

"Circles and circles": Notes on African feminist debates around gender and violence in the c21

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"When we move, we cause ruptures."
(Patricia McFadden¹)

"That we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief... If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to create less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, may be made of grief besides a cry for war."
(Judith Butler, preface to *Precarious Life*, 2004)

Introduction

The strategies opened for political activism through mobilization as "women" shift dramatically in different historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts (Geisler, 2004; Razavi and Molyneux, 2002; Ferree and Tripp, 2006). Some analyses of such shifts privilege identity politics as a key resource in understanding differences, tensions, and alliances (so that religious identities, for example, or racialized ones, become central to the theorization of particular activist agendas or initiatives). Others are more interested in the contextual confluence of economic and political realities through which people gendered as "women" find themselves deprived of access to power, material resources, and/or political representation. In the past few years, there have been vibrant, critical discussions on the nature, shape and direction of "women's movement" organizing, and in African contexts, I would suggest there are four overarching debates which have circled continually through intellectual writing on "women's movements", activist organization at several levels, and within numerous fora – workshops, conferences, World Social

Forum tents, small rooms and patches of shade in which planning, arguing, and celebrations have been undertaken (Bennett, 2009).

The first debate concerns the meaning of the state. Although there are, of course, continental contexts in which the concept of a coherent “state” is not useful, there has been over the past four decades, considerable energy vested in the struggle to hold post ‘flag-democracy’ states accountable to ideals of gender equality in terms of political representation, state-based budget processes, and the delivery of resources and services. Where “states” themselves are however corrupt, fragmented, in rapid transition, or organized through military rule, there has been debate about the value of this work, and its vulnerability to co-optation by interests far from feminist (Mama, 2003).

This debate is interlinked with a second: the meaning of the interaction between the North and diverse initiatives concerned with “women’s human rights,” “South-based feminisms,” and “gender-alert social justice”. As Aili Tripp suggests, “The term ‘transnational feminism’ is sometimes used as shorthand for Western involvement in and influence on feminist movements globally”(Tripp, 2004: 46)² and although (as she points out) this shorthand expresses only one dynamic of transnational feminist organizing, it is the dynamic which provokes difficult questions concerning integrity, sustainability, control, and longterm strategy.

The third debate concerns the very existence of a “women’s movement” (Essof, 2005). In an era in which WTO policies, the still-ongoing American war on Iraq, and increasing gaps between the world’s wealthy and its poor, belie notions of “progress” or “democracy”, there has been a powerful escalation of political protest, demanding alternatives. The place of gender justice within these protests, alongside the seeming intransigence of local gender oppressions, has led to serious reflection, analysis, and a desire for new beginnings, new strategies. Some of this discussion has been accompanied by a sense of despair (Chigudu, 2007), challenges to “older feminists” (Wilson, Sengupta, and Evans, 2006), and a search for new alliances. Other voices have approached current political and economic contexts of complex gender injustices with renewed vigour, theoretical analysis which seeks to engage a wide array of local and transnational activists, and strategy which encompasses the streets and the screen. These voices are most visibly located not in research literature, but in the activism and report-production of feminist organizations which deliberately challenge convention about who constitutes the category “women” and what it means to design theory about

the eradication of violence in “women’s” lives.

One of these organizations, I would argue, is *Urgent Action*, based in Nairobi, Kenya. Since 2005, the organization has been clear that fighting for the rights of people who identified as (or were targeted by state and local homophobias as) lesbian, gay, transgendered, bisexual and intersexed flowed logically from an overarching commitment to the defence of human rights. More pointedly, targeted anti-homophobic work flowed directly from a long engagement with the meaning of violence and discrimination against women (Kiragu, 2005). This position raises a fourth major debate driving the shapes of conversation within feminist movement-building.

This debate concerns the fact that concerns long animating women’s organizing -- access to reproductive health and to freedom from gender-based violence – have become embedded into demands for access to sexual rights. “On the global front, too, it has become clear that in the post-9/11 world, sexual politics – and the morality that underpins dominant discourses on sexuality – can no longer be relegated to the periphery of feminist analysis” (Mama, 2005). The link, however, between gender, culture, and sexuality is so intricate and so deeply naturalized within discourses of nationalism, the family, and – indeed – into *being human*³ that organizing through recognition of sexuality as a political force demands a conversation about what it is we mean, in 2010, when we link the terms “gender”, “sexuality” and “violence”.

The proactive defence of counter-heteronormativities, in particular, has both been termed “the true test for human rights defenders” (Kiragu, 2005) and raises an opportunity to explore the range of theoretical conversations which implicate contextual norms of gender and sexualities within economic, state, social, social, systemic, military and/or epistemological violences.

This article seeks to explore, at a theoretical level, the broad trajectories of recent African feminist engagements with ideas about gender and violence, and argues that while there is evidence of “silo-ization” between different approaches to understanding what it means for feminists to strategize against violence, contemporary counter-heteronormative activisms can both benefit from links to differently-focused activism (such as work which confronts militarism) and simultaneously contribute enormously to how we can imagine worlds free of complex misogyny (Pereira, 2003).

The article opens with a section which locates questions about the link between gender and violence within contemporary African feminism within exploration of colonialism and its legacies. The section moves into a brief

survey of theory on what has been conventionally termed “gender-based violence” and highlights some of the debates in this field about the meaning of patriarchy, about the impact of wide-spread feminist activism shaped through NGOs and legal reform work, and about “culture” or “poverty” as explanations for violent misogyny. The following section suggests that these debates are articulated largely in isolation from other zones of writing, such as discussion of the HIV epidemic, work on African masculinities, and particularly recent research and writing about gender and militarism in African contexts, where masculinities are implicated in questions of war-driven violence. The final section asks what knowledges of violence against *lgbti* identities, organizations, and spaces bring to the theorization of gender and violence.

Starting points

The work of theorizing the interaction between gender and violence is bedeviled, globally, by questions of origin. If one of the dynamics deployed most widely by human beings in their social, economic, and political craving for notions of ‘being’ (routes to the comprehension of life, and others’ lives) – *the processes of gender* – can be experienced as thoroughly implicated in torture, murder, cruelty, demonization and human abjection, where does such violence come from? Surely the processes of “becoming social” within African history which are so deeply ingrained into cosmologies, notions of family, and the core business of sexuality and reproduction cannot *of themselves* be organically hospitable to unique forms of violence (the sexual torture of people located as “wives”, or peer-bonding exercises among young men which demand the rape of a person gendered as a “girl”, the kinds of cruelty which demand “perpetration” from someone gendered as a man and the response of agony and fear from someone gendered as woman)?

In African feminist theory, there has been a tense relationship between ideas about violence which prioritize the processes of colonialism as fundamental to understanding the relationship between gender and violence and ideas about local norms of becoming gendered which may – or may not – have tolerated, or encouraged, abuse of women (in particular contexts) as part and parcel of conventional and contextualized masculinities and femininities. Although it is difficult to generalize, post-colonial writing generally interprets colonialism *as* violence (epistemological, embodied, economic). Research reveals diverse layers of colonial praxis as saturated with hierarchical notions of gender, sexual coercion of women, the inability to respect or understand non-colonial social

arrangements which involved gender, and the consistent overall degradation of women (Loomba, 1998, McClintock, 1995; Gasa, et al., 2008).

Nineteenth century racial classifications were primarily driven by the terror of colonial notions of gender dynamics, whose potential to create unpredictable heterosexual/ reproductive relationships between those born to the context and those seeking new power within it was obvious (McClintock, 1995). The preservation of “racial purity” was a gendered business, twisting the meanings of “race” and “gender” together into deadly ideological prisms through which to implement economic and political policies. As a form of epistemological violence, post nineteenth-century processes of “becoming gendered” within African contexts were inextricably linked to racializations which rationalized the theft of land, resources, and authority.

At one level, then, the epistemological gaze of colonialism⁴ has been argued as foundational to research on gender and violence in contemporary African contexts. The gaze itself is seen as intensely violent, shoving human beings in complex and diverse forms of social and political organization into new and distorted categories of humanity. In British colonial contexts, within the c20, such categories included “our women”, “European women”, “native women”, “non-European women,” “Coloured women”, “black women,” “white women”, “African women”. The relationship here between becoming gendered and violence is thus intimate; the violence is an epistemological and discursive one, wrapping human beings into categories of otherness alien to their own ways of being and working, and useful only to the operation of class formation and the extraction of local labour.

At another level, records of colonial administration suggest another form of connection between gender and violence. The earliest legal codes against rape in Cape Town and in “Rhodesia” were put in place explicitly to “protect” white settler women from the local men around (and in) their homes, and no sanctions were formalized to protect local women, and girls, from settler men’s sexual and physical violence. Most lenses through which we can illuminate the links between different forms of early c20 gender dynamics and the violences of sexual assault, battery, abduction, harassment, and torment are muddled and distorting. They highlight the hypersexualization of “African masculinities” as aggressive; they construct “European women” as cocooned and sexually fragile racists; the lives, relationships, engagements with sexual delight or heterosexually-generated violences between ordinary men and women largely disappear.

The avalanche of African feminist challenges to “ordinary” violence – wife-

beating, sexual abuse of girls and women, sexual harassment in public and work-places – in post-independence states, from the late 1980's onwards, did not come from nowhere. However, there is a powerful myth that in contexts of liberation struggles, grave political instability, and conflict, women who are being targeted for violence (especially sexual violence) by men in their daily lives do not usually challenge this violence for fear of “betraying” the men and the movements they may belong to. This myth is usually accompanied by a twin: that African activism combating violence against women in the late 80's and 90's (through to Beijing in 1995) was rooted in copy-cat work based on Northern feminist writings and ideologies of patriarchy. Not only is this simplistic (Northern feminist writings and activism of the late 80s and 90's are full of debate about the connection between gender and violence, and include very strong voices of critique – mostly by women of colour⁵ – on analyses which ignore the dynamics of imperialism); it is simultaneously derogatory, profiling diverse African -based women activists and thinkers as a mere flock of sheep.

Overall, however, there is very little systematic research on how women largely invisibilized by colonial and early independence records⁶, who may have experienced violence from particular men as part and parcel of their lives as daughters, wives, or family workers, fought against this. And there is even less which seeks to trace a history of those wrestles and negotiations from the early c20, in a specific contexts, to the 1990's efforts of feminist thinkers and activists to change laws, to institute organizations to advocate against women's abuse, and to write about what it is that survivors of such abuse might know about the politics of gendered embodiment.

In South Africa, hints of women's rejection of sexual harassment and gender-based stigmatization come to us through the records of trade union movements from the early 80s, from the pages of *Speak*⁷, from the acknowledgement of high-ranking *Umkhonto we Sizwe* women cadres that sexual violence took place within the underground military formation (Mtintso, 1997), from the formation of organizations (People Opposed to Women Abuse), and the records of women's organizations who were part of the broad anti-apartheid mass movement of the 1980s, such as the Port Alfred Women's Organization (Meer, 1990: 80).

In Senegal, Awa Thiam's *La Parole aux Negresses* was written in 1978, and documented in an inimitable way her outrage – explicitly feminist – at the range of violences women in parts of West Africa speak of suffering at

the hands of husbands, fathers, brothers, families, and other women (she includes female genital cutting as one of four dominant and normalized forms of violence against women) (Thiam, 1978). Women in Nigeria (WIN) was formed in 1982, and explicitly identified sexual violence against women as one of the major barriers to their participation in the economy (Mohammad and Madunagu, 1986). Such evidence (a tip of the iceberg) of engaged theoretical work suggests roots but – to my knowledge – no comprehensive narrative of the threads of pan-African feminist theory and activism arising from analyses of links between gender dynamics and violence from the early c20 to the 1990's⁸.

By the late 1990's, however, what is indisputable is the number of NGOs on the continent dedicated to the support of women and girls who had been abused, physically, sexually, economically and psychologically by people gendered as men (and related to these survivors in more ways than it is possible to describe) (Green, 1999). This support included counseling, legal advocacy, efforts to integrate a women's recovery from violence into new opportunities for economic well-being, finding shelter, training law enforcement officials, writing educational materials, driving policy change, conducting research. The work was almost always donor-supported (but struggled for resources), and driven by women who worked often, at first, as volunteers. The term "gender-based violence" came to replace the phrase "violence against women" as the preferred term for the kinds of violence suffered by women, it was theorised, on account of their gendered status within different contexts.

Gender, as a political dynamic, thus became theoretically foregrounded as a force which organized "women" into positions of vulnerability (through marriage, ideological notions of "belonging" to men in terms of customary norms, and/or through options for access to labour and resources). The control of sexuality was understood to be part and parcel of the deployment of gender against women, and thus a term like "gender-based violence" came to encompass a vast range of potential violations: rape, domestic assault, abduction, trafficking, incest, sexual harassment, beating, murder of wives and sexual partners, and so on. Intersectional analyses stressed the importance of class, ethnicity, race, and/or age to analyses of gender-based violence, and usually recognized that women with fewer resources were more vulnerable to sustained violence. The meaning of sexuality, in this approach, was strongly oriented towards the deconstruction of heterosexualities as zones of risk and mutilation masquerading as "pleasure", "intimacy" and "family" for both

people gendered as “men” and “women”.

In many ways, however, this approach to the link between gender dynamics and violence struggled with theories which position colonialism (and its legacies) as responsible for rooting particular possibilities for gendered cruelty into African-based people’s lives. The struggle manifested itself in the discursive dichotomization of “modernity” and “tradition” (where “tradition” normalized violence against women as ritual and “modernity” recognized such ritual as inhumane), and in the associated pair: “culture” and “rights” (here, “culture” tolerates, and even encourages, violent masculinities and passive forms of womanhood, while “rights” welcomes gendered equality, free of abuse).

Some theorists tried to bridge these dichotomies by suggesting that the economic legacies of colonialisms, and the projects of independence which failed (or were not interested in) the redistribution of resources, accounted for gender-based violence – economically disempowered men were theorized as “e-masculated”, and sought to establish their authority through rape, or women-battery (Kraak and Simpson, 1998 Mills and Ssewakaringa, 2005). Others have chosen a different route by stressing the fluidity and pragmatism of “culture” and stressing the historical fact that rights discourses in African contexts (especially those entrenched in constitutions) are part and parcel of national debates about justice, humanity, and morality, and thus as “cultural” as any other prism (Ndashe, 2004).

The first argument is discriminatory and counterfactual (if all men disempowered by poverty turned to gender-based violence as a *modus vivendi*, I think the -- admittedly unsatisfactory – quantifications of assault against women and girls would escalate hugely; in addition, men with resources are very well documented as perpetrators, world-wide).

The second is much more interesting; it leaves hanging, though, the conundrum of origin. If an interest in rights (including the right to be free of sexual violence and domestic assault) is as thoroughly imbued with African sensibilities, debate, and negotiation as any other legal concept with which our judiciaries work, then from where does the overwhelming “normalization” of some men’s sexual, domestic, professional, and privatized violence against women (and, often, girls) stem?

Different interlocutors?

In the past decade, the relationship between violence and gender has been raised in debates which, on the surface of it, are not organically connected to African feminist theories which seek to politicize the private, exposing conventional contexts of security (the family, the marriage, the religious, the intimate) as zones of gendered power struggles where women may lose hope, sexual pleasure and health, resources, and sanity alike.

These debates are very interesting, both in themselves, and for what they can offer to c21 discussion of “gender,” “sexuality” and “violence”. The most prolific of them has been the years of work on the transmission and treatment of the HI virus. A second lies in the efforts to integrate an understanding of gender dynamics into the theorization of militarism and conflict; this discussion has been especially sharp around the meaning of rape as a weapon of conflict and war-mongering. A third – not unrelated to the other two – takes the performances and rituals of masculinities seriously, exploring the processes of becoming gendered as a boy and man in ways which are more interested in political and economic pressures towards a tolerance for violence (towards men and – differently – towards women) than in ideas about masculinities and testosterone.

HIV, gendered and sexual dynamics, and notions of violence

Material on the links between sociality, gender, violence, and HIV and AIDS is so vast that it would be naïve to try and summarize the theoretical contributions of African feminists in a short section here. Suffice it to say that the dominant contribution here is three-fold. Firstly, a challenge to the initially overwhelming biomedical orientation of thought on African bodies and lives, in the context of HIV, from sociologists, public health researchers and feminists insisted – in the mid-90s – on putting gender dynamics squarely into the centre of questions about HIV transmission and treatment. Secondly, the shift from the search for marginal populations responsible for transmission (gay men, long distance truck drivers, sex workers) to the recognition that transmission occurs most frequently within the ordinary dramas of sex-lives (teenage romance, marital beds, sex-for-pleasure, affairs and multiple partnering) encourage thoughtfulness about the shapes of heterosexual liaison, and the place of gender dynamics within them. Young women and men, women having sex with men who had several partners, married women, and sexual transactions of many different kinds became routes to “identities” which were not as easily

stigmatized as “immoral” or “sinful” and therefore deserving of the virus. Thirdly, gender-based violence was gradually accepted as worth consideration in understanding transmission. The definition of “gender-based violence” here is, however, fuzzy; there is research which targets practices such as widow inheritance (Nyanzi, 2009), virginity testing, and female genital cutting as practices which increase the likelihood of transmission of the virus to girls and women. Within a separable theorization of “gender-based violence” in some countries, the fact that the HI virus can be transmitted during any form of rape is medically and legally recognized (everyone involved is vulnerable, of course, but the body vulnerable to the most trauma is also most vulnerable to transmission). Overall, African feminist work has done much to centralize gender dynamics as essential to understanding the relations of power, identity, and agencies in which transmission becomes possible.

Masculinities research

The question of masculinities could be located both within its own theoretical trajectory within African-rooted scholarship and activism, and it could also be argued to have strong dialogue with HIV-oriented discussion. The first collected edition of research on “African masculinities” was put together in 2005 by L. Ouzgane and R. Morrell, *African Masculinities: men in Africa from the late nineteenth century to the present*. The collection is wide-ranging; the overarching frame however is explicitly concerned with hybridities of masculinization created in collusion with, and rebellion against, diverse forms of political and/or religious authorities. And although there is empirical evidence in the different chapters suggesting that degradation of people gendered as women is normalized within masculinities, no chapter explicitly confronts the relationship between becoming masculine and tolerance of violence, especial violence against women.

It is the work on masculinities connected with HIV transmission which foregrounds questions of violence towards women as tightly wound into the possibility of men’s access to status, peer-bonding and authority. The work is heavily concentrated upon Southern Africa, and the performances of masculinities within youth cultures, urban poverties, work environments, and mobile professional cosmopolitan success are peppered with high levels of tolerance for violence against women, strong investment in visibly “successful” sexuality, and seeming indifference (in heterosexual encounters) to women’s sexual power, choice, or pleasure (Burja, 2002; Barker, 2005;

Morrell, 2003; Varga, 2001, Campbell, 2000; Shefer et al, 2005; Smith, 2007). Much of the theory is carefully attuned to the shifting economic landscapes within the contexts under study, linking the shapes of changing masculinities to questions of forced migrancy, highly competitive markets for labour, and the challenges of political and economic instability.

A few voices (such as Tina Sideris, Kopano Ratele, Lincoln Theo), consistently wary of the spectral historical figures conjured up by discourses of hyper(hetero)sexuality, violent and careless misogynies, and myopically self-seeking itinerant identities, encourage an imaginative engagement with masculinity which could dislocate becoming gendered from predications concerning authority, labour, and power. Reading the work as a collective, however, one is struck overall by how little theory rejects “masculinization” as an interesting or socially valuable route to the notion of *human being*, flirting instead with notions of “crises” and “flaws” (Murunga, 2010).

Militarism as violence

The work of African feminists who concentrate on understanding the technologies, processes and strategies of conflict and militarism (Mama and Okazawa-Rey, 2008; Ochieng, 2008; Lewis, 2006; Karame, 2006) is a different critical interlocutor. The theorization in this field of the relationship between gender and violence is somewhat unsettled (and unsettling). On the one hand, the intimacies between gendered options for being alive (and the ways these are embedded into questions of access to land and resources) and the shapes of the violence within armed conflict are clear. As Clarke suggests, it is precisely a reliance on gendered convention (even as conflict zones may radicalize these at moments of extreme crisis) which contributes to the formation of “armies”, “refugees”, “those who kill”, “those who flee” (Clarke, 2008). Here, Butler’s argument that gender dynamics are implicated – as categorical violence -- into the deepest centres of social process (and must manifest as such) resonates (Butler, 2004).

On the other hand, the extraordinary work of ISIS-WICCE, Uganda, as an organization which documents the experiences of women survivors of war and armed conflict (Ochieng, 2008) is less concerned with the notion of gender *as* epistemic (and actualized) violence. ISIS-WICCE is interested in the knowledges of war told through the voices of women who have survived catastrophic devastation and/or who have found ways to organize their way into leadership and influence in the face of obdurate “post-conflict”

processes and the conflict-driven destruction of all community livelihood. The conviction that women's stories matter, politically and epistemologically, is driven not so much by any essentialism but by a decade of information on what gendered embodiment, in conflict zones, has meant for those largely marginalized by the categories of "armed fighter"⁹, "*military commander*," or "*peace-negotiator*".

Just as theory on gender and violence created through a focus on masculinities struggles with the idea that the processes of becoming gendered are, in themselves, a form of violence (so that the quest for a "non-violent" masculinity is oxymoronic), so the writing on gender and violence emerging from consideration of conflict, transitional justice, or militarism struggles with the public/private divide, a classic point of feminist analytic deconstruction. There is virtually no recognition within recent writing on conflict and peace-building of the fact that violence against women, and the knowledge of political embodiment which flows from these experiences, has been a cornerstone of feminist theory for decades. It is as though the degradation, sexual attacks, and mass public terrorization of war and conflict dwell in space uninformed by the possibility of domestic assault, rape, or gendered fear and brutality within "civilian" or "peaceful" (and private) environments. Although writers like Sideris, Gqola, and Muthien have, as feminists, rejected talk about security and conflict which accepts the distinction between "war" and "peace" for women (or men) (Sideris, 2003; Gqola, 2000), other theorists and activists are not so sure that what happens under conditions of mass-based, multi-pronged, armed conflict should be conflated, theoretically or strategically, with the vulnerabilities of femininity within the home, the ordinary street, and the normalizations of gender dynamics.

"Circles and circles": the violence of heteronormativities

"You can just go round and round in circles and circles: you can't be at school because you want to be a boy, not a girl; you can't go home because your mother says you are killing her; you can't see your father because he says if you are such a boy, you can join the army and fight like a man and hopefully you will be killed; you can't kiss your girlfriend because you are so scared about what will happen when she finds out; you are a man and you need to get check-ups for cervical cancer, because that's what your sister died of; you go round and round, circles

and circles in your head; you feel insane, and then you realize, they have got you" (participant, transgender justice workshop, Cape Town, October, 2010)

In the five years since Urgent Action published its report on LGBTI rights as the "true test for human rights defenders" (Kiragu, 2005), the assault on counter-heteronormativities across the continent has escalated dramatically¹⁰. This escalation has included repeated efforts by state actors (including Presidents), senior religious authorities, judicial officials, and a wide range of bodies (from the African Union to WILDAF) to intensify legal, political and social discrimination against anyone identified as *lgbti* (and – in some cases – anyone supportive of *lgbti* people's rights and lives)¹¹. Even in a country like South Africa, where legislation actively protects these rights, violent homophobia can be witnessed in the media, in popular and religious discourses, and in targeted and sometimes lethal assaults (Mkize, et al., 2010). The violence is frequently legitimated through reference to religious texts (often unexplored in any exegetically honest way), through sweeping notions of pan-African cultural homogeneity, and through a particular version of anti-"Western" discourse.

Experiences of such violence are terrifying and the shapes in which perpetrators come are endlessly various: brothers, friends, school-teachers, doctors, strangers, priests, parents, police officers, lawyers, street traders, children, taxi-drivers, party-goers, musicians, politicians, writers, soccer-players. As varied as the perpetrators, so are the forms of the violence: everything from murder to levels of unimaginable social and economic exclusion. The outrage and hatred catalysed through homo/transphobia is bewilderingly violent, and yet, with the exception of a few feminist organizations on the continent (notably *Sister Namibia*, *Amanitare*, *Urgent Action* and *POWA*), there has been very little activism based in linkages between "gender-based violence" and "homo/transphobic violence" and indeed, African *lgbti* organizations (and individuals) have not been wholeheartedly welcomed¹² into the strategic work of those tackling domestic violence (for example) or those who focus on gender and transitional justice or gender and militarism. Given that some of Africa's leading feminist voices have, in the past decade, been publicly both explicit about the theoretical links between gender, the processes of heteronormativities, and the multi-stratal layers at which new gender-formations are resisted (often very violently) and explicit, too, about

the possibilities of working across and within these layers¹³, this lack of deep co-operation seems odd.

Arguments to particularize homo/transphobic violence?

It is certainly the case that the current violences directed towards *lgbti* people – at the surface – seem differently organized from those marshalled (for example) through domestic violence. For one thing, they are legal, in many forms, and widely justified in popular and religious opinion. For another, the authority to police *lgbti* space, identities, and relationships is devolved across society: children in the schoolyard can be as powerful in their active homophobia as state jurists.

Thirdly, while (again for example) advocacy against domestic violence often recognizes the term “women” as a stable category, essential to advocacy, *lgbti* connotes so loose – and diverse – a constituency of people, issues, and political struggles that it is barely understood by popular discourses. It may be possible to grasp a slogan such as “*real men don’t beat women*”; it is much more difficult to accept that categorization by gender, and attendant assumptions about sexualities, may constitute harassment in itself, and legitimates a flood of subtle and gross brutality. The latter is not a slogan; neither does it slot smoothly into the current languages of gender equality. While domestic violence may target a woman for being a “bad wife”, and the violence of war-mongers may be fuelled by notions of national, ethnic, religious and militia/gang memberships, the violence of *lgbti*-oriented assaults seems to deny the possibility of *lgbti* humanity itself.

And finally, of course, *lgbti* justice demands rethinking masculinity. It is not enough to suggest that homophobia targeted at people gendered as men (*gay*, *MSM*, *the man who thinks other men are beautiful as soul/sexual partners*) is simply a particular form of political surveillance, catching all people born with visible penises into diverse networks and negotiations of masculinities. Gay men certainly negotiate masculinities; they also, however, redefine the language of desire, insisting on pleasures that resist domestication or formal authority¹⁴. And transphobia cannot imagine masculinity without a conventionally-sexed male body. While there has been a growth of literature on African masculinities, almost nothing takes up the question lived by transmen: what masculinities can be fashioned through re-sexing the body? if masculinity may be a choice (although an urgent one, for transmen and transwomen), what options for ‘new masculinities’ – or new “human beings” –

can be glimpsed? The “new masculinities” desired by those theorizing gender-based violence (Sideris, 2004) prioritize an interest in “women’s” freedom (*women’s rights are human rights!*); the “new masculinities” theorized through transexperiences despise the notion that the processes of becoming gendered should be fixed in relation to one another, except by the choice of those involved (Marais, Morgan, Wellbeloved, 2009; Cabral, 2005)..

This places theorization of violence into a seeming dilemma: if ideas about patriarchy and colonialism predict that masculinization encourages violence, the link between gender and violence is causal and catalytic – gendering dichotomizes the organization of social violence, just as it dichotomizes the organization of labour, authority, or ownership of land. If ideas about contemporary conventions about being gendered as “men” or “women” (which include predictions about heteronormativity) predict violence, the shape of the link changes. It becomes one of ontology. Gendering is no longer implicated in shaping the terms of violence: gender, as practiced conventionally despite diversity of contexts, *is* violence.

Closer than at first sight?

I have made four arguments above for differentiating thought about the experiences of violences aimed at *lgbti* people and the experiences of those (especially women) assaulted by rape, domestic violence, sexual assault, and sexual harassment: the public encouragement of homo/transphobia, the wide social participation in active homo/transphobia, the complexity of the *lgbti* space in political and popular imagination, and the place of masculinities in each zone. Perhaps there are more; what needs to be done with these four arguments, however, is to suggest that, under scrutiny, they weaken considerably.

Firstly, the question of the criminalization of homosexuality and (under the guise of “public nuisance” laws) the active police harassment of transmen and transwomen¹⁵ - it must be recognized that African feminist thought and activism has long struggled against the criminalization and harassment of people gendered as women, who are simply going about their business. The category “woman” is hierarchized through the ever-embattled politics of respectability, and the deconstructive polarization of “good” and “bad” women has long been a tenet of feminist theory worldwide, resisting the split between “wife” and “sex worker”, “innocent girl-child” and “pregnant teenager”; “poor woman” and “vagrant”; “mother” and “single woman”. Longwe v Hotel Intercontinental (1992) laid a precedent setting case against

a Zambian hotel for police harassment when Sara Longwe sought to enter the hotel on her own; as recently as two months ago, the Ugandan Minister of Ethics and integrity forced the cancellation of a sex workers' conference outside Kampala because sex-work is illegal in Uganda¹⁶. African feminist struggles for women's rights, and their freedom of movement, political choice, and economic independence, have stories to share with those incarcerated, mocked, and put under fear of assault and battery as *lgbti* people.

Secondly, conventional processes of gender are rigorously policed, and notions of gender norms shape the experience of becoming human (and recognized as being human) from at least birth onwards. Children certainly play their part here, especially once formal schooling systems shape their lives; homophobia is used as a weapon in these patterns of surveillance but just as *lgbti* is ostracized, so too are "girls" and "boys" who refuse to conform to the expected norms of their context. Such ostracism and stigmatization play out in the micro-politics of lived experience, entangled with and shaped by other critical social forces. The argument that it is only homo/transphobia which can conscript so wide a range of advocates (small children through to presidents and chiefs) does not hold water beyond a certain point. The terrorization of a young man perceived as a "moffie" bears witness to practices of gender and (mis)knowledges about sexuality which influence the rejection of teenage mothers from schools, the pathologization of unemployed young men, the religious restrictions around the right to reproductive choice, the vulnerability of women to sexual abuse. And so on.

In 1988, Suzanne Pharr wrote *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* whose theory was based on the experiences of thousands of lesbian women she had encountered as she ran support and advocacy groups across the United States of America (Pharr, 1988). Her theoretical position was simple: homophobia (she was not, at that point, thinking about the experiences of transgendered and intersexed people) relied upon conservative prescriptions for gender dynamics and these prescriptions included the demand for heterosexual performance and demanded, too, very hierarchized patterns of gender within this performance.

Pharr's grasp that the political interests of homophobia overlapped with, and were utterly complicit with, sexist notions about women's inferiority and the operation of conventional gender norms which reinforce this inferiority became overridden in the 90's, within Northern theory of sexualities (powerfully driven by queer discourses arising in part from the war against

USA HIV/AIDS policies in the late 80's/early 90's, and drawing on Foucault rather than Millett – or more usefully, Barbara Smith). Within mainstream USA theory and politics, the zones of “reproductive and sexual health and rights”, “queer”, “lesbian feminism”. “transgender justice” grew steadily apart in the 90's¹⁷ -- and fundamental concerns about intersectionalities became marginalized, especially within queer scholarship and activism.

In contemporary African contexts, however, strong activist voices in *lgbti* have long recognized that the term “lesbian”, for example cannot be automatically separated either from questions of masculinity or from issues of heterosexuality, nor can it be separated from questions of religion, racialization, class, and the meaning of post-independence nation-building. Even if one is ready to accept, as (so far) many activists in the area have done, that the term can be incorporated into political organisation and advocacy, the fact is that it constitutes an “imposition” over most linguistic descriptors for sexual and reproductive identities. In South Africa, for example, there are on the one hand derogatory terms, such as ‘*Nongayindoda*’ in isiZulu, which stigmatise women thought to be living beyond accepted heterosexual norms of dress, behaviour or desire. On the other hand, there are no widely accepted, positive, non-colonial terms for a celebrated and chosen, non-conventional sexual identity. In addition, many lesbian women have children and long to have children and have past or ongoing social relationships with men. A clear separation between the gendered politics of reproduction and the politics of alternative sexual identity is not useful when it comes to deep understandings of lesbians’ daily experiences. And the question of “lesbian masculinity” is taken up with vigour in the negotiation of several South Africans with their preferences for self-recognition, sexual orientation and gender identification (Mkize, et al., 2010).

This re-raises arguments three and four – about the complexity of *lgbti* as opposed to the (relatively) straightforward *women* of gender equality advocacy, and about the meaning of masculinity for theories on gender and violence. Of course *women* is certainly not a “relatively straightforward” term (decades of feminist theory attest to that) – argument three is almost ludicrous in the face of familiarity with the terrain. And of course many contemporary people gendered as “men” (through myriad relationships to masculinities) are intimately acquainted with the possibilities of taking skilled (and unskilled) violence into their repertoires of professional, political, and personal agency. We cannot afford to spend time obfuscating that fact. What *lgbti* theory and activism suggests, however, is that we are at the very

beginnings of re-imagining worlds in which becoming human (let alone operating economically, culturally and socially) does not entail, as a primary politics, the process of becoming gendered. The politics of sexual and gender identity have moved questions about masculinity, agency, sexual choice and freedom from violence beyond dichotomization (perpetrator/victim; man/woman; white/black¹⁸) towards ideas which destabilize predictability and insist on a politics of transformation far beyond notions of “gender balance”.

Lgbti-imaginations

In conclusion to this section, I would argue that representations of recent *lgbti* experience, in different African contexts, offer three essential edges to the theorization of gender and violence.

Firstly, these experiences reposition “the domestic” and “the nation at peace” as zones of intense and targeted danger; the explosion of the public/private split has long been, as noted earlier, central to feminist theory and particularly powerful in the analysis of labour. It has however been somewhat backgrounded by work on militarism and gender (which has understandably focused on the meaning of mass-mongered conflict, peace negotiation, and notions of transitional justice – all very “public” endeavours), and theorists of gender-based violence have always struggled to get non-feminist acceptance (at, for example, policy level) that the conditions of violence faced by some women, boys and girls within the domestic render national notions of being ‘at peace’ very vulnerable. It is much easier to advocate for the elimination of gender-based violence via the design and implementation of democratically-aligned policy than it is to assert that any country is, via gender-based violence, at civil war. Violence against *lgbti* space, education, identities, and lives dissolves any pretence that the public/private split is analytically useful to mapping vulnerability, causation, and participants.

Secondly, *lgbti* challenges to systemic violence offer very interesting truths about the nature of impossible battles (such as the battle to eliminate sexual abuse, or the struggle to make economically driven conflict a thing of the past). The constituency of African *lgbti* activists is tiny, and many face regular physical and legal threats against their lives. However, the number of small *lgbti* NGOs in Uganda now stands at over 10¹⁹, the expansion of the South African Durban Lesbian and Gay Community Centre (which has always prioritized the health and security of working-class black gay and lesbian people) in 2010 includes three new “mini-projects as centres” in poor, small,

towns, and the Coalition for African Lesbians applied to the African Union for observer status. The AU's refusal made international headlines²⁰. Although often in struggle²¹, *lgbti* activism can be theorized as a zone of "possibility", an on-going testament to the fact that despite enormous odds, change (uneven, costly, and fragile) is visible – 5 years ago, no *lgbti* organizations on the continent existed as political forces, except in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe.

Thirdly, *lgbti* debate and strategy refuses to release the terms "gender", "sexuality", and "violence" into notions dominated by pain, damage, violation, and coercion. Although a handful of individual African feminists (such as Jessica Horn, Patricia Mcfadden, Sylvia Tamale) and a wide coalition of SRHR activists have insisted that pleasure and desire should be part and parcel of sexualities debates, and that women's right to sexual pleasure deserved specific attention in the design of sexual health and education programmes, much feminist writing continued to work simply with the theory that becoming gendered as a woman made (hetero)sexual suffering, in the worlds of neoliberalism, aggressive nationalism and patriarchal institutions, likely. Within *lgbti* space, discourse on the politics of sexual pleasure has never had to be "recouped" from the overwhelming association of sex with suffering (necessarily) embedded in gender-based violence writing. In part, and ironically, this has to do with homophobia itself: particularly lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are categorized as "only sexual" in their identities (their sexual practices may be deviant and/or illegal, but they do engage sexually). More usefully, it has been the *lgbti* focus on the politics of sexuality and gender, and an openness towards the importance of sexuality which has tackled deeply ingrained restrictions and fears head on, in ways campaigns around HIV transmission have still not accomplished (especially for women).

Conclusion

This article set out to sketch a terrain in which there are multiple, differently rooted, conversations among African feminists about gender and violence. There are few resolved debates, and many ways in which discussion which leads, in a pan-African gaze, towards mutual understanding and cohesive strategizing remains a naïve idea. In 2010, however, I would argue that it is safe to suggest that the terms "gender" and "violence" remain simultaneously deeply entwined (even interchangeable, for some of us) *and* infinitely separable (perhaps *genderings* may be imaginable, free of their current inscription into

complex hierarchies^{22?})

What matters most, perhaps, is recognition of what it entails to battle the ‘circles and circles in your head; you feel insane, and then you realize, they have got you’. As I understand it, so far, one needs lateral thinking, passionate engagement with some of those not necessarily in agreement with one, delighted suspension of belief in the normal and open arms. I would argue that this is theoretical work in the strongest sense of the term: work which is rigorously attuned to the importance of multiple debates, even in the face of material and strategic violence which can have the power (temporarily) to obliterate any sense that we have time to devote to discussion.

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Endnotes

1. Patricia McFadden, quoted in 'Transformation: An Informal Journal about Yari Yari Pamberi 2004', Felicia Pride, November 2004, www.thebacklist.net
2. Aili Mari Tripp, "Regional Networking as Transnational Feminism: African Experiences," in *Feminist Africa* 4, 2005, 46 -63, p 46
3. I am indebted to Deborah Posel, Institute for the Humanities in Africa, UCT for this phrase as a lens into questions of disciplinary and the epistemological approaches to 'studying the human' within the humanities and social sciences.
4. It is always dangerous, however, to inscribe colonialism as 'monolithic'; not only did the process take place unevenly, directed by very different national interests and strategies, but in-depth its operations defy homegoenization (see for example Loomba, 1998, and a vast scholarship).
5. See, for example, C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa, 1984; and Patricia Collins, 1990).
6. There are excellent historical studies of the ways women did seek recourse to colonial law on occasion, and studies too on the relationships between rape and enslavement. See, for example, M. McClendon, 1994; P. Scully, 1995; P. Gqola, 2010; and Y. Abrahams. 2000.
7. See, for example, from *Speak* 13, 1986, "No to Rape, say Port Alfred Women", article collected in S. Meer , 1998, *Women Speak*, a collation of articles from the popular activist women's magazine, which ran from 1982 - 1997.
8. Perhaps such a narrative is not - in fact - either possible or useful. There are very marked historical and political differences between contexts, and it is not until very recently (such as in settings like the African Feminist Forums) that African-based feminists have begun to explore what a continental frame offers our theoretical approach to questions of gender and violence. Because resistance to violence demands such careful, collective and sophisticated theoretical work, however, I am nonetheless drawn towards the possibility of such a narrative.
9. The fact that women, and girl-children, do become - by choice and by force - armed participants in conflict is not ignored by ISIS-WICCE, or other feminist workers in this area. It is not a fact which threatens an overarching analysis of military violence as damaging to women's lives in ways which fundamentally reshape the meaning of "conflict and peace".
10. I use the term "counter-heteronormativities" because it captures a wide range of ideas and experience concerning sexualities, gender, and embodied life without seeking to homogenize these as identities. As the piece moves, I switch to *lgbti* as a pragmatic term - widely used organizationally - to focus on particular

counter-heteronormativities. The term *lgbti* is deployed within both activist and policy work; there remains, however, a grounded set of debates about whether the acronym appropriately or usefully invokes the diverse realities of people whose lives and being challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality in contemporary African contexts (see, H. Gunkel, 2010). The article later seeks to resolve these politics of nominalization through returning to the debate on gender and violence.

11. For in-depth detail here, see the ongoing news updates of Behind the Mask, an NGO which uploads information on different countries' engagements with *lgbti* rights: www.mask.co.za; the WILDAF reference concerns the remarks of Berenice Sam, of Women in Law and Development in Africa of Ghana which argued strongly against same-sex marriage and struck many as inciting homophobia (December, 2010). Ms. Sam has been challenged, but has made no clear statement supporting *lgbti* rights; again, see www.mask.co.za
12. Personal communication, GenderDynamix transnational training, October, 2010, Cape Town
13. Some examples would be Sylvia Tamale, of Uganda, whose legal advocacy has spanned a wide range of issues, including homophobia; Elizabeth Khaxas and Liz Frank who founded *Sister Namibia*, which has explored a very wide range of feminist concerns; Dawn Cavanagh, who used to work at *FEW (Forum for Women's Equality)* which ran the first anti-hatecrime campaign in Alexandra, South Africa and who also works broadly as a feminist activist in gender-based violence, and access to health for women; Dorothy Aken'ova of *INCRESE (International Centre for Health and Reproductive Rights)* in Nigeria, which has long allied questions of freedom of sexual choice to broad questions of democracy.
14. The question of *g* interest in the politics of gender, particularly the politics of feminism, also deserves examination. This requires more space than offered within this article, however; suffice it to say that the organizational story of *g* and *tm* activism on behalf of women's rights is universally thin. There are however some wonderful exceptions of individuals: I think, for example, of Mario Pecheny, of U Buenos Aires, Argentina; Vasu Reddy of the Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa; Robert Hamblin of GenderDynamix. There must be many more. A different point – but one that must be noted – is that it is silly to over-homogenize the shape of *g*-identities, politics, and experience, especially in African contexts where the tolerance for visible gay livelihood is minimal. The point is simply that *lgbti* justice advocacy demands rethinking masculinities; the notion of “men” as “always-prone-to-violence” or “not-really-men, ie.gay/transmen” doesn't carry us far enough to encompass the meanings of *lgbti* experiences.
15. The harassment against intersexed people is spread throughout all gender and sexual ‘identity’ categorizations: men, women, gay, lesbian, transmen, transwomen; intersexuality glosses such a wide array of possibilities of body, life-gender choice (mostly enforced), desire, political challenge, that in many ways, it could be seen to stand as the *Ur* category for the purpose of illuminating the

violence of conventional gender and sexual systematicities.

16. In November, the Ugandan Minister of Ethics and Integrity, Hon Buturo, cancelled a conference of sex workers, to be hosted by Akina Mama wa Afrka, because sex workers were deemed a “criminal” constituency and could not legally meet – see www.mask.co.za
17. There are, of course, individuals and organizations who have worked very hard against this tide, forming for example, the extraordinary consortium which created the Yogyakarta Principles, see www.yogyakartaprinciples.org
18. To my mind, analyses which draw on dichotomized notions of power sometimes remain valuable, still (such as, for example, in understanding rape; and the meaning of racism is hard to theorize without dichotomies).
19. Personal communication, Kasha, Jacqueline, Freedom and Roam, Uganda
20. See Special issue *Pambazuka*, 506, November, 2010; www.pambazuka.org
21. Such struggles especially include resources of space, funding, and access to the media.
22. Oyeronke Oyewumi has, controversially, suggested pre-colonial Yoruba shows linguistic evidence of gender categorization completely free of the meaning of dichotomized power – although there are interesting debates here (see Bibi Bakare-Yusuf in Arnfred, S. et al., 2004), I am not attempting to rehearse her argument, but to suggest that contemporary debates on gender and sexuality encourage us to eschew fundamentalist equations between forms of gender, lives of sexualities, and power.

