

## Editorial

### Sarojini Nadar<sup>1</sup> and Fatima Seedat<sup>2</sup>

Sex, text, food and bodies – offers a good summary of the key themes in the articles presented in this issue of the *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*. While developing bodies of knowledge within the fields of gender and religion in Africa is the main focus of this journal, in this issue, the focus is also on a critical interrogation of real bodies – bodies which are sexed, bodies which need real sustenance, bodies which are shaped by religious and cultural norms, and bodies which are circumscribed by the gendered norms of ancient sacred texts as well as contemporary media texts.

Several feminist scholars have pointed out that the provision of daily sustenance for the bodies of children and families, as well as other labour conventionally provided by women, is often missed in the literature that describes the relationship between labour and economy. While the work involved in the provision of food is largely ignored or downplayed in mainstream economic statistics, it has certainly not been adequately interrogated within the fields of theology and religion. In her article “Extending the Table: Eucharist as a Model for Feminist Food Justice”, Elizabeth Getman explores the space of the Eucharist as a site to explore “the link between the ritual of communion and the practice of feeding real bodies, real food.” Contextualised within studies on food security and feminist theology, this article makes a case for moving beyond the church charity models of food provision towards a concept of food justice that reclaims the kitchen “as a sacred space in which to practice theological action.” Getman is careful to note that reclaiming this space does not indicate a biologically essentialist alignment with the popular adage, “a woman’s place is in the kitchen” but instead argues

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<sup>2</sup> Fatima Seedat (PhD Islamic Law, McGill) holds a Senior Lectureship in Gender Studies at the School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Cape Town (UCT) where her long term project is concerned with the convergence of historical and traditional constructions of sex difference with contemporary gender norms and legal paradigms.

that a commitment to food justice requires a shift in thinking beyond gender binaries.

Recognising that gender binaries are often constructed and maintained by and within sacred texts, in his article “Paul, the ‘Real’ Man: Constructions and Representations of Masculinity in 1 Corinthians”, Johnathan Jodamus critically interrogates how masculinity is constructed within the text of 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5. While the text on the surface may be seen to celebrate the apparent vulnerable masculinity which Paul displays; on the contrary, through the method of socio-rhetorical interpretation, and a critical gendered lens, Jodamus shows that the text actually belies a more powerful masculinity that entrenches rather than subverts the prevailing gendered norms. He cautions scholars working within a liberation paradigm and who reach for facile models of “redemptive masculinities” within the biblical text that they should not overestimate the performativity of biblical discourse in addressing issues of toxic masculinities. As one reviewer points out: “This is especially the case where contexts exist attributing almost magical quality to the performativity of biblical discourses, since an exaggerated appropriation may actually evoke serious alternative problematics.” The importance of nuance within biblical interpretation even within or perhaps especially within gendered readings of the text is encouraged.

The subject of nuance is picked up in the article by Megan Robertson which reviews various scholarly contributions at the intersections of queer sexuality and religion. Robertson helpfully categorises the literature into three themes: the irreconcilable contradiction, negotiating sexuality and religion, and transformative queer religiosity. It is within the latter two more nuanced trajectories of scholarship that Robertson finds particular value especially within the context of calls for more decolonised ways of producing knowledge. When viewed through a decolonial lens, one is compelled to look for paradigms beyond those which conceptualise Africa as a site of irredeemable patriarchy and queer-phobia. This critical review of scholarship, going beyond the irreconcilable contradiction, is therefore an important contribution for scholars wanting to research in this field, particularly in Africa.

Sustaining the value of a critical review of scholarship, Saras Reddy and Thobeka Khubisa explore the possible theoretical framings available to a study of women in bodybuilding, adding valuable nuance to the field by introducing religion and culture as a fresh analytic lens. Operations on the body – intense training schedules, regulated diet regimes, and high intensity competition preparation – come under the scrutiny of cultural and religious norms. Women who pursue body building are “viewed as

transgressing or breaking away from the cultural constructs of gender and how women's bodies are supposed to be; [namely] their embodiment of muscle". The agential activity involved in body building also challenges "historical understandings of the black female body; as sexualised and warranting regulation". The juxtaposition of theoretical framings of the body that is inscribed by identity, the performative body, government of the body, and the body as an evolving 'project', highlight potentially rich theoretical texture available in the study of women's bodybuilding subcultures. The authors argue that women's bodybuilding illustrates the ways in which bodies are a "cultural artefact" policed by historical and contemporary norms, and women's bodybuilding subcultures enter into these sites of bodily production not only to "celebrate the female body" but also to "manipulate their bodies" outside of patriarchal limitations.

Osman and Shaikh remain in the realm of body politics, this time examining queerphobia, homonationalism and intersectionality in local South African politics of queerness. They draw on Jasbir K. Puar's analytic of the regulatory effect of "the authoritative and universal queer archetype" built upon "a false binary" between queer and Muslim. Through an analysis of the work, politics and theology of *The Inner Circle*, they point to the ways in which queer politics troubles the "heteronormativity within the 'mainstream' Muslim community in the Cape". They demonstrate the ways in which the TIC simultaneously "resists the regulatory framework of queerness" and, through participation in the Cape Town Pride March which represents an exclusionary elite politics, also becomes "complicit with such a regulatory neoliberal formation". Importantly, the work of TIC is supported through progressive interpretations and a framework of Muslim liberation theology, "collective resource(s) to nourish Queer Muslims".

Similarly, Ismail and Seedat's work also relates to the connection between historical and contemporary religious expressions. In this case they explore the online fatwa platform of a South African based jurist, for the ways in which petitioners and muftis co-construct a juristic discourse on sexuality in marriage. Through the fatwa case studies on imam.com of Mufti Ismail Desai, they explore how Muslim adherents in minority contexts navigate "the dissonance between contemporary expectations of marriage and sexual intimacy characterised by mutuality and reciprocity and fiqh-based gender asymmetrical norms", to produce current sexual norms. Using a feminist poststructural lens, Ismail and Seedat identify five strategies that illustrate a move toward an "ethical discourse centred on mutuality". Desai, they argue, combines the historical legal imperative to preserve marriage in minority Muslim

contexts where marriage is conceptualised through ideas of mutuality, “female agency and choice”, thus constructing a narrative of sexual communication and benevolent masculinity. In their formulation of questions and responses, Ismail and Seedat suggest that petitioners and muftis may also be presenting “possible future reformulations of an ethics of marriage as mutuality and wellbeing”.

Staying with contemporary media texts, Scharnick-Udemans explores the ways in which bodies of knowledge are erased or circumscribed from mainstream knowledge production, particularly in the area of media and religion. She reviews a critical corpus of work by feminist scholars who have recognised this absence and have made cases for “the importance of gender’s inclusion and centralisation [in] the interdisciplinary study of religion and media.” Using a South African contemporary case study of pastors who encourage “grass-eating” and “petrol-drinking” of their female parishioners, the author shows the importance of an intersectional lens in reviewing the interdisciplinary production of knowledge on religion and media, because while the absence of gendered bodies of knowledge seem to be theorised and denounced, a similar absence of Africa as both an epistemological and a conversational partner is left unspoken of.

Between the bodies of petitioners, the words of muftis, the utterances of African prophets, the diets of bodybuilders, the politics of homosexual pride, queer religiosity, the interplay of vulnerable and interpretive masculinities, and a commitment to food justice, this issue brings together novel explorations of the sexual and nutritional appetites of bodies proscribed by religion and culture.