

Too late to come back? The paradox of being a 50-year-old 'early career' black female academic

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Abstract

Much of what is known about the experiences of black women in academia is from research in the developed world. Little is known about the experiences of black women at African higher education institutions (HEIs) and even less about the experiences of black women who experience career breaks. Using an auto-ethnographic approach I reflect on her attempts to balance the demands of her different roles as a black woman and an academic. In a narrative that explores the complex relationship of time, career and context, the author argues that the time of womanhood, blackness and motherhood in academia is out of joint. Finally, she considers some of the strategies and resources that enabled her entry, re-entry, survival and growth during the course of her stop-and-start academic career. The author hopes that her story may contribute to the ongoing debates about the challenges of and possibilities for late-entry female academics at HEIs.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, mentorship, professional time, early career, blackness, womanhood, higher education, status shifts, career breaks

INTRODUCTION

Three decades ago when I completed my first degree and sought entry into the job market, I encountered a recurring statement in job advertisements. It went something like this, '(xx number of) years of relevant experience would be an advantage'. I was fresh out of university, and the only experience I had was three, two-month periods of 'temporary' teaching during the long vacations in my first, second and third years, a total of six months. Obviously that experience did not count. First, it was not 'relevant' experience (why not?) nor was it enough. All employers seemed to want experience, but none was willing to give it. By the time I landed my first job, I understood that entry into the world of work is not easy. I did not, however, anticipate the challenges of surviving and progressing in that world.

What followed was a long and arduous career journey that took me in and out of the classroom as a high school science teacher, a university tutor and lecturer; in and out of the world of research as an ornithologist and a researcher in biodiversity conservation; and in and out of the maternity ward twice to deliver two babies. For

almost 25 years I juggled life as a high school teacher, a mother, an ornithologist, a university tutor and a lecturer. As my children grew up my roles shifted. The mother role receded into the background while my role as a career woman occupied most of my time. I soon realised that in spite of having spent a total of 25 years in the workplace, I did not have the ‘relevant experience’ to re-join and participate fully in academia. I had acquired a broad range of experience in teaching at secondary and tertiary levels, in research and publications – mostly in biology – but it was obtained from a career path marked with breaks and discontinuity of presence in academia. My studies had been interrupted and at 50, I was still classified as an ‘early career academic’.

This article is a reflection on my experiences in all my roles as a black woman and a professional; looking back at some of the challenges and constraints as well as the opportunities and affordances of my chequered career path. I take an auto-ethnographic approach in which I revisit and reflect on my experiences as a black female academic. As Alvesson (2003, 175) explains, auto-ethnography differs from self-ethnography in that the former is retrospective and reflective, ‘the deeply personal experiences of the researcher are in focus’, whereas in the latter, the intention is to ‘draw attention to one’s own cultural context, what goes on around oneself rather than putting oneself and one’s experiences in the centre’. I will use my personal experiences in an academic context to show that the ‘normal’ chronology of an academic career does not match the chronology of a woman’s life.

MY METHODOLOGY

In telling my story I use the narrative methodology to ‘unearth some buried stories’ (Acker, 1997, 65). According to Polkinghorne (1995), narratives in education research can either be constructed by the respondent or they can be constructed by the researcher/observer. In the former case, the stories are part of the data and can be subjected to narrative analysis. In the latter sense, the stories are constructed to transform the data in order to paint for the reader a mental picture of the situation. I use both of Polkinghorne’s narratives to unearth and reconstruct the ‘buried stories’ from my memory as well as to analyse, interpret and make sense of the meanings of the stories.

While I concur with Acker’s cautioning about telling one’s own story and how it is often ‘marked by lapses in memory, desires to appear heroic’ (Acker, 1997, 65), I argue that interrogating the constraints and affordances of my experiences might bring to the fore both the heroism and the many failures and/or lost opportunities. I argue that the very reason for telling my story is to affirm black women academics by reflecting on the challenges of negotiating entry into and survival at higher education institutions (HEIs) in spite of constrained choices. Wright, Thompson and Channer (2007) question the continued need for what they describe as ‘the same old tired narratives of oppression, marginalisation ...’ and I agree that there is now a need for a new kind of narrative, the kind that affirms femaleness and blackness in academia.

I start my narrative with a reflection on an experience during my high school years which was to remain with me for the rest of my academic and professional years. It awakened me to the extraordinary expectations of black girls and women and the false promises that are implied in those expectations. However, before embarking on the narratives themselves I would like to give the reader an idea of my personal background so as to provide a context for the discussion of my preparation and experiences as an academic.

CONTEXT: PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I was born in the city of Bulawayo in Zimbabwe; the third of 11 children, five girls and six boys. We had two homes, a municipal house that our father rented in the city where he worked as a hospital general hand, and the family home in the village where we sometimes spent the school holidays with our mother. Both my parents spoke isiNdebele, which was to be my language of instruction for the first two years before I transitioned to English as language of learning in Grade 3. For my primary education, I went to the local township primary school just a few streets from our house. With only one salary to provide for 11 of us, my parents had to make many compromises. We were taught at an early age to engage in handiwork, such as sewing, growing vegetables for sale or buying and selling wares in order to assist with raising money for our school fees. Back then it was not unusual for parents to withdraw their children from school when there was not enough to pay for school fees and if they had to choose which child to withdraw, it would invariably be a girl. However, in spite of their own lack of education my parents never compromised on schooling, not even for us girls. In the end all of us completed primary school and went on to secondary school; six of us completed secondary school and four went on to obtain a college education.

I finished at the top of my Grade 7 class and was awarded the City Council bursary to cover my tuition for four years at secondary school. However, I could not be admitted to the only secondary school in my township because for political reasons my parents did not have the documentation required by the school. I attended a secondary school about 10 km away in the next township where I studied for my Ordinary Level exams (O-Levels). One of the incidents I refer to later in the article relates to a lesson with my history teacher, Mr Sande, at this school. His influence shaped my thinking and some of the choices I made as a career woman later in life.

I proceeded to do my A-Levels at another township high school. It was at this point that I first became aware of the second experience that I will focus on in my narrative, that is, the lack of mentorship not only for black girls, but black school children in general at that time. This was to be a recurring issue for the rest of my years at school and at university. Like any child growing up I had dreams of becoming a teacher or a nurse. These were prestigious professions, open only to the best performing black girls at O-Level. I had in fact been accepted at the only nursing school in my town

after my O-Levels, but I turned it down because I had heard from my friends about A-Levels and I wanted to do those.

I had expected my parents to insist that I take up the nursing offer as it was a paying position even while one was still in training. That way I would be able to help pay for my younger siblings' schooling. My mother's reaction to this situation was most interesting and was to be a source of inspiration for me in making other choices later about studying; all the way to my decision to do a PhD. I told her I was going to accept the nursing position so as to be able to assist with family finances. She asked me what it was I really wanted deep down in my heart. When I said I wished to pursue further studies, she told me to forget about the family's financial situation and proceed with my education. For someone who has only three years of education herself that was an indication of how much she valued schooling. The next hurdle for me was deciding on the subject combinations for my A-Levels. I was the first in my family (and in the extended family) to study beyond O-Levels and I did not know anyone else who had ever done A-Levels before. There was, therefore, no one to give me guidance or the mentorship that I needed not only to decide on which A-Level subjects to do, but also to understand how those combinations would get me to my desired career. In the end my decision was informed by my friends and my A-Level teachers.

NEGOTIATING ACCESS INTO ACADEMIA: MY FIRST EXPERIENCE

I proceeded to the University of Zimbabwe to do a Bachelor of Science. I had my first baby in my final year of university and one of the critical incidents discussed in the article relates to my experiences as a student and a mother, and later as a new graduate and a mother, attempting to gain access to the world of work and especially into academia. After the first degree, my first job was as a science teacher at a high school back in my home town. After teaching for two and a half years, I responded to an advertisement for a position at a local biodiversity research institution. I was appointed as an apprentice ornithologist and curator of the ornithological collections, one of the first three black academics at the institution. My duties included managing the largest ornithological collection in the southern hemisphere, comprising over 100 000 skins plus skeletons, eggs and a nest record card collection. Furthermore, I was expected to conduct research and publish not just on historic data from the collections but also from research on current bird distributions and their habitats. At that time all I had was my first degree in biology and no experience in research or publishing. This was to be the most exciting and at the same time the most traumatic transition I have had to make in my academic career. I was a mother, a wife and an early career woman; a black female negotiating entry into a previously white male profession. Of the nine research positions at the institution, six were held by white males, one by a white female, one by a black male and two by black females (an entomologist and me, the ornithologist). Moreover, this was a turbulent time in terms of the political changes that were taking place in our country. As a new democracy, the

government was implementing various transformation programmes and promoting black empowerment. This meant that government policies favoured young black graduates. However, this also meant some drastic changes in the working conditions of the older (mostly white) academics and other professionals in the country. Later in the article I discuss how this context shaped my experience as a novice ornithologist and emerging researcher, and also how it afforded as well as constrained my venture into academia.

This was to be the beginning of my chequered career as a wife, mother, teacher, researcher, student and (eventually) teacher educator. I worked in ornithology and biodiversity research for a total of 11 years; initially for three years in the early 1980s and then for eight years from the mid-1990s to 2002. Between these two periods, I worked for five years as a tutor at a university in the neighbouring country of Botswana. I had come to join my husband who had been posted there the previous year. The last eight years in biodiversity research were to be the most productive of my academic career. In my discussion of this productivity later in the article I argue that the very chequered nature of my experience was the reason for my productivity then as well as in my current position at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

During my second term as an ornithologist, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I enrolled for a master's degree by dissertation in zoology and conservation biology with the then University of Natal (Durban) now the University of KwaZulu Natal. The decision to study part-time was a pragmatic one. I was now the mother of two school-going children and needed to divide my attention between advancing my own studies and seeing them successfully through their own schooling. In the end, however, the extended time it took to complete the qualification worked in my favour as I gained some of the most useful expertise and experience in research that I had not had during my first degree or in the honours degree. My master's supervisor became one of my greatest mentors in academia. I refer to his contribution later when I talk about mentorship issues for black women academics. After 11 years in biodiversity research I received an invitation to help with research at Solusi University, a local university just outside my home town. I had not envisaged re-joining higher education again after my five-year tenure at the University of Botswana, and had therefore never considered obtaining a teaching qualification. However, my teaching experience at Solusi University consolidated in me the desire to remain in tertiary education. I obtained a graduate diploma in education and started on a career path that combined my skills and experience from biodiversity research with my teaching experience. Once again I will return to this point when I discuss the benefits of my chequered career.

NEGOTIATING ACCESS INTO ACADEMIA: CROSSING BORDERS

After four years of teaching at Solusi University, I decided for the first time that I wanted to do a PhD, but to do that and still be able to support my children I would have to explore options outside the country. I moved to South Africa to take up a job

as a high school science teacher. Once again I had left academia and returned to the high school classroom. Three years later, I registered for a PhD at Wits and returned to academia albeit as a student and a research fellow in a mathematics and science education research project. Again I had to make a pragmatic decision. As a foreign national in South Africa in 2005 it was not easy to access ‘proper’ jobs in academia and I made the decision to join the university in the most junior position available at the time. This would position me strategically to continue my studies within an environment that exposed me to the research community that I hoped to re-join fully once my PhD was done. When a full-time position was advertised two years later, I applied and joined the Wits establishment as a full-time tutor. I changed from full-time to part-time study and completed my PhD as a member of staff. This transition into the South African academic context had its own challenges and affordances, as discussed in the next section.

DISCUSSION

I now focus my discussion on what I see as the challenges and constraints as well as the opportunities and affordances of my chequered career path. I reflect on some of the ways in which the experiences narrated above may have been instrumental in facilitating my access into and out of academia during the course of my career development.

The promise of potential and agency: ‘You girls can make it if you work hard’

Like many girls and women elsewhere (see, for example, Wright et al 2007), I have always felt that I had to prove myself much more as an academic. Often this was demanded by my elders, my community, my teachers, my colleagues, and the institutions at which I have worked and eventually I required it of myself. I now return to the incident alluded to earlier in this paper, which happened very early in my high school days. For the first two years of high school I was in a class of girls only and we were probably the most difficult class in the school. In the second year, in Form 2, I had an encounter with the history teacher, Mr Sande, one of the people who were to have a lasting influence on my education and on my thinking about myself and the world I was growing into.

Like other teachers, Mr Sande struggled to maintain discipline in our class and on this particular day he arrived for the history lesson to the most chaotic classroom situation imaginable. Some girls had wandered out of the classroom; others were leaning out of windows, calling at the top of their voices to passers-by; some were standing on desks – the situation was out of control. Normally Mr Sande would have barked an instruction from the door and we would all have rushed back to our seats. On this day, he simply stood quietly at the door for a very long time. When we finally settled down, Mr Sande abandoned the history lesson and engaged us in a discussion that I have never forgotten. I do not recall most of what he said, but what

I do remember has stayed with me all my life. Making reference to a boys-only class next door to ours, Mr Sande said words to this effect:

Bantwabami (isiNdebele for 'My children'), do you see those boys next door in Form 2A? You have to work three times harder than them to make it in life. You must work hard because you need to pass your five subjects to get your O-Level certificate. You have to work twice as hard because you are girls – if those boys fail they can go and work in the factories or on farms, but you can't. You have to work three times harder because you are black girls – you have no inheritance. Wake up, black girls! Wake up bantwabami.

I was only 15, so although they were wise words, they were mostly meaningless to me at the time. It took me many years to realise the importance of Mr Sande's words. We were growing up in a world that did not yet have the space for black girls to participate as equals, neither with boys of any colour nor with white girls. Moreover, we were becoming educated black girls and there was no ready niche for us to fit into in the workplace. Mr Sande was aware of how the political and cultural traditions of our country had always cast black women as wives and mothers or as workers fit only to be 'maids' in white masters' homes. However, he was also aware of the beginning of an important change due to the many years of 'struggle' against black oppression. Black women were beginning to break into professions that had previously been reserved for white women, as secretaries, bank tellers, trained teachers and nurses. It was still a struggle but it was now possible. Mr Sande knew this and we did not.

The long road into and out of academia has shown me how important that advice was. I have seen Mr Sande's words play out in the experiences of my own students, male and female. I find myself using a modified version of Mr Sande's words with my own students. As I explore my struggles and victories in managing the tensions of my changing identity as a mother, a teacher, a researcher and an academic at an HEI, I recall the promise of Mr Sande's words; that black girls' hard work will always be rewarded with success and fairness. However, the journey through my career has also revealed a mismatch between the promise of those words and the reality of being a black woman academic. For me, a striking example of this mismatch is in the way time and space seem uncontested in a professional black woman's career path. I now discuss two incidences in my career that relate to this mismatch.

Too late, on time, in time – whose time?

Hamlet: Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint – O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let's go together.
(Shakespeare, Hamlet Act 1, scene 5, lines 186–190)

Several years after the experience with Mr Sande, I sat on a hospital bed in Bulawayo, on a September Friday, nursing my newborn baby with my university files and notes on my bedside. I had requested special permission to have my study materials brought to the hospital in order to prepare for my final examinations. The university had re-opened that week for the final semester of my final year and examinations were due in six weeks. My baby had been born that week by Caesarean Section (CS), two weeks later than expected. My baby was late, I was late back to school and I was over 400 km away from the university.

I arrived at the university a week later, nursing a fresh CS wound and a week-old baby. My mother-in-law had agreed to come with me to look after the baby while I attended lessons and prepared for examinations. I learned to synchronise the institutional requirement to complete the degree on time with the demands of motherhood. Two months later, in December, I made the 400 km bus trip back home, my degree completed, my CS wound healed, and my three-month-old baby in tow. I had completed my Bachelor of Science degree in the university's allocated time of three years – on time. From then on, my career journey was to be a continual negotiation of time, juggling roles and negotiating shifting and competing identities as defined by my diverse communities of practice (Wenger 1999).

Twenty-nine years later, at ten minutes before noon on another September day just after my 51st birthday, I handed in my doctoral thesis for examination. It was a landmark achievement, long awaited not only by me, but by my children, my family, my colleagues, my supervisor and my university. It was a requirement in order to legitimise my position as an academic at my university. It was also a requirement for the institution's drive to increase its postgraduate student throughput.

During the course of my studies, I had been required by the university to submit regular progress reports to indicate that I was still on course to finish in the university's expected time. I had completed in the expected time and so, I was on time. According to university regulations, I could have gone on for another two years and I would still have been on time, in extra time. I was 51 years old and I was on time. I had been 22 when I graduated with my first degree and 40 when I obtained my master's degree. At 51, I had handed in my doctoral thesis, on time, at a university 1 000 km away from home.

A doctoral thesis submitted within five years of part-time registration is on time. Was a doctoral thesis submitted 11 years after completing my master's degree on time? Was a doctoral thesis submitted 29 years after completing my first degree on time? Was a doctoral thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for confirmation as a lecturer at 51 on time? On whose time? My chronological time or my institution's time? What is an appropriate time for a black woman to complete a doctorate? At what time is it appropriate for a mother to complete her work? Is it before, during or after motherhood, as had been the case with my first degree, 29 years earlier?

Harvey (1990, 419) argues that the role of members of any community is 'defined in terms of the spaces occupied at specific times' and that space and time determine

social order. According to Durkheim (in Harvey 1990), space and time are social constructs and as society changes, conceptions of time also change. By implication then, as society changes, its conceptions of the roles of members of the community also change. I soon found out that the communities of practice (CoPs) to which I belonged defined time variously and thus conceptualised the roles of a black career woman differently. Moreover, while communities held varying definitions of the space and time of a 'black career woman' they failed to define the space and time of a 'black career mother'. Perhaps the most obscure but very significant mismatch is in definitions of time and space in culture as opposed to those at the HEI where I obtained my BSc degree. For example, to meet the demands of a final semester of a BSc degree meant not only balancing my new role as a mother with my role as a final-year BSc student, but also my new role as an Ndebele daughter-in-law living with her mother-in-law. The latter role came with a whole range of cultural demands on me as a daughter-in-law and the mother of a newborn. Just by leaving the home and travelling 400 km on public transport with a newborn, I was violating the most basic cultural expectations of a woman who had just delivered. In my language the elders would say disapprovingly, 'The baby's umbilical cord had not even dropped!' It had not been easy to convince my mother-in-law to make that bus trip with me with a 'wet' baby. Both the time and space were out of joint. It was equally taboo for a black woman to travel 1 000 km from her family and her home to acquire a PhD. These two examples only illustrate my interpretation of the mismatch of the time of professional womanhood with cultural norms and values of the communities from which the black academic woman draws her identity. I now consider further my experiences of the mismatches between the time of womanhood and institutional imperatives.

Institutional imperatives and demands: Promise and reality

My first experience of this dislocation of time of black-career-motherhood was in my very first job as a high school science teacher just after completing my BSc degree where I found myself in the middle of various overt and covert debates. There were raging debates on: the statutory differences between remuneration for black and white professionals, and male and female graduate teachers; provisions for maternity leave; on whether or not married women should be entitled to a pension and/or medical cover and whether the provisions should be similar for black and white women. None of these debates touched on provision for mothering. I soon realised how blackness, womanhood, motherhood and being professional were not in sync. From their research on female faculty with children, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004, 234) observed that work pervaded family (in my case mothering) space and that many institutional policies remained silent on the issue. Parenting academics were expected to come up with their own strategies for managing work and family such that family did not pervade work. Similarly, I had to quickly learn new survival strategies that could enable me to manage successfully my duties as a female teacher and a mother.

Three years later I left high school teaching to join biodiversity research. The situation was no different there. There were no institutional policies in place to help balance work and family. My job involved systematics research and publication. This was a rare opportunity for a young black graduate at that time. Mine was the third of nine research departments to be headed by a black person. It was both an exciting and petrifying prospect. However, my biggest anxiety emanated from a different source altogether. Unbeknown to me I was already pregnant with my second child when I was interviewed for the position. I received the news of my pregnancy in the same week as the offer of the job. I was going to be an ornithologist and a second-time mother.

I was quite confident in my knowledge of biology and I was eager to learn about research and publishing. I did not anticipate any of the challenges that lay ahead. I was a young black woman trying to penetrate a previously white male-dominated profession; a black woman breaking out of traditional expectations of 'educated women's jobs' such as being a teacher, a nurse or a secretary. I was also a young black mother defying traditional expectations of a mother as defined by my ethnic and religious communities. In defiance of cultural and religious norms of motherhood, I had not only taken on full-time employment but had also broken with convention, taking a job not associated with black people, let alone a young mother.

The key performance expectation of my new job was research and publication. However, my university education had not adequately prepared me for that role. I had done some writing at university but a different genre of academic writing than was now required of me. Although I had the requisite knowledge of biology, I lacked the tools and skills to enable me to participate fully in the systematics research community and the discourses needed for publication. My country had just attained independence and was in the transition from a colonial white government to black majority rule. The white colleagues who should have been mentoring me and my other black colleagues had become 'victims' of recent political changes in the country. The new government had announced a reduction in the retirement age from 60 to 55 in order to create job openings for young black university graduates who were entering the job market. The majority of those who at the time were close to retirement were white colleagues. This created tension and hostility on either side; the blacks wanted the 'whites' to get out and the whites were angry at 'these blacks and their government'. Meanwhile, there was an expectation for black professionals to be able to take over and run the institutions and conduct the same research that the whites had done for years. Moreover, we were science graduates and were expected to simply come in and do research and publish. We were in a Catch-22 situation; on the one hand, we expected to receive training and mentoring from our more experienced white colleagues, while on the other hand, we were part of the fight for social transformation.

For almost two years my fellow black colleagues and I were in limbo, we did not know who to turn to for support and assistance. It was then that I became acquainted with a fellow ornithologist, Dr M (not his real name), a white Zimbabwean, who

worked for a sister organisation. Dr M took me under his wing and introduced me to systematics and biodiversity conservation research and publishing. I later met two other white men, an ornithologist, Dr K, who over the years became a very close friend and mentor, as well as an ecologist, Dr S, a tremendous mentor for my master's dissertation. Both Dr K and Dr S were South Africans. The fact that all three mentors at this point were white males is significant for the argument I am presenting in the article, that for me the time was out of joint. I was caught up in racial politics that my mentors and I were able to put aside.

The proverbial coin flipped over. Because the time was out of joint, whether I succeeded or failed was based on the random flip of a coin. On the one hand, hostile race relations at my institution denied me the training and mentoring that I needed as a young professional, while on the other hand, I found support and mentoring from across the same racial lines. I learnt from Dr M, Dr K and Dr S how to write proposals for funding; how to prepare conference papers; which conferences to go to; and which key people to seek out at conferences to establish professional networks. In fact, Dr M took me to my first conference in Nairobi in 1996. Later he and another colleague helped me convert my conference paper into a journal article, my first publication in an international refereed journal. My other mentor, Dr K, and I worked on complementary research in our respective countries and presented on our research at an international conference in Thailand. My mentors held my hand, as it were, and supported my entry into the discourse of academia – an opportunity which many black professionals were denied. I realised that while my history teacher's exhortation to work three times harder would spur me on, it would not always be enough to help me deal with the constraints of my historical background in moving ahead in academia. Having access to the discourse was not enough, I still had to gain recognition in academia.

Status shifts and symbolic capital

The ability to break into and succeed in academia is assumed for a graduate. As a student enters academia, the institutional demands and expectations are spelt out and the skills and aptitudes to meet them are presumed to have been acquired. The institution has no memory/understanding of the background of its members, and often its rules and regulations are not informed by the diversity of the members. All are assumed to be equally and sufficiently equipped. Young (2007, 95) argues that in attempting to deal with difference, HEIs tend to require 'a melting away of difference' instead of 'promoting the reproduction of and respect for group difference without oppression'. Thus, while upholding a desire and a drive for social transformation, often there is a lack of institutional awareness and sometimes deliberate ignoring of people's contexts and experiences.

My experiences with the challenges of gaining access into and recognition in academia date back to my days in ornithology research. First, there was the challenge of taking responsibility for a research department for the first time. On the one hand, it was assumed that as a university graduate I would know how to run a department and

be able to conduct research. On the other hand, my designation was ‘trainee’, which meant that I should be trained and mentored in the position. There was resistance from some of my more experienced colleagues to assist young black graduates as they felt that the new government had a secret agenda to replace them, which was not surprising. However, it was an interesting contradiction because I felt that they were more qualified than me, precisely because of the differential opportunity which they had benefited from in the past, and they felt that I was benefiting now – time out of joint. As discussed earlier these sentiments were sometimes verbalised in unhappy tones in meetings, over tea or in jest, but often they were carried on in undertones that were hard to substantiate and impossible to reproduce in order to seek intervention or to facilitate mediation. What had started out as an exciting dream job turned out to be a place of struggle and political engagement. This was to be an on-going struggle in negotiating access into and recognition in my other positions in academia over the years.

My journey as an academic finally led me to Wits as an aspiring PhD student. I had arrived in South Africa two years earlier as a high school science teacher having left a job as a university lecturer. I had close to four years of experience as a lecturer at Solusi University in addition to the five years as a tutor in Botswana, plus 11 years of research experience in biodiversity. I was a relatively seasoned biologist and educator, with a sound record of research and publication as well as supervision of student research. However, as a non-South African, I did not have the social and institutional capital to allow me access to a proper job at an HEI in South Africa. I had capital as an educated black person, but I was a foreigner. Enrolling for a PhD was a strategy for re-entry and subsequently for survival in academia in South Africa, which was ultimately successful. Later I was awarded a PhD Fellowship which covered my tuition and subsistence as a student. The coin had flipped over. I had landed an opportunity to study and empower myself for survival at an HEI in a foreign country.

The dilemma, however, was that my PhD stipend did not enable me to provide for my children until it was legal for them to be gainfully employed in South Africa. The demands of motherhood continued to impact my academic and professional progress. Once again I needed to make a pragmatic choice, which was to opt out of full-time study a year into my PhD to take up a full-time position at Wits. I now had to juggle study and work, thus pushing back the time of completing my study and so postponing my confirmation in academia. Yet again, time was out of joint. Hattingh (2012, 1140) in her report on a study of African and Norwegian women pursuing PhD studies, observed that most of the African women in her study were caregivers and/or sole breadwinners. Their choices were often limited. For example, they would pass up attractive scholarships designated for ‘women only’ in order to be close to their families and/or dependents. This was a common phenomenon for African women pursuing PhD studies.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of 'African time' has mostly negative connotations, perceived as a culturally entrenched tendency to a relaxed attitude to time. It is often likened to tardiness and lack of punctuality (Mbiti 1969). The flip side of the coin is that African time might represent a different consciousness in respect of time. For example, African time is determined by the movement of the shadows, representing and communicating the different times of day relative to the position of the shadows cast by objects. Similarly, the time of womanhood, of motherhood, and of blackness as an academic takes its cues from the shadows that signal the shifting positions of the black woman, the mother and the academic that casts it. Whereas academia upholds the illusion of the congruency of the standard chronology of a career with the chronology of a person's life, African time might acknowledge the reality that career time is out of joint. African time is context bound and might be sensitive to the fact that the time of womanhood is different. That it comprises a biologically determined child-bearing age. African time might be sensitive to the child-like development of the older African woman who comes back to further her education in her adult years. African time might be sensitive to the adult-like responsibilities of the African girl child, who at an early age has to take on adult responsibilities while pursuing her own studies. However, the notion of positive African time remains elusive. Yet, might not African time be a resource as HEIs negotiate the challenges of transformation and empowerment of black women academics? African time might be sensitive to the perpetual mismatch between the promise of potential and agency and the reality of blackness and woman-ness in academia.

In telling my story I have tried to show how it defied the standard career path determined by my institutions; and how my career time was totally out of joint. African time would acknowledge the demands that the development time characteristics of one of 11 children is not the same as that of the middle-class traditional university student, from a family of two, or at most four. This is not a story of a single unique woman, but it is a story played out in a shared context together with other black girls, continually negotiating the tensions of the demands of our cultural and emerging academic identities.

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