‘FROM NATION TO FAMILY’:
RESEARCHING GENDER AND SEXUALITY

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Introduction

Considering the current political, social and economic crisis in Zimbabwe, along with the strong dependence on a discourse of ‘culture’ and respectability that nationalisms depend upon (See for example Yuval Davis 1997; McFadden 2001; Gouws 2005), I examine the multiple representations and interpretations of tradition and modernity as they apply to women, women’s bodies, masculinities, femininities, ‘culture’, sexuality and power. This requires an examination of the uses and abuses of calls to ‘culture’ in both justifying and naturalizing violence committed on the bodies of men and women (and the gendered nature of this violence) that are manifest within this crisis. While my interests are particularly concerned with the everyday practices often referred to as ‘our culture’ – the contentious issues surrounding being a woman, dressing for and occupying public space maintaining ‘respectability’ and adhering to the appropriate modes of conduct for a young woman – it is difficult to ignore how these discourses play a role in and are exacerbated by the current crisis.

In an open letter concerning the situation in Zimbabwe, Onannela Selolwane responds to Everjoice Win:

you identify the source of suffering clearly and unambiguously as politically motivated and organized violence. Like so much violence directed against women within the sanctity of the home and family, this is supposed to remain unnamed and unspoken, to protect families and men from shame. There is an assumption, as you rightly point out, that liberation war leaders, like husbands and heads of households, have earned an unlimited right to ‘chastise’ (read ‘abuse and violate’) with impunity those that are under their ‘guardship’. Because they are guardians, ‘providers’ and ‘protectors’, they themselves are protected from having their acts named as violence as this would signify that such acts are wrong morally and legally (Selolwane 2004, 77–78).
This paper investigates the methodological and ethical considerations for a study of young women, examining gender, sexuality, ‘culture’, and power as a means of scrutinizing the trope of ‘the nation’ in Zimbabwe. ‘Women’s experience’ is a particularly meaningful way to examine the constitution of both ‘the nation’ and ‘culture’. ‘Women’ in this sense must be viewed as both material and symbolic subjects. Examining ‘experience’ in this manner requires an epistemological shift from the position of unsituated objectivity. This in turn requires methodological and ethical transformation. These shifts allow us to avoid what has been described as ‘eating the other’,¹ that is, appropriating women’s experience and speaking as though ‘women’ are a universal subject. I assume the position of the participant/researcher as a means of attempting to bridge the gap between the ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ and in doing so reflect on what are considered the main ethical concerns, when researching with human subjects: the concern for the safety of the research subjects; informed consent; privacy and confidentiality; and finally, how to deal with adverse situations that arise in the research process.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008, 199) remind us that the subject itself matters; ‘feminist self consciousness also identifies subtle forms of oppression and imbalance and it teaches us to address questions about whose interests are regarded worthy of debate.’ This has implications in regards to the nature and subject of the questions that my research wishes to ask, for instance, taking the narratives of young women on love, sex and marriage as relevant material for an analysis of the state of a nation. This also brings into question the appropriateness of unsituated objectivity in the production of knowledge.

Using feminist appropriations of standpoint theory, I interrogate the usefulness of ‘experience’, or perhaps ‘shared experience’ as a viewpoint from which to conduct social research. The much discussed ‘native ethnographer, ‘outsider within’ position requires careful interrogation. I offer a combination of feminist standpoint theory and feminist postmodernism, with a focus on both experience and discourse as a solution to this epistemological (and on the level of ‘eating the other’) ethical dilemma. Departing from the same ethical viewpoint, I elaborate on being both the ‘outsider within’ as well as a partici-

¹ The title of an essay by bell hooks (1999) where she interrogates the commodification of Otherness.