

# Editorial: Expanding Methodological, Literary and Cultural Frontiers within Feminist studies of Religion

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*Editor*

In this issue of the AJGR our contributors continue to explore, document and reflect on the multiple and varied ways that religion and gender intersect in, and beyond the context of Africa. It contains scholarly reflections that preoccupy feminists across geographical contexts, disciplinary borders, theoretical boundaries and methodological frontiers. Our contributors address the complex question of how religion can either, (though often simultaneously), shape positive and negative norms related to gender. In this issue, this complexity is explored through various social and geographical contexts, as well as an array of texts - historical, literary, lived, and sacred.

Writing about Sarah Palin's vice presidential nomination in 2008, Gloria Steinem declared: "Feminism has never been about getting a job for one woman. It's about making life more fair for women everywhere. It's not about a piece of the existing pie; there are too many of us for that. It's about baking a new pie."<sup>1</sup> While Steinem was speaking specifically about women in American politics, this applies to what many of us have felt in our collective feminist gut about mainstream academia too - apart from the pie being too small, the piece of pie that we get is often simply unpalatable. We need to bake a new pie! What are the ingredients for such a pie, and how does it look, taste and feel? Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, scholar-artist-

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Steinem. "Palin: Wrong woman, wrong message." *The Los Angeles Times*, September 2008.

activist, showcases the possibilities of both form and content, in her piece "[In] Searching Our Mothers' Archives: Building *Umi's Archive* through Mourning Work."

Originally submitted as a "praxis" piece for the journal because of the ways in which Abdul Khabeer explores the creative and the speculative within historical archives, we were prompted by one of the peer reviewers to make this piece one of our "mainstream" articles, precisely because we align ourselves as a journal, with Abdul Khabeer's central contention that "Black feminist scholarship provokes us to reimagine archives in creative and speculative ways." Drawing on the physical archive and the digital space of an exhibition series curated by the author, Abdul Khabeer's article not only weaves together the important narrative of her *Umi*, Amina Amatul Haqq, but she surfaces her method of representation and analysis of the archive, as a means to interrogate how we do Black feminist work in the academy. She concludes that,

"... though intimacy gives access to knowledge, it is not totalizing. It does not give you access to everything there is to be known because, as we know, our knowledge, wherever we acquire it, is always partial. However, intimacy does provide a more dynamic knowing. In colonial epistemologies, we are only supposed to approach our work with the "eye of a scholar" and that is what makes it legitimate research, valuable, and the hallmark of the Euro-American intellectual tradition. However, I have found using only one lens inhibits understanding. In fact, this project is at its best when I am all of those things at the same time, scholar, activist-artist, and child, opening up knowledge rather than foreclosing it as "objectivity" discourse presumes."

Abdul Khabeer's piece, in both content and form, provides a powerful and poignant challenge to the systems of knowledge-making, which we are, as feminist scholars, simultaneously implicated in, and contribute to. It is certainly a fitting way to open this issue of the journal.

In many ways, representation and analysis of the kind offered by Abdul Khabeer, constitutes an exercise in 'epistemic risk.' This is a subject that Pumla Gqola picks up in her article: "Religious Mapping, Epistemic Risk and Archival Adventure in Athambile Masola's *Ilifa*." Like Abdul Khabeer, Gqola too is asking key questions about archives and power, through an examination of Masola's debut collection of poetry and her "uses of Christian vocabularies to amplify multigenerational African (women's) contribution to South Africa's intellectual and creative archives." Gqola argues that "[W]hereas all deliberate products of the imagination are an encounter with risk, additional danger attaches to a poetry project in which a contemporary African feminist attempts to write herself into a vanishing tradition." Gqola shows the ways in which Masola not just contributes to African literature, but how she linguistically subverts the missionary project of African literacy through this collection in isiXhosa, as well as how she theoretically (perhaps even theologically) punctures missionary attempts to create the ideal "Victorian-native" woman, through her feminist imaginative ends.

Continuing with the theme of missionary initiatives, in the third article, "Making Good Women: The bequeaths of colonial encounters in the making of the Clergy Wife in Ghana" the trope of the "good woman" is explored via the making of the "clergy wife" position in Ghana. Abene Kyere expands the literature on how missionary enterprises created the "ideal" Christian woman, to show how the making of the position of "clergy wife" (CW) set a utopian standard that remains to this day. The article traces "the complex historical 'formation' of the position of the CW in Ghana by showing that the education the girls received was gendered and domestic. While it might not have been a particularly enviable position to be a CW in the West, the Ghanaian case tells a different story," Kyere argues. She concludes that "[I]t was, indeed, a privilege for girls or young women to be recommended for the position. However, the position was consciously created through a Western-gendered ideology of expected roles and positions for men and women. A CW was, thus, expected to fulfill the missionary and Western concept of acceptable womanhood."

While Kyere seems to suggest that the Ghanaian clergy wife trope was 'created' and 'made' by western Christian missionary ideals, leaving little room for women's agency, Elorm Stiles-Ocran in her article, "Theology and Women's Agency in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence" demonstrates how women's agency comes to the fore, in a different situational context. Challenging the literature that seems to govern studies on IPV that "cultural norms and religion sustain women's experiences of IPV," Stiles-Ocran, drawing on "constructivist grounded theory to inductively analyze the stories of thirteen abused Christian women in a mainline church in southern Ghana," assembles and posits a more nuanced account of the relationship between theological beliefs and IPV. While not denying how "multiple systems, including informal social support networks, constrain survivors" she also demonstrates how the personal faith and individually constructed theologies of survivors, "serve as catalysts to their self-enactments and emerging agency, concluding that " these findings provide nuance to existing (and contested) conceptions of agency."

Exploring a different type of agency, that could arguably be considered a textual agency, Gertrud Tönsing, in her article "Losing the Lost Coin: Gender Doublets in the Synoptic Tradition," critically examines a literary tradition of parable gender doublets in the bible. She convincingly argues for the importance of placing such narratives (for example the woman with the lost coin, or the woman baking with leaven), within the historical Jesus tradition as gender parable doublets, since it likely demonstrates an intention to include historically female and male lived experiences within didactic illustrations. Notwithstanding the gender-essentialist framing of these roles, the inclusion of tasks traditionally designated "female" to illustrate 'higher' spiritual values about the kingdom of God within the historical Jesus tradition makes a difference to the authority such texts are granted in contemporary societies. In contexts where the bible is regarded as a sacred text authorising contemporary gendered norms, the deliberate

and conscious construction of these gendered doublets provides emancipatory possibilities for contemporary Christian women, which effectively challenge the later epistle instructions that oppose women's leadership and participation.

Moving from biblical mandates that prohibit women's full religious participation and leadership, in the final piece in this issue, Sonene Nyawo's article, "Deprivation of Land Tenure to Daughters of Mother Earth: The Case of Eswatini" shows how cultural mandates also limit and control women's access to economic autonomy and leadership. She demonstrates that "under Swazi law and custom, a woman can only be granted land rights by the chief through her husband, male relatives, or male children." Through three case studies, Nyawo's article reveals the limited utility of legislation which grant women equal access to property rights, in contexts where social and cultural norms dominate women's acquisition to such rights. The tension between legislative change and cultural gendered norms are once again brought to the fore in Nyawo's piece and indicates the ongoing challenges which must be taken up in feminist activist and academic spaces.

Overall, the contributions in this issue of the journal continues to expand the frontiers of scholarship at the intersections of the study of religion and gender. Cultural, social, literary, and religious scholarly landscapes are creatively and critically explored, to reveal how deep theorizing and intellectual reflection are key to the ongoing work of crafting emancipatory gendered conditions.