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Theorizing Feminism from the South: Knowledge Production through South Africa's Feminist Journal AGENDA

By Amanda Gouws¹

Abstract

One of the important ways that feminists in South Africa have generated knowledge and theory is through an independent feminist journal, AGENDA, that was founded in 1987. In this article, I discuss the history of AGENDA and analyze the type of feminist knowledge that AGENDA produces as a feminist journal of the Global South and specifically Africa. I also show how African feminism and intersectionality have always been the two core dimensions of knowledge production in AGENDA through the analysis of two trilogies: one on African feminism and one on African sexuality to show how knowledge is used to create new theories. I also reflect on the South/North divide and hegemonic thinking from the North. What the analysis reflects is the resistance against hegemonic thinking, the invention of new concepts, as well as new theorization and hybrid theories that draw on the Northern theories at the same time as it disrupts them.

Keywords: Global South, Knowledge production, AGENDA journal, African feminisms

Introduction

“The South” locates one in a way that becomes an invisible marker of difference and often of inferiority. Those of us who are Southern feminists (inside and outside the academy), and in my case an African feminist, have all experienced the lack of engagement with our work and ideas by scholars from the Global North. The South is therefore more than a geographical location. It is also a relationship, ways of knowing and epistemological dislocation from a hegemonic canon of literature.

Those of us who have trained in the North often find ourselves in a situation of wanting to publish in international journals where our work will be read, but often Northern peer reviewers are quite critical of knowledge that disrupts existing paradigms. At the same time, our Southern colleagues may suspect us from deferring to the North. This is what Comaroff and Comaroff (2011: 4) calls bearing scholarly signatures that are simultaneously from the North and the South, because bearing this signature means “multiple *displacements*, multiple focal lengths, multiple interpellations, multiple movements both away and towards”.

Feminist journals play an important role, allowing feminist activists/scholars to claim, generate, and disseminate their knowledge. Until the late 1980's there was a dearth of feminist journals (both popular and academic) in South Africa. AGENDA, founded in 1987, was the first feminist journal to attempt to accommodate popular and academic writing in the same journal. This journal also now serves as an archive of feminist voices over a 33-year period. In

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what follows, I will contextualize AGENDA in the settler post-colonial society of South Africa. I will then focus on six issues (two trilogies) to show, through drawing from its content, how theorizing originates from intersectionality and how a body of African feminist literature contributes to a canon of scholarship that is different from the Global North.

Theorizing from the South

The necessity to use the Global South as a reference point for theorizing is a response to the hegemony of theory from the North and its influence on scholars from the Global South (i.e., developing countries with colonial histories). But it is also more than a geographic location—it is a set of relations in which colonialism has positioned the South in the periphery of theory making, while theory is spun out by the centripetal force of the Global Northern center. These relational terms of theory making will acknowledge geopolitical connections but also distance (Morrell, 2016: 191). It is not about the South as a geographical location, but about the effect of the South on theory (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2011: 4).

The hegemonic position of the Global North in theory production (specifically North America and Europe) implies that scholars from the Global South must read and learn theories from the Global North, but the reverse is not guaranteed (Banerjee and Connell, (2018: 3). If scholars do not meet the criteria set out by Northern journals, they will be considered professionally deficient (Roberts and Connell, 2016: 136). Scholars in the South often get caught up in a process which African theorist Paulin Hountondji² called extraversion—of being oriented to authority external to one's own society—such as reading the leading journals and publishing in them in the Metropole, gaining recognition there (Connell *Rethinking Gender from the South*, (2014), Connell *Southern Theory* (2007)). While scholars in the South have developed epistemologies and theories, the Global North often treat these countries as case studies or area studies. This continues the colonial premise that countries in the Global South provide the raw material while the North theorizes (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert and Koobak, (2016: 214); Banerjee and Connell, (2018: 4)).

Apart from the neglect of epistemologies and knowledge production by scholars from the South by the canon of the North, there is the imposition of concepts of gender that never existed before colonial conquest. For this situation to change there needs to be a greater engagement with the scope and sophistication of knowledge produced in the South (Banerjee and Connell, 2018: 18). An example of the critique of the Northern imposition of the concept “gender” in the African context is the scholarship of Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, a Nigerian scholar, living in the USA, in *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997). Oyèwùmí's writing shows that the concepts central to Western feminist thought, such as ‘woman’ and ‘gender’ are constructed on the basis of Western cultural particulars. This is then universalized regardless of whether it may fit the cultural and social configurations of a specific context. Oyèwùmí shows that in Yoruba society in Nigeria, age is the central organizing principle, and that women and men are not caught up in gender role divisions as they are in the Global North. What her work reveals is how Western feminist scholars think that they are using the particular and theorizing contextually, while still drawing on Western concepts that are assumed to be universal³ (Coetzee, 2017: English version).

In coming to grips with post-colonial conditions, Southern feminist scholars have done a lot to theorize gender issues such as land, migration, poverty, rurality, and sexual violence.

² Hountondji, Paulin, J. “Introduction: Recentring Africa”. *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails*. CODESRIA, 1997, pp. 1-39.

³ Oyèwùmí is not without her critics, but this is beyond the scope of this article. See eg: “‘Yoruba’s don’t do Gender’: A Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewumi’s. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*”, by Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, https://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/BAKERE_YUSUF.pdf

What is required is epistemological fragmentation to re-center the South so that it is not only an object of study, but also refers to agentic subjects that theorize (Morrell, 2016: 193).

Border Thinking and Disidentification

Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak (2016: 213) make the important point that rather than asking why Western feminists do not embrace Southern feminist theory, we should ask why people think that feminist theory is by default Western. What is needed is the development of new analytical tools to disrupt dominant logics and imaginaries in knowledge production. They use the transformative tools of “border thinking” and “disidentification”.

One of the problems that needs to be addressed is the “coloniality of knowledge”—where all epistemologies and knowledge production are subsumed by Western modernity and measured by its norms, in a way that delegitimizes all knowledge that does not meet these norms. To decolonize knowledge there will have to be a destabilization of the subject-object relations from the position of those who were not allowed subjectivity and rationality in the epistemic matrix of modernity (Tlostanova et al, 2016: 214). Becoming subjects is to engage the world through the lived experience of being in the South. Border thinking involves this situatedness as well as being located (in)between the academy and activism (Tlostanova et al, 2016: 215). Border thinking emerges from the gaps of modernity and escapes its control. This is a process that also demands disruption that requires grappling with multiple forms of knowledge that will refuse closure (Kasembeli, 2019: 14).

Using disidentification aims to disrupt the cultural logic from the position of marginalized subject positions and incorporates plural speaking positions. Working in this way means that authors are not assimilated into hegemonic discourses, nor do they break free from its inescapable presence (Tlostanova et al, 2016: 219-220). Border thinking works on a general epistemological level, and disidentification is an immediate praxis. Drawing on Mignolo⁴ they argue: “I am where I think”.

Feminist Knowledge Production in Settler Colonial States

Settler colonialism as a variant of colonialism locates settlers and indigenous populations differentially along a continuum of difference that is also hierarchical. This hierarchy involves assumptions of modernity, culture (“backwardness”), race (in many cases ethnicity), class, and gender. Settler societies function through extensive systems of exclusion, and exploitation of indigenous populations through coercive, ideological, legal, and administrative systems that benefit the settlers exclusively (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995: 4). Settlers in settler societies maintain a relationship with the Eurocentric center from the periphery and view themselves as superior to indigenous populations. Through knowledge production and Eurocentric historiographies, indigenous knowledge production and systems become erased and distorted while the complexity of social relations in indigenous societies are treated in reductionist ways (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995: 5). These histories of settlers and indigenous populations are interdependent and linked to class formations and racial and gender hierarchies.

South Africa has a history of settler colonialism and in the 20th century, apartheid, that legalized racial superiority of white settlers in a political economy of racial capitalism (the exploitation of cheap Black labour). Racial superiority and economic prosperity created hierarchical relationships embedded in and reproduced by identity markers of race, class, and gender that cannot be ignored in analyses of past and current understandings of exclusion, oppression, and domination. These relationships of domination that involve gender, race, class, and locality are not separate but engage each other in fluid and dynamic ways.

⁴ Mignolo, Walter. “I am where I think: Remapping the Order of Knowing”. *The Creolization of Theory*. Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 159-192.

The liberation struggle in South Africa prioritized racial liberation over gender liberation (see eg Hassim (2014). African women's histories, writing, art, and activism, however, show the erasure of gender struggles that could only be expressed through understanding the intersectionalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Until the 1980s there was limited engagement with feminism as a body of knowledge/theory in South Africa in and outside the academy. This changed with the founding of a feminist journal, AGENDA, in 1987, prior to democratic transition. The South African women's movement, the Women's National Coalition, an umbrella body that developed during the transition phase, helped to open spaces for feminist discussions on democracy, the state, the construction of a national gender machinery, women's rights, and activism thereby legitimizing women's knowledge production. AGENDA created a space through which women's lived experience as well as its theorization could be addressed, and the gender politics of transition could be taken on board through the publication of articles, briefings, interviews, poetry, and stories.

Below I will show by drawing on articles in AGENDA how South African feminism starts from the perspective of the intersectionality of identities and positionalities, "understood as the interlocking relations of dominance of social, political, cultural and economic dynamics and power that are multiple and determined simultaneously" (Bilge, 2013: 58). (See also Gouws (2017) and May (2015)). AGENDA has remained viable for a period of 33 years.

AGENDA: The Historical Context

The first issue of AGENDA saw the light in 1987, in the dying days of apartheid, and was founded by a group of feminist activists and students wanting women's voices and struggles to be included in the struggle for democracy. Since its start and in the seven years up to the first democratic election AGENDA's aim was to include women's voices in this critical period of transition. One of the main motivations to start AGENDA was feminists' general despondency about the gender blindness of men/male scholars on the Left and the desire to include a critical feminist perspective in the transition (Meer, 1997: 6).

It was started by a small group of feminists, called the "AGENDA Collective" that put it together and edited it "on the run", doing the editing, production, and distribution (Friedman (1997); Moletsane, Haysom, and Reddy (2015)). This volunteerism managed to give a space to feminist theorizing, but also to explore the impact of politics on women's lives, centering African feminism. Even though it was committed to intersectionality, Black feminists were critical of the journal because of the lack of enough representation of Black women and the historical privileging of white women's voices over Black voices.

In the bigger political context of the anti-apartheid struggle, this journal also played an important role to generate knowledge amidst an academic boycott against South Africa by European countries and the USA that made engagement with feminist knowledge generated elsewhere difficult. The mass opposition movement inside the country, the United Democratic Front (UDF), became a key player in regulating the invitation of politically acceptable academic visitors, but also which academics could travel overseas to conferences (Hyslop, 2006: 60). This sparked what became known as the representation debate in AGENDA, or "who could speak for whom". Given apartheid racial segregation of schools and tertiary institutions, white scholars were in the privileged position to travel to conferences and often spoke on behalf of or about Black South Africans in ways that reproduce racial hierarchies or ignorance about the lived experiences of Black people. This debate was one of the first to feature criticism by Black women of white women (see AGENDA vol. 14 and vol. 15 (1992), AGENDA vol. 16 (1993)). This debate about representation and how knowledge is used closely linked women in the women's movement with women in the academy, exposing universities as sites of struggle (Hassim and Walker, 1993). By its ten-year celebration, AGENDA has

grown to such an extent that it had an office, paid staff, and funding from different sources⁵. Circulation has significantly increased with targeting readers, educators, community workers, students, women's organizations, and academics (Meer, 1997: 12).

One of the embedded practices of AGENDA is to give voice to marginalized women who are excluded from publishing, for example, rural women. In the earlier issues, the struggles of women workers and trade unions were given exposure, especially because worker struggles were important in Left politics in South Africa. Weaving theory from different perspectives gave voice to women who are often voiceless and enabled the journal to capture the devastating impact of colonial legacies and later neo-liberal globalism on lived experience⁶.

AGENDA was unashamedly feminist with an intersectional approach right from the beginning. Reflecting on a demand for journals that are concerned with women and women's issues, it stated in the first Editorial (2):

Within this context AGENDA aims to make feminist ideas and gender sensitive thinking and doing, accessible to as wide an audience as possible. It intends making available news and information as well as ideas and comment and hopes to provide a forum for discussion and debate for all those who share with us, a concern to understand the position of women and men within South Africa.

We believe that people in South Africa experience exploitation and oppression on the basis of *their class, their race and their gender*... This requires an understanding of the ways in which class, race and gender shape women's lives and women's struggles – past and present (emphasis mine).

Thus, AGENDA is an explicitly feminist journal. It is concerned with women's issues and women's struggles and wishes to encourage women to write by offering contributions to the journal. As the title of our journal suggest [it] does not wish to close ranks on men [It then encourages gender sensitive thinking]. Gender sensitivity affects both how we understand particular issues and how we act on that understanding in our personal and our political lives.

The lens of intersectionality influenced selection of members of the Editorial Advisory Board, as well as editorial decisions on which submissions to include and the distribution of authorship according to race, class, gender (men were also included), and rurality (Moletsane, et al, 2015: 771).

The Editorial Advisory Board (also called the Agenda Collective)

The Editorial Advisory Board is representative of different feminist voices, the majority currently being Black women, the majority also academics, indicating a shift from a broader range of representation. The EAB members bring diverse experiences to the board and shape editorial policy, approve themes, as well as guest editors for different issues, and the editorial that is written by guest editors for the issue they edit. As Moletsane et al. (2015: 769) observe AGENDA: "...mediates and balances the demands of peer-reviewed and peer-sanctioned knowledge production with the requisite gender, race and space/place equality, in the context of mechanisms that often privilege particular ways of knowing".

After the democratic transition in 1994, there was a demand for more localized research by the government, as well as the control over the quality of scholarship as a consequence of market driven priorities. This meant that AGENDA had to comply with rigorous peer review demands. This compliance was necessary to maintain its International Bibliography of the

⁵ Over the years these include inter alia HIVOS, African Women's Development Fund, the Open Society Foundation for South Africa, Oxfam Canada, Ford, the South African Human Science Research Council, subscriptions, and more recently a South African feminist NGO, Gender Links.

⁶ For the early history, see AGENDA n°34 (1997).

Social Sciences (IBSS), as well as its South African Post-Secondary Education (SAPSE) accreditation. The South African Department of Education gives a certain amount of funding to authors' universities, per article published in a SAPSE journal, which is aimed at encouraging research. This has skewed publication toward scholarly articles and the voices of academics, becoming a form of gatekeeping. It also skewed the membership of the EAB towards academics (Moothoo-Padayachie, 2008: 7, 13). This had a negative impact on the type of publishing that AGENDA prioritizes, diminishing the contributions of grassroots women, intergenerationality and a rural focus. To counter this development AGENDA employed two strategies to involve rural and marginalized women—that of a radio programme broadcasting at community level through local languages, and Feminist Dialogues that brought together academics, activists, non-governmental organizations, community-based organization, and other grassroots organizations (Moletsane et al, 2015: 774). The Feminist Dialogues (of the topics of the FD covered were “land and violence on women’s bodies”, “young women’s activism”, “the decolonization of international law”) went through digital technology. While this gave marginalized women a certain type of access to knowledge production, it still marginalized them from scholarly production. AGENDA took a further initiative to also nurture emerging scholars through writing workshops and writing skills programmes to mentor their writing for a broader audience and for publication (Moletsane et al, 2015: 776).

Methodology⁷

I have been a member of the Editorial Collective for seven years and guest edited four special issues. I also engaged one of the consulting editors, one of the founding members of the journal, and the main administrator. The archive of the journal is located in Durban, South Africa, but I could not visit it due to the COVID lockdown⁸.

At the time of this analysis, 125 issues of AGENDA have seen the light. Issues of relevance for Southern feminist knowledge production are issue 34, a reflection of 10 years of AGENDA’s existence, issue 72 (2007) twenty years of feminist publishing, and issue 120 (2019) that self-consciously reflects on Southern Feminisms.

In order to deal with the volume of information, we categorized the issues by theme, revealed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Themes	AGENDA Issues
African Feminist Discourses	50, 54, 58 (trilogy), 72, 83, 100, 120 (Southern Feminisms)
Women, the Economy and Labour	18, 35, 78, 81, 121
Women and Politics/the State	20,26, 30, 45
Women and the Law	82, 107
Women and Development	12, 48, 52, 114
Women and the Environment	29, 73, 101
Women and Food Security	51, 110
Women’s Health and Reproductive Rights	15, 27

⁷ The author thanks her research assistant, Melanie Green, for assistance on this project.

⁸ The author thanks Lou Haysom, Asha Moodley and Shireen Ragunan for their assistance.

Women and Technology Advancement	38, 71
Women, Sport and Recreation	17, 85
Women and the Home/Family	22, 76, 87
Women, Religion and Spirituality	25, 61, 109
Women, Identity and Culture	32 (Race), 46, 57, 68
Women and Education	21, 53, 80
Gendering childhood	56, 79
Women and Citizenship	40
Women's Rights	10, 24, 47
Women's World Conferences (UN)	64, 69, 2021 (forthcoming Beijing +25)
Women and Xenophobia	108
Women and Poverty	33
Gender-based Violence	36, 74 (trilogy), 112
Women and Violence	16, 66, 70 (trafficking), 105, 117
Women, Conflicts and War	43, 55, 59
Women's Leadership	65, 118
Women's Movements and Activism	60, 113, 119
Women and the Media	31, 77
Women and Writing	46, 99 (autobiographies)
Two Decades of African Feminist Publishing	72
Women's Imprisonment	106
LGBTQI focused sexuality and gender	37, 62, Special Focus on culture (2005), 67, 90, 102, 103, 116
Women, Sexuality, and Body Politics	23, 28, 63
Gender and Disability	104
HIV/AIDS	39, 44, 75
Women and Land	42
COVID	2021 (forthcoming)
Un-themed editions/Special Issues	9, 14, 34, 115

Digital distribution increased AGENDA's reach significantly. It received 49,000 article downloads in 2020 which is 38% higher than downloads received in 2019 (Agenda Publishing Report, 2020). Downloads were Africa: 36%, North America: 20.4%, Europe: 29.4%, and Asia: 7.74%. This shows that the journal's distribution is very wide, with articles accessed and read in the Global North.

Issues before 1991 were not thematized. This changed in 1991 and became linked to a call for papers that is widely distributed in South Africa and internationally. With issue 20 (1994) there was a shift from a women-centered journal to a gender-focused journal. It is also

reflected in the title of the journal that changed from *AGENDA—Journal about Women and Gender* to *AGENDA—Empowering Women for Gender Equity*. This can be related to a changing global/transnational environment with a greater focus on gender mainstreaming and in South Africa a decline of activism because of processes of democratic institutionalization. Women's writing after 1994 started to focus more on women's representation, engagement with institutions, and other technocratic tools of governance (Moothoo-Padayachie, 2008: 87). This shift was also conducive to including men's interests and LGBTQI concerns.

The early themes of *AGENDA* focused on the struggles of Black working-class women, and included biographies of Black women, telling the stories of ordinary South Africans, often focusing on women in a male-dominated world, drawing on womanism. Over many issues, *AGENDA* showed that the development of South Africa feminism is a hybridization of western origin feminism, that of radical, Marxist, socialist, and liberal feminisms as well as womanism (as developed by Alice Walker) with a more specific adherence to Socialist and Third World Feminism⁹ (Moothoo-Padayachie, 2008: 20). Chandra Mohanty's (1991) theorization of the West's views of "third world women" as victims of underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, poverty, overpopulation, and religious fanaticism in "Under Western Eyes" became very influential in South Africa in the 1990s, for making visible the lacunae and distortions in the views of Western feminists of post-colonial societies.

Because of a lack of space, it is not possible to engage with all the issues of *AGENDA*. I therefore selected two trilogies (3 issues on the same theme) that of "African feminisms" and "African feminisms: Sexuality". These issues speak to the core of *AGENDA*'s agenda—to give exposure to African feminism and intersectionality. I will illustrate how theorizing from the South has been captured in *AGENDA*.

African Feminisms Trilogy: Resisting the North, Inventing the New

The first issue in the trilogy series is also the 50th issue of *AGENDA* that aims at extending debates on feminist theories and gender activism, involving authors from a greater continental range of locations. The trilogy was shaped by three considerations: the changing terrain of gender struggles in transition to democracy, extending the range of authors, and an expanding readership in Africa.

This trilogy represents theoretical engagements with the content of African feminism, the identity of African feminists, and the centrality of colonialization and diaspora in these spaces. As the guest editor of *African Feminisms 1*, in 2001, Desiree Lewis articulates:

Theoretical reflection is one of the areas in which diversity and contestation have flourished... describes the evolution of these different theoretical strands in relation to theorists' concerns with self-naming and critical intervention. (4)

She names, for example, Pumla Gqola and Amina Mama as African feminists who raised important questions about different perspectives included in African feminism, and how to name them—be it womanists, Black feminists, African feminists, or post-colonial feminists, as well as varying engagements with Western feminism. Rather than thinking of African feminism as a geographic site it is about how gender issues are articulated since many African feminists are part of the diaspora and do not live on the continent. This contributes to geographical and political fluidity within African feminism (Lewis, *Introduction* 2001: 4).

Lewis' argument highlights the hybridity of theoretical production—of feminists drawing on theory from the USA and Europe, but also from Africa. What stands out about this scholarship is "a shared intellectual commitment to critiquing gender and imperialism coupled

⁹ Third World Feminism was a term used during the 1990's but later shifted to post-colonial feminism.

with a collective focus on a continental identity shaped by particular relations of subordination in the world economy and global social and cultural practices” (Lewis, *Introduction*, 2001:5). She points out the importance of autobiographical writing to make visible the legacies of imperial and male dominance, advancing the interplay between theory and experience of cultural marginalization and social oppression.

Some of the writing in AGENDA also engages cultural practices that can be oppressive to women as articulated by women who themselves grapple with these experiences as lived realities. Very often when white western feminists write about cultural practices in multicultural societies in the West, they refer to harmful cultural practices of minority immigrant communities of which they themselves do not have any lived experience. What is presented is the heterogeneity of theorizing that, for example, uses literature. Cultural practices such as polygyny are articulated through fiction in the short novel of Mariama Ba, an author from Senegal, “So Long a Letter” in which the lived experience of being a first wife who needs to accept the husband’s choice to marry another younger wife is shown. Even though Ba rejects the concept of feminism, it is related to how she understands feminism in a country that is 90% Muslim. She therefore prioritizes her identity as a Muslim woman. This stance is similar to Black women in Africa who reject feminism because of its association with whiteness and being Western¹⁰. This does not mean that these women do not hold beliefs that can be considered feminist (Latha, 2001).

Many of the articles deal with the problem of naming the type of feminism or feminist identity as feminist scholars in Africa, such as the article by Pumla Gqola (2001) “Ufanele uqavile: Blackwomen, feminism and postcoloniality in Africa”. This is important in a post-colonialism context where indigenous populations were refused the power to name themselves and others, at the same time as it is a way to distinguish African feminism from inscriptions from the North.

Gqola engages the writing of Molaria Ogunjide-Leslie and Carole Boyce Davies who write to disrupt the colonial and patriarchal systems of logic. This writing is post-colonial through opposing othering and distortive inscriptions and is always articulated in relation to the dominant imperial culture. It asks for new meaning making, and articulation of identity as a feminist, as a Blackwoman (spelled as one word), and as postcolonial subjects (Gqola, 2001: 13, 15). These are ways to reclaim the power of naming and not to be named in the image of the colonial/empire, as well as a rejection of the inscriptions of the center. It is about the use of language to challenge systems of definition and is crucial for self-naming (Gqola, 2001: 16). Gqola lingers on the issue of the qualifier for the type of feminism—African feminist, Black feminist, etc.; she questions if it refers to people of African descent (living on the continent or in the diaspora), theorizes her relationship to Africa, or refers to the location of theory in relation to the continent. This is a contested terrain that speaks to border thinking and disidentification with the North.

In “Learning by doing. Notes towards the practice of womanist principles in the ‘new’ South Africa”, the importance of womanism is discussed by Abrahams (2001). For her, activism is a form of action research but also a way of creating theory by doing. She also argues that the critique of womanism as American is unjustified. There are, however, differences because womanhood in the USA focuses on the individual, while in Africa it focuses on a collective identity as Black that opposes white supremacist ideology and economies (Abrahams, 2001: 73). This author implicitly critiques the problem of deference to the North. She also views the idea of solidarity with Black feminists in the USA as problematic when women there are living in a powerful country that ensures its own types of (diasporic) privileges which is not the reality for women in poor Southern locations. She poses an important question:

¹⁰ See e.g. (Imam, Sow, Mama, 1997).

“What arguments can we offer for working to wean ourselves from the North and its cultural products, but still accept the radicalism of certain northerners?” (Abrahams, 2001: 81). Feminists in the Global South, and especially Africa, return to the question time and again. It indicates the difficulty of engaging the North without agendas being re-interpreted and mutated into Northern focused endeavors, and at the same time drawing on feminist solidarity.

Sisonke Msimang (2002) returns to the vexed question of if it is possible to be an African and a feminist in *African Feminisms II* as the guest editor. She refers to intellectually formidable African feminists by name: Amina Mama, Fatou Sow, Yassine, Bisi Adeyele, Prudence Mabele, and Adelaide Silika. In this issue there is engagement with pan-Africanism, transnationalism to disengage from the center/periphery, Eurocentric model. Sisterhood can never be global if women’s knowledge in the periphery is viewed as parochial.

African Feminisms II features many diasporic voices and there is an engagement with the political nature of theory (that is often criticized from viewpoints that theory should be apolitical). Andrade’s theorization engages the way in which African women use their bodies as a tool of rebellion and to shock by disrobing. The “naked curse” is invoked when women feel that they have no other option. The link between theory and practice was clearly shown recently when Stella Nyanzi, a scholar and poet from Uganda stripped naked in 2019 because she was jailed for “insulting” President Museveni of Uganda in a poem published on Facebook¹¹. This type of resistance is not included in feminist repertoires of action (in the North) to show that women in Africa are not mere passive victims (see also Naminata, 2020; Gouws, 2018).

African feminists in some cases still embrace motherhood and the family as platforms of power, and do not allow for the distinct separation between public and private as in Western feminism. Neither is the private sphere necessarily isolating and exclusionary for women. African feminists have an imaginary that attempts to provide for the co-existence of women and men (men and women are often allies in the face of racism). In this regard it is a resistance against Western feminists’ rejection of motherhood as oppressive and the stereotypical hostility toward men. It promotes African women’s self-understanding and critiques Western feminists’ blindness to their own racism (Arndt, 2002: 43).

African Feminisms III explores another pathway into feminism—through liberation struggles against racism. Guest Editor, Bahati Kuumba (2003) draws attention to the difference between being African in America as opposed to being African American and how continental involvement (through nationalist and Pan-African organizations) shapes consciousness. African feminisms are read as plural, and this plurality includes African women in the diaspora—opposing the hegemony of Western feminism. The damaging effects of colonial slavery are dissected. She argues that too many forms of resistance by African women have gone unnamed, unrecognized, and submerged, and the African feminist project is one of excavating past resistances of hidden forms of struggle (Kuumba, 2003: 7).

The colonial impact on women’s sexuality is theorized in “Colonialism, dysfunction and disjuncture: Sarah Bartmann’s (sic) resistance, (remix)”. Yvette Abrahams traces the historical contours of the colonial gaze on Black women’s sexuality through the “freakishization” of Sarah Baartman who was put on display in Europe in the 1700s so that Westerners could look at her genitalia. She draws on the theorization of institutionalized rape of slaves and indigenous women in settler colonies. In the story she tells of the difficulty of bringing Baartman’s remains home. As she makes us aware that “the height and the depth, the breadth and the width of our oppression can be measured by the fact that we struggle to bury

¹¹ “Uganda feminist, Stella Nyanzi deploys nude protest to challenge free speech sentence” [<https://advox.globalvoices.org/2019/08/05/ugandan-feminist-stella-nyanzi-deploys-nude-protest-to-challenge-free-speech-sentence/>] (accessed 17 May 2020).

our dead” (Abrahams, 2003: 13). She ends the article with a poem by a Black South African poet, Diana Ferrus (Abrahams, 2003: 25)

I have come to take you home:
 I have come to take you home
 Where the ancient mountains shout your name
 I have made your bed at the foot of the hill
 Your blankets are covered in buchu and mint
 The proteas stand in yellow and white –
 I have come to take you home
 Where I will sing for you
 For you have brought me peace.

This one verse of the poem captures the colonial continuities of the degradation of women that is juxtaposed with women’s acts of kindness and justice which Abrahams weaves into her article. This poem was read in the French parliament as a plea for the French government to release Baartman’s remains (that were kept in France), which it eventually did. Diana Ferrus was one of the women who accompanied the remains home in 2002. In telling this story Abrahams theorizes colonial monstrosities and injustice.

This issue introduces new concepts like “institial politics” (intersectionality), “exilic thinking” (thinking from positions of exile), and interlocking oppressions, as well as Ogun-dipe-Leslie’s (in Kolawole, 2002: 95) concept STIWA (social transformation including women from Africa) and Stiwanim to replace the word feminism. Elabor-Idemudia (2003) introduces de-womanization to explain the link between slavery and trafficking that turns women in to commodities and de-womanize them as the next section on sexuality will show.

African Feminisms: Sexuality Trilogy

The Sexuality trilogy focuses on the theorization of sexuality in relation to the body. It engages this contested terrain from the perspective that there is an ongoing debate, dissension, and a lack of closure on issues of sexuality. As the guest editor Vasu Reddy (2004: 3) of issue 1 argues, sexuality—like gender—resists construction and should be read as the intersections among the political, social, class, and gender power. Drawing on the writings of Ife Amadiume, he brings into focus African matriarchy and its goddess focused religions in connection to forms of social organizations that have a direct bearing on sexuality (Reddy, 2004: 5).

When sexuality is used as a category of analysis rather than gender, it allows for other identities like gay, lesbian, queer, and trans to become visible and to trouble the focus on gender identity and heteronormativity, making radical social and intellectual change possible (Reddy, 2004: 5). Mourning, death, and pain is associated with sexuality in Africa due to the AIDS epidemic (nearly 70% of people that contracted HIV/AIDS resides/resided in sub-Saharan Africa¹²). AIDS never had this impact on Western societies. This makes pleasure and desire invisible in relation to sex, encouraging the policing and repression of women’s sexuality specifically, and curtails the autonomy of choices with regards to reproductive rights and sexual citizenship.

Issues 2 and 3 engage lesbian sexuality, Black masculinities, and gender non-conforming identities in relation to heteronormative scripts, showing the subversive impact of art to give a new reading of the male gaze on women’s sexuality, as well as cultural meanings of sexuality in the African context. Articles draw on literature, art, and poetry, making visible the theorization of, for example, lesbian desire, homosexuality, and heteronormativity in the

¹² Sources from Avert: <https://www.avert.org/global-hiv-and-aids-statistics>.

construction of sexuality. In “Against the grain: black women and sexuality”, Desiree Lewis illustrates how the photographs of lesbian photographers, Zanele Muholi and Ingrid Masondo, subvert the male gaze and deconstruct the male and colonial presentation of Black women’s bodies. As art, these photographs are subversive and disrupt heteronormative understandings of women’s bodies and sexual pleasure. It also unsettles ideas of motherhood and reproduction (Lewis, 2005: 21). The hegemony of ideas about sex and sexuality that is portrayed through Western media has a pervasive influence that opposes self-definition. Greater freedom for Western women through the sexual revolution of second wave feminism did not have the same effect for African women whose bodies became sexualized through colonialism as hypersexual and then controlled through rape.

Given the ways in which patriarchal cultures in Africa resist gender equality and homosexuality, Kopano Ratele calls for a “mutiny against culture”, but how is this done without also staging a mutiny against the self? He asks how to uncouple ideas about sex and sexuality from cultural notions that some things are (un)African—this is a phrase often used to refer to Africans who are gay. Ratele (2005: 41) poses a central question: how to unlearn our pleasures and ourselves outside of culture. Culture and tradition often manage to construct its subjects as outside of modernity in a way that reinforces the colonial gaze of African sexualities.

These trilogies show the hybrid nature of theorizing through border thinking. In some cases, it reflects disidentification and in other cases it still draws on Northern theories but adjust/retheorize them to explain the experiences of African women (and sometimes men). Reclaiming naming through innovative concepts is a central dimension of African feminist writing and theorizing, whether it is through academic work, art, poetry, biography, or novels. Intersectionality and the legacy of colonialism are most often the starting points of theorizing.

Reflecting on Theorizing from the South

The journal AGENDA has managed to capture theorizing from the South in a variety of ways. Articles draw on feminisms from Western contexts. It is then applied to local contexts through adjusting, revising, and reinterpreting through which new or hybrid theories are created which can explain local contexts, sometimes through the invention of new concepts. The intersectionality¹³ of the identities of authors, as well as the intersectionality of positionalities, combined with self-reflexivity and interpreting activism form integral dimensions of theorizing that involves both border thinking and disidentification. What these theories do is to disrupt the dominant logics of writing on and about women in Africa from a Northern perspective. It frames non-Western feminism against the hegemonic center of the North.

What the analysis of issues of AGENDA makes clear is that intersectionality has always been the yardstick with which the writing, authorship, and publication in AGENDA has been measured. Moreover, consciousness of how intersectionality shapes lives and experiences, predates the conceptualization of intersectionality by Kimberle Crenshaw (1988), it was just not called that at the time. The origins of intersectionality are multiple, but the Global South was instrumental in the theorizing of multiple identities and positionalities. How intersectionality now is used by some Northern feminist scholars is a good example of the reproduction of hegemonic thinking without acknowledging that intersectionality as a position was a resistance against Western hegemonic thinking. The appropriation of disidentification for minoritarians are re-packaged as feminist dis-identification, of which the majority can be white. This is when disidentification becomes a reinstatement of the privileged position, because disidentification is not used to challenge or survive (Thapar-Björket and Tlostanova (2018). This appropriation of disidentification by white feminists was my experience at a

¹³ See for example, AGENDA, vol. 74, 2015 that also includes disability as a dimension of intersectionality.

gender conference in Europe in 2019. Here intersectionality was all the rage among white feminists, who gave no recognition to the origins of the concept or its theorization by Black feminists located in the North and the South. Many panels had intersectionality as a theme and presenters were loath to engage questions who were critical of this usage of intersectionality. This is what Sirma Bilge (2013: 405, 2010) calls “whitening intersectionality”, when white women call intersectionality the “brainchild of feminism”, erasing the contribution of Black feminists, leading to silencing and exclusion rather than transformative counter-hegemonic knowledge production. In this case, intersectionality was subjected to the very hegemonic practices and divisive logics it contests (May, 2015: 11), see also Gouws, (2012) for a Northern perspective on Southern knowledge).

When we center Black women’s lived experience and decenter the Global North’s claims to knowledge it disrupts the standardized meanings of concepts like the family, care work, reproduction, motherhood, land, and sexual violence. It calls for the decolonization of feminist knowledge production.

Conclusion

Drawing on feminist theorizing from the South in the South African feminist journal *AGENDA*, I illustrated how African feminist scholars resist the imposition of hegemonic knowledge from the Global North by developing hybrid theories and using intersectionality as the starting point of theorization. Theory can include academic scholarship, art, literature, poetry, and life writing. It draws on the lived experience of women in post-colonial conditions. By engaging the North, but not necessarily deferring to it through border thinking and disidentification, knowledge making is reshaped and revised to reflect Southern (post-colonial) experiences.

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