

This Little Rage of Poetry¹ / Researching Gender and Sexuality

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“Researching gender and sexuality” has come to represent the thing I do, my career prospects and the dream I have had for near a decade. Yet, I begin my doctoral studies with a sort of ambivalence: ambivalence best characterised by deep rage and deep resignation. This standpoint offers some thoughts about how I got here, how to strategize “in here”.

Many of my peers (well, now former peers) at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town – the mostly women with whom I studied my honours and master’s degrees – were bemused by my naïve love of everything that was academic. I was – I am – I *was* completely enamoured with all intellectual exercises, wanting to take all the passion of my feminist politics into serious scholarly practice. Although deeply flawed and patriarchal, I had viewed this place, the university, as the site best suited for the articulation of my freedom, the site where I could best express my rage and the site through which I would make my largest contribution towards a better world.

To say this view has changed may be incorrect. I still bear some resemblance to my old self; that is, I do intend to complete my PhD and pursue the academic dream – although these days this dream flutters through my imagination at sleep time more often in the form of a nightmare. What has changed is that I no longer know why I want to inhabit academic locations. So, in this exercise of writing a standpoint piece (to be read by my peers, feminist intellectuals) instead calling myself a name I have come to dislike – a “feminist researcher”³ – I attempt to articulate an unnameable rage within.

As a young feminist researcher now engaged in PhD level work in sexualities, my previous (and some new) mentors⁴ have rightly taught me to consider the intellectual, ethical and methodological consequences to knowledge production in all spaces, and particularly within academic spaces. While trying to hold myself accountable to a feminist ethics of this kind,

I have found that as a PhD researcher, I continue to be positioned outside of what is “real” or “serious” knowledge by peers, faculty, and institutional dynamics around my status as a young political philosopher and writer. My current professional job description is synonymous with “apprentice-thinker”. However, like many of my peers I am attempting to do work that takes seriously the private worlds of men and women – of masculinities, femininities and sexuality – and of power.

I recently met a young man named Lennon, a young Zimbabwean researcher, interested in questions of gender, sexuality and power, like myself. Our conversations have lifted me from the sense of isolation that I have allowed myself to indulge in for a number of months. I wish to share parts of our conversations on being young Zimbabwean scholars who want to do work on our nation, citizenship and sexuality. These ground my comments on rage, on dilemmas of ethics and intellectual location and also – perhaps – explain why I remain engaged as an African feminist researcher in discourses on the body as a space committed to transforming positivist positions, legacies, and categorization.

Researching Sexuality in Zimbabwe, as “Zimbabwean”?

Curious about this man who talked “sex” and “gender” language, I asked Lennon to elaborate on the discussions concerning “sex” and “gender” at the University of Zimbabwe. To be honest, I was compelled to do so because while he exhibited an interest in power, sexualities and gender, he described his research interests in sociological terms as a “phenomenological study of the perceptions of male circumcision and HIV in contemporary Zimbabwe”. I was intrigued when he responded that “inquiry into the realm of sexuality in Zimbabwe has been continuously riddled by the tensions surrounding discussing issues that have been “culturally” constructed as taboo and “obscene”, with values and norms that militate against open discussion on issues of sexuality, the social construction of masculinities and femininities.” I was aware of this.

Lennon continued:

“The problematic, but largely unproblematized hegemonic discourse on culture has meant that research on sexuality is faced with numerous hurdles, and consequently may not achieve desired or meaningful impacts, in terms of the transformation of the androcentric and phallogocentric deployment of sexuality tied to the tentacles of patriarchy.

"As a young researcher at the University of Zimbabwe, the experiences of conversations and academic work on issues of gender and sexuality, and the attendant research into the area manifest "culturally" embedded notions of sexual propriety and sexual difference amongst male and female students. In the process of tutoring sexuality in social theory, insightful observations resulted from discussions of the dominant cultural definitions of male and female sexuality. Female students seemed uncomfortable discussing commodified female sexuality and transactional heterosexual encounters, since women have been taught to play ignorant and be the pure and innocent Virgin Marys despite the experiences they might have had. Male students were eager to bring their ideas to the fore, befitting the culturally sanctioned assertive and aggressive male, as they discussed their sexual experiences and derived similarities between the "commodification of sex and sexification of commodities" in Dakar to Harare⁵. It was as if for the males openly talking about both their and the female students' perceived sexual activity was scoring huge, making the girls shy and presenting themselves, as men, as having more "experience" and knowledge of issues of sexuality."

For me, this was not new, but comforting, having recently submitted a doctoral proposal where I had outlined intellectual intentions to research engagement with sexualities and gender as driven by similar observations, and to which I had on occasion, received sceptical feedback. While Lennon had found himself confronted with these discussions initially in an academic space, I had been confronted with hostility to my academic interests as those were incompatible with the femininity I was "raised" to perform.

Growing up in Zimbabwe, the contentious issues surrounding being a woman, dressing for and occupying public space, maintaining "respectability" and social reproduction became fairly clear to me as I was often policed and controlled into the appropriate modes of conduct for a young woman. The constant (and consistent) reminders of appropriate management strategies of and for women's bodies and sexuality, as I experienced them in Harare, drew me to consider the historical underpinnings of what my peers described to me as "our culture". Interrogating this national culture, it became clear that at the crux of constructs of "tradition" and "modernity" in these discussions were women's bodies: the success or failure of the project of "national culture" (if we are to call it that) appears to be placed at the national family's ability to manage and control the mobility and sexuality of women's bodies, be it

through mothers, fathers and brothers, or on the streets of Harare through the police force. Integral to that control are the subjects we, as respectable women, speak about and under what conditions.

When you are young, female and black, and you tell colleagues that you are interested in studying sexuality, and it does not appear to be a project aimed at “preventing the youth from contacting HIV”, or something otherwise intervention related, eye brows are raised. Critiques concerning frivolity, self-indulgence, and irrelevance are offered. Intellectual respectability would be restored were one to research public policy and/or development connections, and these suggestions too are offered.

However, these conventionally patriarchal positions on sexuality studies are perhaps not the most infuriating. There are also “liberal” lenses, where a young Zimbabwean woman’s intellectual interest in sexualities becomes read as a form of liberation from a former victimhood under atrocious African traditionalism – another version of restored respectability. Restored of course, until you tell them that you are traditionally married and pregnant – and all hopes from saving you from African patriarchy are diminished – respectability gone, again.

And finally, there are those who merely do not understand. Just as the act of wearing a skirt an inch short, walking down the street of the city centre after 5pm, or looking a man straight in his eye can result in your fallen status (you prostitute!), to speak of sexual matters in any way is dirty, dangerous, unrespectable and threatening.

I imagine that all this may also influence Lennon’s silent women undergraduates in tutorials. I imagine there must be some agency in being a young man, speaking of such matters. I say as much.

Lennon responds:

“My intense interest in gender and sexuality emerged again in a Masters class where I earned the name Foucault from my friends, who would jokingly describe me as mad or crazy about studying sexuality, despite that I wasn’t “doing it” as much anyway. This endeavour to understand how sexuality is socially constructed, defined and deployed has been viewed as a wild goose chase, chasing after the wind because this is an area that few want to lend a critical eye to. Even the students I discussed with would end up thinking the aim was to discuss some of them, or shame them, as the issues under scrutiny became too sensitive and were probably hitting closer to home. My friends would constantly ask, “What is so

interesting about studying how or why people have sex, or why they feel or act feminine or masculine?"

For Lennon, issues around funding and supervision too impacted on his quest to study sexuality. Initially interested in the “small house”, his final proposal focuses on “male circumcision” and the associated bio-medical discourse in the field of HIV/AIDS. We speak often about this and time and again when the subject arises, one finds him *enraged*, again at the anthropologic enquiry into the sexual mind of the African man: research designed with interventions in mind – the top-down “African solutions” platform. Lennon says:

“I chose a dissertation topic on the phenomenon of the “small house” in Zimbabwe: the transactional extramarital heterosexual relationship in which married men maintain their wives and families, the “big houses” but have other women who are the small houses. Initially, I had decided to abandon sexuality because of family considerations. What would my mother, father, brother say if they discovered that I am interested in studying sexuality? Can I discuss this with them if they asked me what my research area is? Thank God my parents, even after I had taken up a new topic on male circumcision, were supportive and did not pathologize my interest as others sought to do. I am not surprised that some would choose topics they think are socially acceptable, and would not “shame” their friends and family.”

The politics of funding and supervision aside, Lennon’s work faced other brick walls: access and credibility. Rich and powerful men and their “big house” wives are unlikely to publically “out” (that is, to a young academic researcher) their affairs, at the expense of their well *earned* respectability. Similarly, “small house” wives may be in neither the social or political position to risk “outing” their relationship and having it subsequently end. Furthermore, the validity of the claims made by younger and relatively disempowered women would most certainly come into question:

“Such research did not seem to be problematic only in the sense of attempting to study an area that people are eager to shunt to the background, their sexuality, but the rather more overarching one of power, both at the micro and macro level. It might not be surprising that the very same figures who are vocal in the political construction of African nationhood and identity are the very protagonists in these sexual power plays which seek to perpetuate the subaltern position of one sex, and prop up the gerontocratic, phallus centred expression of sexuality.”

Like Lennon's, my own doctoral research proposal "from nation to family"⁶, intends to illuminate the close relationships between family and nation in constructing patriarchal cultural practice. Considering the current political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe, I wish to interrogate the multiple representations and interpretations of tradition and modernity as they are applied to women and women's bodies (as both social and material categories/subjects), masculinities, femininities,⁷ "culture", sexuality and power.⁸ The conflation of "respectable" femininity with social and biological "mothering" or "motherhood" has been central to the constitution of the nation⁹, and an examination of the discourses concerning the "nation" would be crucial to this study. In this light, the "nation" itself cannot be considered as a stable and closed entity. Zimbabweans now occupy several diasporic communities world wide and the idea of "home" has great power in the Zimbabwean social imaginary as people construct identities and discourses on "our culture". I do not wish to work with a notion of "Zimbabwe" as a "nation" with a related "diaspora", but rather to think about the constitution of "national culture" in light of a context where "Zimbabwean identity" is diasporic.

As I outlined in my research proposal, I wish to conduct this work with a multi- and trans-disciplinary methodological approach. As this work is feminist-inspired, I wanted to work from a position that was suspicious of unsituated objectivity. Framing my study as one generally concerned with the "body", the "nation", femininities (of course one cannot examine femininities in the absence of masculinities) and discourse, and while using ethnographic methods, such as participatory oral interviews, I wished to focus my attention on narrative practices. This had important implications as I did not want to propose a study of 12 to 21 year old women living in a certain suburb of Harare or Johannesburg as a "case study", for instance. My focus on narrative practices would avoid producing an analysis that problematically over-generalizes the "experience" or "identity" of "women in/from Zimbabwe". I sought to disturb, rather than reinforce the categories of experience which frame the experience of the "cultural practice" of "Zimbabwean women".

I proposed a feminist research ethics that was self-reflexive and self-aware and in so doing, I intended to include my own narrative in this research. If I was to expect young women to share their experiences of sex, of rape, of abortion, of make-up and short skirts and "red light districts", of hair-braiding, hair relaxing, of clubbing, of kissing, of marriage, of heart-ache, of disease, of political disenfranchisement, of jungle fever, of same-sex action,

of empowerment, of deep sadness, and of rage and joy – surely I should be expected to share my own. Where writing women’s experiences into academic language presented a potential crisis, I believed in the possibilities of auto-ethnography in both disturbing the power dynamics between “researcher” and “researched”, as well as in offering me an opportunity to express my own rage – that thing that brought me to this work – this “thing” I do. I still wish to do all of this; however, my deeper immersion into the academic culture of “knowledge production” has brought me, in conversation with peers, to a rage with whose parameters I struggle.

A Politics of Rage?

Lennon and I sat together to discuss the question of knowledge production in Africa. Our readings on the matter included, Paul Zeleza’s 2002 reflections on “African Universities and Globalisation”¹⁰, Teri Barnes’s on the “Politics of Mind and Body”¹¹, and Amina Mama’s “Is it Ethical to Study Africa?”¹². We had previously faced this discussion in a group of our peers, lecturers and senior lecturers, and our discussions had focused on the main themes discussed in the articles presented. I had especially selected Barnes’s piece on account of her critical view about “who knows” and Africa: “how they know”, “what they know”, and really, what “knowing” entails – an interrogation of the racialised and gendered implications of “knowing” in African universities. Now faced with one other, in the realities we had shared concerning issues of funding, questions about our intellectual location as “African sexualities scholars”, concerns about the ethics of “researching young men and women in (and out of) Zimbabwe”, our discussion wavered. Lennon remarked, “It must be nice”, referring to the luxury of a feminist ethics concerning research and knowledge production in Africa. In the privacy of our conversation with one another, we knew that many of us could not survive as young researchers without the compromise of western-led funding objectives, or affiliations with imperialist intellectual projects – we only have mischief and creativity as tools in our endeavours – and with the main incentive of a doctorate qualification, our ethics – our politics – the thing that brought us here, is compromised.

Is it really ethical to study young people? To talk about their sex? To talk about *our* sex? To take our secrets and compile them into rational intellectual analyses of power and discourse, using words and terms generally inaccessible to the owners of the secrets? Is it ethical to sanitize our work rendering it acceptable to the gatekeepers of the academy – some feminist, some

otherwise, who often still – despite a veneer of language around knowledge and transformation – maintain a strong resemblance to the racist, masculinist vestiges of a much-critiqued scientific objectivity and truth? As research “initiates”, we have found that our insights and ideas are often viewed as preliminary, naive, underdeveloped, too subjective, immature. That may be one source of rage. A more insidious form, rage at the self being constructed by the doctoral machine, asks: who am I to tell a friend that her experience of a back-street abortion is important and valuable, facilitating my role as a researcher, when fundamentally my work in this sense is reduced to a mere exercise for the sake of my own intellectual fulfilment? Who am I to expose my own secrets, my imagination, my joy and, most precious, my fury, in light of an academic environment that often fails to credit my knowing?

It is probably a very good thing to be disillusioned by “the university”. After all the hierarchies produced here are precisely the hierarchies we see in the world – of those who labour the “mind”, versus those who labour the “body”, as though both processes were not dependent upon the other, each rite of academic passage presenting a new opportunity for the reification of class hierarchies. Is it really appropriate for me to take the words, lives and experiences of my peers and use them to access a new “height” in this sense? With the rampage of global neoliberal reforms where intellectuals need to constantly (and competitively) write and publish to keep up in the marketplace, is it possible that my (or any of our) efforts at a politically active and motivated research ethics can survive? The university has become a mass production line, and it seems to me that they are milling PhDs out like cold product. While I am angry because I feel alienated within the hierarchy of knowledge production within the university, I am even further enraged by the “knowing” distance between these sites of knowledge production and those more accessible to ordinary people. I want to again find the language for a rage-inspired feminist research, revelling in the body/mind reactions of my thinking self, because I do not know any other way to cope with the brick walls that are standing in my way.

I propose a research ethics based on a politics of rage. I do so, because I think that what I have to say about sex and gender is important and that what my peers have to say about the matter is also important. I believe that these are matters of power, identity that reach the core of the messy, rotting world within which we live. A politics of rage, for me is a recovery of sites of intellectual production – it is about being open to and participating in sites of knowledge production outside the university.

It is also about co-production of knowledge in research, that is, while including my own narratives as data, my work intends to take the narratives of the women contributing (participating) to this work more seriously than the usual view of them as “objects” or “sources” of data. I seek a politics of rage that refuses to be made tame by the money-driven bureaucracies that shape the university today.

I suspect that a politics of rage (or of this sort) is what many of you and many of my mentors have applied as a means of making sense of what it means to do research – to investigate social life in this awful, messy place. But what do you do with the actual rage? Unapplied.

Endnotes

1. Overthinking the subject of how one writes about a feminist methodology one evening, Maya Angelou’s reflections: “Give me your hand / make room for me /to lead and follow you/beyond this rage of poetry. / Let others have / the privacy of/ touching words/ and love of loss/ of love. For me/ give me your hand. (Angelou, Maya. 1994. “A Conceit,” in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House) [first letter of every line should be in capital; spacing inconsistent). That is, I wish to summon in language and in language to intellectualize what is irrational, deeply sensual, lived bodily inquiry into the social lives of people. While Angelou wishes to take us “*beyond* this rage of poetry,” my task in this case is to rationalize what is no little rage, into a coherent, accessible rhetorical intellectual exercise.
2. I completed my Master’s Degree at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. Lennon Mhishi is completing his Master’s Degree in the Department of Sociology, at the University of Zimbabwe. Both researchers currently work at the School of Arts, Monash South Africa.
3. For I am yet to graduate to the status of “intellectual”, “researcher” appears to best describe my practice. This position of knower/not knower – of seeker of knowledge, was once liberating – but as I have found myself constantly thrust into the position of unknowing apprentice-thinker, I find myself increasingly discomforted by the status.
4. Thankfully, I continue to encounter new sheroes and heroes in my travels!
5. Here Lennon is referring to Francis Nyamjoh’s proposition of “Disquettes” and “Thiofs” in Dakar, Senegal. (See, Nyamjoh, Francis. 2005. “Fishing in Troubled Waters: ‘Disquettes’ and ‘Thiofs’ in Dakar,” in *Africa* Vol 75: 3.)
6. The title, “From Nation to Family”, occurred to me as I drafted a paper for a conference investigating ethical and methodological approaches in the context of violence or conflict, where I reflected on this research proposal. The paper was originally titled “Gender, Sexuality, ‘Culture’, Power and Violence: An African Feminist Intervention in Research Methodology,” and a little later I removed the “African” qualification to the form of intervention intended. This change of

course relates to my epistemological investment as a researcher. The subjects of “gender”, “sexuality”, “culture”, “power” and “violence” are all invoked in the research that my work wishes to examine. However, as I continued to consider the who/what/why/where and how I am trying to frame this subject, it occurred to me that in fact I was speaking to the manner by which “the family” and “the nation” function together in constructing and policing femininities in Zimbabwe (and elsewhere of course!). Specifically, I was thinking about Onanella Selolwane’s, response (Selolwane, Onalenna. 2004. “Response to Everjoice Win Concerning the Abuse of Zimbabwean Women’s Human Rights”, in *Feminist Africa 3* National Politricks. Cape Town: AGI) to a letter written by Everjoice Win, (Win, Everjoice. 2004. “Open Letter to Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Other Women in the South African Cabinet”, in *Feminist Africa 3* National Politricks. Cape Town: AGI): she writes “you identify the source of suffering clearly and unambiguously as politically motivated and organized violence. Like so much violence directed against women within the sanctity of the home and family, this is supposed to remain unnamed and unspoken, to protect families and men from shame. There is an assumption, as you rightly point out, that liberation war leaders, like husbands and heads of households, have earned an unlimited right to “chastise” (read “abuse and violate”) with impunity those that are under their “guardship”. Because they are guardians, “providers” and “protectors”, they themselves are protected from having their acts named as violence as this would signify that such acts are wrong morally and legally.” (77-78). This is precisely the manner by which I wish to examine the “nation” and “family” as the institutions that regulate the disciplining practices of femininity. The more famous application of the term “From Nation to Family” is that of Cindy Patton in her essay “Containing African AIDS” (Patton, Cindy. 1999. “From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS”, in Hesse-Biber, Sharlene., Gilmartin, Christina., & Lydenberg, Robin. (Eds). *Feminist Approaches to Theory & Methodology*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.)

7. I use the plural to point to the instability of definitions of “femininity” and “masculinity” offered in dominant discourse. I wish to pursue Elaine Salo’s application of the performance of femininities and masculinities (dominant, non-dominant, “respectable” and otherwise). See Salo, Elaine. 2003. “Negotiating Gender and Personhood in the New South Africa: Adolescent Women and Gangsters in Manenberg Township on the Cape Flats”, in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Pg 345-365., for example.
8. The discourses of sex and gender translate into particular practices of sexuality. “Cultural practice” as it has been constructed in Zimbabwe (and the rest of the world, of course) is heteronormative and heterosexist. A close examination of the policing of young women’s sexuality can bring this to light. I say “power” to point to both the structural power of patriarchy and to elaborate power relations in a manner similar to Lila Abu-Lughod (Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1990. “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women”, in *American Ethnologist* Vol. 17. Issue 1), who views power as fluid (that is: not just from the top down) and complex.
9. See Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender & Nation*. London: Sage Publications.

10. Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe. 2002. "African Universities and Globalisation," in *Feminist Africa* 1.
11. Barnes, Teresa. 2007. "Politics of the Mind and Body: Gender and Institutional Culture in African Universities," in *Feminist Africa* 8.
12. Mama, Amina. 2007. "Is It Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom," in *African Studies Review*. Vol. 50:1, April, pp. 1-2

