I would like to begin this exploratory piece by posing what I think are two very key conceptual challenges facing African feminism, which have arisen out of the moments of transition across the African continent over the past few decades. These tensions and cross-currents are currently most dramatically exhibited in the shifts that are occurring within the central and southern African regions. There is a critical need to revisit and re-conceptualise the notion of ‘the post-colonial’ in relation to feminism as it has been imagined, articulated and practised by radical African women scholars and activists, as well as to scrutinise more closely the assumptions and normative meanings that have become associated with independence – a time when all African societies ‘crossed over’ from white supremacist domination; a time which in reality has remained fundamentally colonial but different in ‘new’ ways that are mediated by shifts in the reconstruction of class, race and gender relations. The second conceptual challenge that faces us as radical women engaged in social transformation is the necessity of ‘crafting’ a contemporary feminism – whose essential elements are already surfacing in the newer discourses that are emerging within limited circles of feminist theorising and social engagement.}

Feminism as a radical thinking tradition
In very general terms, feminism as a radical thinking/conceptual tradition has deliberately ruptured the boundaries of conventional, often reactionary knowledge production everywhere it has been practiced, and has challenged convention as an ideological practice, by arguing for a politics of transformation and of daily life. Basically, in terms of the meaning of feminism, I think it is important to recognise two key elements of this political phenomenon. One is the development of a theoretical tradition by women, which has produced forms of knowledge that are centred on the lives, struggles and celebrations of women across the various social, political and cultural divides. Another is the translation of feminist theory into a praxis that has transformed activism, advocacy and policy making/implementation, as well as changed the ways in which women live their private lives.

Feminism is the rejection of and struggle against Patriarchy (as a system and set of structures and ideologies that privilege men and allot them various forms of power in all societies) and is also the celebration of freedom for women everywhere. As Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones (1998) put it: “Feminist theory seeks to analyse the conditions which shape women’s lives and to explore cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman”. It was initially guided by the political aims of the Women’s Movement – the need to understand women’s subordination and our exclusion from, and marginalisation within, a variety of social arenas. Feminists refuse to accept that inequalities between women and men are natural and inevitable and insist that they should be questioned. Theory, for us, is not an abstract intellectual activity divorced from women’s lives, but seeks to explain the “conditions under which those lives are lived” (Jackson & Jones 1998:1) and to change them. Over the past hundred years, feminist theorising and practice has been changed as well by discourses that challenge racial privileging among women; class and issues of property giving certain groups of women power and prestige over other groups of women; the assumption that the body was not a contested site among and between women; the critique of ageism and hierarchies of social privilege that are deeply embedded in notions of culture and acceptable behaviour among women of particular races and cultural formations; and the most dramatic issue of heteronormativity and a critique of heterosexism within women’s movements everywhere, which are linked to
homophobia and the distancing of LGBTI communities and movements.

Within the academic world, feminism has often been treated as separate from the more established, male-defined traditions of political economy. Here I mean political economy as a radical critical tradition of analysis whose key objective is to expose the workings of capitalism as a system of profit accumulation and class privilege. However, the intersectional relationship between political economy as a critique of, and resistance to, capitalism and imperial domination of Africans, and the development of a radical discourse and stance that is embedded in the lives of African women, has always been a significant feature of African feminism. There is no doubt that for the past century, what we have come to understand and embrace as African feminist thought and political engagement across the continent has deep roots in the collective struggles that we as a people engaged in to free ourselves from colonial and imperial domination and supremacy.

In this article, I would like to return to the organic link between these two important elements of radical thought and practice, so as to pose a few questions which I hope will contribute to the crafting of a newer and more contemporary feminism. My “return to the source”, so to speak, is inspired by the obvious crisis that has gripped radical politics across the board, these past few decades, but especially since the independence of a staunchly neo-liberal South Africa in the early 1990s. Additionally, the obvious movement of time has exposed the inadequacies of existing discourses and ways of producing radical knowledge, thus insisting that we re-think the ways in which we understand and change our worlds.

Troubling conventional conceptual normativity

I want to return to the relationship between the critique of colonial capitalism and the formulation of radical women’s politics (feminism) by challenging the normative representation of the time after independence (the raising of the flag and the declaration of nationalist states) as being ‘post-colonial’. No doubt, a more concerted critique would reveal a wider range of elements to be questioned. For my purposes, I will focus on three elements that speak to this troubling conceptual normativity. Firstly, we need to remember that any moment of social transition is both chaotic and productive, that is, the collapse of particular structures and practices is inevitable (and much of the literature about southern Africa in particular has dwelt on these issues of ‘crisis’), but the possibilities for real change always accompany the demise of the old regime.

I will argue that there has not been a real transition since independence in terms of peoples’ entitlements and rights, and my position is that this is due to the narrowness and inability of nationalism as a resistance ideology and political practice to deliver an inclusive dispensation for all Africans, mainly because it was/is essentially formulated in the service of the ruling classes locally and globally. Nonetheless, there were significant changes for African women and their communities as outcomes of anti-colonial struggles, which must be recognised and cautiously celebrated. In anticipation of a later argument, I would like to argue that most of the productive aspects of the transitional moment have often escaped us, and for African feminists, the possibilities that transition has offered so far have been deftly captured and reconceptualised through a very hegemonic neo-liberal ideology.

Secondly, I think that it is conceptually inept to continue to collapse two critical socio-historical notions into an assumed common meaning when it is clear that each notion requires very specific definition and elucidation, especially given the confusion and lack of new radical knowledge within the radical community generally. Why has it been acceptable to conflate the notions of ‘neo-colonialism’ and ‘post-colonialism’ in an unproblematical manner in literature and discussions about social life and political engagement in our region/continent when they do not mean the same thing even for the ruling classes continentally and globally? The rare exception to this casual conflation can be found in some feminist scholarship.

For feminist theorising, I think that this conceptual clumsiness is partly related to the dominance of nationalist ideology in the construction and articulation of women’s politics generally on the continent (and in the African diaspora), with nationalist-inspired notions of the political informing the imaginaries even of radical politics by feminist scholars. I located myself in this category, until very recently. African male-defined political economy is also as deeply inflected by the dominance of nationalist discourse of liberation and nation/state. Recognising these profound conceptual and ideological influences and theorising their consequences for the ways in which we have imagined and performed radical thought and practice is crucial to stepping away from the past, even as we understand it more deeply.

How the ideas of who we have become through struggles against colonial domination and the various ex-
Conclusions that accompanied this state formation must be re-visited and questioned, not to jettison our histories of resistance and re-making as African peoples, but in order to understand how we arrived at the contemporary moment, shadowed by notions that we really had not adequately considered, which have marked our socio-economic, political and economic realities in profoundly troubling ways.

By making a distinction between ‘neo-colonialism’ and ‘post-colonialism’ for purposes of understanding the moment of transition more deeply, we not only return feminism and its dynamic concepts of gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, etc. to the site of critical thinking and productive knowledge making but we can also define the key elements of post-colonialism in boldly feminist terms.

I think that a conceptual scrutiny of the moment of independence will also enlighten us as radical scholars on the opportunities that the moment has provided for the emergence and frightening growth of a revisionist literature, which touts the ‘glories’ of white supremacists against ‘terrorism and communism’ in our region in particular, with a casual arrogance. It will also enable us to understand that the moment of independence ushers in new reflexes in the social, economic and political restructuring of class relations; the adjustment and negotiation of racial privilege (even if under duress for settler whites), and a swift appropriation of gender as a concept and as a crucial feminist tool for radical transformation. What are the implications of these ‘negotiated settlements’ which re-defined race, class and gender as ‘neutral,’ elements in the ushering in of the neo-colonial moment for feminist understandings of women’s social realities? What has the ideological and political cost been to African feminism of trans-racial, trans-class coalitions especially in a deeply unequal society like that of South Africa, whose neo-colonial politics is being pushed as the ‘model’ for the rest of the continent? Can we excavate the lessons of tactical alliances with oppositional forces in our respective societies and bring them to a newer discussion and reformulation of our feminist praxis?

Thirdly, and tremendously significant, is the conflation of neo-colonialism, as a transitional historical moment, into post-colonialism. This tendency obscures the largely un-crafted imaginary of becoming post-colonial in terms of new ideologies for radical changes in racial, class, gendered and sexual relations. It reflects the distance that has grown between feminist theorising and the use of intersectional analyses that position class, race, gender, sexuality and other key elements of radical analysis at the centre of an analytical framework.

The separation of gender as a concept and its redefinition (and dislocation from its radical feminist origins) within a neoliberal framework which has depoliticised it and made it basically useless as a transformational tool, has also been a major factor in the conceptual laxity which characterises much of what is called “developmental” analysis. In fact, there is hardly a functional analytical framework that activists can draw upon and work with in a collective sense. Instead, we are faced with a fragmentation of issues relating to health, reproduction, sexuality, class struggles over land and property, etc. – a clear reflection of the fragmentary impacts that neoliberal capitalism and its globalisation ideology are having on our thinking and social systems.

‘Crafting’ as a radical feminist practice

Therefore, if this critique of what has become a normative and staid ‘conceptual frame’ – if one can call it that – for understanding women’s and people’s lives in our respective societies is accepted, the possibilities of shifting our lenses and seeing new features of social and political life in historical and contemporary terms become visible in our imaginations. By making a distinction between ‘neo-colonialism’ and ‘post-colonialism’ for purposes of understanding the moment of transition more deeply, we not only return feminism and its dynamic concepts of gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, etc. to the site of critical thinking and productive knowledge making but we can also define the key elements of post-colonialism in boldly feminist terms.

By so doing, we initiate the process of ‘crafting’ a contemporary feminism – a feminism that comes out of the contemporary struggles of this time in our lives – and which begins to respond in more effective ways to the consequences of neoliberal dominance and the seemingly unchallenged rampancy of class and race and heteronormative privilege in our regions. To paraphrase
Elaine Salo in a recent piece published in Feminist Africa, attention needs to be paid to details about the tensions, silences and fractures represented in everyday relations and quotidian activities in local places6 and at the regional and continental, as well as the international, levels of working peoples’ and women’s struggles.

Crafting: new thinking, new tools of transformation
Let me turn to the second part of this article, which attempts a mapping of what I think is an essential process of reformulating feminism as a radical contemporary idea and practice. The most important entry point into any kind of radical thinking, which takes one’s analysis beyond the status quo conceptually and in activist terms, is the creation of new thinking tools. As Audre Lorde so presciently put it several decades ago, radicals cannot transform the master’s house using the tools of the master. We have to craft our own tools of transformation and social reconstruction.

In this instance, I find that the idea of ‘crafting’ itself provides a window of opportunity to imagining new thinking and activist tools; it is the process by which we mobilise intellectual resources and re-shape the language and energies that accompany the desire for transformation. Crafting has always been a vibrant site within which we, as humans, fashioned tools for utilitarian and aesthetic purposes – for use in production and in destruction, as well as in the provision of visual and emotional/spiritual pleasure. What we call technology today is rooted in this intrinsic ability of humans to craft – to create value, and to make accessible to the larger community products that satisfy our immediate and long-term needs in social, material and aesthetic terms.

When we bring this capacity to the intellectual production process and we craft new language and new imaginaries that are shared and enriched by the interactions they encounter with a vast array of intellectual traditions and new energies – especially energies that are driven by the desire for transformation and for freedom – we push the boundaries of social existence forward, thus moving ourselves into a new time. Interestingly, movements as political and social platforms of transformation are distinguished by this very feature in their moments of greatest impact. Once they have achieved the goals of those who wield most power within them, such movements tend to decline, leaving only a memory for those whose interests were least served. Thus the crafting of new ideas and ideologies is both profoundly revolutionary in terms of human creativity, and inevitably conceptual and determined by the imperatives of the moment. We have to craft and re-craft continuously in order to move forward all the time in social and intellectual terms.

That is why it is so important to recognise that we need to craft the tools for a new understanding of our social reality in this moment as well as to understand how the moment has been fashioned by the past and the persistence of particular sets of human relationships, most of which are detrimental to the dignity and livelihood of the majority of people in our societies – and therefore must be changed.

Crafting is as much about bringing to bear upon the intellectual process an ancient productive human practice as it is about mobilising the collective energies of a society for the reorientation of political, economic, social and cultural change. Feminism provides radical women with the traditions and experiences of pulling together, at particular moments in our herstories of struggle for freedom and dignity as human beings, as persons, the dynamic energies that reside in women as individuals and social collectivities. Crafting a new radical politics that comes out of and reflects the contemporary struggles of women for freedom is encapsulated in the notion of ‘contemporarity’7 – a deep understanding of what needs to be done to shift the ideological and activist practice in order to create a new moment that is inclusive of everyone.

How women craft these new ideas and make them a reality is tied to the initiation of new practices in the making of theory as radical knowledge; shifting the discursive ground so as to enable new ideas to emerge among radical constituencies of women and change activists; recognising and celebrating the individual contributions and strengths that make up the feminist movement and feminism as a political practice; and by making new ideas and new ways of doing feminism accessible and open to every constituency of women and of radical people everywhere.

Why do we need a contemporary feminism?
The desire for a contemporary feminism is underpinned by the needs of the contemporary moment – which in my opinion is a neo-colonial moment that is characterised by tensions and negotiations between and among various classes and social groups, which continue to control the vast wealth of our respective societies through the maintenance and/or reinforcement of an array of repressive and exclusionary mechanisms inherited from
the colonial formation all over the continent. Black men and a few black women (a supposed sign of the new gender equality) are engaged in a reactionary, rightwing process of accumulating wealth and power – through their occupancy of the state – in collusion with an entrenched, economically powerful, white social class.

In southern Africa in particular, we are witnessing a frantic restructuring of race as a historically exclusionary category and as a means through which a particular social class acquired incredible wealth within colonial capitalism. This reconstruction of race is occurring through systems of negotiated access to economic and social privilege for a miniscule group of mainly black males, and the re-invention of notions of nation and identity premised on the supposed demise of apartheid capitalism as a consequence of these classed and raced alliances. Nonetheless, most African people in that society, and in the region at large, continue to struggle for lives of dignity and fairness in terms of access to social and material resources.

How does a contemporary feminism deal with the persistence of this racist-classist heteronormative patriarchy, whose essential features have seemingly triumphed over the kindliness and consideration that the nationalists so persuasively convinced African people would resolve the entrenched tendencies and practices of settler colonial supremacy?

Can the deconstruction of the notions of neo-colonialism and post-colonialism also be applied more specifically to the claim of a ‘post-apartheid’ South Africa so as to produce new insights for southern African feminists on how to proceed with the agenda for freedom and lives of dignity, which so many courageous people gave their lives for over centuries of fierce anti-colonial resistance? How can we mobilise these historical forms of courage and belief in human freedom so as to shift the current intellectual and activist terrain in another direction and undermine the dominance of neo-liberalism in that society?

Critiquing class privilege in the nationalist women’s movement

In order to mobilise and sustain a viable and lively, dynamic feminist process of intellectual and activist engagement, the contemporary feminist movement will have to identify itself as such – distancing itself from the established, nationalist-inspired/inflected women’s movement, which has basically run out of steam and is
now openly allied with the ruling classes within the neo-colonial state and with international capital mainly through alliance with donor agencies that represent European and North American states. This is a deeply contentious and fractious issue – especially for (black) middle-class female elements, who have secured their social class reproduction by assuming a mediator role within such donor organisations, thereby not only undermining the autonomy of African women’s organisations by depoliticising their agendas, but also by serving as dedicated gate-keepers of ‘gender’ as a conservative, mainstreaming notion, that is steeped in neoliberal definition and practice. They have become the ‘human face’ of humanitarianism in Africa and across the societies of the South.

However, if African feminists are to reassume their position as the cutting edge of women’s politics on this continent and in the diaspora, we will have to face the fury of the black female middle-class conservatives at being called on their appropriation of radical politics. We shall also need to get past the essentialised notion that ‘we are all black women’, which inevitably results in the perception that the critique of their reactionary class politics is an expression of disloyalty to the essential black female collectivity. This homogenisation of black women for purposes of maintaining a myth of ‘classlessness’ among African women harks back to a disturbingly familiar claim that was made by black men in their efforts to repress the emergence of women’s politics within liberation movements just a few decades ago. The vicious backlash that radical feminists and younger women who question the hierarchies of power experience when they raise these issues is a clear expression of the intolerance of political contestation that black middle-class women in positions of power have learnt from their black male class counterparts in the state and in global agencies.

Thus a key imperative of contemporary feminist theorising will be to make this fractious yet necessary critique of how the class positions of some black women have changed – they have become middle class and increasingly reactionary – as an outcome of the restructuring of economic and gendered relationships within all our societies since independence. By understanding that neo-colonialism is a moment of class reconfiguration in Africa through which some black women and men change their class identities and statuses, we begin to reveal how this process of class mobility has occurred in structural and ideological terms. It requires that feminists look at the structural facilitators of gendered upward mobility for black women in relation to the women’s movement – as a social and material base; the relocation of skilled and politically informed black women into the structures of global capitalism – the UN, the World Bank, and the IMF to name only the most obvious globalising systems; the shifting locations of black middle-class women within regional and continental structures such as the African Union and the Southern African Development Community, for example; and what ideological implications this has for women’s political relationships with the neo-colonial state and global agencies/donor agencies.

A contemporary feminism will have to craft a new language and strategies to get past the barriers that such class collusion has put in place; to create a new and vibrant political consciousness among young people in particular; and to launch dynamic theoretical and activist initiatives to put in place an alternative to neoliberal plunder and ideological fraudulence that will be sustainable and transformative in every aspect of social reality for the majority of African people.

Interrogating the state is an urgent feminist imperative

Equally important is the need to understand the state in Africa, its configurations and functions, and how it is a site of contestation and struggle between and among various factions of the middle and ruling classes for control over the wealth of the continent. The state has been central to the systems of exploitation and accumulation everywhere; it has played a key role in the invention and deployment of ideological and structural systems that extend privilege to certain groups and maintain the exclusion of others. Throughout history, the state has served the interests of patriarchal ruling classes and those groups who collude with them. Africa is no exception, whether we are dealing with the pre-colonial, colonial or neo-colonial periods.

However, feminists generally have tended not to pay adequate attention to the state as a site of power (particularly for men). The complaint that women who rise to state power through the collective efforts of women forget their constituents cannot be translated into a critical analysis if we do not understand the ways in which power works in the state or how individuals are affected by shifting loyalties and renegotiations of power. One of the major barriers to a critical analysis of the state by feminists has been the dominance of liberal discourses that are based on a conservative notion of gender. These are
liberal perspectives that accompany donor funding and that re-orientate women’s agendas, and which focus women’s energies on ‘numbers’ in parliament and in political parties. This formalistic expression of gendered representation often eclipses the necessity for critical analyses of power, thus leaving the status quo largely unquestioned. Such campaigns have been largely a failure everywhere. An understanding and critical analysis of the state is also essential in terms of the redefinition of citizenship and the repositioning of people’s entitlements and rights in more accessible and sustainable ways. Notions of citizenship that are declaratory and far removed from the daily lived realities of most people, and which are mediated by private property and the ability to ‘purchase’ rights as a market commodity – a central feature of rights in this contemporary moment – have been shown to be useless to excluded communities everywhere. In order to re-conceptualise entitlements and to create a consciousness of rights as outcomes of struggle, which are situated in the state by those who struggle for them, we will have to centre citizenship in new ways within a contemporary feminist perspective.

My position is that the state in Africa has to be re-conceptualised and re-imagined in terms of the interests, entitlements and rights of working people. We cannot pretend that we can have rights outside the context of the state; so-called humanitarian organisations and groups cannot provide – and never have provided – anyone with rights as sustainable social and material resources. We also have to understand that as long as a particular configuration of NGOs and agencies stand between us – the people – and our states, regardless of how ruthless and acquisitive the latter may be, we will not be able to transform the state, nor will we become “post-colonial”. In order to transition from neo-colonialism, with its often brutal and neglectful state functionaries, and initiate the moment of post-coloniality as the possibility of crafting new inclusive ideologies and practices for all African people, we have to ‘move the intermediaries aside’ – no matter what guise they wear such as donors, humanitarians, the UN, or whatever – and step into the future on the basis of our own understandings and definitions of what we want our post-colonial societies to be. We have to become post-colonial by daring to invent new ideological and social systems and practices that we have crafted, and which we own as African people. Radical feminism has to be an essential part of this future.

Patricia Mcfadden is a Radical Feminist who lives and works on the continent and in the global feminist movement, and has taught women’s studies and supported the development of young feminists for many years. Patricia has worked as a gender trainer and consultant, building women’s organisations and supporting the development of feminist analysis and activism. She has published extensively on various feminist issues in Africa and edited SAFERE (a feminist journal) from 1995 to 2000. She is currently a distinguished visiting professor at Syracuse University in New York State, USA.

Endnotes
1 The journals, Feminist Africa and Agenda, provide excellent resources in terms of understanding the critiques and contestations that have accompanied the emergence of feminism on the continent, particularly in Southern Africa.
2 See Jackson & Jones, page 1.
3 The ideology and practice of heterosexism are deeply embedded in Patriarchy as an ideology that defines sexual relationships between women and men as “normal” – and that institutionalises this “normalcy” as heteronormativity, giving rise to a form of supremacy among heterosexuals who treat heterosexuality as “natural” and other forms of sexual orientation as behaviour that is deviant and outside the norm. Heterosexism has remained largely unquestioned and unchallenged within women’s movements in Africa, and is responsible for several unresolved political tensions between LGBTI women and hetero-women.
4 LGBTI is an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans-gendered and Intersex people.
5 Amilcar Cabral published a set of foundational pieces on the political economy of liberation, entitled Return to the Source. This expression is intended to reflect the radical tradition that he endowed us with as radical Africans.
7 See Patricia McFadden, “Challenges and possibilities in crafting a Contemporary Feminist politics in Southern Africa”.

References