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DISCIPLINING THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

Learning Feminism in Africa and the United States

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having the cultural competencies that could comfort me as a representative of black culture, yet clearly being a part of the community, I did not think of being black as I do now as related to the specific heritage of black American culture. I saw race primarily in terms of the black body and of racism, racism based on the abnegation of the black body—color, form, face, and hair. From outside my community, my body was racialized in pernicious ways. Inside the black community, it was again the body that defined me—this time in terms of gender and sexuality. Management of the black female body was at the core of my identity.

For me, the care and discipline of the body were established interculturally, through the multiple and overlapping discourses and communities or “part societies” of which I was a member. For example, in 1957 when I was twelve going on twenty, the Soviet Union’s launching of its *Sputnik* satellite pushed me to pit mind versus body as I studied science and craved a soft feminine vulnerability in the shadow of Marilyn Monroe. At the same time, I ran away from the images of savage Africans that were exploding in mass media, especially the Mau Mau in the colonial uprising in Kenya, and embraced racial uplift through education and civic duties. At home my family profited from the gains of blacks in organized labor unions, and in my social life I flirted with boys as I confronted the evils of sexuality. My subjectivity, my sense of myself as a person, and my existence as a subject in the world were constructed through the conjunction of ideas, meanings, images, discourses, and actions emanating from different social and cultural domains.

This conjunction or intersection I call interculturality—a way of describing the borderland, but not only between different communities and “part societies.” Interculturality also refers to the intersection of different forms of knowledge and experience, and deployments and effects of power. Using this term is a recognition that society and culture can be fragmentary, multivocal, and emergent and that contradictions and tensions are continually negotiated and manipulated by actors in society. The individual, the social agent or actor, is a product of culture and produces culture. An individual’s subjectivity is determined by that which he or she is subject to (such as laws, language, and stories) and that which he

Coming of age in a black segregated community in Virginia in the 1950s, I felt out of step with the world around me, but I knew that I was with my people, that my ship would rise or fall with the tide of black folk. I was not good at verbal games or physical games, I hated going to church, and while I liked music and dancing, I could not carry a tune and my dancing was more enthusiastic than polished. Although I joined social clubs and civic organizations, became a spokesperson for my school and community, and was praised for my academic achievement, I still felt bad because I was not good at what so many others could do with easy pleasure. Not

or she is subject of (such as personal decisions, actions, and stories). What holds together fragmentary cultures and part societies? I find the term *discourse* useful for thinking about linkages and articulations within and across "part societies."¹

Part societies I think of as the space beyond the borderlands, where the center does, if only momentarily, hold. The idea is that there may be some degree of coherence in fragmented social fields. For me, discourse is a way of talking about social and cultural processes that link disparate ideas, resources, rules, persons, and institutions in an open interactional field, constituting the field, defining the elements of the field, the range of accepted behavior as well as the modes of resistance, and emphasizing the reality of power in the construction of what is and can be done and known. Fragmented planes of human interaction, interactional fields, intersect. Whatever unity is achieved must come through various kinds of linkages and articulations. Surely, violence and coercion play a part in the maintenance of loosely integrated systems, as do hegemonic consent, media, communications technology, transportation systems, and social inertia. The state of the world's economy, military and trade alliances, wars and treaties, ecological and ethnic group movements can be forces for change and for conservatism. There are many different kinds of articulations, not all of them compatible, that pull together fragments and partial societies; discourse analysis is but one method of finding connecting threads.

This chapter is an opportunity for me to look back on my own process as a black feminist anthropologist, to show how my early experiences influenced my work as an anthropologist and how my work as an anthropologist influenced my feminism. I categorize my work as black feminist anthropology because I allow my consciousness as a black woman to influence how I think through research problematics regarding gender. It is not just gender consciousness that makes my work feminist but a commitment to understanding and undermining sexism. Sexism goes hand in glove with other inequalities in society, and my work seeks to bring to light the intersection of inequalities through an examination of discourses of subordination and domination, showing how gender distinctions are created with and through wide-ranging power differentials, especially in regard to race, sex, and class.²

I am indebted to issues raised early in the development of feminist anthropology for directing the questions that I ask: Michelle Rosaldo's caution that the status and power of women must be seen in relation to the forms of inequalities that men suffer and Eleanor Leacock's insistence that the mode of production regulates women's status and power greatly influenced my approach to feminist anthropology.³ In the decades that followed these works, feminist anthropologists have turned from production to consumption, from status to performance, and from essentialist notions of the female body to social constructions of gender. Feminist anthropologists, for whom gender is defined by power differentials in competing and overlapping sociocultural domains, have studied the different ways men's and women's bodies signify race, suffer capitalist exploitation, perform sexually, and are inscribed by the powers of the state. In this chapter, I discuss my early adolescence, showing the ways in which intersecting domains or discourses contributed to my own bodily discipline.⁴ In truth, that meditation on my life has been so constructed because of what I learned using a similar approach in the study of colonial discourse in Kenya.

When I first went to the field in Kenya in 1971, I was prepared to find individuals caught between competing demands derived from their cultural and social systems, to understand internal diversity, and to note the influences from outside the community and the nation. Curiously, what I was not prepared for was how important gender differences were. My grappling to understand the differences it made to see Kikuyu society from a woman's perspective was as crucial to my becoming a black feminist anthropologist, as were my determination for equal rights for women and my sense of outrage at male domination. For me it took a discovery of gender in the field to uncover my own subjugated knowledge, and it took feminist scholarship to help me articulate the intersections of race and gender in shaping who I am and the theories that I choose.

Feminist anthropology helped me grasp that it is the social construction of gender that is at stake in production and reproduction, and that gender, like kinship, emerges from an interactional field in which biology is just one of the constraining and empowering resources.⁵ Feminist scholars underscored that women must be

apprehended through gender plus race, class, and sexuality.⁶ I was especially interested in understanding the power of sexuality in shaping the person and society. Too often sexuality is understood as a subset of gender, obscuring the ways in which sexual categories and practices contravene notions of gender and blocking apprehension of the role of sexuality in itself in the social construction of the person. During the consciousness-raising seventies, like many women I also came to see that private experiences had public consequences: construing the personal as political, we broke down the barriers separating private hurts and social norms.

What I present here is an autoethnography, an ethnography of myself, or a psychosocial history. Like any history, it is teleological. I am looking back to explain the present moment—my existence as a feminist anthropologist—and with that in mind I highlight those moments of the past that seem most relevant to the present. This does not mean that I will find everything that went into making me a feminist anthropologist or that what I find is actually the most significant. My story, like any life history, could be told in many different ways. What I leave out in this process of selection, reinterpretation, remembering, and forgetting may actually carry weight equal to or more than what is included here—I am not sure that I am the best interrogator of my own life. Ten years from now in a different historical and theoretical moment, my story might look quite different. And so, in this chapter, for this moment, I address how I was constructed through intercultural processes, discuss my becoming a feminist anthropologist, and reflect on my work with African women.

MARILYN MONROE, MAU MAU, "SPUTNIK," AND ME

When I was a girl, I dreaded playing the dozens. Growing up in the 1950s in a black community in the Tidewater area of Virginia, I was not afraid that the game of escalating insults would turn into a physical fight. I was afraid that I would not be quick enough with a retort. Fortunately I was not often called on or "called out" in this game. But it was not just the dozens, but "signifyin'," hand clapping games, jump rope games—a whole repertoire of verbal skills and athletic abilities that eluded me. I did not have the cul-

tural competencies often taken for granted in the black community. Friends and relatives, adults and children teased me for being awkward and uncoordinated. I was "big for my age," "goose-necked," and had a "liar's gap" in my teeth. While teachers praised me as bright and articulate, I had no street smarts, and I was a disaster on the playground. In elementary school, I achieved distinction as everybody's friend, a good public speaker, and an "A" student. The body was important, but I could not win with it.

My world was made up of black people. Racial segregation was the law of the land: all of my schools in Virginia were segregated, and Jim Crow laws regulated access to public facilities and accommodations. Although there was a drugstore run by whites not far from my house, most of the white people I saw were on television. Most of my neighbors had working-class families like my own, but there were a few schoolteachers and nurses in my immediate community. My mother and father both worked. My father was a longshoreman, and his union card placed him in an elite blue-collar category that never failed to distinguish me as privileged.

Most of the women I knew were working mothers, and their older children had considerable responsibilities for younger brothers and sisters. We went to black doctors and lawyers, but some people speculated that white lawyers would be less likely to cheat you and that maybe white doctors were better trained. Feelings that we were second-class citizens getting the worst from the United States competed with a sense of ourselves as a strong community, lifting ourselves up from being field hands and tenant farmers, enjoying the prosperity of the United States. The intersection of the domain of rights, codified in legal, political, and civil rights and expressed through discourses of racial subordination and resistance, and the domain of wealth shaped by the strength of the economy and the differential access to and control over economic resources created the bumpy terrain that we traversed daily.

When I went to junior high school, my world widened. I came into contact with a broader range of black people—boys and girls living on one of the last plantations in Virginia, children of the black middle and upper classes, teachers who had gone to school with whites in the North, and school principals and guidance counselors determined to prove that we were as good as or better than

any white person. When the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik I*, I was twelve years old in the eighth grade. Shortly thereafter my segregated high school began dividing students into "tracks," and I was put on the college prep track. The goal of the United States—a goal so pervasive that funds to support it trickled down to a black high school in the South—was to build the country's math and science resources so that it could never be bested by the communists again.

This tracking led to my getting an enriched education and constant attention from teachers and guidance counselors. When I wanted to drop out of typing because I was hopelessly awkward, my parents were called to school and told the importance of my knowing how to type when I went on to college. In the school cafeteria, when I struggled with using a knife and fork to cut my chicken, my geometry teacher quietly showed me how. When I came to school in a tight sweater with a heavy pendant nestled between my breasts, the guidance counselor called me into his office to tell me that I, especially, should not wear revealing and sexy clothes. As I developed into a woman, the staff at school worried that I would be lost to sexuality and pregnancy. And well they should have worried.

Around the same time that I was helping increase the United States' math and science war chest, my own chest was growing. I was alternately thrilled and embarrassed. For me, mind and body were in opposition, as they also had been for my mother: my grandmother had yanked her out of school in the eighth grade after my mother had had her first gentleman caller—"You can't see boys and go to school," my grandmother had said. I had shown through my awkwardness, my total lack of athletic skills, that body was not my thing; would I as a teenager rebel and find sex the one physical area for easy pleasure? No, I didn't want to be loose, but I did want to be attractive, to be alluring, with a teenage intensity unmatched by any in adulthood.

Could I be smart and sexy? To answer that question, I had all the images and representation of women around me. The image of Marilyn Monroe was everywhere, sporting a soft pink comeliness that I knew was out of my reach but fantasized about. Another "double M," Moms Mabley, a raunchy and raw black comedienne whose records we secretly enjoyed, was more available

as a cultural type. What I wanted to know as a young black girl was whether I had to trade the sense of myself as soft and vulnerable for the hard-edged raunchiness that the popular mainstream media and we ourselves often associated with black women. In contrast, Dorothy Dandridge, an icon of brown-skinned beauty in the fifties, was one of my idols. Magnificent in *Carmen Jones*, she was smart, sexy, but tragically brought down by her own pleasures. Eartha Kitt seemed cut from the same mold. Only recently in thinking back over this time period did I realize that Lena Horne was also an available role model. And when I think about this, I realize that it was easier to pretend to be Marilyn Monroe than to envy the icy beauty of Lena Horne. In doing that I would be admitting that I wanted light skin and entry into the black upper classes—that was nothing to play with. Lena Horne's almost white beauty was a real impossibility, too painful to imagine.

My sense of myself as a woman was not constructed only through mass media. But if I were looking in my community for women who thought of themselves as good women and as sexual, then my task was once again well nigh impossible. I had before me in my community many positive role models and some equally eloquent negative role models of what it meant to be a woman. On the plus side were the mothers of the church, the working mothers, the teachers, the scout leaders, the women of the lodges and secret societies, and the storytellers, entertaining us well into the night. On the negative side were the drunks, the women who ran off with other women's husbands, the women who stayed with men who beat them, the women who gave all their money to men, and the women who stayed at home and did not have paid employment. This last group—I only knew one—was acting like they were white, we thought. What black woman with any gumption would just stay at home? Good women worked, I knew that, but were good women also sexy? Did good women enjoy sex? I knew that they had children, but what about sexual pleasure?

Given the heavy doses of sexuality in rhythm and blues music popular in my community at the time, it was not as though sex were hidden. But rather that sex was naughty, downright bad. Some women rejoiced in that badness, but in my family, sex was the original sin, one of the ways that evil is expressed in the world.

The closest I ever came to knowing what ecstatic enjoyment was, was in the church when floods of emotion would overtake women as they "got happy" during a sermon or hymn: their hands and feet would fly in all directions, their bodies would arch, and then they would collapse in exhaustion. It was expected (all in the passive voice) that girls would not have sex until after they married, but if they did and got pregnant, they were never turned out. In fact, with motherhood, they were likely to be accepted into the family as adults and their children treated as though they were their brothers and sisters. One way of thinking about this is that sex was represented through two opposing discourses: the first, sex is dangerous—destructive of the moral fiber—and the second, sexual intercourse is inevitable, and the products of sex, children, are loved and valued.

Discipline of the black female body brought together contradictory discourses from many domains, including religious ideas about original sin, the sanctity of marriage and the blessing of children, and popular representations of the black women as sexually available and as workhorses. Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, pits the black woman as mule against woman's desire for tenderness and sexual fulfillment.⁷ The interactional field in which the black female body is disciplined includes the limitations on women's social and physical mobility as well as racial segregation. This field includes women's economic and psychological constraints and resources and the push and pull of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces.

With sexuality constructed through contradictory and incompatible discourses, actors must navigate their own way. Normalizing tendencies help define core sexual relations as legal, monogamous, heterosexual, and fruitful, but the margins include expression of dissident sexualities, including but not limited to gay and lesbian, commercial, nonmonogamous, single motherhood, and celibacy.⁸ While I wanted to be sexy and alluring, I was constrained by my need for social approval in the black community and by my fear of mistreatment at the hands of whites who would see me as a workhorse or a whore. This demanded dignified, circumspect dress and public demeanor. In private, "A" student that I was, I found ways of resisting the control of my body as representative of the

race and the use of my body for political statements about the goodness of black-skinned women.

Modesty and virtue are masked by dark skin. Harryette Mullen in her work on American slave narratives suggests that it is the inability of dark skin to redden in a blush that, from a white perspective, denies modesty, virtue, and innocence to the darker races.⁹ A recent documentary film on the racist Aryan white power movement in the United States uses the phrase "blood in the face" as its title, connoting the importance placed on reddened skin as a sign of the honor of whiteness. This is particularly crucial to women whose honor is vested in control of the body, in maintaining an inviolate body. With slavery and the rape of enslaved black women as originary or foundational in the production of African Americans, the skin of the black women in the context of the slave master's sexual violation showed no signs of modesty. (Enslaved women's bodies often bore marks of the lash but no demure blush.) The white veneration of modesty and its display in young women were underscored in a study of blushing in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, where one can find "a narrative event in the coming of a blush," revealing what a young woman knows of love and the expectations of marriage.¹⁰

The face should show what is on the inside. Black American composer Fats Waller aptly captures the problematic for blacks of the relationship between the inside and the outside in his composition "Black and Blue," which asks, "What did I do to be so black and blue?" The reply: "I'm white, white inside, but that don't help my case, cuz I can't hide what is on my face." What is on my face? Political statements and moral precepts written in skin color and facial features. What is on my face? Eyes (bulging or squinting), nose (big, wide, open), teeth (gapped, bucked), jaw (protruding, square), forehead (sloping, wide)—all make statements about sensuality, poverty, intelligence, brutality, and honesty. Racial aesthetics are a part of discourses of domination and subordination through which black bodies, male and female, are disciplined.

While I was imagining a soft, seductive femininity in black, popular media presented the figure of the black man as dangerous or a dupe. In 1957, Virginia was in the midst of "massive resistance" to school integration; public schools were shut down to avoid racial

integration. Editorials condemning the Civil Rights movement, said to be communist-inspired, filled white newspapers in my hometown. National media based in the North self-righteously decreed that the South had a problem with race, while right there in national magazines like *Newsweek* and *Time* were representations of Kenyan "tribesmen" as, at first, dupes of communists and then as Mau Mau savages.¹¹ The Kenyan Mau Mau movement contained many contradictions, but it was essentially an anticolonial movement that started after World War II and was crushed by the British military even as Kenya moved toward independence. American discourse on Mau Mau joined together three great fears of white America in the fifties: blacks who did not stay in their place, the incursion of communism, and unbridled sexuality.

In the U.S. print news media during 1952–1960, Mau Mau synedochically stood for all black people, and especially for American blacks as we began to make moves to change the status quo—from integration of the armed forces to school desegregation to the Civil Rights movement. Discourses on Mau Mau resonated with competing American tropes on the naturalness of racial hatred, the communist threat to racial harmony, the inferiority of the Negro, and the limits of education. As the American press took up the colonialists' cause in the fight against Mau Mau in the 1950s, racial and cold war politics merged to construct Mau Mau as a threat to the civilized world of Western democracies, coming from the dissatisfied lower classes and races who were stirred up by communist agitators. The representation of Mau Mau as degenerate, violent, oversexed, concentrating on bloody Mau Mau oaths instead of political analysis—all point to the image of "the Negro" as essentially primitive, despite the best intentions of Western civilization.

I came to know Kenya during this period, and I got the message that the progress that had been brought to Africa by British education and civilization was halted by the senseless, superstitious violence of Mau Mau. White America was worried that education, even in integrated schools, would not go deep enough to touch the licentiousness of black women or the savagery of black men.

While a member of a segregated black community and a young "lady" who tried to live up to that community's strict codes for a

good and moral person, I was also constructed as scientist and savage, vulnerable and hard, American and suspect. These various constructions of self emanated from discourses of competing and overlapping domains of society. I was, in effect, a member of several local communities and "part societies," crisscrossing black and white America. As I grew older, my experiences within black communities, in the South, in the North, in the Midwest and on the West Coast, on city streets and in suburban homes, in lesbian and heterosexual groupings, and in Muslim and Christian gatherings—experiences as a "bookish" outsider in almost all these environments—have directed my theoretical attention to the internal diversity within black communities and the crosscurrents of contradictory beliefs and ideas that are continually renegotiated in social interactions.

There are varieties of black cultures in the United States; as black communities differ, so will black culture. The amazing similarities of blacks in the United States are as much a result of the impact of the social and cultural domination of whites as of the cultural identities forged in those communities. Persisting throughout the variation of black cultures are contradictory beliefs and ideas that individuals negotiate in conjunction with equally contradictory beliefs and ideas from outside those communities. As a young woman, I viscerally felt what it was like to be at the nexus of competing discourses and social expectations. In Kenya I sympathized with individuals similarly caught between worlds.

GENDER IN THE FIELD AND FEMINISM IN THE SEVENTIES

I chose to study the Kikuyu in Kenya for two main reasons: because I wanted to understand the other side of the people who brought the world Mau Mau, and because I wanted to see the effects of racism in a former white settler colony. During my first extended ethnographic fieldwork during 1971–1972, I lived among the Kikuyu about fifty miles north of Nairobi, Kenya. My dissertation research focused on the relationship between kinship and politics in this community that had given the world the fierce image of Mau Mau anticolonialists in the 1950s. My book, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race,*

Sex, and Class in Kenya, gives a fuller development of that research and of some of the theoretical, historical, and ethnographic material contained in this chapter.¹²

Briefly, the Kikuyu, one of the major ethnic groups in Kenya, live primarily in villages and towns in the foothills of Mt. Kenya, although many men and women have for generations lived in Nairobi and other urban centers in the country. An area with long-established labor migration, the rural countryside, where women work family farms, is overwhelmingly populated by married women, children, and older men. Before the colonial period, Kikuyu were polygynous, patrilineal, with a predominant pattern of patrilocality, although tenancy with distant relatives and nonrelatives was widely practiced.¹³ In the past, clan ties and age grades based on male and female initiation ceremonies brought these widely scattered people together.¹⁴

Today, for women, income-generating cooperatives, community-building organizations, and social clubs, and for men, political parties and local beer halls perform some of the same integrative functions. Although Kikuyu men and women jointly participated in some activities, and either men or women could hold certain leadership positions, Kikuyu conceived of their system as one in which women were excluded from political decision-making. Women were expected to defer to their husbands, to contribute to family subsistence, to cook and participate in the maintenance of home, to provide primary child care, and to conduct themselves with dignity so as to honor their natal and marital lineages.

Concentrating on an analysis of social processes, my research endeavored to elucidate the effects of the involvement of Kikuyu in wider political and economic networks, to reveal the variability and openness of African communities, and to assess structural and incidental change over time. This Marxist-influenced problematic led to queries about conflict, contradiction, dialectics, economic determination, and social transformation. Processual analysis deals with the relationship between structure and agency, but it focuses on the social system.¹⁵ In this approach, people are thought to be pulled in multiple directions by competing organizing principles such as kinship loyalty and patron-client relationships. As people

literally and metaphorically make decisions, they are shaped by and help reconfigure their social systems.

In 1971, I did not go into the field looking to understand gender relations. What surprises me as I reflect on that period of my life was my ability to keep my awareness of gender as a major force in my life separate from my interest in understanding organizing principles that shaped society in Kenya. A story I often tell about my fieldwork is that I learned about gender in the field, at twenty-six years of age. I learned about the importance of gender from trying to come to grips with an obstreperous daughter-in-law in the family I lived with. I'll call her Eunice. Eunice was a nurse, trained wholly in Kenya, and a young mother who continually upset everyone's expectations of her as a kinswoman. She always went outside the expected norms to achieve her ends. Presenting herself as a "modern" woman, Eunice was disrespectful to her mother-in-law; she was disloyal to her own mother; she argued publicly with her husband; and she was exploitative of the young women from her mother's family who took care of her house and child. I did not like her.

Having been trained to look for individual negotiations within systemic variation, I was not surprised to find that Eunice, the daughter-in-law, could manipulate cultural rules and understandings. The daughter in the family I lived with also had her own way of doing things. A high school graduate, she had had a child out of wedlock, and her parents were, she believed, greedily holding off on the wedding until the bridewealth transactions were completed. This daughter had no qualms about using covert methods to achieve her ends, including involving me in surreptitious appeals to her father and father's brother to speed up the bridewealth negotiations. She would massage the system to get what she wanted. Eunice was different—her actions protested the unfairness of her situation, and she loudly proclaimed when she was mistreated as a wife, daughter, or daughter-in-law. This daughter-in-law was not just being the obstinate bride trying to get her way. Eunice was asserting a right for self-determination within her marriage and within her natal and her husband's families. One New Year's Eve it all came to a head, when Eunice broadcast this cutting

remark to her husband in front of a crowd at a local nightclub: "Who are you to tell me what to do? I have money." Once they got home, he beat her and she left him—they reconciled after a few weeks. I interviewed women who had seen the incident and knew of its consequences, asking them who was in the wrong and what was at stake in the argument.

Most women believed that Eunice was in the wrong, that she should not have embarrassed her husband in public. She should have shown him more respect; he was right to beat her. But even in these statements supporting patriarchal authority, women told of their own power and how they, often in private, could shape family and community decisions. My observations of the daughter-in-law bothered me and stayed with me once I returned from the field. Not classifying Eunice as a feminist or a proto-feminist, because she did not articulate or even imply a position that was of and for women, I nonetheless saw that central to the tensions and anxieties that motivated her was her sense of the possibility that she could be equal to her husband and that her treatment as a woman was unfair. Eunice, the obstreperous daughter-in-law, was demanding the right to make her own choices. Years later, when I was working in Zimbabwe, a black Zimbabwean sociologist articulated a vision of "women's liberation" that spoke to Eunice's standpoint. In Zimbabwe, Rudo Gaidzanwa, in a review of women's fiction from the colonial period to independence, argued that liberated women are ones who exercise choice, act creatively, exploit opportunities, and maximize options.¹⁶ She agreed, however, that drastic changes needed to take place in society and culture to free women's options, so that choice creatively exercised would not condemn women to reproduce a cultural system that devalues them.

Back from the field, teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I developed a course on African women, which I taught for the first time in 1974. This was the beginning of my positioning myself as a feminist, influenced by my reflections on my Kenyan fieldwork, my reading of the literature on African women, my membership in an anthropology department that had an equal number of women and men, and my residence at an interdisciplinary college that had instituted one of the first women's studies programs in the United States. My theoretical position had also

changed: although I was not at that time using the term *interculturality*, the idea, then greatly influenced by the women's movement and academic women's studies, was beginning to develop. After Kenya, my belief in cultural and social holism was much shaken, and I came to see gender as more than just one of the organizing principles of society that could be negotiated in an open interactional field. I saw gender as central in shaping social and cultural worlds. Later, especially through feminist writings, including those of bell hooks, I agreed with the idea that gender is constructed in the matrix of race, class, and sexuality.¹⁷

How could it be that it took my experiences in Kenya to teach me to foreground gender, when I grew up smarting from having to take care of my older brothers, being told what I could and could not do because I was a girl, and seeing women struggling to support families, husbands, and lovers? Why had I not asked anthropological questions about gender? Compartmentalization? Not wishing to be doubly marginalized? At some level, I was obsessed by what it means to be female and on another I did not take up the issue. There was a disjuncture between my knowledge as a woman and my learning to foreground that knowledge. This unbidden knowledge can be thought of as subjugated knowledge.¹⁸

Subjugated knowledge includes understandings that are obscured by hegemonic theories and practices as well as by subaltern theories and practices themselves. I also use the phrase to mean knowledge that can be retrieved through personal excavation of the sort that I am undertaking in this chapter. As I see it today, my earlier theoretical approach obscured the centrality of gender by making it one among many variables. My personal concern about status and advancement in the university made me shy away from topics that would further marginalize me, topics such as women and children. And my own anger at gender inequality was suppressed so that I could function smoothly at work and at home.

The women's movement put an end to all that, especially to peace at home. I had married during my senior year in college and had given birth to my daughter eight years later, while I was writing my dissertation and teaching at the university. With the birth of my daughter, my workload trebled, and I grew resentful of my professor husband, then a Black Muslim, follower of the Honorable

Elijah Muhammad, who believed that men should have nothing to do with children younger than twelve years old. I was too tired to cater to him as I had done before. He had also introduced a young woman into our home, a student at the university, a potential convert to Islam, but one who stirred up my anger and passion. In the late 1970s, I began to meet with graduate and undergraduate students, mostly white women, in writing groups that also functioned as consciousness-raising groups. In that context, I learned to see the personal as political, to speak bitterness, and to examine my own choices and desires. A few years later, I left my husband and embraced lesbian feminism. Not until now, when I am once again married to a man, have I written about the influence of my lesbianism on my theory.

Being a woman-identified woman freed me in many senses—I more fully accepted myself. In my thirties, I wanted to relive my childhood—read children's books, ride bicycles, play games, run, dance, join a gym, exercise my body. I wanted to claim my body as a site of pleasure in ways that I had not done as a girl. My life was full of possibilities, and this sense of abundance spread into my theory, which concentrated on the transformation of political and economic structures for women's liberation and human fulfillment. I resisted cultural feminism, quite popular on my campus, that celebrated female difference, inscribing the body with deterministic powers. I embraced socialist feminism, wanting to understand how capitalism structures male dominance and how male dominance is organized by the capitalist division of labor, with my goal being undermining these structures for radical social change.¹⁹

Living a transgressive lifestyle made radical social change seem possible. Joining the battle for the Equal Rights Amendment, for abortion rights, for affirmative action, against sexual harassment, for equal funding of women's sports, for welfare rights, for recognition of women's unpaid labor, and for comparable pay for comparable worth in women's employment was not only liberating but exhilarating. In black communities, I found many people with fellow feelings, but I did not necessarily come out to them as a lesbian. Black lesbians and feminists were sometimes challenged to declare which side they were on, with black people or with women.

Being taunted with the specter of a government armed and turned against blacks, we were reminded that being black meant that we could not hide among white women or in predominantly white gay and lesbian communities. In social and political encounters with other black people and in classrooms made up mostly of white students, I took pains to be inclusive, to deal forthrightly with the pervasive power of racism, to develop class analysis, and to not come across as man-hating (which I was not). My revolutionary zeal has died down since that time; I believe less in the possibility of radical social change. But that I associated the possibility of such changes in social life with the opening up of my personal life is undeniable. One thing I know for sure is that my resistance to the disciplines of the black female body to which I had consented before was crucial in my approach to black feminist anthropology.

MORE LESSONS FROM AFRICA

Despite my concern to ameliorate the condition of women in the United States, my research focuses on African women. In that research I maintain an interest in the body and in sexuality. In a recent book on African feminisms, Gwendolyn Mikell states that experiences of exploitative political leaders and of economic restructuring have "pushed women toward greater boldness in addressing the economic and political elements that determine and affect their status."²⁰ Mikell contrasts the political and economic concerns of African feminists with Western debates about essentialism, the female body, and radical feminism, accurately characterizing African feminism as "distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal, and concerned with many 'bread, butter, culture, and power' issues."²¹ It is the stark contrast between Western concerns with the female body and African concerns with the body politic that I object to and that my research addresses. I want to underscore the ways in which the effects of power are felt in everyday experiences and how the body is material for the expression of discourses of domination and subordination.

Historian Achille Mbembe, in a study of Cameroon, his first work published in English, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," suggests that the authoritarian modality in the postcolonial state

is marked by coercion, violence, and extortion as well as by collusion, compliance, and performance, when the face of power looks like your own. In discussing the grotesque and carnivalesque mobilization of male and, especially, female bodies for the postcolonial state's show of power and popular support, Mbembe draws out the following all too common images:

In the postcolony bodies have been used to entertain the powerful in ceremonies and official parades. On such occasions some of the bodies have had the marks of famine upon them: flaky scalps, scabies, skin sores. Other bodies have attracted small crowds of flies. But that has not stopped them from breaking out into laughter or peals of joy when the presidential limousines approached. They stamped the ground with their feet, blanketing the air with dust. Wearing the party uniform with the picture of the head of state printed on it, women followed the rhythm of the music and swung their torsos first forward, then back; elsewhere they pulled in, then thrust out their bellies, their undulating movements evoking as usual the slow, prolonged penetration of the penis and its staccato retreat.²²

Mbembe argues that the power of the state is dramatized as ecstatic sexual master of women's bodies.

African women's concern with sexuality is most often heterosexual, but that is fraught with inequalities that many women want to overcome. Mbembe's provocative work contends that women are not just vehicles of the ruler's power or of that of the postcolonial state; they are also sexual tokens or trophies of office for male bureaucrats:

I could mention too the way bureaucrats harass students at school exits, honking their car horns behind schoolgirls walking down the street, cruising up to them, stopping and opening their doors to invite them to sit in the "seat of death." The everyday life of the postcolonial bureaucrat consists of the following: alcohol, amusements, lewd propositions and bawdy comments in which the virtue of women comes under scrutiny by allusions to the sexual organs of office secretaries and the prowess of declared favourites and young mistresses.²³

African feminists address these excesses of the postcolonial state as directly concerned with disciplining of the female body. Feminists I worked with during my second extended stay in Zimbabwe,

another former white settler colony in southern Africa, as a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe during 1983-1984, used both discourses of rights and discourses of socialist feminism to protest the disciplining of the female body. I arrived in Zimbabwe just days after the government had begun a massive effort to rid the capital city of prostitutes and vagrants—Operation Clean-Up. I joined with an interracial, international group of feminists in the Women's Action Group to end Operation Clean-Up and to release women arrested and held in detention during the sweep. Due only in part to our protests and publicity campaigns, the women were released and Operation Clean-Up ended. To aid this effort, in 1983 and 1984, Women's Action Group members wrote protest letters to the editors of the major newspapers and published analytical articles in influential newsmagazines. One such statement engaged the discourse of rights and indicated how basic the rights recently won by women in Zimbabwe were:

In Zimbabwe the question of women's liberation was first raised in the struggle for independence. And social changes, especially since independence, have meant that some women, particularly in cities, have been able to acquire a measure of freedom denied to them traditionally (but granted to men)—such as the right to live where they like, rights to work, to walk unaccompanied, to choose their own associates and to go about their daily lives without interference. These freedoms and rights have all been challenged by the "clean-up" campaign.²⁴

Within this discussion of the rights of women is a protest of the control, management, and discipline of the female body.

In the press, black Zimbabwean Women's Action Group members were also demanding socialist feminism and trying to understand the moment as one of a transition to socialism. Their sentiments were echoed in the biting criticism lodged by Tsitsi Dangarembga and Juliet Baah in an article written for a popular political magazine that presages the arch-feminism of Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*:²⁵

The problem is: women are oppressed in ways that do not seem to be economic, so this oppression will be the last to be destroyed. But if it combines with the new socialist jargon it can lead to worse oppression.

For example, since socialisation of the means of production is a basic aim of scientific socialism, socialist men in the transitional stages, who still regard women as mean-objects, will happily subscribe to the notion of socialisation of women—joyfully and lustily throwing to the capitalist any shreds of decency and self-discipline they might have had in this respect. So we see a married man, enjoying an evening out with his "sugar mummy," who claims that this is an aspect of traditional socialism that was stifled by the present capitalist system.²⁶

The solution Dangarembga and Baah propose: revolutionary consciousness and solidarity among women, with women recognizing that they are as good as, as intelligent as, and as useful as men in the home and throughout society. The authors tell men that if they value women in society, appreciate their contributions, and are willing to join forces with them, then "We promise you, you will not regret it."²⁷ According to Dangarembga and Baah, the economic and political changes of socialism are necessary to women's liberation, but dignity and respect for women cannot be accomplished without focusing energies directly on changing social and cultural evaluations of women and ideas associated with what it means to be male or female. In the late 1990s, discourses on socialism are absent as Zimbabwe is embroiled in World Bank and International Monetary Fund-sponsored economic structural adjustment programs. In cutting social supports and health benefits, decreasing public financing for education, and retrenching employment, these programs too show powerful effects on women's bodies.

African women in Zimbabwe are concerned with the way in which their bodies are subject to the discipline of society and with what this discipline means to their own subjectivity. In my future research in Zimbabwe, I intend to investigate how Zimbabwean women's notion of themselves as women (the particular strengths and vulnerabilities of female bodies that they perceive and their desire to attract men and to attach themselves to men) influences their health and welfare as participants in Zimbabwean civil society. This research is especially crucial in Zimbabwe now, given its status as one of the countries in the world hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic, and in the light of or shadow of the virulent antifeminism and homophobia in the country.²⁸ What a long route I have taken to get to this position, with many lessons taught to me, in-

tentionally and unintentionally, by African women. Beginning with the sense that my body could not be properly disciplined as a child, moving to discipline exacted through competing and contradictory discourses, to lessons learned from African women and from women-loving women, I regained knowledge of myself, surrendered to the interplay between the personal and the political, and now I find myself returning to Africa to understand the discipline of the black female body in Zimbabwe in the era of AIDS and political and economic constriction. I have come full circle to a politic of black feminist anthropology.

NOTES

1. My notion of discourse, presented in greater detail in Carolyn M. Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), is particularly hybrid, drawn from Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979); idem, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1980); and idem, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980); Hayden White's interpretation of Foucault, "Michel Foucault," in *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and an amalgam of social anthropology, including the political anthropology of Marc Swartz, Victor Turner, and Arthur Tuden, *Political Anthropology* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1966). I have used the term *discourse* to convey the ideas and social practices, including language, through which differences are created and meanings and power mobilized. I try not to use *discourse* as a substitute for what the term *culture* implies, but to use discourse to capture the sense that there may be more or less temporary conjunctions of ideas and practices by which individuals and groups come to understand who they are and what powers they are subject to (and more to the point, to act on these, even if they do not consciously understand them). Realization of oneself as a subject of one's own actions and as subject to other forces lays the ground for resistance as well as compliance.
2. Part societies I think of as the space just beyond the "borderlands" (see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* [San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute Books, 1987]), where the center does, if only momentarily, hold. The idea is that there may be some degree of coherence in fragmented social fields.
3. See especially chapter 1, "Introduction: Social Theory and Colonialism," and chapter 7, "Race, Class, Empire, and Sexuality," in Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions*.
4. Michelle Rosaldo, "The Uses and Abuses of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Signs* 5, 3 (1980): 289–317; and Eleanor Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance: Collected Articles on Women Cross-Culturally* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981).
5. My use of the term *discipline* follows on Foucault's discussion of biopower, identifying disciplinary discourses that shape minds and bodies (see Foucault, *History of Sexuality and Power/Knowledge*). In delineating disciplinary power, Foucault emphasizes power that is more dependent on bodies and what they do than on the wealth and commodities. Although I disagree with Collier and Yanagisako's argument against the inclusion of biology as a prediscursive given in the construction of gender, I find that, on the whole, they mount a convincing argument for the social construction of gender. See Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako, eds., *Gender and Kinship: Essays toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).
6. See Bettina Aptheker, *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982); Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and*

Class (New York: Vintage, 1981); idem, *Women, Culture, Politics* (New York: Random House, 1989); and Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

7. See Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 1990). Soon after Hurston's protagonist Janey discovers her own blossoming sexuality, she is married and transfers her labor to her husband. In an extended metaphor, Hurston likens black women to beasts of burden, mistreated and discarded when no longer of service—the black woman is the mule of the world (p. 29). Janey's quest for love and tenderness ends with her destroying her one true love and returning home to live, independently and expectantly, on her own.
8. See Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, for a study of how discourses in medicine, religion, education, psychiatry, and population management contributed to the production of "normal" forms of sexuality and at the same time delineated and produced those patterns of sexuality that lie beyond the boundary of the normal.
9. Harriette Mullen, "Gender and the Subjugated Body: Readings of Race, Subjectivity, and Differences in the Construction of Slave Narratives," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1990; and idem, "Indelicate Subjects: African-American Women's Subjugated Subjectivities," Feminist Focused Research Activity Conference, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1991.
10. Ruth Yeazell, "Podsnappery, Sexuality, and the English Novel," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 343.
11. For further discussion of the treatment of Mau Mau in newsmagazines in the United States, see chapter 6, "Mau Mau Discourses," in Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions*.
12. See especially chapter 2, "The Production of Women: Kikuyu and Gender Politics," in Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions*.
13. Historians indicate that the Kikuyu age grade system was important in territorial expansion and the acquisition of land. Young initiated men, warriors, working for elders could become tenant farmers on the land they helped clear. During the colonial period, the number of young men who were landless increased as colonial authorities limited movement and their access to land. The internal tension between young and old and landless and landless played a part in the Mau Mau uprisings. See Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500–1900* (Nairobi, London, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); and Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petite-Bourgeoisie* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980).
14. The female initiation ceremony traditionally included clitoridectomy. When I was in the field in 1971–1972, genital cutting was still being practiced although the large-scale celebrations, concurrent ceremonies for boys, and associated education by older women had all but died away. The overwhelming majority of women I interviewed in one village in Murang'a District had had clitoridectomies and wanted their daughters to undergo genital cutting. Since that time, the government of Kenya and some women's groups have made efforts to end female genital cutting. Today women are more divided about the practice, with some holding on to the idea that only with it will their daughters make good marriages and will their well-being be ensured. I discuss this in greater detail in chapter 3, "Kikuyu Women and Sexuality," in Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions*.
15. From the late 1950s through the 1960s, the work of Africanist anthropologists of the Manchester School, those at or influenced by research from the University of Manchester in Great Britain, was sometimes referred to as processual anthropology or processual analysis. This approach sought to elucidate the effects of the involvement of African populations in wider political and economic networks, to reveal the variability and openness within African communities, and to assess structural and incidental change over time. This is the approach that I was schooled in before I began my dissertation fieldwork in Kenya. For studies of the involvement of African populations in wider political and economic networks, see Max Gluckman, *The Judicial Process among the Barots of Northern Rhodesia* (1940; reprint, Manchester, England: Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, University of Manchester Press, 1958); A. L. Epstein, *Politics in an Urban African Community* (Manchester, England: Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, University of Manchester Press, 1958); idem, *Urbanization and Kinship: The Domestic Domain on the Copperbelt of Zambia, 1950–1956* (London and New York: Academic Press, 1981); and Marc Swartz, "Situational

- Determinants in Kinship Terminology," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 16, 4 (1960): 393–397. For studies that show variability and openness within African communities, see Swartz et al., *Political Anthropology*; Bruce Kapferer, ed., *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976); and Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester, England: Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, University of Manchester, 1957). For studies that deal with structural and incidental change over time, see especially Phillip Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanization in a South African City* (Capetown: Institute for Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, Oxford University Press, 1961); and Victor Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1969).
16. Rudo Gaidzanwa, *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare, Zimbabwe: College Press, 1985).
17. I profited from conversations in a stimulating feminist environment in Santa Cruz. While an independent scholar living in Santa Cruz, California, bell hooks wrote *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).
18. This use of "subjugated knowledge" derives from Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge*, but also compare it with Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), in her "argument for situated and embodied knowledges and against various forms of unlocatable and so irresponsible knowledge claims. Irresponsible means unable to be called into account. There is a premium on establishing the capacity to see from the peripheries and the depths. But here lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if 'we' naturally inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges" (p. 191).
19. See Allison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Roman and Allenhead, 1983), for a discussion of forms of feminism. According to Jaggar, socialist feminists infuse radical feminism, the recognition of women as an oppressed class, with aspects of Marxist analysis, foregrounding the problems of capitalist patriarchy with its corollaries of racism and imperialism. The goal of socialist feminism is to eliminate the sexual division of labor in every realm and to transform the determinative social relations.
20. Gwendolyn Mikell, ed., *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 5.
21. Ibid., 4. Suffice it to say that despite this too brief characterization, Mikell also recognizes several versions of "Western feminisms."
22. Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa* 62, 1 (1992): 20.
23. Ibid., 24.
24. This excerpt is taken from an article by Women's Action Group founding members Rudo Gaidzanwa and Petronella Marambe, "Operation Clean-Up," *Connexions: An International Women's Quarterly* 12 (1984): 18.
25. Tsitsi Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1988).
26. Tsitsi Dangaremba and Juliet Baah, "Seizing Power," *Social Change and Development* 1, 9 (1984): 23.
27. Ibid., 22.
28. See Margrete Aarmo, "How Homosexuality Became 'UnAfrican': The Case of Zimbabwe," in *Female Desires: Transgender Practices across Cultures*, ed. Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 255–280, for an overview of the current situation. In the wake of an AIDS epidemic in which one in four adults of reproductive age is estimated to be HIV positive, religious fundamentalism and nationalism have combined to create a hostile environment for feminists, gays, and lesbians.