“NO LONGER IN A FUTURE HEAVEN”: WOMEN AND NATIONALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

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All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous. Nations are not the natural flowering into time of the organic essence of a people, borne unscathed through the ages. Rather, as Ernest Gellner observes, nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist.” Most modern nations, despite their appeal to an august and immemorial past, are for the most part very recent inventions. Benedict Anderson thus argues that nations are best understood as “imagined communities,” systems of representations whereby people come to imagine a shared experience of identification with an extended community.

Nonetheless, nations are not simply phantasmagoria of mind. The term “imagined” carries in its train connotations of fiction and make-believe, moonshine and chimera. The term “invented community,” by contrast, refuses the conservative faith in essence and nature, while at the same time conveying more powerfully the implications of labor and creative ingenuity, technology and institutional power. Nations are elaborate social practices enacted through time, laboriously fabricated through the media and the printing press, in schools, churches, the myriad forms of popular culture, in trade unions and funerals, protest marches and uprisings. Nationalism both invents and performs social difference, enacting it ritualistically in Olympic extravaganzas, mass rallies and military displays, flag waving and costumery, and becoming thereby constitutive of people’s identities. The green, black, and gold flag of the African National Congress, or a Palestinian kaffiyeh, may be bits of colored cloth, but there is nothing fictive about their power to conjure up the loyalties of life and death, or to provoke the state’s expert machinery of wrath.

For this reason, nationalisms are dangerous, not, as Eric Hobsbawm would have it, in the sense that they should be opposed, but rather in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence. Nationalisms are con-
tested systems of representation enacted through social institutions, and legitimizing, or limiting, people's access to the rights and resources of the nation-state: land and water, political and economic power, children, food and housing, the technologies of violence. Nations are situations under constant contest.

All nationalisms, moreover, are gendered. "When you own a big chunk of the bloody Third World, the babies just come with the scenery," as the Chrissie Hynde song goes. In the chronicles of male nationalism, women, too, are all too often figured as mere scenic backdrops to the big-brass business of masculine armies and uprisings. Theorists of nationalism (Fanon notably excepted) have seldom felt moved to explore how nationalisms are at every minute implicated in gender power. No nationalism in the world has granted women and men the same privileged access to the resources of the nation-state. So far, all nationalisms are dependent on powerful constructions of gender difference.

George Santayana, for one, gives voice to a well-established male view: "Our nationalism is like our relationship to women: too implicated in our moral nature to be changed honorably, and too accidental to be worth changing." For Santayana political agency is straightforwardly male, and the male citizen stands in the same symbolic relation to the nation as a man stands to a woman, political power thus depending on a prior construction of gender power. Santayana's sentence could never be said by a woman, because, quite simply, the "our" of national citizenship is male. The needs of the nation are identified with the needs, frustrations, and aspirations of men. As in the translated (not original) title of Fanon's famous essay "Algeria Unveiled," women are construed as the "bearers of the nation," its boundary and symbolic limit, but lack a nationality of their own. In such instances, women serve to represent the limits of national difference between men. Excluded as national citizens, women are subsumed only symbolically into the national body politic. Thus male political power is heavily dependent on a naturalized, and none too "accidental," ideology of gender difference. Nationalism is constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse, and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power.

Nira Yuval Davis and Flora Anthias have suggested that women's relation to nationalism has taken at least five major forms. Women serve

- as biological reproducers of national groups (the biological mothers of the people)
- as symbols and signifiers of national difference in male discourse ("Singapore Girl, you're a great way to fly")
- as transmitters and producers of the cultural narratives themselves (mothers, teachers, writers, playwrights, artists)
- as reproducers of the boundaries of the nation (by accepting or refusing sexual intercourse or marriage with prescribed groups of men)
- as active participants in national movements: in armies, congresses, trade union activism, community organizations.

WOMEN AND NATIONALISM 105
Nations do not have transhistorical effects. There is no one single nationalism, nor one privileged narrative of the nation, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s phrase. In South Africa, certainly, women’s relations to the competing national narratives and struggles have taken a number of intricate and changing historical shapes, contests in which women are themselves deeply involved, and which have profound implications for the future of a transformed South Africa. In what follows, I wish to explore some of the varying ways in which women have been implicated in the competing nationhoods, both within Afrikaans as well as African nationalism.

**Afrikaner Nationalism and Gender**

*The men all good for nothing and hardly any women at all.* —Jane Austen

Contrary to the legends of white invention, Afrikaner nationalism did not begin with the scraping of Dutch keels on the Cape shores in 1652. Afrikanerdom, far from being the timeless emanation of a monolithic “Afrikaner volk,” is of very recent origin. The major themes of the “national” saga (divine sanction and manifest destiny, cultural brotherhood and racial distinction, patriarchal power, entitlement to the lands, and a single, unifying language) are invented traditions. Afrikanerdom is not the mysterious manifestation of a divine plan unfolding through the centuries and flowering into history with the Great Trek, or the ancestral gees (spirit) inherent in every Boer. Rather, it was forged very recently in the crucible of colonial contradiction.

Until the 1860s, Britain was indifferent to its unpromising colony at the southern tip of Africa. Only upon the discovery of diamonds and gold were the Union Jack and the redcoats shipped out with any real sense of imperial mission. Very quickly, mining needs for cheap labor and a centralized state collided with traditional farming interests, and out of these contradictions, in the conflict for control over African land and labor, exploded the bloody Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902.

Violently improvised in the shocked aftermath of the war, Afrikaner nationalism was a doctrine of crisis. After their defeat by the British, the bloodied remnants of the scattered Boer communities had to forge a new counter-culture if they were to survive in the emergent capitalist state. The invention of this counter-culture had a clear class component. When the Boer generals and the British capitalists swore blood brotherhood in the Union of 1910, the raggle-taggle legion of “poor whites” with little or no prospects, the modest clerks and shopkeepers, the small farmers and poor teachers, the intellectuals and petite bourgeoisie, all precarious in the new state, began to identify themselves as the vanguard of a new Afrikanerdom, the chosen emissaries of the national volk.

To begin with, Afrikaners had no monolithic identity, no common historic purpose, and no single unifying language. They were a disunited, scattered people, speaking a medley of High Dutch and local dialects. The dialects, blended with smatterings of the slave, Nguni, and Khoisan languages, were scorned as the kombuistaal (kitchen language) of house servants, slaves, and women. But in the early decades of the twentieth century, as Isabel Hofmeyr has brilliantly shown, an elabo-
rate labor of “regeneration” was undertaken, as the despised hotnotstaal was revamped, purged of its rural, “degenerate” associations, and elevated to the status of the august mother tongue of the Afrikaans people.

The new, invented community of the volk required the conscious creation of a single print language, a popular press, and a literate populace. At the same time, the invention of tradition required a class of cultural brokers and image makers to do the inventing. The “language movement” of the early twentieth century, in the flurry of poems, magazines, newspapers, novels, and countless cultural events, provided just such a movement, fashioning the myriad Boer vernaculars into a single identifiable Afrikaans language.

At the same time, the invention of Afrikaner tradition had a clear gender component. In 1918 Afrikaans was legally recognized as a third language. The same year, a small, clandestine clique of Afrikaner men launched a secret society, with the mission of capturing the loyalties of dispirited Afrikaners and fostering white male business power. There, in the magic, inner circle of Afrikanerdonm’s new intelligentsia, with vows of secrecy and initiation ceremonies in dark, sequestered rooms, apartheid doctrine was spawned. As Allistair Sparks has observed, the tiny white brotherhood swiftly became the think tank of the Afrikaner Nationalist movement, burgeoning into a countrywide political mafia that has exerted immense power over all aspects of Nationalist policy and cultural life. The gender bias of the society, as of the rest of Afrikanerdonm, is neatly summed up in its name: the Broederbond (the brotherhood). Henceforth, Afrikaner nationalism would be synonymous with white male interests, white male aspirations, and white male politics.

Two decades later, in 1938, an epic extravaganza of invented tradition inflamed Afrikanerdonm into a delirium of nationalist passion. Dubbed the Tweede Trek (Second Trek), or the Eeufoes (Centenary), the event celebrated the Boers’ first mutinous Great Trek away from British laws and the effrontery of slave emancipation, and commemorated the Boer massacre of the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River. Nine replicas of Voortrekker wagons were built. Each was named after a male Voor- trekker hero. No wagon was named after an adult woman, but one was called, generically, Vrou en Moeder (Wife and Mother). This wagon, creaking across the country, symbolized woman’s relation to the nation as indirect, mediated through her social relation to men, her national identity lying in her unpaid services, through husband and family, to the volk.

Each wagon became the microcosm of colonial society at large: the whip-wielding white patriarch prancing on horseback, black servants toiling alongside, mother and children ensconced in the wagon—the women’s starched white bonnets signifying the purity of the race, the decorous surrender of their sexuality to the patriarch, and the invisibility of female labor. The wagons rumbled along different routes from Cape Town to Pretoria, sparking along the way an orgy of national pageantry, and engulfing the country in a four-month spectacle of invented tradition. Along the route, white men grew
beards and white women donned the an-
cestral bonnets. Huge crowds gathered to
greet the wagons. As the trekkers passed
through the towns, babies were named af-
after trecker heroes, as were roads and pub-
lic buildings. Not a few girls were baptized
with the improbable but popular favorite:
Eeufesia (Centeneria). The affair climaxed
in Pretoria in a spectacular Third Reich
marathon led by thousands of Afrikaner
Boy Scouts bearing flaming torches.

The first point about the Tweede Trek
is that it invented nationalist traditions and
celebrated unity where none before ex-
isted, creating the illusion of a collective
identity through the political staging of vi-
carious spectacle. The second point is that
the Nationalists learned the trick from the
Nazis. The Tweede Trek was pure
Nuremberg, as Allister Sparks notes. Hit-
er is said to have sent a spy to South Africa
to sniff out sympathizers, of which there
was no shortage. The Broederbond ar-
ranged for a few promising Afrikaner stu-
dents to spend some time in German
universities—the same men, as it hap-
pened, who were destined to become the
foremost architects of apartheid ideology.
One of these men, Piet Meyer, baptized
his son Izan—Nazi spelled backwards.

As Sparks shows, these men returned
to South Africa inspired not only by the
Nazi creed of Blut und Boden, but a new
style: the politics of symbol and cultural
persuasion. In our time, the experience of
national collectivity is preeminently
through spectacle. By anyone’s standards,
the Eeufees was a triumph of image
management, complete with all the Third
Reich symbolic regalia of flags, flaming
torches, patriotic songs, incendiary
speeches, costumes, and crowd manage-
ment. More than anything, the Eeufees re-
vealed the extent to which nationalism is
a symbolic performance of invented com-
munity, staged by political interests, and
enacted by designated cultural actors. In
reality, the Eeufees was a calculated and
self-conscious effort by the Broederbond
to paper over the myriad regional, gender,
and class tensions that threatened them. As
a fetishistic displacement of difference, it
succeeded famously, for the success of the
Tweede Trek in mobilizing a sense of
white Afrikaner collectivity was a major
reason, though certainly not the only one,
for the Nationalists’ triumphant sweep to
power in 1948.

Indeed, the degree to which the Eeufees
papered over fatal divisions within the
white populace became most manifest in
1988, during the height of the state of
emergency, when no less than two com-
peting Treks set out to reenact the reen-
actment, each sponsored by two bitterly
rivalrous white nationalist parties.

From the outset, as the Eeufees bore
witness, Afrikaner nationalism was de-
pendent not only on powerful construc-
tions of racial difference, but also on pow-
erful constructions of gender difference. A
gendered division of national creation pre-
vailed, whereby men were seen to embody
the political and economic agency of the
volk, while women were the (unpaid) keep-
ers of tradition and the volk’s moral and
spiritual mission. This gendered division
of labor is summed up in the imperial gos-
pel of the family and the presiding icon of
the volksmoeder (the mother of the nation).
The idea of the volksmoeder is a changing, dynamic ideology rife with paradox, under constant contest by men and women, and adapted constantly to the changing context of African resistance.

**The Invention of the Volksmoeder: Mum’s The Word**

At the beginning of the Great Trek, so the story goes, Susanna Smit, the hefty wife of Reverend Erasmus Smit, threatened to cross the mountains barefoot rather than genuflect to the perfidious Union Jack. Late-nineteenth-century narratives are scattered with references to the burly, whip-wielding Boer women, who dragged wagons over mountains and knew more about inspanning oxen and breeding horses than embroidery anglais. Indeed, the Anglo-Boer war (which was really a war over African land and labor) was in many respects waged as a war on Boer women. In an effort to break Boer resistance, the British herded thousands of women and children into frightful concentration camps and then torched the farms and lands. In these appalling places, 25,000 women and children perished of hunger, desolation, and disease.

Yet after the Anglo-Boer war, the political power of the fierce Boer women was muted and transformed. In 1913, three years after Union, the Vrouemonument (Women’s Monument) was erected in homage to the female victims of the war. In a circular enclosure, women stand weeping with their children. In the iconography of the monument, women’s martial role as fighters and farmers was purged of its indecorously militant potential and replaced by the figure of the lamenting mother with babe in arms. The monument enshrined Afrikaner womanhood as neither militant nor political, but as suffering, stoical, and self-sacrificial. Women’s disempowerment was figured not as expressive of the politics of gender difference, stemming from colonial women’s ambiguous relation to imperial domination, but as emblematic of national (that is, male) disempowerment. By portraying the Afrikaner nation symbolically as a weeping woman, the mighty male embarrassment of military defeat could be overlooked, and the memory of women’s vital efforts during the war washed away in images of feminine tears and maternal loss.

The icon of the volksmoeder is paradoxical. On the one hand, it recognizes the power of (white) motherhood; on the other hand, it contains that power within an iconography of domestic service. By defining women as victims, their activism could be overlooked and their disempowerment ratified. As Elsabe Brink notes in a fine essay, a massive march of Afrikaner women to parliament in 1915 was symbolically reinterpreted, not as a political event, but as a quintessentially feminine surrender to the imperatives of romantic love: “Love called, love obeyed.”

The exaltation of the volksmoeder also had economic and class motives. After the war, South Africa began rapidly to industrialize, and white working-class women were drawn into the factories in large numbers, discovering a taste for independence, and ceasing to reckon their father’s rod. As in Victorian Britain, a revamped ideology of motherhood was invoked to...
usher women back into the home, and thereby back into unwaged service to fathers, husbands, and sons.

In the early decades of the century, as Hofmeyer shows, women played a crucial role in the invention of Afrikanerdom. The family household was seen as the last bastion beyond British control, and the cultural power of Afrikaner motherhood was mobilized in the service of white nation building. Afrikaans was a language fashioned very profoundly by women’s labors, within the economy of the domestic household. “Not for nothing,” as Hofmeyer notes, “was it called the ‘mother tongue.’” Women were crucial in the construction of a distinctive Afrikaner culture. As readers of Huisgenoot, the most widely circulated magazine in South Africa, women began the enormous task of transforming virtually every aspect of daily life into the ciphers of the Afrikaner spirit. Certain foods became Afrikaans foods, certain clothes became Afrikaans clothes, certain types of furniture became Afrikaans furniture.

The idea of “motherhood” in Afrikaner nationalism was not a concept imposed willy-nilly on hapless, inert women. Rather, motherhood is a political concept, under constant contest. This is important for two reasons. Erasing Afrikaner women’s historic agency also erases their historic complicity in the annals of apartheid. White women were not the weeping bystanders of apartheid history, but were active participants in the invention of Afrikaner identity. As such they were complicit in deploying the power of motherhood in the exercise and legitimation of white domination. White women were jealously and brutally denied any formal political power, but were compensated by their limited authority in the household. Clutching this small power, they became complicit in the racism that suffuses Afrikaner nationalism. This is a major reason why black South African women are justly suspicious of any easy assumption of universal, essential sisterhood. White women are both colonized and colonizers, ambiguously complicit in the history of African dispossession.

Afrikaner women’s relation to nationalism is thus complex. In their major, culturally defined role as biological mothers, women literally reproduce the citizens of the white nation. In 1961, for example, all white women were exhorted to do their national duty and “Have a Baby for Republic Day.” Women also reproduce the cultural and symbolic boundaries of white “nationhood”—standing discreetly at the elbows of white male power, as unpaid wives of army colonels, cabinet ministers, and police, or as activists in the home, schools, and churches. At the same time, men draw deeply on figures of gender difference to police the boundaries of racial and class difference. Finally, and in limited numbers, white women have become formal political participants in defense of
white power, in public forums, in conservative women’s organizations, in an auxiliary capacity within the army, or carrying arms as citizens on farms along the borders. Nevertheless, even here women’s potential military power is muted and contained within an infantilized and sexualized ideology of the family, summed up in the nickname “Botha’s Babes,” for women who serve within the South African Defense Force. Finally, however, one cannot forget the few renegades who have militantly crossed into the forbidden territory of anti-apartheid activism: in Black Sash, the Mass Democratic Movement and the ANC.

Nation, Citizenship, and the Marriage Relation

A man and a woman are one and he is the one.

Verwoerd’s cold dream of post-1948 apartheid was to reinvent South Africa as a constellation of separate independent African “nations,” scattered around the central white “nation.” Each “nation” would have its own distinct culture and language, each its own set of traditions and customs, and each “nation” would be assigned a separate territory and political system. The originality of the move was that it graced the Bantustans with the status of “proto-nations,” casting over the wretched partition of the land the false glamor of independent “nation” building. According to the grand proclamation of the Promotion of Black Self-Government Act (46 of 1959): “the Black peoples of the Union of South Africa do not constitute a homogenous people, but form separate national units on the basis of language and culture.”

The Group Areas Act controls ownership, use of land, and residence in terms of a labyrinthine network of population classification. The key to the current system is the Population Act of 1950, which lays down three basic definitions, black, colored, and white. A black is a “person who is, or is generally accepted as, a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa.” So-called “coloreds,” as Martin West shows, are defined negatively, as a residual category: “a person who is not a White person or a Black.” However, the definition of a white person is “a person who (a) in appearance obviously is a white person, and who is not generally accepted as a Coloured person; or (b) is generally accepted as a White person and is not in appearance obviously not a white person.” Chinese, Indians, and Asiatics belong in a “national home” outside South Africa.

The tortured logic of the classification, and its constant emendations, makes a mockery of Prime Minister Botha’s trumpeting claim in 1981: “The acceptance of multinationalism, the recognition of minorities, the existence of various cultures, ideas and traditions is not an ideology, it is a reality. We did not create it, we experience it.” But the borders of the Bantustans, and the hodgepodge of racial classifications used to buttress them, do not reflect any cultural reality, but rather invent tradition. The Bantustan borders are carved with clumsy artifice over immense social variation. The Xhosas, for example, are supposedly one “nation,” yet are
allocated to two distinct “nation states,” the Ciskei and the Transkei. Other contradictions abound. Under apartheid in South Africa the legal definition of citizenship has become a nightmarish concoction of imprecision, vagary, invention, and sham, crosshatched by self-contradiction.

Citizenship is the legal representation of a person’s relationship to the rights and resources of the nation-state. But the putatively universalist concept of citizenship becomes radically unstable when seen from the position of women. Obedient to the inimitable logic that “a man and his wife are one, and he is the one,” women in post–French Revolution Britain and Europe were not incorporated into the nation-state as citizens, but only indirectly, through men, as dependent members of the family in private and public law. The Napoleonic Code was the first modern statute to decree that the wife’s nationality should follow her husband’s, an example other European countries briskly followed. A woman’s political relation to the nation is thus submerged in a social relation to a man through marriage. Citizenship in the nation is mediated by the marriage relation.

Rycroft has noted that “exactly what sort of citizenship a person enjoys in South Africa hinges precisely on racial classification.” Yet this is only partially true, for he neglects to mention that the sort of “citizenship” a black woman enjoys is mediated through the marital relation. For black women, citizenship depends not only on the labyrinthine tangle of racial classifications, but also on powerful constructions of gender difference. According to the Group Areas Act, as Martin West reminds us, if people marry across their racial groups “a white partner, male or female, takes the classification of the other partner, whether black or colored.” Thus a white man would become instantly classified as a black man. Whereas if a “colored” woman and a black man marry, the woman takes the man’s classification. Thus the black group excludes all black women with colored partners. And the colored group excludes all colored women with black partners. Thus a white woman may be classified white in terms of the Population Registration Act (by descent), yet classified black in terms of the Group Areas Act if her husband is black. At the same time, as soon as a black woman marries, she may be endorsed out of the place of her birth, as in the case of Mrs. Msini, and banished to the Bantustan of her husband, becoming in an instant, in one of the stunning oxymorons of South African life, a “foreign native.”

Mr. Harlan Msini, for example, is a crippled African factory worker who resides in Paarl in the Cape province. His wife, Mrs. Lena Msini, however, is not legally entitled to live with her husband, since, on marrying, she became at once the wife of a “disqualified person”—a disqualified person being a person who has not earned the right of permanent residence by serving ten years in continuous employment with the same employer. Since her relation to the national rights of residence and work is entirely mediated through the marriage relation, Mrs. Msini was told she could live legally with her husband only when he had qualified. Summarily ban-
ished from Paarl, Mrs. Msini set out for the bleak Dortrecht location in the eastern Cape, where she had been born, to wait.

In July 1970, when Mr. Msini became a “qualified” person, the headman at Dortrecht sent Mrs. Msini to live with her husband at Paarl. At a stroke, falling now under the tutelage of her husband, she forfeited her right to live in Dortrecht, the place of her birth. Yet in Paarl, at the whim of the local bureaucracy, she received only a “temporary permit,” and this permit was not renewed. In November Mrs. Msini was charged with living illegally in the area. She was ordered out of Paarl and banished once more to Dortrecht. In Dortrecht, however, she was given only a temporary permit. This soon expired and was not renewed. In short, Mrs. Msini had entered the impossible nowhere-land of permanent illegality inhabited by thousands of South Africa’s “displaced people.” As the “superfluous appendage” of her husband’s labor, in the notorious official terminology, there is not one inch of her native South African soil on which she can legally tread.

In South Africa black women live under three legal systems: customary law, native law, and European law, and their lives are dominated by three fundamental legal dimensions: influx control law, family law, and labor law. In the thirties laws were passed which forbade a woman entry into a town unless she was certified as the wife of a man who had been working in that area continuously for two years. In 1937 the noose was tightened. The wife or daughter of a legal resident could be certified only if she could prove that housing was available, and since housing had been deliberately frozen, this became impossible. In 1952 came the first real attempt to bring women to heel. The Native Laws Amendment Act gave the state the power to evict anyone defined as “undesirable.” In the late 1950s it became illegal to recruit women in the reserves as migrant workers. In 1964 the noose was tightened again. The Bantu Laws Amendment Act now decreed that a woman could only live with her husband if his entry had been legal. In following years even wives and daughters of entrenched residents were denied admission. Because the woman’s legal status is entirely dependent on the man’s, if he dies, or if the marriage breaks up, she may lose her lease as well as permission to stay in the area.

A woman who marries under customary law is seen as a perpetual minor under the guardianship of her husband. Any money she earns belongs by law to her husband’s household; she cannot enter into a contract for loan of livestock; she cannot sue or be sued, or have custody over her children. She has no legal right to protest rape or domestic battery. Under the Natal Code, all women, married or single, are denied all legal rights. A woman can own no property, except immediate personal possessions; she cannot bring any legal action to court; she cannot marry under customary law without her father’s, or nearest male guardian’s, permission. Marriage, for the vast majority of black women in South Africa, is thus a legal and political catastrophe, yet marriage is virtually the only means for a woman to have access to housing or residence rights.
These nightmarish anomalies have recently become the center of a national debate within the Mass Democratic Movement and the ANC on women's status within a transformed South Africa.

**Women and African Nationalism**

*No longer in a future heaven*

African nationalism has roughly the same historic vintage as Afrikaner nationalism. Forged in the crucible of imperial thuggery, mining capitalism, and a dizzyingly rapid industrialization, African nationalism was, like its Afrikaner counterpart, the product of conscious reinvention, the enactment of a new political collectivity by specific cultural and political agents. But its racial and gender components were very different, and African nationalism would describe an entirely distinct trajectory across the century.

In 1910 the Union of South Africa was formed, uniting the four warring provinces under a single legislature. Yet at the “national” convention, not a single black South African was present. In 1912 African men began to arrive in Bloemfontein from all over South Africa to protest a Union in which no black person had a voice. At this gathering, the South African Natives National Congress was launched, soon to become the African National Congress. For Africans the Union was an act of profound betrayal. A color bar banished Africans from skilled labor, and the franchise was denied to all but a handful. The infamous Land Act (1913), soon to follow, condemned all black South Africans—seventy-eight percent of the population—to a meager thirteen percent of the most broken, parched, and devastated wastelands in the country.

At the outset the ANC, like Afrikaner nationalism, had a specific class component. Drawn from the tiny urban intelligentsia and petite bourgeoisie, its members were mostly mission-educated teachers and clerks, small businessmen and traders, the kind of men whom Fanon described as “dusted over with colonial culture.” They were deeply influenced by Gandhi’s nonviolent philosophy, by the moderate policies of Booker T. Washington, and by their white mission friends and liberals in parliament, who counseled restraint, patience, moderation. They were urban, anti-tribal, and assimilationist, demanding full civic participation in the great British empire, rather than confrontation and radical change. They were also solidly male.

While the language of the ANC was the inclusive language of national unity, the Congress was in fact male, exclusive, and hierarchical, ranked by an upper house of chiefs (which protected traditional patriarchal authority through descent), a lower house of elected representatives (all male), and an executive (all male). Indians and so-called “coloreds” were excluded from full membership. Women could join as “auxiliary members” but were denied formal political representation, as well as the power to vote.

In 1913 the white state saw fit to impose passes on women in an effort to preempt their migration to the cities. In outraged response, hundreds of women marched mutinously on Bloemfontein to fling back their passes, and for their temerity met the
full brunt of state wrath in a barrage of arrests, imprisonment, and hard labor. From this climate of militancy, the Bantu Women’s League of the African National Congress was launched in 1918, drawing by and large on the tiny educated, Christian elite. Thus women’s first tentative inclusion into African nationalism stemmed less from the invitation of men than from their own politicization in resisting the violence of state decree. At this time, however, women’s potential militancy was muted, and their political agency domesticated, by the language of female service and subordination. Women’s volunteer work was approved insofar as it served the interests of the (male) “nation,” and women’s political identity was figured as merely supportive and auxiliary. As President Seme said: “No national movement can be strong unless the women volunteers come forward and offer their services to the nation.” After the Second World War, however, the ANC adopted a new constitution in recognition of the need to expand the movement and organize a mass base. At women’s own insistence, the ANC granted women full membership and voting rights in 1943. It had taken thirty-one years.

In 1944 the Youth League was formed, and from its ranks arose men like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Oliver Tambo, who called impatiently for Congress to become a full national movement. Unlike Afrikaner nationalism, the language of African nationalism at this time became racially inclusive: “African nationalism transcends the narrow limits imposed by any particular sectional organization. It is all-embracing.” Yet even at this point, the ANC was largely urban based, and women’s role within the movement remained subordinate and auxiliary, confined to building a nation for their husbands and children.

During the turbulent fifties, however, the ANC Women’s League thrived. This was the decade of the Defiance Campaign, the Freedom Charter, the Congress Alliance, and the Federation of South African Women. In 1956 thousands of women marched on Pretoria to once more protest passes for women, and the Women’s Charter was formed, calling for land redistribution, for worker benefits and union rights, housing and food subsidies, the abolition of child labor, universal education, the right to vote, and equal rights with men in property, marriage, and child custody. It is seldom noted, however, that this charter preceded the Freedom Charter, and inspired much of its substance.

Until this time, short shrift was given to women’s empowerment in its own right. But in 1955 Oliver Tambo declared women’s emancipation a national priority and a precondition for victory. “We know that we cannot win liberation or build a strong movement without the participation of the women.” He insisted that the Women’s League was no longer a mere appendage to the ANC, and he broke taboo ground by deploring the “outmoded customs” that hobble women, and broached the vexed issue of domestic labor, urging fellow Congressmen to relieve women “in their many family and household burdens so that women may be given an opportunity of being politically active.”
Within African nationalism, as in its Afrikaans counterpart, women’s political agency is couched in the presiding ideology of motherhood. Winnie Mandela has long been hailed as “Mother of the Nation” (Mummie, for short), and Miriam Makeba, the singer, is reverently addressed as “Ma Africa.” Yet as Gaitskell and Unterhalter have argued, the ideology of the “mother of the nation” differs in some important respects from the iconography of the volksmoeder in Afrikaner nationalism.

Motherhood is, again, less the universal and biological quintessence of womanhood than it is a social category under constant contest. African women have embraced, transmuted, and transformed the ideology in a variety of ways, working strategically within traditional ideology to justify untraditional public militancy. An anti-pass pamphlet of the 1950s couched women’s indecorously insurgent defiance within the decorous language of domestic duty: “As wives and mothers we condemn the pass laws and all that they imply.” Unlike Afrikaans women, moreover, African women appealed to a racially inclusive image of motherhood in their campaigns to fashion a nonracial alliance with white women. A Federation of South African Women pamphlet of 1958 exhorted white women: “In the name of humanity, can you as a woman, as a mother, tolerate this?” In 1986 Albertina Sisulu appealed impatiently to white women: “A mother is a mother, black or white. Stand up and be counted with other women.”

Over the decades, African women nationalists, unlike their Afrikaans counterparts, have transformed and infused the ideology of motherhood with an increasingly insurrectionary cast, identifying themselves more and more as the “mothers of revolution.” To be a black mother in South Africa is to routinely face tear-gas and shambok attacks, police dogs and water cannon, bullets and torture. “Black mothers have to live with the agony of having to bury their children every day” (ANC document, 1987). Paradoxically, the sheer randomness of attacks by the South African Defense Force on homes and children has brought the war irrevocably into the lives of most women, deeply and widely politicizing those who might otherwise have remained aloof. Women organize increasingly as the militant protectors of their communities and activist children, and as a consequence the image of the militant mother, the revolutionary and political mother, began to enter official ANC rhetoric. As one ANC document declared in 1987: “The mothers of the nation, the womenfolk as a whole are the titans of our struggle.”

The custodians of apartheid are experts at anger, and the police are skilled at exploiting the specific vulnerabilities of women as a means of political terror. The burden of parental guilt falls more cruelly on women activists than on men. All too often, women detainees under interrogation are tormented by the police who degrade them as failed mothers, reminding them of helpless and unattended children at home, accusing them of “loose morals,” and playing on the wracking social contradictions in the women’s lives between the vocation of parenthood and the vocation of activism. Even Ruth First, assassinated by letter bomb for her anti-
apartheid activism, was accused of being a bad mother for ending up in detention, an unthinkable accusation to level against a man.

In the black communities, “motherhood” involves far greater community sharing and responsibility than in the white communities, and the concept of “mother” extends far beyond immediate biological motherhood to aunts and grandmothers, cousins and paid child-care providers. On the other hand, exalting women for their maternal power alone has calamitous consequences, erasing and undermining the multifarious other forms of women’s work, which come to be figured as temporary departures from women’s manifestly maternal destiny, and are hence undervalued and underpaid. In a recent interview with Speak, an African women’s magazine, leaders of the ANC Women’s Section warned of the very real danger of exclusively glamorizing the profession of motherhood: “We must not assume that every woman is a wife or mother, or that she intends to be a wife or mother. This is a weakness. It arises from our tradition.”

Exalting motherhood makes it very hard for women to stay single, to choose not to have children, to come out as lesbian or bisexual. The heterosexual family within the sanction of matrimony acquires the inevitability of destiny, and women are seen not as independent members of the national community, but as wives responsible to the nation through their service to individual men. In the absence of alternatives, as one woman put it, the prestige of motherhood becomes “a beast of burden prestige indeed.”

Since the seventies, women’s local rites of defiance have been mirrored on a national scale in rents and bus boycotts, organized squatter camps, strikes, anti-rape protests, and community activism of myriad kinds. Even under the state of emergency, women have everywhere enlarged their militancy, insisting not only on their right to political agency, but also on their right of access to the technologies of violence. On August 9, 1985, the twenty-ninth anniversary of South African Woman’s Day, the ANC’s Women’s Section called on women to “take up arms against the enemy. In the past we have used rudimentary homemade weapons like petrol bombs. Now is the time that we use modern weapons.”

Black women’s relation to nationalism has thus significantly shifted over the years. At the outset, women were denied formal representation; then their volunteer work was put at the service of the national revolution, still largely male. Gradually, as a result of women’s own insurrections, the need for women’s full participation in the national liberation movement was granted, but women’s emancipation was still figured as the handmaiden of the national revolution. Only recently has women’s empowerment been recognized in its own right, distinct from the national, democratic, and socialist revolution. Only recently has women’s empowerment come to be seen as a separate, independent, and indispensable element of the full social transformation of the nation.

Feminism as Imperialism

For many decades, African women have been loath to talk of women’s emancipation outside the terms of the national
liberation movement. In 1979, Mavis Nhlapo, representative of the ANC women’s secretariat, insisted: “In our society women have never made a call for the recognition of their rights as women, but always put the aspirations of the whole African and other oppressed people of our country first.” Again in 1981, when Nhlapo was asked about sexual politics and male domination, she said: “this is secondary to the primary goal of the struggle.” The ANC delegation to the Nairobi Conference on Women in 1985 concurred: “It would be suicidal for us to adopt feminist ideas. Our enemy is the system and we cannot exhaust our energies on women’s issues.”

During the sixties and seventies, black women were understandably wary of the middle-class feminism that was sputtering fitfully to life in the white universities, cities, and suburbs. All women do not experience apartheid in the same way, and African women raised justifiably skeptical eyebrows at a white feminism that vaunted itself as giving tongue to a universal sisterhood in suffering. Many employed black women in South Africa are domestic workers, and for these women, ferrying between plush suburbs and the desolate townships, the terms of white liberal feminism had scant relevance and appeal. At this time, moreover, women’s position within the nationalistic movement was still precarious, and women could ill afford to antagonize men so embattled and already so reluctant to surrender whatever patriarchal power they still enjoyed.

In recent years, however, dramatic changes have been wrought in the South African discourse on feminism, stemming largely from women’s enhanced visibility within the Mass Democratic Movement. On September 23, 1989, women gathered by the thousands in the streets of Pretoria, braving razor wire, water cannons, police cordons and batons. Helicopters hovered overhead and police squads put the city under siege. Earlier that year, a huge new alliance of women’s organizations had formed. WAR (Women against Repression) united a broad spectrum of women from a host of organizations, including the Federation of Transvaal Women, the Natal Organisation of Women, the Black Sash, and a medley of student, worker, and church organizations. April 1990 saw a protest march of more than three thousand people, mostly women, organized by COSATU women to protest the Labor Relations Amendment Act. One of the placards called: “Women come out of the kitchen!” “We are the traffic officers of the future,” yelled a female marshal. In February 1990, women took one of the few
anti-rape marches in the country through the streets of Soweto.

In recent years a transformed African discourse on feminism has emerged, in which black women demand the right to fashion the terms of feminism to meet their own needs and situations. In 1987 Sister Bernard Ncube, for one, saw the Christian feminist movement as melding both Christianity and feminism for local needs: “The feminist movement is working for the political, economic and social equality of men and women, boys and girls in every area of life. The Christian feminist movement frames this process on the biblical understanding of God as incorporating masculine and feminine equally in ‘One Person.’ ” At a seminar entitled “Feminism and National Liberation,” convened by the Women’s Section of the ANC in London in 1989, a representative from the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO) exclaimed: “How good it feels that feminism is finally accepted as a legitimate school of thought in our struggles and is not seen as a foreign ideology.” At the seminar, the women agreed on the need to ensure that commitment to gender equality be more than rhetorical, on transforming labor and gender imbalances within the household, on dismantling traditions that shackle women, on forming separate women’s organizations without their becoming infantilized as “nursery schools or ghettos.”

On May 2, 1990, the National Executive of the ANC issued a historic “Statement on the Emancipation of Women,” which forthrightly proclaimed: “The experience of other societies has shown that the emancipation of women is not a by-product of a struggle for democracy, national liberation or socialism. It has to be addressed within our own organisation, the mass democratic movement and in the society as a whole.” The document calls for “a real understanding of gender oppression,” admits that “the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes” permeates the ANC itself, and calls for a wide range of policies to eliminate “gender-oppression now and in the future.” The document is unprecedented in placing South African women’s resistance in an international context and in granting feminism independent historical agency. It declares, into the bargain, that all “laws, customs, traditions and practices which discriminate against women shall be held to be unconstitutional.” If the ANC remains faithful to this document, virtually all existing practices in South African legal, political, and social life will be rendered unconstitutional.

A few months later, on June 17, 1990, the women leadership of the ANC Women’s Section, recently returned home from exile, gathered jubilantly at Jabulani Stadium. In an interview with Speak, the ANC women called for a National Commission of Women and insisted on the strategic validity of the terms “non-sexism” and “feminism”: “Feminism has been misinterpreted in most Third World countries. . . there is nothing wrong with feminism. It is as progressive or reactionary as nationalism. Nationalism can be reactionary or progressive. We have not got rid of the term nationalism. And with feminism it is the same.” Rather, feminism should be tailored to meet local needs and
concerns: “We have tried to use feminism to suit our conditions.” A few months later, on August 9, 1990, a national, non-racial organization of women was launched.

Yet very real uncertainties for women remain. So far, theoretical and strategic analyses of South Africa’s gender imbalances have not run deep. There has been little strategic rethinking of how, in particular, to transform labor relations in the household, and women are still not given the same political visibility as men. The majority of South African women remained penned up in rural desolation, working for parlous wages, if at all, in domestic service or as farm workers, bent double in field and factory, bent double again in the household.

At a recent Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) convention, trade union women called for attention to sexual harassment in the unions, but their demand was brusquely flicked aside by male unionists as a decadent symptom of “bourgeois imperialist feminism.” Lesbian and gay activists have been similarly condemned as supporting lifestyles that are no more than invidious imports of empire. The charge is a familiar one, flung frequently at the heads of nationalist feminists (both women and men) and at other mutinous groups to quell demands that are not subservient to the interests of the nationalist elite.

There is not only one feminism, nor is there only one patriarchy. Feminism is not transhistorical, any more than nationalism is. History reveals myriad feminisms, and all take very different shapes in different contexts. Feminism is imperialist when it puts the interests and needs of privileged women in imperialist countries above the local needs of disempowered women and men, when it operates within the terms of imperial power, borrowing from patriarchal privilege. Certainly, the relation between feminism and nationalism has involved a double repression. If theories of nationalism have tended to ignore gender as a category constitutive of nationalism itself, so too have some feminist tendencies (largely white and middle-class) ignored race and class as categories constitutive of gender.

In the last decade, women of color have been vehement in challenging privileged feminists whose racial and class power seems invisible to them. Hazel Carby, for one, issued her famous call to white women to listen, the Egyptian feminist El Sa’adawi accused certain Western women of “maternalism,” and Marnea Lazreg, the Algerian feminist, warned Western feminists to be wary of the borrowed, imperialist power of academic interpretation. Some nationalist women have chosen to use the term womanist as a replacement for feminist with its Western undertones. In an important article, Chandra Mohanty has decried the appropriation of the struggles of women of color by hegemonic white women’s movements, specifically through the production of the category “Third World woman” as a singular, monolithic, and paradigmatically victimized subject. She argues brilliantly that “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the ‘third world’ in the context of a world system
dominated by the west, on the other, characterize a sizable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world."

Denouncing all feminisms as imperialist has calamitous results for women in national liberation movements, erasing from memory the long history of women’s resistance to local and imperialist patriarchies. As Kumari Jayawardena notes, “movements for women’s emancipation and feminism flourished in several non-European countries” well before Western feminism emerged. Women’s myriad indigenous revolts are thereby annulled or dismissed as the phantasmagoric evanescence of white women’s agitations—an imperialist and infantilizing notion indeed. “Feminism,” Jayawardena argues, “was not imposed on the Third World by the West, but rather historical circumstances produced important material and ideological changes that affected women.”

Many women’s mutinies around the world predated Western feminism or occurred without any contact with Western feminists. In South Africa there is evidence of women resisting the plunder of their labor and sexuality in forced marriages before the ravages of colonialism had made itself felt. The historic women’s anti-pass march in the 1950s, to take one example from many, took place beyond the influence of Western feminism, which was then floundering in the doldrums. Women resist not because feminism has been surreptitiously ferried in from abroad, but because the contradictions in their own historical circumstances compel them to do so.

Moreover, if all feminism is derided as a pathology of the West, there is a very real danger that, paradoxically, Western, white feminism will remain hegemonic, for the simple reason that such women have comparatively privileged access to publishing, the international media, education, and money. A good deal of this feminism may well be inappropriate to women living under very different situations. Instead, women of color are calling for the right to fashion feminism to suit their own worlds, while also learning from the strategies of other nationalist women and women of color. As the Algerian feminist Marie Aimée Helie-Lucas puts it: “Now that we start supporting each other from within the Third World, within the Muslim world, etc. . . . it becomes increasingly difficult to limit our action to an imitation of the west. . . . Inside our countries, and even within the women’s groups, we leave ourselves less open to nationalist justifications for being silent.” The singular contribution of

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nationalist feminism has been its insistence on relating the feminist struggle to other liberation movements.

All too frequently, male nationalists condemn feminism as divisive, bidding women to hold their tongues until after the revolution is over. Yet feminism is a political refusal of gender conflict, not its
cause. To insist on silence about gender conflict when it already exists is to cover over, and thereby ratify, women’s disempowerment. The identification and refusal of rape and domestic battery are not divisive—rape and battery are. The refusal of economic disadvantage is not divisive—economic disadvantage is.

To ask women to wait until after the revolution serves merely as a strategic tactic to defer women’s demands. Not only does it conceal the fact that nationalisms are from the outset constituted in gender power, but, as the lessons of international history portend, women who are not empowered to organize during the struggle will not be empowered to organize after the struggle. If nationalism is not deeply informed, and transformed, by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations, and male privilege.

All too often, the doors of tradition are slammed in women’s faces. Yet traditions are not the sacrosanct and timeless essences of a people; they are social inventions often of very recent origin—the outcome and the record of political contests and power. In a nationalist revolution, both women and men should be empowered to decide which traditions are outmoded, which should be transformed, and which should be preserved.

Around the world the Women’s Decade has been the decade of hopes deferred. Nationalists frequently argue that colonialism or capitalism has been women’s ruin, with patriarchy merely as a nasty second cousin destined to wither away when the real villain finally expires. Yet nowhere has a national or socialist revolution brought a full feminist revolution in its train. In many nationalist or socialist regimes, women’s concerns are at best paid lip service, at worst greeted with hilarity. If women have come to do men’s work, men have not come to share women’s work. In societies like Nicaragua and Cuba, very real efforts have been made to transform women’s lives and works. Both countries have written into law the equal sharing of housework and have invented ingenious tactics such as radio announcements during mealtimes urging men to help. But in the absence of sustained campaigns, education, and organized change, the weight of male self-interest and tradition proves overwhelming. In South Yemen and China, women were able to mobilize for change insofar as they helped spread the political base of the party, swell the labor force, and march against withered family elites and warlord regimes. In the process, the nose of traditional patriarchy was bloodied, and dramatic changes for women were won. But nowhere has feminism in its own right been allowed to be more than a maidservant to nationalism. Most nationalisms have been singularly unenthusiastic about granting gender conflict as fundamental a role in history as class or race conflict, and feminism for its own sake has either been scoffed at or unceremoniously squelched.

Frantz Fanon’s prescient warnings against the pitfalls of the national consciousness are nowhere more urgent than now in South Africa. For Fanon, nationalism gives vital expression to a popular memory of shared suffering and shared re-
fusal. At the same time, he is fully aware of the attendant risks of concealing, and thereby exacerbating, the very real contradictions within the strategic collectivity of nationalism—conflicts of class, gender, ethnicity, regional and generational difference. Nationalism contains the very real risk of projecting the denial of difference onto a conveniently abstracted “collective will.” Yet insisting on a single politics of identity (nationalism, feminism, internationalism, socialism) cannot guarantee political correctness, nor is there one privileged national “subjectivity.” Moreover, a Western, Hegelian discourse that traffics in the abstract Center and Periphery is no longer adequate to the current international distribution of power. Rather, I would draw on Audre Lorde’s evocation of the multiple, contradictory constructions of subjectivity, as well as on Homi Bhabha’s notion of a “hybrid,” multiple political identity, crisscrossed by myriad differences and loyalties.

Indeed, the ANC’s democratic commitments offer a model of political agency that refuses any racially exclusive definition of the citizen, allowing for the mobilization of a variety of political agents. The narrowness of a vanguard party is offset by an appeal to a collective, democratic community of action. The national transformation is “no longer in a future heaven,” to borrow Fanon’s phrase. But the current situation gives sober poignancy, especially for women, to the lines from Pontecorvo’s famous film on the Algerian national war of liberation, The Battle of Algiers: “It is difficult to start a revolution, more difficult to sustain it. But it’s later, when we’ve won, that the real difficulties will begin.”

SOURCES


