

Standpoint

"Where Angels Fear to Tread?" Some Thoughts on Patricia McFadden's "Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice"

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Patricia McFadden's article "Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice" is powerfully written, highlighting as it does the extent to which women's sexuality is under-researched, poorly understood and often repressed. "Good women" do not discuss sexuality in public; by extension, to intervene into discourses of sexuality is to engage in battles that are not for the faint-hearted. McFadden raises important issues, such as the relationship between sexual pleasure and power, the critical need to distinguish sexuality from reproduction, the reassertion of feminist agency as the starting point for confronting sexual violations, and the necessity of sexual choice for women.

As intellectual and political issues, these not only challenge masculinist structures, subjectivities and practices, they also raise challenges for feminist intellectual and political practice. It is at this latter level that I engage with McFadden's arguments. It is precisely because the issues she raises are so critical to African feminist intellectual and political projects that the need for rigour and astuteness in theorising and strategising are paramount. I argue in what follows that McFadden's mode of argumentation is problematic because of the assumptions on which her claims rest, and the manner in which she erases complexities and contradictions in African women's realities.

McFadden refers to the debates around sexuality, reproduction and rights as being confined to "safe zones". What is "safe" about African women organising against deeply entrenched practices that communities are sensitive about and justify on the grounds of "culture"? What is "safe" about African women organising against diverse forms of woman abuse and, in the process, risking abuse themselves?

McFadden also condemns the many silences in the debates and theorising about African women's sexualities. Why should these silences simply be condemned, given the historical conditions of imperial expansion and racist fascination with the hypersexuality projected onto Africans by Europeans (see Mama, 1996)? Rather than condemning the silences, would it not be more productive to map them with a view to their further exploration and understanding? The silences around sexuality have many sources, and, as Jane Bennett (2003) has argued, we need to understand what the silences are about, what noises are filling those silences, and how to transform those silences into more appropriate responses.

McFadden bases her argument about the primacy of sexual pleasure on the assumption that African women are deeply repressed sexually. While this is to some extent true of many categories of women, the generalisation is highly questionable. Does this repression apply across all parts of the continent, across ethnic, religious, class and age divides, and in the same way? Have African women always been so repressed? There is no suggestion in McFadden's article that African women's sexualities may vary across space and time and across regions. We need to ask how sexualities have been constructed within given contexts in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Agnes Runganga and Peter Aggleton (1998), for example, show how changes in the political economy of Zimbabwe over the last 100 years or so have changed dominant meanings of sex among indigenous people. New meanings have become assimilated into existing systems, profoundly changing certain elements of more traditional sexual culture.

It is possible to argue for the need to enhance the value of female sexuality and to promote basic sexual freedoms without assuming the universal suppression of female sexualities

(see Machera, 2004). The notion that sexuality is "bad" or "filthy" is a relatively recent phenomenon. It has been introduced to Africa through colonialism and Victorian interpretations of Christianity, and has also been stressed in some Christian denominations, such as Catholicism, more than in others. Importantly, in the religious doctrines of Islam, women's sexuality is viewed as a powerful force that needs to be controlled, rather than as simply "dirty". And when we consider certain traditional contexts, it is noteworthy that Laobe women in Senegal are extensively engaged in the production and distribution of erotic articles and in teaching about sexuality and traditional erotic culture (see Niang, 1996).

While it is true that women's sexual pleasure is usually defined with reference to marriage, McFadden does not acknowledge variations in the conceptualisation of women's entitlements in the sexual domain, even within marriage. For example, among the matrilineal Akan, women are said to have rights over their sexuality and rights to sexual satisfaction in marriage, even if these are not necessarily matched in practice (see Awusabo-Asare et al., 1993). Within Islam, women also have formal rights to sexual satisfaction in marriage, and the denial of such satisfaction constitutes grounds for divorce. By contrast, Christianity is silent on the possibilities of women's entitlement to sexual satisfaction within marriage. In indigenous Malian structures, 'Magnonmaka', or nuptial advisors, advise women on how to enhance their sexuality during the wedding period and beyond (see Diallo, 2004).

McFadden claims that "By re-claiming our sexual energy and power, we can discover reservoirs of personal and political courage that can equip us to envisage and to fight for what lies beyond the prison of life-threatening and oppressive social systems and circumstances". But this is presented as an assertion, and not as an argument. We need to ask in what senses sexual power is a political resource, and how the use of sexual power can transform social spaces. Clearly addressing these questions would elucidate her affirmation of feminist traditions of understanding women's sexuality and erotic power. It would also help to specify the connection between these traditions and those of feminist resistance against masculinist sexual hegemony. To do justice to her claims, McFadden would have to engage with psychoanalysis and history in her analysis, an approach exemplified by Anne McClintock in her groundbreaking book, *Imperial Leather* (1994).

The restricted argument around eroticism is also reflected in the limited scope of the writer's discussion. Why select "pleasure" and "choice" as self-sufficient dimensions of the terrain of sexuality, and what informs the choice of these two dimensions in isolation? Why not consider "desire", "intimacy" or "reciprocity"? There is something ironic about a feminist argument that asserts the primacy of sexual pleasure and choice for women, independent of considerations such as reciprocity between sexual partners, whether male or female, or even the construction of desire. After all, is it not hetero-normative masculinity that prioritises male sexual choice and sexual pleasure in sexual relations to the exclusion of all other facets of individual and interpersonal well-being?

Moreover, simply asserting the necessity of "pleasure" and "choice" is not enough to ensure their realisation. The complexity of the Unconscious means that women may sometimes choose partners who are profoundly destructive of their personas and bodies, and who ultimately bring them little in the way of sexual pleasure. This is suggested in a study undertaken by Rakesh Rajani and Mustafa Kudrati (1996). Focusing on street children in Tanzania's second largest city, they point to discrepancies between lived experiences and interpretations of those experiences, and show that despite "rather overwhelming experiences of sex as power, intimidation and practical exchange, many girls often interpreted those experiences in terms of love, physical attraction and friendship" (1996: 314). It is also noteworthy that women may choose to be celibate. Are such women to be condemned for not being politically correct, or even for "false consciousness"?

Although McFadden states that women's sexual subordination and exploitation are part of a broader system of economic, political and social domination, she does not address the question of the relationship between change in the arena of sexuality, and change in the economic, political and social arenas. Her overall approach implies a hierarchy of significance in which change in the domain of sexual pleasure and power is primary, and, in itself, brings about change in all the other arenas. But if sexuality is implicated in women's experiences of economic, political as well as social domains, then surely it is important to understand how it is implicated in these various arenas. As African feminists, do we really understand the diverse ways in which this happens? Is it not necessary to understand these before advocating strategies for change in singular and definitive ways? Has our existing experience not taught us that, in the face of multifaceted, complex and changing social realities, a multiplicity of strategies is necessary?

Is there not a need to ask how sexual power and sexual pleasure are understood by diverse categories of women and men? Addressing the nuances of contradictions, complexities and interconnections will be critical for developing appropriate bodies of feminist thought and strategy. Without such a perspective, a focus on sexual pleasure and choice reduces complex issues to one or two determinants. Whose notion of sexual pleasure will address the problems of the trader who, because of her economic disempowerment, is forced to trade sexual favours for the dues demanded by customs officials at the borderlands of trade and residence? What choice can a woman in her position be expected to exercise? Whose idea of sexual pleasure will resolve the problem of treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS, or care for the children orphaned by AIDS? Whose conception of sexual pleasure would have prevented Amina Lawal from being criminalised in such a misogynistic manner? Would she have avoided her predicament by being erotically empowered enough to have derived greater sexual pleasure from the encounter that left her pregnant out of marriage in a Sharia state in Nigeria?

In the face of the differences that constitute African women, McFadden's assertion that sexual pleasure is the fundamental feminist choice is reminiscent of the deterministic and totalising perspectives of diverse authoritarian and masculinist regimes. Surely this is what feminists should be aiming to transcend, not replicate. Inverting the relationship, albeit from a different starting point and by dealing with significantly different content, is simply not good enough if the aim is social transformation.

Ultimately, the effect of McFadden's argumentation is to oppose masculinist hegemony with a feminist orthodoxy, in which the "correct" feminist knowledge and orientation are predetermined. It is one thing to recognise the ways in which psychodynamic and personal experiences are politically structured. It would be a mistake, however, to conflate the psychodynamic configuration and sense of sexual self with the range of possible and actual variations in the material and ideological expressions of African women's sexual desire, choice, intimacy and pleasure. Several layers of understanding are required in what should effectively be a collective feminist project: a project in which those involved are acknowledged, in their differing ways, for daring to go "where angels fear to tread".

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