

Standpoint: "Won't nobody even try to reach her mind..."

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I had never considered myself an activist, and before coming to university my feminism had never moved me beyond the borders of familiar spaces where I felt my voice carried some weight. This piece serves as an autobiographical reflection on of some of my experiences as part of the Women Crossing the Line project, run by the African Gender Institute, and it is worth noting that the personal journey of my involvement has taken me simultaneously outwards into an experience of freedom *and* inwards towards the growth of a self-reflective gaze which made me feel uncomfortable. Conscious scrutiny of how I live and negotiate spaces as a young woman has been neither straightforward nor "safe". Months after my involvement with the project ended I came across a song that captured most of my experiences as a young, black woman who did not fit the conventional models of beauty (or so I thought) and who walked around apologetic and often hiding, invisibilizing my sexuality as if it were a shy dirty secret.

She's a big chick

Big ol legs

Big ol thighs

Big ol ass

Big ol tits

She's so big

Won't nobody even try to reach her mind... Jill Scott - *Thickness*

Working with a self who was hiding both her body and her mind to discover what my sexuality and gender offered me as a route towards genuine power was exhilarating – and terrifying.

Starting point

One morning sitting in a Gender and Development lecture we received a presentation about the project as they were looking for young women to

join the project. I wrote a motivational letter to become part of the project because I heard the buzz words ‘empowerment and young women’ the two things I have always felt should go together. Although I formally joined the project in its second phase, all my expectations of what it might entail were thrown out the window early on, as I had to engulf myself in a conversation with my peers that I never even dared to have with myself. Conversations about bodies; conversations about race; conversations about bodies and race and sexuality. And conversations as a strategy for something but at first, it was hard to know what.

The project began by creating live performative installations, within university space, in which a team of young women acted out the stereotypical roles of femininity: the woman starving herself to be “beautiful”; the woman who is the “slut”; the woman whose sexuality is owned by her family or her religion. I was part of these installations which showed the different ways women’s bodies were policed through the state, religion and media. As I was shouting, performing the stereotypes, where people were watching, I felt so exposed as if I was showing the world my insecurities as if I were the one in the centre of it all. I have always been conscious of my wide hips, big thighs, stretch marks and all the things that the world of commercialized femininities tells us are bad, not sexy enough to go on magazine covers. Although I usually walked in the corridors of the university, showing a confident demeanor (I felt it was appropriate to act this way because I identified as feminist, and therefore showing the cracks in my confidence was not an option) publically performing myself – even as a stereotype – as sexual and sexually conscious felt too dangerous. Doing the performance accentuated inside my heart the secret conversations and encounters with the mirror, which reflected all the negative things the world projected about my thickness. The negative things I had also begun to internalize and own as “who Athi was.”

The experience of being part of the team of “performing stereotypes” highlighted how important it was for me to question, interrogate my opinions and experiences as young woman located in this ‘intellectual’ space, living in a body that is raced, gendered and to ask how all these intersect to shape my sexuality and offer me possibilities of relationship to my own body and others. One of the significant features of the project was the dialogues after every action (such as the installations) which provided a space for young women to discuss all the things we often keep silent about on campus. We spoke in

depth about why it is acceptable for men to be overtly sexually assertive, while women – in this post-liberation South Africa era – had to be forced into a “good girl role” sexually. We acknowledged that we rarely derived any pleasure from this, and that we wanted pleasure – sexual pleasure, the pleasures of intimacy, and the pleasures of confidence in our bodies. We grieved over the frequency with which we seemed to accept the “good girl” role sexually, all in the hope of running away from being called whores or sluts.

Personally, the confrontation between my Christian faith and my politics of my sexuality was an internal dilemma that I had to deal with. The stark contrast between what I believe spiritually and what I feel and experience forced me to exist in a position where I had to silence certain aspects of myself in both these environments respectively. As part of the media training in the project I wrote a piece on masturbation, something I have never been able to talk to my Christian friends about – the project allowed me the space to express this mounting curiosity I had about my body. It is fascinating how in all my days going to church and growing in my faith I had always been made to feel like a temptress, my sexuality never acknowledged as anything but dangerous. I had to cover up my legs – if my skirt went above my knees I was causing my brethren to stumble. But wait, what about me? I have all the embodiment making me sexual, a sexual being too. What makes me stumble? Is stumbling the only possibility?

It was only at university that I got to have a conversation about my clitoris. It was always the big bright pink elephant in the room. My sexuality always discussed in relation to men and never in its individual capacity as something that I can explore without a man. That’s why the piece I wrote on masturbation was a narrative of how liberated I had felt being able to openly talk about the sensations of sexual pleasure, about the fullness of being a woman without feeling dirty – someone whose sexuality was only a source of temptation to others.

The project also opened up a space for us to discuss issues of institutional culture that often go unchallenged. This signified the move from the personal transformation into the analysis of the ordinary university spaces as political ones. Within the University of Cape Town, we have the “walk of shame” – this is the name given to the experience of a woman student leaving a men’s only residence at night. As she walks out, away from seeing a man friend or partner, she has all these demeaning sexual and gendered labels placed on her, called

out by the men she passes in the corridors and along the pathways between the women's and men's residences. These judgments never apply to men. Some students claim this exercise is harmless, but I believe it has dire consequences on how women's bodies are treated within this space. A few months ago a young woman was raped on campus in a way that provoked a public outcry, and it still puzzles me that my peers – on hearing the news – initially asked, “What she was wearing?” The assumption is always that the experience of formal education would open our eyes to the dynamics of sexual violence, and to the politics of gender. But the ways in which contemporary cultures mould notions of hypersexual femininity (always a temptress, always a slut) lead to social permissions for men to lay claim to our bodies. When men are violated, sexually or otherwise, when do we hear, what was he wearing?

Although my activist work with sexuality has so far been generated only within the university space, the dynamics surfaced transcends any university wall. They are shaped by widespread discourses that affect us all individually however strongly we claim immunity from them. These are discourses about who is and is not sexually desirable, what it means to be sexually assertive, and who has the right to control of her reproductive and sexual body. As I worked harder and harder to unpack these discourses through dialogue, action, and internal negotiation with my own beliefs and feelings, I felt liberated being one of the women that got the ugly stares on campus because we were being “too radical” or because we were talking about matters that ‘should remain private’ as though the consequences of our private encounters remain within private spaces. These consequences morph into language, images and discourse that we negotiate (what are the consequences of having “consensual sexual intercourse” when drunk? What are the consequences of accepting anal sex from a boyfriend even if you, his girlfriend, don't like this form of sexual activity? What are the consequences of not insisting on the use of a condom?).

Despite the uncomfortable truths I was confronted with working within this space of activism, there was a liberating element that has impacted my personal growth as a “graduating student” working within a formal space that I hoped to influence. Seeing other young women coming to the dialogues and events we held as a team appreciating the platform to talk openly, without being ridiculed or judged for wanting to explore their own bodies, was rewarding. It felt like the kind of reward you could call building a movement. It felt like a different route to graduation, one I had helped to create myself.