

Researching Violence in Africa as a Black Woman: Notes from Rwanda

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Abstract

This working paper addresses some of the ethical and methodological concerns I confronted as a non-white woman conducting research in post-conflict Rwanda. White westerners have long dominated the field of political science. It is therefore not surprising that much of the literature produced about the study of violence through ethnographic method comes from this group of scientists. In this paper, I address the wanting diversity of perspectives with regards to reflexivity, positionality, and risk in the field and expose some implications of conducting research in politically charged environments for non-white, “brown,” and/or non-western researchers. I also introduce perspectives that may influence the ways in which they gather and analyze their data when researching political violence. The paper looks at how I navigated my field experience as a Western female researcher of the African diaspora. I argue that underrepresented researchers and the study of violence can benefit from broadening the conversation about researchers’ identities and how they relate to the field, their research subjects, and their data.

Keywords

Race, gender, positionality, field research,

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Introduction

In 1954, Dr. Jewel L. Prestage, became the first black woman to receive a doctoral degree in political science from an American institution. Sixty-years later, there are still few black women in the discipline and even fewer are engaged in international relations and political violence scholarship. While non-American black female international relations scholars² are present and active, their numbers remain small, their visibility limited, and contributions to scholarship on micro-level field research and reflexivity in the field scarce. While great strides have been made to include women voices and nuances in their positionality, their perspective often remains part of the dominant white hegemony.

Indeed, while in recent decades, feminist literature in social sciences has been sensitized to the diverse constructions of self and how it relates to research (Joseph 1996), some scholars in anthropology for instance (Kobayashi 1994, hooks 1992, Spivak 1988, Lorde 1984) have pushed back against the supposed authority and representation of white feminism. Even in this discipline, when race and gender are considered simultaneously, such as in the case of black women, their voices are usually enshrined in western discourses (McClaurin 2001, Simmons 2002, Williams 1996, Woodson 1990). However, a growing number of scholars with similar methodological training, but with more diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, are increasingly engaging in field research, including in ethnography of post-conflict societies.³ Considering that race, gender, nationality, and class, all have varying degrees of impact depending on the context of the research site and population, it is important to problematize the shortage of minority perspectives with regards to reflexivity, positionality, and risk in the field. For the purpose of my work, I address this problem from the perspective of scholars engaged in ethnographic methods when studying violence in highly politicized settings.

This paper hopes to expand the growing discussion on identity and positionality in the field. More specifically, I hope to start a conversation about what can be gained analytically when considering and including intersectional identities of a growing number of social science academics who also have to juggle, albeit differently, the power and privilege of the researcher position. In this paper, I engage the literature from a variety of disciplines in social sciences on identity and positionality in field research and highlight the gaps that I found problematic as I prepared for the field. I suggest that these gaps have important implications on appropriate field preparation, data gathering and analysis, and self-care. I will then discuss my research experience as a western female researcher from the African diaspora conducting research in post-genocide Rwanda.

Preparing for my fieldwork

² Notable examples include Tandeka Nkiwane and Funmi Olonisakin, among others.

³ Anthropologist Grace Akello from Uganda and historian Martha Awaka from Namibia are examples.

Prior to entering the field, I was conscious of the importance of a researcher's identity, and like countless others involved in ethnographic methods, I familiarized myself with the literature on reflexivity and crafting one's identity in the field (Kondo 1990, Coffey 1999, Rabinow 1977, McLean and Leibing 2007). As a black woman of Togolese origin, raised in Quebec and living and studying in the United States, I hoped to gain greater insight into practical ways to apply principles of self-awareness and reflexivity when dealing with an intersectional and multinational identity. I wanted to make sure that I understood how to be reflexive and beware of representation issues while still engaging in meaningful political analysis of violence.

I determined that a good starting point would be to familiarize myself with feminist approaches to fieldwork. Feminist methodologies push researchers to address inequalities based on gender, race, and class in participants' lives and in the researcher-participant relationship (Wolf 1996, England 1994, Williams 1996, Joseph 1996, Warren 1988, Harding 1987, Ladner 1987, Tsuda 2003). These methodologies emphasize how those characteristics impact hierarchical interactions and the way we analyze and explain our research, on one hand, and on the other, the need to be aware of the politics and processes of knowledge production (England 1994, Katz 1994, Hurd 1998, Moss 2002). Additionally, I incorporated the important insights of black feminists and how they conceptualize and emphasize power and positionality outside of the white feminist paradigms (Collins 2002, McClaurin 2001, Ladner 1987). Black feminism challenges the assumed representation of early feminism theory and underscores the intersection between race, gender, sexuality and power asymmetry. This literature and its focus on black feminist epistemology empowered me to unapologetically place myself at the center of the analysis with a racialized and gendered perspective (hooks 1984) in a field of knowledge defined by a Eurocentric framework.

Naturally, my methodological enquiry followed with a more systematic investigation of the literature produced by African Americans about race in the field and their contrasting experiences from their white counterparts (McClaurin 2001, Simmons 2002, Williams 1996, Woodson 1990). I was particularly interested in the concept of identity incorporation (Woodson 1990) when conducting field research among "skinfolk" (Hurstons 1942, Williams 1996), or black scholars doing research within other black communities. This small body of literature highlighted how the communities in which they conducted their research perceived those researchers and the different insights they gained from being racial insiders. While black researchers engaged in research in black communities are "outsiders from within" (Collins 1986), there are limits to identity incorporation. Indeed, African American scholars understand that skinship does not necessarily give black researchers insider status (Woodson 1990, Williams 1996, Hurston 1942) or privileged knowledge (Davenport 2013). For example, Henderson (2009) explained that during her research in Mozambique, she found that the possibility of racial solidarity as a member of a subaltern group was mitigated by her American citizenship (see also Townsend-Bell 2009). Similarly, while Williams (1996) shared diasporic connection with her Guyanese research group, she admitted that besides textbook knowledge of Guyana, she felt that these were not "her" black people, and therefore felt a clear break between her and her research participants.

Another body of literature particularly relevant to my research in post-conflict Rwanda dealt with the challenges of conducting fieldwork in dangerous or highly politicized settings. Nordstrom (1997, 8-9) for instance explains that “[t]o include research at the epicenters of violence involves a number of responsibilities above and beyond those associated with more traditional ethnography: responsibility to the fieldworker’s safety, to that of her and his informants, and to the theories that help forge attitudes toward the reality of violence both expressed and experienced.” Indeed, I found a great deal of scholarship on the ethical challenges of the Institutional Review Board (Hemming 2009, Gallaher 2009), the protection of data, confidentiality and anonymity of respondents (Sriram 2009) and self-care in the field (Goodhand 2000, Mertus 2009). Additionally, the literature also exposes the important gendered security concerns of women conducting field research in volatile and dangerous settings. While sociologist Kathleen Blee (2002) discussed how her being a woman helped her assuage the concerns of some of the white supremacists she worked with because she was perceived as lesser of a threat, on the other hand an increasing number of anthropologists are addressing the risk of sexual harassment and rape of female researchers in the field (Winkler 1995). This literature was especially useful during my fieldwork.

However, despite this vast body of research produced on fieldwork, I found it difficult to “find myself” in the literature that was offered. As an international relations scholar, I felt like a few important items were missing from my field research toolkit. Indeed, there are two main aspects that I grappled with and found lacking during my preparation. The first issue was how to negotiate the intersection of my race, gender, *nationality*, and *cultural background*. Looking for literature that addressed reflexivity and positionality in field research in Africa from the point of view of members of the African diaspora yielded very little (Munthali 2001). Indeed political science literature, for instance, provided me very general fieldwork advice on issues of power relations between researchers and subjects and insider/outsider status (Bayard de Volo 2009) as if researchers have no other salient identities (Townsend-Bell 2009). Unsurprisingly, there is more accounting for race and gender in field research in anthropology or geography. While African American anthropologists addressed gender and race, they understandably did so from a western perspective. But what of non-US born, non-white scholars researchers?

Black researchers with stronger diasporic ties/connections to the communities they research (a Tanzanian social scientist studying in Cameroon for example) negotiate their identities much differently than African American researchers in non-American black communities. Likewise, the paths of introspection, cognitive styles, and emotional responses to the field experience differ also. The result was that the extent to which I could draw on their racial experience in the field was limited.

Additionally, “native” field researchers, or those who are perceived to be so, often have added social expectations. Some participants do not understand why they ask “silly questions” (Munthali 2001, 122-3). Hence, while white researchers may readily receive answers to some questions, respondents may at times resist “native” researchers’

inquiries when discussing topics that they believe to be self-evident among insiders (van Ginkel 1998, Fahim and Helmer 1980). Sensitive to this reality, I attempted to find reflexive insights from Africans and members of the African diaspora conducting research on political violence in the region. At the time, I came out disappointedly empty-handed.⁴ Therefore, I turned to authors like Kondo (1990) who, as a non-Japanese speaker, Japanese American conducting research in Japan, had to navigate a situation analogous to mine.

Finally, I also sought to understand how non-white/non western researchers managed volatile or highly politicized research settings, particularly in communities in which they share close diasporic ties. But such literature was also scarce. All researchers are exposed to risk when doing fieldwork in dangerous settings. They can be taken into custody by government agents if they threaten the established order (Thomson 2011), and in extreme cases, they can face death (Oglesby 1995). But in many cases, western white researchers enjoy a privileged position of relative security.⁵ Native researchers, or those perceived as such, are relatively easier targets and can easily be victims of government overreach if they violate social or political norms. For instance, in June 2014, Alexander Sodiqov, a PhD student in political science at the University of Toronto arrived in his native Kazakhstan to conduct research on conflict and conflict prevention in this authoritarian state. Within a few days, he was arrested and charged with espionage and treason. He remained in detention for months. As a Kazakh citizen, he could not access diplomatic legal assistance from Canada even though he was studying in a Canadian institution. Of course, local authorities in politicized settings can arrest any researcher regardless of nationality. However, this situation begs examination on the extent to which researchers like Alexander may be vulnerable vis-à-vis political authorities who exert more control over their own citizens. If they are significantly more vulnerable, how do they account for that difference when they prepare to enter the field? And if they are aware of such vulnerabilities or potential security risk, to what extent does fear impact their research, ability to remain objective (Nilan 2002), self-care measures, and analytical sharpness (Blee 2002) compared to their white/western counterparts?

In sum, as I prepared to undertake my field research, I found that these gaps in literature on reflexivity, positionality, and risk in the field made it challenging to address some of the concerns particular to my position and that of other researchers like me. In additions to their implications for my work in the field, these gaps indicated the hegemony of white or western experiences when generating knowledge about research in contentious settings. While the data available is good and may enable researchers to address a variety of issues, the near-absence of non-white/non-western voices also means

⁴ I have since stumbled upon a few cases like those cited in this paragraph. Admittedly, my failure to obtain such literature at the time is most likely attributable to the fact that such publications are difficult to access from North American databases. In fact, while drafting this piece, I found a brilliant reflexive article published in 2012 in an lesser known German journal by Dr. Grace Akello, a European-trained Ugandan medical anthropologist who went into great detail about how her life experience influenced her work and her research among wartime children in Northern Uganda.

⁵ I say “relative” because of course, a white/western researcher would obviously be in a great deal of danger if she were to conduct research in areas controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), for example.

that they may not be fully prepared for some of the realities of fieldwork that some of their white or western counterparts will not encounter. It may also fail to explain specific research insights from non-white non-western inquiry perspectives.

My Identity in the Field

My dissertation, “In the Shadow of Prison: Power, Identity, and Transitional Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” (2013) investigated power relations in Rwanda’s transitional justice program. More specifically, I analyzed how the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) manipulated the transitional justice program to legitimize its post-genocide rule. The project explored the legal journey of former prisoners accused of genocide crimes and exposed the bearings of long years of socialization in post-genocide prisons on ordinary citizens and how one-sided criminal accountability challenged social repair. It also explored how released prisoners remembered the multiple episodes of violence in Rwanda that took place during the 1990s. In this work, I argued that the transitional justice program in Rwanda emerged as one of the newer battlegrounds of identity politics in a continuation of power struggle between political elites since the colonial era.

In my dissertation, I used a mixed-method approach that involved four months of ethnographic work in Northern Rwanda, where I conducted in depth semi-structured interviews with released prisoners accused of genocide crimes. Some of my respondents were found guilty and others exonerated by the justice system. Moreover, because many of my respondents lived along the Kigali-Ruhengeri road in northern Rwandan, they had also experienced the civil war that took place prior to the genocide. Pinned between the RPA and the Rwandan government forces controlled areas, they experienced frequent episodes of intense violence between 1990 and 1993. Their narratives of violence often included the crimes committed by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the then-rebel group and current ruling party, against civilians. These crimes are excluded from the official narrative on violence in the Great Lakes Region. My research took place in the faultline of the authorized discourse on transitional justice in Rwanda. Hence, interviews with subjects took place in the privacy of their own homes in order to allow them the space to share their memories with as little risk as possible to them.

Prior to my departure for Rwanda, I suspected that I would be able to access a different dataset from that which White North American or European researchers, who are usually the most visible producers and consumers of research on Rwanda, would be privy. This assumption was strengthened by a comment made by a friend I made upon my arrival in Rwanda. Shortly after meeting me, not wanting to waste any time to start my education on Rwandan culture, she invited me to the wake of a deceased relative. After the mass, we joined the family for a reception. While we waited for the main event to begin, we discussed my research. I shared with her my apprehensions about what people would be willing to share with me. Later that evening, I wrote down our conversation in my notes:

[She] told me – I had not mentioned my thoughts to her – that I would probably have an easier time getting the information that I’m looking for

because people would look at me and assume that I am Rwandese or a Rwandese who left and came back after the genocide. Apparently, there are a lot of Rwandans who came back who do not speak either French or Kinyarwanda. So people could perceive me as one of them. But most importantly, the fact that I am not White American, Canadian or European takes away a lot of that resentment that some Rwandese have against Europeans, particularly the Belgians and the French.

However, my identity/identities, and hence my positionality in the field, were much more complex than simply my race. First, when one conducts research in Rwanda, she or he does so in a context where concerns about identity are paramount. Identity discourses in Rwanda have, for a long time, drowned out any other conversations. Going back as far as pre-colonial times, one's identity (whether determined by class or by ethnicity) determined one's socio-economic and political position, educational opportunities, and economic power or obligations (Lemarchand 1970, Mamdani 2001, Newbury 1988). During the civil war and the genocide, one's ethnicity and regional provenance were crucial in determining allegiances and personal safety.

In post-genocide Rwanda, while ethnicity has been legally eradicated, labels such as "survivors," "victims," "perpetrators," and "infiltrators" are implicitly rooted in one's pre-genocide ethnic identity (Burnet 2012, Longman and Rutagengwa, 2010, Eltrigham 2011). Those same labels identify also one's relationship with the State, the value of one's testimony during a genocide trial, and whether one is a legitimate source for the "truth" on Rwandan history. Geertz (1973, 15) argues that "the relation between informant and field-worker is bespeckled with mutual misunderstanding, clientelistic interests, power games, and cultural proselytizing." Hence, to respondents, determining one's identity allows them to clarify motives, understand acts and performances, and determine which discursive strategies are appropriate at any given time.

My shifting identity made me a "conceptual anomaly" (Kondo 1990, 11), which complicated my relationships with respondents. In my daily interactions in the field, I found that whether I was in the city or in rural areas, people were uncomfortable with not being able to pinpoint who I was. In fact, during one of our many discussions on identity with my research facilitator, he stated that Rwandese "need to be able to put people in categories. If I hear one speak, I can determine that he is from Tanzania or Uganda. I can even tell if one may be French or German, Tutsi or Hutu. People look at you and something is off. You could be a Tutsi, but you're not quite one. People will keep staring at you until they can put you in a box." As I engaged in participant-observation research, determining which box I was assigned to on any given day was precisely what determined the power implications between the research participants and me (Williams 1996, 73).

It is often difficult to determine with any degree of certainty where I am from originally. Also, because my physiognomy does not betray my ethnic make-up, some

people had no qualms believing that I was Rwandan.⁶ Many others simply stared at me, unsure. There is no doubt that the color of my skin allowed for what Williams calls – borrowing from Hurston (1942) – “skinfolk connection” which is a process of identity incorporation rooted in “historical linkages between ‘shared’ race as potentially shared culture” (1996, 77). But unlike Fujii (2009), who felt like she had a dual status as an insider/outsider in the field, I was constantly moving along a spectrum of supposed kinship, depending on the day and the amount of personal information I had offered or had been requested from individual respondents.

What made me a “skinfolk” for some was my Togolese origins and for others the fact that my husband was also originally from West Africa. I had a continental connection, an understanding that went beyond the simple color of my skin. For others, it was the perception or the belief that I was in fact Rwandese; in spite of the fact I still do not believe that I, in any way, look Rwandese. Language played hand in hand with my physical appearance. I did not speak Kinyarwanda, but French is my native language, which meant that I was not an English speaking Tutsi Rwandan returnee from Uganda or America. I found that for respondents, most of whom were Hutu, determining who I was *not* was as important as determining out who I was.

The skinfolk connection at times offered great insights about respondents understanding of violence in the region and how it compared to the rest of the continent. Sometimes, interviews turned into conversations as respondents asked me questions about topics of ethnicity and social cohesion where “I came from” and tried to understand the differences and similarities between sub-regions. One of my respondents did not know that there were black people in the United States and inquired about how I felt about race relations there. As such conversations took shape, there were brief moments of exchange of information, as opposed to the usual one-sided inquiry.

On the other hand, that same “skinfolk” connection created confusion during the interviews. At times, I asked my research assistant to make sure the interviewees understood that I was not Rwandese, so they would not make assumptions about what I did or did not know. For example, during one of my first interviews, a respondent refused to answer a question saying: “You, you know the answer to this question, why do you bother asking. Aren’t you from here?” my assistant replied “I can guess the answer, but our guest here is not Rwandese. Can you explain it for her?” When assumptions about who I was led respondents to believe that I already knew the answer to a question, or that I was trying to trick them, I would make sure that they knew that I was not Rwandese. In some cases, when I could discern hesitation because of doubts about whether I was Hutu or Tutsi, particularly for those who feared imprisonment for mentioning ethnicity, making my nationality known was essential.

⁶ On many occasions, Rwandans approached me and asked me something in Kinyarwanda. Upon realizing that I did not speak the language, some would mock me or be offended. Even on a recent research trip among the Rwandan political diaspora in exile, a former political official alluded to my Tutsi-like height and built.

Another aspect of identity that is worth noting is the combination of my gender and my age. Despite the fact that Rwanda is a country with a very high percentage of women in parliament, in powerful positions in the government, and in the armed forces, the role of women in rural communities has not changed as drastically as in Rwanda. Rural areas are still, for the most part, patriarchal (Burnet 2012). My time spent in Rwanda took place in a men's world. My assistant was male and all my interviewees, save half a dozen, were also males. Moreover, all my respondents were older than me. When conducting my interviews, most of the wives sat on the periphery, either in a corner of the room, a different room, or outside the house with other women. With my cargo capri pants, my Nike shoes, and my pigtails, I often passed for a young girl.

I knew that I could have capitalized on my identity incorporation by attempting to blend in and adopt the local dress mores for women. But for practical reasons (hiking in a skirt was not conceivable to me) and to remain authentic to who I was, I decided to assert my individuality and to remain an unapologetic anomaly. As an African woman, I was acting outside the established patriarchy, but felt that I could not be effectively reflexive if I was not honest and did not embrace my western upbringing. This often led interviewees (and some people around them) to assume that I had not yet reached womanhood and to refer to me as the "girl." The combination of race, age, gender, and perceived marital status at times offered respondents the opportunity of balance the power asymmetry that exists between investigator and respondents. However, when my assistant would correct them: "She is a woman," indicating that I was married, there was a clear and sudden change in their demeanor, an increased respect which was apparent in their body language, the way they would look at me, and acknowledge my presence. I no longer appeared as a "little girl" poking in adult business.



Figure 1: In the field with some of my respondents

Finally, I want to share a brief anecdote on how concerns about my safety impacted my risk management and research decisions. Half-way through my field work I had the opportunity to go to Goma, in Eastern Congo to conduct additional research. A respondent, who has family there, offered to take me across the border. I discussed the possibility with my husband and after a lot of deliberation, we both decided it was too risky. As a Canadian citizen, I visited the embassy website which clearly stated that any Canadian going to the DRC was doing so at his/her own risk and would not be repatriated in case of a crisis. Before this opportunity came up, I had gotten into a little bit of an exchange with a Rwandan military officer and the fact that I could easily "pass" for a Rwandese, and therefore easily be arrested was cause for concern for my husband. Our other concern was that if instability returned to Goma, I could also "pass" for a Congolese and have difficulties finding my way back to Rwanda. So I ended up on the shores of Lake Kivu, looking at the border but I never crossed over. The North-Kivu War erupted a few months later.

Two important things can be taken away from this experience. First, while my concerns may have been intuitive as opposed to being based on an objective risk analysis, it clearly determined my research decision. My race, which at times allowed me to blend in and create "skinfolk connections" (Hurstun 1942) with my respondents, was also a liability as it did not offer me the same level of protection enjoyed by some of my white counterparts in the region.⁷ Based on my risk and vulnerability assessment in this specific context, where violence and skinship were part of the equation, (Belousov et al. 2007, Mertus 2009), engaging in more research in Goma was not safe. Second, closely related to the first point, is that ultimately, my perceived safety concerns limited my ability to collect data. I forwent the opportunity to interview people who would most likely have offered a different vantage point from which to investigate the legacy of violence in the Great Lakes Region and enrich my research.

Conclusion

As I navigated between and through identities, my relations with Rwandans were rarely static and required constant negotiation and management of what they expected a person like me – whatever that was at that given time – should or would do. My relationship with respondents evolved within an interview session and differed with each respondent and how it is that we engaged, how much personal information we exchanged, and whom they decided I was.

There is definitely a white bias in the acquisition and dissemination of micro data in conflict research (Davenport 2013) and this bias is reflected in the literature available on fieldwork in conflict and post-conflict settings. Nevertheless, non-white researchers with various degrees of "skinship" and diasporic link to their research community are indeed engaged in this scholarship. It is also safe to assume that more of these academics will occupy this scholastic space in the near future. Their presence the field of political violence needs to be normalized in western academic circles. This should be

⁷ Note again that I am speaking specifically to the DRC context. The racial dynamics could definitely be different if the research was conducted in Northern Mali or Libya, for instance, where white westerners are often targets of kidnappings.

accomplished by encouraging western academics and their students to seek and use literature from the global South. Then, non-white/non-western scholars should write about their field experiences about investigating political violence. They, along with the discipline, have much to gain from broadening the conversation about researchers' identities and how they relate to the field, research subjects, and data.

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