

Gender Research/Teaching Forum

"To a Different Degree": Student Reflections on Gender and Women's Studies

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Introduction

Yesterday, for the second time in my life, I found myself using the words, "feminist", "Africa" and "academic" in the same sentence in order to describe myself and my current positioning. By way of subverting these loaded terms, I heard myself throwing in the word "calypso" too, just to add colour and frivolity. I have never before thought of myself as an "African feminist academic". But then I have never had to describe myself, my location, or my increasing need for understanding my world as a complex prism within which gender, race and class reflect and refract. Neither have I had to name and locate my growing proficiency to grow ideas in small pots and sprout the words to articulate them with a minimum of care and feeding. Nor have I been more aware that my location within the academy forces me clearly to assert this positioning because this location is yet another site of struggle.

I'm a graduate student in gender and women's studies (GWS) in South Africa, and like my sisters with whom I share this space, "our world" in which we assimilate, propagate, and glow can be both a haven and a hell. It is a world that presents particular challenges and opportunities and one which I feel impelled to describe through my own insights as well as those of other students who bravely inhabit it.

This piece is therefore informed by a panel presentation of student experiences of GWS at particular South African institutions. Barabra Boswell shared her insights of GWS at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Nthabiseng Motsemmi dealt with her location at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and Lerato Ngoma focused on the University of Cape Town. These voices were supplemented by a series of informal conversations I have had with Christine Mbala, Joy Watson, Faithful Chaminuka and Laura Templeton, all based at the University of Cape Town. All these women are registered graduate students, some from as far as Namibia, Zimbabwe and the United States. A few come directly from an academic trajectory, whilst the large majority have chosen to return to the academy after working in the field.

The institutional spaces we inhabit vary: UWC, a historically disadvantaged institution and UCT, a historically "white" university, are located in the Western Cape whilst Wits is situated in another South African province, Gauteng. UCT and UWC have dedicated GWS degree programmes, while at Wits gender is "mainstreamed" and courses are offered within existing disciplines. Despite these varied positionings, all of us are currently grappling with developing writing and research skills and an analytical base in feminism through undertaking course work and/or research.

We also embody a diversity of postcolonial positionings; each of the individual stories about the road through and beyond GWS is rich because of its particularities and nuances. But what also emerged from my conversations were common themes that ran across our experience of GWS. At these points, voices converged in their articulation of what it means to be a student within this discipline, and it is these broad experiences that form the substance of this reflection.

Arriving at the door of GWS

As students within this discipline, our decision to work towards degrees in GWS is informed by lived experience and the deep desire to understand reality when scrutinised through a gendered lens. This is captured by Lerato when she describes her undergraduate experience: "I did psych as my first degree, we had these white male lecturers ... they did

not speak to my experience as a child of the struggle ... I couldn't find any relevance in my community or background. Psych was just a degree. In my second year I took a class in race, class and gender ... this opened up a whole lot of stuff that I knew on an instinctual level ... I needed to know more because this began to speak to me."

But the desire to "know more" is just one explanation for arriving at the door of GWS. There is often a deeper motivation, a passion and rage for social transformation, intellectual growth and personal empowerment. This multi-faceted mission is often articulated by GWS students in more concrete terms as the importance of dealing with issues that impact on our realities as those located on this continent, the need for skills development in order to undertake this work rigorously and systematically, and the strengthening of personal voice in relation to hegemonic beliefs and systems of knowledge.

Regional location

In describing her motivations to study at UWC, Barbara asserts, "I wanted to feel part of Africa and be familiar with feminist trends in other parts of the continent." While dedicated GWS programmes on the continent are few and often under resourced, many existing programmes have a clear commitment to social transformation. For many students who have consciously chosen to be based here, it is crucial that the courses taken speak directly to the realities and tensions of living with a particular colonial history and with particular postcolonial challenges.

The expectation of most students is that African-based and African-centred GWS programmes carry a particular flavour; they should be rooted in the continent's history of anti-imperialist struggle, and should engage head-on with inequalities based on gender, race and class. They should privilege the writings of African scholars and thereby challenge the power structures that continue to discount Africa's contribution to knowledge production, while fiercely interrogating and subverting a patriarchy that works in intricate ways to undermine women.

Within our courses, Amina Mama, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Pat McFadden and Dzodzi Tsikata often sit next to Frantz Fanon, Claude Ake, Steve Biko and Mahmood Mamdani, to cite a few. It is from these writings that we draw our inspiration, even though the institutions within which we are situated are not always hospitable to more radical ideas and agendas. It is this that speaks to the lived realities and political leanings of a new generation of young women scholars in GWS.

Challenges of an institutional location

The academy is rarely comfortable with the alternative, and this is what GWS presents: a different way of seeing the world. As students located at the juncture of the alternatives offered by GWS and the conservatism of the universities in which it operates, life can often seem overwhelming as we try to manage the interstices of personal, political and academic agendas. As Laura says "I often feel like I'm on my bike in the middle of a busy highway. As a GWS student sometimes I feel like the best I can do is hope that I don't get run over. This is a strange place to be. It certainly isn't boring, although I think it can be life threatening at times."

What is "life threatening" about such a scenario? As GWS students we are empowered to confront the injustices in our institutions because of the tools we develop as students, the intellectual resources that confirm and support deeply-held personal and political beliefs, and the sense of community we enjoy within our departments in relation to GWS staff and other students. Yet we constantly need to engage with a wider institutional context, one that by its

very nature works to erode and disempower.

For GWS students and teachers alike our institutional contexts are patriarchal and conservative. Women have "never had to be taken seriously, or taken into account because African women are never vocal or visible as active participants in knowledge production"(Nthabiseng). Thus, assertive young black women with feminist agendas are often perceived as a destabilising force, a threat within institutions that seek to reproduce the status quo and the power dynamics that underpin it.

This is revealed in Joy's remarks: "I take an elective from another department and am so blown away by the assumptions that underpin the course. I would constantly be asking questions, the lecturer would often get annoyed...there's a lack of tolerance ... At the end of it, I found I had to unlearn what I had learnt." The power dynamics associated with a woman student pitted against a male lecturer are especially challenging. They can generate the intellectual and psychological growth, confidence and independence of the student, but they can also be debilitating and silencing - to the point that many women with considerable creative and critical abilities choose silence or the decision not to continue with further study. These options are taken because, as Christine notes, "the odds are often stacked against us, we are fighting many battles at many different levels."

Skills development

Within such an environment, GWS teachers and students often carve out a niche to ensure some level of sanity and support in their academic pursuits. These "safe" feminist spaces allow for the realisation of another set of clearly articulated student objectives in doing GWS, succinctly articulated by Christine: "to understand and maintain the link between feminist theory and praxis, to develop the skills in writing, reading, research and critical analysis."

This is perhaps the most overwhelming call by students, and these skills cannot be assumed or taken for granted in a context where a combination of gendered, racial and other forces often militate against black women's acquisition of reading, speaking and writing skills. Lerato testifies to this when she says: "It was just assumed people could write and voice what they were feeling... I never got that in my undergrad days, there was no pressure to improve. No-one said go to the writing centre; they just pushed you through despite the rubbish you wrote." How one develops and fosters these skills remains fertile terrain for debate and discussion amongst both faculty and students. Whatever the path, the honing of skills is, as Joy observes, "hard work, frustrating, it takes time and commitment, sometimes even tears ... but I know that I can't give up."

Of course, the process of "tooling up" serves to further future career paths. It should be noted here that the growing interest in gender politics and research on the continent has spawned a lucrative industry that often puts young women researchers and graduates with GWS backgrounds in demand, no matter how treacherous the playing field. It is this "marketability" that may lead some of us to think very seriously about where and how we choose to position ourselves, for the field is extremely wide. It can range from servicing the globalised development industry to working within initiatives dedicated to radical and subversive feminist transformatory agendas.

Studying in relation to multiple roles

Our socio-economic realities as women mean that many GWS students are already engaged in some form of paid or unpaid work. As an extremely difficult dialectic to manage, this comes with pressures and challenges that are never made visible or acknowledged within the mainstream academy. The competing demands and responsibilities on our time

means that for some of us the commitment to academic pursuits translates into studying during the late hours of the night or the early hours of the morning. This is far from ideal, but perhaps the cold comfort is that certain GWS programmes recognise these realities, and show support in acknowledging our multiple positionings as women. Barbara illustrates this in her experiences at UWC "...our classes are held from 4.30pm to 7.30pm and we arrive to find a bowl of fruit and biscuits laid out ... this is a symbol of the nourishment we receive at that level and at many other levels too."

It is these sorts of supportive gestures that help to sustain us in our efforts to function fully as productive and politicised beings who also engage in the reflection, reading, conversation and writing that helps to take feminist agendas forward. Often, the spaces and time for sustained and invested mentoring are not always available when offset by competing demands upon individuals or a small faculty. Consequently, students often turn to peer support and collaborative discussion through reading groups, telephone or electronic networks. For some, support is found in books, or regional and continental networking and friendships.

Voice

Nthabiseng observes that "the feminist colonisation project can't assume that people can just do this kind of work. Unfortunately when you do go out there, people silence you. You need to be strong, because out there my confidence is constantly being eroded; I'm constantly being pulled into spaces where I cannot speak my feminism." The issue of "voice", reiterated both in the panel presentation described and in the conversations I have had, opens up vast and intriguing dynamics.

What is so frequently named as "voice" appears to be realised through a complex combination of confidence building, mentoring, skills acquisition and, especially initially, having a space that is safe and comfortable enough to begin to express rage and passion about the gender inequalities that we live with everyday. This supportive space is especially important when expressing one's voice in writing and contributing to (and, often, intervening into) existing knowledge production. It is the commitment to this difficult feminist project of supporting students' marginalised voices that marks GWS from the mainstream, and that brings together students and teachers in the pursuit of a very different kind of degree.

On behalf of a group of GWS students presently involved in a listserve discussion, I would like to invite all GWS students who are keen to participate in an on-line discussion forum to sign up to our new space for feminist intellectual engagement and networking for:

- sharing experiences and information*
- peer review*
- vibrant discussion on topical issues*

Please e-mail: Barbara@kingsley.co.za to register.