

# Discursive Challenges for African Feminisms

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**Abstract. Discursive Challenges for African Feminisms.** In what follows, I draw attention to the necessity for connecting national and continental feminist challenges to those that confront feminisms globally. Two main discursive manifestations of the neo-liberal co-optation of feminism are explored: the growth of moderate rights-based discourses; and secondly, the co-optation and adulteration of gender research and teaching. While there are important differences in the way that these trends have evolved and currently function in different parts of the world, I stress that they are politically connected. In the third and final section, I focus on ways in which some feminist commentators are invigorating the language and practice of feminism to contest our present context of hegemonised knowledge and information.

**key words:** Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial, globalization

## **Introduction**

It is sometimes assumed that the ‘indulgence’ of deconstructing discourses should be undertaken mainly in Northern contexts and that ‘practical’ and ‘material’ struggles must be paramount in the South. The fallaciousness of this assumption is revealed in Nawaal el Sadaawi’s comments on the universal use of language against oppressed peoples. ‘We need’, she writes, ‘to unveil the words used by global and local governments, by their media and education’ (2004: 5-6). Describing one of the most potent weapons in the attack on women’s rights, she argues:

Language is often used against women and the poor in every country, especially in our countries, the so-called South’. Today, the word ‘liberation’ means military and economic occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. The word ‘peace’ means war, and ‘terror’ means the massacre of Palestinian women and children under Israeli occupation. The word ‘development’ means neo-colonialism, robbing people’s economic and intellectual riches in Africa, Asia

and Latin America. (2004: 5).

Our present context of limitless information, globalised power relations, transnational media oligarchies, and commoditised academic knowledge mystifies patriarchal and neo-imperial injustice through the rhetoric of 'liberalisation' and 'legitimate' paternalist protection and patriotism. Radical struggles have become increasingly challenging because the exercise of domination has become progressively more overwhelming. The deluge of information that routinely bombards us has contributed to and ensured this. Those who wield power in the present age also wield control over and access to knowledge: knowledge circulated via the World Wide Web, information - promulgated in institutions of higher learning - that often only appears progressive; 'public' information ostensibly aimed at marginalised groups, yet concerned least with their interests and most with profit-making.

Critiques of neo-liberal challenges to African gender struggles have increased in recent years. Ruth Meena (1992) and Marjorie Mblinyi (1992) writing on Tanzania, Pat McFadden (2001) dealing with Zimbabwe and Dodzi Tsikata (1997) focusing on Ghana have all critically examined ways in which 'good governance', structural adjustment, patriarchal state building, and elite consolidation have led to neo-imperial states acting in collusion with the donor community and international capital to orchestrate token policymaking for gender transformation. Such manoeuvring addresses the proviso made by donor communities that third-world countries should liberalise in order to obtain foreign funding. They also seek to placate women's movements in countries where such movements have battled for substantive gender transformation.

But a relatively neglected facet of the neo-liberal environment is the upsurge of what could be termed a gender industry on the continent, and the extent to which this, ultimately, has been shaped by the developmentalist paradigms that entrenched neo-imperialism and economic dependency. Ranging from the growth of duplicitous discourses on rights to the mushrooming of technocratic and conservative trends in tertiary education, the industry has set in place technologies of gender designed to reconstitute what is substantively transformative, and to institutionalise a

bureaucratic ethos of top-down engineering and politically correct rhetoric.

The neo-liberal co-optation of feminist demands is not, of course unique to third-world contexts. It is an overwhelming feature of contemporary ostensibly 'postfeminist' liberal-democratic societies. The hegemony of global imperialism is increasingly eroding feminism and radical cultural expression and discourses in civil society at an international level. What takes the place of these are industries of information and knowledge production that often work to consolidate elite interests, exploitative patterns of consumption and distribution, and long-established global economic and political inequalities.

In what follows, I draw attention to the necessity for connecting national and continental feminist challenges to those that confront feminisms globally. Two main discursive manifestations of the neo-liberal co-optation of feminism are explored: the growth of moderate rights-based discourses; and secondly, the co-optation and adulteration of gender research and teaching. While there are important differences in the way that these trends have evolved and currently function in different parts of the world, I stress that they are politically connected. In the third and final section, I focus on ways in which some feminist commentators are invigorating the language and practice of feminism to contest our present context of hegemonised knowledge and information.

### ***The pitfalls of rights discourse***

In analysing the politics of contemporary women's-rights discourses, it is instructive to examine the development of gender discourses in South Africa. This is because South Africa during the last decade exemplifies the way mainstreaming progressively dilutes gender activism and discourses. This trend has been a rapid one: in the space of a decade, South Africa has come to be viewed as one of the most 'gender-sensitive' countries in the world because of the centrality of women's rights and gender equity to an official narrative of nation-building. The ambiguity of this language of gender equality is the focus of the first half of this section.

The eighties marked a high point for integrating gender into public and political discourses on human rights in South Africa. Various community, regional and national organisations<sup>1</sup> provided structures for working women, students and activists to play dynamic roles in anti-apartheid politics. From the early nineties, by the time of the release of political prisoners and the national preparation for dismantling apartheid, the ground had therefore been laid for systematically confronting both gender and racial injustices, since women's organisations and civil society activism had effectively prioritised feminist demands in the struggle for South African democracy.

A crucial event marking the shift away from the articulation of gender struggles in civil society activism was the formation of a Women's National Coalition four years before the first democratic election. As the culmination of years of activism, lobbying and organisation, the Coalition's primary objective was to ensure women's equality in the constitutional dispensation being negotiated by different parties and organisations at the time. Its role has been described in the following way: 'In creating the WNC, all of the major women's organizations allowed something larger and more representative to command an authority that none of them could achieve alone, making the WNC something that they could not avoid affiliating to as well as something that could not be controlled by any one organization' (Kemp, Madala, Moodley and Salo, 1995: 151).

The Coalition, of course, was distinctive not only because it drew together different groupings, but also because this amalgamation marked a process of sidelining political differences to achieve consensus around nation-building and 'democracy'. It indicated how the 'mainstreaming' of gender concerns into the national democratising agenda entailed compromise, arbitration and regulation as myriad organisations and individuals focused on negotiated legal and formal rights. The taking up of gender

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<sup>1</sup> These included the Natal Organisation of Women, the United Women's Congress, the Federation of Transvaal Women and other organisations aligned to the United Democratic Front.

into the nation-building agenda, or what Shireen Hassim has identified as the 'gender pact' (2003) entailed an arbitration process through which particular gender concerns were identified as those that should be institutionalised in the discursive construction of democracy. It could be argued, then, that the Coalition signalled the displacement of the nature of gender activism as earlier preoccupations with women's agency and interests were jettisoned in favour of pursuing consensual rights-oriented lobbying and policy-making that postulated common rights and entitlements monitored or granted by the state.

The transformation of the nature of gender activism was accompanied by a concomitant displacement of the *locus* of gender struggles - away from civil society and into the state bureaucracy. This was associated, for example, with the committee work of a caucus of Parliamentarians; the Women's Budget in 1966, which focused on policy areas specifically concerning the needs of women; the Office of the Status of Women in the office of the President, regional Gender Desks and a national Gender Commission.

It is indisputable that women's movements and radical currents within civil society prompted mainstreaming in the first place. It is also clear that gender mainstreaming is a desirable goal when defined as a systematic and holistic process for introducing policy implementation, institutional restructuring, educational transformation and planning in ways that rectify persistent gender inequalities. In fact, the belief in this structural change motivated the concerted involvement of radical organisations and individuals in mainstreaming processes during the nineties. In recent years, however, there has been growing scepticism about the effectiveness of state structures. In particular, many feminist writers and activists have raised questions about the disparity between policy and practice.

Generally, the argument is that blueprints for gender transformation in South Africa are in place, but there has generally been a failure on the part of policy-makers, actors within the state or existing structures and institutions to realise the goals of policies. A special issue of South Africa's leading feminist journal, *Agenda*, entitled 'Realising Rights', made this argument very clearly in 2001, with the editorial stating that: 'While

our Constitution is regarded as one of the most progressive in the world, 'Realising Rights?' questions the extent to which women are able to realise the rights enshrined therein. The passing of a number of progressive laws and the amendment of certain pieces of legislation, theoretically implies the improvement of women's positions in society – yet the reality is that the majority of women continue to face marginalisation and discrimination in their homes, workplaces and communities (Moolman, 2001: 2).

A persuasive explanation of the gap between South Africa's gender-oriented theory and practice is provided by Amanda Gouws (2004). Gouws draws attention to how different voices are always already inscribed in legislation, and to 'different discursive inputs being made within different sites' (2004: 43). Her discussion is suggestive in its Foucauldian attention to the way that power is played out through a 'multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies' (2004: 43). The analysis of policy-making can be taken further if we bear in mind how much discursive power is unequally distributed. Negotiation processes in South Africa have not simply entailed various voices in dialogue with each other. They have involved domination, covert censorship and hegemonisation, with different voices having hugely disparate access to sites for articulating knowledge, information and goals.

The uneven allocation of discursive authority has led to the evolution of a levelled, mediated and compromised notion of what the interests and goals of a generalised group of women are, and to the circumscribing of terms around who is included and who is excluded in discussions about justice. The emphasis in public discourses of gender transformation has therefore shifted dramatically from a bottom-up articulation of the interests of women's organisations, to the top-down codification of negotiated rights and entitlements that are believed to have national relevance.

The discursive terrain has changed in remarkably swift ways. Where the language of gender transformation was formerly marked by a climate in which the class, regional and racial political interests of particular women drove them to struggle for distinct agendas for social trans-

formation, our current rights-based discourse assumes that melioristic and state-engineered transformation can grant rights and entitlements in terms of generalised notions of what 'women' of South Africa need and want. These abrupt changes in the first decade of democracy have gone hand in glove with a veering away from the notion of 'justice', towards a veneration of 'rights'. 'Rights' have levelling and universalised legal meaning. 'Justice', on the other hand, is far broader, and implies a holistic understanding of ways in which certain groups and institutions can prevent others from realising their different liberties. Speaking for 'rights' can occur within the framework of formal procedures that ensure the nominal access of all to certain platforms or resources, without comprehensively considering whether all relationships and structures in society actually guarantee this access.

The emphasis on women's rights in policymaking, legislation and the language of transformation has generated a very distinctive national mythology about gender transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. A rhetorical climate shaped by circumstances including the constitutional emphasis on gender equality; policies on sexual harassment and employment equity in the workplace; and legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act of 1998, has set in place a persuasive rhetoric, and has charged certain words and expressions with a sense of their reflecting a new reality. Phrases such as 'gender equality', 'women's empowerment', and 'gender transformation' therefore permeate public discourses in ways that are both remarkably authoritative and also deeply superficial and complacent. First, it is as though rhetorical force were being substituted for any real reflection on actual gender relations and agendas for change. Secondly, the terminology in place consistently stresses the technical and formal dimensions of social dynamics, rather than their political and socially transformative repercussions.

The persuasiveness of the current language revolves considerably around the fact that it often refers to conditions or situations that are fundamentally in accord with neo-liberal development and patriarchal anxieties around changing the gendered status quo. It is noteworthy, for example, that 'women's empowerment', 'women's equality', 'gender

parity' or 'gender equity' are often used in policy documents or public discourses, rather than phrases such as 'women's freedoms' or 'feminist liberation'. The former expressions point fairly straightforwardly to the idea of power within the status quo, to women's aspirations to the status and privileges that men have, while the latter complicatedly opens up the possibility of situations and conditions that may lie beyond existing class and gender models of material achievement and public success.

Many other terms that have become current underline the gradual shift towards moderacy. The term 'gender' in itself has acquired growing influence in defining interest groups, social change and political goals. Consequently, where it used to be legitimate to argue that the voices and interests of *women* were paramount in identifying how patriarchal domination marginalised a group on the basis of gender, the current ascendancy of 'gender' neutralises power relations and almost implies that the social categorisation and identity of women as women and of men as men is not of key importance. Revealing too is the way that 'gender activism' has successively displaced the term 'feminism'. It as though the radicalism signalled by the latter term were being anaestheticised and patriarchal anxieties about change were being appeased. Ostensibly, the jettisoning of 'feminism' is made in relation to claims about its being westerncentric. But this argument disguises a deep-seated conservatism thinly masquerading as a healthy populism. The avoidance of 'feminism' placates the unease of patriarchal nationalism which routinely invokes the charge of spiralling 'westernisation' to attack African women's radicalism.

The need to placate anxieties about change is well-illustrated in the consistent avoidance of 'patriarchy', and its substitution with phrases such as 'male dominance' or 'gender inequality'. Repeatedly, the tendency is to underplay politics and power relations, and to construct a view of hierarchies and inequalities which turns them into 'anomalies' easily corrected through moderate, melioristic and formal rights-oriented strategies for change.

As the rapid transformation of the political terrain around gender struggles in South Africa reveals, mainstreaming has been borne out of a process of negotiation in which the language of rights both reflects and

regulates the accommodative incorporation of political agendas into the state bureaucracy and official narratives of nation-building. The effects of mainstreaming in an environment characterised by the unequal distribution of discursive power must lead us to ask hard questions about how and why ostensibly progressive agendas can so easily be watered down. By turning to the ways in which co-optation and compromise occur through language, we can become more vigilant about the ways in which double standards and duplicity deflect progressive action. Rather than simply positing a gap between language and goals or action, it may be more useful to explore as well the ambiguities and paradoxes embedded in discourse itself, as well as the range of institutions, texts and discourses that rewrite messages of freedom.

The impetus behind mainstreaming in South Africa has been the women's movement and progressive forces in society, although the discursive and political context in which gender activism is now located dilutes its political focus. A similar situation prevails globally. Internationally, what became known as 'gender mainstreaming' peaked from the early nineties, and, through the Beijing Platform in 1995, was identified as a *radical* strategy for guaranteeing state, intersectoral and international collaboration in alleviating women's structural subordination (see True and Mintrom, 2001).

The visibility of this global diffusion, however, needs to be considered in the light of how international instruments and policies function as discourses. Transnational instruments set in place a language of rights which targets universal and transhistorical subjects as clients or beneficiaries who 'receive' what has been conceptualised as just mainly by others. Apart from the projection of individuals as supplicants, the main problem here is that rights discourse assumes the universality of social subjects. In other words, rights discourses privilege certain forms of freedom and justice over others; they fallaciously assume generalised access to measures and mechanisms that are set in place to safeguard individuals. There are related practical problems associated with the universalistic model. When we consider CEDAW, for example, it is clear that there are no actual mechanisms by which states can be held accountable to the

United Nations. While the UN may insist on certain measures to protect women's freedoms across the world, legislation and policy-making that directly affects women is undertaken and regulated at the level of the nation-state. Through rights discourses, gender mainstreaming consequently constructs universal subjects as passive recipients, shuts down on their agencies in driving change to foreclose possibilities for them to drive alternative gender transformation in society, and privileges the subject positions of globally and regionally dominant subjects.

While the pitfalls of the global dispersal of gender transformation in the nineties may seem obvious, it is alarming how rapidly such diffusion has taken place. The language of rights is firmly entrenched in lobbying, planning and policy-making around gender justice, while the radical activism that formerly drove feminist transformation is now, according to popular wisdom, dismissed as *passé*, outmoded or obsolete. By a deft slight of hand, the discourse of rights, which so evidently sets in place passive, de-historicised and politically disempowered subjects, has achieved ascendancy as the language of social transformation.

It is noteworthy how the language of rights has set in place a model for 'dealing with gender' which mirrors the model that – over the last decade – has been entrenched in South Africa. It is small wonder, then, that the idea that many women in the North today live in a 'postfeminist' age, namely, an age where feminist struggle has become obsolete, has gained currency. When paradigms of progress and freedom are shaped by a language that identifies universally agreed upon and measurable success and achievement, and when such models are instituted by states, or through international agreements, it is difficult to insist that there is a need to struggle for change within civil society or through women's actions; change appears to be guaranteed both by the 'gender-sensitive' paradigms that exist, and by the language inscribed in these models. Naomi Wolf's (1993) writings have gone some way towards critiquing this situation. By condemning the salience of what she terms 'victim feminism', she accurately describes the present mood of gender awareness in the North: 'over the last twenty years, the old belief in a tolerant assertiveness, a claim to human participation and human rights - power

feminism - was embattled by the rise of a set of beliefs that cast women as beleaguered, fragile, intuitive angels: victim feminism' (1993: 147). Wolf identifies the construct of women as supplicants in relation to the state and policymakers, of women positioned as recipients rather than agents; of generalised notions about women's universal needs and entitlements. And as Elizabeth Schneider (1991) has argued, the pre-eminence of rights discourse turns women into passive targets and victims who become dependent on the state and other instruments and sources of power both for articulating and granting their freedoms.

### ***Gender teaching and research***

The manoeuvring around language in relation to popular myth-making and public discourses is reflected in gender teaching and research. This has been the case nationally and globally. In South Africa, 1994 marked a stage when the state and state-recognised sectors within civil society created a new mood around gender research, new patterns of funding and support for it, and also a new public awareness of its relevance to emerging agendas for democratisation. One effect of this galvanising of governmental support for 'gender' was a trend towards technocratic and functionalist developmentalism. This was buttressed by the shift towards market-driven and career-oriented teaching in South African higher educational institutions.

Nationally, over five women's and gender studies units offering postgraduate programmes in gender studies were launched in different provinces. And the climate of institutionalised gender research quickly encouraged technocratisation. Teaching increasingly became less concerned with feminism in the academy, with students' political and personal growth or with making women visible in research and writing, and progressively more preoccupied with how gender analysis should equip students with applied or analytical skills<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> I am referring here mainly to the packaging of courses within universities, which have become more and more concerned with marketing degree programmes. Whether

The mid-nineties therefore ushered in a phase of consolidation and marketisation around women's and gender studies, with this 'mainstreaming' being geared towards teaching gender 'expertise' and 'skills' to promote the efficiency of state structures, policy-making and commerce. Bureaucracy, professionalisation and technocracy spiral in this context, alongside a prominent group of 'experts' whose analytical tools, methodologies and concepts often directly shape planning and policymaking. Pat McFadden astutely points to this trend at a continental level in her polemical 'Why Feminist Autonomy Now?':

Our staid matrons (the continent's 'experts' on gender training and mainstreaming) also serve as the link between the women's movement and the state in almost every country on the continent. They control the flow of resources between the state and donor communities...They carefully tread the thin lines drawn by Northern donors on issues of reproductive health and sexuality, cautiously referring to difficult issues like abortion and sexual orientation only in moderate tones, and rarely, if ever, rocking the national or international boat (see *fito*, [www.fito.co.za](http://www.fito.co.za)).

Spaces and discourses that seem progressive have been co-opted into national efforts to mainstream and market technologies of gender, and to situate gender concerns within neo-liberal state building and 'good governance'. This is starkly reflected in the renaming of women's studies as gender studies, for example. Or in the painstaking efforts to market women's studies courses as being of 'use' to students in the demand for skilled human resource persons in government and the workplace. No longer is there an assumption that women's studies matters because it prompts the broad personal and political transformation of human beings. Gender studies is seen as serviceable because it is securely written into a moderate template for state consolidation and neo-liberal development under the aegis of 'mainstreaming'.

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or not individual lectures and researchers have resisted the depoliticisation of gender teaching, courses, within the broader framework of university policies, are marketed and defined according to the logic of their practical usefulness for the job market. The effect of this has often been to underplay the humanities and arts, and privilege disciplines like psychology and the social sciences. For a further discussion of this, see Lewis, 2002, especially Appendix, 'Institutional Review'.

A mainstreaming trend that has been growing increasingly prominent in Africa is one in which 'women's studies', as the title of a discipline, or of departments, is being viewed with greater awkwardness and anxiety. 'Women's studies' is rapidly giving way to 'gender studies', and the new term is embraced for its inclusiveness and its rejection of ghettoisation. Many courses have been revamped, course outlines rewritten, and the general culture of departments altered to turn them from supportive spaces aimed primarily at empowering women's students, into spaces where men and women are believed to grapple collaboratively with issues to do with gender.

The intellectual usefulness of 'gender' here is indisputable: 'gender studies' correctly captures the extent to which feminists need to engage with identities and processes that mould relations between men and women, in other words, gender dynamics. Clearly too, 'gender studies' captures the fact that the subject of study cannot be 'women' in isolation, but women in relation to men, as well as processes and relationships that are gendered. What remains revealing, however, is the way in which the new labeling of a field of study has modified the *politics* of the field of study, and in many ways buttressed a broader climate around mainstreaming.

The emphasis on opening up the field and making it inclusive for women and men occurs alongside the underplaying of long-entrenched power relationships, a neglect, for example, of the fact that today there is still an absurdly preponderant focus in knowledge production on men as subjects. The question that this situation therefore begs is why there should be a concern within women's studies with 'balancing out', when this is one of the few spaces where the privileging of men's knowledge production is directly contested. Overall, therefore, there are huge problems with the 'commonsensical' idea that mainstreaming gender studies corrects a passé emphasis on the compensatory and atomistic focus on women. Distinct institutional needs and contexts (for example, the fact that rape is a regular occurrence in many universities in South Africa and more generally throughout Africa) make separate women's studies departments important and strategic. Separate women's studies departments

have the potential to provide invaluable supportive cultural pockets of focused feminist support, research and teaching within institutions which remain, overall, extremely fraught spaces for women academics and students to negotiate.

The skewing of feminist research and education has also occurred in the North. In a powerful critique focusing on the meanings and fate of 'theory', Barbara Christian (1990) identifies the two connected trends of commoditisation and professionalisation that - over the years - have worked to depoliticize feminist scholarship. In the seventies and eighties, a collective identity of women in academia - supported and influenced by the resurgence of feminism in the sixties - formed caucuses and associations, or engaged in lobbying, or spearheaded disciplinary innovations in contesting the exclusiveness of the patriarchal academy. Their interventions were deeply political and radical, and they struggled to challenge injustice, silencing and domination on various fronts.

By the nineties, as Christian notes, much left-wing academic theory had

'become a commodity which help[ed] to determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions' (1990: 37-8).

Most importantly, this theory grew more and more marked by what is monolithic and monotheistic, by what is elitist and exclusive. Professionalism, through which feminist academics and discourses are absorbed into the canon by echoing its exclusivist and monolithic language and procedures, became the goal of feminist academia. As Joan Scott (1991) therefore concludes, the elevation of 'professionalism' firmly replaced the preoccupation with 'politics' as many feminist academics capitulated to notions of mastery and excellence, and so sanctioned the exclusion and silencing that an earlier generation of feminists had squarely denounced.

In the North, the 'success story' of feminist scholarship revolves largely around its progressive shift away from a defiant 'marginality' towards a mastering of the theoretical tools and strategies of the mainstream. Women's studies, as the site in which a language for speaking about women's agendas was inaugurated, can be seen to have moved from the disparaged margins to the triumphant centre. The centrist desti-

nation has been linked to a fixation with high theoretical rigour and a recuperation of the idea, formerly anathema for many feminists, of knowledge as science, of knowledge as that which can 'stand up firmly by itself'. The professionalisation of gender research and education in Africa has revolved mainly around the growing complicity between a gender industry and the state's ideological apparatus, creating a situation in which much gender education and research tends to service mainstreaming and neo-liberal development. In the North, such professionalisation has mainly involved the commoditisation of research and the elevation of knowledge as cultural capital. This has led to the growing alienation of academics and knowledge production from civil society activism and women's organisations.

This trend is clearly reflected in the turn towards an uncritical poststructuralist deftness. Here there has been a growing de-politicization of language as the site of revolutionary practice, towards a preoccupation with language as that which must capture the 'complexity of things'. The consequence of this has been astutely explained by Jacqui Alexander: 'Postmodernist theory, in its haste to disassociate itself from all forms of essentialism, has generated a series of epistemological confusions regarding the interconnections between location, identity and the construction of knowledge... Postmodernist discourse attempts to move beyond essentialism by pluralizing and dissolving the stability and analytic unity of the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This strategy often forecloses any valid recuperation of these categories or the social relations through which they are constituted (1997: XVII). On the intellectual left, therefore, discourses have spawned such deft phrases as 'negotiating identity' or 'negotiating freedom' which often foreclose any systematic attention to power.

Many poststructuralist concepts are aimed at destabilising a fixed notion of struggle, and drawing attention to the multiplicity of agencies and social identities. They seek to stress how social actors make sense of their experiences from their point of view and to emphasise their agency in the face of those who presume to speak and act for them. They have been invaluable in dislodging doctrinaire notions of struggle associated

with leftist orthodoxy. This includes the leftist orthodoxy of Marxism and western-centric feminism. Poststructuralism intervenes here because it allows one to think about processes, consciousness and agency beyond hegemonic notions of what impossibly ‘universalised’ persons must want. In particular, they allow us to take into account the extent to which certain social actors are circumscribed by particular relations and practices. They also encourage us to consider how certain women’s struggles make sense on their terms and to respect the fact that particular groups have distinctive legacies of resistance.

But the concepts and methods of poststructuralism also hold out the possibility of disarticulating relations of power. In short, they can provide ideological cover for proliferating divisions and injustices in the contemporary world, and especially for shifting attention away from identifying power and its effects. Bell hooks, among many other feminist commentators, shows how this language has developed as certain academics seek legitimation and access to academic and intellectual canons. She writes:

While academic legitimation was crucial to the advancement of feminist thought, it created a new set of difficulties. Suddenly the feminist thinking that had emerged directly from theory and practice received less attention than theory that was metalinguistic, creating exclusive jargon; it was written solely for an academic audience. It was as if a large body of feminist thinkers banded together to form an elite group writing theory that could be understood only by an ‘in’ crowd (2000: 22).

What should be stressed here is not – as I hope my preceding discussion has demonstrated – the belief that African and other third-world and socially engaged feminists should concern themselves only with ‘bread-and-butter’ issues, rather than with theory, with discourses and with deconstructive and postmodern theories. The language and practice of deconstruction can contribute enormously to shaping radical and revolutionary social and intellectual activism and struggles for gender justice. What I am concerned about here is the extent to which certain applications of postmodern feminism can feed into existing relations of power and function purely or mainly as symbolic capital for individuals and groups who use intellectual currency to gain access to the centre.

### ***Imagination and the public sphere***

Today, an unprecedented circulation of information is guaranteed by apparently limitless knowledge production, the massive growth of print technologies, global flows of information and knowledge, cyberspace and the Internet. At the same time, intellectual knowledge production is uniquely registering the intricacy of social identities, the complexity of individual and social behaviour, the nuances of institutional and social processes. The deluge of information, knowledge and language that persistently overdetermines the political has led Manuel Castells to coin the term, 'information politics' (1997: 310). Although Castells is referring mainly to the burgeoning electronic media as the new 'privileged space of politics', it is important to acknowledge the complicity of pervasive professionalisation and commoditisation within the academy, and the steady process through which ostensibly subversive knowledge has been adulterated and depoliticized. At the same time, the language of 'rights from above' dominates public debates about gender transformation at the communal, national and international level, and seriously constrains civil society activism and independent debates. The result of this hegemony has been silencing. When we consider the evolution of discussion and debate in the public sphere, and the current apathy within civil society, we must ask what all these apparently liberating and democratising discursive processes really mean. Somehow, the promise of lively public discourses and civil society activism has rapidly diminished in recent years.

This stasis should encourage us to re-assess what the new forms of wielding power in our current information age are. Specifically, they must lead us also to reconsider, for example, what 'censorship' means in our present age. To what extent can we think about radical feminist knowledge as being 'censored' despite the fact that it is allowed, formally, to exist. To what extent do the procedures and value systems for elevating certain kinds of expert knowledge function as forms of repression, surveillance and silencing? And how do current forms of gatekeep-

ing curtail the circulation of radical knowledge even in spaces that seem amenable to the free flow of information and ideas?

It is no coincidence that many radical feminist writers today are searching restlessly for terms that powerfully invoke transgression, the quest for new ways of thinking and speaking, and the pursuit for what is 'visionary' and 'imaginative' (see for example, McFadden, 2004; hooks, 2000; and Pereira, 2002). Posing a challenge to African feminists to transcend neo-imperial and patriarchal frontiers, Pereira raises imperatives that have both cognitive and practical implications:

There is no way of creating knowledge that is not circumscribed by the oppressions of our times if we cannot imagine a better future... Without imagination, we cannot search for the kind of knowledge that allows us to fully understand our divided realities in order to transcend them. It is the imagination that allows us to move from where we are to where we would like to be even before we get there. We must learn to liberate the imagination, to unleash the energy that so many of us dissipate, often without realising, in upholding the intellectual barriers that divide us not only from one another, but also from ourselves and from other ways of knowing (2002: [www.feministafrica.org/fa%201/2level.html](http://www.feministafrica.org/fa%201/2level.html)2002).

One of the primary challenges that face feminists today is the challenge of re-imagining our goals, of insisting on the powers of the imagination to articulate our desires in ways that transcend the limiting visions bequeathed by neo-liberal globalisation. In an argument that the struggle for democracy needs to take new forms, Alan Touraine identified the slipperiness of discursive control in neo-liberal democracy and called for the need to re-think 'activism':

Power used to be in the hands of princes, oligarchies and ruling elites; it was defined as the capacity to impose one's will on others, modifying their behaviour. This image of power does not fit with our reality any longer. Power is everywhere and nowhere; it is in mass production, in financial flows, in lifestyles, in the hospital, in the school, in television, in images, in messages, in technologies...The fundamental matter is not seizing power, but to recreate society, to invent politics anew, to avoid the blind conflict between open markets and closed communities, to overcome the breaking down of societies where the distance increases between the included and the excluded, those in and those out (quoted in Castells, 1997: 309).

Touraine describes our present age of globalised neo-imperial domination, a phase following the independence of many African countries, the

disintegration of soviet societies and the attack on left-wing movements in the North. These processes occur against the backdrop of a global diffusion of coercive control and 'manufactured consent'. The situation that currently faces feminists is far more insidious and multifaceted. And as we confront our current discursive landscape, we must squarely face the need 'to recreate society, to invent politics anew'.

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