

Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa

Edited by Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon

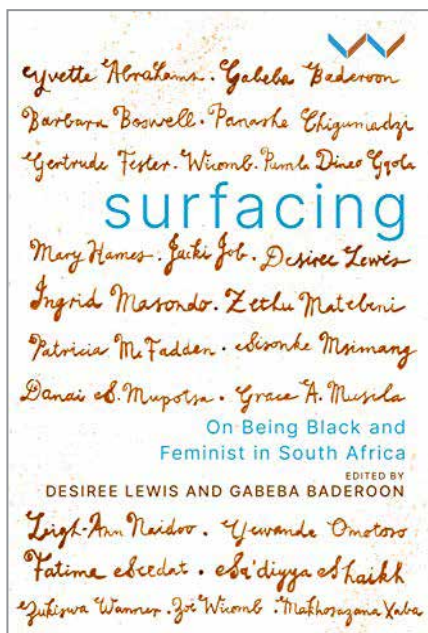
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Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa is an important reader on feminist thought in South Africa and its multiple contributors open the space for multi-directional questions, critical insight and intimate resonance. As well as the editors it includes Sisonke Msimang, Zoë Wicomb, Mary Hames, Gertrude Fester-Wicomb, Fatima Seedat, Jacki Job, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Zethu Matebeni, Ingrid Masondo, Danai Mupotsa, Yewande Omotoso, Zukiswa Wanner, Barbara Boswell, Grace Musila, Panashe Chigumadzi, Leigh-Ann Naidoo, Makhosazana Xaba, Yvette Abrahams and Patricia McFadden.

Edited by Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon, the book is poetics-meets-research-meets-conversation grounded in the dynamic landscape of black South African feminism. *Surfacing* forefronts

feminist voices and the ways in which South Africa's black feminists have engaged the longstanding crisis of an anti-black, cis-heterosexist, gender-binary-fixed, patriarchal and ableist world.

Surfacing invites ways of engaging with black, African and, in this case, South African feminism as a large-scale movement that cannot be held by one figure or explained through one nation. It is significant then, that in bold red ink, the book cover is etched with the names of each contributor – not just the editors' names, as is usually the case. Such intentionality speaks to visibilising multiple representations of black feminists and brings to the surface an array of experiences and personal perspectives that challenge an assumed single-story monologue.

Focusing on black and South African

feminism, the book seeks to highlight the diversity that comes to the surface when we are attentive to multiple perspectives and experiences located in our geographical, national, religious, political, racial, gendered, socio-economic, sexual, embodied positionalities, dynamics and relations. For Lewis and Baderoon, 'this collection is an intervention into the global and national circuits of knowledge-making, debate and pedagogy that, until now, have obscured the dynamic form of black feminist thought and practice in South Africa'.

South African feminists have contributed extensively to a myriad of fields, such as Literary Studies, Queer Studies, Health Sciences, Gender Studies and Law, with a vibrant on-the-ground activist movement. Lewis and Baderoon offer *Surfacing* to evince the potent presence and impact of South African feminists and the socio-political, religious and cultural environment that frames their persistence towards a liberatory expression as part of the larger global feminist imagination. Black feminist thought from South Africa cannot be dislodged and is always already present within currents of feminist imagining across the world.

Black feminism, argue the editors, has been for too long reserved for the intellectual contributions of North American and, to some degree, West African black feminists, sidelining the concurrent presence of feminist thought and activism in Southern Africa. We know quite well the danger of distinguishing and iconising a single feminist figure with the current example of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie whose feminism has been globalised to represent the entire continent. Her trans-exclusionary statements and refusal at accountability have only concretised an idea of African feminism as fixed on cis-gender womanhood and hostile to its large queer and gender diverse community across the spectrum.

The book itself does not disrupt this stereotyping view, however, it

scratches the surface of recognizing the contribution of trans, gender nonconforming, non-binary, and intersex feminists with Gertrude Fester-Wicomb's essay. Whilst the project of this book is clearly centred on the diversity of black feminism in South Africa by extending black to include non-black feminists who are black in the Black Consciousness articulation of blackness, the curation of only cis-gender contributors emphasize the problem in Black African feminism where non-binary, transgender, and intersex feminists do not figure in their own voice in African feminism and anthologies like this one. Certainly, as the editors anticipate, the editors anticipate these kinds of limits: 'It acknowledges the depth of a body of black feminist thought while also recognising the limitations of surveying the terrain. No collection is definitive. Nor can it be representative of a given topic or of a single group: there are always fractures, omissions and silences. Bringing together this group of women writers conveys some of the key connections and dialogues among perspectives and voices that continue to be sidelined in publishing, scholarship and public debates in South Africa.'

What is the current terrain of black feminism and what kind of interventions does it invite? What would a deliberate gender diverse, and non-binary-trans-intersex conscious feminist project bring to the surface and how would it illuminate the longstanding presence and contribution of feminist thought produced by gender-nonconforming, transgender and intersex thinkers, activists, and art makers?

In 'Queering the Queer,' Fester-Wicomb teases out the limits of a homogeneous queer identity by looking at the stories of Richard Rive, the late Sally Gross and her own. In a book about being feminist in South Africa, the story of Sally Gross, a womxn born intersex and assigned male at birth, and a feminist in her own right, is important precisely because feminism

is not a cis-gender female assigned at birth enterprise. Gertrude Fester-Wicomb admits to having failed Sally Gross by adhering to the chair of the Commission for Gender Equality's advice 'to discontinue the project'. Perhaps, the invitation in this failure is how might the practice of feminism in South Africa disabuse itself from imagining change to come from within the very institutions, systems and structures built on our undoing. To petition political leaders for transformation has proven a farce, even as we've witnessed marginal changes that don't resolve the problem of being black and the gendered, sexual, embodied and material realisations of that blackness. It also brings to bear the need to call ourselves to account, be accountable for impact (not merely our intentions), constantly self-evaluate how we show up in our feminist work, and reckon with the limits of our own imagination, theorisation, ethics and the ways we might reify the very systems we actively work to transform.

Sisonke Msimang's essay on 'Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and the Archive,' and Desiree Lewis' conversation with Zoë Wicomb in 'Representing Sara Baartman in the New Millennium,' incisively challenge the ways in which Baartman and Madikizela-Mandela have been taken up in generic ways that lack rigour and evade complexity. Msimang, who published *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela* in 2018, reflects on how Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's story has been 'misinterpreted and weaponized against her,' and how a feminist approach of care might allow complex parts of figures such as Madikizela-Mandela to emerge without falling to the extremes of either unscrupulously vilifying or uncritically celebrating them. The intimacy of the personal essay affords Msimang the spaciousness to trace her journey as the biographer of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela alongside a childhood memory of her neighbour whose identity she protects with the made-up name, Aida. Msimang powerfully holds these >>

two womxn, of different generational and national contexts, as equally commanding and deserving of non-judgement, and the right to their lives and bodies beyond the hold of men, society and antiblack porno-trope.

Perhaps even more sharply, Wicomb's conversation with Lewis on the 'enrobing' and 'disrobing' of Willie Bester's Sara Baartman statue at the University of Cape Town astutely points to the troubling entitlement to Sara Baartman, as seen in the litany of artworks, literary works, relational claims, defences and advocations for agency, that all but scratch the surface to make sense of and explain the condition of blackness as structured by racial slavery and its expression in the treatment of the 'ungendered' and exploitable female-assigned black body that Baartman represents. Wicomb states, 'Baartman can be seen as a ready-made cipher: her history – situated as it is in colonial history – lends itself to all kinds of meanings and manipulations, always available for metonymic displacement'. What might occur should we suspend reaching for the readily available fleshiness of Sara Baartman, and even Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, and perhaps rigorously attend to the terms of agreement that determine our

socio-structural lineage to Baartman's abjection?

Building towards 'Remaking' (or 'making anew'), the 'Unmaking' section turns to the capacity of feminist agitation and questioning to uproot institutions of power such as religion/spirituality, education and the law, and our own internalised self-sabotaging notions. 'South African Feminism in Search of the Sacred,' by Fatima Seedat, reflects on the jarring yet common interjection of a cis-gender male patriarchal symbol in a space centered on the safety, freedom and agency of womxn. At the 2018 #TotalShutdown march against gender-based violence at the Cape Town Parliament, a cleric started the proceedings with a prayer to God the Father, unbothered by the ways in which imaging God as male and patriarchal is the basis for much of the ideology used to dominate, infantilise and justify the violation of womxn. What might be disrupted, fall away and even transpire when we conceive of God as divinely non-binary or unsexed and ungendered? What is required, as Seedat invites, is more than a mere semantic shift, and rather an intra-structural shift that necessitates unpacking and reimagining the deep implications of religion in our racial, sexual, gendered

and economic construction of the world.

Reflecting the multi-layered reality of feminist thought and praxis, Danai S. Mupotsa's essay, 'Breathing Under Water,' is a poetic meditation on the layers of feminist voices she embodies, wears like ink etched beneath the surface of her skin, has swallowed and holds in her stomach. Mupotsa's tracing of layers of feminist influences illuminates the rhizomatic, ghostly and citational reality of feminist thought. From her daughter, grandmother, to writers Bessie Head, Christina Sharpe, Koleka Putuma, Chinelo Okparanta, Audre Lorde and the poet-healer vangile gantshe, who wrote the 'breathing under water' poetry novella *red cotton* after which Mupotsa has titled her essay. These essays bring to the forefront the feminism in the shadows, by the wayside – the 'experiential feminism' passed on by Makhosazana Xaba's mother; the forceful feminism of Miriam Tlali and its impact on Barbara Boswell; the necessary transnational feminist solidarities highlighted by Leigh-Ann Naidoo; the unassuming and humorous feminism of Grace Musila's grandfathers, her 'Two Husbands' and the radical environmental feminism of Yvette Abrahams. **NA**