

Reimagining leadership through lessons from the life of Aurelia Erskine Brazeal

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lessons

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the literature by examining the import and impact of the generative leadership philosophy and praxis of Ambassador Aurelia Erskine Brazeal, an African American Female Foreign Service Officer.

Design/methodology/approach – This single subject case study, augmented by portraiture, employs an interdisciplinary methodological design also using polyvocal narrative, oral history and arts-based research.

Findings – The research revealed that a prosocial disposition, compassion, strategic vision, clarity of purpose, commitment to fair play, focus on balance, hearing everyone out and the practice of leadership as a potentiating art are the hallmarks of a generative leadership praxis.

Research limitations/implications – The research posits that to be effective in the 21st century, leaders would do well to incorporate generative leadership qualities and characteristics into their praxis.

Practical implications – This study found that listening, co-creating connections and safe spaces, promoting dialog, critical reflection and collective action are as important to diplomatic tradecraft as they are to generative leadership practice.

Social implications – The challenge of epistemic exclusion suggests that a well-conceived case study examining the life, leadership philosophy and praxis of Aurelia Erskine Brazeal – an individual of merit and distinction – can serve as an exemplar in efforts to reimagine public leadership in the 21st century.

Originality/value – The value of this research is found in its phenomenological approach which shares insights drawn from personal biography as well as key perspectives on public history.

Keywords Black women's leadership, Family curriculum, Generative leadership, Potentiating leaders, Diplomacy, Epistemic exclusion, Arts-based research

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The monumentally important work of reimagining public leadership is clearly critical in view of human failures to be truly democratic and inclusive. Indeed, the onto-epistemological endeavors of sensemaking compel scholars from historically oppressed communities to speak out and share their concerns, insights and wisdom (Bhattacharya and Kim, 2020). Speaking of African American Foreign Service Officers, McLellan (2015) urged scholars to take a “critical look at their individual and collective influences, impacts, and leadership characteristics” (p. 61). The challenge of epistemic exclusion (Settles *et al.*, 2020) suggests that a well-conceived case study examining the life, leadership philosophy and praxis of Aurelia Erskine Brazeal – an individual of merit and distinction – can serve as an exemplar in efforts to reimagine public leadership in the 21st century. A polyvocal narrative, this study engaged Brazeal and eight additional research respondents, ranging from protégés and colleagues to

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Brazeal's fictive daughter, Joan Ingati (Ibsen and Klobus, 1972; Stewart, 2007). Weaving together the polyvocal narrative with elements of public history, a process Portelli (1997) terms history-telling, the research also considers the possibilities generative leadership can offer to the project of reimagining public leadership. This study examines Brazeal's formative years in the segregated South and the extraordinary steps her parents took to protect her from the toxic effects of racism and legal segregation (Grier and Cobbs, 1992; King and Smith, 2005; Lawrence Lightfoot, 1983, 1995; Rodgers, 2017; West, 2004; Collins, 2000, 2003). The research employs the Haudenosaunee's (Iroquois) concept of generativity enunciated in the Great Law of Peace, which evinces an ongoing commitment to long-term, sustainable decision-making, as a focal lens (Bedford and Workman, 1997). The concern for the welfare and well-being of future generations (generativity) moreover, is a prosocial behavior which is described as actions that are positive, helpful and intended to promote social acceptance, community cohesion and friendship, formidable tools in any leadership praxis (de St. Aubin, 2013; Fabius, 2016; McAdams *et al.*, 1993; McAdams and Logan, 2004; McAdams and de St Aubin, 1992).

Portraiture, a prologue

Rolling (2013) described portraiture as a "qualitative research method pioneered by sociologist Sara Lawrence Lightfoot and arts educator Jessica Hoffman Davis that integrates the systematic rigor and evocative resonance, blurring the boundaries between aesthetics and empiricism" (p. 15). Indeed, portraiture has been called "the people's scholarship" (Featherstone, 1989, p. 376) and a "dialogue between art and science" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 14) as it seeks both to generate new knowledge and make information and insights accessible beyond the academy to the wider reading public. As a qualitative research methodology, portraiture insists upon academic rigor noting "the portraitist's work is deeply empirical, grounded in systematically collected data, skeptical questioning (of self and actors) and rigorous examination of biases – always open to disconfirming evidence" (Lawrence Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 85). The vignettes that open and close this research contain brief descriptions of Ambassador Aurelia Erskine Brazeal illustrating the rich and textured data generated by the qualitative research methodology of portraiture.

Imagine, if you will, a tall, statuesque woman with unblemished brown skin and piercing dark brown eyes. She carries herself with a profound sense of confidence and dignity, no doubt born of a tradition the values the sacred within each human being, no matter their station in life. Now, listen to her voice as she thoughtfully and clearly enunciates her words and shares her strategic vision and intent with you; there is an ever so slight southern lilt in her warm tones. At 6' 1", the towering figure I described herein is Ambassador Aurelia Erskine Brazeal, Rea as she is known to her colleagues, friends and family. Aurelia, I learned, is derived from the Latin *aurum*; it is the feminine form of the Latin name *Aurelius* meaning golden.

Positionality

Hartley (2018) posited that the practice of public leadership is complex and frequently contested. She challenged researchers to employ designs that reflect the intricacies and dynamism of public leadership in efforts to "create synergies" (p. 202). This interdisciplinary qualitative research journey afforded me the opportunity to assume an emic posture (Bourke, 2014), given my interest in studying the African American Female Foreign Service Officer (AAFISO), a role I inhabited for 30 years. I clearly meet Hayano's (1979) definition of "researchers who possess the qualities of often permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognized both by themselves and the people of whom they are a part" (p. 100). While conducting this research I adopted a liminal stance – occupying the positions of inquisitive yet respectful portraitist and Foreign Service veteran. Moreover, eight

of the research participants in this polyvocal narrative study, including Brazeal, were either active duty or retired career United States Foreign Service Officers.

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Research participants

This article highlights important episodes in Brazeal's life and professional practice using her narrative as well as the observations, insights and experiences of Anthony Fernandes, Brian Goldbeck, Thomas Hull, Joan Ingati, Larry Palmer, Robert Reis, Linda Thomas Greenfield and Heather Joy Thompson – the research respondents. Combining the polyvocal narrative with data generated from arts-based research approaches, what follows is a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of Aurelia Erskine Brazeal.

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The interview process and interview guide

During the course of conducting this research, I met Ambassador Brazeal on numerous occasions in her Washington, DC home to develop a sense of her unique frame of reference (Brazeal, 2007). In addition, I interviewed six of the eight research participants on a face-to-face basis, Messrs. Hull and Goldbeck, who live outside Washington, DC were interviewed using Zoom. Drawing upon Morris' (2015) work, I developed an Interview Guide to serve as a general frame of reference for Brazeal and other research respondents to consider during the semi-structured interviews. The questions and issues noted in the Interview Guide were developed to serve as prompts to stimulate research participants to share their insights, observations and experiences. The Interview Guide was divided into two parts. The first part of the guide, designed with Brazeal in mind, contains the following sections:

- (1) Family of Origin
- (2) Leadership Philosophy and Practice
- (3) Being a Foreign Service Officer during Difficult Times
- (4) Generativity
- (5) Wisdom

Noting that the arc of Brazeal's Foreign Service career covered the period from 1968 to 2008, the second part of the guide was designed as a series of prompts for knowledgeable informants to share from their service with, personal interactions with and observations of Brazeal's generativity, leadership philosophy and practice.

Family curriculum

To understand and truly appreciate the complex being – Aurelia Erskine Brazeal – it is essential to consider the import and impact of her parents, Brailsford and Ernestine Brazeal, her extended family and her community, on her life, values, leadership philosophy and professional practice (Brazeal, 2007). Martin (1994) emphasized that, historically, the Black family in the United States has been depicted as dysfunctional. Martin noted the vital importance of generating knowledge concerning the resourcefulness and resilience of the Black family. Lawrence Lightfoot's (1995) concept of "family curriculum" (p. 2) provided a rich and textured way of describing the carefully curated socialization process Brazeal enjoyed. This family curriculum, lovingly designed and delivered by her parents, provided much-needed content to offset the prevailing toxic stereotypes about Black people in the United States (Grier and Cobb, 1992; King and Smith, 2005; Rodgers, 2017; West, 2004). Brazeal, for example, was approximately 11 years old when she accompanied her mother

downtown to shop. On the bus ride home, a white girl about Brazeal's age, entered the bus. There were no vacant seats and the prevailing expectation was that Brazeal and her mother would give a seat to the girl. Instead, they decided to walk home rather than stand after surrendering their seats. While they were being displaced by the demeaning conventions of Jim Crow, they exercised agency in resisting said racist practice. West (2004), for example, likened the toxic racial stereotypes about Black people to carbon monoxide – odorless, colorless but nonetheless lethal when present in one's environment.

Together with her older sister, Ernestine, the Brazeal's close-knit nuclear family constituted a cohesive and loving unit. Brazeal's family, however, was more than a collection of consanguineous relationships. Her personal narrative revealed the vital importance of her community and extended family. Fictive kinship, according to Ibsen and Klobus (1972), "encompasses the adoption of nonrelatives into kin-like relationships" (p. 615). Brazeal and Joan Ingati fall under the technical rubric of fictive kin, as they observe the obligations that family ties imply. Stewart (2007) characterized fictive kin as a familial connection that while not established by blood or marital bonds, nevertheless, implies a "level of ongoing commitment" (p. 163). Furthermore, Stewart explained that:

Historically, African Americans have held a view of family and kinship that focused on extended rather than nuclear relationships. The emphasis on extended family groups originated in the West African communities from which slaves were taken, was maintained throughout the eras of slavery and emancipation, and has contributed to the resilience of African American families. (p. 164)

Clearly, the Brazeal family stands in stark contrast to the popularly distorted depictions of the dysfunctional Black family (Martin, 1987). Her parents, both educators and administrators, recognized the non-negotiable value of education as they devoted their professional lives to building the institutions of Morehouse and Spelman, the twin towers of Atlanta's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) educational landscape. Brailsford Brazeal earned a doctorate in Economics from Columbia University in 1942 while Ernestine Erskine Brazeal earned a master's degree in American History from the University of Chicago in the 1930s. Central components of the Brazeal family home training stressed academic excellence, a dedicated work ethic and the dignity and equality of all people. The foregoing elements constitute the basic building blocks of Brazeal's leadership philosophy and subsequent praxis. Brazeal, for example, recalled her parents' teaching that "everybody has a talent to offer and is smart in their own way, so not to ever look down on anybody as incapable of learning or doing things." Viewing leadership as a potentiating art, McCaslin and Snow (2012) explained that leaders see possibilities within people. This research led me to theorize that generative leaders demonstrate the attributes of deep understanding, critical reflection and maturity (McCaslin and Snow). We will return to the concept of the potentiating leadership, the notion that leaders build other leaders.

Brazeal described her community as a *cocoon*, a warm and protective place within which to grow and develop. During our first interview, Brazeal shared a remarkable illustrative memory. She explained going to the library on a weekly basis and, in one instance, actually reading all of the books she had checked out before her parents picked her up. The foregoing example is an early indication of the development of Brazeal's copious intellectual skills. Her academic acumen and formidable intellectual prowess were further reinforced at Atlanta's Friendship Baptist Church (FBC) where the Rev. Dr. Maynard Holbrook Jackson, father of the late Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, and the Rev. Dr. Samuel Woodrow Williams preached intellectually engaging sermons emphasizing civic engagement and Black political empowerment.

The research respondents speak

The data I collected and analyzed for this study led me to theorize that Brazeal's early memories of growing up in the segregated South and her exposure to exclusion and suffering

there, made compassion central to her diplomatic and leadership praxis. Linda Thomas Greenfield, for example, recounted Brazeal's interactions with Somali women they encountered in the Dadaab Refugee Complex in Kenya, the world's largest refugee camp noting:

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We were running from meeting to meeting and we apologized that she could not have a separate meeting with the Somali women. As we're driving out of the camp, the women just sat in the middle of the road and our cars could not go through. They brought out these little benches. The security people were telling the ambassador not to get out. She got out, she sat on the bench, and we met with them. I think those women, it made their day, but it also let them know that we had an ambassador that cared about their issues. We could have easily gone around their group. We could have allowed the security people to push them out of the way. Her approach was let's take the time. Let's talk to these women.

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This account illustrated, *inter alia*, the role of compassion and prosocial behavior in Brazeal's leadership philosophy and practice. The Somali refugee women occupied the lowest rung on the socio-economic ladder. They, doubtless, lacked political influence. Brazeal, nevertheless, recognized their creative determination and, despite time constraints and potential security risks, she listened to their concerns. Once again, I see this as evidence of her parents' insistence on treating everyone with respect and dignity, no matter their station in life or your station in life as is evident in Rea's Rules [1].

Both Goldbeck and Palmer spoke of experiences illustrating Brazeal's leadership praxis which Josselson (2002) termed the concept of balance, "True compromise, balance between the needs of the people involved, sharing of resources, and taking account of everyone's point of view all require perspective and energy" (p. 439). Palmer discussed what he called the "fine line" Brazeal had to tread as the Dean of The Senior Seminar (TSS) dealing with 30 egos of both military and civilian US Government leaders explaining:

She had to walk a fine line, basically, as being the Dean, the leader, the example-setter, the person that was going to be the honest broker. Because you have 30 upwardly mobile, dare I use the word, aggressive leadership candidates. And so, by that, many of them are creative, they're innovative, many of them are stubborn, but they are excellent leaders.

He described an example of the challenging egos that occurred on the first day of the 41st Senior Seminar saying,

I do remember one person. I'm sure that Dean Brazeal will remember right well. I will not use his name, but he was an Army colonel who said, "Yes, and my name is XYZ, which is German for does not play well with his neighbors." Very first day, first day out. And indeed, he was a project for her, I'm sure, but one that she managed very well.

I found the Palmer account of Brazeal's handling of a subsequent leadership challenge regarding the election of the TSS class president illuminating. Noting the importance she placed upon serving as an "honest broker" over the elections, Palmer related the following critical incident:

We had one person who said, listen, we're all professionals here. We do not want to have one of these divisive processes of election. He says, I would like to propose Larry Palmer as president. Are there any objections? There were none. But Ambassador Brazeal said, wait a minute. She did not want this to appear to be a process of we're just going to push this through. So she said, well, wait a minute. You know, that's fine, but I want to be sure that this is the will of everyone.

Instead of acquiescing to the suggestion and taking the low hanging fruit, Brazeal insisted upon a transparent electoral process. The foregoing example, in my view, speaks to the importance Brazeal places upon democratic values and practices when a cohort, community or a country, for that matter, chooses its leadership. The story also illustrates the core values

contained in the Brazeal family curriculum such as integrity and fair play. In the end, Palmer was elected president of the 41st Senior Seminar.

Goldbeck, who served as Chief of the Political/Economic Section and later as Brazeal's Deputy Chief of Mission in Ethiopia, identified several examples of Brazeal's achievements. Her balanced approach to leading (Josselson, 2002) and her excellent judgment (Kramer, 2003) were in evidence in Goldbeck's explanation of how Brazeal treated the differing opinions colleagues held about the nature and direction of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. He told me:

It's the way she handled that issue that I thought was interesting. Because she did not just pooh-pooh and ignore people's viewpoints. She heard them out and listened to their evidence and asked them to hear what other people had to say, and then engaged in a real dialogue in terms of a debate to have the best information, best ideas. I thought that was a professional skill that I think she has – she brings to the table.

Goldbeck also provided an account of Brazeal's efforts to disrupt ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia's southwest region:

She had individual meetings first, which gave all those people face and gave them a chance to have a face-to-face with her. She went in kind of knowing what all the different parties had on their mind and what their complaints and concerns were. When they had the large group meeting, it gave all of the parties a safe place or a safe space in which they could meet and express their views and have the parties that they felt were involved in the killing or involved in the suppression, hear their views. The government also got a chance to hear their views.

Clearly, Brazeal's pragmatic approach to tackling complex problems requires strategic vision, clarity of purpose, energy, focus and a commitment to hearing everyone out. Goldbeck's observations position Brazeal as a leader who listened to the full range of views on the issue of ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia. Using her convening power as the US Ambassador to Ethiopia, she was able to bring a wide range of stakeholders, including Ethiopian Government officials, to the table. Before doing so, she met with them individually to ensure that she understood their concerns. Moreover, Brazeal was able to grasp the nuances and intricacies of the leadership challenges set before her as a consequence of the foregoing committed praxis.

When asked about the values that inform Brazeal's leadership philosophy and practice, Goldbeck singled out her clarity of purpose, ability to set achievable goals – despite Washington's sometimes unrealistic expectations – and her ability to communicate. Goldbeck's reference to Brazeal's methodology of promoting "real dialogue" and creating a "safe place" and "safe space" for antagonists to speak their minds was compelling. These practices constitute essential tools in leadership as well as diplomatic tradecraft, which to be effective, must be studied, emulated and applied in 21st century leadership praxis.

Hull, who served as Brazeal's Deputy Chief of Mission in Ethiopia from late 2002 to 2004, told me, "It was a pleasure to work with her. *She was consistently a strategic thinker and that was always her mantra; think strategically* [emphasis added]." Discussing the complicated problems they encountered in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, Hull recalled:

That was also a time post 9/11 of counterterrorism being a major concern and the global war on terrorism was on and Ethiopia was a very important ally in that part of the world. Historically, a Christian country, Ethiopia had evolved into a country where there was a very large Islamic presence. And although there were historically excellent relations between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia, there were growing concerns about Islamic extremism. In addition, HIV/AIDS was a major concern. We were one of the first PEPFAR [2] countries so we had a large HIV/AIDS program before that and part of it was simply transforming it to fit into the PEPFAR model. We also had famine to deal with in the country. We had severe environmental degradation that was on our list of priorities. . . . generally, good governance, freedom of the press, try to push the country toward a more democratic style.

Hull's observations offer fascinating insights into the complicated range of leadership challenges Brazeal confronted in Ethiopia including, *inter alia*, health, counterterrorism, democratic governance and famine. Indeed, Hull characterized her emphasis on strategic thinking as her mantra. No doubt Brazeal emphasized strategic thinking because it was an important element in her leadership toolkit clearly inherited from her parents.

Brazeal worked on Japan-related trade issues for the decade of the 1980s. While serving in Tokyo, for example, she transcended the micro-aggressions of a male chauvinist supervisor who refused to provide her an English language newspaper and assigned her to cover textiles because "women sew." The ill-tempered supervisor was notorious for harassing female officers. Brazeal simply chose to go to work early to read the English language newspaper thus achieving her goal. She did not afford him opportunities to aggravate or upset her. Instead, she created a unique portfolio of economic issues of import to the bilateral relations of what were then the world's two largest economies.

Robert Reis served with Brazeal both in Tokyo and on the Japan Desk at the State Department. Reis mentioned that Brazeal was largely responsible for managing the State Department's relationship with the office of the United States Trade Representative. Reis stated that she became an expert on automobiles and aviation issues and was actively involved in negotiations with Japan. Noting that the negotiations took place during the Cold War, Reis explained:

All of us on the desk were trying to manage our economic relationships with Japan in a way that the frictions over economic things did not bleed into overall relationships or particularly, relations with Japan on defense matters . . . The U.S. Trade Representative's Office, from time to time, tried to expand their authority into other areas, for example, aviation, to gain further leverage over the Japanese on trade matters.

In the foregoing example, Reis observed Brazeal's adept approach to managing an important inter-agency balancing act particularly during the Cold War. Once again, Brazeal recognized the nuances of both our bilateral relationship with Japan as well as the complex dynamics within the United States Government. This, in my view, provides another example of Brazeal's clarity of purpose.

Heather Joy Thompson, like Brazeal, understands the toxic elements of race relations in United States history (Grier and Cobbs, 1992; King and Smith, 2005; Rodgers, 2017; West, 2004) and their impact on US foreign policy (Krenn, 1996; McLellan, 2015). Brazeal encouraged her to pursue a career in diplomacy. Thompson observed:

I love the way that she moves. I think she has a very interesting perspective on the world, and I do not think she was ever of the mindset that she was unable to effectuate change. She understands what the score is. She knows what we deal with working in the environment. The State Department is part of the U.S. Government. We have a very complicated and ugly history that we have to contend with. The Thursday Luncheon Group [3] was founded for a reason. African American officers were not permitted to use a lunchroom at a point in our history. We cannot ignore that.

The practice of standing against bigotry, treating people with respect and meeting them where they are, served as critical features of the Brazeal family curriculum and her leadership philosophy and praxis. The lessons that her parents inculcated in their daughters and, by extension, their students, constitute a compelling legacy. Their legacy has, undoubtedly, influenced Brazeal's diplomatic practice as seen in her role as a potentiating leader dedicated to developing others (McCaslin and Snow, 2012; George, 2020). Their teachings emphasizing the non-negotiable nature and paramount importance of respect for human dignity have lasted a lifetime and have been transmitted across two additional generational thresholds to Brazeal's fictive daughter, Joan, and granddaughter, Ernestine.

Brazeal held leadership positions in the Thursday Luncheon Group. While serving as Dean of the Leadership and Management School at the Foreign Service Institute, Brazeal played a crucial role in incorporating diversity into the Leadership Training Continuum for State Department Civil Service and Foreign Service employees. She was, moreover, instrumental in the establishment of the Leadership and Management School at the Foreign Service Institute. Indeed, she was subsequently instrumental to implementing Secretary of State Colin Powell's Mandatory Leadership and Management Training Program for State Department employees.

Joan Ingati discussed the impact of both Brazeal's prosocial behavior and potentiating influence on her academic achievements, personal and professional development noting:

She's the only person in this world who has made me feel I'm smart. I can be anything. She has believed in me so much more than anybody in this world has believed in me. She has believed I'm smart and that has made me go an extra mile. Because growing up, my family thought I was nothing. My sisters, they just saw me and they did not think I was smart enough to accomplish anything. That's something that stayed with me for a long time. Mom believing in me and just thinking I can do – and she let me know you can do anything in this world you put your mind to.

As Brazeal's fictive daughter, Ingati was well-positioned to discuss the impact of a prosocial potentiating leader. Brazeal, according to Ingati, created an enabling environment in which she thrived as a student. While members of Ingati's family of origin doubted her abilities, Brazeal believed in her. Their relationship began when Brazeal recruited Ingati to care for her aged mother, Ernestine, while serving as US Ambassador to Kenya (1993–1997). The relationship blossomed as Ingati demonstrated a commitment to care for Ernestine compassionately. Brazeal reciprocated the loving care Ingati had demonstrated by caring, in turn, for Ernestine, her mother's namesake and Brazeal's fictive granddaughter while Ingati successfully completed degrees in nursing and education. In 2021, granddaughter Ernestine continued the family tradition attending Spelman College as her grandmother and great-grandmother had done.

Brazeal clearly emulated her parents' approach consistently seeking to develop the talent she encountered. Calling Brazeal the "ideal officer," Anthony Fernandes reported drawing inspiration from Brazeal's example as an economic officer serving in Asia. In addition, referring to her prosocial disposition, Fernandes characterized Brazeal as being "hardwired to want to be supportive of others." Fernandes frequently turned to Brazeal seeking her counsel concerning his assignments as well as feedback on his Employee Evaluation Reports.

The accounts of Brazeal's prosocial disposition, compassion, strategic vision, clarity of purpose, commitment to fair play, focus on balance, hearing everyone out and practice of leadership as a potentiating art constitute the hallmarks of a generative leadership practice (Josselson, 2002; Kramer, 2003; McAdams *et al.*, 1993; McCaslin and Snow, 2012). Brazeal overcame microaggressions and toxic stereotypes (Crenshaw, 1989; Grier and Cobbs, 1992; Rodgers, 2017; West, 2004) that African American women encountered in their efforts to make the Foreign Service a more inclusive and representative profession. In exercising her convening power and employing her exceptional listening skills as well as co-creating safe spaces, Brazeal helped to make the difference between war and peace in Ethiopia. Brazeal's leadership practice, marks her as a lifelong learner as she continuously maintained an inquisitive mind and remained open to the contributions of others (Bell, 2010; Preskill and Brookfield, 2009).

Arts-based research resources

Supplementing portraiture and oral history (Kerr, 2003, 2016; Lawrence Lightfoot and Davis, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005) with arts-based research methodologies, I also sought to explore and explicate Brazeal's leadership philosophy and praxis through photography, collage and mind maps. Kramer (2003) noted "the most important emotional and existential

dilemmas in life may not lend themselves to linear rational lines of thinking, but require alternative modes of representation, such as imagery, art, metaphor, and nonlinear logic” (p. 132). In studying Brazeal’s leadership philosophy and practice I elected to employ an arts-based research approach (McNiff, 2008; Rolling, 2013) inviting her to participate in an exercise I termed the “your favorite things” treasure hunt. The exercise, conducted in her home on July 15, 2019, was fascinating as it revealed glimpses of her artistic, political and pragmatic sensibilities. I asked Brazeal to consider the collection of artifacts she had acquired during her world travels, select her favorite items, and explain why. I recorded her reflections and found this exercise offered additional layers of understanding concerning her aesthetic sensibilities, preferences and priorities. Brazeal selected pieces acquired during her assignments in Argentina, Japan, Micronesia, Ethiopia and Kenya as well as pieces from the United States.

The Camel’s Milk Basket, from Ethiopia (Plate 1), is a unique yet practical art piece. The basket is so tightly woven that it can hold liquids without leaking the contents. Likewise, the basket constitutes a powerful example of appropriate technology as it was designed as a traditional storage device and was produced using indigenous materials. The basket is simple, elegant and utilitarian. That description reminded me, in part, of the attributes of Aurelia Erskine Brazeal, elegant and pragmatic.

In addition, using arts-based research methodologies, I took a series of photographs and created a series of collages as a way of making sense of the data. Inspired by the décor of Brazeal’s home which has several oriental rugs, I decided to place photographic images of her *Diplomatic Practice* (Plate 2) on an oriental rug. Playing with the images, while using the carpet as a backdrop, provided greater flexibility and preserved the photos – from her personal collection – intact.



Plate 1.
Camel’s milk basket,
photo by author



Plate 2.
Diplomatic practice
collage by author

Diplomatic Practice (Plate 2) provides pictorial data documenting the impact and reach of Brazeal's professional practice. In *Diplomatic Practice* we encounter Brazeal, the consummate diplomat, presiding over a Country Team meeting [4] of senior leaders at the US Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. We see her at the lectern addressing audiences in venues as distinct as Tokyo and Washington. We find photos of Brazeal with Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles, Kenyan Presidents arap Moi and Kibaki, Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Coptic Church. With images of lions, rhinos and elephants present, this collage reflects Rea, the environmentalist, and her love of Africa's wildlife. We also see and sense Brazeal's role and impact on the world stage as data in this collage include scenes from her diplomatic service in Argentina, Japan, Micronesia, Kenya, Ethiopia and the United States.

State Speak (Figure 1) uses State Department terminology to capture and convey the emic nature of this research including terms such as Work Requirement Statement, Employee Evaluation Report (EER), Corridor Reputation [5], Rating Officer, Reviewing Officer, Assignments, Protocol, Promotion Panels, Cone, Angel's Game, Demarche, High dudgeon, hard power, soft power, smart power, law of the instrument, Dissent Channel [6] and Country Team. Diplomacy, for example, is also known as the Angel's Game and a demarche is a formal message from one state to another. The foregoing terms routinely populate the world of career Foreign Service personnel.

Concluding observations

As I endeavored to weave the various threads of her complex life story into a coherent tapestry, I started where Brazeal began – with the story of her parents – Brailsford and Ernestine. This is by no means a hagiographical study, as Brazeal grappled with issues of



Figure 1.
State speak word cloud
by author

excess weight, smoking, a life-threatening illness, as well as a failed marriage. From my vantage point, nevertheless, Aurelia Erskine Brazeal is a national treasure as evidenced by her impressive 41 years with the State Department, and 40 years in the career Foreign Service.

This study revealed she is from a stock of resilient, pragmatic people who consistently thought and acted strategically. A generative leader, Brazeal is an individual who clearly makes connections across borders and boundaries whether they are national, linguistic, sectarian, racial, political, or socioeconomic. I developed the distinct impression, moreover, that her family curriculum lovingly designed and implemented by her parents and community, equipped Brazeal with the skills, attitudes, values and disciplined work ethic she needed to master several domains – economics and trade policy, languages and diplomacy. The study centered the development of Brazeal's formative years and her trailblazing career as a vehicle to examine the complexities of being a Black woman serving in a non-traditional career field as well as the strategies Brazeal developed and deployed to advance to the top of a highly selective public service profession (King, 2013).

Portraiture, an epilogue

As I close this study of Aurelia Erskine Brazeal, let us once again visualize Rea, the diligent student who excelled academically whether at Oglethorpe Elementary School, Northfield School for Girls, Spelman College, Columbia University or Harvard University. We see her parents at the Highlander Folk School comforting young Rea as she clutched her injured right foot; they reassure their youngest daughter that she will receive proper medical treatment. We encounter the eclectic Rea cultivating her lifelong love of opera while celebrating the improvisational nature of jazz. I invite you to look closer at Rea's early excursion into international affairs. In Puerto Rico she studied with students from several Latin American countries, considering the importance of democratic governance. At 21, Rea joined approximately 250,000 other people at the iconic March on Washington where she listened

to the inspiring words of Martin Luther King, Jr, who was her father's student and family friend. Next, we encounter Rea writing her host family in Sweden explaining her love of water sports and chess. We find the Rea who knows that Thurgood Marshall helped the Kenyans write their constitution; the Rea who acknowledges that Ralph Bunche's work on the United Nations Charter laid the intellectual and diplomatic foundations needed to disrupt colonialism. We see the Brazeal who continues to appreciate the incisive mind of James Baldwin and his critique of American society. In this study also we met Brazeal, the caring mother and doting grandmother, demonstrating her ongoing commitment to her fictive kin, Joan and Ernestine.

In this research, I sought to bridge the gap in the literature involving the leadership philosophy and praxis of an African American Female Foreign Service Officer, responding to McLellan's challenge:

Since little is known of the personal and professional journeys of many of these Black American leaders and diplomats, uncovering and illustrating more of their stories can serve as intellectual, personal, or professional motivation and stimulation for future generations. (p. 74)

From a phenomenological standpoint, my lived experience as a diplomatic practitioner led me to conclude that the State Department lacked the presence of two strategic biochemicals – melanin and estrogen. This is the case despite the Foreign Service Act of 1980 which calls for a Foreign Service that is truly representative of the American people in all their diversity. In other words, as with other institutions in American society, the State Department desperately needs people of color – men and women writ large – within the leadership ranks of the career Foreign Service. I invited Aurelia Erskine Brazeal to serve as the exemplar in this study (King, 2013) as we have much to learn from her practice of generative leadership. In addition, eight research respondents offered their observations and lived experiences concerning Ambassador Brazeal thereby adding depth and dimension to the study.

Rea's Rules follow:

- (1) Treat people with dignity and respect, regardless of their station in life or your station in life.
- (2) Keep an open mind – question your own thoughts and assumptions.
- (3) Listen and learn.
- (4) Recognize that people bloom at different times – meet them where they are.
- (5) Develop your critical thinking skills – continuously question conventional wisdom.
- (6) Do not fear footsteps behind you, instead embrace the opportunity to encourage, guide and develop those people.
- (7) Learn the system in which you work, otherwise you do not know how to go around it, under it or over it to get things done.
- (8) Give everyone the benefit of the doubt; assume they are doing their job to the best of their ability.
- (9) Everything takes longer than you think it will take so plan accordingly.

Notes

1. Found at the end of this study, Rea's Rules constitute a distillation of the tenets of Brazeal's leadership philosophy and praxis.
2. PEPFAR stands for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a U.S. Government policy initiative developed to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

3. The Thursday Luncheon Group, the State Department's first employee affinity organization, was founded in 1973 to increase the participation of African Americans and other minorities in the formulation, articulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy.
4. The Country Team is comprised of the senior leaders of various U.S. Government agencies operating at a U.S. Embassy abroad. The Country Team meets regularly to address key issues influencing diplomatic relations as well as the management of Embassy operations.
5. At the U.S. Department of State, a person's corridor reputation is what their colleagues say and think about them. A type of informal 360 review, the corridor reputation is built over time and is enhanced or damaged by whether you follow up, do what you say you'll do. ("Corridor Reputation," n.d.)
6. The State Department established the Dissent Channel in 1971 to allow employees, both Civil Service and Foreign Service, to voice criticism of government policy internally without fear of reprisal. Dissent Channel messages are disseminated to the Department's senior leadership and the Policy Planning Staff members are tasked with answering the messages.

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Atim Eneida George: A dedicated lifelong learner and retired career diplomat, Dr. George attended both traditional academic institutions (brick) as well as blended academic programs (click) and has successfully completed rigorous scholarly programs in both environments. In 2020, she published her dissertation, *Generative Leadership and the Life of Aurelia Erskine Brazeal, a Trailblazing African American Female Foreign Service Officer*. Her interdisciplinary research revealed, *inter alia*, that generative leaders embody and exhibit compassion, prosocial behavior, strategic vision, integrity and clarity of purpose. As a Postdoctoral Fellow at UC Santa Barbara, (2020–2021 academic year) Dr. George's work as an embedded researcher led to the production of *Respect – Making Your Mess, Your Message: What I Learned About Courageous Truth-telling from Gender-based Violence*, exploring the intricacies of that difficult yet important topic. In addition to her research, Dr. George designed and delivered a 5-week seminar entitled *Black Women, Intergenerational Trauma and Healing*, under the auspices of the Discovery@UCSB Program for undergraduate transfer students at UC Santa Barbara. Atim Eneida George can be contacted at: ageorge@antioch.edu

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