Dolana Mogadime

South African Canadian Women Reclaiming Revolutionary Storytelling Through Grandmother's Warrior Eyes

The present research on South African matrilineal storytelling in the homeplace and the revolutionary knowledge produced through a Grandmother's warrior eyes addresses both the transnational struggles of Black women against racism and sexism, and the use of storytelling as a survival tactic to resist societal systems of oppression. Since my grandmother, Dudu Esther Tshabalala, died in 1958, before I was born (in 1963), I rely on my mother, Goodie Tshabalala's, stories of my grandmother's community contributions and community activist life in South Africa. This research on the knowledge generated through my mother's and grandmother's revolutionary storytelling eyes is a response to bell hooks' (1992) challenge to Black women to do research and record the stories of revolutionary women in our own communities. bell hooks' challenge comes out the fact that storytelling has played a significant role as a form of oral communication through which women from Africa and the African Diaspora create the space to articulate their personal experiences and struggles. Gay Wilentz (1992) and bell hooks (1990), identify the woman-centred genre of storytelling as a site within the "homeplace" for the politization of "a community of resistance." Wilentz informs us that it is the Black mother and daughter dyad relationship, and Black women to women community supportive relations, which have provided the social context for both telling and hearing these stories. The diagram "Storytelling as a Praxis for the Development of Black Women's Community Leadership" details how the storytelling genre in woman to woman supportive relations assisted in the development of Goodie's activist position in life.

The present research on South African matrilineal storytelling in the homeplace and the revolutionary knowledge produced through a Grandmother's warrior eyes, addresses both the transnational struggles of Black women against racism and sexism, and the use of storytelling as a survival tactic to resist societal

systems of oppression. Since my grandmother, Dudu Esther Tshabalala, died in 1958, before I was born (in 1963), I am relying on my mother, Goodie Tshabalala's stories of my grandmother's community contributions and community activist life in South Africa. This matrilineal intergenerational knowledge was an important aspect of my master of education research and the publications that resulted and which focused on Black feminist epistemology (Mogadime, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000).

Our (both Goodie and my own) mutual matrilineal praise poems of our mothers' community upliftment work and communal roles identities, reflect our valuing and understanding of the female self in process. By this I mean as listeners of our mothers' stories, we have both come to value the very self-assertions and empowered self-definition of central importance for our mothers during the process of resisting racial and sexual oppression. Knowledge of this counter consciousness holds transformative possibility for the listener/daughter for the reason that these stories are "vital to the daughter who would know and speak herself as subject" (Burstein, 1996: 13). These are the stories that contribute toward building an empowered self-definition which is rooted in a community ethic of social responsibility which, Black feminists argue, are vital for Black women to develop. Sheila Radford-Hill (1986) refers to the contemporary loss among Black women of the concept of thought and action (praxis) as it has been defined by Black feminists. Radford-Hill argues that the crisis of Black womanhood has resulted from "the deep seated rupture in the structure of self-identity" (1986: 167). She points to various sites which rupture Black women and render us "unable to resist the cultural imperialism of the dominant culture" (1986: 168-169). Patricia Hill Collins (1991) also points to institutions which represent the mainstream such as schools, the media, literature and popular culture as sources of externally defined images, where Black women are objectified. Collins suggests that there are alternative safe spaces, such as Black families where Black women's empowered self-definition and culture of resistance is given the space to develop.

I situate this research (about matrilineal revolutionary storytelling) within the literature produced by researchers in the African Diaspora (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1992; Wilentz, 1992), and also make transnational connections by examining the way in which praise poetry and storytelling provide a praxis (both theory and action) for the development of South African women's community leadership in South Africa and Canada. Tracing the matrilineal line across three generations, I argue that South African women's stories need to be actively told in order to contribute to this transnational dialogue about Black women's culture of resistance (through praxis) and our dynamic leadership and contribution to racial uplift and community building. These are the stories which generate an empowered self-definition in the listening daughter and further inspire the next generation to rise up and go and do great things for oneself and also for one's community.

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grandmother's revolutionary storytelling eyes is a response to bell hooks' (1992) challenge to Black women to do research and record the stories of revolutionary women in our own communities. bell hooks' challenge comes out of the fact that storytelling has played a significant role as a form of oral communication through which women from Africa and the African Diaspora create the space to articulate their personal experiences and struggles. Gay Wilentz (1992: xxxiii) and hooks identify the woman-centred genre of storytelling as a site within the "homeplace" for the politicization of "a community of resistance" (hooks, 1990: 42). Wilentz (as does Collins) informs us that it is the Black mother and daughter dyad relationship, and Black women to women community supportive relations, which have provided the social context for both telling and hearing these stories.

"Izibongo": a Zulu oral tradition

"Izibongo" (praise poems), is a Zulu oral tradition that is a social communicative site for the cultivation of an ethic of community responsibility and communal role identities in contemporary society. Through my research and analysis of Goodie and Dudu's life and work, I provide examples of how the fluidity of this traditional oral form of communication and dialogue, which names the individual through praise names and praises, becomes reshaped into contemporary storytelling. These stories are the means by which the daughter/listener learns about the female self as a proactive agent of change. My grandmother's stories (as told to me, by her daughter [my mother] as forms of praises), emphasize the role Dudu played in moving the community forward. These stories were central for the development of my mother's own consciousness raising female socialization for agency, community activism and leadership. I have described in detail the extent of this intergenerational contribution elsewhere (Mogadime, 1998a) from Dudu's participation as a Manyano (a women's prayer group leader), to her role as the first lay president of the church, to her feeding schemes and home shelter projects sustaining the livelihood of the young (Mogadime, 1998b)—these all contributed toward Goodie's own commitment to take on a community leadership role in initiating South Africa's first community college in 1991 (Mogadime, 1998a). In this paper I want to specifically explore the cultural, social and material dimensions sustaining a Black feminist epistemology and communal role identities (of community othermother, cultural work through community uplift and leadership) as they are nurtured through storytelling.

Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwala (1991) in "Musho! Zulu Popular Praises," describe Izibongo as praises, praise names or praise poetry. In their collection of praise poetry, Gunner and Gwala characterize the Izibongo as being "primarily concerned with naming, identifying and therefore giving significance and substance to the named person or object" (1991: 2). In my first life history interview with Goodie (Mogadime, 1997), she expanded on what this act of naming, identifying and giving significance did for herself. Her meaning

making is relevant to her own conceptualization of the implications of praise poetry from both a personal and social standpoint. Goodie:

> Praise poetry gives that sense of connection with the community, it inspires you to the work that you do that is revered by other people, so that younger people can emulate you and they can aspire to be like you. Because of the qualities you exhibit first of all within the family, then in the community. It's the activities that you initiate that raises the standard of the community. And it's not just [for] you (Interview, June 20, 1996).

As part of the Zulu communal ethic, praises and praise names were given to family and community members to consolidate one's connections with the community (as well as the desire to "raise the standard of the community"). Goodie explained the impact of being given a praise name. She told me that her birth name Noma Gugu meaning "my favourite" was changed into the praise name "Goodie" by her family.

This renaming by her aunts and uncles affirmed the social memory of the Msimanga's and Sillio's (Goodie's matrilineal family) in relation to the expectations they upheld for the young. Goodie understood this to mean that they were to "become and do good" by "being achievers in and for the community" (Interview, June 3, 1996: 1). These assertions situate the social memory of Goodie's family history. During the nineteenth century Natal was a British Colony. The colonial state had set aside reserved land that developed into mission stations. Goodie's fore-family settled on two such mission stations, her father's people were among the Tshabalala's at Lady Smith, while her mother's people, the Msimang's and the Sililo's were at Edendale. Christianization and missionary education facilitated their prosperous transition to the colonial economy. The expectation they conveyed in renaming Noma Gugu (Goodie) expressed both the family's sense of material success (developed out of their position as middle class after the transition to the colonial political economy) and their sense of African continuities and accountability to the community.

Goodie's praise name formed an important aspect of her self-concept and self-definition which she developed in relation to the community. This came through when she said: "I've worked really hard to keep that name" (Interview, June 3, 1996: 2). In describing the internal relational process she underwent as a receiver of a praise name, Goodie said she started to envision herself according to the attributes prescribed by the praise. Gunner and Gwala (1991) add much to my attempts to understand how praises were intimately tied to Goodie's self-understanding and identity:

> Praising ... shows the desire for marking the personality concerned, thus giving his [or her] life meaning by names which become the essence of the person. What is also involved is a two-way process,

> knowing and using the praises of others and knowing oneself the same way.... (1991: 18)

Goodie's understanding of her mother Dudu's self-concept and self-definition also centred on the notion of self-empowerment through one's connection to the community. Dudu was given a special status in the family as the first born girl. As "Nkosazane" (her praise name), she was endowed with the title of head of the family or "queen of the family" (Interview, June 20, 1996: 25).

Gunner and Gwala (1991) support the view that "the act of praising focuses on identifying a person, embodying his or her personality through the process of naming..." (1991: 3-4). In this way, "praises relate to individual self-esteem" and self-concept on one hand, and the development of a sense of empowerment through one's attachment to the family and community on the other (1991: 44). According to Goodie, for Dudu, carrying the title "queen of the family", was directed toward affirming a positive self esteem, but was also tied to a familial expectation of responsibility to her younger sisters and brother (Interview, June 20, 1996: 25). It was expected that she would achieve self-reliance and independence for group purposes - in order to ensure the survival of the family members.

For Goodie and her mother, dignifying their praise name entailed honouring what Mazizi Kunene terms a "social ethic" (1982: xi). That is, it was expected that this responsibility toward others in her family, would then be taken into the community and developed into a sense of accountability to the community as othermother. One's work relative to this communal role within the community become part of the "lineage Izibongo".

Kunene (1970) points out that Zulu literature embodied within the individual praise name or praise poetry, like most African literature, is communal. Individual praises coexist and were augmented by those praises extended to members of the lineage through "lineage Izibongo," According to Kunene, Zulu oral literature of lineage Izibongo records the deeds of the ancestors (1970: 9). The lineage Izibongo provides ancestral role models for the young. In reciting the lineage Izibongo, "the fore[mothers] of the living individual, are through their naming being invoked and summoned" (Gunner & Gwala, 1991: 4). Such praises to the ancestors of the lineage were specifically created for those individuals:

> Whose actions have approximated the social ideal...who are deserving in a higher order of being ... [who] by their heroic examples, established standards of moral excellence which succeeding generations are expected to emulate.... (Kunene, 1982: xii)

Those individuals known as the "Beautiful Ones," the "Blind Ones," the "Great Ones," (Kunene, 1982: xi) had lived what was considered the highest

virtue which supported the Zulu communal organization: "self-sacrifice on behalf of the community" (Kunene, 1970: 110). Knowledge of these heroic acts provides role models for the young which are conveyed in order to challenge and inspire the present generation to achieve as much and excel (Kunene, 1982: xv). Gunner and Gwala highlight the "way in which the language of praise names and greetings moves between present and past and provides a bonding and sense of belonging between present and past generations" (1991: 36).

Gunner and Gwala's (1991) analysis of this bonding between generations suggests that the link with the ancestors nourishes the notion of one's attachment to the community and sustains the sense of communal responsibility. Hence self-concept development, self-definition and character development are dynamically connected to one's link with the community and a notion of accountability to the community.

Reshaping the oral genre of praises into storytelling: a praxis for Black women's leadership

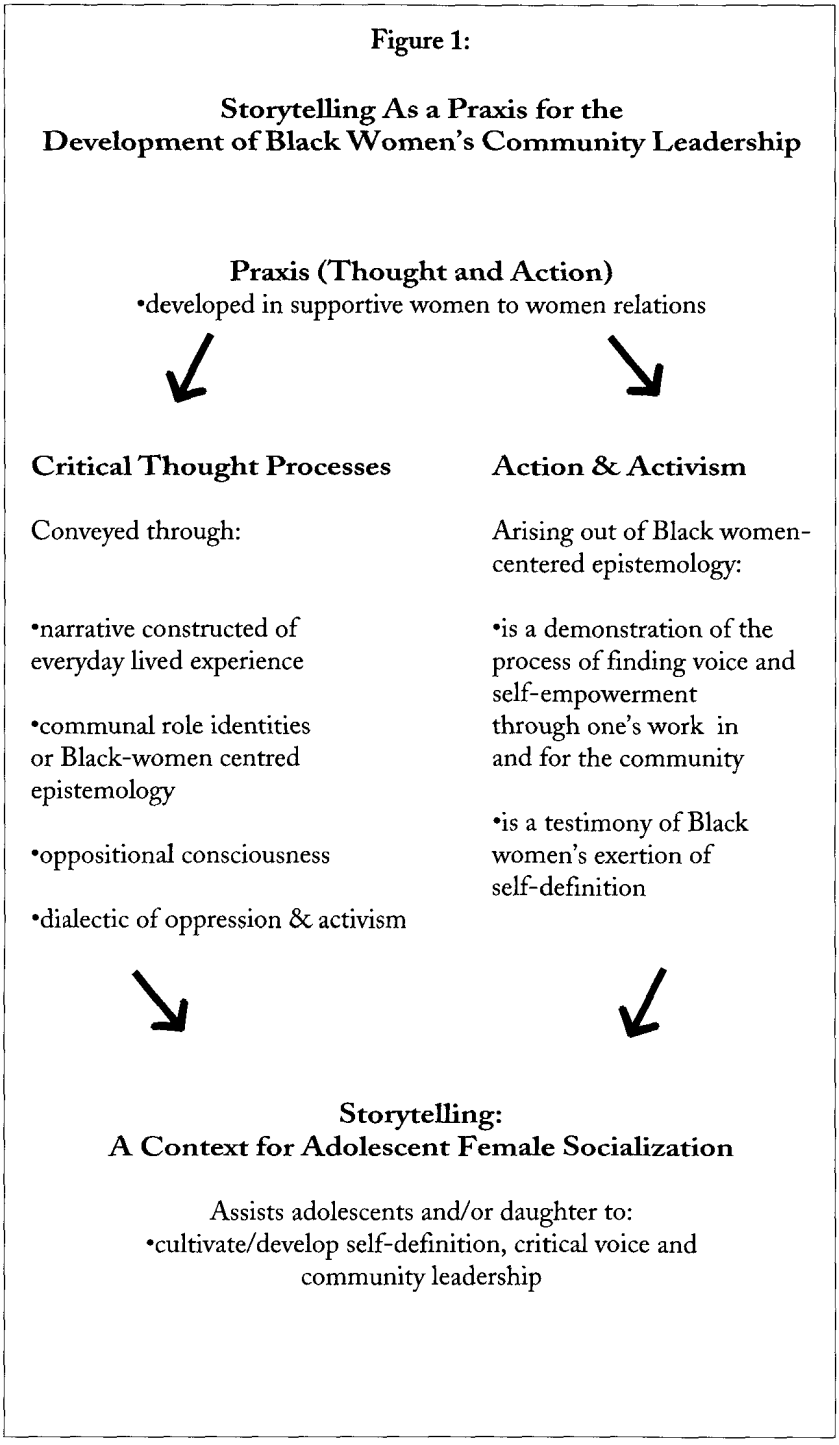
The fluidity of the oral genre of praises and praise names and praise poetry (Gunner & Gwala, 1991: 2) allows for its reshaping and extension into storytelling. The indigenous ethic of social responsibility to the community were woven through the stories Goodie's mother told to her. During my second interview with Goodie, I asked the question: What was the driving force behind your community leadership abilities? (Interview, June 20, 1996: 25) She responded by recounting the influence her mother had through the stories Dudu herself told about her own activism. According to Goodie, her mother's work did not just end in the community, she also came home and talked about it. These narratives of struggle, survival and resistance socialized Goodie as the listener/daughter toward activism in her own life.

I asked Goodie to share one such story with me. I have named it "Censoring Black Women's Presence: Relegation to the Gallery." At a later point in this section, I will attempt to analyze this story in depth, but for now I want to discuss how Goodie's testimony of this particular incident assisted me in constructing the diagram titled "Storytelling: A Praxis for Black Women's Leadership" (see Figure 1). "Censoring Black Women's Presence: Relegation to the Gallery" illustrates the transformative possibilities storytelling holds for the listening daughter. I demonstrate these connections (see Figure 1) as follows:

- A storytelling dialogue conveyed *the praxis (thought and action)* which Goodie witnessed in her mother's community leadership. It is the site for the development of self-definition and self-knowledge which resists racial oppression and nurtures an ethic of cultural accountability to one's own community.
- The point at the end of the arrow (on the second level) to the left of the diagram, shows the *critical thought processes* Black women con-

Figure 1:

Storytelling As a Praxis for the Development of Black Women's Community Leadership



struct from their everyday lived experiences within the various communal role identities. A standpoint of opposition to dominance and the dialectic of oppression and activism are conveyed at this location.

•The point at the end of the arrow (on the second level) on right side of the diagram, shows the resulting *action and activism* produced within the communal role identities of community othermother, cultural worker and community activist. It represents the process of finding voice and self-empowerment through the service one does for the community. Black woman's community activism is a testimony of her exertion of a self-definition which resists subscribed notions of Black women as nameless and voiceless.

•The productive ends the oral genre of storytelling serve come into fruition as *storytelling provides a context for adolescent female socialization* and assists the listener/daughter to be able to locate her own voice of resistance within the struggles of the community. I indicate this in the bottom level of the figure. Storytelling assists the listening daughter in cultivating both the thought and action-central for the development of self-definition, critical voice and community leadership.

This diagram results from the story below which, as mentioned before, I named: "Censoring Black Women's Presence: Relegation to the Galleries." Goodie:

As part of her work developing the community, my mother visited the women's auxiliary meetings at White churches to learn what these organizations were doing. When she entered the church building, she was immediately told to sit in the gallery, because she couldn't sit with White women. (Interview, June 20, 1996: 25)

To that demeaning experience, Goodie said of Dudu:

She didn't care. That didn't take her away from her objective. She planned to take that information back with her and build in her own community. A plaque engraved with her name, remains mounted on the wall of the local church to this day. It was put there as a remembrance of the work she did for the church and for the community. (June 20, 1996: 25)

This story conveys how oppressive racial discourses have historically been a part of everyday interactions between White and Black people in South Africa. It reflects Black women's location in the wider society as silenced, suppressed and relegated to the lowest level. However, there is a double element

of meaning that Dudu transpired to Goodie in telling this story. While the decision to stay (in the gallery) and be silenced is seen and understood by the oppressor as Black women's submissiveness and acceptance to White superiority, an inner self-reflective unobserved response operates in this story. Dudu's continued presence, in spite of the conditions of repression demonstrate her expression of a self-constructed knowledge which would not be persuaded or defined by societal denigrated definitions of Black women.

Collins (1991) describes this ability to be able to negotiate and reconcile with the contradictions between how we view ourselves and the denigrated location of Black women, as essential for Black women's survival:

> The struggle of living two lives, one for them and one for ourselves creates a peculiar tension to extract the definition of one's true self from the treatment afforded the denigrated categories in which all Black women are placed. (1991: 94)

The diagram "Storytelling as a Praxis for the Development of Black Women's Leadership" shows that the storytelling genre not only provides a context for a Black woman to critically extract and assert her own self-definition; it also, provides several important lessons for the listener/daughter. These lessons support the development of a Black women's standpoint of resistance to domination. Storytelling provides the context for the listener/daughter to learn how to become critical of a denigrated racialized location in society; further than that, it demonstrates how to resist subjugation by locating and naming it; and finally, how to develop the self-reflective thinking skills involved in critically reinventing herself from the margins, in opposition to exterior definitions.

Storytelling conveys both the thought processes Black women construct of their every day experiences and their conscious movement from object to subject. By conveying Black women's experiences in the dialectical location of oppression and activism, and the development of her opposition to dominance, storytelling provides the thought and action for listener/daughter to learn how to become an actor in history.

"Censoring Black Women's Presence: Relegation to the Gallery" describes how Dudu used the oral genre of storytelling to socialize her daughter for social responsibility and leadership. In this story we see how Dudu's creative energy became applied to authoring stories of her "deeds" or activism in the community. In the female bonding relationship of storytelling, mother presented to daughter the description of herself "acting upon the world even when [her] subjectivity was denied" (Weiler, 1988: 62) by Eurocentric hegemony. Dudu's stories were composed as self-praises in the way that Kunene explains it below:

> Almost every member of society has [her] "praise-poem" which is either given to [her] or made by [her]self about [her] deeds. If [she]

> makes a praise about [her]self, this is not self-praise in the individualistic sense, but an appeal for social approval for the contributions made to society... It is on the basis of an awareness of obligations expected by the community that the individual composes [her] poem; thus [her self] "praise" is an affirmation of a social ethic (1970: 12-13).

Dudu's storytelling relationship with Goodie urged Goodie toward developing a self-definition in relation to family and community struggles. These teachings converge with what Black feminists refer to as the "utility of Black women's relationships with one another in providing a community for Black women's activism and self-determination" (Collins, 1991: 4). A notion of self-determination allows us to place both our individual and our collective concern of the community at the centre of our agenda. Storytelling in the mother and daughter dyad relationship and Black women's connection with each other as community workers nurture and sustain the community struggle for social justice and racial upliftment.

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored how Black feminist communal role identities of community othermother, cultural worker and community activist, as described by Black feminists have assisted Black women in their struggle for survival in racist South African society. I contextualized how these roles are understood within South African oral traditions of praise poetry. I also established how women's actions relative to these communal role identities have created distinct Black female spheres of influence in the community.

The mother and daughter dyad relationship provides the social context for conveying the interconnections between these communal role identities. For instance, in the role of cultural worker, Dudu provided the stories that communicated the grounded experiences of her role in moving the community forward. These stories conveyed Black women's standpoint of opposition to dominance. This standpoint arises out of Black women's response at the dialectical location of oppression and activism. Female spheres of influence, such as women's organizations and the mother and daughter storytelling dyad, provided the social contexts for daughter to see the female self as an actor. This role modelling influenced Goodie's growing vision, desire and ability to act toward changing the inequalities in the community rather than simply complying with assimilating and reproducing the social order. "Storytelling as a Praxis for the Development of Black Women's Community Leadership" details how the storytelling genre in woman to woman supportive relations assisted in the development of Goodie's activist position in life. In "Black Girls/ Black Women-Centered Texts and Black Teachers as Othermothers" (Mogadime, 2000), I describe the uses of storytelling for Goodie's BAG (Black adolescent girls) Drama Group and think through the maternal lessons that Black

feminists writers provide for their reading audience in a similar manner as does the diagram "Storytelling as Praxis."

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