

9-2016

Transformative Learning and the Road to Maternal Leadership

Rachel Panton

University of Miami, rwestley@nova.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/hcas_dcma_facarticles



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

NSUWorks Citation

Panton, R. (2016). Transformative Learning and the Road to Maternal Leadership. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2016 (147), 19-25. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20195>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department Communication, Media, and Arts at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication, Media, and Arts Faculty Articles by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

2

This study of three African (Black women of the Diaspora) holistic health educators shows how their woman-centered learning cultures led them to personal transformation and leadership roles. Understanding their development can inform educational programming and support services for Black women students.

Transformative Learning and the Road to Maternal Leadership

Rachel Panton

The three women discussed in this study all transformed their own assumptions and habits of mind gained from their backgrounds to create a new belief system and a practice based on that belief system. Transformative Learning Theory suggests that there are three processes involved in transformative learning: changes in understanding the self, revising ones behavior, and changing ones approach to life (Mezirow, Taylor, et al. 2009). In other words, an expansion of consciousness must take place in order for transformation to occur. This usually happens after a dramatic, life-changing occurrence, which produces a “disorienting dilemma” that alters our perspective. In each of these stories, events, such as rejecting a mother’s religion, rejecting a husband’s authority, and losing loved ones, were pivotal to the woman’s understanding of her development.

This study used portraiture, an interdisciplinary, qualitative research approach developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), describe as the blending of art and science. From many hours of interview and observation, the researcher creates a portrait, or complete written ethnography of each participant. Though this approach limits the inclusion of numerous participants, it allows for an in depth understanding of each woman. The three Black women chosen for this study represent three different approaches to women’s health and wellness, led by each one in her community for more than 10 years. They include a Christian perspective practiced by dancer Catherine Connor, the Yoga/Hinduism perspective taught by Gaia Budhai, and a Yoruba/Africanist perspective led by Yeyefini Efunbolade. The following short portraits provide a condensed version of their stories.

Catherine Connor, a dance enthusiast and 25-year cancer survivor, is a Black American, born and raised in New York City who has lived in Miami for the past 30 years. After beating her battle with cancer, Catherine sought to combine her dance career with her cancer experience. Frustrated with Catholic ideology, she left the church and converted to the Baptist denomination. She created a career in which she teaches women to fight disease with a healthy lifestyle of good nutrition, movement, de-stressing, faith and—prayer. Although her work is not limited to the Black community, she has become a health and wellness leader in traditionally Black churches throughout South Florida. To spread her message of prevention and healing, Catherine hosts community events and performances in Black churches. She's also published a book in the form of a photo essay in dance that chronicles her life story. Her work has been showcased in national and international media, and she has been recognized by the American Cancer Society. Born in Queens, New York, Catherine enjoyed what she describes as a pleasant childhood. Though she was raised Catholic, she was drawn to a Christian Daily Word publication of inspirational Biblical messages that both her mother and her great aunt found comforting. Physical fitness and dance became important in her childhood, and at the age of 11, she began teaching gymnastics to young preschool children. During high school, she led others in gymnastics and dance. Inspired by the civil rights and Black power movements, she began to wear her hair naturally in defiance of Eurocentric beauty standards. At Howard University in Washington, DC, an historically Black university, she majored in physical fitness. The year she left for college, her mother developed breast cancer and underwent radiation treatment and two hip replacements. Despite her obstacles, Catherine's mother displayed great spiritual fortitude. She called her a "phenomenal fighter, a strong woman—no matter what."

After graduating summa cum laude from Howard University, Catherine began graduate school in exercise physiology & health education and was hired by a private corporation as a fitness specialist for their international training center. After 2.5 years she was promoted to health management administrator. Soon after she married, relocated to Miami, Florida and started a new job as assistant administrator in health promotion at area at hospital. Within one year, both her parents died. Then Catherine's first pregnancy resulted in her son being stillborn. Confronted with these major losses, she had no church community of support, no spiritual leader, and no one to perform a ritual ceremony of burial. When Catherine returned to her Ob/Gyn a year later to discuss the possibility of planning for another baby, her doctor found a lump in her breast and she was diagnosed with cancer. Lying in the hospital after the surgery, having faced several disorienting events, she learned that her oldest sister had nearly died in a serious car accident. Catherine believes she experienced a total transformation at that moment because *she was ready to die*.

After the surgery and during six months of chemotherapy, she started exercising as soon as she could when her energy level allowed, but now she connected her movement to spirituality. As she rode her bike or swam, she prayed thanking God for her ability to move and was grateful to be alive. One month after her last chemo treatment, she went back to her passion—dance. Still searching for a spiritual home, she attended a Bible study group and eventually was led to The Bethel (Baptist) Church that was very different from her Catholic experience. She began to use her love of dance to address issues of wellness with the congregants. Catherine participated in four documentaries about breast cancer awareness and survival, including one on alternative treatments. Despite the numerous trials in her life, she became an independent health and wellness consultant, dance/fitness specialist, and ministers through liturgical dance in churches throughout South Florida.

Gaia Budhai, born in Jamaica, has been teaching yoga in South Florida since the early 1980s. Though she was brought up in the Catholic Church, she and her mother became disillusioned with their faith. Her open-minded mother began to explore meditation and eastern philosophy and to study Raja Yoga with Indian Guru Prem Rawat. This practice focuses on the breathing, self-restraint, and concentration more than the physical postures or asana that most people know as yoga. At the age of 18, Gaia chose to follow her Guru to India. Like her mother, who became a vegetarian and founded the Jamaican vegetarian society, she chose to resist dominant cultural traditions. Gaia spoke of her mother, Blossom, fondly as someone who led by example, charted her own path and encouraged her children to do the same. Her mother's courageous spirit and open-mindedness made an indelible mark on Gaia that would catapult her into a lifetime of similar behavior. Back home in Florida, she built a community, shared her own new learning, and opened her own yoga studio, which became a teacher-training institution.

Historically, Black women in the West have not been a part of the Yoga community, which has been associated with White, middle-class women. According to Gaia, in Jamaica yoga was thought to be the antithesis of Christianity, often associated with evil sorcery and cults and therefore largely taboo. However, both Gaia and her mother were able to resist these pressures, question these assumptions, and chart their own paths. African Womanist scholars have made links between their life's work and their mother's influence (Gilkes 1995; Trotman 2011). Diana Hayes, a Black theologian's (2006) choice to convert to Catholicism in a community and family that was primarily Black and Protestant was viewed by some as a move to self-identifying as White. However, her mother's backing helped her to realize her dreams of making the spiritual and professional changes that better served her interests. As Hayes (2006) affirmed: "I stand today in the shoes my mother made, wrapped from head to toe in that wondrous tapestry she

created that protects but also encourages me to challenge the status quo and keep movin' on up a little higher." Without formal training, African American mothers such as these teach their daughters the essence of transformative learning: to challenge dominant assumptions, reflect on them, and act. Gaia's story shows the power of maternal support for allowing a young woman to express her own voice and form an autonomous identity.

Yeyefini Efunbolade, born in Panama is an Ifá (Yoruba traditional religion) priestess, speaker, life coach, cultural consultant, author, lecturer, and master trainer to African Spiritual Life Coaches internationally. She has created programs and workshops on healing and wellness and has a wide media presence. Yeye, as she is affectionately called, was raised in a Christian home by a mother who immigrated to the United States for a better life. Yeye's consciousness of Pan African movements began to coincide with her spiritual awakening and at the age of 16, she refused to practice any form of Christianity and felt very disconnected from her family. In college she became involved with Black Studies and African nationalist movements. At home in New York, she found another woman to be her mentor—Mama Keke, a Yoruba Priestess of Barbadian descent. During her breaks from school, Yeye would work for Mama KeKe's Morembi Bookstore and at an African-centered day-care center. When her college refused to allow Black Studies on campus, Yeye dropped out of school, went back to New York permanently, began to wear African clothing, took on an African name and began sporting an Afro. Rejected by her mother and pregnant, she turned to her "other mother," Mama Keke, who took her to the Oyontunji African Village in South Carolina, founded by Oba Efuntola Osejeman Adedun Adefunmi, (Nee Walter Eugene King) who is said to be the first African American to be initiated into a traditional African religion postslavery (Oyotunji African Village n.d.).

Women in Yoruba culture were respected as the culture bearers and Yeye became one of the king's co-wives, a priestess, and community leader. As she grew stronger, her respect for her husband diminished and she made a break by taking her three children and leaving the village. Yeye claims that as she became more autonomous, she "stopped depending on the religion." Back in Florida, she developed a relationship with her mother again and started teaching Spanish in the public school system. With her mother's help, she bought a house and began working with the African American Cultural Center. She soon became a leader in her local community, known for teaching "all things African."

Yeyefini's story shows a woman who broke away from her birth mother, traditional religion, and the village, which had been her community. Through the support of an "othermother," she was able to become autonomous, reject the male authority, and develop her own Africana-based style of leadership.

The influence that mothers or "other-mothers" (Collins 2000) had on the three participants, both spiritually and emotionally was immense.

Catherine, Gaia, and Yeyefini all learned how to identify themselves spiritually, as women, and as leaders through their mothers or other-mothers. All three expressed a pedagogy of caring and nurturing; a desire to mother. Two of the three did not bear children, yet each one views herself as a maternal spiritual leader. As Catherine recalled, “God has blessed me with all these children I’ve been teaching to dance. I’m fulfilled, a universal mother”.

Yeye expanded this idea to express her sense that her work is ruled by a divine spirit, or the energy of Yemonja, a mother deity and patron of all women in Yoruba culture, especially those who are pregnant or mothers. Yeyefini was very different from her own mother and the two never saw eye to eye on cultural politics and spirituality. Like author/activist bell hooks (1994), whose mother did not understand her daughter’s need to rebel from conventional norms, the writer still found it difficult to take a definitive stance against her mother. Though critical of the daughter’s life choices, like Yeye’s mother, hooks’s mother had been caring and helpful in other ways.

Transformational leaders can be defined as those who “motivate their followers to do more than the followers originally intended and thought possible . . . [who] set challenging expectations . . . [and who look] to higher purposes” (Bass and Bass 2008, 618). They tap into their followers’ sense of self-worth. Transformational leadership is, “consistent with feminist principles of inclusion, collaboration and social advocacy” (Chin 2007, 7). When paired with a feminist or Africana Womanist approach, transformational leadership becomes maternal leadership with a pedagogy of caring. This perspective acknowledges that personal expressiveness is significant to the knowledge validation process, but it also challenges followers to take responsibility for themselves and their communities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2006). hooks (1994) and Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006) have highlighted the significant role of Black women teachers who have led change in their communities throughout American history via formal education settings, informal adult education, and church programming as “other-mothers.” Stephen Brookfield described this kind of leader as one who, “holds the community to be in a state of normative need and assumes a responsibility for transmitting values, skills and knowledge to members which will result in the community moving to a new qualitatively improved state” (1983, 88). The women in this study view themselves as “other-mothers” in their communities and maintain an ideology of nurturing, political and social responsibility, and the belief of motherhood as power.

For these three Black women educators, the religious practices they were raised with did not answer their questions. Each rebelled or resisted the frameworks and assumptions they were given. Their status as minorities, rather than oppressing them, served as strengths. With support and nurturing from their own or other mothers, they were each able to selectively take elements of their home world and blend them with new or different practices to create a teaching approach distinctly their own.

These life stories contain seeds that educators of African American women and other marginalized groups can cultivate. Yeyefini dropped out of college after the Black Studies program was cut and sought an alternative Afrocentric community. A college might not have lost her if they had paired students with mentors of a similar cultural background. Catherine's concern for physical fitness and health might have been addressed by attention to the body such as Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's *Wellness Revolution*, a lifelong initiative at Spelman College for Black adult learners as well as the Black Women's Life Balance Conference held at Spelman annually (<http://lifebalanceconference.com/>). The actual testimonies of women like Gai'a's mother, who chose to follow yoga and reject her own religious tradition, are valuable resources that could supplement academic research focused on what is wrong and broken about Black women. The college curriculum can include authors and assignments that honor the voices and experiences of these women. Furthermore, civic engagement projects and independent studies can allow minority women to nurture, be culture bearers, and mentor younger students. Heeding these suggestions would allow educators to build on the strengths of Black women rather than highlighting differences as deficits.

References

- Bass, B. M., and R. Bass. 2008. *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, & Management Applications*, 4th ed. New York: Free Press.
- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. 2006. "A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers." In *The Womanist Reader*, edited by L. Phillips, 280–295.
- Black Women's Life Balance & Wellness Conference. Accessed December 15, 2014 at <http://lifebalanceconference.com/>.
- Brookfield, Stephen. 1983. *Adult Learners, Adult Education, and the Community*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Chin, J. L. 2007. *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Collins, P. H. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Gilkes, C. T. 1995. "We Have a Beautiful Mother: Womanist Musings on the Afrocentric Idea." In *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology*, edited by C. J. Sanders, 21–42. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Hayes, D. 2006. "Standing in the Shoes My Mother Made: The Making of a Catholic Womanist Theologian." In *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, edited by S. Floyd-Thomas, 54–76. New York: New York University Press.
- hooks, B. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnson-Bailey, J., and M. V. Alfred. 2006. "Transformational Teaching and the Practices of Black Women Adult Educators." In *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, no. 109, edited by Edward W. Taylor, 49–58. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., and J. H. Davis. 1997. *The Art and Science of Portraiture*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Mezirow, J., E. W. Taylor, & Associates. 2009. *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace and Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Oyotunji African Village. (n.d.). Accessed December 15, 2014 at <http://www.oyotunji.org/about-us.html>.
- Trotman, F. K. 2011. "Legacies from Our Mothers." In *Black Womanist Leadership: Tracing the Motherline*, edited by T. C. King and S. A. Ferguson, 27–44. New York: SUNY.

RACHEL PANTON, PhD, is a personal historian, founder of Write My Life Memoirs, and lecturer at the University of Miami.