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Resisting Heteronormativity/Resisting Recolonisation:

Affective Bonds between Indigenous Women in Southern Africa and the

Difference(s) of Postcolonial Feminist History

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One of the implicit questions posed by the topic of this themed submission is the extent to which the periodization of western feminism into the first, second, and third waves may be useful as a way of historicising feminism globally while taking into account that the efficacy of such a framework may be limiting for understanding feminisms that have emerged and developed in indigenous, non-western contexts. Not only is this question deserving of serious consideration, but it is certainly one that needs to be theorised so as to challenge Eurocentrically-privileged feminism and the reinscription of centre-periphery relations that have been part of western feminism's past. Might theorising the first wave globally enable a more comparative feminist scholarship that will allow us, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes, 'to expose and make visible the various, overlapping forms of subjugation of women's lives' (Mohanty 2003: 236) in a relational sense, that is, across cultures at particular historical moments? Can it take into account the *difference(s)* of postcolonial and indigenous feminist histories?

As I am excited by the intellectual possibilities of theorising first-wave feminism globally, I remain wary of its hegemonic and imperialist implications. On one level, the topic implies potentially interesting comparative and cross-cultural work if one focuses

on specific locations and local histories and examines gender not as an essentialist or single category of analysis, but as shaped by, and determinant of, particular historical, cultural, and ideological conditions. The term 'globally' also requires further deconstruction and critique; that is, to what extent does globality collapse into 'western' and an elision of local conditions and contexts outside of the Euroamerican axis that may impinge, or exert pressure, upon our understandings of the global? In other words, we may need to ask: "'Global' according to whom?" This would mean a challenge to the modernist binary logic that determines the global as self-evidently progressive, abstract, historically dynamic, and overriding the local, which is understood under such a paradigm as rooted in concrete experience in specific, undifferentiated, and enduring cultures, traditions, and locations. It is also important to note that the global/local binary is a self-serving invention coming out of western, economically privileged zones of the world. In the context of theorising feminism, and its three waves, globally we need to ask *who produces knowledge about colonised people and what the political stakes of that production might be*. Over two decades ago, Chandra Mohanty, in her seminal essay 'Under Western Eyes,' warned us about the discursive colonisation of Third World women under the auspices of feminist scholarship produced in the West. Mohanty exposed western feminist scholarship not as the mere production of knowledge about a certain subject, but, as with other forms of (western) scholarship, as a directly political and discursive practice that is purposeful and highly ideological. That essay, though familiar to most of us now, is worth (re)quoting in the context of theorising the first wave globally. Mohanty writes:

This connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures. I would like to suggest that the [western] feminist writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular ‘Third World woman’—an image that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse. (Mohanty 1997: 256-57)

To what extent does the very form of historicisation and periodization of feminist struggles in the West, mainly in the anglophonic world, repeat the imperialist gesture when attempting to historicise the struggles of women in postcolonial locations, where the three waves of western feminism as an organising framework, however loosely constructed, are nonetheless transplanted to non-western locations where they did not emerge historically? To what extent do we reproduce the all-too-familiar trope of white, western women as material *subjects* of their collective histories, and indigenous women as *objects* (of western scholarship), and the histories of their struggles as undifferentiated and tailored to fit under the waves of development of feminism in the West?

In attempting to theorise the first wave globally, we must also recognise, as Mohanty reminds us in her more recent treatise on feminist scholarship *Feminism without Borders*, that there has been little historical work on the engagement of Third World women with feminism. This does not mean that there is little scholarship on women’s

liberation movements and the roles and status of women in the developing world, particularly the political roles taken on historically by indigenous women to resist colonialism, but that these histories often need to be made more complete by reading them against the grain of other intersecting progressive ideologies and discursive practices, such as postcolonial nationalism, western feminism, etc. (Mohanty 2003: 46), and, I would add, by accounting for the ways in which postcolonial cultural nationalisms, western feminism, and queer theory often shift from operating as strategies of agency, resistance, and opposition to functioning as problematic sites of (re)colonisation and discursive subjugation at particular historical instances. The term 'feminism' itself is already full of contradictions and sites of contestation which become even more heightened as feminist thinking travels across borders. Postcolonial feminisms, for instance, have heightened awareness that ideologies of womanhood and struggles against gender oppression intersect with, and cannot be analysed separately from, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and the contextualisation of 'womanhood' within a history of imperial power. With its conflictual histories both in specific postcolonial contexts and in relation to the West, feminism cannot ever denote fully a set of unified, essential, or self-evident practices either in the West, in the postcolonial world, or in the encounter between them. It would seem rather difficult, then, to theorise the first wave globally without a fuller historiography and understanding of feminist practices outside of the Euroamerican axis; otherwise the global becomes once again synchronised with the West.

Most important, any attempt at theorising the first wave globally must account for the fact that feminist struggles amongst indigenous women in postcolonial contexts are linked to a history of colonialism, racial domination, and their ongoing effects. One

needs to bear in mind that prominent feminists in many parts of the postcolonial world have opposed the reduction of gender to what Signe Arnfred refers to as ‘universal female subordination’ since gender is much more dependent on social contexts and specific social relations rather than being reducible to bodies alone (Arnfred, ‘Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa’ 2005: 12). This means that one needs to understand gender in postcolonial contexts as discursively enfolded into imperial power and its ongoing legacy. As Achille Mbembe, in *On the Postcolony*, elucidates: ‘During the colonial era and its aftermath, phallic domination has been all the more strategic in power relationships, not only because it is based on a mobilization of the subjective foundations of masculinity and femininity but also because it has direct, close connections with the general economy of sexuality.’ Not only is male domination derived ‘from the individual male’s ability to demonstrate his virility at the expense of a woman and to obtain its validation from the subjugated woman herself’ (Mbembe 2001: 13), but, in addition to that, imperial relations of rule have been based on the construction of the subaltern other as feminine as a way of marking power relations between Europe and its colonies. This involves a recasting of gender beyond oppositional gender dichotomies and discourses that have formed part of the history of western feminism, and it is worth remembering that historically feminism has used the rhetoric of universality to exclude differences amongst women. Feminist struggles by indigenous women in southern Africa, the area in which I work, have been more than a mere demand for equal access to the symbolic order on the basis of gender alone, and this points to the need for those of us who are feminist in the West to read carefully the cultural and gender implications of writing and performances by indigenous women that do not fit easily into familiar

theoretical paradigms and forms of periodization that mimic the development of feminist thinking and practices in the West. The imbrication of struggles against racism and imperialism with feminist practices in postcolonial contexts would need to entail a radical revision of our precepts of the first wave and its history when theorised globally, since traditionally, western feminism, in both the first and second waves, enabled white, middle class, heterosexual, western women to focus on their oppression by gender and ignore the other ways in which women were disempowered.

Developing the problematics of periodization, Mbembe once again reminds us that African existence is predicated neither on 'linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it' (Mbembe 2007: 16). African social formations, according to Mbembe, rather than being based on social models of stability and rupture which underpin western social theory and have been used to account for western modernity and the failures of non-European worlds to replicate it, are based instead on a series of *interlocking*, yet paradoxical, presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining previous ones rather than replacing or effacing them (Mbembe 2007: 16). This implies, then, a more dialogical encounter between indigenous African pasts, and between past, present, and ongoing encounters between Africa and the West. More important, Mbembe's distinction of African social formations that do not converge toward a single point or trend calls into question the basis of periodization in feminist thinking into three waves, each distinct from the other. New feminist work coming out of southern Africa, for example, points to some important shifts and revisions in feminist thinking. Margaret Daymond remarks in the collection she edited *South African Feminisms* that women in formerly colonised nations are casting

aside old lines of dependency on the metropolitan centre, particularly through “indigenising” theory and through the use of oral and performative practices, in addition to written texts, as sites of knowledge production to the extent that these forms of textuality make use of the cultural and intellectual traditions of African societies and do not fit familiar (western) literary or textual paradigms (Daymond 1996: xxxvii-xxxviii). Certainly any dialogical engagement between first and third world feminist practices, at whatever historical juncture, will broaden feminism, but to what extent might the imposition of periodization, based on the development of feminism in the West, mask the complexities and differences of the lives of women outside of the Euroamerican axis and their particular expressions and articulations of feminist thought?

Another significant difference to consider in theorising the first wave globally is the need to think especially about gender and sexuality as linked axes of analyses in ways that have been elided historically in the West. Judith Butler’s assertion that sexuality is regulated in culture through the policing and shaming of gender (Butler 1993: 238) often resonates with hyperbolic effect in postcolonial contexts since postcolonial nation-states often attempt to naturalise gender roles for women (and men) by conflating heteronormativity (marriage, reproduction) with ‘proper’ gender and loyal citizenship, thereby undermining women’s (and often men’s) erotic autonomy, and, at the same time, erasing the histories of indigenous, counterhegemonic, non-heteronormative sexualities under the auspices of locating same-sex desire as a vestige of territorial colonialism, and/or as an effect of continued western economic imperialism and, in either case, as alien to indigenous cultures. Indeed, attempts by some forms of postcolonial cultural nationalism appeal precisely to a pre-colonial authenticity marked by a fantasized

heterosexual inheritance, and is not unrelated to what Partha Chatterjee has referred to as the deliberate effort to preserve the distinctiveness of the spiritual or 'inner' domain of national culture which must be protected from western encroachment (Chatterjee 1993: 6).¹ Yet, while such nationalist thinking often reduces same-sex desire to a western aberration, whereby lesbians and gay men are seen as importing 'lifestyles that are no more than invidious imports of empire' (McClintock 1995: 384), lesbian and feminist theorists working in postcolonial contexts have exposed nationalist thinking as an *impediment* to decolonisation by indicating that same-sex bonds between indigenous women did, in fact, occur prior to the colonial encounter and are part of the cultural history (and the so-called spiritual domain) of many indigenous groups. This helps to disrupt self-serving nationalist claims made in the name of decolonisation in the absence of an analysis of gender power and erotic autonomy. For example, in the Caribbean, M. Jacqui Alexander writes that such nationalist strategies attempt to foreclose counterhegemonic memories of insurgent sexualities that historically had to be housed outside of state structures because of excessive codification, regulation, and discipline going as far back as colonialism; yet work by communities of lesbians in the Bahamas and Caribbean feminists in Suriname, Curaçao, Jamaica, Grenada, and Carriacou have sought to elaborate counterhegemonic memories around such indigenous traditions as '*mati* work,' *kachapera*, man royals, and *zami* 'which interrupt the state's continued adjudication of heterosexual inheritance' (Alexander 1997: 86). As Ruth Vanita succinctly sums up in writing about the history of same-sex love in India, colonialists, and then nationalists, have attempted to rewrite multivocal traditions into a univocal, uniform tradition (Vanita 2002: 3). It would seem crucial, then, to theorise postcolonial,

indigenous feminist struggles into a different cultural calendar, other than the three waves of feminism that have developed in the West, that would take into account the difference(s) and ongoing effects of colonial domination in women's lives.

Along a related, somewhat bifurcated, axis, it is important to bear in mind simultaneously that the hetero/homo opposition and the conflation of sexual *identity* with sexual *practice* implies further deconstruction and analysis in indigenous contexts, and especially in Foucauldian thinking, which, in proposing a historic shift in homosexuality in the nineteenth century from a temporary aberration to an emergent identic category, helps locate Foucault's *History of Sexuality* even more firmly in the West. Exclusive same-sex relationships in many indigenous contexts are often quite rare; yet, as Ruth Vanita once again argues, ongoing same-sex relationships for both women and men often coexist with the obligations and privileges of heterosexual marriage, and may even function as the primary affectional and erotic relationship (Vanita 2002: 3). This is especially true in southern Africa because marriage often occurs at an early age in more traditional indigenous societies and is often tied to the sustainment of local, rural economies. Any theorisation of the mutually inflecting work of feminist and queer enquiry in postcolonial and indigenous contexts would need to account for the heterosexist biases of western feminism historically, while similarly taking into account the long, but under-elaborated traditions of affective and erotic bonds between women that may have existed prior to colonisation and certainly prior to first-wave feminism, in so far as they have challenged, though in varying degrees, dominant forms of intergender relations yet have been historically erased, elided, or misinterpreted. Further, the pervasiveness of heterosexuality as a regime and normalising force, especially in the

years following colonial rule, often makes same-sex bonds between women invisible. As Signe Arnfred observes, indigenous same-sex bonds between women were not even initially noticed by earlier ethnographers and researchers as they were seen as unthinkable and reveal the limitations of the observer rather than the actual conditions of the women's lives such researchers were trying to interpret and understand (Arnfred, 'Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa' 2005: 15). While various strands of African cultural nationalism have certainly claimed that homosexuality is a form of western decadence, as I have argued in detail elsewhere,² same-sex bonds between women in Africa have always existed, but as Arnfred once again stipulates, they have not necessarily existed as forms of sexual identity as understood in the West (Arnfred, 'Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa' 2005: 21).

Close, intimate, affective bonds between indigenous women in Lesotho, which often include genital eroticism, begin as intense friendships in adolescence and often continue to coexist alongside conventional heterosexual marriage, and they are a recognised means in Sesotho culture for young women to extend the range of their social relations (Gay 1986: 102-103). Yet the relationships both *participate in* and *resist* the imperatives of heteropatriarchy legislated in the name of nation building and national development.³ The archive is a bit different as well; whilst the relationships developed and sustained by Basotho women were researched and documented by Judith Gay in the 1980s, her anthropological perspective is rather limiting as one of her conclusions is that the affective and erotic ties between Basotho women help to displace the western insistence on the opposition between hetero/homo and point to the growing recognition of bisexuality in the psychosexual literature (Gay 1986: 111-112). But is the opposition truly

ruptured, or is it simply maintained through bisexuality, which, as a category, may not be particularly useful to explain these relationships? ⁴

Examining affective bonds between Basotho women from a materialist feminist perspective and providing a glimpse of the lived experience of these intimate ties, Limakatso Kendall has published a collection of narratives *Basali!*, by and about Basotho women, several of whom speak about caring for the women they love. These stories were gathered orally in Sesotho and then translated into English by Kendall with careful attention to the nuances of language. Most of the narratives do not overtly address same-sex desire between Basotho women but point instead to their close bonds and felt connections to other women. For example, in ‘What about the *Lobola?*,’ written anonymously, the writer reflects on her attractions to nuns in the nearby convent and her fascination not only with their lives, but with the women themselves: ‘I was fascinated by their dress and their way of life Very soon I became absorbed with thoughts about these nuns. “Where they ordinary human beings, or perhaps angels just descended from heaven?” I wondered’ (Anonymous 1995: 92). Nuns, convents, and Catholic schools for girls figure prominently in these narratives; rather than simply dismissing the presence of the Catholic Church in Lesotho as an effect of imperialism, it must be pointed out that it did allow spaces for women to form alliances and bonds with other women. The convent also allowed for another site of resistance to marriage and the possible forfeiture of bride price (*lobola* or *bohali*) for the bride’s family, which, the writer of ‘What about the *Lobola?*’ fears in terms of getting her father’s permission, and that of the village elders, to join a convent. Her defiance to masculine control through marriage and childbearing as the predominant trajectory for women speaks loudly in the narrative: ‘When I arrived at

my sister's place, she was sitting outside under a peach tree, suckling her third child. Already, at the age of twenty-five, she looked like a haggard crone. I swore to myself that I would never be married. I would never, never get married to any man!' (Anonymous 1995: 94). Rather than reading convents, nunneries, and Catholic girls' schools in postcolonial contexts as straightforwardly masculinist and as part of the imperialist project, one must look for spaces of resistance and new alliances within these institutions. Hilda 'M'amapele Chakela, in 'How I Became an Activist,' describes growing up in Lesotho and attending a Roman Catholic high school in Leribe in the 1960s, particularly noting how the black nuns who taught her were models 'of strong African women, even *within* a system which indoctrinated them to submit to [masculine, white] authority' (Chakela 1995: 115; emphasis and brackets mine). The black nuns were very much against apartheid in neighbouring South Africa, unlike many of the white sisters, who labelled Chakela as 'too political and aggressive' and wrote her an unfavourable recommendation for admission to nursing school. Race needs to be taken into consideration to account for the plurality of ways in which women are politicised, thereby calling into question Eurocentric forms of the periodization of feminist history that do not adequately take into account geopolitical spatialisation and a history of colonialism and imperial power.

Other narratives in *Basali!* speak of strong women in favour of strengthening women's roles and social positions in village life without dependency on male approval. Mzamane Nhlapo writes of how her own mother, Mama KaZili, in 'Give Me a Chance,' refuses to remain idle when her husband stopped sending money for family support from the South African mines where he was employed on a contract for long periods of time.

While the husband had reportedly taken another wife, his parents were not sympathetic to Mama KaZili's plight and simply saw their son's decision to take another wife (and support the new wife instead) as another form of male prerogative and entitlement.

Determined not to allow her children to starve, Mama KaZili makes the journey to the relatives of her husband and one of her babies dies from hunger along the way.

Questioned by the men in the family, Mama KaZili argues that when men do not support their families, women need to take action; in her case, to leave her children with her in-laws while she seeks employment so that they do not starve. She asserts: 'Society and government don't want to give women a chance. Women have to seek permission for everything that can improve their lives. Before I pass away in this world, I want to have had a chance to improve my life and the lives of my children' (Nhlapo 1995: 35).

Such passionate declarations may not address eroticism between women, but speak against masculine authority even while being simultaneously positioned in and constituted by it. At the same time, in the specific example of the Nhlapo narrative just mentioned, Mama KaZili becomes radically politicised and motherhood becomes a site of agency rather than a position often read by the West as always already symbolic of Third World women's oppression simply through their roles as mothers. Not only do these narratives form a possible site of feminist resistance to heteropatriarchal notions of gender and sexuality, they may also be a possible site of lesbian existence to the extent that the narratives undercut the primacy and exclusivity of heteronormative social relations. Marilyn Farwell describes a lesbian narrative space as that which occurs when women seek another kind of relationship to other women and to patriarchy which is not prescribed in heteropatriarchal structures (Farwell 1990: 98). In this sense, lesbian

existence need not speak merely to a sexual identity or sexual practice, but is more broadly understood as a political position, what Catharine R. Stimpson has referred to as ‘that invaluable way of being in, with, and against the world’ (Stimpson 1990: 377) all at the same time. What further enables one to (re)read the narratives just mentioned as a possible lesbian narrative space, and to challenge the presumed link between heterosexuality and narrative, is the story of female same-sex bonds told by ‘Mpho ‘M’atsepo Nthunya, who, in her piece ‘Three Moments in a Marriage,’ writes of female same-sex love and eroticism practiced by some Basotho women. She recalls:

When I was living in the mountains near Marakabei I got a special friend. She was living in another village, and I passed her house when I was going to church every month. One day she saw me and said, ‘What is your name?’

I told her it was ‘M’atsepo Nthunya. So she said, ‘I always see you passing here. Today I want to talk to you. I want you to be my *motsoalle*.’ This is a name we have in Sesotho for a very special friend. She says, ‘I love you.’ It’s like when a man chooses you for a wife, except when a man chooses, it’s because he wants to share his blankets with you. The woman chooses you the same way, but she wants love only. When a woman loves another woman, you see, she can love with her whole heart.

I saw how she was looking at me, and I said, ‘*Ke hantle*.’ It’s fine with me. So she kissed me, and from that day she was my *motsoalle*. She told her husband about it, and he came to my house and told my husband, and these two husbands became friends too. (Nthunya 1995: 4-5)

The higher visibility of Basotho women in traditional social and familial roles might be seen as providing a layer of protection against heteropatriarchal surveillance, discipline, and regulation for women who also engage in varying degrees of emotional and sexual intimacy with other women. Are Basotho women with erotic ties to other women merely ‘passing’ as straight and therefore rendering their lesbo-erotic desires illegible? This would be a huge analytic leap, since affective and erotic bonds between women are socially registered within Sesotho culture as special friendships *and* as desire. While queer work in the West has placed a high emphasis on antinormative display, that is, as Biddy Martin argues, through defiant cross-gender identification in lesbians and resistance to conventional norms of femininity (Martin 1998: 32), the *motsoalle* relationships may be placed under another kind of erasure to the extent that neither of the women involved in them appears to be crossing gender. For this reason, queer analysis would not be sufficient and a feminist analysis is needed to ensure that the axis of sexuality not override the axis of gender. As long as cross-gender identification serves as the primary paradigm for representing same-sex desire, as well as the primary means for building and sustaining transnational political solidarities, one risks not only the suppression of the gaps, the nuances, the differences that refuse to be subsumed under such a paradigm, but of new ways of thinking about the relation between gender and sexuality in postcolonial contexts where, for a variety of reasons, they may not be immediately apparent to western eyes.

At the same time, closely related to the problem of imposing western frames of reference and categories of analysis, it is important not to simply translate into English ‘Mpho ‘M’atsepo Nthunya’s use of the Sesotho word *motsoalle* (‘a name we have in

Sesotho for a very special friend’) as *lesbian*. Marc Epprecht critiques my suggestion in my book *Imperialism within the Margins* that we theorise these relationships as a possible feminist practice and as ‘a potential site of decolonisation’ to the extent that they create an alternative vision and erotic space more or less free from male sexual domination and intervention, because, Epprecht admonishes, no Mosotho feminist, or the women and girls that Judith Gay interviewed thirty years ago, ever referred to the relationships in such a way! Not only does such a view foreclose further theoretical elaboration or debate, Epprecht falls prey to his own rhetoric by referring to the *motsoalle* relations as ‘lesbian-like’ (Epprecht 2008: 15), a term that local women in Lesotho who engage in such relationships generally abhor. More problematically, Epprecht’s rather positivist view of history and ethnography, and his hostility to queer analysis, rehearses a nativist, originary myth of African culture, a position which has been critiqued by African studies scholar, Kwame Anthony Appiah, to the extent that it presumes an essentialised, centred, homogenous African subject and ‘characteristically African ways of thinking’ (Appiah 1992: 24) of which the historian, like Epprecht, or the ethnographer, supposedly have direct access. More important, far from subsuming same-sex attachments between indigenous Africans under the rubric of western understandings of ‘queer,’ one of the points of my earlier book was that the very differences of these erotic and affective relationships help expose the limitations of western sexual categories. The reductive imposition of such terms as ‘bisexuality’ or ‘lesbian’ to understand specifically the romantic and erotic ties between Basotho women may potentially enact further sites of discursive colonisation, radically suppressing difference and denying the heterogeneity and the erotic agency of the women in question, particularly if one ignores the ways in

which the women themselves describe their relationships using the resources of indigenous African languages. Therefore, because rural women in southern Africa may engage in same-sex eroticism with other women without necessarily *self-identifying*, indeed often resisting being named, as *lesbian*, it is important for any theorisation of feminism globally not to lose sight of how affective/erotic exchanges between women help *rearticulate* and *redefine* gender, sexual, and African identity all at once, rather than simply reinventing or instantiating the gender/sexual codes of the West, while simultaneously asking the extent to which indigenous women's felt connections to other women subvert, *whether consciously or not*, heteropatriarchal imperatives that limit their erotic autonomy.⁵

Related to the issue of translation and sexual identity, Adrienne Rich's, controversial, yet, in this context, significant, notion of a lesbian continuum may be useful as one possible analytic lens with which to read affective bonds between women in Lesotho by calling attention to the difficulties in simply identifying the women who engage in them as lesbian.⁶ Rich herself has pointed to the need for further unearthing, describing, and developing the notion of lesbian existence beyond the contextual limits of white, middle class, western frames of reference, and for examining women's lived experiences in racial, ethnic, and political contexts outside of the West (Rich 1986: 66). In postcolonial contexts, the continuum *may be* a useful way for *thinking* about indigenous women's affective and erotic ties to each other, but defers the identification of these bonds as lesbian in the absence of an understanding of their specific social and sexual differences. In other words, by deferring the identificatory label 'lesbian,' one is avoiding the enactment of yet another site of colonisation when studying affective

relations between women outside of the West, while not diminishing the possibility of broadened understandings of lesbian *existence* (as distinct from lesbian identity). At the same time, the continuum helps to expose the complexities of assigning an essential sexual identity, whether it be lesbian or bisexual, especially in acknowledging the ways in which women may move in and out of the continuum whether or not they consciously self-identify, in any way, in whole or in part, as lesbian. While it would be erroneous to translate *motsoalle* as *lesbian*, it might be possible to place *motsoalle* relationships on the continuum to debate, theorise, and imagine them as possible sites of lesbian existence, given the close emotional and intimate bonds between the women, but with the stipulation that the relationships not be reduced to western understandings of ‘lesbian’ (Spurlin 2006: 71-72), or even named through identitarian terms.

Rich’s continuum is also useful because it enables a conceptual space to move away from considering Basotho women who have *motsoalle* relationships as essentially lesbian or as essentially bisexual and appreciates desire as multiplicitous *within the same individual*. Borrowing from Gloria Wekker’s explanation of ‘*mati* work’ in Afro-Surinamese contexts, Mumbi Machera points out that indigenous women may be in a variety of relationships with men (including marriage, concubinage, and visiting relationships) while having sexual relationships with women either concurrently or consecutively (Machera 2005: 164).⁷ Indigenous women’s multiplicitous desires and erotic bonds cannot easily be read as bisexuality, given that not all women necessarily shift out of a sexual relationship with a partner of one gender while engaging in a sexual relationship with a partner of the other gender, though some may, and given that women’s emotional commitments to partners of both genders may be so strong that it

may be difficult to tell which relationship serves as the primary erotic bond. It may be more productive to suspend the hetero/homo split which may not be sufficient to describe the erotic lives of indigenous African women who engage in affective and/or erotic relations with other women. Another important site of difference is that some forms of sexual expression may be more *performative* than *discursive* (Arnfred, “‘African Sexuality’/Sexuality in Africa’ 2005: 74), and therefore may not be reducible to a specific sexual identity named with precise linguistic referents as I have mentioned earlier with regard to questioning Foucauldian thinking and making use of Rich’s lesbian continuum. The same has been true in the resistance of indigenous women in Africa with regard to the use of the term ‘feminism’ because, as Mary Kolawole points out, it is a western ideology that may have problematic cultural and political implications if grafted uncritically on to an African cultural context (Kolawole 2005: 261) to the extent that, as I have been arguing, we need to think of gender and sexuality, and the politics that surround them, in more culturally and historically specific ways.

The affective ties between Basotho women point to the aporias, the gaps, the differences occurring at the nexus of first world and third world feminisms, the first and third waves of feminism, postcolonial theory, and queer enquiry whereby none is a sufficient site of analysis in and of itself. In order to (re)theorise the first wave globally, we need to make use of what we know now in the present so that we can better understand how gender has always already been implicated and (re)appropriated in a history of colonialism, nationalism, racial and sexual politics, and in the ongoing effects of western imperialism in Africa and elsewhere. Similar to the ways in which local AIDS activists in South Africa have made use of the strategies of western activism, such

as those of Queer Nation and ACT UP, in order to defy patent laws of pharmaceutical companies and make antiretroviral drugs available for at least some of the 5.7 million South Africans currently living with HIV/AIDS, connections to western feminism's history and theory can at best be made provisionally, contingently, carefully, not as another master discourse to locate what Spivak has referred to as critique or confirmation of western thought (Spivak 1999: 110), but as strategic *redeployment*, localized and indigenized by those who may decide to use them as such. Kolawole and other African feminists acknowledge this in noting that feminist ideas should not be neglected simply because they have come from outside of Africa, as long as one bears in mind that feminism is not culturally neutral in its emphases and diversities (Kolawole 2005: 264). Therefore, it is important not to dismiss completely feminism or 'queer' as tools because they may contain the trace of western influence, but to make use of them *strategically* (as a space to theorise possible conjunctures and discontinuities and as new sites of hybridity and knowledge production), rather than *paradigmatically* (so as to avoid the eradication of local difference(s) and to avoid new sites of discursive (re)colonisation).

Finally, a retheorisation of first-wave feminism globally enables us to ask new questions of the past from the perspective of present-day knowledge and pressing social concerns. Moreover, it puts pressure on the idea of history as linear progression to the extent that there have been gaps and elisions in our understandings of postcolonial history along the lines of gender, and, in particular, along the lines of sexuality. Sara Ahmed notes that 'queer,' in the broadest sense of the word, can be used to describe a sexual and political orientation that 'unfolds from specific points, from the lifeworld of those who do not or cannot inhabit the contours of heterosexual space.' Yet to lose sight of the sexual

specificity of 'queer,' she continues, overlooks how heteronormativity shapes what coheres as given and the effects of this coherence on those who refuse to be so compelled (Ahmed 2006: 172). 'Queer,' as a mode of enquiry and form of social praxis and resistance, rather than as a specific (sexual) identity alone, can help constitute new sites of knowledge production, particularly about the past, and help make more apparent intersecting forms of oppression and subjugation in women's lives. Postcolonial feminisms must continue to expose the effects of territorial colonisation (which was still in force under the first wave of feminism in the West) while simultaneously paying attention to continued forms of economic, discursive, and psychic colonisation on the lives and struggles of indigenous women in southern Africa and elsewhere. Yet feminisms, both in the West and in the postcolonial and developing world, must also examine more broadly the ways in which experiences of sexual oppression, both in the past and in the present, have struggled to resist the homogenisation of desire which earlier historiographers, as well as the Eurocentric biases of some strands of academic queer studies, including Foucault, have been complicit in reproducing. How might narratives pertaining to counter-hegemonic memories (and appropriations) of women's affective and erotic bonds with other women in the past be used so as not to form a communal or fetishized cultural heritage to be reproduced in a new key, but as Ella Shohat suggests, to be renegotiated within the archive of feminist thinking 'as fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences on the basis of which to mobilize contemporary communities' (Shohat 2000: 136)?

Retheorising first-wave feminism globally cannot occur without a simultaneous understanding of present conditions that continue to impinge upon women's erotic

autonomy. Postcolonial women of colour, given the history of the exploitation of their labour and their bodies under colonialism, postcolonial nationalism, and the so-called globalised new world order in the present, understand that imperialism was never a momentary aberration in history, with discrete boundaries neatly relegated to the period of colonial occupation. Rather, the entire history of imperialism has undergone a series of continual, but ever so slightly nuanced, shifts, highlighting the point made in referencing Mbembe earlier where African existence and understandings of the past are not based on a process of stability and rupture, but on interlocking connections. What this implies of history, according to M. Jacqui Alexander, is that it always already proceeds in a way that makes ruptures (or invented forms of periodization) seem neither clear cut nor final (Alexander 2005: 93) given the ongoing persistence of imperialist tendencies and postcolonial continuities, which have feminist implications both past and ongoing. In thinking about a more global understanding of first-wave feminism, what should drive us are not so much the generalities of periodization, but the *particularities* of women's lived experiences at specific historical junctures and cultural contexts and our own self-reflexivity, as feminists, in terms of the ways in which history is thought, narrated, and made. And as a plurality of feminist thinking and practices moves across national borders, feminist visions of social justice must not lose sight of the local conditions under which women have lived, worked, and loved and the differences of those local histories. It must also include an analysis of women's erotic autonomy as a viable praxis of decolonisation, a reimagining of social space so as to disrupt and exceed the coherence of normative citizenship tied to the reproduction of heteronormative relations in the past and present, alongside a radical rethinking of the temporality of feminism across the globe.

Notes

¹ Chatterjee does not specifically mention same-sex desire as encroaching on the inner domain of sovereignty and the identifiable trace of cultural authenticity and distinctiveness that postcolonial cultural nationalisms often seek to preserve. His theory of postcolonial nationalism is important because it is distinguished from European forms of nationalism which were centred around liberal-nationalist thinking related to wealth, industriousness, liberty, and progress and came about and developed under post-Enlightenment thinking in the eighteenth century (Chatterjee 2001: 2-3), obviously under a different set of historical, material, and ideological conditions than in the postcolonial world. His theory of postcolonial nationalism is double-edged in that it takes into account the history of colonial domination and the ongoing resistance to its effects alongside the need for western influence in the material domain of the nation as a means of economic development. According to Chatterjee, postcolonial nationalism is a search for the regeneration of national culture so as to reach the standards set by alien (western) cultures for development on the one hand, while preserving the distinctiveness of the 'inner' domain of national culture on the other (Chatterjee 2001: 2). But the remaining question that needs to be asked is whether or not the so-called inner or 'spiritual' domain of postcolonial national culture is necessarily heterosexual.

² See William J. Spurlin (2006) *Imperialism within the Margins: Queer Representation and the Politics of Culture in Southern Africa*, especially Chapter 4.

³ I borrow the term 'heteropatriarchy' from M. Jacqui Alexander's usage to describe the link of heterosexualization with patriarchal power in the constructions of many postcolonial nationalist imaginaries. Alexander borrows the term from Lynda Hart's (1994) *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton UP) and uses it in a postcolonial framework to analyse state-sponsored violence in the Bahamas that attempts to foreclose and suppress desire between women in the name of developing the Bahamian tourist economy. See Alexander (1997): 65.

⁴ I realise that the place of bisexuality in transnational studies of sexuality is shifting and that it has not been sufficiently interrogated in western queer studies, or, when it is, as Clare Hemmings reminds us, it is understood as undermining lesbian and gay claims to legitimacy by bringing lingering traces of opposite-sex desire into the investigative frame, or, bisexuality is assumed to produce once again oppositional

identity categories (hetero/homo) which queer theorists purport to challenge. In either case, bisexuality remains invisible within queer enquiry so that lesbians and gay men remain its *de facto* subjects (Hemmings 2007: 14). Bisexual queer theory and politics have certainly helped challenge received thinking about bisexuality as tied to earlier stages of development, the imperialist remnants of which remain to the extent that bisexuality is relegated discursively to the past, that is, as a precondition for sexual modernity in the West. I mention this because I think further theorisation needs to address Gay's assertion that affective and erotic bonds between Basotho women reflect a growing recognition of bisexuality in anthropological research given that it is not entirely clear from her study how the women differentiate, if at all, between their relations with other women and those with their husbands. Some women, such as 'Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya, whom I cite later, seem to speak implicitly to the dutiful (sexual) relations they have with their husbands as wives and mothers, and to the stronger emotional (and sometimes erotic) ties to their female *motsoalle*. I do not have the space to develop this line of thought in this piece, but I am not sure if bisexuality, as an identic category, would be a useful or sufficient way of reading these particular close intimate bonds.

⁵ Judith Gay does report that Basotho women exercise a great deal of initiative in their relationships with other women as opposed to the formal rules of marriage, given that their bodies are not bound exclusively to male desire and that the women are not bound in their relationships with other women to the formal rules of marriage and to the male-dominated family and economic systems (Gay 1986: 111). As in other patrilineal societies, yet differing only in a higher literacy rate among women that exceeds men in Lesotho and women in the rest of Africa, Basotho women are still subject to male control, principally through the continuing practice of *bohali* (*lobola* or bridewealth), usually paid in cattle or cash to the parents of the bride as a seal of marriage (Malahleha 1984: 5).

⁶ Rich's continuum created controversy amongst feminists and lesbians when it was first published in 1980 in the immediate aftermath of second-wave feminism in the United States. Many feminists seriously questioned the notion that all women could be placed somewhere on the lesbian continuum by virtue of their emotional or political connections to other women even if they didn't specifically identify as lesbians or have sex with women—this response was largely a strategy to deflect and distance the specific agendas of lesbian politics at a time when an anti-feminist, homophobic cultural context marked feminist

positions as lesbian. Similarly, radical lesbians critiqued the continuum for blurring the distinctions between lesbians and heterosexual women in supportive relations with other women and for undermining the specificity of the ways in which women related to one another erotically. While traces of these controversies surrounding Rich's continuum still remain at present, the continuum is nonetheless useful here, not as a solution to better understanding same-sex desires between women in postcolonial contexts, but, perhaps, as Teresa de Lauretis suggests, as a political and intellectual strategy for (re)imagining the existence of the varied relations between women, including lesbian existence, despite 'all that conspires to obliterate, deny, or make it unimaginable' on the social ledger (De Lauretis 1994: 191).

⁷ For further discussion of '*mati* work,' as practiced by Creole women, see Gloria Wekker (1997) 'One Finger Does Not Drink Okra Soup: Afro-Surinamese Women and Critical Agency,' in MJ Alexander and TC Mohanty (eds), *Feminist Genealogies, Critical Legacies, Democratic Futures*, London: Routledge, 330-352.

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