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A conversation with Oyeronke Oyewumi

Patricia Purtschert and Serena Owusua Dankwa

About the many futures of gender

The aim of the project is to tell and reflect the different histories of feminist theory. To this end, conversations are held with protagonists who had and have a formative influence on feminist theories. In engaging with these scholars, we wish to delve deeper not only into the ideas and concepts that form the key basis of these theories but also to explore the historical contexts, collective thinking, political practices, and historical controversies that enabled them at the time. The conversations bring forth exigent questions around power, inequality, and violence, intersectionality, the relation of sex, gender, and sexuality, or the critique of binary thinking. We discuss the contributions of feminism to analyzing and challenging significant differences other than gender, such as race, class, nationality, religion, and caste. The project is rooted in oral history and philosophical exchange. It has value for those of us interested in the history of feminist theory and in feminism as a resourceful way of challenging dominant knowledges and creating different ones.

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I just could not understand how you would look at mothers and say that they were powerless: A conversation with Oyeronke Oyewumi

Patricia Purtschert and Serena Owusua Dankwa

Serena and I have been sending interview questions back and forth between Manhattan and Bern for the past hours. Serena traveled to New Haven for a panel on "Sex and gender in hard times" and stopped over in New York City. We figured that this was the ideal moment to have a conversation with Oyeronke Oyewumi. We both greatly appreciate her work and have learned a lot from it. I sit at the kitchen table in my Bern apartment, where it is already night, and Serena and Oyeronke Oyewumi appear on the screen in a light-filled office. The connection works, and our conversation begins.

Patricia Purtschert (PP): I would like to start with a question about feminism: Can you remember when you had your first encounter with feminism or with something that you might call a feminist experience when you look back?

Oyeronke Oyewumi: No, I do not recall a moment when I saw something and said that "this is feminist." But I do remember being introduced to feminist thinking by an old boyfriend. When I was at the University of Ibadan, he was known as an intellectual and a Marxist. He had many American friends. One day he said, "Have you ever heard of Shulamith Firestone?" I remember that distinctly. For the first time, I was exposed to something called feminist thought. But I do not think I made too much of it at that time. Over time, it became part of some of the intellectual discourses we were engaging in.

Serena O. Dankwa (SD): But then you ended up doing gender studies at Berkeley.

Yes.

SD: How did it continue, your journey with feminism?

I was at the University of Ibadan in the 1970s, from 1976 to 1979, and studied political science. Of course, the education on the continent was still generally based on Western ideas. In political science, the theorists we read were Joseph Schumpeter, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the like. There were a few courses on African politics and on colonialism. I took one class in sociology, a class on the sociology of the family, taught by an Italian woman but which had nothing to say about African families. That topic never came up. Much of it was based on classic sociological texts on families in London, England. But what I found interesting about it was that it focused on women and families. This is an approach that I did not get in political science. I became interested in the topic because I was beginning to think about how colonization had impacted African families. I came to that

conclusion as a result of personal experiences of my own family, in contrast to the families of some of my friends, whose mothers were college-educated and more consciously attuned to some Western cultural practices. Their families were different from mine. Mine was a large multigenerational family. Here I am trying to avoid describing my family as polygamous and extended, terms that privilege Western ways of viewing African families. But unfortunately, I cannot find a usable substitute in this context. I have used the adjective "large" to describe my family because in Yoruba, my family would be described as "ile nla," which connotes more than the English "large." My mother never attended a Western school and was not directly inculcated with Western norms. And so I became interested in studying sociology because I wanted to understand the connection between families and colonization. When I applied to graduate school in the United States, I applied to the department of sociology rather than political science, which was unusual since my first degree was in political science. In the British system as practiced in Nigeria, the understanding was that when you studied something as an undergraduate in a particular discipline, we took it for granted that your graduate studies would continue in the same discipline, which is not necessarily the case in the United States. But I applied to sociology because I wanted to study families. And I did not think that political science was receptive to that topic. That was how I applied to the sociology department at the University of California Berkeley.

PP: When you arrived there, did you find the kind of knowledge that you were interested in?

No. No in the sense that a couple of things happened. One, I was one of maybe three or four African women on that large campus. There were very few Africans and not too many Black people. And in certain ways, as a result, I stood out. Often fellow students would ask me what I was studying. I would reply that I am a graduate student in sociology. And then there was usually a follow-up question as to why I was enrolled in the sociology department and not in anthropology. Their questions surprised me. I never really understood the basis of it. Once I responded to a fellow student, "So, why this question? Why do you think I should join the anthropology department?" And he said, "Well, you know, sociologists study their own society and anthropologists study other societies." I replied, "Voilà, I am a sociologist studying my own society; I plan to do fieldwork in Nigeria."

But these questions made me observe more closely what I was learning in my courses. There was really little or no reference to Africa, even in studies of race. This erasure of Africa was not peculiar to the Berkeley sociology department, it was built into the discipline. Years later, this awareness led me to write as the first sentence in my book *The invention of women*: "American sociology is unaware of Africa" (p. xix).[1] But it was only much later that I was able to fully understand the importance of those questions that I was being asked. They really meant to say that Africa belongs with anthropology, which was founded to study primitive societies, in contrast to sociology, which was established to make sense of modernity and modern societies. They saw Africa as being on the primitive side of the binary and they noticed that I, the budding African sociologist, was misplaced, in the wrong department.

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1 Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses* (1997).

Another development which proved to be fortuitous was my discovery of women and gender studies. When I got to the sociology department at Berkeley, I was surprised to discover that there was a new field called women's studies. I enrolled for my first sociology of gender graduate class. And being at Berkeley, it was taught by one of the top scholars in the field at the time, Nancy Chodorow. I was happy to enroll in her class. She wrote a very successful book about the psychology of mothering.[2] The big question she asked in her book that gets you going is, "Why do women mother?" The brilliance of that question is that it interrogates human reproduction, something that seemed so "natural," so taken-for-granted, as something to be investigated, researched! She wrote a whole book on the sociopsychology of mothering. And in explaining why women mother, she provides a theory of mothering and a theory of feminism too. Chodorow's *The reproduction of mothering* made a deep impression on me.

As I started to take courses in graduate school, I had a remarkable experience, which I came to see as a feature of schooling in the United States. I noticed that I was invisible or, better yet, inaudible; I did not have a language for it at the time. It goes like this: As a nonwhite foreign student, you are sitting in a class in which we are having discussions on assigned topics. And then you speak up and attempt to contribute to the ongoing conversation. The class would pause for a second, but without any acknowledgment that you had spoken, and then they continued the discussion as if you never said a word. I have heard other students report similar experiences.

It was compounded by the fact that you were often the only Black student in the course. I remember on one occasion, in a graduate gender course, let me call it feminism 101, I learned that everywhere you look, males are dominant and as a result, it is believed that females are inferior. Thus, the lesson continued that because of their sense of superiority, in every society, men actively and constantly sought to distance themselves from females and anything associated with women as much as possible. It was as if they did not want to be contaminated by these inferior beings. What I learned in these classes seemed to suggest that men and women, males and females, are regarded as being of different species. I think this is related to that whole idea that men are from Mars, and women are from Venus. Indeed, one of the first things I learned was that in a patriarchal society all sorts of artifice are used to show that women are different, period. And when they say "difference," the notion of difference in Western thought is not merely descriptive, it is evaluative in that it assigns a hierarchy to the categories under consideration. Male-associated categories are presented as superior by default. Establishing difference involves evaluating which group is up and which is down in the hierarchy. Difference turns out to be a measure of hierarchy.

For example in the courses that I took, there would be a focus on genitalia, breasts, Adams's apple, and things that men and women are deemed not to have in common. The fact that men and women have noses, they have lips, they have legs, things that they share as humans, were rarely of interest. I remember sitting there one day feeling so puzzled, and then I raised my hand and I said, "The culture I come from, Yoruba society of Nigeria, at least at the level of language, is the complete opposite of what you just described. There is no word for son, there is no word for daughter, we use the same word for sons and daughters. They are not different, or at least there are no different words. There is no word for brother, there is no word for sister,

2 Nancy Chodorow, *The reproduction of mothering* (1978).

we use the same words." And people just looked at me. They stopped for one second and then the discussion rattled on as if I never said a word. I was puzzled.

But subsequently, as I became a savvier graduate student, I started to understand the hierarchies in the academy: hierarchies of disciplines, hierarchies of people, and indeed the place or rather non-place of Africa in discussions of human society. I came to comprehend that no one was taking my comments seriously or into any account. It was not surprising considering that part of our gender discussions seemed to lead to the idea that African women are the most subordinated women in the world, and African men the most primitive and worst oppressors of women. Perhaps they just could not grasp my comments against the background of the received information circulating about Africans. I started to understand that. And I have to say that one of the reasons why language looms large in my work has precisely to do with that, with the realization that since no one would believe me or take me seriously, it would be better to make statements about Yoruba language since these could be easily verified independent of my presence.

PP: What you say makes me think of what you have described before, that in sociology, there was no space to deal with African societies. And in gender studies, there was no space to deal with the experiences you brought with you. This gives me a background to your book The invention of women*. You went to Berkeley to get knowledge on the sociology of the family, a kind of knowledge that works for the context you were familiar with. But then you ended up creating this knowledge yourself, right?*

Very well said. I like that rendering of it very much! I created this knowledge almost from scratch. The third thing that happened, which is equally important, is that I discovered Black studies. I discovered African American studies. I discovered race more specifically as an attribute of my personal identity. At the time I showed up at Berkeley, I did not know that I was Black. That concept was not in my vocabulary or in my head. I was not feeling minor, or like a minority. I come from a country of millions, over 100 million people at that time, now there are over 200 million people in Nigeria, and most of them look like me. It is not as if you go to the mirror and say, "I'm Black." It was at Berkeley that I learned about race as component of individual identity. At the same time that I started to take a class on gender, I enrolled in a course on "Race and ethnic relations." That is what they called it then, not racial oppression, which would have been more appropriate! But most importantly, there was a new African American studies department. And there was a wonderful scholar of literature, very well known, who has passed on now, Barbara Christian. She was one of the founders of Black women's literary studies. In fact, one of her books is called *Black women novelists: The development of a tradition*.[3]

I met Professor Christian when I applied to be her teaching assistant. In the sociology department, there were not that many teaching assistantships, especially since my cohort was a large one of around 15 people. As a graduate student, even if you received a teaching assistantship in a particular semester, you soon exhausted whatever was going to be available to

3 Barbara Christian, *Black women novelists: The development of a tradition, 1892–1976* (1980).

you for the duration of your studies. The opportunity was extremely limited. You were entitled to only four semesters of such support in your graduate career. I had to find another job on campus in order to be able to pay for my graduate education. Fortunately, at that time, the African American studies department was new and did not have its own graduate students yet. I was happy to find a job there. Initially, I did not know anything about the subject matter. But oh my gosh, I learned so much about race, about literature, about American history, culture, and society by digesting the course material. Auditing courses in the African American studies department gave me an important lens through which I was able to understand the US through the Black experience. That occurrence was invaluable. If you read the first chapter of my dissertation, published as a paper titled "The white woman's burden,"[4] you would see that I was able to merge my studies of sociology of race and gender with what I was learning about Black Feminism in Barbara Christian's course.

PP: Apart from Barbara Christian as a mentor, did you have peers, colleagues, or friends who were dealing with similar questions around race and gender and who helped you think through them?

I think not. It was a very isolated experience until much later. And I say much later because after about four or five years of being at Berkeley, when I started working on a dissertation, I was able to form a dissertation group with two other women, Lula Fragd and Pauline Wynter. There was also a group on campus that I discovered much later. Many of the people in that group were literary critics, and they were engaged with something called postcolonial discourse. One of them was David Lloyd, a professor in the English department. That was the beginning of postcolonial studies, and I was excited about it. I attended many of their meetings. But initially, I was on my own. I was muddling my way through, and if you ask me, I do not know how and why I survived the process.

SD: You mentioned something that caught my attention when you talked about your time in Ibadan. Maybe you can come back to that briefly. You were saying you realized that your family was different from other families, and your mother's position was different. How was it different?

I had friends whose mothers were Western-educated. And many of these mothers were also Christianized. On the face of it, their families appeared to be monogamous, "nuclear families" in the European sense of the concept. Mine was not like that. Mine was a large family in which we had three mothers. A couple of the mothers had some Western education, but my mother, Olori Igbayilola Oyewumi, my father's first wife, was not literate. She spoke two languages and imparted to me much knowledge and wisdom. It was only in the last couple of decades that I came to appreciate the breadth and depth of knowledge that I acquired from her. These days, when people ask me about the origins of *The invention of women*, I find myself saying, "You know what? One of my superpowers, if I had any, was that my mother was not schooled

4 Oyeronke Oyewumi, The white woman's burden: African women in Western feminist discourse (2003).

into Western gender norms." I say "schooled" deliberately—I think schooled into submission, whether it is by reading the Bible or schooled into the ideas of how a woman must behave and comport herself as exemplified in some scriptures. In retrospect, I believe that my mother was free of a lot of those debilitating, restrictive, and prescriptive ideas about appropriate female behavior. Her orientation turned out to be an advantage for me.

SD: How did the freedom that your mother embodied show?

How did that freedom show? In how she comported herself with dignity and a strong sense of who she was. This was not peculiar to her. I noticed that many so called non-westernized women who did not depend on Eurocentric definitions of how to be, carried themselves with confidence. I learnt much from being around and speaking and interacting with my mother and people whose Yoruba language competence and cultural literacy was clear and highly accomplished. I am often complimented on my self-presentation and general fashion sense. Even that I got from my mother despite the fact that my mother, unlike me, always dressed in Yoruba cultural attire. I had an amazing role model in terms of the fact of having a sense of oneself that did not derive from an internalized colonialism.

PP: When you did your research, was your mother one of the interlocutors you would talk to? Could she pass on her knowledge to you when you were looking into questions of gender and the family?

Yes! All the time, I was talking to my mother. And in fact, in the preface of *The invention of women*, I said that I learned so much being around her in her court (p. xvi). Because when you were sitting around in my mother's quarters, people would constantly stream in, this was a palace after all that constantly drew in townspeople. I would be sitting there watching and listening. For example, once I noticed how she greeted a couple of women who were visiting. And later I asked her about that particular manner of greeting she had directed at them. She said that the two women were co-wives who had just lost their husband. I learned so much by just sitting around, observing and asking questions. I did that too with my dad to some extent. But I was mainly with my mother, almost 24 hours a day for months. My mother was a very curious person, and she understood my "assignment." I remember that sometimes when I asked questions, some relations, who were present, would say things like, "Why are you asking? Why do you want to know that?" And my mother would respond, "Let her ask! She wants to know." I had acquired a reputation for asking endless questions!

PP: Since you mentioned The invention of women*, I would like to ask a few questions on that book, which is such an important book for gender studies.* The invention of women *contains a crucial critique of the idea that gender shapes social structures universally and in all places. In your work, you show that in Oyo Yoruba culture and particularly precolonial, pre-19th-century, social hierarchy was determined by social relations, such as seniority, and not by bodily differences. That is why you suggest working with the terms "anasex," "anafemale," and "anamale" in reference to precolonial Yoruba society, because this allows you to emphasize*

the lack of causality between the human body and the social position that humans hold. A causality that is created in modern Western thought. I want to ask you whether you could tell us something about how you were able to develop both, on the one hand these insights into the way social positions worked in precolonial Oyo Yoruba culture and on the other hand a fundamental critique of mainstream Western feminist thought that you grounded on your insights of Yoruba culture.

That is a big question. I was working these things out myself, especially since I had very little supervision, because there was nobody who knew what I was trying to do. And maybe I myself did not even know exactly what I was trying to do, but I knew I was up to something. What I should also mention, as a way of getting into it, is that my dissertation was titled *Mothers not women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. That dissertation was the basis of *The invention of women*. It was always clear to me that one of the big points of Yoruba departure from Western ideas about gender is the way "mother" was subsumed under the term "woman" in Western gender discourses, an inferior and subordinated category, by definition. As a Yoruba, as an African, I just could not understand how you would look at mothers and say that they were powerless. That is what came out in the title of my dissertation. I was focused on showing that mothers had power and should not be erased by fiat.

After I completed the dissertation, I had a postdoc position at the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. This university housed the first officially approved women's studies major in the country. During this time, I revised my dissertation in preparation for publication. And you would be surprised to hear that I then wrote the first chapter of *The invention of women*, a very important chapter titled "Visualizing the body: Western theories and African subjects," in which I pulled together theoretical ideas about the body being at the core of the fundamental difference in how Yoruba thought about hierarchy, and social organization in contrast to the West. It is in that chapter that I discuss biology and body politics. I show that in the West, the body is the bedrock of social identities and social organization. That chapter was not in the dissertation. Some of the ideas must have been percolating, and when I wrote it during the postdoc, I was able to theoretically pull together many different strands of ideas that may have been left hanging. That chapter was the last one that I created in the process of writing the book.

The other thing that shows the difference between the dissertation and the book is chapter 3 of *The invention of women*. In fact, it turned out to be my favorite chapter in the volume, because I was so excited to apply my thinking of non-gendered Yoruba world to political hierarchy and the monarchy. What is interesting about that chapter, which is called "Making history, creating gender: The invention of men and kings in the writing of Oyo oral traditions," is that the dissertation was sent out by the University of Minnesota Press to three reviewers. They all came back saying, "You have to publish this book." One of them said, "Well, this is a very interesting argument, but Yoruba society is a monarchical one. Why then does the author not apply that argument to political hierarchy and the monarchy?" This was a wonderful insight because I just was not conscious that I had made such an omission. By the time I got into the political hierarchy, I realized that my arguments and findings became even stronger because I had always known that anafemales could become kings. They were not queens. Historically,

both males and females occupied the throne. That was where my evidence led. But when I started looking at political hierarchy, I was positively surprised to find out that historians of the Ibadan School of History had written about female kings in the Oyo Empire. I had never read about this. Imagine you are making this argument, and this is where the evidence leads to, and then you find out that you are not the first or only scholar to articulate such a viewpoint. To boot, Professor B. A. Agiri of the University of Ibadan had provided documented evidence of females on the throne of Oyo. That is why that chapter is so important to me. It was gratifying to see what good research yielded.

I come from the royal family. My father, Oba Jimoh Oladunni Oyewumi, was the king until 2023, when he passed on. He was on the throne for almost 50 years. He was the Oba of Ogbomoso. I would sit with my father, who was literate, unlike my mother; he had Western schooling, and we would talk for hours. One day I was telling him that in the historical past, there were female kings, and I lamented that in the contemporary period, they had ceased to exist. I was trying to account for their historical presence and their contemporary absence. Before I finished talking, my father took the words almost literally from my mouth and stated that in some families, females could be the leaders, they could be the king, they could be the baale, the head of the town. My father continued: "There is a female baale that I just inducted in a small town not far from here. You should go and interview her." I said, "Really?" I knew of one female baale who had been on the throne for about 30 years, Baale Maya, whom I had interviewed earlier on.[5] My father informed me about a second female baale that I did not know about, Baale Aroje, whom he had elevated among her siblings. He gave her the top leadership post of the town. "Why did you choose her?" I asked. "Because she was the rightful person," he said. My eyes opened wide. And then he continued, "however, this cultural practice of enthroning females and putting them in kingly and chiefly positions is not universal, it only pertains to certain families, not ours!" I laughed and replied, "Oh, so you do not want my children, sons and daughters, to come and claim the throne here in Ogbomoso?"

SD: In the Ghanaian Akan political system, there is the role of the queen mother, who is not actually the mother of the king. She is the female elder and the king's symbolic mother. But you are saying that the king was actually female. On the other hand, in the case of your mother, she also had a certain role as the wife of the Oba that is probably comparable to what queen mothers did: that they were in charge of the women of the community when they had disputes for instance. Is that comparable?

Well, I think the Ghanaian Akan system is different. I want to say that it is a gendered system, although gendered in different ways than the European. Part of what I show in *The invention of women* is that in Yorubaland, there was no social position, occupation, profession, in which you did not have both anamales and anafemales. Then there is the role of the mother, the role of the father, and there is the role of senior people. Because my mother was the first wife, and a senior mother in the community, many people would come to her for advice and

5 See Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses* (1997), pp. 49, 96, 105–107.

mediation. But it was not as formalized in the way in which I understand the queen mother's role in the Akan system.

PP: You were working on your dissertation and on the publication of your book in the 1990s. That was the time when Judith Butler's Gender trouble *came out, in which they make an argument that in a way is coming from the opposite direction than yours, saying that sex is always already gender in the sense that if we talk about biological sex, we refer to an episteme that is culturally and historically specific.*[6] *So, once we talk about sex, we are constructing a notion of sex, and that makes sex into gender in a certain sense. Now, you developed your work during the same time, making a similar claim from a different angle, saying that gender in the Western context is always sex, or that it cannot be disconnected from sex, because there is always a material reference to the body, even though feminists try to take gender and sex apart. But since that does not really work, gender keeps being haunted by sex. I think it is so interesting that we have these two books coming out in the 1990s, Butler's* Gender trouble *and your* The invention of women, *that both make a crucial critique of the inseparability of sex and gender in Western thought.*

Yes, I think that this is one thing we agree on, Butler and I, which is that gender and sex are not separable in the way in which the West talks about them. However, you remember the book by Ifi Amadiume, *Male daughters, female husbands?*[7] What she argued was that in Igbo society, you could separate gender and sex. And that kinship categories were flexible. It was because of that flexibility that somebody of a female sex was allowed to become a son. In that argument that she was making about Igbo society, the distinction between gender and sex is crucial. I am just putting that in. I do not know to what extent that is sustainable, but her argument did rest on such a distinction. And I think she was the one who introduced the idea of gender flexibility. These days, when I hear about fluidity, I say, some of this goes way back, and back to Amadiume.

SD: Were you ever in conversation with Ifi Amadiume?

No. I was not. I met her for the first time after *Male daughters, female husbands* had been published. We did not compare notes because I believed that we were looking at totally different societies in a space that came to be named Nigeria. In my estimation, our understandings of the Western construction of gender were radically different. In *The invention of women*, I argued that the concept of gender, and the category of woman, had been nonexistent in precolonial Yoruba society. In contrast, Amadiume understood gender categories to be very much part of Igbo society, but she showed that notions of gender were more flexible and not identical to the Western construction.

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6 Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (1990).

7 Ifi Amadiume, *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society* (1987).

SD: When I think of fluidity in Amadiume's work, I understood it more as a transferability of social roles. And that was important for my work. It did not mean that there were no hierarchies. I realized that, for instance, the concept of Jack Halberstam's female masculinity[8] *did not fully grasp the subjectivities of women in urban Ghana who have erotic relationships with other women. But it was easy for them to claim certain positions, because power was not so much associated with masculinity or with visible forms of masculinity. If you wanted to attain authority as a woman, you could do it for instance through having kids, or through becoming senior. Actually, seniority became a very important concept to my own work. And in some ways, that is why I was inspired by what you were trying to do with gender, namely, to show to what extent gender positions are transferable across bodies and to critique Euro-American concepts of sexuality.*

I have to read your book.[9] One of my issues with Ifi Amadiume is the idea that a woman had to become a man, a daughter had to become a son, in order to claim the position of a man in the family. What I thought her work did was to show permutations of male dominance. In Yorubaland, you did not have to become a male daughter in order to be head of the family or king. And most importantly, even up until now, in many places, children of females who would inherit the throne could found families and even new towns. There is no woman-to-woman marriage in Yorubaland, which is quite interesting. I think on the African continent, maybe over 200 societies have been identified as having woman-to-woman marriage.

SD: What I found difficult with Amadiume's work was the title-taking. She wrote about how women could take certain titles. But in practice, it was still much more male persons who ended up with these titles because they had more time to aggrandize, to work in the fields, etcetera. And that is something that I am also interested in within your work. I mean, we have these changes that came with colonization. Still, it was possible for females to become kings. But in practice there were more male kings. Or did I understand that wrongly?

That is my question! At what point were there more male kings? There is that chapter in *The invention of women* in which I refer to Samuel Johnson, the historian, who claimed that of all the names on the king list gathered from the oral tradition, only one was female, and that female was a regent. And I asked the question, how did the historian know which names were male or female, since Yoruba names are not gender-specific? Attaining the throne is undoubtedly a complicated accomplishment. When you look at the way people got there or who supported them, the whole issue of looking at it statistically in terms of gender becomes problematic, since there are other considerations. What is the role of statistics here? I have a whole argument about what I call "statistical gendering" in one of my chapters. By that I mean that it is not the statistical gendering that clarifies gender, it is the statistical gendering that creates gender. We enter into statistics with a gendered lens and impose it on society. If they

8 Judith Halberstam, *Female masculinity* (1998).
9 Serena Dankwa, *Knowing women: Same-sex intimacy, gender, and identity in postcolonial Ghana* (2021).

showed you 20 people, you and I might be looking at this male body and that female body, but maybe it is just that they are all firstborns or some other criterion.

PP: I think that at this point, we get back to your crucial critique. You are questioning these universalizing gendered logics, especially in Western feminism, because what is assumed first will be found later. You are pointing out an epistemic circle that we need to analyze self-critically. You have already mentioned "The white woman's burden," this text that was part of your dissertation and later published as a chapter in the anthology African women and feminism.[10] *In it, you conclude that white feminists occupy positions of power in many places and that makes collaborations with women from different contexts difficult. Also, epistemologically, it limits the scope of knowledge because of the kind of epistemic narrowness that these feminists bring with them. Again, this is a very convincing critique. I wanted to ask whether you think things have changed somewhat since you published that article more than 20 years ago in 2003. Do you think that there is a different kind of awareness on the side of Western and white feminists?*

I would say no. No in the sense that I do not know what people are teaching in women's studies. But in the last three or four years, I have had journals sending me articles to review. More recently, there was one in which the author was asking why there is no African women's philosophy. She was of the view that African men had been able to transcend this idea that Africa has no philosophy, but African women had not succeeded in founding African feminist philosophy similar to Western feminist philosophy. Her objective in the paper was to show and to tutor African women on how to do African women's philosophy. Her attitude was condescending, at the least. My reaction was: "What if indeed it is true that African women do not 'do' feminist philosophy? Has it occurred to this person that maybe they do not agree with the notion that there should be an African feminist philosophy? That philosophy should not be gendered or that the field of philosophy itself makes no sense to them!" In another paper, an author wrote that African women do not do theory. The only African theorist that this person mentioned is a white woman in South Africa. "African women don't do theory!" And then I have seen a critique of my work in which there is no real critique other than "Well, West African women don't believe her." There are Westerners who cannot deal with my book, and they escape dealing with the book by saying that we do not understand the language. And that is why they have to rely on the fantasy of West African women who do not agree with me as evidence for not taking my work seriously.

That is unlike my experience in Brazil. I just came back from Brazil two weeks ago. I am amazed at the reception of my work there. Last year in October, I was invited to a literary festival in Cachoeira, which is not far from Salvador in Bahia, and then I gave a lecture at the Federal University of Bahia. After the panel discussion, I had to sign books because *The invention of women* had been translated into Portuguese a few years ago. Up to 200 persons who had bought copies of the book lined up to have me sign their books. Many were telling me how much they appreciate my work and how it was contributed to their own studies and writings! Then I went to São Paulo, and the same thing happened. The following year, when I

10 Oyeronke Oyewumi, The white woman's burden: African women in Western feminist discourse (2003).

visited Rio de Janeiro, I happily signed more books. From these visits to Brazil, I have brought back books written in Portuguese and presented to me by their authors, who thanked me profusely for inspiring their own work. I am told that *The invention of women* is now being taught in some high schools in Brazil. That is why I met some very young people informing me that they had read it.

PP: I find it interesting that you mention Brazil because in Latin American feminism, your work has been well received. I am thinking of María Lugones, who in her crucial article "Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system"[11] *from 2007 takes your work and that of Paula Gunn Allen as a base to go beyond Anibal Quijano's account of coloniality.*[12] *She says that gender is at the heart of coloniality and sees gender as a central colonial category. To make this argument, she heavily relies on your work. I would like to know more about the reception of your work in decolonial thinking, especially in the Latin American strand. I am also interested in finding out whether you had been in touch with María Lugones directly. Has there been an exchange between the two of you?*

Well, I am glad you are asking this question, and equally pleased that you stated this history properly, underscoring the fact that María Lugones's work was based on my work and that of Paula Gunn Allen, a debt laid out in that paper. María Lugones has passed on now. What I found strange was that she never reached out to me to say that she was writing such a paper, or to say that she had found something so valuable in my work. It is also quite interesting because we were both working in the State University of New York [SUNY] system. I never found out that she had written about my work until years after she had published that paper.

PP: And still, you never met, you never talked to each other?!

We never talked. Although I knew her, I had met her in 1993 at the University of Minnesota during my postdoc at the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies during the 1992–93 academic year. She had given a talk at the center. That was more than ten years before she was doing her decolonial work. She never reached out to me, and the only way I got to know about her article, and I was so shocked when I found out about it, was through a Ugandan student at Binghamton. She may have worked with María, and this student, Caroline Tushabe, had invited me to be her external examiner. It was only from her that I found out about the fact that María Lugones had used my work. But further on, talking about the reception of my work, I found that some feminists in the decolonial community want to attribute my ideas to María Lugones, rather than give me credit for my pathbreaking work. That is unfortunate.

In that vein, a few years ago, I think it must have been during COVID-19, I was invited to give a lecture in Brazil. It was a Zoom lecture because I gave it from Nigeria, and during the Q&A, a white Brazilian woman asked me this bewildering question, "Why didn't you quote María Lugones in your lecture?" I was appalled and shocked at the audacity of her ignorance! I told her off in no uncertain terms, explaining that María Lugones's decolonial work was

11 María Lugones, Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system (2007).
12 Anibal Quijano, Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America (2000).

based on mine, and that her question was based on a false premise on who is indebted to whom. When I talk about the Brazilian reception of my work, I think I have to start making distinctions because many of the people who deeply appreciate the relevance of my work are Afro-Brazilians. When I asked some of the Afro-Brazilian feminists why it is so important to them, they point out that many of the proliferating theories come from the "Occident" but "when we read your work, we saw ourselves and it started to explain so much." They identify with my ideas and see themselves in my writings. Most of my books, monographs, and anthologies have been translated into Brazilian Portuguese. I continue to get invitations and visit different parts of Brazil to share my work and engage in conversations. I find this development particularly gratifying.

So yes, decolonial discourse has benefitted from my work and the joke is that some of us were doing decolonial before it became trendy. I want to make this point here because I made it about a year ago when a group of decolonial scholars were in conversation with me,[13] and somebody referred to me as a decolonial feminist. They were surprised when I rejected that label. The focus of that rejection was the decolonial, but also the feminist. The reason why I have a problem with the decolonial is that it has become so trendy. It has become so pervasive. The other day I joked that I have to give a lecture titled "What do Africans do when they are NOT decolonizing?"

What do I mean by that? My position is that every time you mention that word "colonial," no matter what prefix or suffix you put in front of it or after it, you reinscribe the white man. That is my problem. I asked the question, "Decolonizing, to what effect? What is the point?" And I came up with this idea that if as Africans we talk about decolonializing, it should not be an end in itself. It is a means to an end. And that end, I stated, is to reclaim our habits of sovereignty. I did not say reclaim our sovereignty, I said our habits of sovereignty, because I feel that discourses of decoloniality take so much agency away from Africans and nonwhite peoples and spaces. When I am drinking from this cup, am I decolonizing? When I do my hair, am I decolonizing? Everything is decolonizing! That takes agency away from Africans because we are portrayed as merely reacting, not acting on our own behalf! When I say the habit of sovereignty, what I want us to reclaim is the understanding that we were once our own agents, our own self-creators, not thinking that all our actions are authored or inspired from elsewhere. Most Africans are still acting on their own behalf today, for good or ill. And, by the way, an African mother birthed humanity.

I also reject the chronology of decolonial feminism saying that, if I am a decolonial feminist, how do I talk about the Mother Deities in Yorubaland who authored humanity and much more? I write about it in *What gender is motherhood?* In fact, in the opening texts, I have a poem of praise of Yeye Osun as the mother of knowledge. If I am a decolonial feminist, where do you put Osun in this discourse? Do we subsume Osun under some white man who came to Africa hundreds of thousands of years after Africans had been in existence? *Homo sapiens* have existed in Africa for at least 200,000 years, and the humans who left Africa we are told migrated only approximately 100,000 years ago. Is that in decolonial time? What do we do with that?

13 The panel discussion took place on January 28, 2024 and was organized by Toyin Falola. The participants were Oyeronke Oyewumi, Julia Suárez-Krabbe, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter Mignolo, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and Shose Kessi.

Those are some of my misgivings about how decolonial is being used. I think that decolonial is so much tied to the experience of mestizos in Latin America. They are descendants of whites, Blacks, and Native Americans. They are a product of colonization and many talk about decolonial as if there is nothing before and outside of colonization. I beg to differ. Focusing on victimization is not enough, we must simultaneously speak about our responsibility to ourselves!

PP: Thank you so much for this critique and for pointing out the place of your work in the history of decolonial thought. Let me add one last question about decolonial feminism. I think what is interesting is the current debate about the position of María Lugones and Rita Segato around gender. We have Lugones saying, with reference to your work, that gender is a product of colonialism and that is exactly how we should treat it, namely as a colonial category. And we have someone like Rita Segato saying, no, we need to keep working with gender, and for this, we need to distinguish between gender relations in low-intensity and high-intensity patriarchy.[14] *That is roughly her way of distinguishing between colonial and precolonial societies. And I was wondering, given that your work is so much associated with that of Lugones, would you also subscribe to the position that we should use "gender" in order to describe how colonialism worked and keeps working? Or do you see a use of gender as an analytical term that goes beyond that, in the way that Segato points to?*

I have no problem with describing a lot of things that are happening today as gendered. And I think that my colonial chapter in which I detail the ways in which gender was absorbed into the society explains my position that, of course, we must take gender seriously today because of its analytical power: It can be used to account for much that is happening in society. No question about it. Especially since gender was used to set up the colonial state, and gender was used to set up schools. My problem starts when things are not historicized. It is necessary to historicize. And it is a very dynamic situation, because things keep changing and then reemerging in all sorts of ways. So much has been created with gender and by gender. You cannot ignore it.

PP: Plus currently, there are these attacks all over the world on gender, which probably changes the way we deal with the term again.

That is what Judith Butler talks about in their latest book.[15]

PP: Exactly. Because the term, as difficult as it is, has been taken away from feminists in the past decades, first by the Vatican, and later by all kind of religious fundamentalists and right-wing politicians and governments.

Yes, no question. And then of course in women's studies, some of the developments in transgender studies have created some internal conflicts in the field. There is a lot going on. It is a very dynamic situation.

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14 Rita Laura Segato, *The critique of coloniality: Eight essays* (2022).
15 Judith Butler, *Who's afraid of gender?* (2024).

PP: Did I get this right that you would say "gender" is a helpful term, we can use it for all kinds of analysis, but we have to historicize it, we cannot universalize it? And there is always a link to colonialism, gender has an intrinsic colonial history. Would you frame it that way?

Yes, I would. I do not know whether there are other societies where you could talk about gender independently of colonialism. Maybe there are. But from where I am standing in Yoruba society, it is clear to me that gender categories were not independent of colonialism. I also know that Hausa language in northern Nigeria betrays gender categories. But I have not traced that history. I am not going to universalize the Yoruba experience. However, what my work does is to draw attention to a notion of gender that is closely tied with colonization, and perhaps it speaks to the depth and layering of the concept even in societies that may have had some gender division earlier on.

SD: At this point, I am thinking of Sylvia Tamale's book Decolonization and Afro-feminism.[16] *She says that there is a need not just to deconstruct gender, colonialism, and coloniality in Africa, we also need to reconstruct African forms of knowledge. But where do you get even the imagination of something prior to Eurocentrism? I think that is where your work is extremely powerful. No matter if it is called decolonial feminism or something else, there is a real need to reinvent knowledge and reconstruct what constitutes understanding of personhood beyond coloniality.*

Thank you. Yes, indeed that is where my work became necessary, even for stoking the imagination. Part of the issue with the prominent Latin American decolonial scholars is that they have to rely on "indigenous societies" in order to make their arguments. They have to go outside of their most immediate communities to "find" and interpret Native American indigenous knowledge. I did not have to go anywhere. One of the things I appreciate in my work is that I analyzed Yoruba societies and probed their imagination. I did not have to invent anything, I merely tried to interpret my findings. Many Yoruba and English bilinguals are unaware of the presence or absence of gender categories in their own language. This lack of perceptiveness occurs because we rarely gave much thought to our own linguistic categories since we were not exposed to the language enough in school. But once they draw their attention to the difference between English and Yoruba gender linguistics, they immediately get it, albeit puzzled as to why such knowledge was not readily available to them.

SD: Actually, a queer African scholar asked me to ask you about sexuality. And I was like, "Yes, but I'll ask her about the erotic, because sexuality is already so fraught with categories." To me, queer studies hold not just that the private is political, but that the intimate, the erotic, and everything that concerns our desires is also relevant. Erotic touch can be part of the spectrum of female friendships alongside marriage and motherhood. Especially if we think that anatomy does not matter beyond the question of procreation, does that not open up new ways of thinking about the erotic and the many possibilities of humans connecting in intimate

16 Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-feminism* (2020).

ways? And that is what the erotic is for me, one way of connecting, whether or not you consume sexual relationships.

I would have to think about it. I have never thought in those terms. In fact, I have done very little work on sexuality, let alone the erotic aspects of it. One question I have been asked with regard to *The invention of women* is why I did not say something about sexuality in Yorubaland. Strangely enough, one scholar accused me of being homophobic, because of my purported omission of sexuality in my account of gender. I had to laugh because sexuality was the last thing on my mind as I conducted my research. It did not come up, probably because I never met a lesbian or a gay man in Yoruba society. I never witnessed queerness.

SD: Maybe they did not show it to you.

Probably. But my point is this, especially since you know the work of Rudolf Gaudio, who worked on Hausa, on *yan daudu*.[17] I grew up in what would be called a Hausa society in Jos, central Nigeria. I regularly saw cross-dressing men and supposed homosexuals called *yan daudu* in public spaces. They are part of an institution in Hausa societies. But I have never observed, seen, or heard about a similar group of transvestites or homosexuals in Yorubaland. The question is why? This apparent difference between Hausa and Yoruba society in regard to the visibility and invisibility of homosexuality respectively is a puzzle.

SD: I think this may be the case because Hausa society is so gendered. The more gendered a society is, the more crossings happen. It is similar in Senegal among the Wolof. Góor-jigéen were seen as feminine men and as such they performed social roles at weddings and funerals and other important events. This does not say anything about their sexual desire. But feminine men, masculine women, as well as trans and nonbinary persons, are often associated with the possibility of so-called same-sex desire, whether or not they consider themselves as being of the same sex as their partners. I am surprised that you are saying that in Yoruba context, there are no such institutions. But maybe it has to do with the fact that Yoruba society has not been as gendered. So there is no need to transcend gender boundaries.

Well, you are confirming something that many of us have thought about. I believe that the presence of cross-dressing *yan daudu* in Hausa society has to do with the strong influence of Islam. It is no secret that Muslim societies exhibit more gender divisions and rigidity in their social organization. I think we can agree on that. Gender segregation and divisions are very strong and visible in Hausaland. For example, I never understood why a five-year-old Muslim girl should be veiled but a boy does not have any such article of clothing. How legitimately sexual is a five-year-old girl? Or even a boy? What I gather from such practices is the unnecessary sexualization of children.

SD: But that is also part of the current backlash, the new conservative ways of Islam.

17 Rudolf Pell Gaudio, *Allah made us: Sexual outlaws in an Islamic African city* (2009).

Yes, there is that too. What would be interesting would be to conduct comparative research at a place like Ilorin in Yorubaland where Islam is quite well rooted and deep. What would one observe and find? I do not know. But I have always felt that the impact of Islam has been deep in creating gender categories, gender divisions, institutions, and behaviors in African societies. A classic example of the social construction of gender, if you ask me.

SD: Let us talk about your book on motherhood.[18] *Your argument is that motherhood is not gendered. Instead, the act of giving birth, the act of bringing forth, has its own standing and spiritual logic.*

Yes.

SD: You are not using the term "motherhood," you are describing Iya. That is very much focused on the act of procreation and the spirituality that comes through the sacredness of the Iya and child. Can you say a little bit more about why you wrote this book in the first place?

As I said earlier, my dissertation, which became the basis of the book *The invention of women*, started as a study of the power of females as exemplified by mothers. Thus, the dissertation was titled *Mothers not women* to show that in Yoruba society, mothers were neither powerless nor subsumed under a subordinated category called women. That was the book I was writing when I started my dissertation. My focus was going to be motherhood precisely because I thought that the way in which the category mother is constructed in Western thought did not make much sense. The idea that mothers are naturally weak and subordinated did not sit well with me. But as I started to write, it became apparent that I could not discuss motherhood without first unpacking gender. I had to set aside topics on motherhood to concentrate on explaining gender first. Thus, the book *The invention of women* was born. But "what gender is motherhood?" was the question that animated me even before the dissertation was written.

SD: For me, the notion of motherhood became important in looking at cross-generational relationships between women, including sexual relationships. Motherhood or sugar motherhood was often a metaphor to talk about intimacies across generations. However, when their love became particularly passionate and romantic, the women tended to reduce, rhetorically, the age difference. They would sometimes refer to an older lover as a sibling, a senior sibling, but still a sibling. It seemed to me that more equality is afforded to siblinghood. And that is why I was also asking why you chose motherhood and not, for instance, siblinghood. I know that you have a critique of sisterhood and that sisterhood is somehow more acceptable to white feminists, whereas there is a bias against motherhood. But I could see abuses in these relationships also, because the "mother"—not the person giving birth but the older lover in a relationship—has more experience, has more seniority, and may therefore also abuse their authority at times. That is another side of motherhood.

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18 Oyeronke Oyewumi, *What gender is motherhood? Changing Yoruba ideals of power, procreation, and identity in the age of modernity* (2016).

Did you read *The politics of passion?*[19] When I met Gloria Wekker, the author of that book, I told her that for me, one of the most fascinating aspects of her research was the extent to which the lesbian community that was the subject of her research was preoccupied, nay, obsessed, with having sex. They seemed to be behaving like stereotypical males in their attitude towards sexual intimacy. She just laughed about my puzzlement.

But the book *What gender is motherhood?* is about procreation, the birthing of a child. Motherhood chose me. I could not focus on siblinghood because my study was about procreation, birthing humans, Yoruba cosmology and the place of mothers in it. In Yoruba cosmology, there is a notion that before each and every one of us comes to Earth, we already exist. And at some point, we kneel before the Creator and choose our destiny. We call it choosing your Ori, literally head, but actually the spiritual "inner head." It means that pre-existing "souls" choose their fate as part of a pro-Earthly ritual as they prepare to come to this human realm. What my work did was to draw attention to the fact that when this Yoruba soul, or whatever you want to call it, is choosing their fate, they choose their mother because there is no way you are going to come to Earth without a mother. I used that to point out that the relationship between a mother and child is pre-Earthly, is gestational. And that in the Yoruba understanding, fatherhood and motherhood are not counterparts, especially because the relationship between the mother and child is so long and deep. It is the European nuclear family that creates the idea that mother and father are counterparts in relation to a child. My understanding of gender is that it is a binary, it is a twosome. I then used that to say that motherhood is not gendered because gender is a binary, but motherhood is singular, it has no equivalent or complement in the Yoruba imagination.

SD: But in the last chapter, you are saying that it is not just biological, that you are thinking it bigger than that. Because not every woman can give birth. Does that mean she cannot become a mother?

I mean, in our societies, oftentimes in the older generation, you do not even know that somebody did not give birth in that so many people are calling this person mother. And such women are no less so. However, the origins of motherhood in Yoruba cosmology that I discuss are spiritual and pre-Earthly, and one cannot pretend that getting pregnant, carrying and birthing a baby are inconsequential. So maybe the question you want to ask is what difference does being a birth mother make among women who are all called mother, after a certain age? There must be one.

SD: How can a woman who does not give birth tap into that power, that social power of motherhood and its matripotency?

Well, good question. Must she tap into that specific form of power? There are other avenues and other kinds of power.

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19 Gloria Wekker, *The politics of passion: Women's sexual culture in the Afro-Surinamese diaspora* (2006).

SD: To be a respectable adult, don't you have to give birth? It seems to be easier if you do give birth. If you are not having your own kids, you have to adopt. At least in Ghanaian society, you have to be a very good person to make up for not having given birth yourself.

You are talking about the contemporary period. In our research, we should be able to account for changes. The point at which giving birth or not looms so large is when women are young. In many communally based African societies in the past, for older women including those who never gave birth, the issue is moot because "mother" became a universal name for women. But of course, this does not address the more personal and psychological aspects.

SD: But the idea that a child or a soul chooses a mother is really powerful.

Yes.

SD: I know quite a few African feminists, Ghanaian and others, who think the imperative of motherhood is also a burden. What if you are not chosen by a soul?

But non-motherhood too is burdensome. C'est la vie! Life is burdensome but few of us want to die young! As to the question of not being chosen as a mother, Yoruba would say it is also related to the destiny that you, the would-be mother, chose when you were choosing your Ori, your destiny.

SD: It also points to the fact that people do egg transplantations to have their DNA in their kids. I mean, it speaks to the fact of how much we are still attached to that kind of biology.

Yes. With the new developments around IVF, surrogate motherhood, and the whole gamut of technologies used in reproduction, so many complex questions are being raised.

SD: In the debate on queer parenting, people mostly talk about how to get pregnant or how to get hold of kids, how to become a parent. But then the whole process of raising, of caring, of nurturing is often not in the picture. At least, that is my impression, that sometimes it stops there and we do not continue to think motherhood beyond that moment of conception and giving birth.

As one colloquial saying, which I cannot date, goes: "The woman who gives birth, thoughts of children will be the death of her." Similarly, "The woman who does not give birth, thoughts of children will be the death of her." The aphorism speaks to the burden that children represent in society and in the imagination.

PP: What I found really striking in your work on motherhood is that it points out how much everything changes if we put motherhood at the center of things. The term "matripotency" that you use is powerful because it brings up a structural element. You ask why we do not see motherhood as something that incorporates strength and can be made visible in the political sphere and in the economic sphere. And you observe how in the West, women try to hide

being mothers because it makes them look unprofessional. You bring to the surface how much motherhood in Western societies is degraded, pushed to the side, and seen as something you better not relate to. Whereas the term "matripotency" makes a structural change thinkable on the material and the symbolic level.

Yeah, motherhood is foundational for the organization of society. And if you go into the story of human origins, that is the foundation. That is why I always found it strange that you could push it aside, and you could marginalize it. Motherhood is the foundation of society. That is what I was trying to get to with matripotency. I was looking for a concept to capture the spiritual, the symbolic, whatever. I do not know whether you are familiar with the fact that Ifi Amadiume wrote a new book.

SD: No.

We all should go read it.

SD: What is the title?

African possibilities: A matriarchitarian perspective for social justice.[20] In it, she has this concept that she uses throughout the book, matriarchitarian. We should all study it. The fact that Ifi Amadiume has a new book is a big deal. But nobody knows about it, unlike Judith Butler, whose new book *Who's afraid of gender?* is being reviewed everywhere. There was a lot of hullabaloo about it in the press. Ifi Amadiume is an important scholar who had been silent for a while. So the fact that she wrote another book should have been met with a lot of fanfare and curiosity. Amadiume's book *Male daughters, female husbands* was written in 1987. Judith Butler's *Gender trouble* came out in 1990. Seniority should mean something!

SD: I think it also has to do with disciplinarity, she is an anthropologist. And as soon as you focus on detailed ethnographic work, you may not be considered a theorist any more.

I think she is quite interdisciplinary. She was in the department of religion. And she has written about human rights.

SD: And she is one of the few African anthropologists. Because understandably, many Africans do not want to do anthropology.

PP: Let me ask a final question, if I may. What is, according to you, the future of feminist theory or gender theory?

What is feminist theory, what is gender theory? More recently, I have been discovering the origin of the concept of gender in the West; apparently It was tied to queerness and race.

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20 Ifi Amadiume, *African possibilities: A matriarchitarian perspective for social justice* (2024).

Consider Zine Magubane's work as a sociologist and a theorist. She has a couple of papers that are interesting and enlightening. In one of them, she talks about the origins of the gender concept in the writings of Dr. John Money, the psychologist, who published on gender in the 1950s.[21] And then of course, the way in which the concept was related to intersex people, and a whole lot of it was also tied to race, racialization, and racism. In American society, and in American sexology, she argued that those who were identified as intersex, were horrifically recreated as male or female in a bid to maintain a binarized gender system. But the whole process of "sex correction" was focused on white babies, on white people, not on Black people. According to Magubane, in the white community and the way in which the society is organized based on gender, it became crucial to maintain the binary and to "correct" those who do not fit into the binary because so much was at stake: the right to vote, the right to inheritance. Those things were crucial and informed why correcting intersex was important for white bodies. It did not matter for Blacks since they did not enjoy any rights. I find this line of research very fascinating and illuminating.

PP: Keeping the binary in place.

Keeping the binary. But for Black bodies, it did not matter. They had no access to property. They were not going to vote anyway. And there was already something defective about Blacks as Black. There is that literature that I am just finding now. Even from the very beginning, the way in which gender was used in United States discourse was tied to issues of race.

PP: The future of gender theory is, according to you, that we need to rewrite the history of gender theory and its relation to race?

We need to understand so much more. I have also been reflecting on current issues concerning race and Africa. When you look at what is going on in the Olympics and how they suddenly discovered two African women in the Olympics who have high levels of testosterone, you have to wonder by whose standards. Christine Mboma and Beatrice Masilingi, the two Namibian teenagers, never knew that they were not woman enough! I wonder whether they even knew what testosterone was when they were rudely yanked from their Olympic events. They were going about their daily lives. And when they started running at the Olympic level, they were accosted and forcibly tested to check their levels of testosterone. And then they were suddenly declared ineligible for some track events.

My question is: Why this gross violation of their personhood and human rights? And who is speaking up for them? At one level, those kinds of incidents tie up with the notion that African women, Black women, are not women enough. Yet we gave birth to humanity! So there are a whole lot of things opening up that we, especially Africans, need to be conscious of, and must research. Why was South African runner Caster Semenya accepted in her village but rejected in the global arena? Why were these Africans accepted in their local context, when in the

21 Zine Magubane, Spectacles and scholarship: Caster Semenya, intersex studies, and the problem of race in feminist theory (2014).

international setting they were not going to be allowed to be themselves? I have so many more questions about gender!

PP: Thanks so much for this wonderful conversation.

I am glad we were able to do this. And I appreciate your interest in my work.

The conversation took place online on December 4, 2024.

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