

Nurturing Researchers, Building Local Knowledge: The 'Body Politics' Project

Sophie Oldfield and Elaine Salo

Narratives about cities and about social change in Southern Africa often are framed by the pervasive effects of globalization and neo-liberalization. Development, cities, life experiences are interpreted in these contexts in relation to economic processes, to structural adjustment, to the challenges in the South African context to rework Apartheid legacies. In these stories, the state, the international community and financial context loom large. Our literature and the popular press reporting on Southern African cities thus highlight structural processes, enacted on a national and regional scale, bound up in the geopolitics of global processes.

Although important, these sorts of depictions of development and urban change are partial. In their dominance they efface and write over the intimate, regular, and local processes that constitute the everyday body politics central to Southern African urban experiences. On the one hand, politics within households, in homes, in the community-based processes that flesh out the urban, remain unaccounted for. On the other hand, the messy realities that characterize the ways in which the state works and engages appear cleaned up in these modernist linear accounts. In consequence, durable binary stories about power that depict victims and losers are reproduced. Yet, these types of narratives do not take account of how differently gendered bodies engage with and act on state policies and through state and economic and spatial processes, and the ways in which individuals, families and communities shape everyday life and, in these processes, our cities.

The 'Body Politics' project, from which this issue has been produced, takes these imperatives seriously. In doing so, we grapple with ways to substantiate how ordinary individuals and families have some agency to shape everyday processes, and in these actions, to challenge city and broader development processes. In their own meanings, these practices challenge what often appear as predetermined structural processes, city flows and spaces. This sort of

research is immersed in politics itself: in the intricacies of the field and the politics of method, all central to the knowledge we produce.

In this short Profile piece, we reflect on the project and the processes that have helped us build a community of young scholars committed to this type of research. In doing so, we highlight the intimate connections that link together the theoretical direction of body politics work, gendered readings of urban space, and the merits and richness of a regional conversation, all central to our own political and theoretical commitments.

The Body Politics Project¹

Beginning in 2006, the project has been anchored in the Body Politics post-graduate course entitled 'Gendered and Cultural Readings of Home, Citizenship and Cities'. As the course progressed, we built the conceptual foundation, a place and the process through which we generated a trans-disciplinary conversation to read, research and reflect on identities, gendered subjectivities and agency, explored through ideas and practices related to home, struggles for citizenship and a reading of cities from this rich, diverse local base.

We actively recruited gender studies, geography, and development studies students into the course and into the project. In doing so, we have worked hard to bring together students working on, and residing in, Cape Town and Lusaka, and who were of diverse nationalities – Zambian, Zimbabwean and South African – and willing to research their home towns and cities further afield. The students' needs to initiate their research in these diverse Southern African sites were two-fold. Zambian and Zimbabwean students already had access to research networks in their sites at home, but required financial assistance. South African students had relatively easier access to financial assistance but required an opening to research networks in Zambia. We thus actively supported Zambian and Zimbabwean students with field research. Funding was provided by the National Research Foundation (NRF) to work in Lusaka and Cape Town, and through Ann Schlyter's and the University of Zambia's contacts. This provided South African students with the opportunity to work in Lusaka and to gain the rich insight generated in comparative projects.

Building a supportive and intimate place in which to unpack the theoretical debates and in which to demystify the process of fieldwork has been very important. Central to the project and the development of student research, we have regularly met as a community, sharing our research experiences,

filling in the gaps between proposal and fieldwork, thinking carefully about the practice of research methodologies, discussing the complexities of the field, and developing the links between field research and the theoretical conversation in which field stories have been framed.

Grounding the research in the seminar room: fiction, theory, field notes

A jointly taught post-graduate course has helped us integrate questions of theory, fieldwork, everyday life and research practice. Our seminar class has focused on rigorous readings of Southern African and Southern literature on gender, home, citizenship and the city. Feminist readings of globalization and modernity cogently read the local in relation to the global and modern (Nagar *et al.*, 2002; Mbembe, 2001). Research in the spaces that women predominate – for instance in homes and neighbourhoods of our Southern cities, in the informal rather than the formal economy – reveals globalization and modernity not as seamless or singular all-powerful processes, but partial, contested, and fragmented in the everyday lived experience (Gibson-Graham, 2006). The prioritization of everyday spaces and practices as critical sites in our work and knowledge production challenges notions of women and the economically marginalised, of local spaces and practices, as ‘homogeneous victims’, as power and powerlessness constituted in some uni-dimensional way in relation to development and modernity.

Analysing gendered everyday practices in Southern African cities produces a more complicated understanding of material and social processes in the interstices of which women negotiate their agency. These contexts lead us to question and complicate the ways in which global notions of modernity play out at a local scale, inhabited by particular gendered, raced and aged bodies, in turn producing multiple, overlapping, often conflicting interpretations, narratives and experiences of space and socio-economic change. The making of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ and its projection on the city in post-colonial contexts is thus messy, complex and exclusionary (Myers, 2006). Both feminist critiques of globalisation and post-colonial readings of modernity direct us to record and understand the everyday and to theorise from this base, opening up a theoretical terrain that is embodied: one that is peopled, gendered and placed in time.

We have combined this traditional set of academic practices with conversations with locally-based activists, and by holding workshops and

seminars in different sites in Cape Town beyond the university campus. These sites ranged from up-market coffee shops in De Waterkant and a pizza restaurant in Cape Town's upmarket Atlantic seaboard, to a buy-and-braai butcher/restaurant – Mzoli's – in Gugulethu, the Manenberg People's Centre and the Manenberg women's food gardens, sites in townships. Our journeys to these places provided students with opportunities to experience the relative value of their own taken for granted cultural mores, linguistic codes and norms beyond their socio-spatial comfort zones, and to talk about the diverse racial, economic, gendered and sexual meanings of place imbricated in the physical dislocation as we traversed the urban landscape.

At the same time, we have actively encouraged students to bring their fieldwork into class, to make central to our conceptual discussions our collective engagement in these complicated contested sites. Part of our critical engagement with the 'everyday' has included student journals that bridge the discourses of theory and academically produced knowledge with everyday popular and vernacular conversations and debates about our cities in newspapers, magazines, popular media and through our own individual negotiations of these spaces, flows and experiences. In these journals, students built bridges between the theoretical, the political, and the personal, interrogating in their own lives the 'everyday-ness' of experience that they deliberated on with research respondents in 'official' field sites.

While facilitating the processing of fieldwork and developing a more nuanced and empowered approach to sometimes obtuse conceptual work, as importantly, these diverse sites and sources of 'knowledge' combined in our seminar to challenge our notions and assumptions about ordinary working people's lives in so-called 'peripheral' parts of Lusaka and Cape Town.

Scaling up the body politics conversation

Two opportunities to share our research and to participate in broader gender and city conversations have been important in the development and articulation of the collective work we have produced. The first in 2007, was a workshop collaboratively developed with the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Zambia. This workshop provided an opportunity to bring South African and South African-based Zambian students together with University of Zambia students and academics in Lusaka. The second was the organization and hosting of the Gender Justice and Body Politics conference, an international academic meeting held in Cape Town in February 2009.

Walking and talking in Lusaka

The experience in Lusaka drew on two parts: a formal workshop at University of Zambia and just as important, an opportunity to explore and engage with the realities of Lusaka. The first two days thus consisted of fieldtrips and walking tours around Lusaka. We grew increasingly hot, sweaty and dirty as we walked between different types of neighbourhood – from the dire poverty of George, through the differentiated privatized housing of Matero and between the old and technically informal, but very established areas of Matendere, the old home of the ANC in exile. And throughout these meanderings, we were constantly reminded of how safe we were, as women and men, strangers in this city, even in the dark of night, in comparison to ‘home’ in Cape Town, South Africa. Walking home in pitch dark on pot-holed dirt roads, laughing at our South African collective physical intake of breath, and Zambian laughter at our in-built response and bodily reactions built on our assumptions about safety. Our responses were also influenced by the realities of ‘in-your-face’ South Africa – in-Africa, marked by the economic presence of South African brands in glam malls ranging from pizza takeaways, burger joints, banks and supermarkets; of the trans-national presence of Toyota and Range Rover, four-wheel-drive recreational motor vehicles sitting cheek-by-jowl alongside the social proximity, textures and colours of local market places. These fieldtrips gave us a sense of the smells and ‘feel’ of Lusaka, a city on the move between the disappointments of the old welfarist, post-colonial nationalist state project and its tentative explorations in brave, bold neo-liberalism. These impressions remain of course, superficial.

The workshop itself focused on the presentation of research papers reflecting work in Lusaka and Cape Town. The conversations generated between Zambians and South Africans helped us think more carefully about the assumptions and contexts that underpin what is embodied in more formal conversations about development and gender, and our conversations about urban citizenship and critical thinking about home. Our initial explorations of Lusaka and attention to discussions of method and context in the discussions, helped ground the notions of peripherality, of informality, of housing and concepts of the inter-linkages between physical environment and the economics and politics of shelter – all central to our project conversations.

The Cape Town conference – gender justice and body politics²

Our project officially culminated in February 2009 with the Gender Justice and

Body Politics Conference which brought together 65 researchers from South African universities (Pretoria, Cape Town, WITS, UKZN, Fort Hare, Stellenbosch and Monash), Southern and Western Africa (Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Swaziland, Malawi, Kenya, Mali), Brazil, India, North America, Germany, as well as a large delegation of Swedish researchers from the Gender and Development Network Sweden, extending our Swedish-South African partnership with Ann Schlyter.

Cumulatively, the conference focused critically on the negotiation of citizenship, social justice, and body politics in the South. Panel papers and discussions focused on: Negotiating the Politics of Citizenship; Re-reading the State and Neoliberalism; Women's Networks and Livelihoods; Gender and Terrains of Struggle; Ascetics and the Politics of the Body; Contesting Identity and Public Discourse; Disciplining Spaces; and the Politics of Knowledge Production in Southern contexts. Debates were framed by two key note addresses: the first by Richa Nagar, a globally renowned Indian feminist scholar based in the United States, on the politics of knowledge production in feminist fieldwork and collaborative practice (*Sangtin* writers and Nagar, 2006); and the second, by Elaine Salo, one of the authors of this piece, on current debates in contemporary South African feminism (Salo, 2009). The conference provided an open context to embrace the contradictory and challenging realities that frame our work and the critical questions that we ask about justice, the gendered nature of power relations, state-society relations, and the imperative for rigorous, locally-grounded, globally-informed research.

The workshop in Zambia and the international Gender Justice and Body Politics organized and hosted at University of Cape Town, exposed our students to an interesting and challenging set of conversations and provided opportunities for students to present their research and to engage in debate – processes invaluable for the later development of student work into publishable papers, some of which are included in this issue.

Engaging the everyday: nurturing researchers, building a project

Through the Body Politics Project we have nurtured a committed group of student researchers, able to engage rigorously with theory, with methodology, and the politics of our research practice. In doing this in a project community, we have brought debates to life, integrated these conversations with the

challenges of fieldwork, and, perhaps most importantly, supported each other and built friendships.

In the increasingly iniquitous social and political contexts that characterize urban Southern Africa, we face an imperative to produce knowledge that reflects these complexities with integrity. This project has worked towards this goal: nurturing skilled student researchers, who are aware of the myriad social complexities that characterize the Southern African region; informing our own development as activist-scholars; and producing new knowledge about our own social contexts, evident in this issue. These collaborations emphasize that knowledge production does not occur out of context, in sterile isolated institutions, or with lone researchers. Research conversations and theoretical innovation happen through engaging multiple voices and different types of research products and producers. The combination of rich analytical and ethnographic detail could only come about because in and outside of the academy we assumed boundaries are porous, negotiated, and fluid and we celebrated negotiating these borders and building relationships.

References

- Gibson-Graham, J. K. 2006. *End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mbembe, A. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkley, California: University of California Press.
- Myers, G. 2006. "The Un-Authorized city: Late-Colonial Lusaka and Post-Colonial Geography", *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 27(3): 231-234.
- Nagar, R., Lawson, V., McDowell, L. and Hanson, S. 2002. "Locating Globalisation: Feminist (re) Readings of the Subjects and Spaces of Globalization", *Economic Geography* 78(3): 257-284.
- Salo, E. 2009 (forthcoming). "South African Feminisms. A Coming of Age?" in Basu, A. (ed.) *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspectives* (Second edition). Amherst: Westview Press.
- Sangtin writers. and Nagar, R. 2006. *Playing With Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Endnotes

1. The project has been funded by two South African National Research Foundation grants: from 2006 to 2008, the Swedish-South African Links Programme and from 2008 to 2011, an Institutional Research and Programme Development Grant.

2. The Gender Justice and Body Politics Conference was funded by the Swedish Vetansksapsradet, the South African National Research Foundation, and the University of Cape Town Research Committee and was hosted by the African Gender Institute (AGI) and the Department of Environmental and Geographical Science (EGS), and affiliated with the African Centre on Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town.