

# Editorial: Researching for Life: Paradigms and Power

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*“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?*

## References

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## Endnotes

1. Head, Bessie 1993 "A Personal View of the Survival of the Unfittest", in *The Cardinals, With Meditations and Stories* Cape Town: David Philip 1993: 149
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
3. ISSER (Institute for Statistical, Social Science and Economic Research) at U. Ghana, and the NIR (National Institute of Research) at U. Botswana are examples of these.
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".