

BRIDGING

NORTH and SOUTH...

Notes Towards True Dialogue and Transformation

By Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi

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 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.”

Feminism is still very much misunderstood because those who “exported” it did a poor job of foregrounding the issues and connections among 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.

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, belong to and find 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 and those of us who speak to/within 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.

THE NEED FOR TRUE DIALOGUE AND RESPECT BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

I think of myself as 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 are important to me, given that fighting discrimination—gender, ethnic, racial, linguistic, political (bolstered by my minor-

ity 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 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 spite of the fact that I rarely saw our experiences as African and/or “Third World” 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?”

tions?”

The correlation that I draw between my mother, an “illiterate” African, grassroots feminist, and myself, educated in her ways and the ways of the west, is intrinsic to my relations with women of the North. What women like my mother have done, are doing, and will continue to do—in short, what they have been doing for millennia—do not seem to be finding their rightful place in academic language/spaces except when a select few, with international renown, are co-opted to speak the Third World/native women’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.



Where are grassroots women in feminist discourses?

Stephanie Hollyman/Forum '95

I once had an encounter 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 was 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. 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

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true dialogue between different interests and interlocking issues.

I continue to be concerned about some 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 inroads. They are either considered "outside" of academic discourses, or, when deemed acceptable, endowed with "universal" qualities and appropriated or validated to serve specific agenda. It is our job to stop perpetuating and reinforcing hierarchies that can only serve as hindrances to the construction and promotion of dialogue among 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 phrase.

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