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Response to Amadiume - 2

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Response

Ruthann Godollei

Amadiume's presentation raises the question, "Why does American culture emphasize personal 'liberty' over, say, community or family?" Many Americans will chuckle and say it is in our Declaration of Independence after all, along with the Pursuit of Happiness. The recent PBS television series *Liberty* (produced here in the Twin Cities) featured an interview with *Time* magazine's Paris bureau chief and she indicated that while both the French and American Revolutions emphasized Liberty, the French also included *Fraternité* and *Égalité*, Brotherhood and Equality.

Now what might this mean for Sisterhood *sans* Equality once a totalizing capitalism has had two hundred years of building a culture? When someone figures out how to take your liberty from you and sell it back to you, ongoing profits are nearly perpetually assured at the expense of women's self-esteem and the ability to aid each other.

Amadiume rightly states that white Western feminists seem inexplicably able to ignore larger, more pressing, and even self-identified concerns expressed by African women. Particularly ignored are economic realities: conditions of starvation; badly conceived, often externally imposed economic programs; lack of shelter and education; not to mention epidemics and genocide—the basics. Instead, the focus is misplaced on interpersonal relationships and the confusion of Western ideas about sex and romantic love with "freedom"!

This is unfortunately becoming clearer to me as I study commodity culture as a shaping force in my own society. I team-taught a marvelous course with Professor Michal McCall in Sociology called Images in Consumer Society. The research we did for this course had a deep impact on me as an artist, a feminist, and an educator. I have come to believe that the enormous pressures commercial media images have brought to bear on women have so distorted their views of themselves that they can be induced to ignore the basics of even their own self-interest and self-preservation. Even worse, this distorted mirror is circulated around the world on a vast scale. Movies and television are one of America's topmost exports today. There is little chance for balance and few alternative images make it to the fore. Xenophobic mainstream American media rarely shows the varied lives of women from other countries. If you watch American television, African women are

largely invisible. The Western media projects women as valuable only insofar as they are able to attract men. This construct is embodied in an image of the white, thin, young, presumed heterosexual female with access to money to consume products. She either has her own money or the ability to attract a man who will give it to her. She is portrayed as only interested in sex and consumption.¹

As an example, the popular television show *Sex and the City* features supposedly liberated women “daring” to have sexual adventures. The characters are all white or white-like heterosexuals with money and free time on their hands. When their personal sexual encounters don’t result in satisfying romantic ideals (surprise), the characters console themselves with food (but not too much food) and buying shoes. The show’s web site describes the lead character in the following way, “And no matter what the occasion, Carrie treads in strappy stiletto heels. As for accessories, Carrie is armed with the Fendi baguette bag and she never takes off her signature gold nameplate necklace with a Playboy bunny charm.”²

Seeing the show might make one wonder, what do these women do? What do they make of their lives? Where is any sense of obligation to contribute to their world? The useless ornamental female role once imposed, for example, on Victorian upper class women has been altered to a voluntary life-position and held up as an ideal. This image, packaged and exported, implicitly attempts to define all women’s new presumed goals in life.

I want to make clear that I am not objecting to sex in some prudish way. I’m objecting to its being packaged and sold and interfering with my own and other women’s ability to negotiate other kinds of images and lives for ourselves.

As Jacobson and Mazur point out, “The problem is that repression has been replaced by exploitation—the result is a limited view of sexuality as commodity.”³ In a 1996 conference held in Great Britain on the work of Frantz Fanon, titled *The Fact of Blackness*, Kobena Mercer commented, “My sense is that questions of sexuality have come to mark the interior limits of decolonization, where the Utopian project of liberation has come to grief.”⁴ The problematic message is that if you are not those things that the consumer media tells you (over and over) are definitionally attractive or sexy, then you are “worthless.”

For some people, of course, being white, heterosexual, etc., is a physical impossibility, never mind whether one might even want to ascribe to those constructs and all they entail. (And I’m not even going

to get into issues of sexuality and exotic *otherness* here, although it is a huge area for discussion.) What one needs, in fact, has been irrevocably pushed aside in consumer society and replaced by an insidious system of artificially created wants or deficits. Consumers must be kept perpetually insecure in order to buy more and more products.⁵

Wants and desires are mistaken for needs. "Your lips need underwear," says one magazine ad. Cosmetics are often marketed as "essential." The language is imperative and coercive. The staggering figures surrounding the excesses of the beauty industry could float whole small countries. In 1995, Jacobsen and Mazur gave some statistics for consumer spending:

\$33 billion on weight loss products.

\$20 billion on anti-aging products.

\$7 billion on other cosmetics.

\$300 million on cosmetic surgery.⁶

This brings me to a current television ad for a Twin Cities plastic surgeon. It depicts Rubens' *The Three Graces* from 1639. This oil painting, now in the Prado Museum, Madrid, portrays three large, nude, fat-dimpled white women, displayed, as John Berger would say, front, side, and back for optimal viewing pleasure by an implied male audience.⁷ Large women from European-based societies resisting the cultural imperative to thinness as the only definition of attractiveness used to say, "I'm Rubenesque." Now, through the wonders of computer graphics, the TV commercial for plastic surgery magically morphs the *Three Graces* into skinny waifs. In an instant, a nearly four hundred year old celebration of round-formed women is evaporated. Subtextually, that ad is the harrowing hound for women who naively might have thought there was a way to feel okay about their natural selves should they not conform. I'm reminded of the Borg motto, "Resistance is Futile."

Worse, the commercial hides the fact that it is promoting a process of physically cutting up a woman's body, mutilating by knife for the purpose of conforming to a culture's standards. Isn't it ironic for Western feminists to be investigating female genital mutilation in Africa whilst ignoring culturally encouraged carving on women's bodies here? And here women don't need to be held down forcibly to submit

to the process. They pay high fees and walk in “voluntarily.” Anesthesia, knives, scars, pain, and surgical complications are never mentioned by the ads.

Other women help enforce the cultural code of thinness by critiquing and comparing. It is insidious and pervasive. An even more prevalent form of bodily mutilation in my culture is self-starvation. In reading Amadiume’s essay, I imagined a funny inversion where teams of concerned African feminists bring loads of chocolate pie for the anorexics of America. In fact, the Cuban government recently proposed sending its surplus doctors to rural American areas where U.S. doctors apparently have little interest (or potential profits) in working.⁸ This isn’t funny.

The inversions here which induce women and men to ignore their bodily needs, their mental needs, their emotional needs, their need for community, and their community’s needs — instead conforming to a purposely unattainable media ideal — are performed in the name of freedom, the free market, and personal choices.

It isn’t that women have not in the past or are not now depicting themselves in all their diversity. Racial, ethnic, class, age, and sexual orientation differences are being portrayed in various contemporary art forms. It is rather that depictions other than the presumed norm are not well funded, are not seen by the many, or, when seen, are dismissible by the sheer volume of the tutelary examples from the mainstream.

Americans are trained to ignore what is in front of their own eyes. Wooley states that 75% of college age women in a 1984 study felt they were too fat, while only 25% could be considered medically overweight.⁹ Women are in training to think of their bodies, as is, as all wrong.

Now to the idea of the artist in my culture. After a brief boom of sorts in the late 1980s, flirting with marketability and profitability of “alternative” arts, mainstream culture decided it had little use for artists, particularly those out to define identity for themselves. Little wonder that once a few women, people of color, and self-identified homosexuals received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the NEA was promptly grossly underfunded in a massive backlash. To me, it’s a distressing symptom of a society untrained to handle reality,

one that can't see what its artists do and say and are. The public can't see, much less value, the ideas of a few citizens trying to express real struggles of real (even tax-paying!) populations, just not the ones you see on TV.

For the Columbian Quincentennial, Coco Fusco eloquently dressed in "native drag," kitschy leopard print, fake grass skirt, etc., in order to critique both historic colonial and current colonizing categorizations. The museum-going public, trained to see unreal dehumanizing stereotypes and tropes of *otherness* as "real," couldn't get the joke and mistook the Couple in the Cage for "authentic natives."¹⁰ It was appalling and yet a good gauge of the extent of socialization in the audience. Much of the population, therefore, must not be seeing the bars or limitations on their own imaginations, superseded by the limited imaginary parameters of the mass media.

I see a liberatory possibility in artwork, not as socialist realist exemplars of correct thought but as disruptive, resistive, descriptive, diverse actions in light of an increasing pressure towards a homogeneous experience. bell hooks quotes Frantz Fanon saying, "O my body, make me a man who always questions," and she brings up the idea of women's bodies leading them to question. She then suggests that feminist thinking might transform one's understanding of what the body questions.¹¹

I'm not trying to essentialize women to their bodies. I'm suggesting bodies and minds in my culture are in need of decolonization as much as anywhere, with the colonizing forces opaque, naturalized, and pervasive. Even a woman imagining she sees through media colonization has to expend energy fighting it off, energy perhaps better spent in other ways.

Notes

1. Jacobsen and Mazur 1995, p. 81.
2. 2000, http://www.hbo.com/city/cmp/carrie_and_company.html.
3. Jacobsen and Mazur, p. 87.
4. Read et. al. 1996, p. 116.
5. Williamson 1986.
6. Jacobsen and Mazur.
7. Berger 1977, p. 55.
8. Calzon 2000.
9. Wooley 1984.
10. Fusco 1995, p. 53.
11. Read et. al., p. 82.

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