Editorial
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In the wake of the volume of post-colonial and feminist writing demonstrating that culture and subjectivity are socially constructed, it may seem passé to insist that culture and identity are political. But the inscription of gender in contemporary African cultural processes and social identification requires ongoing reflection - both in terms of subjects that have long been proscribed, and in terms of the depth of our critical vision. While "changing cultures" embraces a range of inquiry, the emphasis on sexuality, cultural production, and discursive constructions of gendered identities in this issue addresses some key and neglected concerns. Explorations of sexuality break some especially heavily veiled silences. Despite the fact that perceptions of sexuality, sexual behaviour and sexual relationships embed a range of hierarchical relations - between men and women, between those who police individuals' rights and those who insist on them - the impact of sexuality in configuring a host of naturalised cultural practices, social identities and deep-seated cultural discourses, has gone largely unacknowledged.

These naturalised discourses of "culture" in Africa have functioned coercively. Fictions of authenticity, custom, and "the past" bolster patriarchal goals and desires, while perpetuating the servitude of women, and demonising both the men and women who choose to reject heterosexist norms. Such fictions carry a charged emotional force because they are linked to a sense of loyalty among those with a shared history of misrepresentation and cultural marginalisation. But their claims to inclusiveness are belied by their projections of culture as an edifice of unchanging institutions, traditions and identities. Arguments about the timelessness of the latter have a particular valence in the context of colonial and neo-colonial domination: salvaging a receding past is seen as the antidote to a host of colonial and neo-colonial ills. Ironically, then, the sense of a "culture" fixed in dominant discourses echoes colonial projections of a static and primordial African culture that is diametrically opposed to Western modernity.

Fictions of an undiluted African culture have been weapons for enforcing women's obedience, with the charge of "Westernisation" being used against many women in public realms dominated by men. Women so castigated are pressurised to modify their "untraditional" behaviour or relinquish an identity that appears to bequeath a communal dignity. Yet the selective lauding of certain institutions, customs or values lays bare the spuriousness of discourses that claim to speak in the name of a culture. Particular notions of authenticity have dominated the public sphere, with the hegemony of certain views becoming an obstacle to thinking critically about how these views ultimately serve certain groups' interests, or how beliefs that dominate public debate suppress the vantage points and experiences of certain members of a culture.

In recent years, the charge of "Westernisation" has surfaced with special virulence against feminism on the continent. With the growth of the women's movement and feminist scholarship during the last decade, feminism has increasingly challenged nationalist agendas that deify the leadership and ideologies of elite men. Predictably, the backlash has invoked the idea that African feminists have betrayed, violated or contaminated "culture". Uma Narayan confronts this situation in relation to Third-world feminists at large by pinpointing their "suspect location", their being seen as "merely one more incarnation of a colonized consciousness, the views of 'privileged native women in whiteface', seeking to attack their 'non-Western culture', on the basis of 'Western values'" (1997: 3). The vehemence of the feminist backlash testifies to the anxieties of those who have long built their sense of themselves, their material interests, and their political power on extremely fragile claims to the collective voice implied by their defence of "culture".

Increasingly, dominant narratives of culture have also been marshalled to repress all

individual choices that threaten sexually and socially ascendant manhood. As Sylvia Tamale and Mary Hames indicate, the resilience of homophobia in Uganda and South Africa, two African countries often singled out for their thriving democracy, is evidence of an entrenched collective terror in the face of any disruption of the myths and rituals of the hetero-normative gender hierarchy. Attacks on gays in the name of African authenticity are rooted in the fear, experienced by many men and women, who perceive their most closely held values and norms to be imperilled. Homophobia therefore symbolises a profound resistance to surrendering the identities, ritualised behaviour and social codes that cultures prescribe for us. An index of the intensity of this anxiety is the silence - directly confronted by Tamale and Hames - about homophobia from "the left", a situation that must be read as a pervasive collective investment in certain cultures' hegemonised taboos, naturalised behaviour and fixed identities.

In accounting for this collective investment, it should be acknowledged that masculinist visions of culture have been espoused not only by patriarchs who endorse or practice Sharia Law, by politicians who reprimand "their women" for capitulating to "Western feminism", or by threatened men demanding that African women return to their "rightful" place in the home. As Nana Wilson-Tagoe demonstrates in her analysis of dominant narratives of the nation, and as Goretti Kyomuhendo suggests in her survey of Uganda's literary history, the inventions are embedded in the African social imaginary, the repertoire of beliefs, images and stories we turn to for imagining our past, present and future. The compelling scripts of culture that propelled anti-colonial struggles throughout the continent - evident in the poetry of Leopold Senghor, the novels of Chinua Achebe, the impassioned declarations of freedom of Kwame Nkrumah, Agostinho Neto or Steve Biko - illustrate myth-making processes in which masculine self-definition and values are central, with women being "present" only to serve the image-construction of assertive African manhood. Permeating definitions of nation, culture and identity in the present day, this legacy of patriarchal cultural nationalism has valorised masculine needs and yearnings, relegating women to the status of symbols and cyphers, handmaidens and caregivers, the recipients and projections of visions, rather than their crafters.

The figure of the African woman as mother has been a particularly prominent and confining one in patriarchal nationalism. This trope extols the ostensibly unique qualities of nurturance, protectiveness and altruism of African women, qualities that are often believed to make them morally and culturally superior to "Western" women. Celebrated in much of the nationalist poetry and prose during the fifties and sixties, the figure recurs in a range of present-day discourses in public and domestic life. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf examines the mother trope in the work of certain African women scholars, critically appraising ways in which it reinforces familiar gendered roles, and ultimately reproduces patriarchal prescriptions. The extent to which affirmations of motherhood constrain discursive frameworks of justice for women is blatant in much of the public debate, campaigning and policy-making that surrounds women's relationships to their bodies. Patricia McFadden identifies this in relation to dominant trends within research, public debate and policy-making around HIV/AIDS, while Jessica Horn's profile of AMANITARE considers how the patriarchal emphasis on reproductive health anchors perceptions of women's sexual health firmly in stereotypical gender roles and identities.

Patriarchal scripts of identity and culture are entrenched in the icons that give shape to our hopes, in the literary traditions that inspire us, and in the very words that we use. They are engrained in our behavioural codes, our institutional cultures, the ostensibly natural conventions by which we live, work and find pleasure. Construed as being part of a sacrosanct or "natural" order, they often assume unquestioned allegiance as the reasonable and necessary response to the status quo. Here, the tyranny of what Amina Mama has described as "authoritarianism at all levels of African psychology" (1997: 79), demands the

scrutiny that she advocates. Authoritarianism and its institutionalising of hierarchy and obedience set in place a moral framework in which all that is different and contentious is perceived as corrupting, disruptive and treacherous. The prescribing of accountability to "leadership", "community", "culture" or "nation" has therefore had powerfully conservative effects. While group loyalty and solidarity may have been central to the strategic essentialism and liberatory practices of anti-colonial resistance, their fierce orthodoxies suppress many individual and creative freedoms. And when their value systems pervade our psyches and the fabric of our cultural lives and discourses, they generate an omnipresent fear, a paralysis of our needs and desires, a stunned culture of silence and conformity.

The challenge that this presents is for innovativeness in contesting discourses, practices and identities that police our rights, freedoms and desires. Contributions to this issue explore these courageous interventions by showing how creative writers have struggled with language, as the key repository and instrument of our cultures, to re-envisage how we see ourselves and our worlds. These contributions reveal the significance of cultural expression in unravelling the layers of silenced or mystified belief that work to confine our worlds and our sense of a place within them. The relevance of this realm of cultural production to feminist research, therefore, is that it can open up "humanistic concerns", "holistic paradigms" and "expansive methodologies", rather than underscore "technocratic approaches to development, dedicated to the service of national and international policy-makers and bureaucracies of the development industry" (Mama, 1997: 76).

It should be stressed that much of the well-funded research and activist work on women and gender - indeed, what has currently become an industry in development work - conceives of discussions of cultural practice and production as peripheral to governance, economics and resource allocation. The effect is to ignore the matrix in which political and economic relationships occur, to reduce transformation to two-dimensional economic, technological and structural issues, and to invalidate the political repercussions of ideology, consciousness and cultural practice. Explorations of culture help to stimulate comprehensive explorations of social experiences, and also encourage critical attention to the roots and complexities of social institutions, political processes and economic trajectories.

In his preface to *Culture and Development in Africa*, written over a decade ago, Stephen Arnold propitiously showed how the sidelining of "culture" had become an insidious but spiralling trend in African studies. His definition of this as "technocratic balkanisation" (1990: viii) points both to ways in which donor and neo-colonialist agendas control frameworks of development on the continent, and to the intellectual impoverishment of our culture of inquiry and debate around how and why we do what we do. The recent publication of Feminist Futures: Re-Imagining Women, Culture and Development (see Bhavnani et al., 2003), is a bold effort to dislodge the technocratic and dehumanised face of "development" in relation to women and gender throughout the Third World. By affirming the liberating effects of cultural and ideological transformation, as well as the role of cultural production in propelling this transformation, this interdisciplinary and international publication is in many ways symbolic of the determination of a Third-world feminist community in refusing sterile blueprints for development crafted by our leaders, by technocratic policy-makers, and by ruthless international donors.

The energy of African women's movements since the nineties has provided a supportive context for women's writing to make inroads into a public culture of inquiry. The Ugandan writer's association and publishing house, FEMRITE, has offered a crucial platform and support network for women writers. Across the continent, media organisations such as the African Women's Media Centre, Women's Media Watch, the Ugandan Media Women's Association, as well as e-networks including GAIN, the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) for African Women, and Women'sNet are challenging the gendered

representations - in newspapers, magazines, radio, television and websites - that saturate public and private life and profoundly influence how men and women think about who they are. The increased visibility of African women in the media, film-making and fiction-writing has been complemented by growing support for their work internationally. Since financially precarious publishing houses and limited resources inhibit the production and dissemination of the cultural work of both African men and women, this support can often ensure that their work is more easily available within and for the continent. Internationally published anthologies of African women's writing, for example, the recent Women Writing Africa Project in particular, introduce many previously unpublished but path-breaking writings by African women into the public sphere, and also draw together notable writings within a seminal and widely distributed source.

The politicised explorations of fiction in this issue explore intersections of ideology and material realities to show how fictional representations speak to the interstices and gradations within politics, society and subjectivity in ways that comparatively brittle academic writings and political theory often cannot. Supporting the recent publication of studies of individual women writers, including Bessie Head (see Eilersen, 1995), Tsitsi Dangerembga (see Willey and Treiber, 2002) and Yvonne Vera (see Muponde and Taruvinga, 2003), these explorations also contest the stereotyping of African women's writing as straightforwardly expressive and autobiographical. They consequently show how the philosophical, interpretive and creative powers of socially marginalised writings can transform our sense of "knowledge", of "aesthetic value", of what it means to be African.

The effect that women's writing will play in transforming public debate therefore rests not simply on its quantitative increase, but on ways in which certain writers encourage us to consider new visions of freedom. In her article, Nana Wilson-Tagoe shows how writers like Yvonne Vera and Ama Ata Aidoo have jettisoned male-centred inventions of nation, and, in so doing, envisioned identity and community in newly liberating ways. Transcending perceptions of a unified and seamless collective project, these writers have therefore struggled to redefine what has been constituted as the national project.

Their inventions tantalisingly suggest how the politics of culture is linked to the "politics of the possible" (Sangari, 1997), the realm of hope and imagining that is not peripheral to action, but the necessary emotional and cognitive substratum for "action". Significantly, two contributions to this issue celebrate the powerful fiction of Zimbabwean author, Yvonne Vera. Focusing on processes of signification to peel back layers of individual and collective belief in the mind, in language and in myth, Vera reaches beyond the boundaries of inherited thought and cultural meaning. In a context where the language and goals of feminism are increasingly being packaged and depoliticised by patriarchal states in their token concessions to democracy and gender justice, this "capacity to go beyond what is given, to fantasise, to create new possibilities", is becoming progressively more important to our feminist thought and action.

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