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Shifting Contexts: Lessons from Integrating Black, Gender, and African Diaspora Studies

Beverly Guy-Sheftall

In a special issue of *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* on “Africa and the Diaspora” (fall 1996), the editors called attention to the emergence of a new field of study, African diaspora studies, which was in many ways the result of the evolution of black studies since its beginnings in the 1960s.¹ In 1979, many of the world’s leading scholars and Africanists assembled at Howard University for the First African Diaspora Studies Institute. The publication of *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*² was one of the most important results of that historic conference, because it provided new conceptual frameworks for the study of African peoples around the globe. For purposes of the conference, the African Diaspora was defined as “the voluntary and forced dispersal of Africans at different periods in history and in several directions; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad without losing the African base, either spiritually or physically; the psychological return to the homeland, Africa.”³ The African diaspora includes both “continental Africans” as well as “descendant Africans” (blacks dispersed in the New World). Four years later, the Association of Black Women Historians sponsored a conference at Howard University on “Women in the African Diaspora: An Interdisciplinary Perspective” because of the lack of women participants at the earlier Howard conference and inadequate attention to women’s experiences in teaching and research about the African diaspora. *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*,⁴ edited by Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing (conference co-conveners), underscored the importance of the newly evolving field of women and African diaspora studies (also called black women’s studies or African diaspora women’s studies). The new scholarship aimed to foreground gender issues within the fields of black or Africana studies, which had historically been focused on men or insensitive to the intersection of race, class, and gender in the lives of African peoples.⁵

Our curriculum development project at Spelman College—Women and African diaspora studies—has had two major goals:

reconceptualizing the women's studies program so that it will be more comparative, more global; and gendering African diaspora studies, which has historically been more sensitive to race, class, and geographical region than it has been to gender and sexuality issues.⁶ The faculty has also found it necessary, like other scholars studying women around the globe, to problematize the binary of biological sex and social gender, which has been a fundamental conceptual paradigm within Western women's studies teaching and research. A basic limitation of the sex/gender binary can be underscored by an analysis of the experiences of African women in particular cultural contexts and at various historical moments.

Multiple Challenges from One Text

In a groundbreaking anthropological text by Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Western feminist scholars can find a useful analysis surrounding the situation of Igbo women in Nigeria during the precolonial era.⁷ In this text, Amadiume asserts the flexibility of gender constructs among the Igbo, where women can become husbands in woman-to-woman marriages and where as daughters within their lineage groups, their age or birth order significantly influences their experience of what it means to be female. Amadiume offers evidence that the Western preoccupation with the status of wife obscures the important role of daughter among West African women. The tendency on the part of Western scholars to examine primarily the conjugal household in other cultural contexts misrepresents the complex institution of family within the sub-Saharan African context, for example, where women have multiple roles and statuses beyond that of wife.

Early on, conceptualizing the category "woman" was regarded as relatively unproblematic in Anglo-American feminist theory construction, since the conceptual distinction between biological sex and social gender was critical to an understanding of human experience. In fact, the separation of sex and gender has constituted a basic conceptual framework in Western women's studies. A basic limitation of this sex/gender binary can be underscored by an analysis of the experiences of African women in a particular precolonial context, as Amadiume's anthropological work on the Igbo underscores.

My experience as a women's studies professor in graduate classes is that it has frequently been unsettling for "seasoned" women's studies students within the U.S. academy to have some of their basic conceptual frameworks challenged by moving outside Western cultural con-

texts. A primary example is the tendency of U.S. students to read woman-to-woman marriages as examples of lesbian partnerships on the African continent. In Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, there is a discussion of woman-to-woman marriages that is frequently very difficult for Western students to process (unless they've been exposed to anthropology classes), because they employ their familiar notions about marriage as they attempt to understand the institution of marriage, broadly speaking, in other parts of the world. Lesbian students are frequently very disturbed by Amadiume's introduction, which they label heterosexist (and worse) because she challenges Western feminists, including Audre Lorde, who interpret woman-to-woman marriages as an illustration of lesbianism in the African context. Though Amadiume explains the cultural context in which woman-to-woman marriages occur among the Igbo, many women's studies students critique the text for its silences about, rather than a discourse on, sexuality, its refusal to acknowledge that the women in these marriages could in fact be practicing lesbian sex, and her lack of an analysis of the nature of female friendships in the polygamous cultures she studies.

Prominent African feminist scholar/activist Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie identifies areas of research that need to be undertaken without the ethnocentric biases that have characterized analyses of African women in the past: "Some gender issues are not yet receiving the intellectual attention they should. . . . too many silences persist in the area of human sexuality in Africa. Sexual orientation is certainly one area that has not been opened up for research or discussion . . . The experiences of sexual orientation in traditional arrangements require discovery still."⁸ It is certainly the case that it is also necessary to probe issues of sexuality in cultural contexts that constitute the African diaspora (the Americas, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa). Such an investigation represents a particular challenge since the discourse on sexuality outside the United States has been more limited than discussions about sexuality within this country. It is also the case that some cultures consider public discourse about sexuality to be inappropriate.

There are disciplinary biases as well. Women's studies students who may not have had an anthropology course also critique Amadiume's text because it does not employ interdisciplinary women's studies frameworks, though it is clear that *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* is solid anthropological scholarship that attempts to disrupt the ethnocentrism of Western studies of African women, including that generated by white feminist scholars.

I am not suggesting, however, that there are easy answers in classrooms that address cross-cultural issues or that there is one correct way to approach complicated questions. There are still many silences, many gaps in our knowledge about gender constructs outside the United States. There is considerable debate among scholars, for example, about the status of women in precolonial Africa and the impact of colonialism on the situation of women. The emergence of African feminist scholarship calls into question the discourse about women within the contemporary context as well.⁹

Moving Beyond U.S. Categories of Identity

Other contentious issues have emerged in our exploration of the implications of gendering the field of women and African diaspora studies. It is necessary to interrogate traditional racial categories within and outside the United States. Racial categories familiar within this country are somewhat useless in a consideration of what we would call racial/ethnic women outside it. Borrowing U.S.-based racial categories, for example, to analyze the experiences of women in the African diaspora, which includes the Caribbean, South America (especially Brazil), Canada, and the United Kingdom, would render invisible the complexity of racial constructs outside the United States. It is sometimes the case that Caribbean faculty, with intimate knowledge of the history of South Asians and their relationships with persons of African descent in many parts of the Caribbean, especially Trinidad, find it difficult to conceptualize South Asians as "black," which is a racial category that is useful in the black British context. Many other contentious issues arise when North American students and faculty confront different discourses about race in assigned texts. For example, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie asserts that she does not see herself as "black" or use this language to describe other African women, and asserts that there are cultural contexts in which ethnicity, nationality, age, and class are more important categories for understanding identity formation. She, for example, refers to herself as an African, Yoruba, middle-aged, middle-class woman.¹⁰ There are no references to her racial identity in these descriptors. She goes on to say, as well, that she does not refer to herself as "a black woman." When a few of my African-American students read this particular essay, they asserted what I would call ethnocentric biases when they accused Leslie of being in denial of her "blackness." In other words, it was difficult for them to transcend African-American or Pan-African political imperatives, which insist that people of African descent proudly espouse a

"black identity" as one way of resisting the hegemony of a Western racial discourse associating "blackness" with a broad range of pejorative attributes.

And finally, the problem of using black nationalist versus Afrocentric versus African feminist versus African-American feminist frameworks in the study of women of African descent is a vexing one. In this regard, a number of contentious issues remain around linguistic categories, especially Third World/First World. There is some hostility among non-U.S. black women about the use of the category Third World, which some perceive to be a derogatory category, even when women of color within the United States and around the world embrace this terminology as a political category that is useful in discourse on global feminisms.¹¹ Nor have debates been resolved about the relevance of the term "feminism" for women who are not white and middle class. Alice Walker's counterdiscourse on "womanism" provided an alternative terminology for black feminists in the early 1980s when many African-American women, as well as other women of color within the United States, were raising angry voices about their marginalization or erasure from mainstream white feminist discourse. Walker introduced the term "womanist" in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*,¹² not as a rejection of the term "feminist," which is often how her statement is interpreted, but as a way of broadening the concept to include a range of perspectives. In fact, she asserts that "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender," which suggests that womanism is a deeper, more intense form of feminism.¹³ Walker's use of the term "womanist" underscores a particular, culturally specific way in which African-American women conceptualize resistance to cultural norms of many kinds. Consider Walker's dismissal of normative categories: "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility . . . and women's strength." Womanists are not narrowly focused on women's liberation: "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health." Her concept of "womanism" (from the black folk expression "womanish," which mothers use to describe feisty or "outrageous" female children) captures the legacy of struggle that black women collectively inherit as a result of our particular history in the United States. Writes Walker: "Traditionally capable, as in, 'Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.'" Though the term "feminism" continues to be contested and controversial within many black communities, students and some faculty are often surprised by the growing body of gender discourse

generated by women on the continent and throughout the African diaspora who employ the term "feminism" and who make an effective argument for our need to examine indigenous feminisms in many cultural contexts outside the West.¹⁴

This new feminist scholarship by African women, as well as women of African descent in Europe and the Americas, is critically important for understanding the experiences of women in different regions of the world and in helping to dismantle the hegemony of Western (white) feminist analytical frameworks. These emerging and evolving African diasporic feminist frameworks have the potential for transforming both African diaspora studies and women's studies. I am also hopeful that the required feminist theory courses in most women's studies programs in the United States and the required introductory courses in African-American or Africana studies will begin to take into consideration feminist discourses outside the West. This will certainly make for more contentious classrooms, but it will also surely provide a more textured, more complicated analysis of the meanings of race, gender, and sexuality here and around the globe.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was presented at a panel of the Women's Studies, Area and International Studies Project, cosponsored by the Ford Foundation and the National Council for Research on Women, in October 1997.

1. Black studies, also called Afro-American studies, African-American studies, and Africana studies, emerged in the 1960s as a response to black students' demands for a more inclusive and relevant curriculum within higher education during the social upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement. This interdisciplinary academic field called attention to Eurocentric biases in the construction of knowledge and the erasure of the histories, cultures, and experiences of African peoples within the U.S. academy.
2. See Joseph E. Harris, ed., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982).
3. Editorial, *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* 3, no. 2 (fall 1986): 2.
4. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Rushing, eds., *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1987).
5. A number of publications have appeared since *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, many of which are comparative studies of women of African descent throughout the diaspora.
6. The culminating activity of our Ford Foundation project was an invitational conference on Women and African Diaspora Studies (May 29–30, 1998), during which four commissioned papers were presented: Rosalyn

- Terborg-Penn, "The State of the Field of Women and African Diaspora Studies"; Rhoda Reddock, "Black Women in the Anglophone Caribbean"; Angela Gilliam, "Black Women in Brazil"; and Carole Boyce Davies, "Claudia Jones: Anti-Imperialist, Black Feminist Politics."
7. Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (London: Zed Books, 1997).
 8. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994), 15.
 9. Recent publications, especially the scholarly work of African women, are particularly useful in this regard: Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves*; Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*; Gwendolyn Mikell, ed., *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also the creative/political work of Professor Osonye Tess Onwue, especially her play, *Tell It to Women: An Epic Drama for Women* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), which critiques Western feminism from the vantage point of rural African women and "is the first dramatic text from Africa to break the literary silence on issues of homosexuality," according to Ngugi wa Thiong'o who has written an excellent foreword to the play (p. 9). The earlier work of Filomena Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1987) and African-American anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa on African family structures is also useful.
 10. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves*, 218.
 11. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), for a useful discussion of these issues.
 12. See Helen Charles, "The Language of Womanism: Re-thinking Difference," in *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, ed. Heidi Safia Mirza (London: Routledge), 278-97, for a lengthy analysis/critique of Walker's concept of womanism, from the perspective of a black British critic.
 13. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), xii. See also Chikwenye Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," *Signs* 11.1 (1985), in which she indicates that she "arrived at the term 'womanism' independently" (p. 72). There have been a range of responses to Walker. Some black women reject the use of the term "feminist" altogether because of its exclusive association with white women and prefer the term "womanist." This includes a group of self-defined African-American "womanist" scholars doing pioneering work in theology such as Jacquelyn Grant. There are black women, such as bell hooks and others, who prefer the term "feminist" though they continue to critique Western feminism. For hooks, in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist*,

Thinking Black (Boston: South End Press, 1989), "the term 'womanist' is not sufficiently linked to a tradition of radical political commitment to struggle and change" (182). Ogundipe-Leslie (*Re-Creating Ourselves*, 207–41) uses the term "stiwanism," an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa, to describe feminist discourse in Africa and its cultural specificity.

14. See Safia Mirza, ed., *Black British Feminism*; Heidi Safia Mirza, *Young, Female and Black* (London: Routledge, 1992); Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, *Scattered Belongings: The Cultural Paradoxes of 'Race,' Gender, Nation* (London: Routledge, 1998); Irene A. d'Almeida, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1994); Carole Davies and Anne Adams Graves, eds., *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1986); Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia, eds., *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women* (London: Routledge, 1993); Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing*; Awa Thiam, *Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 1986); Terborg-Penn et al., *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995).

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