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# Feminist Africa 11

## Researching for Life: Paradigms and Power

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# Editorial: Researching for Life: Paradigms and Power

Jane Bennett

*“Personally, privately, I do not fear death, but I find myself unwilling to face a sudden and violent ending... Who am I? What am I? In past and in present, the answer lies in Africa; in part it lies within the whole timeless, limitless, eternal universe. How can I discover the meaning and purpose of my country if I do not first discover the meaning and purpose of my own life?”*

(Bessie Head)<sup>1</sup>

Bessie Head, one of the giants of African philosophy and creativity, chose for herself the title of an autobiography she never wrote: *Living on a Horizon*. As Meg Samuelson’s review of Desiree Lewis’s pathbreaking critical engagement with Bessie Head’s oeuvre suggests<sup>2</sup>, horizons connote not simply vision but a way of being in the world – with, and despite, the angle of location. A “researcher for life”, if ever there was one, Bessie Head’s relationship with the representation of inner and outer experiences as a sign of her love for Africa speaks to the questions which underlie *Feminist Africa 11*. A key challenge for African feminists remains the need to create knowledges which both emerge from the diverse and complex contexts in which we live and work and speak to such contexts with sufficient resonance to sustain innovative and transformative action. Designing research methodologies capable of addressing the questions which compel us constitutes a politics in its own right, demanding a re-evaluation of received approaches and sophisticated reflection on the intersections of theory and practice as researchers and writers. *Feminist Africa 11* takes up the challenge of exploring research methodologies, not simply as adjuncts to issues of epistemology or as bridges between the conceptualization of an inquiry and its outcome, but as spaces in which the constellation of context, voice, ethical and political depths, and the comprehension of discovery as a process as capable of horror as of illumination deserve our feminist attention.

As a term, *research* conjures up as many scenarios as it does emotions. The academic expectations of universities around the kind of thinking, working, and representation (usually, but not always, writing) which lead to the recognition of research as professional (qualifying the creator as a Doctor, or Master, of Philosophy within a discipline) bear almost no relation to the kinds of work expected of those working as, for example, parliamentary researchers. The difference here lies not only in conceptions of valid information and the overarching purpose of the work, but in questions of time, the identity and context of the researcher, the parameters of engagement with others (and with others' creation of knowledge). The parliamentary researcher must produce a gender analysis of the state's proposed bill on electrification of the lower regions of district x, by tomorrow; the PhD researcher is expected to show command of a library of others' work before she (or he) is recognized as "ready" to have an idea herself, and this process is usually supposed to take at least a year. *Researchers* constitute a large and complicated congregation, but one riven with differentiation not only of discipline but much more powerfully of status and privilege (medical is more valuable than historical, pure is better than applied, quantitative is stronger than qualitative; positivist is more credible than feminist/indigenous/post-anything). The cultural habits of hierarchization extend to the notion of what is "non-research". At the University of Cape Town, for example, there is a longstanding struggle between the Department of Performing and Creative Arts and other departments about whether its work (choreography, orchestration, installation, poetry and so on) gets recognition as formal research, garnering appropriate subsidy and professional status. So far, although the department's work is cited in the university's Research Report as "Creative Output", the battle to understand it as *research* has not been won.

Some universities, in addition, make a distinction between something called *research* and something called *Extension work* or *Social responsiveness*. There are of course university sites<sup>3</sup> where social realities constitute critical terrain for the engagement of thought, writing and the possibility of change. There are, nonetheless, still very strong ideas about the segregation of *research* from *activism*, so much so that as Zethu Matebeni writes in her Standpoint on initiating research on lesbian lives in South Africa, a supervising colleague warned her that in order to become a good researcher, she should resign from her NGO activist work.

Feminist work has always been particularly concerned with the relationship between *research* and *activism*. Although many would struggle to be completely

clear about when they were definitively engaged in the one activity and when in the other, the legacies and contemporary realities of privilege (of class, of race, of ethnicity, for example) continue to live out across definitions of roles, identities, and the value of feminist work (Lewis, 2004). Sylvia Tamale's review of Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa's *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*<sup>4</sup> notes that while the collection of pieces on lesbian and intimate women-with-women lifestyles in African contexts is courageous and interesting, the stance of its editors on the "absence of African lesbian researchers" damages the book: "the whole top-down approach is starkly bound up in what can only be described as manifest p/maternalism that smacks of racism and imperialist politics" (Tamale, 2008).

Although the Coalition of African Lesbians, a collective of women working across many identities (mothers, analysts, advocates, researchers, lovers, activists) grew out of the process of creating the pieces, the book-as-product remains, in itself, a source of anger and distress to many involved,<sup>5</sup> because of the issues raised by Tamale. What is witnessed here is the ongoing necessity to be vigilant about the ways in which notions of *research* and *activism* can become deployed in the rehearsal of brutal and demeaning legacies. At the same time, however, Jessica Horn's Profile of the African Feminist Forum, held in Kampala in September 2008, suggests that the animating questions for the Forum did not primarily involve identities (researcher or activist, Southern or Western, religious or not). It involved debate on strategy, participation, and the meaning of decades' long work for the design of future directions, and women from myriad locations, positions, and experiences entered these debates with vigour, humour, and insight. That *research* and *researching* are vital processes within the project of transforming conditions of war, misogyny, injustice and poverty in African contexts remains indisputable: *research* as discovery, *research* as forensic analysis, *research* as detective work, *research* as cosmology, *research* as witness, *research* as voice, *research* as undercover strategy.

This returns us to the questions of research methodologies with which this issue of *Feminist Africa* is concerned. One of the dilemmas facing African-based feminist work on research methodologies is that it is tricky to draw a line between a theory (a way of approaching realities and experiences) and research methodologies (the "how" of the engagement with those realities and experiences which is directed towards both understanding them differently and, where injustices emerge, making alternatives possible).

This is especially true, given several decades of African feminist research whose fundamental concern has been to address and transform the impact of androcentricity on scholarly mindsets, practices, and writings and to engage directly in work aimed at addressing discriminations and injustices (Imam, Mama, and Sow, 1997). The weight of this mandate can blur the fact that good research production needs to distinguish between the conceptual framework governing an initiative and the approach to creating new knowledge which flows from this. And, especially in work of researchers on commission, under tight crisis-driven deadlines, or working towards degrees, it is often in the concrete engagement with methodologies and methods that ideas about the value of taking gender seriously disappear as conventional qualitative and quantitative approaches to “the field” are deployed. Thus, we find PhD candidates with radical, and feminist, ideas about the need to interrogate sexuality education in schools being required to explore the context through standardized questionnaires, or feminist researchers being asked by donor-driven agendas to submit findings “with recommendations” as though “recommendations” from the author(s) of a research report were likely to be useful (sometimes, they are, of course. But any feminist worth her/his salt knows that only decisions reached collectively, over much time and difficult negotiation, have any genuine hope of addressing complex problems). The demands of our work, and the institutional and organizational conventions through which we channel it, frequently leave us neither time nor direction in terms of how to *actually* think through the meaning of “doing research” in our contexts.

It is not that there is no feminist legacy of thought on questions of doing research in African contexts. Awa Thiam’s astonishing and radical *La Parole aux Nègresses*<sup>6</sup> remains inspirational in its methodological experiment: getting the voices of women as close as possible to the reader’s ear.<sup>7</sup> The publication of the book was predated by the formation of AAWORD/AFARD<sup>8</sup> which turned its mind towards questions of both the theory and the practice of research from the early 80’s on. Since then, there have been numerous occasions, collectives, and publications<sup>9</sup> in which the practicalities of methodologies have received critical attention, and context plays a role in the narrative of the decades’ long growth of a rich and provocative tradition of African feminist thinking on the nature, shape and processes of research work. The In Conversation between Charmaine Pereira and Jane Bennett offers one such contextualized story, through Pereira’s reflections on the development of the

Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria, whose roots include organizations such as Women in Nigeria and Women Living under Muslim Laws. There are however, of course, other narratives of how and where questions of African feminist research have been unpacked over the years.

It is true, though, that the dominant themes of this legacy concern epistemology and theory. Overwhelmingly, debate has entailed the deconstruction of the colonial and patriarchal gaze on "African women", and the strategic orientation towards location, context, and paradigms which demand consideration when one takes on research work. There are icons here: Bolanle Awe, Ayesha Imam, Patricia Mcfadden, Amina Mama, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Ruth Meena, Guy Mhone, Dzodzi Tsikata, Fatou Sow, Filomina Chioma Steady, and the list is much longer. There are substantial debates among these voices, and these concern priorities, modes of analysis, and differences of ideology and vision. They comprise, nonetheless, a dense conversation on the meanings of *research*, and stimulate their interlocutors (virtual or real) into questions about reflexivity, the eradication of stereotypic lenses, and the power of gender analysis. What very few of them do, however is write at length about the concrete processes of methodologies – *how* to imagine a "field" (in an African context!), *how* to strategize a relation between methods (statistical ratios and poems?), *how* to work across languages, *how* to protect, respect, and be accountable to those with whom we work, *how* to select research foci and methodologies which are capable of dialogue with worlds we want to change?

In 2004, the African Gender Institute ran a continental research project, **Mapping Sexualities**, funded by the Ford Foundation. The project marked the development of new interest in the field of sexuality within the partner institutions (the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, and the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria) which we all understood as confirmation of the strategic and intellectual importance of generating locally grounded in-depth research in diverse African contexts. The project was developed through a series of research workshops, with the AGI and the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ghana, where six different projects were developed, and some of the papers developed appeared in *Feminist Africa* 5.

Within the workshops through which this project was developed it was quickly recognized that issues of research methodology in the field of sexuality and gender studies are as challenging and interesting as the findings and new

theorizations themselves. Issues raised by researchers included the difficulties in breaking up concepts into the local language of the research communities; breaking up “sexuality” into familiar elements to facilitate entry into data gathering; defining core concepts in sexuality such as “desire”, “virginity”, “rape”; getting accurate language equivalents of core concepts—from colonial into local languages and the other way round; understanding the use of metaphors or a language style peculiar to issues surrounding sexuality; dealing with issues of contradiction; identifying the policy implications of research findings for educational programmes that touch on sexuality like national HIV/AIDS campaigns; gaining access as “researchers” into communities hostile to interaction with individuals identified as “different” (because of faith affiliation, for example); protecting interviewees’ confidentiality; the meaning of research ethics in contexts where security is an issue; and the complexity of understanding gender and sexuality beyond familiar frameworks in which women’s bodies and lives are organized through explicit relationship to gender-based violence. It was recognized through the workshops that the project had uncovered a need to prioritize research methodologies as a key zone for discussion.

Feminist research on sexualities is not unique in posing particular methodological conundrums for African-based researchers. The meaning of multi-lingualism, the ethical dilemmas raised by the economic chasms between writers and those whose lives matter to them as part of their research and activism, the actual complexity of living out feminist principles around the relationship between *research* and *action* (in contexts in which the possibility of action may be compromised at numerous levels), the impact of the interests of donors, the haphazard and unreliable attention of state actors, and the demands for emotional endurance would affect research on agriculture, militarism, urbanization, land, reproductive health, any zone in fact in which gender needs taking seriously.

It would be possible to devote a whole issue of a journal to any one of the methodological issues above – language alone constitutes a zone of such intricacy, and such potential challenge, that one sometimes wonders whether the almost complete dearth of theory on research in multi-lingual contexts in Africa constitutes a shadow space – the space just too hard to contemplate head-on, but which stalks over every analytic insight reached within English, French, Portuguese or Arabic.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of located misogyny, too, presents methodological challenges across disciplinary divides: notions of what “women” may say, to whom, and

with what consequences, structure the meaning of “hearing voices” and impede the impact of what has, in fact, been said.

Perhaps the issue which most fundamentally challenges the design of research methodologies is daily life. Crude as that sounds (and open to charges of gross generalization), the realities of transport, the intricacies of lives negotiated through violence and poverty, the arduousness of work and family engagements, the frustrations of wrestling a pathway between a sponsor’s (a supervisor, a donor, a state) expectations and one’s own insights, the frustrations of resources, the implacability of life’s capacity to surprise, befuddle, and infuriate all bedevil the hope of clean methodological journeys. And that is in contexts of “peace”<sup>11</sup>. In contexts formally under military siege, or suffering natural or man-made disasters, daily living constitutes a strategic negotiation from one moment to another, not a terrain on which a long-term research plan can be mapped. It is not that research cannot be undertaken in conditions of relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise – it is more that methodologically-focussed writing and thinking on these conditions as *the norm* is rare<sup>12</sup>. Texts on research methodology tend to assume a stable environment, one in which it is possible to plot sampling, interview processes, quantification, and data-collation within a logic rendered seamless, partly by sheer a-contextuality and partly by the notion that the researcher is not multi-tasking and is largely impervious to the impact of what he or she is engaged with. No feminist, whether working in a shelter for abused women, within a farm workers’ union, within a teaching environment, or within a parliamentary office finds his or her life “stable” environmentally. Indeed, instabilities, uncertainties<sup>13</sup>, are often the grounds from which the most interesting insights and intuitions about realities and possibilities for change emerge.

*Feminist Africa 11* hopes to offer a contribution which can both reflect on experiences as researchers and see, in those reflections, a route towards contemporary and relevant theorization of research methodologies. Hanan Sabea’s piece demands re-engagement with the paradigmatic “order of things” through which questions of Africa, nation, gender, and location are imagined. Her invitation is to see past the prefixes of “trans” (-national, -continental), “inter” (-disciplinary, -dialogic) and “post” (-feminist, -colonial, -state) to discover the operation of homogenizations which recolonize, remonopolize, the gaze on the sheer complex and multi-gendered realities of work, mobilities, and meaning. Vasu Reddy and Theo Sandfort pick up the concern in Sabea’s

article around integrity: *What gets to be said by whom, and according to which points of reference, crossing and challenging which boundaries? What is left out, what is included and how, using which resources, which languages and invoking the interlocution of which libraries and paradigms, for what effects?* (Sabea, 2008).

In Reddy and Sandfort's exploration of what it means to accept the challenge of researching the experience of men in South Africa who have sex with other men, they conclude that such work, vulnerable as it is to homophobic and over-medicalized interests, needs rooting within the ideas and mandate of the lesbian and gay advocacy and outreach organizations and individuals from a wide range of countries: Senegal, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa. Their piece outlines the process undergone here, and concludes with questions about visibility – what is it, in the end, in deeply homophobic contexts that creates a visibility synonymous with security?

The challenge of engagement with community is taken up in a different way by Catriona Macleod. Located in a country in which termination of pregnancy has been legal since 1996 but in which powerful swathes of popular opinion demonize abortion, she explores the assumptions underlying the terminologies of methodologies of recent studies (a community of research) of young women, pregnancy and abortion in South Africa. Macleod uncovers with precision that fact that research on a “feminist topic” may carry far from feminist readings of youth, adolescence and pregnancy, and that in contexts of political volatility around an issue, researchers need to be scrupulous about the ways in which their work is undertaken and articulated. Gains won at hard cost are easily lost.

All four authors of these feature articles (Macleod to a lesser extent, Sabea directly) include their own voices and experiences as material within their reflections. It is Karabo Mohlakoana's piece on becoming a doctoral researcher in Lesotho which places autobiography at the centre of exploration of methodological process. The piece is unremittingly honest about the pain and dislocation of the encounter with formal research demands. Mohlakoana asks what it means for a “respectable moSotho woman, a woman of the church”, living and working in a conservative and complex society, to be interested in taboo subjects. She writes of the experience of *living the academic* as one with costs, one for which no amount of reading textbooks on feminism and methodology had prepared her, and one in which her own experience of teenage pregnancy become both “data” and multi-pronged pain.

Mohlakoana's piece opens up one of the taboo areas in the discussion of feminist (or other) research methodologies: emotion, the self (gendered, sexual, located by others, located by oneself), the issue of rebellion. The two Standpoints in this *Feminist Africa* take up directly the interaction between "the personal" and "the researcher". Zethu Matebeni writes of her experience of being inducted into appropriate research processes when she chooses to work with black lesbians living in Johannesburg South Africa. As a black lesbian herself, she finds herself a source of "news about the exotic" to her university colleagues, and of sudden authority (about dating, about the world) to those friends and acquaintances she is now "researching". Danai Mupotsa (working with Lennon Mhishi) responds to the contradictions and hypocrisies of *living research* with rage, a rage she both can and can't transform into political and intellectual strategy. Both these pieces recognize how deeply the personal is implicated in the processes of research and writing, and although both attest to passion about the task of imaginative and analytic discovery, they refuse clichéd or simple conclusion: *I suspect that a politics of rage (or of this sort) is what many of you and many of my mentors have applied as a means of making sense of what it means to do research – to investigate social life in this awful, messy place. But what do you do with the actual rage? Unapplied.* (Mupotsa, 2008)

The two Profiles in this issue move the discussion into writing about the actions of African feminists (of diverse locations and views); one is Jessica Horn's brief discussion of the September African Feminist Forum in Kampala, and the second is written by Shereen Essof of the Feminist Political Education Project, one of several civil society and activist initiatives insisting on direct political engagement with the Zimbabwean state. The Profile is about research, at its most visceral level: *What is life like for women in a country where inflation is 300 million percent and counting? What is life like for women in a country where the life expectancy of women is 34 years? What is life like for women in a country where 3 men hold a nation hostage?* (Essof, 2008). Essof's response here details both the thinking and some of the most recent actions of the Project, not as a holistic reading of the Zimbabwean context nor as an analysis of the Project's work, but as an *activism*.

The trajectory, then, in this issue from Sabea to Essof (complemented by the book reviews) is one which moves from radical, motile, humorous, and challenging questions about the very terms of location and naming from which we imagine research to the stomach-punching volatility of direct speech, speech to, speech on behalf of, speech as revolution. As Cynthia Mugo

and Saida's Ali's review of WOZA's (Women of Zimbabwe, Arise!) report on the human rights violations suffered by women in their activism with WOZA since 2001, *Counting the Cost*, suggests, it is not simply possible to include research and documentation as part of political engagement, it is essential.

In conclusion, it is important to say in this editorial that the choice of foci for the issue was difficult. Once the question of African feminist research methodologies was on the table for exploration, a host of ingenious work, individuals and organizations sprang to our minds: Women'sNet of South Africa (which has just won an award for being one of the best activist website in NGO circles), Women and Law in Southern Africa, whose archive of legal research remains one of the finest in the region, Urgent Action of Uganda which has galvanized research and activism around a host of issues facing marginalized women, the writers of *Kwani?* in Kenya, *Sister Namibia* in Windhoek. Not only did the number of research projects and research-driven ideas come to mind, but simultaneously came questions unaddressed by this issue: *how have African feminist researchers lived the engagement of quantitative and qualitative approaches? How does geographical and professional location shift meanings for strategic and solid research? How do disciplinary backgrounds change the shape of the challenges we face? What forms of research, innovative or conventional, do we believe have changed perspective and altered realities for the better? What does it mean to build to website, blog, make a documentary, or a song instead of writing a paper? What do our mothers and grandfathers think of our work? Our sons and daughters? What in our lives has been saved through research? Whose life have we saved, and does it matter if we don't yet know the answer?*

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2. See this issue of *Feminist Africa*; Samuelson, Meg 2008 *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining*. By Desiree Lewis. 2007 Trenton & Asmara: Africa World Press
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4. *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*. Edited by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa. 2005. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
5. Personal communication, April 2008.
6. Thiam, Awa 1978 *La Parole aux Nègresses*, Donoel/Gauthier
7. There are difficulties raised by Thiam's homogenizations, and by her lack of interest in the political and historical contexts of the women (and men) she is engaged with. The book should however be on any African feminist's shelf, as ancestor and signpost.
8. The Association of Africa Women for research and Development/Association des Femmes pour la Recherche et le Développement, founded in 1977
9. One history of these moves from AAWORD/AFARD, to the 1992 SAPES publication, edited by Ruth Meena, in which Marjorie Mbilinyi's still useful piece on research methodology is located, through to the CODESRIA 1992 conference which led to many publications, and seminars (including the 2004 Codesria Publication, *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms*, edited by S. Arnfred, B. Bakare-Yusuf, E. Waswa Kisiang'ani, D. Lewis, O. Oyewumi, F. Chioma Steady) – Signe Arnfred's "Gender Research in Africa: Dilemmas and Challenges as Seen by an Outsider" in this 2004 collection
10. There are several excellent journals on African languages and linguistics, but very rarely do these include material specifically focused on what it means to do research (let alone feminist research) in contexts in which people are engaged with multiple forms of literacy and linguistic forms.
11. Given the prevalence of gender-based violence in our contexts, I am not sure this is a useful term.
12. There is some feminist writing in contemporary ethnography which attempts this; see the work of N. Naples or K. Visweswaran, for example.

13. Thanks to Shereen Essof for reminding me of Ben Okri's words here: "Certainty has always been the enemy of art and creativity; more than that it has been the enemy of humanity".

# Transnational What? Encounters and Reflections on Questions of Methodology

Hanan Sabea

There are some constructs and conjectural spaces that keep recurring in one's life – sometimes making their appearance metaphorically, at other moments materializing more physically, and still at others they remain a promise, a hope and a dream. Two in specific have seeped into my life from different corners, sometimes unexpectedly and accidentally, at other junctures being part of a premeditated plan. Many a time their appearance was not necessarily marked or registered as a node in a matrix, yet in retrospect and from particular positions of articulation (or rather re-articulation) they do acquire special signification and parlance. One is the infamous “from Cape to Cairo” and the other is the “transnational”. A spatial axis underpins both, invoking the nation and the state as pertinent in their thinking and making, yet both are indeed about crossing the boundaries of the nation and the state, in pursuit of other connections and possibilities.

Moreover, both are constructs and signifiers for multiple histories, relations, positions, and projects, variously articulated by the different groups<sup>1</sup> that hailed and keep on hailing them as possibilities of what Fabian (2000: 281) once called “remembering the present”. Their meanings and deployments varied tremendously: “from Cape to Cairo” was once a node in an imperial design, later re-appropriated as a powerful idiom for reconfiguring connections in revolutionary and liberatory projects and imaginings of/for Africa, and yet at other moments deployed to ridicule the very possibility or tangible nature of that project. Transnational has many biographies and meanings, some celebrating the possibilities offered by the concept that promises methodological rigour and theoretical advance achieved by multiple crossings of boundaries, the national being only one among many<sup>2</sup>. Other usages add the “ism” and turn transnational into a meta-narrative and system-like formation or explanation, thus challenging unwittingly the potentials of “crossings and connections”, while as an adjective transnational

is appended to such a multitude of nouns, that its efficacy gets lost in the myriad phenomena, experiences and relations it presumes to describe, let alone analyze<sup>3</sup>. Transnational was also wrapped up in capitalist and imperial designs, signaling the corporate body that metamorphoses with the historically different configurations of capitalist relations.

In the subsequent sections of the article, I will use both constructs as entry points to reflect on questions of methodology, particularly feminist methodologies. My notes – tentative, unfinished, incomplete, and raising more questions than answers – embody thoughts, experiences and encounters that were part of a personal and intellectual journey while traversing diverse places, literally Cape and Cairo, but also Tanzania, the UK and the US, as well as other spaces that were encountered by proxy through the institutions, libraries, texts and interlocutors engaged along these paths. They also aspire to a beginning of conversations and dialogues, again literally between Cape and Cairo, and beyond.

Rather than a linear temporal narrative that has a moment and place of a beginning (and what would these “beginnings” be, since they cannot and did not start with the “fact” of being born in Cairo, receiving my primary through high school education at a German missionary school at a time when Nasser’s nationalist project reached its heights only to crumble a few years later), I will start with the recent past and navigate my way through to the past(s) that made the present possible. Attempting to isolate a moment of beginning in a personal journey assumes that a trajectory starts with the “fact” of birth; rather the latter intercepts structures of meaning and conditions of existence that shape, facilitate and contribute to certain conjunctures, whose comprehension is necessary in unpacking the making of the subject and the multiple positions from which she speaks/acts/imagines.

## **Re-Turns and Different Positions of Engagements**

In August 2006 I accepted a position teaching anthropology at the American University in Cairo, after 20 years of studying and teaching in the US. Many – myself included – talked about this movement in unidirectional manner, i.e. a “return”. Was Cairo a place that I “came back” to, to which I re-turned? But what did this re-turn actually mean, given all the “transnational talk” about the dense social fields within which our lives and works are wrapped, and which insisted on challenging the unitary nodal points of departure and return, and along with that the compartmentalization of knowledges, experiences and histories? Was mine yet another narrative similar to all the accounts that,

particularly since the 1990s, proliferated in bookstores, journal articles, policy documents and newspaper reports about “transnational” connections, lives and experiences that crossed the boundaries of nation-states, among a multitude of other boundaries ranging from race, to gender, to ethnicity, to disciplines, eras and spaces. In fact, from a rather hasty online search on *Academic Search Complete*, I would fall right there with the 43,233 citations for articles that included transnational in their subject index, the 21,734 entries that *Jstor*’s results produced, as well as the 4464 texts generated from an *Amazon* listing for transnationalism<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, my pace and directionality of crossings did not alter much since my “return”. While residing in the US I traveled regularly to Africa to visit friends and family in Egypt and attend conferences. I went to Tanzania for research, to South Africa and Mozambique for collaborative teaching and research engagements, or to Europe for research and more workshops. From Egypt, I equally crossed to the US to visit friends and family, to attend conferences, and to the other parts of the African Continent for teaching, conferences and research. However, moving between nation-states was only one crossing and not the most salient either, though at each immigration station or embassy post the power of states and capital in marking and regulating the movement of bodies was rendered very “real” and visible, especially for certain geopolitics (like the Middle East). Hence, what does transnational actually mean? A recent encounter is a case in point.

During the last two months, I participated in two *international* conferences, one in Johannesburg about labour crossings and the other in St. Paul, US organized under the rubric of an area studies’ annual meeting. Both events were *interdisciplinary* and at both transnational talk abounded in rooms where panels were held and more pertinent at keynote speeches and plenary closing sessions. At both transnational was marked off from other prefixes like “cross-”, the “multi-”, the “inter-”, and the “post-” and was placed on the pedestal of critical categories to “challenge”, “go beyond”, “question”, “subvert”, “change”, and “revitalize” debates, paradigms, and theorizing practices<sup>5</sup>. But what did the participants actually mean when they engaged transnational as part of their conversations and their praxis? And equally pertinent: what do our students mean (particularly US-based graduates and undergraduates) whose theses and papers are saturated with references and usage of transnational this and that, in an attempt to situate themselves in an economy of knowledge and manner of articulating experience that has packaged transnational as the discursive form of value? How different then is

the biography of the concept transnational from other categories, like gender and identity<sup>6</sup>, whose efficacy of critical analysis and political engagement has been subject to recent debates and skepticisms? Has transnational then – like the category gender – “become such a taken-for-granted buzzword”, deployed as a “catch-all term for a plethora of competing meanings and agendas, shorthand for which the longhand has either been forgotten or was never really that clear in the first place” (Cornwall, 2007: 2)? I would argue that indeed transnational – like its predecessor concepts – has become a buzzword, circulating with such ease and facility that it naturalizes its critical analytical potentials. And indeed like gender, “it may not have lost its utility. Rather, what might be needed is, as Wittgenstein puts it, a bit of cleaning before it can be put back into circulation” (Cornwall, 2007: 10).

What follows are some thoughts on possible cleansing practices that are the outcome of encounters and conversations that took shape from particular locations and positions, while simultaneously attempting to traverse compartmentalized and already packaged forms of knowledge. Several of these thoughts are also products of the shifting locations from which we practice and produce knowledge, particularly in this case the re-turn to Cairo, and the different meanings it posed to engagements with students (and which students doing what), to collaborative endeavors, to the world of development and its practitioners, and to the value of social sciences and humanities as political projects. They are also a product of what Mignolo entailed by “conversation as research method”. He elaborated, “By conversations I do not mean statements that can be recorded, transcribed and used as documents. Most of the time the most influential conversations were people’s comments, in passing, about an event, a book, an idea, a person. These are documents that cannot be transcribed, knowledge that comes and goes, but remains with you and introduces changes in a given argument” (Mignolo, 2000: xi).

## **Locations in Packaged Fields**

Knowledges that we gain in the classroom in encounters with students and reading and re-reading of texts fall squarely within those conversations that “remain with you”. During my year at the American University in Cairo, a question re-appeared in two of the graduate seminars: why are we reading these texts, and the reference was to a collection of diverse ethnographic texts that dealt with transnationalism and migration in one and history production and memory in the other. At the heart of the query was a sense of distance

to texts that concerned “regional” contexts in China, South Africa, Columbia and Haiti, and which rendered the engagement with ideas, experiences and analyses unfamiliar and foreign. A proximity to texts about West Africa was articulated in terms of Islam and to the US in relation to the hegemonic role it plays in the global imaginary and consciousness, while those referencing Algeria, the Gulf, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt were “home”, “here” and “near”. This sense of distance and proximity was further magnified by questions of relevance and congruence, which marked a substantial part of student queries and concerns. Despite all the “talk” about crossings and connections and the references to transnational possibilities, the boundaries were “real”, bespeaking the effect of regional imaginings and carvings that had the power to defy both historical and contemporary connections and crossings as well as histories of intricate relations that simultaneously were delineating “the Middle East” as separate and distinct from “sub-Saharan Africa”, “Latin America” and “Asia”<sup>7</sup>. Ironically, what has been labeled “methodological nationalism”<sup>8</sup> – namely the reproduction of specific national histories and traditions as ahistorical, naturalized and essentialized constructs, with only lip service paid to transnational parameters in introductions or prefaces – remains powerful enough a tool to lock and confine not only the imagination of the nation but also by extension the regional orbit within which the nation implants itself. The invocation of a “Global South” – itself imagined and constructed as a product of transnational connections with aspirations for radical change in epistemology and practice – has yet to challenge the resilience and lasting effect of area studies, as well as the homogenizing tendencies that come under the rubric of measures and scales for success in international discourse and practice, particularly by governmental, non-governmental organizations and international institutions<sup>9</sup>. Indeed as Mama (2006: 153) argued, “many less-than-radical gender interventions in which gender is applied as depoliticized technical device, generating log frames and statistics, do little to challenge unjust gender relations”.

Students in a seminar were not the only ones articulating sensibilities about the familiar and the distant, neutralizing and naturalizing the critical potential of categories and constructs. At the launching of an international report on Gender Equality and Justice (Cairo 2007), one of the criticisms about the report was its heavy reliance on case studies from Africa, Latin America and South Asia as documentary evidence for the complexity of the constructs of gender, equality and justice, as well as the experiences of unequal relations

that marked the lives of thousands if not millions of men, women and children of diverse yet overlapping languages, races, ethnicities, castes and religions. A call for a substantial inclusion of the more familiar terrain of the “Middle East” (but how the latter was to be bound remained ambiguous) cut through many of the discussions and deliberations of participating scholars and activists, NGO representatives and spokespersons of women’s, feminist and human rights organizations, donors, and policy-makers. Bye-bye Global South!

Similarly in an interview with members of local women’s rights organizations in Cairo, where debate on where and how to locate Egypt in relationship to diverse orbits of engagement, arose, it was primarily around the question of FGM that situating Egypt in the Middle East was questioned. Rather than the Middle East the point of reference became the equally ambiguously bound construct of Africa. Indeed it is gendered bodies that become a terrain on which the geographic imagination of places and their linkages are mapped out. Here, a brief and short detour from Egypt to Tanzania and South Africa helps to further clarify the mutual mapping of regions and gendered subjects. My research in Tanzania concerned the making (and unmaking) of labouring subjects on sisal plantations whose birth on the East African shores occasioned the institution of the German and later British colonial projects. Central to the constitution of the category of labouring subject was an imagination of the plantation worker as an inherently and essentially single migrant male figure. Particular ethnic and regional repertoires compounded the gender and age axis along which labor was constructed. An elaborate knowledge production machinery codified what was to comprise plantation workers, with an equally sophisticated apparatus and technology geared towards regulating, molding, and managing labour, i.e. rendering labouring subjects into breathing, eating, working and reproducing bodies on the plantation. Complex institutional entities were established and thrived on the production of extensive statistics, qualitative studies, codes of behavior, legal decrees, plans of operation, maps of travel routes and of camps along the roads and on the plantations, layouts and plans of fields and social spaces for work and sociality, calendars for work operations and for entertainment minutely organizing times for work, food, and sexual encounters. All procedures and processes of what Fabian (2000) classified as cognition and recognition were made to see, hear and deal with single migrant men, to the exclusion of any other possibility of difference that in fact prevailed on the plantations. The power of experiences

on South African mines, which fueled the imagination of the single migrant male, shaped the Tanzanian plantation trajectory, making their presence visible through commentary and comparison. And the power of the imaginary not only molded the vision and ideas of planters and state officials, but also equally pertinent was the effect on the scholarly productions<sup>10</sup> that ensued for years to come, reproducing the narrative that was handed down and passed on as the “common sense” about plantation workers.

However, plantation workers were as differentiated, diverse and complex as the messy social life that surrounded the plantations and from which plantations were carved out and parceled as distinctive and singular entities, the likes of which did not and could not exist. And the differences were not only in terms of sex, age and ethnicity, but also migration, locality and mobility. Men, women, and children, old and young, strong and feeble, local and alien, populated the plantations fields and camps, day and night, working, living and socializing. Yet, apart from the single migrant male, the “others” were rendered invisible – or rather almost invisible – by virtue of the power of an apparatus that built a category that was premised on a refusal of recognition. Indeed, it was precisely around and through the cracks of that which was “absent” that plantation workers constituted their lives in ways never imagined nor desired by colonial (and post-colonial) planters and state agents.

Back to Egypt via Tanzania and the politics of the local and the refusal to recognize. And in a similar vein, how the politics of the “local” shape processes of knowledge production, circulation, and consumption, which areas, domains and targets to tackle and which to silence, adds to the work that gendered bodies have to perform as well as the disciplinary authorities that come to speak about them, with what values and resonances. As Sholkamy (1999: 121) argued in relation to Egypt, “while qualitative data collection is recognized as a relatively cheap and efficient way of gaining insight into human behavior, the concepts and theories from which these methods derive are still underemployed and viewed with some suspicion. The battle is over representation and meaning”. Moreover, not only do scholars and academics of the social sciences and humanities have very little space from which to speak in debates about restructuring Family Law and Family Courts, equivalent to legal and religious authorities and experts (despite the fact that kinship and gender consumed a substantial part of anthropological and sociological engagements for years), but equally pertinent are areas, which are wrapped in silences and “processes of maintaining deafness” (Bennett, 2000: 8),

and there are questions to be asked about how, when and by whom do these areas eventually erupt as domains of intervention. Of particular interest in Egypt are those pertaining to sexual desires, incest, and sexual violence, which have recently received international funding to become “areas for research and intervention”. Yet the question remains: whose agenda and intellectual project frames the tackling of these “off-limit” and “scandalous”<sup>11</sup> arenas? What gets to be said by whom, and according to which points of reference, crossing and challenging which boundaries? What is left out, what is included and how, using which resources, which languages and invoking the interlocution of which libraries and paradigms, for what effects, are all questions that remain unsettled.

### **Attempts at Different Possibilities: From Cairo to Cape**

Through a number of conversations that crossed many boundaries, intellectual and personal, spatial and temporal<sup>12</sup>, the Cynthia Nelson Institute of Gender and Women’s Studies at the American University in Cairo initiated a two-year long program/project to interrogate the intersection of the constructs of region and gender<sup>13</sup>. It was also an attempt to rethink in practice the meaning of dialogue and collaboration within the context of what came to be construed as the “Global South”. As we moved along with the project in a quest to challenge the compartmentalization of knowledge production processes and products, our conversations with colleagues from four already-given and disciplinarily recognized regions – namely Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Latin America – spilled over into rethinking the nature of travels of constructs and paradigms, the limits and possibilities of gender category, and the location and binding of the Global South.

How are regions bound and imagined, what key gate-keeping constructs are developed without which regions cannot be imagined (both in the social science and humanities knowledge production processes and in policy interventions) formulated the first set of questions, that were placed in relation to how gender as a category intersects with the imagination and binding of regions. Histories mattered in such analyses, particularly in terms of what moments shaped the marking of regions and gender categories and how such histories layer the production of knowledge at present.

“From Cape to Cairo” and “from Cairo to Cape” effectively became a “reality of engagement”. The first workshop was held in Cairo, and was followed a few months later by a second workshop in Cape Town. What

became clear in these mobilities and crossings, particularly in the debates that ensued, was the need to emphasize the flux in binding and mapping out what constitutes region, thus challenging the self-evident and naturalized manner in which regions came to be deployed, re-imagined, or rendered subject to parceling, to certain linkages with other regions, or wherein some parts of a region (e.g. nations, states, or sub-regions) come to stand metonymically for the whole, or from the other end of the pole treated as exceptional. Hence, methodologically, a comparative framework that historicizes the very making of regions in relationship to each other is paramount, not only to unpack linkages and connections, but also to explore what questions have been raised in one region regarding a specific domain, but refuse to be the subject of engagement in another. Similarly, this opens the possibility for answering why some regions have been indeed in conversation, acting as faces of the same coin for each other when it comes to certain debates, and which others have been imagined as off-limits with no potential productive value arising from such a nexus. Which themes and domains served as linking axes in inter- and intra-regional debates and interventions, and which remained the purview of one region or one place within a region, held in suspension but always revisited? Are there some regions or parts thereof that act as “exporting zones” of knowledge and concepts, while others remain as consumers of such knowledge? How are international agendas framed with certain regional tropes at the heart of their making?

These last two points relate directly to the circulation of paradigms, frameworks, and theories between and within regions, and how – and if – theories are indigenized, by whom and with what agenda? How are travelling constructs constrained by a particular topography of languages, libraries and resources? And who controls the ease and facility with which the ethnographic, the particular and the historical get to be the ground on which theorizing proceeds geopolitically in particular locations and not others, and from particular spaces and not others? Of special significance are moments of crises of the social sciences and humanities, the value of their statement and methodologies in specific settings, and the efficacy of not only the production, but also the consumption of their paradigms both locally, nationally, regionally and transnationally. This is particularly pertinent in historicizing the present with all the contradictory trajectories and trends that are arising from aggressive moves to corporatize institutions of higher learning and universities, render research centers nodes in a development or

human rights machinery and industry, or de-politicize critical engagement with the re-ordering of society. Neoliberal and religious fundamentalism tactics are but two of the most serious contingents that are at present shaping the making (and re-making) of regions, the linkages or de-linking of regions or parts thereof, and the setting of agendas and definitions pertaining to the constitution of difference of which gender is one of the most salient. Certain phenomena are at the heart of the everyday lives of peoples molding and remolding experiences, connections, and subjectivities in the process – such as migration and mobility, violence, policing of boundaries, the burgeoning of types of suspect bodies marked and regulated through elaborate yet simplistic and reductionist inventions of schemes of classification, HIV/AIDS, sub-contracting, feminization of labor, the unholy alliances between patriarchy and globalization, the proliferation of identity politics as markers of a political process, the unrelenting power of consumerism, the mushrooming of NGOs, the intensity of democratization talk and rights talk, the power and efficacy of religiously fundamental ideas and practices and their normalizing projects, to enumerate only a few.

Given some of the currents outlined above and the skepticism that has already engulfed the category of gender, has the impasse in gender studies been reached? Binaries and essentialisms, with all sorts of deeply disturbing naturalizing tendencies are rebounding with ferocity. The question remains how to refuse being incorporated, co-opted or rendered superfluous and non-threatening. Is one possible way out to re-examine from the vantage point of other spaces (region being one among them) and times, that which has been left out, that which is not fitting, that which has not yet been packaged, that which has been absent through its awkward presence from the normal imagining of fields of practice, and which retains the potential for disturbing the “order of things”?

As I mentioned at the onset of these notes, they are tentative, unfinished and incomplete, raising more questions than answers, yet hoping to think through possibilities for a different kind. Penning them to paper gives them a certain materiality that also aspires for connections and conversations between Cape and Cairo.

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## Endnotes

1. What Shohat and Stam delineate for the construct of multiculturalism as "protean, plural, conjunctural, existing in shifting relation to various institutions, discourses, disciplines, communities and nation-states" (2003: 6) operates in parallel lines to the transnational and the paradoxical invocation of "from Cape to Cairo".
2. The list is long, and for a selective reading see Basch *et al.* (1994), Schiller *et al.* (1992), Kearney (1995), Appadurai (1991), Vertovec (1999), Stoller (1997). While recognizing the value of the construct and the approach, others voiced cautionary notes on questions of methodology (Portes *et al.*, 1999), the long history of connections and flows that preceded the era of late capitalism (Mintz, 1998), particularly taking the instance of the Caribbean as a region constituted by long histories of transnational flows (Mintz, 1996; Trouillot, 2003), and the salience of meaning of the construct in everyday experiences of peoples (Fitzgerald, 2004).
3. Again the list is rather long and includes transnational being appended to families (Lima, 2001; Garcia, 2006; Levitt, 2001; Bryceson and Vulero, 2002), to childhood (Orellana, 2001), to communities (Georges, 1991; Kearney 1989), to connections (Al-Rasheed 2005), to identity (Gorashi 2004; Gupta 1992; Miller 1998), politics (Smith, 2008), to commodities (Hansen, 1995), cultures (Kennedy, 2002), times (Berezin, 2003) and of course corporations (e.g. Bennett, 1985; Gereffi, 1981; Kirkpatrick, 1981). The coining of transnational and feminist practices and politics; as well as gender studies also had its fair share of the literature (e.g. Mohanty, 2003; Tripp and Ferree, 2006; Moallem *et al.*, 1999; Hesford and Kozol, 2005; Grewal, 1994; Shohat, 2001; Salih, 2003).
4. Amazon listings have a more elaborate classification. Beside the 4464 entries for transnationalism, there are 646 under transnational feminism, 894 texts for transnational families, 1897 for transnational crime, while transnational management has 2206 publications. Only 39 texts were classified under transnational blackness, and 4 entries for transnational tortillas.
5. These ranged from essentialized analyses and readings of nation-states, histories, contexts, communities, gender, race, labor, class, politics, fields of power, theoretical paradigms like Marxism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, as well as methodological tools like comparative approaches.
6. Cooper and Brubaker (2000) provide a provocative analysis of the concept identity and its uses and misuses. For gender see for instance Cornwall (2007), Mama (2006, 2004), Kandiyoti (2005), Butler (1990), Benhabib (1999).
7. See Mignolo (2000).
8. This construction was part of a discussion at the closing session of the Labour Crossing Conference in Johannesburg, September 2008.

9. In the case of gender in Global South the measures and scales pertain to the assessment of performance of various nation-states and regions in relation to the Gender and Development Index (GDI), the Gender and Empowerment Measure (GEM) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG), among others (see Moghadam, 2007).
10. See Sunseri (1996).
11. Indeed scandalous was the terminology used by different participants at the aforementioned conference launching the gender equality report.
12. For instance, national, disciplinary, location in the field as researcher or practitioners, regional encounters through networks and initiatives in the so-called global south, personal histories and institutional affiliations
13. This project is coordinated by Martina Rieker, Director of Institute of Gender and Women's Studies at the American University in Cairo and myself. Funding for the project is provided by the Ford Foundation. The reflections in this paper are my readings, re-interpretation and re-articulation of the debates and conversations that shaped the first two workshops of the project, one held in Cairo and the second in Cape Town.



# Researching MSM<sup>1</sup> in South Africa: Some Preliminary Notes from the Frontlines of a Hidden Epidemic

Vasu Reddy and Theo Sandfort

## Introduction

This article outlines some views on researching MSM (men who have sex with men) in South Africa based, in part, on insights gleaned from a recent working conference on gender, same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. The core concern is understanding what research processes should consider in future MSM research in relation to community knowledge, community participation and the design of programmes targeted at intervention in the transmission of HIV.

To argue that questions of sexuality occupy critical zones of concern in African contexts is beyond dispute. Researchers asking questions about identities, bodies, health, disease, gender, power and difference are compelled to take sexualities seriously and indeed, virtually all aspects of our lives could be interpreted through the lens of sexuality, regardless of personal routes to sexual identity. Sexuality, as we have come to interpret it, could be broadly defined as “a set of social processes which produce and organise the structure and expression of desire” (Cranny-Francis, 2003: 9). As Rubin argued, more than two decades ago, it is when sexuality, as an abstract concept, moves towards tangible expression – sexual acts, sexual behaviours and sexual choices – that constructions of the social find themselves embedded in both overt and subtle articulations of sexualities, politicizing values, identities, and activities in ways that constitute embattled zones of citizenship (Rubin, 1984: 263). “Sex acts”, Rubin (1984: 2) notes “are burdened with an excess of significance”.

When applied to the context of disease (especially HIV/AIDS), and in relation to homosexuality, it is the bodies of homosexuals that often circulate within medical and social discourses as “pathological”. Since HIV/AIDS was first diagnosed and since its first identification with homosexual transmission,

homosexuals have virtually been ignored in treatment and prevention programmes, except where – as in the United States of America between 1985 and the mid-1990’s, gay and lesbian activism forced a focus on homosexual health rights. In South Africa, almost all medical and civil society-based research on HIV and AIDS has been focused on heterosexual transmission (or on mother-to-child transmission) (Abdool Karim & Abdool Karim, 2005). The near-erasure of homosexuals from the HIV/AIDS epidemiological picture in South Africa could be attributed to political exclusion (Fourie, 2006). It may also be due to a historical reluctance by policymakers to address HIV/AIDS in same-sex practicing populations because such an engagement would require engaging with sexual practices and identities that are already steeped in prejudice and pathologization (Johnson, 2007).

We would argue that the prevailing culture of denial *vis á vis* homosexuality in the South African context is in and of itself a hostile response towards homosexuality, and is something which warrants analysis in terms which include South Africa in other continental cultures of denial around homosexuality. These cultures tend to categorize homosexuality as a Euro-American perversion that has contaminated African “tradition”; despite increasing evidence of the existence of homosexuality in pre-colonial Africa<sup>2</sup>. The assumption that homosexuality is a sign of European and Western decadence is underpinned by homogenising discourses that view “tradition” as static, unchanging and fixed. Central to this discourse is the common and totalising argument that homosexuality is “unAfrican” with the argument often focused on homosexuality’s absence in pre-colonial Africa (Antonio, 1997). Antonio (1997: 295) is reluctant to use the preposition “in” to locate homosexuality within “*African* culture”, but chooses rather to explore the range of sexual practices possible within diverse African societies and claims that the “absence” of homosexuality in pre-colonial Africa is a construction deployed simply in the architecture of a homogenising and political homophobia.

When debating homosexual practices in African contexts, it is important to note that open articulation of homoerotic desire and activities is unusual; such desire is shrouded in codes of silence, secrecy and taboos that prevent public discussion and exposure<sup>3</sup>. However, public responses to ideas about homosexuality in many African contexts usually dramatise a contestation over the legitimacy of homosexuality, constructed through the representation of same-sex practices (Dunton & Palmberg, 1996; Reddy, 2002). Given that

language is one fundamental part of representation, and that representation of experience entails the rejection of any centralised or universal meaning, reference to homosexuality becomes a crisis of representation in relation to culture and politics. Engagement with simply ‘naming’ homosexuality becomes a political act of exclusion, where those who practice same-sex activities, express same-sex desire, and/or identify themselves in any way within codes identified as “homosexual” are excluded in the same breath as they are named. Such exclusion takes place for a number of cultural reasons: (1) notions of purity concerning sexual orientation (Hutchins and Kaahamānu, 1991: 221) where same-sex acts are scripted as “impure”; (2) various types of stereotyping such as promiscuity (Dunphy, 2000), where same-sex practices are already coded as part of a degraded promiscuity; and (3) stigmatisation via the labelling of homosexuals as HIV carriers (Aggleton, 1999a, 1999b, 1996; Herdt, 1997; Treichler, 1999; Sontag, 1991; Waldy, 1996).

Thus, research which seeks to uncover the realities through which men in African contexts desire one another sexually, seek one another out for sexual and other encounters of intimacy and friendship, and/or engage socially or politically with one another in the comradeships of acknowledged homosexual experience and desire, faces two overwhelming challenges. Firstly the challenge of researching the “unAfrican” within Africa raises complex questions of legitimacy. Secondly, even to name the “man-having-sex-with-a-man” – as a focus for research – is to place him within the vector of the pre-pathologized. This is particularly true where homosexuals are considered transmitters of disease and the bodies of overtly gay men in particular become sexed in relation to AIDS (Watney, 1997, 2000; cf. also Ruel & Campbell, 2006 for a more contemporary argument about the link between homophobia and HIV/AIDS). This article explores the complexities of researching MSM in African contexts, seeking to raise questions about research processes whose political location seem to make them doomed from the outset but which, we aver, are critical to a deeper understanding of the epidemiology and impact of the illness.

### **Lesbian and Gay Vulnerability to HIV and AIDS: Preliminary Research in African Contexts**

While we know that the epidemic in South Africa is pronounced among heterosexual populations, we also know that lesbian and gay communities are not immune to HIV/AIDS. In his seminal study, *Off the Map: How*

*HIV/AIDS Programming is failing Same-Sex Practicing People in Africa*, Johnson (2007) suggested that HIV/AIDS stakeholders have jeopardized efforts to combat the AIDS epidemic in Africa, fuelled in large measure by the denial, criminalisation and erasure of same-sex desire and behaviour, resulting in increased vulnerability by same-sex practicing populations. Over and above people who self-identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, HIV/AIDS also impacts on other men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women (categories of sexual practice that are often erased from studies and interventions). Where prejudice runs deep about homosexuality in many societies, this is fuelled in part by perceived (received) ideas about gender, belief systems, stigmatisation and socialisation, and the absence of human rights and the presence of human rights violations. While several studies about same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS in Africa have now been published<sup>4</sup>, South Africa still lags behind; although data have been presented in posters and lectures at conferences, peer-reviewed papers are still rare (e.g. Lane *et al.*, 2008; Parry *et al.*, 2008; Sandfort *et al.*, 2008).

The medical literature shows that the first cases of HIV-infection and AIDS in South Africa, reported in 1983 and 1985, revealed that at that moment in time infections were largely confined to white men who had sex with men<sup>5</sup>. The concern among some medical professionals, as illustrated by a brief discussion paper in the *South African Medical Journal*, included recommendations for precautions in sexual activity, the importance of the existence of a gay community, and the need for rapid revision and change in South Africa's health care support system (Isaacs & Miller, 1985). In 1988, Schoub and colleagues (Schoub *et al.*, 1988) reported with careful optimism that the rate of expansion of the (white) homosexual epidemic in South Africa "shows preliminary signs of being checked". Beyond this period, concern around the illness appears to have been overtaken by fears of a heterosexual epidemic with no thought spared for what was happening to homosexual transmission.

Since the generalised HIV epidemic began to unfold in South Africa in the late 80s, attention has thus shifted away from MSM where this concerned openly gay men and has become focused on the prevention of heterosexual and mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Much more significantly, until very recently, there has been no recognition whatsoever that people who have sex with those of the same sex may simultaneously be involved in heterosexual relationships, including marriage. There is currently no information on the

prevalence of HIV among MSM in South Africa, regardless of whether these men identify as gay or bisexual, or do not identify. There is a paucity of information addressing the social situations and broader contexts in which HIV transmission among MSM is taking place, the strategies among MSM to prevent HIV infection (and on whether these strategies are working or not). There is also little information on how to ensure that their HIV prevention and care needs are being addressed by current programmes and services.

A recent overview by AMFAR (The American Foundation for AIDS Research) provides a global picture with regard to HIV prevalence among MSM in various low and middle income countries. The table below shows the ten countries with the highest prevalence.

	HIV prevalence among MSM (%)	National HIV Prevalence (%)	Criminalize MSM?
Kenya	43	6.1	Yes
Jamaica	25-30	1.5	Yes
Benin	25.5	1.8	Yes
Thailand	24.6	1.4	No
Ghana	25	2.3	Yes
Bolivia	21.5	0.1	No
Senegal	21.5	0.9	Yes
Guyana	21.3	2.4	Yes
Trinidad & Tobago	20	2.6	Yes
Ecuador	19.2	0.3	No

Source: AMFAR Special Report (2008: 5)

The data in the special report by Amfar Aids Research (2008) contains recent epidemiological data (128 countries) of HIV among MSM, showing an increased rate of infection in countries where the epidemic appears to be fueled by denial, indifference, inaction. The report also highlights necessary steps that are recommended for corrective action and intervention. In addition, some important community driven initiatives are also currently underway as a collaboration between LGBT (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender) partners in Southern Africa, Latin America and the Schorer Foundation (Netherlands) focused on same-sex populations. The aim is to upscale HIV/AIDS prevention programmes targeting LGBT people between 2007 and 2010. The Southern

African partnering organizations are OUT-LGBT Well-being (Pretoria), the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre, the Triangle Project (Cape Town), the Rainbow Project (Namibia), Lesbians and Gays in Botswana (LEGABIBO) and the Gay and Lesbian Association of Zimbabwe (GALZ). The Southern African Project is called PRISM (Prevention Initiative for Sexual Minorities). The needs assessment phase of the major partners in the Southern African project is complete. Preliminary conclusions from a needs assessment conducted by OUT-LGBT (Pretoria LGBT organisation) focused on men, indicate that “HIV and STIs are seen as serious health problems confronting gay men”, and “casual sex seems to be occurring in a context where anal sex is a preference”, indicating that “these men (are) at a high risk of contracting and transmitting an STI or HIV” (OUT, 2008a: 29).

The *2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic* (UNAIDS: 30) indicates that in the three decades of AIDS, we have seen that worldwide incidence has peaked, with the generalised epidemic nearing saturation and that mortality is rising globally. In 2007, 67% of all people living with HIV were in sub-Saharan Africa, while Southern Africa shared the disproportionate share of the global burden: 35% of HIV infections and 38% of AIDS deaths. In most regions outside sub-Saharan Africa, HIV is disproportionately affecting injecting drug users, sex workers, and men who have sex with men. Apart from evidence in modes of transmission with heterosexual intercourse related to serodiscordant couples, sex workers, and injecting drug users, recent studies demonstrate that unprotected anal sex between men is another factor in the Sub-Saharan African epidemic. Evidence showing HIV transmission between men who have sex with men revealed some important data: (1) in Zambia one in three (33%) surveyed men who had sex with men tested HIV-positive; (2) in the city of Mombasa (Kenya) 43% of men who said they had sex with other men were found to be living with HIV; (3) in Dakar, Senegal an HIV prevalence of 22% was found among 463 men who have sex with men. The above data suggests that men who have sex with men is a mode of transmission that should be investigated and examined in terms of sexual orientation and cultural interdictions against homosexuality.

Global responses to HIV/AIDS are increasing. At the first UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on HIV/AIDS, UN member states adopted a Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS, which was followed by an agreement in 2006 to achieve universal access to HIV/AIDS programmes by 2010. In South Africa, there have been some developments, with the National

Strategic Plan [hereafter NSP] for 2007-2011 dedicated to identify key interventions to reduce new infections. The contextual factors that underpin such interventions are poverty, gender and gender-based violence, cultural attitudes and practices, stigma, denial and discrimination, mobility and labour migration and informal settlement.

Taking three examples, the NSP (2007: 30) recognises the link between sexual violence and HIV infection and argues that the “culture of violence involves negative attitudes (e.g. deliberate intention to spread HIV) and reduced capacity to make positive decisions, or to respond appropriately, to HIV prevention campaigns”. In respect of cultural attitudes and beliefs, the NSP (2007: 31) draws attention to the element of patriarchy in that patriarchy prescribes women’s lower status and therefore “impacts significantly on the choices that women can make in their lives, especially with regards to when, with whom and how sexual intercourse takes place”. With regard to stigma, denial, exclusion and discrimination, the NSP (2007: 31-32) recognises that stigma is a factor that “interferes with HIV prevention, diagnosis and treatment as (stigma) is widely perceived as an outcome of sexual excess and low moral character leading to a strong culture of silence [...] because of fear of rejection and isolation by close relatives and the community at large”.

In the NSP discussion of populations that are considered vulnerable to HIV infection, several groups at higher risk are included: women, adolescents and young children (15 to 24 years), children (0 to 14 years), people with disabilities, people in prisons, sex workers, people engaging in mobile, casual and atypical forms of work, refugees, and men who have sex with men (MSM), the first time that MSM has been included in the NSP. The NSP timeously calls for research to prioritise vulnerable populations with MSM being one example. The NSP states that there is “very little currently known about the HIV epidemic amongst MSM in the country” (69) and that “MSM have also not been considered to any great extent in national HIV and AIDS interventions” (p.38). The strategic plan further argues that behaviours of MSM are wide-ranging and include bisexuality, implying that “the HIV epidemic amongst MSM and the heterosexual HIV epidemic are thus interconnected” (p.38). The extent to which this actually is the case is currently unclear. The proposed study addresses this gap by combining an exploration of the sexual practices and sexual networks of MSM with HIV testing of this understudied population.

## Researching “MSM”

In all of this, pertinent questions abound for the researcher embarking on research to find potential solutions to better understand “marginalized and hidden populations” and to formulate interventions that change behaviour and so help to minimize the epidemic. If research is to be seen as setting up “objects of inquiry”, it is also about ontology and epistemology. Research implies finding answers to questions, implying engagement with *process* rather than merely the output of a *product* (with value accruing to the steps in the research process). It also serves an applied function, and in our case, we see research as essential as a basis for evidenced-informed strategies to resolve problems, and for finding potential solutions to unanswered questions. Therefore research serves multiple purposes that should enable us to engage between theory and praxis, the context within which we work, the communities which we engage in our quest to research that which is “hidden”, “private” and oftentimes “taboo”. The context against and within which such work is undertaken, is of immense importance to how we interpret the meaning of “surveillance”, “prevalence” and “intervention” in same-sex practicing populations. We shall return to the question of categories and their meanings later but first a brief context for our own research.

Despite South Africa’s progressive legal protections on grounds of sexual orientation, prejudice, hate and discrimination against homosexuality and against anyone practising same-sex sexual behaviour abound. With a full understanding of some of these material realities, as well as including the context of the diversity of sexual expression, and in the absence of data on homosexual transmission, we embarked on what we describe as first steps in exploring a research-based project on same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. We reflect in the following section on method and implementation by drawing into our argument ideas about the research process.

HIV research collaborations between the United States and South Africa have been going on decades, but such collaborations are exclusively focused on heterosexual transmission. Collaborations between the North and South also reflect the uneven terrain of resources at our disposal, the varied contexts in which we work, access to knowledge, and donor driven priorities in the broad field of development. To concretize these differences between us as co-researchers, and authors of this piece, Theo works principally through the lens of the psycho-social, and Vasu’s is informed by cultural studies. Together

we have been able to bring our disciplinary, cultural, and activist toolkits to engage a process that is directed toward the creation of material that brings together research and advocacy sites. It is also the case that Theo's location in the North, and Vasu's location in the South, highlight the question of authenticity and location. The location of researchers within disparate geographies often results in tension around who speaks, who engages with what issues, and how such an engagement will lead to mutual collaboration. From our initial discussions about the context for research which meaningfully engages community participation as active agents, we were able to name these tensions, and commit to a partnership which could transform the political hierarchies at play. Theo, for his part, has been an attentive listener, persuaded by the value of research that has a purpose, sensitive to context and location, and a methodology that is inclusive and accountable to the beneficiaries of research. Vasu has taken the lead in terms of designing an approach to a context he shares which can respect the potential dangers of creating a new category of homosexual men to be hated by the state: "MSM".

We began with the recognition that same-sex sexuality and any engagement with homosexual transmission had disappeared from the epidemiological picture in South Africa, and that the role of same-sex transmission within the overall epidemic was completely unclear. We also found that while lesbian and gay populations in South Africa are visible and actively engaged in identity-based politics, there are other "hidden" populations that do not self-identify as either lesbian or gay, but who are part of the subcultures within same-sex practicing populations (Isaacs & McKendrick, 1992). It was essential to work with the hypothesis that such 'hidden' populations might be considered vulnerable in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but equally essential to recognize that such populations might overlap with "heterosexual" people and that the categorization of people via their sexual behaviour alone (not by their politicized affiliation to a socially marginalized constituency) was a fraught business. "Vulnerability" in our interpretation refers to the lack of opportunity, skills and power to make informed decisions about sexual practice and sexual negotiation. Vulnerability could be compounded by societal prejudice and discrimination linked to sexual orientation, to the reality of living a double life within both heterosexual social circles and zones in which same-sex sexual activity could take place, and to the stigma attached to sexual activity between men regardless of the identities, or contexts, concerned.

To explore potential answers about the experiences of MSM in South Africa, we decided to put together a three-day working conference at which a diverse group of approximately thirty researchers, community leaders and activists would take stock of available knowledge, establish some research priorities, explore and resolve challenges related to undertaking such research, and create a basis for innovative, community supported research activities. For this purpose the Gender and Development Unit (Human Sciences Research Council), the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies and the Department of Sociomedical Sciences (Columbia University, USA), the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre and OUT-LGBT Well-being (Pretoria), came together.

We had collectively a threefold purpose to be implemented in a workshop format to (1) review the history of research strategies on homosexuality and to evaluate available research pertaining to same-sex sexual practices in its relation to HIV/AIDS; (2) identify research needs and priorities related to same-sex sexual practices and HIV/AIDS; and (3) explore challenges and potential solutions to research on same-sex sexual practices and HIV/AIDS.

The gathering also brought together prominent activists from Namibia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa, including policymakers from the South African government, as well as researchers and programmers. The approach to our conference considered the value of diversity and collaboration in a participatory research process that acknowledged the active presence of the researcher in processes of knowledge production. In addition, the value of experiences, concerns and voices of stakeholders who are themselves subjects of research (in our case, same-sex populations) is crucial to address power relationships when seeking to combine the knowledge of researchers and the experiences of those who are researched. Significant also is the fact that knowledge is best generated *with* people (Reason, 1994), that research is not merely about generating new knowledge, but directed toward change in society. In broad terms, the notion that science, what Harding (1991) describes to be a “strong science” requires us viewing the world from a variety of perspectives, and especially those of people normally excluded from positions of power (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). In all of this, we recognised that future work in research necessitates a process of relationship building between the researcher and researched. But more importantly, a relationship between researcher and the subject of research (and the *researched*) should proceed with responsibility, as expressed at the conference by Nonhlanhla Mkhize (Durban Lesbian & Gay Centre):

"There's a greater need to assist our communities to understand the need for the research, to engage with the researchers and the questions are developed towards that research being undertaken. But also and even more important, there is a need to even hold those researchers responsible for the information that they send out after having engaged with the relevant communities. There's a whole lot of misinformation after researchers have engaged with us and it's about time that we mobilise against dealing with such issues."

The ideas generated within the conference confirmed for us community knowledge is central to any future work. There was an overwhelming solidarity by all participants at this conference. The majority of participants also argued that there is no information about HIV prevalence among those who have sex with same-sex partners, that there is no understanding of how homosexual transmission plays a role in the overall epidemic and that there is no understanding of the prevalence of unsafe sexual practices among men who have sex with men and little knowledge of the psychosocial determinants of HIV risk behaviours. Flowing from a lack of knowledge were other consequences, namely: (1) lack of political support and resources for prevention; (2) current limited prevention efforts are not evidence-based; (3) nothing is known about the effectiveness of current prevention efforts; (4) knowledge can be gained by future studies focused on same-sex populations, and by (5) including same-sex sexuality in large population-based studies.

Underpinning all of the above factors was the issue of labels and language. Why do we use concepts such as "same-sex sexuality" and what purpose does this serve in the context of destigmatising discourses of homosexuality? The term "same-sex sexuality" for its part could be conceived as a broad concept that is inclusive rather than exclusive. While there may be a pragmatic dimension to this usage, the term "same-sex sexuality" discloses its own limitations. Given the complexity of identity-based categories such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexed, such terms place a premium on visible, politicised and established markers of identity. It should be noted that even identity politics is a recent development: where sexual identity became a fashionable term since the 1970s, the term has served the purpose of mobilising collectively LGBT populations against homophobia in a rights-based discourse. But even identity-based politics has not resolved the problem of discrimination. And where it comes to researching the prevalence of sexual activity between men (or between women), identity markers (especially those

believed to be borrowed from the West, such as “gay” or “lesbian”) are more of a hindrance than a help.

Cheik Niang (a Senegalese researcher) expressed some of these concerns about the relevance of language in MSM research:

“What I would like to insist on, is that we have to go back to the ontological and philosophical debate. There are a lot of things to be explored at the philosophical, symbolic level, spiritual level, even language. The language is full of expressions that show different constructions of male-to-male sexuality or women-to-women sexuality. There are multiple identities and if we don't know the identities, if we don't work with the identities, the multiple identities, we will be sending a message that will not be received. People only receive the message when they think that you are talking to them. You will only reach them when it is clear that you know them, you know each other. You are in a position of empathy and empathy most of the time is excluded from the scientific research. Empathy could help to understand the other and redesign all the programs, messages and politics. If you say African societies are homophobic, I say okay, one side only, one level. If you go deep, you will find a completely different story. How can you use what is deep in order to challenge what actually exists in order to arrive at comprehensive HIV/ Aids strategies? We should use a holistic approach of MSM as a marginalised group and make our research part of the process of social and political transformation. Societies are not rigid, are not fixed. Societies move, they have to evolve. New agendas will push for transformation when they take into consideration everything I said before.”

If we assume that homosexual transmission of the HIV virus is not merely applicable to self-identified individuals, it is plausible to make the case that there are some people whom we describe as men who have sex with men (MSM) and women who have sex with women (WSW) who may not self-identify on these grounds. Such descriptions also do not fit the conventional label of homosexual men and women. Growing out of the global response to HIV/AIDS, such terms may be seen to run counter to the political interests of an identity-based constituency in some quarters. The terms MSM and WSW describe behaviour rather than a specific group of people. The terms foreground and aggregate sexual practice around same-sex desire but also minimize identity and differences between the varieties of sexual expressions of sex between men. Included in this category could be self-identified LGBT

people, as well as heterosexuals. Many men in particular who have sex with other men do not consider themselves gay or bisexual. As a result of marriage, and where discrimination persists, including social stigma, particularly men who have engaged with sex with other men, choose to keep their private sexual lives hidden from public purview. Fear of exposure and public embarrassment compel such individuals to remain in the closet. This is particularly true of repressive social contexts where homosexuality is criminalised and where heteropatriarchal power persists.

We were aware that with the categorization “MSM” or “WSM”, there is the possibility of further stigmatisation. Given the fact that HIV/AIDS is already fraught with blame, shame, denial and discrimination, often allocated to vulnerable groupings such as women and homosexuals, the tendency exists that with new labels such stigma could be perpetuated. As early as 1991, Carol Vance points out as an example, the fact that homosexuality is seen in a variety of ways with varying degrees of recognition, that in some societies is tolerated as well as encouraged, or in others seen simply as acts and not as an *identity*. Vance concludes her article by foreseeing a reversal back to a biomedical approach to sexuality (and therefore a loss in momentum to the cultural or social side) due to the AIDS outbreak. She maintains that with the advent of AIDS, the biomedical model of sexuality has come to the forefront. The danger here is that it reduces sexuality to being a “derivative from physiology and a supposedly universal functioning of the body”. It denies that sexuality has a history and that changes bring about a difference in how we interpret it over time and in different cultural contexts. Even though Vance does not refer to MSM, the value of her argument lies in the fact that if we are to consider homosexuality in its relationship to HIV simply in terms of *acts* rather than *identity*, we run the risk of viewing sexuality purely in terms of its biological function.

It is true that with HIV/AIDS, the medicalization of sexuality is intensifying. The public turns to medical authorities for sexual information and advice. Donors and funders are insistent on quantifiable data that explains “prevalence” and “incidence”. Thus, medical and public health interests in sexuality are expanding to new areas beyond the specialities to which it was traditionally confined: sexually transmitted diseases, obstetrics and gynaecology, and psychiatry. According to Vance (1991) there are also some limitations about biomedical responses to sexuality. These are (i) re-medicalization; (ii) re-pathologization of sexuality; (iii) emphasis on quantification i.e. “behavioural data” (iv) “safer sex” becomes an issue.

Despite the risks here, however, we believe that the lack of attention for same-sex sexuality in the HIV/AIDS epidemic is unacceptable. From a public health perspective, limited attention to same-sex sexual transmission might undermine the overall fight against HIV and AIDS in Africa. It is obvious that much work needs to be done and the conference on which some of these insights are based raise questions that address: (1) how are same-sex sexual expressions and practices organised and networked? and; (2) what is the prevalence of HIV among same-sex practicing populations, and what is the contribution of homosexual transmission to the South African epidemic? While wariness around medicalization of homosexuality was part of the conference deliberations, and while it was broadly agreed that the MSM category – in its overt connection to issues of public health – carried dangers, it was also agreed that the vulnerability of men having sex with men (and women having sex with men) to HIV transmission warranted activist-oriented research.

There was general consensus among conference participants that, in relation to HIV transmission, research is needed that not only acknowledges prevalence of same-sex sexualities, but which also fosters an understanding of the diversity in same-sex sexual practices. Furthermore, labels that are being used do not necessarily have identical meanings for the persons involved. The label “gay” as used by black men in townships intersects with gender-role identification and differs in this respect from the meanings in the industrialized world. For example, in South Africa, terms such as *isitabane* (hermaphrodite) are used. Then there are terms such as *skesasana* (a boy who likes to be fucked), *injonga* (one who proposes and does the fucking) and *imbube* (a man who sleeps with men and women)<sup>6</sup>. Understanding diversity of sexual expression implies acknowledgement of the fact that the organisation and expression of same-sex sexuality is tenuous: the use of identity labels is changing while men and women’s self-understandings change. This is the result of increasing exposure to different ways of expressing same-sex sexuality, within South Africa as well as more globally. Research is also part of this process and is likely to contribute to it. Whatever future studies will be conducted about same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS, there is a great need for understanding of the meanings attached to identities and practices.

A second point, critical to developing our research strategies, is that HIV cannot be understood, and also not be effectively addressed, without interrogating the context and issues that affect men and women with same-sex sexual desires, a point highlighted by Pierre Brouard (active in HIV/AIDS as an activist and counsellor for over two decades):

"In our research and prevention, we should not only focus on behaviour. Behaviours don't occur in a vacuum, they occur in a social context. Ideas circulate in the social and I think it is important to look at the labels people use. I am thinking about research Graeme Reid has done in townships outside Ermelo, where you define yourself as a lady or a gent and the ladies are the bottoms, the gents are the tops. And the tops often are involved with women and marriages as well. Those labels define your behaviour and your roles and your identity and what you do sexually, how you negotiate. So I think it is worth looking at labels and language too."

This is in line with current thinking about HIV/AIDS that emphasizes that in addition to the role of micro level factors, attention should be given to structural factors as well. This implies that the socio-economic and cultural circumstances in which same-sex sexuality is practiced, including the stigma attached to same-sex sexuality – while South Africa currently has the most liberal constitution as far as homosexuality is concerned, the country's social norms form a sharp contrast with its liberal constitution: the level of acceptance of homosexuality in South Africa is very low (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Discrimination and violence, resulting from the stigma attached to same-sex sexuality affect how MSM and WSW shape, structure and experience their sexual practices, including the risks they take. Instead of exclusively focusing on individual determinants of risk, research should furthermore account for *how* sex is expressed in social relationships, calling attention to power dynamics and structures. Understanding the potential spread of HIV also requires looking beyond individual behaviour, and exploring social and sexual networks.

The representation of various practical and scholarly disciplines at the conference also introduced a discussion of research ethics. In the discussion, participants expressed that there was a strong need for constant reflection upon what researchers are doing: Why are specific research questions asked? What could be the consequences of the outcomes of the studies we initiate? Is there acknowledgment of the context in which the work is being done? The ethics of "highlighting for science" the sexual practices of people who would be socially stigmatized by neighbours, friends, family members, for their sexual activities and desires needed to be constantly under interrogation. While there was acknowledgement that this was easier said than done, the recognition that researching same sex sexuality could bring "justification"

to state-based homophobia (“these men are spreading the virus”) was reiterated frequently within conference discussions. This placed “researching MSM” within a dynamic very similar to that already inhabited by lesbian and gay people in South Africa: “coming out” as people publicly willing to acknowledge the meaning of same-sex sexuality is risky – as much as there is potential to engage (and perhaps disperse homophobia through discussion, new knowledge, and activism), so is there the risk that the mere visibility of homosexual people intensifies local homophobia.

It was agreed that research about same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS needs to follow specific ethical guidelines. To start with, directly affected communities (notably the LGBT communities) should be involved in as many parts of the research process as possible, a point articulated by Ian Swartz (Rainbow Project, Namibia):

“People who participate in research should get their information back. Once we started signing agreements with researchers stating that the study findings would make their way back. One of the researchers for instance just sent an electronic version via internet, a 150-page document to people here who have hotmail addresses. These are all people that access the internet from internet cafes where they pay per 1/2 hour and then you end up paying anything between R1,00 and R2,50 per page. So again now people have received the information, but there is nothing they can do with it. In fact they can't even open the document properly, forget about reading it, because you pay per minute that you access the internet at an internet café. The other thing is that the information is written in a language, I mean it is written by an academic. The language is such that people can do very little with it. And so what we do nowadays is that we actually agree on how the information is going to make its way back. That you as a researcher promise to come back to Namibia and not just send us something. That you do a little presentation. And if there were too many people, then you would train some people who were part of the research project to go out and do that presentation to others. But to get the information out so that it has meaning and so that people can really benefit from it. That is important”.

Such participation should not be limited to the recruitment of study participants, but also include the development of research questions, the methodology as well as decisions about dissemination of the outcomes. Inclusion of the community will facilitate that research resonates with the

realities of the target group and promote the use of findings in ways that are planned and thought through as part of local strategies against homophobia. Furthermore, it was agreed that researchers should be aware of the needs that might be elicited by their studies and make services available to address the needs identified. It was also suggested that researchers should take the responsibility for providing proper and adequate feedback to the target group once a study was finished.

In all of this, researchers need to reflect upon their social position as researchers and the role of research. This implies an understanding of the political dimensions of the work they are doing and the power dimensions involved. This also includes an awareness of the fact that in research, issues can be framed in various ways and that the way an issue is being framed is also embedded in a politics. Researchers should ask the question: does my study and the terminology used do justice to the reality of the persons involved?

While intellectually we know that research is supposed to further our knowledge of a problem, issue and a field, in relation to HIV/AIDS (as may be the case for other fields), there is similarly an applied aim to research as well: research should help us to prevent further transmission of HIV, to make sure that affected people receive the support they need, and to counteract stigma attached to HIV/AIDS. Consequently, the aim of most HIV/AIDS research is to develop interventions, respond to policies and develop new ones where existing policies fail.

It also became clear in discussions at this conference that research about same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS could have several additional functions. One of these functions may seem basic, yet the political implications are vast in the context of silence and denial: research can deliver proof that homosexualities of many diverse shapes exist; dispelling through an evidence-based framework that homosexuality is simultaneously African. Any discussion of same-sex sexuality must include the relevance of identity politics that confronts homophobia and bigotry. Several activists expressed the view that the institution of science (through a research endeavour) could be used to challenge homophobia, as well as to advocate and increase visibility of same-sex sexuality. In parallel, and perhaps idealistically, research can have a legitimizing function for people who engage in same-sex practices. "Science" can be harnessed, despite its history some argued, to urge political attention to problems and to promote the release of resources for prevention. The

inclusion of same-sex sexuality in mainstream population studies, such as the upcoming South African National HIV prevalence survey, is likely to promote some acknowledgement of same-sex sexuality and increase its visibility.

There was a strong consensus that what should be prioritized in South Africa is research that brings about *change* that has an impact on a variety of levels, and can be used by various stakeholders. These stakeholders include policy makers, LGBT communities, health care workers, and persons with same-sex sexual desires and practices. Different stakeholders will of course have different research needs. In this sense the *value* of collaboration received overwhelming support by the stakeholders present. But while there was consensus, a number of concerns remain for us. The key concerns flow from the dearth of previous research in the area. The sheer number of questions we need to answer is overwhelming.

### **Key Questions: The Politics of Choosing “Research Foci”**

While all participants acknowledged a strong need for research on same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS, there was also an awareness of the various barriers to the kind of research proposed. One major barrier was the difficulty of gaining access to relevant populations, partly resulting from reluctance which formed a barrier to participation in research due to a homophobic climate. Another factor, making research interesting but also complicated, is the diversity of expressions of same-sex sexuality. While research should acknowledge this diversity, and even make it an object of study, this diversity also will limit the possibility to develop generalizing conclusions. More structural barriers signalled by the participants were the scarcity of financial and material resources and the lack of a social scientific research infrastructure in South Africa focused on same sex sexuality.

The list of questions related to same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS that require research attention is extensive and it is hard to set priorities. The research questions requiring attention can be organised into various categories.

Firstly there are several epidemiological questions. Research is needed to assess HIV prevalence among MSM and WSW and to understand the role of homosexual transmission in the South African HIV/AIDS epidemic. The political need for epidemiological data is to be able to legitimize attention for HIV prevention aimed at MSM and WSW and to claim needed resources to do so. Understanding homosexual transmission of HIV also requires determining who is having sex with whom, and what people are actually doing together

in their social and sexual networks. Are people having sex with persons from within their social network or do sexual networks exist relatively independent of social networks? Understanding sexual networks will help to find out what the best places to intervene to prevent the further spread of HIV are<sup>7</sup>. Epidemiological research also requires sophisticated sampling approaches that allow for generalization of study findings. Integrating homosexuality in general population surveys would give the opportunity to make comparisons, and to utilize the findings regarding same-sex sexuality into proper perspective.

A second group of research questions should help to successfully address the prevention and care needs of persons who engage in same-sex sexuality. This involves the exploration of the various factors associated with unsafe sex as well as with the adoption of preventive strategies. Also relevant in this context is to understand how sexual interactions come about: what kind of sexual communication takes place and how are desires negotiated? Beyond the individual level, research focused on communities might be helpful: how are communities being built and how do such communities support safer sex practices? Other questions deal with access to health care, including voluntary counselling and testing, and treatment for HIV: what kind of barriers exist and how could these barriers be removed?

Understanding risk behaviour only makes sense if a broader context is taken into account. “Risk” as a concept is potentially dangerous and could have ambiguous meanings, depending on how it is being deployed. Risk often has moral implications, and when used in relation to sexuality and sexual practices, these meanings have to be carefully unpacked. Given the reality that same-sex sexual practices already operate in a stigmatized and specifically homophobic environment, the meanings of “risk” in relation to such sexual practices must be first understood by people who self-identify with same-sex sexual practices. More importantly, to address populations effectively, it is of crucial importance to understand what same-sex roles, identities and practices mean to individuals and communities. What kind of understanding do people have of same-sex sexuality? How are these understandings changing and as a consequence of what kind of factors?

In order to promote adequate political attention to same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS, we also need to understand the history of policy making. What happened for it to take so long to include same-sex sexuality in South Africa’s National Strategic Plan? Such questions should be studied in the context of South Africa’s general HIV/AIDS policy, taking into account the social

meaning attached to homosexuality, and the role that should be played by lesbian and gay organizations in mobilizing around HIV/AIDS. Other questions that would fall under the rubric of policy research deal with current decision making processes: What attention is being paid to same-sex sexuality in policy? How can a research-based advocacy influence the latter?

A final set of questions addresses programmatic needs and program evaluation. Even though solid evidence is lacking for the development of interventions aimed at people with same-sex practices, such interventions are being implemented, predominantly by LGBT organizations and community centres (notably in South Africa) but in other African contexts (for example, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe), but this is difficult where homosexuality is criminalised. If and where interventions do take place, ongoing monitoring of the quality of program implementation and the target populations' responses to the programme is also important.

It is clear that one research project cannot take on all the above questions, and yet, the vulnerability of MSM and WSW demand that all be addressed. The choice to pull together activist and expert LGBT constituencies in order to debate the way forward proved powerful in building partnerships for undertaking the research but at the same time generated expectations for the impact of the research – and a wealth of research foci – in ways that position us as researchers in a difficult place. Not all the questions can be answered; not all the expectations can be met.

## Conclusions

Researching MSM and WSW within South Africa has a complex background. On the one hand, it is imperative that the vulnerability of men who have sex with men, and women with women, (in diverse contexts, ways, and identities) be much more deeply understood and comprehensively addressed. On the other hand, homophobic contexts, the vast diversities of practice, identities, and desires involved, and the need to ensure that what becomes “knowledge” about MSM and WSW contributes to social justice as opposed to stigmatization and increased homophobia presents researchers with daunting challenges. As researchers, we are emboldened by the solidarity of our conference allies, yet concerned about the tensions within the terrains. Would it be possible to create knowledges which “proved” to state-located homophobes that MSM are “responsible” for the epidemic? Will research on MSM pull donor funds and research interests away from the needs of (for example) poor, married,

women? How do we ensure that the man having sex with men, whom we meet as part of our research discussions, receives the ARVs he may need (or simply the care and respect he deserves from his community)? These are some of the worries that stalk our midnight hours.

However, the worry that gets us out of bed – towards the methodological design of research we are about to undertake – gnaws with even greater strength. In the vast South African literature on HIV and AIDS, where are “we”, the MSM and WSM? Should we remain invisible for another decade, will it even be possible to say “we”?

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## Endnotes

1. The label MSM (men who have sex with men) is used here as a descriptor for a myriad expressions of same-sex desire by men, including men who self-identify as gay, those who may self-identify as transgendered men (who have not fully transitioned to the opposite sex), those who may self-identify as bisexual, those who may not self-identify as either gay, bisexual or transgendered but engage in sex with their own gender, and those who use the acronym as an identity label. MSM are considered a vulnerable group as they are prone to stigmatisation, lack inappropriate targeted health facilities, have little or no attention within national AIDS programmes, and where inadequate or unreliable epidemiological information about their sexual practices exist. While South Africa has decriminalised homosexuality, the reality in most African countries is that homosexuality remains criminalised. Because criminalisation rights do not accrue for lesbians and gays, in the absence of rights, homophobia and discrimination persists. And despite decriminalisation in South Africa, homophobia and discrimination are also realities for many South African homosexuals because of the cultural stigma. Even though this article does not engage in detail with these issues, we recognise that when we talk about MSM, such men will also be located within lesbian and gay groupings even though they may not self-identify with the label "gay". We draw on LGBT groupings to research "MSM" because such groupings interrogate and challenge homophobia, make the case for a rights-based approach to sexual diversity, and because MSM interact and intersect within LGBT groupings.

2. See Amory (1997), Baum (1995), Bleys (1995), Epprecht (2004), Johnson (2001).
3. See for example, Constantine-Simms (2001), Epprecht (2004), Gevisser & Cameron (1994), Murray & Roscoe (1998).
4. Allman *et al.* (2007), Cloete *et al.* (2008), Geibel *et al.* (2007), Jewkes *et al.* (2006), Kajubi *et al.* (2007), Lane *et al.* (2008), Lorway (2006), Niang *et al.* (2003), Onyango-Ouma *et al.* (2005), Sanders *et al.* (2007), Sharma *et al.* (2008), Teunis (2008), Van Griensven *et al.* (2008), Wade *et al.* (2005).
5. Anderson *et al.* (1983), Puren (2002), Ras, Simson, Anderson, Prozesky, & Hamersma (1983), Sher & dos Santos (1985), Spracklen *et al.* (1985).
6. See Gevisser & Cameron (1994: 165-168).
7. See Friedman *et al.* (2006).

# Developing Principles for Research about Young Women and Abortion: A Feminist Analysis of Difficulties in Current South African Studies<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Soon after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy (CTOP) Act of 1996, which legalised abortion for the first time, was passed. Since the introduction of the CTOP, a number of studies have been conducted on abortion in South Africa. Many have taken a health-related focus, but some research on young women and abortion has also been conducted, and it is to this (published) research that this article speaks. Two facts highlight the importance of this kind of research in the context of the abortion debate. Firstly, data from the Department of Health indicate that from 1997 to mid-2006, 12% of women undergoing terminations in the provinces in which age-related data are available were under the age of 18 (Department of Health: 2006). Secondly, the subsection of the Act allowing minors to request abortions without parental consent has caused some controversy. For example, the Christian Lawyers Association filed a suit in the Pretoria High Court in 2003, arguing that the above-mentioned subsection was unconstitutional. Their application was not successful.

The research conducted on young women and abortion is etched against a background of change and contradiction in young people's lives in South Africa. In addition to enabling legislation on termination of pregnancy, which is premised on the rights-based approach of the first democratically elected government of South Africa, various opportunities and challenges define the lives of young women. Specifically in relation to sexual and reproductive health, the Department of Health's National Adolescent Friendly Clinic Initiative aims to make family planning and other services more accessible and acceptable to young women (Dickson-Tetteh *et al.*, 2001). However,

HIV/AIDS and “safe sex” programmes define sex as dangerous and individual young women as responsible for close monitoring of heterosexual spaces. The Child Support Grant, shown to enable functional mothering (Case *et al.*, 2005), has sparked controversy in terms of providing perverse incentives for poor young women to conceive (a claim refuted by the research – Makiwane & Udjo, 2005). Young, black and poor women who conceive are, in particular, stigmatised and teenage pregnancy is in many respects racialised (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002).

In this paper I highlight some of the problems in the research conducted on young women and abortion in South Africa since the legalisation of abortion. The specific aim of the paper is, through this analysis, to draw out feminist principles that should be considered in this kind of research. My argument draws on postcolonial feminisms that theorise the multiplicity of oppression along gender and, *inter alia*, race, class, age and location lines (Macleod, 2006). The paper is premised on the assumption that, in a field as fraught with gendered, race and class politics as abortion, regardless of the method used, researchers need to inspect the ideological implications of their work, and to be vigilant about their scholastic practices, and any claims legitimately made.

To my knowledge, the ten articles featured in this paper represent all published research which focuses specifically on young women and abortion in South Africa following the legalisation of abortion. As such, they represent the body of “sanctioned” knowledge on young women and abortion, having gone through a peer review process. Two of the papers have been published in international journals<sup>2</sup>. All the other studies were published in accredited South African journals<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the dominant focus has been on education or health. The studies can be placed into two broad categories: (1) those that explore the experiences of young women who have undergone a termination of pregnancy, and (2) those that investigate the views of the broader population on adolescence and abortion. A brief, factual description of each study appears in Appendix 1.

Based on my reading of these studies, the paper discusses feminist issues that arise with regard to research about young women and abortion. I first discuss the potential implications of how we conceptualise “adolescence”. Second, the language used to describe abortion and the “foetus” is inspected. Third, citation practices that mask ideological positions are criticised. Fourth, sampling issues pertinent to these kinds of studies are highlighted. Finally, the lacuna of comparative research and the potential for ascribing experiences to an abortion that may be a result of an unwanted pregnancy are highlighted.

## How “Adolescence” is Conceptualised

Central to any understanding of adolescence and abortion is our theorising or, failing that, taken-for-granted assumptions concerning the nature of “adolescence”. In many of the articles reviewed here, statements of the nature of ‘adolescence’ were made as preludes to the study or, alternatively, as explanations for an observation. In other words, these statements did not emerge from the data but instead formed the taken-for-granted backdrop against which the problematic of young women and abortion were etched. A number of studies<sup>4</sup> invoke a “transition” discourse of adolescence as a universal truth. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001: 92) in fact state that “The adolescent’s affective development is unstable and variable in nature because they find themselves between the child and adult world”<sup>5</sup>. This “delicate” process, they state, can be disturbed by an abortion. The teenager who terminates a pregnancy is, in their words, confronted with a double developmental crisis – “adolescence” and abortion (the fact that two of the nine participants in their study were 22 years old and three 19 years old seems quite irrelevant to Geldenhuys and de Lange). Olivier *et al.* (2000: 213) and Olivier and Bloem (2004: 177) state that the person who terminates a pregnancy “is merely an adolescent”. Adolescence is seen as the period of life when major developmental changes take place “which challenge the child to make a transition from childhood to full adulthood” (Olivier *et al.*, 2000: 213). These “challenges” are naturalised and therefore rendered universal, as evidenced in the following statement of Olivier *et al.* (2000: 213): “It is quite normal that coping with the natural challenges of adolescence can be problematic for some adolescents”.

However, such transitional understanding is not self-evident or even necessary given the historical, social and cultural variability of what has been called “adolescence”. The construction of adolescence in the “West” as a separable developmental stage of transition is a relatively recent one. Compayré (1906)<sup>6</sup> notes “A few lines by Aristotle [about adolescence], then nothing for 2000 years until Mr Stanley Hall’s 1300 pages”. Stanley Hall’s treatise on adolescence<sup>7</sup> is famous for his theory that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny – that the transitional stage humans went through to move from primitiveness to civilization plays itself out in a similar form in the developmental transition of humans from childhood to adulthood. It was only at this stage that “adolescence” started to be seen in the Euro-American context as a time that required a moratorium on the assumption of adult

responsibilities, in contradistinction to the encouragement of young people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to assume adult roles as soon as possible. Sociologically, this change in the understanding of young people's nature corresponded with the rise of mass schooling and the outlawing of child labour (Dubas *et al.*, 2003).

Caldwell *et al.* (1998: 137) stress the “underlying importance of different historical cultures in determining the nature of adolescence”. In Africa specifically, they argue that “adolescence” did not exist prior to colonisation. Rather the transition to adulthood took place through social mechanisms such as marriage and initiation practices. In other words, the achievement of adult status was not an individual matter, with the individual working through various crises and difficulties as is the premise of “adolescence as transition”, but was rather a social matter marked through social rituals. Indeed, through a range of colonial mechanisms such as schooling, the introduction of Christianity and an economy based on the exchange of money, the idea of “adolescence” has to some extent taken root. Despite these factors, there is currently great social and cultural variability in what is considered “adolescence”. For example, in an edited collection of research on youth in Africa, De Boeck and Honwana (2005: 1) stress that youth is a “plural and heterogeneous categor[y]”. Thus, while many young people may experience their lives in ways that echo the tenets of “adolescence” as defined by Stanley Hall and as taken up by various theorists in Psychology, many will not. Or, probably more accurately, young people will experience their lives in complex and contradictory ways, sometimes performing “adolescence” in the ways described above, and at other times in ways antithetical to these tenets.

Given these contradictions, setting our conceptualisation of young people at the “adolescence as transition” default becomes problematic. Yet, the deployment of a discourse of transition has potential effects. Firstly, the analytical lens is placed on the individual young woman who is developing according to a developmental blueprint. The context within which particular social interactions occur may be elided. For example, Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001), drawing on the “transition” discourse in which “lack” and “child-likeness” feature, indicate that apparently, the “adolescents” in their study were not always aware of the consequences of their sexual behaviour. This, they state, can be ascribed to a lack of information or misinformation. Sexual interaction is thus ascribed to the individual's lack or incompleteness. While it may be true that some young women lack information and awareness, ignorance and

lack of awareness cannot solely lead to intercourse or pregnancy. Heterosexual relations primarily take place within a gendered space. Thus, the gendered power relations within which sex occurs, and the potential for exploitation, coercion and violence need to be acknowledged. The literature on “teenage pregnancy” in South Africa has begun to highlight this latter aspect (Wood & Jewkes, 1997; Wood *et al.*, 1998).

Secondly, the discourse of transition, particularly if infused with notions of lack, creates the rationale for intervention and surveillance on the part of the adults/experts. This theme is taken up in the context of HIV/AIDS by Mitchell *et al.* (2004). They argue that the “politics of innocence” implicit in constructions of “childhood”, “youth” and “adolescence” excludes young people from the position of knower and in so doing legitimates certain kinds of interventions (e.g. the encouragement of abstinence) which may exacerbate their vulnerability to HIV infection. Four of the ten studies reviewed used their research findings (sometimes in a rather oblique way) to develop recommendations for interventions by experts (educational psychologists, educators, psychiatric nurses). By way of example, Olivier and Bloem (2004: 177) believe that the teacher “has to face the daily challenge to deal with the child in a variety of situations where the child is in need of meaningful accompaniment with regard to the complex world, characterized by changes in all spheres of life, fleeting contacts, superficial relationships, inadequate socialisation and insecurity in which the child is growing up”. In these recommendations, the educator or nurse remains invisible – the adult is assumed to be capable of, albeit challenged by, the task of accompanying or mentoring the “adolescent” into the realities of the adult world. The power relations implicit in this kind of “accompaniment” discourse and the potential, particularly in the area of abortion, for the infusion of the relationship with ideological injunctions are glossed over.

### **Naming Abortion and the “Foetus”**

The way in which abortion and the “foetus” are spoken about will have a major impact on how the issue of young women and abortion is studied and the conclusions reached. While there has been significant debate in the international literature on these sorts of issues (Cannold, 1998; Smyth, 2002) careful reflection on the implications of referring to abortion and “foetus” in particular ways is lacking in the research under review. For example, Olivier and Bloem (2004: 178) state that the teachers who participated in their research

were “all employed at this school, where teachers were aware of the *problem* of abortions among adolescents, and which seemed likely to supply data “rich in information””. Slipped into a section concerning purposive sampling is an apparently innocent reference to the “problem” of abortion. To understand the implications of such a reference, it becomes necessary to replace “problem” with other terms which are more neutral such as “the ‘health issue’ of abortion” or even, the opposite of “problem”, “the ‘emancipatory potential’ of abortion”? Each of these pre-defines abortion in a different way and each has implications in terms of how researchers and participants understand and relate to the subject matter at hand.

One of the major controversies within the abortion debate is the status of the “foetus”. The most well known is the contest between Christian pro-life activists and pro-choice activists. The former argue that life begins at conception and that therefore the “foetus” is a person. The latter argue that the “foetus” is only potentially a life form and that separating the “foetus” from the mother’s embodiment makes little sense, especially as the “foetus” generally only becomes viable outside the womb from about 24 weeks or even later depending on the available medical technology. However, more subtle constructions are being highlighted in the literature, for example, Williams *et al.* (2001) discuss the various constructions of the “foetus” deployed by health care staff at a hospital in the UK. These included: person, patient, nobody, and commodity.

Given the centrality of the debate over the status of the “foetus”, the fact that it can be constructed in a number of ways, and the potential ideological implications of assigning a particular status to the “foetus”, researchers need to pay particular attention to the terms they use. In a classic text on abortion, Luker (1984) chooses to use the word “embryo” to avoid the implications of either a pro-abortion or anti-abortion stance. Nevertheless, “foetus” continues to be the term most commonly used in research. I choose to place “foetus” in inverted commas, thereby deploying, and simultaneously questioning the inevitability, of the signifier. This kind of careful thinking is lacking in some of the South African research on young women and abortion. One of the questions posed in the questionnaire administered by Kok (1999: 237) is “Has an unborn baby got the same right to life as you?”<sup>8</sup>. Geldenhuis and de Lange (2001: 95) refer repeatedly in their article to “die baba se vader [the baby’s father]” and indicate that a young woman’s decision to terminate her pregnancy is usually because “the baby has no reality for her [translated from

Afrikaans]”. Thus, in this article, the “foetus” is given the status of a fully formed baby, and parental status is conferred upon the young woman’s partner.

These seemingly minor slips have major implications. Firstly, within the discourse of rights which is so pertinent in the current South African constitutional context, denying a *person’s* rights is tantamount to a crime. The only answer available within this discourse to the question of whether another person (“the unborn baby”) has the same right to life as you is “yes”. It is little wonder that 86% of Kok’s respondents answered yes to his question, as the terms of possibility were set *a priori* by the ascription of personhood and the invocation of rights. Secondly, ascribing babyhood to the “foetus” allows for the positioning of a woman and her sexual partner as parents (e.g. Geldenhuys & De Lange, 2001). This implies certain duties and responsibilities that only the most neglectful would renege on. Furthermore, it would not be without justification if certain sanctions were brought to bear on the neglectful parents of a baby. Researchers need to be aware that implying, if only in an oblique way, that these duties and responsibilities and possible sanctions should form part of the discussion around abortion adds a particular ideological dimension to the discussion.

### Masking Ideology Through Citation Practices

Research requires one to position oneself within a field of literature. Citing literature clearly serves a number of purposes, one of which is validation of particular findings, especially in qualitative research. Amongst the articles under review, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (1998: 733), for example, state that a “literature control was done to verify the results”. Mpshe *et al.* (2002: 71) and de Lange and Geldenhuys (2001: 248) use a “literature control” to “recontextualise data”. What is not alluded to in this rendition, however, is how citations can act as absent traces that potentially mask particular ideological positions. For example, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (1998), who self-label their research as “neutral”, use the Pro-Life Activist’s Encyclopaedia (Clow, 1995) to validate their claim that the partner of the young woman who has undergone a termination of pregnancy feels guilt and helplessness. This document, which, *inter alia*, equates abortion with the holocaust and calls homosexual groups “organised perverts on the march”, was first published in 1995 by the American Life League, a well-established and active anti-abortion group.

One assumes that Poggenpoel and Myburgh (1998) used the chapter on the “Impacts on Fathers [sic]” to validate their claim concerning the young

woman's partner. In this section of the Pro-Life Activist's Encyclopaedia, reference is made quite vaguely to "studies" with no citations. The tone instead is what one would expect of a fundamentalist pro-life activist group. For example, the authors state that "The impacts of abortion on the fathers of the preborn babies who go to their "little deaths" are largely ignored by hard-line pro-abortionists and the medical profession". Leaving aside the fact that this literature simply cannot serve as a validation of findings as it is not even a secondary source let alone primary research, the ideological content of the publication is clear. As such it serves the absent trace of an anti-abortion position, masked by the seeming neutrality of citation practices.

### Sampling Issues

Abortion is a sensitive topic. Thus, women undergoing abortion may be viewed as a vulnerable population – although this in some ways perpetuates the (contested) view that abortion is necessarily deleterious. Because of the perceived vulnerability of this group, sampling in research that investigates women's responses to abortion tends to be convenience sampling. Of the studies reviewed here, only two – Kok (1999) and one aspect of Varga (2002) (neither of whom were studying women who had undergone a termination of pregnancy) – did not use convenience or purposive sampling. This is to be expected. Nevertheless, even within this kind of sampling, there are particular issues that need to be taken into consideration. One is period of gestation at the time of abortion and the other socio-political location.

The medical literature on abortion consistently differentiates between first trimester and second trimester abortions. The procedures recommended and medical management of cases are different, as are the potential medical outcomes (Huntington, 2002; Stubblefield *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, in the CTOP Act regulations (although perhaps not in reality), obtaining a second trimester abortion is substantially more difficult than obtaining a first trimester abortion. Second trimester abortions are granted under specified conditions whereas first trimester abortions are granted on request. Therefore, conflating women who undergo first trimester abortions with women who undergo second trimester abortions is problematic. Examples in which this kind of conflation occurs are the studies by Majopela-Batka and Schoeman (2003) and Mpshe *et al.* (2002). Although Majopela-Batka and Schoeman (2003) acknowledge that marital status and age may influence the emotional reactions of women who have terminated a pregnancy, they pay

little attention to gestation at the time of the termination in their sampling. Over half of the sample of women they interviewed had terminated their pregnancies after 12 weeks of pregnancy. Similarly, seven of the nine women interviewed by Mpshe *et al.* (2002) had terminated their pregnancies after 12 weeks. However, in both studies, no differentiation is made in the analysis between these women and those terminating their pregnancies in the first trimester. Although Majopela-Batka and Schoeman (2003: 146) indicate that their participants' reasons for requesting abortion "did not include risk to the mother's physical or mental health, the risk of giving birth to a genetically defected (sic) child, or pregnancy resulting from rape or incest", they (and Mpshe *et al.*, 2002) do not indicate the conditions (stipulated in the CTOP Act) under which participants in their second trimester at the time of abortion were granted a termination of pregnancy. In other studies, like de Lange and Geldenhuys (2001), information concerning gestation is simply missing, although the authors indicate that all the participants in their study had terminated their pregnancy in the first trimester.

Other than gestation, there are a number of complex, interweaving socio-political locations (e.g. race, class, language preference, educational status, geographical location or religious positioning of the participants) that need to be considered in terms of sampling and the kinds of conclusions that can be reached. In comparing the abortion experiences of Israeli women and Russian immigrants, Remennick and Segal (2001: 49) found that "dramatic emotional reactions are uncommon and, where present, are shaped by both *social context* and *concrete life circumstances*" (my emphasis). Hence, careful attention should be paid to spelling out the social context and socio-political location of the convenience sample of participants in order to situate the conclusions reached, something that has not always been done in the studies under review. The criteria for inclusion in Poggenpoel and Myburgh's (1998) study were: adolescent girl who had an abortion, her parents (if informed) and partner (if informed). However, no further information is provided on the axes of socio-political differentiation that feature strongly in South African social life. While language preference can be gleaned by the fact that the extracts from the interviews are in Afrikaans, the authors simply neglect to situate their results within the socio-political realities of these women's lives.

Describing a convenience sample carefully in terms of the socio-political axes mentioned above is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provides the canvass against which we can attempt to understand young women's

responses to abortion. The day-to-day lives of young women in South Africa are fractured along the lines of race, class and locality, with vastly different access to resources, schooling, and opportunities being a key feature across these lines. Furthermore, the meanings of sexuality, pregnancy and fertility are disparate and take on local significance, as highlighted in the work of Preston-Whyte (1999) and Mkhwanazi (2004). Locating the findings of research within these realities is important in terms of increasing not only the scientific validity of the studies but also a nuanced and politically located understanding of young women and abortion.

Secondly, a careful description of convenience samples in terms of their socio-political positioning alerts us to the analytical conclusions that can be drawn. Yet, Geldenhuys and de Lange's (2001) study gives very little consideration to these issues. In the sampling section, we are told that they interviewed black adolescents. In the discussion section, we find that the young women they have interviewed have "inadequate" relationships with their parents. They mention, in a generalised way, that:

"In families where parents make a living as migrant labourers, the poor relationship can be further ascribed to the parents' absence that increases the possibility of poor communication, supervision, discipline and guidance" (Geldenhuys & de Lange, 2001: 94)<sup>9</sup>.

And yet there is no indication as to whether this statement holds for these particular young women. No information concerning their parents' occupational status is provided to the reader nor, as far as we can read, was it obtained from the participants. It is methodologically unsound to provide statements of "fact" that do not refer directly to your participant group. All the above statement achieves is to further pathologise the participants while glossing over the veracity of its relevance to the group under study.

### **Lacunae: Comparative Studies**

In five of the studies under review, the experiences of young women who had undergone a termination of pregnancy were investigated. These studies took, for the most part, a phenomenological approach, with the aim of qualitatively describing the experiences of a small sample of participants. The results pointed to negative experiences, although some of the authors allude to some positive ones. While this kind of research is in and of itself methodologically sound, what is missing in South African research on young women and abortion is comparative data. We are thus still not any clearer about whether

the researchers' findings concerning the young women's relationships, emotions, decision-making, defence mechanisms, and moral standings hold true only for this group or whether similar findings would be found for older women who had undergone a termination of pregnancy or for young women who took their pregnancies to full term.

This, unfortunately, is true of research on abortion elsewhere in the world. Quinton, Major and Richards (2001: 492) bemoan the fact that "psychological literature currently contains no comprehensive, longitudinal, methodologically sound study that compares minor and adult women's psychological adjustment to abortion". Studies that compare groups of adolescents against each other are also few and far between, although the exception is Zabin *et al.* (1989), who followed 360 teenagers in the United States over two years after they had been interviewed when seeking a pregnancy test. These were divided into three groups: those who had a negative test, those who were pregnant and carried to full term, and those who were pregnant and had aborted their pregnancy. They concluded that those young women who had chosen abortion were doing as well as, and often better than, those who had carried to term or had not been pregnant.

Both these forms of comparative data (i.e. between teen-aged and older women and between teenagers who have different pregnancy outcomes) are important in honing our understanding of the experiences of abortion for young women. However, comparative studies that use age as a criterion have additional methodological problems to consider. Some studies such as Franz & Reardon (1992), have found that younger women react more negatively to abortion than older women. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is *age per se* that has led to these reactions. As Adler *et al.* (1998) point out, there are other variables confounded with age that may affect the relationship, one of which is marital status. Unmarried women are more prone to negative responses following abortion than married women. Whether this is owing to the potential increased emotional or economic support provided within a marital relationship is not clear. What is important to note here is that young women's possible negative reactions to a termination of pregnancy may have to do with these kinds of factors rather than age, as fewer younger than older women are married.

While researching the experiences of young women who undergo terminations of pregnancy is not problematic in itself, the process nevertheless involves a hidden danger. The lack of comparative data concerning the outcome of pregnancy (i.e. between groups of teenagers who conceive)

means that researchers may attribute experiences or effects to the abortion that may in fact be an artefact of an unintended and unwanted pregnancy. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001) in fact note that one of the consequences of the abortion experience is mistrust in men:

"After the physical pain has been worked through, some of the adolescents experienced a feeling of relief ... After the feeling of relief, came a mistrust in men" (2001: 96)<sup>10</sup>.

They use the statements from two participants as evidence. One participant says that she does not ever want to be involved with a man, and the other states that she does not want to have a boyfriend until she has finished school. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001) then verify their conclusion by quoting research in which women's feelings for their partners, their sexual lives and other aspects of their social lives weaken after an abortion. Hence, the analytical conclusion is that what Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001) construe as mistrust has been caused by the abortion and not the unwanted pregnancy. However, would these young women not have expressed a similar emotion had they taken their pregnancy to full term, given birth, and either kept the child or "given it up" for adoption? Without comparative data we cannot know.

### **Implications for Future Research on Young Women and Abortion**

Abortion is, and in all probability will continue to be, a controversial issue. As indicated by the Christian Lawyer's Association's high court challenge of the subsection of the CTOP Act dealing with minors, these controversies take on even greater complexity where young women are concerned. Within this context, then, it becomes essential for researchers to be vigilant on the rigour of their research as well as the potential taken-for-granted assumptions and slippages that may occur. As seen in this article, this kind of vigilance and rigour has largely been lacking in current research on young women and abortion. The point of this article is not to disparage particular researchers or to suggest that their research has no value, but rather, through a process of analysing some of the difficulties encountered in the research, to draw lessons concerning research with respect to young women and abortion. So what are these lessons? I have divided these into two broad areas of consideration: political reflection and methodological carefulness.

Many of the studies<sup>11</sup> reviewed took an explicitly, self-labelled "neutral" approach. Others<sup>12</sup>, while not explicitly stating that their research was neutral, imply this through their language and discussion of methodology. This assumption of neutrality is, in many respects, implicit in the canon of research

methodology employed by the researchers, ranging from the objective outsider position assumed in quantitative research<sup>12</sup> to the phenomenological method of bracketing that underlies many of the studies under review.

It is possible (although not necessary) for these kinds of methodologies to leave the researchers blind to the socio-political issues. In a review of phenomenological work conducted at Rhodes University, Painter (2005: 103) argues, that “phenomenological research practice, premised on [...] a strict adherence to an assumed methodological neutrality, treated the location from where it worked, an economically privileged white environment, as a neutral and transparent epistemological position”. Specifically, as shown in this article, the assumption of neutrality within research on young women and abortion may serve to disguise the infusion of the analysis with unexamined taken-for-granted assumptions concerning “adolescence”, abortion, and the “foetus”. Particular (circumscribed) understandings of “adolescence” may be treated as “fact” and the politics of abortion that is always already imbricated with gendered (and to a large extent racial and class) politics may be ignored.

We therefore need to engage in an ongoing process of political reflection in our research on young women and abortion, no matter what our chosen methodology is. This does not imply that researchers have to declare a pro-life or pro-choice position, as these positions represent a bifurcation that fails to capture the complexities of a politics of abortion. The politics of abortion collapses the private into the public and vice versa. Complex and contradictory ideologies of gender, motherhood, sexuality, religion, demography, and understandings of personhood and agency criss-cross public debate and personal reactions. For example, in their comparison of France and the United States, Husting and King (2005: 447) argue that “discourses on abortion are grounded in politics of nationalism. In the United Kingdom, Hopkins *et al.* (1996) show how psychological understandings are mobilised for political gain in the abortion debate. These complexities are part and parcel of any research on abortion. Instead of ignoring them, researchers need to engage in careful reflection that situates themselves and their work in relation to these complexities and that takes cognisance of the fact that writings, actions, practices and research on abortion are already carriers of political undertones.

In terms of research with young women and abortion, there are a number of specific issues I wish to highlight here. Firstly, we need to understand that the way in which we theorise adolescence has implications for how we position young women in relation to the termination of pregnancy. Adolescence may be understood theoretically in many ways. It is not a self-evident and homogenous

category of human development. Instead, it is experienced and practised in multiple ways, depending on context, “culture”, socio-economic status, location and gender, and within each of these, in contradictory ways. Setting the default mode as a “transition” discourse is indeed problematic. Although some young people may experience their lives according to the broad tenets of “adolescence as transition”, there is also enormous contextual variation in what constitutes youth. We should understand that conceptualising “adolescence” as transition potentially conceals the normalised end-product, allows for particular power relations to be explained as an individual “adolescent’s” lack, and allows for regulation of the lives of young women.

Secondly, the language we use should be constantly inspected in terms of its political and ideological consequences. Talking of abortion as a “problem” or of the foetus as a “baby” pre-defines what we are studying in a particular way. While there is no such thing as neutral language, vigilance concerning the implications of deploying particular signifiers is called for.

Thirdly, acknowledgement of the fact that the works we cite are inevitably steeped in the politics of abortion is necessary. Making the position of these works explicit, as well as our own position, is part of the political reflection in which we should engage.

In terms of methodological carefulness, we need to take cognisance of the following. We should be vigilant about what conclusions we can justifiably reach based on our methodology. In particular, we must be careful not to imply that a certain experience, perception, or reaction is caused by a young woman’s age or, alternatively, due to the abortion, when no comparative age related or pregnancy outcome data is available to verify such claims. The corollary to this is that researchers interested in studying young women’s experiences of abortion should consider designing age-related or pregnancy outcome comparative research. Moreover, we need to be rigorous in our understanding of the implications of our sampling. For example, we need to recognise that a first trimester pregnancy is not necessarily equivalent to a second trimester one. We need to acknowledge that the conclusions we can reach are circumscribed by the socio-political location of our sample.

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## Appendix 1

De Lange and Geldenhuys (2001) interviewed nineteen teenagers undergoing a termination of pregnancy in the Eastern Cape. They used phenomenological interviews to collect the data but employed an ecosystemic perspective to analyse the experiences of these young women. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001), utilising some of the same data, discuss the experience of black teenagers who are undergoing an abortion. Using a purposive sample, Mpshe, Gmeiner and van Wyk (2002) conducted an explorative, descriptive study of the experiences of nine black teenagers who had terminated a pregnancy. From this study, Gmeiner, van Wyk and Mpshe (2002) derive guidelines for the advanced psychiatric nurse in providing supportive counselling for these kinds of young women. Mojapelo-Batka and Schoeman (2003) studied black teen-aged women's moral concerns and emotional reactions to the termination of their pregnancy. They conducted interviews with seven women one day to three months post their abortion. The aim of Poggenpoel & Myburgh's (2000) research was to explore the teenage "girl's" and her partner's experience of an abortion and to describe the developmental implications of abortion for educational psychologists. Individual, phenomenological interviews were conducted with a purposive sample.

Kok (1999) investigated the reaction of matriculants to abortion soon after the promulgation of the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act. A questionnaire, which tapped knowledge, moral-ethical understandings, understandings of social and heterosexual relations, and opinions on the government's handling of the abortion issue, was administered to just under a thousand pupils in Gauteng and Mpumalanga. Olivier and Bloem (2004) explored the views of teachers regarding abortion amongst adolescents. They conducted focus group discussions with a purposive sample of teachers and subjected their data to descriptive analysis. Olivier, Myburgh & Poggenpoel (2000) researched the views "adolescents" have on the termination of pregnancy during "adolescence". They conducted focus group discussions with a purposive sample of Grade 9 teenagers. Varga (2002) used focus group discussions, narrative workshops, role playing, a survey and interviews to explore the role of abortion in young people's lives, its acceptability, why and how likely it would be that a young person would choose abortion, and the commonly used methods of abortion.

## Endnotes

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2. 'Studies in Family Planning' and 'Education'.
3. '*South African Journal of Education*', '*Health SA Gesondheid*', '*Society in Transition*', and '*South African Journal of Psychology*'.
4. Geldenhuys and de Lange (2001), de Lange and Geldenhuys (2001), Olivier *et al.* (2000) and Olivier and Bloem (2004).
5. Translated from Afrikaans.
6. Cited in Koops & Zuckerman (2003: 346).
7. Published in 1904.
8. Translated from Afrikaans.
9. Translated from Afrikaans
10. Translated from Afrikaans.
11. Mpshe, Gmeiner & van Wyk (2002), Olivier & Bloem (2004), Olivier, Myburgh & Poggenpoel (2000), Poggenpoel & Myburgh (1998).
12. de Lange & Geldenhuys (2001), Geldenhuys & de Lange (2001), Kok (1999), Varga (2002).
13. Quantitative methods were used by Kok (1999) and for part of Varga's (2002) study.

# It was Rocky, Long, Winding and Twisted....

Karabo Mohlakoana

## Introduction

This piece works to explore my long and winding research journey in the area of gender and sexuality, a journey that has positioned me as both researcher and the researched. I argue that the research experiences of individuals matter and should, in fact, be part of what any researcher theorizes in writing up their work. Most text books on research methodologies portray the research process as linear or perhaps circular, offering neat steps for the would-be researcher to follow. They hardly ever inform the readers of the realities that sensitive and complex areas (such as sexuality) bring to the research process. Neither do the research reports, to which a new researcher may have access, hint of the tortuous nature of the process. Researchers who learn “doing research” predominantly from these texts find themselves lost and wondering if they are really in the world of research. With this piece, I reflect on some of the challenges I had to negotiate as a researcher, challenges about which I never read in methodology guidelines and with whose impact I have wrestled.

My research, towards a PhD, investigated the experiences of young women who became pregnant while at school. I was interested in finding out how their experiences were shaped and the effects they had on the young women’s educational trajectories. I wanted to investigate the way in which history had shaped the construction of womanhood, family, sexuality, motherhood and young women’s pregnancy in Lesotho, and locate the young women’s experiences within contemporary beliefs, perceptions and education policies on teenage pregnancy.

My research was qualitative, and I interviewed young women who were, or had been pregnant while still at school, their teachers and parents, some of their family members, and representatives from churches, the Ministry of Education and other bodies. In exploring my experience of becoming a researcher while listening to a multiplicity of voices, I cannot help but state

(cliché or not) that the telling and reliving of a story and an experience is a challenge. As I scratch my hair to try and think, some experiences of my own interactions with different individuals remain blurred while others are as sharp as though they happened yesterday. I was a researcher in the study and at the same time, I used my personal story as a pregnant teenager many years ago as part of the data. Additionally, as I carried out the study, my life did not stand still, and all the roles and responsibilities I undertook, which I try to fit snugly into my life remained active and interactive.

I could choose to begin from the point at which I actually began to identify myself as a “researcher in sexuality and gender”, but it is important to take note of the fact that my engagement with questions of sexuality started long before the research itself. Hence, questions that I faced as a researcher should probably be understood as questions about gender and sexuality I encountered as a girl, and a woman, and as a result the patterns in my narrative of “research” cannot be positioned simply as rooted in that phase of my life alone. Narrating my research thus involves rethinking my life, moving between and across different periods of time, and this kind of movement suggests that my past is tied quite closely both to the steps taken to conduct the study on sexuality, and to the way that research unfolded as a process.

### **Where Did I Come From?**

From as far back as I remember during my childhood in a village in Lesotho, issues around gender and sexuality had always stood out through the power of discourses in which I was told precisely what I could or could not do “because you are a girl”. My brothers’ “dos” and “don’ts” were very different from my own. As a girl in the family, I was continuously warned against engaging with any form of sexuality; I was taught how to sit properly which was always expressed as “like a girl”, I was warned against “playing” with boys because they were dangerous. My brothers however, were encouraged to make sexual advances towards girls without fear of being rebuked. The differences in the household were also obvious in the community in different ways. The female body I was born into was always a cause for social and family concern, a focus for total community control.

Given this environment, it is impossible to say that I chose to focus on gender and sexuality as a researcher (indeed, one could say the sexuality focus chose me). In the spaces I occupied when I began to think of myself as a

researcher – such as being a “*Mosotho* woman”, mother, Christian, wife and many others – sexuality was discussed in the context of morality: “do not”, “it is bad for you”, “good girls do not go near those areas”.

Being a *Mosotho* woman is a very loaded status, and her sexuality is constructed as one full of passivity and innocence (or, ignorance). Statements such as “*Mosali oa Mosotho ha a itsoare joalo, ha a robalake hohle*” (a *Mosotho* woman does not behave like that, she does not sleep around) are rife, and locate her as the epitome of sexual respectability. The discourse on respectability includes reference to her clothing; everything from a neckline to a skirt length is of concern: “*O tenne letolo ekare ke letekatse*” (she is putting on a short skirt, she must be a loose woman).

In the Christian space, in which I am fully identified as “one of the faithful”, constructions of a “good woman” are to be found all over the Holy Book and one of the most commonly invoked in my community is: “Thou shall not commit adultery”. As a wife to a miner, a migrant worker, travelling into South Africa for months at a stretch in the 1980’s, I was bombarded with injunctions about maintaining a sexless life because “my husband would have a fatal accident if I had sex with other men”. This was usually expressed by relatives and neighbours as “*Monna o tla oeloa ke tafole ‘maeneng koana*”. The warning came from family members, neighbours, strangers, teachers, priests and government through the mouths of senior officers.

Added to this mix of Christianity, superstition, and gendered community norms, was a state-designed discourse around HIV and AIDS, one which became increasingly omniscient and omnipresent as Lesotho moved into the 1990’s, under an epidemic of HIV-related illness and death. This “official” confirmation around the connection between “loose women” and death due to HIV and AIDS found fertile ground for the long-held Basotho belief that sexuality was a dangerous zone, one in which the control of women amounted to the hope of escape from the perils of disease, anarchy, and godlessness (Mapetla, N. and Tuoane-Nkhasi, M, 2003).

## How Did I Get Here Then?

In formal settings, my first encounter with issues of patriarchal control over women’s sexuality was when I began a professional career after completing a thesis at Masters Level in Science Education at the Reading University in the UK. I worked as an inspector of schools and one of my roles included visitations to schools where I dealt with management issues as well as subject

inspection in agricultural science. My interest got drawn to the way school in which principals dealt with issues around young women's pregnancy despite the fact that at the time, there was a strong state emphasis on the importance of human rights at all levels of national policy-making and implementation. The policy environment explicitly prohibited the expulsion of girls from schools, but principals continued to get rid of the pregnant girls by ill-treating them till they left school or expelled them. Even as I interacted with the unfairness of all that was happening, I did not code the analysis I was making of the injustice meted out to the young teenagers as primarily an injustice rooted in the politics of gender and sexuality. In part, this was because at that time I did not have access to frameworks about "gender and citizenship" or "sexual rights" which became powerful to me later (I was a scientist). It was also due to my concern with each school as an individual site, for inspection – where principals were mistreating pregnant girls, they struck me first as "unfair principals", rather than as patriarchal agents. While in the job as inspector, I also became active in environmental education and I became more exposed to issues of gender in the area in relation with distribution, use and control of resources. It was clear to me on a daily basis that gender was one of the routes through which access to land, sustainable livelihoods, and government support was being determined, and that women were consistently being overlooked. After spending about three years working with schools, I decided to apply to study for a PhD.

### **Those Weekend Seminars**

I was admitted to do my studies in Science Education. The degree was structured through sharing facilitated through bi-monthly weekend seminars. In the very first seminar I attended, students shared the research that they proposed to do. Lecturers also shared the kind of research work they were previously engaged in and their current research interests. Among the stories I was attracted to was a study that employed feminist methodology. The study investigated the career trajectories of female academics in South African universities. As the researcher shared her work, I felt relaxed and comfortable with the work she had done on women and higher education, and in retrospect I think there were three reasons for this. Firstly, I learned for the first time that I could do a PhD study of the kind that allowed autobiographical experience as data and took the researcher's positionality seriously. Secondly, in listening to this study, I became aware of a theorization of the connection between the

body, the politics of gender, and the systematicity with which people gendered as women encounter exclusion through their “bodily” experience. Thirdly, I recognized the value of research on “barriers” as a route to transforming educational institutions themselves. I decided there and then not to share my intended Science Education study since I knew I had changed my mind.

I went for consultations with the supervisor and shared the kind of study I wished to undertake: I wanted to study my own experience and the experiences of the dozens of teenage girls of whom I had heard (some of whom I had met), of being pregnant at school-going age, in Lesotho, an environment deeply hostile to them. The supervisor warned me of the dangers of undertaking such a study especially since I intended to use my story as part of the data. The hostility of the environment was not a “theoretical construction”. We spoke of the fact that for me to expose myself could also make participants vulnerable: in the eyes of those who knew of my interest in their stories, I could well be interpreted as a “bad influence”. Nonetheless, after many hours of conversation, we agreed that my conviction about the importance of my undertaking the study was critical – I may have been chosen in my own way. In retrospect, this sounds like sentimentality, and yet surely it is vital to respond to the urgencies placed in our minds as “key research questions”. At the very least, I felt that I was the best-placed individual to do the study as researcher and research instrument.

### **Setting the Stage: “Me” in the Research**

Feminist views of research base some of their assumptions around the researcher as a knower, and thus, the researchers’ opinion and experience forms part of the data (Stanley and Wise, 1990). This sounded like a strong platform when I began the work, acknowledging that I knew what it meant to be a pregnant teenager. Yet, when I opted to use my own autobiography, I found myself uncomfortably negotiating different spaces and locations at different times in the study. One example of this comes from my experiences of listening to participants, who were young, often scared, and pregnant as a researcher. Because of my status in the community as an adult, a Mosotho woman, a church leader, participants allowed me to “claim the power seat” as they shared their feelings of powerlessness. But I viewed them differently: they were the ones who had information and they owned the data that I was so eager to get from them. In addition, I “saw” myself (a memory of myself) in their stories, and found myself simultaneously proud of their courage (in

talking with me) and enraged by the conditions of discrimination they were facing. My connection to my own autobiography positioned me as “insider”, when in fact issues of age, perceived status, and education separated me powerfully from the young girls talking to me. How girls being listened to “saw” me became a continual area of tension for me. The relationship of interviewer/interviewee has been characterised by a sense of give and take (Beoku-Betts, 1994). There is an advantage to observations that power can be both a benefit and a drawback at the same time. As I communicated with the participants there was a time when I wished I could be less of “this” or “that”, in order for them to “take” the power (which of course, in turn, would mean re-empowering the young Karabo, who had endured so much impotence of her own).

When I began the field-work, I expected few teenagers to be willing to share their experiences. But when they learned I had been a pregnant teenager they unfolded and I ended up getting more participants than I had initially planned. However, parents who learned about the study and how I came to be involved in it had mixed feelings. Some parents thought I would assist them to discourage teenage pregnancy while others felt I was a bad influence who was set out to target their young daughters to become pregnant again.

I had to constantly reflect on the things I knew and how I came to know them and sometimes I struggled with my own value systems. For example, when participants spoke to me about how they “felt bad because they had disappointed their parents”, I wanted to know what they felt for themselves. This question troubles the line between “researcher” and “counselor”, especially as the idea that they *could* have feelings about themselves which were separable from what they had been told by parents or teachers was very difficult for most of them. They had accepted that they were guilty of the pregnancy and as a result deserved to be punished in all ways. This I found unbearably painful at times, evoking memories of my own internalized guilt, the journey I had travelled to discover that such guilt was unnecessary, and then, the exposure to the reality, through the participants’ pain – that despite the decades between us (decades which include Beijing and a host of other feminist commitments to change), the environment of conservative gender and sexuality norms had not shifted.

The discomfort brought about by my occupation of more than one space at the time (researcher, woman-who-had-experienced-teenage-pregnancy, Mosotho woman) was difficult (though perhaps typical) for a researcher

who worked between the public and the personal. However, although I had read about the value of the personal to the design of research processes in feminist research methodology texts, *living* this connection in practice was something on which I found very little guidance. Belonging to very diverse worlds was enriching in terms of epistemology, but deeply troublesome in terms of coming to a place of peace and acceptance in the face of my own past (constantly being re-evoked, spoken about, and thought through as I listened to the participants).

My location within the research was also complicated by the need to place my work into the “literature review”, so important to academic work. Because I dealt with a topic that was predominated by medicalised views (occupying the same space as homosexuality, or infertility – a deviance) teenage pregnancy in African contexts (where not portrayed as sinful) was largely written about in terms of risk to the physical body. My review of the literature found that while worldwide, the subject of teenage pregnancy has been widely researched, the overwhelming paradigms involved concern medical and social “deviance” frameworks. Young girls become pregnant because of ignorance about reproductive and sexual health and/or because of social failure to address poverty, alcoholism, or poor schooling. Although I found material on teenage pregnancy in South Africa and Botswana (most of which drew from the two frameworks above), there was no research into what happened to pregnant girls in Lesotho schools. More significantly, school-based research by the teachers and pregnant girls was unheard of and the little available research by researchers who were not schools-based, was not relevant to experiences within the schools. Research from Lesotho was from commissioned studies by the Ministry of Health. This meant that the studies were dominated by biomedical research, while international studies were working at levels that were too sophisticated to be useful for my context, where what I needed was “basic” – knowledge of the experiences of pregnant girls themselves. I thus found myself positioned as simultaneously “behind the times” as a researcher working at the very beginning of a set of questions about teenage pregnancy in Lesotho, while others were writing about sophisticated questions of sexual and reproductive health and radical (even dangerous) idea with reference to my own context. I found this contradictory space epistemologically destabilizing, making me unsure whether I was a radical subversive at a doctoral level of research, or an old-fashioned empirical “data-gatherer”, working at the edges of an out-moded social anthropology.

## On-going Challenges

At a personal level, despite my eagerness to conduct the research, I was scared. What I was about to tell the world through the study would not only affect me as my family and friends were a part of me and I had to consider their feelings. Thinking about my friends and family reading my work made the writing process complicated. Discussions with the family members and a few other people who would remember that more than twenty years ago, I had a baby out of wedlock were not quite the same as a book that would be on the different shelves of academics, or university libraries. I discussed the issue with some family members, in ways that alleviated my fears, but realized that family members of my research participants were also crucial. Given the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality are intimately constructed through close relationships, one individual's "sexual" experience implicates and influences the experiences of others, and no research on gendered sexualities can afford to ignore this.

As I shared my intended study with colleagues and friends, people who were close to me said "*Ke haeba ene e se uena*", meaning "it could not have been you if you could not do a study about teenage pregnancy". What the statement said to me was that it was typical of me to want to get involved in issues that others may be uncomfortable tackling. Sometimes I understood the comments as "labelling" me in a troubling way (although it was good that they saw me as different to an extent that I could be allowed certain special treatment). This "difference" was in itself a revelation to me. Before initiating my PhD work, I never knew that difference was an attribute that could be celebrated. I grew up in a world where conformity earned people status, no matter how uncomfortable one was within the space into which I had been crammed as a "woman" in Lesotho.

I also found myself criticised by peers and colleagues who felt I should have "looked at something else because pregnant teenagers were nothing and not worth the trouble, they were just promiscuous little things that are not that important". This was said to me by people who did not know that I had been "one of those promiscuous little things", and their condemnation was both infuriating and positioned me awkwardly: to reveal my own story to them as a response to their commentary would not have served my research interests well; to be silent was to rehearse the environment faced by my young participants. Some peer researchers believed that the motive behind the study must be economic – some donor paid me to do it. In conversations with

peers and professors, the “loss to the science world” was always emphasised. This in particular positioned me within a nexus of epistemological pain I still find hard to accept: that the experience of pregnant girls is not “worthy” of scientific study speaks volumes for the length of the road we still have to travel as feminists to redefine the parameters of “science”.

The decision to use my own experiences as a major part of the data, for a topic that seemed so sensitive at a cultural level, also challenged me. Narrating what had happened to me in the context of the study went far deeper than anything I had shared with friends or family before. As I wrote, I struggled with how much narration of the sexual experiences was sufficient for the study. When I chose to leave out certain parts of the story, I was plagued by whether I still felt and carried the shame that I was taught was appropriate for pregnant teenagers. For instance, I realised that the story I told very skilfully side-tracked issues around desire, pleasure and arousal.

How pregnancy out of marriage continues to be viewed in Lesotho stems from religious teachings and interpretations. My church upbringing, degrading my fertile young body as “impure” surfaced continually as I tried to adhere to my chosen frameworks of feminist appreciation for my right to choose, sexual choice, reproductive health, and pride in my body, as an individual woman (regardless of age) I found, as I wrote my story for the study, that I was asking questions about the institutions in which I was brought up and taught never to interrogate authority, and often I found the idea that I was doing this to be unnerving. The participants also constantly referred to the wrong they had done to God and they were not ready to interrogate some of the issues any further, and in their reluctance and fear, I could hear my own anxieties at the back of my heart. The research process put me into an intensive negotiation with the meaning of God, my church, and my love for faith in a way that the actual experience of surviving teenage pregnancy and a lonely and abusive marriage had never done. The demand of the research to explore meanings, to look at the construction of values and principles, now and then, put me at the coalface of much more demanding questions than those raised by school principals’ intransigence or teenage girls’ hopes for their future.

### **Local Costs of Doing Research**

During my study period, I was a single mother and had three children and one grandchild. My divorce had just gone through and I was a mess. I had to leave my children for days and go to university. I worried constantly about whether

I had made the right decision to choose the research journey and yet, I knew in my heart that at the end all sacrifices would be worthwhile. Sometimes, however, I looked at the children and I wondered if they would understand and if they would not hold the absences, the preoccupations, and the fact that my attention was on my research against me – I told myself that it was the benefit for us all. I also hoped that with my doctorate would lead to a better job which would lessen the financial constraints on us as a family. Studying sexuality and gender, especially in Lesotho where national emphasis is on the need for research which will address economic issues, was and is still seen as a waste of time and money

As an adult and part time scholar, I had too many roles to play in my home and work situation. Due to my focus on research, the amount of time I spent with the people who were close to me diminished. Consequently, relationships became strained. People expected me to continue behaving exactly as I had been doing before I embarked upon my research journey, but my life and thoughts were changing due to my research encounters and the intensive writing and contemplation where I was enclosed with my work. The dilemmas and triumphs of these spaces could not be easily spelled out for all to understand. I would sit down to have a drink with friends and would very quickly remember that I had to go and search out some information or type out some detail. The pressure of the demand to “be the researcher” would overwhelm me and I often had to excuse myself, which hurt some of my friends. I also got hurt because when I needed assistance, it was not forthcoming since many of the people around me felt inadequate in terms of providing support to a “researcher”, or felt I was theorising at a level that was “too advanced” for them. For some of my closest friends though, the reluctance to take me seriously emanated from their discomfort with the focus of my study. I also have to acknowledge that my children felt the impact of the study in terms of the demand to help out physically with photocopying and to stay up late just to be with me and give me support when I needed it. To this day, they are clear that they are not very keen on doctoral study after they saw me labour without much rest.

I have a strong belief that these intimate costs of the research were due to the gendered space of being a woman. I was living within fixed gender roles that could only increase as my status as a mother, and a community member, grew. My identity as an emerging researcher did nothing to shift the expectations which came with these roles, which were also gendered

(a man's role as a father may significantly decrease in certain ways if he is also a graduate researcher). In fact the study made my feminine burden even heavier. No matter how late I worked, I was still responsible for the family meals, laundry and caring for the sick. I still had to help with home work and listen to how the kids had been bullied in the play ground in school. I remained my mother's first born girl and still had to rush home to my village to take her to her medical check ups.

Then there were issues around my workplace which did not consider my studying as part of the institution. My supervisor had clearly indicated that the institution did not consider a doctorate as a requirement for its workers. My desire to study, as a working woman, was anomalous, a burden I had put on myself. What this meant was working during stolen time working during breaks when I should have been resting from a very tedious schedule. Staying in the office till very late had become the order of the day as well as working on weekends. All my leave was spent on my studies as I had to take days off to attend the weekend seminars and to write the final thesis. As I write, I wonder how I coped with all the stress of the time. Coping is a difficult word to use. I just dragged myself along. I did have excellent colleagues with whom I nearly formed a tears club – sometimes we just sat and cried while we prayed to God to assist us. Sometimes I was just too tired to do anything else. The issues of fatigue, lack of solidarity, and the implacability of reproductive labour are rarely discussed within feminist research methodologies. Nevertheless, learning how to negotiate with these became vital “research” skills.

## **Ethical Considerations**

In the context of sexuality and gender, the need to consider the ethics of what I wanted to undertake was serious, especially since I planned to discuss parts of individuals' lives that were considered to be private, shameful and therefore taboo. I found myself in a dilemma about how to make ethical decisions on how I could gather and collate the women's voices. I knew I had to learn to listen in a new manner, a way which would enable me to narrate what they said and present it in an acceptable academic manner.

However, the issue of what aspects of the study to share and which to retain as “notes for myself” became critical. Some parents wanted to know details of the meetings I had with their children. They even went further and pestered the participants, asking them to repeat the interview session, when I refused to share the contents of the participants' stories with them.

In addition, concealing the identities of participants was challenging. Although I used pseudonyms for places and participants, some readers who later read my research remarked that a particular story I had analysed in my work was similar to a certain individual's story. The idea of confidentiality in a closed, vigilant, deeply interactive community was very difficult. I was observed holding meetings with individuals and groups, and my research focus generated interest, scepticism, and suspicion.

Feminist research ethics stress (like other guidelines on research ethics) that interviewees' safety must not be compromised by the researcher. In my case, the mere fact that I was interested in their experiences as young, unwed, pregnant teenagers threatened to highlight their stigmatized status. There was very little I could do to shift this stigmatization simply by engaging with them openly as "research participants"; and this also raised my anxieties around ethics. Feminist research principles stress the need to transform oppressive conditions through the research process wherever possible. This is a noble but perhaps naïve goal. My research process could not – in any meaningful way – transform the environment of hostility which my participants endured during their pregnancies.

### **Hardest Patches on the Path**

It is very difficult to express in writing what I regard as rough patches in the research journey. The whole journey was for me a trial. When I look back, I embarked upon the study with very little information through which to make concrete decisions about how to live the research process. I did not consult people who had gone through their own doctoral studies and I guess at the end of my study, I was horrified by the cruelty I had experienced from the work itself: the implacability of the expectations that I continue to work as "mother", and "community member" even as I took on the task of "researcher"; the demands of transforming the participants' stories of shame, guilt, distress, and rejection into "data"; the loneliness of the late-night writing; the fatigue. For me it was a lonely route with very little support.

The most difficult part was the final writing. At the time, I was tired. I do not remember having had to write that much in my life. The challenge was with the quantity and quality of writing in the final document. I asked for support, and my location within material concerning sexuality and gender meant that most colleagues felt that I was working with "unfamiliar frameworks". The period of writing up was filled with sleepless nights and

many moments of uncertainty. This is also an area which is largely untheorized by feminist research methodologies, although it is one in which key concerns about femininity, authority, and subjectivity intersect.

I believe there is much to be explored by those of us creating knowledge, at doctoral levels, within African contexts, about the late-night wrestles with weak bibliographies, rich and heart-searing data, and the funding-fuelled pressure of writing within doctoral conventions which seem unmotivated by anything rooted within our own familiarities with text (no book, or research article, is written like a PhD dissertation – the format for this is unique).

### **Implementation “Researcher” versus “Activism”**

As I was writing, uncovering more and more material on the issues that had originally spurred me to work on teenage pregnancies in Lesotho (issues of unmitigated injustice), my supervisor stressed that I should complete my research and get involved in activism “later”. She said that I was “not yet an activist” and warned me to write in a manner which was acceptable to research conventions, moving away from assertions about injustice and concentrating on the representation of the girls’ experiences as diverse and contextually located. I must have followed her advice because I graduated.

Yet, there is a part of me that she did not know. Before I learned about feminist research, I was already an activist though I did not label myself as such. In fact, throughout the research process, I strongly believed that activism and research went hand in hand and that line of thinking made it very difficult for me to restrict myself to the confines of research away from activism. Like other authors such as Devault (1996) who believe that activism and research are intertwined, I found myself drawn into diverse spheres of activism while undertaking the research. Without identifying myself as activist, I had made moves to initiate policy change around the treatment of pregnant school girls, I had set up educational programmes around sexual and reproductive health, I had counselled teachers, parents, and community leaders, and had become visible as a community figure with both facts and opinions on gender, sexuality, and justice at my fingertips. I did this without announcing myself as an advocate, and this allowed me to make certain advances, although access to school cultures and management was difficult.

As I have moved beyond ownership of a PhD into efforts to make more changes in the environment faced by pregnant schoolgirls, the issue remains trivialized and my battles as an activist remain unalleviated by my possession

of the highest possible degree awarded by a university. This indeed raises certain questions for me about feminism and research – when I wanted to implement some of the recommendations within the research, I met with the same lack of seriousness that I had encountered when I conducted the study. There is an assumption in the literature on feminist research methodology that excellent research *will* open obstinate doors around policy and practice. I have not found this to be the case, which raises concerns for me about the conviction with which I spoke to my participants, that telling me about their experiences could be important to shifting the landscape of gendered prejudice around them.

Ironically, I have found that in Lesotho where the church plays a major role in socialization of individuals, it is difficult for one to operate outside it. The space I occupy within the church is the safest for me to initiate change as an activist. The placement of discussions about sexuality and gender in the church context results in protection and advancement of ideas, even where “morality” continues to serve as a basis for judgement. As a PhD graduate, my research ideas remain trivialized within university and educational spaces, but as a church member, people can approach me without fear and I am able to share with them the very ideas I believe in. This is a study in itself – where and how “research and activism” can coincide may be worth deep exploration. Yet, this exploration portrays me once again as “different” and writing about the alienation and difficulties I experienced as a researcher in sexualities and gender, in a contextually stigmatized area, has reminded me of how hard it is to take oneself as the “centre” of feminist reflexivity.

In this article, I have reflected on some of my feelings of loneliness and tiredness and I have shared some of the struggles as struggles of research methodology. I do this with the intention to create support for other researchers in the area of sexuality. The completed dissertation largely forbids expression of the “personal” implications of working within innovative, sensitive, and autobiographically complex zones, but the future of strong feminist research in sexualities and gender in our contexts demands that we begin to tell the stories of the “personal” where “the personal” means not simply experiences “outside” the academy, but the experiences of *living the academic*.

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# *Vela Bambhentsele*<sup>1</sup>: Intimacies and Complexities in Researching Within Black Lesbian Groups in Johannesburg

Zethu Matebeni

## Introduction

Gay and lesbian people have been on the social, legal and political agenda for some time. Post-apartheid South Africa has boldly included gay and lesbian rights in the transition to democracy. Most recently, same-sex marriages have been legalised even though widely challenged. While there is much talk about gay and lesbian rights, for many lesbian women these rights are merely paper rights as women struggle to cope and live with the challenges of a society with rampant inequalities. Furthermore, gay and lesbian people continue to face resistance from a society entrenched with patriarchy and notions of homosexuality as “unAfrican”.

Since the 1930s, sex and sexuality in South Africa, although to varying degrees and largely focusing on men’s experiences, have been widely speculated on and have been an important register of social hierarchy and change (Delius and Glaser, 2002). Under apartheid, public and political scrutiny of sex and sexuality was intensified through legislature, policing and censorship, as argued by Posel (2004). Also in the last two decades, sexuality has gained momentum in the public sphere due to the HIV and AIDS epidemic which has forced public discussions on sex and sexuality. The 1996 Constitution and the Bill of Rights have also placed sexual practices, identity, and freedom of expression as protected rights accessible to all citizens. Despite some of these advances, critical work on lesbians or women’s same-sex relationships has been minimal in the scholarship in South Africa.

Much work that is written about black lesbians often positions us as victims of violence, hate crimes or relates our existence to that of gay men. My interest was to tap into a terrain that is rarely focused on, the terrain that has contributed to our invisibility and silence as black lesbian women, disregarding our lives and our experiences. Furthermore, in much of the

scholarship, there is a tendency for female same-sex relationships to get desexualized (see Potgieter, 1997). This happens when attention is not paid to the desire and erotic sexual relationships between women and the focus is on lesbian feminism, which sometimes emphasizes political positions and non-sexual relations between women, or when women's same-sex sexualities are viewed with a heterosexual gaze.

I embarked on a study to investigate the lives of black lesbian women in Gauteng. Throughout the study, I had to negotiate my own position as my identities and sexuality continue to be influenced by the people who inform my research. I am interested in what it means to be engaged in doing research in areas that have been considered taboo, unresearched or working with those who have been represented in ways that limit their agency.

The term *lesbian* is used with caution. Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1996:192) argue that “the term lesbian freezes human sexuality into two dichotomous fixed practices – heterosexual and lesbian. These do not reflect historical reality”. Use of such a term implies that some identities are fixed throughout their lives, which is not the case. One preferred reference is to “women in same-sex relationships” but this has implications for who gets recruited. I was looking for women who had been or were in relationships with other women. I did not use terms such as lesbian, bisexual, *stabane*, and others (although these did come up during interviews).

## Researching from the Inside

First I drew from Kirin Narayan's work in problematising the notion of “insider”. Narayan notes that some scholars have questioned the authenticity of an “insider”. “Insiders” or what she terms “native” researchers and anthropologists are those who are believed to write about “their own culture from a position of intimate affinity” (1993:671). She argues against the insider/outside dichotomy as factors such as “race, class, education, sexual orientation, gender or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status”. Narayan further argues for the “enactment of hybridity” in our texts, advocating for “writing that depicts authors as minimally bicultural” in terms of belonging simultaneously to the world of engaged scholarship and the world of everyday life.

Prior to starting the research I was aware of some of the challenges I would face. While my identity as a lesbian was an asset in terms of gaining access, I had to be cautious of the implications this might have on my

academic career as my study could be dismissed on the basis of writing “for my own group” and my work “tainted by personal concerns”. In many of my meetings with colleagues and supervisors, I was asked about how I would maintain distance from the participants. At the same time, my ability to go deeper into the lives of the participants, to be trusted and obtain sensitive information which revealed new and exciting worlds to my colleagues, proved to be an asset.

Much has been written by anthropologists (and to some extent sociologists) about researching within lesbian communities and on the dynamics that such research brings to the researcher and the informants. The main concern of many anthropologists is the distance between fieldworker/researcher and informant. Such distance, as Evelyn Blackwood (1995: 55) argues, is accompanied by a sense of loneliness and alienation that fieldworkers experience, and is perpetuated by the notion that the researcher is the knower and the informants the known. Similarly, Jill Dubisch (1995) explores relationships in the field between informants and herself as researcher. Such relationships can affect and challenge one’s thinking about oneself, one’s identities, accounts of one’s own sexuality and ideas about how one relates to others. Relationships in the field bring into play hierarchies of knowledge and power which are not necessarily discussed in the field. This becomes difficult as the researcher tries to maintain her or his true identity beyond being just a researcher.

I felt the hierarchies of knowledge and power strongly during the course of my “fieldwork”. Participants asked me questions about issues pertaining to lesbian lives, about same-sex marriage, sexual styles, gender identity or how to get a new lover. The assumption was that I was clearly the more informed one, or had wider contacts and networks. In addition, while I shared a number of similarities with many of the participants, I also had to be aware of the ambiguities of ethnicity, gender identity and power in the “field”. While issues of language and translation, (which Tina Sideris (1986) foregrounds as usually problematic) were usually easily negotiated as the cultural gap between myself and the participant was minimal, with one participant there was a communication breakdown as I could not fully follow her street lingo and her fluent use of *tsotsi taal*. In another interview, I had to engage with my own identity as the participant attempted to figure out who I was in her own understanding of “lesbian” and she worked towards a self-construction in relation to me:

A: What are you exactly? [pause] I don't know what you are. I can't say you're butch or femme.

**Int: ...What is it...?**

A: It's clothing; it's hair...Um – [hesitating], Okay, you're butch!

**Int: Butch because of?**

A: Because of the way you dress, I suppose. I don't know, I don't know – it's the way you dress, I think. It's hard to just put a label on something and then you have to justify it somehow. What if that label is not even right? So, ja – I don't know what you are.

(interview with *Ayanda*)

The importance of being a lesbian and known was that I could easily find informants who moved in social circles that overlapped with mine. However, I had to manage the tension between being a friend and a researcher at the same time. Also, being an “insider”, as Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1996) experienced, meant that the researcher knew some of the subtleties of lesbian “culture”. Whether these then became foregrounded, and explored, in the interview could be tricky. On the one hand, exploring shared “cultural meanings” could be illuminating; on the other, the knowledge that I was asking questions about “cultural meanings” for research purposes raised questions about what I was prepared to share with an “outside” audience.

Furthermore, studying populations close to one's identity can give one access to people and open possibilities for intimate relationships of different kinds (Esther Newtown, 1996: 220). While I did not explore any romantic liaisons with participants, it became difficult to evade “suitors”, with whom I needed to stay in contact as they were interviewees. I had to be cautious about possible sexual attraction to participants and about the sexual suggestions directed at me during an interview or during ethnography. My “insider” status also created an emotional dynamic. Esther Newton argues that there could be emotional blocks to hearing interviewees' experiences, blocks that are caused by our shared social oppression as lesbians, and which could limit one's clear thoughts about a particular topic (1996:184). Issues around sexual violence, hate crimes as well as violence within lesbian relationships became difficult to engage with as I struggled to remove myself from the participant's experience in order to truly listen to her.

The position of power I held as researcher on the inside became much clearer as “fieldwork” progressed. This position suggested the notion of “*Vela Bambhentsele*”. I became known as the person who asked intimate details

of people's lives and recorded people's stories, which also meant that people volunteered to be participants. I continued to listen to many life histories even though I knew that I would not include them in the study. I had a number of requests from participants to set up appointments to interview them. When I made follow-ups with one potential participant who requested to be interviewed, I found out that she was under the impression that we were going on a date. I was surprised by her suggestions to meet at a fancy restaurant in Sandton, on a Friday night. I decided not to pursue the interview, not only because my budget could not cater for the restaurants of her choice, but also because I was very uncomfortable as I had been told that she had a lover who was jealous and knew how to put up a good fight.

Throughout the research I had to remind myself of the complex implications of the intimate nature of my interviews and of the relationships that were formed between myself and the participants. For all the participants, it was the first time they had talked openly and fully about their lives and shared intimate details of their full life history and sexual life. Close friends also became a problem as they could not understand why I chose not to interview them for the research and I had to negotiate different ways of engaging with friends about the research.

I had anticipated encountering ethical problems with regards to consent, confidentiality and anonymity. These were raised during the ethical clearance process for my research. In the "field", however, these were played out differently. While consent forms were distributed to participants weeks before the actual interview, I found that because participants knew me, they explained that they did not need to sign a consent form. They felt that there was already a level of trust in place and because I was part of their circles, I would do justice to how I used their information and represented them.

This was a serious concern for me as I had to engage with participants not only as a researcher, but as an activist as well. In these situations I had to be very direct about what consent meant; how our stories and lives have been recorded by others and how our images have been presented. Such representation has at many times occurred without our full knowledge and consent and we are sometimes not aware of what happens to these stories and images and how we are represented. During this research I continue to encounter people who want to "bare it all" (inside or outside my own circles), thus giving me unrestricted access to their lives and to the "field". This did not always feel comfortable.

Maintaining close ties with participants also meant that they were aware that I could “verify” their stories and get to know more details of their lives, beyond the frame of the research. This illustrates an unclear boundary of being in the “field” and out of the “field”. In my experience, my life is the “field” and I continue my struggles to get out of the “field”. For some researchers who have researched lesbian or same-sex relationships as insiders, the “field” was less difficult to negotiate as the researcher’s study would come to an end or they would literally leave the area where they did research or end a relationship they had with an informant<sup>2</sup>. For me, this was not the case.

### **The Activist Inside**

The next thoughts are an attempt to engage with the notion of researcher/activist binary. Much of my research has existed across what are termed binaries: insider/outsider; participant/participant observer; researcher/friend and researcher/activist. These binaries are complex, layered and interlinked. Thus they are not just binaries, but linkages. Here, I want to explore some thoughts on the linkage: researcher/activist. I became conscious of this linkage when an academic colleague suggested I halt my involvement in an organisation as it would interfere with the research. For a number of other reasons, I took heed of the advice and left the organisation (although I became part of another one). However, I struggled with this and it was difficult to explain to academic colleagues that activism was not limited to involvement in an organisation.

Even when I ceased to work within an organization as an “activist”, limited to participating in events, marches, protests and supporting friends, I would still be seen as one. This linkage presents various complexities. Similar to Kennedy and Davis (1996) who wrote an ethnohistory of a lesbian community of which they were part, I have to engage with issues of hierarchy, reflexivity and dialogue. I have to constantly consider who I am writing for and for what, as well as reflect on the implications of what I write. As an “insider” and activist who has close ties with the subject of the research, I will be able to represent the voices and perspectives of the informants. However, I also feel it a priority to give the research back to the participants who have informed the research (so far I have done this by returning the transcripts as well as audio recordings of the interviews to the participants) as well as to various lesbian groups.

However, as Kennedy and Davis show, this is not easy as the researcher/s constantly have to negotiate the responsibility they have to the lesbian

communities represented in their research. There is a battle with power in matters of interpretation, which are at the core of the research hierarchy. Ellen Lewin and William Leap (1996:7) raise concerns about how an insider researcher/activist puts oneself in the ethnographic picture. They argue for the need to be more explicit about one's motives, expectations and personal history; and discuss how this affects the way "truth" is told, especially concerning questions of loyalty to "their people" (p19).

Overall, I have found that the work of doing research within one's group offers various opportunities, but at the same time, can be very complex and challenging. While the researcher may find such research an opportunity to learn about herself/himself, the dynamics in the "field" may raise many unexpected complexities requiring serious negotiations of power and position. So far, I continue to engage with the complexities. However, there are days when the tension of the binaries threatens integrity, patience and the belief that knowledge creation can transform the injustices in our lives.

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## Endnotes

1. This is a Xhosa phrase with a literal meaning “appear /approach and they will open their legs for you.” It is also a clan name for Dalibhunga, Madiba, Yem-yem, Sophitsho, Ngqolomsila (the people who were born when the sun appeared).
2. For example see works by Gloria Wekker (2006), Kennedy and Davis (1996)m, Esther Newton (1996), Evelyn Blackwood (1995).

# This Little Rage of Poetry<sup>1</sup> / Researching Gender and Sexuality

Danai S Mupotsa with Lennon Mhishi<sup>2</sup>

“Researching gender and sexuality” has come to represent the thing I do, my career prospects and the dream I have had for near a decade. Yet, I begin my doctoral studies with a sort of ambivalence: ambivalence best characterised by deep rage and deep resignation. This standpoint offers some thoughts about how I got here, how to strategize “in here”.

Many of my peers (well, now former peers) at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town – the mostly women with whom I studied my honours and master’s degrees – were bemused by my naïve love of everything that was academic. I was – I am – I *was* completely enamoured with all intellectual exercises, wanting to take all the passion of my feminist politics into serious scholarly practice. Although deeply flawed and patriarchal, I had viewed this place, the university, as the site best suited for the articulation of my freedom, the site where I could best express my rage and the site through which I would make my largest contribution towards a better world.

To say this view has changed may be incorrect. I still bear some resemblance to my old self; that is, I do intend to complete my PhD and pursue the academic dream – although these days this dream flutters through my imagination at sleep time more often in the form of a nightmare. What has changed is that I no longer know why I want to inhabit academic locations. So, in this exercise of writing a standpoint piece (to be read by my peers, feminist intellectuals) instead calling myself a name I have come to dislike – a “feminist researcher”<sup>3</sup> – I attempt to articulate an unnameable rage within.

As a young feminist researcher now engaged in PhD level work in sexualities, my previous (and some new) mentors<sup>4</sup> have rightly taught me to consider the intellectual, ethical and methodological consequences to knowledge production in all spaces, and particularly within academic spaces. While trying to hold myself accountable to a feminist ethics of this kind,

I have found that as a PhD researcher, I continue to be positioned outside of what is “real” or “serious” knowledge by peers, faculty, and institutional dynamics around my status as a young political philosopher and writer. My current professional job description is synonymous with “apprentice-thinker”. However, like many of my peers I am attempting to do work that takes seriously the private worlds of men and women – of masculinities, femininities and sexuality – and of power.

I recently met a young man named Lennon, a young Zimbabwean researcher, interested in questions of gender, sexuality and power, like myself. Our conversations have lifted me from the sense of isolation that I have allowed myself to indulge in for a number of months. I wish to share parts of our conversations on being young Zimbabwean scholars who want to do work on our nation, citizenship and sexuality. These ground my comments on rage, on dilemmas of ethics and intellectual location and also – perhaps – explain why I remain engaged as an African feminist researcher in discourses on the body as a space committed to transforming positivist positions, legacies, and categorization.

### **Researching Sexuality in Zimbabwe, as “Zimbabwean”?**

Curious about this man who talked “sex” and “gender” language, I asked Lennon to elaborate on the discussions concerning “sex” and “gender” at the University of Zimbabwe. To be honest, I was compelled to do so because while he exhibited an interest in power, sexualities and gender, he described his research interests in sociological terms as a “phenomenological study of the perceptions of male circumcision and HIV in contemporary Zimbabwe”. I was intrigued when he responded that “inquiry into the realm of sexuality in Zimbabwe has been continuously riddled by the tensions surrounding discussing issues that have been “culturally” constructed as taboo and “obscene”, with values and norms that militate against open discussion on issues of sexuality, the social construction of masculinities and femininities.” I was aware of this.

Lennon continued:

“The problematic, but largely unproblematized hegemonic discourse on culture has meant that research on sexuality is faced with numerous hurdles, and consequently may not achieve desired or meaningful impacts, in terms of the transformation of the androcentric and phallogocentric deployment of sexuality tied to the tentacles of patriarchy.

"As a young researcher at the University of Zimbabwe, the experiences of conversations and academic work on issues of gender and sexuality, and the attendant research into the area manifest "culturally" embedded notions of sexual propriety and sexual difference amongst male and female students. In the process of tutoring sexuality in social theory, insightful observations resulted from discussions of the dominant cultural definitions of male and female sexuality. Female students seemed uncomfortable discussing commodified female sexuality and transactional heterosexual encounters, since women have been taught to play ignorant and be the pure and innocent Virgin Marys despite the experiences they might have had. Male students were eager to bring their ideas to the fore, befitting the culturally sanctioned assertive and aggressive male, as they discussed their sexual experiences and derived similarities between the "commodification of sex and sexification of commodities" in Dakar to Harare<sup>5</sup>. It was as if for the males openly talking about both their and the female students' perceived sexual activity was scoring huge, making the girls shy and presenting themselves, as men, as having more "experience" and knowledge of issues of sexuality."

For me, this was not new, but comforting, having recently submitted a doctoral proposal where I had outlined intellectual intentions to research engagement with sexualities and gender as driven by similar observations, and to which I had on occasion, received sceptical feedback. While Lennon had found himself confronted with these discussions initially in an academic space, I had been confronted with hostility to my academic interests as those were incompatible with the femininity I was "raised" to perform.

Growing up in Zimbabwe, the contentious issues surrounding being a woman, dressing for and occupying public space, maintaining "respectability" and social reproduction became fairly clear to me as I was often policed and controlled into the appropriate modes of conduct for a young woman. The constant (and consistent) reminders of appropriate management strategies of and for women's bodies and sexuality, as I experienced them in Harare, drew me to consider the historical underpinnings of what my peers described to me as "our culture". Interrogating this national culture, it became clear that at the crux of constructs of "tradition" and "modernity" in these discussions were women's bodies: the success or failure of the project of "national culture" (if we are to call it that) appears to be placed at the national family's ability to manage and control the mobility and sexuality of women's bodies, be it

through mothers, fathers and brothers, or on the streets of Harare through the police force. Integral to that control are the subjects we, as respectable women, speak about and under what conditions.

When you are young, female and black, and you tell colleagues that you are interested in studying sexuality, and it does not appear to be a project aimed at “preventing the youth from contacting HIV”, or something otherwise intervention related, eye brows are raised. Critiques concerning frivolity, self-indulgence, and irrelevance are offered. Intellectual respectability would be restored were one to research public policy and/or development connections, and these suggestions too are offered.

However, these conventionally patriarchal positions on sexuality studies are perhaps not the most infuriating. There are also “liberal” lenses, where a young Zimbabwean woman’s intellectual interest in sexualities becomes read as a form of liberation from a former victimhood under atrocious African traditionalism – another version of restored respectability. Restored of course, until you tell them that you are traditionally married and pregnant – and all hopes from saving you from African patriarchy are diminished – respectability gone, again.

And finally, there are those who merely do not understand. Just as the act of wearing a skirt an inch short, walking down the street of the city centre after 5pm, or looking a man straight in his eye can result in your fallen status (you prostitute!), to speak of sexual matters in any way is dirty, dangerous, unrespectable and threatening.

I imagine that all this may also influence Lennon’s silent women undergraduates in tutorials. I imagine there must be some agency in being a young man, speaking of such matters. I say as much.

Lennon responds:

“My intense interest in gender and sexuality emerged again in a Masters class where I earned the name Foucault from my friends, who would jokingly describe me as mad or crazy about studying sexuality, despite that I wasn’t “doing it” as much anyway. This endeavour to understand how sexuality is socially constructed, defined and deployed has been viewed as a wild goose chase, chasing after the wind because this is an area that few want to lend a critical eye to. Even the students I discussed with would end up thinking the aim was to discuss some of them, or shame them, as the issues under scrutiny became too sensitive and were probably hitting closer to home. My friends would constantly ask, “What is so

interesting about studying how or why people have sex, or why they feel or act feminine or masculine?”

For Lennon, issues around funding and supervision too impacted on his quest to study sexuality. Initially interested in the “small house”, his final proposal focuses on “male circumcision” and the associated bio-medical discourse in the field of HIV/AIDS. We speak often about this and time and again when the subject arises, one finds him *enraged*, again at the anthropologic enquiry into the sexual mind of the African man: research designed with interventions in mind – the top-down “African solutions” platform. Lennon says:

“I chose a dissertation topic on the phenomenon of the “small house” in Zimbabwe: the transactional extramarital heterosexual relationship in which married men maintain their wives and families, the “big houses” but have other women who are the small houses. Initially, I had decided to abandon sexuality because of family considerations. What would my mother, father, brother say if they discovered that I am interested in studying sexuality? Can I discuss this with them if they asked me what my research area is? Thank God my parents, even after I had taken up a new topic on male circumcision, were supportive and did not pathologize my interest as others sought to do. I am not surprised that some would choose topics they think are socially acceptable, and would not “shame” their friends and family.”

The politics of funding and supervision aside, Lennon’s work faced other brick walls: access and credibility. Rich and powerful men and their “big house” wives are unlikely to publically “out” (that is, to a young academic researcher) their affairs, at the expense of their well *earned* respectability. Similarly, “small house” wives may be in neither the social or political position to risk “outing” their relationship and having it subsequently end. Furthermore, the validity of the claims made by younger and relatively disempowered women would most certainly come into question:

“Such research did not seem to be problematic only in the sense of attempting to study an area that people are eager to shunt to the background, their sexuality, but the rather more overarching one of power, both at the micro and macro level. It might not be surprising that the very same figures who are vocal in the political construction of African nationhood and identity are the very protagonists in these sexual power plays which seek to perpetuate the subaltern position of one sex, and prop up the gerontocratic, phallus centred expression of sexuality.”

Like Lennon's, my own doctoral research proposal "from nation to family"<sup>6</sup>, intends to illuminate the close relationships between family and nation in constructing patriarchal cultural practice. Considering the current political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe, I wish to interrogate the multiple representations and interpretations of tradition and modernity as they are applied to women and women's bodies (as both social and material categories/subjects), masculinities, femininities,<sup>7</sup> "culture", sexuality and power.<sup>8</sup> The conflation of "respectable" femininity with social and biological "mothering" or "motherhood" has been central to the constitution of the nation<sup>9</sup>, and an examination of the discourses concerning the "nation" would be crucial to this study. In this light, the "nation" itself cannot be considered as a stable and closed entity. Zimbabweans now occupy several diasporic communities world wide and the idea of "home" has great power in the Zimbabwean social imaginary as people construct identities and discourses on "our culture". I do not wish to work with a notion of "Zimbabwe" as a "nation" with a related "diaspora", but rather to think about the constitution of "national culture" in light of a context where "Zimbabwean identity" is diasporic.

As I outlined in my research proposal, I wish to conduct this work with a multi- and trans-disciplinary methodological approach. As this work is feminist-inspired, I wanted to work from a position that was suspicious of unsituated objectivity. Framing my study as one generally concerned with the "body", the "nation", femininities (of course one cannot examine femininities in the absence of masculinities) and discourse, and while using ethnographic methods, such as participatory oral interviews, I wished to focus my attention on narrative practices. This had important implications as I did not want to propose a study of 12 to 21 year old women living in a certain suburb of Harare or Johannesburg as a "case study", for instance. My focus on narrative practices would avoid producing an analysis that problematically over-generalizes the "experience" or "identity" of "women in/from Zimbabwe". I sought to disturb, rather than reinforce the categories of experience which frame the experience of the "cultural practice" of "Zimbabwean women".

I proposed a feminist research ethics that was self-reflexive and self-aware and in so doing, I intended to include my own narrative in this research. If I was to expect young women to share their experiences of sex, of rape, of abortion, of make-up and short skirts and "red light districts", of hair-braiding, hair relaxing, of clubbing, of kissing, of marriage, of heart-ache, of disease, of political disenfranchisement, of jungle fever, of same-sex action,

of empowerment, of deep sadness, and of rage and joy – surely I should be expected to share my own. Where writing women’s experiences into academic language presented a potential crisis, I believed in the possibilities of auto-ethnography in both disturbing the power dynamics between “researcher” and “researched”, as well as in offering me an opportunity to express my own rage – that thing that brought me to this work – this “thing” I do. I still wish to do all of this; however, my deeper immersion into the academic culture of “knowledge production” has brought me, in conversation with peers, to a rage with whose parameters I struggle.

### A Politics of Rage?

Lennon and I sat together to discuss the question of knowledge production in Africa. Our readings on the matter included, Paul Zeleza’s 2002 reflections on “African Universities and Globalisation”<sup>10</sup>, Teri Barnes’s on the “Politics of Mind and Body”<sup>11</sup>, and Amina Mama’s “Is it Ethical to Study Africa?”<sup>12</sup>. We had previously faced this discussion in a group of our peers, lecturers and senior lecturers, and our discussions had focused on the main themes discussed in the articles presented. I had especially selected Barnes’s piece on account of her critical view about “who knows” and Africa: “how they know”, “what they know”, and really, what “knowing” entails – an interrogation of the racialised and gendered implications of “knowing” in African universities. Now faced with one other, in the realities we had shared concerning issues of funding, questions about our intellectual location as “African sexualities scholars”, concerns about the ethics of “researching young men and women in (and out of) Zimbabwe”, our discussion wavered. Lennon remarked, “It must be nice”, referring to the luxury of a feminist ethics concerning research and knowledge production in Africa. In the privacy of our conversation with one another, we knew that many of us could not survive as young researchers without the compromise of western-led funding objectives, or affiliations with imperialist intellectual projects – we only have mischief and creativity as tools in our endeavours – and with the main incentive of a doctorate qualification, our ethics – our politics – the thing that brought us here, is compromised.

Is it really ethical to study young people? To talk about their sex? To talk about *our* sex? To take our secrets and compile them into rational intellectual analyses of power and discourse, using words and terms generally inaccessible to the owners of the secrets? Is it ethical to sanitize our work rendering it acceptable to the gatekeepers of the academy – some feminist, some

otherwise, who often still – despite a veneer of language around knowledge and transformation – maintain a strong resemblance to the racist, masculinist vestiges of a much-critiqued scientific objectivity and truth? As research “initiates”, we have found that our insights and ideas are often viewed as preliminary, naive, underdeveloped, too subjective, immature. That may be one source of rage. A more insidious form, rage at the self being constructed by the doctoral machine, asks: who am I to tell a friend that her experience of a back-street abortion is important and valuable, facilitating my role as a researcher, when fundamentally my work in this sense is reduced to a mere exercise for the sake of my own intellectual fulfilment? Who am I to expose my own secrets, my imagination, my joy and, most precious, my fury, in light of an academic environment that often fails to credit my knowing?

It is probably a very good thing to be disillusioned by “the university”. After all the hierarchies produced here are precisely the hierarchies we see in the world – of those who labour the “mind”, versus those who labour the “body”, as though both processes were not dependent upon the other, each rite of academic passage presenting a new opportunity for the reification of class hierarchies. Is it really appropriate for me to take the words, lives and experiences of my peers and use them to access a new “height” in this sense? With the rampage of global neoliberal reforms where intellectuals need to constantly (and competitively) write and publish to keep up in the marketplace, is it possible that my (or any of our) efforts at a politically active and motivated research ethics can survive? The university has become a mass production line, and it seems to me that they are milling PhDs out like cold product. While I am angry because I feel alienated within the hierarchy of knowledge production within the university, I am even further enraged by the “knowing” distance between these sites of knowledge production and those more accessible to ordinary people. I want to again find the language for a rage-inspired feminist research, revelling in the body/mind reactions of my thinking self, because I do not know any other way to cope with the brick walls that are standing in my way.

I propose a research ethics based on a politics of rage. I do so, because I think that what I have to say about sex and gender is important and that what my peers have to say about the matter is also important. I believe that these are matters of power, identity that reach the core of the messy, rotting world within which we live. A politics of rage, for me is a recovery of sites of intellectual production – it is about being open to and participating in sites of knowledge production outside the university.

It is also about co-production of knowledge in research, that is, while including my own narratives as data, my work intends to take the narratives of the women contributing (participating) to this work more seriously than the usual view of them as “objects” or “sources” of data. I seek a politics of rage that refuses to be made tame by the money-driven bureaucracies that shape the university today.

I suspect that a politics of rage (or of this sort) is what many of you and many of my mentors have applied as a means of making sense of what it means to do research – to investigate social life in this awful, messy place. But what do you do with the actual rage? Unapplied.

## Endnotes

1. Overthinking the subject of how one writes about a feminist methodology one evening, Maya Angelou’s reflections: “Give me your hand / make room for me /to lead and follow you/beyond this rage of poetry. / Let others have / the privacy of/ touching words/ and love of loss/ of love. For me/ give me your hand. (Angelou, Maya. 1994. “A Conceit,” in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House) [first letter of every line should be in capital; spacing inconsistent). That is, I wish to summon in language and in language to intellectualize what is irrational, deeply sensual, lived bodily inquiry into the social lives of people. While Angelou wishes to take us “*beyond* this rage of poetry,” my task in this case is to rationalize what is no little rage, into a coherent, accessible rhetorical intellectual exercise.
2. I completed my Master’s Degree at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. Lennon Mhishi is completing his Master’s Degree in the Department of Sociology, at the University of Zimbabwe. Both researchers currently work at the School of Arts, Monash South Africa.
3. For I am yet to graduate to the status of “intellectual”, “researcher” appears to best describe my practice. This position of knower/not knower – of seeker of knowledge, was once liberating – but as I have found myself constantly thrust into the position of unknowing apprentice-thinker, I find myself increasingly discomforted by the status.
4. Thankfully, I continue to encounter new sheroes and heroes in my travels!
5. Here Lennon is referring to Francis Nyamjoh’s proposition of “Disquettes” and “Thiofs” in Dakar, Senegal. (See, Nyamjoh, Francis. 2005. “Fishing in Troubled Waters: ‘Disquettes’ and ‘Thiofs’ in Dakar,” in *Africa* Vol 75: 3.)
6. The title, “From Nation to Family”, occurred to me as I drafted a paper for a conference investigating ethical and methodological approaches in the context of violence or conflict, where I reflected on this research proposal. The paper was originally titled “Gender, Sexuality, ‘Culture’, Power and Violence: An African Feminist Intervention in Research Methodology,” and a little later I removed the “African” qualification to the form of intervention intended. This change of

course relates to my epistemological investment as a researcher. The subjects of “gender”, “sexuality”, “culture”, “power” and “violence” are all invoked in the research that my work wishes to examine. However, as I continued to consider the who/what/why/where and how I am trying to frame this subject, it occurred to me that in fact I was speaking to the manner by which “the family” and “the nation” function together in constructing and policing femininities in Zimbabwe (and elsewhere of course!). Specifically, I was thinking about Onanella Selolwane’s, response (Selolwane, Onalenna. 2004. “Response to Everjoice Win Concerning the Abuse of Zimbabwean Women’s Human Rights”, in *Feminist Africa 3* National Politricks. Cape Town: AGI) to a letter written by Everjoice Win, (Win, Everjoice. 2004. “Open Letter to Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Other Women in the South African Cabinet”, in *Feminist Africa 3* National Politricks. Cape Town: AGI): she writes “you identify the source of suffering clearly and unambiguously as politically motivated and organized violence. Like so much violence directed against women within the sanctity of the home and family, this is supposed to remain unnamed and unspoken, to protect families and men from shame. There is an assumption, as you rightly point out, that liberation war leaders, like husbands and heads of households, have earned an unlimited right to “chastise” (read “abuse and violate”) with impunity those that are under their “guardship”. Because they are guardians, “providers” and “protectors”, they themselves are protected from having their acts named as violence as this would signify that such acts are wrong morally and legally.” (77-78). This is precisely the manner by which I wish to examine the “nation” and “family” as the institutions that regulate the disciplining practices of femininity. The more famous application of the term “From Nation to Family” is that of Cindy Patton in her essay “Containing African AIDS” (Patton, Cindy. 1999. “From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS”, in Hesse-Biber, Sharlene., Gilmartin, Christina., & Lydenberg, Robin. (Eds). *Feminist Approaches to Theory & Methodology*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.)

7. I use the plural to point to the instability of definitions of “femininity” and “masculinity” offered in dominant discourse. I wish to pursue Elaine Salo’s application of the performance of femininities and masculinities (dominant, non-dominant, “respectable” and otherwise). See Salo, Elaine. 2003. “Negotiating Gender and Personhood in the New South Africa: Adolescent Women and Gangsters in Manenberg Township on the Cape Flats”, in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Pg 345-365., for example.
8. The discourses of sex and gender translate into particular practices of sexuality. “Cultural practice” as it has been constructed in Zimbabwe (and the rest of the world, of course) is heteronormative and heterosexist. A close examination of the policing of young women’s sexuality can bring this to light. I say “power” to point to both the structural power of patriarchy and to elaborate power relations in a manner similar to Lila Abu-Lughod (Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1990. “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women”, in *American Ethnologist* Vol. 17. Issue 1), who views power as fluid (that is: not just from the top down) and complex.
9. See Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender & Nation*. London: Sage Publications.

10. Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe. 2002. "African Universities and Globalisation," in *Feminist Africa* 1.
11. Barnes, Teresa. 2007. "Politics of the Mind and Body: Gender and Institutional Culture in African Universities," in *Feminist Africa* 8.
12. Mama, Amina. 2007. "Is It Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom," in *African Studies Review*. Vol. 50:1, April, pp. 1-2



## In Conversation: *"The Room For Questioning is Huge":*

Jane Bennett speaks with Charmaine Pereira

Charmaine Pereira has been the Director of the Nigerian Initiative for Women's Studies since 2005, and has worked as an African feminist researcher, advocacy and policy designer, and organizational leader throughout her life. She is responsible (with other members of the Initiative) for research and networking projects around issues of citizenship, policy, higher educational institutional culture, and sexuality. She is the author of numerous papers and journal articles, some of which have appeared in *Feminist Africa* (see issues 1, 2 and 5), and has worked with many different research and activist organizations on the continent, including the African Gender Institute. Her most recent book **Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System**<sup>1</sup> was reviewed in *Feminist Africa* 9.

**Jane Bennett (JB):** We've been working together for a while, teaching on the African Gender Institute's intensive seminar programme for researchers who want to take issues of gender and sexualities seriously. In one of our last seminar sessions, Funmi Bammeke, from the Department of Sociology at the University of Lagos, asked you to talk a little bit about your own history as a "feminist researcher activist", and you responded with a powerful narrative of cross-country, cross-disciplinary, personal and political work. Would you mind telling us that story again?

**Charmaine Pereira (CP):** At the time I began my doctoral research on teachers in day nurseries in the UK, I was not a feminist. I became a feminist towards the end of the research, in the mid 1980s, and then had to grapple with wishing that I'd done things differently, asked different questions and so on.

I think this sort of self-questioning is likely to happen anyway, after a period of research training and with the benefit of hindsight, but "reading"

my work through feminist eyes accentuated the distance between the questions I had originally posed and those that subsequently caught my interest. My research was on efforts in the UK to try and bring together day care and education for children under five by introducing teachers into day nurseries. Although day nurseries were initially set up to provide care for the children of working mothers (not their fathers!), after the Second World War reasons were being sought to reduce the numbers of such nurseries and limit their intake. So they began to cater mainly for the children of single parents or from families who were considered “at risk” in some way. The staff in day nurseries had training backgrounds in health and welfare, unlike teachers in nursery schools whose training was in education. A number of local authorities in England were concerned with the lack of educational input in the lives of under fives in day nurseries and so they started employing teachers to work part-time in the nurseries. The assumption was that teachers would make a difference to the children because they would provide “education”, as opposed to the “care” that nursery officers provided. However, teachers also worked in smaller groups with the children and for shorter periods of time. In my research, I compared the interactions and conversations that teachers had with these small groups of children with those of nursery officers. I also spent hours observing children’s play and interactions, with a view to making statements about the relative levels of children’s social development, in nurseries that employed teachers as well as those that did not. Although it got really tedious towards the end, it was quite interesting observing the children, paying attention to language and behaviour, and learning about the shifts and turns in policy in this field.

All this I found useful even when later, I started working on quite different terrain. When I moved to Nigeria and started teaching at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), I was in the sociology department which meant a shift in disciplinary base since my background was in psychology. I started teaching courses like “Women in Society” and “Family in a Changing World”, which got me more directly involved in the arena of Women’s Studies at ABU, although the courses were not presented as such in the department.

**JB:** That’s so interesting! I didn’t know you began your “research life” in early education. How did you get the ideas and interest for the “Women in Society” course?

**CP:** Even before I had started teaching at ABU, I was invited to take part in collective research on the practice of Muslim laws in Nigeria, under the

auspices of the international solidarity network Women Living Under Muslim Laws. I learned a lot through this experience – about doing feminist research in this field, about the society in which I was now living and the significance of identity politics and religion, and about doing collective action research.

Through my teaching at ABU, I learned first-hand about the challenges of trying to stay intellectually alive in a university context that was eroded in many ways. I learned about the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, particularly for female students. And the feeling of combined rage and powerlessness that I had about being unable to change the situation stayed with me for a long time.

**JB:** Were there other women faculty with the same sense of frustration?

**CP:** Even when Women in Nigeria was alive and well organised on campus in the 1980s, the women who tried to do something about sexual harassment and sexual violence in the university found it very difficult to address the situation. By the 1990s, although WIN still existed at ABU, it was no longer marked by the feminist politics of its predecessors and I did not see it taking forward any serious effort to change the status quo. It was my experience of being unable to change things then that informed my determination in later years that a more concerted effort should be made to challenge sexual harassment in universities. For me, becoming a feminist researcher and activist has been an ongoing process, one in which the trajectory has not been predictable or marked by continuing in an apparently unilinear direction for a long period of time. That probably reflects my own tendency to want to take on new ideas and challenges, and then I have to balance these with existing commitments. What I think is important in this process is trying to keep an open mind whilst being willing to ask questions about power – who uses it, in what ways, with what effects and how women figure in all of this – in the research process as well as in drawing on research for activism.

**JB:** I'd be interested in hearing more about your sense of how a "feminist" WIN changed into something different (and I know a lot has actually been written about WIN) but let me move into another area. Many feminists in the North speak of the "tension" between research and activism – in African contexts, my own experience has been that while tensions do exist, they don't usually lead to the possibility of "academic researchers" complete segregation from the mess and difficulties of local political activism. What is your sense of this?

**CP:** I agree with you. I think many "academic" researchers i.e. researchers based in universities, have some connection with activism, or are at least aware of

different initiatives but it's by no means the case across the board. I remember at the second Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria workshop on Concepts and Methods for Gender and Women's Studies, quite a few of the academics present wanted to know more about existing forms of activism, how they could form links with activists and make connections between their work and research. This shows that the academics were not very much involved in activism themselves and felt some kind of disconnect with that sphere. This may be a more recent phenomenon concerning "academic" researchers of the 1990s. My sense is that the researchers who were "academics" in the 1980s, or who left universities in the 1990s, have tended to be concerned about legacies of imperialism and the continued exploitation of African societies; their involvement in activism has generally been fuelled by a sense of wanting to use their knowledge to make a difference and this often means being inserted into networks of activists in the process. So they may be called upon by activists at different times and in different ways – to attend workshops, or participate in projects at different levels, or mobilise around particular issues and so on. African universities have generally not been ivory towers as in the North, but spaces for developing leaders for the nation.

In addition to that, research and writing that has a bearing on social relations is rarely so specialised in our contexts that it can be carried out without some reference to what is currently going on in the society. So African academics in general, women and men, have been expected to engage in some kind of community, if not political, service. Women in Nigeria, an organisation aimed at carrying out research to understand the conditions of women's lives and using this knowledge to mobilise women and men to change unequal power relations in society, had its inaugural meeting in 1982 at ABU, in Zaria. So *how* you think of knowledge and *why* it is important – these are critical dimensions of the connections or tensions between research and activism.

**JB:** You yourself have conducted research in many different ways – as part of research networks, as an individual scholar, as someone working with donor-funded projects, as the strategic director of a network. How have these different positions impacted on the meaning of "strategic feminist research" for you?

**CP:** I think of "strategic feminist research" as research that advances feminist knowledge and understanding of a particular issue to the extent that one is in a position to decide which strategies are appropriate for bringing about particular kinds of change. This would be change that furthers a feminist vision of relations among peoples and nations. Strategic feminist research

is ultimately tied to advancing the use of appropriate strategies, but for me this is not about strategies divorced from theory. In fact, I see the theory as critical to refining feminist understanding of what the issues are and what needs to change. Without that deep understanding, any choice of strategies is likely to be flawed. Now how you link the capacity to do that kind of research and the different positions from which one may conduct research, is not a straightforward question! I would say that the ability to do strategic feminist research has a lot to do with the nature of your research question, which is shaped largely by your politics, and the autonomy with which you can pursue that question. Having sufficient funds to carry out the research helps – in fact, it helps a lot – but it is not in itself a prime determinant of the ability to ask a feminist question.

I think the main way in which the different positions I've occupied as a researcher have affected the character of the research has been in terms of the scope of the research. For example, the research projects I co-ordinate at IWSN are the only national level studies I've worked on and that reflects the fact that there are a number of researchers involved from different parts of the country. However, this didn't just happen – it took quite a lot of effort to raise the funds for the questions that we wanted to ask, as opposed to us working on priorities determined by funders. As co-ordinator I have some degree of control over the conceptualising of the project and certain methodological issues, such as how the research questions might be interpreted and what kinds of methods may be taken up but I am also dependent ultimately on the researchers who are actually doing the research. When working as an individual scholar or as a member of a research network, you are not dependent on others doing the research and you may also work with your own agenda, but the responsibilities are different and you are responded to differently by people you may want to influence with your research.

**JB:** Please tell us about IWSN – the origins of the network, its approach to research as a political space for “women’s studies”, its challenges.

**CP:** The network began at a workshop in January 1996 in Kaduna, convened by Amina Mama. It brought together women, and a few men, who were working in some way on gender and women’s studies in different disciplines and from different universities across the country. The aim was to map the intellectual resources available for gender and women’s studies in Nigeria and to collectively set an agenda for teaching and research in the field. At that workshop, participants agreed to form a national network, to be known as the

Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria (NWSN). Given that most people were working in isolation, often in environments that were quite hostile to gender and women's studies, we felt it was important to maintain a forum for engaging with others working in the field and to develop ourselves in the process. We chose "women's studies" quite consciously, because whilst we appreciated the significance of gender relations in women's lives, we wanted to put the emphasis on "women" as taking the lead in analysing and studying women's lives.

Through the British Council, NWSN was involved in an innovative three-way higher education link programme with ABU and Liverpool University. This was very useful since exchange visits were part of the programme and we were able to acquire documentation for a resource centre at ABU, and material for study packs for participants at NWSN training workshops. Amina was the NWSN co-ordinator and I co-ordinated the ABU arm of the programme. We held three training workshops subsequently: a second one later that year on Concepts and Methods, one in 1997 on Curriculum and the third in 1998, on Policy. Shortly after that, Amina left for the AGI and our existing funding from the British Council came to an end. I had been nominated Co-ordinator at the 1998 workshop, in view of Amina's imminent departure.

For a long time after that, I struggled with fund raising – none of the donors in Nigeria that I approached were interested in funding what we wanted to do. It was a very difficult time; there was no money for anything. The break came in 2002, when I was able to get funding from the British Council for our next workshop, on the Gender Politics of Violence. Meanwhile, I had just completed a study of gender and the university system as part of a research network convened by the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, and had been approached by Carnegie at the end of that research about the possibility of taking the work on gender further. I thought that this would be a good opportunity to do some research on sexual harassment through NWSN, as opposed to doing it as an individual. Anyway, our 2002 workshop allowed us some space to plan a collective research project on sexual harassment. Carnegie subsequently decided not to fund the research but eventually, with support from Lennart Wolgemuth, the former director of the Nordic Africa Institute, we were able to get funding from SIDA, Stockholm. This made it possible for NWSN to open an office in Abuja in 2005.

**JB:** That's quite an amazing journey, of perseverance and passion! I remember seeing your first office in 2005, and thinking what a feat it was that had been accomplished.

CP: Well, did you know that when registering the organisation, we had to change the name because the Corporate Affairs Commission did not like the word “network”, just like they didn’t like words such as “coalition”, “democracy” – anything that suggested people might want to organise or run their own affairs. So we renamed ourselves the Initiative for Women’s Studies in Nigeria (IWSN).

Our second main project is on women’s citizenship in practice, and that began by IDRC approaching me after I’d given a paper on that theme at a CODESRIA meeting. They were interested in supporting research on women’s citizenship and again, I thought it would be good to do this through IWSN. The project began last year. We have a smaller project ongoing on women’s empowerment, which began with the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy at the University of Ghana approaching me to work on this theme as part of a group based in West Africa. The West African researchers are part of a wider, international consortium co-ordinated by Andrea Cornwall at the Institute of Development Studies, at the University of Sussex.

JB: What sort of approach did IWSN take to strengthening research capacity for feminist work?

CP: In its early years, IWSN began with a model of capacity building based on annual 3-day training workshops. What we have today is a much more intensive engagement with action research carried out collectively. The researchers involved are selected on the basis of having some knowledge, if not experience, in the area; they are IWSN members; and come from different parts of the country. The process provides researchers and their assistants with greater access to research materials, support in conceptual and methodological development and at the end of the day, assuming the research is successfully completed, intellectual resources for all of us which would be useful for teaching and further research. It’s very challenging doing capacity building this way – it takes a lot of energy and effort to maintain contact with researchers and try to keep the idea of the research alive in their minds, given the anti-intellectual environments that most universities in Nigeria have largely become. Many of the researchers have heavy teaching requirements, those who get promoted have huge administrative workloads, and some are very busy with consultancies. Health problems abound, which is not surprising given the stress that researchers are under, since they generally have familial and community responsibilities on top of everything else. I often feel I’m treading a fine line trying to be sensitive to all the demands they currently

face, whilst adding IWSN's own demands to get the research done, and done well!

**JB:** Done well... I know what you mean. Sometimes, for me, "done well" gets to be just "done," under some of the circumstances researchers can face. If you had to choose, which of IWSN's projects strikes you as the most successful? Was there any project work which left you disappointed, and why?

**CP:** It's not possible to compare the projects in terms of their relative success – they started at different times and are at different levels of completion. I think they are all exciting in different ways, but also quite demanding.

One of the main challenges has been encouraging researchers to think more creatively, outside the existing restrictive frameworks and across disciplinary boundaries. I think there's a gendered dimension to this – in order to think more freely you have to be prepared to "break the rules" sometimes, and this is precisely what girls and women are taught *not* to do, especially in societies where women are expected to be "respectable". It's not something that I find that hard to do, thinking outside of the box, that is, and I think I expect the researchers I'm working with to do the same so it is sometimes disappointing when I find that this is not always the case. It just means one has to work harder to do innovative research.

**JB:** Well, for me it's always been a total pleasure working with you and your "out of the box" thinking – I've learned a huge amount from working with you as a teacher, and from interacting with your approaches to the sexual harassment research process IWSN undertook. What are the most exciting spaces, for you, right now in working as a feminist researcher and activist?

**CP:** I'm really interested in finding out more about women's lives, bearing in mind the diversities in Nigeria and how little is documented and analysed concerning women's experiences. What I find exciting is using approaches that are intrinsically interesting in themselves, like life stories, to open up the conceptualisation of issues like citizenship, which are not often addressed using such methods. I like making connections between areas of thought that are not normally seen as relevant to each other.

I'm also fascinated by questions of meaning and representation, like how do we know what anybody ever means when they say something? Or when someone else says what a particular woman or group of women are supposed to have said or done, like when the male-dominated media report on women. Issues of meaning and representation come up in any case in a multilingual context, where the official language is a colonial language that most people

don't normally use at home. It's particularly relevant when the subject of discussion is sexuality, which is not generally spoken about in straightforward terms anyway. So when women are demonised on sexual grounds and they become the subject of public debate, even when there is uncertainty about what the woman has been said to do or not to do, people often take up moralising positions concerning the woman that become very polarised and absolute. And yet the room for questioning is huge, given the character of language and of sexuality. I find these sorts of issues really compelling to research from a feminist perspective.

And perhaps the most exciting for me is being able to show that *how you think* is crucial for *what you do*, whether in terms of choice of strategy as a feminist or countering some powerful official's notion of what should be done. The most recent example of this was the public hearing in the National Assembly on Senator Ekaette's bill on Public Nudity, Sexual Intimidation and Other Related Matters. The bill aims to criminalise "indecent dressing" and it tries to do so by labelling it "nudity". Whilst this seems incredible, it's amazing how many people think in ways similar to the Senator. So arguing against such a ridiculous piece of legislation is not as straightforward as it might seem. But women strategised and mobilised, and the National Assembly had never seen as many women in one place under its roof, and even some outside, as on that day. The Senate was left in no doubt as to women's utter rejection of the bill.

What I found exciting, apart from the actual mobilising, was thinking about how to unravel the justification for the legislation with strong arguments that refuted the *sponsor's* position, as opposed to simply making arguments based on the priorities that *activists* think are important in terms of advancing an agenda for women. This particular struggle is not over yet, we need to be vigilant in terms of what happens next with the bill.

JB: Wow, please keep me updated about that one – there have been very strong popular expressions around policing women's dress in South Africa lately – women getting attacked for wearing short skirts or skimpy tops – and it is interesting to watch how these concerns "spark out" across our different contexts. You travel widely within Africa; what is your sense of the ways in which different national and political spaces impact upon what can be undertaken as "feminist research" – as activism – continentally?

CP: I think the fact that different national contexts in Africa have their own particular histories and politics means that the issues of concern to women

are configured differently in these various locations. Differing regulatory frameworks shape the ideological bases for many struggles for access and control. The outcomes of these struggles have a bearing on women's access to land and other resources as well as determining the contours of what is considered "normal", such as whether same sex relations are criminalised or not, as they are in most African countries. The terrain on which women organise to change the status quo also varies in different contexts. So for example, the practice of Muslim laws is much more salient for women in North and West Africa than it is for Central and Southern Africa, except to some extent for South Africa. At the same time, some issues are common across the continent and beyond, like violence against women. Here too though, there are some forms of woman abuse that might be specific to certain locations and not others. So I believe that any effort to undertake feminist research continentally has to contextualise the significance of the research in any given national space and be sensitive to the commonalities as well as the specificities of that question across national contexts.

**JB:** Last one – what do you wish someone had told you about becoming a feminist researcher?

**CP:** This is a very interesting question. In terms of doing feminist research, I wish I'd heard more accounts of the nitty-gritty, can't-figure-out-what-I'm-doing-and-why aspects of feminist research, especially early on. I used to worry a lot about "theory", not "feminist theory" in particular but "theory" in general – what exactly it was and how to produce it. I would have loved to have had "theory" demystified a long time ago. I think it's fascinating to hear about how different women came to live their feminism, what the turning points in their lives were and how this informed the research questions they ultimately pursued. I would have liked to have heard more about how other women had become feminist researchers, what trajectories their lives had taken and what was significant to them about the research they had done, and not done. That would have been not only been very interesting but useful too, in terms of seeing how they had dealt with the various challenges in their lives and what I could learn from that. I'm not sure that I can think of any abstracted "lessons" that I wished someone had told me about – I'm more interested in the detail and why that is important in the context of a person's life.

**JB:** Charmaine, thank you so much; you're right – the power of the detail to illuminate the political dynamics at play around a space, or a body, or a

collective, is fascinating, but what you have reminded me of here is how it can take a lifetime to discern that power – to be “happy” as a researcher with “details” in a world which still forces upon us broad sketches of experience as “dominant reality”. I’ve learned a lot from listening to you here (again). Travel safely.

## Endnotes

1. Pereira, C. (2007) *Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System*. Oxford: James Currey; Ibadan: Heineman Educational Books



# Feeding Freedom's Hunger: Reflections on the second African Feminist Forum

Jessica Horn

*she is milk feeding  
freedom's hunger, starlight  
in rebellion's sky*

*There is something magical about a gathering of African feminists: rooms filled with the breath and radiant minds of women seeking more nourishing landscapes of social existence and more liberating forms of political and cultural expression. It is the earthly magic of women's collective resistance, inhabiting a kaleidoscope of earthly bodies: programme officer, photographer, professor, parliamentarian, donor, grandmother, sex worker, heterosexual, lesbian, differently abled...*

The second African Feminist Forum (AFF) was held in Kampala, Uganda from 17-21 September 2008 and attended by over 130 feminists from all walks of life and locations in Africa and its migrant Diasporas<sup>1</sup>. The theme "Feminist Power, Agency and Resistance: New Visions for a Revitalised Continent", proved a prophetic choice given the backdrop against which discussions were staged: post-election crises in Kenya and Zimbabwe, the forced resignation of South African President Thabo Mbeki, and growing state fundamentalism, censorship and public harassment of feminists and sexual rights activists in Uganda itself.

Forum discussions were organised around four thematic clusters: political and economic power, knowledge production and creative expression, bodily integrity and autonomy, and movements and organisations. Perhaps due to the rarity of such a large feminist gathering in Africa, the agenda itself was packed with activities, from formal plenaries and workshops to book launches, poetry readings and talk shows. Over the four days, participants used these diverse formats to assess the state of the region from a feminist perspective

and shared examples of feminist resistance in academia, policy, and society at large. Participants also raised questions about the efficacy of feminist responses and modes of mobilisation, and levels of resources available for transformative work. Echoing the sentiment of much of these conversations, South African feminist Pregs Govender asked “how *do* we vision and how do we dream again?”

## About the African Feminist Forum

“This is not a forum for feminists ‘if’, ‘but’ or ‘however’. This is a forum for feminists, full stop.” – Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, AFE Participant, Nigeria

The AFF is a regional platform developed by a working group of independent feminist activists and launched in Accra, Ghana in 2006. It is a collective of individual activists, rather than an organisation, and is anchored by a secretariat currently based at the African Women’s Development Fund in Ghana and, biennially, by the feminist institution that hosts the regional meeting. The AFF was designed as a medium for sharing African feminist thought and practice, providing “safe spaces” for critical reflection on personal and collective progress, and a springboard for action. The regional forum has already stimulated a number of related initiatives including an AFF website and the establishment of national feminist forums in Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana. People participate in the regional forum and its sister initiatives in their personal capacity. This was an intentional strategy to enable individuals to share and grow their activist beliefs and commitments beyond the limitations of their institutional positions or roles. It also means that the AFF itself is not “owned” by any particular institution, but rather by the collective commitment and energy of those who participate. The AFF is a political platform. As such, all participants must publicly identify as feminists, and sign the Charter of Feminist Principles, which outlines an ethical framework for African feminist engagement based on principles of human rights, choice, non-discrimination and individual and collective accountability.

## Bodies, Bodies, Bodies

“The vagina is what goes into law, is attacked by culture...” – Musimbi Kanyoro, AFF Participant, Kenya/USA

“The point is now, in all our communities, people are wearing the hijab.”

– Doaa Abdelaal, AFF participant, Egypt

The politics of the body permeated forum discussions, as participants confirmed the feminist truism that women’s bodies are a site of struggle, a

source of creativity, and a target for attack in mainstream culture, religion and politics. Participants dove head-first into the many silences and oppressions framing African women's bodies, challenging the conservative mantra that anything enabling women's bodily integrity and autonomy is "unAfrican, ungodly and immoral". Feminist theologian Musimbi Kanyoro highlighted the fact that while many African policy makers refuse to fully legalise abortion, much of the early documented information on abortifacants was gathered from North African doctors. Other participants conferred that knowledge of herbal abortifacants forms part of women's reproductive knowledge in their cultures. Many participants referenced the growing influence of religious institutions, in particular new charismatic Christian churches, in demonising these forms of knowledge while actively campaigning against measures to protect women from violence and enable sexual and reproductive choice. The need for tactical, consolidated activism in this area was deemed urgent. As Zimbabwean girl's rights activist Betty Makoni asked in the face of ongoing sexual abuse, "how do we organise to protect the sovereignty of our vaginas"?

The AFF is one of the few regional forums to actively embrace sexual diversity and take a public stance against homophobia in African women's organising and in broader society. This solidarity was vocally expressed by heterosexual activists, and appreciated by lesbian and bisexual feminists participating, who saw the AFF as an the opportunity to move the debate beyond moral judgments to a more productive engagement with the politics of sexuality. The topic of sexuality was not comfortable terrain for all, however the safe space created at the forum allowed for this necessary dialogue. As Ugandan human rights defender Sylvia Tamale put it, we need to "remove the moral veil, get out of our comfort zones and reorganise old belief systems".

## Feminist Visions of Democracy

"We don't need a gun, we need brains now."– Margaret Dongo, AFF

Participant, Zimbabwe

Halfway through the forum participants heard reports of the resignation of Thabo Mbeki. The news sparked a process of collective commiseration at the prospect of unabashed sexist Jacob Zuma leading one of Africa's economic and political powerhouses. It also added fuel to the fire of discussions around tackling Africa's "democratic recession", the betrayal of African citizens by their own states, and the re-entrenchment of militarism and state chauvinism. Reflecting on Kenya's recent history, human rights activist Muthoni Wanyeki

expressed, “These travesties are happening in the backyards of those countries that are supposed to be at the forefront of our so-called second liberation”. Participants interrogated the success of models they have used to champion women’s political participation, and agreed on the need for feminists (and not just women) to take their place in public decision-making. A dialogue also began around the near blanket acceptance of neoliberal economics by African governments and the implications for national and individual economic autonomy. As Nigerian academic Ayesha Imam provoked, “These models have not even worked for most men, let alone most women”.

### Creative Subversions

“When one is an artist, one has to dare”– Fatoumata Kinda, AFF Participant, Burkina Faso

Both in its methodology and content, the second AFF aimed to stimulate creativity as an essential force for change. In the words of Kenyan feminist Atsango Chesoni, creative expression is a powerful means of practicing “the psychology of liberation”. In a session on women’s writing, participants were surprised to find a common difficulty with writing about themselves and in the first person. This made visible the impact of patriarchal power in censoring and devalourising women’s own individual experience and voice. Speaking about the embattled place of feminism in the academy, Senegalese professor Fatou Sow commented that “feminist knowledge is [still] not perceived as scholarly. It is a site where you are always having to prove yourself and that what you are doing is ‘scientific’ and ‘valuable’”. Despite these myriad forms of silencing women’s expression, a range of beautiful and subversive expressions emerged and were shared by women at the forum. These included an account by Senegalese writer Aissatou Cisse of the writing workshops she runs for marginalised girls to help them write their own stories, a practice unheard of in a context where girls are not even expected see a world beyond the kitchen. Many forum participants affirmed the critical need to document and share oral and written herstories, in particular the stories of kinswomen and feminist “ancestors” as a means of retaining our collective memory and learning from the rich resource of women’s knowledge.

### Looking in the Mirror

“We have to start from the basic understanding that values are to be lived”– Pate Made, AFF Participant, Zimbabwe

At many points during the AFF, participants engaged in collective self-critique. This was framed by premise that the work of feminism is not only for transformation of broader society, but also the transformation of how we deal with each other as individuals and within our organisations and movements. Far from navel-gazing, the discussions allowed for necessary scrutiny around feminist priorities, the effects of “NGO-isation” on feminist activism, and issues of inclusivity, diversity and sustainability. This self-critique was made live in a mock trial, in which the African feminist movement faced charges of irrelevance, elitism and inefficacy. The trial was conducted with a defence and prosecution team made up of the region’s finest lawyers and a number of newly found acting talents. In another plenary session, participants staged a debate around the question: “Can men be feminists and involved in the African feminist movement”. The debate called into question the growing numbers of men being hired by African women’s organisations, working as gender experts and raising funds for work on women’s empowerment and rights. The room was electric, with the team debating against the motion benefiting from majority support in the audience. Arguments included the assertion that a movement based on women’s lived experience of sexism could not be led by those who have never experienced it, and the desperate defence that “if there are no men in our movement, who will make the tea?”.

While provoking a great deal of laughter, these two sessions instigated discourse around pressing questions facing African feminists. Among these were the questions of whether our interventions are accessible or even relevant to a broader constituency, where we choose to place our institutional resources and energies, how to navigate donor pressures and stay true to our agendas, and navigating the difference between “doing gender” and engaging in feminist work. Alongside institutional politics, forum participants were encouraged to reflect on the politics of their own well-being and to see self-care as central to sustainable activism. We were invited to learn feminist massage, and to think about our own financial, spiritual and emotional health.

## Building Regional Sisterhood

“Out there she seeks to know who her fellow travellers are”– Demere  
Kitunga, AFF Participant, Tanzania

The second African Feminist Forum provided confirmation that feminism in Africa is indeed alive, diverse and infectious! It also established one more

space available for the urgent work of African feminism to consolidate and spread. As with any process of mobilisation and change, there is always a lot more to do. Those who have organised national feminist forums in Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana are committed to sustaining the processes that they have created. Discussions are also underway amongst participants from other countries (including Kenya), around initiating their own national feminist forums. Other spin-off initiatives are in gestation, including an online resource on African feminist art and an accessible “Feminism 101” guide for people new to feminist thought. The AFF is as relevant and vibrant as the people that constitute it. The work is in our hands, and it is with our hands that African feminist thought and practice will flourish, and ultimately succeed in transforming mainstream consciousness on our continent.

*For more information on the African Feminist Forum and to read the Charter of Feminist Principles visit [www.africanfeministforum.org](http://www.africanfeministforum.org)*

## Endnote

1. The forum was hosted by Akina Mama wa Afrika, a Kampala-based organisation that has worked for over two decades to build feminist leadership across the African continent and among African women in Europe.

## 3 Men Holding 12 Million People Hostage

Shereen Essof, Feminist Political Education Project,  
Zimbabwe

*I want to start with a simple question: how do the shocking statistics about Zimbabwean reality – the world's highest inflation rate and lowest life expectancy rate – translate when it comes to Zimbabwe's women? What do the current political negotiations mean for women and how are they responding?*

To put it differently:

- What is life like for women in a country where inflation is 300 million percent and counting?
- What is life like for women in a country where the life expectancy of women is 34 years?
- What is life like for women in a country where 3 men hold a nation hostage?

It is difficult to answer these questions. It is only once you visit a country that has been torn apart that you can fully understand the implications of the dismembering and subsequently what constitutes life. But the media has become very good at reporting the pulse of Zimbabwe via palatable sound bites and this reporting has been such a recurring blip on the so called media electro cardiogram that we no longer notice it, we no longer notice that it has flat lined. So perhaps we no longer ask questions about “what is life like in Zimbabwe”?

Here is the beginning of a response for today: women are fighting to stay alive. They are fighting to survive. And in Zimbabwe right now the contradictions of this struggle run deep. I listen to stories of women who have nothing to eat, who forage for roots, wild fruit and rats. These are stories of desperation, displacement and despair. But the magic of capital plays interesting games in a context of dire need and so the development of

a highly sophisticated informal economy means that the deprivation coexists with plenty. Everything and anything can be conjured up if you have the money, just not in the places you would expect to find it: petrol is available not at a garage, but under a tree on a quiet side road in Harare's avenues, or at an office on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of an office block; after a quick phone call to arrange a pick-up, if you can get through given the ever breaking down mobile networks and stolen fixed line cables, sugar and rice can be purchased from a car boot, and chicken from the hardware store near the train station. Some fresh produce can be bought from women selling on the side of the road, a victory given that roadside vendors were "cleaned up and out" after Operation Murambatsvina removed "the filth", but then given that the country has dollarised, it's essential to have "maUSA", as it's known locally or US dollars, to make your purchases even of a few tomatoes, sweet potatoes or greens.

If you don't have access to "forex", you don't have anything right now and basic commodities will remain an illusion. Depending on the formal sector for jobs or access to services means you just don't survive. The endless queues outside the banks are evidence of the difficulty that women have getting their (and you can take your pick) "re-valued", "de-valued", "under-valued", but certainly hard earned cash out of the banks. This means that everyone is trying to make a quick buck, to wheel or deal to generate maUSA's and remittances from diaspora workers abroad go a long way. And while this may read like a comedy of errors, women whether in the leafy suburbs or in the remote rural areas, are tired of the struggle for survival, of the inconveniences, of deprivation, of trying to figure out where to get the next meal to put on the table.

Women are also tired of the collapsed health care system, characterised by the lack of drugs, the shortage of health care personnel and the breakdown of equipment. They are tired of an ailing education system characterised by continued strikes by teachers due to poor remuneration, lack of supplies including textbooks and stationery, delays in the writing of exams and in 2008, due to elections and political instability, schools operating for only 65 days in the year.

Women have had enough of the electricity and water cuts that sometimes last days and weeks. They are tired of the violence, the grave politically motivated and sexualised violence that women and women activists of all ages have suffered during the post election period and which has continued

to prevail. Women are fatigued by having their roles dictated by the private sphere even when entering the public. They are fed up with the months and of the retrospective years of waiting, waiting while the quality of women's lives continues to decline.

So that's the beginning of a response to the question: what is life like for Zimbabwean women in late 2008. It's only a beginning.

### **And the 3 Men and their Teams Continue to Deliberate.**

The elections on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2008 were one in a string, eight in the last eight years, meant to break the stranglehold of the increasingly authoritarian Mugabe led Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) regime. With the birth in 1999 of the Movement for Democratic Change, the elections as an expression of democratic practise were– aimed at reinstating a new and democratic dispensation. But as is widely recorded, the extreme politically motivated violence and accompanying post election machinations have meant that elections have lost their integrity in Zimbabwe and the voting public are both traumatised and fatigued by the process.

The polarisation of Zimbabwean politics means that women only have two options, (now three, with the split in the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formation), ZANU PF, MDC Tsvangirai (T) and MDC Mutambara (M). If one takes the time to examine the party constitutions, election manifesto's and programmes, none adequately addresses or expresses a commitment to the priorities and needs as identified by women. Thus, none provides a really viable alternative for a new dispensation which seeks alternatives that allow for the freedom of all. And this freedom is, in the end, not something to be decreed and protected by laws or state, it is something that we shape for ourselves and share.

So there are thoughts that knot my stomach in the wee hours of the morning: can it be said that a potentially "new" dispensation has arrived, as the global press is claiming, if over half of the population's structurally subjugated position at best remains the same or at worst has regressed into a poverty and repression never seen before? If we do call this a victory for a democratic movement, what does it say about our definitions? If we are serious about the so called change that Zimbabwe needs, it is important to be concerned about the quality as well as the quantity of the change. What exactly is the prescription or framework that is going to resuscitate Zimbabwe? We live in a pitiless era of neoliberal market dependency whose end is even

more poverty, and emiseration is not an option. It will require much more radical thinking of what is possible and much more imagination of what is desirable for a so called “new” Zimbabwe. And (the concerns grow) once the current impasse has been overcome and the ink has dried on the agreements and deals, what then? Will we, like we did in 1980, breathe a sigh of relief and put our feet up, basking in the glow of “victory” for a “democratic moment”? Will women be co-opted in order to once again serve patriarchal agendas? How do feminist activists conceptualise the work ahead?

As I write in November 2008, it has been 8 months since the harmonised elections, and subsequent South African Development Community (SADC) endorsed, Mbeki facilitated negotiations that put in place the Global Political Agreement, a hybrid document that provides a framework for the formation of a new government and a plan for the subsequent reconstruction of Zimbabwe. But also as I write, the talks between the principals of political parties have deadlocked and are awaiting the deliberations of a full SADC heads of state meeting. The media tells us that they have deadlocked on the allocation of “key” ministries and apparently even with this so called “new” dispensation on the horizon, the key ministries have been identified as: Home affairs, Finance, Foreign affairs, Information and Defence. Surely if this “new Zimbabwe in the making” was serious in putting the needs of the Zimbabwean people first the key ministries would be identified as that of public works, health, education, women’s affairs and the how of the reconstruction programme would be uppermost in their minds.

But right now that is perhaps too much to hope for.

So while the talks deadlock and the weeks roll into months, women are sacrificed, a country is sacrificed and, the sacrifice is being made on the alter of power – of male ego, political survival, posturing and self interest. The **deliberation of 3 men is holding the country hostage**, and right now it is not clear how the current round of talks are going to bring food back into the shops, teachers back into the schools and medicines back into the clinics; this seems to have fallen off the agenda.

## **It is Time to Put the Zimbabwean People First**

While the men talk in the golden glow of the Rainbow Towers in Harare, women are saying enough! Kwete!

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 2008 at the self-same venue, over 100 Zimbabwean women met, deliberated and had the militant foresight to engage in direct action

by occupying public space in an extremely hostile and policed environment not only to call attention to the injustices in Zimbabwe but to catalyze action, demanding that the talks end immediately. The message here was clear: We are on the frontline of this war and for too long we have suffered. We want change now! We are worn down but not broken! We are here! Look at us, starving. All we want is a “normal” country with “normal” systems that work. And we want that to come now. We will continue to create a community where the social fabric has been ripped apart, we will continue to share scarce resources in a context of extreme deprivation and we will continue to fight and act, to make our voices heard in order to sustain and make ourselves strong so we can challenge sexism and realise the dreams and possibilities of a new Zimbabwe as full and equally participating citizens in all spheres. But right now we, as the Feminist Political Education Project, demand:

- i. availability of affordable and accessible food
- ii. provision of accessible clean water and electricity
- iii. provision of affordable and accessible health services including Anti Retrovirals (ARVs)
- iv. restoration of a functional education system
- v. easy access to our cash in the banks
- vi. the people of Zimbabwe have suffered enough. The suffering must stop NOW!

These demands are bolstered by a range of interventions being carried out around the country by strategically placed formations that are prepared to engage in direct action, political lobbying and pressure. It is difficult to talk of a movement right now and I will not hazard to do that in the space afforded me. How organising manifests in time of crisis needs deeper, longer reflection and theorisation, but writing while doing and reflecting while talking, women’s organising in Zimbabwe has suffered the same fate that broader civil society has and this makes it tricky to suggest that the energies of struggle comprise any version of a co-ordinated engagement.

In the last 20 years the civic landscape has been taken over by donor funded Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) who, as the regime got increasingly more repressive, attempted to speak out but soon lost their voice and power and thus became subsumed into the status quo or at the very least, continued to engage in activities that did not overtly disturb the balances of power. Similarly there are civic groupings which have aligned with political parties and as such, have

lost their objectivity as they jostle to align with the balance of forces. There are many women's organisations in Zimbabwe operating to meet the practical and strategic needs of women. This is important work.

But interestingly there are also autonomous formations comprised of energetic, Zimbabwean feminists who are committed to breaking down boundaries and transforming social relations, to reduce economic and political inequality, in short, to turn the world upside down. These women are committed to mobilising women nationally, and they work to create spaces for women to come together to access information, to share, reflect and strategise in the formation of agendas, in order to more boldly act, demand and claim what is rightly theirs.

This is the painstaking work, to use the language of the day, of movement building. It is this political education work, this very long term work that seeks to unpick centuries of socialisation, that deconstructs the forces of patriarchy and capital, which aims to build the community and create alternatives that can be claimed now. This is the work that ensures whatever government Zimbabwe has, women will hold it accountable. These formations are also committed to engaging political leaders, creating spaces for them to "meet the women" so they know that women are a constituency, that women are watching their every move and that women are prepared to act.

There is no happiness without justice

This is difficult and dangerous work in a context where the levels of repression and violence are high, where everything is under surveillance, and where the space for organising has shrunk and the infrastructure eroded. Zimbabwe's polarised landscape means partisan politics further complicates both strategy and action. Countless, countless women have been arrested, detained, tortured, displaced and on their bodies carry the literal and figurative scars to show for it. No matter what the outcome, it will take several generations to undo the damage on the national psyche.

It is important to turn anger into action.

Many women continue to envision a "new" Zimbabwe and are clear about what they want. In small and sometimes big ways women work to make the dream of feminist futures possible. Even in the harshest of environments. We know that no matter what the outcome of this chapter of Zimbabwe's history, the struggle against sexism requires vigilance, and continued engagement in feminist political education. Women's lives will not change overnight. The effects of patriarchy will continue to manifest through the range of violence that women live with and against which women will continue to organise.

This is what we must be prepared for.

A final word to the men who are holding the people of Zimbabwe hostage:

"You are inaccessible to women! You are inaccessible to the 12 million who at the last census made up Zimbabwe: some who have remained and face the daily grind, some who are in the diaspora, and who know that making the choice to leave is similar to having a baby and committing to have your heart walk outside of your body for the rest of your life, and the countless who in the intervening years have died."

To the men who are holding the people of Zimbabwe hostage: *Show the political leadership that the people of Zimbabwe need right now or ship out.*

"The eternal", according to Spinoza, "is now", and women in Zimbabwe are living history and taking it very personally. The worst cruelties of life are its killing injustices. Zimbabwean women's acceptance of adversity is neither passive nor resigned. It's an acceptance which sees beyond the adversity and discovers there something nameless. Not a promise, for women know that (almost) all promises are broken; rather something like a hiatus, a parenthesis, in the otherwise remorseless flow of history. And the sum total of these parentheses is eternity and in that, the knowledge that: "on this earth there is no happiness without justice".



# Review

Sylvia Tamale

*Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa.* Edited by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2005

*Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men & Ancestral Wives* confronts the millions of Africans that have lived in denial of the existence of lesbianism on the continent with a reality shock. Its contents sit very uncomfortably within a culture that treats same-sex relationships as taboo, alien, unnatural transgressions. Not only do African societies treat any form of homoeroticism (same-sex love and desire) with disgust, considering it a grave pathological sin, but it is also listed as a criminal offence in most countries. Absurd as it may sound, if the law finds two consenting adults of the same sex making love, it would subject them to imprisonment (in countries like Uganda, for life).

*Tommy Boys* demonstrates the hopelessness in enforcing a “victimless crime”. The rich narratives of various lesbians from six African countries provide a rare peek into the complex personal lives of lesbian individuals. Participants were interviewed from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland. Through their voices, the reader learns a great deal about the lives of African lesbians – from the way some of them play out the dominant gender roles, including violence, to the delicate ways that they make love. The narratives include captivating stories of “lesbian men” who impregnated their lovers, female *sangomas* (medicine people) that secretly make love to their “ancestral wives”, and exploratory “mummy-baby” boarding school relationships. Each of the ten chapters opens with a photograph from the brilliant collection of South African lesbian rights activist, Zanele Muholi, which adds to the appeal of the book.

This pioneering book clearly highlights the different ways in which African lesbians face multiple oppressions on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, class, race and religion. It provides rich data to reveal the

complexity and diversity of lesbian experiences and relationships. Specifically, it explodes some stereotypes while reinforcing others. When Nokuthula, a South African pastor, talks about her commitment to her lesbian lover, for example, we discover that it is possible for individuals to live at peace with both Christianity and lesbianism (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005: 208-9). At the same time, Hans' (Namibia) construction of herself as a male lesbian who takes care of her girlfriend "because as her superior, as her boss, I have to take care of her so she must look good" (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005: 161), simply reinforces societal perceptions of the lesbian butch-femme role playing. In the pages of this book, the reader becomes privy to the feelings, attitudes, emotions, roles, beliefs and behaviours of lesbians from various African cultures. Each chapter is neatly structured to cover related topics such as community, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, same-sex practices, etc.

From the book, it is easy to discern the commonalities that run through the lives of lesbians across Eastern and Southern Africa. For example, the bigotry and homophobic tide that floods all aspects of the lesbians' lives (including South Africa where the constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation). The reports from different countries are not balanced, as some are more detailed and compelling than others. Namibia and South Africa, for instance, cover two chapters each, while Uganda takes only eleven pages of the book.

The most problematic issue with *Tommy Boys* lies with its methodological and conceptual approach. Readers that expect "deep" sociological analysis and conceptual insights woven into the narrative descriptions will be bitterly disappointed. The fact that the book was conceptualized and primarily driven by two white women who also co-authored each of the chapters written by the black researchers, is not lost on any critical reader. For example, in the introductory chapter of the book, we are informed that, "The project which forms the basis of this book was conceptualized... around Ruth's kitchen table when Saskia was spending a few days in Johannesburg en route to Namibia... The problem was that we could not identify sufficient African woman researchers working on female same-sex practices" (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005: 11). We are further informed that once the African researchers had been identified, both Wieringa and Morgan proceeded to conduct a training workshop for them in methodological, theoretical and analytical issues related to life history research on same-sex relations. The research itself was conducted in three quick months, in time for the 2003 International Association for the

Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS) conference. The findings were subsequently disseminated in a conference session on African lesbianism organized by Wieringa and Morgan.

While the rewards of interracial, interdisciplinary and intercultural research are not disputed, it must be pointed out that a book on African lesbianism that is steered by allegedly altruistic impulses from researchers in the North (yes, Morgan is from South Africa but her “white privilege” places her on a different power plane structure from that of her nonwhite counterparts) imports several problems of perspective, positioning and conceptualisation beyond the specific topic under analysis. It is well known that most Africans misconceive lesbian practices to be a decadent unAfrican import from the North, and this has been the dominant approach of pundits, politicians and preachers opposed to same-sex relations. In this particular case, the approach adopted by Wieringa and Morgan only helps to fuel the misconceptions and myths surrounding the topic. When the two authors/editors make reference to “the respondents in our project” (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005: 324), it becomes very clear that the project was not “owned” by the African participants who engaged in it. The whole top-down approach is starkly bound up in what can only be described as manifest p/maternalism that smacks of racism and imperialist politics.

Regardless of the noble intentions that Wieringa and Morgan may have had, the end product value of this project was significantly watered down by the dominant Western voices that overshadowed and marginalized the otherwise important non-Western dialogues in the book. It has the inadvertent and unfortunate effect of “westernizing” the realities and experiences of the African lesbians who were interviewed for the study. The fact that the generic chapters on “historical reflections” and the final tying up of the case studies in the concluding chapter titled, “Present-Day Same Sex Practices in Africa” are exclusively authored by Wieringa and Morgan speaks volumes of the relations of power and intellectual hegemony that infuse every aspect of the project that led to this book. The review of the literature in chapter 9, though incisive, lies on the ethnocentric premise which ends up reinforcing the “othering” legacy of African women. Indeed, while over the past twenty years Western feminists and scholars have generally heeded critiques of their colonizing representations of non-Western women, it is quite evident that such sensitivity is yet to reach scholarship in queer studies.

The methodological blot aside, *Tommy Boys* represents an important milestone in the study of same-sex relations in Africa. It has opened the door

for a more comprehensive, integrated and balanced study of the important link between same-sex sexuality, gender oppression and African feminisms. It is certainly a welcome addition to the much-needed scholarship on African women's sexualities.

# Review

Megan Samuelson

*Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining.* By Desiree Lewis. Trenton & Asmara: Africa World Press, 2007.

*Living on a Horizon* is an outstanding companion to Bessie Head's extraordinary oeuvre, and one that matches the richness of vision, density of meaning and lyricism of Head's own writing. Over the course of eight chapters, Desiree Lewis presents deftly framed close readings of each of Head's published works, as well as of the "imagined communities" she produced in her voluminous correspondence. The study opens with an epigraph taken from a letter by Head in which she bemoans: "No one could understand a word of what I was saying and even today there is a huge joke going the rounds – 'It doesn't matter what Bessie says because no one will believe her'" (Lewis, 2007: 1). Here, finally, is a book length engagement that "understands", meticulously following Head's logic into previously unexplored vistas. As Lewis observes, Head's "comparative neglect [alongside other South African authors] is largely a result of her deviation from existing political standards" (Lewis, 2007: 1). A new language is being forged in Head's oeuvre, and it is one that critics have indeed been slow to comprehend. With sensitivity and exceptional scholarship, Lewis offers us a vocabulary and conceptual framework with which to enter into conversation with it.

Reassessing the manner in which "Head's writing represents and responds to the political" (Lewis, 2007: 2), Lewis, like Head, prises open conceptions of "the political" and of "resistance" "'Resistance' in South African writing during the fifties and sixties", Lewis trenchantly observes, "tended to limit definitions of social and creative freedoms. In particular, it meant fixating on racial struggles, neglecting the gendered implications of being black, and yoking the role of writing only to pressing political concerns. Head consistently challenges this" (Lewis, 2007: 125). In detailing this challenge, Lewis attends to one of the fecund conjunctions in Head's work, namely that between the individual and the universal (by-passing, in the process,

the politics of the narrow group, whether it be defined by nation, ethnicity or gender). As she emphasizes: “Head confronts many of the political relationships and situations that other South African writers explore. But she also interprets universal patterns associated with them, as well as the breadth of social and individual quests for freedom” (Lewis, 2007: 2).

Given her sustained enquiries into the very nature of power and of freedom, Head’s acute analyses, Lewis implicitly suggests, are as applicable, and necessary, today as when they were penned. As she notes: “While Head’s approaches to politics initially alienated her from a progressive cultural mainstream, they have become increasingly important to South African explorations of the discursive and psychological implications of power, and to varying and contextualized perceptions of freedom” (Lewis, 2007: 2). It is, indeed, to Head that we must (re)turn as we try to make sense of our post-apartheid political landscape, as well as that of post-colonial (Southern) Africa more generally.

Instead of seeking for coherence of stance, Lewis explores the ways in which “intersecting voices generate complex narratives” (Lewis, 2007: 5) in Head’s oeuvre. Those that she singles out for detailed attention include the voices of the autobiographical, the political and the spiritual. One of the more important contributions to Head scholarship that this study makes lies in its attention to “the spiritual”, and to the ways in which it meshes with the political and the personal in Head’s oeuvre. Head’s encounters with Hinduism, Lewis shows, radically shaped her literary vision, not least due to “its reluctance to separate the profane from the spiritual” (Lewis, 2007: 84), or the “religious [from] the secular” (Lewis, 2007: 11). Like Head herself, Lewis consummately avoids conceptual polarities. The investment in spirituality, she attests, does not in any way evidence a turning away from the material (as, for instance, it does in Ayi Kwei Armah’s presentation of Ram Krishna in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*): “Although [Head’s] philosophical views take recourse in Hinduism and Eastern philosophies, her epistemology, emerging both from her social locations and her interrogation of these, is also firmly rooted in cultural materialism” (Lewis, 2007: 15).

Head’s use of autobiographical material in her fiction and letters is similarly read outside of binary structures that would set it at odds with “creative envisioning” (Lewis, 2007: 6). Much has been made of Head’s personal biography, and certain critics have taken apparent delight in holding her to account for distorting it. Lewis’s handling of Head’s life-narrative

is most refreshing; she engages this material thoughtfully and sensitively, without holding it up to the test of veracity and beating the writer over the knuckles for acts of ‘creative re-visioning’. As she puts it, “in the same way that Head’s fiction sought to challenge oppressive social myths, so did she transform the details of her life history (as the dominant cultural myth of her ‘self’). In this way she asserted her right to name herself, seizing society’s position of authorship to – in a sense – write her own life script” (Lewis, 2007: 18). With this premise in place, Lewis explores the ways in which Head drew creatively upon autobiographical material in her critical engagements with structures of oppression, recasting it productively in her imaginings of new regenerative worlds. Once again the work of the imagination is prioritized, validated and valued. This is precisely the kind of reading that Head’s oeuvre seems to summon in an act of hailing that has been inexplicably ignored in far too many responses.

The extent to which this study reads Head’s oeuvre on her terms is apparent in its title, which was proposed by Head for her unwritten autobiography: “I would like the book entitled as *LIVING ON A HORIZON* – a title definitive of one who lives outside all possible social contexts, free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment, but shaped by internal growth and living experience” (Head qtd. 18-19). This is indeed the Head that Lewis recovers and engages, in a welcome and much needed departure from the rejected and tormented Bessie Head that has haunted the pages of so much scholarship. The horizon, rather than the state of agony, is indeed Head’s significant habitation. We read her again and again today *not* because of her “tragic life”, but because of her artistic vision which exceeded all the straightjackets into which society, and then the critical establishment, tried to squeeze her. What Lewis reveals is that, “while there are many indications of her suffering the circumstance of her life, there are also hints that this suffering inspired her philosophical and artistic vision. Situations of compound domination were seen both as locations of political powerlessness and as empowering enunciating positions” (Lewis, 2007: 21). Locating her on the horizon, they ultimately enabled Head to achieve, as she puts it, “the biggest view possible” (qtd. 105).

This view is one that Margaret, the artist figure in *Maru*, produces with sweeping gestures across her canvas. As Lewis notes of Head’s women characters such as Mouse and Margaret: they “often inhabit linguistically silent domains in which their non-verbal responses covertly contest the authority of other’s to

speak for or about them” (Lewis, 2007: 96); they are “character[s ...] trapped in others’ fictions, yet [ones who become] triumphant creator[s] of artworks” (Lewis, 2007: 109), confronting and contesting “distinctly gendered patterns of silencing in addition to those of apartheid” (Lewis, 2007: 111). The reading of Margaret is in turn magnificently enhanced by the dialogue Lewis sets up between her figuration and that of Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Questions of gender course through *Living on a Horizon*, as they do through Head’s oeuvre, yet Lewis avoids the temptation to approach “women” as a coherent and singular category. Instead, she notes the ways in which gender functions under various imaginings of domination and liberation. The romance script, in particular, with its specific castings of women is treated to scrupulous scrutiny.

Another of Lewis’s major contributions to scholarship on *Maru* lies in the manner in which she engages Margaret’s Masarwa identity, which is enabled by her attention to the intersectionality of gendered and raced identity. Rather than simply reading Margaret as a symbol of otherness and oppression, Lewis engages the historicity of the sign of Masarwa-ness that Head evokes. Once again Lewis notes and draws out the implications of Head’s larger vision, which refused to restrict itself to the concerns of the here and now. Thus, observes Lewis, “Head turns to the victimization of a San character at a time when this group’s extreme subjugation was repressed by a nationalist or anti-apartheid fixation with racial conflicts between white and black. She therefore represents a group whose unique story of victimization is drowned out by an influential politics of resistance” (Lewis, 2007: 160).

This project accrues further urgency in *A Question of Power*. Following Head in radically broadening the frame of reference from which to approach power and responses to it, Lewis is able to navigate with remarkable insight the continuum between good and evil that Head establishes in this novel. This is one of the few readings of *A Question of Power* that does justice to its psychic and spiritual intensity while remaining utterly lucid in exposition. It follows the novel in moving towards the vision that Elizabeth’s “softly, drooping hand” conveys, and that her participation in co-operative farming ventures begin to frame; “the pivotal struggles of everyday people”, Lewis argues, are presented as “constitut[ing] meaningful oppositions to power” (Lewis, 2007: 204). In a discursive context in which resistance and land, on the one hand, and women and land, on the other, have been rhetorically bound together, Head forges new relationships to the land, or recovers and

recasts prior ones, which anticipate in part the later strategies of a novelist such as Yvonne Vera. As Lewis points out, “Where conquest, ownership and the abstraction of “land rights” feature prominently in both colonial and ostensibly oppositional African nationalist fictions, Head’s emphasis on small-scale projects, co-operation and agricultural production suggests radically different encounters with the land” (Lewis, 2007: 145), and thus of post-colonial liberation.

Picking up on the “gesture of belonging” with which *A Question of Power* concludes, Head, argues Lewis, constructed “compelling textual home[s]” (Lewis, 2007: 255) in her latter three books, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, *The Collector of Treasures* and *A Bewitched Crossroads*. Emphasizing once again Head’s conception of the “the reconstructive thrust of narrative” (Lewis, 2007: 227), Lewis finds that *Serowe* “extols those who refuse socially prescribed courses and create their own destinies” (Lewis, 2007: 228) – those, in other words, who inhabit the horizon. Tracing continuities in Head’s oeuvre, Lewis shows how the concerns of her fiction are revisited and extended in the later books, describing her final work, *A Bewitched Crossroads*, as the “joyous condensation of her vision” (Lewis, 2007: 274) in which “previous narrative patterns”, treated with caution in the earlier works, finally “soar” (Lewis, 2007: 294). Ethical visions cohere again around states of reciprocity and co-operation, which challenge and transcend the frontiers and boundaries that colonialism and oppositional nationalisms depend upon, as “[l]iberating reciprocal encounters [that] reverberate throughout Head’s writing” find their “most sustained textualiz[ation]” (Lewis, 2007: 288-89).

Lewis’s concluding section, “Imagined Horizons”, urges readers to grapple with the “politics of imagining” that animate Head’s textual worlds. Head, she insists, “was deeply opposed to the relegation of the imagination to a dismissed realm of ‘fantasy’ – conventionally thought to have no meaningful role in collective and political struggles” (Lewis, 2007: 294). Seldom has southern Africa literature played host to such impassioned articulations of the imaginings of power, and the power of the imagination, as we find in Head’s oeuvre; even more seldom has the Southern African critical establishment recognized in imaginative processes the purposefulness that Lewis brings to the fore in *Living on a Horizon*. I recommend this important and beautifully-wrought study in the highest possible terms.



# Review

Cynthia Mugo and Saida Ali

*Counting the Cost of Courage: Trauma Experiences of Women Human Rights Defenders in Zimbabwe* Report, Women of Zimbabwe Arise, Bulawayo: August 2008

## “It is a Challenging Time...”

These are the words that first crossed our minds when we discussed this report ‘Counting the Cost of Courage: Trauma experiences of Women Human Rights Defenders in Zimbabwe’.

The report by Women for Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) was launched on 3 September 2008 at the African Gender Institute (AGI). Reading the report one is reminded of the words of Sylvia Tamale who calls for feminists to be poetically drunk! In quoting words by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet, Charles Baudelaire “Be Drunk”<sup>1</sup>, she challenges human rights defenders, feminists and women’s rights activists to be “elated, exhilarated and drunk on our cause, our objectives, our mission, our obligations”. This is the feeling one gets on reading the WOZA report – women human rights defenders who are not “tipsy” but completely immersed, “giddy”, with what they believe and stand for.

With disturbing pictures of continued violence against women by state agents, the WOZA report brings to light the depth of trauma affecting Zimbabwean women in light of the country’s political, social and economic repression. This report is a search for facts about the nature and prevalence of human rights abuses visited upon WOZA activists, but it is also an assertion of passion and fury, and its drive towards the documentation of (some of) the risks taken in the quest to demand a democratic and just Zimbabwe deserves critical respect.

WOZA, a Ndebele word meaning “come forward” is a social justice movement engaged in non-violent civic action in a politically repressive environment. In response to the social, economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe, WOZA created space to allow Zimbabweans, especially women,

to articulate issues they were too fearful to raise alone. The report points to the struggles of WOZA within a context of desperate times in Zimbabwe since the year 2000. Despite all this WOZA has emerged as a leader in social justice and transformation. Since its formation, WOZA has conducted over 100 peaceful demonstrations that have brought together over 2000 women in the struggle to demand internationally agreed rights such as the right to: assembly, expression, quality healthcare, and living standards in a failing economic system. Members of WOZA have protested over various injustices and crimes against humanity. They aim to keep the voice of protest alive.<sup>2</sup> All of these freedoms outlined in the WOZA report are enshrined in not only international conventions and protocols that Zimbabwe has ratified, but also in the Constitution of Zimbabwe.

The focus of WOZA protests is precise though the way protest occurs involves diverse activities and a range of contextually specific demands since 2000. The report indicates that action by members has included protests over the lack of inclusion of ordinary citizens in the SADC mediation process in June 2007, demands for an end to the political violence based on the March 2008 presidential elections and protests over the dilapidation of the economy due to ill conceived government policies. This range of “voice” shows the fearlessness of WOZA members in treading paths that others may have feared to take, and in directly engaging the state. The report cites political and economic security violations in addition to the commonly reported social violence. This is a significant step in thinking about human rights violations. It opens up the way to disaggregating information on state-sponsored repressions and violations during political crises and, reaching for a more refined analysis. This analysis for Zimbabwe holds the key to the larger picture of social transformation, social justice and democratic change.

For anyone unfamiliar with the difficulties of organizing in Zimbabwe, the report is a reality check as it reveals both the overwhelming enormity of the task ahead for WOZA and the people of Zimbabwe, and the risks of taking on such a task. The Mugabe government has been consistently hostile in response to WOZA members. WOZA protests are unique in their non-violent approach, but they always, provoke hostile and violent reactions from the state agents who send their security forces to disperse the women violently. Instead of the government responding to the underlying political, economic and social problems that motivate women to protest, the police have brutally attacked WOZA members, physically and verbally abused them and further,

have imprisoned them in police cells sometimes overnight with their young children.

The report documents, using quantitative methods, persistent long-term systemic violations of human rights in Zimbabwe by a ruling party desperate to cling to power. The violations include widespread intimidation and harassment of opposition activists, arbitrary arrests and acts of political violence. As the report illustrates, any attempts by political and civic groups to press for alternative policies has been met with repression thus cutting off any possibilities for working towards the improvement of people's lives.

The report is based on quantitative research conducted by WOZA in 2007 to investigate the extent of certain forms of trauma suffered by its members as a result of state repression. 2000 women participated in the study, which reveals the depth to which the political and economic instability has affected the women of Zimbabwe. The study was carried out and completed before the wave of political violence following the 29 March 2008 elections. So, the atrocities committed since April are not part of this report, but it is more than likely that they would deepen the picture of State repression against activists.

The research sought to document two broad categories of trauma suffered by WOZA women; "displacement experiences" and "organized violence and torture" (OVT) mainly from the hands of state agents such as the police and army. According to the report, most women interviewed experienced more incidences of trauma after the country's independence from Britain than before independence. Of the 1, 983 WOZA members interviewed, fourteen per cent experienced trauma as a result of a lack of food in 1979, compared to a staggering sixty-six per cent between 1980 and 1999. On health, nine per cent did not have access to medical treatment in 1979, whereas between 1980 and 1999 this figure shot up to twenty four per cent. On shelter, six per cent did not have access to shelter in 1979, while the number doubles between 1980 and 1999. The rate of dependency has also risen from eleven per cent in 1979 to twenty five per cent between 1980 and 1999. Between the year 2000 and 2007, 2007 recorded the highest levels of trauma with the lack of food topping the list with the percentage of those suffering a lack of food being as high as fifty seven. These point to poverty as one of the main challenges of future work in reconstruction of Zimbabwe.

This kind of documentation is important because it is a first step in redefining global security – focusing on the interleaving human dimensions

of state brutality, both overt and covert. As noted in a report by the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), the concept of local, national and global security has been almost exclusively defined in military terms, thus equating human security with weapon-based security. What the WOZA women have done is to insist on a broader vision, one that puts human life and human rights at the forefront to include lives free of all forms of violence. It is also important in historicizing and drawing the intersections of human rights, democracy and good governance or the lack thereof as being rooted in patriarchy. The report articulates the experiences of women in Zimbabwe and their activities, which are the consequences of women's social and political positions in relation to their lived experiences. This is important since it aids the articulation of women's experiences, and thus "contributes to the process of transforming women's consciousness by giving female activities and experiences public presence and legitimacy" (ACCORD Report).

WOZA members should be saluted for their courage. The report is a challenge and a call to movement building – the power in collective action. The WOZA struggle illustrates that if ordinary people do not question and do not speak out; they are in effect endorsing such violations of human rights. The efforts by WOZA bring to life important lessons on movement building and activism. What cannot be achieved by one person, can be achieved through collective action. There are lessons on efficacy of strategies that are employed in working towards gender equity, social justice and opportunities for activism, collaboration and alliance building. As Symington and Sprenger point out at times there is a "sense of urgency and trepidation, an acute awareness of the struggles of the past and uncertainty about the future" (2005: 2). These are the emotions *Counting the Cost of Courage* evokes. Through the mobilization of women at different levels in Zimbabwe, this report gives some hope, a sense of optimism of Zimbabwean women's willingness to act with renewed vigour – to act collectively, decisively and effectively.

The WOZA report is a refreshing reflection on how change happens given repressive conditions. "Change happens when we say 'no'. When we say no to discrimination. And to dehumanisation. Change happens when we defend each other's rights to dignity. Change happens when we stand to be counted. Change happens when we create spaces for transformation" (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2006:10) . The WOZA report is clear on the commitment to change.

It is also, however, chillingly clear on the costs of that change. As such, the report goes beyond a contribution to knowledge about a very

specific period in Zimbabwean history. It works as a clarion call to activists everywhere, especially those committed, through feminism and a vision of an interdependent, self-sufficient, and peaceful African continent, to go beyond the page. The people of Zimbabwe (and WOZA is only one of the groups battling to create knowledge, alternatives, and political hope) deserve our solidarity. It is time to act.

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## Endnotes

1. This paper was presented at the Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID) 10<sup>th</sup> International Forum on Women's Rights and Development (How Does Change Happen?), Bangkok, Thailand, October 27-30, 2005
2. Women for Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) Report, *Counting the Cost of Courage: Trauma Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders*, August 2008.
3. Paper presented at the AWID 10<sup>th</sup> International Forum on Women's Rights and Development (How Does Change Happen?), Bangkok, Thailand, October 27-30, 2005



# Review

Desiree Lewis

Post-apartheid herstories: Zubeida Jaffer's *Our Generation* Cape Town: Kwela, 2003 and Pregs Govender's *Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination* Johannesburg: Jacana, 2007

A strong tradition of women's autobiographical genres in Africa reveals their potential to subvert official, state-driven and masculinist narratives of nation and community: Nigerian works like La Ray Denzer's *Constance Agatha Cummings-John* (1995) and Folarin Coker's *A Lady: A Biography of Lady Oyinkan Abayomi* (1987) or Laeticia Mukurasi's *Post Abolished* (1991), the story of a Tanzanian woman who was sexually harassed in a state-owned company, stress the agencies of African women in relation to neo-colonialism and patriarchy. Intervening into masculinist narratives of nationalism and post-coloniality as well as domains of textual interpretation that often speak for women, they have contributed to a rich though neglected tradition of women's history from below. In *Our Generation* and *Love and Courage*, Zubeida Jaffer and Pregs Govender expand this vibrant continental legacy of women's self-narratives.

Written by women stalwarts of anti-apartheid struggles and post-apartheid activism, *Our Generation* and *Love and Courage* are at once stirring testimonies of women's political roles in South Africa and powerful interventions into masculinist postcolonial history. They also venture further than what could be described as a first wave of South African women's autobiographical writing<sup>1</sup>: in the eighties, the self-narratives of writers such as Sindiwe Magona, Emma Mashinini and Ellen Kuzwayo challenged hegemonic patriarchal views about struggles for human rights. Jaffer and Govender unravel difficult personal experiences around for example, marriage and family life, or deal frankly with depression, illness and spiritual despair; in so doing they unveil silences that a previous school of black women autobiographers were unwilling or unable to address. Writing at a time when it is less difficult for South African women to "betray" gender-blind notions

of family, community, nation or constantly being strong for others, Jaffer and Govender grapple with gendered dynamics in personal and public life in ways that were not possible for writers like Kuwayo or Mashinini.

Both texts push back the boundaries of masculinist intellectual activism and struggle, and show how women's political involvement prompted moves to ensure gender equality in post-apartheid South Africa, and generated a productive disobedience in the face of gendered authoritarianism – at the level of the family as well as at the level of the state and national politics. As such, the books can be read as inspiring herstories bequeathed to daughters. In fact, the impression of a message to daughters is spelt out in Jaffer's frequent references to her daughter, Ruschka. The writer also invokes an audience of metaphoric daughters, women who can learn from the female-authored stories so often marginalised in male-stream canons. At the end of chapter thirteen, reflecting on the plight of a Dutch woman who witnessed her mother's trauma at the end of World War 2, Jaffer writes about the post-apartheid legacy she is determined to help forge: "I take the image of that woman into my heart, carrying her with me as a constant reminder that this is not the kind of future any of us should wish for our daughters" (2003: 90).

Pregs Govender's autobiography is both an inspiring and a cautionary narrative about the courage needed to retain ethical and political vision in the face of struggles for individual and social freedom and against all injustice and authoritarianism. Govender describes her early life in terms of its class and political complexity, and her carefully structured text provides enthralling descriptions of the author's childhood in Durban, of her family and community, and of her eventual involvement in student politics. As a spirited child growing up in one of Apartheid's specially designated "Indian areas", she is influenced by her father's radicalism and grapples from a young age with various social injustices. Her political awareness grows when she begins to attend university and becomes a student activist, and her militancy becomes even bolder once she starts teaching and later works as a trade unionist.

Govender also deals intricately with personal experiences – as a wife who battles to extricate herself from constricting scripts of femininity, as a single parent struggling to raise children on a meagre income, and as a spiritual being searching for an enduring sense of serenity. This textured account of different facets of her life is connected to her better-known public activity – as a leading member of the Women's National Coalition formed in 1992, as head of the Women's Charter campaign which would make recommendations

for gender transformation under democracy, and later as an ANC MP in the first parliament after 1994.

Especially noteworthy in Govender's account of South African politics is her portrayal of the build-up to the dismantling of apartheid. Govender gravitated increasingly towards the feminist organisation and mobilising which drove the institutionalizing of gender transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Her experience of feminist activism under Apartheid and in Parliament allows her to provide a nuanced inside view of the way gender activism shifted away from civil society to become the responsibility of the state, and the autobiography will be of considerable interest to analysts of gender struggles in South Africa.

Many readers are also likely to find her insights into corruption, nepotism and intolerance within anti-apartheid activism eye-opening and sobering. Particularly revealing is the writer's evidence that present-day patterns of state authoritarianism originate in trends within the anti-apartheid movement. When Govender worked as a trade unionist in the late 1980s and tried to pursue struggles for justice, union leaders threatened and condemned her, and eventually ordered to drop her call for action. Exposing little-known evidence of trade union activism in the 1980s, Govender writes: "Things went from bad to worse... The organisers and the administration staff were warned not to speak to me.... Ostracism was a powerful weapon" (2007: 103). Experiences of such persecution start even earlier – when she is involved in student politics and realises that "leaders were excellent in their ability to strategise and plan, but their desire to control everything and everyone was a huge weakness" (2007: 58).

The writer makes it clear that both the anti-apartheid struggle and the postcolonial state have provided scope for some to abuse power; paradoxically, then, they often reflected the brutal codes of the system that they sought to supplant. In the face of these codes, women's independence is construed as disloyalty, disobedience, a betrayal of what is "proper" in a woman; wayward women are humiliated and divested of a sense of belonging within communities: ostracism as she reminds the reader, is a very powerful weapon.

In dealing with the post-apartheid period, Govender describes how earlier experiences of being disciplined and isolated intensified as the stakes for power through access to the state apparatus increased among the new elite. She shows that the state is as much classed as gendered, and that this character permeates post-apartheid nation-building; as is the case in other

African countries, state apparatuses become important means for individuals to consolidate capital and power. The autobiography explores the writer's courageous condemnation of events including: the arms deal and the way that the government prioritised military expenditure, often involving personal gain for politicians, even when 70 per cent of South Africans live in poverty; the introduction of the neo-liberal economic policies which steadily supplanted the more socialistic economic programmes introduced immediately after independence; and the failure of the state to provide adequate response to HIV/AIDS, especially as this affected poor women. Although Govender's courageous responses to these issues are well-known, her testimony of the details of her responses, and of the action taken against her for "insubordination" are captivating and shocking.

Particularly important in the book's treatment of these issues is the writer's complex analysis of power, gender and patriarchy. Refusing the simplistic idea that patriarchy is a system in which "men oppress women", she explores the way in which social behaviour and political action come to be pervasively gendered, with masculine and repressive behaviour and codes often being assumed by women and men determined to protect their privileges and power. Deeply entrenched cultures of aggression are revealed especially starkly in an episode she recounts in a chapter titled "Elimination", when she describes her discovery that her commissar in the ANC underground had sought formal permission to have her eliminated because she was "insubordinate".

Govender's prose is evocative and often almost lyrical. The narrative voice is that of a woman who has passionately immersed herself in myriad challenges at an emotional, spiritual and political level, and a deep serenity and compassion – despite the frequently alarming content – makes this work highly inspiring and optimistic. Its title, *Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination*, is therefore extremely apt, and encapsulates a state of freedom seen to be vitally linked to resisting injustice and authoritarianism. The book provides a deeply spiritual configuring of what individual and social freedom could and should be in a real "democracy". This optimistic vision is not the facile reconciliatory message that has been central to commercialised post-apartheid nation-building, a process that Govender relentlessly demystifies. Repeatedly uncovering some ugly facts behind "the struggle", and "the new democracy", Govender gives fresh content to the idea of speaking truth to power.

Like Govender's, Zubedia Jaffer's narrative deals with her involvement in South Africa's present with reference to the past, and explores distinct

periods between the 1960s and the present day. These could be described as a period when anti-apartheid struggles shaped strong bonds of loyalty and solidarity – in class, religious, ethnic and gendered terms – among those who were driven by the struggle against racist injustice; the euphoric period of the build-up to the first democratic election and a time immediately thereafter; and a postcolonial phase of reflectively taking stock of how far democratic struggles still have to go.

Jaffer's style is very different from Govender's; documentary and naturalistic, it graphically communicates events about her personal and political life. She often deals with events a-chronologically, shuttling backwards and forwards in ways that capture her own tortuous struggles with pasts in relations to presents. Here her detention and torture are extremely important, and function as a reminder of past spectres that she has dedicated herself to challenge. The purpose of the impressionistic style and a-chronological structure becomes especially clear when Jaffer describes her illness, which developed several years after the ANC government came into power, towards the end of the book. This physical and emotional trauma is shown to stem from the political persecution she endured under Apartheid and a long period of simply never having had the scope to deal with the trauma of her detention and torture.

Thematically, the autobiography focuses on women's un-heard or misunderstood strengths, on what Ellen Kuzwayo in her autobiography has called "Patterns Behind the Struggle". Despite the visibility of male heroes in South Africa's struggle (such as Govan Mbeki, Ashley Kriel, Trevor Manuel, or Albie Sachs), the autobiography conveys the centrality of women activists and thinkers in struggles for democratic rights and discourses, especially at a time when the UDF was waging a final attack on the weakening Apartheid state. The narrator herself is of course a key example of female determination and resilience, and "the personal as political" is given a charged meaning in accounts of, for example Jaffer as a young woman leaving Cape Town to study journalism at Rhodes, a historically white university, or as a pregnant woman standing up to her torturers and maintaining her commitment to radical journalism. Without lapsing into individualism, Jaffer conveys evidence that she has excelled in a world monopolized by dominant racial and gendered groups, and her experiences as a journalist especially illustrate her success in a sphere that has traditionally been highly masculinist.

As is the case with Govender, courage in the public sphere is linked to courage in dealing with personal relationships and emotional experiences:

Jaffer describes expressions of independence in relation to her father, her husband, the imams who sought to monitor her submissiveness as a child and a woman seeking a divorce. She provides a clear picture of a woman who refuses to compromise her independence, and like the fiction writer Rayda Jacobs, shows that Islamic doctrine has often been reconstructed to prop up patriarchal interests.

As is the case in many South African autobiographies, Jaffer's individual experience is connected to the collective, and she deals with her own triumphs in relation to other women, including her female relatives. The autobiography provides an important account of the author's family and an ethos that is significant to historians of this period. In particular, however, it celebrates the tenacity and spirit of the writer's mother and grandmother, women who refused to conform to dominant ideas about wifely subservience and invisibility, and who defied apartheid, racism and patriarchy. The subtext of the story of male-led struggle is therefore a record of how black women have always struggled for justice and rights; accounts and photographs of women such as Zora Mehlomakhulu, detained as a young woman in the 1970s and Mildred Ramakaba-Lesiea, one of the main organisers of women activists in the Western Cape, locate the author's personal experience in a proud and independent history of struggle.

In ways similar to Govender's autobiography, the book seems to seek to expel pain and suffering through truth. When Jaffer describes her submission to the TRC, she explains her reason for testifying as "I felt that I don't want to go into the future, in the years to come, and pass all this pain on to my daughter and future generations" (2003: 134). Like Govender, then, Jaffer is alert to the existential and psychic implications of political oppression, to the way that injustice and persecution are not only political and social processes, but also afflictions that corrode the human spirit. Both autobiographers explore "freedom" in ways that transcend traditional, masculine and rational definitions, and tap into a realm of feeling and perception often associated with the gendered or raced "Other".

Several years ago, Amina Mama<sup>2</sup> called on African feminists to challenge gendered authoritarianism at all levels of African psychology. Expanding public debate on issues such as activism, democracy and human rights, and also resounding with the courage, passion and eloquence that the autobiographers have demonstrated throughout their lives, *Our Generation* and *Love and Courage* take Mama's call up in powerful ways.

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## Endnotes

1. Black South African women, such as Noni Jabavu, did write autobiographies before the eighties, although the eighties – marking the airing of gender debates in anti-apartheid struggle – saw the consolidated production of work by black women autobiographers.
2. See Amina Mama, “Shedding the Masks and Tearing the Veils: Cultural Studies for a Post-Colonial Africa” in Imam, A., Mama, A. and Sow, F. eds. *Engendering African Social Sciences*. Dakar: CODESRIA. 1997.



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