

(Writing) On the Wide Margin

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[F]eminist thought and imagination are permeating the work of some scholars but this influence, among the present generation of scholars, remains relatively rare. (Pereira, 2002: 27)

The Wide Margin (TWM) is a digital journal of feminist thinking on matters thought to be important by its writers, who are of African descent. The journal's focus is nonfiction critical writing, but it allows room for poetry and for illustrations (both artistic representations of essays and a comic strip). *The Wide Margin* is a title inspired by bell hooks' book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* and its allusion to the fact that women generally form the majority of people living on the margins of society. "Wide" also alludes to the intention of the publication to include as many different voices and ideas on feminism as there are readers of online writing. While contributors to the journal are strictly of African descent, located anywhere in the world, the primary target audiences are young feminists and non-feminists of all genders who are interested in reading feminist thought by contemporary African feminists.

The Wide Margin came into being in October 2014 in Nairobi; its inaugural issue, *Feminist While African*, was published online in July 2015. Our first issue – which comprised six pieces and an editorial – was one of the most fulfilling things I had ever worked on. Publishing it marked not only the first and most difficult step in beginning such a monumental project (to us), it also marked the beginning of a learning process, meeting brilliant feminist writers and readers, and the beginning of an unexpected ripple effect (however tiny the ripples).

The inspiration to create a feminist writing platform came to me a year after I had contributed to a southern African feminist publication, *Buwa!* Having very few friends and not much of a social circle, I had a limited selection of people with whom I could share this idea and work on actualising

the project. At the time, I asked the only two feminist friends I had who I thought demonstrated feminist ways of thinking and speaking. One of them, Sharon Nyaboe, was running a project she cofounded called World's Loudest Library (WLL)¹, and was the only other person I knew who owned a copy of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and had it on her bookshelf. It would have been an injustice to the project to exclude her; she is now a contributing editor at TWM. Orem Ochiel, now an assistant editor, was inspired by the vision for TWM and had at the time shown interest in writing critical reviews of African feminist literature.² Orem was also interested in supporting TWM with the technical aspects of editing to allow for balance in the editing process, which we learned was not always easy in political projects. Finally, Daniel Muli, an illustrator and band member at the time, joined us later to run the comic strip *Unfamiliar Territory*³. Dan brought in ideas about ways in which he would talk to men who were not feminist.

The core team comprised two men and two women, and was supported by the issue illustrator, Naddya Aluoch. Naddya read through all the essays and produced illustrations depicting her interpretation of the essays. During the editing and creation of illustrations for the first issue, Naddya did not particularly identify as feminist, but after several conversations we had about the work she was doing for TWM and after finalising the illustrations and publishing the inaugural issue, she told me that she now identifies as a feminist. This was unexpected and not directly intentional, although consciousness-raising is the main objective of TWM. But it was our first small victory.

The Wide Margin began because we (the editors) found a glaring scarcity of spaces that enable critical feminist discussion and are inclusive. Existing platforms where we hoped and expected to explore feminism did not publish what we were seeking:

The popular spaces (our national newspapers and dailies, lifestyle magazines, mainstream television) where we could explore feminism are ridden with superficialities, silences, and erasures which perpetuate sexism, or they are inaccessible to those who would reform them. How then should we subvert the popular sexist ways of discussing women and feminism and advance the growing interest in talking and thinking about women beyond gender stereotypes? How should we advance thinking about feminism in Africa? What are the issues with

which younger feminists are grappling? What new frontiers of African feminism are becoming visible even as the old struggles continue? “Feminist While African” explores how we (Africans) have come to understand feminism, how we are involved (or not) in feminism, how we interact with feminism, and how we have learned and continue to learn about feminism. (Sika, 2015a: 6-7).

So we created what we needed.

Issue 1: Feminist While African

We decided to focus the first issue on introducing ourselves as “feminists while African” because of the prominent argument against feminism on the continent: that feminism is not African. We invited contributors and readers to think about feminism by asking in the editorial:

What is it that African women and men mean and aspire to when they say “I am a feminist”? What misgivings, and perhaps misunderstandings, about feminism, are revealed when people refuse or reject feminism? (Sika, 2015a: 6)

The response to these questions was a collection of essays ranging from discussions challenging the notion of feminism being unAfrican (Njagi, 2015), to making an argument for a feminist voice consciousness which takes cognisance of subaltern women living in Africa (Okoth, 2015). One essay made a case for feminism as a necessary path to survival (Makiya, 2015); another challenged the notion that there is a right way for an African woman to be (Wendo, 2015). Sara Salem (2015) wrote about the political being personal, stating that she does not see a clear distinction between her personal and political life and I wrote about sisterhood and the importance of naming ourselves as feminists (Sika, 2015b). These writers came from as far away as Australia and Egypt, and closer to home, from Kenya.

Feedback on the first issue was overwhelming and varied. TWM was widely read, cited and shared across various digital platforms. The general reception was encouraging and confirmed to us what we suspected all along – that a platform like this was needed and that more platforms like TWM are needed. Some of the critique we received had a lot to do with the title of the issue, *Feminist While African*. One reader thought the title was an apology for being feminist, another reader argued that the order of the nouns in the title should have been reversed because we are African first before we are anything

else. Other forms of critique involved annoyance at the fact that the TWM website did not have a comments section, which the critic believed would provide a platform for meaningful engagement with the essays. We did not fully respond to these critiques because, at the time, we did not have a system established for responding to such feedback other than replying to emails and to tweets.

The first issue gave way to our forthcoming second, titled *The Black African Body*. After discussing what it meant to be feminist as Africans, we decided that it would be prudent to discuss the site of our politics and being, our bodies. Essays in this issue discuss sex, violence, identity, bodies as resistance, abortion and much more.

Writing Support and Resources

From the beginning, I believed that there were only two possible ways of getting good quality submissions to the first issue of the journal: either through being part of an existing feminist writers' community (I was not part of such a community), or by compensating writers with whatever little amount of money was available. The principle of compensation for work is core to *The Wide Margin*, as it is a crucial feminist issue the world over. There are countless arguments for why writers are not paid on online platforms, some legitimate and others mere excuses, in my thinking. I was determined to ensure the availability of resources, however small, to compensate contributors – it was nearly as important as the writing itself. Thus, there was only one plan, to get resources and to publish.

It was not difficult to explain why we needed more feminist writing to TWM's patron and first supporter. Dr Murunga instructed one of the courses I studied in graduate school at the University of Nairobi. He was also the director at the African Leadership Centre (ALC) in Nairobi. It was serendipitous to find a patron who believed in mentoring and training young Africans to think critically and to make meaningful contributions to their communities; one who almost immediately understood and supported what we were working towards with the publication. Dr Murunga supported us through the African Leadership Centre for two issues and in various other ways, including a launch celebration at the ALC.

We leaned on several feminists who wrote their lives and those who documented their thoughts for us to use as guidance later on, for the online

publication. We braced ourselves for the age-old indictment against writing – that writing is not doing, that theory is not useful in Africa, that what was needed was praxis, and not writing. Sylvia Tamale’s words from 2006 ring true to this day, however unfortunate it is that we must still justify why it is important to write:

Feminists in the African academy and the activist practitioners on the ground tend to operate in separate cocoons... Yet theory leads to informed activism. Theory is about understanding the “what?” the “why?” and the “how?” questions about women’s oppression, about power. When feminist theory does not speak to gender activism and when the latter does not inform the former, the unfortunate result is a half-baked and truncated feminism. Under-theorised praxis is comparable to groping in the dark in search of a coffee bean. It leads to obscurantism, hindering clear vision, knowledge, progress and enlightenment. Social transformation can hardly be achieved under such conditions. (Tamale, 2006: 41).

Community, Audience and Ripple Effects

Responses to *The Wide Margin’s* first issue far exceeded our expectations. We knew that online feminism was a new force to be reckoned with in the feminist movement globally. Several sources pointed to this fact, including *Feminist Africa’s* Issue 18 on *e-spaces and e-politics* which acknowledged that feminists in Africa are strategically moving more into the virtual world in their work on visibility for women’s rights (Radloff, 2013). In only one month, the website received over ten thousand views, even without a comprehensive distribution and communication plan. The success of the inaugural issue is significantly thanks to social media platforms where we shared links to the different pieces. It is difficult to map out precisely how an online community is built for anyone who only goes in with an intention to share their work. In the case of *Feminist While African*, Facebook and Twitter were the distribution channels. Meeting feminists online who were interested in supporting *The Wide Margin* was as surprising as it was touching. Meeting Tiffany Mugo, who runs HOLAA, a Pan-Africanist queer womanist collective, led to an organic friendship and system of support for both our spheres of work. Tiffany encouraged us to start a hashtag to discuss on Twitter what it meant to be feminist while African. The hashtag

we organised together was our method of creating awareness about the journal and for distributing our first issue.

It is far less convoluted to discuss all the ways we can keep and grow online and offline communities than it is to explain how the community comes about in the first place. It is more often an organic process than not. The power of online feminism to mobilise people across generations to take political action has been documented. Martin and Valenti (2013) note that online feminism has transformed advocacy and action in the feminist movement, although in *ad hoc*, reactive and unsustainable ways. They argue as follows:

Bloggers and online organizers largely suffer from a psychology of deprivation – a sense that their work will never be rewarded as it deserves to be, that they are in direct competition with one another for the scraps that come from third-party ad companies or other inadequate attempts to bring in revenue. As a result, they are vulnerable, less effective and risk burnout. (Martin and Valenti, 2013: 3)

This report was heavily critiqued at the time.⁴ Although US-centric, the argument above rings true, however, for online feminists in Africa, too. How does one go about building and sustaining a community amongst an already existing community of mostly *ad hoc* online feminist activists? We need a map of online feminism in order to know who is doing what work. We also need to be proactive and deliberate in forging partnerships with other online feminists in a way that will allow us to support each other by sharing our resources and expertise. For any of this to be possible, we must also be working towards being sustainable.

The organic nature of community does not, however, imply leaving things to chance. *The Wide Margin*, after the first issue, was deliberate in its online interaction with various feminist writers and projects. Paying attention to what others were doing and taking part in their work, reading and sharing their work has constituted a large portion of our community engagement. Meeting new feminists everywhere online became vital to our work because we were actively learning from as many people as we could, while simultaneously taking note of prospective future contributors to our forthcoming issues. A few months after the first issue, I attended the Fourth African Feminist Forum (AFF) in Harare to talk about writing online. This opportunity afforded me the chance to meet feminists I would otherwise

most likely never have met. Attending the Fourth AFF also led me to contributing to this issue of *Feminist Africa*.

We imagined that because fiction-writing is quite prominent and popular on the continent – due to the existence of various awards, fellowships and writing platforms dedicated to fiction – it would be a challenge to put together nonfiction essays. To our pleasant surprise, we were able to receive submissions to both the first and second issues of TWM, all nonfiction, except for one poem in the forthcoming second issue. We are happy to be struggling to find ways to manage the volume of submissions we receive. It has become increasingly clear to us that there is a considerable demand for critical essays with feminist analysis, based on how many readers we've had so far.

There have been two platforms which have sprouted since TWM, whose founders have written to thank us for inspiring them to start their own platforms. It might not be as a direct result of having started TWM that these two platforms now exist, but it has certainly been some of the fuel added to the fire that led to their creation. One of these platforms is *Fibre of Her Fabric*, which describes itself as an online womanist community and magazine covering a breadth of issues concerning black womanhood. The other is *Clapback Zine*, which describes itself as a woman-centred platform where African youth can be seen and heard.

Beginner's Luck? Our Experience in Writing and Publishing Online

Writing and publishing online has been rewarding, as new as it is to us. We have reached people who write back to us to share their work and to express their gratitude for ours, people who are interested in joining our team, people who are interested in simply meeting and talking about feminism, and people who are interested in helping us in our work. *The Wide Margin* work of editing and publishing feminist thought has taught us that we are capable of more than we limit ourselves to thinking and believing. We read more, think differently, learn from our contributors and from our readers much faster than we did when we were only consuming other people's writing. I have learned patience and compromise from negotiating with contributors and from responding to emails demanding things which we are not able to provide, such as a comments section.

Unfortunately, there are not many people who talk about the pleasures of publishing. I am guilty of not having learned to find or recognise and articulate pleasures in activities such as writing, editing and publishing. I am well aware of their importance and urgency, but until recently, not of the joys of this work. Perhaps this gap in articulating the pleasure in doing this work is because we seldom celebrate or enjoy such work. Perhaps the pleasure lies simply in knowing that we are doing important work? Should we learn how to derive pleasure out of feminist work?

Maybe we acknowledge the importance of effective writing and publishing, and highlight the barriers, rather than discuss the pleasures, because we are constantly working towards more and better. The challenges of publishing are well recognised. As Amina Mama writes:

There are many who will agree that the act of producing writing is always experienced as a primordial event, no matter how many times it is repeated. However, if the craft of writing is demanding, so too is the act of getting published. (Mama, 2000: 13).

Going into the project of putting together *The Wide Margin*, I knew and expected the writing to be difficult. What nothing could have prepared me for was the process of publishing. Writing and getting published was already demanding in the year 2000, before it became increasingly popular and (debatably) simple to publish one's work online. Publishing is extremely demanding. It is even more demanding when one has to also write and edit while working a fulltime job and while in graduate school at the same time. I bit off more than I could chew, but the work got done and the issue got out. In fact, I published the website one late evening while on a research trip in Kampala. Writing and publishing, if not your day job, is unlikely to be allocated adequate seriousness and time unless one pushes and creates the time. Even though we got support for the first two issues of *The Wide Margin*, there are, generally speaking, not many institutions or structures (outside academia)⁵ to support nonfiction feminist writing on the continent.

Despite TWM hitting the ground running with its first issue, it was no mystery to the editors that the second issue would be even more demanding to publish compared to the first. It has taken 17 months to get the second issue ready for publishing. During this time, there were three job changes, the team drifting off to focus their energies on their wage earning jobs, and many weeks of throwing in the towel only to pick it back up the following week.

The fact that this project is not a paying job, that there is no guarantee that there will be resources for the third issue, that there might not be any team with which to work, is enough to send anyone packing. I have packed and left and come back more times than I can count, but in the end I have stayed because *we must write*.

[W]riting remains a politically vigorous means of constructing visibility, accountability and the meaning of time. (Bennett, 2000: 4)

Endnotes

- 1 World's Loudest Library is a monthly book swap event/party where loud music is played and participants talk about various social topics, sometimes inspired by books that they have read, and other times inspired by current affairs.
- 2 Reviews of *Dust* by Yvonne Adhiambo and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie on Open Letters Monthly.
- 3 The term 'unfamiliar' was derived from the artist's exploration of a subject (feminism) with which he was unfamiliar.
- 4 Jessica Marie Johnson (2013) discussed some critiques of *#FemFuture: Online Revolutions* on her website, *Diaspora Hypertext*.
- 5 Academia, like bureaucratic institutions in general, tends to have various rules and requirements for providing support for projects such as *The Wide Margin*. These rules and requirements tend to lock out more people than they invite in.

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