



Eros, beauty and crisis: notes from Senegal

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Women have been taught to suspect the erotic urge, the place that is uniquely female. So, just as we tend to reject our blackness because it has been termed inferior, as women we tend to reject our capacity for feeling, our ability to love, to touch the erotic, because it has been devalued. But it is within this that so much lies of our power, our ability to posit, our vision. Because once we know how deeply we can feel, we begin to demand from all of our life pursuits that they be in accordance with these feelings....

I believe in the erotic and I believe in it as an enlightening force within our lives as women. I have become clearer about the distinctions between the erotic and other apparently similar forces. We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalising sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way. And when I say living I mean it as that force which moves us toward what will accomplish real positive change.

Audre Lorde in an interview with Claudia Tate (1983: 100-15).

The first scene of the film, *Karmen Gei* (Ramaka, Senegal 2002; an adaptation of Bizet's opera, *Carmen*), is deceptively familiar. It shows a Senegalese *sabar* or dance, with *griot*¹ drummers and women circled on the sand, clapping and singing joyously. It is night-time, and with the entry of Karmen, a striking, towering, dark-brown woman with long braids, the story begins. Dressed in a sheer, flowing black boubou, Karmen starts to dance with abandoned yet deliberate movements. Each opening of her long legs, like a fan, stirs up and cools down the erotic charge of her presence. The scene could be anywhere in Dakar, where there is no dearth of tall, beautiful women for whom such public events are the turning points of personal and community drama. But from the presence of one seated woman in the audience, we know that the story is particular. Despite this woman's efforts to suppress her response, her breath deepens, her chest rises and falls, her eyes fixate on Karmen, and her

desire is irrepressibly awoken. Yet this is no ordinary gaze of desire, nor even of transgressive lesbian desire, for Angelique, the woman, wears a khaki uniform – she is Karmen’s prison warden. The scene is not a Dakar alley, but a woman’s prison on Goree Island,² and the famous refrain from Bizet’s opera, “Love is like a bird which cannot be tamed/ If you cage it, it will fly away” has special resonance in this case.³

From this scene onwards, the character Karmen Gei does nothing less than disrupt the law in its concrete, institutional and intangible forms. First, with the help of a lovesick Angelique, she escapes from Goree Island, across the liberating sea, back to the spectacle and chaos of urban Dakar. Here, she embarks on a new course of flamboyant disruption: she gatecrashes the wedding of an elite family and seduces the groom, Lamine, a police officer. First she throws the groom her long scarf, which he eagerly sniffs – drawing attention to the power of fabric and fragrance in the erotic repertoire of the Senegalese woman. Next, she provokes his bride into a dance contest which stretches the limits of propriety, as they both hike up their wrappers and dance the fan dance of the hips. Almost exposing her loins as she dances, Karmen’s antagonism becomes anger and she outperforms the bourgeois bride, finally throwing her on the ground with contempt.⁴ Then, having captivated the groom and outraged this “respectable” family, Karmen, as if a *griot*, seizes the stage as if to sing praises, but in this case utters denunciations of the corrupt political elite: “You are all evil! You’ve swallowed up the country, but we’ll eat your guts. You’ve swallowed up the country. But it will stick in your throat.”

Thus Karmen is a woman who not only arouses but incites; she subverts and disrupts politics; she not only escapes from prison (through an inverted version of the heteronormative script in which a hapless man in authority is seduced), she frees herself from the restrictions of normative womanhood. And though she ultimately meets her death at the hands of a resentful male lover, like the typical *femme fatale* of the Western operatic genre, this does not nullify the film’s powerful exploration of the force of female sexuality to contest and disrupt social and political order. Her quest for freedom and love questions the conditions and possibilities for women’s realisation as political, social, cultural and sexual agents. Her story suggests that an outlaw woman may have no other recourse for political intervention than through seduction – of both men and women, of those with repressive power (the prison-guard) and those with social and political power (the bridegroom) – and the erotic power of her body, beauty and sexuality. This power is evocative, if not carnivalesque, of *mokk*



pucc,⁵ the influence which Senegalese women wield through the seduction of patriarchs in their conjugal beds. Such interpretations of the film raise broader questions, to be explored in this piece, of the possibility for self- and social transformation in Senegalese women's cultures of beauty and sexuality, and the opportunities or constraints which African crises engender for relations of interdependence, affect and eroticism amongst women.

In order to explore these issues, I will offer in this article a series of observations and reflections upon relationships among Senegalese women in their roles, capacities and strivings as mothers, friends, rivals and entrepreneurs. These relationships are all, of course, mediated by relations of gender, class, caste and religion. I am therefore taking the concept of "sexual cultures" to mean not only regulated and resistant sexual practice, but erotics, intimacy and intersubjectivity. As Audre Lorde suggests in her Utopian essay, *The Uses of the Erotic*:



The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.... Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic from most vital areas of our lives other than sex (1984: 53–55).

We must ask to what extent the dynamics of the regulation of female sexuality, so naturalised and valorised in beauty and sexual cultures, are open to enduring contestation or change. What opportunities or constraints do multi-faceted African crises bring for re-ordering relations of interdependence, affect and eroticism among women?

By focusing on relationships among women, I seek to explore the erotics of several arenas in public, private and social life in which women reveal such "empowerment", both at the centre and the margins of dominant heteronormative relationships and social structures.

In particular, I will explore the dynamics of seduction as rehearsed and performed by women among women: how they negotiate the "gaze" of other women and their own reflected needs and desires. The socio-economic crises and the resulting structural reconfigurations of both domestic and public spheres in Senegal have had a gendered impact, and I show that local women have drawn upon innovative strategies in order to negotiate them. Drawing upon my fieldwork in Senegal, I will suggest how a feminist agenda on sexual

cultures might reconsider and theorise material from everyday life that may not seem directly related to heteronormativity, sexual practices and regulation.

Agency, power and beautification

In postcolonial Africa, institutional and normative crises suggest the need for social agents and analysts alike to look to unconventional forms and sites of power for a renewal of self, action and vision. Political and economic crises across the continent have led to socio-cultural and moral disruption, and it is no exaggeration to say that changing gender relations at work and home have resulted in crises of masculinity and femininity. The ramifications of such crises have yet to be fully considered, even if they are suggested in the conditions of sexual health and disease, sexual violence and conflict that all too often prevail across the continent. In particular, the contemporary African trilogy of sex, AIDS and death generates sensational media representations of the distressed bodies of African women – perhaps once beautiful, but now seen as embodying (literally) powerlessness. Yet arguably, even in the most destitute and desperate of conditions, women strive to cultivate an appropriate and attractive *bodily* appearance, be it of propriety, piety or beauty. If, for instance, newspaper reports routinely display the human misery of refugee camps, it must be noted that many refugee women still arrange their headscarves carefully. Similarly, poor urban women invest precious coins on lotions to soften hands roughened by too much housework and harsh cleaning agents. Beauty and beautification are thus, it seems, important aspects of women's strategies for survival.

Senegambian women have a long and rich tradition of cultivation of self in relation to others through ceremonial exchange, expressive culture and the cult of personal beauty. The contemporary practices and debates of local women in Senegal show that beauty is of social, moral and practical consequence, as will be discussed below. Through self-care, care of intimate others and adornment, women reassemble bodies and selves that are jeopardised or threatened by patriarchy and crisis. Also through these processes, women strengthen their commitment and ties to each other. *Teraanga* is the Wolof ethic of hospitality and reciprocity which undergirds Senegambian culture, and prescribes a range of duties in everyday life, from public etiquette, to mutual financial aid, to attention to one's tired husband at the end of the day. This ethic necessitates one's presence, performance and presentation at social events; it motivates the often excessive sartorial display and exchange of gifts that takes place at weddings, naming ceremonies and the like. However, many criticise the "hypocrisy"



of women who appear at such events expensively dressed, but at the cost of deep debt, reneging on their financial obligations to others, or by resorting to theft and sex work.

For the fact is that in contemporary, cosmopolitan Dakar, women now face deepening socio-economic vulnerability, along with new opportunities. According to the scant available research, in contrast to other West African societies, urban Senegalese women's trade activities were limited by Islamic and French colonial ideologies, which prescribed limited mobility and social contact for women in public spaces. As a result, women, mostly of the lowest income or caste groups, engaged in small-scale trade in food markets or from their own back doors (see Grandmaison, 1972; Kane, 1977; Sarr, 2000 on this trajectory of urban women's work). French and Lebanese traders had long dominated the more lucrative trades such as textiles, plastics and light industrial production.



In the 1980s, neo-liberal reform re-opened restricted trade routes, albeit on terms largely unfavourable to Senegal, and structural adjustment and local coping strategies expanded the informal economy (Mustafa, 1998; Dieng, 2000; Coumba Diop, 2002; Simone, 2004). When adjustment programmes dismantled the educational and employment base of the already fragile middle class, many men were financially and socially disempowered. In contrast, middle-class women began to move into tailoring and the cloth trade, opening shops in markets and at home. The Wolof adage that “men are head of the household and women the head of the bedroom” was increasingly challenged, as women became the main breadwinners and men their resentful dependents. By “walking around the city” to “look for money,” women increasingly occupied public space, thereby contesting traditional norms of modesty and propriety. They hired male tailors to work for them, reversing gendered notions of authority in which men usually hold a higher ranking than women. And, as they began in the 1990s to travel to Jeddah, Las Palmas, Gambia and Nigeria to buy fabric, gold, cosmetics or shoes, these women further destabilised norms concerning women's publicity and mobility. Such women strategically linked entrepreneurial, ceremonial and personal networks, possibly even negotiating crises through cosmopolitan personal style and aggressive commercial strategy.

I will advance these claims by closer scrutiny of certain rituals performed by women in both public and private urban Senegalese spaces: the notion of the *dirriankhe*, and the implications of this spectacle as increasingly commercialised and performed for other women; and the erotics of motherhood, as embedded in the grooming rituals carried out within private, all-female spaces.

Seduction and the construction of the public self

It is impossible to think of Dakar without thinking of the *dirriankhe*.⁶ This refers to the corporal, sensory and visual spectacle of mature femininity – a woman in flowing robes that fall underfoot, a voluptuous body polished by lotions and fragrant with incense, clinking waistbeads, and a slow, seductive gait that is performed for public audiences on the streets, in the markets and at social ceremonies in Dakar. Urban lore contends that this sight was known to “drive the Yankees crazy” at their post-World War Two naval bases, hence the word *dirriankhe*. However, an etymology of the word suggests that it refers to the slow gait of the women in question, from the Wolof *dirri*, meaning “to drag”. The anecdotal suggestion that the seductive performance of local women entranced and maddened representatives of an external authority reminds us of Karmen’s manipulation of the hapless Angelique, underscoring the subversive potential of publicly performed beauty.



The air of nonchalance with which the *dirriankhe* is performed belies the great efforts that enable such presentation. The allure of the *dirriankhe* is found, first, in the idealised corpulent body shape of the woman concerned. Next is the sheer quantity of cloth used. African and Afro-Islamic dress styles often use volume, density and ornamentation to signify the prestige of the wearer. The wrapper, a two-metre length of cloth tied around the waist and falling to the ankle, is the foundation of female dress. It is accompanied by a six-metre embroidered tunic or robe (*boubou*) and a two-metre headscarf. The intricate wrapping and layering of these fabrics allows for both concealment and revelation of the body – the *boubou* may slip off the shoulder, the headscarf may slide in a breeze – creating a spectacle at once modest and also alluring or suggestive.

The eroticised and commercialised femininity of the *dirriankhe* is a public expression of the sensual beauty of women previously restricted to the domestic sphere – the household and extended kin. This ideal guides the consumption and display of middle-class women, who perform their gendered identities through elaborate and skillful dress in public ceremonies, primarily for the approval and appreciation of *other women* – to gain friends and peer support among these women, to establish their status, and so on. At events such as weddings and naming ceremonies, there are hardly any male attendees, just close female family or friends. The men present sit in contained groups on the outer edge at these functions, while women occupy the centre. For these women, the moment of entrance to these ceremonies is the one that evokes

the desire, judgement and rivalry of other women. As one woman explained to me, she seeks to enter the mind of anyone who looks at her to the extent that they are maddened (the discourse of powerful enchantment and loss of control once again) by the spectacle of her superior beauty. Women may be discreet as they gaze at and judge other women at these events; there is nevertheless no doubt that when an entourage of well-dressed women enters the ceremonial circle, they are scrutinised and assessed. Women admire each other for their apparent mastery of techniques of dress and self-presentation; they admire the choice of an outfit, and the deportment and grace of the wearer.

It is perhaps not surprising that there is criticism of the importance some women place on their public dress, appearance and performance. Some men complain that their wives dress up to go out, but wear shabby robes at home. Women who lighten their skin with *xeesal*, chemical creams, do so for public viewing. This often means that they have light hands, feet, necks and faces, so that in the intimacy of the bedroom, their husbands are presented with multi-coloured women with dark bodies. By bringing the practices and allure of seduction from the conjugal sphere to public life, it could be argued that *dirriankhes* sometimes solicit and enjoy the public gaze at the expense of their husbands' gaze and desire. This reflects a shift in which women increasingly seek approbation from within public spaces rather than private domestic spaces, and from homosocial scrutiny rather than heterosexual intimacy.

This outward turning of women's beauty is also subject to widespread gendered moralistic discourses concerning "the fall" of women. These claim that traditions of feminine elegance and beauty have become perverted by female narcissism, with its excesses of consumption and self-interest, and a concomitant neglect of women's familial duties. These excesses, or women's public appearance, it is alleged, belie their true financial position. As one of my informants told me, "You see a woman, all dressed in a grand *boubou*, but you go in her house and you will see that the children are eating porridge." Indeed, I did notice stark contrasts between appearance and household standards of living. The new generation of women traders in particular stand accused as agents of this commercialism and the accompanying "moral and cultural degeneration". Their excessive ceremonial expenses, travel and use of *xeesal* are thus the source of community anxiety and, I would argue, envy. Skin-lightening with *xeesal* in particular is condemned by doctors, religious leaders and many others. Women who use *xeesal* are imitated and ridiculed. I saw a tailor friend, who often imitated *dirriankhes* and their regal gait, also



imitating the ritual of applying *xeesal*, scrunching up his face and scrubbing at it with clumsy hands in a parody of the practice. More highly-educated men and women also spoke disdainfully to me about the “know-nothings” who thought they were achieving beauty even as they wrecked their skin with dangerous chemical products.

Such moralistic discourses on women’s beautification practices are part of a broader moral panic concerning the “degradation” of fashion, ceremonial and social life in Senegal. These discourses charge that the domestic sphere has been contaminated by modern, commercial values that prioritise money and status – the values and instruments of the public, global domain – over reciprocity and honour – those of the domestic, African domain. Elsewhere, I argue that such critiques are grounded in cultural anxieties that refer not only to the degrading commercialisation of social life, but also to the challenges which women’s increasing independence poses to patriarchy and elite power (Mustafa, 2002). Both men and women, of all ages, and with varying degrees of intensity, participate in condemnation of female narcissism, thereby conflating women’s complex strategies to ensure social and economic survival with the excesses of a few.



The erotics of motherhood and homosocial intimacy

The display and public performance of beauty is learnt in the most private spaces of the bedroom – familial and domestic spaces generally inhabited by women only. In Senegal, mothers and other central female caregivers inculcate their female children into the practices and cultures of beauty and beautification practically from birth. Beauty practices, objects and images further serve to situate the self in a lineage of women. “Our grandmothers taught us elegance,” I was told, as an introduction to popular histories of the elegant women, known as the *St. Louisienne*, of the Senegambian coast. Their legacy can be traced not to colonial civilising projects, as might be expected, but to the mixed-race *signares*⁷ who consorted with French traders, and had enormous stores of gold and slaves. Today this tradition inspires a range of cultural and commercial practices, from the photographic tradition of poses of languid reclining to the work of costume and fashion designers.

Young Senegalese girls grow up witnessing the women of their families making sacrifices for their children. In this previously matrilineal society, mothers and maternal kin remain very important. Mothers often invoke maternal duty to justify their sacrifices, as they scrape together funds to sustain their

children or as they tolerate a husband's taking of a second wife. At the same time, girls see their mothers invest considerable money and time in dressing themselves. This combination of self-sacrifice and self-care requires a moral balance, acquired through experience and peer support, through the moral economy of *teraanga* considered above.

In an impoverished household that I frequented, everyday support of the baby and young sisters of the family included care of their bodies. From birth, after a warm bath, a baby is massaged nightly with shea butter by her mother, aunts and grandmother. Through such care of the body, the child develops affective bonds with her family, and is also socialised into the prevailing gendered behaviours concerning beauty and presentation of self. For instance, by the time she was one year old, baby Awa had already been present at numerous hair-braiding, grooming and gossiping sessions with her mother's friends in the central courtyard of their modest home. Sitting in the warmth of her mother's lap, I saw her gleefully imitate the gestures which her mother performed on her and others, stroking along the hairline with oil.



There is thus a clear duty to pamper and train a baby or child's body, and thus to shape her nascent, gendered sense of self. But women continue these activities long after childhood, and in so doing foster solidarity and hierarchy among themselves. Dressing is one of the central activities through which this happens, and through which women break up the drudgery and tedium of household chores. The pleasure of dressing up begins not when a woman steps out of her home onto the street, but when she is in the intimacy of her room with other women, before the public moment. This was made apparent to me on one occasion in Dakar, when I went to a female friend's house before a ceremony.

When I arrived, her room filled with cousins – about four women at the height of the two-hour long dressing-up session, in a furnished room measuring 10 by 12 feet – and her cupboard was filled with the carefully folded *boubous* of the cousins closest to her in age. The women politely took turns bathing, dressing and making themselves up. But it was also a collaborative effort: my friend lifted a *grand boubou*, six metres of cloth, over the head of her younger cousin and arranged it carefully on her shoulders; another cousin helped her sister to perfect her headtie and so on. The conversation among the women focused on the dressing and preparations for the outing:

"Did I put on too much blue?"

"Do I look like a gaudy *griot*?"

"My braids are too old, should I wear a scarf?"

The responses were carefully reassuring and supportive; comments about issues such as weight (such as “too heavy” or “too light”) were never made, for instance.

At such moments, these women are building their skill in self-cultivation and self-presentation, revealing and concealing themselves through adjustments of cloth, judging and learning what is considered excessive as opposed to tasteful display. They are learning this with and through other women, through the intimacy of the shared space. The attention, care and encouragement that comes from dressing up with kin or friends after a long day of cooking, trading or boredom builds up spirits for the planned outing. The constant touching, arrangement and approval-seeking builds tactile and emotional relationships between adult women who, in fact, rarely expect or rely on such fulfilment from adult men in the strictly hierarchical patriarchal network of relations that dictate heterosocial contact.

Other moments in these intimate spaces and exchanges emphasise dependence and reveal complex webs of formal relationships rather than simple camaraderie between women. For example, mothers or aunts lend jewelry to young girls who are first beginning to dress up. In one case I witnessed, Nabou, an adopted child in a fairly affluent family, was not at the centre of family investment as were the “real” biological daughters of the family. As I waited to attend a ceremony with them, I saw that Nabou barely had time after her lunch duties to dress. Yet the final step of her preparations saw her kneeling in front of her adoptive mother, who placed a chain around her bowed neck. Elements of discipline, duty and gratitude were inscribed and reproduced within this private exchange and maternal moment. Through it, a mother and child reinforced their mutual affections for and obligations towards one another, performing all the while according to gendered scripts of beauty, maturity and age hierarchies. Similarly, younger women render beauty services to older women in their family by braiding their hair; another example of how women rely upon each other, within the intimacy of the home or family, to cultivate a beautiful self.



Conclusion

As Lorde (1984) reminds us, it is crucial to think about erotic power outside the limits of sexual practice. In Senegal, as the institutional and economic structures of heteronormative domesticity collapse, women’s social networks provide multiple social and financial supports. At the same time, increasing economic hardship reinforces the sense that for many younger women, their

body and physical presentation remain their only currency. Conversations with young women revealed increasing disillusion with the prospect of heterosexual fulfilment or even financial security through marriage. Some spoke to me of wishing to find a male partner who was dignified and did not sleep until noon. Another woman described the way she coaxed money out of an older man as her own way of “eating before being eaten”.

Many Senegalese lament the moral decay in their society that is said to be epitomised by young women of good families prostituting themselves. For women in their twenties, relationships with men are commercial enterprises that generate money, cloth, fleeting social status, and possibly some emotional fulfilment, but rarely marriage. Courtship is thus often conflated with prostitution (see also Chipu Hungwe’s article elsewhere in this issue, and Charmaine Pereira’s article “*Zina* and transgressive heterosexuality in northern Nigeria” in *Feminist Africa* 5). Marriage is no longer a reliable or viable centre to women’s lives or aspirations. As the institution of marriage virtually collapses, and with growing strain in polygamous families or households of transnational traders, women expect little but conflict from male company.



It is in such a context that beauty, an arena in which pleasure and politics are deeply entangled, becomes very important. The disciplining of women’s bodies and selves through gendered norms and conventions of personal beauty is part of many societies. But the extreme attention paid to beauty and self-presentation by women in Senegal, with each other’s support, service and judgement, suggests that heteronormative regulation does not adequately explain women’s motivations for subscribing to such norms and practices, or the effects of beauty practices.

As in the presentation of Karmen’s story, Senegalese women continue to nurture their potential to disrupt social, legal and cultural norms through the transformative and subversive powers of their beauty, as well as their ability to *perform* this beauty according to social convention. At the same time, grooming and dressing rituals shared between women, and passed on from one generation to the next, clearly offer embattled women a degree of support, tactile warmth and reinforcement.

So women negotiate patriarchal regulations of the body while establishing their own agency through the aesthetic cultivation of the body, in a collective of women. These notes from fieldwork done in Senegal show how women’s cultivation of beauty generates an erotics of self and interdependence that far exceeds beauty’s service to the patriarchal social order of dignity and male desire.

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Footnotes

- 1 A *griot* is usually a wandering singer, poet or story-teller; they often act as praise-singers.
- 2 Ile de Goree, a small island off the Dakar coast, was a trading enclave of Portuguese and French Creole African cultures from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. It then gained infamy as a slave embarkation port for the Atlantic slave trade. Today it is a tourist centre and site of heritage pilgrimages by African-Americans. With this history, it has symbolic status as a place of both incarceration and encounter.
- 3 In the context of national reconstruction, another continent-wide process, it is worth mentioning another film based on the story of Carmen, set in a Cape Town township: *U-Carmen e-Khayelitsha* (Dornford-May, 2005). Shot as an opera in Xhosa, with mostly untrained actors from and in the townships, it shows that self-realisation is on the cultural agenda in this post-apartheid society. As a metaphor for the emergence of the new nation, Carmen's erotic persona challenges repressive histories of political, legal and gendered orders as they intersect with both the toughness of life and women's personal agendas in townships.
- 4 Senegambian societies are organised through oppositions of caste and nobility. In the pre-colonial period, castes were hereditary artisanal groups such as weavers,

praise-singers and leatherworkers. Although labour is no longer organised in this way, casted persons still face prejudice and stereotyping. Casted persons are seen by nobles (the middle classes) as being less restrained, and therefore more publicly performative, morally lax and greedy. Women of caste are said to be sexually lax, while noble women are supposedly dignified and restrained. It is noteworthy that the actress who portrayed Karmen Gei so spectacularly claimed that she never learned to dance before playing this role, thereby distancing herself from the casted figure she plays.

- 5 *Mokk pucc* is a set of practices of self-presentation and seduction, involving beautifying the body for husbands, preparing a room with incense and clean sheets, and massaging a partner.
- 6 This term refers to both the “performer” and the “performance” of the *dirriankhe*.
- 7 This term, taken from the Portuguese *senhoras*, refers to the mistresses of the European traders, who were famous for their beauty, and who wielded significant influence in Dakar society.



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