practical matters

Listening to Experience, Looking Toward Flourishing: Ethnography as a Global Feminist Theo/ethical Praxis

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Introduction: Ethnography as Global Feminist Praxis

Melissa D. Browning

Ivory towers are tempting. We know our way around the lecture rooms and libraries. Ivory towers keep us busy—there are classes to teach, articles to write, tenure applications to complete. And to be honest, ethnography is not a requirement of the discipline. But perhaps it should be. As theologians and scholars of religion, we are people who speak about God and God's people, yet very little is required of us in terms of speaking *to* God's people, to all people, to all creation. Womanist/feminist theological praxis, springing from the tradition of liberation theologies, has served as a corrective to the ivory tower complex. It has reminded theologians (and clergy) that experience—especially women's experience—matters a great deal.

Ethnography is still a growing edge within the discipline of theology. As theologians, we are still stumbling through the "how-tos" of interviewing and analyzing data, if we have ventured there at all. In the preface of her book *Women, Ethics and Inequality in US Healthcare: "To Count Among the Living,"* Aana Marie Vigen focuses on a White ethic of listening. Vigen describes the

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process of doing fieldwork with Black and Latina women as an experience in humility. She says, "Engagements in messy dialogues, ethnography, or conversations in a second language will likely make white folk, especially 'scholars' awkward and somewhat bumbling. But there is great learning to be had from such experiences. They may teach us what it is to be not the standard of humanity, but instead to be simply human."[1] I begin with this quote in order to say that in the endeavor leading to this article, the authors had their share of messy dialogues and meaningful moments.

In June and July of 2009, Loyola University Chicago hosted a project in Nairobi, Kenya called "Exploring Global Feminist Theologies in Postcolonial Space." The idea for this project came about as a result of a graduate student feminist theology reading group at Loyola. Women in the group were reading theological texts from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and were coming to a realization: the texts they were reading were disconnected from their own feminist praxis because the students were disconnected from the women who wrote the texts. These texts were not on our reading lists for courses or on our comprehensive exam lists. As we contemplated this lacuna, we began to ask how we could teach these texts without understanding more fully the contexts in which they were written. As a result, the Loyola group began to plan a collaborative venture to make better connections with our African sisters.

The project was conceived with an appreciation of the injustices of the past as well as a desire to be forward-looking, collaborative, and constructive. Early in the history of feminist theology, critique was leveled against White feminist theologians for universalizing the concerns of White women as the concerns of all women.[2] While third wave feminists have become more global in their approach, we knew the issue remained relevant for Western feminists. And that if we feminist theologians in the West truly sought to respond to this critique, we must first carve out a space to listen in solidarity to women around the world, or the words we spoke would only echo the hegemony we were seeking to deconstruct.

So we planned out a program and looked for funding. While our goal was to be collaborative, one issue from the onset is that we did not know who to collaborate with. The Kenyan scholars who ended up taking part in this project were unknown to us at the time. The Loyola participants recognized that this project would have been better had it been collaborative from the beginning. Even the goals of the project—to explore pedagogy and ethnography in a global context—were continually redefined as we grew to know each other better and learned to listen better to the informants in our field research.

The project, which was funded through grants from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, the American Academy of Religion, Loyola University Chicago, and the University of San

1 Aana Marie Vigen, *Women, Ethics and Inequality in US Healthcare: "To Count Among the Living"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), xxiii.

2 See, for example, Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984), 66-71.

Diego[3] began in Nairobi, Kenya with a three-week course on African feminist/womanist theology offered by the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies. The course, taught by Sr. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, provided a chance for the eight participants (four from Loyola and four from various Kenyan universities) to dialogue on issues of critical importance within the classroom setting. Maryknoll also provided the opportunity to do fieldwork, making available to each participant a field assistant who could help make connections in the community and translate when needed. At the completion of the coursework, the group continued the practice of ethnography with a collaborative service project in an IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camp outside of Nairobi. The individuals in this camp had been displaced through the post-election violence and, a year and a half later, were still living in UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) tents with little access to water or other basic provisions. We also spent a week in a listening symposium, focusing on pedagogy and obstacles to cross-cultural listening. This experience gave us the opportunity to debrief both our fieldwork and the borders we each crossed individually in getting to know each other's lives and concerns.

In this article, we reflect on these fieldwork experiences in both theoretical and practical ways. For some of us, the experience of doing qualitative fieldwork was brand new; for others, it was common practice. It was sometimes messy as we stumbled through language barriers and logistics. But for all of us, it was a meaningful way to step inside the experiences of others and learn from their lives. We interviewed women and girls from many different walks of life. Some were doctors or lawyers; others were fruit sellers or school girls. We interviewed in homes of diviners and in places of Christian worship. We spent time in IDP camps, in social service organizations, with women who were poor and rich, healthy and sick, and we learned more than we can possibly process in this space. But here we offer our reflections on the importance of ethnography as global feminist practice, in hopes that these words will push us a bit further beyond the ivory tower.

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3 The project participants are grateful for the support and assistance of chairperson Susan A. Ross, faculty members Aana Marie Vigen and Michael Schuck, and administrative assistants Catherine Wolf and Marianne Wolfe. For a detailed description of this project, see: Susan Ross, Melissa Browning, and Elisabeth Vasko, "The Goods and Evils of a Globalized Context: African and American Women Doing Theology," Concilium 1 (2009): 47-49. See also: http://www.kenyaimmersion.com/kenyaimmersion/Welcome.html

Ethnography in Practice

Edith Chamwama

The Global Feminist Theologies Project partnered with the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies in Nairobi, Kenya. The Institute, founded in 1989, uses the ethnographic model proposed by James Spradley.[1] The Institute requires that students complete an hour of fieldwork for every hour of class. Each student is assigned a personal field assistant who assists in setting up interviews or facilitating the student's access to the venue of research. Students are thus exposed to the methodology of ethnography, especially the grounded theory method, and are challenged to integrate material gathered from fieldwork with what they have learned in class. Classes are also interactive, as students learn through lectures and discussions of the readings and fieldwork.

The ethnographic methodology used by the Maryknoll Institute emphasizes a grounded approach to the questions raised by postcolonial feminist theologies. In particular, feminist theologians give attention to those complex threats that present barriers to the flourishing of women globally. Instead of simply reading and talking about these concerns, the project participants met and interacted with people from various walks of life in Nairobi and on the outskirts of the city, (for example, by listening to their stories and sharing their experiences); participated in activities; took field notes; and began their preliminary written analysis. Ethnography encourages students to go out of the classroom to learn from the experiences of people. Feminist theologies also engage human experiences as a source for theological inquiry, but feminist methodology goes a step further when it encourages a spiral of action and reflection. Members of the Global Feminist Theologies Project enacted this method in a variety of ways.

One way that we approached the dual task of feminist methodology (that is, both reflection and action) was to participate in an empowerment project at one of the fieldwork sites. Our group conducted fieldwork in an IDP camp. Project participants were able to interact with the residents of the camp, interviewing residents and listening to their stories about the trauma of Kenyan post-election violence and its consequences. Based on the information gathered through interviews and observation, our group decided to go back to the camp for a collaborative service project. In the first set of interviews we conducted, residents described their hopes for initiating projects that would help residents take care of their own basic needs instead of feeling dependent on the government and charitable organizations. Our group discerned that we could help the residents to realize some of their goals. To this end, we donated food stuffs, school supplies, clothing, and other items in order to assist in the economic empowerment of the community. For example, we donated some goats and chickens to assist in the initiation of income-generating projects. Through this project, our group tried to live out the praxis of the theological spiral of action as we sought ways of contributing to the transformation of unjust structures. Our goals were to understand the struggles of

1 James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 3.

the residents in the IDP camp, to listen to their stories, and to discern how we might respond in a way that might lead to some kind of positive transformation.

In addition to the learning that happened in the classroom and in our fieldwork, participants also learned a great deal from dialogue with one another. During the listening symposium held in the final week of the project, participants discussed and analyzed the data of their fieldwork not only in workshop sessions but also through collaborative rituals. Major themes that surfaced in field research were re-examined not only in vibrant discussions but also in personal testimony and ritual prayer. Since one of the goals of the project was to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue, these rituals enabled group members to work together on cross-cultural teams to plan, organize, and lead communal activities that further examined the themes of the project. For example, in one of the collaborative rituals, which focused on the theme of postcolonial space, participants were divided into pairs (one American and one Kenyan in each group), and each pair was instructed to plan one part of the ritual (one pair had to find an appropriate space for the ritual, another pair had to formulate a song/poem, another had to create a collaborative prayer, and another had to incorporate storytelling). Through this cross-cultural and collaborative ritual, the group began to share and process their experiences of fieldwork. The rituals were a powerful expression of the dialogue between the participants and resonate with Rayburn's assertion that ritual enables group cohesion and identity formation.[2] Rayburn rightly observes that women sometimes generate rituals that reflect their creativity, their concern for others, and their nurturing of themselves. This was particularly true of our group's collaborative rituals.

Thus participants in the project learned about feminist theology and women's experiences in a variety of settings, including classroom discussion, fieldwork, conversations among one another, and collaborative rituals. The heart of the project involved a grounded approach, enabling participants to integrate ethnography with classroom learning and discussions among participants.

2 C. A. Rayburn, "Ritual as Acceptance/Empowerment and Rejection/Disenfranchisement," in *Women and Religious Ritual*, ed. Lesley A. Northup (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1993), 87-104.

The Challenge of Objectivity in Ethnography and Theology

Eunice Kamaara

Theology, the systematic analysis of the human response to revealed truths, is largely contextual because truths are not only revealed in specific contexts but are also interpreted from specific contexts. Hence, contextual theological research necessarily involves ethnography, that is, observation and description of cultures. According to a classical ethnographer, Bronislaw Malinowski, the goal of ethnography is "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his visions of his world."[1] This implies that a theological researcher immerses herself into the world of the study subjects in order to learn from them about their perspectives on revealed truths and to observe them in their daily activities. While ethnography is an effective method of studying specific cultures, it poses the challenge of objectivity because the researcher is herself a cultural being. The researcher should admit in the process of data collection and analysis that she does not possess a "neutral" vantage point. For a researcher in theology, this challenge is more difficult because the researcher is not only a cultural being but is herself constantly engaged in theological reflection, even in the very process of research.

In June and July 2009, I was involved in the aforementioned Global Feminist Theologies Project, which involved immersing myself into specific cultural contexts in order to learn about feminist theologies in Kenya. In my fieldwork I interviewed an African Christian female diviner. In the following paragraphs, I relate my experience in this one activity to illustrate the challenge of practicing objectivity in ethnographic field research. I begin by presenting my research report on the session with the diviner.

> The subject is a woman in her late 40s or early 50s. She is a diviner in the African Prophecy Church. She has been separated from her husband for the last five years. She has seven children. She started divining in 1992. My field assistant and I arrived at her house in Ongata Rongai on the outskirts of Nairobi city around 2pm and found her having lunch with a boy who she introduced as her nephew. We gave her time to finish eating, and then we introduced ourselves. As soon as we introduced ourselves, she looked at us and asked if we were committed to our studies or if we would drop out like some had done before us. Before any of us could respond, the diviner pointed at me and said that she was particularly concerned about me because her spirit was telling her that I was not serious with my studies and thought I would drop out of college to get married. (I found this particularly interesting since I am married and have already completed my doctoral degree.) Then she went on to make more prophesies about our personal lives.
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> At some point she gave up on her prophesies saying she could see we were not interested in them and asked us to explain again what had taken us to her house. We were happy to quickly explain our mission again and started conducting our interview following the

1 Bronislaw Malinoski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge, 1922).

> interview schedule I had prepared. She was very resourceful in responding to all of our questions with regard to when she started divining as well as why and how she divines. She indicated that divining is a full time activity for her. She sits in her two-room house, and people come to her for divination. She does not charge for her services, but most people give her tokens of appreciation such as money and material goods. She relies on these tokens for her daily needs including school fees for two of her youngest children. She does not advertise her gift in divining, but people who have visited her tell others about her work.
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> According to the study subject, she realized suddenly that she had power to divine in 1992 while she was still living with her husband. A woman friend came to visit her house, and she received an inspiration that this woman was suffering because her husband was beating her and mistreating her. When she asked the woman who had visited her if this was the case, she confirmed, wondering how she had known her problem. From then on, she says she could feel certain powers whenever people came to her house, and she could tell what was wrong before they told her anything about themselves. Then the spirit in her told her not to go out of her house but to wait inside for people to come and share their problems with her. She does not leave the house except on Sundays when she goes to church. The informant said she could read her husband's mind and tell him what he was thinking, and this caused a lot of tension and conflict between her and her husband. Eventually, her husband left her.

As a researcher, I found it difficult to learn from this woman because of two reasons: my cultural and religious background and my experience in my professional life. To begin with, I was born and brought up as a strict Presbyterian. Then I was married into a Roman Catholic family[2] about twenty years ago and became a practicing Roman Catholic. Throughout my life, I have been skeptical about the existence of diviners because in my upbringing as a Presbyterian and now as a Roman Catholic I was taught to believe that the tradition of divination is superstitious and primitive. This mentality, imposed by Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century who condemned African traditional beliefs and practices as primitive and heathen and demanded that a person denounce them before joining the Church, continues to have a strong hold on many of us in Africa.

Secondly, as a Black African university student majoring in literature and religious studies, and later as a professor of religious studies with a good deal of international exposure, I am privileged in that I know well the impact of colonialism and Christianity on Africans, especially in making us hate our traditional ways of thinking and acting, and by extension causing us to have little self-confidence and self-esteem. Hence, I am constantly engaged in a struggle to appreciate traditional African beliefs and practices and to respect attempts to integrate these into modern life and Christianity. Moreover, the course that we took at the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies as part of

2 Among the traditional Gikuyu community (one of the ethnic groups in Kenya) marriage is not an individual affair. It is an affair in which two or more families come together to support two individuals, a man and a woman, to form their own family. In spite of modernity and other forces like Christianity, this cultural value remains strong among the Agikuyu (people belonging to the Gikuyu community).

the immersion program was precisely geared toward encouraging learners to appreciate African belief and practices.

Such is the background I took to my interview with an African diviner. I had mixed feelings: admiration of the idea of an African Prophecy Church—specifically its continued practice of divination—and also skepticism about divination. Such are the contradictions of real life for many of us in postcolonial situations.

Conscious of the need to be objective in field research, especially on matters of theology and culture, I deliberately sought to convince myself that what I *think* is not as important as what I would *observe* in the field. Unfortunately, when the woman began to prophesy about us, I could not help thinking that either she is not a true diviner or she is not always inspired in her calling as a diviner. My understanding is that if she were a true diviner, then she would have known that we were not regular students at Tangaza College but were on a brief program, and that I am already married and have advanced degrees. Moreover, I thought she was very naïve and did not make keen observations of situations, because if she did, she would have noticed that I was wearing a wedding ring. Or did this make her interpret that I was going to get married before I completed college studies? Perhaps. The fact that I was dressed in trousers may have made her think that I am a young, modern, urban girl who adorned a ring not because she is married but because her boyfriend had given it to her. In a postcolonial situation, observations of a common phenomenon do lead to different interpretations given the "confusion" of cultural identities. On another occasion in my life, I contemplated throwing away my ring, but for a different reason. Earlier on I wanted to throw it away because it is foreign to my culture, but later I realized that culture is dynamic. Now I wanted to throw it away because it was not serving an identifying purpose.

From the minute the diviner started making incorrect prophesies about me, I lost all faith in her as a diviner, and my mind kept reminding me what I always believed: there are no diviners. How could I learn from this subject whom I had already dismissed as untruthful? I struggled to consider that perhaps she was not having the true spirit on that specific day, and that perhaps she is effective in her divining to other people since she has enough clients to meet her daily needs in spite of not charging for her services. At the end of the day, I still do not know whether my interview with this woman was fruitful. As a scholar of religion, my role is not simply to describe the informant's situation and beliefs but also to contextualize, analyze, and interpret her beliefs. I continue to ask myself what I learned about divination in this interview. Such are the challenges and complications of research practice.

Practicing Thick Description

Elisabeth Vasko

The challenges and complications of ethnography are worth what we gain through this praxis. Theology cannot happen only at the level of intellectual abstraction because life, in its fullness and in its pain, is both physical and spiritual. As Emilie Townes argues, conversations about human flourishing and human suffering must be rooted in "concrete existence (lived life)."[1] In other words, theology must be developed in conversation with the concrete context and knowledge of particular communities.[2] It is in this sense that ethnographic research methods and practices hold relevance for theology. Through thick description, they can help us in bringing the stories of the living to bear upon the tradition.[3] Yet this is only a beginning point; it is not an end in itself. Thick description is not enough, especially when the theologian witnesses systemic ways in which oppression is embodied, or those unprecedented and unexpected ways in which grace is encountered in the world. I find it problematic that thick description presupposes the neutrality of the observer. The most important contribution of ethnographic research, in my view, is that it enables the researcher to encounter living communities—and this has the potential to change us as persons.

As a part of my participation in the Global Feminist Theologies Project (described above by my co-authors), I had the opportunity to do field research for the first time. Inspired by the work of ecofeminist theologians such as Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Ivone Gebara, I wanted to understand the practical ways in which environmental issues and gender intersected in the lives of women living in rural Kenya. With the help of my field assistant, I was able to secure several interviews with tea farmers living in the Central Province. As I sat down for my first interview, it became readily apparent that I did not have a clue as to what questions to ask, much less how to listen to answers given.

Moreover, my interviews did not look anything like the ones we practiced in class.[4] Instead of sitting in chairs in a quiet and orderly fashion, I found myself playing with my interviewee's children and a sharing a meal with her family. My interviewee had become my host, and our session was no longer "research" in the formal sense; it had become a relationship. In this context, interviewing a woman who is struggling to feed her family in the midst of a drought was more than just an opportunity to listen to her story and document the impact of ecological destruction on her

1 Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 48.

2 Ibid., 49.

3 I credit Clifford Geertz with the term "thick description." See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (NewYork: Basic Books, 1973).

4 Training in ethnographic research methods is a central component of courses taken at the Maryknoll Institute for African Studies in Nairobi, Kenya.

life. It also invited critical reflection upon my own social situation. Just as Eunice describes the self-reflection prompted by her interview of the diviner, I, too, found that this interview with a tea farmer and her family required that I engage in analysis about myself, including reflection on my own experiences, thoughts, values, and hopes. In particular, this interview heightened my awareness of my own socio-economic privilege, calling me to reassess the practical and transformative aspects of the theology I teach and write.

Ethnography as a Praxis of Solidarity

Emily Reimer-Barry

In my teaching and research, I value the practice of solidarity. Yet I realize that for White feminist theologians from the West, solidarity is often more speech than praxis. In an essay describing a feminist vision of solidarity, M. Shawn Copeland, an African-American Catholic theologian, writes:

> Focus on solidarity calls for an end to the facile adoption of the rhetoric of solidarity by Celtic-, Anglo-, European-American feminists, while they ignore and, sometimes, consume the experiences and voices of the marginalized and oppressed, while, ever adroitly, dodging the penitential call to conversion—to authenticity in word and in deed.[1]

I had Copeland's critique in mind when I participated in the Global Feminist Theologies Project in Kenya this summer. As I reflect on my experiences of fieldwork in Kenya, I wonder what solidarity with the poor really means for a U.S.-based researcher on an immersion trip in Africa. While conducting fieldwork interviews, I met a variety of women in different circumstances and learned about the struggles of their lives and the faith that sustains them. Some of the site visits enabled me to meet people who are doing what they can to alleviate suffering for women and children, but I also came to a greater understanding of the huge systemic issues many women and girls in Kenya battle against every day. I was especially challenged by the stories of the women who struggle daily against poverty, disease, and sexual violence. It is difficult for me to know what to do with these experiences of listening, since so many of the stories I heard are very different from my own. How can I be in solidarity with these women in an authentic way without (in Copeland's words) *consuming* their experiences and voices? When is it appropriate for me to speak, and when is it appropriate for me to simply listen? And when is it appropriate for me to do more than listen and speak?

My fieldwork enabled me to interview forty women, including secondary school students, members of a support group for HIV-positive mothers, a nurse who runs a support group for AIDS-affected families, members of a women's empowerment project in the slums, a social worker in a children's home for AIDS orphans, teenage girls living in a camp for internally displaced persons, secondary school teachers, and a university professor. I enjoyed the opportunity to meet women and ask them about their everyday lives and about how they understand what it means to be a woman in Kenyan society. Some told stories of empowerment, while other told stories of trauma

1 M. Shawn Copeland, "Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity," in *Women and Theology: The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995), 3.

and exploitation.

For example, when I interviewed eight students at a secondary school for girls, each one told me that she does not feel pressure from her family or teachers to get married at a young age. These eight young women want to meet partners who will respect them. All were remarkably candid in their critiques of some parts of traditional African culture(s). They critiqued widow inheritance, arranged marriages, and the assumption of a wife's submissiveness. They affirmed that women are equal to men "in everything," and they have been told that they should wait until they are at least twenty-five years old before they even think about settling down and getting married. Some confided that they do not even know if they want to get married and do not know if they will be able to find partners who will regard them as equals. But these young women told me that they feel empowered through their education, and that they do not want to settle for a life in which they feel used or mistreated. They told me that their teachers have told them to believe in themselves and to take care of themselves.

The young women I interviewed at a camp for internally displaced persons told very different stories. They told me they are very bitter about their situation and they do not like living in the camp. One young woman explained: "Actions speak louder than words. This government isn't doing anything for us. They only give promises. They don't know what my life is like, how hard it is." In their stories, I saw how vulnerable these young women are. They want to go to school, but not all of them can, and those who do are not happy in school. They told me that they are discriminated against at school and called the "shaggy girls" by the students who do not live in the camp. The young women who are able to go to school have to do their homework by candlelight in their one-room plastic tents shared with family members. They do not sleep well and have trouble paying attention at school. Some girls are dropouts. When I asked why, they offered a list of reasons: school fees, pregnancy, threats by boys, and pressure to marry. They said that they try to be strong women. They want to respect their bodies, get an education, and help their families, but they do not feel safe. One young woman told me that the scariest thing she has to do every day is fetch water. She is vulnerable because the local police and security patrolmen prey on the girls and taunt them; some girls have been raped. "They know you are IDP," she told me. "It is terrible." When I asked if they could tell me about it, or if they were able to tell me about the violence they witnessed after the election, no one spoke. Some looked away or looked down to the ground. Then one young woman looked straight at me, and as we made eye contact she explained: "We have to keep secrets to survive." These young women live in tents with their families and tell me that they do not have sanitary pads, school notebooks, or proper-fitting shoes. They asked me if I could help them.

I also had the opportunity to interview residents of Kibera, the largest slum in Africa. One woman told me she had been married for sixteen years when her husband died of HIV. His family blamed her and chased her out of the village saying she had brought shame to their family. With six children in tow, she arrived in Kibera to fend for herself in the city. She complained: "If a man dies of HIV, his family can still say it is his wife's fault, even if she was faithful to him. That's

what happened to me." Another woman living in Kibera told me that she was twenty-seven when her husband left her for his mistress. She and her three kids moved to Nairobi, and for a while she worked as house help for a wealthy family. When that family moved out of the country, she lost her job and could not find another job. Thinking she had no other options, she turned to prostitution. She told me: "No one likes prostitution. But when you see your own children hungry and crying, you don't have a choice. A mother has to do whatever she can to provide for her children. That's what a mother does. That's what I did." Now she is a member of a women's empowerment program and is able to make beaded necklaces, which she sells so that she can provide for her family. As our interview was winding down, the women began to ask me if I could help them. They asked me for food, clothes, and money. The women in our immersion project had purchased foodstuffs to donate to the empowerment project, and these were distributed as we were leaving. As we were walking away, I felt as if I had not done enough, but I did not know what else to do.

Some schools of anthropology and sociology advocate fieldwork as a method that enables researchers to describe "what is going on," but they stop there. As a feminist Catholic ethicist I do not think descriptive analysis goes far enough. When young women tell me that they are afraid of being raped while fetching water, or when a widow tells me that her husband's family blamed her for his death even though he was the one who contracted HIV by being unfaithful to her, I cannot simply offer a thick description of these stories without also acknowledging the injustice of these women's situations. But I also wonder when it is appropriate for me—a White, educated American—to speak out against injustices I perceive in the lives of others, especially when we do not share the same culture. And when is it appropriate to do even more than listen and speak? During my time in Kenya, I was able to appreciate in a new way the struggles that African feminist women have endured in trying to raise awareness within their own culture about the dignity and equality of women. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, Musa W. Dube, and many other members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have written with courage and conviction about the oppression of women in some parts of traditional African culture. Their contributions will do more than mine ever could because they speak as insiders. I know that the women I interviewed—women who described problems with the ways women and men are socialized in the Kenyan context; who described personal experiences of sexual violence and discrimination; and who shared with me their struggles to feed, clothe, and shelter their children—want their stories to be taken seriously, even if they challenge expected social norms. As I continue to reflect on the fieldwork I conducted in Kenya, I am grateful for having had the opportunity to engage in the praxis of listening, the first step in feminist methodology. My next task is to engage more deeply in social and theological analysis, and to discern with my colleagues how we can work to transform the unjust social structures we have described and critiqued.

Women Doing Theology, Women Doing Ethnography

Sussy Gumo Kurgat

As I reflect on the experience of the Global Feminist Theologies Project, I have to admit that feminist theology was a confusing discourse for me at first. I had previously thought of theology as a scholarly discipline exclusively for those aspiring to become preachers and priests. My participation in this immersion project gave me the opportunity to learn more about the work of feminist theologians and what they are doing to reshape the discourse. As a scholar of religion, my work focuses on the leadership of women in church communities, so my work has always been attentive to the experiences of women. Now I have a better appreciation of the contribution of feminist analysis in this research.

During our four weeks of meeting, interacting, and discussing feminist theology together, the women in our group found that we had much in common, even though we came from different places. Each of us is deeply concerned about the oppression of women. In our study we gave particular attention to the problem of patriarchy in religion and culture. What struck me in our work together is that feminist theology is not simply a discourse about God, but a call to work for social transformation. African women theologians advocate for the flourishing of all people and seek to foster healing of human brokenness and the transformation of societies. Women have to be prophetic in our struggle to reclaim our rightful position in society as well as in the church. We must work to eliminate those cultural practices used to enslave women as second-class citizens in society. In my context, women doing theology necessitates women doing ethnography.

Through our shared experiences, the participants came to see that women must advocate for themselves and give special attention to their own self-care. To do this, some women will need to challenge traditional value systems and create the space for visions of a more empowering social order that respects the dignity of women. Women must speak up and speak out on issues affecting women in society. Women cannot be silent. Silence is taken by the oppressors as implicit approval of socio-cultural systems and structures that continue to marginalize women in Africa. I urge African women to become engaged in this struggle for justice.

Sometimes women feel they are fighting an uphill battle in Kenyan culture when they do not see the voices of women honored in public spaces. I believe strongly in the power of the women's movement to challenge patriarchal power structures deeply rooted in African cultures. In my fieldwork, I was able to meet women who are leaders in their faith communities, and yet they frequently endure many difficult struggles.

In order to transform our societies, people of different life experiences, races, and backgrounds will have to work together. The voices of women are too often overlooked or silenced, but the world needs to hear the voices of women. The problems facing Kenyan women are overwhelming and complex. But my experience of our group's collaborative research taught me that women

who share a common vision for the flourishing of women—even if they come from very different places and have very different life experiences—can form a network of friendship and solidarity. My experiences as a participant in this project helped me to reframe my scholarship so that the work I continue to do can make an even greater difference in the lives of women.

Scripture as Ethnography

Jeanine Viau

As a feminist ethicist concerned with the normative uses and abuses of scripture, I am always looking for ways to integrate theories of reading and appropriation with transformative and liberating practice. Admittedly, I am often stuck in the libraries of the ivory tower. My participation in the 2009 Global Feminist Theologies Project provided concrete experience and insight into the ways that scripture interprets life, life interprets scripture, and how, ultimately, scripture is a human interpretation of life that should be engaged, interrogated, and re-told. Our methodological commitment to ethnography was essential for the relationship between text and concrete experience to grow bones and take on flesh.

Feminist approaches to Scripture share some characteristic elements: a commitment to women's experience as the starting point of the hermeneutical circle and as a critical lens of reflection; analysis of socio-cultural location for both text and reader; evaluation of both the liberating and oppressive dimensions of the biblical tradition; and acknowledgement of the essentially social and political character of the biblical texts themselves, including their ongoing historical interpretation and appropriation. In a postcolonial global ethos, the significance of these hermeneutical commitments becomes more acute. African feminist theologian Musa Dube calls for a "decolonizing" feminism. She reminds Western feminists "to be self-critical and recognize that they have often not escaped colonialist representations of the 'colonized woman' and the Two-Thirds World women of our day;" her cautions remind feminists from former colonial centers that "colonizing frameworks are still, by and large, in place and unless one deliberately chooses to be a decolonizing feminist, one is likely to operate within these oppressive paradigms, and consequently to reproduce them."[1] For Dube, this process of decolonization requires a transformation of reading and writing practices, particularly in regards to the Bible, which has been and still is a tool of domination and exploitation for the colonizing ideology.

Judeo-Christian Scripture is essentially an ethnographic project. The Bible is a collection of integrated accounts and interpretations of the concrete experience of God's work in human history. This historical process of recording and reflecting is at the root of theological method and carries significant implications for defining and doing theology. Eunice Kamaara writes above that "theology, the systematic analysis of the human response to revealed truths, is largely contextual because truths are not only revealed in specific contexts but are also interpreted from specific contexts. Hence, contextual theological research necessarily involves ethnography, that is, observation and description of cultures." The same is true for our sacred literature and its interpretation. Believers construct compounded ethnographies, analogically telling their stories and approaching

1 Musa Dube, "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces, and Religion" in *Postcolonialism, Feminism & Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 104-105.

their struggles alongside biblical figures, insights, and/or movements. Scripture itself makes this move, particularly the gospels, which reinterpret the mission and destiny of the faith community in light of prophetic material from the Hebrew Scriptures and the historical encounter with Jesus. Taking seriously both this insight into the character of Scripture and Musa Dube's call for the decolonization of feminism, as a White, Western, feminist scholar, I need to listen closely to what women living and surviving in postcolonial space have to say about Scripture. As a believer and interpreter, I also have to recognize the analogies between their stories and those of the biblical narrative, making connections that support the project of liberation rather than the still-present forces of colonization.

One example from our fieldwork sheds light on the dynamic interchange between life and sacred story: the women of the Success Self-Help Group in Kibera. The women of the Success project self-identify with biblical heroines in their community work as HIV/AIDS survivors. (Although I experienced in my fieldwork some points of strong resistance to certain interpretations of Scripture, particularly those that I felt perpetuated disempowerment for women, here I want to focus on a positive example.) By and large, my encounters revealed a deep and self-affirming reliance on biblical stories in the face of great hardship and impending despair. However, even in this case, what I call the "contradiction of dis/empowerment" surfaces. Similar to many of the biblical accounts, survival has to accompany social and political empowerment.

The visit to Success took us into the Kibera slums, to a community support group for women living with HIV and AIDS. The Success Self Help Group brings women together to support each other through education, community care, income generation projects, and spirituality. The organization uses a grassroots model of education and incorporation. Women are taken in and encouraged to be open about their HIV/AIDS status; the group cares for them and their families, and educates them about HIV/AIDS facts and transmission, good self-care and household hygiene practices, effective communication, and anti-stigmatization and self-worth building strategies. The women, in turn, educate their children, other family members, and community members, as well as new women entering the organization.

The members have formed four smaller working groups, which they have named for biblical heroines. Each group is responsible for a particular community mission and/or an economic enterprise: Deborah is the leadership and education group; Esther works on fighting stigmatization and discrimination in the community, and the members are fish sellers; Magdalene fosters self-love and forgiveness, provides home-based care for those suffering with AIDS, and sells vegetables; and Dorcas is made up of craftswomen, who encourage good works and focus on the beauty in each other as persons made in God's image. The women gather daily for self-led prayer services, incorporating song, prayer, and testimony. Their meeting space (really, a church) is austere, with a concrete floor, wooden beams and supports, simple benches, and no images of the divine.

I was very impressed by this organization and the women who compose and sustain it, but I was troubled by the constant emphasis on lack of resources. Although these women are developing

models and strategies of social and personal empowerment, their efforts are often crippled because members and their families are barely subsisting. One example of this paradox that surfaced is that women are taught household hygiene practices but cannot afford basic hygiene products like water and soap. The organization's budget is roughly $1000 a year, not nearly enough to support the development of micro-businesses capable of sustaining 600 members.

Eunice and I interviewed the Deborah group. Just as Deborah was a judge and community leader, the members told us how they are often called in to settle disputes in the community. When asked about the post-election violence and the potential for female leadership, they were very clear about the culpability and corruption of Kenya's current leadership, saying that these men were the only ones to benefit from the violence. The women understood their roles to be community educators and peacemakers, trying to prevent a similar episode of violence in the future. They called for a constitutional review, a turn over in leadership, and strict term limits. They said that if a woman were at the top, it would be much better because they think of others; women are concerned for the welfare of the entire community, rather than a man who thinks only about himself. When nudged about organizing a campaign for a woman representative in Kibera, again they pointed to the need for resources. How can they organize, how can they truly succeed and attain social empowerment if they cannot even feed their families?

This was a consistent chorus throughout our entire visit. Every presentation by the group and activity coordinators, every testimony, and every question about empowerment concluded with a plea for economic support. Even as we were leaving, the women crowded around us, begging us with their bodies not to go. I was so moved by their fortitude, resilience, and ingenuity in the face of tragedy, but I was deeply saddened by the constant economic limitations plaguing them. Here are women already organized, willing and able to mobilize for transformation, but the struggle to survive and feed their children preoccupies them, taking all of their creativity and energy. Out of this struggle to survive, heal, and flourish despite severe marginalization and illness has arisen a movement of great hope. But what will it take to move beyond subsistence to success?

In closing, I want to acknowledge some of the limitations for a White, Western, English-speaking woman attempting to do fieldwork in Nairobi, Kenya. For almost all of my interviews, I had to rely on an interpreter or one of my African cohorts to translate. I am sure that a great deal of nuance and meaning was lost in translation. Also, it became apparent that our respondents related to the American scholars very differently than to our African colleagues. The perception of our economic affluence was a large part of this dynamic. However, in the case of the Success Self-Help Group, among others, the lived analogy to Scripture offered me a more complex and deeper glimpse into the self-understandings of the group members. As these women continue their work, this integrated interpretation will sustain them, as it already does, and will continue to help them communicate their goals more effectively to new members and the community. Scripture becomes a great resource for teaching, self-identification, and affirmation. Their integrations of self and sacred story are very helpful to me as I return to the U.S. to share their stories and attempt to teach

meaning-making in an increasingly global academy.

Wounded Hearts, Unbroken Spirits: Stories of Survival and Hope in Kenya

Damaris Seleina Parsitau

I was privileged to participate in the project my co-authors describe above. The objectives of the course were designed around a number of themes: listening and learning, speaking and experience, and ethnography and pedagogy. Students and field assistants spent time together in the field collecting data from various locations, observing, interviewing, and experiencing as part of the ethnographic research process. My field assistant and I visited three women-founded churches of Pentecostal and Charismatic inclinations that are currently led by women. These churches and ministries include: Single Ladies Interdenominational Ministries (SLIM), founded by Reverend Elizabeth Wahome; Faith Evangelistic Ministries (FEM), founded by Reverend Terersia Wairimu; and Jesus Is Alive Ministries (JIAM), founded by Bishop Margaret Wanjiru. I also conducted interviews of other pastors and parishioners, including Reverend Esther Njeri, a female minister from the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) at St. Andrews Church, Nairobi; and a female member of an African Instituted Church. I also conducted interviews with a traditional diviner, traditional birth attendant (TBA), business women, a policewoman, and a female lecturer at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA).

Throughout my fieldwork, I came across the all too familiar stories of pain, excruciating poverty, and sexual violence—especially rape, forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and spousal abuse. In the informal settlement of Kibera (the largest informal settlement in Africa), I witnessed people struggling to eke out a living in the most dehumanizing living conditions one could imagine. We saw sad faces of people, especially women living with HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and witnessed the worst manifestations of hunger and poverty. But we also came across stories and voices of hope, of faith in God and themselves, of resistance, and of a stubborn refusal by some to be silenced by their situations. I came across stories of heroines in the form of female religious visionaries who are resisting victimization and rallying women, particularly vulnerable women. These women leaders are pulling together the collective energies of vulnerable women and helping them turn their situations around. I saw practical theology at work in one interdenominational women's ministry I visited. From my field research, I managed to piece together a short history, including the objectives and mission of the ministry.

Single Ladies Interdenominational Ministry (SLIM) is an interdenominational Charismatic ministry committed to the empowerment of single women in Kenya and beyond. It was jointly founded in 2004 by Reverend Doctor Elizabeth Muthoni Wahome and seventeen single women who meet regularly for prayer, fellowship, and mutual support. The organization has grown to become a large transnational Christian organization with branches in Uganda, Tanzania, Congo D.R.C., Ethiopia, Seychelles, and the U.S.A. Rev. Wahome claims that she received a vision from God to start SLIM (initially Single Ladies Interdenominational Fellowship, SLIF) as a space for

lonely single women to fellowship. She realized that most Christian churches did not provide such a space, despite the needs of this growing cadre of women. After holding weekly fellowship meetings, listening to the needs of these women, and consulting her husband and friends about her vision, she raised enough money to help these women establish small businesses to earn a livelihood. The prayer group soon grew into a large organization with a membership of over one thousand single women.

Through a college she founded in Zimmerman Estate, Nairobi, Wahome provides economic, spiritual, and social empowerment to single women. They receive training in HIV/AIDS management, business, counseling and legal services, reconciliation of broken families, marriage guidance, reproductive health services, and campaigns against FGM and early marriages. The ministry attracts various categories of single women: spinsters, women who are separated or divorced, widows, and single mothers. The women are categorized and given roles according to the nature of their singleness, using biblical heroines as examples.

According to Wahome, the first category—separated and divorced women—are represented by Hagar, the maid of Sarah, in Genesis 21: 13-14. In this story, Abraham (Sarah's husband) sent Hagar and her son Ishmael away. They wandered in the wilderness and suffered hunger and thirst. Hagar endured the pain of seeing her son faced with imminent death. In her pain and despair, she cried to God who heard her cry and responded. Wahome draws parallels between Hagar's plight and that of many separated and divorced women, who are left with the responsibility for raising their children single-handedly.

The second category is that of single mothers—women who have never been married but have children. This category of women is often despised, stigmatized, and accused of wrecking "stable families" by luring husbands away with their loose morals. Wahome argues that most single mothers are shunned even in churches. She knows the pain of rejection, for her church shunned her after she got pregnant out of wedlock, despite being a committed member. Women in this category are consoled by being assured that their status has been transformed, for they are living in the newness of Christ, according to 2 Corinthians 2:1

The third category is that of spinsters. The story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Matthew 1:21-23 is used as a model. Just like Mary, these women have been patiently and hopefully waiting for husbands to marry them. Mary is depicted in the Bible as faithful and subject to God's will. This category of women is encouraged to live holy lives. Wahome exhorts them "to occupy till he comes"; in other words, to get busy serving God until a husband shows up.

The last category is that of widows, who are represented by prophetess Hannah, a widow in Luke 2:36-38. According to Wahome, widows have a special place in God's heart. In Psalms 68:5, God is depicted as a "husband" to the widows and a "father 'to their children."

All four categories of single women are encouraged to rise above their experience of victimization and value themselves as God's children. They are often exhorted that they are not alone, because Jesus is their husband, provider, counselor, friend, and helper. Women of valor, courage,

and great piety in the Bible such as Hagar, Deborah, Ruth, Mary, Elizabeth, and Mary Magdalene are declared women of excellence and models to be emulated. They are metaphors of inspiration to women facing difficult situations. The ministry has invented powerful metaphors for survival, with a central theme of personal and social rebirth. In other words, the use of the language of transformation becomes the first tool for perceiving their hopeless situation differently. This is evident in SLIM's literature, which emphasizes the mission of the ministry: to bring women hope, healing, and reconciliation. The language of the ministry is a language of empowerment and transformation. For example, in one of the ministry's documentaries, the message is said to "*bring out the princess out of the dunghill.*" Women are challenged to arise from living the downtrodden life, which is given to them by what she called the "cultural mind frame" that single ladies are incomplete without husbands.

Whether gathered for their annual conferences, or joined in "sister keeper fellowships," cell group meetings, or bible study groups, these women share their stories of sufferings and restoration through confessional testimonies. The meetings allow them to disclose their inner life among generally supportive women. They learn to speak and build confidence and self-esteem. These meetings can be powerfully therapeutic, as women narrate their sufferings and pain at the hands of abusive spouses, or the loneliness they felt when deserted by a spouse, or just their struggles and pain as they fend for their children Sadness, loneliness, sorrow, pain, neglect, despair, poverty, domestic violence, sin, sufferings, and diseases bind them in these fellowships. As a crusader for vulnerable women, Wahome has been recognized and honored for selfless service to scores of women from broken homes or marriages.

In my interviews with women at SLIM and other churches I visited, women narrated stories of their personal struggles to rise above victimization and to rise above an enslaving tradition aimed at silencing their voices, poverty, and spousal abuse. But they also narrated stories of hope and of faith in themselves and God. My research also pointed to an emerging trend within new religious movements in Kenya: women are gradually dislocating and increasingly questioning deeply patriarchal structures to become leaders of these churches and ministries. Such visionaries include Bishop Margaret Wanjiru of JIAM. Her story is one of struggle, pain, victimization, and poverty, yet she became a member of Parliament, an assistant minister for housing and shelter, and the first-ever ordained bishop of a charismatic ministry.

The service project at the IDP camp also exposed me to the dehumanizing situations in which the victims of the post election violence (PEV) live. After the disputed and highly discredited December 2007 presidential elections in Kenya, the country witnessed an orgy of violence, which left over thirteen hundred people dead and thousands displaced. The displaced found refuge in camps and tents provided by UNHCR, and, to date, many still live in such camps in different parts of the country, though predominantly in the Rift Valley. And as is always the case in situations of war and conflict, women and children bear the consequences. We visited one such camp in the Rift Valley and saw how people lived in the most dehumanizing conditions, with no access to water and prop-

er sanitation. I had the opportunity to interview dozens of women and girls whose heart-wrenching stories left my heart deeply wounded and depressed. But what was striking to my colleagues and me was that even amidst these dehumanizing conditions, the women's spirits were unbeatable. We were impressed and touched by their resilience and courage. As my heart bled for these women and girls, I left with hope. The determination in their eyes won our hearts as we realized how these women had organized themselves into groups with neat proposals of what they wanted to do to improve their lives and situations. In our interviews with these women, stories of hope, faith, resistance, and voice also emerged as these women struggle to rise above their circumstances.

I continue to grapple with a number of questions: How can feminist theology descend from the ivory tower and become a practical theology so it can impact more directly to lives of women living in such difficult situations? How can women theologians in Kenya develop a theology of resistance to affirm and stand in solidarity with women living in dehumanizing situations? How do we address the broader social and political issues affecting our society, and can we begin to transform these unjust systems? Clearly, our work has only just begun.

Concluding Remarks: A Way Forward

Through the ethnographic fieldwork incorporated into the program, the Global Feminist Theologies Project gave each participant the opportunity to immerse herself in and learn about the everyday lives of Kenyan women in a variety of settings. The project also enabled us to listen to and learn from one another, and to form bonds of friendship and solidarity. Creating space to speak together is a critical endeavor for feminist theology. As the participants learned, authentic listening is an essential component of this endeavor. While we came to the project already formed by our own life experiences, national identity, social location, religious commitments, and education, we also realized that we are people who continue to be shaped by our daily experiences. And indeed, we each acknowledge the significant ways that this project has shaped us, challenged us, and strengthened our commitments to seek justice and flourishing for all. Some important themes surfaced in our individual reflections, and as our work continues we will continue to think through these questions and commitments, both individually and as a group.

The first theme is that women's experiences *matter*. Women's voices must be heard and honored. Ethnography can help researchers to explore the complex contexts of women's experiences, so that researchers can begin to understand what is going on, what is at stake, and what prevents women from flourishing. Thick description is necessary so that communities can begin to better understand what is going on. The voices of women, and especially marginalized women, are overlooked too often. Many women in Kenya remain vulnerable in a variety of ways, and yet have much to contribute to society.

A second theme is that culture is complex and dynamic. This theme arose out of both our group's assessment of the Maryknoll Institute model of teaching African traditional culture and our reflections on our own cultural locations and values. From conversations about such varied topics as cooking, marriage traditions, government corruption, cell phones, and driving rules, we were challenged to appreciate and (sometimes) challenge the worldview of other cultures, at the same time that we looked at our own cultural assumptions with fresh eyes. As we began to understand culture through the lens of postcolonial reflection, we saw that culture holds the power to both liberate and oppress. Culture is sometimes used as an excuse to marginalize or exploit women, and yet culture is always in flux. In a world increasingly influenced by globalization, one cannot hold a view of culture as static. Our conversations frequently relied on an understanding of culture as a human construct, open to transformation.

A third theme concerns the need to maintain an understanding of both objectivity and subjectivity in ethnography. As we understood the task of ethnography, the focus was placed on the experience of the informant. Our task was to ask questions about our informant's experiences, beliefs, and values, and then in our writing to bring the informant's stories to the larger community in a way that offers an empathetic understanding of the informant's worldview. But the experience of fieldwork consistently invited us to ask questions about ourselves and to challenge our own as-

sumptions through this process of self-reflection and self-evaluation. These experiences seem to point to an understanding of a healthy tension between objectivity and subjectivity in ethnographic methods.

In addition, sometimes our desire for appropriate distance or objectivity seemed to conflict with our desire for active involvement. As a group, we wanted to contribute to the transformation of unjust structures. In the reflections above, some participants describe their messy and confusing experiences in the field. We frequently shared these concerns with one another during the course of the program, when we asked questions such as: Why is it that Emily and Eunice can talk to the same group of young women and hear very different stories? Why did the informant talk for five minutes, yet my translator seemed to only talk for two? Did we disrespect an appropriate boundary when we contributed donations to the IDP camp residents or to the members of Success in Kibera? When does emotional distance signal respect, and when does it dehumanize the interviewee? Should active participation be encouraged, and if so, to what degree?

Finally, we must acknowledge some the limitations of our project. All of our fieldwork took place within the span of three weeks. This made it very difficult to establish long-term relationships of trust and intimacy with the people we interviewed. Most fieldwork sessions involved a commitment of three to four hours, including travel time. Most interviews and focus groups were approximately 90 minutes. These time constraints, as well as the previously mentioned language barriers for U.S. participants, presented us with some significant limitations in our data collection. But we were also struck by the depth and power of so many of the stories conveyed during these interviews, and for most of us, our field notes span many notebooks!

Despite the limitations we have described, we each walked away knowing we had taken a step in the right direction. We had stepped out of the ivory tower—at least for a few weeks. In our traveling together, in our sharing meals and accommodations, and in seeking to collaborate through coursework and fieldwork, we were learning to embody ethnography as feminist praxis. We had our share of stumbling, messy moments. But in the midst of our being together and doing field research together, we glimpsed the vibrant possibilities of the grounded cross-cultural scholarship the academy so desperately needs.