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# surfacing

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On Being Black and  
Feminist in South Africa

EDITED BY  
DESIREE LEWIS AND GABEBA BADEROON

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Fatima ebedat. Sa'diyya Shaikh  
Zukiswa Wanner. Joë Wiombé. Makhorazama Xaba*

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To our teachers and our students,  
and in memory of Elaine Salo

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## Editorial Note

*Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa* features the usage of Black, White and Coloured with upper-case initial letters in some chapters. This reflects the political choices of the authors in whose chapters they feature. In other chapters, black, white and coloured remain lower case, a style choice adopted by Wits University Press. Similarly, some chapters feature words and concepts from languages and histories outside of the English language. Translations and explanations appear for these words and phrases where absolutely necessary, with the respective authors' permission. In other chapters, we have respected authors' political preferences not to translate indigenous African language words and phrases.

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# Being Black and Feminist

*Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon*

surface (*n, v, adj*)

*noun*

outside, covering, skin, face

*verb*

rise, arise, come up, come to the surface, reappear, materialise, come to light

*adjective*

outer, outside, apparent.<sup>1</sup>

## Journeys through identities and knowledge-making

‘Surfacing’, especially in this book, has many meanings. In the most immediate sense, it may mean that those who have not spoken in public spaces now do. But black South African feminists have always spoken – through action, creativity and words. Many came to prominence during the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970s, but others were visible before then. Several constellations of black feminist South African writing flourished in different regions and cultural forms. The significance of these constellations, as well as iconic figures such as Sara Baartman, Winnie Mandela and Miriam Tlali, has been severely neglected in the archiving of South African cultural and political traditions.

This book starts to address these omissions. 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 black 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 *kind* of knowledge matters is linked to the question: *Whose* knowledge matters? The rapid rise of identity politics has been important to democratic struggles from the late twentieth century to the present. As the collection shows, the personal essay is well suited to the standpoint knowledge of subjects who have been silenced, stereotyped and politically subjugated. Globally, the essay form has been deftly crafted by black feminists including Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Michele Faith Wallace and, in Southern Africa, Zoë Wicomb, Bessie Head and Patricia McFadden. As storytellers, scholars and poets, these writers have demonstrated that big ideas need not be anchored in what are conventionally seen as 'big forms' – such as the academic article. Concision, wit, poetic force and autobiographical storytelling in the personal essay can carry enormous weight. As the poet and academic Danai S. Mupotsa illuminates, potent essay writing is the product of dense thought, autobiographical reflection and forms stretched to their creative limits.

The voices gathered specifically for this collection build on a literary legacy of feminist forerunners who have inspired their distinctive ideological and creative views. It is sometimes assumed that essays and writing from socially marginalised standpoints can generate only knowledge that speaks to the experiences of these groups. Black feminist writer Patricia Hill Collins contests this. She argues that 'seeing from below' can generate a new *non*-post-Enlightenment and post-colonial understanding of 'being human'.<sup>2</sup> Ideas derived from the European Age of Reason remain central to dominant notions of the 'human' even today. The explicit exclusion of Africans from such conceptions was used to rationalise slavery and colonialism, so the limitations of these ideas are

particularly visible ‘from below’. Those who are positioned at the margins see the world differently. They can intervene at distinct moments and from specific perspectives to offer understanding and insight that speak not only about and to – but beyond – their own locations.

Whether this knowledge is respected or taken up in the public domain is another matter. The crucial point is that this knowledge is generative and not only reactive. It does not only counter racist and patriarchal world views; it envisions new ways of being human and is therefore relevant to all. In other words, it produces future possible worlds. In one of her affirmations of commitment to imagining worlds beyond the realities of oppression, Bessie Head, whose contribution to black feminist literature was acknowledged only after her death in 1984, wrote:

We learn bitterly, every day, the details of oppression and exploitation so that a writer automatically feels pressured into taking a political stand of some kind or identifying with a camp. It was important to my development to choose a broader platform for my work.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1980s, comments such as these made Head vulnerable to the charge of being apolitical. Yet her assertion constitutes a compelling call in the context of post-apartheid and post-millennial politics. At a time when political confidence in *primarily* classed, or *only* racial, or *pre-eminently* feminist transformation is being questioned by attention to complex identity politics and intersecting forms of subordination, Head’s words remain powerful. They echo the themes of many essays in this volume by conveying a globally resonant desire for a vision of a just world.

### Categories

Blackness in this anthology is conceptualised in line with Stuart Hall’s emphasis on *identification*, rather than the state or condition of ‘having identities’: that is, a dynamic recognition of oneself in the range of possibilities called blackness.<sup>4</sup> The present continuous signalled in

being black does not imply a fixed identity. Instead, it gestures towards the provisional standpoints and strategic locations that shape writers' perspectives on freedom, power and justice without essentialising, homogenising or hardening ways of seeing.

The need to avoid fixing black feminist ways of seeing becomes clear when we acknowledge the global and regional diversity of black feminisms. Black feminism has accrued meanings that are both wide-ranging and very particular. The histories and the breadth of the category, alongside its many applications, warrant an exploration of terms and the parameters of this anthology. As discussed in the next section, black feminism in the global imaginary is often synonymous with African-American feminist thought. Black and African diasporic writings are usually understood to be writings by those of African descent around the world, but not *within* Africa. In contrast, Carole Boyce-Davies's and Margaret Busby's anthologising work has been crucial in archiving legacies of writing across geographical borders that speak to connected experiences which are simultaneously raced and gendered, and also rooted in a sense of African ancestry. During the 1990s, Boyce-Davies's *Black Women's Diasporas* and Busby's *Daughters of Africa* offered crucial resources to a generation of South African literary critics who would shape the post-apartheid critical landscape.

In many contemporary cultural, political and academic contexts, however, globally resonant meanings of black and African diasporic feminism tend to marginalise South African and African traditions. This is not the result of deliberate exclusion by writers, editors or publishers, but an effect of the dominance of resources and networks at the metropolis. A strong case can therefore be made to foreground feminist knowledge produced on the continent *in conversation with, in response to, and as part of* a broader conceptualisation of black feminism than what is currently known. And since trends in Africa are so diverse, it is important to disaggregate the regional or national trends that constitute the varied body of scholarship and writing in and from Africa.

Apart from the subordination of black South African feminism to African-American and continental feminism, the meaning of

blackness in South Africa is itself contested and fractured. Apartheid's compartmentalising of ethnic, religious and mixed-race groups has had a powerful impact on how groups continue to identify themselves. In earlier waves of anti-racist protest against apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s, many radical students, activists and writers refused this divisiveness and assertively embraced the label black as a unifying political identity. This was a response both to the racist designation of being 'non-white', and to the destructive partitions created by apartheid. Arguing in opposition to the nationalist ideology of the time, Steve Biko advocated for a philosophy of blackness constituted by consciousness – not skin colour. To *choose* to be black rather than non-white was an act of political resistance to the divisions of apartheid.

Paradoxically, post-apartheid preoccupations with recalling lost identities have led many younger coloured and Indian commentators to feel unheard, unseen and unrecognised in a transformative South Africa. In her work on race and specifically on coloured identity, sociologist Zimitri Erasmus holds the position that for some scholars, activists and academics, identifying as coloured in the post-apartheid period is integral to assertive self-naming. Amid this vigorous debate, the editors of *Surfacing* seek to reactivate the sense of political blackness associated with Black Consciousness. The return to political blackness gained currency with the rise of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements since 2015, a period of concerted activism around identity politics and feminism. This period has seen calls to decolonise education, interrogate the trappings of post-apartheid democracy, and critique rainbow nation myth-making and its obsession with reclaiming cultural difference.

The embrace of political blackness, especially in younger feminist politics embedded in these movements, has also sparked an interest in African feminism: since 2015, many conferences, blog posts and book titles reveal a welcoming of this form of feminism. This has been driven by the need to connect racial politics to reclamations of canons and knowledge erased by hegemonic metropolitan traditions in South Africa. The work of the African Gender Institute at the University

of Cape Town started some of this work in the early 1990s. But the widespread revival of African feminism in the country has been a response to recent educational, cultural and intellectual struggles: the call for decolonisation. The term's current broad appeal accommodates numerous meanings, some of which jostle uneasily against one another. An array of popular magazine pieces, digitally circulated information and images, and commercialised ideas that link African feminism to notions of glamour and success reveals how ambiguously the category has gained currency. We are alert to the impulse to revitalise the term, and the political and psycho-existential needs that drive it. But in our efforts here, we try to avoid the urge to simplify, essentialise, homogenise or limit the difference that the category African feminism offers to promote.

### Contexts

Our methodology for sourcing contributions to this volume has been informed not by any narrow understanding of writers' formal citizenship or national origin, but by a more encompassing understanding of citizenship as participation: participation in dialogues about the confluence of power relations in South Africa's past, present and future. These include questions about how knowledges in South Africa have been hierarchically positioned in terms of gendered, colonial and global dynamics. By including both writers who embody biographical mobility and those whose work has been shaped by such mobility, *Surfacing* thus expands conceptions of what constitutes a national corpus of writing. These contributions involve the local context but also contain expansive and original responses to the challenge of crafting nationally resonant responses to racialised, gendered and authoritarian ways of seeing and being.

Such alertness to authority makes it clear that the collection's writers have attended to multiple and shifting relations of dominance. Intersectionality, a buzzword in recent debates about feminism, has fuelled an industry of research – often driven by white academics. This is because the term has been understood not so much as an

attentiveness to power, but as engaging with a confluence of identities. A deeper understanding of intersectionality is at work in *Surfacing*. In the essays of many of its writers, the term is better conceptualised with reference to Jasbir Puar's explanation of assemblage. Assemblage provides a valuable strategy for understanding intersecting power relations and systems that constantly shift, proliferate and cohere, either to recuperate or contest varying forms of injustice and oppression.<sup>5</sup> Assemblage avoids this reification, yet responds to the need for theoretical alternatives. Anna Bogic contends: 'In an age of advanced capitalist globalization, the functioning logic of the world we live in today is more about folds than structures . . . In such a nondialectical and multilocal world, we are left with an increasingly difficult task of mapping sites of power.'<sup>6</sup>

The 'multivocality' and challenge of 'mapping sites of power' that Bogic identifies are traced in many of *Surfacing's* essays. And the daring and resolve of forerunners who have sought justice by confronting interconnected power relations have inspired many of the book's contributors. Many black feminists transcended permitted political boundaries of resistance by insisting on the salience of gender and, by doing so, redefined radical politics.

Illustrating the multivocality in this volume, Makhosazana Xaba's chapter shows how a generation of women, born in the early 1900s, actively responded to the simultaneous operation of racial, colonial and gender discourses while working to educate young women to challenge oppressive discourses and power relations. Exploring enmeshed power relations in the second half of the twentieth century, Mary Hames uncovers the extent to which South African anti-apartheid feminists resisted interlinked forms of injustice. Reflecting on her development as a black feminist teacher in the 1970s, a time when the pre-eminence of race in anti-apartheid struggles drowned out attention to gendered ones, Hames recalls how women confronted violence against women within the anti-apartheid struggle perpetrated by certain male activists. This demonstrates that intersectionality, although not named as such, was being theorised by

black South African women many years before the coining of this term by Kimberlé Crenshaw and its popularisation within a metropolitan black feminist tradition. Like other contributors, Hames reveals that the preoccupation with black women's perspectives and voices – within contexts of decolonisation and anti-racism – has a long history.

### Black feminisms and South Africa

A Google Scholar survey of black feminism yields the names of numerous North Americans, including Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde and many others.

Ironically, two iconic black South African women have been the focal point of black feminist commentary around the world: Sara Baartman and Winnie Mandela. They have been repeatedly invoked in North American-based black feminist artwork, scholarship and fiction, yet few black Southern African writers have achieved this status of universal visibility. It is as though black South African women are worthy of being invoked as icons by other black feminists, but rarely – even within post-colonial feminist canons – granted positions of centrality as intellectuals themselves. They often appear as material for other feminists' analyses but have not been recognised for their own feminist writing. The same is not true about black feminist work from, for example, West Africa, and especially Nigeria. Nigerian scholars such as Oyeronke Oyewumi and Amina Mama, and writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are often canonised as exemplars of black African feminist thought in diasporic anthologies.

There are multiple explanations for this. They include hegemonised legacies of feminist thought in the US, since even though black feminists may be marginalised in the North American academy, their work is of great consequence globally. In addition, a significant number of African intellectuals, particularly from West Africa, have made their home in North America and attained prominent positions in the academy there. The migration of academics and academic knowledge between West Africa and North America is, of course, an

uncanny echo of the North Atlantic slave trade. For various reasons, there are stronger solidarities and alliances among networks in the United States and West Africa than among African-American and South African feminists.

Whatever the reasons, and they are undoubtedly numerous and complex, South African traditions of black feminist thought – as opposed to North American, West African or diasporic black feminist ones – have been neglected in scholarly and literary networks. The absence of a deep engagement with such thought is also true *in* South Africa, where work from or close to metropolitan centres is far more visible (and therefore held as more important) than work from regional margins.

This collection is an intervention into the global and national circuits of knowledge-making, debate and pedagogy that, until now, have obscured the dynamic forms of black feminist thought and practice in South Africa. The book starts with Sisonke Msimang, and Zoë Wicomb and Desiree Lewis exploring Southern Africa's most hyper-visible black women icons. Both figures have been subject to numerous interpretations and reinterpretations, and yoked to racist and colonial fantasies as well as to twenty-first-century reclamations. What do these reclamations and retellings mean? And why is Sara Baartman, like Winnie Mandela, so often cast as a symbolic figure who, in the words of a key character in Wicomb's novel *David's Story*, 'belongs to all of us'?

Many of *Surfacing's* contributors acknowledge the legacies which have moved and inspired them. For example, Barbara Boswell identifies Miriam Tlali's response to masculinist Black Consciousness literary traditions in the 1970s, and highlights a trajectory of fiction and autobiography – including work by Sindiwe Magona, Emma Mashinini and Ellen Kuzwayo – that boldly confronted gendered identities and relations at a time when many urged the importance of a unified black protest. In her excavation of intersectionality, Gertrude Fester-Wicomb highlights her location as a lesbian, radical black woman who is also a practising Christian. Drawing attention to the intensely personal struggles

of gender non-conforming public figures from the 1980s, she conveys their beleaguered battles for dignity and recognition at a time when neither legislation nor public discourse addressed entanglements of identity on the basis of sexual orientation, gender non-conformity and race.

Growing up as a Jehovah's Witness in a working-class Cape Town suburb, jacki job learns how to 'be a lady' from chastening biblical narratives, but eventually finds the beginning of an approach beyond ecclesiastical tales in the 'body's sensibilities'. Fascinated by the codes she learns by watching people move, job longs for a language that can contain her secrets and make her 'more than just this body'. She finds such a language in dance, an art that enables her to avoid being 'in the eyes' (simply pleasing to others) and instead makes space for a 'lady that is not ashamed of her body'. Employing a similarly capacious vision, two Muslim feminists, Sa'diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat, reflect on distinctly South African experiences of political protest to deliberate on the gendering of divinity. Shaikh traces her path to religious and political growth in which women like her mother and her female teachers offered a potent counterpoint to the patriarchal weight of both Islamic and secular education. Her resonant account of anti-racist and feminist activism in a Muslim group places us at the centre of events that helped shaped local and global debates on gender and Islam. In her essay, Seedat fascinatingly observes during a protest march in Cape Town that even radical feminists struggle to invoke a God who is not masculine. To her, the inability to reimagine the gender of divinity is a striking blind spot in feminist consciousness, exemplifying the cost of the feminist neglect of religion. As with fester-wicomb and job, the reader is alerted in these essays to the centrality of religious *and* broader spiritual concerns in many feminists' articulations of justice, freedom and existential good.

This book is concerned not only with the inclusion of marginalised voices; it also focuses on their power. In her incisive critique of both masculine and racist biases in the publishing world, Zukiswa Wanner references Maya Angelou when she poses the rhetorical question: 'Do I make you uncomfortable?' Her account of her journey in the South African publishing industry, its efforts to pigeonhole her, and her efforts

to subvert its institutions, while ultimately offering an alternative, is a study in the disruptive and creative impact of black feminist practice. 'To surface' in this anthology therefore entails what Yewande Omotoso evocatively describes as 'the creative endeavour itself. The employment of imagination, using the act of making to unmake the ways of sensing and thinking that are often at the root of so much of what doesn't work in our lives and societies.' *Surfacing* consequently upends set ways of doing things, sedimented ideas, and tyrannical orthodoxies that haunt both the left and the right on the political spectrum in South Africa.

The perspectives in this book are politically black and feminist. They are positioned as intersectional or complicated by multiple and shifting identities, but they also caution against aspirations to be equivalent to our ascribed embodied identities. Many contributors acknowledge how entangled our experiences and subject positions are, inviting readers to speculate about discovered subjectivities that result not from reclaiming identities, but from envisioning new ways of being human. This is an invitation to understand that, beyond our need to be recognised, heard and seen in worlds that marginalise us on the basis of officially ascribed identities, we often strive to picture freedoms beyond these predetermined identities.

Freedom, as Makhosazana Xaba, Patricia McFadden and Yvette Abrahams show, is expansive and multi-faceted. It is not only linked to our liberation from material and ideological subordination, but also embedded in our richly erotic, sensual and existential desires. Xaba recalls her mother's forthright language about the body, alongside her own transcendent wording about discovering bodily pleasures through masturbation. McFadden and Abrahams, as intellectuals who deal with labouring with the earth in their writing, draw on women's knowledge of farming and healing practices to generate alternative economies of belonging and community. Their cultivation of food and herbs harnesses both old and new technologies, and fosters relations of reciprocity and abundance with their neighbours and the earth.

Such practices also gesture towards our struggle to create unexpected solidarities – such as those that might be built when

feminists find themselves adrift on an ocean and under attack by patriarchal imperialist forces. In her essay describing a peace mission to Palestine by transnational activists, Leigh-Ann Naidoo's image of a boat steered by feminists with the potential to forge what Chandra Mohanty calls bridges of solidarity that transcend borders is a deeply inspirational one.<sup>7</sup>

Further rewriting the meanings of difference and dissension among black women, Zethu Matebeni and Panashe Chigumadzi unveil the affective and psychological complexities that often propel seemingly unreasonable political responses. Matebeni's engaging memoir refutes the familiar account of family rejection of queer people and instead reveals the protagonist's relatives to be a source of loving and expansive meanings for the word 'lesbian'. The speaker encounters a rich and complex view of sexuality through her aunt's personal library. Her understanding is further deepened by her grandmother's stories about her time at boarding school, which teaches the speaker a name for female intimacy that cannot be found in a dictionary. When she is attacked and almost raped at university, it is her family's immense emotional and spiritual resources that help the speaker to heal. Chigumadzi recounts the silences she 'heard' when speaking to women in her family about the many losses of Zimbabwean history. To write about a past marked by war, forced removals and fractured families, Chigumadzi learns to discern her elders' 'militant' refusal to speak and therefore to 'hear [their] silence'.

### Ways of speaking, seeing and hearing

How we hear, recognise and see is often determined by the genres and art forms we use. A binary world where linear and unemotional knowledge is ascendant privileges the power of the written and not spoken word. The tyranny of the written word must, as many decolonial, post-colonial and black feminists have argued, be dislodged as part of the process of freeing knowledge-making. This would allow fiction, artwork and other artistic forms to encourage us to listen and

feel in new ways. Wicomb's allusion, in her conversation with Desiree Lewis, to 'a mode of narration that none of us have dreamt of' invites an expansiveness of vision and of form.

But what does it really mean when we say that art *speaks* in ways that words don't? The reader is taken on a creative journey with photographer and South African National Gallery (SANG) curator Ingrid Masondo. Her visual essay explicitly defies the categories that situate other essays. Masondo encourages us to participate in her own tour of some lesser-known black women's photography as potent encodings of feminist ways of knowing. Her reflective comments therefore open up a space for us to respect the artworks on their own terms, rather than to bind them to a heavy-handed critical interpretation that reveals more about the interpreter than about the artist or art. And so we are given some space to breathe, think and imagine.

In her 'playful letter' to the artist Gabrielle Goliath, Pumla Dineo Gqola prompts a similar process of yielding space for the reader's active sensory engagement. Gqola enables us to experience works like *Bouquet III* and *This Song Is For . . .* through the emotions, insights and physical sensations the works arouse for her. Standing with her before *Ek is 'n Kimberley Coloured*, we feel ourselves 'stretched in [our] own skin'. Goliath's *Faces of War* sparks an epiphany about women's exclusion that leaves Gqola breathless: 'We created a country in which large-scale experiences of violence by women under apartheid were cast aside in the definition of past, memory and nation.' Gqola's journey through Goliath's art gives us an opportunity (rare in a world of knowledge-making where readers are expected to prioritise rational understanding) to sense, gasp and cry. Meanwhile, in Grace A. Musila's superbly crafted narrative 'My Two Husbands', the protagonist learns from her grandparents, both living and dead, how to navigate the unexpected consequences of her educational achievements. The important lesson that women's ambition should not be limited by masculine fragility is conveyed through humour, memorable characters and an exquisitely unfolding plot that brings the story to a piercing conclusion.

Such intricate work illuminates the unsuspected complexities of the world, often exposing readers to interpretations of human, social and political experiences that many publishers neglect. It therefore matters profoundly how writing becomes accessible to broad audiences. The South African publishing world has tended to welcome poetry and fiction by black feminists much more than their prose. During the '80s and '90s, several collections of feminist poetry were published by presses such as Ravan Press and Ad Donker, and in magazines such as *New Coin*, *New Contrast* and *Staffrider*, while the late 1990s and start of the millennium saw a surge of autobiographical writings. In contrast to this focus on poetic and testimonial expression, there has been a dearth of published intellectual, polemical and philosophical thought by black South African feminists. Correcting this absence, as the collection begins to do, is beneficial not only to South African feminists; in fact, it offers to audiences the richness of voices in whose work new understandings about human experiences, social subjectivities, society and culture in South Africa surface.

We believe that this collection will not only expand readers' knowledge and understanding, but also lead to a writerly pleasure that refuses the usual binaries between, for example, knowledge and creativity or creation and deconstruction. We hope that it will generate ongoing critical thought about South African politics and culture both among feminists and a wider audience. Such thought would focus not only on what it means to challenge racialism and heteropatriarchy, but on what sorts of political and communicative freedoms are truly emancipating and democratic, and what a visionary understanding of liberation can encompass.