SYMPOSIUM

"We Thought You Would Be White": Race and Gender in Fieldwork

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After an exhausting 22-hour trip from St. Louis, I landed in Maputo, Mozambique, alone, for the first time in July 2003 to begin my dissertation research on women and women's organizations in Mozambique since democratization. I spent an hour talking to a young man who was returning home (to Maputo) from Brazil. Seeing it as an opportunity to practice my Portuguese with someone who spoke English, I did not realize that an hour had passed and my "welcoming party" still had not arrived. The young man and I switched from Portuguese to English as he began telling me the "cool places to hang out and get a drink" in Maputo. I had no idea who was coming to pick me up as I was armed only with the information that it was my in-country advisor's brother who would be there. As this young man and I were talking someone came up to me and asked, "Are you Frances?" With a sigh of relief, I said yes, and he replied, "I was here all of the time and I did not realize that you were here until I heard you speaking English with this young man. I did not recognize you; we thought you would be white."

Stunned but too tired from the trip to say much in Portuguese, I piled my bags into the waiting car as we headed to the boarding house where I would stay for the next six weeks. As my advisor's brother explained who I was to the old white Portuguese family who owned the boarding house, it was only then that I realized that the fact that I was black could be a problem for them.[1] Tired, borderline sick, and bleary eyed, both my contact's brother and I convinced the older white couple that I indeed would not be a problem. I'm sure the fact that I paid cash (American dollars) did not hurt.

This story marks the beginning of my pre-dissertation trip to Maputo. It never had occurred to me to e-mail my advisor a picture of me, which in retrospect would have been the smart thing to do. However, what this initial experience reflects is the intersection of race, gender, and nationality for one researcher in the field. Over the course of the next six weeks, and then again over the course of the year (2003–2004), the fact that I was an African American woman in a southern African country had some very interesting implications. In this piece, I will draw on my experience in the field as a researcher to explore the ways in which race, gender, and "Americanness" intersect and challenge both my notions about identity and my host country's ideas about African American women.[2]

Using feminist and qualitative methodologies in the field ("soaking and poking," participant observation, and other methods) presents dilemmas, rewards, and challenges. Feminist inquiry centers on studying women from the perspective of their own experiences and assumes that women, all types of women, can be agents of knowledge with regard to not only their personal situations, but can also articulate the structural and material conditions of their own lives vis-à-vis society. Feminist inquiry leads to feminist research, which "strives for reciprocity, collaboration and advocacy in an attempt to address longstanding inequalities based on gender, race and class in participants' lives and in the researcher-participant relationship" (Alcalde 2007, 144). This requires that feminist researchers take the postmodern turn and place their own class, race, and gender assumptions "in the frame of the picture that she attempts to paint" (Harding 1987, 8; see also Ladner 1987; Tsuda 2003). This type of reflexivity also leads to the evaluation of the researcher's identity within the context of the field and the perceptions of their informants with regard to the researcher. As a feminist researcher, I early on availed myself of being a dispassionate scholar who would not intervene, as on many occasions I found myself acting as a scholar, a friend, and a cultural ambassador in the field.

RACE AND NATIONALITY IN THE FIELD: THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE, POSITIONALITY, AND IDENTITY

"Why did you all think I was white?" I asked my in-country advisor about three weeks into my initial visit to Maputo, after we had established a rapport. "Oh, because the people who come here from the U.S. to do research are white." My advisor's statement was telling and opens the door to an analysis of issues of race and the production of knowledge about African people, culture, and politics. Southern African women scholars have expressed their frustration around the fact that publishers, journals, etc. in the West privilege material written *about* them by Westerners rather than material written *by* them (see Meena 1992, among others). My advisor's comment reflects the experience of many scholars in southern Africa; often knowledge production about African women's lives is conducted by non-African scholars from the North, for consumption by non-African audiences in the North. This is problematic because epistemological issues (who can be the knower and articulator of whose experience) follow us into the field and in some instances color the interactions that we have with other scholars in the site, as well as informants. Subsequently, regional scholars and informants' experiences with other researchers who preceded me had an impact on their perception of me and of my work and at times called into question my qualifications as a researcher.

My identity as an African American woman researcher in Mozambique initially cast me as an anomaly, or at least a

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curious oddity with regard to the community's perception of the normal field researcher from the U.S. I cannot say whether my blackness got me more interviews (many women had already had contact with other researchers from the U.S. with regard to their life experiences), a warmer response in various social situations, or more personal accounts of particular events. Nor did it garner me immunity from charges by southern African women scholars that I was part of the process of the re-colonization of knowledge. I could not ignore the legacy of U.S./Western imperialism in Mozambique, the region, or academia. As many of us know, solidarity and shared experiences based solely on gender cannot be taken for granted (Mohanty 1991). Neither can the prospect of shared experiences be dismissed. My positionality as a member of a subaltern group (as an African American woman), presented the *possibility* of solidarity with the women of southern Africa based on this subaltern status that sat at the nexus of my experience of gender and race in the United States. And as many scholars have noted, "the nature of [the anthropologist's] data is largely determined by his [social] identity as seen by his subjects" (Cicourel 1964; see also Tsuda 2003, 10).

As Michael Hanchard suggests, my identity in the field as a scholar, a researcher, a woman, and an African American "had as much to do with [Mozambicans'] views on Blackness in the United States as it had to do with me as an individual" (2000, 167). This identity was both formed internally and externally. As a participant-observer, I built a rapport with my informants by responding to their questions and inquiries about the lives and conditions of African American women in the United States. These probing questions led to my own act of reflection on my identity from a space as far away geographically and politically as Mozambique. Responding in an honest and forthcoming manner to questions or comments about my country, my life, and status based on my gender and race mitigated my strangeness and forced me to reflect, from a very different perspective, on my life as a black woman academic.

"*OLA MENINA*!" GENDER AND IDENTITY IN INFORMAL SETTINGS IN THE FIELD

Problematizing my race and gender[3] within the professional setting of discussions, interactions, and interviews with informants and other academics was different than having these discussions with my friends/informants. Those who have conducted field research in another country for more than three months know the importance of developing friendships in the field that will sustain you. In addition to my advisor, American ex-patriots, fellow Fulbrighters, and American embassy staff, I developed close friendships with three Mozambican women, all of whom were within five years either side of the age of 30. These women became my cohort, friends, and sounding board, and kept me grounded in the field. They also provided me with frank, urban Mozambican women's perspectives and strategies on behavior and social norms with regard to sexual harassment and unsolicited attention.

"Psss psss pss!" I hissed back as we passed a group of men on the busy *baixo* streets of Maputo with my friend Olga.[4] Sensing my irritation, Olga half jokingly cautioned me to stop responding to catcalls in this manner or I was going to "get us hurt." As being on the receiving end of this unsolicited attention was the norm for me on a daily basis, I barely heard Olga's admonishments and kept my quick pace. The fact of the matter was that upon leaving my apartment to go for interviews, to the market, or to the embassy, I was greeted on the street with leers/calls of "*Ola menina*" (girl) or "*Ola fofinha*" (soft cuddly woman) and "Pss, psss, pssss!" every time I walked out the door. This experience of negotiating catcalls and intimidating behavior from local men is not an experience that is new to women researchers in their field sites. Gifford and Hall-Clifford correctly point out that women have "special concerns" with regard to close "social scrutiny based on the body" (2008, 26). This close social scrutiny leads to "safety concerns and resulting restrictions on movement; management of reputation in the field site while maintaining an independent research schedule and actually conducting our research" (Gifford and Hall-Clifford 2008, 26–27).

Researchers are judged, liberated, or constrained by the social norms that we carry with us from our native society into the field. However, we are also judged, liberated, or constrained by the social norms of the site in which we conduct our research. Simply learning these norms and social behavior is an enormous part of fieldwork. Reconciling these norms with your own beliefs or personal politics complicates the matter even further. In the field, one is continuously negotiating one's whole self not only with the locals, but with oneself, in a manner that is conducive to conducting research (Tsuda 2003). When it comes to navigating the professional and social identity of a Western woman field researcher, cultural and social norms around gender in the field take center stage. Rules with regard to catcalls and the appropriate responses to them in the U.S. were mitigated by my understanding of the norms in Maputo and my own feminist leanings.

My reaction to unsolicited comments and harassment on the streets or in cafes/restaurants varied according to my mood. Sometimes I ignored them, hissed back, glared, or threw a hostile gesture. My three Mozambican women friends had different reactions. Olga stated that it was a part of everyday life in the city for women who were walking alone or with other young women. It certainly did not help, she always added, that I was an exotic foreigner (exotic here by virtue of being a foreigner and an African American).[5] But she also cautioned me to be careful how I reacted as some men wouldn't hesitate to move beyond comments towards actual physical contact. Of course, she had her own car and drove virtually everywhere. Another friend, Cristina, would generally hiss back or shoot back, "pss psss is for cats; I am not a cat." (Incidentally, it was from her that I originally gained the courage to hiss back.) Finally another friend just ignored them (she also took taxis everywhere, and did very little walking). These varied reactions represented three different ways of negotiating what was for me a daily annoyance at best and at worst a sometimes hostile space.

Norms and customs in Maputo made it generally acceptable for men to lob unsolicited remarks and catcalls at women (young women) walking down the street on a daily basis. Perhaps some thought it was harmless, perhaps others did not care. What I experienced as sexual harassment was in the eyes

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of some of my friends and informants no more than the norm for behavior of some men on the streets. This is not to say that my three friends were not bothered by it; to some degree or another they all at least *noticed* it. However, their reactions are telling in that all but one of them seemingly accepted it as a part of daily life, by either ignoring it or being afraid to respond out of fear of escalating the situation. As I spent most of my time travelling by *chapa* (public transportation), or taxi or on foot alone I couldn't help but notice, and despite my best attempts, be affected by what I considered an unwanted gaze upon my body. The catcalls and remarks in no way kept me from conducting my field research and I never felt that I was physically in danger of being attacked or even touched. But, I would argue that this gendered phenomenon belies the matrix of power relations from which these gazes emerge. I use this example in order to point out the ways in which my physical appearance (black, woman) thrust me in the middle of this power matrix and provided me with a firsthand experience of some of the norms that reflect patriarchal relations in the urban areas.

"WHAT *IS* KWANZAA?" INTERROGATING AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY AND REALITY.[6]

Olga and I sat sipping beer and eating calamari in a restaurant down by Maputo Bay immersed in an intense conversation about African American politics, culture, and identity. I was used to fielding questions from strangers about my self identification as *uma americana*[7] and as an African American woman. However, Olga's comments and questions were more subtle and penetrating. As she was an informant who became a very close friend, I was at ease with her and we discussed everything from politics in Mozambique to our friends and family. When she asked what Kwanzaa was, and why African Americans "invented" it, I wasn't surprised. I explained to her what I thought to be the truth; that Kwanzaa is an effort on the part of some African Americans to reconnect with their roots, forge a new bond with Africa the "cultural homeland" that they had been ripped from by slavery. In her usual flip manner, she dismissed it as culturally inauthentic, by saying that there was nothing African about Kwanzaa. Intrigued and a bit annoyed, I asked her how she felt about African Americans identifying themselves as *African* Americans, when it could be argued that the *African* part of this moniker was culturally inauthentic. She said that she was fine with it and that she thought that it was appropriate.

In some respects this exchange is akin to the opening vignette in which my Mozambican in country advisor thought that I was white. Both experiences speak to the liminal space that I occupied as an African American woman academic in the field in Mozambique. My American dollars spoke louder than my skin color in my opening vignette, allowed me to work out in the posh hotel gym and walk into any restaurant and be served regardless of what I was wearing. In many instances, I, like other African Americans who were foreigners in other parts of the developing world, occupied that liminal space afforded to me by the foreignness of my black American status.

Olga's questions go to the heart of social identity as it is constructed both internally and externally not only in the U.S. but also in other parts of the world, which follows one into the field. While her ideas and assumptions about black Americans were based on personal interactions that she had in her travels abroad, other's perceptions about me and ostensibly African Americans were based instead on media portrayals of black American culture that dominate international airwaves. However, Olga's seemingly contradictory ideas about the authenticity of Kwanzaa versus the moniker *African* American reveals an ambiguity about African Americans that is a result of this most current type of cultural imperialism. The images that are transmitted abroad are distorted images that don't capture the complexity of African American reality and identity in the U.S.; nonetheless these images of the black Americans are the ones that many Mozambicans hold, know, or align with or against. Thus the ambiguity in some instances represents a disconnect between African American realities and the "bling" lifestyle transmitted through pop culture that seemingly sets black Americans apart from the rest of the black developing world.

CONCLUSION

Many social scientists view fieldwork lasting more than three months as unnecessary soaking and poking. Very few of us receive funding to conduct extensive trips to the field. Those of us who do are sent with our suitcases, books, memories from home, and notes from a qualitative methods class (usually taken in an anthropology department) into the field. Experiences in the field are rarely discussed among social sciences colleagues, but these can have an impact on our work.

I have focused on a few of my complex, multilayered experiences in the field. I went to study Mozambican women in politics, but found that my own body, positionality, and identity became a site of contestation for my informants in Mozambique and for me. It is important to acknowledge the impact that positionality has on daily living and research in the field and to expect these types of experiences. I suggest that political science researchers take a cue from our colleagues in anthropology, who have written extensively on the importance of reflection about identity before going to the field, in the field, and upon one's return. In terms of gender and sexuality in the field, I would suggest *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, edited by Don Kulick and Margaret Wilson (1995). *Racing Research, Researching Race*, an edited volume by France Winddance Twine and Jonathon Warren (2000), problematizes race in field research. Researchers should keep a diary of daily experiences and reflect on them in the field. Further, take texts that interrogate identity with you, not only to share with your informants, should they ask, but to help you keep things in perspective. I always take Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) with me into the field. Finally, e-mail a picture of yourself to your field contacts, so they at least have an idea what to expect. ■

NOTE

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1. Mozambique was a Portuguese colony in which a white settler regime established a racial hierarchy with black Africans at the bottom. The

family that owned the boarding house had moved from Portugal to Mozambique in the 1950s and had enjoyed a moderate lifestyle based on their ownership of land. The entire staff of the boarding house consisted of black Africans who referred to the owner as "patron," displaying a type of deference reminiscent of the type of relationship that existed under colonialism.

2. Identity here consists of both the self "developed and experienced internally, through one's own perceptions and experiences of the social environment" and social identity that is externally defined by others in accordance with standardized cultural and social norms and social roles" (Tsuda 2003, 9–10).
3. Rarely was I asked about class. I think that the assumption was that I lived on a meager graduate researcher salary.
4. Names have been changed to protect the identity of those in Mozambique. These friends were urban, young middle- to upper-middle-class African women who spoke both Portuguese and English.
5. In the field I was careful not to draw attention to my dress; but my physical appearance, my demeanor, and my Portuguese often belied my foreigner status.
6. Kwanzaa is a cultural holiday invented by Dr. Maulana Karenga in the 1960s. It is a celebration of harvest and life based on African principles that is celebrated for seven days between Christmas and New Year's. Over the last 20 years, Kwanzaa has entered the American cultural lexicon and an increasing number of African Americans celebrate it as a holiday.
7. This was my response to the question "Where are you from?" Generally people would then ask, "What type of American, north or south? Why do you Americans think that you are the only ones who live in any of the Americas?" followed by a barrage of comments about Bush's war on terror.

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