Archives and Collective Memories: Searching for African women in the pan-African imaginary[1]

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Introduction

In July 1985, Nairobi hosted a meeting of over 14,000 women at the United Nations' Third World Conference on Women.[2] Domestic and international women's rights activists held a concurrent meeting, dubbed Forum 85. Organised by non-governmental organisations, Forum 85 served as a space for activists to oppose capitalist exploitation, patriarchal subjugation and racist oppression, and to build coalitions and develop more nuanced critical views of patriarchy, capitalism and racism in postcolonial and post-slavery societies. The event brought women from all over the world to Kenya. Notably, African women contributed directly to its planning, an action that resulted in a shift in understandings of power within the global women's rights movement. Scholars and activists who were present spoke about Nairobi as momentous not only because "it was here, unfettered by formal responsibilities, that feminists openly expressed ideas, analysed experiences, and set forth expectations for the future" (O'Barr et al, 1986: 584), but also because of the inclusion of women from Kenya and the African continent. The forum was significant, too, for the embrace of transnational black feminist frameworks, and for disrupting (if only momentarily) the notion that women's roles in national building were solely domestic and reproductive.

Yet whereas Kenyan women were central thirty years ago in championing global discourses and strategies towards gender justice and equity, there is limited archival documentation and scholarship specifically about feminism in Kenya. Some scholars have been able to excavate Kenyan women's histories and to thereby consider questions of gender politics and agency: scholars such as Kanogo (1987), writing on the Mau Mau Rebellion, Shaw (1995), studying gender, class and racial issues in Kenya, and Hay (1976), who

conducted an economic survey among Luo women in colonial Kenya. Gender has been considered as a category of analysis by other Africanists writing about Kenya who posed questions relating to gender to their respondents in the field (e.g. Oruka, 1990; Cohen and Odhiambo, 1989). However, in our view, Kenya's participation in African feminist academic spaces and networks still lags behind that of other countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and South Africa. Furthermore, as is the case with many African nations, much of the documentation and circulation of women's lived histories has also been limited to studies focusing on women along ethnic lines or in terms of their urban or rural locations, more in keeping with a colonial archive.

We see the archive as a location for women to document their lived experiences, and we argue that archiving has great potential to build more inclusive records, histories, and also futures, bringing the "margin to the centre" (hooks 2000). The archive has traditionally been a formal space under the purview of the state and other official institutions. However, we argue that in the 21st century, cultural production through visual and digital devices (e.g. community based work with metadata, performance) that allow for localised inventions and participation can constitute a legitimate archive too, and thus has the potential to advance various forms of democratisation by broadening the knowledge base (Maingi, 2011; Sanya, 2013). "History," of course, privileges certain narratives and silences others. Therefore questioning the content and circulation of the history of the nation becomes a necessary endeavour. Seeing that women are often rendered invisible in conventional history-making projects, we envision grassroots, national, regional and continental women's visibility and archiving in e-spaces (Radloff, 2013) as well as visual/digital projects.[3] Here we would especially advocate attempts to (re)member and (re)consider women's involvement in national histories that do not privilege imagined and idealistic visions of 'African womanhood' – visions of the kind critiqued by novelists such as Ama Ata Aidoo (whose work is discussed by Delia Kumavie in this issue), Mariama Ba, Okwiri Oduor, Margaret Ogola and Nawal el Saadawi, among many others.

Collective Memories: Shaping National and Transnational Imaginaries

The notion of "collective memory" can be understood as the continuous construction of memories through shared cultural images, stories, and

conceptions of the past (Halbwachs 1992). In questioning the ways in which historians conceptualise events in national histories, the connections between memories of individuals and the social collective still remain relevant and enlightening. While archives and collective memories are not the same, they certainly are connected. Langford explains, for instance: "a photographic album is a repository of memory … [and in turn is] an instrument of social performance" (2006: 223). Langford's examination of the relocation of photograph collections from private spaces to the public realm illustrates how objects (in this case photographs) create new "remembrance environments" (2001; 2006). Photographs (and arguably other accessible archival documents) thereby operate as "constituents of collective memory" and as "historical markers" that allow individuals to find historical and fictive connections through which they can "imagine" where they were located in a larger community (Brennen and Hardt, 1999:7). As such, the archive is not a necessarily a physical building that contains historical documents or records. Rather it is any location, including individual homes and virtual spaces, where historical records of a place, institution or people reside.

The collective memories shared by elders, griots, and in folk tales also make up the archive. Simply put, histories of African communities are not only found in libraries, museums and national archives, whether on the continent, in former colonial metropoles and in other sites around the world. They are also located in photographs on the walls, in magazines, in cultural, political and satirical comics, in graphic novels, in text messages, in comments on Facebook,[4] YouTube and Twitter feeds, and in blog posts. The archive is vast, exhaustive, dynamic, partly inaccessible, unsorted and, most importantly for our argument, it includes narratives of a broad spectrum of the lives and experiences of African women and men. Virtual and dynamic, the archive is also is not bound by the the nation-state. This insight allows us to pose questions about the location and figuration of African women in global imaginaries. From international aid discourses to academic texts, historical documents and popular culture, for instance, we most often find African women represented in the following tropes: submissive, wise, strong, hardworking, resilient, abused, circumcised, oppressed, poor, sick, angry, hungry, needy and illiterate.

Yet a reconstituted archive allows for a dismantling of such traditional and constrictive assumptions about African women. Here, interventions by queer

of colour critiques are productive in establishing "a capacious notion of the archive by locating the quotidian within the messy physical, symbolic, and emotional arrangements of objects, bodies, and spaces" (Manalansan 2014: 94). With this, there can be an increased visibility of the women whose role in nation-building has been ignored or erased, as has their diversity. For example, Kenyan Swahili women have been involved historically in coining sayings on *kangas* or *lesos* in exchange for money or cloth.[5] However, these sayings are not considered part of a national archive but rather as part of the commodities in question. Indeed after women submit their sayings to the cloth manufacturers, their identities are unknown and unnamed. The ability to contribute to kanga production provides women with a potential avenue to project their opinions and feelings, and to resist or flout patriarchal norms. Their sayings on *kangas* could therefore be recorded and valued as historical moments because they emerge from the conditions and contexts of the women's daily lives.

A second example is the work done by Weavers, a woman-only space in which Kenyan women self-define, support and affirm their life goals, ambitions and histories (contributors to this issue). The Weavers are mobilising collectively to remember, narrativise, and reflect on their experiences. In so doing they are creating spaces such as "#weaving16" which generated a collection of voices and stories, an archive-making world-shaping project by Kenyan women" (Keguro, 2014). Explicitly and inclusively defined, the group of women rely on an ethical practice of affirming, archiving and amplifying each others' voices and work. Using the metaphor of weaving to generate theory, memory and personal narrative, the group explains:

> The language of "weaving" is a foundational claim to our cultural traditions and legacies of women working and speaking together, of collaboration and co-operation. We claim not any one method or fabric, but the practice of weaving our labour and weaving the imagination of women together, so as to make something new.

In collectives like Weavers, then, women "showcase the vexed relationships between objects, bodies, narratives and desires... as the quotidian becomes the fuel for animating capacious engagements with... 'impossible subjects' of history" (Manalansan 2014: 95). Such collectives challenge the privileging of patriarchal archives and archival practices; they challenge the "epistemic violence" that is the routine silencing and erasure of marginalised women (Spivak 1998; Dotson 2011).

As individuals and a collective, women on the African continent have also joined the "struggle to produce new and relevant knowledge in the 21st century" (Mama and Barnes, 2007:1) through research and documentation work, in efforts to redress inequality and ignorance about women's lives. In a previous issue of *Feminist Africa*, Amina Mama points out that "the persistence of patriarchal hegemony across the African region has stimulated a visible proliferation of feminist scholarship and strategy, yet this is only rarely brought for collective reflection and analysis" (2002:1). Mama's argument is important here as she raises the question of representation and inclusion. Similarly, Mama and Barnes write that "the transformative ideals of higher education remain relevant and attractive, while the condition of production of knowledge have remained deeply gendered in ways that have proved difficult to change" (2007: 4). As such Mama and Barnes (2007) point to the gains that have been made in including women in academic work while at the same time showing what challenges persist and the gap between knowledge production and circulation.

There are a growing number of organisations, scholar-activists and gender institutes such as the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town and Women and Law in Southern African Research and Education Trust (WLSA) that have been established to develop greater African-centred intellectual equality, including by combining academic teaching, training and research with the training of activist research networks. However, there is continued need for individuals,[6] universities and non-governmental organisations to further create spaces such as conferences, journals, gender studies centres and institutes, for even greater knowledge formation and dissemination. As they are consolidated, such archives cannot be thought to simply complete national and transnational archives and projects. They can be revolutionary in disrupting how women in Africa are at all imagined.

Conclusion

In this standpoint, we have called for the re-conceptualisation of African archives towards a more expansive view, which includes traditional and non-traditional texts and objects, and reveals and opens up spaces while filling in the gaps that exist in national histories. Such a reconfigured archive would feature not only conventional collections such as national archives, museums, libraries but also alternatives ones, including photographs mounted on walls,

kept in family albums and, more recently, sent as SMS or circulated via Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and blog posts. This vast archive would represent a broader spectrum of the lives and experiences of Africans, and thereby reconstitute our collective memory and sense of self. And indeed, as we write, more and more Kenyan feminists are blogging, creating online platforms that document their everyday lives, and creating music that embraces the past but also reveals the dynamism of the present. Kenyan women are speaking out through newspaper and journal articles, too. Additionally, scholars like Wangui wa Goro have highlighted an archiving and documenting of Kenyan women's histories, largely collected in the 1980s and 1990s, that has yet to be published. That such work exists at the grassroots and is in many ways invisible is significant and telling. It vividly demonstrates that archiving our necessarily multiple experiences in Africa cannot happen through top-down perspectives and actions but requires integration in our education system, oral histories, popular culture, and formal and informal archival sites such as libraries and museums to name a few. We envisage archiving as a resource for research that not only shifts collective memories but influences what is taught in classrooms, that is to say our collective futures.

Endnotes

1. This work owes much to the close reading and thoughtful criticism of Teresa Barnes, Keguro Macharia, and T.J. Tallie. Many thanks also to Michael Brün, Bryce Henson, Relebohile Moletsane, Abigail N. Sanya, and Crystal Rizzo, for their critical feedback and clarifying questions and comments. We also benefitted from discussions in Chantal Nadeau's queer theory and methods course and insightful feedback given by Cynthia Dillard, Gesa Kirsch, and Assata Zerai at The 10th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry and the 5th Annual Center for Writing Studies Graduate Student Symposium where excerpts were presented. Finally, many thanks to our generous issue editors, Amina Mama and Hakima Abass for their patience and crucial feedback, which consistently re-affirmed our desire to locate this essay on the continent even though we write from diasporic locations. While we were making final edits to this manuscript, the brilliant and engaging Kenyan folklorist and publisher, Asenath Bole Odaga, passed away. This work builds upon an archive that she generated in her close to five decades of publishing African literature.

2. The UN has organised four world conferences on women, which took place in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995). Beijing was "followed by a series of five-year reviews" (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2014).

3. We concur with Said's notion of an eclectic archive, where he writes: "the book culture based on archival research as well as general principles of mind that once sustained humanism as a historical discipline have almost disappeared. Instead of reading in the real sense of the word...distracted by the fragmented knowledge available on the internet and in the mass media" (Said, 1979, p. xx).

4. Facebook groups such as The Nigerian nostalgic project – Pre-Nigeria, as well as The Nigeria nostalgic project 1960-1980, and The Nigerian nostalgic project 1980-2000 provide platforms for Nigerians to nostalgically recollect moments in history and in so doing, they insert personal narratives into the national narrative though photographs, local advertisements and brief descriptions. These then provide a communal and collaborative public archive.

5. These multi-purpose fabrics used in everyday life among many Kenyan households often have proverbs and sayings generated by women. The saying or proverbs require cultural knowledge as the interpretation is informed by the context and existing relationships.

6. Nkiru (2002) extensively chronicled her efforts in using information technologies to promote African scholarly production and communication by establishing several online journals.

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