

# Bridging North and South ...

## Notes Towards True Dialogue and Transformation

by *Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi*

*Cet article démontre l'écart qui existe entre théorie et pratique féministe, entre les expériences des femmes du Sud et celles du Nord, et comment cet écart touche de près le développement de liens réels dans le secteur du féminisme international.*

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I am writing these notes from the perspective of a woman from the South who has lived in North America for the past eight years. Over the years, I have become increasingly troubled by the widening gulf between feminist theory and feminist practice. As a black, "third world" woman and scholar, I have become suspicious and weary of "well-meaning feminists" from the North who pay lip service to feminist politics in theory but are quick to shy away from putting their theories into practice—especially in their relations with women from the South or the so-called "third world."

Consider the following. Nineteen hundred and seventy-five was the Year of the Woman. I was still at the threshold of completing my secondary education. I did not know what the fuss was about. I did know that it had something to do with feminists and a feminist movement. I got older and I learned a lot. If the phrase, "I am a feminist" were to escape my lips in Cameroon, this assertion would lend itself to various reactions: raised eyebrows, open hostility, mostly verbal, sometimes non-verbal. "So you are one of those women who wants to be like white women? who does not want to enter the kitchen anymore? who does not want to cook (just like white women)? So you are one of those women who want to be men? No wonder you behave like a man. I am sorry for your husband (or the man who will marry you)."

**"You want to be like white women."**

I can clearly remember those moments in Cameroon when most of our men (and some women) openly condemned the few women who dared (sometimes casually) in conversation to mention they were feminist. "So you want to be like white women?" is the inevitable question. There is no doubt in the minds of the men who rebuke us

for wanting "to be like white women" that there is nothing positive in our "imitation" of white women; that what they perceive as "aspiration to whiteness" speaks eloquently to the colonial and neo-colonial experiences of their lives. Our "need" for feminism cum mimicry of white women underlines their pejorative views of us, "their" women, who have gone wayward because of another ideology that white people—specifically white women—have exported to, or "dumped" on, their country. These men find fault with our so-called defection, with white women, and with the feminist movement as a whole. Where some of us were once foolhardy enough to bleach our skins with the imported corticoids that flooded our markets in order to "look like white women," now we go one step further in choosing "to be like them."

**"You don't want to enter the kitchen anymore."**

Before I came to North America I was made to believe that white women do not cook, that they do not clean house, in short, that they were not confined to the domestic sphere because they were all feminists and those were roles that fell outside of their duties. Imagine my surprise! Some white women do cook, do clean house... If a(n) (educated) Cameroonian, woman/feminist were to come back from work one day and declare she was too tired to cook, the reaction would be predictable. "She is making her whiteman thing and does not want to cook." But were the fact of her being a feminist not known, the same statement would draw a different reaction. A member of the extended family, living under the same roof, would offer to cook or accept to perform the duty without undue complaint. A double standard is thus created simply because of a label.

Feminism is still very much misunderstood because those who "exported" it did a poor job of foregrounding the issues and connections between women. In my country, being a feminist means you are an educated, sometimes frustrated, sometimes angry, sometimes unmarried, loudmouth woman, who shuns domestic duties and having many children! For too long being a feminist in Africa has meant copying unattractive western attitudes that have no place in African cultures. The gradual understanding of the word feminist to mean a woman dedicated to fighting gender discrimination is a slow process indeed.

**"You want to be like men."**

This statement has as its referent, not white men of course, but "our" men. These men see feminism as a movement whose prime aim is to destabilize predeter-

mined gender roles, thus revising gender relations and transforming the overall nature of their societies. If feminism means that their women will walk out of their kitchens and refuse to give them children, then it is unacceptable.

When I went home this past summer of '96, I heard men scuff at women's complaints (mine included) and gleefully remark: "Go ask Beijing. Didn't we hear that Beijing conference answered all your problems?" This says to me that the more feminist theory and practice does not find common ground, does not make itself more explicit, more inclusive, more accessible to all strata of women (and the

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burden lies on the shoulders of women both South and North), the more it gives our societies some of the weapons that can be used with impunity against us. The dissensions that have been rampant at international women's conferences between women's groups from the North and the South have only helped reinforce these attitudes. The dissensions and the negative conclusions that are drawn from them, by both men and women, have put those African women who are attracted to what the feminist movement can represent, sometimes in awkward positions or in bitter opposition to the very men they want to work with, to adequately fight gender discrimination. No wonder so many women are reverting to the traditional/local politics of their foremothers and shying away from the term "feminist" and the "feminist movement."

#### **My mother and feminism in Africa**

I was raised by a mother who never had the western education that I have, but she went about the business of living and survival every single day of her life. She never hesitated to use the tools at her disposal to demand and obtain what was rightfully hers. Her children, her husband, her family (extended, as well), were her world. She, like millions of African women, will never know the word "feminist" or what it means. Yet, she was and still is, in my eyes, one of the most important feminist figures that I shall ever know, as I also go about the business of living and survival.

Needless to say, when one talks about feminism in Africa, the millions of women like my mother are always an "absence." Feminist theory and practice, in the conventional sense, is something that belongs to and finds its roots and definitions within an African middle class of women, like myself, who have been privy to western

education. We carry on that colonial mantle that demands of us to label ourselves in various and varying contexts. My mother will therefore, in essence, not lay a claim to the word "feminist," and unfortunately, academic feminist discourses have left women like her by the wayside, in spite of the fact that their lives and experiences are those that have grounded my feminism, those of us who speak to/with(in) western feminism and international feminist circles. Academic feminist discourses have, on the whole, failed to identify grassroots feminists as custodians of ways of knowing, of knowledge that academics do not possess. They have failed to listen to grassroots feminist voices and this is a reflection of the arrogance of academics who see themselves as "producers" of knowledge and scholarship for and about women. We need to do more by unlearning our paternalistic tendencies, by listening, recognizing, and incorporating into our feminist practices, the vast amounts of feminist knowledge that are alive and thriving within the communities of non-academic women all over the world.

#### **"Black women have it handed to them on a platter."**

A few years ago, while I was living in Canada, a prominent feminist scholar came to speak at McGill University. The day following her talk a workshop for faculty women was held. Female graduate students were also invited to attend. After all, the workshop was a space for faculty to meet with our distinguished guest and discuss the hurdles that women face in academia, with emphasis on the problems they have to deal with regarding tenure and promotion. There were mostly faculty women at this meeting but I and a couple of other graduate students did attend. I was the only black/"third world" woman in the room. When the topic of tenure and promotion got heated, I raised my hand and asked a question: "I am soon going to be on the job market." (It was November of '93. My dissertation oral exam was scheduled for January '94 and I was looking forward to some interviews at the MLA held in Toronto.) "If I am hired, are there problems that as a black woman I should be aware of, and how can I anticipate dealing with those when the time comes?"

I thought I had asked an innocent question but I was stunned by the answer that came from the invited guest. She flat out told me that black women have it going for them; that they have everything handed to them on a platter. She emphasized her point by stating that a black woman just got a very important job at *Newsweek* because of the colour of her skin. I was dumbfounded by the thrust of her response. What had I said that had literally derailed the discussion from tenure practices to privilege inherent in my *black* skin. It was so "funny" I could not even laugh. I was quietly thinking of all the black women who have been denied tenure *in spite of* their black skin. I was thinking of all the women of colour for whom their institutions had made life so unbearable they had to resign

or be fired. The discussion moved on as if I had not asked the question but an uneasy blanket shrouded the room.

About 15 minutes later, one of the participants came back to my "situation." She mentioned that it was important to take seriously the issue that I raised, because women of colour have been *so* discriminated against, because their experiences have been, are, *so* different from those of white women. Again, our guest responded that there is no difference between the lives of women here, in Montreal or New York, and women in Bangladesh. The condescending tone in that room was so sharp it could amputate a leg. Again, we moved on. I thought the subject

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was closed but I was wrong. The last speaker of the session said she wanted to come back to my question. She said she had attended three conferences over the summer, and the same issue kept coming up: the hiring of women of colour. She concluded by saying, people are tired, and she was tired, so tired of hearing the same thing over, and over, and over.... On that note, the meeting came to an end.

#### **"My African friend, the informant"**

I was invited to speak to a class of undergraduate and graduate students on "African Women's Writing." I was not given the usual introduction that guest-speakers get before their lecture begins. The brilliant feminist scholar who invited me to her class, simply said something along these lines: "this is Juliana Abbenyi who has come to speak to us today about...." Nothing was said about my background, about the body of research I had done, etc. I went ahead with the lecture and took many questions during and after. It was an engaging experience that we all enjoyed and I was asked to come back a second time. But why had I not been properly introduced? Was I seen as a scholar who was bringing her expertise and knowledge into that classroom or was I simply an illustrative tool, on display, of those "Other" women whose writing had been included in the course readings?

Subtle and not so subtle hierarchies were being constructed and sustained. I decided to assume that she must have spoken to the students about me and my work before I came to class. I only realized this had not been the case when some of the students came up after class, either to talk or to thank me earnestly not only for coming to speak, but for forthrightly addressing (western) feminisms the way I did. I answered their questions about my research and background in both oral and written African litera-

tures. They could see why my examples had moved fluidly from orality and the written texts, to concrete examples from the experiences and lives of women I have known in Africa. Crossing and merging these "boundaries" were unproblematic to me.

Something else quite revealing also happened. Two of the students confessed that after listening to me, they felt "pretty sure" that I had sometimes been mentioned in class, but not named. Some went as far as telling me that I must be that "informant" or that "African friend" who was sometimes referred to by their teacher to confirm certain statements that were made in class. If they were right, then I was, in absentia, a source of points of view that could neither be researched nor questioned. Things could have been said that this "informant" might have said, might not have said, or might have said differently, depending on the context. In any case, the un-named African informant's voice was usurped, appropriated as need be. Situations like this one make it imperative to question the politics and practices of some feminist scholars. Why is it so easy to refer to a "third world" scholar as an *informant* without being accountable? One often hears statements at conferences such as "My friend from ... (somewhere in the 'third world') says...." Why are these so-called "third world" informants not appropriately named as valuable, academic, quotable sources? After all, they are being used as a source of information to ground scholarly arguments. Where does feminist theory end and feminist practice begin? One wonders.

#### **The need for true dialogue and respect between North and South**

I think of myself as a feminist in many ways, irrespective of how I define my feminism, but in many other ways, I find my relationship with feminist theory and the practice of feminist politics to be sometimes very frail. Feminism and women organizing is important to me, given that fighting discrimination—gender, ethnic, racial, linguistic, political (bolstered by my minority anglophone status in Cameroon), etc.—has been intrinsic to my life and experiences. My relationships with some women of the North, some of whom have helped me question and rethink feminism from my own positional perspectives, have sometimes caused me to doubt my own feminism, to question the sincerity of feminism in general, to wonder what the hoopla around "international feminism" is all about. In such moments, I feel not only betrayed but (unfortunately) aligned with those men back home who have always been suspicious of feminism, let alone, international feminism, even though our reasons for this suspicion might be different.

In spite of the fact that I rarely saw our experiences as African and/or "third world" women spoken about (although always spoken for) in much of feminist theory and academic feminist discourse, women organizing across cultures continues to hold my attention. The attraction to

feminist theory for me always lay in the ability of "theory" to give spaces and acknowledgment to "other/Other" voices. Living in an-Other culture, I sought to find a space for myself with women in North America but soon realized that international feminism was too often cloaked in empty rhetoric. I have networked, I have attended conferences, and I have asked myself, when we have gone through all the theoretical "abstract" jargon: "where are women like my mother (who are in the majority around the world) in these high-powered reflections? What space, if any, do they occupy in our feminist theorizing and practices? Where do I position my mother, whose life grounds and shapes most of my feminism, within feminist academic discourses?"

The correlation that I draw between my mother, an "illiterate" African, grass-roots feminist, and myself, educated in her's and western ways, are intrinsic to my relations with women of the North. What women like my mother have done, are doing, will continue to do, in short, what they have been doing for millennia, does not seem to be finding its rightful place in academic language/spaces except when a select few, with international renown, are co-opted to speak "the third world"/native woman's experience. Similarly, the connections and disconnections between my status as *informant*, in relation to feminist practice and post-(neo)colonialism must be highlighted if our goal is respect, sensitivity to each other, and true dialogue and transformation between North and South. How can I speak proudly of a healthy international feminism when to my distress, I am asked, "So you are the African friend, the African informant?" I was surprised, embarrassed and finally, hurt and betrayed. My faith in feminism and what it stands for was strangely shaken.

This incident reminded me of an earlier incident with a feminist journalist. She had interviewed me for her radio show, for a couple of hours, about my thoughts on "African feminism" and how I saw my thinking fitting into the larger picture of "global" connections between women. She later offered me a copy of the interview, and the piece that had aired. I was surprised when I finished listening to the show. I had spoken on a variety of issues of prime concern to most African women, issues that are often neglected by western feminism. I had also answered her questions on homosexuality in Africa and lamented the fact that it is a topic rarely addressed as part of sexuality debates in African literary studies. That was the one issue that she chose to put on the air.

I did not hear the program when it aired, but I did get a call from a very angry African woman, to say the least, who assaulted me with a barrage of words (I respect her desire not to be named). She did not mince her words when she clearly pointed out that I was a shame to Africa, that I was not doing African women like herself a service when the only thing that I could talk about on radio was to blame Africans for not discussing homosexuality. She classified me among those African women scholars who have sold their souls to white women, pandering to

western sensational political issues, for whatever crumbs they throw us, in order to carry the banner of *their* agendas and not *ours*. She could not understand why, I, put in an enviable position like the radio, where few of us are rarely given the forum to *speak for ourselves*, would ignore what she considered other pressing and more important issues that are relevant to the daily struggles of millions of African women. She felt betrayed by me (even though she agreed that I no longer had control over what happened to my taped interview after it had been conducted); I felt betrayed by the journalist, because I also questioned what her agenda had been all along. I had earnestly believed that she was genuinely interested in my take (as a woman from the South) on feminism and its inter-relatedness or disconnections with the lives of African and western women. Her piece reaffirmed the disconnections more than the possibilities of a true dialogue between different interests and interlocking issues.

I continue to be concerned about some of the feminists in the North, who espouse academic feminist discourse, play the "global" card and parade the banner of "international sisterhood" yet fail to recognize their own prejudice when, in various forms, it rears its ugly head. I am disappointed with academia. Our experiences and discursive practices as African women, as "third world" women, are not making tangible in-roads. They are either considered "outside" of academic discourses, or, when deemed acceptable, endowed with "universal" qualities and appropriated, or validated to serve specific agendas. It is our job to stop perpetuating and reinforcing hierarchies that can only serve as hindrances to the construction and promotion of dialogue between women around the world. If women's voices do not meet as equals, then the battle for "global sisterhood" is lost before it even begins. True dialogue between women of the North and the South must include making concrete efforts at narrowing the gulf between feminist theory and practice. Academic feminists must learn to switch the lenses of their gaze. They must learn to be Other(ed). They must also learn to be "consumers" of (other) feminist theories and practices, and what they have termed "grassroots feminisms" must be integral to this process otherwise, "bridging North and South" will remain a hollow statement.

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