

Theory in Action: A Pan-Africanist Online African Feminist Reading Group

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Abstract

African Feminisms, including Pan-African Feminism, emphasise that there are multiple ways of knowing, and that profound knowledge can emerge from unlikely locations and groups. Popular and informal knowledge-making arises from collective and participatory learning platforms generated by the socially and politically marginalised, with the intention to recognise, value, inspire and challenge each other to grow, transform and find liberation. This paper considers one such intentional online popular education community started in 2020, called the *African Feminist Reading Group*. This online group has expanded and contracted over the past four years to accommodate African, Scottish and African diasporic women who seek both active and passive communal engagement with African Feminist ideas and the pursuit of Pan-Africanist objectives. We share our experiences of the online reading group to show how African Feminist praxis, in the form of radical care, vulnerability, working with differences, learning from each other, solidarity and collaboration, expands and transforms how and what we know and who we are in relation to each other.

Keywords: African Feminisms, decolonial praxis, radical care, transformative learning, virtual feminist epistemic communities

Introduction

Academic imperialism has led to the marginalisation of alternative kinds of knowledge and knowledge-making despite their profound transformational effects on their users and producers. African Feminist thought and other decolonial approaches to knowledge-making confront this universalism by welcoming and legitimising a broader range of possibilities for what counts as knowledge (Moletsane 2015). Popular and informal education is about ways of learning and producing knowledge outside of regular and formalised institutions. In a Pan-Africanist context, this kind of educational practice is focused on individual and collective liberation and justice on the continent and in the diaspora (Benya and Yeni 2022).

Reading groups, as spaces for popular education, have played key roles in Black feminist and Pan-African feminist movements by providing spaces for women to create their own ideals of conscientisation, solidarity and knowledge-making (McHenry 2002; Davies 2014; Farr 2022). A notable example is the *Sisterhood*, a Black women's writing group from the 1970s that served partly as a reading group and the foundation for creating other reading groups. This group — which was made up of Nana Maynard, Ntozake Shange, Louse Meriwether, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, Alice Walker, Audrey Edwards, June Jordan and Toni Morrison — embodied a revolutionary ethic of Black feminist sisterhood through which they maintained critical and collective reflections on Black women's stories and the idea of finding others, of being read and being understood (Greenidge 2023). In doing so, this reading and writing circle refused to footnote themselves within the mainstream literary world, as they assigned one another's work to their students long before that work was considered part of the canon. Another notable example of an African Feminist reading group as a form of popular education is highlighted in the work of Khan, Asfour and Skeyi-Tutani (2022). They present their *Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group* as an extracurricular space that offers community.

In this paper, we situate our African Feminist reading group within feminist traditions of reading groups. We reflect on the relational onto-epistemologies and axiology (Chilisa 2017) of the group as a contribution to the conversations about the overlaps and synergies between the transformational effects of a virtual

African Feminist epistemic community and Pan-African popular education. In doing so, we explore how the discursive processes, pedagogical approaches and feminist praxis embodied in this reading group offer insightful critiques of the “male-stream”/mainstream decolonisation discourse, and the way it has not recognised long-existing African Feminist praxis in knowledge-making and epistemic community formation.

The *African Feminist Reading Group*, as we call it, is made up of creatives, women pursuing PhDs, administrators and scholars in several universities who find themselves on the margins, particularly in the racialised spaces of the ivory tower. Over the past four years since its formation, the group has undergone different iterations in its decolonising intent to disrupt a reliance on traditional academic methods and conventions, and to emphasise instead the political and emotional rigour that generates transformational feminist knowledge. In conversing about African women issues and the Pan-Africanist liberatory project, we use the oral and other relevant archives to effectively “grapple with the contradictory realities faced by women across various classes and income-levels” (Mkhize 2018, 137).

What follows is a discussion outlining the reflexive methodology we use. We then locate the reading group in the history and politics of African women’s learning, friendship and solidarity through epistemic communities with a Pan-Africanist orientation. Our reflection on the reading group aligns with what we understand as popular education, and shows how the virtual space, while it can be exclusive and dangerous, can also be a platform for radical care and communal knowledge-making.

Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

This paper’s purpose and methodological approach employs the reflexive perceptions and experiences of the authors to locate the *African Feminist Reading Group* in an African Feminist and Pan-Africanist popular education framework. We write as insiders of the group, who have shared our deliberations in one of our reading group sessions for the input of the group. We address the contestations and complexities at the intersections of African Feminisms and Pan-Africanism as we show how our online group is embedded within the core concepts and

values of conscientisation, radical transformative politics, community-building and the emancipatory possibilities that undergird both ideological and political movements. We show how selected African Feminist values and principles from Bamberg et al. (2021), when practised in an informally operating group which we regard in a Freirean sense as a form of popular education (Freire 1970), can bring solidarity and transformational learning to local and diasporic African Feminists and their allies. We explain more broadly, how this trans-continental solidarity building in our reading group, the African Feminist scholarship we engage with and our embodiment of *ubuntu* are all geared towards the political and cultural unity, emancipation and self-reliance of Africa and its diaspora (Adebajo 2020). *Ubuntu*, in an ontological sense, serves as a reminder that our humanity is infused and entangled with our relationships to each other.

Our reflections are guided by our positionalities as women who live and work in different geographical locations and who act as small representatives of a larger web of connections — between people of different races, continents, faculties, languages, orientations and backgrounds. Knowles writes as a white South African woman who researches and teaches at the intersection of African Feminisms, politics and sociology, through which she remains in constant reflexivity about her contributions to and positionality within social justice movements in the country. Mensah is a Ghanaian based in Scotland, where she teaches and researches the interconnections between environmental law and resource extractivism through a decolonial, African Feminist lens. Ntšekhe is a Mosotho based in Lesotho where she also deploys African Feminist thought in teaching and amplifying the voice and visibility of women in computer science. What we have in common is the intention to learn from each other, recognising that we are constituted by each other and are committed to community and what we call radical care, which we explain in more detail later.

Pan-African Feminist Popular Education through Reading Groups

Drawing from the participatory education practices in Paulo Freire's work, Manicom and Walters (2012) explain popular education as participatory, dialogical, inventive and community-oriented pedagogical practices that foster

critical consciousness and the collective production of emancipatory knowledge and praxis. In examining the affinities between feminist praxis and popular education, Manicom and Walters (2012) highlight the political commitment of feminist popular education to addressing relations of dominance through reflexivity and sensitivity to different ways of apprehending the world, as well as contesting and refining the politics of solidarity. The transformative possibilities created through such feminist epistemic communities serve more than a formal educational purpose: they offer a community building strategy that disrupts the university façade (Okech 2020, 324). Benya and Yeni (2022) highlight how popular education platforms provide African women with an avenue to transcend political and social marginalisation and enable the creation of their own collective and participatory learning spaces. This underscores the fact that African Feminists can develop, refine and popularise local feminist concepts that stretch those already existing, thereby making them more meaningful and effective for analysing gendered oppressions and subordinations (Benya and Yeni 2022).

The particularity of our contribution to this long-standing history of reading groups as feminist popular education is our use of the virtual space for trans-continental solidarity building and our emphasis on African Feminisms that are imbued with community as a decolonial praxis. In building this virtual feminist community therefore, we exemplify a decolonial approach to knowledge creation and sharing, where we work across North and South boundaries and re-imagine epistemological infrastructures that celebrate communality, global feminist solidarity, friendship and liberatory practices grounded in African Feminisms.

Pan-Africanism and Creating Diasporic, Pan-Africanist and African Feminist Epistemic Communities

Rhoda Reddock uses the term Pan-Africanism to describe “the conscious identification with Africa and critiques of European domination and racism, as well as the mutual responsibility of persons of African descent dispersed throughout the world, to each other, wherever they may be located” (2014, 59). Since originating in the diaspora in the early 20th century, Pan-Africanism has

focused on the politics of African identity and resistance in the face of structural systems of racism, slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism (Reddock 2006). This shows the commonalities between Pan-Africanism and diasporic relations which, as Carol Boyce Davies (2014) notes, also intersected with feminism as 20th century political positions which challenged entrenched systems of racial and gender domination.

Even as the continental mainstream Pan-African agenda remains confronted by institutionalised support for patriarchal values (Salami 2015), Pan-African Feminist movements continue to pursue the long-standing history of women's cultural production and organising towards unity and solidarity on the continent and the diaspora. African Feminisms, broadly speaking, emerged as oppositional to patriarchy and misogyny, pursuing a contextual perspective to counter colonial brutalities and effects on the continent (Oyěwùmí 2002). Through varied approaches, including networking, activism and research informed by a rich history of African philosophy, spirituality and resistances, revolutionary Pan-African Feminists have been at the forefront of movements confronting multiple vectors of cultural and material subjugations while infusing class and racial analysis in their discourse on gender and sexuality (Hargreaves 2023). Feminist Pan-Africanism therefore emerged as the visionary ideological frame towards a transnational political movement concerned with the complete liberation of all African peoples (Abbas and Mama 2014). The transnational feminist praxis of these movements functioned as part of a wider anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist endeavour by bringing together the logic of the intersection between Pan-Africanism and feminism. In doing so, they articulated an emphasis on grassroot mobilisations, knowledge production and advocacy that transcended state constructed borders to develop frameworks that are simultaneously intersubjective, comparative and relational, yet historically specific and grounded (Davies 2014). By tracing the activism and scholarly works of earlier Pan-Africanists who were feminists (or feminists who were Pan-Africanist), Davies highlights the conjunction between the seemingly disparate positions of Pan-Africanism and feminism through which Pan-African Feminists operated with an understanding of the simultaneity of political oppressions and political positions (2014, 81).

It is within this trans-locationality that we situate our online *African Feminist Reading Group* as a diasporic, Pan-African Feminist epistemic community as decolonial praxis. Our reading group is Pan-African in the sense that our conceptual framework, the methodology of our engagements and the politics of our knowledge-making and sharing are all guided by the core value of pursuing the cultural, political and socio-economic liberation of Africa through challenging and transforming systems of inequality embedded in the dominant epicentres of knowledge-making about Africa and African women. As a meeting of African Feminist researchers who share the liberatory themes of Pan-Africanism, this space is a safe haven for us freely to express our frustrations with malestream Pan-Africanism in academia, which as Mama (2017) argues, is where men dominate and resist feminist scholarship, perpetuating its global and continental subjugation.

At the founding of the group, we envisioned it as a place where diasporic and continental-based women can meet outside the confines and formalities of the ivory tower to pursue discursive engagements relating to African women and African Feminist thought. Over time, this group has grown to constitute women of different races, ages, nationalities and ethnicities, all of whom share a common interest in African women and the Pan-Africanist liberatory project. Pan-Africanism, to us, involves the socio-economic, political and cultural liberation of Africa through a genuine engagement with the invaluable contribution, scholarship, movements and resistances of African and African diasporic women against extractivist patriarchal capitalism and its hydra of configurations on our lands, communities, bodies and minds. We channel these frustrations by celebrating the African Feminists whose activism and scholarly works are located within Pan-Africanism towards confronting the particular placement of African Feminist scholarship and Pan-Africanism within the continental and global landscape of knowledge-making. We achieve this through an onto-epistemic prioritisation of Black feminism, African Feminisms and Afrocentric scholarship in our readings and generative discussions. Afrocentricity, as Asante (2020) explains it, shares the Pan-Africanist goal of the necessity for African mental liberation. Afrocentricity goes further to transcend the disruptive insertion of colonialism, slavery and imperialism into African history by asserting the centrality of Africans within the context of African phenomena (Asante 2020, 211).

This allows us to centre the experiences and voices of those who have historically been marginalised and excluded from mainstream academic discourse.

Reading group members, some of whom find themselves in the diaspora, come from different African countries. Our commonality around profound love for African Feminist scholarship, African interests in the post-colony, and the warmth which has grown between us, unites us across our different backgrounds. This praxis of Pan-Africanist and African Feminist ideas brings wholeness to our reading group, helping us to achieve what Okech (2020, 23) describes as “the co-creation of knowledge production spaces which are generative rather than extractive”; since, despite our differences, there is trust.

The African Feminist Reading Group

The online reading group, which we call the *African Feminist Reading Group*, was founded in 2020 by Knowles and Mensah. The two founding members had begun their PhD studies using African Feminist framing and wanted to foster a supportive environment for their academic pursuits. It soon became a meeting of friends with the intention of expanding our knowledge about African Feminisms but also checking in on each other during an unprecedented global pandemic that plunged the world into lockdowns and isolations. Ironically, and fortunately for us, it was within these moments that we were brought into an even closer community, across time and space.

The group, which started with four members and currently sits at 43, has gradually grown to include friends and colleagues who were invited by word of mouth, and who joined because they also shared and believed in the Pan-African Feminist values of the group in their research, creative works and activism. As the group grew, we rotated the facilitation of the sessions fortnightly. This was done strategically to disrupt a reliance on one person to lead by opening up agency and empowerment to all members of the group. It also led to increased diversity in the pieces that were submitted for discussion: they extended beyond formal academic books and journal articles to include other literary and visual pieces such as poetry and videos. Above all, shared facilitation was done to establish our own peer review process where members are encouraged to bring their work — draft books, chapters, or papers — and to lead discussion and gain

valuable input from the group. In doing so, we disrupt the hierarchies that often limit who can speak and whose opinions are deemed worthy and transcend what can sometimes be an overly critical and intimidating dynamic in academia and the creative spaces. In our discussions, through kindness, openness and respect, we welcome the experiences, interpretations and reflections of all, regardless of age, stage, background and achievements.

We prioritise the deepening of connections and engagement with each other in a few ways. Before each session begins, we share how we are and what is on our minds. After each session, the audio of our discussions is posted on the group email allowing those who did not attend to engage with those who did. This practice reinforces the value of knowledge preservation and aligns with Okech's (2017) call to develop longer trajectories of feminist knowledge production that we can return to as part of our contemporary ways of building movements. By facilitating this practice, the internet and its digital tools become useful in flattening power hierarchies that are associated with access to knowledge.

In navigating this virtual onto-epistemic space, we maintain a reflexivity grounded in African Feminist methodologies and decolonial practices to ensure that we do not replicate the gender, race and class-oppressive context in society which also tends to manifest in online spaces (Iyer 2021, 93). We are very intentional in creating an epistemically generative, rather than extractive space, by a praxis grounded in African Feminist principles of kindness, care, respect, reflexivity and accountability – sometimes challenging each other in the group (and occasionally afterwards) about the words we use, and regularly reflecting on how the group discussions are impacting how we feel (grateful, empowered, seen) and how we do our scholarly and pedagogic work. This typifies what Okech (2020, 3) aptly describes as “a critical lifeline for surviving and thinking through power relations between knowers and the ecosystem that shapes the construction of knowledge” in a world that is riddled with hostile knowledge-making contexts.

Virtual Onto-epistemic Feminist Spaces as Sites of Popular Education and Knowledge Production

In recent years, the internet and other digital technologies have offered powerful tools for feminist-led movements to surmount the constraints presented by rigid

colonial borders and language zones (Abbas and Mama 2014). Agunwa (2024) confirms that the digital space has enhanced the visibility of women's movements in Africa, creating a platform for their voices to resonate within and outside the continent. While Pan-African Feminist movements of the 20th century, such as the one involving Amy Ashwood Garvey, were able to forge impressive international and intra-regional solidarities without modern communications technology (Reddock 2014), advancements in information communications technology and the proliferation of social media and digital tools have made it even easier to overcome spatial and temporal barriers, leading us into an era of rapidly expanding cyberfeminism (Nyambura 2018) and Pan-African solidarity.

We are witnessing in real time women across the continent mobilising on social media and other digital platforms as feminist digital counter-publics. As Okech drew from Lamont Hill, these are spaces “where any virtual, online or otherwise digitally networked communities actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues or negotiate oppositional identities” (2021, 4). Through social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook, women in Africa and the diaspora have been able to catalyse the evolution of feminist communities of knowledge and solidarity in resisting online misogyny and its material manifestations in femicide (Okech 2021). However, as Agunwa (2024) rightly emphasises, the digital arena is not available to all and is also open to bullying, harassment and abuse. These concerns were pivotal to discussions in the recent Feminist Africa/International Feminist Journal of Politics joint Conference on Digitalization, AI and Feminist Futures (2024) which highlighted how modern technological revolutions are embedded in patriarchal, capitalist and imperialist logics. This joint conference further highlighted how online harassment, violence, surveillance and other forms of digital divides marked by intersecting inequalities of race, class, gender and generation have become even more heightened. One of the ways to address these issues is to cultivate “safe and inclusive digital spaces for everyone, where women's voices are amplified, their rights are protected, and their leadership is valued” (Agunwa 2024, 122). The creation of our *African Feminist Reading Group* as a safe space where feminist solidarity is nurtured, and African women's intellectual labour is amplified, aimed to heed this crucial feminist call.

Admittedly, our *African Feminist Reading Group* is not the first African Feminist reading group, nor the first feminist epistemic community to use virtual tools as a platform. A notable example of the use of digital technological adeptness in promoting visibility of African Feminist knowledges is *Feminist Africa*, which was originally envisaged as an online intellectual forum for feminist research and activism. Since its establishment over two decades ago, this journal has grown significantly in its promotion of independent feminist scholarship as an activist project (Radloff 2013). More on the digital front, *Hub of Loving Action in Africa* (HOLAA!) and *None on the Record* respectively serve as online platforms that use digital storytelling, archiving and knowledge production for queer African women and African LGBTQ communities. Okech (2020, 322) attests to a virtual reading circle established by a group of African Feminists based in South Africa, serving as an alternative learning platform where the individualised and siloed approach to learning African Feminist knowledge in the university setting is decentred.

These further demonstrate how, in the digital era, African Feminists are building Pan-African solidarity and acquiring knowledge outside the bounds of the classrooms, formal organisations and governments. Essentially, they are being empowered through popular education. We understand this as an inclusive modality of learning which allows a more holistic, embodied, personal and relational expression than we find in the formal spaces we occupy. As African women in academia and the creative space, we have nurtured this reading group as a separate forum for us to engage fully with our histories and contemporary African Feminist theorisations, movements and praxis. By using Zoom — a video conferencing software — our reading group has since its inception acted as a virtual platform that infuses a paradigm shift from traditional forums of research and knowledge diffusion. In the post-Covid-19 pandemic world, where concerns about the imperviousness of nation-state borders, global health and access to research remains prevalent in discourses on feminist ethics of research, the use of this virtual platform has proven to be effective for us. It has allowed us to build a growing network that represents what Mohanty (2003) referred to as “feminism without borders.” This is despite the different parameters related to internet access, such as speed and quality of connection, which often poses

uneven access to complete visual engagement among all members to enable non-verbal cues and body language to be factored in the interactions.

The virtual *African Feminist Reading Group*, as an onto-epistemic feminist community, recognises that knowledge is embodied, and that we all come into this space ready to expand the frontiers of hegemonic knowledge production in ways that also acknowledge the politics of the body and the legitimacy of emotions and experiences. Despite the potential disembodiment that comes with meeting online, we were and remain intentional about making connections across similarities and differences, with humility and empathy (Nnaemeka 2005). As Byrne (2020, 8) argues, “solidarity, ally-hood and respect ... take account of differences between feminists of different groups and allow colonial onto-epistemological hierarchies to be broken down”. Knowledge as embodied provokes the conscientisation of our histories and contexts as differently raced and aged people living on different continents, and how this affects our positionality in relation to each other and to African Feminist theory. When we talk about the embodiment of knowledge, we refer to the ways in which knowledge can hold the embodiment of the oppressive, hierarchical structures we find in society, especially knowledge that is rooted in colonialism (Wilson-Tagoe 2003). A consequence of our constant exposure to Eurocentric, individualistic mainstream university knowledge is that the western inspired Cartesian dualism creates “a false division between mind and body in experiential learning that obscures our physical internalisation of social realities” (Nguyen and Larson 2015, 335). As Gqola (2001, 11-12) explains, this also creates a false separation between theory and praxis. Wane adds that the effects of this kind of knowledge — in schools and in universities — is an alienation from oneself and one’s body, because it takes place “within the context of a history of colonialism, imperialism, and neo-colonial, post-colonial and anti-colonial conditionalities” (2008, 193). In our online reading group, we address this by employing practices such as questioning each other, providing alternative views and encouraging the sharing of experiences and/or any other kind of marginalised knowledge that may include knowledge from the oral archives. To illustrate, in analysing a poem on female genital mutilation through the lens of Ogundipe-Leslie’s (1994) Stiwanism (a branch of African Feminism: Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), we interrogated the role of “*Dede*” (first-born girl or daughter in Ghana) in the

ritual. Our analysis included a vibrant discussion on masculinity and patriarchal representation in rituals from different African countries and communities. Through this discussion, we were able to draw from different oral and linguistic archives to create parallels between “Dede” and “*rakhali/rakgadi*” (paternal aunt in Lesotho, Botswana and South Africa) in our efforts to understand the language of the poem, particularly in setting the stage for a military interpretation of moving in a file towards doom. Our analysis brought to life what Magoqwana and Maseko (2023, 394) regard as “a process of valuing maternal legacies of African women through all forms of archives.”

This example provides insight into our discussions, demonstrating how practices that recognise and welcome a range of different bodies and ways of being and knowing are instrumental in contesting alterity and affirming endogeneity — “an intellectual standpoint derived from a rootedness in the African conditions” (Adesina 2008, 135). Alternatively, it demonstrates how the informality of the space contributes to affirming endogeneity as members are comfortable to engage at the level that makes use of “verbal documents” or orality, as defined by Oyeniya (2021).

Cultivating radical care in and beyond the virtual space

The *African Feminist Reading Group* is more than an online intellectual engagement with the scholarly work of African women. The intentional space we have created is also focused on connecting with each other, inspired by a shared interest in African Feminisms, shared values of empathy and a desire to inspire individual and continental liberation. Adomako Ampofo explains that keeping a focus on core feminist goals is vital considering the distractions of “the exigencies of life” and that “ultimately it is only possible to maintain one’s strength as a feminist scholar and activist through constant reflection, both personal and communal” (2010, 28). This kind of reflection in our reading group is indeed a way to build our strength, as we engage each other and use African Feminisms to unpack our scholarship, activism and citizenship in the shared online space. In a higher education context where Black women’s intellectual and emotional labour continues to be marginalised, overlooked and overworked for a variety of reasons (Bamberg et al. 2021; Okech 2020; Kiguwa 2019; Swartz et al. 2018),

they nevertheless find ways to support, care and nourish each other. What has heartened us in this unfolding is the extent to which the intellectual work we do is charged and permeated with emotional and political embodiment, held together with radical care.

Radical care incorporates and overlaps with a number of ideas: *ubuntu* as an African orientation of mutual constitution; interconnectedness and interdependence (Tamale 2020); *feminist humanism* as a “socio-centric ethos” concerned with collective liberation and justice (Steady 2011, cited by Nkealah 2022); *feminist humaneness* (Nkealah 2022) which is described as unconditional “care and kindness” to those in need; and finally, *self-care* (McFadden 2021). McFadden speaks of “stepping away” from the noise of “gendered nationalism” as a profoundly conscious act of self-care and reconstruction of her life and “to craft new imaginaries of feminist freedom” (2021, 297). The need to take care of ourselves, and finding solidarity with each other, are regular imperatives that are accommodated in the space. There are times when members of the group step away from our engagements to focus on other things and are welcomed back warmly when they return. All these ways of being are relational and radical because they are intentional and conscious praxes of caring towards social justice. The introductory conversations set a tone for a more holistic engagement with each other — whether this is about South African electricity woes which sometimes disrupt our scheduled time or prevent people from attending, or workloads, or family concerns, we are cognisant that each member is more than their thoughts and words. Even silences, as Chigumadzi (2021) argues are important signifiers and ways of communicating and sometimes lead to an individual comment on the Zoom chat function or a follow up afterwards to ask if someone is okay. The kindness and concern expressed during the session or after is a demonstration of the kind of radical care that is a political act of resistance to neo-liberal values in our institutions, where, as MacFadden (2018) points out, our responses to “patriarchal violence” become “habitual”.

Radical care is not paternalistic — rather, it is the kind of non-hierarchical relationship reminiscent of the *ubuntu* we subscribe to in the reading group. Bamberg et al. (2021) explain five aspects of radical care: *attentiveness*, *responsibility*, *competence*, *responsiveness*, and *solidarity*. We feel a synergy with these ideas and have explained how our gatherings have a focus on connections

with each other, creating a space where people can bring their unfiltered selves and concerns and sometimes even their children to the online space where they are unconditionally welcomed. The praxis of *attentiveness* is experienced as a reaching and an offering across a virtual divide to engage holistically, aligned to Hames' "Getting to know each other sessions" (2021, 65) which recognised and accommodated the differences in backgrounds and experiences. We come from different countries and experiences in our reading group, and when we speak, our words are signs of the embodiment of the knowledge that has impacted and changed us. Accordingly, the way that we learn from each other and from the texts we engage with, become part of who we are collectively and individually — we are constituted by each other and the African Feminisms with which we work. Examples of how this happens include the friendships that have developed inside and outside of the reading group; and the ways in which we can learn from each other by presenting our own work for discussion in the group. In an intentional feminist onto-epistemic community, how we know and are known can be transformational, as we are attentive and entangled in each other's journeys and experiences. This kind of holistic and relational attentiveness expands us — we would be poorer without it.

The attentiveness is expanded by the *responsibility* that we take on in how we relate. Collins argues that this kind of openness to knowing each other as we seek transformational knowledge brings with it an "ethic of personal accountability" (2003, 63). In our reading group, we have found that this sense of accountability and the navigation of power relationships based on historical constructions of race, age, gender, ethnicity, class etc. have been transformative. It has meant having difficult conversations about the terminology we use, which may carry negative connotations (such as "third world" or "people of colour"), sparking thought-provoking discussions as members expressed their unease with these labels. Like the South African-based *Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group*, ours provides a space for African Feminist intimacy and building of a supportive onto-epistemic community that is welcoming of difference, debate and discomfort (Khan, Asfour and Skeyi-Tutani 2022, 4).

Doing this work, and seeing it done in our group by others, helps us to develop *competence*, not only in the range of our empathy, but in our understanding of ourselves as competent researchers and thinkers. The warm reactions and

critical advice establish a space where it is safe to be vulnerable — either leading to people sharing their fears or experiences or sharing their own scholarly work for discussion. Over time, this grows into a *responsiveness*, where we can think ahead, and be present to address the needs of each other — either during our group sessions, or afterwards in the form of relevant papers being sent to each other, or communication around issues raised in the group. Finally, we build *solidarity* as part of a collective consciousness and responsibility to receive and give care to each other and the wider society.

This comes against the awareness of how contemporary feminist calls for sisterhood have been soured by Black women's experiences of betrayal by white feminists, and the histories of mistrust, exploitation and appropriation of Black women's intellectual labour (hooks 1994, 102). Indeed, we are not naïve to the problematic nature of transnational feminist solidarity, its ethical dilemmas, susceptibility to the prevailing North/South or white/Black dichotomies and associated epistemic extractivism — and indeed at different times, we as a group have confronted and navigated some of these tendencies. In this, we draw on Okech and Musindarwezo's (2019) advice in our pursuit of reflexive transnational feminist praxis where we remain ever cautious of how race, class and heteronormative logics work to sustain differential power hierarchies in transnational solidarities. Accordingly, our effort to construct friendship and radical care within a feminist sisterhood made up of white, Black, young, old, queer and straight women is conscious of the need to build meaningful ties that avoid the replication of the servant-served, victim-saviour and colonised-coloniser paradigms within dominant scholarship and praxis. Our reflections in the group have included some honest discussions around how we are differently located in historical legacies of oppression, and how, through sharing our experiences in the group, we are able to understand each other and provide the necessary support.

Within this virtual, trans-boundary and transdisciplinary space, we do our best to ensure that everyone feels seen and every voice is heard. This manifests in how we assign the rotational facilitation of meetings, readings and discussions within the group. A consensus is built to continue with discussion, if need be, based on comments/questions that may have emerged in the chat facility or in talking through an issue. The chat facility provides us with an additional layer of interaction that allows members to share their insights or any other relevant

resources to the discussion without interrupting or waiting their turn to speak. As a secondary channel of communication, the chat facility enhances engagement, even in instances where members may initially be hesitant to speak up verbally: at times out of concern about potentially disrupting ongoing discussions with a contribution that is essentially meant to be banked for future discussions, while at other times out of preference to maintain control over the communication of their ideas by carefully selecting words to use. This contributes to generation of ideas and making the space more inclusive in that it allows us to be reflexive in our praxis.

Discussion on Unanticipated Benefits and Lessons

A significant development from the *African Feminist Reading Group* has been the continued nurturing of connections and collaborations even outside of the group. Members have found in each other critical readers, co-authors of manuscripts, co-presenters of conference papers and friendships based on conversations in the group. A few months after the start of the group, the two founding members applied to run a short course as part of the annual Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences (SGSSS) Spring Into Methods doctoral seminars. Crucial to this application was the successful advocacy for the inclusion of an equal number of African graduates to participate in the free, online course. Around 40 PhD students from Scotland and other parts of the UK, Ghana, South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana and Zimbabwe participated, all of whom were invited to join the reading group after the completion of the course.

The SGSSS doctoral course, and other collaborations and projects that have emerged from among group members, are a testament to how such informal platforms for alternative onto-epistemologies can be transformative for the formal knowledges legitimised in universities. The course synthesised the learnings from the reading group — the creation of diasporic communities; using the virtual platform to establish holistic connections; and cultivating radical care. Some of the participants in this course who joined the reading group remain some of the most regular members to this day. African Feminisms, as marginal as they are in the traditional hierarchies of knowledge, are gaining traction and disrupting the hegemonic canon through popular education and the scholarly

works they influence: the courses we are running, papers we are writing and performances we are producing. There have been and will, hopefully, continue to be other collaborations through the platform of the reading group that illustrate how informal spaces, when operating with the intention of transformation and connection, can equally lead to robust and supported contributions in the formal education sector.

We are in conversation in the group about how to respond to oppressions in the university system, perhaps in the form of a letter to all universities. We look forward to the time when our solidarity results in acts of advocacy that could have an effect beyond the borders of our group. Embracing vulnerability has also taught us the importance of recasting anger as part of this process. Rather than being labelled as angry Black women, we have acquired a deeper understanding that anger can empower us, as indicated by Audre Lorde during her 1981 keynote address at the National Women's Studies Association Conference. Specifically, we have grasped the essence of her statement that: "We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty" (Lorde 1997, 281).

In our reading group, we have found a sense of freedom in expressing our ideas without the pressure of over-theorising or over-explaining their legitimacy. This space has allowed us to share our thoughts in their raw and unfiltered form, while still being mindful of each other's differences. Rather than reducing epistemic rigour in these practices, we find a liberation into expanded and humanised ways of knowing and being, conscientised by the experiences and insights we share (Freire 1970).

Embracing vulnerability has been a crucial lesson for us, as it allows us to reflect creatively and critically on diverse knowledges, learn from different perspectives and willingly receive feedback and comments on our work. Through our engagement with vulnerability, discomfort and the sisterhood we have nurtured over the years, we hope we have illustrated how reading groups such as ours, which are grounded in African Feminisms, can be used not just as sites for resisting dominant approaches to knowledge creation and pedagogy, but as spaces for healing and building feminist solidarity. This act of theorising vulnerability, healing and resistance at the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality and disability have since been identified as foundational to

non-Western feminisms and scholarship, where lived experiences situated at the margins fuse to create theory in the flesh, which urge women of colour to create a praxis that enables healing, survival and resistances (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Anzaldúa 1987).

Conclusion

The *African Feminist Reading Group* that we discuss here is an example of how our intentional praxis of African Feminist principles in the group has led to the kinds of learning and transformation that, in our experiences, are perhaps not always possible in more formal settings. The group has grown to include diasporic scholars and encouraged intercontinental collaborations through its operations. The radical care, spirituality, recognition and solidarity we experience speak to and transform our being in the world in profound ways. We show how this informal online platform, the *African Feminist Reading Group*, falls within the parameters of a Pan-Africanist popular education, offering and enhancing formal educational contributions and efforts that are motivated by the same intentions. Interestingly, the group has also led to politically and emotionally rigorous contributions to mainstream education, in the form of courses run, papers written and presentations at academic conferences. Our PhDs and formal article writing have been strengthened through us being able to open these to loving critique in the group; and we have co-developed a course that is the praxis of African Feminist pedagogy. The virtual platform that we use has had the effect of establishing and sustaining connections between people who, despite many differences, are connected through African Feminist transformational ideas and principles. Coming, as we do, from different African countries and the diaspora, what we learn in the online reading group inspires our contributions, activism and citizenship in these various locations, in small but meaningful steps in the direction of the Pan-Africanist ideal of continental liberation and justice.

We posit that the advancement of feminist epistemic communities through digital technology helps to valorise orality in knowledge production and recognise the potential of oral traditions as legitimate forms of generating, preserving and sharing knowledge. This emphasis on orality has been an important way to recognise and honour what we bring with us to the group — not only through

what we say, but through stories and metaphors that have been passed on to us and that we share in the group to expand on our understanding of the text. When these are shared, the group becomes permeated with the holistic spirituality and connection with our elders and ancestors as members expand on the text to include other ways of knowing, supporting what Motsemme (2004, 910) claims: “when we reject dominant western oppositional hierarchies of silence and speech, and instead adopt frameworks where words, silence, dreams, gestures, tears all exist interdependently and within the same interpretive field, we find that the mute always speak”. In this way, digital technology enables unanticipated and expanded connections across space and time that are supportive and inspirational in theory and practice.

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