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Who Run the World? South African Female Artists' Relationship to History and Normativity

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EDITOR'S NOTE

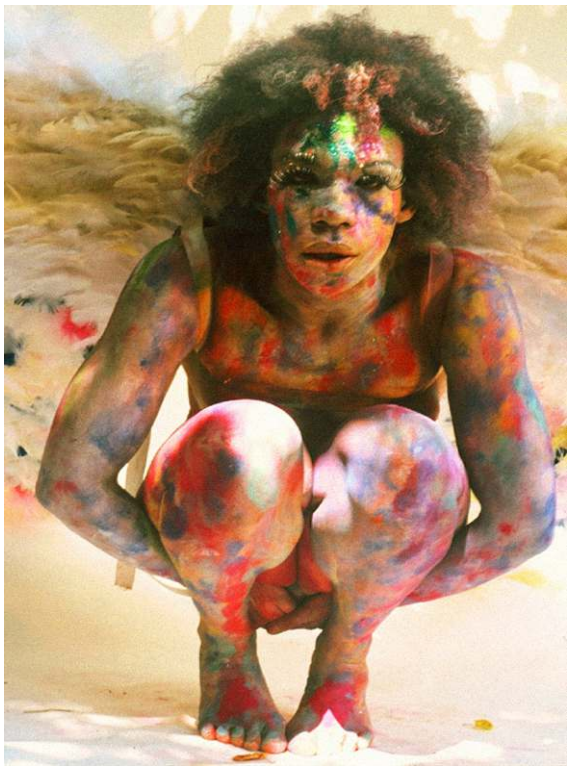
The Institut français and the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) are proud to introduce Julie Crenn's article: "Who Run the World? South-African Female Artists' Relationshipto History and Normativity." Julie Crenn is the first recipient of a new grant for writing and publishing a critical essay, which was created jointly by those two institutions in partnership with *Critique d'art*.

This grant is part of a new direction taken by the Institut français in the field of visual arts, in partnership with the Artistic Creation department of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication. It aims to help budding French writers and researchers specialised in contemporary art emerge on the international scene. The goal is not only to make the content of French research more visible but also to encourage the circulation of themes, essays and ideas. This is why the support program created by the Institut français and the INHA encourages the writers' mobility as well as the circulation and the translation of their articles.

The writing and publishing grant is part of this new program, and was launched with a call for applications in December 2015. With the grant, Julie Crenn was able to travel to South Africa in July 2016 to study the African art scenes from the viewpoint of female artists, in keeping with her research on feminist and postcolonial practices. Julie Crenn is an art historian, critic and curator and she is representative of the new generation of researchers who are committed to writing an alternative history of artistic practices on a global scale, taking into account individuals or groups that were traditionally

marginalised. It seeks to go beyond the multiculturalist essentialism that has sometimes affected postmodernist interpretative frameworks, offering in its place a complex take on these identities understood in their hybridity and their fluidity, which is precisely characteristic of contemporaneity.

Larisa Dryansky, research adviserin Contemporary Art History, INHA (2014-2016) and Vincent Gonzalvez, Institut français



Tracey Rose, *Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1 – The Messenger*, 2003 © Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery

> "Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture."
> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor, 2012)

1 Even though artistic and critical territories tend to reach out more and more to all geographical and cultural areas, an undeniably predominant position is given to Western, White female artists. "Whatever the quality of the artistic production, when we look down the line of the generations and movements, women artists have always been underrepresented, and black women artists have been a minority in this minority. Nor has this changed significantly today. The small minority – when compared to their male counterparts – of women artists who are acclaimed in different arenas of the art world should not blind us to the fact that patriarchy and sexism are still very much operative. Moreover, the cultural bias, combined with the lack of knowledge of and interest in cultural settings foreign to the Euro-American heritage, places the work of African women artists in a precarious corner of the global art scene."[1] In 2007, two major exhibitions were organised in the United States: *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art) and *Global Feminisms* (New York: Brooklyn Museum).[2] The first was curated by Connie Butler and recounted the history of the feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s, the latter by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin. It showed artworks by female artists active from the 1990s to the 2000s. As well as its

militant and contemporary characteristics, *Global Feminisms* also displayed a strong desire to break with Eurocentrism. The curators created a dialogue between the works of such artists as Pipilotti Rist, Lida Abdul, Hiroko Okada, Ingrid Mwangi, Miwa Yanagi, Pilar Albarracin, Tracey Rose, Lin Tianmiao, Dayanita Singh, Tania Bruguera, Béatrice Cussol, Ghada Amer, Yin Xiuzhen, Michèle Magéma and Tracey Emin. Such a pluralistic dialogue is still all too rare.

2 Though some exhibitions that are exclusively made up of artworks by female artists may be devoted to a specific theme or technique, others take on a more intersectional (gender, race and class)[3] reading. Exhibitions dedicated to female African artists and/or to the African diaspora are on a strong increase in Europe. Three of these exhibitions are particularly noteworthy. In 2014, Christine Eyene curated *Where We're at! Other Voices on Gender* at BOZAR (Brussels).[4] The artworks were mainly photographs and video, and dealt with questions of gender and sexual orientation from the perspective of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. *Body Talk: Féminisme, sexualité et corps*[5] was also held in Brussels, at the Wiels, and was curated by Koyo Kouoh, mostly showing the development, traces and recordings of the performance work of six African artists. The display of works by Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Marcia Kure, Miriam Syowia Kyambi, Valérie Oka, Tracey Rose and Billie Zangewa asked the following questions: "What is the exposed body of the black African woman? Is it the supreme object of patriarchal sacrifice? Is it the sacred, stained body, transgressing the boundaries of race and gender in the way it stages, incorporates and embodies history? Is it all the above?"[6] Orlando Britto Jinorio curated *Lucy's Iris* at the MUSAC in León in the continuity of this project. *Lucy's Iris* was a group exhibition that brought together 21 female artists from Africa or the African diaspora.[7] The curator's argument was born of an observation on the choice of name for the woman nicknamed "the grandmother of humanity," Lucy. Her remains, discovered in 1974 in Ethiopia, were named after the Beatles' song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,* which was constantly played on the radio at the time. Thus the body of our African common ancestor bears a Western name, which for Orlando Britto Jinorio is yet another colonial act of violence, because her history is concealed, reformulated and reclaimed. From there, he posits that female artists from Africa and/or the African diaspora are also denied a voice because of the invisibility of their work. Their discourse can and must no longer be hidden away. *Lucy's Iris* tackled the issues of colonial history, religions, female bodies, love, violence, illness, injustice and anger. By merging personal and collective experiences, the artists deal with a combination of oppressions and assignationsin order to give a new reading of the patriarchal system and to reclaim their bodies and their history.

3 *Where We're at!, Body Talk* and *Lucy's Iris* were the three exhibitions at the starting point of my reflections about not only the new visibility of female artists from Africa and/or the African diaspora, but also the discourses, messages and thoughts that structure their artistic practices. Though issues of intersectionality are predominant, the artists featured in these three exhibitions also give an important role to the critical reconsideration of female bodies by female artists, thus trying to abolish the stereotypical vision of female bodies that is theorised and conveyed by men, of course, but also by women, because of their internalized sexism. The artists that I selected defend a concept that I will call the political feminine. In our patriarchy-dominated collective history, the political feminine conjoins two dichotomous notions: essentialism and materialism. The political feminine runs all through art history, from the paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi to pieces by Tracey Emin, the works of Frida Kahlo, Claude Cahun, Louise Bourgeois, Carol Rama,

Linder and Elke Krystufek. The political feminine posits a critical reflexion from the viewpoint of female experiences, female bodies, their representations and their reach in collective representations, without ever disparaging femaleness. These artists transform, manipulate and displace sexist, stereotypical and discriminatory discourses, shaping critical tools out of them. The concept of femaleness generates a new analysis of the multifarious territories of bodies, spirituality, freedom and violence. The political feminine generates an empowerment that helps reinvest and reclaim the physical and conceptual spaces that women have been kept away from for too long. This is why I decided to concentrate on the South-African scene, the liveliest in Africa since the 1990s. South Africa was particularly well represented in the aforementioned exhibitions, with works by Berni Searle, Jane Alexander, Tracey Rose, Billie Zangewa, Zanele Muholi, Cecilia Ferreira and Sue Williamson. Their notable presence in the exhibitions led me to Johannesburg and Cape Town, where I met the artists whose work was shown in the exhibitions, as well as a wider panel of artists, critics, art historians, gallery owners and museum directors. Together, we discussed issues of gender, intersectionality, and past and present history. These conversations helped me find a better understanding of the artistic, political and critical issues that are at play on this extremely lively scene. I will discuss these issues from the perspective of three main themes: history, the political feminine and the representation of black bodies.

4 **Purveyors of collective history**

5 The history of South Africa is built on violences that even today are neither solved or contained. Many artists choose to examine colonial history, analysing its visible consequences on contemporary society and denouncing its persisting racism, although the range of themes has widened in recent years. The apartheid, racism and sexism are crucial subjects because South African society has been traumatised. Artists transmit and decode their troubled collective history. The work of Jane Alexander (b. 1959) is typical of the South African scene. Since the 1980s, she has been developing a world in which strange, worrying, hybrid creatures move about. Through sculpture installations, photographs and photomontage, she deals with ante- and post-apartheid South African society, the brutality of racial segregation and its consequence on contemporary mentalities. Race relations play an important role in Alexander's practice, but so does the question of control. Surveillance, imprisonment and the manipulation of subjects create the monsters that inhabit her uncomfortable artistic territory. These moving figures are also to be found in the work of Minnette Vári (b. 1968), who transforms her face and body through technical means. The filmed image of her naked body is hybridised with images and sounds taken from television broadcasts from the end of the apartheid onwards. These multiplied, deformed and alienated bodies express extreme emotions (fright, brutality, euphoria) along with feelings of discomfort, trauma and shock.

6 Many artists choose to follow a storyline and to create a real-life or fictional character that enables them to reflect upon women's condition within the history and current affairs of South Africa. Senzeni Marasela (b. 1977) created a character named Theodora, that she uses to recount the experience of her own mother, who left her rural area near Cape Town after she got married, and came to live in Johannesburg. She was deeply traumatised by the violence of the apartheid during the 1960s. Marasela, wearing a traditional dress, retraces her mother's steps. She visits different historical sites, like the Apartheid Museum in Soweto, as well as places where her mother lived (*Theodora comes to Johannesburg*, 2005-2008). The photographs always show Theodora with her back turned

towards the viewer, facing her memories, her face eluding them. "Marasela cannot mimic her mother's experiences because she is of another generation marked so differently by South Africa's history. She can only re-create an imagination of her mother's stories, a kind of personal memorial image acknowledging apartheid as not just a physical brutalism, but as a continued mental violation."[8] Marasela also examines the relationships between physical and mental violence by exploring the tragic story of Sarah Baartman (also known as the "Hottentote Venus") in a series of watercolours and embroidered drawings. With red ink or red thread on a white background, she shows herself covering Sarah Baartman's naked body with a piece of fabric, expressing her desire to heal the wounds of collective history, whose main victims were (and still are) Black women. This idea is also very strong in the work of Ayana V. Jackson (b. 1977), who reclaims archive images from slave-trading Africa and the Southern United States. Her photographs, mostly self-portraits, transpose her body onto the body of the anonymous slaves, giving a new take on black history and its complicated narratives. Thus she reclaims a poorly written history that has not yet been come to terms with, whose repercussions still damage representations of Black persons, and particularly of Black women. Ayana V. Jackson does not present herself as a victim of history. Rather, she very consciously decides to fully embody it. Photographer and performance artist Lebohang Kganye (b. 1990) also reclaims photographs. Through the use of family archives, she visually transcribes a narrative that is at once personal and collective. Her *Ke Lafa Laka* project (which literally translates as "her history", "heiress") is made up of photomontages in which she superimposes her image to images of her mother. She reenacts the same scenes, immersing herself in her day-to-day life. She also personifies her grandfather, performing in hand-made cardboard scenery sets, dressed in a man's suit and hat. The cardboard scenery is covered with black and white archive pictures. Jeanne Mercier points out that the artist's personal history meets the country's history: "the history of families uprooted and resettled by the apartheid laws and the confiscation of their land. A history made of migrations through the country and temporary accommodation, bearing direct consequences on the identities of families (for example, the artist's family's name went from Khanye to Khanyi to Kganye)."[9] This exploration of South-African history by the artists discussed above leads to a reflexion on cultural identity as well as the different means needed to find and determine physical, critical and visual reclamation of this complex collective history.

7 **Political feminine**

8 Many female artists now avoid certain terms or themes for fear of reinforcing clichés or essentialism. Expressing ideas of femininity (a widely overused word nowadays), motherhood, the body, eroticism, desire, sexual orientation and violence both visible and invisible, can indeed be a dangerous endeavour if the critical discourse lacks in structure. These issues are regarded as traditional or classical, as belonging only to the feminine sphere. Though they may seem complaisant in their accommodation of essentialist views, these ideas can also be critical and political, becoming what I have termed the political feminine. Several artists have chosen to connect to their female cultural heritage, through the use of techniques and material belonging to representations of domesticity. For example, Billie Zangewa's (b. 1973) tapestries express her will to represent her own conception of contemporary African women: free, unapologetic, independent and modern. On large surfaces made of torn and reassembled pieces of silk, Billie Zangewa cuts up and reassembles silk fragments, a fabric traditionally associated with femininity,

the private sphere, and seduction. She shows women who are urban, strong, sensual, independent, trendy, confident and brilliant, opposing all stereotypes. Her work is based exclusively on images of her own body, occupying a space that is at once poetical and political. Her self-portraits represent a woman who is free, at ease in her environment, conscious of her status, her history and her role. She embroiders urban backdrops for these female figures: Paris, London, Johannesburg. Through Zangewa's consciousness of her body, history, memories and questions, her work acquires a certain narrative dimension. Frances Goodman (b. 1975), on the other hand, uses the very concept of femininity as an artistic material. She uses different media (sculpture, photography, installations, sonic installations) as well as objects that are usually linked to the "feminine" sphere: beads, fabric, embroidery, jewellery. From dresses to manicuredartificial nails,she reclaims these body decoration devices, that extend and accessorise it. They are connected with fashion and a number of physical codes and norms that can be extremely violent and oppressive towards women. For instance, Goodman creates organic-shaped sculptures made of many different coloured artificial nailsthat she assembles together. In this way she manipulates and diverts the glamorous and sexy appearance of her artwork, in order to construct a critical discourse that she launches against the patriarchy, as well as the media and advertising industries that support it. Turyia Magadlela (b. 1978) uses the same process, altering objects linked to privacy and the body: she gathers sheets, tights, stockings, underwear, cut-up clothes sewn together, creating patchworks with them. With nylon tights and cotton thread, she makes abstract compositions. The works from her *I Never Made Swan Lake* series (2015-) bring together tights of various shades (from lightest to darkest). The work is obviously a reference to the famous ballet, but also to the racial categories instituted during the Apartheid and still in effect, the assembled tights expressing a vision at once metaphorical and critical of different discriminations. At the heart of all these different practices, the alternative narratives attached to these materials linked to privacy creates critical and political perspectives that seriously question essentialist and sexist stereotypes.

9 **Overdetermined bodies**

10 "Part of what makes the black female body uncomfortable for audiences is the fact that it has been overdetermined for centuries. It carries a long history of abuse, and has been the object of multiple projections. It signifies too much, and audiences are pressed to understand the historical memories that two voices, at least, have inscribed on these bodies: the anthropo-scientific lexicon, and the silent, and at times obsessive, lexicon of desire and lust."[10] Many South African female artists work towards a new view and the reclamation of the bodies of Black and Coloured women. They thusly analyse the violence exerted on Black women throughout history, appropriating the means through which they are dispossessed from their bodies, their image and their voice. This alienating system is exposed in Mary Sibande's (b. 1982) sculptures and photographs. Her self-portraits draw on a critical analysis of the stereotypical representations of Black women since the colonial times. Sibande's mother and grandmother were servants to White families who, because they were unable to pronounce their names, gave them new Western names. This deprivation of identity is continued by Sibande, who names her fictional alter-ego Sophie. Sophie, who always wears a colonial-style servant's frock, has the artist's face. Her closed eyes conjure up the dreams of a limitless imagination in which Sophie is transformed into an expert rider, a magician, a middle-class woman, a

queen or a superhero. Sibande captures the moments when her character fantasises about her dream-life instead of working, when dreaming and projecting oneself become acts of resistance. Sibande's artworks function like monuments in honour of a shared history. Their metaphorical and poetic appearance actually conceal a strong political commitment. Tracey Rose (b. 1974) also makes a critical tool from her body. She is a major figure on the critical and militant scene, devising a visual language made of violence, *détournement* and subversion. She first came to the attention of the public with a series of performance pieces in which she explored and questioned the limits of her own body. Tracey Rose is part of the post-apartheid generation of artists. She grew up in an extremely violent environment that is implicitly ever-present in her work, where she represents her own questionings. Through performance, video, photography and painting she confronts colonial history, sexism and racism with her own body. In 1997 she created *Span I* and *Span II* for the second Johannesburg Biennial, in which, locked in a glass case, she displayed her body to the visitors. Naked, her head shaven, she sat on a television set knitting her own hair. The television screen showed a close-up view of a naked reclining woman: a classical vision in art history, in which the naked woman, the painter's model, offers up her body to the eyes of the visitors. However, when she submits her own body to the public, naked and sat upon a stereotypical artistic version of women, Rose offers a subversive and political alternative to the representation of women's bodies. In this instance, she controls her image and her body.

11 Militant art is at the heart of South African contemporary art. Since the 1960s, art (and especially photography) plays a political role: providing evidence, denouncing and revealing social situations or political facts. The photographs of Zanele Muholi (b. 1972) continue this militant and radical tradition. Since the beginning of the 2000s, she has been developing a body of work based on her experience as a woman, as a Black woman, and as a Black lesbian South African woman. She centres her work on the living conditions of Black lesbian women and transgendered persons, a group she calls the Black Queers. She sheds light on the LGBT community, that South African society stifles, victimises, rapes and kills, because its members are different and transgress patriarchal traditions. Muholi constantly challenges traditions and morality through her militant and uncompromising documentary work. She regards her portraits and self-portraits as the archives of this community, that falls victim to everyday violence. Muholi's work has influenced new forms of practice and political commitment within the younger generation of artists. In Cape Town, I met the eleven members of IQhiya, a feminist group of angry young Black female artists. Together and/or separately, they conduct an analysis at once materialist and spiritual of the role, the position and the representation of Black women.[11] They draw on the principles of sisterhood, in which mutual aid, solidarity, attentiveness and discussion rule. "We are IQhiya – young black women who collided paths in the institution. We make art. There is a lot to say that wouldn't fit into this fold up, and it's debatable whether you are paying attention in any case – because blackness and womanness is *absentness*."[12] Together, they stage performances as well as other public actions that question a system corrupted by crippling patriarchal traditions and the dispossession of women's voices. Rejecting silence and submissiveness, they explore and personify body languages drawn from ancient rites or protest movements. Resistance and emancipation are at the heart of their collective and individual practices.

12 **Feminism/Womanism**

13 "Then an academic, a Nigerian woman, told me that feminism was not our culture, that feminism was un-African and I was only calling myself a feminist because I had been influenced by Western books.[...] Anyway, since feminism was un-African, I decided I would now call myself a Happy African Feminist."[13]

14 Since the 1960s, the various feminist struggles have intersected and interacted, but remain different. The various conversations I conducted in Joburg and Cape Town marked out the boundaries of feminist territory and drew two very different paths: Black (African) feminism and White (European-American) feminism. "A lot has been written about the divide between Western feminism and feminism in Africa. One of the major critiques foregrounded by African feminists is that Western feminism has done little to understand the cultural specificities at play in the global struggle for liberation from male dominated regimes. In addition, African women tended to see Western feminism as being anti-man and anti-birth, and as committed to establishing female homosexuality as a contentious issue. African feminism, conversely, is perceived to be pro-man, pro-marriage, pro-natal and definitely heterosexual. In other words, a woman's independence and freedom is not achieved at the costs of losing the social status that marriage and motherhood provides."[14] Black female artists in their twenties take on a radical position, by adhering to womanism, a concept that appeared in 1979 in a poem by Alice Walker called *Coming Apart*:"The wife has never considered herself a feminist – though she is, of course, a 'womanist'. A 'womanist' is a feminist, only more common."[15] This trend is seen as less authoritarian and more inclusive. Buhlebezwe Siwani (IQhyia) considers it as crucially important. "Feminism protects and supports the liberal ideas of white feminisms; it does not in its action support women of colour. In the past it writes and speaks for all from a white perspective. It cannot speak to the ideals and philosophies of black women all over the world, as our experiences may be collective experiences as women but black women and white women do not share the same collective experience, womanism seeks to disrupt this idea. I am womanist, as a young black female, I sometimes find myself oppressed and ostracized by feminist ideas and behaviour, this is because they do not speak for me, and they speak to and for whiteness, feminine whiteness that lends itself to privilege. Black bodies have never been privileged; this is exactly why I identify myself as a womanist."[16] The dissension between feminism and womanism dates back from the 1960s. Though what is essentially at stake is not the same for each group, feminist artists as a whole, be they African or Western, all take part in the same struggle: including women in the historical narrative, in order to deconstruct sexism and the violence it constantly generates. But despite evolutions in their theories, these two currents seem irreconcilable.[17]

Lebohang Kganye, *kwana Germiston, bosiu I*, 2012 © Lebohang Kganye, Courtesy Afronova Gallery

NOTES

1. Kouoh, Koyo. « Body Talk: Feminism, Sexuality and the Body », *Body Talk*, Dakar: RAW Material Company; Metz: 49 Nord 6 Est; Lunds: Lunds konsthall; Bruxelles: Wiels, 2015, p. 11

2. *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (4 March-16 July 2007), Los Angeles: MOCA. *Global Feminisms* (23 March-1st July 2007), New York: Brooklyn Museum

3. The term "race" and "racial" must be understood in the context of colonial and Black history. The exhibitions mentioned above all study the issue of intersectionality: sex, race, class. This three-fold oppression was analysed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. See Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics",*University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989,p. 139-67

4. *Where We're At! Other Voices on Gender* (18 June-31 August 2014), Brussels: BOZAR

5. *Body Talk : féminisme, sexualité et corps* (14 February-3 May 2015), Brussels: Wiels. The exhibition was subsequently shown at the Lunds Konsthall in Lund, from 30 May to 29 September 2015, and at 49 Nord 6 Est—FRAC Lorraine in Metz from 30 October 2015 to 17 January 2016.

6. Kouoh, Koyo, "Body Talk: Feminism, Sexuality and the Body ", *Body Talk,Op. cit.*, p. 13

7. *Lucy's Iris: Contemporary African Women Artists* (30 January-12 June 2016), León: MUSAC. The exhibition then traveled to the Musée départemental d'art contemporain de Rochechouart, from 7 July to 15 December 2016 (curated by Orlando Britto Jinorio and Annabelle Ténèze).

8. Khan, Sharlene. *Postconial Masquerading: A Critical Analysis of Masquerading Strategies in the Artworks of Contemporary South African Visual Artists—Anton Kannemeyer, Tracey Rose, Mary Sibande, Senzeni Marasela and Nandipha Mtambo*, London: Goldsmith, University of London, 2014, p. 99

9. Mercier, Jeanne. « Lebohang Kganye – Ke Lefa Laka », in *L'Œil de la Photographie*, 13 October 2014. Online : http://www.loeildelaphotographie.com/fr/2014/10/13/article/26323/lebohang-kganye-ke-lefa-laka/

10. Kouoh, Koyo, "Body Talk: Feminism, Sexuality and the Body", *Body Talk,Op. cit.*, p. 12

11. IQhiya : Thuli Gamedze, Lungsiwa Gqunta, Bronwyn Katz, Bonolo Kavula, Matlhogonolo Kelapile, Pinky Mayeng, Thandiwe Msebenzi, Sethembile Msezane, Sisipho Ngodwana, Buhlebezwe Siwani. More information at : https://www.facebook.com/iqhiya/

12. IQhiya. « Uncovering a Discourse Centered on the Voices of Black Women ». Self-produced journal, 2016

13. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminists*, New York: Anchor, 2012

14. Kouoh, Koyo, "Body Talk: Feminism, Sexuality and the Body", *Body Talk,Op. cit.*, p. 13

15. Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Inc, 1983

16. Siwani, Buhlebezwe. « Womanism ». Unpublished text sent by the author, 8 August 2016.

17. This schism in feminism will be the subject of my next research project, taking me back to South Africa to prolong and present my reflexion through a new essay and an exhibition.