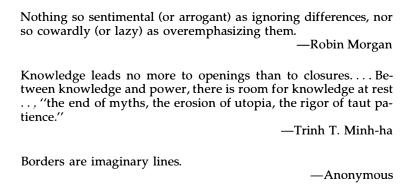
## Bringing African Women into the Classroom: Rethinking Pedagogy and Epistemology

OBIOMA NNAEMEKA



Explorations into the character, possibilities, and survival of feminism and sisterhood on a global scale have led me to revisit the evolution of feminism in the West, especially in the United States, since the 1960s and to examine the question of identity in structuring and destructuring alliances. The crisis in the feminist movement in the United States is a microcosm of the problems that militate against women forming alliances across continents. The troubled history of second-wave feminism in the United States chronicles the movement from the radicalism and sexual politics of the 1960s to the theorizing and feminist politics of the late 1970s and early 1980s to the narcissism and identity politics of the 1980s. A study of this evolution raises some epistemological and pedagogical questions: How do the ways in which we construct, teach, and disseminate knowledge of the Other undermine or promote alliances between women?

As feminists take stock of years of concerted struggle, some suddenly realize that their shared experiences are expressed and articulated in a language they no longer understand. The theorizing of feminism created structures of power in the feminist movement analogous to those

for which patriarchy is attacked. As positions of margin and center became delineated, the resistance of the marginalized to the imperious hegemony of that center became more apparent. Not opposed to recognizing differences, the resistance instead has challenged the creation of a hierarchical paradigm in which these differences are placed and interpreted. The theorizing and the subsequent ideologizing of feminism have culminated in the legitimation of the subject/object, self/ other, center/margin dyads within the feminist movement itself. Such strategies of exclusion intensify group identification and loyalties which could ultimately fragment the movement. Identity politics or "home politics" should be not an end in itself but the means to an end, providing the initial building blocks for constructing social change. Nonetheless, the security that identity politics can offer may insulate us from forming the alliances necessary for political action. Bonnie Zimmerman cautions that a fine line separates autonomy from fragmentation: "There is a price to pay for a politics rooted so strongly in consciousness and identity. The power of diversity has as its mirror image and companion, the powerlessness of fragmentation. Small autonomous groups can also be ineffectual groups."1

In a television interview on December 31, 1979, Tom Wolfe characterized the decade that was closing as the "Me Decade." Feminists were part of the "Me Decade," too, and the identity question that simmered in the late 1970s intensified as the 1980s wore on. Symbols of commonality, oppression, and sisterhood, for example, through which the feminist movement sought to forge solidarity, became increasingly questioned as women began to assess these symbols in all their complexity. As oppression took on a human face, thus raising questions about difference, the issue of sisterhood, especially global sisterhood, assumed wider implications, transcending biology and genealogy. The belief that "sisterhood is global" became a political matter.

Some feminist scholars continue to have faith in feminist scholarship because of, not in spite of, the fissures within it—fissures that enhance its vibrancy and relevance. Our faith, however, should not deter us from examining the sources of these fissures, and from working to prevent them from deepening and destroying women's ability to form and maintain alliances. We must therefore thoroughly scrutinize the theoretical and epistemological issues, the methodological procedures,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Bonnie Zimmerman, "The Politics of Transliteration: *Lesbian Personal Narratives*," in *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from Signs*, ed. Estelle B. Freedman et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 268.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>This is also the title of the book edited by Robin Morgan, Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology (New York: Anchor Press, 1984).

and pedagogical questions in feminist scholarship as it addresses marginalized women, particularly African women.

In this day and age of "multiculturalism" and "pluralism," we find a corresponding shift in feminist scholarship from the theorizing of difference to theorizing diversity. Skeptics and cynics (often with good reason) might scream, "Hell, no! Let diversity be!" Theorizing diversity is a risky business; when diversity comes eyeball to eyeball with theory, it is diversity that blinks! Difficult questions remain: How can we theorize diversity without falling into the trap of erecting hierarchies, upholding difference, and legitimating exclusions? How can we save the dynamism of diversity from the hegemonic grip of theory? Trinh T. Minh-ha brilliantly articulates the danger in the use of what Amilcar Cabral calls "the weapon of theory"3:

Indeed, theory no longer is theoretical when it loses sight of its own conditional nature, takes no risk in speculation, and circulates as a form of administrative inquisition. Theory oppresses, when it wills or perpetuates existing power relations, when it presents itself as a means to exert authority—the Voice of Knowledge...Difference needs not be suppressed in the name of Theory. And theory as a tool of survival needs to be rethought in relation to gender in discursive practice.4

The tension between theory and diversity motivates Susan Griffin's claim that any theory in which "the knowledge of oppression remains mute" will begin to destroy as it is transformed into ideology. I do not believe in theory as a purely innocuous formulation "born of genuine feeling of a sense of reality." Because many theories evolve from the distortion and manipulation of reality, we cannot totally absolve theory from the hegemony that taints ideology. I agree with Griffin when she asserts that ideology "is a martinet." But isn't theory also a "martinet" in its own way? Theoretical frames also border and exclude. Our concern should be less with what is framed in and more with what is framed out, with what is silenced. In feminist scholarship, as we charge ourselves to listen to silences, particularly in women's writing, we must, with equal enthusiasm, listen to the silences imposed by theory. We must interrogate the history/histories of theory/theoretical frameworks and in so doing bring to the fore the human agency implicated in their

<sup>3&</sup>quot;The Weapon of Theory" is the title of chapter 14 in Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings of Amilcar Cabral (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 119-37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 42–43.

<sup>5</sup>See Susan Griffin, "The Way of All Ideology," Signs 7 (1982): 647.

formulation, suspecting the smoke screen of objectivity which obscures the ever-manipulative human agency. The smoke screen's illusion undermines us all.

The fundamental dissimilarity between the theorizing of difference and theorizing diversity is that the latter emphasizes the centrality of contiguity. The focus on contiguity which simultaneously recognizes difference and the possibility and/or reality of connection reminds me of a quilt. The quilt, separate patches revealing different and connected geographies and histories, suggests a lesson in possibilities, particularly the possibility of creating harmony out of contradictions. The quilt's beauty transcends aesthetics; the quilt is beautiful because it is also a powerfully political act and art. A theology of nearness—genuine connections, mutually empowering intersections, and fruitful interpenetration—must nurture the theorizing of diversity. Here lie the difficulties and the risk. Feminist theorizing and praxis must be rooted in *genuine* feminist ethics. The troubling contradictions between what we preach and write and what we do fuel the frustrations felt by many who continue to value and practice feminist scholarship.

In the last decade or so feminist scholars have bandied around the word *intersection*. For considerations of intersection to be meaningful, however, we must not embrace the term arbitrarily. Intersection must be allowed to assume its full meaning and range. We cannot talk about the intersections of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual preference without carefully considering the intersection of theory and practice, without recognizing the intersections of world systems, particularly as the world gets smaller owing to technological advances that shrink distances.

We must interrogate feminist scholarship not only on theoretical but also on epistemological grounds. Instead of making the usual philosophical wanderings into epistemology, we must reframe questions about epistemology. Instead of perpetually constructing and renegotiating the so-called standpoint epistemologies, we must take a stand against epistemological inventions and manipulations. In short, we must ask fundamental questions about the manipulation of knowledge, about information management; the politics of publishing must be investigated and interrogated. Information management feeds partial or possibly distorted knowledge, which in turn undermines the intersections we theorize.

In 1980 Zed Press (London) published Nawal El Saadawi's *Hidden Face of Eve.* This edition's preface remains one of the best analyses of the Iranian revolution and of the relation between imperialism and Islam, outlining its effect on women in the Arab world. Saadawi cate-

gorically states in the preface that to understand and explain fully the condition of women in the Arab world, one must take into account foreign, particularly American, intervention in the region. This important preface, which establishes a connection between imperialism and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, with the attendant repression of women, did not appear in the American edition published by Beacon Press, an omission that prompted a strong reaction from Saadawi:

Yes, and here is a very subtle form of exploitation practiced, unfortunately, by feminists—so-called progressive feminists. Gloria Steinem of Ms magazine writes me a letter in Cairo and asks me for an article about clitoridectomy. So I write her an article setting forth the political, social and historical analysis, along with comments about my personal experience. She cuts the political, social and historical analysis and publishes only the personal statements, which put me in a very awkward position. People asked, how could Nawal write such a thing? She has such a global perspective on clitoridectomy, how could she write such a thing? They didn't know Steinem had cut the article. The second example is Beacon Press in Boston. I gave my book, The Hidden Face of Eve, to the publisher in London; he published all of the book—the preface, introduction, everything. The preface, which is a long preface, is crucial and important to the book. Beacon Press cut it without my permission, making me feel that I have been exploited and my ideas distorted. Without the preface, it appears that I am separating the sexual from the political, which I never do. To me, women who think they are liberated but who are obsessed with sexuality are not liberated. They are living a new slavery. They are obsessed by not having men around just as they were obsessed with having them around. It is the other side of the same coin.6

Although *The Hidden Face of Eve* has been widely read in the United States, the American audience, reading an incomplete version, is denied this powerful book's full impact. As readers of Saadawi in North America lead their war against physical excisions made on Arab girls, they should with equal enthusiasm challenge the type of excision Saadawi claims was performed on her book. Such manipulations of information have grave implications for our theorizing and praxis.

How can we theorize difference or diversity, and what are the pitfalls in such theorizing? How do we gather information about the Other? How do we organize, order, and disseminate that information? In short, how does information management contribute to our construction of a notion of self and at the same time alienate us from the Other? These

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Quoted in Tiffany Patterson and Angela Gillam, "Out of Egypt: A Talk With Nawal El Saadawi," *Freedomways* 23 (1983): 190–91.

are crucial questions that we, as students and teachers, confront in varying degrees. These and other related issues have led me to explore the subject in my essay titled "Bringing African Women into the Classroom." While working on this essay, I got a call from a colleague. During our conversation I told him about my topic. "Eh! Bringing African Women into the Classroom!" he sneered. "What do you mean by 'bringing'? Can't they walk? How do you bring them?" he asked. I replied, "You bring them on a leash." Although my response was meant to be a joke, in retrospect I believe I accurately described the profound objectification of African women in classrooms in the West. And as we consider the commodification of African women in Western classrooms, we must also address the issue of tokenism. Quite often the work of an African woman writer is thrown into a course syllabus in order to take care of race, gender, ethnicity, and class issues in one fell swoop, thereby creating a "multicultural course" which will in turn produce "multicultural students."

To study a culture presupposes in some ways that one is outside it. Can we teach as outsiders? Oh, yes, we can. The pertinent question, however, remains: How do we learn and teach as outsiders? In studying and teaching another culture, the teacher finds himself or herself situated at the congruence of different and often contradictory cultural currents. This point of convergence where the teacher stands has its privileges and rewards, but it is also fraught with danger. To survive at this precarious position requires a large dose of humility. Issues involved in researching, writing, and teaching about other cultures are inextricably linked to survival. Can we cross cultural boundaries and still survive? And the notion of crossing cultural boundaries is in itself problematic. What do we mean by "crossing"? Do we mean moving from one point to another, in the process abandoning one set of realities for another? It seems to me that a cross-cultural pedagogy entails not a "crossover" but a transgression whose partial enactment denies the finality implicit in a "crossover."

As students and teachers we discover that our explorations into understanding other peoples and cultures place us in an ambiguous site where we will never accomplish a "crossover" but rather stand astride cultures: our culture and other cultures. It seems to me that crossing cultural boundaries means standing at the crossroads of cultures. In other words, we must see that we enter other cultures with our own cultural baggage. The extent to which we allow narcissism and notions of self to mediate our analysis will determine the degree of distortion in our conclusions. As we learn and teach about other cultures, two fundamental questions should be asked: (1) Why do we want to learn

and teach other cultures? (2) How can we learn and teach other cultures?

The first question raises the issue of intention. Charges of concern with economic advancement and professional upward mobility have been levied against some scholars, ranging from historians and social anthropologists to feminists and cultural critics, who proclaim themselves experts on Africa in general and African women in particular. The same could be said about studies of other minorities in which insiders and outsiders to the minority cultures collaborate to advance themselves economically and professionally by means of distortions they invent about the minority cultures, distortions that run against the sacred nature of these cultures. As Ward Churchill writes:

The past 20 years have seen the birth of a new growth industry in the United States. Known as "American Indian Spiritualism," this profitable enterprise apparently began with a number of literary hoaxes undertaken by non-Indians such as Carlos Castaneda, Jay Marks (AKA "Jamake Highwater," author of *The Primal Mind*, etc.) and Ruth Beebe Hill (of *Hanta Yo* notoriety). A few Indians such as Alonzo Blacksmith . . . and Hyemeyohsts Storm . . . also cashed in, writing bad distortions and outright lies about indigenous spirituality for consumption in the mass market. The authors grew rich peddling their trash, while real Indians starved to death, out of the sight and mind of America.<sup>8</sup>

An issue related to the methodological concerns that the second question raises is that of perspective, equally crucial to evaluating how we learn and teach other cultures. Perspective, distance, objectivity. Perspective implies possibilities, alternatives, choice. How can we choose an appropriate location to situate ourselves? How far or close should we stand vis-à-vis the subject of our analysis? In a 1961 lecture in Japan, Simone de Beauvoir affirmed that in a war situation the privileged and probably the most objective position is that of the person on the sideline, the war correspondent, who witnesses the battle but is not embroiled in the fighting. Richard Wright brilliantly articulated the problematic of perspective: "Perspective is that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Ifi Amadiume, preface to *Male Daughters*, *Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Press, 1987).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>Ward Churchill, "Spiritual Hucksterism," Z Magazine (December 1990): 94. <sup>9</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, "Women and Creativity," in French Feminist Thought: A Reader, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 27.

too close and the result is blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things."<sup>10</sup> In our study and teaching of other cultures, balance and humility must mediate our choice of perspective.

Different problems arise depending on whether one teaches a culture as an insider or an outsider. As I mentioned earlier, one can teach as an outsider, but to do so requires the humility that is grounded in knowledge. Unfortunately, when teaching about Africa and African women, many outsiders prove too impatient to claim expertise. A three-week whirlwind tour of Africa does not an expert on Africa make; speed-reading two or three African novels cannot produce an expert on African literature. Sadly enough, schools in the West sustain tremendous institutional tolerance and encouragement of such expertise. As the academy provides a breeding ground for such experts on Africa and African women, it puts in place stiff requirements for the teaching of Western cultures and literatures. In such areas expertise must be proven through transcripts, graduate degrees, and teaching experience. Trivializing other cultures encourages the type of miseducation that leads to further trivializing of such cultures.

Teaching as an insider poses its own set of problems. Overidentification with one's culture leads to the type of romanticization that produces other levels of distortions. Good examples surface in some Negritude writings. The romanticization of Africa and the subsequent oversimplification of issues have led to much of the negative reaction against the Negritude movement. Furthermore, insiders can also be alienated from their own culture. A Western-educated African who teaches African culture also speaks from a position of alienation which may not necessarily be as profound as that of the outsider. Whether one teaches as an insider or an outsider, the issue of distance is crucial. It is Chinua Achebe's recognition of the interplay of identification and distance that sets him apart as one of Africa's foremost writers. With Achebe we experience a rare moment in literature where the writer balances himself or herself strategically. In spite of his Western education, Achebe remains a true son of Igboland, what the Igbos would call "a son of the soil." Immersed in his cultural and social milieu but possessing a critical eye, he simultaneously identifies with and maintains a distance from his environment. In his works Achebe narrates with charm his profound identification with and love for his environment while at the same time he recognizes its flaws, particularly those

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *The Black Aesthetics*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 341.

generated by foreign interventions.<sup>11</sup> Achebe demonstrates that a post-colonial subject can maintain a balanced view of the postcolonial condition.

The issue of balance is neglected in the one-dimensional Western constructions of the African woman—usually poor and powerless. We African women have witnessed repeatedly the activities of our overzealous foreign sisters, mostly feminists who appropriate our wars in the name of fighting the oppression of women in the so-called third world. We watch with chagrin and in painful sisterhood these avatars of the proverbial mourner who wails more than the owners of the corpse. 12 In their enthusiasm, our sisters usurp our wars and fight them badly—very badly. The arrogance that declares African women "problems" objectifies us and undercuts the agency necessary for forging true global sisterhood. African women are not problems to be solved. Like women everywhere, African women have problems. More important, they have provided solutions to these problems. We are the only ones who can set our priorities and agenda. Anyone who wishes to participate in our struggles must do so in the context of our agenda. In the same way, African women who wish to contribute to global struggles (and many do) should do so with a deep respect for the paradigms and strategies that people of those areas have established. In our enthusiasm to liberate others, we must not be blind to our own enslavement. Activities of women globally should be mutually liberating.

During the Gulf War the biggest issues in the U.S. media were Saddam Hussein and Saudi women. I will leave Saddam Hussein to George Bush. I was, however, intrigued by the numerous stories about Saudi women. American pronouncements regarding Saudi women suggest prevalent attitudes about other peoples and cultures. One remarkable example comes to mind. On December 27, 1990, the television show *Inside Edition* carried a segment on Saudi women, focusing less on Saudi women and more on the veil—supposedly the ultimate symbol of oppression. The first part of the segment showed us faceless Saudi women shrouded in ample yardage of black cloth. They did not speak. They were not made to speak. They moved against a powerful male presence: the male reporter who commented on their lives of abject subjugation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>See in particular Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), and *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1960). Equally pertinent is Achebe's critique of the West in his books of essays, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1977), and *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), as well as his critique of post-independence Africa, in particular Nigeria, in *A Man of the People* and *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1985).

<sup>12</sup>An Igbo proverb.

Halfway through the tedious, patronizing commentary another Saudi woman appeared, a college student in Jordan. She wore Western clothes (symbols of freedom!) and perched on a red convertible (another symbol of freedom!), ready to speed away into the limitless unknown. This "liberated" Saudi woman spoke; she deserved to speak because she was "free."

At the end of the segment another male presence was installed. Bill O'Reilly appeared on the screen. With an evasive look in his eyes and a dubious smile on his lips, he asked the viewers, specifically the female viewers: "Aren't you lucky to be here?" A program designed to teach us about Saudi women turned out to be a lesson on how lucky and free American women are. After watching that program, I found that my concern was not for Saudi women, since the program gave me no meaningful information about them. My concern was for the millions of American women who went to bed that night believing Bill O'Reilly and his assurances. My concern is about the naïveté and arrogance that such assurances nurture. Many who teach African women writers in classrooms in the West are no different from Bill O'Reilly. As we look at other cultures, relativist arguments and arrogant feelings of superiority numb us to the realities of our own predicament. We need to be conscious of our own oppression in order to collaborate with those who are similarly oppressed.

In the classrooms where we teach and learn about other cultures, three important elements continuously interact: the text, the teacher, and the student. Each takes enormous risks in being there. The text is at risk primarily because it cannot defend itself against use, misuse, and abuse. But the essential question we should ask is this: Why do certain texts and not others on the same subject (in this case, African women) find their way into classrooms? What factors determine our choice of texts, films, and other teaching materials? Does one attribute such choices to a teacher's ignorance (the teacher does not know any better) or to the fact that particular texts and films confirm and legitimize the teacher's prejudices about other cultures and peoples? As we study and teach other cultures, do we enter into meaningful dialogue with the materials we have chosen? In order to unearth the prejudices and assumptions inherent in the materials we use, we should ceaselessly ask questions such as: Where is the writer in the text? Where is the filmmaker in the film? In short, we cannot meaningfully communicate information without first of all asking serious questions about the construction of knowledge. We should examine not only what the texts say but, more important, how the information and data in the texts came into being and are articulated. Concern with epistemological and methodological issues is therefore crucial if we are to save the text. A course syllabus not only demonstrates how much the teacher knows but also betrays the teacher's limitations and prejudices. The same could be said for compilers of anthologies, particularly those designed for use in world literature classes.

Often, token gestures of inclusion are extended to women and socalled third world writers. In such quasi-invisible inclusions, the relevance of a token contribution to the entire anthology or syllabus receives little attention. On a couple of occasions colleagues have asked me to name an African woman writer for inclusion in their course. The appropriate thing would have been for them to tell me the focus of the course and the required texts already on the syllabus. This information would determine whether I recommend the work(s) of Bessie Head. Aminata Sow Fall, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Flora Nwapa, or any other woman writer from Africa. My point here is that, contrary to current thinking and practice, African women writers are not easily interchangeable. It is not so important that Bessie Head's work appears on a syllabus as that it relates and speaks to other chosen materials. Such intertextual considerations help us derive optimal benefit from even the token inclusion we make. I once saw a literature syllabus that lumped Chinua Achebe together with Robinson Crusoe and Saint-Exupéry. Evidently the several missions that Saint-Exupéry flew over North Africa and the Sahara earned him the spot beside Achebe! It seems to me that Chinua Achebe and Joseph Conrad would have made a better combination.13

Students who flock to courses on African women do so probably for as many reasons as they take other courses, ranging from the desire to learn about African women because it is in vogue—the right thing to do in this day and age of cultural literacy and pluralism—to the possibility that other courses are filled and the students have nowhere else to go for credits. Nonetheless, many non-African (particularly Western) students who walk into courses on African women fall into a different category; almost all of them come in with expectations pretty much defined and entrenched in their minds. The teacher is, therefore, expected to teach those expectations. The teacher who teaches otherwise risks, among other things, receiving uncomplimentary evaluations for his or her unpardonable deviancy. And when African students take courses on African women, they are often called on to validate the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* could be taught in conjunction with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, 1–20.

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pervasive distortions of African women's lives in texts and films. If the African students dare to think or argue otherwise, they are accused of overreacting. Tension builds up, creating a potentially explosive situation that impedes learning and understanding. Not merely an individual who disseminates information, the teacher who survives must also be a diplomat and psychologist.

Not too long ago I taught a course, "Women in Developing Areas: Power, Politics, and Culture," in a small Midwestern liberal arts college. We started by reading materials written by Judith van Allen and some African women scholars, Ifi Amadiume, Bolanle Awe, and Kamene Okonjo.14 At the end of two weeks of intense reading, one of my students informed me that she was not getting anything out of the course. Her complaint surprised me since a few other students had mentioned to me that there was too much information to absorb. After a long discussion with the student, it dawned on me that her problem lay more with the nature of the materials we were reading, which discussed primarily the powerful positions that women occupy in indigenous African social and political formations. My student was basically asking, "Where are those excised/circumcised African women in marriages arranged by families who eventually shipped them off to be victimized by heavy-handed polygynists?" I told the student to exercise patience. Circumcision, arranged marriage, and polygyny would be discussed during the seventh and eighth weeks of class; she had only five short weeks to go! Our preconceived notions can be so strong that they get in the way of our learning about cultures and other peoples whose lives and realities transcend our cultural boundaries. As teachers we can overcome this difficulty by painstakingly and judiciously selecting materials that build a balanced syllabus.

The teaching of cultural studies often focuses on exposing differences between cultures. It seems to me, however, that we could accomplish much by teaching similarities and connections as well as differences. It makes sense politically that women, as teachers, teach connections, thereby reducing the distance between the student and the foreign culture and increasing points of interaction and identification. It is the teacher's responsibility to delineate the differences and commonalities

<sup>14</sup>The recommended readings were: Ifi Amadiume, preface and introduction to *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*; Bolanle Awe, "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System," in *Sexual Stratification*, ed. Alice Schlegal (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 144–59; Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in *Women in Africa*, ed. Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1976), 45–58; Judith Van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6 (1972): 165–81.

between the student's culture and the foreign culture, without unduly establishing facile universalism and untenable connections. This methodology which I call teaching connections has been helpful to me in my teaching of African women to a Western audience, especially in teaching the three most discussed issues about African women—clitoridectomy, polygyny, and arranged marriage.

The pervasive sensationalization of clitoridectomy in Western media and scholarship leads to the equally pervasive belief in the incompleteness of most African women, a belief that basically questions our humanity. From the West an intense war led by Fran Hoskens, the guru of clitoridectomy, has raged against this "barbaric act" perpetrated against helpless African and Arab women. Women within Africa and the Arab world have equally condemned the practice. There is disagreement, however, about how to wage the war.<sup>15</sup> Our Western sisters have seen clitoridectomy primarily as an issue of sexuality, and the fixation with sexuality in the West helps explain the intensity of their intrusion. They denounce clitoridectomy because, according to them, it prevents African women from enjoying sex. But then, wasn't clitoridectomy initiated in part precisely to prevent women from going around and enjoying sex? This unmitigated advocacy of the enjoyment of sex most often leads to a stricter imposition of certain customs on African and Arab women. Foreigners, however well-meaning they may be, must not fail to see how they contribute to the intensification of oppressive patriarchal practices in Africa and the Arab world. The upsurge of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East and other parts of the Arab world occurs as a sign of resistance to imperialism and other forms of foreign intervention. The return to the veil arises not by accident. In the name of resisting foreign interventionism, patriarchal societies resort to rigid and heavy-handed enforcement of old ways-tradition, religious fundamentalism—which often oppress women. So by fighting our wars badly, our Western sisters inadvertently collaborate in tightening the noose around our necks.

Clitoridectomy goes beyond sexuality. It raises questions with profound social, political, and economic implications. Any meaningful fight against this practice must coordinate with other battles against the political, social, and economic conditions that generated and continue to perpetuate such a practice. We must consider an issue such as this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>See AAWORD, "A Statement on Genital Mutilation," in *Third World: Second Sex*, ed. Miranda Davies (London: Zed Press, 1983), 217–20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup>See Nawal El Saadawi, preface to the English edition of *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Press, 1980).

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in all its complexities. We must establish linkages, teach connections. Furthermore, we must acknowledge the history and global nature of circumcision and clitoridectomy in order to situate the debate where it duly belongs. As Nawal El Saadawi rightly points out, the issue is not barbaric Africa and oppressive Islam. The issue is patriarchy:

In Copenhagen, we had a lot of disagreement, we women from Africa and the Third World, with her [Fran Hoskens]. In our workshop, we argued that clitoridectomy has nothing to do with Africa or with any religion, Islam or Christianity. It is known in history that it was performed in Europe and America, Asia, and Africa. It has to do with patriarchy and monogamy. When patriarchy was established, monogamy was forced on women so that fatherhood could be known. Women's sexuality was attenuated so as to fit within the monogamous system. But she doesn't want to hear any of this.<sup>17</sup>

There are other aspects of teaching connections which I apply to my teaching of clitoridectomy. I teach clitoridectomy in tandem with teaching abuses of the female body in other cultures: forms of plastic surgery in the West and foot-binding in China, for example. For a Western audience I bring the issue home by comparing breast reduction surgery and clitoridectomy. We must not be distracted by the arrogance that names one procedure breast *reduction* and the other sexual *mutilation*, with all the attached connotations of barbarism. In both instances some part of the female body is excised.

Some women undergo breast reduction for some of the reasons that some young girls undergo clitoridectomy—to be more attractive, desirable, and acceptable. For the women in areas where clitoridectomy is performed, beauty is inextricably linked with chastity and motherhood. The crucial questions we must ask are: For whom are these operations undertaken? For whom must these women be desirable and acceptable? Women's inability to control their bodies is not country-specific. Abuse of the female body is global and should be studied and interpreted within the context of oppressive conditions under patriarchy. Teaching connections radically shifts the grounds for debate from racial and national particularism and idiosyncrasies to comparisons of women's oppression under patriarchy. In the American classroom I have observed that this shift interrogates and modifies the notion of self among the students, particularly the female students. They go from

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>Quoted in Patterson and Gillam, "Out of Egypt," 90-91.

thinking nationality (American) to thinking simultaneously nationality, sex, and gender (American women).

Polygyny has been condemned in the West as one of the worst symbols of African women's oppression without any assessment of the advantages the practice accords women: sharing child care, emotional and economic support, sisterhood, companionship, and so on. Our Western sisters who pity us for having to share our husbands with other women forget that husband-sharing was perfected and elevated to an art form in the West. Polygyny comes from two Greek words: poly (many) and gyne (woman or wife). Polygyny has, therefore, two possible meanings—"many women," or "many wives." The English dictionary sanctifies only one of the two possibilities, "many wives," a limitation to which no one seems to object. I remember that the first English dictionary I used in the colonial school was written by one Michael West, a man. I gather that men still write dictionaries—English dictionaries!

Polygyny as "many women" places the Western man with one wife and one or more mistresses in the same category as the African man who legitimates his relationship with more than one woman. We must not also forget the brand of polygyny euphemistically called serial monogamy in the West. The need to qualify monogamy in this instance is suspect. As a matter of fact, an African woman in a polygamous relationship seems to be a step or two ahead of her Western counterpart living under the illusion that she is not sharing her husband: the African woman knows who else her husband is with. In teaching and understanding polygyny, the issue is not uncivilized Africa but men.

Arranged marriage is another issue used to illustrate the enslavement of African women. As I teach connections, I point out practices in the West similar to the arranged marriage for which African and Asian societies have been ridiculed. One wonders if the dating services mushrooming all over the United States do not engage in some similar arranging! I have watched with amazement the facility of arrangements conducted on the television show "Love Connection." On a couple of occasions I have witnessed the triumphant return of a "connected" couple to the show: the woman walks out jubilantly with a baby in her arms, and the man, now her husband, follows a few steps behind with a conspiratorial grin on his face. A family is established before our eyes, and we applaud. Again, in the issue of arranged marriage, it seems to me that African women are better off: they do not pay for the services for which their American counterparts pay exorbitantly. My American feminist friend has argued vehemently in favor of dating services because, according to her, the issue of choice is crucial. With a dating service a woman can decide to choose or not choose a particular "allocation." Incidentally, the day my friend argued her strong case, I saw sticking out of her bookshelf a book titled *Smart Women/Foolish Choices*. She must have bought the book in a moment of doubt.

At stake in our divergent views is the issue of cultural difference. In order to teach difference, we must thoroughly examine how difference comes into being. Can we distinguish between constructed and actual difference? Ideology thrives on differences; ideology actually constructs differences, thus hiding similarities and actual differences. Concerning African women in the classroom, what we see in most classrooms in the West is not the study of African women but rather the study of the African woman, in whatever way we choose to invent the myth. Usually the invented African woman carries a heavy load on her head and a baby strapped to her back, and holds two kids, with about four more in tow. Of course she lives in a village. She is the myth. The problem with myths is not what they reveal but what they conceal. In order to understand African peoples and appreciate the rich diversity of Africa, we must put a human face on the African continent. In teaching African peoples, an observer notes, "we need to breathe life into our classroom."18 Distortions in the study and teaching of African concerns stem from imperialism's refusal to historicize and differentiate African space and peoples. We Africans must realize that our survival depends to a large extent on our ability to reclaim our history. As bell hooks correctly notes, "Our struggle is also the struggle of memory against forgetting."19

The understanding and mutual respect which can emanate from teaching connections are necessary tools for revisiting global sisterhood and reconceptualizing marginality. Sisterhood is not an abstraction which all women can claim simply on the basis of commonality of sex; it flourishes only through hard work. True sisterhood is a political act, a commonality rooted in knowledge, understanding, and mutual respect. For true sisterhood to emerge, women must realize the intersections of their personal and collective histories and recognize how and where their liminal histories touch. These points of intersection and convergence constitute sites of energy, power, and agency, sites where we can name ourselves or refuse to be named as we center our marginality. Only in full recognition of the possibilities of the marginal site

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup>Donna Blacker, "On Student-Centered Education," unpublished manuscript, 11. <sup>19</sup>bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 148. This quote is taken from the ANC Freedom Charter.

may we begin to see it not as a position of loss and disenfranchisement but rather as a location of contestation, gain, and empowerment.

The epistemological issues raised here clearly indicate that knowledge must ground the teaching of connections. The battle flaring in the academy over issues of diversity and multiculturalism is more than a struggle over power and turf. The bitter fight to protect the sanctity of the canon and to exclude "marginal discourses" betrays an anti-intellectualism that I call the new illiteracy: the refusal of literate people to read, to learn, and consequently to know and grow.

The current debate over transforming the academy reveals that the issue of knowledge entails risks, both institutional and personal. Institutions may engage in the diversity business to give a polite nod to change and pluralism. They set out to burn a tree but find that they have set the forest ablaze. What ensues is the panic control we find in a crisis. Crisis management during a panic leads to the dangerous vacillation of one step forward, two steps back.

In response to this situation, I renew the call for a thorough examination of the relationship between sisterhood and knowledge. Susan Lanser's essay in this volume offers a fertile terrain for understanding and analyzing this relationship. True sisterhood grounded in knowledge (of self and others) will shield us from the alienation and disconnectedness of the voyeur-tourist in Lanser's study of *A Small Place*.

In order to teach our sisters, we must know them, not assume knowledge of them. Teaching connections makes great demands on our energy, time, and dedication. It compels us to retool ourselves through knowledge. Instead of using pluralism and multiculturalism as excuses for creating superficial and irrelevant visibility of peoples and issues that have for so long been relegated to the margins of scholarship, we should use them as modes of production for bringing about personal and societal transformation through knowledge. When I teach Mariama Bâ, I do not make territorial claims to the entire field of knowledge and experience contained in her work simply because, like the author, I am an African woman. Mariama Bâ's work grew out of an African tradition with which I am familiar, but it also evolved from an Islamic tradition with which I was totally unfamiliar. Her work required me to retool myself. I read the Koran and familiarized myself with Islamic culture, particularly the status of women in that culture.

The personal risks involved in teaching connections are great. The courses that are designed to teach inclusiveness and diversity stand as mirrors in which we as teachers see ourselves as well as the other alien cultural fields and cartographies of pain that come under our purview.

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As we all know, self-knowledge can be frightening and humbling, but it is also necessary, healthy, and empowering. Equipped with proper and adequate knowledge, we can no longer walk though our sisters' "small place" as voyeur-tourists, but rather we become true sisters who are aware of how we and the institutions of which we are a part are implicated in creating our sisters' "small place."

What Lanser calls "unreal loyalties" may blind us to the full extent of our complicity and shield us from engaging in positive action informed by the transforming powers of knowledge. "Home politics" can be meaningful not only in terms of understanding and legitimating our "home" but also, and more important, in terms of understanding how our "homes" connect to and affect other "homes." Teaching connections requires that we grasp and teach sameness and difference simultaneously.