

Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way

Displace and undo that killing opposition between the text narrowly conceived as verbal text and activism narrowly conceived as some sort of mindless engagement.

—Gayatri C. Spivak 1990, 120–21

African scholars, and especially women, must bring their knowledge to bear on presenting an African perspective on prospects and problems for women in local societies. Scholars and persons engaged in development-research planning and implementation should pay attention to development priorities as local communities see them.

—Achola A. Pala 1977, 13

In 1999, I was invited to speak at an international conference organized by the “Women Waging Peace Project” at Harvard University’s Kennedy School that attracted participants from some of the conflict zones of our troubled planet—Northern Ireland, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Bosnia, the Middle East, Burundi, Angola, and so forth. One of those invited to address the gathering was Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher who has assumed high visibility and substantial recognition in development studies through her articulation of the “human capabilities approach,” pioneered in development economics by Amartya Sen, a Nobel Laureate in economics.¹

After a brief presentation of the human capabilities approach, Nussbaum had barely sat down when she was verbally attacked. The attack

Dedicated to Françoise Lionnet for many years of collegiality and collaboration.

¹ According to Nussbaum, the human capabilities approach focuses on “what people are actually able to do and to be . . . the capabilities in question should be pursued for each and every person, treating each as an end and none as a mere tool of the ends of others; thus I adopt a principle of each person’s capability, based on a principle of each person as end” (2000, 5).

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was unexpected in its swiftness, visceral in its content, and vociferous in its articulation. The first to speak was an African-American woman who lives in the Harvard neighborhood. In a moving speech she complained bitterly, first, about not having been aware that an event with a high representation of Africa-based sisters was taking place in her neighborhood and, second, about the difficulties she encountered making her way into the conference hall. When she arrived at the Kennedy Center, virtually all the entrance doors were locked. As she tugged at one of the locked doors, she was accosted by a policeman who asked her what “[she] was doing there.” The next “plaintiff” was an Africa-based African participant who spoke with a “communal voice,”² stating that she preferred to be told/shown what has to be done to ameliorate the situation in her part of the world rather than be bombarded with irrelevant discourses and empty theorizing. Obviously, the theorizing is “empty” precisely because of its inability to connect with or refer to the realities and environments with which the plaintiffs identify. In the midst of the heated argument, Nussbaum perched silently on her chair and issued no response. I stood up not to defend Nussbaum (she’s very capable of defending herself) but to issue a cautionary note to the women of color (especially those living and working in Africa) while assuring them that I understood and identified with their frustration and anger at having to sit through interminable “discourses,” while the immediacy, messiness, and raw brutality of their conflict-ridden homelands were weighing heavily on their minds.

I was struck, however, by the lack of engagement with the substance of Nussbaum’s presentation. She was dismissed for offering irrelevant theorizing instead of a clear road map for action. Although I am sympathetic to the centrality of practice in development work, I am wary of a stance that is so staunchly antitheory that it leaves no room for any engagement with theory. Theory plays a central role in helping to scrutinize, decipher, and name the everyday, even as the practice of everyday informs theory making. One can argue about the use/abuse and the politics of theory, as I will argue in the next section, but to dismiss theory as always irrelevant is not helpful. On the contrary, most Africans with whom I have worked inside and outside the continent argue not for the death of theory but against its use and abuse; particularly, they interrogate the ways in which theory, as a site of political struggle, raises concerns about “invention,” appropriateness, and applicability. This leads me to

² Many African participants concurred with interjections of “go on, my sister,” “I agree with you one hundred percent,” “speak for us, my dear,” “tell her that’s not what we came here to *do*,” etc.

believe, then, that the objection to Nussbaum's presentation was probably not against theory per se but against the failure of the presenter to anchor her theorizing in reality in any relevant or significant way for the "plaintiffs." Nussbaum's fame and privileged social location are epistemically salient in the sense that they authorize her views and writings, but they could also be discursively dangerous in terms of the impact of her views/writings in shaping the lives of women on whose behalf she intervenes.³ I cautioned my women-of-color sisters not to dismiss Nussbaum for the simple reason that the individuals and foreign/international institutions responsible for making policies that affect the lives of women of color in the so-called third world read Nussbaum and model some of their policies on her views, conclusions, and writings. The best way to engage Nussbaum is to read her writings on gender and development, expose contested terrains (which are many), and offer alternative arguments and paths.

The above incident at Harvard exposes the evolving double apartheid of social and epistemological exclusions that is at the heart of Arjun Appadurai's exposé of the disjunctures festering among diverse constituencies within and between nations in a globalizing world. Globalization, with its incessant shifts and turns, has produced anxieties not only in the academy where disciplinary certitudes are disrupted but also outside the academy where different worries abound:

What does globalization mean for labor markets and fair wages? How will it affect chances for real jobs and reliable rewards? What does it mean for the ability of nations to determine the economic futures of their populations? What is the hidden dowry of globalization? Christianity? Cyberproletarianization? New forms of structural adjustment? Americanization disguised as human rights or as MTV? . . . Among the poor and their advocates the anxieties are even more specific: What are the great global agencies of aid and development up to? Is the World Bank really committed to incorporating social and cultural values into its developmental agenda? Does Northern aid really allow local communities to set their own agendas? . . . Can the media ever be turned to the interests of the poor? In the public spheres of many societies there is concern that policy debates occurring around world trade, copyright, environment, science, and technology set the stage for life-and-death decisions for

³ For discussion of epistemic salience, see Alcoff 1995.

ordinary farmers, vendors, slum-dwellers, merchants, and urban populations. (2000, 1–2)

The increasing divorce between the parochial debates “about such issues as representation, recognition, the ‘end’ of history, the specters of capital, etc.” (Appadurai 2000, 2) in the academy on the one hand and the vernacular discourses and realities of constituencies outside the academy on the other hand demands new and imaginative ways to view and conduct research, one of which is to globalize research from below⁴ with the force of an element usually identified with creative writing and the arts—imagination. My extensive work in the past decade with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots constituencies in Africa—ranging from literature, health, and human rights in Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, and Madagascar to ethnicity, peace, and conflict resolution in Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—has led me to rethink the place and role of theory, research, and scholarship and to recognize the potency and utility of the force of imagination mentioned above. My work with constituencies beyond the academy illuminates and makes pertinent my work in the academy. This article reflects what I have learned from the men and women I have worked with in the robust, dynamic space where the academy meets what lies beyond it. This juncture where worlds meet is what I call the “third space of engagement” (*engagement*, in the Sartrean sense of the word). The third space is not the either/or location of stability; it is the both/and space where borderless territory and free movement authorize the capacity to simultaneously theorize practice, practice theory, and allow the mediation of policy. The third space, which allows for the coexistence, interconnection, and interaction of thought, dialogue, planning, and action, constitutes the arena where I have witnessed the unfolding of feminisms in Africa.

In this article I will explore, among other issues, the intertwining of the colonial moment, the politics of fieldwork, and the politics of representation in feminist scholarship and development studies by revisiting the processes of theory making and knowledge construction in an environment of unequal power relations and cultural difference. I will use the different features and methods of feminist engagement in Africa to propose what I call *nego-feminism* (the feminism of negotiation; no ego fem-

⁴ This is not an exclusivist strategy that shifts power and focus from the privileged to the subaltern. Rather, it should be an engagement in which privilege is diffused to allow for an interactive, multilateral flow of voices (from above and below simultaneously).

inism) as a term that names African feminisms.⁵ Aware of a practice (feminism in Africa) that is as diverse as the continent itself, I propose *nego-feminism* not to occlude the diversity but to argue, as I do in the discussion of “building on the indigenous” in the last section of this article, that a recurrent feature in many African cultures can be used to name the practice. The diversity of the African continent notwithstanding, there are shared values that can be used as organizing principles in discussions about Africa, as Daniel Etounga-Manguelle aptly notes: “The diversity—the vast number of subcultures [in Africa]—is undeniable. But there is a foundation of shared values, attitudes, and institutions that binds together the nations south of the Sahara, and in many respects those of the north as well” (Etounga-Manguelle 2000, 67).

Through a brief discussion of the inception of a women’s studies program in Africa, I will address issues of disciplinary boundaries, pedagogy, and institution building in an atmosphere of intense NGO activities bound and structured by donor interests, conditionalities, and politics. Ultimately, I will plead for the interrogation and repositioning of two crucial issues in feminist studies—positionality and intersectionality. This process will entail a constant interrogation of one’s positionality at all levels—from the social and personal to the intellectual and political—as an active subject location of shifting reciprocity where meaning is made and not an essentialized location where meaning is discovered. Finally, it will also envisage a modulated shift in focus of the intersectionality of race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, culture, national origin, and so forth from ontological considerations (being there) to functional imperatives (doing what there) and speak to the important issues of equality and reciprocity in the intersecting and border crossing.⁶ I argue for going beyond a historicization of the intersection that limits us to questions of origins, genealogy, and provenance to focus more on the history of now, the moment of action that captures both being and becoming, both ontology and evolution. The discussion will proceed in three movements: the second section will address the use/abuse of theory and the marginalization of African women in the

⁵ Discussing feminism in Africa in an earlier work, I noted that “it will be more accurate to argue not in the context of a monolith (*African feminism*) but rather in the context of a pluralism (*African feminisms*) that captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women’s activism/movements in Africa . . . the inscription of feminisms . . . underscores the heterogeneity of African feminist thinking and engagement as manifested in strategies and approaches that are sometimes complementary and supportive, and sometimes competing and adversarial” (Nnaemeka 1998a, 5).

⁶ For a good discussion of intersectionality, see Crenshaw 1991.

process; the third section will examine the importance of culture and difference in debates about theory and development; the fourth section will argue for the necessity and prudence of “building on the indigenous” in the construction of African feminist theory.

Dwelling/duelling on possibilities: Debating theory, knowledge, and engagement

In African studies, as in other branches of humanistic and social research, the subordination of human and social problems to disciplinary trends has pronounced negative effects that undermine the integrity and social utility of scholarship.

—Richard Sklar 1995, 20

Theory makers and their methods and concepts constitute a community of people and shared meanings. . . . Why do we engage in *this* activity and what effect do we think it ought to have? As Helen Longino has asked: “Is ‘doing theory’ just a bonding ritual for academic or educationally privileged feminist women?” Again, whom does our theory making serve?

—María C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman 1986, 28

A rapprochement between theory and engagement requires clearing the ground to dwell/duel not only on what theory is but, more importantly, on what theory does, can and cannot do, and should and should not do. The disciplines in which my work is situated—African studies, women’s studies, literary studies, cultural studies, and development studies—are affected by or implicated in these processes. Theorizing in a cross-cultural context is fraught with intellectual, political, and ethical questions: the question of provenance (where is the theory coming from?); the question of subjectivity (who authorizes?); the question of positionality (which specific locations and standing [social, political, and intellectual] does it legitimize?). The imperial nature of theory formation must be interrogated to allow for a democratic process that will create room for the intervention, legitimation, and validation of theories formulated “elsewhere.” In other words, theory making should not permanently be a unidirectional enterprise—always emanating from a specific location and applicable to every location—in effect allowing a localized construct to impose a universal validity and application. I argue instead for the possibilities, desirability, and pertinence of a space clearing that allows a multiplicity of different but related frameworks from different locations to touch, intersect, and

feed off of each other in a way that accommodates different realities and histories. Nussbaum's concern about the applicability of a single universal framework is equally pertinent here: "And we also need to ask whether the framework we propose, if a single universal one, is sufficiently flexible to enable us to do justice to the human variety we find" (2000, 40). Above all, theory should be used to elucidate, not to obfuscate and intimidate.

Like other so-called marginal discourses, feminist discourse raises crucial questions about knowledge not only as being but as becoming, not only as a construct but as a construction, not only as a product but as a process. In other words, knowledge as a process is a crucial part of knowledge as a product. By injecting issues of subjectivity and location into epistemological debates, feminist scholarship seeks, as it were, to put a human face on what is called a body of knowledge and in the process unmask this presumably faceless body. By focusing on methodology (and sometimes intent), feminist scholarship brings up for scrutiny the human agency implicated in knowledge formation and information management. We cannot assume critical thinking without asking crucial questions about what is being thought critically and who is thinking it critically. But Western feminism is also caught up in its ambivalence: fighting for inclusion, it installs exclusions; advocating change, it resists change; laying claims to movement, it resists moving.

Some decades ago when *littérature engagée* was in vogue (in France, at least), writing was linked to social engagement. But in poststructuralist contexts, writers and intellectuals erect discursive walls that insulate them from the social action (*engagement*) needed to promote social change. The emergence of poststructuralist theory as "theory" and the role it has come to play in shaping not only feminist intellectual life but also the investigative paths of literary and cultural critics and other intellectuals of the Left has implications for social action/change. Poststructuralism is "a dead end for progressive thought," as Barbara Epstein (1995) argues in her quarrel with "poststructuralism-as-radicalism" and its theoretical claims that have little to do with progressive politics: "I am also dismayed by the subculture that developed around feminist poststructuralism and the intellectual world with which it intersects. In this arena, the pursuit of status and the worship of celebrity have become pervasive, probably more so than anywhere else in academia. Intellectual discourse has come to be governed by rapidly shifting fashions. Work is judged more by its sophistication than by the contribution it might make toward social change. Sophistication is understood to mean agility within a complex intellectual structure, the ability to engage in the-

oretical pyrotechnics, to intimidate others by a display of erudition” (1995, 85–86).

Poststructuralism’s “nominalism,” denial of the subject’s ability to reflect on social discourse and challenge its determination, thesis of undecidability, and assertion of the “negative function” of political struggles led Linda Alcoff to pose crucial and pertinent questions about poststructuralism’s potential threat to feminism itself:⁷ “Adopting nominalism creates significant problems for feminism. How can we seriously adopt Kristeva’s plan for only negative struggle? As the Left should by now have learned, you cannot mobilize a movement that is only and always against; you must have a positive alternative, a vision of a better future that can motivate people to sacrifice their time and energy toward its realization. How can we ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subjectivity? Nominalism threatens to wipe out feminism itself” (1988, 418–19). Poststructuralism’s focus on discourse and aesthetics instead of social action encourages the egocentricity and individualism that undermine collective action. The atomization of the intellectual community and the isolation in intellectual work allow, at best, the emergence of “stars” but produce, at worst, a dysfunctional and ineffective family that is not fully equipped to meet the challenges of societal transformation. African studies and women’s studies are not immune to these disciplinary trends. African studies’ focus on the idea of Africa rather than the reality of Africa mimics women’s studies’ foregrounding of the notion of the African woman rather than the humanity of African women. In feminist scholarship, theorists of different persuasions are mired in the theorizing and intellectual navel gazing that insulate them from social action and undermine relevance. African feminisms bring up for scrutiny the relationship with and resistance to the endemic feminist politics and theorizing that inaugurate social irrelevance and forestall true *engagement*—from feminist social and epistemological exclusions to feminist scholarship’s disconnection from social utility.

Indeed, with my professional-cum-intellectual trajectory redefining and realigning itself in recent years, I tend to be less charmed and intimidated and more alienated and dismissive of the intellectual gymnastics and empty theorizing in feminist scholarship, as evidenced by my incessant etching of “so what?” as marginal notes in my rereading of feminist texts that awed and humbled me as a graduate student and as a junior faculty mem-

⁷ See Alcoff 1988 for a discussion of what she calls poststructuralism’s “nominalism”; also Jacques Derrida’s thesis of undecidability (1978) and Julia Kristeva’s “negative function” (1981, 166).

ber.⁸ More importantly, as a teacher I worry about the implications of this state of affairs for upcoming generations of feminist scholars and teachers—our graduate students—who know less about the substance of required texts and more about trendy jargons, with the result that they produce similarly framed responses to different and unrelated questions. Specifically, I worry about my graduate student advisee and her seasonal obsessions with “post” (poststructuralist, postcolonial, postmodernist) jargons. At some point, it was “simulacrum” that she saw everywhere. That lasted for a few months. Then came one that refused to go away—“cleavage.” This ubiquitous monster was imbued with meanings that metamorphosed perpetually—from the sacred to the profane. Frustrated by the rapidity with which her dissertation was increasingly “marked” by this monster, I issued a stern warning: “If I see this ‘cleavage’ on another page of this dissertation, I’ll take you off my list of advisees.” Cleavage bowed to the threat, sanity reigned, and the dissertation moved ahead.

Even more pertinent to the situation of African women regarding theory making is the urgent need to open up a conversation not about the challenge to the impossibility of a theory (one) but the benefit of exploring the possibilities of theory (many). As Judith Butler aptly notes, “it may be time to entertain a radical critique that seeks to free feminist theory from the necessity of having to construct a single or abiding ground which is invariably contested by those identity positions or anti-identity positions that it invariably excludes” (1990, 5). When Barbara Christian spoke up over a decade ago against the “race for theory,” she brought up for scrutiny the link between identity positions and feminist theory by insisting that people of color have always theorized but differently: “I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in the riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (1995, 457). At issue here is the personalization of theory formation in the West (Cartesian, for example) as opposed to the anonymity of a communal voice that articulates knowledge claims in African narrative forms and proverbs (which in Igboland are often preceded by “*ndi banyi si*/our people said”). As colonial subjects, one of the difficulties we encountered in our absorption into the colonial world of knowledge acquisition was our being required in the colonial schools to memorize and correctly identify the ubiquitous quotes and

⁸ I am not alone in this. Not too long ago, a longtime feminist scholar/activist informed me that she had terminated her subscription to a top women’s studies journal because of “its philosophizing that has lost touch with reality.”

ensuing four-part questions that tortured us at examination time—who said, to whom, when, and where? (identify the voice that authorizes, the passivity that legitimates it, the temporality that marks it, and the location of the one-way traffic of a “transaction”). We forget such inanities at the peril of our educational advancement. No one bothered to ask us how we view knowledge, its formation and articulation; no one bothered to find out if we draw frames for knowledge (framework); no one cared to find out if our journey with and into knowledge is an ever-evolving, boundless love affair that sweeps us along with our neighbors, our ancestors, and those we have neither met nor “read” (“*ndi banyi si*/our people said” not “*ndi banyi delu*/our people wrote”).⁹

The location of African women (as knowledge producers and as subjects/objects for knowledge production) in feminist epistemological quarrels is both specific and complex. African women’s critique of prevalent feminist theories goes beyond the issues of relevance, adequacy, and appropriateness to include crucial questions about representation and task-allocation/sharing. In their review of three edited volumes on gender and international human rights, J. Oloka-Onyango and Sylvia Tamale (1995) laud the volumes’ attempts to incorporate diverse voices from the so-called third world in opposition to earlier international collections that at best marginalize and at worst silence “third-world” voices.¹⁰

But a further probing of these three laudable volumes reveals their complicity (some are more culpable than the others) in the endemic pattern of quarantining “third-world” voices to specific sections that are marked by predetermined notions of the intellectual and epistemological boundaries of “third-world” knowing subjects. So-called international volumes usually exclude from the “theory section” the voices and presence of “third-world” women (absent as producers of knowledge and makers of theory but sometimes present to “rematerialize”¹¹ or concretize the abstraction of theoretical positions). These publications tend to banish “third-world” women to case-study and country-specific sections, implying, of course, that these women can speak only to the issues pertaining to the specific countries from whence they come and do not have the capacity to dabble in the intricacies of theory as an intellectual, scientific abstraction that requires brain power to fashion and comprehend. Hidden

⁹ Those whose epistemological journeys are guided by orality (*ndi banyi si*) not writing (*ndi banyi delu*) are bound to theorize differently.

¹⁰ The books they review are Center for Women’s Global Leadership 1994; Cook 1994; and Peters and Wolper 1995.

¹¹ See Smith 1989, 44–46.

in the inner workings of this assumption or reasoning are the unspoken issues of race and social location. Furthermore, this allocating of tasks to research subjects and their positioning as objects is colonial both in intent and execution. In the same way that Africa produced the raw materials that the *métropole* transformed into manufactured products, African women (as researchers/scholars and as the researched) are instrumentalized: as researchers/scholars they are the instruments for collecting the raw data with which foreign scholars manufacture knowledge; as the researched they are the instruments through which scholarship is produced and careers built. Often in genuinely collaborative work, Western researchers do not include Africans as collaborators or coauthors (at best, they are recognized and thanked as “informants”).

The past couple of decades have seen the rise of African NGOs supported and financed primarily by foreign NGOs and international institutions and foundations. As Aili Mari Tripp notes in her study of new political activism in Africa, women’s increased participation in civil society and governance is due to the intervention of “donors [who] have supported women’s efforts to participate in civic education, constitutional and legislative reform, and leadership training, and [have] funded programs for female parliamentarians” (2001, 144). However, NGO activities in Africa raise serious questions about information gathering and knowledge construction. With the impoverishment and collapse of the higher education system in many African countries and the increasing practice of foreign donors and NGOs to fund local NGOs (not individuals) for projects, there is an increased pressure on African academicians and scholars to form or join NGOs in order to receive funding for research projects. Aside from the usual (and legitimate) charge that research focus is often donor driven (witness the explosion of the number of African NGOs working on the hot-button issue of the 1990s—so-called female genital mutilation), there are more worrisome questions regarding the nature, reporting, and archiving of “research” and the broader issue of accountability. The lack of reciprocity between Northern NGOs and their Southern counterparts is predicated on unequal relationships where the former demand transparency and accountability from the latter while maintaining secrecy and no accountability in return, a state of affairs that prompted Tandon Yash to caution Africans about being vigilant and demanding from their Northern partners an “alliance” (not one-sided “solidarity”):

The fact that western NGOs provide money for “development” . . . gives them an easy access to African NGOs. Periodically, the western

NGOs demand that their “partners” open up their books and hearts to explain what they have been doing with “their money.” This is called “evaluation.” . . . African NGOs have no such privileged access to the hearts and minds (and accounts) of the western NGOs from which they receive money. There is an unwritten law that says that where monies are spent they must be “accounted for,” but where information is supplied (as African NGOs do to western NGOs) there need not be any accountability on how that information is used. The doctrine of financial accountability is legitimate; the doctrine of informational accountability is not. (1991, 74)

This lopsided model of accountability has enormous implications on intellectual and epistemological levels. Often, the information gathered by Southern NGOs comes in the form of raw data crammed into reports whose aim is to show expenditures and justify the use of funds. In all this, little or no effort is made to encourage the Southern NGOs to transform their findings and data into an intellectual enterprise. Claiming total ownership of the findings and reports, the Northern NGOs (as funders) exercise the proprietary rights to use (even abuse) and dispose of the materials delivered to them while requiring the Southern NGOs (the producers of the data) to seek and obtain their permission before using the findings for other purposes. But how and by whom the data are used is of great significance. The restrictive NGO parameters notwithstanding, a small number of enterprising African NGO-affiliated academicians and scholars have succeeded in producing reports to satisfy funding conditionalities and at the same time use the findings imaginatively to produce knowledge that is disseminated through scholarly outlets—journals, edited volumes, and so forth. In order to participate fully in the shaping of knowledge about Africa, African NGOs should not hesitate to bite the finger that feeds them. Specifically, they should be prepared to challenge donor institutions and demand accountability and responsibility from them, when necessary, even as they seek financial support from them. The NGOs should walk the fine line between benefiting from corporations and being incorporated.

In their essay on the cultural imperialism and exclusions of feminist theory, María Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman also raise the question of accountability on the part of feminist theorists: “When we speak, write, and publish our theories, to whom do we think we are accountable? Are the concerns we have in being accountable to ‘the profession’ at odds with the concerns we have in being accountable to those about whom we theorize? . . . Why and how do we think theorizing about others

provides *understanding* of them?” (1986, 28; emphasis in original). Shouldn't Spelman and Lugones's concerns about accountability and ways of seeing/knowing be part of feminist theorizing? An African colleague once told me that African literature, because of its deconstructive and subversive nature and its position on subjectivity, voice, and representation, can only be conceptualized and theorized in the context of postmodernism: “*Only* postmodernist theory can tame and explain this 500 pound gorilla,” he opined with his inimitable laughter scattered all around me. My response was, if this gorilla is truly African, there must be some “gorilla-like” indigenous contexts and formulations that can lead us to a better and more understandable conceptualization and theorizing: “How about ‘*nmanwu* theory’ or even more specifically an ‘*atakata* theory?’” I responded, collecting and redirecting my colleague's scattered laughter back to him. In Igboland (southeastern Nigeria), *nmanwu* (masquerade) and *iti nmanwu* (masquerading) are both spiritual and mundane. *Nmanwu*, in its indeterminacy (spirit in human form), walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, but it ain't a duck. *Nmanwu* is a spirit that assumes a human form through an artistic expression that blurs the boundary between “high” and “low” art. Through its complex incorporation and weaving of prose, poetry, and “noise,” the *nmanwu* crosses genre boundaries with facility. Its pastiche of a narrative runs counter to a grand narrative. Indeterminate and ambiguous in its conceptualization (spirit in human form), playful in its attitude, simultaneous in its enactment of different genres, deconstructive in its movements, multiperspectivist in its workings, this bricolage of an art form (*nmanwu*) arcs toward a “postmodernist” formulation (but let us not forget that masquerading in Igboland predates the emergence of postmodernism in the last century). The *akataka*, with its energy and agility, is the most disruptive, “fragmenting,” and subversive of masquerades. In its conceptualization, construction, inner/outer workings, and appearance on the scene the *akataka* “deconstructs” and decenters everything, sending subjectivities, multivocality, and representation flying in all possible directions. The Igbo say “*adiro akwu ofuebe enene nmanwu*/one cannot stand at a spot to watch a masquerade”—a proverb that raises profoundly the issues of perspective and subjectivity.

While my colleague argues for using theoretical musings and abstractions of postmodernism to rematerialize or give form to African literature, I plead for “building on the indigenous” (see the fourth section) by arguing that, in effect, African worldviews and thought are capable of providing the theoretical rack on which to hang African literature. Can the *akataka* theory be more useful to the producers of African (Igbo, specifically) literature to understand and explain the literature to them-

selves and the rest of the world? Can postmodernism understand and explain itself to itself and to the rest of the world through *akataka* theory? Can institutional and disciplinary requirements, the politics of publishing, and professional survival allow the intrusion of *akataka* theory in the cross-fertilization of theory making? In short, why should a medley of voices not rise to formulate theory in the context of a cross-fertilization of ideas, concepts, and concerns? Culture (as a negative force) remains a central issue in colonial, developmental, and (Western) feminist discourses about the “other.” Can the “other” culture be viewed otherwise? Are its concepts translatable to mainstream theorizing?

Culture, development, and (Western) feminism

The development discourse is part of an imperial process whereby other peoples are appropriated and turned into objects. It is an essential part of the process whereby the “developed” countries manage, control and even create the Third World economically, politically, sociologically and culturally. It is a process whereby the lives of some peoples, their plans, their hopes, their imaginations, are shaped by others who frequently share neither their lifestyles, nor their hopes nor their values.

—Vincent Tucker 1999, 1

The true development of human beings involves much more than mere economic growth. At its heart there must be a sense of empowerment and inner fulfillment. This alone will ensure that human and cultural values remain paramount. . . . When this is achieved, culture and development will naturally coalesce to create an environment in which all are valued, and every kind of human potential can be realized.

—Aung San Suu Kyi 1995, 18

As processes of unequal power relations, colonialism, development, and even current so-called globalization focus more on the material and less on the human. Colonialism’s focus on natural resources, institutions, and frameworks is matched by development’s focus on economics, institutions, and processes. The same goes for “the world in motion” in this age of globalization where resources, capital, and skills are more “in motion” than certain categories of humans—mostly poor, unskilled, people of color from the so-called third world (immigration policies of many Western nations are designed to regulate and manage the flow). I find the French word for globalization (*la mondialisation*) more pertinent to the issue I wish to raise here about humanity and materiality.

La mondialisation, derived from *le monde* with its double meaning of the physical world (materiality) and people (humanity), captures both the materiality and humanity of globalization. The humanity that is at best minimized and at worst ignored in the discourse and practice of globalization in general takes center stage in discourses and practices that I see evolving in Africa.

From colonialism to development and globalization, the West has mounted persistent (and sometimes wrongheaded) insurgencies against the “weird regimes” that make up the “unacceptable” cultures in many parts of the so-called third world. Using the “weird regimes” as justification for demoting the practitioners of the cultures below human level, the West argues that to exorcise these subhumans of their “weird regimes” will rehumanize them and lead them to the gates of civilization. Arrogating to themselves the moral responsibility to intervene to rescue women victims from the “weird regimes,” Western feminists have brought to the fore intense debates about the conception of good, social justice, and moral responsibility from which, unfortunately, the humanity of those to be rescued is relegated to the background. Susan Moller Okin’s (1999) essay on polygamy among African immigrants in France is instructive. Okin’s essay speaks eloquently to the conflicts among liberalism, multiculturalism, and feminism. She argues for a liberal democracy’s obligation to intervene in resolving these conflicts, particularly in the so-called minority cultures that are not responsive to women’s rights. However, speaking for universalist intervention, the essay rests primarily on the following assertion by Okin: “In the late 1980s, for example, a sharp public controversy erupted in France about whether Magrébin girls could attend school wearing the traditional Muslim head scarves regarded as proper attire for postpubescent young women. . . . At the very same time, however, the public was virtually silent about *a problem of vastly greater importance* to many French Arab and African immigrant women: polygamy” (1999, 9; my emphasis). But those of us who have worked on/with African immigrant communities in France know full well that for them, the problems of “vastly greater importance” are *le racism* (racism) and *le chômage* (unemployment). *La polygamie* (polygamy) comes a distant third or even further down the line. Okin blames polygamy for the conjugal conflicts debilitating African immigrant families huddled in inadequate living space.¹² We must not forget that numerous monogamous African immigrant families are also faced with the same problem of inadequacy of

¹² If adequate living space is the key to harmonious marriages, the divorce rate in Beverly Hills (with its numerous mansions) would be one of the lowest in the world!

living space. Because families always want the best for themselves, one can argue that African immigrant families (monogamous and polygamous) share inadequate living space because that is what they can afford. It seems to me that one should be making an economic argument in this instance. But Okin's essay jumps from Muslim scarves to polygamy (so-called symbols of religious and cultural oppression for which the West is not responsible), bypassing racism (in which the West is implicated) in order to clear the terrain for debates about African and Muslim cultures, cultural relativism, multiculturalism, universalism, and moral responsibility on the one hand and endless assertions about "minority cultures" (read non-Western cultures) and "majority cultures" (read Western cultures) on the other hand. Many top scholars joined the debate to produce a book of the same title without any serious attempt made to interrogate the fundamental assertion on which Okin's essay rests. When wrongheaded immigration policies and practices join forces with racism to produce an underclass of poor, unemployed immigrant families, we blame their culture (polygamy) instead of their socioeconomic predicament!¹³ Should not the moral outrage of the universalist interventionists be equally directed at what ails the immigrants—racism and unemployment?

But when do certain acts become "culture"? Spousal murders (by shooting, stabbing, lethal injection, running over by car, etc.) are rampant in the United States and are often described by Americans as "crimes of passion." More women are raped in the United States than in most African countries, but Americans describe the problem as "violence against women," not "culture." As of March 2003, 171 countries (about 90 percent of the members of the United Nations) are party to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the United States is one of the few countries that has not ratified the convention. One wonders why attendees at UN conferences (from Nairobi to Beijing) had not been mobilized to help American women address the U.S. nonratification of CEDAW at the same time they are mobilized to discuss polygamy, child marriage, and so forth. Do "third-world" women have the moral responsibility to intervene on behalf of oppressed females of the United States? Can "third-world" women be enlisted or be allowed to invite themselves to exercise

¹³ The situation of African immigrants in France is much more complex than the cultural explanation that is advanced here. Using the "my culture made me do it" mantra to frame and explain the predicament of "third-world" peoples is no longer tenable. Not surprisingly, one of the essays in the volume carries this mantra as its title.

this moral obligation? Women in many parts of the “third world” object to the idea of a unidirectional intervention. Interventions should be allowed to cross and recross borders in the spirit of true “global feminism.”

Often, the interventions (moral and otherwise) are not aimed at saving the “victims” but rather at transforming them in the image of the interventionists, as Mark Beach’s narrative of the “impossibility” of taking an “individual” photograph in a village (Piela) in Burkina Faso demonstrates. Beach, an American photographer from Pennsylvania, traveled to Burkina Faso to take “individual” pictures for a photographic project titled *Dreams of Our Neighbors*, commissioned by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in 1995. However, things did not quite work out when the time came for him to take “individual” photographs of Sibdou Ouada, a pediatric nurse and the wife of a local pastor, who was never asked if she liked posing for “individual” photographs:

When the moment to photograph finally arrived I asked Sibdou to stand where the natural, ambient light was particularly attractive. Sibdou agreed; then promptly called her four children, the twins and an older son and daughter, to surround her. As I wanted only Sibdou in the photo, I was faced with a problem. As a compromise I made several images of the family, and a few with children in the background as I plotted the next location where I might succeed in making the individual portrait. Sibdou agreed to stand in the doorway of her porch for the next series of images. I asked that only she be in the photo. She smiled and promptly called for her children to stand around her. In a foolish effort to isolate Sibdou in the frame, I moved my camera slightly, hoping I could crop the children out when I printed the photograph in the darkroom. As the camera moved, Sibdou and the children all moved in tandem. First one way, then back the other. Sibdou finally placed the twins in front of her. I was defeated. Perhaps it was the dry heat of Burkina Faso, or the long days making photographs and interviewing, but I finally understood that a photograph of Sibdou meant a photograph of her family. There was no distinction. Sibdou knew this. She was only waiting for me to understand it as well. When I finally did make two images of Sibdou alone, they were lonely images. Sibdou stood uncomfortably in front of the camera. (Beach 1995, 1–2)

Two pertinent issues arise in this encounter between Mark Beach (the

center) and a woman in a far-flung village in Africa, Sibdou Ouada (the marginal). First, in collision are, on the one hand, Sibdou's notion of self, identity, and place in the scheme of things, and on the other hand Beach's desire to remake Sibdou according to his perception of being—individual, standing alone, having a personal space. Second, the reporting of the event claims that Beach learned about individualism while photographing a nurse in West Africa. But that is not what this story taught Beach. He was the one teaching Sibdou individualism, and Sibdou in turn taught him community, alliance, connectedness. To say that Beach learned individualism is to confirm what we know already—that imperialists and colonialists never learn from the colonized: they teach them. They do not ask questions; they manufacture answers in search of questions. Border crossing has its dangers, its seduction, its unpredictability, its humbling moments, but it also has its enriching rewards. Border crossing entails learning about the “other,” but more importantly, it should also entail learning from the other. Learning about is a gesture that is often tinged with arrogance and an air of superiority; learning from requires a high dose of humility tinged with civility. Learning about often produces arrogant interrogators; learning from requires humble listeners.

Culture, as an arena of political and ideological struggle, needs constant and close scrutiny to separate reality from invention or trace invention's transformation into reality. Culture is dynamic in the sense that it derives its meanings, evolution, and reformulation from people's encounter with and negotiations in it in the context of historical imperatives. The validity of clear lines drawn between cultures is seriously tested, particularly in this age of globalization. Christopher Miller's observation that “cultures, nations, and spheres like ‘the West’ do not exist in isolation” (1993, 216) but in constant contact with other spheres for millennia is supported by James Clifford's eloquent articulation of how “cultural *poesis* and politics” participate in the “constant reconstitution of selves and others through specific exclusions, conventions, and discursive practices” (1986, 24). In writing about cultures, ethnographers also write cultures; by revealing, explaining, and ascribing meaning to cultures, ethnographers create cultures: “As a professional discourse that elaborates on the meaning of culture in order to account for, explain, and understand cultural difference, anthropology ends up also constructing, producing, and maintaining difference. Anthropological discourse helps give cultural difference (and the separation between groups of people that it implies) the air of the self-evident” (Abu-Lughod 1993,

12). Lila Abu-Lughod proposes that a mitigated reification of culture could be accomplished through “writing against culture” that focuses on the interconnections between the positionality of the researcher and the researched and a move away from collective subjects to the “ethnographies of the particular.”¹⁴ Development discourse and practice stand to gain from the development of the particular. Until development assumes an individual, human face instead of the anonymity of the collective (the poor, the needy), it will remain an unrealizable goal in the “third world.”

The goal will be accomplished through an honest effort to humanize development processes and not assume that economic growth guarantees development. The truth of the matter is that people in need are complex beings like most other people are—they eat, work, love, shop, dance, laugh, cry, go for walks, hug their children, and so forth. To strip them of their complexity is to deny them their humanity. Propelled by humanistic considerations, philanthropic organizations and development agencies, well intentioned for the most part, dehumanize in their attempt to humanize. As I have argued elsewhere (Nnaemeka 1997), culture should not be dismissed as a negative or neutral factor in development; rather, attempts should be made to find out in what ways culture is a positive force that can serve development well. As Aung San Suu Kyi forcefully argues, man should not be an economic tool for development: “When economics is regarded as the most important key to every lock of every door it is only natural that the worth of man should come to be decided largely, even wholly, by his effectiveness as an economic tool. This is at variance with the vision of a world where economic, political, and social institutions work to serve man instead of the other way round; where culture and development coalesce to create an environment in which human potential can be realized to the full” (1995, 13). In the past few decades, the development process in Africa has been marred by the blind spots in its conceptualization and the shortcomings in its articulation and implementation. The development process, as it is engineered from the outside and “above,” has dragged Africans along while leaving behind African ideals of humanity, responsibility, compromise, and true partnership at the heart of democratic values that would have smoothed the rough edges of the so-called development in theory and practice. It is to the question of building on the indigenous in development processes that I now turn.

¹⁴ See Abu-Lughod 1991, 149–57.

African medi(t)ations: Nego-feminism, building on the indigenous, and (re)claiming the third space

When something stands, something stands *beside* it.
—Igbo proverb

A person is a person because of other people!
—Sotho proverb

One head cannot go into counsel.
—Ashanti proverb

The sky is vast enough for all birds to fly without colliding.
—Yoruba proverb

Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. . . . In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a “proper.”
—Michel de Certeau 1984, 117

In documenting the features of African feminism, I noted elsewhere that “to meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism but rather to the African environment that one must refer. African feminism is not reactive; it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance” (Nnaemeka 1998a, 9). Armed with the knowledge of the African worldview as inscribed in proverbs (see above) and enriched by many years of collaboration with Africa-based scholars and activists in development processes and social movements, I will attempt here to use the African scholars/activists’ practices to formulate and name a framework that describes their engagement as it is rooted in the indigenous. I argue that African feminist theory should be built on the indigenous in the same way that Claude Ake argues that for development to make some progress in Africa, greater attention must be paid to “building on the indigenous”:

We cannot significantly advance the development of Africa unless we take African societies seriously as they are, not as they ought to be or even as they might be; that sustainable development cannot occur unless we build on the indigenous. Now, what is the indigenous and how might we build on it? The indigenous is not the

traditional, there is no fossilized existence of the African past available for us to fall back on, only new totalities however hybrid which change with each passing day. The indigenous refers to whatever the people consider important to their lives, whatever they regard as an authentic expression of themselves. We build on the indigenous by making it determine the form and content of development strategy, by ensuring that developmental change accommodates itself to these things, be they values, interests, aspirations and or social institutions which are important in the life of the people. (1988, 19)

The distinction Ake makes between the traditional and the indigenous is an important one because it frees us from the reified notion of culture as it is evoked by “tradition” to clear the space for the functioning of the now and then, and the here and there—a dynamic, evolving hybrid of different histories and geographies. Building on the indigenous creates the feeling of ownership that opens the door to a participative, democratic process where stakeholders’ imagination, values, and worldviews are taken into account while mitigating stakeholders’ alienation, which could result from the invalidation of their worldviews and values.

In my view, the work of women in Africa is located at the boundary where the academy meets what lies beyond it, a third space where the immediacy of lived experience gives form to theory, allows the simultaneous gesture of theorizing practice and practicing theory, and anticipates the mediation of policy, thereby disrupting the notion of the academy and activism as stable sites. My choice of *space* over *place* or *location* in mapping what I call the *third space* is informed by the distinction Achille Mbembe makes between place and territory in his essay on boundaries, territoriality, and sovereignty in Africa. In mapping his arguments, Mbembe acknowledges Michel de Certeau’s work on spaciality, *L’invention du quotidien* (*The Practice of Everyday Life*): “A place, as Michel de Certeau points out, is an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies a stability. As for a territory, it is fundamentally an intersection of moving bodies. It is defined essentially by the set of movements that take place within it. Seen in this way, it is a set of possibilities that historically situated actors constantly resist or realize” (Mbembe 2000, 261). In my view space presents an expansive notion of terrain that allows for the interplay of resistances and realizations at the heart of the border and critical engagement I call *nego-feminism*—the brand of feminism that I see unfolding in Africa.

But what is *nego-feminism*? First, *nego-feminism* is the feminism of negotiation; second, *nego-feminism* stands for “no ego” feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of

negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance. Here, negotiation has the double meaning of “give and take/exchange” and “cope with successfully/go around.” African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework. My use of space—the third space—provides the terrain for the unfolding of the dynamic process. Furthermore, nego-feminism is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies. The theology of nearness grounded in the indigenous installs feminism in Africa as a performance and an altruistic act.¹⁵ African women do feminism; feminism is what they do for themselves and for others.¹⁶ The rest of this section will examine how African women have negotiated disciplinary and pedagogical spaces and also address issues in gender, language, and practice.

The women’s studies classroom in the West (in the United States, specifically) functions in a feminized (all/almost-all-female) environment as opposed to the gendered (a healthy mix of women and men) context operative in women’s studies classrooms and conferences in Africa.¹⁷ A homogeneous (in terms of sex, at least) classroom that is anesthetized by the comfort of the familiar/“home” needs the “foreignness” that challenges and promotes self-examination; it needs the different, the out of the ordinary, that defamiliarizes as it promotes the multiple perspectives and challenges rooted in heterogeneity.

¹⁵ Take, e.g., the Igbo proverb, *ife kwulu, ife akwudebie*/when something stands, something stands beside it. Sibdou Ouda’s action during the “photo-shoot” (i.e., beckoning her children to stand beside her) is a vivid enactment of this proverb.

¹⁶ See Nnaemeka 1998a, 5. Also see n. 2 above where one of the African participants interjected “tell her [Nussbaum] that’s not what we came here to *do*.” An African participant made a similar remark when the fight for supremacy erupted among feminists, womanists, and African womanists at the first Women in Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) conference (see Nnaemeka 1998a, 31, n. 3).

¹⁷ At the first international WAAD conference I organized in Nsukka, Nigeria, in 1992, about 30 percent of the participants were male. About the same percentage attended the third WAAD conference in Madagascar. The Women’s World conference held in Kampala, Uganda, in 2002 also attracted many male participants/presenters. At the first WAAD conference, some foreign participants complained about the presence of men (see Nnaemeka 1998b, 363–64). I heard the same complaint from the same constituency at the Kampala conference in 2002.

An examination of the difference between the development of women's studies as a discipline in Africa and in the West (the United States, for example) is useful in addressing the issues of negotiation and social utility of scholarship I raised above. An example will suffice. The inauguration and development of the Women's Studies Department at Makerere University, Uganda, are due to a combination of internal and external forces—on the one hand, the global women's movement and the international development community and, on the other hand, the individual and collective efforts of Ugandan academics and activists as well as local NGOs such as the Action for Development (ACFODE) and the Ugandan Association of University Women (UAUW). Sensitive to diverse (national, regional, and international) perspectives on women's issues, the Makerere University committee charged with drawing up the curriculum for the program invited the participation of experts from Zambia, Zimbabwe, and the United States. From its inception in 1990—with five faculty members and thirteen master's degree students—to 1995, the department had enrolled in the M.A. program fifty-four students, six of whom were male. The program of study includes four semesters of course work followed by field research and submission of a thesis (Mwaka 1996).

The program at Makerere is initiated and sustained by a strong sense of the social utility of scholarship and the need for inclusion (particularly in terms of gender), and these considerations account for the differences between this program and programs in the United States. More importantly, women's studies programs in the United States do not begin as graduate programs; usually, they start as non-degree-awarding interdisciplinary programs before acquiring the "department" status that allows them to award a bachelor's degree and subsequently graduate degrees. The Women's Studies Department at Makerere started with an M.A. program due to its mission of linking academic work to policy, advocacy, and other development enterprises. Sensitive to the social utility of academic work, the program sought to produce personnel who would sensitize the society about gender issues, support the work of NGOs, and staff the Ministry of Gender and Community Development. In all this, gender exclusion was not thrown in as a wedge to dam meaningful collaboration between women and men. Although not all women's studies programs in Africa are modeled on the Ugandan example, they usually arc toward gender inclusiveness and social relevance.

The negotiations that are made at the level of gender and language are rooted in the indigenous as well: "African patterns of feminism can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women,

the male is not ‘the other’ but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own” (Steady 1987, 8). African women’s willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around men even in difficult circumstances is quite pervasive. As the Cameroonian writer, Calixthe Beyala, puts it at the beginning of her book, *Lettre d’une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales* (1995), “Soyons clairs: tous les hommes ne sont pas des salauds” (Let’s face it, all men are not bastards; 1995, 7). I take that to mean that some men are bastards! But let us stick with Beyala’s more benevolent phrasing of the issue. Another example is also by a Francophone African woman writer, Mariama Bâ of Senegal, who dedicated her fine novel, *Une si longue lettre* (1980), to many constituencies including “aux hommes de bonne volonté” (to men of goodwill). This, of course, excludes the bastards among them! By not casting a pall over men as a monolith, African women are more inclined to reach out and work with men in achieving set goals. Sexual politics were huge in Western feminism about two decades ago, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that the politics no longer exist; they are not passé. In my view, Western feminism has turned down the volume on sexual politics, but the residues are still a driving force. The resistance in institutions across the United States (including mine) against changing women’s studies programs to gender studies programs is rooted principally in the argument that women’s issues will be relegated to the back burner in a gender studies program.¹⁸ I do not see a similar argument flourishing in Africa.¹⁹ The language of feminist engagement in Africa (collaborate, negotiate, compromise) runs counter to the language of Western feminist scholarship and engagement (challenge, disrupt, deconstruct, blow apart, etc.) as exemplified in Amy Allen’s excellent book on feminist theory, in which the author states that feminists are interested in “criticizing, challenging, subverting, and ultimately overturning the multiple axes of stratification affecting women” (1999, 2). African feminism challenges through negotiation, accommodation, and compromise.

Sibdou Ouada’s negotiation with private spaces is indicative of African women’s negotiations with everyday practice. African women working for social change build on the indigenous by defining and modulating their feminist struggle in deference to cultural and local imperatives. For ex-

¹⁸ Some institutions have negotiated a compromise—women’s/gender studies program.

¹⁹ One of the most prominent centers in Africa (Cape Town, South Africa) for the study of women assumed the name African Gender Institute, without equivocation.

ample, when informed that some state governments had refused to implement the federal government policy of giving a housing allowance to married female public servants, Ifeyinwa Nzeako, the National President of the Nigerian National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), rather than quarrel about the gender inequality in the allocation of fringe benefits, issued a statement pointing out that the discriminatory policy hurts women by depriving them of the benefits to provide for their children. Knowing how to negotiate cultural spaces, the NCWS leadership shifted the argument from gender equity to family well-being/children's welfare and accomplished its goals. In Burkina Faso, the practice of "*je retiens/* I hold back" has helped women raise seed money for business enterprises.²⁰

Conclusion: Border crossing and the chameleon walk

They have disfigured the legacy of the sixties. . . . What I mean by the sixties legacies in traditional political terms are political activism and engagement on behalf of equality, democracy, tolerance.

—Wini Breines 1996, 114

Nego-feminism in Africa is living those legacies in theory, practice, and policy matters. African women's engagement still nurtures the compromise and hopefulness needed to build a harmonious society. As far as theory goes, Barbara Christian (1995) rightly noted that people of color theorize differently. But can feminist theory create the space for the unfolding of "different" theorizing not as an isolated engagement outside of feminist theory but as a force that can have a defamiliarizing power on feminist theory? In other words, seeing feminist theorizing through the eyes of the "other," from the "other" place, through the "other" worldview has the capacity to defamiliarize feminist theory as we know it and assist it not only in interrogating, understanding, and explaining the unfamiliar but also in defamiliarizing and refamiliarizing the familiar in more productive and enriching ways. Thus, the focus will be not on what feminist theory can do in terms of explicating other lives and other places but on how feminist theory is and could be constructed. In this instance,

²⁰ This is a practice whereby women withhold part of their housekeeping money to build enough capital to invest in a business venture that will benefit them and their families. First, they negotiate with/around patriarchy to raise the capital, and second, they negotiate private and public spaces as they put the capital to use. Many of the women invest their money in a kiosk or a shop in front of their homes that allows them to be homemakers and businesswomen simultaneously.

Westerners are led across borders so that they can cross back enriched and defamiliarized and ready to see the familiar anew. How do we deal with the theorizing emanating from other epistemological centers in the so-called third world? How do we come to terms with the multiplicity of centers bound by coherence and decipherment and not disrupted perpetually by endless differences?

In view of the issues about intervention, border crossing, turfism, intersectionality, compromise, and accommodation raised in this article, I will conclude with a piece of advice from my great-uncle. On the eve of my departure for graduate studies in *obodo oyibo* (land of the white people), my great-uncle called me into his *obi* (private quarters) and sounded this note of caution. “My daughter,” he said, “when you go to *obodo oyibo*, walk like the chameleon.”²¹ According to my great-uncle, the chameleon is an interesting animal to watch. As it walks, it keeps its head straight but looks in different directions. It does not deviate from its goal and grows wiser through the knowledge gleaned from the different perspectives it absorbs along the way. If it sees prey, it does not jump on it immediately. First, it throws out its tongue. If nothing happens to its tongue, it moves ahead and grabs the prey. The chameleon is cautious. When the chameleon comes into a new environment, it takes the color of the environment without taking over. The chameleon adapts without imposing itself. Whatever we choose to call our feminism is our prerogative. However, in this journey that is feminist engagement, we need to walk like the chameleon—goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views. Nego-feminists would heed the advice of my great-uncle.

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²¹ It is important to note that he did not advise me to be like the chameleon but rather to walk like the chameleon. The indeterminacy implicated in being like a chameleon is not lost to my people (Igbo) who denounce chameleonlike behavior in humans—*ifu ocha icha, ifu oji ijie* (when you see white, you turn white; when you see black, you turn black). By advising me to walk like a chameleon, my great-uncle takes the chameleon metaphor in different directions.

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