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Making the Sexual Political: Women's Transnational Collective Actions

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### Making the Sexual Political

This paper will look at the disruption of the heteronormative organization of resistance and protest caused by selected collective actions by women from Liberia, Nigeria and Kenya. I will use feminist critiques of the construction of the political versus the personal and theorize about 1) the definitions of what is sexual and sexualized in the realm of the private; 2) the contradictions in the formations and inscriptions onto bodies, of these definitions; and 3) the inscription of these definitions onto bodies and experiences themselves, which determines what is considered valid resistance. I will then look at the multiple and simultaneous disruptions caused to these processes by the examples of women's collective actions in this paper.

Heteronormativity organizes spaces, times, activities, discourses, bodies and experiences into binaries (Warner 1991, 3-7) one of the most pervasive of which is the public versus the private or the political versus the personal. This binary is sexualized and gendered according to masculine and feminine respectively, with the values and characteristics demarcated within each mapped and read onto people. The embedded features of the binaries and the meanings contained within this that I am concerned with particularly in this paper are as follows: the personal sphere is of the feminine, of what is sexual; bodies,

that is, what is the physical and what is embodied; emotion; and reproductivity. The political sphere is of the masculine, of disembodied reason; intellect and rationality; ownership of civilization and culture; and agency.

The contradictions in the formation and conscription onto lives of these binary definitions and processes are inherent, diverse, multiple and simultaneous. A stark and extreme yet common example of the contradictions of this heteronormative binary is sexual violence. For the purposes of focus, I use sexual violence within the context of situations classified as war in this illustration.

If the realm of the personal is of the feminine and of reproductivity, and demarcated as distinct from the political and masculine, then how do we explain the well-documented (if not well-acknowledged) deliberate use of acts such as rape and sexual slavery in war situations that men soldiers inflict upon women of enemy groups?

Heteronormativity organizes women's bodies as sites of reproduction of nations, cultures and nation-states, which connects to the marking of ownership by men onto women during armed conflicts through physically violent ways as erasing enemy nations and cultures, and of humiliating enemy soldiers by displaying their inability to protect their people, specifically the futurity of their people through the bodies of their women (CITATION NEEDED).

The humiliation and terrorization of women in war is not only individual and familial but also national and cultural to the targeted communities. Humiliation and terror are part of what may be considered the psycho-affective structure, that of emotions.

Heteronormativity separates emotion from reason, and the respective spheres of the

feminine personal from the masculine political are mapped and read according to this binary. It would be impossible to extract the psycho-affective from situations of war and conflict, yet these are precisely part of the heteronormative technologies of discourse and representation about war that do not acknowledge the gendered and sexualized experiences of war.

These are the heteronormative organizations of systems of oppression. What happens in the activities and discourses of resistance? The binary of political versus personal is still present in the organization of resistance. The reformulations and theorizations of political activities including legislating and marching in a rally do not acknowledge sexual and gender dimensions. Heteronormativity dictates which roles women play in order to be acknowledged as a protestor, what their stated goals are, and how they are resisting and protesting.

So what are the cases selected for this paper telling us about resistance and protest? First, I will describe each case and then analyze it in terms of the disruptions caused to the assemblage of heteronormativity outlined in my introduction.

In 2003, women in Liberia organized a sex boycott to protest the attitudes and efforts of men involved in formal peace talks to end the civil war in the country. In an interview with Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report* in July 2009, one of the women involved in the peace movement that organized the boycott, Leymah Gbowee explained why and how the sex boycott was called for, and why it was necessary.

I argue that Liberian women made multiple, simultaneous and powerful statements with these actions. The boycott forced attention to the deliberate and openly stated disruption of the heteronormative division of political versus personal by women refusing the use of their bodies by men as soldiers, comrades-with-other-men and politicians for reproduction and pleasure, or as Gbowee describes it in the interview with the phrase, “to warm your bed”. This was done as a collective action for explicitly political aims, putting women’s experiences of war and the stakes women have in processes of decision-making about war and peace center stage. Thus they demanded recognition of women’s rights to controlling their sexualities in defiance of the heteronormative marking of women’s bodies as passive and other-owned.

The boycott also concretized experience, emotion and memory as corporeal and that corporeality as legitimate and valid. Gbowee describes the war crimes committed during the war against young girls, young boys and adult women and classifies them as key factors for the desperation and determination women felt in protesting that they were not going to allow the peace process to fail. This highlights the simultaneity of the positions of victim, survivor and actor/agent by those who are are and are considered disenfranchised from the processes of both war and peace.

This is a challenge and disruption to heteronormative realities and discourses about conflict in a number of ways: it points to how conflict is gendered and sexualized, and to the generational temporality of psycho-affective and physical trauma. The boycott underlined physical and emotional experiences as directly and inextricably part of the political, part of war so that the legitimacy of the heteronormative marking of women and

children as emotional equals to irrational equals to the personal is disrupted and proved as false.

In June 2002, women in Nigeria's Niger Delta threatened to strip naked in public in protest of exploitation by oil companies of the resources and people of their communities, and in 2009, women marching in Ekiti State in Nigeria stripped half-naked to protest an alleged subversion of the will of the people through rigging in elections.

According to the International Coordinator of the Niger Delta Women Sokari Ekine, "The stripping off of clothes particularly by married and elderly women is a way of shaming men -- some of whom believe that if they see the naked bodies they will go mad or suffer some great harm. The curse extends not just to local men but also to any foreigner who it is believed would become impotent at the sight of "the naked mother"".

These women used their bodies and what their naked bodies signify in their specific cultural lexicon to demand recognition of the environmental damage, poverty and community exploitation caused by oil companies in the region. They focused attention on the erasure of the negative experiences of indigenous communities of development aggression by corporations in countries classified as the Third World.

They invoked particular emotions of humiliation and shame in and directed towards men, rather than of themselves or their bodies. Their affective claim was to anger and they did not disavow emotions as part of their protest and of their experiences.

Age was also a key component in these protests since the participants who are grandmothers are using their aged physical selves in confrontation. Thus, they signified

that they are people with histories rather than disembodied and/or timeless objects or objectifications.

In April 2009, the Women's Development Organization coalition in Kenya declared a week-long sex boycott in protest over infighting within the Kenyan government, which had sparked fears of the outbreak of violence. The coalition offered to pay commercial sex workers if they participated and called on the wives of the prime minister and president to join in the boycott as well, which the prime minister's wife did in May 2009. These actions disrupted the heteronormative division of political versus personal in terms of women's bodies as sites of reproductivity as well as pleasure, with the women's organization coalition offering compensation of livelihood to commercial sex workers being a key component. They were a statement of the women's ownership of their own sexual selves and sexualities and of their self-determination and self-valuation of their roles, from wife to commercial sex worker. They were also a clear display of the varied dimensions of women's sexualities that are unacknowledged as part of the social, economic and political structures of a society, and the interconnections between them. By offering to pay commercial sex workers for their participation in the boycott, the coalition showed an understanding of the material conditions of sex workers and simultaneously respected the potential agency of women involved in sex work to participate as equals in the protest. Thus, this was also demonstrative of a commitment to solidarity with women in different positions within Kenyan society.

To conclude, I would like to address the questions of declaring these particular collective actions by Liberian, Nigerian and Kenyan women as success or failures. I do not agree with assessing the success or failure of these actions by whether permanent peace and prosperity on just terms was achieved in the three countries solely on the grounds of the women's sex boycotts or threats of public nudity. It is obvious to state that there are multiple, interlocking and simultaneous components in any conflict situation, and in any movement organized to protest, resist and change such situations.

Instead or rather, at the same time, I argue for the marking these actions as successes on the following basis: that they demonstrated the agency, initiative, self-determination and self-determination of the women involved; that they offer lessons in resourcefulness, creativity, solidarity and organization for resistance actions and processes; and that they force attention to the heteronormative organization of discourse around resistance itself that experience, corporeality and emotion should be acknowledged in more depth than it is, in order for such discourse to include actions and people who are either ignored or publicized in the very terms they are defying.

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