

African Feminism/s: constructing alternatives for women and the world through knowledge generation that cares and resists

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Good Morning,

Let me begin by contextualizing this coming together of women as activists, intellectuals and change makers in the many diverse ways that we present here today, by asking a foundational question: Why is this moment so crucial to women's freedoms and the future of our worlds?

This is not a rhetorical question that might simply take us down many philosophically curious pathways. In my understanding of the reasons and urgencies that have brought us together in this place, approximately one year before the next Women's World Conference, we are gathered here because the time for an honest, forthright, and visionary understanding of the work at hand is upon us.

We are poised on the cusp of re-imagining and re-creating a new and different world – an ideal that we have invented and reinvented over many centuries of resistance and celebration as women who love our freedoms and ourselves. The discussions, ideas, debates and dreams that we will engage in over the coming months as we prepare to consolidate the gathering of women from all the corners of our planet, will be imagined, shared, contested, embraced and set free to breathe a life-force into the World Women's Conference as a resistance and celebratory platform – a stepping stone into our futures. It is a pivotal moment in the long and dedicated journey that so many women who came before us crafted and built – step by step, brick by brick, one life at a time – often at the cost of those lives.

What I would like to contribute to the introspection of this moment is a few reflections that I have drawn from my own journey as a radical black woman who proudly declares that she is uncompromisingly feminist and loves every part of her radical self. When we are born, we begin the hazardous journey of becoming female in the multiple ways that patriarchy has constructed for us – as mothers,

wives, daughters, sisters, grandmothers, aunts – in the service of those who own and control power.

It is in the search for ourselves – as autonomous and creative beings who are each unique and special in our own particular ways and forms, that women have sought to retrieve their bodies and their selves. To return to the love that nurtures and grows us as sentient, caring and empathetic beings, bonding us to Nature, and providing us with the option of becoming free in the deepest and most satisfying ways possible.

When we eventually are able to step into the public arenas of our societies, into the dangerous and often hateful places where we are so easily mauled and violated – reminiscent of the terror of the private spaces from which we seek to escape – we quickly learn that our greatest strength is our collective embrace. Recognizing our vulnerabilities, women have created solidarity platforms in the public as one of the most powerful expressions of our resistance to patriarchy as well as in celebration of our strengths, ideas and inclusive futuristic imaginaries.

This is the significance of the idea and realization of the Women's World Conference. It is about women's power and the desire to create and consolidate a practice of hegemony as Antonio Gramsci intentionally meant it (and not as it has been appropriated and redefined by US liberals in particular to mean state power over the people), but rather as the most profound expression of human freedom.

The political and personal significance of the WWC in this moment of deep neoliberal capitalistic crisis is crucial to formulating new and alternative strategies and forms of activism against the most heinous manifestations of extractivism and greed which are dramatically playing out on and in the bodies of women everywhere, and which are at the core of the planetary ecological crisis. Fire, water, wind - the three most essential and also most destructive forces of nature – are raging across our worlds, reminding us of the fundamental disequilibrium that our warped existential realities are pegged upon.

Therefore, I understand and approach the idea and practice of the WWC as an expression of all the struggles, resistances, ideas, dreams and visions – to date - that women have brought to human society ever since its emergence as a social formation; as well as being a reminder of the indefatigable energy of freedom, our most basic and most resilient instinct as humans.

Now let me turn briefly to the exasperating yet unavoidable issue of Extractivism and its seeming innateness to life and contemporary times. At the core of capitalism and all the systems that preceded it – is the appropriation of the life force of human and material energy. While the notion of extractivism has acquired its current limited meaning from the plunder of mineral resources, extractivism is deeply embedded in an ideology of accumulation and recklessness – the irrational decimation of forests, of biodiversity and genetic materials, and minerals above and below the earth.

This so-called modernization of human life, which has inevitably resulted in the pollution and decimation of land, waterways, ecosystems and landscapes everywhere, is also a blatant representation of the raced and classed divides within all our societies.

Ruling classes across Africa are selling off natural resources to capitalist corporations using the repressive and legislative arms of the state. Everywhere across our continent, they are forcing communities off land which the people have protected and used to sustain themselves in wise and life honoring ways. In South Africa, a new bill which parades as the recognition and respect for ‘traditional leadership and culture’ is actually a Trojan horse for the expansion of mineral plunder and a further subjugation of rural communities through the consolidation of patronage relationships between feudal classes which were preserved by the colonialists, and the new black masters of our continent.

Extractivism drives the impunitous appropriation of the life force of humans and of Nature, which are perceived of and treated as economic opportunities. It forms the basis of patriarchal capitalistic power and supports the alliances of classes and groups which are the beneficiaries of exploitative and oppressive socio-economic, cultural and political systems.

From slaving and the plunder of the majombes in Angola and the earth’s heartland in the Amazon; across the oceans to the landscapes that comprise the Americas and Australia where the genocide of the native people remains the core of those so-called ‘civilized’ societies, and on to Asia and beyond, the reckless and insatiable greed, mainly of white men, has fed capitalism both as the epitome of inequality, cruelty and inhumanity and as the greatest challenge that has faced humankind during its entire existence of over three million years.

Capitalism is the antithesis of humanism and freedom – it is the complete opposite of feminism as the source of a future which is inclusive and alternative

Entrepreneurship, which is code for accumulation, is the most irrational, most fraudulent system that has been imposed upon the majority of humankind – mainly through the use of fear and the threat or actual imposition of violence.

Operating as ‘the market’ a mechanism of exploitation which has become naturalized and which is now credited with being the arbiter of social and economic equilibrium, capitalism has positioned itself as the ultimate expression of human ingenuity. Human history has been declared complete and ended, and anyone who dares to challenge this fraud is marked as socially and politically dangerous. In fact, the very term ‘capitalism’ is treated as provocative and insulting to those who have learnt to naturalize inequality as achievement.

How then do we respond to this dire situation which confronts us all everywhere we live and work for lives of dignity and integrity?

I think that first of all we have to accept that we already have an ideological and political resource that millions of women have crafted and bequeathed us with. Feminism – which is essentially a discourse and politics of women’s struggles and resistances for justice and freedom, and which, in its wider application is inclusive of all humans and thus provides the basis for a new kind of humanism – is the only worldview that can enable us to create the Alternative societies we so desperately need.

An embrace of feminism as an identity, a politics, a life style and a celebration of our being as humans, as well as the recognition that to build and sustain alternative, sufficient societies we must radically change the relationships between and among us as humans as well as our relationships with other sentient beings – this will provide us with the base for the articulation of new values and ways of being necessary to make the shift away from greed, accumulation, consumption, violation, predation, supremacy, various phobias and forms of hatred and destructive behavior which have become the bane of present day human life.

While we must of course engage in lively and critical debates among ourselves as women who embrace radical and questioning identities and ways of being – within the academy and in our private, domestic spheres, it is also vital that we not become distracted by the hair-splitting associated with a lack of courage to be angry and brave.

The fear of becoming and being feminist is ‘natural’ in the unethical and fraudulent societies that patriarchy has built. Only the individual woman can take herself to

feminism and find her courage to face the inevitable backlash that swiftly accompanies a rejection of patriarchal power. There is always a price to be paid for becoming free – and only those who dare to imagine themselves outside the cage, can soar into the open sky.

Therefore, we have to find the new and radical ways – and they are already there in the universe, because no problem exists without its solution. We have to search for and find the ways to situate and sustain feminism as a discipline and as a discourse, at the core of the academy, and transform the academy, as a discursive site, into a place of lively, creative and radical ideas for the future of our societies.

We must, in the same breadth, bring back subjectivity to feminism by translating feminism as a living politics in our personal lives. This we can do by asking the difficult but necessary questions regarding the meanings of feminism as a politics and practice in relation to our professions, our activist work, our relationships with other women, what we understand and mean by community and ‘the commons’ and of course what it is that defines our core as women who believe in and struggle for social justice.

We also have to face the Activism-Academy divide which is fed by a deep-seated suspicion and resentment among many activists (who consider themselves the authentic representatives of ‘grass-roots women’) and who believe that feminism is contemptuous of working women and working people in general, and that feminists are elitist and arrogant.

These tensions are underpinned by anti-intellectualism and patriarchal strategies of ‘divide and rule’ among women, which construct women who challenge existing epistemologies of dominant knowledge as inauthentic and threatening. Feminism has crafted alternative epistemologies which center and visibilize women’s ideas and visions, and which insist that women can be and must be intellectuals in their own right within and outside the academy. We must therefore debate the impacts and influences of anti-intellectualism as well as the tendency towards elitism, and imagine new ways of collaboration and alliance building through a celebration and application of our collective knowledge.

We need to make feminist debate and critique our conversation points in any and every context – on the bus, at the dinner table, in the café, in our intimate spaces and in our movements.

Let me reiterate that there is a direct and nuanced connections, between the violent, exclusionary misogynistic and anti-human behavior and practices towards females and other humans of all ages, and the centrality of war, militarism and all forms of violation which characterize our relationships (or lack thereof) with those who occupy the state and the infrastructures of power in all our societies. Feminism cannot be something we do in the classroom or at conferences. It has to inform every single aspect of our lives. Of course it will cause tensions and arguments, and challenge the taboos and silences that we pretend do not exist in our lives. But that is the only way that we will begin to initiate the change we need – by being that change.

We must find new ways of raising the consciousness of individuals and communities about the consequences of millennia old systems and practices of inequality and exclusion, which are now exploding and imploding in all our societies and they must be confronted.

We must step back from the old and tired ways of doing our politics as women, and definitively define ourselves as feminist – as humans who are uncompromising in terms of our integrity, dignity, and lives – as contemporary humans who put our freedom at the center of our existence.

We must question and interrogate, with frankness and honesty, our relationship with Nationalism and anti-colonialism as meta narratives of resistance and struggle by shifting our epistemological ground from traditions that no doubt moved us towards our freedoms in limited ways, but which have kept us, as women, tethered to ideas and notions of individual and collective identity which are counter-productive to our yearning for feminist inspired freedom.

Let us have the difficult but necessary debates and arguments about what it means to be feminist in Africa. What do we mean when we speak about ‘feminisms’? Does the pluralization of feminism imply serious ideological differences amongst us, or does it reflect the diverse contexts and strategies that we have always adopted as women who struggle for our freedoms. These are crucial intellectual and activist challenges.

Finally, let me reiterate that for us to find our wings and fly on the energy of our convictions , to become the most beautiful creatures nature has ever created (I know that this is supremacist but I dare to say it...) we must be uncompromising in our insistence that we have everything we need inside ourselves to be complete and amazing – and that we do not need to violate the bodies and lives of other sentient

beings; we do not need to defer to other humans nor should we allow anyone to humiliate and dominate us. We do not need the gluttony of over-consumption; all we need to do is nurture and love ourselves, and we can live long and sufficient lives of joy.

This is the core message of the WWC in 2020 as I have understood it. We are the ones we have been waiting for – let us resist with all our might and overthrow the systems, languages, practices, institutions, habits, fears, intimidation and humiliation of being patriarchalised women – and step into our future present - using our solidarity and power as radical women – to transform ourselves and our worlds.

Thank you.