

# Elaine Rosa Salo (1962-2016) – An Appreciation

Terri Barnes



Reprinted with permission from Colin Miller

Everyone and anyone connected to *Feminist Africa* knew Elaine, so although I am typing this alone at my computer, I also feel that I am writing a collective statement about our friend and comrade.

Elaine was not a friend to everyone. She did not suffer racists, fools or hypocrites lightly.

On the other hand, if Elaine was your friend, she was your friend forever. She had a kind and compassionate heart. In her life, she probably gave away a lot of money to people she didn't know very well, and she quietly supported other folks that she did know well. She gave her jewellery away to her friends. She would come to help at a moment's notice. She loved deeply, and with truth.

I lived in Zimbabwe for most of the 1980s, and moved to South Africa in 1991. I met Elaine in the late 1990s at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town. We became friends in the way that parents do when their children are close in age, managing holidays, sick days, birthdays. I was excited to work with the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in the early 2000s on the "Gender and Institutional Culture in African Universities" project, and thus on several issues of *Feminist Africa*

when Elaine was on the AGI staff. When I relocated to the US in 2008, Elaine's brother Ken and his family were the only people I knew here at the University of Illinois. We are part of a large, transnational, southern-Africa-based personal/professional community, durably connected by bonds of affection, respect, and scholarship. I know that the readers of *Feminist Africa* have their own such networks and that many of them intersected with Elaine.

Elaine lived her feminism. Her scholarship was an extension of her daily life. She researched and wrote with the same passion that powered her teaching, mothering and activism. She threw her home and kitchen open to any and all comers. Her partner, Colin Miller, and their two children, Miles and Jessica, have friends across the continent, and indeed the world, because Elaine and Colin never missed an opportunity to host a spontaneous party complete with Western Cape/Italian cuisine, music, dancing and always the sound, somewhere in the house, of Elaine laughing.

Elaine was born in Kimberley, in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. I got the sense that Elaine and her brothers, Bertram and Ken, came from a careful, conservative community that deeply valued its traditions of faith and survival as well as good food, good music, good dancing and a lot of laughter. Although all three left Kimberley and its conservatism behind, both professionally and intellectually, I always felt that they knew where they came from, and valued their home.

Elaine attended UCT and graduated with a BA in 1984. She then studied for an MA from Clark University in Massachusetts on a Fulbright scholarship. She returned to teach in the UWC Anthropology Department, and served for two years as the head of UWC's Gender Equity Unit. In 2004, she received her PhD in Anthropology from Emory University in the US. She returned to UCT, now at the AGI, teaching AGI and Anthropology courses. After eight years, she became the head of the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Pretoria. Her final move was to the University of Delaware in the US, where, for two years, she was an associate professor in Politics and International Relations.

Elaine was an anthropologist of gender, politics and development in working-class communities in Cape Town. But there is as yet no magnificent book on masculinity and femininity in Manenberg, on the Cape Flats, that bears Elaine's name. She did not finish her book. There are three reasons for this. I think Elaine wrote slowly and carefully because she wanted to

“get it right”. Second, in South Africa she just had too much teaching and administration to do. Third, being true to one’s principles as a feminist living on the African continent means responding to an endless number of requests, and participating in many, sometimes seemingly tangential, intellectual pursuits. But as gendered identities and inequalities are central to human endeavour, all of Elaine’s intellectual work was connected to her passionate concern for social justice. This kind of intellectual reach is wonderful for networking and for developing a breadth of interests. But as one’s time is taken up with these things, months and years pass and none of that is good for working on one’s book manuscript. The University of Delaware should have been the place where she was finally able to settle in to do that work, even while she continued to collaborate with colleagues on the African continent. But we lost Elaine too soon.

This is not to say that Elaine did not leave behind a substantial body of work. The pages of *Feminist Africa* 4, 6 and 13 bear special witness to this, as do her other journal articles and book chapters. Her CV shows a huge number of invited talks, lectures, workshop presentations and keynote addresses. There are efforts underway to edit her thesis and to collect and publish her other unpublished work so that her critical insights are not lost.

Elaine was also a wonderfully supportive mentor and supervisor of postgraduate students in Cape Town, Pretoria and Delaware. At the AGI, she supervised one PhD and seven MA theses, on topics ranging from women and politics in Mauritius to women’s experiences of infertility, the politics of hair, the discourses of rape, and HIV and AIDS. All her students would testify to Elaine’s intellectual breadth and generosity as well as her willingness to go the extra mile for them – repeatedly, if necessary.

Elaine was proud to be a feminist of the African continent, and I think nothing gave her greater pleasure than to work with and learn with other like-minded academics and activists. South African academics have a deserved reputation for conducting themselves as if they were disconnected from the African continent. Elaine never partook in that fallacious practice. In a quite devastating critique of one self-proclaimed feminist in South Africa who actually didn’t know the slightest thing about African history or feminism, Elaine wrote:

I continue to draw inspiration from a veritable continent of African feminist thinkers living and writing on a continent that many South

African scholars located exclusively within the Eurocentric tradition barely know of, or whom they often dismiss... Our students need to be introduced to these diverse traditions of [African intellectual thought] if they are to resolve seemingly intractable problems such as unequal development and inequality; social conflict and weak states; environmental degradation; climate change; the material effects of hate speech; and so on ("Lessons in race and African feminism", *Sunday Independent*, 8 Sept 2013).

At the end of that article, Elaine gave us an ABC of African feminism: "A' is for Ama Ata Aidoo, Amina Mama, Ayesha Imam, Akosua Ampofu; 'B' is for Bessie Head, Bolanle Awe, Bisi Fayemi" and so on. After a 15-year battle with breast cancer, Elaine passed away in Newark, Delaware, on August 13, 2016. A few months later, her friends and colleagues in Cape Town held a remembrance and reading group in her honour and called it, "E' is for Elaine" – a very fitting title.

We honour and will remember Elaine's fighting spirit, wit, feminist principles and practices, insightful scholarship, and her love of family, country and continent. *Hamba gatle*, dear Elaine.