

Contemporarity in Africa: Feminist Perspectives of an Alternative Future

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Introduction:

Let me begin by thanking Kwame and his colleagues for making it possible for me to be here today. It is a great pleasure to share this time with you, and I hope that pleasure will be the main intellectual emotion that will connect us during the hour or so that we will be conversing.

I come from the place where humans stood up and took the first step into the future. Although the racist inspired denials about human origins have tended to die down more recently, the apparent need to contest this ‘scientific fact’ still lingers within the core of racist supremacist discourse, but that is not of importance, and it never really was to most Africans anyway.

I often use this momentous shift into our becoming human as a stepping stone in contextual and conceptual terms, excavating the dynamic of a profoundly significant gesture so as to experience myself as African, female and black in different and powerfully intimate ways. I am using these identity markers in a lateral sense; as an intersectional site where I continuously re-imagine myself.

Contextually, I have found that by retrieving imaginaries of Africa – spatially and humanistically - which enhance the amazement of who we are as beautifully creative creatures – I am able to step back from the dominant, often overwhelming negative narratives of colonial, racist contempt and condescension.

I am also able to begin leaning away from Nationalism and neo-colonialism, the latter understood as the political and ideological process by which black heterosexual men on the African continent have been consolidating their class positions and power, through impunitous and often brutal uses of state repressive infrastructures.

I have spent many years trying to understand the logic of Nationalism because my political consciousness as a radical African person was tempered in the cauldron of anti-colonial liberatory engagement and struggle, and my feminism is still deeply

marked by nationalistic instincts, which I am struggling to unlearn for reasons that are becoming more urgent as I take the new turns in my personal and larger political re-making as a contemporary radical feminist.

Besides providing a large and open platform for all Africans who resisted colonial occupation, nationalism has functioned as a facilitator for black male class and sexual hegemony on our continent. Nationalism has enabled for feudal systems and practices of cultural authenticity to persist in the exercise of hegemonic masculinist impunity in most relationships between women and men across African societies. It also continues to provide the socio-cultural exclusionary legitimacies against all groups of Africans who adopt alternative identities and are consequently constructed as other in relation to being 'real Africans' ie. heteronormatively conforming individuals.

Fanon most presciently understood and critiqued this classed tendency of the ideology, and I have a somewhat adequate understanding of the phenomenon in a larger sense, and therefore still keep those insights of nationalism within reach as I travel along the new intellectual trajectory that I am engaged in crafting at the present time. But this is not what I want to focus on today.

One of the tasks I set myself throughout my life as a deliberately radical female person, is to resist and unlearn the dominant constructions of who I am or should be that are continuously imposed and reiterated by heteronormative notions and expectations everywhere I live and work.

So in making the retrieval of what is most beautiful and creative about being African and black a core element of my radical self and life politics, I have focused on both the stepping back from the hegemonic hetero-patriarchal narratives while searching for the dynamic energies that are the source of human life, particularly for us as African people.

In these senses, then, context is not only about spatiality – although of course, we live in time, space and motion – but it is also very crucially an ideational opportunity to re-invent ourselves. We humans are the greatest inventors in the universe. It is our special gift as living, moving matter to also continuously re-imagine and change our relationships with each other and with other sentient forms of energy on our planet, now more so beyond the boundaries of our known universe.

In setting the context as African intellectuals – of coming from a vibrant place/space where what we understand as being human begins, we also initiate a political process of self-retrieval from patriarchally repressive imagery and signs, and embark upon Contemporarity, as a sensibility of the immense power and capacity which we are endowed with when we are born.

Context as the retrieval of deliberately erased knowledge and productive intellectual instincts also becomes the opportunity to craft new theoretical and explanatory frames for new activism, within which the glimmers of an Alternative to heteropatriarchy and imperial capitalism can be imagined and explored.

Recognizing and acknowledging this foundational truth about the meaning of being human is vitally important especially at this moment in social time. The human condition is defined by our recognition of what it is that fractures us and or a celebration of that which makes us infinitely creative and viable. Scrutinizing this intersection, which is created by our immense capacities to be expansive beyond even our own, often bounded imaginations, is what makes the difference between progress and backwardness.

My notion of Contemporarity, which is still largely exploratory, and which still feels like an intellectual instinct – lies at the interface between defining context as a dynamic ongoing process, and stimulating my human agency towards an alternative trajectory of wholeness.

While on the one hand, my sense of the urgency to craft alternative radical thinking opportunities has become a personal imperative, given that the conceptual landscape of feminism in Africa has been so distracted by nationalism as a fundamentally reactionary ideology, Contemporarity not only provides me with the new stepping stones into what feels like immensely productive intellectual possibilities, but it also enables me to return to myself as a central subject in my own life and in re-defining how I live and interact with people in my lifescapes, in personal and political ways.

It is pivotally about continuously retrieving the ability to re-imagine the future in multi-diverse ways, always against the grain of patriarchal and class infrastructures of conformity and homogenization.

Struggles for inclusive social justice are the contemporary prism, the cutting edge of a re-imagined humanism, and how for Africans, this is embedded in anti-colonial dreams and struggles for wholeness as well as in contemporary resistances against neo-imperial and neo-liberal exclusions.

Recognizing the sameness that capitalism, racism and neoliberal plunder impose upon all humans who are situated outside the parameters of privilege and entitlement, and finding new ways to respond to this exclusion, is the new imperative. From Black Lives Matter to Rhodes Must Fall we are reiterating the insistence that our humanness can never be erased. And we are calling towards a new humanism. This resurgent rising to challenge the monster of supremacy and impunity across the divides of space and the imperial hegemonic infrastructures of extraction and imposed homogeneity, reiterates the unbreakable ties that bind us as African people in the contemporary world.

It is the youth who are marching on the frontlines once again, against the fascism and disdain of imperial capitalist arrogance. We are truly in a new moment of social and political time, and the rallying call is to take back our selves and craft the new political and activist futures. The old ways of theorizing and explaining capitalism's egregious impacts upon our lives have been eclipsed by the seemingly inescapable ability of the system to find ways of re-inventing itself and morph into new forms of exploitation and repression. And thus far it has done so very successfully everywhere.

Therefore, we have to find the new ways of resistance by retrieving the courage of our most beautiful ones – James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Claudia Jones, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Nawaal el Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Antonio Gramsci, Awa Thiam, to mention only a few – and excavate the new from the incorrigibility of those who have come before us.

Contemporarity – the rhyme of the new in the legacies of past resistance and dreams of dignity - not only illuminates these legacies of shared collective resistance for an inclusive humanism, it also provides a window into the possibilities of doing the new radical work, for me, in feminist terms.

I have already alluded to the sensibility that the notion of contemporarity feels like opening a window on endless theoretical and intimately personal political and real

lived possibilities. So let me conclude this conversation with you in this instance by pointing out another feature of contemporarity that is one of the most attractive elements of this exploratory theoretical journey I have embarked upon– and share how it is enabling me to return to the core feminist mantra of ‘the personal is political’ through the notion and practice of integrity – bodily, emotional and sexual integrity.

Contemporarity speaks to a personal sensibility in the particular locations that one inhabits, in spatial, ideological, structural and activist terms – the sites of interaction and engagement with ones’ body as a lived in, lived through reality and the challenges that I, as a woman face in relation to heteropatriarchal intrusions and violations, as well as the joys and delights of being able to enjoy the fullness of one’s humanity and personhood through self-defined identities and shared collective notions of community and political activism.

Today I will only touch on these elements as expressions of the new foraging I am undertaking in theoretical and intimate landscapes that are important familiars of my feminist identity and practice. By situating myself at the interface of theory and praxis in new and alternative ways I am crafting and contributing to the new feminist humanism of living my political ideas and dreams. And it is a truly beautiful gift I am giving myself.

I have found that the new creativities and insights I am articulating as I expound on Contemporarity, are directly linked to my vegan lifestyle, growing most of my own, organic food, and choosing celibacy as an expression of my new sense of self in an aging female black body.

So I will speak briefly to these three areas of new feminist sensibility in terms of how they are changing the larger notion of integrity as a core feminist idea and politics, and how they are significant expressions of the person I am becoming as I enter the last quarter of my century.

But briefly, how did I get to this place of alternative feminist introspection? Essentially, I realized that there was no room for my radical ideas and self in the African women’s gendered movement, which was/is an extension of black male reactionary nationalist politics and practices. I can speak further on this during the discussions. I also realized that until I engaged in the daunting yet apparently

necessary task of daring to dream feminist dreams in new ways, and thus becoming part of the emerging Alternative – which is always there in the dynamic process of the human experience – I would basically become emotionally and intellectually stunted and staid. I have successfully resisted becoming a colluder in the neo-colonial project, and am very proud of my consistently radical identity and lived practice.

However, having stepped away from the gendered nationalist movement as a political and activist space, I found myself ‘in the gap’ between a past that I increasingly rejected (and feel embarrassed about) and a future that was still largely undefined and daunting in many ways.

Then a very personally intimate event occurred just over a decade ago, which thrust me deeper into the gap – leaving me floundering in emotional and spiritual ways that threatened to overwhelm and extinguish my life. I lost someone I loved more than I can remember loving in all the lives I have lived before. I felt cheated by the universe, and the sense of loss was greater than the sense of *jour d’ vivre* that had nurtured me through many crises and struggles for half of my lifetime.

Eventually my instinct to live overcame the desire to go searching for my son, and I brought my feet back onto terra firma and took the next step into a future that was hazy and which felt totally uncharted. I was starting all over – but now it is becoming more coherent.

My parents had bought a farm on the Lubombo mountain along the eastern boundary of Swaziland with Mozambique, where I had grown up ‘wild and free’ on a mountain that means ‘the backbone of the earth’ in siSwati. So, to crawl out of the gap – I returned to my childhood as a space, a memory, a home – which offered me the possibilities of moving on.

Over the past decade I navigated many mine-fields – the deep seated heteropatriarchy and misogyny within ‘the family’ I had been born into, and I was astounded most of the time by the viciousness of the backlash against my sense of self-love and my autonomous lifestyle. They kept on demanding that I become ‘a woman’- in the deeply backward feudal sense that most women in that vicious dictatorship conform to, and of course, that just made me fiercer and more determined to be even more radical every single day.

Throughout this brutal battle to not only retain the parts of myself that I loved and honoured, and to grow the person I had brought to the mountain, but also the necessity of finding my path into the future, I turned to nature - the source of our very existence – and I began the process of learning in new ways to appreciate and honour the earth, the multitude of sentient living beings around me, and of always, vigilantly being on the look-out for the new and alternative ways of being.

It worked. I had locked my gate (figuratively and literally), stepped back from what is called family – which I had known through feminist herstorigraphy as the deepest and most dangerous site of male supremacy and hatred of females – and which I encountered in daily battles to retain my personhood, and I had refused to participate in the altruism and self-demeaning that is required of women everywhere. I insisted that I was enough for myself. They are still offended by my audacity, and some of them continue to slander me and call me ‘a mad woman’ – code for a free woman, of course – and sometimes to even threaten my life. But I have taught myself to lean back from the noise of it all and to focus on growing Patricia in the little world of living and nurturing beings that surround me.

Growing my food (about 80 per cent now) without polluting the earth and or participating in the genocidal capitalist extractionism which characterizes so-called agriculture all around me in Southern Africa in ways that are mind-boggling, has become another reality that allows me to experience freedom in the alternative ways.

I am continuously astounded and delighted in beautiful ways by how generous and bountiful nature is when we respect its integrity and essential being, and this has become a core element in the re-definition of how I feel and live in my increasingly loved, aging body. From planting the seeds, carefully coaxing the new seedlings into the habitats that I have cultivated for them, watering and touching them, walking among them, navigating the presence of other beings – like moles and hedgehogs for example – which harvest where they have not sown, and accepting our collective ownership of the harvest that nature bestows on us each season, this is the wonderment that stimulates my intellectual and emotional sensibilities. I feel joy and love it.

It enables me to approach the financial precarity which inevitably accompanies my insistence that I will always be radical, with a sense of understanding that having

chosen to become and be this person that I respect and love so dearly, I will have to pay a small price in financial terms. And next to the immense sense of fulfillment that I am enjoying by living vegan, honouring the earth, learning to recognize the Alternative from my daily interactions with healing herbs and the plants that nurture me, how could so-called financial security be more important?

My refusal to collude and ‘grow up’ as some colleagues have whispered in my ear each time I am refused a job in the academy, completely outweighs the feeling of anxiety about aging without adequate financial security – something that is largely a fiction that is tragically exposed with each capitalist crisis.

So in excavating the new ways of living that are so enriching and which are changing the meaning of freedom for me in a human and feminist sense, I am building longevity into my life beyond the chronology of declaring that I plan to live to a 100 years of age (which still leaves most people stunned...and which give me a mischievous sense of pleasure).

In creating a sufficient eco-system of life which provides my body, my spirit, my emotional territories and the very essence of how I experience my being with endless opportunities for living a joyous life, I am celebrating Alice Walker’s wisdom in living lives of joy as a treasured part of living as a radical black woman – in the Alternative universe that each of us can craft and share as we re-envision our futures as free humans – beyond the confines and restrictive boundaries of the heteropatriarchal system and its malevolence.

This is the intention of Contemporarity and the search for Freedom in the futures that await us.

Thank you for your audience.