



feminist dialogue series

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Becoming Contemporary African Feminists: Her-stories, legacies and the new imperatives

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There is a new rising of the women and we are its cutting edge. By pushing, once again, against its boundaries, its newly emerging contours, I aspire to see a fuller picture of what lies ahead, around the corner, over the horizon – because that is where a different future lies. This reflection is a contribution to the charting of an alternative discourse about ourselves, our bodies, our dreams and visions and our lives lived in deeply unyielding patriarchal societies.

The issues I am raising here have interfaced with my own experiences and phases of growth as a radical feminist living on this continent and working as widely as possible in the world, over the past four decades. I would like to touch on some of the conceptual challenges we face as feminists, coming from long traditions of resisting patriarchy and celebrating each other as women; I will then speak briefly to some of what I think are the main sources of our radical feminist consciousness and politics and refer to four women who were my 'radical touch stones' on this amazing journey of radical living. Finally, I will argue for a Retrieval of the foundational feminist notions of Bodily Integrity and Dignity, Well-Being and Citizenship as we craft the new feminism and the movements that

will take us forward. They all speak to the powerful feminist mantra that the personal is always political.

Conceptual challenges for today's feminists

Throughout my life, I have revelled in the pleasure of thinking radically at every opportunity – digging deeply into my own life while carefully observing, often with unabashed curiosity, the lives and performances, choices and directions that other people enact around me. Pleasure – that still largely unacknowledged and often reviled giving of joy to the self – has been my secret doorway into an understanding of patriarchy and its machinations, and a stepping stone into moments of clarity about my life and my choices. This is one of the gems of feminist identity and living – being able



to explain the often dark and murky depths of learnt submissiveness and refusing to conform because I know what it's about and what the consequences will be. Leaning into Freedom as a possibility!

The first conceptual challenge that faces African feminism in this contemporary moment is the unavoidable necessity of making the distinction between Gender, as a construct that was crafted out of women's need to locate and explain women's lives in the silences and invisible spaces that women had been pushed into - mainly through domesticity and the marking of the public as male and beyond the reach of all females. The early work of Ann Oakley was an immeasurable gift to us all.

The hijacking of "Gender"

This patriarchal incarceration of women through normalized 'roles' and 'duties' was illuminated by the invention of the notion of gender and its insistence that it was not about sex but about locations and practices of exploitation and exclusion from power. As the notion took hold across the world, and women on the African continent began to link development with gender, questioning the status quo and 'naturalness' of who women were told they are, what they could not do or say or be, the strategy of mainstreaming gender was hatched, (usually linked to support for women's organizations) and over a period of 25 years, gender became about everyone; it became a panacea for all the challenges our societies posed, and a response to all the demands that women had made; it became a state and UN language and men readily positioned themselves within it as a 'framework' which very effectively and deliberately silenced women and pushed them back to the margins of their societies. It has become an industry and a source of economic enablement and social approval. University departments have established 'gender and women's studies'. In the main-stream, gender is meek, toothless and without an overt political identity. However, at the core of this strategy of conceptual appropriation lies the ideology of neo-liberal conservatism, which is really quite reactionary and pro-status-quo.

Side by side with this conceptual sabotage of a notion that was crafted out of women's struggles for a better

understanding of patriarchy, gender as a critical thinking tool has served to explain the ways in which women experience patriarchal exclusion, impunity, supremacy, and dehumanization, through a theoretical exercise and practice that is foundationally informed by the ideology and political practice of Feminism - as a resistance and celebratory tradition.

Feminist Political Economy - which brings women's lived realities, their struggles, dreams and agencies to the numerous sites of contestation and power within all our societies, and which insists that women are entitled to their full humanity and dignity - this epistemological approach has enabled a distinction between Gender and Feminism to be conceptually and politically drawn as a first step in the charting of a clearer meaning of what feminism in Africa means, and is about. There are no Feminist Studies departments in any African universities or research institutes, and women who teach gender rarely refer to themselves as feminist professors. It is unacceptable in the status quo of the African academy.

The fact of the matter is that gender has been very effectively constructed as a means of re-inventing patriarchal systems and practices in the contemporary moment of the 21st century - and of keeping women in their place by parading a few 'successful' women as evidence that when women 'work hard' they can 'become like men' and still be 'feminine'; and by then arguing that women 'are their own enemies', PHD syndrome being the loudest applauded accusation. Women in Politics, in Parliaments; Women in Entrepreneurship and Business; Women in the Military and in the Police; Women in the UN - the globalised state, in the AU and in regional state infrastructures; Women in Research Institutes and Universities; Women in the Corporate world; all these locations serve to blunt the political edges of women's demands for inclusive political, economic, legal, and other forms of equality and rights.

This strategy has not only silenced most civil society voices and pushed the majority of women back into the dark and musty crevices of the society, where we see a ferocious backlash against anyone female, Queer,



black, young, old, bodily and mentally challenges, and 'Other' in terrifying ways, the strategy has also depoliticized women's realities and left most radical scholar/activists bereft of resources, energy and ideas. It has been a long, dry, season in the field of vigorous, challenging ideas and dreams across the continent, and largely, this is the outcome of a very effective strategy and policy of mainstreaming the thinking tools that women fashioned for their freedom.

Gender as a feminist thinking tool

Therefore, it is crucial that African women who yearn for their freedom, make the distinction between gender as a 'tool' of neo-liberal status quo re-invention, and gender as a feminist thinking tool, which is embedded in the radical epistemologies of resistance to patriarchy and all its institutionalized systems of privilege, supremacy, impunity and sexism. Feminism uses gender as part of a critical intellectual and activist wedge, prying open the patriarchal language and taboos that still inhibit women from being the creative, dynamic, conscious beings who bring their agency to the contested sites of power, at the interfaces between themselves/their communities and the institutions of the state and its largely feudal infrastructures, policies and practices.

Nationalised Feminism

Side by side with this conceptual distinction and its political and ideological implications is the deeply contentious issue of identity – between gendered nationalism and feminism. Over the almost 40 years that I have lived and worked as a radical woman – I have realized that the conflation of gendered nationalism into feminism has been the bane of radical thought and activism everywhere on the continent. This conflation has created a schizophrenic relationship between women who speak the rhetoric of rights and equality, but who long to be part of the ruling elites and privileged classes of their respective societies. Coming from anti-colonial nationalism as a broad platform that brought Africans together across the divisions of gendered, ethnic, class and other social differences (with the exception of sexuality), women's politics was wrought in the cauldron of nationalist essentialisms and the passion for independence.

However, in the lived context of neo-colonial upward social mobility, gender became a means to a more comfortable and supposedly secure ladder of class mobility, and the rhetoric of equality spawned a deep cynicism about real change that was often expressed in vicious attacks of feminists who called such women on their corrupt and manipulative political behaviour.

After experiencing several incidents of vilification and deliberate mobilization against me – using homophobia and accusation of intellectual theft – I realized that this very personalized war was really a reflection of a deeper contradiction within the African women's movement as it had evolved over several decades of independence. It was about the threat that radical, principled political theorizing and activism poses to the ascendancy of gendered nationalist elites into the state, the UN, and related institutions and global infrastructures. It was fundamentally political and of course feministically personal.

Making the distinction between those who use women's struggles for freedom and lives of dignity as a step up the social and class ladder, and those women who commit their lives to a lived, radical politics, provided me with an exit from the African women's movement and into new terrains of feminist thinking and activism.

Sources of our radical thinking and consciousness as African Feminists

For me, born at a time when 'the winds of change' were blowing over Africa, despite having been a little girl under British colonialism and witnessing the decolonization moment of the 1960s, there are three powerful radical legacies that have influenced my feminist consciousness, knowledge and political practice.

International traditions of leftist resistance

The first was the international traditions of leftist resistance, exemplified most poignantly in the critique of capitalism and finance capital through the Marxist interrogations of the imperial state and colonial exploitation and plunder. This deeply humanist





analysis, whilst lacking a specific referent to Africans as part of the human community in its earlier debates, did resonate with radicals across the continent, and it influenced the exemplary courage of great intellectual anti-colonial dreamers like Amilcar Cabral, Eduardo Mondlane, Samora Machel, Patrice Lumumba, Steve Bantu Biko, Thomas Sankara and Franz Fanon. These radical male scholars left a powerful mark on my understanding of the political economy of colonialism and the exclusion of Africans from human history as creative and sentient beings, and their courage unleashed an incorrigible anger in my black soul at the brutality and impunity that continues to be experienced by African people everywhere on the planet. In particular, Cabral, Sankara and Fanon inspired in me a sense of love of the African self, and in reaching towards a better epistemological inclusion of women's resistance traditions in their own intellectual and activist contexts, they articulated some of the most essential markers of African feminist thought – a retrieval of women's resistance as a general expression of the yearning to reclaim African dignity and freedom.

In particular, the discourses crafted by Fanon and Cabral ignited a deep sense of appreciation of the immense value and pleasure that radical analysis and praxis enables in one's understanding of systems of exclusion as well as in the possibilities that freedom offers, albeit as a long term project. I wanted to be part of this tradition of humans who not only dream of freedom, but who actually live it, even if in its most partial and initial sense. Feminism opened that door to my intellectual soul. My encounters with Simone de Beauvoir as a teenager and Sartre – and their intimate contestations and affections made me realize just how vast the human vista on life was. As I searched further, I invariably encountered Rosa Luxemburg, Alexandra Kollontai, Virginia Wolfe, and many of those amazing women who were rupturing the complacency of the male left towards the neglected realities of women in the societies of the north.



Black female intellectuals

And so I read everything I could lay my hands on, as I stumbled through my teenage years and into adulthood – encountering radical black feminism in literature and the critique of US slaving and repression of Africans in the US and the Caribbean. Bell hooks, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Patricia Williams, June Jordan, and a host of black female intellectuals who insisted on positioning the black woman in all her multiple realities at the intersection of race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and large social locations in the northern world, opened once again another vista of intellectual and activist clarity and pleasure.

However, even with this astounding internationalist backdrop of radical traditions to lean on and learn from, the most dramatic influences on my feminism as an African radical came from four amazing African feminist intellectuals, whose lives and praxis inspired the foundational shift in my sense of black feminist self and continues to infuse my life in the current context. Nawal el Saadawi (*God dies by the Nile and Woman at Point Zero*), Micere Mugo (*From the Mind of my Heart and I will Marry when I Want*), Fatima Mernissi and Awa Thiam – radical stars in my feminist firmament – stand out as the most courageous radical women of the generation that precedes mine. Their courageous engagement with the most foundational challenges around Bodily Integrity and Sexuality, Pleasure and Dignity, and an unremitting rejection of feudal and contemporary state hegemony on the bodies and lives of women across the class divide, has provided the key principles upon which African feminist theorizing and activism are based. More contemporary feminists like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi are celebrating the legacies of radical women who have walked the path of writing resistance and living different lives – opening pathways for women's futures. In my own journey across the hazardous landscapes of neocolonial repression and expulsion, the challenges posed by African women's struggles for lives of dignity, personhood and integrity, a complete citizenship, and the entitlement to lives that are celebratory and sufficient; remain largely unresolved and urgent.

Rupture with gendered nationalism

A broad sweep of the trajectory of Black feminist



her-story across the African continent reveals deep intimacies and entanglements with Nationalism as the first opportunity that enabled for women to ‘step into the public’ as individuals who could participate in a national project for liberation and self-emancipation, despite its flawed patriarchal limitations and unavoidable masculinity as a politics and later, state practice. This troubled relationship with Nationalism and its essentialisms of unquestioning loyalty, class bias, racial compromise and collusionary practices with feudal patriarchal remnants in sites where most African women are located, and in the cultural and social consciousness of African women generally, these conundrums pose a clear challenge to African Feminists in our attempts at distancing our politics from gendered nationalism and from the appropriation of our ideas, language and agencies by the State in all its configurations (national, regional, continental and global).

In my opinion and experience of politics as a radical woman on this continent, and in the transnational feminist communities internationally, this is the most urgent task facing African feminism – the rupture with Nationalism in ideological and conceptual terms, and the crafting of new and contemporary notions, theories and activist practices that will move the feminist freedom project into a different future.

Retrieval and imaging a new African Feminist Future

In the decade after I backed off from the gendered nationalistic African women’s movement – to lick my wounds and re-orient myself in an increasingly brazen and unashamedly neo-liberal world – I realized just how crucial it is for radical women to ‘step away’ from the noise of the everyday status quo and reassess who we have become, and how we can re-imagine ourselves and our futures as humans who not only dream of freedom, but whose lives are expressions of freedom as a lived reality. Finding our safe spaces and reflecting on the new tasks as a necessary part of being radical and continuing on a radical trajectory, is for me, an inevitable feminist imperative.

In stepping away and into a closer relationship with myself and the earth, my earlier choice of a vegan lifestyle has becoming increasingly the sites of

multiple opportunities to re-imagine how I live in my gorgeous, elderly black female body. This has been a revolutionary moment for me in living my feminism, and in choosing to be celibate. I have worked in sexuality for most of my radical life, and the challenges facing African feminists in terms of sexuality and the black body vis-à-vis notions of decency, pathology (as reflected in the conflation of black female sexuality, HIV/AIDS and disease) remain almost intractable. The repression of Black female bodies through cultural tropes and essentialism around meanings of African identity and acceptability loom large and fierce in the lives of women, particularly for women who live in reproductive bodies and whose bodily integrity is continually threatened and violated by the custodians of feudal patriarchal privilege and power. These are difficult yet necessary stances that African feminists must adopt and engage with, whether as straight or Queer women, because, as I have realized in my own life, it is only when women understand the power of their bodies and the creativity of their minds, that freedom begins to translate from the rhetorical claim to the lived experience. And it is only through an engaged and uncompromising positioning in the most radical aspects of women’s her-stories that one finds her wings, and learns to fly.

Accompanying the new realizations that each of us must make so as to re-position our radical agencies and lived praxis, is the difficult challenge posed by neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism in the form of an unaccountable and increasingly brutal and impunitous state across the continent and the world at large. The blatant collusion between and amongst repressive states and corporations in the plunder of collective resources, the mauling and brutal repression and suppression of people, particularly of women who publicly resist state impunity, and the de-politicization of women’s lives and the realities of their communities in the interests furthering global finance capitalist plunder of African mineral and ecological resources, must be confronted and stopped. The collective commons must be retrieved through new social movements that are anchored in the most radical ideas and resistances





that we can imagine, so that a different relationship with the state as a historical phenomenon, not as an inevitable ruling class instrument of power and accumulation, can begin to be crafted.

Contemporary Collective Citizen Identities

This urgent political imperative is directly tied to our identities as citizens in new and contemporary ways and expressions. In some of my more recent work, I have begun to explore the notion of a feminist *contemporarity* which interrogates the presumption (that inhabited much of my own thinking for a long time), that the state can be transformed through engagement and insistence. In part this is still a necessity. However, because the balance of power between women in particular as aspiring citizens and the existing state infrastructures is so wide and the disparities are so deeply entrenched, feminists will need to craft new movements and notions of community and engagement which initiate transformation at the individual and community levels, even as we engage with the state elites and their 'global partners' on issues of citizenship in new and collectivist ways.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that, despite the seemingly dire state of the world and of our continent in particular, the power of imagining and actually living a life of Freedom and Dignity through Feminist consciousness and activism is the most precious gift that each of us can give ourselves. To be part of the human endeavour of making life a beautiful experience for all is the most profound reason anyone can have to be here, on this planet, in the human form, with all the joys and pleasures that it entails. So to my sisters who have recently joined this amazing community of radical women - welcome!! I hope to be theorizing, strategizing and struggling with you in feminist solidarity for many years to come. ●

Selected Readings/References:

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- Simone de Beauvoir** (1949) The Second Sex
- Alexandra Kollontai** (1923) A love of Worker Bees



About the Author

Patricia McFadden is a radical African feminist scholar and author from Swaziland. A trained sociologist, her main issues of intellectual inquiry involve sexuality, citizenship and post-coloniality, nationalism and revolutionary struggles and writing as resistance on the African Continent. She has taught in various universities on the African continent and in North America. She is the former editor of the “Southern African Feminist Review” (SAFERE). In 1999 McFadden received the Hellman/Hammett Human Rights Award as recognition for writers who have been targets of political persecution.

The Feminist Dialogue Series

The Idea of the Feminist Dialogue Series was born during an International Workshop on Political Feminism in Africa organized by the Mozambican Feminist Platform *Fórum Mulher* and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in October 2016 in Maputo. The gathering brought together over 50 feminist activists and scholars from all over the continent. Inspired by the stimulating discussions and interventions at the workshop, this series is intended as a platform to share important feminist reflections. In this way the series wants to contribute to the development and spreading of African feminist knowledge to transform political and economic conditions on the continent towards social and gender justice.

The Feminist Dialogue Series proudly counts on the artistic contribution of Ruth Bañón (art header) and the design of Sebastião Montalvão (Lateral Multimedia).

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