



## Chapter 2

# Can I Call you Ma or Prof? Reflexivity, Memory, and Space in African Feminist Research

Siphokazi Tau 

### Abstract

In this chapter, I reflect on a question that came to mind, as I started my interview process with African women leaders in South African universities. The question being, “Can I call you Ma or Prof?” was unexpected and allowed me to delve deeper into establishing a better understanding of my participants’ experiences of leadership within the higher education landscape and how they position themselves. Importantly, this question also positioned me within the research itself, the complicated understanding of self as an African who was raised within an African community. With consciousness, “the multiple ways of being black in the world” (Khunou et al. 2020: xvii) in addition to being a student in the current higher education context. I locate this within the understanding of mothering and parenting in the African context as a sociocultural practice (Mkhize 2006; Nathane & Khunou 2021), where an elder or peer of your parent becomes your parent too – uMa/mama. I show in this chapter that our bodies are hosts of memory which carry ways of knowing and registers of engaging with each other that Eurocentric and Western ways of doing research in higher education do not account for. I affirm myself with the knowing that “I am not a researcher doing research, I am a human being doing research” (Mxalisa 2024) and that my being, which is relational, will always remind me of its existence.

## Introduction

Where do I begin to locate myself within my research, and why does this locating happen at the point of engaging with the participants? Why does this research push me and my identity into the research? It was an easy decision to study African women leaders. Growing up, I was intrigued by my mother's strong character and sense of leadership. Later in the chapter, I write of my mother's multiple identities. My mother was the first woman I knew who had multiple names and identities which all had their time and place. From what I could see and to the little ability of mine to "read" her, she moved from one identity to the other effortlessly. By this, I am not suggesting that those shifts were easy, accepted, or well received. Instead, her effortless embodying of these identities means that she showed up and stepped up consistently. She did not need to be cajoled to do so. Similarly, this research affirmed to me that "the various roles that women assume within African households, rupture the limits of gendered pro-marital conceptions of womanhood" (Mohlabane & Tshoedi 2022: 6). And this understanding is what allows me to see them in different ways outside of the limitation of the professional space.

So, 'mothering' in this chapter ought to be understood as relational, therefore its meanings are not tied to the function of motherhood as biological or action-based, but to the trigger that happens when we read bodies in our surroundings. Be that as it may, there is value in understanding the function of biology<sup>1</sup> and nurture particularly in the discourse of nature versus nurture. The relational use of uMama/Ma, too, can translate to care responsibilities, leading to invisible labour African women perform in the academy (Magoqwana, Maqabuka & Tshoedi 2019).

In my study, "African feminism(s) as it informs the experiences of African women leaders at universities" (Tau 2022), I interviewed five African and Black women who were leaders in universities in South Africa. These interviews were intended to take place via the traditional face-to-face process to allow me to interview them at their physical place of work. Meaning that

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1 That of my mother birthing me.

it would be in their respective offices and universities, exposing me (the researcher) to the office layout, the architecture of the buildings that they were in, and the overall physical landscape of their institutions. The intention was to experience these African women within their workspaces and to observe them from that lens and perspective. This was to ensure that the participants would be understood from their professional profiles, seeing them within their day-to-day practices of performing leadership work in the university. This was an intentional step to not focus on their identities outside the 'professional' as an attempt to avoid the lens of seeing them within the sociocultural context of 'mothers' or 'mothering'.

Although other studies have considered the intersectionality of women's identities in the community and the academy, such as "othermothering" by Patricia Hills Collins (1994), negotiating mothering and professional life by Lucille Maqubela (2016), and the work of Venitha Pillay (2012) on academic mothers. Other scholars who have also made valuable contributions to theorising gender from an African and Indigenous lens include Magoqwana (2018), Mohlabane and Tshoaedi (2022), Ifi Amadiume (1987), and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997). By not focusing on their various identities, of which motherhood is assumed to be one whether biological or social, it detached them from the care-work and what Magoqwana et al. (2019) call being forced to care and expected to 'pay Black tax' in the academy because you are a woman and African.

This chapter focuses on two reflective areas, the first being how the question of multiple identities or intersecting identities emerges for me in the study. Secondly, how a reading of space and location gives us the possibility to think of the histories and intellectual traditions these women come from, through specifically thinking of the home as a site of intellectual tradition. In this instance, home is valuable as the participants were mostly working from their homes because we were in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, where workspaces shifted to the home. These reflections offer a window into understanding the relationship "between intellectual histories of bodies in African societies and the everyday meanings that bodies may or may not

carry” (Oyěwùmí 2011: 1) in the context of higher education in South Africa.

The modern university in Africa “as an institution is a product of Western traditional culture and intellectualism. This means that its practices, orientation, philosophical and pedagogical models are all geared towards Western values” (Tamale 2020: 13). Within the South African higher education landscape, the culture of the education system is borrowed and adopted from the colonial model (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017), where the academic is the centre of knowledge, and the students are the receivers. Current debates on transformation within the curriculum, particularly the #FeesMustFall movement in the South African higher education landscape, have challenged this linear transferral of knowledge. Popularly understood to be about elitism and rising tuition fees, the movement also focused on the decolonisation of the curriculum, the exclusionary nature of the university culture, and its exclusionary human resource system. The #FeesMustFall movement courageously championed the insourcing of cleaning and security workers. The movement fundamentally demonstrated that the struggles of students and workers are intersectional in so far as it advocated for access and freedom within our universities as a space of learning, work, cultural making, and belonging.

For many students in the higher education landscape, workers were a direct representation of the people in their communities, as some of us come from working-class backgrounds. Important to note is that there is little literature on students who come from upper classes and their intersections with cleaning and security staff in the university. This intersectional reading was important for the movement to address continued inequalities and dehumanisation of people who come from Black and African communities (Masutha 2015). This meant that the power dynamics within the university shifted, allowing students’ voices to also find expression. This de-hegemonizing of power within the university landscape has meant that voices which have been invisibilised are brought to the centre of the fabric of the university.

Thus revealing how the colonial make-up of the university and its culture influences an African student's experience of the space, conditioning the ways in which students conduct research with their participants, in a way that disconnects and disassociates them from themselves. Important to remember is that the African women participating in this study fall in a different class status compared to other African women who also exist in structures of labour and power within the university, such as cleaning and administrative staff. Be that as it may, Khunou et al. (2020) remind us that class movement is not linear. These reflections also demonstrate how class does not supersede the nuances of relating as African and Black people, especially outside of what is African and Black spaces. And that even in a space such as the university, whose framing is not African and Black, Black existence finds expression. In essence, the logic of African mothering or social mothering applies to all who provide nurturing whether intellectual, such as in the academy, or care of space in the case of cleaners, security, and administration.

African societies, like any other space, typically exist within a power structure of some sort. Oyěwùmí (1997), among other African gender scholars (see Magubane 2004; Mikell 1995), have already argued that the African power structure operates differently from the biological-centred, Eurocentric one. That is to say, the structure that would allocate power based on the physical body is not necessarily the only one applicable within African societies. In my society in the Northern Cape and Eastern Cape regions, where I was raised, seniority was the dominant power structure used. This is similar to what Oyěwùmí (1997) argues is one of the structures of locating power. Power thus is located to seniority and seniority is linked to responsibility.

For instance, in the case of my upbringing, young people never refer to senior people by name. Instead, seniors would be referred to by their relational term derived from the responsibility of raising children. For parents or guardians, *mme/mama/ma* (mother) or *rra/tata* (father); for grandparents, *Mme/Nkgono* and *rra/papa*. Although these references emerge out of meaning-making of households and sometimes from biology, they translate to social relations beyond nuclear family make-ups. Thus, it is

expected that when you carry a particular title or responsibility reference within your household, it also applies within the society itself. Nathane and Khunou (2021) refer to this as social relatability that functions parallel to biological relatability. Essentially, biological parenting is not the determining factor for whether someone is referenced as a parent, elder, sibling, or grandparent. Instead, age and seniority will award you the responsibility despite biology and genetic relation.

What emerged for me as I was conducting my interviews was the question, “Can I call you Ma or Prof?”. I asked my participants this question as part of our introductory conversations ahead of the interviews. In my planning ahead of the interviews and even in the email communication with my participants, this had not emerged for me as I had communicated with them via email and used their professional titles. This realisation of how to relate with my participants emerged as I met them, saw them, and began to talk to them, albeit it being virtually. There was some relief for me in now having to interview my participants virtually, as I felt that they could protect themselves more easily because of this. Furthermore, I was concerned that the virtual space would be a challenge in building rapport as we would not be able to make meaning of our feelings and energies.

These introductory encounters sparked some questions for me such as: What does this question of relatability mean in African feminist research? What does it mean in the context of maintaining objectivity in doing research for a researcher to ask their participants what title of respect is more suited for them? What does it mean in the case of power dynamics and positionality for the researcher to highlight the power dynamics themselves? Where is the power located between the researcher who is a student in the university and the African woman who leads the university? Does this particularly matter or change when the student is the researcher and the leader is the participant? These are the questions that emerged for me as I reflected on those encounters and their meaning for me as an emerging academic studying the university, power, and African women.

Decolonial scholars Lugones (2010) and Mokoena (2020) argue that the coloniality of power structures produces a one-sided understanding of being, and where African women are concerned – an oppressed object. Manning (2021) reminds us that the importance of critiquing Western representations is because colonial power renders the ‘other’ an object of knowledge and not one who already exists within a canon of knowledge. This is because coloniality enables the continuation of colonial cultures that infiltrate, among others, language and spiritual-political identity (Mokoena 2020). Decolonial approaches insist that the violence of colonialism is not only limited to the past. Instead, it extends to other articulations of Western dominance as well as beyond physical space to psychological, linguistic, and cultural epistemic violence (Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective 2022). These questions of reflection speak to this very point of how the university produces students who disconnect with their already-existing knowledge repertoires, so by asking the questions shared earlier I was reconnecting to already existing knowledge registers.

Part of what the university does as a colonial product is erase women as persons who ought to be in the space. Noting that women of Western descent had an advantage of entering the university space before African women, the late entry and the intents of gender coloniality (Lugones 2010) makes the experience of African women quite unique. What this also exposes is how the university in its elitist nature continues to erase African women, producing students who in return also become detached from their identities and would refer to African women by the one-sided identity only of Professor (Prof.) or Doctor (Dr). This practice demonstrates what Wane (2008: 185) postulates to be the result of teaching from the European canon, which “disassociated from and devalue the cultural knowledges and wisdom” of the heritage and community of a student. What this further does is limit our understanding of African women, whereas within my socialisation, irrespective of position, social status, and biological experience, a woman who is the peer of my mother would be referred to as my mother too socially. That very same woman would be able to take up the responsibility of parenting even when

my mother has not given an instruction to do so. The authority and responsibility of mothering are embedded in the society's social contract, and the understanding and responsibility to respect this is part of the social contract.

My memory of my upbringing points to no instruction ever being made about my body and its limitations in accessing spaces in the world. This changed after learning that my mother, a teacher at the time, only had one of two career choices: either a teacher or a nurse. This is because the historical structuring of education for Africans limited their access to other professions. Mabandla (2014) reminds us that the formation of the Black middle class in South Africa dates back to the colonial encounter and dispossession of land ownership for Africans. Thus, placing educated Africans in professions such as administration, nursing, teaching, and priests would privilege them over poorer Africans but keep them restricted by the colonial system (Mabandla 2014).

Power, for a very long time, seemed to be a gift of age. And so, for the longest time growing old was the aspiration, as I was interested in navigating the various economies of power age would grant me. This power came with responsibilities, and those who have power ought to be respected because of the responsibilities they must perform. This of course should not be understood as a naïve understanding of power – it is not. It is an interpretation of power outside of abuse, control, dominance, and all the problematic traits that are synonymous with it. So, where am I positioned in this network of power? Well, for most of it, I was a child or young enough to still fall under the category of child in my family and community's set-up – and still, I am. Worth noting here is that the use of 'child' is not to be understood as infantilisation. One is a child in a home and raised as a child who grows up to be an adult. Even when one is finally an adult with responsibility, in relation to those who mould and raise you, you are a child. So, 'child' should be understood within the evolution of being and not be reduced to the limitations of a stage in a person's life. Within the role of being a child or young person, senior people, determined by age and responsibility, would not be referred to by their name. Various titles symbolic of role/age/relation can be used. Although they are different depending on

region, there are some similarities. These would include *Mme/Rre*, *Nkgono*, *Ousi/Abuti*, *Rragadi/Malume/MmeMalume*, *Ngwana*, and *Kgaetsedi/Nnake*.

Like any other organisation, the higher education landscape has roles for people in specific positions. Importantly, it awards titles such as Dr and Prof. to people who have demonstrated an understanding of a field or area of study. The coming to this process is often individualistic. For example, the PhD must be the original work of an individual who will be awarded the title 'Dr'. This is not my contention or the point of disjuncture – the disjuncture is that the title comes because of individual action. Whereas in my context, titles are awarded to individuals in relation to the function they play within the collective. Very rarely is individual success that disconnects one from the collective celebrated. Now, on the point of responsibility and its application in society. Titles being awarded in relation to one's role in the community means that most, if not all, titles function for society. So, titles are for individual action and are likely to emerge within the privacy of the home. However, the application is beyond the private home. If someone plays the role of a mother in their home, the application of the title includes the community and public. That means that as a mother, you are responsible for mothering those who are not directly mothered by you. In turn, they will refer to you by the title of 'mother'. Thus, *Mme/Mama* in my society is everyone that mothers, and everyone who is the peer of my mother and/or those who mother me. This application plays out differently within the academic space. And this paper is not to progress arguments for academic titles. It does however speak to a disjunction of how to relate as Africans in the higher education landscape, particularly where institutions suggest that they are intentional about their identities with being African, for Africa, located in African, and African-centric.

## **Reflexivity in African Feminist Research**

Among the Akan of West Africa, when the community is totally stumped for ideas on an issue or when there is a deadlock over a decision, the community usually consults the *abrewa*, 'old lady'. The old lady's wisdom is received without question and the

community can relax in the assurance that she will know what to do. No one requires that she produce ‘empirical evidence’ for her perspectives. Her perspectives are respected and validated because they have been built over a lifetime of experience, including the spiritual insight that comes with being an abrewa. (Ampofo & Arnfred 2010)

The ‘old lady’ in age and wisdom is common in African cosmology. The amaXhosa have the same concept captured in the song “Dadobawo sicela amandla”<sup>2</sup> when there’s a traditional ceremony that is not going well. They approach *udadobawo*, a senior aunt, for guidance and advice.

Danai Mupotsa (2010) writes of an African Feminist ethic when conducting research: “an ethic that is necessarily in process, partial, therefore, and contingent, but an ethic nonetheless that speaks to our palpable yearnings and that exposes our vulnerabilities and our deep desires to re-imagine and re-envision a loving freedom” (Mupotsa, 2010: 4). This position by Mupotsa is important when noting that, by its nature, “research processes themselves [re]produce power differences” (Harding & Norberg 2005: 2012). The work of feminist scholars is known to be critical of scientific research and its methods in erasing the researcher and their subjectivities as part of the research process (Ackerly & True 2008; Bowles & Klein 1983).

Reflexivity in research enables researchers to consider moments of subjectivity and reflection as integral to the research experience. In other words, reflexivity inserts the self in the research as a way of affirming that the self is present throughout the research experience, particularly when engaging human subjects. Reflexivity thus is “a process of self-consciousness, of ‘researching’ one’s own position in the research process” (Sokoya 2006: 868). Within feminist research, objectivity and the idea of absolute fact have come heavily criticised because they can distort reality and exclude other perceptions and realities (Hesse-Biber 2012). Feminist ethics within research is about making a

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2 Ancient song sung by amaXhosa in various ritual, traditional contexts. It is meant to request the presence of uDabawo – the great aunt to offer insights and/or discernment.

commitment to how ways in which we inquire about the power of knowledge, relationships and their hierarchies, and your own positionality as a researcher (Ackerly & True 2008). This is, among other reasons, because power relations exist where “people of different gender, class, and ethnic origins are enmeshed” (Stock 2018: 3). This intentional approach to doing feminist research is argued to produce different and new questions about feminist theorisations and interpretations (Hill Collins 2000). Thus, expanding the “analysis of the historical, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape women’s differentiated lives” (Ampofo, Beoku-Betts & Osirim 2008: 1).

Within my study on African women and how social hierarchies (Wolf 1996) emerge, I am reminded of what Linda Tuhiwai Smith cites in her work: “research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Smith 1999: 1). The particular power dynamics being that the participants are understood from the relational lens of being mothers, and me of being a child in the community. There is also a dynamic in that both the researcher and the participants are currently in the higher education space, with me as the student and them in senior leadership positions. Objectivity requires us to look at the research as detached from our consciousness as people. Objectivity in research is about ensuring that there is a barrier between yourself and the researcher. This is premeditated. And the gap this creates is that it removes the space for relationality to determine the research interaction. Being able to connect with my participants through this relation allows for “shifting the theorisation of African indigenous realities beyond racialised, gendered and hierarchical binaries” (Mohlabane & Tshoamedi 2022: 6).

What Ackerly and True (2008) argue for is a researcher’s attentiveness to their epistemology and the authority this holds within research. Furthermore, they argue for a de-stabilising epistemology to enable the researcher to “ask important questions about context, change, interrelatedness, relationships of power, boundaries, and embedded epistemology that empower the researcher to break new ground” (Ackerly & True 2008: 696). De-stabilising epistemology is important because it considers other epistemological perspectives. Nnaemeka (1998) argues

that those whose epistemological perspective is located within orality will theorise differently to those located within literary or other traditions. Haraway (1988: 579) champions simultaneously having “an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a real world”, especially in a context where teaching and research happen in a context of the history of colonialism and its conditionalities (Knowles 2021; Wane 2008). Ackerly and True (2008) remind us that the research ethic applied within feminist research is important to mitigate epistemological power through knowledge claims.

What I specifically argue is that to truthfully argue that my participants are knowledge carriers and to centre them means to possibly accept my vulnerabilities as a researcher. Holding onto the power of being the researcher would have been to deny my own identity as it relates to the participants. Instead, stepping into my vulnerabilities allowed me to step into myself, how my body remembers to relate and how respectability functions. Important to note is that at no point do my participants use the fact that they are senior to me in the university context. There’s an absolute humanity without power in our interaction. Which then also affirms the knowing that African women, specifically my participants, do not function from a position of exerting hierarchy unnecessarily although they, more than me, have experience in and exposure to academic research. The interview process felt like a conversation I would have with an elder woman in the community. Earlier I made reference to my mother, her experience and how she navigates the world in the conditions afforded to her. This is integral in how we do research differently because the application of research requires the researcher to be one with the Western lens and rid themselves of their identity to maintain this idea of objectivity. This approach towards maintaining objectivity is harmful as it does not widen the net for understanding for the researcher but also ignores the complexity of identity and history of both researcher and participant.

What does reflexivity teach me within this process? In an interview on *The Path* hosted by Roslansky (2023), Caroline Wanga reflects on how not compromising your identity is fundamental to how we journey through work environments. Often, institutions are there for us to assimilate into their cultures, with little to no adjustment of the culture and ways of being of the bodies that move in those spaces. The argument she makes fundamentally is that we miss opportunities by focusing on where we are, instead of who we are. Through maintaining consistency with who we are, the spaces and environments we are in will adjust to our cultures. As a student in the university studying the university, student voice is not always valued as a long-term stakeholder of the university because of the time limitation of their qualifications. However, this made me realise that to value the student in the university is to value their positionality in complicated ways. Not only as them being a client in the space but as a body that moves within different communities in the university with already existing knowledge registers. This process also affirmed that social hierarchies do not have to be used from a lens of oppression and power. We can uphold social hierarchies “in the shadow of a violent hierarchy” (Gqola 2023) of the colonial university.

## **Mothering as a Sociocultural Practice: Potentially Establishing More Transformative University Cultures**

“Can I call you Ma or Prof?” is the first question I asked my participants during the data collection process of my research study titled, “African feminism(s) as it informs the experiences of African women leaders at universities” (2022). This was also the question I along with my peers in our feminist circle asked ourselves when they had just announced Nelson Mandela University, (where I was based as a student), would have a Black and female vice chancellor for the first time. And the other questions we asked were:

1. What are the implications of calling Prof. Sibongile Muthwa ‘Mama’ instead of ‘Professor Muthwa’ when this was not a question with her predecessor? What does that say about how

we see her in the context of the academy, seeing that this is not a question with male leadership. We simply assign them their title and keep it moving.

2. What does that say about us to not call her Mama when we are mandated by our sociocultural contexts to never refer to an elder by name? What does this question mean in the context of the decolonial project, in bringing in other geographies of knowledge when we question this form of naming?

Yuval-Davis (2006) reminds us our citizenship is multi-layered – it consists of the local, the ethnic, and the national, among others. Asking my participants how to address them was not for them to be comfortable and it was not for me to demonstrate that I respected them. It was a reminder to myself of my own identity. And particularly in my noble attempt to detach these women from their layered-ness, my body reminded me that I, too, was an extension of that very social structure. Oyěwùmí's (1997) work on excavating language to argue against gender as a central power structure shifts us to consider how language and African languages hold registers of knowledge, such as understanding power as seniority. Similarly, Maseko (2018) also argues that within isiXhosa language and people, although stratification exists, it is not in the form of the “biologic”, to borrow from Oyěwùmí (1997). Rather it gives us access to understand deeper.

In *Mothering the 'other': The sacrificial nature of paid domestic work within Black Families in the post-apartheid South Africa* (2016), Maqubela argues that participants in feminist research, such as domestic workers, have an epistemic privilege and double advantage. According to Maqubela, African women who are domestic workers have better insight into their own oppression and are thus better 'knowers' in research of themselves and their experiences. Similarly, in the context of African women leaders who enter the university as bodies that were not thought of in those spaces can better articulate the experience of existing within those spaces. Fundamentally, my argument highlighted by my question demonstrates that they carry the experience of existing in a space that is founded on erasing their identities. What identity do they then carry currently where access to the university is not denied? And secondly, by virtue of access to the university, does

that mean that the identities they hold outside of the university co-exist within the university?

In answering my question, some of my participants simply responded with “You can choose” or “Students tend to use Mama, so I don’t mind”. And this was interesting, because by allowing participants to choose how they want to be referred to ensured that they can have a sense of choice and power in the interview process. This, too, would have allowed them to create distance as a way of protecting themselves. One response that stood out for me was from Professor Seipati,<sup>3</sup> who responded by saying: “Well Siphokazi, you can refer to me as any of those. In my time in the university students will often call me Mama or sisi, but if I had to introduce myself, I would say *nna ke mmagwe Lesedi le Larona, ke nkgono wa Karabo*”. Meaning: I am Lesedi’s and Larona’s mom, I am also a grandmother to Karabo.

Maseko, in *Language as source of revitalisation and reclamation of Indigenous epistemologies: Contesting assumptions and re-imagining women identities in (African) Xhosa society* (2018), argues that the stratification in language indicates factors such as “responsibility, seniority, rank and status of that member, not the physiology of that person” (2018: 38). This of course had been something I was aware of. I was also aware of various ways social currency is gained through marriage for example. In detaching mothering, I also detached the marital status of my participants as I was preparing for the research process. I knew that my mother had three names. One was hers from birth: Nomsa. The second, Noloyiso, defined by her ancestors as part of her initiation and qualification as *iqqirha* (healer). The third is used in relation to her identity in her marriage to my father: Nomonde. In the Sesotho and isiXhosa cultures, among many others, new names are given to brides/wives as they take up their new roles in the family. The first child in the marriage will have the same name as the bride to link the responsibility of wife to the responsibility of mother. So, the name used to identify a wife is also the name used to identify the first child, giving the name a function for two sets of responsibilities.

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3 Pseudonym

This memory is my individual one, but it is one that links me to the collective identity I share with my participants. If I understand that my mother carries multiple identities which all exist in the spaces occupied, then my expectation that the identity of uMama or Nkgono for Professor Seipati identities' would exist and be held by my participants as peers of my mother, albeit within the academy, is justified. This question was a reminder about my own history and, importantly as Bozzoli and Nkotsoe (1991) argue, the forms of consciousness that my participants hold because of their gendered history. According to Goniwe and Gqola (2005: 80), the body can be a site to reflect experiences, thoughts, and emotions encountered in life, be it "concrete, metaphysic, spiritual, imagination or fantasy". The body, my body, remembered the legitimisation of seniority as power and respect. Particularly because of how intergenerational relationships function, how we transfer knowledge, and how we value those who have walked before us through experience and through age (*inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili*<sup>4</sup>). This is not to be mistaken as the use of seniority as power, the type of ways Western logic would use seniority of your position in the university based on your qualification. You are a professor and therefore respect and authority must be awarded to you.

The concept of seniority as responsibility should not be read outside of the context of understanding social hierarchies and use of titles, noting that African women in the academy do engage in unpaid and unrecognised care work because of their identities and cultural backgrounds (Magoqwana et al. 2019). However, care work and mothering should be read as a frame that outlines seniority for purposes of respect and responsibility between persons in a society. Mothering, as used by Oyěwùmí (2005), is to challenge the universalist idea of the family structure being that of the Western frame of nuclear families, which locate power within bodies. So, in the context of my participants, the use and function of them as uMama would still be applicable even if they are not married (Nathane & Khunou 2021; Oyěwùmí 2005) or do not have biological children.

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4 Meaning one learns from elders/those who have come before.

Instead, mothering should be understood from the framework of othermothering by Hills Collins (2000), which is understood as a function of and as a community who are carers parallel to the biological mothers. This concept within African society typically works with extended families, however, members of a community, even outside of blood relation, play these roles (e.g., of mothering). The extension of the community as part of the people that parent is so that communities can sustain similar beliefs and ethics of personhood on children – these would ideally start within the homes but are reinforced through everyday living in the community. Therefore, this expectation on African women in the academy to understand what is meant by my question is not to be misunderstood as a burden on them.

According to Oyěwùmí (2003), motherhood is a commitment of a lifetime where one's mother participates in various rites of passage of their daughter or other expectant mothers by assisting them to navigate mothering. *Ukukhapha*, the process of accompanying or companionship, is common in multiple African societies. Be it a mother teaching *motsetsi*, a new mother, how to navigate motherhood or a married woman teaching a newlywed how to understand marriage in a specific family. This practice also reflects itself with these African women leaders. Professor Chantel<sup>5</sup> speaks to how they want to ensure that the next generation of African women academics are able to navigate the space better:

I think it's difficult to change anything as an individual... and we need to build, you know, networks and communities that create space for us and create space for others and particularly the people who are going to come after us. We need to create those spaces. But I do some very individual things like I mentor young African women, especially at PhD level or just post their PhD.

In a typical African context, as I recall how my sister in-law and later my mother navigated the deaths of my brother and father respectively. Both had a community of other women around

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5 Pseudonym

them, typically older who would have experienced *go roula* – to mourn a partner. *Umkhaphi*, the companion, is the one that helps you navigate the transition particularly during the process of preparing for the burial, the actual funeral, and the post-death grieving processes. The expectation is that experiences that one has not undergone before should not be navigated independently, and as such advice is mandatory and should be expected. This is what amaXhosa refers to as *Inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili*.

African cosmology awards respect and legitimises power based on seniority because of the role and contribution you have made in society. That age, wisdom, your humanity, and role in community legitimises your power. Here, my body was remembering that these women were chosen for a specific kind of journey: entering university and pushing to be part of the knowledge-making process of universities although the university was not created with African women in mind. But importantly noting further that the university, and most disciplines, had excluded African and women's narratives and realities out of the canon of knowledge. These women, *ngoMafungashe*,<sup>6</sup> they are the first daughters of these homes/institutions. *oMafungashe* is the first-born daughter or a senior female bodied child (Magoqwana 2021). What we know and expect of *mafungashe*, and any first-born child, is that they hold the institutional knowledge of the home as taught by the family as it is likely to have a community involved in raising first-born children. This is because it would be the first time the parents would be taking that role, so the community or extended family is likely to assist and instil specific values with the hope that the first born will transfer these to their younger siblings. Importantly, *omafungashe* are the first girl children in the household. They become the blueprint for how the other children will be parented. They are expected to end up as an embodiment of their homes, of their institution.

This concept by Magoqwana is applicable in the current discourses around the expectation of African women leaders in the higher education landscape and what they are expected to do in terms of transforming institutional cultures. My body

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6 First born daughter.

remembered the African ways of being awarded authority and thus responsibility is mutual to the contributions one makes in service of our greater society. With this question, it had been apparent to me that I did not prepare for what an African woman meant to me. My approach had been to take this study with an objective approach of simply seeing them as my participants, they were simply African women leaders in universities. However, that's not who they are only. The intersectionality of their lives and their being became apparent to me in the first encounters I would have with them.

### **Space and the Meanings of Space**

Written in 1998, "I have come to take you home – a tribute to Sara Baartman" by Diana Ferrus (2003) is a poem written due to the reluctance of the French government in returning the remains of the body of Sara Baartman back to South Africa.

I have come to take you home, home!  
Remember the veld,  
the lush green grass beneath the big oak trees?  
The air is cool there and the sun does not burn.  
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,  
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,  
the proteas stand in yellow and white  
and the water in the stream chuckles sing-songs  
as it hobbles along over little stones.

I have come to take you home  
Where the ancient mountains shout your name  
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill  
Your blankets are covered in buchu mint,  
The proteas stand in yellow and white.  
I have come to take you home

In the poem, Ferrus writes about bringing Baartman home and linking the coming of home to scents, plants, and physical landscapes. All of these are things in the physical that symbolise the Africa, the home, that Baartman was taken away from: the mountain, the hill, the mint for cooking or medicinal purposes. The remembering of these is flagged as important, almost like Ferrus is trying to intentionally trigger certain memories for Baartman, even as an ancestor to remember because of the time her body was held away from her home. In her MA thesis on Xhosa widows, Gcotyelwa Jimlongo talks about going back to her home to do her fieldwork. All the memorabilia of her late father, the photos on the wall, as memory and legacy of her late father, which has made her mom a widow, is the very thing that informs her research titled, “Inkcitha nzila nobomi obutsha (The release of the widow and life after mourning): Xhosa widows and citizenship” (Jimlongo 2021).

Ferrus in the evoking of this idea of home, writes as if Baartman would be able to return to home as she had left it – as if in the context of land dispossession and the policing of access to land would be available as before. Ferrus here almost shields Baartman from the current state of home by choosing to evoke only the liberatory elements of the memory of home. It may be that Ferrus evokes this position of home because Baartman’s violent leaving of home was arguably filled by these memories of home. Ferrus insists on this specific remembering because the loss of being physically alienated from home is already major to the point that Baartman never makes it home alive. This way of remembering is significant when understanding that “we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost” (Rushdie 2010: 1) because memory holds better when it is inscribed in space (Jimlongo 2021).

The making of spaces, or place-making, which is commonly used in the fields of architecture and town planning, seeks to make meaning of a process of establishing spaces that should be useful and appealing for people to exist in, live in, and work in (Lennon 2020). According to Pellegrino and Jeanneret (2009), space in the architectural discipline enables us access to know what our external reality is. Space thus influences how “our own

body moves and objects are placed [...] the movement of one's own body" (p.269). Üngür (2011) and De Certeau (1984) suggest that there is a distinction between place and space. Place "is the positioning of objects to each other; space is the experience of them" (Üngür 2011: 6). In other words, space becomes the embodiment of the place, space-making or the meaning of space carries the culture of the place.

This thinking of space making emerges to me during one interviews specifically where both these participants were located at their homes. Professor Tinashe<sup>7</sup> logs into the Microsoft Teams a minute after me. She is sitting on a two-seater couch. I cannot tell if this is a living room or a home office. She seems relaxed. As we begin to exchange greetings, her attention goes to someone in the room with her, I find out that this is her child. She looks to the camera, to me, and says, "Can I have five minutes?". I respond by saying, "Sure, we'll start when you're ready." I was now confronted with the fact that my intention in the study was not to burden my participants with viewing them from the lens of being mothers or having to perform mothering in the academy. Although this appearance of the child does not get engaged in the interview, the conversation takes us somehow back to the child. When reflecting on her early days in the academy, Professor Tinashe mentions that at the time she had joined the institution, she had requested a house as part of the relocation negotiations to accommodate her children. She would subsequently have to leave the children behind and move into a small apartment as the institution said they could not provide for her family needs. She would find out later that a male and white colleague, who had also relocated and joined the institution had in fact been allocated a house to accommodate his family needs, these being himself and his dogs, having said that his dogs would need the yard space.

This made me think about the idea of the home in relation to Professor Tinashe's leadership values which we talked about during the interview. Her leadership style and desired role as a leader is to inform institutional cultures that are rooted in the ideas of belonging, of having a place that is safe, that reflects

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7 Pseudonym

who you are, your culture, your identity. My argument here is that home as a space becomes a framework for African women leaders that guides the types of institutions they want to be in and contribute towards. I see this in how Professor Tinashe lets out a sigh after sharing the story of her children versus the dogs being prioritised. Whose family structure is interrupted by the disconnect of migration of this job? And what are the parallels, in the values African women use when mothering and the possibilities of new institutional cultures?

Home is both a feeling and an experience in as much as it is also a place or places. Memory and identity therefore are fundamental to curating the experience of home. The concept of 'home', according to Ratnam (2018: 1), is an "affective construct where homely feelings can encompass a combination of security, familiarity, comfort, and belonging". The experience of home is built on various elements that encompass its culture – like the university. Collective practices, belonging, and narratives about identity are all part of what builds culture (Ratnam 2018). The idea of home is always in motion in the sense that it connects people, routines, and identities (Arnold 2016; Ratnam 2018). Home, as Jimlongo (2020) alludes to as a space that holds pictures and memories of her late father, is important because it acts as a "source of identity and meaningfulness" and a "symbol of the self" (Valentine 2001: 73) even if the home is made up of mundane activities.

The home for these women becomes the training ground for the type of institutional cultures they wish to create. In her work on *uMakhulu* as an institution of knowledge, Magoqwana (2018: 76) argues that *uMakhulu*/grandmothers are invisible institutions as they "are a body of indigenous knowledge that stores, transfers and disseminates knowledge and values". Elsewhere, Magoqwana and Adesina (2020) postulate that the position of *uMakhulu* is an integral one to African societies and families as they are not only the pillar in their households but within the broader society. Households that have elderly women in them are likely to produce principled people within a society because how women are custodians of values, culture, and language.

*uMakhulu* and, by extension, African women make use of the home, the space or as a space for meaning-making to preserve historical foundations and value systems. This is similar to how some of the participants want to view their institutions. Scholars Lefebvre (1991), Soja (1996), and Saar and Palang (2009) postulate that space is both a physical and “social landscape which is imbued with meaning in everyday place-bound social practices” (Saar & Palang 2009: 6). What Professor Tinashe reminds us of in her request to have a space for her children and by extension her vision for possible institutional cultures is that space “includes both the emotional and behavioral bubbles which invisibly surround people’s bodies as well as complex spatial organization of practices” (Saar & Palang 2009: 6) that affect the leadership cultures in institutions of higher learning. Space or spaces therefore are both “semiotic as much as pragmatic” (Pellegrino & Jeanneret 2009: 271). Homes, like institutions of higher learning, are factories of knowledge for their everyday users.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reflect on a pivotal question that emerged during my research journey: “Can I call you Ma or Prof?” This question opened up profound insights into the experiences of African women leaders in South African universities, shedding light on their navigation of leadership within the higher education landscape and their self-positioning within it. Importantly, this question also situated me within the research process itself, prompting a deeper exploration of my own identity as an African raised within an African community. Thus, it challenged me to grapple with the complexities of being Black in various contexts, both as a member of my community and as a student in today’s higher education environment.

Drawing on the understanding of mothering and parenting in the African context as a sociocultural practice, I argue that this question highlighted the embodied memories and ways of knowing that Eurocentric research frameworks often overlook. Through this exploration, I assert that I am not merely a researcher conducting research, but a human being engaged in a relational process of inquiry. My being, inherently connected

to others, constantly reminds me of its presence throughout the research journey. This chapter underscores the necessity of embracing diverse ways of knowing and engaging with each other, challenging the limitations of Western research paradigms in higher education.

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