Insider/Outsider: A Feminist Introspective on Epistemology and Transnational Research

J. Maki Motapanyane teaches in the Department of Women's Studies at Thorneloe University. She researches in the areas of women's social movements, gender and development and feminism in Africa. Her forthcoming co-edited volume is *Mothering and Hip-Hop Culture*.

Abstract
This article reflects on the methodological politics of transnational research from an interdisciplinary feminist perspective. A doctoral study focused on South Africa and carried out in affiliation with a Canadian university serves as the point of departure in a wider discussion of ethics and collaboration in cross-cultural and transnational research endeavors.

Résumé
Cet article tient compte des politiques méthodologiques de la recherche transnationale à partir d'une perspective interdisciplinaire féministe. Une étude doctorale centrée sur l'Afrique du sud et effectuée en affiliation avec une université canadienne sert de point de départ dans une discussion plus large sur l'éthique et sur la collaboration dans les efforts de recherches interculturelles et transitoires.

Introduction

This epistemology-focused discussion draws on a rich body of feminist debates about research methodology. In the feminist theoretical tradition epistemology is often understood as the theory of knowledge, which feminist theorists Liz Stanley and Sue Wise indicate, "addresses central questions such as: who can be a 'knower', what can be known, what constitutes and validates knowledge, and what the relationship is or should be between knowing and being (that is, between epistemology and ontology)" (Stanley and Wise 1990, 26). Questions of epistemology have been central in contemporary feminist methodological debates: How do we come to "know" what we know (Code 1995)? In what ways may we produce knowledge that is reliable, effective and ethical, while struggling with the boundaries of research institutions and practices that have traditionally shunned the role of experience in knowledge production (Code 1995)? Since the 1970s and 1980s, intellectual feminist debates on research methodologies in North America have absorbed a diversity of critical influences. Earlier critiques exposed sexist bias and androcentricity in academic research practices and debunked the myth of scientific objectivity. However, Stanley and Wise suggest that these critiques paid "relatively little attention to problematizing the research process for feminists ourselves" (Stanley and Wise 1990, 21).

Feminist methodological debates in North America have since broadened, turning a critical lens inward with questions regarding standpoint that pivot on the difference that "difference" makes among women. Nonetheless, there remain points of tension. One immediately relevant to this paper is the politics of cross-cultural and transnational knowledge production. Who knows? What do

we know? How do we come to this knowledge? These are questions about the construction of knowledge that in postcolonial regions and developing countries around the world are brought to bear on the historical legacies of epistemic violence. A key element that continues to distinguish the debates of eminent and still mostly white feminist scholars of epistemology in North America (Alcoff and Porter 1993; Code 1991; Ehrlich 1995; Eichler 1997; Harding 1991) from those of African and other feminist scholars writing about colonialism and epistemic marginality (Amadiume 1997; Collins 1990; hooks 1984; Lewis 2004; Oyewùmí 1997; Sandoval 2000), is that while the former have effectively deconstructed male-centred knowledge frameworks and claims, and debated the logic of ontological claims to womanhood, they have much less frequently or adequately tackled questions of (neo) colonial epistemic violence in regard to both domestic and international contexts.

This paper reflects on my own methodological struggle with such questions while constructing and carrying out feminist research about South Africa in affiliation with a Canadian university. I propose that epistemological questions, in my case those given prominence in the work of African feminists in particular, are necessarily central to research efforts that acknowledge and seek to work against existing global inequalities. In engaging the work of African feminist scholars, I highlight the importance of developing an ethics for conducting transnational research - one that is theoretically receptive to perspectives centred on both relativism and hybridity. Returning to lessons gleaned from my own research process, I contend that contemporary scholarly efforts to nurture transnational research ethics on an international terrain (through research networks, workshops and conferences) continue to be limited by the failure to radicalize questions of epistemology beyond still very privileged intellectual spaces.

Inside, Outside and In-Between

Between May 2007 and June 2009, I designed and carried out doctoral research in South Africa and Canada. The research in question examines feminist agency among black South African women during the twentieth century. The study is focused on investigating empowerment and agency outside of the formal political spheres where women's political consciousness has most often been assessed in South Africa. I examined grassroots and day-to-day forms of politicized resistance among black women who worked as domestic servants, cleaners, factory workers and subsistence farmers and among women who were engaged in multiple income earning activities in the informal economic sector (beer brewing, laundry work, selling produce), and including women who were unemployed for long periods of time. The study relied on archival documents and published oral history materials as primary sources, and critically engaged with a considerable body of existing scholarship on the history of women's activism in South Africa.

My interest in the politicized aspects of black women's lives during the twentieth century grew out of a childhood spent in a South African township, where I observed my grandmother and other black women in the neighbourhood individually and collectively engaging in activities that challenged normative gender roles in their communities. My grandmother was an active member of a women's church union (*manyano*) through which emergency resources were pooled collectively for any of the members in times of crisis. Although this church union was viewed as a demure women's social prayer group, some of the conversations I overheard in later years at my grandmother's kitchen table on Sunday afternoons had a more unconventional tone - advice on how to protect oneself from an abusive husband; how to hide money (contemporary version of guarding a personal bank account); navigate divorce; and deal with sexual overtures from white male employers while working in their homes. Many years later, as a liberal arts university student in Canada, these memories were the basis on which I connected to North American feminist writing on consciousness-raising. I began to identify some of the conversations and activities of my grandmother's social network as "relevant to

feminism" (Briskin 2002, 81)[1], and became interested in understanding why feminist consciousness has been largely written out of black women's history in South Africa. My doctoral research examines the meanings that resistance took on when black women's personal and collective acts of defiance reflected both an awareness of the socially constructed aspects of womanhood, and intentional participation in activities that destabilized normative gender roles in their communities. I have been particularly interested in how research of gender consciousness outside the realm of formal political organizations in South Africa reshapes widely-held assumptions about the constitutive elements of feminist consciousness and feminist practice.

From the beginning stages of research construction, I struggled with African feminist scholar Amina Mama's question, "Is it ethical to study Africa?" (Mama 2007, 1). I have asked myself - how do I know Africa, and South Africa in particular? To what extent, and to whom am I accountable in my research? Why am I doing this research, and where is my investment and grounding in "the broad landscape of Africa's liberation and democracy movements," as Mama suggests is indicative of progressive African scholarship (2007, 3)? In the context of such questions, my ethical task in constructing a methodology for my research involved critically understanding and negotiating my role as an interpreter of meaning. I had to self-reflexively locate myself in relation to the life-history narratives, archival materials and secondary sources that comprised the data for the project, as well as in terms of evaluating the merits of my research according to local specificities in the studied region. I have juggled this with the prescient view of Rosalind Edwards and Jane Ribbens who have argued that,

Even as the researcher may seek to make herself apparent as the translator, via self-reflexivity, she risks making herself more central to the discourse, again pushing the voice of the Third World narrator out to the edge...Nevertheless, to suggest anything else may be to create an illusion, since in reality the Western researcher is inescapably at the centre of the research account. (Edwards and Ribbens 1998, 3)

At what point can self-reflexivity turn into a self-narration that superimposes itself on the very forms of knowledge the research is meant to centre? To answer this question as part of an effort to develop transnational research ethics requires a sober assessment of one's "intercultural literacy" (Miller 1993, 213). This means that the researcher is critically perceptive of the process by which her/his knowledge frameworks, worldview and ways of being in the world are formed in relation to rather than over and above those of others. Intercultural literacy involves the ability to perceive both relatedness and un-translatability. As philosopher Kwasi Wiredu suggests in a related discussion on language and translation, the ability to perceive the un-translatability of an expression from one language into another is a greater marker of an individual's linguistic understanding than the ability to perform routine translation (Diagne 2001, 23). The distinction that Wiredu makes between un-translatability and unintelligibility is useful to this discussion of cultural literacy, since the ability of perceiving un-translatability "involves stepping above both [languages/cultures] on to a meta-platform...an ability that has not seemed to come easily to some students of 'other cultures'" (Wiredu cited in Diagne 2001, 23, brackets mine). In my study, I grappled with questions of interpretation - how to explain my role in relation to the life-history narratives the study relied on, and how to think through the historical and conceptual re-interpretation my research put forward, especially given that much of the thinking and writing surrounding the project took place in Canada. Reflecting on cultural literacy, political investment, the level of research applied and the extent of my geographic and cultural familiarity with the region of study was of significant help to me in assessing the overall context and direction of my research.

Feminist debates surrounding relativism and cultural specificity have also been pivotal to my self-reflexive journey. African intellectuals in particular have been at the forefront of such debates, questioning for example, the applicability of Euro-American

derived concepts such as "Woman as other" and the "public/private" divide to African contexts where seniority based on age and dual-sex complementarity for a long time served as the basis of social differentiation (Amadiume 1997; Oyewùmí 2005). The "bio-logic" of the West in which biology is placed at the centre of most Euro-American understandings (including feminist) of the social world, is taken to task by Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (2005) for its role in universalizing women's subordination. Oyewùmí points to the contradiction inherent in relying on biological understandings of the world while simultaneously being committed to the notion of social construction, which suggests that "the criteria that make up male and female categories vary in different cultures" (Oyewùmí 2005, 11). She identifies a "biology is destiny/social position" knowledge framework in Euro-American understandings of gender that fails to seriously consider the epistemological and ontological implications of difference.

Desiree Lewis (2004), however, has also pointed out that both African and non-African scholars have relied on problematic ways of knowing that are characteristic of traditional anthropology and developmentalism. This includes an over-emphasis on "customs, modes of life and cultural difference," where difference becomes rigid or radical, making it difficult to tell where this difference is being described versus inscribed (Lewis 2004, 28). Lewis has used Ifi Amadiume's *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (1997) as an example of this convention, arguing that Amadiume's reliance on anthropological legacies through her focus on kinship, family, lineage and ethnophilosophy lead her to approach her subject in ways that are problematically similar to more traditional anthropological research on Africa. Part of the argument here is that Amadiume's approach is readily embraced because of her identity as an African academic or authentic "insider" (Lewis 2004, 29-30). Lewis points out that in the end, in their attempts to "salvage past modes of thought, or to invent an entirely new language," such projects "seriously underplay the extent to which current language use,

terminology and theory have become irrevocably creolized" (2004, 31).

The work of numerous African feminists has highlighted the necessity of seriously considering the ways in which the prioritized analytical categories of feminists differ in various locations around the world based on geographic, historical, political and cultural specificities. This literature raises questions about how to decolonize knowledge by means that also acknowledge the hybridized aspects of locally situated and culturally specific positions. Approaching identity as "a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges" (Friedman 2001, 21) is an idea that has been reflected on with significant depth by intellectuals of colour outside of the African continent. Second wave black feminists did this work in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, among them, Barbara Smith, June Jordan, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and Florynce Kennedy. Others - Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Teresa de Laurentis, Donna Haraway and Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick - built on this work (Friedman 2001). Over the course of my research, and with much reflection on intersectionality, the legacies of colonialism and the politics of development and globalization, it has become clear to me that as someone occupying an in-between relational position to South Africa, being both an insider and outsider, I embody an already existing heterogeneity in the geo-political make-up of this region. Nevertheless, commitment to an ethics of cross-border knowledge production, sharing and activism remains key to developing defensible articulations of fluidity. This has also been significant in my research in relation to the culturally based feminist articulations of epistemological relativism that have continued to resonate with me.

Another aspect of the (self) reflexive exercise around epistemology and ethics in my research involves a critical awareness of what feminist work remains to be done in my immediate home environment (Canada), and of how local issues in my backyard are positioned in a global context. Where are the points of connection with other parts of the world? Who is engaged in radical activist work

relevant to my intellectual interests both here and there? How can connections be made as fellow activists, rather than as first-worlders with resources extending a gaze towards regions of the global south from the position of superior knower - in other words, in the exercise of helping others because we know better? In this vein, aside from (1) remaining attentive to and taking cues from the insights of feminist intellectuals who prioritize Africans and Africa as an important source of knowledge on questions of global interest, (2) forging collegial links with researchers and activists in South Africa, (3) employing a historically and politically attuned self-reflexivity in relation to the factors and power dynamics involved in the construction and methodology of my research, and (4) nurturing a sincere and long-standing political commitment to the region, my effort to develop an ethics of conducting transnational research has also included a deliberate turn towards the feminist struggles of local community groups in my Canadian city of residence. This has allowed me to develop an awareness of the ways in which racism, sexism, class disparities and homophobia continue to work against social justice and long-standing feminist efforts in Canada.

Worthy of note and action in my country of citizenship are: the racism of the Canadian immigration system (Jiwani 2005), the discursive dominance and violent erasures produced by the two-founding nations - English and French - story (Lawrence 2002; Stevenson 1999), the violence against First Nations communities and the brutal murder and disappearance of First Nations women (Razack 1999), the disproportionate incarceration of Aboriginal peoples and black Canadians (Jiwani 2002; Monture-Angus 1995), the crippling socio-economic ghettoization of many black Canadians (Henry and Tator 2006), the absence of a federal universal childcare system (Prentice 2005), continuing gaps in pay equity (Spitzer 2005), homelessness and poverty, the low representation of women in Canada's highest decision-making bodies, and the inconsistent and inequitable public administration of women's right to abortion across the country's provinces. These

Canadian realities can serve as a basis for thoughtful engagement with struggles in other parts of the world.

Therefore, critically exploring our relationships to social justice issues in our own regional and national contexts, and deconstructing the basis on which action is taken locally (be it the impulse to help, or to gain a sense of agency over one's own circumstances), are important components of developing an ethics for reaching out more broadly. My own work with a Canadian non-profit women's centre substantiated a longstanding supposition on my part that feminist agency and empowerment manifest in a diversity of forms. The multiple ways in which agency was articulated by the women of largely low-income socio-economic standing who frequented the centre in question called attention to the intellectual marginalization of poor women in the construction of more formal Canadian feminist platforms and woman-friendly government policies.

Radicalizing Beyond First World/Third World

Contemporary feminist discussions regarding transnational research ethics have yet to adequately grapple with the complicated dynamics of research on regions of the global south that is conducted from first world universities by women of colour who are themselves racialized and othered in their academies. While it is true that first world ivory towers are sites of privilege, not all who gain access to these spaces inhabit and share in them equally. The politics of funding and institutional support are not exempt from the vagaries of prejudice and discrimination. This reality does not preclude women of colour scholars in developed nations from also engaging in acts of othering and exploitation in relation to global south regions of study or fellow residents in their own countries, but it does complicate the idea of vast resource availability, which is a key factor attributed to Western domination over the production of knowledge on so-called developing countries (Farmer 2002; Mama 2007).

One of the ways in which researchers

from the first world and the global south have sought to engage an ethics of transnational knowledge production is through regional and international research networks (Mama 2007). Meetings under the aegis of such networks can be important forums for critically examining the challenges, possibilities and benefits of our global interconnectedness. Mama's notion of a radical ethic, which "actively questions and challenges global hegemonies" and includes "a commitment to greater levels of collegiality and solidarity with Africa's radical intellectuals" (2007, 3) echoes the spirit of many of these gatherings. And it should. For as Mama argues, scholars in first world academies "have an ethical responsibility to support, facilitate, and participate in this engagement, instead of just disseminating their own ideas, as if Africa had no intellectuals, no knowledge to contribute" (2007, 4). But who attends these critical discussions?

In my own experience, as a woman of colour in a Canadian graduate program, a sole parent of two children with an average annual income considered below Canadian poverty lines for my region of residence and family size (Canadian Council on Social Development 2005; Spitzer 2005), my interest in such progressive engagements has not been sufficient to support my participation. Involvement in international efforts to connect scholars in "well-endowed and resourced" (Mama 2007) first world academies with colleagues in under-developed nations through workshops and conferences held in global south locations ("theorizing from the south"), has in some instances required from me the same (or close to) participation fee as full-professors at Ivy League American universities, at a minimum cost of $2000-$3000 on average. This is before factoring in the logistics and costs of childcare on my part for a one or two week absence from my household. Sliding scales designed to account for global inequalities are unfortunately often based on a dichotomous reading of the "first world" and "third world." These measures importantly account for challenges and inequalities facing scholars in the global south by subsidizing travel, accommodation and registration costs.

Nevertheless, the larger patterns in fee and subsidy administration mask the ways in which in both developing and first world contexts, it is those with financial means, who are unencumbered by socio-reproductive and care responsibilities, who most often participate in these critical transnational intellectual gatherings.

How then do the absences fostered by prohibitive participation costs and a lack of consideration for the multiple spheres of people's lives outside of the formal spaces of intellectual gathering, affect the contours of the critical discussions around research ethics, epistemology methodology and coalition that take place in these forums? While I nonetheless retain some measure of upward mobility due to expanding academic qualifications, among other factors, and may therefore benefit from greater participation in these international symposia of the scholarly left in the future, I cannot help but wonder what all of this says about the continuing marginalization of primarily activist and grassroots-oriented African women peers and colleagues. What do these silences and exclusions tell us about the radical, independent and anti-colonial research agendas being formulated in these forums?

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented some of the components of my effort to critically reflect on my position as knower within the scope of my doctoral research. This research, which is theoretically and methodologically situated in the feminist (inter)disciplinary tradition, is centred on South Africa as the geographic context of study. Both South Africa and Canada, my present country of citizenship, are regions to which I variously remain both foreigner and cultural insider. The self-reflexive journey on which I embarked to unpack this complicated dynamic revealed epistemological questions, particularly those relating to cultural relativism and ontological difference, crucial to an evolving understanding of researcher positionality *vis â vis* current forms of global inequality. In this process, I continue to acknowledge the merits of epistemology-oriented feminist arguments both for and against cultural relativism. I have

proposed that thinking and acting locally are important elements in the effort to establish wider scholarly and activist connections. Furthermore, as the aforementioned First world/Third world configuration demonstrates, grappling with silences, absences and the complexities of the in-between is crucial to engendering a radical ethics for transnational research and collaboration.

Endnote

1. See Briskin (2002) for a brief but insightful discussion of the politics of reading, naming and claiming feminism for Third World contexts. Here, Briskin relies on the work of Ella Shohat to emphasize the importance of recognizing the diversity of forms in which feminist consciousness and practice manifest around the world. Nonetheless, Briskin rightly cautions against the enthusiastic desire (on the part of First World observers?) to label these examples as "feminist" due to the ways in which this act may reinforce Euro-American dominance over the meaning and form of feminism.

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