" - meaning that we neither reflect on a past deeply etched with the memory of racist dispossession and exclusion, nor invoke lived experiences in order to understand a present where most Africans are positioned as excluded subjects - smacks of supremacist arrogance and dangerous opportunism. Racial privilege, which is the practical expression of racism as a supremacist ideology - is as real and as political as the harsh realities of dire poverty affecting the millions of Africans, most of whom are women, all around us.

Critical to the repositioning of feminist thinking within the politics of post-coloniality is the revolutionary act of imagining oneself through the experience of engaging in intellectual discourse. One has only to realise that the very notions that inform our struggles as activists - no matter where we are situated within our respective societies - are the outcomes of an intellectual process that begins at the level of the imaginary. And imagining ourselves outside and beyond the normative idioms and caricatures that have been so effectively manipulated to silence and mute our ideas and visions is the first critical step towards re-inventing our lives and crafting a different future. Every time we step outside the stereotypes that have been so cunningly fashioned to patrol our imaginations and dull our intellectual energies - a strategy that is central to domination and control - we engage in a politics of the mind, in intellectual resistance, and we change ourselves in qualitatively new and revolutionary ways.

The very action of envisioning, of conceptualising, of questioning and critiquing, of responding with questions about what we hear and are told, and of considering that there is always another way of viewing life and experiencing it differently when we summon the courage to translate the imagined into a reality, causes us to leap forward, "to spread our wings and fly", and to be exhilarated by the power that comes from generating intellectual energies. For me, intellectual engagement is the most sensual and most satisfying

experience of living. It is akin to nurturing the very essence of my being. As a feminist, I draw critical impetus from my own struggles to live differently: to be free and autonomous as a woman who bears an African identity that I re-craft and re-shape in continuous interaction with modernity as a moment of opportunity to live differently. The resistance that women engage in against reactionary patriarchal ideology and its practice feeds my radical feminist intellectual politics and informs my praxis of living and thinking within a radical tradition.

Recently, I have returned to the insights and political traditions that Antonio Gramsci (1971; 2000) so generously bequeathed us as radical intellectuals. In spite of the glaring gendered inadequacies of his ideas, I find affirmation not only of the centrality of intellectuals in the crafting of modern societies (and this definitively includes Africans who have been at the core of modernity for the past half millennium); I also find a triumphant celebration of revolutionary courage in dark and trying times where reactionary politics deeply permeates the gullible consciences of nationalist elites across our worlds and gives license to dictators and militarists to rampage over peoples' rights with total impunity and disregard.

These are the times when we cannot be preoccupied with fabricated inventions between theory and intellectual engagement on one hand, and the practicalities of life as most people experience it on the other; we can no longer be silenced by the threats that taking our anger against gendered violation and a rising tide of femicide to the sites of knowledge production is tantamount to "lack of intellectual rigour" or that it brings the academy into disrepute; we can no longer stand aside while the media continues to portray us as exotic objects whose sexuality has made us "victim" to a virus that is conquerable and manageable; nor can we accept the myth that we can change our lives and societies as African women without the essential experience of becoming intellectuals.

I would like to conclude with a rather extensive quotation from Edward Said because he succinctly captures the view of what I have been saying above.

The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments and corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly power or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously (1996: 11-12).

As feminists, and more especially as radical feminists whose political agency is drawn from the pivotal role that we enact each time we bring the conceptualisation of politics (as theory) to the process of social transformation, to our situated realities both inside and outside the academy, it is crucial that we re-affirm and celebrate the mantra that the personal is truly and inviolably political. And so is the intellectual.

References

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Footnote

[1] This woman, although "black", situated herself in a camp of entitlement and arrogance through which she defined herself as neither black nor African, but as a custodian of that knowledge-producing faction that can conceive of African women only as the voiceless subjects of hegemonic information.