

Editorial: Rethinking Universities II

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Welcome to *Feminist Africa* 9, the second of two issues dedicated to Rethinking Universities, in which we continue the work first begun in FA1 to present and develop feminist perspectives on Africa's institutions of higher learning. The feature articles cover a range of countries, and we are especially pleased to bring work from Francophone Africa to this issue.

As we write this editorial from Cape Town in November 2007, feminist activists and scholars around South Africa are shaking their heads over the news that the ANC Women's League has chosen as their "preferred candidate" for the ANC presidency a man who embodies at best the conservative traditions of southern African patriarchy, and at worst its most cynically misogynist aspects. The ANC Women's League has never been a radical body, but its enthusiasm for this candidate still chills the heart. Given South Africa's electoral system, it is inevitable that the president of the ANC will become the president of South Africa following the next national elections. The supine support of women for masculinist hegemonic domination is not what we thought the mothers, daughters, sons and brothers of South Africa suffered, fought and died for. In this sentiment we join sisters on the continent more experienced with the depths to which the gender politics of newly democratic nations can plummet.

This lamentable political development brings this issue, our issue, *the* issue about knowledge production into sharp and poignant relief. What do we teach the young women and men in our classrooms about their histories and traditions? How do we engage meaningfully with a generation seemingly mesmerised by the chimeric materialism of freedom? How do academics engage with women who live far outside the ivory towers but can have a strong organisational presence? How do feminists survive and mentor each other in the academy long enough to do all these things? Where do they find allies in the struggle to keep critical consciousness alive – and kicking? How long is this piece of string, anyway?

In her book, *Gender, Symbolism and Organizational Cultures* (1995), Italian feminist Sylvia Gherardi writes convincingly about the ways that patriarchal knowledge is coded into everyday practices. She argues that organisations change via the destabilisation of dichotomies and hierarchies, and that is the task of feminist activists. This is, of course, an uncomfortable thought when applied to African higher education systems, which as we know have been massively destabilised already by national developments and international economic pressures. In this volume of *Feminist Africa*, however, we move to explorations of efforts that selectively target the parts of our ivory towers where hierarchies and dichotomies are especially obstructive to the development of equitable, feminist knowledges.

The authors in this volume of *Feminist Africa* report mixed results in pursuing such strategies. Aminata Diaw, Lesley Shackleton, Emebet Mulugeta, and Margaret Ngaling and Joyce Endeley present articles on institutional activism at the universities of Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal), Cape Town (South Africa), Buea (Cameroon) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). At each of these institutions, feminist scholars have sought to transform institutional policies, procedures and practices that perpetuate gender inequality and injustice. Jane Bennett and Vasu Reddy, and Mary Hames, writing about South Africa, address the intellectual activism through which feminists have sought to resist the reproduction of gender divisions and inequalities in the teaching and research functions of universities. FA9 also brings a welcome spotlight onto the often-neglected activism of women students, both in formal political structures and in creative outreach work. Finally, an extensive set of reviews of works on African universities and feminist historiography shows that both are thriving in academic publishing of late.

One of the important threads of commonality in the contributions to FA9 is that university administrations exhibit a range of contradictory and ambivalent responses in resisting feminist activism. Perhaps it is part of the postcolonial condition to reject new ideas from local women as being imported, but this does not explain why there is then a distinct preference for imported projects over local initiatives. Both Shackleton and Diaw allude to this problem in their discussions of initiatives at the universities of Cape Town (UCT) and Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD). At UCT, the HERS-SA initiative for career development and mentoring was tolerated as an externally-funded programme that relied on the labour and energy of one determined individual; but the initiative remained on the margins of the institution and eventually

moved off campus altogether. Thus, UCT (currently celebrating its new status as number 200 on a list of the 200 best universities in the world) has belied its liberal image once again by failing to respond to the opportunity to entrench a successful gender equality programme. With regard to UCAD, Diaw observes that the administration resisted Senegalese faculty efforts to introduce gender and women's studies for many years; but they readily accepted an externally-funded and -led programme to develop women's administrative skills. One effect of this was to reinforce the notion that the gender priority of the institution was women's supposed lack of administrative skills, rather than the lack of support for academic capacity-building.

Similarly, the profile of the Institute for Gender Studies (formerly known as CERTWID) at the extremely male-dominated University of Addis Ababa explores the ambivalence with which university management realises the need to accede to the demand for gender and women's studies, but leaves to dedicated women the burden of responsibility of delivery for such a programme. Resisting oppression by being invited to voluntarily increase one's own exploitation is one of the ironies of feminist intellectual activism.

The record of intellectual activism for curriculum change is also uneven. Our accumulating experience of both the integrationist and mainstreaming strategies is deepening our understanding of what it takes to develop courses that do more than merely 'add on' knowledge to existing paradigms. Feminist teachers have learned a great deal about what it means to design and deliver teaching that challenges pervasive manifestations of gender oppression and inequality. This is teaching, we hope, which develops understandings that reach into personal and political realities so that gender becomes something that we live and do, as well as think. Bennett and Reddy's contribution explores the teaching of sexuality and gender in South African universities, as "...the connection between university classrooms and the environments beyond those classrooms" is realised. They grapple with the distance that exists, and is often unwittingly maintained, between students' complex daily lives and faculty preoccupations. Hames, on the other hand, offers an exposition of how academic feminism can also flower in creative spaces which are more accessible to a range of audiences than classrooms ringing with formal academic discourse. Hames and the student cast of "Reclaiming the P...Word" confront misogyny and gendered powerlessness and turn them around with humour and strength. Women in Cape Town, whatever language they speak, never say *poes*, the "p...word" (vagina, in the Afrikaans language) in public. As we saw in FA6 when

Ugandan women fought in 2005 for public discussion of the play *The Vagina Monologues*, speaking is itself a source of bold social power. Talk about the destabilisation of dichotomies and hierarchies: speaking the pain and finding the happiness that can both be lodged in one's body makes a small space like the converted lecture room in an old building at the fringes of the University of the Western Cape into a fleetingly wonderful liberated zone. Barnes' poem reflects this atmosphere of creativity.

The eagerness with which new students come forward to participate in "Reclaiming the P...Word", and the tough political eye of the UCT SRC president, as interviewed by Awino Okech, are reminders that the initiatives of academic feminism are actually rooted in our intellectual contexts in important ways. Student politics has historically been a seedbed of social and political activism in postcolonial Africa. Students are at their most productive, ironically, when they are at their most challenging: both in terms of critical thinking and physically-expressed activism. When Zukiswa Mqolomba, student leader at UCT, says simply, "I am the president" (rather than "I am a woman president") she configures these debates anew by transcending the "women's league" traditions such as those to which we referred at the beginning of this Editorial. The young student members of the "P...Word" cast are similarly building on older consciousness-raising strategies with a new boldness.

We think that each effort in institutional and intellectual activism, regardless of formal success or failure, has made a contribution to this kind of growth. Activism always leaves important traces, if not always (as we see in this issue) unambiguous success. Even as our institutional spaces flicker in and out of existence; as individuals decide to move on or to retreat to quieter spaces for breathers and rest, there are young women standing on our shoulders. There are young men who have learned to reject the privileges that patriarchy can bring. We salute the energy, keen minds and courage of these young people. The future of the complex ideal of social equality in Africa is in their hands.