Main Article:

Painting a Counter-Narrative of African Womanhood: Reflections on How My Research Transformed Me

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Abstract

Whereas writing a dissertation can be a fear-inducing experience for a doctoral student, there exists the possibility of not only learning but also self-transformation that can take place through the process. In this article, I reflect on how my choice of a research approach provided me with a transformative research experience. I will describe portraiture as a critical feminist research method that was culturally relevant in undertaking my study of African women leaders. Through this process of conducting research utilizing portraiture as method, I became a supplicant learner.

Keywords: portraiture; supplicant learner; counter-narrative; critical feminist research; tempered radical

1. Personal Context and Topic Choice

When I first commenced doctoral studies as an international student in an American institution, I had no idea what my research area would be. Every time the issue of research was brought up in my first year classes, I would always say that I was still thinking about it. Having been interested in the status of women in Africa during my master's program while I was still in Kenya, I thought it appropriate to start from there. I began to read and attempt to write theoretical papers relating to women's status and

women in management in Africa. I was perturbed when I found that much of what I was reading that purported to be about African women only perpetuated stereotypes and power relations (Nzegwu, 2003; Oyewumi, 2002). Some literature misrepresented African women because of the tendency to pathologize African women's experiences (Mbugua-Muriithi, 1996). My personal observations of African women and the limited literature I found that did not pathologize African women prompted me to believe that there had to be a *counter-narrative,* one that celebrated the women's resiliency and resistance in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges (Amadiume, 1997; Baker, 1998; Bennett, 2005; Chandler & Wane, 2002; Ngunjiri, 2006a, 2006b).

Toward the end of my doctoral coursework, I elected to research on women and leadership in Africa, owing to the dearth of research on the subject (Mabokela, 2003a; Ngunjiri, 2006b; Tamale, 2000). Furthermore, my social location and value-orientation as a young woman leader, whose prior experiences, educational attainments, and social status gave her a privilege that other women in her continent did not have, compelled me to both present a counter-hegemonic discourse, and herald the voices of the silenced and unheard. There is an oft-quoted African adage: it takes a village to raise a child. In this case, my being able to undertake graduate studies at an American university was the result of my village folks' moral and financial support, many of them being women. As an honor to them, I was obliged to give authentic, contextualized representation of African women as leaders. My research journey went beyond an academic exercise, to a personal and spirited search toward an understanding of both my research participants and myself as a product of a specific cultural, social, historical, political, economic, and educational context. It became a journey of self-discovery, even as I prepared to learn from my participants. Thus, I needed to utilize a methodology that would enable me to express the participants' voice as well as my own. *Portraiture* became my method of choice as it blends several interpretative approaches, and provides for a potential synthesis between aesthetic sensibilities and scientific rigor, in order to "paint with words," to describe people and context in rich detail (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

2. Portraiture as Research Method

It took several attempts before I could create a suitable guiding question; I began with the status of women, moved to the leadership practices of women, and finally settled on explicating the experiences of women leaders. After several iterations, my research question became: What does it mean to be a woman and a leader in an African context? To adequately explore this research question, I needed an approach that would facilitate my search for meaning--especially the meaning arising out of the women leaders' lives in the African setting. My search for an approach led me to qualitative research.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that takes place in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) involving the *holistic depiction* of phenomena, cultures, people, or organizations. The idea of holistic depiction of people and context was an important qualifier for my choice of the qualitative approach as I needed to stay true to my subject matter and context. However, some qualitative methods, ethnography and life

history included, have historically been notorious for their contribution to the tyranny of colonialism and imperialism in Africa (Oyewumi, 1997, 2002).

In the case of misrepresenting Africa, many of the early ethnographers who claimed to be engaged in participant observations did not really participate; they merely observed, resulting in African data interpreted from Eurocentric cultural assumptions of superiority and racial/ethnic prejudices (Nzegwu, 2001; Oyewumi, 2002, 2003). In the process, they contributed to views upon which colonial policies were based. As such, I was conscious of the need for a qualitative approach that encouraged critical self-awareness as well as authentic engagement with the participants as co-creators of knowledge. Whereas life history centers on the "other" and traditionally ethnography has been uncomfortable with revealing the "self" of the researcher, portraiture necessitates presenting both the self as main research instrument, and the participant as co-conspirator in creating authentic portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

I was introduced to portraiture during my first semester of graduate studies, when I attended the oral defense of Sharyn Jones (2003), who utilized portraiture as a biographical approach to explore the experiences of female African American educational administrators from a systems thinking perspective. After studying other qualitative approaches including phenomenology, grounded theory, biography, ethnography, and case study as described in Creswell (1998), I decided to explore portraiture further as a possible method because it offered a blend of several approaches. I found that portraiture offered me several advantages: (a) a critical feminist approach (Allen, 1998), which has the flexibility to utilize cultural forms such as African proverbs, wise sayings, and expressions in crafting the portraits (Tillman, 2002), (b) the flexibility to utilize my prior educational and life experiences as a starting point for narrating the stories, (c) a process that could be emancipatory and empowering for both participant and researcher, and (d) a chance to present my voice as well as that of the participants. I found that portraiture served as a culturally and contextually relevant method for my study of African women leaders. Borrowing from ethnography, portraiture permits the researcher to provide a thick description of the context in order to produce portraits that are true to the realities of the participants' social, cultural, economic, and political realities.

Portraiture also encourages having authentic relationships with participants, a very important factor in my choice, because African traditions demand establishing a genuine relationship before the realization of business, or in this case, research priorities. For relationships to be authentic, the researcher has to demonstrate honesty, dependability, and trust, thus enabling both researcher and participant to engage in the process of co-creating knowledge. Furthermore, portraiture enabled me to write the kind of authentic representations of African women that I found to be few and far between, that is, portraits that truthfully demonstrate the complexity of the lives of the research participants (Walker, 1983). It also allowed me to produce research that informs as well as inspires the audience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture enabled me to create inspiring portraits because it does not pathologize participants' experience, rather choosing to search for goodness, or that which works (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). I

established that the pathologies and myriad challenges that African women face had been thoroughly documented in many academic articles as well as in the popular literature. Instead, I focused on explicating the counter-narrative that would demonstrate that African women are also survivors and victors, actively engaged in their own emancipation (Amadiume, 1997; Baker, 1998).

I found portraiture to be a method suitable for explicating the experiences of marginalized persons (Sandoval, 2000), as a research method of the oppressed, by the oppressed, for the oppressed, and beyond. The oppressed are women who chose to swim against the tide by fighting for social justice for other marginalized populations such as the poor, the economically disenfranchised, and the educationally left behind. In this case, the oppressed are *tempered radicals* (Meyerson, 2001; Meyerson & Scully, 1995) who fight for social justice because "radicalization criticizes and thereby liberates" (Freire 1970, p. 37). Tempered radicals are people who find themselves at odds with the dominant organizational culture or modus operandi, and who choose to change the status quo while playing the tight rope between hanging on to their jobs and getting fired for attempting to spark off fundamental change (Alston, 2005; Meyerson, 2001).

Portraiture blends ideas from the philosophy of phenomenology and several interpretative methods. Following phenomenology, portraiture concentrates on explicating participants' experiences; following ethnography, portraiture gives primacy to context; following life history, portraiture involves listening for the stories of the participants; finally, following biography, portraiture focuses on the individual (Davis, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

> Portraiture seeks to combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor. The portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity and dimensionality of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3)

To produce the authentic pieces that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis visualized above, it was necessary to immerse myself in the culture. In spite of modernity and westernization, certain elements of African culture have remained intact. One such element that was very important in my choosing to do qualitative research and in selecting portraiture as method is the fact that, in spite of the advent of education and literacy, Africans are still largely an oral people. Storytelling forms the bulk of cultural transmission; the primary storytellers are elder-sage women, the mothers and grandmothers of the community (Kolawole, 1997; Likimani, 1985, 2005; Ngunjiri, 2006a). Beyond passing on cultural history from generation to generation, these sages also inculcate moral values, norms, and social expectations in the minds of the younger generations. As such, portraiture's humanistic sensibilities and artistic expression enabled me to do two related tasks. The first was to listen attentively and actively to the women's stories as they told me about

their lives as leaders--actively because I engaged in culturally expected inquisitive responses and questioning to get further and deeper into the women's experiences. In the African culture, children and youth are encouraged to be learners, to be curious about how the world works, and this knowledge is to be gained not only through bookish learning but especially by listening to elders. As an unmarried and childfree woman, I am still regarded as a child by African standards. The women leaders took on their role of educators and mentors seriously, enthusiastically passing on their lived and tested wisdom, to both guide me and the audiences that my written work would eventually reach. As one leader in my study expressed it, "You are the academic, it is your responsibility to write the books and inform a wider audience . . . [go and] imbue spirituality into academe."

Secondly, portraiture enabled me to take the stance of a *supplicant learner* as necessitated by the cultural context of the study. A supplicant learner is one who is willing to put aside, at least for the moment of interaction with the participant, her "expert" stance, and instead put on a humble, child-like persona in that researcher-participant relationship. In describing their work, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) talked about the respect with which they entered and encountered each new context, a respect that enabled them to relate authentically with the participants and involve their participants as co-creators of the portraits. A common feminist critique of traditional social science research has often been that it is undertaken from the perspective of the researcher as expert (Allen, 1998), neglecting the participants' own expertise embedded in their lived experience. Such neglect would have been counter-productive in my context because the African cultural element of reverence for elders demands that younger people regard their elders with honor and respect (Gyekye, 1997). I therefore entered the field as a supplicant learner, one who felt humbled by the knowledge that these busy women were willing to spend time with me, telling me their stories, letting me observe their lives and learn from their experiences.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, in the African culture, a 30-something unmarried and childfree woman is still considered a child/youth. Humbling myself as a child-researcher then was a way to honor the cultural heritage of my community, and open the space for the women to engage in the role of cultural educators and experts of their own experiences. Furthermore, the African patronage culture demands that a younger person be introduced to people in authority or to older people by another older person or person in authority (Gyekye, 1997). To this end, I utilized the services of a liaison--my maternal aunt, who introduced me to some of the women leaders. My aunt being an ordained minister, a university lecturer, and a community leader, the women leaders were cognizant of her status, and were willing to speak with me. I did not completely give up being an expert in both leadership theory and research process; I exercised my expertise as I analyzed and composed the final product having been the witness, active listener, and interpreter to the events that I was describing (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). However, in the field, I engaged in culturally mandated normative behavior, such as utilizing a liaison and taking the stance of a supplicant learner, in order to maximize my learning and honor my participants.

3. Critical Feminist Research

In my search for a research approach, I was also interested in articulating my value orientation towards scholarship for social justice by utilizing critical feminist theory and critical race theory as conceptual foundations (Allen, 1998; Alston, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991; Tillman, 2002). Portraiture offered me the potential of a research approach that could be both emancipatory and empowering as I attempted to represent the experiences of women leaders from the margins, bringing them forth to the center that is academe (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Sandoval, 2000; Tillman, 2002). My aim was to produce research that would be emancipatory for the participants by engaging them as active co-creators of knowledge, in the production of narratives about their experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Intersectionality is a term used to describe the multiple oppressions that women and people of color face (Crenshaw, 1991). Critical feminist research utilizing the portraiture method enabled me to interrogate the intersectional oppressions that arise from social context, gender, culture, political economy, educational attainments, and the women's chosen vocation as social justice leaders (Collins, 1999; Crenshaw, 1991; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000). To do this effectively, participants in my study previewed their transcripts and added whatever they indicated was missing, or highlighted areas that they deemed important in telling their leadership stories. Many of them commented on the fact that being actively involved in the research made them feel empowered and respected. Additionally, having their voices heard beyond the local context was gratifying to them as leaders who were invested in passing on the practical wisdom gained from experiences. As such, portraiture enabled me to conduct research in a manner that did not *objectify* my participants or create exploitative relationships with them; instead, I attempted to engage in a research journey that was transformative for both participants and me (Collins, 2000; Tillman, 2002).

4. My Transformative Journey Through Research

One of the personal results of this research journey has been my growth and transformation in the area of cultural self-awareness. My participants ranged in age from 40 to 80 years, thus serving as a reservoir of history. I learned the history that does not appear in textbooks--women's roles in social transformation, including their involvement in Kenya's freedom movement and their activism towards achieving peace in Sudan and other parts of Africa. It was particularly inspiring and informative for me to learn the kinds of skills that women utilized as "underground" leaders, such as negotiation, peace-building, and *othermothering,* that is, bringing up the community's children (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Murtadha-Watts, 1999). In terms of ethical leadership, the participants demonstrated leadership that included the ethics of care, justice, and critique (Starratt, 1991). These ethics were evident particularly as they engaged systems of injustice in governance, healthcare, education, law, and the abuse of traditions relating to females such as female genital cutting and forced early marriages.

Additionally, several of the women also engaged in leadership that included an ethic of risk as they challenged unjust social, cultural, and legal systems--they talked about being threatened, and losing their jobs and their marriages as part of the price that they paid for their commitment to social justice (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Ngunjiri, 2005, 2006b; Welch, 2000). There was a sense of relief in discovering that in the 16 participants were 16 different kinds of people--some loud and boisterous, others quiet and seemingly demure--yet all were able to achieve success as social justice leaders. Through this discovery that leaders need not conform to some ideal behavioral makeup, I came to the realization that I too could achieve success as a leader by being true to myself and committed to my calling.

5. Resonance

One of the limitations inherent in a qualitative approach that requires intimate engagement with the context is that I often felt rushed because I had only 3 months in which to conduct the fieldwork. Additionally, I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the number of women willing to be interviewed, and I could not say no to those who recommended still other women leaders to be interviewed. My original proposal stated that I would interview just five women, but, by the end of the fieldwork, I had 16 participants duly interviewed, including those who had been too busy to speak with me when I first arrived. Their enthusiasm to participate, and their willingness to open up the core of lives even about issues that were painful and difficult, came as a surprise to me. Even more surprising was the resiliency and strength that they displayed, in spite of very challenging leadership environments. As one woman leader asserted, "We are not victims. No, we are victors as we strive to bring justice to our society."

This research journey has stretched me academically and transformed me in intimate ways. Academically, I was fortunate to work with a dissertation committee who challenged and supported me, enabling me to create a final product that we could take pride in. They have become mentors in the academy who continue to encourage and guide me even after I graduated. Culturally, I reconnected with a part of myself that I took for granted--the reverence for age and veneration of elders that demanded that I become a child-researcher or supplicant learner. I knew that my culture rewarded inquisitive behavior from the youth, especially when that inquisitiveness was directed toward learning from those elders. However, never before had I used this cultural heritage to inform my academic pursuits. My relationship with the women elders/leaders was positively impacted by my stance as a supplicant learner. They constantly talked about how they felt honored and respected by being actively engaged in the research process (Ngunjiri, 2006a, 2006b).

These women leaders taught me by their example what it means to be a woman and a social justice advocate in spite of, rather than in the absence of, oppressive forces. I saw resiliency personified in each of the women as they had chosen difficult paths in order to serve their local communities, institutions, nations, and the continent of Africa as a whole. They were willing to suffer the consequences of their radical actions, the indignities of being regarded as cultural traitors, and sometimes even forgoing the

comforts of marriage in order to emancipate marginalized people. They challenged me to view my status as a Black-African-woman-academic as a tool for the emancipation of marginalized persons, whether that be in my teaching, research, and/or service within and outside of the ivory tower (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Many of these women utilized scarce resources to advance their social justice agendas with varying degrees of success. The challenge for me then is to use the resources at my disposal to agitate and stand up for social justice ideals. These resources include my position as a junior faculty member, my location in North America, my voice as an alien in the United States, and my status as a cultural ambassador for my native land. The resources and opportunities to stand up for social justice ideals may also arise through my writing, research endeavors, and any speaking opportunities that come my way. That is, my life in academe needs to be guided by the principles that I learnt from the women leaders; how to allow spirituality to guide me, how to become a servant leader, and how to stand up and be counted as a tempered radical.

The women leaders also challenged me to imbue spirituality into academe, urging me to use my voice and to critically engage with injustice. By spirituality, the women leaders were urging me to be true to the calling that I have received, to listen to my inner voice, to remain spiritually-tuned, to seek authentic relationships with students and colleagues, and to realize purpose and meaning through my work ((Murtadha-Watts, 1999; Paris, 1995; Tisdell, 2003). Listening to them, I could hear echoes of Paulo Freire, as he urged professors to engage in emancipatory teaching and research (1970) and Michael Dantley, as he challenged professors to utilize African American prophetic/critical spirituality in training leaders for social justice (Dantley, 2003a, 2003b, 2005).

The women leaders in this study exemplified *servant leadership,* that is engaging in leadership because of the compulsion to serve (Alston, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977). As Greenleaf prophesied:

> The next thirty years will be marked as a period when the dark skinned and the deprived and the alienated of the world effectively asserted their claims to stature, and they were not led by a privileged elite but exceptional people from their own kind. (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 34)

Greenleaf perspicaciously foresaw what these women leaders manifested by their exemplary lives: the dark-skinned, deprived, and alienated leading their own kind towards emancipation. Studies of other dark-skinned, deprived, and alienated folk have yielded similar themes of spirituality, servant leadership, resiliency, and courage in the face of struggles (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dove, 1998; Jones, 2003; Mabokela, 2003b; Mbugua-Muriithi, 1996; Meyerson, 2001; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Reid-Merritt, 1996). The dark-skinned and deprived from this study and those mentioned above have a collective mentality, a social consciousness, derived from their Africana culture and their social location in communities of people who have historically endured much oppression. My research journey brought me in touch with that collective consciousness and put me in touch with the spirited mentality that demands action against injustice in ways that surprised me, moved me, stretched me, and molded me into what I am becoming: a

socially conscious, ethically-engaged scholar, researcher, leader, practitioner--all rolled in one. As such, I stand on the shoulders of giants.

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