

**TITLE:**

**Agency & Compassion As Afrikan Women**

**By Bernedette Muthien**

**Director, Engender (NGO)**

**CONTACT DETAILS:**



**Registered non-profit # 031-555-NPO**

Tel & Fax: +27-21-448 2112

Mobile: +27-83-345 0552

Email: [info@engender.org.za](mailto:info@engender.org.za)

Website: [www.engender.org.za](http://www.engender.org.za)

PO Box 12992, Mowbray, 7705, Cape Town, South Africa

## **ABSTRACT:**

This paper will examine the intersections of oppressions that challenge African women specifically, and women of colour in the diaspora more generally. In particular, learnings from the Black Consciousness movements of e.g. Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko will be employed to highlight that Patriarchy will only ultimately be overcome with a universal gender consciousness and unity among and between diverse women, across all "isms" and geographies. This unity is only possible if power and privilege is deconstructed and owned by a united women's movement, supported by male and other allies (e.g. intersexed and transgendered peoples).

The rationale for this stems from learnings in the anti-apartheid movements, where people of colour united against the prevailing colonial imperatives to "divide and rule". So too the (extra)ordinary extent of gender-based violences (GBVs), as evinced by two recent international studies (Amnesty International and the WHO), highlight that GBV is as critical to the maintenance of patriarchy, as e.g. racial classification and white supremacy was to apartheid.

While liberal feminisms across continents play a critical role in e.g. legal reform, it is precisely the prevailing politics of cooptation that hamper the mainstream feminist movements of the global North and elsewhere like South Africa (e.g. skewed focus on employment benefits and gender representation in institutions of power and privilege, while scores of women in the global South die daily from easily preventable conditions). Colonialism and apartheid effected similar cooptive measures to "divide and rule", legacies that still remain in regions like central Africa (e.g. artificial construction of Hutu and Tutsi).

This internalised oppression among and between people of colour is echoed among women generally, and feminists in particular. As people of colour, and Africans especially, had/have to move beyond victimhood and claim agency and power for themselves, so too women have to transcend heteronormativities and the prevailing imperatives to reproduce patriarchal values and the patriarchal system, of which the equally (mal)adaptive capitalism has been a critical part for the past few centuries.

What will be evinced is that violence and oppression brutalises everyone, from victims/survivors to perpetrators to witnesses, and that all will benefit from transforming societies into equitable peaceful spaces, as even "freeriders" (e.g. the millions of black South Africans who were not part of the anti-apartheid struggles) have benefited from the end of apartheid.

## **acknowledgements**

With immense appreciation to the individuals and institutions without whom my work would not be possible, including my late parents, Dorothy and Valautham, as well as sistahs like Yvette Abrahams, in addition to the Board, funders and supporters of Engender.

## picture perfect<sup>1</sup>

there's a thumbprint  
on a face without a pupil  
and lines of identity  
circling the frame  
greyscale  
with some swatches  
of peach  
life's a finger supper  
snap

## **ubuntu: i am because i belong**

We are all aware of how very different we are. No two humans are exactly the same, not even 'identical' twins. Sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, we are more or less aware of the differences between each of us. Sometimes these differences are used by us and/or others for particular purposes, in particular (groups of) people's interests, in different contexts and at different times, like under apartheid, the Nazi holocaust, Islamic Jihads and Christian Crusades. Thus differences. And its employment for specific purposes and in specific (groups of) people's interests.

Also interesting for me is the notion of wholeness and similarity, as posited in the field of modern quantum physics, by the likes of David Bohm (1917-1992, contemporary of Einstein)<sup>2</sup>. In Bohm's work ancient knowledge became scientific 'truth', provable, demonstrable, tangible. For example, the adage that (pre-)exists in ancient indigenous spiritualities across the world, "as above, so below; as below, so above". Einstein's popular equation,  $E=mc^2$ , not only states that energy cannot be created or destroyed, but also affirms that energy and matter are different forms of the same whole. Bohm suggested that energy and matter are inextricably tied to a third element: "meaning" (or consciousness).

Bohm worked with the modern phenomenon of fractal geometry, with the Mandelbrot set remarkably illustrating that each object has within itself embedded precise replicas of itself, like successive Russian or metruschka dolls, with no two dolls precisely alike, but very similar in structure. Thus the part contains the whole, as the whole contains the part. And thus is echoed in modern science the ancient knowledge of *ubuntu*<sup>3</sup> and other ancient cultures throughout the world, and the more popular Christian belief that humans are created in the image of God, as evinced from every religion that has ever existed throughout time. Scientifically verified.

---

<sup>1</sup> Poem by the author of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> I was first introduced to the notion of fractals and the work of Bohm, by mathematician and spiritual activist, Will Keepin, who wrote the seminal article "The Fractal Nature of Consciousness" (2005).

<sup>3</sup> "I am because of you, you are because of me"; individuals and community exist by virtue of their interdependence.

The histories of, and struggles within and over, science provides further interesting examples of sameness and difference, and the oneness of all. The 10<sup>th</sup> century Arab scholar, Alhazen<sup>4</sup>, informed the work of both the French Franciscan monk, Rene Descartes (1596-1650, “I think therefore I am”), as well as the English Isaac Newton (1642-1727), who both researched the origins, properties and behaviour of light. Alhazen, formulated his theories of vision and light, which debunked the somewhat arrogant and superstitious (assuming humankind is at the centre of everything, including emitting light rays *from* our eyes!) “ray theory” of the Greek scientist, Euclid, by proving that light enters our eyes in straight lines from *everywhere* in our environment, and thoroughly documented reflection and refraction, which both create rainbows. Subsequently Descartes suggested that light was white or colour-less, and that rainbows are created when white light is *broken down* into the separate colours. Newton, through experimental observation (including penetrating his eye socket with a wooden stylus), proved that white light is created by *combining* the separate colours of the rainbow, and thus coined the term “spectrum”, and heralded the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, whose positive and negative ideologies we still experience at present. Ironically, the post-Newton empiricism that modern science is built on was derived from the work of Alhazen, and centuries later by the Italian, Galileo Galilee (1564-1642), an inductive science that is different to the classic Greek methods of deduction and assumption.

Thus Descartes argued that from white comes colours, from sameness comes difference and separation (i.e. white light constitutes the rainbow). While Newton proved that difference and colours generate white (or colour-lessness) and sameness, the rainbow constitutes white light, i.e. that *the spectrum creates oneness and unity*. Hence, in terms of light, oneness does not encompass diversity (we are all one but different), but diversity encompasses oneness (we are all diverse *and* one). So if our foundation is diversity, a fluid spectrum of merging primary colours, our natural inclination is to become united, seen as white (colour-less) light. We are both intrinsically parts of spectra, observably different, and simultaneously be-coming colour-less. Diversity creates Oneness.

In this observable sense, ‘I am because I belong’, in fluid and multiple ways, to both a part of a spectrum, as well as the colour-less collective (created by the spectra). Desmond Tutu asserts that for him, *ubuntu*

speaks of the very essence of being human ... you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say: ‘A person is a person through other persons’. It is not ‘I think therefore I am’. It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.’ [1999:31]

It is in this acknowledgement of diversities, and simultaneous acknowledgement of all being alike, part of the greater whole, each reflections of everything else, that provides the essential foundations of this discussion.

---

<sup>4</sup> Alhazen is how he is known in the ‘West’. Born in Persia during 965, his name is Abu Ali al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham. According to Teresi, Alhazen “was one of Islam’s most influential thinkers”. [2003: 223]. The more recent revision of scientific history as derived from the ancient Greeks, with a hiatus of centuries until the European Renaissance, argues that the “big bang” theory is arguably a less poetic version of the creation myths of ancient indigenous peoples *across* the world that all speak of a “divine copulation”. As Teresi puts it, “Western science is what it is because it successfully built upon the best ideas, data and even equipment from other cultures.” [2003: 7, 8]

## 5,000 years of genocide & counting: gender-based violence

What unites all women, across the world, in every village and every city, I asked? Gender discrimination, gender violence, gender oppression came the answer. This musing is supported by international cross-country studies of gender-based violence (GBV) recently released by Amnesty International<sup>5</sup> and the World Health Organisation (WHO)<sup>6</sup> respectively, clearly showing that gender violence is pervasive in all societies across the world.

The 2002 WHO study on violence and health, reports:

In 48 population-based surveys from around the world, *between 10% and 69% of women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner* at some point in their lives. For many of these women, physical assault was not an isolated event but part of a continuing pattern of abusive behaviour... Data from a wide range of countries suggest that partner violence accounts for a significant number of deaths by murder among women. Studies from Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States of America show that *40–70% of female murder victims were killed by their husbands or boyfriends*, frequently in the context of an ongoing abusive relationship. This contrasts starkly with the situation of male murder victims. In the United States, for example, only 4% of men murdered between 1976 and 1996 were killed by their wives, ex-wives or girlfriends. [2002: 114, 118, emphasis added]

Amnesty International's "Facts & Figures" report<sup>7</sup> of 2004 asserts that at least one third of all women will experience some form of violence against her, and that *20% of all women (1 in 5) are rape or attempted rape survivors*. Some of the statistics in this report include:

At least one in every three women, or *up to one billion women*, have been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in their lifetimes. Usually, the abuser is a member of her own family or someone known to her (L Heise, M Ellsberg, M Gottemoeller, 1999).

Up to 47% of women report that their first sexual intercourse was forced (WHO 2002).

Up to 70% of female murder victims are killed by their male partners (WHO 2002).

[emphasis added]

*The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* [1996] defines 'genocide' as "the mass extermination of human beings, esp. of a particular race or nation". The Medical Research Council's latest report on intimate homicide, or femicide, offers stark statistics: A woman is killed by her intimate partner in South Africa every six hours" [2004: 4]. At least one woman is *murdered* every six hours entirely because she is a woman. There is a war being waged against our bodies and souls, and we are dying in droves. Just as the murders of Steve Biko and countless other activists were crucial for the survival of apartheid, and Patrice Lumumba's for global capital, so too the mutilation and murder of women daily, in every village and town in the world, serves to support hetero-patriarchy. As does our silences about this gross injustice. Our deliberate ignorance of de-faced bodies and serrated vaginas and anuses, infants' abdominal cavities destroyed by rape that is as old as patriarchy itself.

---

<sup>5</sup> "Making Violence Against Women Count", 2004.

<sup>6</sup> WHO's "World Report On Violence And Health", written by Henriette Jansen, includes two rates for intimate partner violence: "In 48 population-based surveys from around the world, 10-69% of women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives. In large national studies, the range is between 10-34%.... Physical violence in intimate relationships is often accompanied by psychological abuse, and in a third to over a half of cases by sexual violence".

<sup>7</sup> Readily available from their website: [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org) .

Amnesty International, in the above report, estimates that at least 2% of all girl babies born are subject “to gender-selective abortion or died in infancy due to neglect”, i.e. 2 in every 100 girl babies are deliberately killed because they are girls. Lloyd deMause draws his conclusion of the pervasiveness of child abuse from “a lifetime of psychohistorical study of childhood and society”:

the history of humanity is founded upon the abuse of children. Just as family therapists today find that child abuse often functions to hold families together as a way of solving their emotional problems, so, too, the routine assault of children has been society's most effective way of Maintaining its collective emotional homeostasis. Most historical families once practiced infanticide, erotic beating and incest. Most states sacrificed and mutilated their children to relieve the guilt of adults. Even today, we continue to arrange the daily killing, maiming, molestation and starvation of children through our social, military and economic activities. [1998]

In his paper he summarises his “evidence of why child abuse has been humanity's most powerful and most successful ritual, why it has been the cause of war and social violence, and why the eradication of child abuse and neglect is the most important social task we face today.” [1998]. The same applies to all forms of gender-based violence, against women *and* children, and against other marginalised people like homosexual and bisexual people<sup>8</sup>, as well as against some men, especially in prisons and gangs, and during formal conflicts.

Thus the routine daily violences against *all* women and girls, children and some men prop up hetero-patriarchy as much as generic violences support generic oppressions. But if apartheid was overcome a decade ago, if we are moving towards an era of neo-liberal democracies, where Fascism and other recent-past totalitarianisms are fading memories, why then has gender-based violence persisted for 5,000 years? Because hetero-patriarchy survives, and GBV is critical to its survival, the oppression of one half of humankind over the other ensures its replication.

While acknowledging that our gender as women, a gender that is socialised differently in different contexts and at different times, unites us, it is also clear that we eat differently, dress differently, believe in different things at different times. And moreso, that the world responds to us differently, depending on whether we have parents, whether we have money and property, whether we are healthy, how much melanin we have in our skin, where we are born, where we live, whether we have different levels of education, etc.

Using gender as *one* unit of analysis (of an endless variety), and *one* unifying factor, does not necessarily discount the infinite differences among us, the countless variations of power and privilege that mark us, wound or kill us, and that we may choose to use against others, as weapons, at various times and in different contexts. It is merely an attempt at finding the common denominator that has branded us women and oppressed us for 5,000 years, variously, differently. And the one single simple marker that draws an invisible chain connecting e.g. ‘maids and madams’ in Cape Town. Our vaginas unite us, and the simultaneous power and vulnerability of our vaginas, our vaginas as sites of struggle, as sites of domination and violence.

---

<sup>8</sup> Lesbians have been (throughout time), and continue to be, raped as an ostensible ‘cure’ for their apparently aberrant sexualities. Much more ironic is the routine ‘curative’ rape of gay men. See Muthien 2003 for further discussion of this.

## separate fingers form solid fists in the air

Under apartheid we developed a simple resistance strategy to oppose colonialism and white supremacy, by opposing its intrinsic 'divide and rule' imperative. How? Unite. Our movements implored *all* people of colour, all oppressed people, to unite against our (racist and class) oppressions. The focus on race and class is arguably due to the progenitors of this ideology: men of colour and/or socialist men<sup>9</sup>. Karl Marx originally suggested that workers of the world had more in common (wage slavery) than not (e.g. the controversial racist Afrikaner miner's strike during the 1920s<sup>10</sup>), and hence implored workers to unite to overthrow capitalism.

Somewhat similar to Marxist calls for unity among the oppressed, Steve Biko's Black Consciousness effectively inspired an entire movement, several of whose current adherents are of some of my best friends. The emphasis on *consciousness* is deliberate. A critical element of the work of Biko, and Frantz Fanon, is for the oppressed, for black people, for Africans, to overcome our internalised racisms. What this requires is an internalising of the popular post-70s phrase, "black is beautiful". Yet in resisting white oppression and racisms, through idealising (and even idolising) an essential blackness, one risks the danger of becoming what we loathe: racist, discriminatory, oppressive.

A white woman friend, Synnov Skorge<sup>11</sup>, recently told me, quite neutrally, that whiteness is a genetic aberration, an anomaly, a genetic flaw. Skorge finds it ironic, given the presumed origins of humankind in Africa, and hence originally black, that whiteness has become such a source of arrogance and domination for white people<sup>12</sup>. Some of my black women friends who espouse black consciousness speak casually of white people as genetic *freaks*. While I understand with compassion the need for grieving and rage about centuries of brutal oppressions and holocausts of black people the world over, I fail to understand how "black is beautiful" necessarily leads to "white is ugly". This almost-involuntary use of Othering and oppression, violence and domination, by oppressor and oppressed alike, may not necessarily be the most appropriate, liberating, revolutionary strategy available to the intelligent, creative people that we *all* are. In the words of Frantz Fanon, first published in 1952:

I as a man of color do not have the right to seek to know in what respect my race is superior or inferior to another race. [...] There is no Negro mission; there is no white burden... No, I do not have the right to go and cry out my hatred at the white man. I do not have the duty to murmur my gratitude to the white man. [...] I have one right alone: That of demanding human behaviour from the other. [...] There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence. [...] In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. I am a part of a Being to the degree that I go beyond it. [...] I am not the Slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors. [...] No attempt must be made to encase man, for it is his destiny to be set free. [...] I, the man of color, want only this: That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be. [...] Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation. [...] I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness. [1986: 228-232]

---

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, et al.

<sup>10</sup> Explicated further in this paper below.

<sup>11</sup> Skorge is Director of the Sarah Baartman Centre for Women & Children in Athlone, Cape Town.

<sup>12</sup> Telephone conversation 17 January 2005.

The late Audre Lorde wrote a seminal article, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1979)<sup>13</sup>, in which she holds forth:

What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable...

...*Interdependency between women is the only way to the freedom* which allows the "I" to "be", not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is the difference between the passive "be" and the active "being". [emphasis added]

For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic...

...Within the interdependence of mutual (non-dominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.

As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that *survival is not an academic skill*. [original emphasis]. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish...

...In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. *Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower*. [emphasis added].

Throughout interviews in a recent anthology, Lorde speaks of the need for recognition of diversities, while forging a united front against oppressions:

And this is the point I was trying to make in the poem, "Who Said It Was Simple?" that racism and sexism fed each other, that if we removed sexism tomorrow, I have no reason to believe that the white female establishment would be any less racist than the white male establishment. And this is why I think it's absolutely necessary for women, black and white women, to get together and to begin to recognize some of the ways in which liberation is sucked away from us all, that we cannot separate the struggles for liberation because it is, eventually, all human liberation. And until we come into that concept, until we broaden our viewpoints so that liberation doesn't remain the private province of any one particular group, until we do that, we're going to be working against each other, and working against ourselves. [Kaminsky, 2004: 4-5]

I think that what is necessary, as a Movement, is to build coalitions between the disparate groups within our sphere, and then between our communities and other communities. [Savren and Robinson, 2004: 81]

Coalition building is not romantic; it's very annoying, it is constant, it is very slow. I think that's where the real coalitions are made on the everyday, grassroots level... we have to look at our goals, if your goals match my goals, whatever our differences may be, we must work together for change. [Cavin, 2004: 104, 105, 107]

Bernice Johnson Reagon affirms the strategic, even if unpalatable, need for coalitions:

---

<sup>13</sup> In Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981, pp 98 – 101.



You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive... At a certain stage nationalism [more homogenous groups] is crucial to a people if you are going to ever impact as a group in your own interest. Nationalism at another point becomes reactionary because it is totally inadequate for surviving in the world with many peoples... You don't do no coalition building in a womb... Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do... And you shouldn't look for comfort... The reason we are stumbling is that we are at the point where in order to take the next step we've got to do it with some folk we don't care too much about. And we got to vomit over that for a little while. We must just keep going. Everybody who is in this space at this time belongs here. And it's a good thing if you came. [...] as Che Guevara said shortly before he died, the great revolutions are those revolutions guided by the basic principles of love<sup>14</sup>. [2000: 343-344, 345, 346, 355]

Since the onset of capitalism, imperialism and colonialism there have been stark differences between workers in different countries, on different continents. While Marx was writing *Das Kapital*, Belgian King Leopold's compatriot mercenaries were cutting off the hands and feet of African workers in Central Africa, apparently to increase productivity in rubber plantations and in gold and diamond mining. More modern globalised capitalism (globalisation or imperialism) has evinced the ironic loss of even white collar jobs in the 'core' in favour of lower wages in the 'periphery', with US and UK workers now protesting ICT jobs increasingly being deployed to India.

The differences between workers, including the impacts of racist ideologies, are routinely and effectively dealt with through the usual discussions of the 1920s miners' strikes in South Africa, where white miners protested their apparent loss of jobs in favour of black miners who were paid less for the same labour, and were more easily controlled through the typical state-capital nexus. Picketing white miners attacked and killed many black miners at the time, obviating fractures amongst the usually privileged (in relation to *actual* workers) socialist workers' organisers.

And still socialists call for unity among workers internationally, we still sing *The Internationale* at appropriate meetings, because only unity will overcome capitalist oppression.

More telling is the strategic alliances forged during apartheid between *all* people of colour under Black Consciousness, and more accessibly through the Congress movements, internally and externally. The differences between us were as stark then as it remains today: socio-economic class, skin colour coded and privileged differently under apartheid's blatant racial hierarchies<sup>15</sup>, access to education, perceived relative privileges of exiles in contrast with internal apartheid lived realities and access to resources, as well as gender<sup>16</sup> and

---

<sup>14</sup> Lorde's notion of love is not entirely dissimilar to Pregs Govender's recent work on "The Politics of Courage and Love".

<sup>15</sup> These racial hierarchies continue to operate throughout the world today, albeit without formal legislation, e.g. with anti-Semitism meaning Jews are relatively more acceptable than those of Arab descent in e.g. the stock exchanges of the world. Ten years into democracy, only 1% of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange is owned by black people, usually meaning black men. The same differences among people of colour still exist everywhere today, e.g. socio-economic class, degrees of pigmentation, hair texture, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Women were routinely raped and sexually harassed in the anti-apartheid movement, while engaging in the anti-apartheid struggle, both inside the country, and in exile. It was common knowledge during the early 1980s that if you were an unmarried woman in an ANC camp outside the country, that you would be raped, and I was

sexualities<sup>17</sup>, *ad infinitum*. And still we were united as one force, different yet together, against one common oppressor: apartheid and white supremacy. The Congress movements and Communist Party were even known as homes to white allies who remain icons of struggle. Joe Slovo stood next to Govan Mbeki in photographs from that time, while Ray Alexander and Helen Josephs marched alongside Lillian Ngoyi, Frances Baard and Amina Cachalia in the groundbreaking 1956 women's march on the Union Buildings in Pretoria. We were a united front, a wall, which the formidable apartheid machinery was never able to effectively breach. The founding of the United Democratic Front in 1983 in Mitchell's Plain<sup>18</sup> still drives us to nostalgic tears, and its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary brought the likes of cabinet ministers and ordinary people together under one roof in celebration again. As late as 1990 the Women's National Coalition, a heterogeneous network, united around another common cause: the drive to have the gender clause inserted into our country's first democratic constitution. Queer activists of all colours and from different communities similarly united to have the sexualities clause adopted in our first constitution, an international precedent.

If people around the world could unite against apartheid and its depredations in an inspiring display of solidarity, what prevents women from uniting against hetero-patriarchy, an international *regime* that has lasted longer (~5,000 years) and murdered more people (especially women, 1 every 6 hours in South Africa) than any other regime or oppression?

What prevents unity among women? Is it the very real, sometimes fatal, differences between and among us? Or is it fear, and self-preservation, rather than concern for the greater good, the survival of the collective? What made some Rwandan women (Hutu) hold down other Rwandan women (Tutsi) for Rwandan men (Hutu) to rape these women (Tutsi)? This particularly in light of the fact that Hutu and Tutsi are artificial constructs, part of the typical divide-and-conquer colonial strategy. What makes a female government employee more concerned with party politics and personal lifestyle issues, than with a starving grassroots woman in South Africa? What makes a bourgeois European woman more concerned with her personal savings and employment benefits than with contributing to gender justice in Africa? Why are South Africans contributing financially to the survivors of the 2004 tsunami disasters, but oblivious to the very real depredations that poverty engenders on our very own doorsteps?

When I speak at conferences abroad I'm often one of precious few women of colour present, and I make a point of noting this in my presentation comments, with polite acknowledgement, sometimes applause, from the predominantly white audience, until three months later and the next conference, sometimes in the same city, with some of the same people, with nothing really seeming to change. Audre Lorde speaks:

I think it is true that there are certain temptations facing white women because they are connected to the primary oppressor – who are white men. And sometimes they are deluded into thinking that they *have* a stake in that patriarchal structure, *which in fact they do not*. But

---

told this repeatedly in South Africa and Namibia (then South West Africa, under apartheid rule), when I was attempting to leave the country as a youth activist.

<sup>17</sup> In parts of the anti-apartheid women's movement/s lesbianism was largely frowned upon, and several lesbians were asked to withdraw from leadership positions in different communities at various times, while in some communities they were more accepted. Several lesbian stalwarts of our internal women's movement either remain in the closet, or have only recently been outed, despite the sexualities clause in our democratic Constitution.

<sup>18</sup> A massive (formerly 'Coloured') township outside Cape Town.

it's harder to see that. In order to recognize that racism is a feminist issue it requires being able to see that racism, sexism, homophobia, elitism, ageism have their root in the same inability to accept difference in a structure that depends for its survival upon profit... *It is essentially divide and conquer*. When white women begin to see that it is not altruistic to be involved against racism, but a question of their survival: if they come for my children today, they will come for yours tomorrow. History has taught us that. I am saying that racism is a feminist issue because it is an issue of feminist survival. [Pache and Dackweiler, 2004: 167, emphasis added]

Identification with the oppressor doesn't only apply to white women. It applies to the ways in which we articulate our personal and institutional survivals within the daunting constraints of hetero-patriarchy, a bit like Gender or Women's Studies departments at universities, an uneasy truce, a living contradiction, oxymoron. I find the academic procession at the annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture at the University of Cape Town particularly surreal, where renowned black author and university Vice-Chancellor, Prof Njabulo Ndebele, leads the faculty into Jameson Hall, dressed in medieval costume, complete with archaic hat and staff.

In South Africa we have a women's movement still hung over from apartheid and its genesis in the 70s liberal sexual 'revolution'. A movement that is still dominated by the protégés of its founders, all inevitably, largely, white bourgeois women. This white feminist movement is being challenged for space and survival by a growing heterogeneous band of women of colour, clamouring for ear time and other resources in a muddy pool of national reconciliation, where many whites are still silent about skin colour, and its concomitant resonances of racist oppression. These exclusive employment and activist spaces are reflected in the feminist mantra of the personal as political by its echoes in equally exclusive social spaces. The same applies to sisters formerly classified "Coloured" or "Indian" under apartheid: how many people whose first language is Xhosa or Sotho come to your parties, how many do you work with daily? Do we even notice this?

When we construct our enclaves, believing them to be safer than larger, more heterogeneous, encampments, who do we include and exclude, and why? In constructing our realities and personal-political homes, do we replicate the same violences of the Us-Them binary so crucial to the survival of racist hetero-patriarchy?

bell hooks suggests that "[m]any women do not join organized resistance against sexism precisely because sexism has not meant an absolute lack of choices." [2000: 135]. Yet gender-based violence, the onslaught against *all* women, denying us our rights to the integrity of our vaginas, bodies and souls, under constant assault, clearly evinces "an absolute lack of choice", especially since rapists and batterers and institutions of domination and power rarely negotiate our oppressions with, and violences routinely perpetrated against, us. This does not necessarily discount the perpetuation of other oppressions among women, and in the feminist movement/s, like racism, classism, heteronormativity, ageism, *ad infinitum*, and the need for us to continuously work towards transforming these. It merely means that five *thousand* years of hetero-patriarchy long precedes a few *hundred* years of capitalism, even as these two, like every other pre-capitalist patriarchal economic system, remain wedded and continue to (mal)adapt to serve its own (exploitative) purposes. Like many others cited in this paper, and many present at this conference, hooks herself comes from relative privilege, including being a sixties alumnus of a US Ivy League college, Stanford University, which tellingly employed Condoleezza Rice as Provost in 1994, when I was a scholarship student there. The critical differences between my own impoverished upbringing under apartheid and identity as black

woman, and the respective backgrounds of our 'divine' hooks and 'demon' Rice, should be sufficient to evince how very *silly* it ultimately is to argue for an essential and universal 'black womanhood', or the ascendance of 'colour/race' over any other 'ism', including geography, socio-economic class, and ideology. Ironically, one of the few things that unite hooks, Rice and I, apart from our all being female and black, is Stanford University, also the academic home of Cherrie Moraga.

Mikki van Zyl reminds that:

It may be worth mentioning the straddling of colonial boundaries by groups in each of more than 50 national (colonial) boundaries, and that as a continent, Africa arguably has the world's most diverse cultural and historic legacies with more than 2000 languages spoken. [Email, 10 December 2004]

In her latest book Peggy Antrobus, one of the founders of DAWN<sup>19</sup>, also reminds us that power is not monolithic, and is always subject to contestation. There are also different kinds of power – power over others, power with others, inner power, and power to do and act together. [...] Solidarity among women across common divides of class, race/ethnicity, etc., allow them to draw on the power of collective action – 'power with' – that can be effective precisely because of the diversity of those involved. This is a particular strength of women's movements, and more attention needs to be paid to it. [2004: 131, 132]

Under different forms of slavery, including apartheid, black women and poorer women were raped with greater ease than white women and wealthier women (with access and male entitlement being a key factor), but still *women* were being raped *everywhere* irrespective of skin colour or socio-economic class. The differences between women are used to divide us, in the same ways that artificial and real differences between people of colour were/are used to divide us, like Hutu and Tutsi in Central Africa.

Patricia Hill Collins speaks of the "dialectics of black woman-hood":

On certain dimensions, black women may more closely resemble black men, on others, white women, and on still others, black women may stand apart from both groups. Black feminist sociologist Deborah K. King describes this phenomenon as a "both/or" orientation, the act of being simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing apart from it. She suggests that multiple realities among black women yield a "multiple consciousness in black women's politics" and that this state of belonging yet not belonging forms an integral part of black women's oppositional consciousness. [...] Viewing an Afrocentric feminist epistemology in this way challenges analyses claiming that black women have a more accurate view of oppression than do other groups. Such approaches suggest that oppression can be quantified and compared and that adding layers of oppression produces a potentially clearer standpoint. While it is tempting to claim that black women are more oppressed than everyone else and therefore have the best standpoint from which to understand the mechanisms, processes, and effects of oppression, this simply may not be the case. [...] a black women's standpoint [...] is [...] not simply the result of combining Afrocentric and female values – standpoints are rooted in real material conditions structured by social class. [2000: 191]

As Lorde and others have stated too many times before, "real material conditions" include factors *in addition to* "social class", such as sexualities, and even differences of pigmentation

---

<sup>19</sup> Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, DAWN is a network of women from the global South. This book was deliberately published by *eight* different publishers, in different regions of the world.

and histories of *comprador*-privileging like Tutsi-Hutu under Belgian colonial rule and Zulu-Xhosa (not to mention “Indian/Coloured”-“African/Black”) under apartheid.

Angela Y. Davis speaks of “the [Marxist] abstract principle of exchange” which creates “a society of fragmented individuals, lacking any organic or human connection.[...] In the era of advanced capitalism [imperialism], the insularity is virtually complete” [2000: 159, 168]. In this article, originally written in prison during 1977, Davis argues for a “revolutionary feminism”, which views “capitalism, imperialism, and racism [as] *symptoms* of male supremacy – sexism” [2000: 147].

While cognisant of the ways in which capitalism “contracts the purchase [...] of an already socially stigmatized female labor-power”, she argues that “the demand for job equality” and other basic employment rights are:

indispensable prerequisites for an effective women’s liberation strategy. [...] The ultimate meaning of the fight for the equality of women at the point of production should transcend its immediate aim. These efforts must be seen as an essential ingredient of a broader thrust: the assault on the institutional structures which perpetuate the socially enforced inferiority of women. [...] Because the structures of female oppression are inextricably tethered to capitalism, female emancipation must be simultaneously and explicitly the pursuit of black liberation and of the freedom of other nationally oppressed peoples. [2000: 171, 173]

Antrobus speaks of the need for “multiple strategies”, which include “insider/outsider approaches” and work “between sectors”, emphasises that “research methodologies must be appropriate to the task”, and that “alliance and coalition building must start with women” first [2004: 133-135]. The heterogeneous South African women’s movements since 1994 have precisely, and of necessity (to transform the multiple spheres of our abused society), been engaged in intersectoral and multisectoral work. We have some way to go with combating racisms and heteronormativity, and, more so, unifying against hetero-patriarchy.

## **agency and compassion**

Like Fanon and Guevara before her, and Lorde after her, as well as bell hooks’ most recent ‘trilogy on love’<sup>20</sup>, not to mention South Africa’s own Pregs Govender working on “the politics of love and courage”, Davis cites Marx and others to argue for a particular notion of “love”:

If, as Marx has said, liberation is to ultimately also mean “the complete *emancipation* of all the human qualities and senses,” which include “not only the five senses, but the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (desiring, loving),” then the positive qualities of femininity must be released from their sexual exclusiveness, from their distorted and distorting forms. [2000: 166]

Davis discusses Christopher Caldwell’s notion of “tenderness as the essence of the [pre-capitalist indigenous] relation”, and asserts that “love alone is impotent, yet without it, no revolutionary process could ever be truly authentic” [2000: 167]. Here Davis suggests that as capitalism has engendered various forms of alienation, so too it centrally cleaved “love” or “tenderness” from economic (and other) relations.

Antrobus asserts that “[s]pirituality and sexuality are sources of power that lie deep within women and are not frequently discussed. A counter-cultural approach would validate these

---

<sup>20</sup> First published in hardcover, 2001, 2002 and 2003 respectively, details in References section, below.

sources of power” [2004: 132]. She also speaks of her notion of “personal transformation”, rooted in agency:

Feminist praxis is a process that starts with the individual (i.e. building inner strength/empowerment, consciousness-raising/conscientization) and moves the individual through the ‘community’ into global public space (by caucusing, coalition building, campaigns) – a combination of counter-cultural and political approaches. [...] The kind of personal change that I envisage is one that would challenge leadership to recognize shortcomings and contradictions within oneself, to be consistent, ethical and honest about one’s own limitations while experiencing one’s own inner power. Above all, this kind of personal transformation would prevent us from thinking ourselves superior to others and trying to control or dominate others, but would rather help us to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions. [...] We need the spiritual to create a feminist movement that offers pleasure to women: sexual pleasure, bodily pleasure, mental pleasure, pleasure of the soul, and also pleasure in work and in activism. We do not need a feminist movement that kills us with work but a movement that dances, laughs, and delights in the creation of choreographics against globalization [2004: 172 - 175]

Let us gaze in the mirrors of our agency, instead of perpetually projecting outwards and onto others. Let us simultaneously labour and frolic between the margins and centres of respective and collective movements. Let us celebrate the fluidities of our existences. And let us always *try* to be as compassionate as possible, for, to echo Lorde, it is in trying, in struggling, that our visions for compassionate, equitable and nonviolent justices may very well be realised.

### **conception<sup>21</sup>**

corner to corner  
full-eyed poppies  
wave smiling bollywood heads  
on delicate necks  
sending whiffs of inovulation  
to pulsing orifi

under cloudy glare  
my irises blossom  
madonnas' hearts  
as my digits float  
thru scarred ozone & oiled mantle  
wildmaned with the wisdom  
of wireless energy  
that is you i all  
& on...

immaculate

---

<sup>21</sup> Poem by the author of this paper.

## REFERENCES

Amnesty International. 2004. *Making Violence Against Women Count*. URL: [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org) .

Antrobus, Peggy. 2004. *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*. Dhaka: University Press, Bangkok: White Lotus, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, Bangalore: Books for Change, Kuala Lumpur: SIRD, Cape Town: David Philip, London and New York: Zed Books.

Cavin, Susan. 2004 (1983). "An Interview with Audre Lorde". In Hall.

Davis, Angela Y. 2000. "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation". In James and Sharpley-Whiting.

DeMause, Lloyd. 1998. "History of Child Abuse". In *Journal of Psychohistory*, 25 (3), Winter 1998.

Eisler, Rianne. 1995 (1987). *The Chalice & The Blade: Our History, Our Future*. San Francisco: Harper.

Fanon, Frantz 1988. *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*. New York: Grove Press.

Fanon, Frantz 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.

Fanon, Frantz 1967. *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*. New York: Grove Press.

Fanon, Frantz 1965. *A Dying Colonialism*. New York: Grove Press.

Fanon, Frantz 1961. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

Hall, Joan Wylie. 2004. Editor. *Conversations with Audre Lorde*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Hill Collins, Patricia. 2000. "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought". In James and Sharpley-Whiting.

hooks, bell. 2003. *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*. New York: Atria Books.

hooks, bell. 2002. *Communion: The Female Search for Love*. New York: Perennial/HarperCollins.

hooks, bell. 2001. *Salvation: Black People and Love*. New York: Perennial/HarperCollins.

hooks, bell. 2000. "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory". In James and Sharpley-Whiting.

James, Joy, and Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean. 2000. Editors. *The Black Feminist Reader*. Malden, Massachusetts, and Oxford: Blackwell.

Kaminsky, Margaret. 2004 (1975). "Interview with Audre Lorde". In Hall.

Keepin, Will. 2005 "The Fractal Nature of Consciousness". Paper presented at the International Symposium on Science and Mysticism, Indian Institute for Science and Religion, Pune, India, 2-6 January 2005.

Lorde, Audre. 1983 ((1979). "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House". In Moraga and Anzaldua.

Medical Research Council. 2004. "Every 6 Hours a Woman is Killed by her Intimate Partner: A National Study of Female Homicide in South Africa". MRC Policy Brief. No 5, June 2004. Authors Shanaaz Matthews, Naeemah Abrahams, Lorna Martin, Lisa Vetten, Lize van der Merwe and Rachel Jewkes.

Moraga, Cherrie, and Anzaldua, Gloria. 1983. Editors. *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table - Women of Color Press.

Muthien, Bernedette. 2003. *Strategic Interventions: the Intersections between Gender-based Violence and HIV/AIDS*. Cape Town: Community Law Centre, University of the Western Cape.

*The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*. 1996. Edited by Judy Pearsall and Bill Trumble. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Pache, Ilona, and Dackweiler, Regina-Maria. 2004 (1987). "An Interview with Audre Lorde". In Hall.

Reagon, Bernice Johnson. 2000. "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century". In Smith.

Savren, Shelley, and Robinson, Cheryl. 2004 (1982). "Interview: Audre Lorde Advocates Unity among Women". In Hall.

Smith, Barbara. 2000. Ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Teresi, Dick. 2003. *Lost Discoveries: The Ancient Roots of Modern Science – from the Babylonians to the Maya*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Tutu, Desmond Mpilo. 1999. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York, London: Image Doubleday.

World Health Organization. 2002. *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: WHO.