

ACUSAfrica Colloquium

Gqebhera, 2-4 November 2022

Session 4: Black Feminism and Critical University Studies

Provocation by Prof Shirley Anne Tate

Disputation by Dr Alude Mahali

In the spirit of the colloquium theme and this notion of the increasing de-politicisation of the university, I want to tell another story. A story of the focused politicisation of the university and all its workings, being driven by Black women. I've been interrogating contemporary African feminisms in recent work and there are 2 moments that catalysed this charge for me.

On 22 March 2016 I attended a panel discussion at the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York City, titled 'Standing in Formation'. This was a play on the recently released Beyoncé song, Formation (2016), in which the singer asks that we "ladies, get in formation" – both a call to assemble but also a charge to empower ourselves with information (I say 'our' as a black woman who writes largely about and for black women). The conversation that unfolded was a candid exploration of the need for a political, historical and contemporary justice-focused analysis on the state of black women and girls in the United States of America. The panel boasted a range of prominent black women from academia and civil society who approached the topics of race, feminism, human rights and social justice challenges from their varied professional backgrounds. However, there was undeniable similarity in their offerings: the increased desire (by/from black women) to connect with other black women for identification, promotion of wellbeing, protection and love. The audience was filled with an erudite and expressive panoply of black girls/women voicing the importance of solidarity between and recognition for black women: it was truly a night of #BlackGirlMagic. As I listened to each speaker I started to draw parallels between what I saw and heard was beginning to happen in America, and what I see and hear is simultaneously beginning to happen in South Africa.

Many of these collectives have been at the centre of leading the charge around confronting the structural and social implications of racism in SA, and I believe that the Fees Must Fall (and all of the fallist movements that fall under this broad umbrella) protests were part of the impulse and urgency around the increasing visibility of black women centred collectives. What the Rhodes Must Fall and later the Fees Must Fall movements did was stimulate complex debates about power, class, and neo-liberalism, but more significantly these debates allowed black feminists especially to carefully position themselves (Lewis, 2016:9). What a deliberately feminist positioning permitted was a sense of organising and building that could bridge the tension between BC and feminism. In other words, patriarchy became as critical as race because, as thought leader Panashe Chigumadzi (2016) writes in response to black men hijacking the student protests: "to black patriarchs, black women are just a source of labour in the struggle of black men to attain equal status with white men". This is the double-bind that black feminist students were vigilant about, i.e. "having to be black or woman first" (Chigumadzi, 2016). Lorde already warned against this in *Sister Outsider* (1984:64), stating "Black men will view sexism and the destruction of Black women as tangential to Black liberation rather than as central to that struggle."

The message is clear: it is our time to speak for ourselves, claim our own spaces and find ways, within those spaces, to destabilise aspects of structural violence that see black women at the bottom of the barrel. There is newfound power and urgency in contemporary black feminisms. It is not necessarily

the feminist ethos that is new, but it is the kind of audaciousness that young black girls and women are bringing to their already existing feminist activism and socio-cultural spaces that is new.

The hashtag #BlackGirlMagic has become a tool that black women use globally to explain the ways in which recognition of black merit intersects with social justice, promotes positive acknowledgement and celebrates the physical beauty of black women in a world that would otherwise objectify and invisibilise the black and brown female body and mind (Kennedy, 2016). #BlackGirlMagic is a virtual space that is attempting to alter the flawed dominant narrative that exalts white supremacy as definitive. It posits that since our (black women's) shared humanity has proven historically insufficient, then perhaps it is time to identify and moreover revel in what is distinctive, sufficient and 'magic' about black girls and women. #BlackGirlMagic as a politics of recognition is a claim for social justice wherein "assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect" and instead "the distinctive perspectives of ethnic, 'racial,' and sexual minorities, as well as of gender difference" are privileged (Fraser, 1996:3). As writer Kennedy McDaniel (2016) asserts: Every Black woman who I have witnessed taking part in Black girl magic has gone or is continuing to go through the deeply personal task of ridding their minds and souls of the omnipresent and oppressive grasp of white supremacy. My personal belief is that every Black woman must go on this journey in order to empower herself and gain freedom from an ingrained social hierarchy that has placed Black women at the bottom.

Black women during and after the 2015 student protests recognised that they must choose themselves first – place themselves at the top of the hierarchy – against Lorde's argument that "there is no hierarchy of oppression". Consequently, for these collectives it is not a matter of choosing between Blackness and Womanhood, instead it is about choosing Black Womanhood. These are the reasons that a space like FBGO – who make it clear on their Facebook page that they are "a pro-Black; pro-Women feminist movement for Black women ONLY, that is deliberately and unapologetically committed to the upliftment of Black women" – even exists today, for instance (FBGO, 2016). Or the 11 member iQhiya collective, who are described as "the recently formed collective of young black female artists that is taking on the white boys club that is the South African art world" (Leiman, 2016). The iQhiya collective is made up of 11 members who met during their undergraduate and graduate years at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art. Some have gone on to become professional artists, while others are still completing graduate school. iQhiya cite the glaring lack of recognition of black women artists in SA's art landscape as the reason for uniting. iQhiya points to the irony of forming a collective in order for their individual practices to be recognised, yet despite frustration being the original catalyst for joining forces, the women have since realised the significance of coming together as a collective of black women artists and the influence they now wield. Similarly, the Feminist Stokvel, a group of eight accomplished black women, came together in 2014 because they wanted to create a space where black women "can feel safe to speak freely" (Bongela, 2015).

The second sort of catalysing moment for me were those pictures of Nompheulo and Shaera that day of the massive march to...

It is hard to forget the often-circulated images of Nompheulo Mkhathshwa on the day of the march to Luthuli House. In the images she stands with both her arms raised, hands balled up into fists, a green and gold ANC-logo-covered iQhiya wrapped around her head and her eyes downcast. She looks visibly exhausted but not beaten, weary but stoic. She stands as a part of the group, but she is clearly leading. To her left stands Shaera Kalla. Closely behind them are thousands of young people marching to Luthuli House to deliver a memorandum of demands to government. The images were replicated and disseminated many times over and became somewhat iconic. Both Shaera and Nompheulo became instant media darlings, covering national magazines, being interviewed on national television

and radio shows. Nompandolo was hailed as the second coming of the likes of struggle stalwarts Lilian Ngoyi and Winnie Mandela (Cele 2015). She was celebrated for some time before stories of political collusion began to erupt (Whittles 2016). The aim is not to throw Nompandolo's name into disrepute but rather to highlight the incongruence of one inspiring young black womxn being celebrated as the audacious face of FMF, against the day-to-day incidents being reported by womxn who were doing the less glamorous footwork. These incidents included stories of male-controlled intimidation, sexual assault, violence, police brutality and stories of trans and queer womxn feeling marginalised in the movement. What is more, even though Nompandolo catapulted to fame, there were those men in the movement – supposed allies – who struggled with the notion of 'getting behind a woman'. This was articulated by former WITS student Pontsho Pilane, who during the protests, recalled how one black male protester shouted: 'we won't be told by a woman!' and several other black male protestors said that 'feminism must voetsek' when Nompandolo addressed them (Pilane 2015).

While womxn have played an important role before, during and after South Africa's democratic transition, the side-lining and abuse of black womxn is not unusual where gender issues have historically taken a backseat to race issues and class often seems to be hidden behind both gender and race in revealing ways (Seidman 1999, 287). In many ways this tendency was replicated during the 2015–2016 student movements except now, young black womxn student activists are deliberate in insisting on an intersectional approach to mobilising, that is, one that recognises how variables such as gender, disability or sexual orientation work together in either enabling or incapacitating access and opportunities. Additionally, these young black womxn activists are calling for an end to misogynoir, that is, the particular racialized sexism that black womxn face that 'has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world' (Bailey and Trudy 2018, 2). This decided positioning was embodied by the #MbokodoLeadUs and #PatriarchyMustFall campaigns.

Indeed, these largely black feminist offshoots began to recognise that RMF and later FMF were reproducing suffering by becoming increasingly sexist, violent and exclusionary. Mbali Matandela, one of the founders of PMF writes: We began speaking up at meetings about what it means to be a black womxn or LGBTQIA people in an institution that still celebrates misogyny and white supremacy...we knew how easily patriarchy can dominate any context, even protests about equal rights... people will look back at this movement one day and see how a small group of black feminists changed the politics of a black consciousness space – a space that has previously excluded these populations. They will remember how black womxn and members of the LGBTQIA community became valued members of one of the most important movements in the university's history. (Matandela 2015) Patriarchy Must Fall (PMF) was formed some months after RMF when a group of feminists from UCT became acutely aware of the predominantly black male leadership governing RMF.

What is significant about this contemporary moment is the special brand of African feminism being fashioned by young black womxn: we have seen through use of their bodies, audacious protest, poignant imagery, knowledge production about African feminisms, poetry and music. The use of these creative methodologies is not necessarily new, but what is different about today is that the young black womxn agitating for change in these protest spaces now have access to a range of feminist literatures and so their interventions are rooted in a feminist understanding of their modern condition. Access to relevant literature, social media and the use of creative interventions now see these young black womxn activists crafting a new range of feminist understandings that are altering the ways in which they demonstrate. The demand now is that response to these issues be inclusive and safeguard the interests of black womxn, not as an afterthought but as central to movement structures.