

Article

If I could write this in Fire/ African Feminist Ethics for Research in Africa

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Abstract

This paper considers the challenges of researching gender and sexuality in Africa, and forms part of my doctoral project. ‘Africa’ and ‘gender and sexuality’ are co-constitutive material and figurative subjects; there can be no adequate method of analysis without this consideration. With Achille Mbembe’s concerns about the ‘dead end’ practices of African Studies and the African social sciences in mind, I consider the utility of a critique of Afro-radical and nativist discourses for feminist-inspired analyses. I conclude by discussing the limitations of Mbembe’s proposal and consider epistemological strategies that enable both a view of the multiple and complex workings of power and subjectivities, without the complete dismissal of materialities.

Introduction

*Like any artist without an art form, she became dangerous.*¹

I am not, nor have I ever been a student of Philosophy, Sociology, English Literature, Political Science, and Economics or of Anthropology – or any other discipline. For I have always been a student in Africana and Women’s Studies, undisciplined, politicised intellectual projects aimed at engaging Africa, race, gender and sexuality. I mention my undisciplined training because as I begin the process of producing a doctoral dissertation, I continue to be confronted with my eccentric intellectual and ideological genealogy. Previously, I have grappled with my position as both a scholar of Africa situated within ‘African Studies’, as well as being a feminist scholar, within the field of African and African-based feminist scholarship and the broader field of ‘Women’s Studies.’ My inadequate and unfinished quest for a methodological standpoint illustrates the difficulties of epistemologies inspired by a feminist ethics.² Then citing my positionalities as a black and African woman, I consider what a methodological standpoint of

difference and power should or could look like, without resorting to oversimplified identity politics and essentialisms. My primary motivations in knowledge production being, as Harry Garuba describes, “both a struggle against marginalisation and objectification within the domain of knowledge” and also a “struggle to interrogate and reconfigure the enabling paradigms and methodologies that under[gird]³ the entire enterprise of disciplinary knowledge production as it evolved in the academy.”⁴

More recently, I wrestled with my position as a new/student/early career knowledge producer within the African academy⁵ and the implications of knowledge production in and on Africa. I called upon a ‘politics of rage’, that is concerned with thinking *that feels* the “contradictions and hypocrisies of *living research*.”⁶ This rage is an ethics and method of coping and a tool that I “can and cannot transform into political and intellectual strategy.”⁷ Elina Oinas and Signe Arnfred offer “reflective scholarship” as a practise of “learning and doing [that] pay[s] constant attention to how our texts are embedded and moulded by the historical legacy of power relations in knowledge production.”⁸ They warn against the tendency to revel in guilt and regret, as “guilt and regret are lousy companions to research, and apologetic attitudes are similarly useless.”⁹ These and other ‘negative’ feelings can be the cause of paralysis, but also a resource in our intellectual projects. Having revelled in rage, Bennett describes my intervention as “recogniz[ing] how deeply the personal is implicated in the process of research and writing, and [attesting] to passion about the task of imaginative discovery, [refusing] clichéd or simple conclusion.”¹⁰

Part of my rage emerged from my feeling unable to find spaces and modes of research practice about gender and sexuality in Africa that did not overemphasise the weight of material inequalities. Of course, this is not to suggest that ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ can ever be removed or disconnected from material inequalities; our quest for a field: African Gender or Feminist Studies serves as testament to the overwhelming reality that the majority of African women continue to remain outside the bounds of disciplinary knowledge production¹¹ and indeed, the time

and resources to ponder the social life of women remains a privilege. Still, I have wondered: when will African women get to study interiorities, without displaying self-indulgence and privilege?

I am thus seeking a methodological perspective that can view the everyday lives of African women, without resorting to modes of description that emphasise the long list of oppressions that African women face and therefore also render any alternative modes of narration as inauthentic. In this light, Achille Mbembe's intervention concerning African modes of self-writing presents a welcome insight into strategies for research. I want to consider the allegations of 'dead end' repetitions of the false. Mbembe argues that "Marxism and nationalism, as practiced in Africa throughout the twentieth century, gave rise to two narratives on African identity: *nativism* and *Afro-radicalism*"¹², and that "as dogmas and doctrines repeated over and over again rather than methods of interrogation, they have led to a dramatic contraction and impoverishment both in the modes of conceptualising Africa and in the terms of philosophical inquiry concerning the region."¹³ I propose that these two narratives of African identity characterise public discourses concerning gender and sexuality in Southern Africa. With this in mind, I wish to illustrate the utility of Mbembe's proposition for feminist thinking and research on Africa, particularly for my research, which takes aim at the reproductive heteronormative family as the precondition of citizenship and aspirational goal of nationalist agendas.

As I stated before, my intellectual genealogy is one inspired by anti-racist and feminist ethics and these are based in a "tradition [that] some would call radical, as it seeks to engage more proactively with the methodological implications of their own liberatory intellectual ethics."¹⁴ Mbembe encourages us to separate the urge to act from our thinking, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that he offers a scathing dismissal of so called "African feminisms" and "womanisms" as "the philosophical poverty of these discourses is notorious, and several isolated attempts to correct this shortcoming have not succeeded."¹⁵ I think that this dismissal requires some attention. In analysing the fantasy of the heteronormative family in African nationalist discourses, I hope to illustrate the

ways in which African feminist critiques always already interrogate the assumptive logic of Afro-radical and nativist agendas. Furthermore, African feminisms are numerous, and heavily contested, and while I do not intend to present an exhaustive review of these discussions, I present my African feminist renderings regarding the production of knowledge that accounts for both the political and libidinal economies through which the disciplining discourses of heteronormativity emerge. This thinking that feels and acts is based on “an ethic that is necessarily in process, partial, therefore, and contingent, but an ethic nonetheless that speaks to our palpable yearnings and that exposes our vulnerabilities and our deep desires to re-imagine and re-envision a loving freedom.”¹⁶

Family & Nation: ‘Nightmares of the Heteronormativity’¹⁷

My doctoral work intends to investigate the historical production of gendered norms and power relations in Southern Africa.¹⁸ I consider the manner by which a dependence on discourses of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural practice’ related to social respectability, middle class consumer-citizenship, domesticity and heterosexual reproductive coupling, are related to the current social, political and economic landscape of the region, and are the discourses upon which the narratives of ‘the nation’ are produced. Calls to ‘culture’ function both to justify and naturalise politicised gendered violence. My interest lies in the manner by which everyday practices and performances of femininities within public and private spaces offer insights into the grander narratives of nationalism. While the control and management of young women has and continues to be a feature of the project of nation-building, young women continue to un-belong to the nation. An investigation of young women’s narratives and strategies regarding sexuality, and reproductive power provides an opportunity to engage with the subject of citizenship.

My project aims to contribute to the growing body of work that draws from preceding ‘personal as political’ feminist endeavours at consciousness-raising and intellectual practice.¹⁹ This work pays attention to the ways that feeling is negotiated in the public and private spheres, and experienced through the body.

An inquiry into affect and emotion presents both an intervention in the selection of a research subject, as well as methodological strategy. With the frequent overemphasis on externalities and political economy within the African social sciences, I wish to explore everyday practices and interiorities by examining the ‘cultural politics of emotion.’ My aim is for this approach to account for the libidinal economy of meanings and complexities, and still offer a critique of political economy.

The modes of self-writing that Mbembe critiques depend on discourses of gender difference and the aspirations of heteronormative patriarchy. I want to consider not just how scholars might critically calibrate the relationship among sex, sexuality and gender without reproducing heteronormativity, but also how norms were made, circulated, lived, transformed, and resisted? Not just: how we were fucked by gender, but also: was it possible to fuck without fucking *with* gender? And most importantly: from which conception of power, what theory of the social and whose understanding of both the subject and embodiment would the most effective and nuanced critique of heteronormativity come?²⁰

The critique of heteronormativity I am aiming at here examines the,

...resurgence of Afro-radicalism and nativism in post-settler and post-apartheid societies [that partly reflect] deep-rooted antimonies of black liberation thought and [partly reflect] current ideological conundrums linked to the limits of both the African national project and global liberal democracy.”²¹

This ‘resurgence’ as Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues is evidenced in the promulgations of the: *Third Chimurenga* in Zimbabwe from 1997, the launch of the ‘Native Club’ in South Africa in 2006, and the explosion of ‘xenophobic’ violence at the beginning of 2008 in South Africa.²² These ‘promulgations’ depend on Afro-radical and nativist tendencies, and these tendencies depend on a discourse of gender difference and the aspirations of the heteronormative family and nation. In examining the gender discourses that surround these and other ‘promulgations’ of nationalism, we can perhaps produce an effective and nuanced critique of heteronormativity.

I want to begin by defining heteronormativity as “the institutionalisation of exclusive heterosexuality in society. Based on the assumption that there are only two sexes and that each has predetermined gender roles, heteronormativity pervades all social attitudes, but it is particularly visible in ‘family’ and ‘kinship’ ideologies.”²³ Judith Butler describes the institutionalisation of heteronormativity as both an operation of power and a fantasy, one that postulates a “founding heterosexuality [that] *works* in the building of a certain state and nation.”²⁴ For instance, as Marc Epprecht has argued “many black Zimbabweans maintain that homosexual behaviour is ‘un-African’. A foreign ‘disease’ that was introduced by white settlers and that is now principally spread by tourists and ambassadors.”²⁵ Interrogating racialist homophobia, “as exemplified by President Robert Mugabe’s anti-homosexual speeches since the mid-1990s,” Epprecht argues that notions of “appropriate, respectable, exclusive heterosexuality” emerged in the ‘cowboy’ culture of white Southern Rhodesia and were then interpolated into African nationalist agendas.²⁶ In other words, a narrative of a founding heterosexuality *works* in the building of Afro-radical and nativist fantasies of the nation. These fantasies of the nation use the state as the machinery by and through which:

Fantasy becomes literalized: desire and sexuality are ratified, justified, known, publically instated, imagined as permanent, durable. And, at that very moment, desire and sexuality are dispossessed and displaced, so that one ‘is’ and what one’s relationship ‘is’ are no longer a private matters, indeed, ironically, one might say that through marriage, personal desire acquires anonymity and interchangeability, becomes, as it were, publically mediated and, in that sense, a kind of legitimated public sex.²⁷

Stevi Jackson reminds us that heterosexuality is not singular or monolithic as “there are hierarchies of respectability and good citizenship among heterosexuals, and what tends to be valorised as ‘normative’ is a very particular form founded on traditional gender arrangements and lifelong monogamy.”²⁸

Intimate relations have always already been at the fore for the construction of both race and sexuality – the construction of otherness;²⁹ and the fantasies and aspirations for respectability, domesticity, middle class consumption and the

emphasis on hygiene emerge as the modes for ‘washing off’ the pathology associated with blackness/femininity/otherness and likewise.³⁰ For instance, Butler argues that “African American kinship has been at once the site of intense state surveillance and pathologization, which leads to the double bind of being subject of normalizing pressures within the context of continuing social and political legitimation.”³¹ Roderick Ferguson instead opts for the term ‘nightmare’, considering the manner by and through which black people have always already been ‘figures of non-heteronormative perversions’ stating:

African-American familial forms and gender relations have been regarded as perversions of the American family ideal. To resituate the authority of those ideals, questions concerning material exclusion – as they pertain to African-Americans – have historically been displaced onto African-American sexual and familial practices, conceptualizing African-American racial difference as a violation of the heteronormative demands that underlie liberal values. As figures of nonheteronormative perversions, straight African-Americans were reproductive rather than *productive*, heterosexual but never *heteronormative*. This construction of African-American sexuality as wild, unstable, and undomesticated locates African-American sexuality within the irrational and therefore outside the bounds of the citizenship machinery.³²

Patricia Hill Collins and others³³ consider how “‘racial blackness’ as a social identity, structural position, locus of identification, and object of desire”³⁴ results in the imagining of races as nations; the notion of the ‘national family’ being always and already constructed in opposition to the always already non-heteronormative and pathological black family. As black sexuality and black bodies are always already being produced as pathological, the aspirations for heteronormativity and the emergence of discourses of respectability with the aim of producing a ‘black middle class’³⁵ are aspirations aimed at tackling the discourses of blackness as pathology (and are also Afro-radical, and in certain articulations, nativist self-narratives).

Hill Collins’ proposal considers that while the ‘nation’ excludes the black woman from the family model, Afro-radical and nativist nationalisms seek to confine her. Policing black women’s public and private worlds was a feature of colonialisms, industrialisation, urbanisation and nationalisms as the “black woman could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a

threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class; as a threat to congenial black and white middle class relations; and as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment.”³⁶ These fantasies of the heteronormative mean that the aspirations of the family and nation will always already be nightmares for women, because the ‘cult of femininity’ they purport “is not unconnected to the experiences of many women [who] live with the haunting fear of rape, sexual harassment, smash and grabs, and other violent intrusions into their spaces, bodies and psyches.”³⁷

In Southern Africa, the project of disciplining bodies into normative middle class subject-citizenship dictates “that the citizen is, above all, an ethical figure and that the precondition of citizenship is the production of moral communities.”³⁸ This discipline has always displayed itself in the realm of intimate relations, as “the intimate is the generative ideal for an affective citizenship that pacifies its subjects into citizen-consumers.”³⁹ For example, South African Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana recently stormed out of the opening of an exhibition by black women, stating that “it was immoral, offensive and going against nation-building.”⁴⁰ The artwork featured photographs of women as couples. The narrative of nation-building clearly is bound here by aspirations for heterosexuality. Such statements not only reify the exclusion and censorship of lesbian women within the public sphere, but also function to legitimate gendered violence directed towards those who fall out of the bounds of the citizenship machinery. Pumla Dineo Gqola describes public sphere discourses in South Africa as,

...very conservative in the main: [as] they speak of ‘women’s empowerment’ in ways that are not transformative, and as a consequence, they exist very comfortably alongside overwhelming evidence that South African women are not empowered: the rape and other gender based violence statistics, the rampant sexual harassment at work and public spaces, the siege on Black lesbians and raging homophobia, the very public and relentless circulation of misogynist imagery, metaphors and language.⁴¹

Women’s bodies become the sites upon which heteronorms and patriarchy are played out, while Afro-radical and nativist narratives are the discourses through which such regulations are both legitimated and normalised, in such a way that

rape becomes a “constitutive element of women’s experience.”⁴² Helen Moffett argues that,

Sexual violence in post-1994 South Africa is fuelled by justificatory narratives rooted in apartheid discourses. At the same time, discourses of race, including accusations of racism, have stifled open scrutiny of rape as a source of patriarchal control. Under apartheid, the dominant group used methods of regulating blacks and reminding them of their subordinate status that permeated not just public and political spaces, but also private and domestic spaces. Today it is gender rankings that are maintained and women that are regulated. This is largely done through sexual violence, in a national project in which it is quite possible that many men are buying into the notion that enacting intimate violence on women, they are performing a necessary work of social stabilisation.⁴³

Recent public debates on gender equity reveal dependence on these discourses, both as a tool for ‘self-writing’ and for the articulation of heteronormative cultural practice. For example, regional public debates on family planning and domestic violence laws show the dependence on these tools for the articulation of what ‘our culture’ is and how feminist interventions in these regards represent an affront to liberatory Afro-radical and nativist agendas.

Lene Bull Christiansen notes that the Zimbabwean government’s *Third Chimurenga* constructs insiders and outsiders of the nation “via a cultural discourse of indigenous authenticity. The relations of gender and power which are inherent to this political discourse [function] through the formulation of discourses of marriage, Christianity, and ‘tradition.’”⁴⁴ Christiansen notes how public debates on the domestic violence law produced two oppositional discourses in support or against the implementation of the law:

Those who defended the law argued that Zimbabwean culture was under attack. This was something which was perceived as fundamentally detrimental to the social order, or at least to the marriage institution, which was also seen as foundational. Those who defended the law attempted to challenge a patriarchal definition of Zimbabwean culture so as to create a discursive space ‘within Zimbabwean culture’ in order to not only advocate the law and women’s civil rights in general but also to root out customs, beliefs, and practices that are harmful to women by depicting them as ‘perversions’ rather than ‘traditions.’ Both positions can therefore be viewed as intending a ‘purification’ of Zimbabwean culture, and both positions needed to take their point of departure in ‘indigenous

Zimbabwean culture' in order to stake their political claims. As such the hegemony of the discourse of the *Third Chimurenga* and patriotic history was maintained throughout the debate.⁴⁵

Her assessment reveals how even feminist endeavours for transformation use Afro-radical and nativist narratives. In this instance, I am not inclined to dismiss this strategy, because of the political usefulness it may present in certain situations. In this sense, for example, it offers a common language within a public debate. Furthermore, this view fails to acknowledge the discourses in support of the law (and otherwise) from feminists who are overtly critical of nationalist discourses of cultural practices and seek alternative modes of articulation.⁴⁶ These and other feminists are often described as 'irrelevant' and again, a threat to nationalist agendas, as Gqola writes here:

...those Black and white feminists who defied the passwords by contesting the gender-talk around the Jacob Zuma trial were dismissed as 'elites', 'irresponsible', 'disingenuous', and out of touch with most poor women, who are coyly called 'real women on the ground'. It is an incredible statement coming from elite men, and amazingly condescending, since these men, we are to assume, know better what women want."⁴⁷

Women's reproductive agency is another arena for public debates concerning the constitution of nationalisms. A recent *New York Times* op-ed piece revealed that anti-abortionists were taking aim at African American women and arguing that abortion clinics target black women as part of a larger project of killing black bodies.⁴⁸ Dorothy Roberts argues:

Racism helped to create the view of birth control as a means of solving social problems. Birth control policy put into practice an explanation for racial inequality that was rooted in nature rather than power. At the same time, the connection between birth control and racial injustice split the Black community. While some community activists promoted birth control as a means of betterment, others denounced abortion and family planning as forms of racial 'genocide'. Black people's ambivalence about birth control adds an important dimension to the contemporary understanding of reproductive freedom as a woman's right to choose contraception and abortion.⁴⁹

Women's reproductive choices also have emerged in public debates in Southern Africa, and the history of 'birth control' in this region⁵⁰ reveals that these fears

are not unfounded. However, when the debates are confined to Afro-radical and nativist renderings of liberation, the multiplicities and complexities that characterise women's experiences and demands for reproductive choices are rendered mute. The economies of meaning and emotion that are missing in Afro-radical and nativist discourses on reproduction are the areas that my work intends to explore.

Homophobia has characterised African nationalist agendas as “the tradition of representing Black people as decent and moral historical agents has meant the erasure of the broad array of Black sexuality and gendered being in favour of a static heterosexual narrative.”⁵¹ Richardson argues that the ‘queer’ in Black history has always been present, despite efforts at its erasure. These narratives have “exalted their manhood and heralded their femininity” and “black women’s sexuality has been discussed as the ‘unrespectable thing unspoken’ of in Black life.”⁵² As I argue earlier, first: the regulation of women’s sexualities becomes a part of the project of national belonging, evident, for instance, in 2006 when Jacob Zuma was tried for rape. Supporters of the ANC leader gathered outside the courtroom holding banners that vilified the woman who had brought the charge that read “burn the bitch.”⁵³ During the court case, “Zuma came to present himself not only as a victim of conspiracy but as an embodiment of Zulu culture” as his support base used phrases like *100% Zulu boy* “and by the actions or failure to disstantiate on the part of Zuma himself [over] the period as a whole, including the post-acquittal phase, this came to embody some of the most disturbing and patriarchal elements, including homophobic statements.”⁵⁴ The public debates surrounding the Jacob Zuma rape trial revealed Afro-radical and nativist machineries of ‘our culture’ where sexuality again represents “a tried and tested terrain for terrorising and controlling people,”⁵⁵ and such machineries provide the foundations for justificatory narratives that condone curative rapes against Black lesbians.⁵⁶

The recent debates concerning xenophobia also reveal aspirations for, and investments in the heteronormative family and heteropatriarchy. Described as

“negrophobia” by Pumla Dineo Gqola,⁵⁷ the female body became the playground for the contestation of male power.⁵⁸ As Shireen Hassim notes,

While Xenophobic attacks seemed to take middle class South Africans by surprise, in everyday interactions in a range of spaces, the boundaries of communities and the criteria for authenticity may be carefully policed. As in many other societies in conflict, women’s bodies are frequently the terrain for such regulation. Virginity testing of young Zulu girls by older women continues to be practiced and defended in the name of the preservation of culture. In some townships in Durban, male community leaders have ‘banned’ women from wearing trousers on the grounds that this form of attire is not appropriate in terms of indigenous Zulu culture, more than one woman has been publically beaten as a result of the edict. In February 2007, a taxi driver sexually assaulted a young woman, Nwabise Ngcukana, at Johannesburg’s Noord Street Taxi Rank, in the heart of the city. Other taxi drivers joined in continuing the assault, stripping her naked and pouring alcohol over her in the full view of a cheering public. Her invitation to this sexual assault, according to the taxi drivers, was that, in choosing to wear a mini-skirt, she was insulting African culture.⁵⁹

The xenophobic attacks presented assertions of the rights and privileges of those who ‘authentically’ belong to the nation. These narratives also served to remind us of the other pre-conditions of authentic citizenship, which as Hassim notes, for women include constant sexual regulations. These regulative and corrective measures of women’s mobility and sexualities are also a feature on nationalist rhetoric in Zimbabwe⁶⁰ and other southern African nations.

My research intends to engage the subject of “love as a social institution, as ‘machinery’”⁶¹ as heteronormative and to “situate its disciplinary effects in the ‘ideologies and institutions of intimacy.’”⁶² The institutions of intimacy always already present what has been described as a ‘prize’ with a ‘price’⁶³ for young women. The heated public debates on homophobia and xenophobia concerning who belongs and who does not belong, and both debates appear to reify the position of Black woman as always and already outside of the parameters of the citizenship machine. Achille Mbembe’s critique of African modes of self-writing offers a methodological tool with which to view these articulations. African feminist critiques of nationalist rhetoric also reveal the insufficiency of these

‘modes of self-writing’ narrative strategies, as they depend on heteronormative and patriarchal aspirations.

The Politics of Writing/Conclusion

Achille Mbembe offers Afro-radicalism and nativism as the two modes of self-writing that characterise knowledge production and practices in Africa. He argues:

Despite their differences, these two accounts share the same *episteme* [...] on the one hand, both rely on an idea of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ – a moral economy – whose power of falsification derives from its opaque ties with the cult of suffering and victimization. On the other hand, both consist of superstitions that function to persuade us that nothing is happening in Africa because history already happened, and anything more would be nothing but a repetition of these originary events. Further, the African subject cannot express him- or herself in the world other than as a wounded and traumatized subject.⁶⁴

The solution he suggests “is to restore a separation on an intellectual level between *the desire to know and to think and the urge to act*. The two moments are both legitimate, but there needs to be a line of autonomy between them.”⁶⁵ Perhaps this is the point where he departs from African feminist epistemologies that seek to produce knowledge that is not removed from action. Furthermore, in his admonishment of the ‘intellectual poverty’ of African feminist renderings, Mbembe’s position is ‘deaf’ to the institutional political and libidinal economies that those of us engaged in African feminist knowledge production are confronted with.

Godwin Murunga characterises Mbembe’s analysis as ‘culturalist’, lending itself to two main trends: treating identity as a “mere cultural repertoire unconnected to material and political realities” and as ahistorical, refusing “to examine the context that has promoted the Marxist and so-called nativist narratives”⁶⁶ that he dismisses. In his view, this perspective “perceives power as diffused in society, as a social relation equally accessible to all people” and this tragically “lumps

into one homogenous experience historically diverse regions like Africa, Australia, Canada and the United States.”⁶⁷ As Jane Bennett writes:

Regrets about the dearth of research in various arenas or knowledge of the difficulties faced by writers gendered as 'women' (and often poor), and recognition of the ways in which access to the written word remains a privilege, cannot prevent excitement at the intellectual and imaginative possibilities open to those whose auditory senses are intact. 'Deafness' is interesting (though often obscene), and must continue to engage the attention of anyone committed to gender justice in African contexts, and elsewhere. What different African-based women are writing, and the connections between that writing and its historical precedents within diverse spheres of expression, could however be the concerns which best stimulate primary intellectual and imaginative energies into the next poem, article, funding proposal, newsletter, Masters thesis, journal entry, or into the first book.⁶⁸

Writing and thinking are not innocent exercises and the severe anxiety about writing and research that I feel at every stage of knowledge production is fed by my compulsion not to commit epistemic violence. To this end, I contend that African feminist interventions in knowledge production offer new and inventive methods and ethics for the advancement of African Studies. Mbembe's proposal on African modes of self-writing is useful for analyses of this sort, but as we are engaged in intellectual traditions and practices that take aim at material consequences and issues of justice, his view can seem both nihilistic and impossible. Furthermore, his dismissal of 'so-called African feminisms and womanisms' reveals an ineptitude to apply the same view of 'complexities and multiplicities' that certainly characterise the broad field of African continental and diasporic feminisms. In the main, as Amina Mama contends “the overall intellectual culture has [...] remained largely untouched by the potentially transformative insights of feminist scholarship.”⁶⁹

In my mind, it is crucial to consider the “role that intellectuals and the academy play in constituting and validating dominant forms of power;”⁷⁰ and as a result, I feel the tensions related to the politics of writing. Jane Bennett notes Michelle Cliff’s 1985 article, “If I could write this in fire” as one she always returns to, viewing the piece as a “deliberate engagement with directives about ‘good writing’ which she says gave her a doctorate but crippled her sense of voice.”⁷¹ I return to my initial comments about the crippling feelings that I associate with living research and that confound my intellectual labours. “This writing is personal because this history has engendered me,”⁷² and as Michelle Cliff suggests, it might just be easier, to write fire. This is writing that feels, says, unsays, implies – speaks in silences, is negotiated, contingent, multiple and complex.

I begin this essay with a quote from Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*. The protagonist is a figure that refuses to escape my imagination. It is this sentence that I often return: “like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.” Michelle Cliff views *Sula* as a tragedy that is “cruel enough to stop the blood.” Cliff explains that “because of [Sula’s] race, perhaps also because of her sex, she has been shut out from art and denied access to art forms. She is an intelligent, thinking woman, who ultimately has nowhere to go.”⁷³ I do not see her as tragic at all; if anything, through her interest and investment in pleasure, she represents a danger to heteropatriarchy and heteronorms. Jacqui Alexander reminds us that “our experience with pleasure has meant that we have also learnt to keep company with its underside. Pleasure invites and incites danger. And with danger comes risk; the risk in this instance, of enacting the *truth* that crossings are never undertaken all at once and never undertaken once and for all.”⁷⁴

The crossings she invites reveal how a figure such as Sula can represent the ‘queer’ figure in Black history that Richardson encourages us to seek, and also offer insights into methodological strategies for producing knowledge on Africa. For instance, these ‘crossings’ could involve multi- and interdisciplinarity as modes of practice for knowledge production. Ultimately, if our intellectual

labours begin at the point of a political investment in knowledge production that struggles against marginalisation and objectification within the domain of knowledge, then I cannot pursue Mbembe's rejection of African feminist intellectual ethics. As Jared Sexton contends this project "provides the only viable – that is to say, ethically consistent – means of unravelling the 'single bundle of nerves' in which the violence of race, nation, class, gender, and sexuality 'does not bear distinction.' [...] The political task that remains is neither a restoration not a restitution, but a creative destruction.

Notes

¹ Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. (New York: Plume, 1982)

² See Mupotsa, Danai S. "A Radical Black Feminist Standpoint? A Very Preliminary Discussion of Methods and Methodology." *postamble* (2006): i-viii., and Mupotsa, Danai S. "An African Feminist Standpoint?" *postamble* (2007): pp. xi-xxiii.

³ "Undergirded" in original.

⁴ Garuba, Harry. "Advancing African Studies in an African University." *Engaging Africa/Advancing African Studies*, African Studies Centre, March 12-14 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2009): p.1.

⁵ Mupotsa, Danai S., Mhishi, Lennon. "This Little Rage of Poetry/Researching Gender and Sexuality." *Feminist Africa* (2008): pp. 97-107.

⁶ Bennett, Jane. "Editorial: Researching for Life: Paradigms and Power." *Feminist Africa* (2008): pp. 1-12. Italics original.

⁷ Mupotsa & Mhishi, 2008

⁸ Oinas, Elina., Arnfred, Signe. "Introduction: Sex & Politics – Case Africa." *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* (2009): pp. 149-157.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2009.

¹⁰ Bennett, 2008

¹¹ See for example: *Feminist Africa*, issue 1: Intellectual Politics, issue 8: Rethinking Universities 1, issue 9: Rethinking Universities 2; Veneay, Cassandra Rachel & Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe. *Women in African Studies Scholarly Publishing*. Trenton NJ: African World Press, 2001. And Mabokela, Reitumetse Obakeng & Magubane, Zine. *Hear Our Voices: Race, Gender and the Status of Black South African Women in the Academy*. (Leiden: Brill, 2005)

¹² Mbembe, Achille. "On the Power of the False." *Public Culture* (2002): pp. 629-641.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2002.

¹⁴ Mama, Amina. "Is it Ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom." *African Studies Review* (2007): pp. 1-26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2007

¹⁶ Alexander, Jacqui M. "Danger and Desire: Crossings are Never Undertaken All At Once or Once and for All." *Small Axe* (2007): pp. 154-166.

¹⁷ Ferguson, Roderick. "The Nightmares of the Heteronormative." *Journal for Cultural Research* (2000): pp. 419-444.

¹⁸ This study takes the view of history, as a "history of the present", in a Foucauldian sense. Drawing from Mbembe's reflections on a method of reading and writing for African Studies, my work aims at reading the archives of the present. Reading present memory in the practice of everyday life requires this view of history-as-the-present

- ¹⁹ See for example: Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2004)
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