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The Poetry in Portraiture: Seeing Subjects, Hearing Voices, and Feeling Contexts

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Creating poetic portraits allows scholars to communicate research findings in multi-dimensional and more accessible ways. The author explores womanist theory and two dimensions of portraiture research—context and voice—used to create poetic portraits about the experiences and practices of three Black women teacher educators. Research participants included Olivia, an assistant professor at a predominately White, comprehensive higher education institution; Tulip, an associate professor at a liberal arts and predominately Black higher education institution; and Tulani, an associate professor at a predominately Black research institution. Data were collected through interview, observation and shadowing, and document review to answer two research questions: In what ways do the participants’ experiences as outsiders-within inform their practices? and How does the theme of race uplift inform the participants’ pedagogy? Examples are presented of poetic techniques from research. The author discusses the use of poetry as a means for educational scholarship to influence wider audiences.

Keywords: portraiture; poetry; Black women educators; qualitative research; womanist theory

Poetry has the ability to point us toward the truth and then stand aside, while prose stands in the doorway relating all the wonders on the other side but rarely lets us pass.

—Pine (1996)

Poetic Portraits

Portraiture’s unique characteristic to blur “the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv) supports poetic documentation of educational research. Poetry can make situations more vivid to the reader. It provides us with a window
into the feelings of characters, and it encapsulates the essence of events that many of us may have lived at one time or another (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). As a research strategy, portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural contexts, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I present poetic portraits of three academics as teaching afriographies, interwoven with their perspectives and experiences as Black women who educate teachers. Poems were developed during data analysis and were created with quotes from interview transcripts, my own shadowing reflections, and specific analyzed documents.

To create each poem, I began with the emergent themes from interview transcripts and shadowing reflections, themes such as spirituality, race uplift, support, and outsider-within. My goal was to describe the stories of my participants becoming and being teacher educators so that the reader would feel a familiarity with, and connection to, each respondent. In most, if not all, cultures, stories have enormous potential for connectivity (Thompson, 1998). I looked for direct quotes from interview transcripts that would confirm the themes and give honor to their voices. I then brainstormed characteristics of each participant. I used my reflective notes to help convey the context of each professor, her office, and the culture of the university so as to paint a vivid portrait filled with the depth of witnessing the experience of data collection. Through my reflective notes, I recalled how I felt at each site as I anticipated the first observational experience. In this way, the two essential features of portraiture—context and voice—assisted in creating poetic portraits.

The context of a portrait is the setting—the “physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic—within which the action takes place” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41). The context becomes the framework or reference point to place people and action in time and space and a resource for understanding what they say and do. Although context is the framework, voice fills the space within the framework. Poems exemplify my voice in dialogue with the participants’ and capture my voice discerning the sound and meaning of their voices (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) while also honoring their voices (Richardson, 2001). Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani’s voices and my voice witnessing their voices help bring their portraits to life.

As with any life, Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani’s day-to-day experiences cannot be neatly defined or summarized in a few stanzas. To capture the richness and complexity of their lives in social and cultural contexts, Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani’s stories of graduate school and of the teacher education professoriate are poetically presented in a linear fashion as well as in an “experienced” fashion. That is, experiences blur and are sometimes intertwined with other experiences. Certain parts of respondents’ portraits are sequential, but like a lived experience, other parts of their poems elaborate on that experience. I take special care in presenting participants’ afriographies, being aware of
writing with respect for their families, students, colleagues, and institutions. For this reason, I use pseudonyms for all names and places. Poems are presented in the order of data collection: Dr. Olivia New-Ever, Dr. Tulip Wise-Ofelder, and Dr. Tulani Hingus Reed.

**DR. OLIVIA NEW-EVER:**
**EDUCATION FOR TODAY**

“You are not only teaching students for life;
You are preparing them for the real world, right now.”

There is a 3 × 5 inch photo on her office door
Of a Black woman teaching students in a one-room schoolhouse.

If you enter, you will see.

A short woman with chocolate skin
And long pressed hair,
The kind that reminds you of getting
Your own hair “hot combed” in the kitchen
On Sunday mornings before church.
She has Indian in her.

A young Afro-Caribbean woman
Who also identifies as African American.
“I am young chronologically and a novice in the profession.”
She is 1 of 4 Black professors in her department,
They make 4 of 35 in this College of Education.
You will see.

A Smart,
Organized
English major
Teacher educator,
Who speaks and enunciates clearly,
And uses uncommon
Vocabulary.
(With a “yes girl” every now and then.)
“I want students to remember what I say.”

Sitting at a desk in low heels
Pinned, diamonded and glamorous
With a body, thick and pregnant
She jokes “of good stock,”
Evoking a tradition of Black womanhood.

You’ll wonder if she is having twins.
Should you enter, you will see
A certified in English, secondary
Who taught high school in the same community
From which her father came
"I am giving back somewhat vicariously."

Adjunct professor to
Instructor to
Assistant professor
With
Tenure.

You watched her last semester.

Walk down the hall with her head so high it demanded respect,
Even when students called her Misses instead of Doctor.
And her secretary too.

You will see.

A visionary pragmatist’s classroom urgency
To prepare students for life
In the present.

A spiritual academic
Who prays consistently.
And is “not a subscriber of self-sufficiency.”

“I didn’t get here by myself, I had help—
Whether it was God,
My family,
The ancestors,
Other Black women,
Or those who have walked before me”
In this a-ca-de-my.
Written here will be.

A perspective on
How experience and
How race uplift
Informs
Pedagogy.
DR. TULIP WISE-OFELDER:
PREPARING
TEACHERS FOR
INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

"Every individual can learn if given the opportunity. Teachers must find ways to help students.
My mission is to prepare people to be the very best teachers and that means how to work with all children on all levels."

I still hear the vibrations
From the Million Man March video
Showing down the hall.
Thoughts and sensations

While I sit
Next to Blackness,
At desks with students
Who have heavy accents.
Most are Caribbean
Some have locks
Like the Dean.
There are no jocks
At this College
But definitely a choir,
Gospel indeed.

Waiting for the professor
To enter.
She reminds me of an aunt,
An elder.

Seldom wrong
Bossy and wise and long.
"Because I’ve always felt that as Black women
We have to be strong."

Bright-skinned,
Conservative and Southern
As in,
You would never see a Sister without her hat
At early rise service,
Or during after-service chat.
And married to a minister.

She taught elementary
In a community
Close to geographically
And culturally
Like the current

“It’s my responsibility.”
“I teach for a love of humanity.”

An other-mother
Lifting as she climbs
To her class,
“We are a family.”
And mentoring students
Individually
Like she was in graduate school
From the old Irish Doctor lady.

This teacher educator
Once a principal and
Now Special Education Coordinator,
Teaches with predominately
Black faculty.
But not before she taught overseas,

As special education advisor,
So presidents could become wiser
From her experiences with classroom inclusion desires.

I feel at home
Amongst this Blackness
Where teaching is a mission in life
A calling to uplift
“My passion is with my people”
This visionary pragmatist’s

Office
is flavored with African American art prints
And family photos and quotes
“Life is a matter of perspective . . . the choice is yours”
Reads on her bulletin board.

I anticipate,

The professor
To enter,
Convictions for God at her center.
To hear her knowledge,
To paint her story.
To see how these experiences and race uplift
Inform pedagogy.

DR. TULANI HINGUS REED:
TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS

“We can’t only talk in terms of Black and White because then we are leaving many people out of the discussion. We often do this in classrooms.”

It is like summer
Raining and warm and thundering
Meeting the professor
Who teaches about liberation versus oppression,
Hegemony, and race, and class, and gender.

There is a Sankofa print
Inducing a reach back to move forward sentiment
Above an African statue on her desk
In this shared office
Important papers are taped to the wall
Several stacks of sociology books and more
About the Foundations surround the tiled floor.

This professor of education,
Has painted brown medium lengthed locked hair.
And today she facilitated
In a deep blue two-piece African pantsuit with White embroidered sleeves,
The hidden curriculum, and the assimilationist.

An intellectual activist
Teaching to combat oppressive practices.
Applying theory to life,
Her philosophy
Rooted in self-knowledge and self-love
Is “one that evolves constantly.”

Skin the color of tanned peanut butter
Body thick and proud
Round and versatile.
Knowing
The values that imply you must be skinny
Come from another cloud,
A different culture
She is confident and self-assured.
“This is me, I embrace it” and
“Can’t help but bring myself into the classroom.”
A theorist who
Writes about personal and professional identities,
Teachers now she helps to bloom.
Was once an
Unfulfilled clothes buyer
Then substitute teacher at an urban school
Where administration could find no teacher hires.
And then an instructor of math at an Afrocentric school
Independent of European and National desires.
To director, a supervisor
Another administrative position
Lacking mission.
Assistant professed at a Midwestern
Brings associate and fulfilling to the present
Institution of Higher education.

A Historically,
Traditionally
Educationally,
And Soulfully
Black University
To teach here is a legacy
Of teaching that
“They can have knowledge for the sake of knowledge,
But we don’t have that luxury.
We need to be able to do something with ours,”
Do not hear this lightly!
There must be a connection to community.

“It is a challenge to teach critical thinkers.”
Meeting this professor to see
How race uplift and her experiences
Inform pedagogy.
This is
Tulani’s afriography.

DISCUSSION

I use the womanist concept to describe the perspectives, experiences, and roles of my participants. To ascertain my participants’ womanist perspectives, they were asked questions in a preliminary interview that related to their philosophy of education, their perspective as a Black woman teacher educator, the types of courses they teach, and their perspective on what teachers should know and be able to do. As demonstrated by their experiences, Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani grew up with missions to teach and to help their race
and respective local communities. Their work as othermothers (Collins, 1991) and change agents demonstrates how they, as Black women academics preparing teachers for K-12 classrooms in institutions perforated with racism, sexism, homophobia, and class-based elitism, extend into their teaching and training a strong-shared commitment to eliminate oppression and to create a more just society (Hill, 2003).

Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani are not only committed to the survival and wholeness of humanity but also “love the spirit” (Walker, 1984, p. xii) and use spirituality as a guide and as a method of support. We can also see from their poems that each participant overcame some type of adversary. They consider themselves subjects instead of objects.

Each poetic portrait is supported by two essential features of portraiture—context and voice. The poetry considers the internal context, or their work setting and my reaction to it. Poems also consider historical context, or the origins and evolutions of each participant and the values that shape her or his perspective. For example, each poem paints a brief teaching afriography that infers a connection to community.

In the poems above, I used voice in several ways: as witness to participant’s perspectives, experiences, and teaching practices; as preoccupation through the way I view reality; as discerning others, or listening for the voices of others, through observation and shadowing; and as voice in dialogue through interviewing and having informal conversations with participants.

I use voice to witness and express the outsider’s stance, “which looks across patterns of action and sees the whole” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 87). In doing so, I take advantage of my position as stranger, which allows me to see through new eyes. As a newcomer to the research site, I was able to perceive and speak about things that often go unnoticed by the actors in the setting because they have become too familiar and ordinary.

Voice not only seeks to witness the participant’s stance, and through new eyes, but also is used in the poems as preoccupation, or the ways in which I see and record reality. This concept of voice could also be viewed as the personal context or the researcher’s perspective of the story.

Listening for others’ voices refers to how the portraitist seeks out and tries to capture “its texture and cadence, exploring its meaning and transporting its sound and message into the text through carefully selected quotations” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 99). I address this by the use of direct quotes throughout each poem. When the portraitist listens for voice, she or he also observes very closely, watching for the ways in which the actors’ movements and gestures speak much louder than the words (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In the margins of shadowing and observation notes and reflections, I made notes of participant’s gestures and expressions. This technique helped to add an everydayness to each poem.

Voice in dialogue chronicles the developing relationship between the researcher and participant. It refers to the presence of the portraitist’s voice,
discerning the sound and meaning of the actors’ voices and sometimes enter-
ing into dialogue with them (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Conversa-
tions with participants were often spirited and lively. As two Black women
talking about our lives, there was often a familiar head roll when explaining
experiences. I tried to capture these instances of data collection in each poem
by noting culture-specific routines such as, for example, getting one’s hair hot
combed or wearing Sunday church hats. This helped add richness to each
poem.

The poems above are also about the researcher being present in the con-
veying of participant’s stories. For example, in one poem I wrote, “Waiting for
the professor to enter, she reminds me of an aunt, an elder.” In another poem, I
explicitly recalled when I was walking down the hall to the professor’s class-
room “hearing the vibrations of the Million Man March video showing in the
hallway.” As researcher, I am definitely of the portrait but not necessarily in
the portrait. Although poetry is a possible methodology that fits within a
womanist philosophical framework of shared participatory research, poetic
portraiture does not seem to allow participants to be visible on their own
terms but instead, as a reflection of the researcher. Is it possible to create
expressive portraits without bringing more of yourself than you intend to?
One way in which the methodology used here may be different in the future
includes having participants write their own poems.

CONCLUSION

The womanist woman that Walker (1984) evoked, one who is “responsible
and in charge, capable and competent” (p. xi), is the kind of vibrant, powerful
woman we see in the poetic portraits of Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani. Poetry fits
well within a womanist framework. I strongly believe that the study partici-
pants are not cases. Instead, they are human, women beings, each with her
own perspective, experiences, and practices. Providing methods that add
depth and detail to participants’ stories, portraiture is to oil painting what
case studies are to watercolor. Creating poetic portraits allowed me to convey
the spirit of their beings in a way that other, more traditional, forms of data
documentation would not enable. As teacher-scholars, we must think of and
charter nontraditional ways of data documentation. We will then influence a
wider audience. Just as the microscope and camera have allowed different
ways for us to see what would otherwise be invisible, poetry and prose are
different mediums that give rise to ways of saying what might not other-
wise be expressed (Cahnmann, 2003). Creating “living” portraits allows the
reader to see, hear, and feel. It not only enhances our ability to understand the
perspectives and experiences of higher education faculty but also supports
Black women faculty potential to add their voices and experiences to the
professoriate.
NOTE

1. Hill (2003) defined the term *afriography* as a kind of chronicle of the past, story, or record of experiences about people of African descent.

REFERENCES


Djanna A. Hill is interim chair of the Department of Secondary/Middle School Education at William Paterson University. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in educational foundations, general methods, and elementary and secondary science methods. Her research interests include Black feminist/womanist theory, multicultural and urban education, the teacher education professoriate, and enhancing qualitative approaches to inquiry. Her recent publications include Teachers for Tomorrow in Urban Schools: Recruiting and Supporting the Pipeline (with coauthor M. Gillette, in press) and “Womanist Traditions: Black Women Scholar-Workers in Teacher Education” in *International Perspectives on Methods of Improving Education Focusing on the Quality of Diversity*, edited by R. Duhon-Sells and L. Agard-Jones (Edwin Mellon Press, 2003).