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Shiera S Malik, DePaul University

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Intellectual Work ‘In-the-World’: Women’s Writing and Anti-Colonial Thought in Africa*

Shiera S. el-Malik

Department of International Studies, DePaul University, Chicago

ABSTRACT

This paper considers women’s practices of thinking, writing and speaking as a less acknowledged part of the anti-colonial project. I argue that the anti-colonial moment in history exposed, and continues to expose, how hegemonic epistemological structures are fundamentally racist and sexist, setting boundaries around who can speak and what can be said, even in the historical record. I posit that ‘looking back’ and asking ‘where are the women?’ reveals a complexity in how women’s intellectual energies and writing practices get harnessed in defining the political problem and in devising a response. I present three examples of women’s writing and intellectual work regarding anti-colonialism in narrative form and suggest that too little attention is paid to the value of what I call ‘present-hind-sight’.

INTRODUCTION

Deolinda Rodrigues (1939–67) was a young Angolan woman, a sociology student and an activist in the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), who was killed in prison at around the age of 28. She left behind a diary that was published in Angola in 2003. Remarkably, the English-language record of Rodrigues’s existence is as follows: a book of letters entitled Dear Deolinda, self-published by Marcia Hinds Gleckler, an American woman with whom she exchanged letters; two letters from Martin Luther King, Jr to Rodrigues that are archived in The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project; and

*This article is based on a presentation at the International Studies Association Annual Conference, on a panel entitled ‘Africa in the World: Pan-African Dimensions of Anti-Colonial Thought’, which took place in San Francisco, CA on 6 April 2013.

1Deolinda Rodrigues, Didrio de um exilio sem regresso (Luanda, 2003); edited by Roberto de Alemeida.

2Marcia Hinds Gleckler, Dear Deolinda: letters to Deolinda Rodrigues de Almeida (Charleston, SC, 2011). Many thanks to M.H. Gleckler for generously furnishing me with a copy of this book.


Author’s e-mail: smalik6@depaul.edu

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a brief biographical mention in an article on women’s writing in Lusophone Africa. In one of her letters to King, which she wrote while at university in Brazil, Rodrigues asked him to advise her on leadership and nationalist movements. He advised her that a nationalist movement requires a symbol. In the footnotes to the archived document, quotes from Deolinda’s letter depict her as earnest and politicised:

I agree [sic] that a symbol for our independence movement is really necessary. Our leaders are not boast [sic] widely and openly but I know we have at Home a hidden political party working to awake my People and which is getting more and more followers. Some of these leaders are already arrested and surely their imprisonment is awakening more people. Indeed it hurts more than I thought it could for me to be away from Home and be well here while my People is having harder trying there. The only thing which becomes me glad is that after prepare myself better I can also serve better my People at Home. This thought and God’s presence help me a great deal to bear homesickness.

Rodrigues sought advice from King after she was told of the likelihood of her arrest if she returned to Angola. On returning home from university she was arrested and jailed, and subsequently killed. Where is Deolinda Rodrigues in the anti-colonial narrative? Where are all the other ‘Deolinda Rodrigueses’ in the anti-colonial narrative?

In this paper, I explore the location of African women’s intellectual work in the anti-colonial nationalist project. Women have been engaged and active players in anti-colonial movements. Yet, they are largely absent from both the primary and secondary literature on anti-colonial movements. Studies of politics have undergone little systematic engagement with these narratives and seldom cite either the excellent scholarly work from other disciplines or the accessible writings of women themselves, even after Cynthia Enloe’s radical query: where are the women? Looking back, women appear as leaders in anti-colonial movements alongside men, as parliamentarians, as community organisers, as trade unionists, as writers, as soldiers, as producers of food, children and other forms of labour. Women’s practices of thinking, writing and speaking are a less acknowledged part of the anti-colonial project.

What does it mean to ‘look back’? This is a question about the purpose of history. My question is inspired by Nigerian historian Yusufu Bala Usman’s approach to ‘looking back’. He is attentive to the power invested in reading history as truth. He considers the power involved in constructing primary sources and suggests that all sources must first be subjected to analysis of the conditions that allow them to exist in the first place. For him, ‘questions of their reliability and accuracy’ are secondary. Usman favours, ‘an identification and

6This literature is generally either unpublished and unavailable, privately published in small batches, or out of print. Some of the sources in this essay come from my own collection. Over the past decade, I have been systematically amassing materials from second-hand bookshops, library sales, hidden archives and other online sellers. I am currently exploring options for making this material more accessible.
7Cynthia Enloe, Bananas, beaches, and bases: making feminist sense of international politics (Berkeley, 2000).
8Yusufu Bala Usman, Beyond fairy tales: selected historical writings of Yusufu Bala Usman (Zaria, Nigeria, 2006). 2.
assessment of the basic categories and assumptions’ that bring sources into being.9 From this angle, ‘looking back’ is neither an exercise in nostalgia nor an act of resurrecting a moment of pre-colonial ‘authenticity’ as a contemporary political tool. Rather, it is about examining a relationship between a historical moment, its actors and its location, and the present historical moment. Anti-colonialists had to maintain a sense of self from which to speak and at the same time reject the essentialised, past ‘self’ believed to be authentic, which was used to justify colonialism. I posit that ‘looking back’ and asking ‘where are the women?’ reveals a complexity in how women’s intellectual energies and writing practices get harnessed in defining the political problem and in devising plans of action. I argue that this ‘looking back’ yields an acknowledgement of the permeability and the fluidity of the boundaries of the ‘anti-colonial moment’.

As Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire teach us, there is a lot more to colonialism and anti-colonialism than thought.10 These projects had ontological, aesthetic, epistemological and ethical elements and commitments. For many anti-colonial thinkers, it was important to engage the multiple fronts of domination and struggle. However, ‘looking back’ at women in general and women’s writing in particular makes visible anti-colonialism’s intellectual moment as one that was bound by ideas that still resonate. In other words, in this paper, I first contemplate colonialism and anti-colonialism as an epistemological project, thereby making the boundaries of anti-colonialism appear more blurry than a focus on the male leaders would allow for. Second, I posit that during the anti-colonial moment imaginative possibilities carried weight. I maintain that it was an important moment that exposed, and continues to expose, the ways in which hegemonic epistemological structures are fundamentally racist and sexist, setting boundaries around who can speak and what can be said, even in the historical record.

In the first section, I engage the intellectual aspects of the anti-colonial project as a temporal moment, in order to illustrate the diversity and multiplicity of people who participated in it. In the second section, I examine where women are located in the literature on anti-colonialism. The anti-colonial narrative and archive consists mainly of the works of a select few men who appear over and again in analyses of colonialism and anti-colonialism. Given that anti-colonial efforts required active ‘on-the-ground’ work, both the narrative and the archive appear to be missing that detail. In the third section, I present three cases in narrative form and ask what they tell us about women’s writing and intellectual work regarding anti-colonialism. In the fourth section, I suggest that too little attention is paid to the value of what I call ‘present-hindsight’, which is the insight that lives in the details that people give to explain their experiences as well as the contemporary relevance and resonance of those experiences. I conclude that anti-colonialism looks messy, less triumphant and (importantly) ongoing when one considers these narratives. Additionally, the narratives contextualise and make collaborative the work of traditionally recognised leaders such as Amilcar Cabral, Julius Nyerere, Léopold Senghor and Kwame Nkrumah, to name a few. It also contextualises the work of less

9Usman, Beyond fairy tales, 20.
well-recognised leaders such as Mabel Dove Danquah, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Bibi TiTi Mohamed.

‘CREVICE MOMENTS’ AND INTELLECTUAL WORK

I am interested in the decolonisation moment for two reasons. First, it is what I call a ‘crevice moment’, a moment of disruption in hegemonic forms of discursive consolidation. Césaire was correct when he said that Hitler’s approach to essentialising identity along with his perpetration of state-legitimated violence and regulatory practices reflected the return to Europe of practices that had long been ‘acceptable’ in the colonies. This return resulted in a political catastrophe as old practices were connected to Hitler and his ‘evil’ ways, to photographs of piles of ‘white’ bodies, to systematic scientific torture, and to the shocking banality of ‘evil’ pinpointed by Hannah Arendt. The political catastrophe yielded new ideas premised on alternative discourses (such as human rights and self-determination) that acquired political purchase and made audible earlier forms of anti-colonialism. As activists and local leaders drew on and refined these ideas, anti-colonial and civil rights movements gained political ground. Together, these reflect a crevice moment that finished by the end of the 1970s in a reconsolidation of hegemonic power positions under the guise of neo-liberalism. Thus, a crevice moment is a moment in which competing discourses can be intelligible. It is a moment of possibility. Further, the significance of anti-colonial practice, just like the violence it challenges, lies not in its recognition as such but on the very fact of its existence. That is, anti-colonial struggle does not begin at the moment when it is made intelligible as a quest for ‘national self-determination’, human rights or civil rights. These are frames of recognition and it is useful to appreciate both the possibilities they allow for and the limits they impose on and bring into conversations about colonialism.

Anti-colonialism is quite literally an intellectual project in the sense that it is a project of imagining, thinking and enacting possibilities. Anti-colonialism evinces a collective and creative ‘brain-storming’ about how to transform contemporaneous conditions of oppression. To the extent that anti-colonial writing receives attention, it is often turned towards a select few of the many prominent anti-colonialists (both men and women) who have university degrees and, in some cases, PhDs, from European and American institutions. Yet, all people ‘make sense’ of their world even if their observations are not necessarily scholarly. I consider this ‘work-of-the-mind’ to also be intellectual work. Conceiving of intellectual work in this way expands the frame to encompass knowledge practices and forms of expression that do not appear in the generally acknowledged archive. For example, a small number of historians, including scholars cited in this paper, undertook to document and study

Césaire, *Discourse on colonialism*.


David Scott, *Conscripts of modernity: the tragedy of colonial enlightenment* (Durham NC, 2004). Scott calls this the ‘Bandung moment’ in which ideas of humanism, sovereignty and self-determination drove resistance against oppressive regimes. He argues that this project has been foreclosed. According to him, contemporary thinkers are faced ‘with the virtual deadend of the Bandung project that grew out of the anticolonial revolution. [This exhausted story] cannot enable us…to give point to the project of social and political change’ (57).
women’s activity in colonial Africa. In some cases, they studied well-known women leaders.14 In others, they collected on-the-ground, first-person histories.15 Studies of literature have also engaged with women writers.16 Their work illustrates the ways in which racist and sexist knowledge practices are predisposed to legitimate certain speakers and certain forms of speaking.

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

Colonialism operated unevenly in practice. In some places, pre-colonial forms of social practice were destroyed and in other places colonial forms of authority-making were mapped onto existing social practices and yielded an ‘assemblage’ of sorts. One of the most important structuring processes of colonial authority in terms of its invasion of everyday practices, even in places where a European presence seldom occurred, was law-making.17 The administrative and legal project of colonialism fundamentally altered and regulated local practices. Laws, and legitimated practices of conflict resolution that came out of colonial processes, do not necessarily destroy other forms of practice, but they can render them silent or ineffective. Colonial laws based on written documentation, private property and a Victorian form of social sexual differentiation—a bourgeois, Christian, male-female pairing—yielded a field of practice that incrementally disempowered women.

Colonial regimes politically, economically and educationally marginalised African women. Susan Geiger suggests that the reduced effectiveness of traditional forms of women’s political engagement related to practices of shaming, restitution and compensation subsequently lessened women’s capacity to advocate for themselves.18 Thus, women’s political independence was incidentally curtailed. I say ‘incidentally’ because patronising and paternalistic colonial assumptions about women's place and roles bled into both legislation and practice without overt intention. For example, Cheryl Johnson explains that in Nigeria, ‘While British officials did not go out of their way to change women's political functions, it simply never occurred to them that women had any significant role, and so they never made provision for it’.19 These patterns also reduced women’s economic independence, their control of the products of

17Mahmood Mamdani, Define and rule: native as political identity (Cambridge, MA, 2012).
their labour and, thereby, rebalanced power in favour of men, in particular those benefitting from indirect rule. Again, speaking of Nigeria, Cheryl Johnson-Odim writes:

By the mid nineteen forties the colonial government had enacted several policies that were inimical to the interests of the market women. The government had set price controls for goods sold in the market, demanded that the women turn over quotas of goods to the government to offset shortages induced by World War II, imposed conditional sales whereby if a market woman purchased (for re-sell) fast moving goods such as sugar she had to agree to purchase so many slow moving goods (such as cutlasses), and levied taxes on women without any women’s representation on colonial governmental bodies. The colonial government delegated to traditional bodies...the job of enforcing these unpopular and unfair policies, thereby giving them far more power than they had traditionally wielded.20

These practices were repeated across colonies as European powers sought revenues for their wars and nation-building projects. Colonial legal structures privileged written documents and women were seldom educated. In keeping with a missionary agenda, colonial mission schools were invested in normalising the Christian family, in creating wives and mothers rather than citizens. They did not recognise women as public agents, even though they were, in many cases, supportive of women’s suffrage at home.21

An oft-rehearsed argument, that anti-colonial nationalism marginalised women and women’s concerns, can easily be shown to be accurate. Joyce Chadya argues ‘African nationalists’ support of women’s causes was part of a tactic of social and political inclusion that was meant to yoke as many people as possible to the nationalist struggle’.22 This argument carries weight across Africa, to the much-discussed case of Algerian women whose energies were critical to the success of the war for liberation, but whose concerns were made secondary to the process of state building, to similar cases across the continent. Further, in many instances, no clear agenda appeared to exist that took seriously women’s concerns. In fact, Chadya continues:

The dominance of men in the political and military organisations suggests that men paid lip service to inclusion and that they perceived women as auxiliaries to the true fighters: men. Evidence suggests that these unequal gender relations during the struggle also laid the basis for post-independence gender inequality and discrimination.23

Despite this, women’s voices complicate this narrative, when they are audible. For example, in other arguments, women are presented as energetic and teachable. Chadya suggests that Nyerere recognised women as a revolutionary force, but not as a force for revolutionary leadership.24 Yet, as Geiger explains, on the basis of her own interviews:

It is incorrect, however, to assume, as most accounts would have us do, that Nyerere taught nationalism to women activists; on the contrary, women activists evoked, created and performed the nationalism that Nyerere needed

20Johnson-Odim, ‘For their freedoms’, 55.
23Chadya, ‘Mother politics’, 155.
to make TANU [Tanganyika African National Union] a credible and successful nationalist movement. In this regard, it is not incidental to note that Nyerere only became ‘father of the nation’ after independence; to the women activists of the 1950s, he was their ‘son’.  

It is not unusual for women to have used relational language to refer to their positions, just as it is not coincidental that women referred to Julius Nyerere as their ‘son’ rather than their ‘father’. Women have, in many cases, become politicised as mothers. These relational positions are not necessarily viewed as ties that bind in a constricting sense; they can also be enabling. In her study of the small group of women leaders, Johnson-Odim notes that:

each of these women…travelled internationally, was active in women’s education, and espoused a feminist, Pan-African, anti-racist and anti-imperialist philosophy. None felt she had to choose between marriage and an activist life, but each chose a husband who was active in struggle, had strong international connections, and encouraged her independent activity and understood and supported her activist philosophies on behalf of women and the independent nation she hoped to help create. Each had parents who believed in girls’ education, which was not the norm for Africa or Europe of their time.

One such leader, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, offered a critique of class oppression, imperialism and racism. For both men and women (but women were more explicit about it), anti-colonial thought’s profound contribution to social critique had to do with the way it embedded different forms of oppression in the political economic structures of the colonial project. Thus, for Ransome-Kuti, as for others, racial oppression, gender oppression and class oppression overlapped in complicated ways. As Johnson-Odim put it, ‘in fact, these oppressions could not be disaggregated…[T]hen, as now, there was a reluctance to embrace a solely feminist identity, even in the process of waging struggle against indigenous patriarchy, and certainly not when waging struggle against international patriarchy and oppression’. The aspect of women leaders’ work that, I think, contemporary readers find troubling is the lack of emphasis on ‘the answer’, or ‘a solution’ to oppression as opposed to seeing it as the outcome of power dynamics and structural processes that must be negotiated. As with others, Ransome-Kuti:

began to adopt an explicitly anti-colonial philosophy. Though she did not believe an end to colonialism would automatically resolve the oppression of women or other disenfranchised groups, and she was equally critical of those elements of indigenous Nigerian cultures that she felt were oppressive, she saw ending colonialism as a sine qua non in the democratization of the country.

Thus, the problem of oppression was a problem bigger than could be resolved by the end of formal colonialism and the beginning of democratisation, or by challenging power structures. The problem was rooted in politics. In recognition of these politics, 1960s and ’70s scholarship appears to bear witness to silenced

25Geiger, ‘Tanganyikan nationalism as “women’s work”’, 469.
28Johnson-Odim, ‘For their freedoms’, 52.
29Johnson-Odim, ‘For their freedoms’, 55.
voices, as historians and anthropologists begin to document stories of women’s engagement with both colonialism and anti-colonialism. In some cases, young academicians questioned the assumption of a burst of anti-colonial activity from a handful of primarily charismatic male leaders and sought to complicate the politics of this narrative by looking at women. Historian Susan Geiger writes that:

Life histories, court records and, where they existed, autobiographies were not simply useful for filling gaps. Women’s testimony and narratives held the possibility of challenging accepted interpretations and understandings, sometimes demanding thorough reconceptualization. Cheryl Johnson-Odim, Nina Mba, and LaRay Denzer had sought in personal narratives what the archives did not hold.³⁰

The personal narratives indicate that women were not simply acted upon, they were at the forefront of dictating the agenda and making sure that the agenda worked across boundaries created and/or exacerbated by indirect rule. In most cases, however, they did not challenge the validity of the categories of race or gender. Instead, they made sure that their organisations were trans-ethnic in order to counter colonially-produced tribal and ethnic delineations (e.g., TANU, etc.). Yet, in the historical record, many of these women are labelled ‘women nationalists’ when in fact they were quite simply anti-colonial nationalists.³¹ Having provided some background in this section, I want to focus on three narrative examples that are excluded from the dominant anti-colonial archive.

**ANTI-COLONIAL WOMEN’S WRITING: A JOURNALIST, AN ACTIVIST AND A WRITER**

Anti-colonial women’s writing takes different forms that each reveal a relationship between speaking, writing, activism and anti-colonialism. This section includes examples of journalistic reportage, interviews, novels and letters. Woven into these writings are politically significant examples of recording the voices, thoughts and activities of those who are elided from the anti-colonial archive even as they enact a ‘speaking back’. The first narrative is an excerpt from the story that journalist Stephanie Urdang³² wove together about her time in the forest with fighters and organisers of Guinea Bissau’s African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) in 1974 and 1976, and especially women participants in the liberation movement. The second narrative comprises a sample of a selection of interviews which Senegalese writer Awa Thiam conducted in Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria in 1977. Thiam focused especially in her interviews on polygamy and clitoridectomy and infibulation. While Urdang used an ethnographic lens, Thiam’s goals were overtly political. She used her case studies to argue for an African anti-colonial feminism and to build a case against female genital mutilation. The third narrative is a story woven from the...

³¹Geiger, ‘Tanganyikan nationalism as “women’s work”’, 467.
³²Stephanie Urdang grew up in South Africa. She emigrated to the US in 1967 and became active in southern Africa’s liberation support groups. She is also the author of *And they still dance: women, war and the struggle for change in Mozambique* (London, 1989) in which she analyses, again through women’s voices, the struggle after independence in Mozambique. She cites Amilcar Cabral as having said: ‘When we are independent, that is when our struggle really begins’: Urdang, *And they still dance*, 18.
personal writings of South African Bessie Head. These writings illustrate the intellectual sense-making work of a woman who grew up ‘in-between’ races, as ‘Coloured’ in Apartheid’s nomenclature. Her personal writings are grounded in the post-1960 Sharpeville massacre era in South Africa, an especially oppressive period in South Africa’s Apartheid history.

The journalist

Journalist Stephanie Urdang was invited to visit PAIGC organisers in 1974 and she went back in 1976 to complete her interviews. Her book, *Fighting two colonialisms*, documents women acting against both the Portuguese colonial authority and local forms of patriarchy. She provides the following story of women in Guinea Bissau’s liberation struggle:

One hot day, early in 1961, a young man, barely more than twenty, arrived unexpectedly in their village...‘Nino’ Vieira was in fact a PAIGC mobilizer, and, after having contacted a few people in the village he could trust, he had gone to live in the forest. Bwetna was among the first four people he mobilized...While he was working as a mobilizer, she took him food every day and listened with tremendous excitement to his words. The ideas filled her head and she could think of little else. That they themselves could change their lives! When he talked it seemed so obvious, so possible. Soon Bwetna was beginning the work of mobilizing other people in her village. Like many women, she joined PAIGC before her husband, and it was she who mobilized him, convincing him of the need to begin the struggle against the Tuga.34

Women responded quickly to proposals for collective action, participated in articulating collective action and became mobilisers themselves. Urdang explains how quickly Bwetna’s village became mobilised.

Within a few months the seemingly unchanging rhythm of village life had been totally disrupted. Guerrilla camps were established in the forest, filled with men and women who had come from the villages, some to train as guerrillas, others to carry out the different supporting tasks.

In other words, mobilisation incurred tasks for both men and women that tended, however, to work along an already-entrenched gender division of labour. Women already relied on team-work to complete their tasks. And, their tasks already prepared them for the heavy daily work of maintaining a group in ways that appeared to uphold traditional labour formations:

In addition to the staple diet of rice, the women would try to take the guerrillas fish and even meat, along with water for drinking and washing. And although these were time-consuming tasks, they never questioned the sacrifices they made. ‘We know well what the guerrillas are fighting for’. Bwetna would say to herself. ‘My husband is in the forest. Our sons and daughters are in the forest. I too must make an extra effort to see that they get enough food. We are part of the same fight’.36

34Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 120.
35Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 121.
36Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 122.
Despite this, it would be short-sighted to consider the tasks of ‘cooking’ and ‘feeding’ to be retrograde rather than revolutionary. In this moment, these tasks took on new meanings. Urdang is told that:

‘It was the women who were the easiest to mobilize’, said Francisca Pereira, in an interview. ‘They realized that this was a great opportunity for their liberation. They knew the attitudes of the party and understood that for the first time in the history of our country, they would be able to count on political institutions to safeguard their interests’.37

PAIGC policy is laid out in the collection of Amilcar Cabral’s writings *Unity and struggle (1979).*38 Tackling gender inequality was not a political afterthought. PAIGC displays a theoretical and practical recognition of the fundamentally racist and sexist character of colonialism. In ‘The weapon of theory’, Cabral says that ‘the men comrades, some, do not want to understand that liberty for our people means women’s liberation as well, sovereignty for our people means that women as well must play a part, and that the strength of our Party is worth more if women join in to lead with the men’.39 Urdang notes, ‘The development of these institutions was not accidental. The position that women must be liberated in the process of overall revolution had been a clear and integral part of the ideology of PAIGC from before mobilization’.40

Urdang captured the political mobilisation of women *both as women and as colonial subjects.* ‘Party mobilizers launched the battle for women’s emancipation necessarily on a most elementary level. They began by talking’.41

‘People began to understand how serious PAIGC was’, said Cau Sambu, ‘when the party began organizing the work, and insisted that both men and women take on the same responsibilities. Through our practice, not only through our words, women understood more clearly why they had to fight for their rights as women’.42

What is unique about PAIGC’s approach of ‘meeting people where they are’ is the way it worked systematically with conditions on the ground. Urdang explains, ‘How PAIGC implemented this was one of the first questions I asked Teodora…“We solved the problem by a very practical method,” she said. Each member of the council had a different area of responsibility. The tasks assigned to women at first related to the work they traditionally performed…’43 Organisers recognised that practices change incrementally and cannot be aggressively implemented from above. ‘It was not a simple matter for a man to cook for the fighters’, added Teodora. ‘But for a woman it was easy, so she took up the task with eagerness. She was basically doing the same work she had always done’.44 But, Urdang suggests,

a qualitative change had taken place: the integration of women into a decision-making body, once a male preserve, brought with it recognition and increased status for women’s work. For the first time, the ‘anonymous daily

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40Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 124.
41Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 125.
42Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 126.
43Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 127.
44Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 127.
work of women’, as PAIGC referred to it, was given a status more in keeping with its real value in the society.45

Thus, women’s position in the legal governing structure of PAIGC was both important and revolutionary. Women participated in anti-colonial politics in various institutionally-legitimated capacities that included decision-making positions.

Once on the councils, the women could take part in all discussions and decision-making, giving them an opportunity to develop self-confidence and leadership abilities. Meanwhile, a new world was unfolding, not only for themselves, but for all the women in the village. PAIGC represented an authority outside of the traditional councils or chiefs, and because it had given its approval and explicit encouragement to the idea of women taking on an equal political role, men could begin to accept this idea as legitimate.46

Women began to accept positions of political and legislative responsibility. Urdang observes: ‘Before too long some councils had a woman president or vice president. By the end of the war, there were many councils with more than two women members’.47

However, returning to one of her interviewees, Urdang reveals a tension in the work of integrating women into governing bodies that disrupt a gendered division of labour.

Bwetna…. [said], ‘Today I work together with men, having more responsibility than many men. This is not only true for me. I understand that I have to fight together with other women against the domination of women by men. But we have to fight twice—once to convince women, and the second time to convince men that women have the same rights as men’.48

Urdang’s other interviewees illustrate this tension further:

Women would talk to me about their work as providers of rice with immense pride, and I could see that they felt their contribution to the war was extremely important, even as a revolutionary act. One peasant woman, asserting that women’s work was equal to fighting because the guerrillas could not continue without them said: ‘The men fight with guns, the women provide the food’. She correctly understood the vital importance of her work. However, she, like a great number of her sisters, saw this as an end in itself and not a transitional step toward breaking down the division of labor based on sex.49

In the case of Urdang’s narrative, the women she interviewed spoke articulately about their conditions as women, about their work in PAIGC, and about their perceived successes and failures in light of the aims of the party. Urdang wrote that in Guinea-Bissau she found ‘that the liberation of women is an explicit and integral part of the overall revolution. At the same time, it is considered a protracted struggle to be waged by the women themselves. As such, it would continue long after independence had been won. It was never implied that their liberation would conveniently materialise at that time

45Urdang, Fighting two colonialisms, 127.
46Urdang, Fighting two colonialisms, 128.
47Urdang, Fighting two colonialisms, 128.
48Urdang, Fighting two colonialisms, 131/2.
49Urdang, Fighting two colonialisms, 133/4.
“because now everybody is free”.

Cabral’s writings explain the concept of unity and struggle as a mode of being in the world that must be constantly engaged—it is a process, not an end.

What comes through in Urdang’s interviews is that existing socialisation practices can be challenging to overcome, even with political will. Urdang captured very well the way in which women’s socialisation worked against PAIGC’s goals. PAIGC understood that the oppression of women is oppression in society. Its leader, Cabral, was one of the most vocal theoreticians and practitioners of anti-colonialism as anti-racism and anti-sexism. This is a well-documented fact and Urdang is well aware of it as she marches through the forests with men and women committed to its agenda. Yet, women’s socialisation also reveals practical exigencies faced by the movement. Women came with practical knowledge that men did not have, because they did all the work. Women’s concerns are anti-colonial in an abstract sense and also in a practical everyday sense. And, women are able to articulate their choices to each other and to Urdang.

Urdang was part of a community of people active in southern Africa’s liberation movements. Her positionality as an emigrant from South Africa situated her in the broader independence struggles that included the one taking place in Guinea Bissau. She also documented a gruesome, yet banal in its everydayness, violence in Mozambique. In this sense her work can be considered an enactment of anti-colonialism also.

The activist

In 1978 Awa Thiam categorised women’s concerns in *Speak out, Black sisters* thus: clitoridectomy and infibulation, institutionalised patriarchy, sexual initiation and skin whitening. In her collection of statements, Thiam documents women describing their conditions in 1977. I include a portion of these statements here from Yacine in Abidjan, Ivory Coast:

> After five years of marriage, I was pregnant for the third time. It was during this pregnancy that my husband returned home one night, about eleven o’clock, accompanied by a young woman. ‘This is my new wife’, he told me. ‘Her name is X…You’ll have to let us have the bed. For tonight, you can sleep on the mat there in the corner with the two children’. I felt as if I was going to faint, and I sat down on the bed…What was I to do?…From that day, my existence took on a completely different direction. Incomprehensible as it may seem, I chose to take a back seat. The ‘new bride’ did the cooking and the laundry for our husband…All I had to do now was to see to my own affairs and look after the children. It was difficult not to get on each other’s nerves…Every night, I had to swallow the insult of being made to witness—in silence—my husband’s amorous antics with my co-wife.

Yacine then speaks about leaving for her home in Bamako, Mali, getting divorced, and the financial problems involved with these decisions, including the decision to refuse her husband’s advances when he begs for her return to Abidjan.

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50Urdang, *Fighting two colonialisms*, 10.
51Cabral, *Unity and struggle*.
52Urdang, *And they still dance*.
Thiam documents seven other first-hand experiences of polygamy and also includes a transcription from what she calls a ‘collective interview’ in Guinea of seven men and seven women. She notes that of the women, only two actually spoke. Her question ‘what do you think about [women’s] present situation?’ elicits a number of responses from the men, to do with preferring polygamy for women’s labour, or equating a rejection of polygamy with modernisation. After being asked to focus on the question, the speakers begin to talk abstractly about women’s emancipation and participation. Thiam asks, ‘Wouldn’t the women be able to tell us about this?’ One man says, ‘They can tell you about it, but since they haven’t made up their minds to do so, we men are giving you our opinion. It’s true that we had to wait till independence for this emancipation of women to make its mark and express itself’. Thiam’s next question is ‘But shouldn’t the women be speaking for themselves?’ The reason why we were so keen to organise this collective interview was so that there could be women present as well as men. [Silence from the women.]’ The ensuing conversation involved a woman who expressed her desire for a partnership with equal decision-making power, and a sustained declaration from one man that polygamy was important because women had become emancipated and were now lazy.

Thiam similarly documents experiences of clitoridectomy and infibulations. ‘I had just turned 12 when I was excised. I still retain a very clear memory of the operation and of the ceremony associated with it’, one story from Mali begins.

On the threshold of the hut, my aunts exchanged the customary greetings and left me in the hands of the excisor. At that moment, I felt as if the earth was opening up under my feet. Apprehension? Fear of the unknown? I did not know what excision was, but on several occasions I had seen recently excised girls walking. I can tell you it was not a pretty sight. From the back, you would have thought that they were bent old ladies, who were trying to walk with a ruler balanced between their ankles, and taking care not to let it fall.

The documentation of this young woman’s experience ends with:

Afterwards, the most terrible moments were when I had to defecate. It was a month before I was completely healed, as I continually had to scratch where the genital wound itched. When I was better, everyone mocked me as I hadn’t been brave, they said.

Another woman spoke of her French-born children. ‘When we returned to Mali, my mother was the first to ask me whether I had had my children excised and infibulated. I replied no, and made it clear that I had no intention of doing so’. Later, stopping in to see her children who she’d left at her parents’ house, she says:

I went into their room. They were lying on mats on the ground, covered with a few pagnes. At the sight of their swollen faces and eyes full of tears, I

55Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 30.
56Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 31.
57Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 33–4.
58Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 35.
59Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 35.
60Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 36–40.
61Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 61.
62Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 63.
63Thiam, Speak out, Black sisters, 63.
gasped and a cry escaped me. ‘What’s the matter? What happened, children?’
But before the children or the two women who were with them could reply,
I heard my mother saying, ‘Just see you don’t disturb my grandchildren. They
were excised and infibulated this morning’.65

Thiam asks this woman: ‘Do you think it is possible to put an end to these
practices?’ [To which the woman replies] ‘I can’t say for absolutely certain, but I
don’t think it’s impossible…But nothing can be done to abolish them unless the
women concerned group together to impose their point of view’.66

Again, Thiam documents various experiences that include a woman who
required surgical reopening of the wound at marriage and a woman who is glad
for her operation because of the control it gives her over her body. ‘I’ve been
divorced for four years and I’ve never for one moment felt the desire to run
after a man, or felt the absence of sexual relations to be a lack, a vital lack’.67

Thiam asks, ‘How should the colonial or neo-colonial context in which the
Black African woman lives affect our understanding of a feminist movement
aiming to challenge her status in society?’68 She devised a set of arguments in
favour of a form of feminism that incorporates the experiences of African
women and concluded that, ‘Challenging the status of women amounts to
challenging the structures of an entire society when this society is patriarchal in
nature. All the problems of society—political, cultural, economic—are inex-
tricably linked to the problem of women. The problem of women belongs in a
general context’.69

Born in 1950, Awa Thiam was ten when Senegal became an independent
state. An important difference between Thiam and Urdang is that Urdang was
writing about and interviewing politicised women who hoped to be a part of a
new state politically and economically. But Urdang’s interviewees were almost
all rural, peasant women. Thiam was interviewing women who had different
expectations. They were not observably anti-colonialist, yet their position in the
political economy was arguably weakened by the fact that they had less control
over important tasks like growing food.

The writer

Bessie Head’s contribution is different again. In Head, we have an urbanised,
intellectual writer who expressed an awareness of the social, political and
material conditions into which she was born, lived and wrote. Born in 1937 in a
South African mental hospital to a white upper class woman who got pregnant
by an unknown African man,70 Head was raised by a coloured family and did
not come to know of the circumstance of her birth until she was in her early
teens.71 As her writing indicates, these circumstances haunted her, particularly
the extent to which she was living evidence of a double transgression of race
and class.72

66Thiam, *Speak out, Black sisters*, 64.
67Thiam, *Speak out, Black sisters*, 66.
68Thiam, *Speak out, Black sisters*, 118.
69Thiam, *Speak out, Black sisters*, 118.
70Bessie Amelia Emery was born in Pietermaritzburg, Natal Province in 1937.
provides the details of Bessie Head’s birth and childhood in her biography.
72She was living evidence of a transgression of legal provisions and prohibitions such as the
1927 Immortality Act.
In her personal writings, as opposed to her novels, Head is very expressive about her history, writing process and ethical drive. She describes the panic that came with the creative urgency to tell a story as a way to critique ‘the political lumberjacks who are busy making capital on human lives’. She says, ‘Whatever my manifold disorders are, I hope to get them sorted out pretty soon, because I’ve just got to tell a story’. Head’s writing exhibits a focus on people that is both politically and ethically humanist.

If I had to write one day, I would just like to say people is people and not damn white, damn black. Perhaps if I was a good enough writer I could still write damn white, damn black and still make people live. Make them real. Make you love them, not because of the colour of their skin but because they are important as human beings.

Sixteen years later, and looking back at what she had accomplished, Head writes, ‘Most of my novels published so far could be said to be didactic works; they were arranged from pre-planned conclusions and principles. I knew what I was preaching against and simply went ahead and preached’.

The stories she wrote emerged from her observations of the world in which she lived. At the age of 24, she connected poverty, white privilege and institutional political economic structures that served to create and maintain a racialised distribution of labour, when she stated: ‘There is something terribly sinister happening. Why are the Coloured, with unashamed determination, handing over the education of their children to the Coloured Affairs Department? In Port Elizabeth and Cape Town they are doing this terrible act with conviction and maddening self-compulsion’. For Head, this ‘handing over’ was part and parcel of a system meant to keep people in their place. ‘These children need all the help that a truthful, normal education can give them; not an education that is going to grind them back into muck’.

Further, the not-Black/not-White person is in a psychologically problematic in-between position that yields a similarly problematic classed leadership.

The Coloured man knows he is oppressed, and he knows his oppressor. He of all oppressed groups in South Africa fears his oppressor most because he is closer to him and really understands the ruthless nature of his power. So, he complies. He is obsequious, just so long as everybody leaves him in peace… Some Coloured leaders would appear to be unaware of the tragedy that is the day to day life of the Coloured people. They would give the impression that the Coloured man is working hand in glove with the oppressor. The real trouble with these leaders is that they have created a conservative middle class of their own which is but a pallid and watery reflection of white privilege.

The older Head exhibited consistency in her recognition of the political-economic legal contours of the problem when she suggested, perhaps more dispassionately, that:

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74Head, *A woman alone*, 24, emphasis added.
76Head, *A woman alone*, 84.
It is possible that no other legislation has so deeply affected the lives of black people in South Africa as the Natives’ Land Act of 1913. It created overnight a floating landless proletariat whose labour could be used and manipulated at will, and ensured that ownership of the land had finally and securely passed into the hands of the ruling white race. On it rest the pass laws, the migratory labour system, influx control and a thousand other evils which affect the lives of black people in South Africa today. The passing of the Natives’ Land Act was devastating enough to evoke, for the first time, organised black protest of an intellectual kind. It stirred into existence the newly-founded South African native National Congress…and gave voice to a new class, a black elite educated for the most part by missionaries in the British liberal tradition.80

Thus, the education system, such that it was, educated a group of people who were able to use their liberal education in order to act in protest. This became pronounced after the National Party was voted into office in 1948, and instituted a formal Apartheid.

In the 1960s, regardless of race, this activist intellectual group drew the attention of the authorities who, in many cases, detained them. The government began to refuse passport applications instead opting to present people with one-way exit visas. It was an efficient way to destroy a political network. Head complains of the loss of intellectual and emotional support:

One of the slobs who are left behind told me rather scornfully the other day that I was not a freedom fighter. I have to admit that it is the truth. I never joined fund-raising campaigns because I can’t ask for money. I never paid at fund-raising parties because I was always broke and yet drank as much wine as I could and talked as loud as I could and quarrelled with the whites who were there. The ‘liberal’ whites seemed to like one to fight because they always provoked the arguments as far as I was concerned and always laughed at the offensive remarks. Yes, maybe I am going to pieces because I was never the type to rush about doing things. I just sat around talking all the time and now all those beautiful ideas have blown up in my face. You can’t think straight about anything if you’re hating all the time. You even get scared to write because everything has turned cock-eyed and sour. This would never have happened if my friend ‘D.B.’ were around. He hated that kind of mentality, and with his sarcastic wit and optimism would have made me seem a complete fool.81

To her mind, ‘One can’t help admiring political people. They never talk about God. I do not, of course, wish to imply that my political friends are non-believers like myself. It is just that we have been too busy arguing about George Padmore to have any time left over for such a subject’.82 However much she describes herself as politically peripheral, she drew strength from her group of thinkers and she was active enough to be later ‘offered’ a one way exit visa herself.

In fact, 14 years after her 1964 ‘exit’, Head commented that all intellectual work and activity in South Africa was political because of the nature of the system itself:

80Head, A woman alone, 105.
81Head, A woman alone, 32.
82Head, A woman alone, 33.
I think that our only education in South Africa, as black people, is a political one. We learn bitterly, everyday, the details of oppression and exploitation so that a writer automatically feels pressured into taking a political stand of some kind or identifying with a camp. It was important to my development to choose a broader platform for my work, so I have avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel they falsify truth. It was necessary for me to concentrate directly on people because I believe it is only people who make people suffer and not some hidden, unknown God or devil.83

This is consistent with her earlier comment on needing to write for and about people. Head was moved by the ordinariness of human suffering and oppression that she argued stems from greed and politically corrupt structures. One of her observations had to do with the way that changes in traditional gender relations destroyed old protections on which women could rely, thereby placing them in more legally and economically precarious positions despite political enfranchisement.

Change and progress has always been of a gentle and subtle nature—the widespread adoption of Christianity gradually eliminated polygamous marriages. At [Botswana’s] independence in 1966, women were given the right to vote alongside men. They did not have to fight for it. But strangely, this very subtlety makes it difficult to account for the present social crisis. The country is experiencing an almost complete breakdown of family life and a high rate of illegitimate births among the children. No one can account for it. It has just happened somewhere along the line. A woman’s place is no longer in her yard with her mother-in-law but she finds herself as unloved outside the restrictions of custom, as she was within it.84

This passage comes from an essay (entitled ‘Despite broken bondage, Botswana women are still unloved’) with a particularly gentle tone that describes conditions that she had seen and that had been conveyed to her by other women. It seems tender because Head’s other writing often exhibits a brashness about positions and descriptions of bouts of anger. She seemed to have had a tumultuous relationship with other people that in various cases she put down to temper, mental illness, stress of poverty, single parenthood and statelessness.85 In one passage, she describes it thus:

My work was always tentative because it was always so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing; it battle with problems of food production in a tough semi-desert land; it brought all kinds of people, both literate and semi-literate, together, and it did not really qualify who was who—everyone had a place in my world. But nothing can take away the fact that I have never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person.86

Head’s story displays the violence of statelessness, mixed raced-ness, sexual harassment, loneliness, stress, madness and its impact on a particular person, in a particular place, and at a particular time. In her novels, Head tackles Pan-Africanism head-on. She found herself subject to both Apartheid’s racism and Black nationalism’s racialisation and patriarchy and this nexus is part of what

83Head, A woman alone, 85.
84Head, A woman alone, 79.
86Head, A woman alone, 45.
she ‘preaches’ about in her novels. Her insights yield nuanced analyses of institutionalised racism and sexism with the recognition that the two are not simply interlinked; they are one thing.

As I present them, each of these three narratives is incomplete. I neither aim nor claim to be ‘telling’ the women’s full stories here. My purpose in studying these women and relating their stories is to ask the following question: What do they tell us about the women’s anti-colonial intellectual work that is contemporarily relevant? The preliminary answer from these stories is that while women’s socialisation contributes a skillset that is useful in mobilising activities, existing social practices can be challenging to overcome, even with the political will to do so. Further, the nature of the system itself in part defines the contours of oppression such that women’s intellectual work recognises and represents navigable and locally specific institutional structures.

CONCLUSION: RACISM, SEXISM AND (ANTI-) COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE PRACTICES

Women’s intellectual and physical energies contributed to the anti-colonial project, but are largely edited out of the historical record. Their voices expose complex, ordinary, creative and human sense-making. Contemplating anti-colonialism in the voices of African women indicates that gendered power dynamics bound the anti-colonial archive to the extent that the racism and sexism of these knowledge practices cannot be disaggregated and cannot be ‘solved’. Yet, the narratives above undo the hegemonic colonial and anti-colonial gendered archive; they disturb its apparent solidity and reveal crevices. Usman is emphatic that his critical assessment is essential for all sources. The failure to make this type of assessment has meant the subjection and confinement of the perception of a historical process to the categories and assumption of the primary sources, which for recent African history actually means largely the categories and assumption of imperialism in its various phases and manifestations.87

This means that the knowledge practices used to ask and answer the questions—Where are the women? And what do their voices illuminate about the anti-colonial crevice moment? And how does their experience impact explanation of the current historical moment?—are always already embedded in colonial power dynamics. The question then is not how to read the actions of these women into the historical present. Rather, it is what is the relationship between the speakers, their context, and the broader historical narrative that obscures women’s anti-colonial work of the mind? The answer, I think, is an onto-epistemological one. While students of politics spend a lot of time seeking answers to questions about epistemology and ontology in ways that satisfy disciplinary requirements about methodology, much less attention is paid to the value of ‘present-hind-sight’: this is the insight that lives in the details that people use to explain their experiences; these details are subject to fears, anxieties and desires, making them difficult to categorise; and a set of legal and social structures that give form to explanation is both discernible and historically/territorially contingent. Racist and sexist knowledge practices are predisposed to legitimate certain speakers and certain speech such that under colonial epistemologies (and arguably neo-liberal epistemologies that study Africa through Area Studies or Development), African intellectualism might

87Usman, Beyond fairy tales, 20.
appear oxymoronic and African women’s intellectual work (broadly conceived) even more so.

Like men, many women who became leaders in anti-colonial struggles spent time in the US and Europe. These women experienced and understood persistent racism and racist/gendered political power such as that depicted by the racialised politicisation of the character, Sissy, a young woman who decides she has to return to the Ghana that invested in her education in Ama Ata Aidoo’s (1977) *Our Sister Killjoy*.88 The personal narratives indicate that women were not simply acted upon, they were at the forefront of dictating the agenda and making sure that the agenda worked across boundaries created and/or exacerbated by indirect rule. Many historians and, certainly, students of politics, pay little attention and collect little actual information about women, women’s roles and writings by women even though it has been shown that ‘during the colonial period, women in many African countries engaged in substantial anti-colonial nationalist activity, that this activity was generally supported by male nationalist leaders, and that there was substantial evidence and certainly historical awareness of this activity on which Africanist historians could draw’.89 For women anti-colonialists, racial oppression, gender oppression and class oppression overlapped in complicated ways. Women leaders’ work evinces a lack of emphasis on ‘the answer’, or ‘a solution’ to oppression. The focus is instead on oppression as an outcome of power dynamics and structural processes that must be negotiated. Certainly, forms of intellectual work without the stamp of approval of a metropolitan university education are even more obscured. Returning to Geiger:

women’s historical experience contained important evidence of and in some instances prefigured the failure of nationalist politics to incorporate popular participation over the long term or transform the relations between the government and the governed. Historians working to recover the political histories of women involved in anticolonial and nationalist activities had found it necessary to explain and analyse not only how and why women at particular points in time and for particular reasons became activists, but also why they were so frequently ‘forgotten’, ‘eased out’, or dismissed in longer term historical and political processes and discourse.90

Ultimately, anti-colonial positions are of-the-world as are contemporary readings of those positions. In this vein, ‘the study of history is, by itself, an undertaking made rather complex by the fact that the concepts, categories, terms, and even the very language used in the study are themselves, like the historian, parts of the historical process. The concepts, categories and terms do not come from outside history’.91 Yet, the contemporary relevance of anti-colonial thought is not readily clear and the voices of the women who participated in this moment are obscured or marginalised such that ‘despite the fact that feminist scholars have been writing women into African colonial histories for three decades, it is still very much the case that unless “women” or “gender” appears in the title, women do not have to be present in the text at all’.92

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91Usman, *Beyond fairy tales*, 141; emphasis added.
Thus, ‘looking back’ at women yields another important insight. Processes that squeezed out these voices are not only past processes; they are also processes of the historical present. The end of colonialism was not the end of oppression. Women’s voices do not echo the general triumphalism of the era. One can see that the anti-colonial moment was not a moment with clear temporal or spatial boundaries, but it was an important moment that exposed the ways in which hegemonic epistemological structures were fundamentally racist and sexist. And they still are, which is why the search for Deolinda Rodrigues continues.

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