LOUD SILENCE: BLACK WOMEN IN THE ACADEMY LIFE HISTORIES AND NARRATIVES

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

“Loud Silence: Black Women in the Academy Life Histories and Narratives” analyses the life histories of three Black women faculty at predominantly white institutions. Using Womanist theory as a theoretical framework this project pays particular attention to the ways in which the participants story their lives and make sense of their multiple identities inside and outside the academy. In addition, the project uses their narratives as a foundation to discuss the impact of gender, class, race, ability and sexuality particularly in academia and in society as a whole.
To My Ancestors
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## Definition of Terms

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<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>A person with ancestors from Africa; connected to the African diaspora the movement of Africans and their descendants to places throughout the world - predominantly to the Americas, then later to Europe, the Middle East and other places around the globe.</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Citizens (by birth) of the United States with African ancestry.</td>
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<td>Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)</td>
<td>Institutions (for the sake of this study, Colleges and Universities) where the majority of the population (student, faculty, staff and administration) is White.</td>
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<td>Academy</td>
<td>Higher education in general.</td>
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<td>Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)</td>
<td>Institutions founded largely after the Civil War with the purpose of educating the Black community.</td>
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<td>Campus climate</td>
<td>The general atmosphere of the campus as a unique society; the degree to which members of the campus community feel included and respected; both policy and practice that refers to behaviors within an institution of higher education that influences whether an individual feels safe, listened to, and treated fairly and with respect; the quality of personal interactions and communication.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women of Color</td>
<td>Largely used by women of color feminists to describe a shared history of colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism and systematic subjugation of women around the world, but particularly in Western countries or Western controlled countries</td>
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Chapter 1

I Want You to Know and Remember

Introduction

They asked me here to speak about scholarship. So I’m going to turn this back around on you all, since you all are able bodied young people, you all tell me, what is scholarship? Don’t be shy. Young man right here in the front row, you look like you want to say something. No. Anybody? Nobody? I see you all are going to make me sing for my supper today. Well scholarship is merely things that people profess to know after conducting research. I see some folks shaking their heads in disbelief. Sistah, you’re shaking your head hard. You don’t believe that definition? Why not? (Student shouts it’s too easy) Too easy she said. Oh someone told you scholarship was harder than the definition I gave? Yea folks do that sometimes. We call them gatekeepers. They don’t want everybody to know that they have the potential to be a scholar but we can talk about that in a minute. So now that we have a definition, what do you all know or profess to know? Don’t be shy. (Silence) I’m comfortable with the silence. I’m a Black woman we’ve been trained to wait in silence. Ok, well I’ll tell you how I came to be a scholar and what my scholarship is. Not to brag, but I came out the womb a scholar. My inherent love of people, particularly Black people, particularly Black women, pushed me to be a scholar. I was born in Mississippi; unfortunately Nina hadn’t penned the lyrics to Mississippi God Damn yet. Anybody know that song? Okay a few of you well that should have been the song that described the year I was born and the time I spent in Mississippi. My scholarship came from taking in the things I say around me. I grew up listening to stories and grew up watching the way folks told those stories. Anybody know any good storytellers growing up? I was exposed to great art before I ever stepped foot inside of the academy. I grew up around street poets, corner griots, and white-gloved church ladies with big fancy hats. I mean they all had other jobs but the real thing that they gave to me was stories; they were storytellers. Not just verbally but they told those stories with their bodies, with their relationships, their craftsmanship the land they lived on; from a very early age I was collecting data and interpreting it. I was an anthropologist before I knew what one was. I left Mississippi when I was young and the only that helped me calm the blow of the separation from my immediate family was preserving every story, every smell and every pebble of the place that I came from, particularly preserving the words from the best scholar/storyteller I ever knew, my grandmother Nan. Remembering became my scholarship. I was passionate about people, about their stories and the importance of remembering those stories. The importance it has on the community and the world to remember those stories so I moved from just wanting to keep the stories of Mississippi alive and went to Africa and studied in a village in the Congo; I studied their stories. I heard somebody in the back say, ‘Why Africa?’ . You, young man in the back you said, ‘Why Africa?’ That’s a good point. Why Africa? Why not? As an anthropologist you are trained to go somewhere else. My somewhere else was the
Congo. There were places in the Congo that reminded me of Mississippi so why not Africa? It wasn’t until I was trained to the scholarship in Mississippi that I could even pack my bags and go to the Congo. I learned how to be a scholar by first studying myself. My scholarship comes from where I come from. What will your scholarship be? Questions?¹

The first time I met Dr. Vivi South she was giving a talk to undergraduate students entitled, “Searching for the Scholar Within: My Personal Journey to Scholarship”. In her lecture she spoke about the importance of scholarship in her life. That was the day I first considered being a scholar. I want you to know and remember, Dr. Vivi South.

I first met Dr. Theresa Bayarea during a protest rally against the passage of Proposition 209 and post-Standing Policy 1 and post-Standing Policy 2. She and students in her modern dance class marched from the dance studio where their class was being held, onto the quad to stand in solidarity with other students, faculty and staff protesting the elimination of affirmative action in California state institutions. With a bullhorn in one hand, a djembe drum in the other and a backpack on her back, she motioned her students to make a semi circle in front of the bell tower. Once assembled, she shouted over the bullhorn, “This is what diversity looks like!” Signaling a man to come forward and drum she and her students each took turns dancing in the center of the semi circle. Within minutes students from the music department made it out to the quad and joined in the informal jam session with instruments in hand. Other onlookers began to clap and chant as Dr. Bayarea and her students began randomly pulling students into the semi-circle to dance. Dr. Bayarea grabbed a friend standing next to me and pulled her into the semi-circle and before walking away turned and said to me, “You’re next, I’m coming

¹ Excerpts from “Searching for the Scholar Within: My Personal Journey to Scholarship” by Vivi South. (Audiotape recorded Nov. 11th 1999).
back to get you. Everybody has to confess”. She moved me. That was the first day I witnessed scholarship in action, I want you to know and remember Dr. Theresa Bayarea.

I first met Dr. Laketi Durban during office hours. I came in to meet with her during office hours to ask for any advice she had about applying to doctoral programs. She gave me a list of things to consider when thinking about schools including information on institutional fit, campus climate, faculty mentoring and funding. She asked me what I wanted to do after I received my PhD. I told her that I wanted to be a professor and I asked her what her experience had been like up to this point as an assistant professor. She paused. Got up from her desk and poked her head out her office door to see if anyone could hear and walked back to her desk and said, “It’s been tough”. She was candid; she told me her truth. I want you to know and remember Dr. Laketi Durban.

I want you to know and remember each of these women because the above oddments and their stories throughout this project characterize what it means to be a Black Woman in the academy. In listening to their cacophony of stories I repeatedly recognized that the academy charges an exorbitant admission fee to those who fall outside the lines of White, Christian, male, heterosexual, middle class, Western, able bodied and Citizen. However, at the same time, the academy is in a “diversity moment”, ironically giving attention, time, and resources to creating inclusive campuses, valuing racial and ethnic diversity, and authorizing a range of voices to speak about their experiences. This tension is embedded in the stories told to me by Dr. South, Dr. Bayarea, and Dr. Durban. Their stories illuminate not only the marginalization of Black women faculty in the ivory tower, but also the academy’s current entrapment of the very
groups that make for a diverse and multicultural campus climate. Collectively their voices urge us to put lessons of history and theory to current use; advise us to create open circles and speak a language of clarity & plainness that has influence beyond the academy; insist on us seeing the academy not as a one-time event in our lives or a separate universe, but a space where we/they can willfully reassemble the fractured parts of ourselves.

Over the past four decades American institutions of higher education have struggled with enacting diversity into the kinds of practices and policies that create campuses and institutions where all people are welcome and able to be a full participating member of a vibrant intellectual community. On February 18th, 2010 I received an email from a friend-colleague with the subject heading, “UCSD Compton Cookout” that served as a vivid reminder of distance between diversity rhetoric in the academy and the valuing of Black and brown bodies, intellect, and ways of being. In the email my friend-colleague writes,

Hey Girl,
I don’t know if you heard about this yet but this is was circulating on a white fraternity's FB page. Can you believe this mess? I’m never shocked and it is La Jolla, but really this is extra! Peep how long the section is on Sistah’s. Aaah yes to be Black and female in America, in the world, in the academy. I don’t know if I’m up to making this moment teachable, I’m tired. Call me when you can.

In solidarity,
C

"February marks a very important month in American society. No, i’m not referring to Valentine’s day or Presidents day. I’m talking about Black History month. As a time to celebrate and in hopes of showing respect, the Regents community cordially invites you to its very first Compton Cookout.

For guys: I expect all males to be rockin Jersey's, stuntin' up in ya White T (XXXL smallest size acceptable), anything FUBU, Ecko, Rockawear, High/low top Jordans or Dunks, Chains, Jorts, stunner shades, 59 50 hats, Tats, etc.
For girls: For those of you who are unfamiliar with ghetto chicks-Ghetto chicks usually have gold teeth, start fights and drama, and wear cheap clothes - they consider Baby Phat to be high class and expensive couture. They also have short, nappy hair, and usually wear cheap weave, usually in bad colors, such as purple or bright red. They look and act similar to Shenaynay, and speak very loudly, while rolling their neck, and waving their finger in your face. Ghetto chicks have a very limited vocabulary, and attempt to make up for it, by forming new words, such as "constipulated", or simply cursing persistently, or using other types of vulgarities, and making noises, such as "hmmg!", or smacking their lips, and making other angry noises, grunts, and faces. The objective is for all you lovely ladies to look, act, and essentially take on these "respectable" qualities throughout the day.

Several of the regents condos will be teaming up to house this monstrosity, so travel house to house and experience the various elements of life in the ghetto.

We will be serving 40's, Kegs of Natty, dat Purple Drank- which consists of sugar, water, and the color purple, chicken, coolade, and of course Watermelon. So come one and come all, make ya self before we break ya self, keep strapped, get yo shine on, and join us for a day party to be remembered- or not." 2

While the aforementioned racist incident at the University of California at San Diego has recently made national and international news headlines, college campuses of late have been plagued with racist and sexist theme parties, hate speech and symbols of violence including but not limited to the displays of noose’s, rampant use of the term “no homo” and exotification and glorification of racist mascots; appalling and blatant acts of racism and sexism that have largely been dismissed or deemed as students exercising “poor judgment” rather than serving as an indictment of institutional climate and global attitudes on race, class, gender, sexuality and other subjectivities. What does it mean to be Black and female and teach and work in such an environment?

In my friend-colleague’s email was a story, albeit brief, about what is like to be a Black woman in the academy. Her email hints at the common disrespect aimed at Black

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2 Personal email correspondence from a Black female colleague that is a graduate student and graduate assistant at the University of California San Diego.
women in the academy that undermines and circumvents Black women from being seen as equitable contributors of knowledge in the academy and beyond. In addition in her brief story she hints at how the seeming responsibility to combat that racism or such acts is the sole responsibility of people of color. Stories are everywhere. We hear them, we read them, we write them and we tell them. As we tell stories we create opportunities to express views, reveal emotions and present aspects of our personal and professional lives. Our ability to communicate not just our own experiences but the experiences of others enables us to transcend personal frameworks and take on wider perspectives. This attribute together with its international, transhistorical and transcultural usage, makes storytelling a powerful learning tool (McDrury & Alterio, 2002).

Authors from a range of backgrounds have suggested telling stories as a means of making sense of experience. These include psychologists (Bruner, 1986, 1987; Erickson, 1975; Polkinghorne, 1988), philosophers (MacIntyre, 1981; Ricoeur, 1984), historians (Clifford, 1986; Mink, 1978; White, 1973, 1981), anthropologists (Bruner, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989), psychoanalysts (Schaefer, 1981; Spence, 1982), health professionals (Benner, 1984; Diekelmann, 1990, 1992; Sandelzoski, 1991; Taylor, 2000), therapists (Hart, 1995; Smith, 2001; White & Epston, 1990), legal scholars (Crenshaw, 1995; Calmore, 1995; Banks, 1995) and educators (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Clandinin, 1993; Friend, 2000; Lauritzen and Jaeger, 1997). In this project I link the art of storytelling from Dr. Vivi South, Dr. Theresa Bayarea and Dr. Laketi Durban with cultural and personal memory and demonstrate how the academy can use stories to inform, develop and advance equity for Black women in the academy.
Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

The lack of tenured Black women in the academy is fundamentally due to powerful vestiges of racism, patriarchy, and other forms of debilitating hegemony. I have been privileged to hear, listen, witness and re-tell Vivi, Theresa and Laketi stories and in some instances my own story of how they/we have survived, lost themselves/ourselves to or in the academy, and in each story is testimony that our very bodies and presence stand in opposition to what is believed appropriate not only for the academy but in society in general. That opposition creates silence. We are expected to remain silent about our experiences and only tell stories when asked by those who are often not genuine and only attempting to sell commodify, repackage and sell our stories in sound bites or fragments on diversity brochures to entice a truth that is far from honest and far from the stories that would actually tell if we believed people were actually listening. Are you listening? The telling of our real stories are in clandestine enclaves where we know another is actually listening, in hallways after we have carefully looked over our shoulders, in a therapists chair, in each other’s homes, in beauty shops, in knowing glances, in simple “how are you’s?” met with “I’m tired but I’m hanging in there” exchanges, at funerals or bedsides where (racism, sexism, homophobia and oppression has masked itself as) depression, exhaustion, cancer, high blood pressure and other stressors that ravage our bodies, and in tenure celebrations, prayer circles, birthdays, weddings and baby births; connecting in ways that enrich ourselves, relationships and practice.

According to The Chronicle of Higher Education 2009 Almanac Issue, there were approximately 485,595 full-time tenure track faculty members holding academic ranks of assistant (173,395), associate (143,692), and professor (168,508) as of fall 2007. Of
those numbers 317,087 were tenured. Of that number, faulty of color represented 71,929 tenured faculty or 14.8% of the tenured population and of those numbers women of color faculty represented only 15,347 or 4.8% of the tenured population, suggesting problems of racism and sexism across United States college campuses (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2008).

Common experiences of academic isolation and institutional racism, sexism, homophobia and elitism are prevalent in discussions particularly with Black women regarding their experiences of in the academy (hooks, 1984, 1989; Lee, 2008). Such barriers have become tremendous career obstacles that have had a devastating effect on their emotional health, physical health, well-being, and academic careers in addition to their overall attitudes towards higher education (Lee, 2008; Taylor, 2008; White, 2008). Chana Kai Lee discusses the barriers of Black women in the academy in her piece, “Journey Toward A Different Self” (2008). She notes,

The Rock of Gibraltar myth be damned. The life of a Black woman academic can be just as eventful and fragile as the lives of others. Over the past four years, I have learned some very tough lessons about my body, my character and my professional community. When I pull back from the agonizing intricate details of every lived moment, I get some helpful perspective. But this philosophical way of seeing goes only so far in capturing what I/we have endured. (Lee, 2008, p. 121)

The use of life history methods within this research project will help to answer:

- How do the life experiences of Black women academicians show the gendered, sexualized and elitist structure of the academy and society in general?
- How do Black women in the academy make sense of their lives (in the academy and in general, do they see them as connected? If so how)?
- How do Black women navigate their own sense of self worth within the academy and within society in general?
Purpose of the Study

While the topic of Black women in the academy has been explored in various historical records including their own memoirs, interviews about their experiences in the academy and their personal reflections, their life histories have yet to be investigated in depth. Those studies that only focus on how Black women are defined in and by the academy fracture and splinter the lives of Black women in the academy, relegating their worth solely to their labor. Dividing their lives in this way assumes that their lives outside the academy look very different from or similar to their lives in the academy, limiting the importance of these similarities and differences in research and the construction of Black women in the academy. It is in this light that my research will contribute to the representation of Black women in the academy and Black women’s position in society in general. The use of life history methods in this study will account for Black women in the academy in ways that previous uses of historical methods and other variations of qualitative methods have yet to do.

By using life history methods to research the aforementioned questions, researchers will be better able to understand the experiences of Black women in the academy. Vivi, Theresa and Laketi’s narratives demonstrate how the academy and society in general, has marginalized or silenced a part or parts of their identity. By listening to their narratives, researchers are able to understand how the participants make sense of their lives within a racist, heterosexist, patriarchal and classist society and how they in turn make sense of their lives in the academy. Lastly, the stories in this study account for how Vivi, Theresa and Laketi have crafted their own form of agency to survive and navigate their lives inside and outside of the academy.
Black women faculty at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) have for years occupied the margins of the academy. Race, sexuality, class and gender compound their lives often calling for wrenching alliances to only one aspect of their identity frequently at the expense of the other(s). As a result, Black women face significant obstacles to their full participation and contribution to higher education (Carter, Pearson & Shavlik, 1988; Danley, 2003; Holmes & Land, 2007). While many PWIs call attention to the increase in numbers of Black women in tenured and tenure track positions as a clear sign of change, more needs to be done to ensure not only an increase in numbers, but the full equity and inclusion of Black women in these institutions (Employess in Colleges and Universities, 2001). Furthermore, while the increase of Black women on predominantly white campuses may suggest change, their increase in numbers does not suggest the end of racist, sexist, elitist and patriarchal structures, but may rather suggest how racism, sexism, class elitism and patriarchy have commodified their identities for oppressive structural benefit and call attention to the ever present conservative nature of the American academy. In addition research patterns reflect a general tendency to treat race and gender as separate issues in education literature (Cobham, 2003). To remedy this problem, scholars have argued that researchers must be aware of the differences among minority groups and gender and not compress them into a meaningless whole (Wilkerson, 1987). Identifying these differences can be accomplished through intense interrogation into Black women’s history, dispelling myths about their culture and formulating theoretical frameworks that relate to their identity within the context of higher education (Vital, 1989).
Predominantly white colleges and universities of the late 20th and 21st century feign interest in solving issues of diversity, yet seem to be moving slowly or in some instances backwards in seriously addressing the disparities that continue to exist for both students and faculty within their institutions. Through life histories and narratives this project, weaves an interesting and complex look into the everyday lives of Black women allowing their narratives to stand as testimony to how their lives were shaped, molded, constrained by dominant ideologies of racism and sexism and how they have made and crafted meaning and identity within their lives.

**Significance of the Study**

This qualitative study of the lives of Doctors, Vivi South, Theresa Bayarea and Laketi Durban life stories is significant because the body of scholarly knowledge on women in academe suffers from a dearth of substantive work devoted to the study of women faculty’s life history narratives in general and specifically on the study on Black women faculty. Their three disparate and sometimes similar narratives represent a very rich transnational migratory complex subjectivity account. Their narratives at times point to the contradictory lessons and messages that Black girls learn; that is important to be educated, yet they must give up very valuable pieces of themselves in order to be fully seen as learned; pointing to the possible explanation of the current decline in the number of Black faculty at predominantly White institutions. Their stories point to evidence of stress from the tenure process, low wages, difficulty of promotion, and dissatisfaction with campus environment; all contributing factors as to why Black women are no longer entering into teaching in record number (Gregory, 1999; Myers, 2002).
At other times their narratives present the resistance of Black women to be defined by their work and place more emphasis on their personal relationships, personal accomplishments and their ability to define success for themselves. However, most importantly their narratives point to their bravery. To be among a cohort of three women brave enough to share some of the most intimate details of their lives is powerful. In fact, a number of women were asked to participate in this project but only three agreed to complete the six interviews, others declined to participate because of the personal nature of the project; pointing to silencing effect of racism, sexism and exploitation, where the very people and structures responsible for that exploitation are often protected by Black women’s reluctance to expose their experiences.

Lastly the narratives that make up *Loud Silence* are important because they enrich our understanding of the way that race, gender, sexuality, class and ability comes together in the ivory tower and in society in general. Their narratives stand as testimony to others that they are not alone. Often it is the feelings of isolation, hurt, devastation and powerlessness that feed and make oppression possible.

Rather than analyze the narratives of *Vivi, Theresa* and *Laketi*, the analysis and additional significance comes in the form of three important contributions to academic discourses/conversations regarding qualitative methods, feminist theory, memory studies, and the power of stories. In order to be open to speaking to any and all the experiences of the three women in this project and the experiences of black women in general using a theoretical framework that is fragile, mutable and makes no rigid claims to a concrete theoretical is paramount. Using a theoretical approach that employs any and everything available to speak to Black women’s conditions, experiences and ways of being lessens
essentialist claims to Black women’s identities and their subsequent objectification. Using theory in this way thus pushes researchers to not only use larger more encompassing theoretical frameworks but suggests that researchers re-evaluate the common process of choosing a theory before conducting research. This traditional model endured because it was/is believed that ‘practical knowledge (praxis) was context bound while theoretical knowledge was/is comparatively context free’ (Eraut, 1994 p. 50). *Loud Silence* recognizes that theoretical knowledge is affected by context and a significant proportion of the context was given in the process of listening to and collecting Vivi, Theresa and Laketi’s stories. In addition, using theory in this way urges researchers to engage research as one connected process versus a fractured process of data collection and analysis which often disconnects us from the very people we are attempting to write up.

The second contribution is to the field of memory. Stories/oral narrative memories by women have the ability to connect us to a larger cultural memory and has the power to impact history significantly because it would not be the same without women stories; women’s memories. In western culture oral narrative memories are often seen as possibly being flawed because of human beings ability to remember every detail of event and thus re-creating a memory that perhaps did not occur and defying a long-standing tradition of written history as objective truth. In addition even in many non-Western cultures women’s storytelling traditions are seen as culturally unimportant as the majority of culturally relevant storytelling is done by men in positions of power. *Loud Silence* relied exclusively on oral narratives. My goal as a researcher was not that each woman recall every detail of their life experiences with precise accuracy nor was it to triangulate their
narratives with other outside data sources existing outside of the interview process rather
my goal was to use their bodies and my own body as a means of triangulation beyond
their tape recorded interviews. By affectively listening, read as listening to spoken
language, body language, tone and syntax as each woman was re-telling memories I was
able to revisit places, people, time, spaces and watch as each woman made sense of our
lives both then (in the past) and now (in the present). I was able to understand how their
memories in particular have helped to make and shape institutions, particularly the
academy and how they affect our reconstructions of historical moments.

The third and final contribution comes in the use of cultural memory as a means
of resistance particularly in relationship to feminist theory. Cultural memory has the
ability to redress hegemony and oppression. Many of the memories that Vivi, Theresa
and Laketi present in their narratives are theirs solely. However their articulation of their
experience (private memories) do not exist in a vacuum but rather signifies that memory
always exist in connection to various forms of collectivity; a collective cultural memory.
Cultural memory allows for the simultaneous articulation of private memory and
collective memory. For example each of the women in Loud Silence shares stories of
sexual violation. While their stories are each different in context their stories speak to a
collective cultural memory of Black women being subject to rape and sexual violation by
means of slavery, colonialism and imperialism. I argue that is the telling of personal
stories (often made silent by racism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression) in
conjunction with a collective cultural memory that create a space for Black women to
speak back to subsequently challenge forms of tyranny.
Chapter Overviews

Chapter one introduces the women in the study, the importance of the study and briefly discusses the major contributions of the study. Chapter two, which contains the review of literature, is broken down into three major sections: an early history of higher education in America; studies of higher education faculty; and Black women in the Academy. Chapter two utilizes past and current research of higher education faculty in America to suggest that the lack of research on Black women in the academy speaks to entrenched racism and sexism that continue to plague the academy. In addition chapter two also makes the point that much of the research that has been done on Black women in the academy has been done by Black women scholars, suggesting that their participation in the academy is both personal (often giving light to their own struggles in the academy) and political (adding to a trajectory of epistemological discourse and thought produced by and about Black women).

Chapter three focuses on the historic experiences of Black women in the academy. The purpose of the chapter is to provide a review of selected literature related to the historic experiences of Black women in predominately White institutions of higher education in order to better situate the contemporary narratives of Vivi, Theresa and Laketi. The chapter explores the importance of education within the Black community and the history of Black women in American higher education; and investigates Black women’s historic experiences in predominantly white institutions, particularly their experiences at Oberlin College. Oberlin becomes central to chart the history of Black women in the academy as it was the first predominantly white college to openly admit students of color into its matriculating bachelor’s degree program and served as the
educational home to such notable Black women educators Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Lastly, the chapter closes with an examination of Black Women’s experiences in higher education in the early 20th century.

Chapter four highlights the methodology used to frame, collect, and write up the narratives of Vivi, Theresa and Laketi. The chapter begins with a brief discussion on the impetus that started the project, giving readers an opportunity to learn more about the researcher’s personal experiences and how she later translated them into a research project and scholarship. The chapter continues with a discussion of qualitative methods, looking particularly at life history methods and its utility in research on Black women. The chapter then discusses the research design of the project and ends with a dialogue on the process of writing up and crafting the narratives of each participant.

Chapters five, six, and seven consist of the narratives of Dr. Vivi South, Dr. Theresa Bayarea and Dr. Laketi Durban respectively. Each chapter begins with a portraiture poem created from transcripts to serve as an introduction to each woman and their thoughts on key aspects of their lives (Hill, 2005). In addition a small introduction of the relationship between the participant and the researcher is given. By and large however, each chapter consists of raw transcript data from various interviews, emails and research journals that have been assembled together create a cohesive story on each woman’s life.

Chapter eight is devoted to the praxis made possible by the research process. In this chapter the researcher clearly identifies the practical contributions to qualitative methods and the theoretical contributions to critical theory that were birthed from participant reflections and her own reflections during the research process.
Chapter nine is the epilogue where the researcher speaks directly to readers and discusses the dilemma of researching researchers and noticeably engages the notion of the personal and political and it’s clear and at times illusive theme in the project and its connection to Black women in the academy.
Chapter 2

The Construction of Black Women in Higher Education Scholarship

Introduction

Black women’s presence in American higher education has been felt since the academies inception. The simultaneous restriction of people of color and women from these institutions made Black women’s absence pronounced and the academies and society’s view of Black women’s intellectual worth clear. These imbalances however did not deter Black women from pursuing an education and leaving a mark on American education. Scholars of Education and various other fields have and continue to research these women, past and present, using various methods to reclaim and continue to give voice to Black women in the academy. The methods most often used to research Black women in the academy have been historical methods (archives, journals, diaries, oral histories) and qualitative (interviews, ethnographies). Whether central to their initial research question, both historical methods and qualitative methods have and continue to examine Black women’s experiences in the academy and examine how race and gender converge in the academy.

While to most historians and scholars, given the fact Black women could not and would not enroll into PhD programs until the latter part of the twentieth century, Black women’s history in higher education, would began largely at the middle of the twentieth century. However, Black women’s struggle to be educated and educate others begins when the first Black woman learned to read and taught another. Black women’s history in the academy within scholarship has been constructed in a number of ways, from a virtual absence, to marginal analyses of race and gender within the historical construction of
American higher education institutions, to reclamation of Black women’s history in education, to autobiographic and biographies of Black women and their experiences in the academy.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the epistemological construction of Black women in the academy via scholarship to make obvious their paradoxical absence and presence in research. The chapter begins with a review of seminal scholarship on the history of higher education in America highlighting how the missing histories on people of color in general and Black women specifically from this texts may not be intentional but speak to a larger problem how the unintentional becomes common practice and common place; thus giving permission for exclusion in the contemporary moment. Next the chapter discusses the contemporary research on American higher education faculty noting that the majority of contemporary scholarship is molded after, or based on, research protocol based on white male faculty; limiting researchers from understanding the possible effects of race and gender on facilities lives in the academy. The chapter ends with a review of scholarship on Black women in the academy done by Black women scholars noting how the reclamation of Black women’s experiences in the academy by Black women scholars has become both a personal and political undertaking that continues be a necessity for Black women’s survival in the academy.

**Early History of American Higher Education**

grant colleges and public state schools and their development overtime within the United States, as well as discussing institutions such as community, women's, and historically black colleges, proprietary schools, and freestanding professional colleges. Thelin’s book marks only the second major historical work to be devoted to the history of higher education in the United States and while comprehensive in covering the major changes in higher education policy in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century, his critical analysis of race and gender and it’s effect on inclusive and exclusive policies and practices relegates his discussion of Black women and men and women of color histories in the academy to brief points in his overall discussion of the history of American higher education.

While Thelin’s book continues to be the most comprehensive work on the history of higher education in America to date, and continues to be an example of exemplary writing and good historical research, the absence of more source material that includes the voices and scholarship on Black women’s history in the academy, as well as other men and women of color, and a critical discussion on racism and sexism throughout history, causes the aforementioned agency and America’s racial and gender structures to be left out of the historical construction of American higher education and disappearing the contributions to the academy by Black women.

Barbara Miller Solomon (1985) undertook the task of writing the history of women in American higher education in her book, *In the Company of Educated Women*. Until Solomon, no historian had tried to analyze the entire sweep of women's higher educational history since Mabel Newcomer's (1959) *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* in 1959. Newcomer tried to cover a wide variety of women's
institutions, but had fallen back on the environment she knew best as a Vassar professor: the eastern women's colleges (Eisenmann, 1997 p. 689). In writing *In the Company of Educated Women*, Solomon challenged the view that colleges had failed women in terms of equal performance with men and asserted that women had declared their place in higher education and had, in fact, repeatedly pushed colleges to accommodate their needs.

In a retrospective analysis and critique of Solomon’s work, historian Linda Eisenmann (1997) offers, Solomon’s historical approach in writing *In the Company of Educated Women* clearly created more room for women historians and women as subjects of history, than any earlier, comprehensive school-based histories. While Eisenmann praises Solomon for her advancement of women’s history in higher education she notes, Recent scholarship has begun to disaggregate the groups of women who participated in higher education, examining the specific experiences of racial, ethnic, and religious groups who sometimes formed separate institutions and sometimes pushed for a place within the mainstream. Historians have not yet, however, integrated this work into the overall story of women's higher education, causing it to remain a patchwork of secondary material awaiting a synthesis or broader framework, or appearing as appendages to wider histories in the way that Solomon wrote. Like the populations it discusses, this scholarship has too frequently been allowed by historians to sit at the periphery of traditional history. (Eisenmann, 1997, p. 691)

Solomon’s lack of inclusion of women of color and their history of education and the history inclusion/exclusion from American higher education normalizes the experiences of white women, particularly white-middle class women. While her book highlights the sexism inherent in the foundation of the idea of higher education in the United States and the struggle of white women to create a more inclusive space for women; her failure to create a narrative of how all women, particularly Black women
fight to be educated limits the impact providing a fractured narrative of feminism and its challenges to oppression in the academy.

**Studies of Higher Education Faculty**

An overwhelming amount of research done on American higher education faculty is done within a larger group context and few researchers and studies have focused specifically on the experiences and perceptions of Black women (Cobham, 2003). Much of the research on faculty either focuses on the faculty in general which is based on and framed around the experiences of White men. Hull et al., (1982) and Collins (2000) affirm that the intellectual void surrounding research on Black women faculty is in part related to the politics of a White male-dominated academy. By this the authors are suggesting that the void in scholarship stems from the dominant group’s narrow acceptance of research that promotes knowledge about people of color in the academy.

In their early study of college faculty at the University of North Carolina, Anderson, Frierson, and Lewis (1979) point out that White faculty members may not share the academic and research interest of their Black colleagues due to cultural differences and misunderstandings. As a consequence, the study found that White faculty offered less support for research projects that were of interest to Black faculty and were less likely to collaborate on professional projects. The effect of White colleagues not supporting research projects that exist outside of perceived mainstream topics, indicates that styles of thinking, acting, speaking and concepts of knowledge have become the socially coded for correct privileged ways of thinking, acting, speaking and knowledge, coded White (Collins, 2000; Frierson, 1996; hooks, 1984).
Studies and researchers that do focus on women faculty generally focus on the experiences of White women. In a compelling study of the impact of children and marriage on the career advancement of women faculty, Mason & Goulden (2003) found that even though women make up nearly half of the PhD population, they are not advancing at the same rate as men to the upper ranks of the professoriate; many are dropping out of the race. The study conducted largely in conjunction with Survey of Doctorate Recipients (SDR) and interview data found that babies do matter for men and women PhDs working in academia, particularly their timing. They found that men with "early" babies—those with a child entering their household within five years of their receiving the PhD—are 38 percent more likely than their women counterparts to achieve tenure. Moreover, the pattern of tenure achievement for women and men stayed almost identical in the humanities, social sciences, and hard sciences. It also held true across four-year institutions, from large research universities to small liberal arts colleges. Their study found that only one in three women who accepts a tenure-track university job before having a child ever becomes a mother. Women who achieve tenure are more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to be single twelve years after earning the PhD figure. Women who are married when they begin their faculty careers are much more likely than men in the same position to divorce or separate from their spouses. Women, it seems, cannot have it all—tenure and a family—while men can.

While their data tells the story of women in the academy specifically and women in professional career fields in general, their study does not account for how their findings are impacted by race and sexuality. Much like white women, Black women account for more than half of the Black graduate students (NCES 2008). Assuming that
once Black women graduated that they wanted to pursue a career in the academy and have a family, according to their study and given the small percentage of Black women in the academy the likelihood of Black women achieving tenure and having a family at the same time, would have a critical impact on their professional lives as well as their personal lives. In addition the study only studies the impact of marriage and babies, and not domestic partnerships and babies or adoption, constructing study that centers on a White, female and heterosexual norm.

Studies done on faculty of color generally focus solely on race. In *Faculty of Color in Academe: Bittersweet Success*, Turner and Myers (2000) construct a compelling argument of the importance of people of color in the American higher education. Written in the aftermath of the dismantling of affirmative action in California and Texas, Turner and Myers focus their studies on major research universities noting, “the major research universities are gateways to positions of significant influence in the United states. These prestigious institutions have guarded privilege in this country for over two centuries, and they are very significant part of the path taken by most people who come to occupy powerful positions” (p. x). Using statistical data and personal narratives Turner and Myers find that challenges to successful recruitment, retention and development of faculty of color to be major obstacles in their full participation in the academy. In addition their findings and analysis show that the predominant barrier is racial and ethnic bias resulting in unwelcoming and unsupportive work environments for faculty of color. It is important to note that their study is not a study of failures, but rather success of faculty of color. Giving a detailed history of the participation of people of color in the academy they discuss how in spite of a chilly climate many scholars of color continue to work,
contribute and push universities and colleges all over the country to recognize the racism that plagues the academy.

While the collection of work documented by Turner and Myers is pivotal to bringing issues of continued racism in the academy to the forefront, particularly the academy as white privileged space, little attention was given to the construction of gender in the academy and the academy as a very heterosexual male space.

While all these studies (Turner & Myers, 2000; Mason & Goulden, 2002; Anderson, Frierson, and Lewis, 1979) are important and critical to both the tradition of research on American higher education and our understanding of the experiences of faculty, they only help to explain some of Black women’s experiences in the academy.

**Scholarship on Black Women in the Academy**

Although the research literature has begun to reflect increasing interest in, nonmainstream concerns and issues in American higher education, there is still a paucity of research on those whose voices have been silent in the academy. Missing from the tradition is narrative research that focuses on individual narratives of Black women, and how they make sense of their lives in the academy. This represents a strong gap in a tradition of research on American higher education faculty; one that once filled will contribute greatly to our understanding of higher education in America.

The majority of the research that examines Black women’s lives in the academy has been done by Black women scholars. Often seen as a personal and political project; Black women scholars reclaim and center Black women’s experiences in the academy within their scholarship. Most noted is the work of Linda Perkins and Jeanne Noble. Perkins contribution to the history of American higher education comes in her
explanation of Black women’s experiences at HBCUs where they often competed with men, and at predominantly White institutions, where they were tolerated, but rarely welcomed. In her early work, Perkins highlighted the dilemma faced by many Black women in the nineteenth century as they confronted the "cult of true womanhood" and its prescriptions for femininity (Perkins, 1983 pp. 17-28). Perkins explained how believers in such notions virtually omitted Black women because of strong racial prejudices that defied ever seeing these women as pure. Yet when African American women nonetheless persisted in their own Black colleges, their contributions were eventually downplayed by African American men, who needed to bolster their sense of men's contribution to "race uplift." Black women were doubly disadvantaged, then: they were excluded from White opportunities and devalued in Black settings where they had made initial progress (Perkins, 1983 p. 18). As Perkins shows in her recent work, Black women continued to navigate these difficult waters, slowly making inroads in the predominantly White settings and asserting their place in Black colleges.

Jeanne Noble’s book, The Negro Woman's College Education, was the first study to outline the history of Black women in the academy. Her work, published in 1956, remains one of the most critical studies in examining the historic needs of Black women in higher education. By using surveys, questionnaires and interviews, Noble’s analyzes what Black women wanted to get out of college, what college did for them and what college failed to do for them within a critical historical and philosophical framework and review of higher education for Black women. Her work has since been used, quoted and critiqued by any scholar writing on women in higher education.
The most recent book to examine Black women in the Academy from a historical perspective is the work of Stephanie Y. Evans (2007), *Black women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954*. Evans main goal is to chart the educational attainment of African American women in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century’s. Using the autobiographies of Pauli Murray, Zora Neale Hurston, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Lena Beatrice Morton, Mary Church Terrell and Rose Butler Browne Evans examine the educational experiences, academic careers of these women as well as analyses and critique of their educational philosophies. Evans pays particular attention to the memoirs of Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune and examines their ideas on research, service and teaching in the academy. In addition Evans pays particular attention to not only to the climate within the academy in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, but to the larger American society at those moments.

The greatest contribution of Evans work is her analysis of Black women, particularly Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune as educational philosophers. Evans notes that Cooper’s and Bethune’s views on service learning and the purpose of education as citizenship and why they are not often discussed in contemporary philosophical debates of education. Evans argues that these women are not part of our present discussions because they were not apart past intellectual movements. She notes Black women were “barred from the upper echelons of higher education, membership in professional societies, and admittance to publishing houses, their ideas were not widely dispersed” and subsequently written out of the history of American education and philosophical thought (Evans, 2007). Her use of interpretive methods allows for a
rewriting of Black women in the academy and their contribution to Educational philosophies.

Black women historians and scholars centering of Black women within their scholarship has been, both a professional and personal undertaking. While Black women scholars account for most of the scholarship on Black women’s history, they are not the only scholars in the field to push for a more inclusive expansion of knowledge and a better understanding of history. Gerda Lerner was not the first twentieth-century historian to embrace the history of women as a subject; she is however one of the first to demand respect for the subject. While Lerner was not a historian of education, her reverence for the field of history pushed her to critically examine how historians and other scholars constructed race, class and gender in their interpretations of history and society. Her criticisms of Betty Friedan’s (1963), The Feminine Mystique, and her support and critique of the Women’s Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, made her research and work critical to the expansion of the field of history. At the center of Lerner’s (1981) book, The Majority finds its Past: Placing Women in History, is an intellectual discussion of the oppressions of racial hierarchy. The Majority consists of past essays of Lerner’s. In a number of these essays Lerner shifts the history of black women out of the anecdotal doldrums in which it had lain and into a position to challenge inherited social history (Kerber, 1995). She also turns the reader's attention to the neglect of the archives on which the writing of history must be based. By making the "denial or neglect of their history" central to the oppression that black women experience, by emphasizing that despite the "renaissance" of black history in the 1960s and 1970s, black women remained
victims of historians as well as victims described by historians, Lerner revitalized a line of work that had long been neglected in the larger field of history (Kerber 1995).

Much of the groundbreaking scholarship on Black women in the academy in the contemporary moment has been examined through the use of qualitative methods. From dissertations, to articles, to books, scholars are continuing to investigate the experiences of Black women in the academy, with particular interest to those in predominantly white institutions. Predominantly white institutions have become the focus in their scholarship because of the large concentration of Black faculty within these institutions. Through these studies scholars have used the voices and telling experiences of Black women in the academy to highlight how racism and sexism converge in American academic institutions.

In the book, *Black Women in the Academy: The Secrets to Success and Achievement*, scholar Sheila T. Gregory (1995) uses survey data, personal interviews and identifies secrets to success and achievement for Black women scholars in the academy. Gregory examines the history of Black women and their families, and explains and interprets these factors as well as others (economic, psychosocial, and job satisfaction) that influence the decisions of Black women faculty to remain in, return to, or voluntarily leave the academy. Her work is the first study to closely engage interviews and survey data to look at the retention of Black women faculty in the academy.

Researcher, Lena Wright Myers (2002) also examines Black women’s unique position in the academy in her book, *A Broken Silence: Voices of African American Women in the Academy*. This book addresses the interlocking systems of race and gender PWIs in America. The study is based on data from African American women faculty of
various disciplines and administrative positions. Myers focuses primarily on the narratives of women in terms of how they are affected by racism, as well as sexism as they perform their duties in their academic environments. Her findings suggest that a common thread exists relative to the experiences of the women and her book challenges and dispels the myth that Black progress has led to equality for African American women in the academy. The results of this study make it even more critical that the voices of African American women be heard and their experiences in the academy be expressed.

To survive, both inside and outside of the academy, Black women have continuously had to invent themselves and define the terms of their existence. Perhaps one of the most necessary tools in constructing Black women in the academy is their own words about their experiences. Scholar Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1990 p. 115) notes that the, “autobiographies” and biographies “of Black women, each of which is personal and unique, constitute a running commentary on the collective experience of Black women in the United States”. Black women’s words are grounded in their experiences of race, class, gender, sexuality and all other parts of their identity as well as how society constructs and sanctions these identities. However, their common denominator, which establishes their integrity as a sub-genre, derives not from the general categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. but from the historical experience of being all those identities at a specific moment over succeeding generations.

Two of the most thoughtful contributions about Black women in the academy using first person narratives in combination with secondary sources are Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils edited by Lois Benjamin (1997) and Sisters of the Academy: Emergent Black Women Scholars in Higher Education edited by Reitumetse
Mabokela and Anna L. Green (2001). Both of these collections combine research and personal narratives to explore educational issues ranging from historical accounts of Black female teachers in the nineteenth century, to the challenges and triumphs of being an activist researcher at the turn of the twenty-first century. They explore themes of identity, power, and change and address specific historical, social, cultural, political, and academic issues that affect Black women in the academy. They call to the nation’s academies to respond to the voice of black women and provide examples of how they have transcended some of the challenges in their pursuit of academic excellence.

Autobiographies, biographies and other narratives by Black women continue to be fundamental to our historical and contemporary analysis of race, class, gender and all other identities that Black women occupy in our society. The use of these narratives have enhanced not only enhanced our understanding of Black women’s educational opportunities and experiences, but it has expanded our understanding of their lives and the society in which we live.

Perhaps one of the most dynamic scholars to master the use of polemic as life history is (b)ell (h)ooks (1989) work, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. While frowned upon by many scholars and applauded by several others, hook’s use of her own life history narrative within her research examines the form and content of her work and its relationship to the ways in which various forms of oppression reinforce each other and are identifiable in the lived experience of other women. Hooks discusses the critiques leveled at her as, a want and a need for a separation of public (intellectual thought/appropriate) and private (personal/inappropriate). She writes,

I have had more time to think even more critically about this split between public and private; time to experience, and time to examine what I have experienced. In
reflection, I see how deeply connected that split is to ongoing domination (especially thinking about intimate relationships, ways racism, sexism and class exploitation work in our daily lives, in those private spaces that is there that we are often most wounded, hurt dehumanized; there that ourselves are most taken away, terrorized and broken). The public reality and the institutional structures of domination make the private space for oppression and exploitation concrete—real. (p. 2)

She argues that it is “confession and memory” that have the ability to clarify experience.

She maintains,

as we tell personal narrative, as both researcher and research subject, we have a sharper, keener sense of the end that is desired by the telling…Story telling becomes a process of historicization. It does not remove women from history but enables us to see ourselves as part of history…Used constructively, confession and memory are tools that heighten self awareness. (hooks, 1989 pp. 109-10).

**Conclusion**

In *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*, Alice Walker (1983) carefully reminds us, “A people do not throw their geniuses away…if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists, scholars and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children…if necessary, bone by bone. She goes on to explain that if Black women genius is thrown away then our collective progress towards equality will decrease. Black women’s exclusion from higher education and later their exclusion from scholarship on the history of higher education is not a coincidence but rather a product of a racist and sexist society that continues to see their presence as disruptive, problematic and unnecessary unless profitable or commodifiable.

In the twenty first century Black women continue to expand an educational vision of inclusiveness via their use of narratives, historical record and various forms of research. Their continual success in the academy exemplifies their need to educate themselves and to continue historic transformative tradition of education as a means of freedom for themselves and their community. The research on Black women in the academy and their experiences remain as testimony that we must continue to bear witness
to their experiences (positive/negative) and re-member as means of decolonizing the academy.
Chapter 3

The Historic Experiences of Black Women in Higher Education

Introduction

The literature is replete with studies of issues of sexism in the lives of women seeking full participation in the academy (Baron, 1978; Caplow & McGee, 1965; Farley, 1982; Finkel, Olswang & She, 1994; Foster, 1981; Harris 1970; LeBlanc, 1993; Mason & Goulden, 2003; Sokoloff, 1987). Volumes, upon volumes record the frustration women face in higher education (Holmes, 1999). There have been numerous reports of wage inequities, vague and unclear research and publication requirements, ambiguous tenure requirement, limited access to certain disciplines, lack of mentorship and networking opportunities and exclusion from strategic decision making positions (Exum, Menges, Watkins & Berglund, 1984; Finkel et al., 1994; Freeman, 1977; Halaby, 1979; Malveaux, 1982; Mason & Goulden, 2003).

In much of this research women are classified as one monolithic group, not taking into account the impact race, gender, class and sexuality may contribute to any of the aforementioned variables if the whole group were broken down into separate ethnic groups (Holmes, 1999). Scholar Sharon Louise Holmes notes that “based upon the long and turbulent history of race and class distinctions in the United States, a person would be remiss to assume historical ideologies (i.e. inferior vs. superior) created by a White patriarchal system have no bearing on the experiences of Black women and other women of color in higher education today (p. 13). This is not imply that White women in higher education have not suffered because of White male patriarchy; rather it is to infer that because of their race and ethnicity, their academic experiences have not been shaped by race, class and gender as those have by women of color (Holmes, 1999 p. 13).
A number of researchers (Gregory, 1995; Perkins, 1983; Wilson, 1989) have suggested that in order to understand the uniqueness of Black women’s experiences, an historical framework is needed to situate their academic lives within an institutional culture originally designed for the benefit of a White male patriarchal system. Wilson (1989) stated that “it is apparent that the limited presence of women of color in higher education [faculty] has its roots in the history of America and cannot be understood separately from that history” (p. 85). While their contributions to the history of American history are continuing to be researched by scholars (Anderson, 1988; Perkins, 1987; Span, 2003; Waite, 2002) historian Linda Perkins (1987) noted that this early omission of African Americans in from the history of American education in general and Black women in particular, reflects the lack of significance of African Americans in general and Black women in particular, have been accorded in United States history.

I assert that in order to determine more fully the impact and the future of Black women in the academy, we must know more about their history in higher education, what they did, as well the issues and the movements that characterized the different periods of time during which they lived. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of selected literature related to the historic experiences of Black women in predominately White institutions of higher education in order to better situate the contemporary narratives of Vivi, Theresa and Laketi. This chapter explores how each generation of Black women experienced the rigors of the academy and shows how some sought entry into the academy on their own terms; examining Black women’s will and courage to educate themselves and to educate other African-Americans.
The chapter begins with a discussion of the importance of education within the Black community and the history of Black women in American higher education. The chapter then moves to a discussion Black women’s historic experiences in predominantly white institutions, particularly their experiences at Oberlin College. Oberlin College is key in discussing the experiences of Black women in predominantly white institutions as it was the first predominantly white college to openly admit students of color into its matriculating bachelor’s degree program and served as the educational home to such notable Black women educators Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper. Beyond the critical decision to openly admit students into the college; Oberlin is expressly important to history of American higher education and Black women in higher education because of its clear struggle to carve out a coherent institutional mission and positive praxis to match its open enrollment policy, while simultaneously battling and dealing with latent and at times blatant racism and sexism. Lastly, the chapter closes with an examination of Black Women’s experiences in higher education in the early 20th century paying particular attention to the impact of the expansion of land-grant institutions, federal court cases that set precedence for the landmark Brown v. Board of education decision and Black women’s agency and determination to succeed in the academy despite immeasurable odds.

**African American Education: Nineteenth Century, Antebellum and Post-bellum**

To say that Black women have worked as educators in large numbers over the last century states an obvious fact. Serving as teachers, administrators, classroom assistants, special educators, counselors, nurses, and professors, often in racist and sexist climates, Black women have and continue to expand the notion of what it means to educate and
what it means to be educated. During the past forty years, a demographic and cultural shift has occurred in higher education and the 21st century marks the largest number of Black women to enter the academy (Benjamin, 1997). As students, professors and administrators, Black women’s contributions to college and university campuses via scholarship and intellectual discourse continue to add to diversity, bodies of knowledge and the enrichment of campus climate. While it is imperative to celebrate and analyze Black women’s continued success in the academy, it is equally important to examine the history of Black women’s struggles to be educated and to educate in higher education. While Black women’s history in the academy does not begin to take off (in terms of the number of Black women enrolled as students and those working as faculty) until the mid twentieth century, their struggle for education begins in the nineteenth century.

Historically, “education has persisted as one of the most consistent themes in the life, thought, struggle and protests of African Americans” (Collier-Thomas, 1982). Undeniably it has been viewed as the major liberation tool for the acquisition of racial, gender and class equality. Although there is a body of research that takes into account the educational experiences of Blacks, there is a scarcity of literature dealing with the history of Black women in America, specifically in education, which would provide a context for analyzing and understanding their overall historical and contemporary experiences.

Black education during antebellum and postbellum years was marred by racism and institutionalized racist practices. “For the majority of African [Americans] who were enslaved, life was a process of being conditioned to accept White superiority and Black inferiority” (Harding, 1981). In order to ensure the success of this “conditioning process” several states passed laws making it illegal to educate Blacks. South Carolina was the
first to pass the “compulsory ignorance” law in America, in 1740. This law prohibited the educating of African Americans (Woodson, 1990). Because of the compulsory ignorance laws in slave holding states, the education of African Americans was primarily by informal means which was largely due to the agency of Blacks themselves. Some slaves acquired literacy skills depending on the type of task they were required to do (Johnson, 2000). Those who learned taught others. As a result gaining literacy skills by task or “accidentally”, there became a core of literate slaves on plantations (Gutek, 1986).

Prohibitive legislation, beginning with the 1740 Act of South Carolina, sent education of the African Americans underground. Educational historian, Carter G. Woodson, notes that clandestine schools “were in operation in most large cities and towns of the South where such law prohibited the enlightenment of Negroes” (Woodson, 1990).

In her memoirs, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers, Susie King Taylor poignantly describes an account of secretly receiving an education in a clandestine school:

We went every day about nine o’clock, with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. We went in, one at time…into the yard to L kitchen [sic] which was the schoolroom…The neighbors would see us going in sometimes, but they supposed we were there learning trades…After school we left the same way we entered, one by one, when we would go to a square…and wait for each other. (1988 pp. 29-30)

Educational historian James D. Anderson (1988 p. 7) notes that slaves and free Blacks had already begun making plans for the instruction of illiterate Black people “before Northern benevolent societies entered the South in 1862, before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and before Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in 1865”. During
Reconstruction, historian Christopher Span (2003) notes that, “formerly enslaved African Americans regarded very highly the idea of being educated, and this sentiment served as an invaluable resource in earliest educational initiatives” (p. 198). He also notes that in places like Mississippi, “between 1862 and 1869, this collective group consciousness served as the “cultural capital” needed to begin and sustain their grassroots educational enterprises (p. 198). These early schools were established and supported by the efforts and resources of slaves, and free African American men and women and later, formerly enslaved African Americans. The rapid rise and success of these “secret schools” reflected the determination of Black men and women, struggling for freedom by whatever means necessary and thus freedom and schooling became intimately intertwined.

The Black women who pursued higher education in the nineteenth century were pioneers. Their desire for higher education, when education for women of any race was still a debatable matter, exemplifies their dogged determination to better themselves and uplift other African-Americans. While the lives, activism and scholarship of many Black women, like Anna Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Church Terrell and Charlotte H. Brown, has been recovered by scholars of various disciplines, hundreds of Black women that helped trail blaze the road to higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s remain unnamed and largely invisible. Their invisibility however does not speak to an inability of Black women to learn, but rather as Karen A. Johnson (2000 p. xxix) notes in her study of the lives of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs, the invisibility of Black women in the early history of higher education serves to remind scholars that, “Black
women’s experiences [in higher education] are complex and often neglected in the interest of racial, gender and class oppression”.

In order to accurately examine Black women’s participation in higher education, it is important to note the changing meaning of higher education over time and context. Both before and after the Civil War, many schools and colleges offered a combination of liberal arts and vocational education. In the late nineteenth century, the growth of private secondary schools and the establishment of public high schools paved the way for more advanced collegiate study. The term “higher education” often applied to any studies beyond the elementary level, although the rate of educational development varied from region to region (Ihle, 1992). For example southerners in the 1880s labeled as higher education what we now consider to be high school education, and even that education was a privilege only available to relatively few people (Ihle, 1992). During the same time period, however, other parts of the country were experiencing a significant expansion in the number of public schools. When substantial populations of students were receiving a high school education, then colleges could raise their academic standards. As a result the term “higher education” became equated with what might be considered at least two years of college today and, before long, four years (Ihle, 1992).

**The Importance of Oberlin College to Black Women in the Academy**

Equally important as understanding the changing definition of higher education is contemplating the formal institutions that fostered Black women’s education. In the mid to late nineteenth century no other school made quite an impact in fostering Black women’s education, growth and activism than Oberlin College. Oberlin was the first institution to admit both African Americans and women and notably enrolled 152
identifiable Black women, in college and preparatory school in the antebellum years (Ihle, 1992) becoming a pioneer in higher education institutions.

Founded in 1833 by the Congregationist denomination and located in the Midwestern agricultural community of Oberlin, Ohio, Oberlin College was founded in part for the purpose of creating a school to educate ministers and teachers to save the “Godless West”. The town and college were founded together, thus the community of Oberlin was both the college and the town. Historian Cally Waite (2002) remarks on the uniqueness of Oberlin, she writes,

In the early nineteenth century this new colony of Oberlin was both progressive and perfectionist. It was a community that embraced progressive and unpopular ideas yet was conceived out of a perfectionist evangelical movement. From the school’s inception in 1833, women students were educated in the same classrooms as men. This was, for the time, unique, as the majority of women who were educated during the antebellum period attended New England female seminaries in small numbers. The notion of women and men learning together was overwhelmingly discouraged. (p. 8)

Although women were not able to earn an A.B. degree at Oberlin until 1837, the “Ladies Course of Study” closely followed the curriculum of the classical college curriculum and in 1834 (one year after its founding), the trustees and faculty of Oberlin agreed to admit students irrespective of color (Waite, 2002). This decision was not completely surprising, as anti-slavery activities at Oberlin dominated the pre-Civil War period of the college. Lectures on anti-slavery were common topics by faculty members of the college and in 1836 an economic boycott of products made by slaves was instituted. The fourth of July was viewed by the College as a day of “cruel mockery” and instead celebrated August 1, the anniversary of the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies (Fletcher, 1943). Little distinctions were made among students. There were no course grades, students recited in alphabetical order, and prizes and honors were not
given at commencement. Secret societies or similar organizations were strictly prohibited from the college and were viewed by the administration as “undemocratic” and a danger to “republican institutions”. Thus the feeling of camaraderie was strong on the campus and students were able to develop academically without a sense of competitiveness.

While Oberlin was founded upon a liberalist tradition it was not without problems in interpreting race, class and gender. In regards to the 1834 decision to admit students regardless of color, both trustees and faculty were fiercely split. Many women students threatened to immediately return to their homes while Oberlin’s President, Charles Finney himself was admittedly no great advocate of equality in stating that he had a “constitutional dislike of blacks”. Oberlin founder John Shipherd however reminded students, faculty and trustees that admitting black students was in the best interest of Oberlin’s founding principles (doing good toward men), as well as following the gospel and Oberlin’s economic survival (Waite, 2002). While Shipherd’s appeal did cause some trustees to change their minds, it was the debate over the possibility of the $10,000 Tappan endowment and eight paid professorships that caused many trustees and faculty to change Oberlin’s admissions policy. Under the Tappan endowment Oberlin would receive funds and eight paid professorships only if they admitted black students. This decision sparked months of controversy. Waite notes,

Issues of faith could be argued in the abstract, but an affirmative decision meant the concrete reality of black students attending the college and living in the community. Surely, fears were raised of a potentially large black population settling in Oberlin, and those fears overshadowed issues of faith. (Waite, 2002 p. 14)

Even after reaching a decision to admit black students few blacks attended. In 1859 only 32 of the college’s 1,200 students were black and by 1861, only 245 of the
8,800 students who had attended during the school’s history had been black (Perkins, 1987 p. 23). While the majority of the nation’s African Americans in the 1860s lived in the South and were prohibited by law from obtaining an education, few Northern African Americans had the financial means or academic preparation to attend college, even the majority of Oberlin’s students—both Black and White—were enrolled in the Preparatory Department (Perkins, 1987). This point was recognized by James Henry Fairchild, Oberlin’s president from 1866-89, who represented the college’s position on the issue by stating: “No adaptation of the course of study to the special needs of colored pupils was ever made. It was not a colored school that was proposed, but a school where colored students should have equal privileges” (Fletcher, 1943 pp. 111-112). Those few students that attended Oberlin prior to the Civil War years were exposed to the unique experience of being educated as equals with whites as well as having the opportunity to develop and participate to a great extent, in the Oberlin community.

To enter the Collegiate Department as a freshman at Oberlin, students had to be examined in:


**Black Women at Oberlin College**

More than being the first school to open its doors to both women and African Americans Oberlin provided an education to some of the most notable Black women in education. Educational pioneers Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper were all students at Oberlin College. While each woman’s journey at
Oberlin and after differed greatly, their resolve and commitment to education for racial and sexual equality and for African Americans and women was strengthened during their years at Oberlin.

Fanny Jackson Coppin, the first Black woman to graduate from Oberlin College, exemplified strength and commitment. Her personal academic accomplishments translated directly into her passion of educating other Black people. Coppin’s studies and work at Oberlin and later her role as principal at the Philadelphia Institute for Colored Youth is a testament to her belief of education as an important tool in fighting for racial and sexual equality.

Fanny Jackson Coppin was born enslaved in Washington D.C., in 1837. Coppin’s freedom was bought by an aunt while Coppin was a young girl (Perkins, 1987). She moved with relatives to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and later to Newport, Rhode Island, where she was able to receive a rudimentary education. As a teenager in Newport, she moved into the home of an aristocratic New England couple where she was employed as a domestic servant. While working there, Coppin was able to take private music lessons and hire a tutor. “To get an education and to teach my people,” was her foremost goal in life and she worked to ensure it became a reality (Perkins, p. 4).

Coppin entered the freshman class of the Collegiate Department of Oberlin in 1861. Coppin recalls, “the faculty did not forbid a woman to take the gentlemen’s course, but they did not advise it” (Coppin, 1995, p. 42). Enthusiastic to disprove stereotypes of African Americans and women, Coppin simply as she states, “took a long breath and prepared for a delightful contest” (Coppin, 1995 p. 43). Coppin, like other Black women, viewed education as means to demonstrate that Blacks were intellectually equal to
Whites. Throughout her life she was challenged by the words of John C. Calhoun, antebellum senator from South Carolina, who made the doctrine of Black inferiority the greatest defense for the institution of slavery (Perkins, 1987). Even at Oberlin, Coppin recognized that white racism and privilege was nearly universal and remarked:

I never rose to recite in my classes at Oberlin but I felt that I had the honor of the whole African race upon my shoulders. I felt that, should I fail, it would be ascribed to the fact that I was colored. (Perkins, 1987 p. 25)

Coppin’s years at Oberlin had a deep effect on her. Not only was she impressed with her fellow classmate’s sincerity and dedication to the abolition of slavery but she was also able to have another of her life’s goals realized—to become a teacher of her race (Perkins, 1987). After the Civil War, Oberlin saw a surge of freedmen. Coppin voluntarily established an evening class which met four nights a week. The class was comprised of mostly adults that came to the evening class after working all day. Most all the students were illiterate so Coppin taught the basic fundamentals of reading and writing. She wrote:

It was deeply touching to me to see old men painfully following the simple words of spelling; so intensely eager to learn. I felt that for such people to have been kept in the darkness of ignorance was an unpardonable sin, and I rejoiced that even then I could enter measurably upon the course of life which I had long ago chosen. (Perkins, 1987 p. 25)

Coppin was extremely diligent with her evening class and often conducted public exhibitions to display her students work. Always willing to keep the talents of Black people before the public, she remarked that she was “always fond of a demonstration”. The evening school drew many visitors and the local newspaper carried accounts of its progress. On February 4, 1863, the Lorain County News reported that:

Coming along College Street the other evening we John Brown Song ringing out in a full chorus from twenty-five or thirty voices in the rooms of the evening
school at Elmore Block…all the exercises are entered into with as much heartiness and interest as the closing song of the evening in question. The school consists entirely of adults, of both sexes, who were deprived of school privileges in early life and whose days are now given to labor. (Coppin, 1995 p. 18)

The following year the newspaper again reported:

We had the pleasure last Friday night of making the evening Colored school, taught in Colonial Hall this winter…This school is open to all the Colored people of Oberlin, both young and old, who desire to receive instruction in the elementary branches, reading, writing, spelling, grammar, etc., and is most ably conducted by Miss F.M. Jackson, a young lady of rare accomplishments and devotion to the work. On the evening of our call the exercises were most interesting. The pupils were mostly adults, who, after a hard day’s labor embracing the opportunity afforded them for self-improvement, bent their minds to the tasks before them with an earnestness and concentration that were truly gratifying. Miss Jackson has the knack of at once interesting and instructing, a fact evidently well appreciated by her scholars who appeared to enter with great enthusiasm into all her novel plans for their improvement. (Coppin, 1985 p. 18).

The success of Fanny Jackson Coppin’s evening class and her success at Oberlin is testament to her will and dedication of not only her own success, but also the success of her people. While Coppin’s evening classes were supported by her fellow colleagues and citizens of Oberlin she was aware of the complexities of race and racism in even a liberal town and college such as Oberlin. She was aware that just as the threat of her own failure would likely be attributed to her race, the threat of failure of her evening students would be attributed to the failure of the black race as well. She used the evening classes as a platform to show that the denial of education to Black people was a sin and that Black people were capable beyond measure of succeeding.

In addition to teaching the evening classes with freed men and women, Coppin also became Oberlin’s first Black instructor in the preparatory department. Her role as instructor was significant because it was customary for the college to hire its best students from that program as instructors and in this position Coppin taught both Black and White
students. Upon graduation Coppin continued her mission in educating Black students by accepting a job as the principal of the Female Department of the institute for Colored Youth, a high school for Blacks in Philadelphia, founded by the Society of Friends in (Perkins, 1987 p. 49).

Coppin and other Black women at Oberlin in the postbellum years, while successful, were still anomalies in regards to the overall status of Black women in higher education. For the majority of Black women after the years following the Civil War working was the only option for survival. Many worked in fields sharecropping alongside Black men, while more were employed as domestics. Formal education, while still important to many Black women, become more important for African American children and the goal of obtaining a college education was indeed seen as necessity for Black survival.

From the post-reconstruction era until the end of World War I (1877-1919), progress for African Americans was slow and uneven. The early nineteenth century ushered in an era of racial beliefs and ideologies that reinforced developing and previously held notions of the inherent inferiority of African people and the superiority of Europeans (Jackson, 2000). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the pseudoscientific theories of Charles Darwin began influencing political theory. His thesis—the process of natural selection, the struggle for existence, the need for adaptation—were applied to human society to justify the political and social subordination and oppression of non-Whites.

In addition to rise of racism, the nineteenth century also saw a resurgence of evangelical Protestantism, which called for the critical importance of educating women
and girls to fulfill their new roles in a changing culture. Educational historians David
Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot (1992 p. 28) explain that,

...educators of education for girls refuted popular stereotypes about the mental
inferiority of women, and sought to convince citizens that practical benefits would
flow from the schooling of girls. Proponents of the schooling for girls believed
that in a republican and Christian United States women had acquired new
standing as persons and required a broader education to realize their “ideal
feminine” character.

This emergence of the “cult of true womanhood” as forming the basis for schooling
women and girls did not however include Black women and girls, at least not in the same
way. The “ideal woman” exhibited qualities of innocence, modesty, piety,
submissiveness and domesticity. She was expected to dedicate her life to her home,
husband and children. As explained by Andolsen, the “true woman was almost certainly
the wife of a well-to-do male usually White and native born, whose economic success
made it possible for her to reign as queen of the home” (Andolsen, 1986 p. 45). The
concept of “true woman” could not apply to Black women. Feminist researcher Beverly
Guy-Sheftall notes that the unfair criticism of the Black woman was due to the fact that
Black women did not represent the Eurocentric image of the “true woman”. She argues
that this was “indicative of the degree to which prevailing notions about race and gender
interacted in the mind of Whites and resulted in a particular set of attitudes about Black
women” (Guy-Sheftall, 1990 p. 40).

The “true woman” ideology prescribed moral guidelines of conduct for the White
native-born middle class female that “essentialized her role as a paragon of feminine
virtue and morality” (McCluskey, 1993 p. 194). The purpose and rationale for both a
classical and a vocational type of curriculum for white women was to increase girls’
chances of marrying well, to make them better wives and mothers, and to add “systematic
knowledge and utilitarian skills to their God-given talents in nurturing children” (Tyack & Hansot, 1992 pp. 28-44). White Philanthropists rationale for educating Black women was the following (Easter, 1995 p. 22):

1. To make good wives and mothers
2. To train good domestic servants and agricultural.

The second reason however was informally expanded by the Black community to include training “Black women to be teachers, nurses, missionary workers and Sunday school teachers in order to ‘uplift the race’” (Easter, 1995, p 23).

The latter half of the nineteenth century gave rise to Black colleges to train Black teachers. Fisk University, Hampton Institute, Tuskegee and several other Black colleges and universities had been established in the post-Civil War South (Davis, 1981 p. 109). Most of these institutions admitted women however; Scotia Academy, Spelman and Bennett were built exclusively for Black women and almost exclusively for the training of Black women to become teachers. For Black women teaching offered the only viable profession other than domestic service. “Black women were excluded not only from male professions, but also from the comparatively restricted areas opened to White women. Being a teacher in the African American community gave rise to visibility that emerged as community leadership” and teaching became an arena for political activism wherever it occurred (Neverdon-Morton, 1982 pp 207-221).

Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Church Terrell, also students at Oberlin College in the late nineteenth century, believed wholeheartedly in teaching as political activism. Unlike Coppin, the schooling and careers of these women encompassed the post-Reconstruction era, however very similar to Coppin these women were also confronted
with the arduous task of struggling for racial and economic uplift and social equality. Cooper was born in Raleigh, North Carolina on August 10, 1858. She was the eldest of two daughters born to an enslaved black woman, Hannah Stanley and her white master George Washington Haywood (Johnson, 2000). As explained by biographer Louise Hutchinson, “from early on Cooper possessed an unbridled passion for learning and a sincere conviction that women were equipped to follow intellectual pursuits” (Hutchinson, 1993 pp. 275-276). Mary Church Terrell was born in Memphis on September 23, 1863. Her father, Robert R. Church, Sr., was a businessman and her mother a house wife. Though her parents divorced while she was young, they both encouraged Mary to pursue an education and sent her to live with close family friends Yellow Springs, Ohio to ensure that she would be afforded an excellent education (Lemert & Bhan, 1998).

Although both women attended Oberlin at the same time the difference in their class backgrounds caused them to have different experiences, yet being Black and a women during the post-reconstruction era caused many similar experiences. Anna Julia Cooper entered Oberlin College at the age of 23 as a widow. Her age and her marital status were in stark contrast to many of the other women that attended Oberlin at the time. Most of Oberlin’s entering female students were between the ages of 17-19 and were unmarried (Lemert & Bhan, 1998). Because she had no financial resources of her own, Cooper lived at the home of Professor Charles H. Churchill. Her living arrangements along with her age and her race only separated her further from her majority white female classmates and physically separated her from other black women living on campus (Lemert & Bhan 1998).
In contrast Terrell came from a seemingly wealthy freed black family. Terrell notes on her experience at Oberlin,

Few women in Oberlin College took the Classical Course at that time. They took what was called the Literary Course, which could be completed two years sooner than the Classical Course but which did not entitle them to a degree, they simply received a certificate. Some of my friends and schoolmates urged me not to select the “gentlemen’s course”, because it would take much longer to complete than the” ladies’ course”. They pointed out that Greek was hard; that it was unnecessary, if not positively unwomanly, for girls to study that “old dead language” anyhow; that during the two extra years required to complete it I would miss a lot of fun which I could enjoy outside of college walls. And, worst of all, it might ruin my chances of getting a husband, since men were notoriously shy of women who knew too much. “Where”, inquired some of my friends sarcastically, “will you find a colored man who has studied Greek?” They argued that I wouldn’t be happy if I knew more than my husband, and they warned that trying to find a man in our group who knew Greek would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack.

But I loved school and liked to study too well to be allured from it by any of the arguments my friends advanced…I decided to take a long chance. I wrote to my father and laid the matter clearly before him, explaining that it would cost more to take the course that I preferred and that few women of any race selected it. My dear father replied immediately that I might remain in college as long as I wished and he would foot the bill. (Ihle, 1992 p. 23)

While this excerpt speaks to Terrell’s middle class background, inherent in her recollection is the thoughts and believed importance for women to marry well and that being too educated could impede a woman’s chances of doing so. In addition her recollection speaks to the limited educational opportunities for most Black men and Black women in general, during the time period.

Despite class differences, the shifting campus climate and budding racial intolerance provided Terrell and Cooper with similar experiences. In her book, Permission to Remain Among Us: Education for Blacks in Oberlin, Ohio, 1880-1914, historian Cally Waite (2002) notes that Oberlin shifted from a historically liberal institution that fostered integration to a conservative segregationist institution that
profoundly changed the educational opportunities for Black students at Oberlin College and in the community. Waite (2002, p. 81) declares that three specific incidents at Oberlin changed the College and town dramatically:

1. In 1882 White students protested sharing dining tables with their Black classmate.

2. In 1905 literary societies formalized the unspoken policy of excluding Black men from membership.

3. By 1909 separate housing was built for Black women because they weren’t welcomed to the dormitories with their White classmates.

These three events are of particular importance not only because of the response from alumni and members of the community, but because they symbolize more than individual prejudice of a few students or faculty members; rather, they indicate the beginnings of segregation recognized and accepted by the college administration (Waite, 2002 pp. 81-82).

Waite comments that in the February 1883 issue of Oberlin Review, one White student wrote,

Is there a color line in Oberlin? Much has been said, much written during the past year about the color line in Oberlin. The outside world has told in articles written to various papers, that Oberlin is no longer the Oberlin of the founders; that she has repudiated her history; that she has become as radical a defender of race distinctions as she was formerly an opposer. It is for the purpose of stating the true position of the case that this article is written. (2002, p. 83)

The student continues by arguing that Oberlin was the same institution that it once was, but he contended that the student body had changed and had become more class conscious. It was the “class prejudice which gave rise to the color line”, and although “there may have been class prejudice before…never before has it been so manifest as this year” (Waite, 2002 p. 83). He argued that “the United States had now created another
class of students who did not need to work their way through college” and it was these students that brought with them racist attitudes. Many Black students agreed that the attitudes of students were beginning to change at Oberlin however it could not be passed off on class differences. Waite notes that several Black students wrote in to the Oberlin Review and put forth, “the assertion that is the wealthier class of students who are more prejudiced to color seems to us false…Let us not stigmatize the wealthy as those who have least refinement” (Waite, 2002 p. 84).

While there is no record of Terrell and Cooper’s public opinion of the growing segregation of Oberlin while they were students, it is certain they were affected by the changing campus climate. Terrell served as an editor of the Oberlin Review during her years as a student and it is more than likely that she read several of the opinions and comments of both Black and White students on the dining hall incident. In her autobiography Terrell talks about her concern during the racial changes and increased segregation at Oberlin after her graduation in 1884. In a 1914 letter of appeal to Oberlin President King to take action and to remember Oberlin’s responsibility to Black students, Terrell writes: “If colored students are to be segregated at Oberlin with such a wonderful record as it once made for itself even in the dark days of slavery, it seems to me it would be wiser and kinder to exclude them altogether” (Terrell & Ham, 2004). In her six page letter Terrell summarized the changes for Black students since she graduated from the college. She recounted her disappointment at each new phase of segregation—in the literary societies, the dormitories, and the athletic teams—and how finally she had to speak out about her disappointment.
Oberlin began to take on the national political views on race segregation, hierarchy and oppression. As one Oberlin student recalled of her years at Oberlin, “Perhaps the first thing that ought to be pointed out that Oberlin is in America. It is not now, nor has it been, an utopia” (Graham, 1934 p. 56). During the post-Reconstruction era both the southern and the northern United States embraced the segregationist policies of *Jim Crow* and in the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision, the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of legally segregating the White and Black races in a passenger rail car in Louisiana. The sanctioning of legal racial segregation by the Supreme Court gave rise to numerous public policies that articulated the importance of maintaining racial hierarchies that catered to the political economic interests of the White ruling class while at the same time oppressing and exploiting people of color. Predominantly White Universities and Colleges throughout the country often discriminated against Black students, either by denying admissions in general or enforcing social segregation on campus.

The opportunities open to Black women after graduating from colleges, whether predominantly White or historically Black were limited. In addition to race, during this time gender also played an important role in determining and impacting the lives of women. The employment opportunities of formally educated women were scarce. Teaching, which was perceived as a womanly job, was the primary if not the only, professional occupation for college and normal school Black and White female graduates during the mid to late 1800s (Harley, 1990). Thus economic necessity as well as prevailing ideology supported the emergence of careers for women in education. “The new tax-supported public schools needed large number of inexpensive (therefore female)
teachers and increasing numbers of women needed a source of income” (Seller, 1994 p. xviii). Both Terrell and Cooper graduated from Oberlin in 1884 and both went on to become teachers. Their experiences at Oberlin and their growth and development as women in the racially hostile post-Reconstruction era enhanced their resolve to dedicate their lives to educating themselves and other Black people.

During their careers both Terrell and Cooper taught at M Street School or Washington Preparatory High School as it was formally known. M Street had a reputation of academic excellence (Johnson, 2000). M Street was the first and only high school established for African Americans in 1870, nine years before the establishment of a high school for White students in the nation’s capital (Johnson, 2000 p. 51). The high school had a long history of attracting highly qualified African American teachers and administrators and the staff (mostly teachers and few administrators) was disproportionately female. While this could be expected since teaching was the most open professional field to Black women it does not diminish the motivation, courage and resolve of Black women faculty at M Street School. Terrell writes,

however well-trained the teachers and strong the principal of a school may be, it is impossible for him to accomplish as much as he might, if his teachers also are not efficient and conscientious in the discharge of their duties…this high school has been greatly blessed…The teachers…not only enjoy superior educational advantages, but have faithfully discharged their duties. (Johnson, 2000 p. 51)

In her historical research on Washington, D.C., Constance Green revealed that at M Street High School a dedicated, stimulating and college educated faculty fostered students’ intellectual ambitions (Green, 1967). M Street’s teaching and administrative staff possessed far more college degrees than the staff at the White high schools in the nation’s capital (Green, 1967). In addition to their brilliant faculty M Street’s curriculum
was dominated by the classics. A classical curriculum in a school for African Americans was rare due to the fact that the prevailing viewpoint of dominant society believed that an industrial education provided the best and most appropriate model of educating Black students (Vasser, 1965). Greens research also found that in an exam given to all of the District of Columbia’s high school students in 1899, M Street’s students scored higher than the District’s White high schools (Green, 1967).

The period from the late 1800s to the 1920s was one of dramatic transformation and rapid expansion in American society. The economy was switching from an agrarian to an industrial and urbanized one. Continued hope for freedom—social, political and economic—was a major theme throughout post-Reconstruction era. While African Americans were free from the institution slavery, they were re-entrenched in the similarly oppressive institution of Jim Crow, a time of oppressive racism that permeated every facet of the American economic, political and social order. Racial terror in the form of lynching and indiscriminate sexual assaults of Black women was rampant. However, “the foundation for all human agency as well as teaching is steeped in a commitment to the possibilities for human life and freedom” (McLaren, 1994 p. 240). In the de jure segregated Black high schools of the past, such as M Street, feminist bell hooks (1994) observes that there seemed to have been on the part of [Black female] teachers and their pedagogical practices “a messianic zeal to transform [Black students’] minds and beings”. Teaching and learning was related to how one lived and behaved and was connected to anti-racist struggle. “For Black children, education…was about the practice of freedom…and for Black female teachers like Cooper and Terrell, teaching was a means of political activism and racial uplift” (hooks, 1994 p. 3).
Black Women in Higher Education in the Early 20th Century

After the Civil War and before World War I was a period of remarkable growth for American colleges and universities. Higher education expanded mainly through institutions financed by public taxes, particularly the land-grant colleges established by U. S. Congress in the Morrill Act of 1862 (Thelin, 2004). Land-grant institutions, along with a growing system of state colleges, marked the beginning of a unique style of American higher education: publicly supported institutions of higher learning serving a broad range of students. Black higher education took a different path. While schools like Oberlin had been the home for women like Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper, the majority of Black students in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were enrolled in private colleges founded specifically for African Americans, known as historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Northern religious mission societies and white philanthropists were primarily in charge of setting up and funding HBCUs (Watkins, 2001). HBCUs figured greatly in higher education for Blacks because most states excluded Blacks from publicly supported higher education. Of the 17 Southern states that ordered racially segregated education during the Jim Crow era, 14 refused to establish land-grant colleges for Black students until Congress required them to do so in the 1890 and the institutions they established were colleges in name only. Not one school met the land-grant requirement to teach agriculture, mechanical arts and liberal education on a collegiate level (Watkins, 2001). The outright racist refusal of these public colleges and universities to accept or create equal facilities for African American students cemented HBCUs as the leaders and proprietors of Black higher
education and the main producers of Black baccalaureates and professionals in the late
nineteenth to the mid twentieth century.

Educational opportunities for African Americans in the late nineteenth century and
the early decades of the twentieth century was consistently highlighted by their own
agency and resolve to be educated and of their need for political, social and economic
freedom. As in previous years Black women continued to educate themselves for the
betterment of themselves, their families, their communities and for their race. In her
study, *The Negro Woman’s College Education*, Jeanne Noble (1956) notes, that in 1920
approximately two in every ten graduates of Black colleges were women. Ten years later
in 1930, four of every ten graduates of Black colleges were Black women and by 1940
more Black women than Black men were receiving degrees from Black colleges. Noble
cites The Great Depression, WWI and WWII as considerable factors that led to a
decrease in numbers of Black men graduates. However she discusses the lure of teaching
and the field of social work as plausible professions as a cause of Black women’s
increased entrance into academe. Teaching in particular has always demanded a college
education (Noble, 1956). In the early years of the Reconstruction, teachers did not need a
degree, but could teach if they had been trained in Normal schools and proved their
academic success in Normal school. However, by the end of the nineteenth century and
the beginning of the twentieth century a bachelors degree had became the norm in teacher
qualification (Noble, 1956).

Teaching for the sake of posterity and racial uplift in the African American
community was never a gendered specific profession. In the years immediately following
the Civil War and throughout the Reconstruction era there was great need for teachers
and the profession was open to both Black men and women (Noble, 1956). However, as educational and professional opportunities expanded for Black men, in areas such as dentistry, preaching, and medicine, Black women gradually began to replace Black men in the field of teaching. Moreover, as qualifications for teaching became more stringent, Black women in large numbers began not only to pursue bachelors’ degrees, but Masters Degrees as well. Many of their advanced degrees were in the field of education and social work. While the professional occupations in education and social work precipitated the number and type of degrees Black women earned, the accomplishment of earning an advance degree at all was an accomplishment that often spoke to Black women’s personal dedication, will and economic sacrifice. While many Black women earned a bachelor’s and even a Masters degree at this time, economic factors kept Black women as a whole from actively pursuing a formal education beyond K-12.

African Americans that wanted to earn a doctorate in the first half of the century had a difficult time pursuing their goal. Black students interested in pursuing a doctorate degree during this time had to attend White institutions in the North because they were not allowed to attend southern white universities and HBCUs did not offer doctorate degrees (Smith & Waite, 2007). Those that did seek doctorate and professional degrees at Northern institutions, either public or private, had to deal with a campus climate that was often unwelcoming of Black students and female students.

In an article in the Journal of Negro Education, Edythe Hargrave recalls her experience as a Black student at white institution in the 1940s. She begins her narrative with describing why she chose to attend a white college stating,

I decided to go to a white college. I lived in the town where it was situated; consequently, I would not have the expense of room and board that would follow
if I choose a Negro college; my brother had graduated from this college; and also I had heard it said that a colored student who graduated from that institution was highly respected for his scholastic ability. (1942 p. 484)

Hargraves reasons for attending a white college began to mirror other Black students possible reasoning and rationale to attend white colleges in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, movement of blacks to the North increased tremendously. Thousands of African Americans left the South to escape sharecropping, worsening economic conditions, and lynch mobs. They sought higher wages, better homes, and political rights. From 1910 to 1970, Black migration transformed the country's African American population from a predominately southern, rural group to a northern, urban one. The geographic shift of Black people from the South to the North during the Great Migration led to greater educational opportunities. While schools in the North were not welcoming of Black students they did allow Black students to attend their institutions. Hargrave discusses her conversations with friends over her choice to attend a white college,

Some of my Negro friends pointed out that they would never think of going to a white college. “I want the social life” they said. “The social phase of college life is the most important.” Well, I entered a white college with the determination to confront all of the white faces over there, and show them that I could be one of them scholastically; even if my color were different...mine was the determination to be a good student. (1942 p.484)

Her resolve to be a good student was often met with surprise and disdain from her white colleagues and professors. She adds,

I realized, however, that a Negro entering a large institution of thirty-one hundred students of whom twenty were Negroes would lack the social life that goes along with a well-rounded education…I had heard that the professors graded Negro students lower simply because they were Negroes. I met many surprised glances and looks of “Do colored students go here?” or frowns of disgust that said, “Here comes a nigger!” . I found that when I spoke the rooms would be in complete
silence to see what the Negro girl was going to say. My reaction was to show these people that I was a good student. This idea obsessed me. (p. 484)

Hargrave never mentioned her college by name, but she did graduate and offered to other students that may possibly consider attending a white college, “It feels all right to be a Negro at a white college if you do not walk around” feeling inferior, “feeling inferior makes one inferior”.

While experiences like Hargrave’s and others may have been the norm for Black students at White Northern institutions, Black students in the South had problems even gaining admittance into some White institutions, particularly white professional and graduate schools. In 1946, Ada Sipuel, a resident of Oklahoma, applied to the University of Oklahoma Law School, the only law school in the state, and was denied because of race. Sipuel, along with the legal team of the NAACP, filed a petition in the Oklahoma courts against the University of Oklahoma’s decision. Their petition was denied on the grounds that the Gaines decision of 1938 did not require a state with segregation laws to admit a black student to White schools. Further, the Oklahoma courts maintained that the state itself was not obligated to set up a separate school unless first requested to do so by Black students desiring a legal education. The decision was affirmed by the Supreme Court of Oklahoma. The U.S. Supreme Court, however, reversed this decision, and held that the state was required to provide Blacks with equal educational opportunities as soon as it did so for whites (Kluger, 1975).

In 1949, Ada Sipuel was finally admitted to the law school in Oklahoma. The University established a law school just for her -in a roped off section of the state capitol in Oklahoma City, where they assigned three instructors to teach her. She suffered this treatment until Thurgood Marshall won the McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents case in
1950, overturning the states previous decision to create separate facilities for students of color. While many believed Sipuel to be a puppet in the NAACP legal strategy to overturn the *Plessy* decision, Sipuel made the conscious decision to delay her legal career in order to challenge segregation. She had the opportunity and economic means to study at Howard University where her brother also attended law school, but instead chose to delay her admission into law school in order to help desegregate the University of Oklahoma (Sipuel Fisher, 1996).

The like other notable desegregation cases before it, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Brown* (1954), along with governmental influences of the post—World War II era—the G.I. Bill, financial aid legislation, and research support—gave African Americans more access to K-12 schooling and more educational opportunities and choices of which undergraduate and graduate institutions they would attend. Black women began to enroll in various disciplines in hopes to widen their career choices and continue to be of service to the Black community. For some Black women the academy/professoriate became a viable career option that would not only satisfy their intellectual curiosity, but through their scholarship would help and serve the interests of the larger African American community.

**Conclusion**

The road to gaining access to higher education for Black women has not been an easy one. It has been one of struggle, perseverance, and enlightenment. While Black women as early as the 1920s had chosen to become professors, many were met with patriarchal and racist, or class exploitative structures (McKay, 1997). While those few that had chosen to become professors in the early twentieth had overcome ostensible
odds, many Black women would be unable to become professors due to the economic
cost of private college and university tuition as well as to the racist admissions policies of
most state colleges and universities. It would not be until the 1970s and 1980s that Black
women would enroll in large numbers in PhD programs and later re-enter the academy as
professors at various types of institutions (McKay, 1997). Their entrance as
undergraduate students, graduate students, professors and administrators continues to
mark great progress but does not mark the end of deeply entrenched practices that are
centuries old. The key to their success, both historically and in the contemporary moment
hinges on the continued development of their own intellectual tradition, their ability to
organize and their ability to use their life experiences both personal and professional as
testimony.
Chapter 4

Methodology

Reading, listening and writing the life of Black women requires delicate negotiations between the need to fill in historical gaps where Black women’s voices are absent and balancing and deconstructing the moments when their voices are commodified and used for their own objectification. This project represents a balancing act; a negotiation. I have lived with the testimony of Vivi South, Theresa Bayarea and Laketi Durban for two years. Their words and stories kept me awake nights riddled with storylistener and storytelling fear; and encouraged me in low moments to make things plain and say what they need me to say. I am not equally comfortable around all of their words/stories, for each of them have their own unique political location and their own temperament. Even still I am admittedly close to each of them, but in very different ways. However that closeness took years to establish and was tested at various stages and moments during the creation of this project.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the methods used for this project. To begin I will discuss how I came to this project. In this section I talk about what prompted my decision to research Black women in the academy and my own journey as a Black woman in the academy. Next I will discuss why I chose to use life history as the medium to discuss Black women in the academy. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the research design for this study and how it lead me to interview Laketi, Vivi and Theresa and the method of co-creating and co-authoring their life histories.
The Personal is Political: Crafting Research

I am the only child of a Southern United States born mother and a Ghanaian, West African born father. Their paths forever converged at a South Los Angeles bus stop in 1977 when after two weeks of driving by and seeing my mother waiting at the bus stop my father finally convinced her to allow him to drive her home. She gave him the wrong address of course, but decided to give him the right phone number. He was different from other men she knew, and she, different from other women he knew. They liked each other.

I was born in the fall of 1979 on the eve of Thanksgiving in East Los Angeles. My grandmother was driving too slowly, so my mother, made her pull over so that she could drive the two of them to the hospital. My father was not there. My uncle (my mother’s youngest and favorite brother), would later have to go to his (my father’s) home, the one that he shared with his wife, and tell him that I had been born. My mother remembers the pain of childbirth the way that all mothers do after spending 37 hours in labor, “They cut me from “a—hole to appetite” to get you out. No drugs. They said you weren’t getting enough oxygen and were just about to give me a C-section, but I started pushing and the doctor came in and gave me one quick cut. I guess that was better than having a C-section…either way I still missed Thanksgiving. It took him an hour and a half to stitch me up and they kept me in the hospital for two days. That was when they actually kept you there, before they started pushing women out the hospital dang near the same day you give birth”.

The most vivid memories of my childhood are the times I spent with my maternal Grandmother. She was my best friend. She was the calm to my parent’s ongoing
relationship drama and she, unlike my parents gave me her undivided attention. Nothing came before me. I was her favorite grandchild. She loved my two cousins no less than me but according to my mother, “you were more her speed…your one cousin was a busybody, always touching something, doing something and the other wasn’t around as much, but regardless of that she could have conversations with you. She’d talk and you’d listen and you’d talk and she’d listen. Everyone could see your connection”.

My grandmother taught me everything I know about storytelling and philosophy. Every Saturday morning after she combed my hair she and I would go shopping for a new eight track tape for her car. She listened to all kinds of music but her favorite was the blues. “The blues isn’t just about singing and the beat. The blues is about a story. We might listening ‘cause the song has a nice beat, but the words are important too”. One Saturday while we were in the record store my favorite song came on, Denise Lasalle’s cover of “Don’t Mess with My Toot Toot”. I begged my Grandmother to buy me the eight track of the song. She laughed and agreed but she told me that we would have to talk about what the song meant on our way home. I agreed. As soon as she paid for it and the man behind that counter put the tape in my hands, I ran to the car. I jammed the tape into the player and waited for my grandmother to start the car. I heard Denise Lasalle singing,

Don't mess with my Toot Toot
don't mess with my Toot Toot.
I know you have another woman
so don't mess with my Toot Toot.
When I was born in my birth suit the doctor slap my behind

He said: You're gonna be special
you sweet little Toot Toot.
So you can look as much
but if you much as touch
You're gonna have yourself a case
I'm gonna break your face.
So don't mess with my Toot Toot
don't mess with my Toot Toot.
I know you have another woman
so don't mess with my Toot Toot.

Don't mess with my Toot Toot
don't mess with my Toot Toot.
Toot Toot - Toot Toot - I know you have another woman - Toot Toc
Toot Toot - Toot Toot - I know you have another woman - Toot Toc
Don't mess with my Toot Toot
don't mess with my Toot Toot. . . .

So what does that mean? I see you shaking your head and popping your fingers, but what
does that mean? My grandmother asked, and I didn’t know. It means don’t mess with her
toot toot, I said proudly. Yes, but what is her toot toot? I was stuck. I paused. Is it her
privates? I was shy. Well it could be, she said. What else could it be?” I don’t know
Granny. Well it is sort of like her privates. It’s her everything. She’s telling him not to
mess with her period, unless he really is committed. She don’t want him messing with
nothing…her heart, her mind, her body, her soul, nothing unless he is truly committed to
loving all of her. She’s standing up for herself. Like she ought to. You gotta listen to
how she says things. How she says the words. All of those things will tell you what
something means. You made a good choice today. Play it again baby, She said. We
popped our fingers all the way home.

In 1990 my grandmother passed away from a five year battle with cancer. My
mother, aunts and uncles decided to bring her home to care for her in last few days. She
didn’t want to die in a hospital. When they brought her home she couldn’t speak and she
was hooked up to IV therapy and an oxygen tank. I was only allowed to see her for a few
minutes because people were stopping by the house in droves to spend time with her and
pay their respects to our family. It hurt me to see her in pain so I only spent a few minutes with her. Granny can hear me, I asked. She nodded yes. I love you and I don’t want you to leave me, I said. She nodded no. But you are. They told me you are. They told me you’re going to die, I cried. She nodded no. Are you going to die, I exclaimed. She nodded yes. Then you’re going to leave me, I said. She nodded no. My aunt came in the room and saw me in tears and made me leave the room. My grandmother died later that evening.

Twenty years later, I am able to understand how my grandmother is still with me. Her ability to read between the lines, understand and mine the beauty, the pain, and the meaning of the most difficult and the simplest stories with only a ninth grade education is the gift that she gave and nurtured within me. Her early lessons on listening and her push to make me retell all the things I learned from listening prepared me for this project and I could not begin to understand how to tell doctors Vivi South, Theresa Bayarea and Laketi Durban story without telling at least part of mine first.

Black Women In the Academy: Finding the Topic and Formulating the Question

I first became interested in studying Black women faculty at predominantly white institutions, during my sophomore year of college in California. I was enrolled in a Sociology class devoted to diversity in America. For my term paper I had written an essay about the ways in which African Americans, Native Americans, Latino Americans and Asian Americans had immigrated voluntarily and involuntarily to the United States and how these migration patterns had connections to each groups labor and economic opportunities (historically and contemporarily). I worked feverishly for weeks on this paper and I was excited to find the grade on the last page was an A-. I read over all the
comments and the one that struck me most was a note that stated, “I hope that you are thinking about going to graduate school, see me if you’d like to talk more about it.” I approached my professor after class and asked her about the comment and she said, “Yes, Chamara, Have you thought about graduate school?” I was having a hard enough time affording tuition for the first two years and couldn’t think about paying for another two to six years beyond undergraduate for a Masters or Doctorate degree. Before I could answer she explained that she would be happy to talk to me at length about graduate school during office hours, but she also recommended that I find a Black female faculty member to serve as my mentor.

I thought about her suggestion and found two Black female professors and enrolled in every class they offered until my senior year. In watching them and talking to them I was intrigued and disturbed by things they said and things that I witnessed others say and do in their presence. I was intrigued because in every class whether the class was specifically listed in Ethnic studies, Women Studies, Sociology, Dance or English they discussed how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and all subjectivities in general impact the construction of knowledge and our ways of being in the world. While I was in awe of their teaching, I often saw how students challenged them in ways that I had never seen in any of my other classes; classes that were often taught by white faculty or male faculty of color. Even though those challenges were painful to witness, their personal conviction, seen through their teaching, actions, scholarship, their undaunted patience with me as a student and a young woman, their experiences and their stories encourage me to know that change on all fronts (racism, sexism, homophobia, and hegemony in general) was possible, despite my identity as a Black woman. It was their stories in
particular that I wanted to know and hear more of. Each woman’s stories became a regular part of the time I spent with them and in each story they told I learned more about their own individual journey’s and I learned something about my own life and about life in general.

The Method: Life History

Life history examines how individuals talk about and story their experiences and perceptions of the social contexts they inhabit. Life history method is used to explicitly recognize that lives are not compartmentalized and that consequently anything that happens to us in one area of our lives potentially impacts and has implications for other areas. I am drawn to life history because of its potential to explore lives as complete pictures while simultaneously providing a historical context in which lives have been lived.

The first life histories, in the form of autobiographies of American Indian Chiefs, were collected by anthropologists at the beginning of the twentieth century (Barrett, 2006). Since then the approach has been increasingly adopted by sociologists and other scholars working in the humanities, although its popularity has tended to expand and diminish. For sociologists, the major focus of life history came with the 1920s work of William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1920), *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Thomas and Znaniecki relied mainly on the migrants’ autobiographical accounts to explore the experiences of Polish peasants migrating to the United States. They note:

But even when we are searching for abstract laws, life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material, and if social science has to use other materials at all it is only because of the practical difficulty of obtaining at the moment a sufficient number of such records to cover the totality
of sociological problems, and the enormous amount of work demanded for an adequate analysis of all the personal materials necessary to characterize the life of a social group. If we are forced to use mass phenomena as material, or any kind of happenings taken without regard to the life histories of the individuals who participated, it is a defect, not an advantage, of our present sociological method (pp. 1832-3).

The prominent position of life history was further explored at the University of Chicago, particularly by Robert Park. Park believed that a sociologist was "a kind of super reporter...reporting on the long-term trends which record what is actually going on rather than what, on the surface, merely seems to be going on” (Raushenbush, 1979 p. 10). Park believed that the city was the ideal laboratory to study human interaction and collective behavior. In the range of studies completed under Park, life history method was the primary method of data collection.

Scholar W.E.B. Du Bois also used life history methods in exploring the lives of African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the paper, “The Laboratory in Sociology at Atlanta University (1903)”, Du Bois (1980) and a team of researchers studied the conditions for African Americans around the university and in addition collected primary source data in the form of life histories and interviews to create a larger discussion and analysis of the conditions of African Americans throughout the United States.

While popular in the early twentieth century, the use of life history methods began to decline within academic disciplines as the need for hypothesis driven, provable and often quantifiable research emerged as the academies first priority. Sociologist Howard S. Becker (1970) notes in his critique of abandonment of life history methods,

It has lead people to ignore the other functions of research and particularly to ignore the contribution made by one study to an overall research enterprise even when the study...produced no definitive results of its own. Since, by these
criteria, the life history did not produce definitive results, people have been at a 
loss to make anything of it and by and large have declined to invest the time and 
effort necessary to acquire life history documents (p. 73).

Life History again became a viable method for researchers with the onset of 
postmodernist theory. Under modernism, life history largely faded away because it 
persistently failed objectivity tests: “numbers were not collected and statistical 
aggregation produced and, since studies were not judged to be representative or 
exemplary, contributions to theory remained sparse” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001 p. 6). The 
use of master narratives and objectivity under modernism, were replaced with multiple 
narratives and subjectivity by postmodernism, thus once again giving life history a 
credible and justifiable space within social science. Scholar Petra Munro (1998) notes,

The current focus on acknowledging the subjective, multiple and partial nature of 
human experience has resulted in a revival of life history methodology. What 
were previously criticisms of life history, its lack of representatives and its 
subjective nature, are now its greatest strength (p. 8).

Data generated in life history studies disrupts the normal assumptions of what is 
known by intellectuals in general and forces a confrontation with other people’s 
subjective perceptions (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). By using life history as a method 
researchers are able to put themselves in the participant’s skin and learn people as they 
are in the various identities they occupy in their lives. In doing so researchers begin to see 
what is taken for granted in research design and shed light on the kinds of assumptions 
embedded in research questions.

Life history narratives is the overall picture of a person’s life as they see (make 
sense of), feel (connect emotion to) and experience (remember) it. The primary goal of a 
life history is an account of one person’s life in their own words, elicited or prompted by 
another person (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). Life history studies provide an
opportunity to explore not only the effects of social structures on people but to portray
the ways in which people themselves create culture. Denzin suggests that the chief
feature of life history is the prolonged interview, which consists of a series of interviews
in which the participant and the interviewer interact to probe and reflect on the
participants’ statements (Denzin, 1970). The interview is supported, where possible, by
documentary evidence and reports. The advantages of the life history approach for this
study are:

- the holistic nature of life history allows for a complete biographical
  picture
- a life history provides a historical, contextual dimension
- in studying a life history, the dialectical relationship between the self and
  society can be explored
- exploring the construction of the gendered, racial, sexual and class self-
  identity
- the relationship between the individual and society in the creation and
  perpetuation of norms as it applies to multiple identities
- the dynamics of power relations within identity politics

In *Subject to Fiction: Women Teacher’s Life History and the Cultural Politics of
Resistance*, researcher Petra Munro (1998 pp. 4-5) asks the question, of herself and others
engaged in researching the life histories of women, “How can we write as women when
the ‘woman’ subject is a construction of masculinist language, or, in other words, a
fiction?” Her question is not to suggest that doing life histories of women are impossible,
rather the task of doing life history is political, reshapes epistemology, and calls
researchers to centralize women’s narratives rather redefine women in masculine terms.
Feminists have highlighted how the narrative genres-autobiography, life history and
biography—assume the male life cycle and experiences as the exemplar for writing life—and thus are culturally determined, gendered as well as raced and classed (Bell & Yolam, 1990 p. 22; Rosenwald & Ochenburg, 1992 p. 15).

Petra Munro uses a feminist lens in her exploration of the lives of female teacher’s in *Subject to Fiction*. In this work she uses life history narratives to answer two important questions:

- How do the life histories of women teachers explain the gendered nature of the teaching profession?
- How do women teachers negotiate their own sense of self against/within cultural stereotypes of teachers?

Unafraid to show her intellectual and personal connection to her subjects, Munro (1998) explains early,

I was eager to collect stories about women teachers who had taught in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s since little historical information is available for these time periods. Second, I chose social studies teachers because of my experience as a social studies teacher. I hoped this would provide a common understanding on at least one level (p. 10).

Munro uses in depth interviews of three participants to share, that while these women differ in various ways (age, social class, opinions and thoughts about teaching), their struggles across time and place within the field of education and their oppositional relationship to patriarchy, linked their lives and their stories.

While Munro’s work is one the best uses of life history methods as it applies to women in education, her use and blend of life history and her own personal narrative is a common and useful tool within life history methods. Her telling of her three subjects lives (Cleo, Bonnie and Agnes) blended with her own story allows her to display and examine her connection to each woman and their connections to each other. This type of
reflection is central to life history methods and when used in this way by researchers, particularly feminist researchers, becomes central to women’s survival and as an epistemological act.

**Life History Methods and Black Women in the Academy**

To conduct life histories of Black women in the academy is to take seriously the lives of women within a patriarchal, racist, heterosexist and capitalistic structure. To take seriously their stories is to acknowledge their conversations as more than just ‘idle talk’ or mere gossip (Munro, 1998). Conducting life histories of these women is to narrate what Alice Walker calls ‘mystories’; stories of the way these women know themselves (Walker, 1993). Thus the simple act of telling a Black woman in the academy’s story from her point of view is a revolutionary act (Christ, 1986).

Women’s narratives/life history become a space for understanding not only the complexity of women’s lives, but explains women’s perception of themselves and the world and how they construct a gendered, classed, racialized and sexualized self through narrative and how they talk about their lives. This means including aspects of life stories that have been traditionally dismissed: how women’s private and public lives intersect; the impact of the mother-daughter relationship; and the familial and female friendship support networks that sustained women’s public activities and of course, their discourse; how they talk about their lives (Alpern, Antler, Perry, & Scobie, 1992).

In the innovative work, *Black Women in the Academy: Promise and Perils*, historian Darlene Clark Hine ends the edited volume with her essay, *The Future of Black Women in the Academy: Reflections on Struggle*. In her polemic she reminisces over her life in the academy and provides words of wisdom for future Black women academics
and staunchly notes, “the surest way to a productive and fulfilling future for Black women in any profession is paved with understanding of the experiences of those who went before” (Clark Hine, 1997 p. 327). It is in this tradition of storytelling and testimony that this project was envisioned, with life history methods illuminating the dynamic interaction between human agency and hegemonic forces. The use of life histories highlight the experiences of Black women in the academy and illustrate how these women have negotiated and resisted imposed meanings on their lives.

In, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*, Alice Walker (1983) notes that Black women come from a long line of testifiers. She notes that Black women’s ability to testify, or every tongue confessing, was a way for Black women to purge the hurt and glorify the goodness of being a Black woman in struggle. It was in these moments that Black women could again connect to each other and speak to the larger issues of racism, sexism, class elitism and sexuality. It is/was in these narratives that they unabashedly create space for themselves and reclaim the rights that were often stripped from them in everyday life.

This study seeks to examine the life history narratives of three Black women faculty at predominantly-white institutions and explore how they have used their life experiences as a lens to guide them in the academy. By using life history narratives we are able to gain an insider’s view of the process and events that have shaped the lives of the faculty members who participated in the study. Therefore, the credibility of this research lies in the ability to illustrate Black women’s lives candidly and efficiently.

The narratives of Vivi, Theresa and Laketi divulge important aspects of their values, beliefs and thoughts about situations they have encountered and provide insight into the
types of coping strategies used to navigate these situations (Phoenix, 1994). By using this approach I am afforded the opportunity to develop theoretical explanations after the narratives are coded and analyzed. Along these same lines this approach is important when studying a minority subgroup within a larger minority group because it produces the voice of the individual being studied and validates the experience of their life. As a trial and error device, writes Collins (1998), “one can use this paradigm to think through social institutions, organizational structures, patterns of social interactions, and other social practices on all levels of…[an] organization” (p. 205). Strauss and Corbin (1998) maintain that theories, which emerge from the data, are most effective in explaining the phenomena and producing thought provoking information. This epistemological endeavor captures the voice, emotions and actions of those being studied and allows the researcher to illuminate the participant’s lived experience and make it available to the reader (Cobham, 2003).

**Research Design**

As I began conceptualizing this project my criteria for participants in the study were that they be African American women who were (at the time of interview), holding faculty positions in the academy, at a research one institution. However, upon critical reflection in order to get a sample of diverse women in the academy, my criteria changed to Black women who have been in the academy for at least three years at any period, (whether currently or previously) and within any institution type.

Changing my criteria from African American women to Black women, allowed me to include women of various ethnicities and national origin in the project. The use of Black in this project is not an interchangeable use of the word African American, but
rather a political term used to denote a shared African heritage and connection to those with African ancestry throughout the world.

Changing my criteria from women who held faculty positions regardless of time to women who had previously or currently worked in the academy, allowed me to gain insight from women who have had time to construct themselves as a faculty member and distance themselves somewhat from their graduate experience. While their graduate experience is valid and does/has informed how they view themselves, I wanted the participants to have a firm foothold on their identity as a faculty member. Changing my criteria in these ways also allowed me to hear the stories of women that chose to leave the academy and understand what experiences, situations and circumstances led to their subsequent departure from the academy.

Lastly, my change from research one intuitions to institutions of any type allows me to understand what it means to be faculty regardless of where or what type of institutions these women choose to work within academe and decentralizes the idea of “faculty” as being one universal idea.

Initially I contacted four of my former mentors to ask if they would participate and serve as possible liaisons and suggest other possible participants. Only three of my former mentors agreed to participate, however each of them put me in contact with other women who they thought would serve as good participants. Overall I originally decided on five participants, 3 of my former mentors and two colleagues that I became acquainted with from their suggestions. However as I continued to collect data only three of my participants from the five had the time to fully participate throughout the length of the project. My strategy in choosing these three women had to do with the complexity
(multiple identities) of their individual stories, their overall dedication (time) to the project, and my access (geographic closeness or ability to visit) to them.

While convenience sampling was used an initial way to gain participant’s for this study, this does not mean that this sample did not present problems during the research process. I have a personal relationship and connection to each participant. Each woman at one time has served as my teacher, and I consider them all mentors and friends. I have been to their houses to baby-sit, their offices to hang out, their homes and offices in times of personal crisis (theirs and my own). I have been there as they have given birth (to projects and children) and been there when mothers, friends, and other loved ones have passed away, as they have for me. My sense of connection to these women as scholars/mentors and sister/friend runs deep. My friendships with these women gives me a deeper insight into their narratives as I have met their families, parents, partners and the many people that will be discussed in their narratives. However, as much as my friendship with them will color this research process and as much as their narratives transformed our friendship, each participant was given the final transcription of her interviews and along with my presentation of their interviews for the purpose of this project. In doing so each woman was given the opportunity to edit, correct or discuss their concerns with their transcripts and my final analysis; facilitating a space of co-authorship and shared knowledge production.

Interviews and follow up interviews occurred from December 2007 to March 2009. Participants were initially asked to participate in the study via a phone call that outlined the projects objectives:

- timeline of completion (began Spring 2007 and concluded Fall 2009)
participant requirements (research journal and choice of site location)

must have been or currently be working at an academic institution holding a tenured/or tenure track appointment

must be able to be interviewed around six key aspects within their lives (Biographical information (Grandparents and Parents history), Early Childhood, School Years, Adolescence, Adult Life, Thoughts and Reflections)

must be open to discussing the aforementioned topics at least 1 hour or more

After expressing that they would participate in the study a written consent form was given to participants at the first interview and signatures were obtained. For participants unable to receive a consent form in person, a consent form was faxed and returned to the investigator, with any financial cost incurred to the investigator. A consent letter, clearly stating the purpose of the data collection, its intended uses, and that participation is voluntary was prepared for informants who would participate in the interviews.

**Interview Protocol**

I approached my conversations with these women as an open process that generally centered on their experiences and reflections. My major research questions for the study were:

- How do the life experiences of Black women academicians show the gendered, sexualized and elitist structure of the academy and society in general?

- How do Black women in the academy make sense of their lives (in the academy and in general, do they see them as connected? If so how)?

- How do Black women navigate their own sense of self worth within the academy and within society in general?

The interview questions used to help answer the major research questions were primarily about their individual experiences, but when needed, I also asked them about their perceptions of larger issues in society relating to race, gender, class and sexuality. I
deliberately avoided using a fixed list of questions, as I did not want to lead their
responses to rigid “yes” or “no” answers. I chose a topical, conversational style approach
that touches on 6 key areas of life, including but not limited to:

- Biographical information (Grandparents and Parents history)
- Early Childhood
- School Years
- Adolescence
- Adult Life
- Thoughts and Reflections

I also asked questions about why they wanted to participate in such a dialogue in hopes to
capture their perceptions on the utility of such research projects. In addition to interviews;
arxival documents (letters, emails, and notes), manuscripts and research diaries from the
participants were used to contribute to the overall project and to establish as broad a
context as possible for understanding the life histories of each participant.

In order to ensure privacy and comfort, interviews were conducted at each
participant’s place of choice, for example Theresa and I often met while she was teaching
and later moved to a coffee shop or her home to conduct interviews. In contrast I always
met with Vivi and Laketi at their homes as they both suggested that in their homes “is
where I feel most comfortable to talk about my life”. Allowing each woman to choose
their own interview location allowed for and often assured that they would be
comfortable and willing to discuss their lives at length and ensured full disclosure
without the threat of breaching confidentiality.
Reflective field notes were used to reflect on my own experiences as I collected data. My field note journal served as the main place in which I explored my own bias, connection, assumptions and judgments about the research process. In addition my journal also served as the place in which I noted changes in participants inflection, tone, physical demeanor, both during the actual interview and as I transcribed their interviews. As Watson and Watson-Franke (1985) points out, due to the intensely subjective nature of life history it is important to identify the specific and immediate conditions under which a life history is written and related. In addition the three participants agreed to keep a journal of their own reflections of the interview process. Their journals allow me to enhance my understanding of the intersubjective process of meaning making (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Our journals collectively serve as a means to enrich the audio data collected via audio tape recorded interviews.

Writing Up Women’s Lives

As a Black woman, a researcher and a feminist, my original concern in seeking a method to study Black women in the academy was to find one that would allow me to recover the marginalized voices of Black women and the meanings they give to their experiences. Jane Marcus (1984) refers to this process of recovering women’s voices as ‘invisible mending’. Black women’s writing, narratives, oral histories and life histories has been preoccupied with the recuperation and representation of the past four hundred years of Black people’s lives (Wall, 2005 p. 5). They have not and do not simply depict Black lives as defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized but rather they focus on the intimate relationships and how race, class, gender and sexuality play out in these relationships and the effect they have on their private and public lives.
In researching Vivi, Theresa and Laketi, I was deeply concerned with how their words would be presented. They are my mentors, my friend, my sister and my angel. I wanted to be sure that my writing of their lives reflected my great levels of love and respect for them. I wanted to make sure my writing would not mine the deepest parts of them and then re-tell it in a way that would objectify or betray them. My task was great because they way they were/are depicted in this study rested/ rests with me. While I was certain that I wanted In this case I will be the last person that will see the final draft that I turn in to committee for review. Thus the final product that you will read are words that I felt needed to be read, said, heard and at some moments could not be told. My final decision in the narratives that you will read however was heavily influenced by the process of member checking. Member checking is a technique used for establishing the validity of an account. Data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of groups from whom the data were originally obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Born out of the necessity to provide research subjects, particularly marginalized research subjects, with an opportunity to have a part in how they are represented in qualitative research; member checking was a tool used to maintain ethics and used to afford Vivi, Theresa and Laketi with recourse to “keep me honest” about how they wanted their image/stories/narratives presented to you.

The actual process of member checking for this project began early. After every interview each participant would receive a transcript of the entire interview. Inside the packets or the emails that they received from me was a note stating,

Hello (Vivi/Theresa/Laketi),

As always thank you for letting me interview you and your participation in the project, I sincerely appreciate it. Enclosed/Attached you’ll find the transcripts of our last interview. Read it over carefully and let me know if there is anything
that you have a reaction to; that sticks out; that you want to grammatically correct; that you’re uncomfortable with or that you want to talk about in greater detail. Highlight and track change away. Our next interview is scheduled for (date) at (time) at (location). Let me know if you need to make any adjustment to that time. Looking forward to hanging out again.
In peace,
Cha

Our transcript member checking was easy. At times I received spelling changes or additional comments that they wanted to make in particular sections or information that they had misspoke about. Our write up member check was challenging. When it came time to craft their stories from transcript data, I wanted to tell their stories in a linear fashion, beginning with their birth and ending with their lives at the present moment. Theresa disagreed. I sent her the first draft of her chapter via email and she replied, “I like it, but why are we starting at the beginning of my life when that’s not the interview we first began with?” She was correct. For the sake of their comfort I suggested during the interview process that each women start where she felt most comfortable. She reminded me, “We started with the birth of my son. I thought that was how we were going to start my life. I like that start”. I argued that I wanted to tell a linear narrative so that the reader’s would be able to follow the entire narrative as a linear story. She rebuffed that answer but eventually gave in to my desire to tell her story as a linear narrative.

While Vivi and Laketi did not mind having their stories told in a linear fashion, they both had questions about the stories that “made” the early drafts of their chapters. In an email responding to an early draft Vivi replied,

Sweetie why are we spending so much time on the academy? They know I’m faculty and they know universities are racist and sexist and homophobic. I want you to tell the story about all of me. That’s just my job. I participated because your methods statement said you were doing life history methods, not “sound-bite
fix the academy off the Black woman faculty they’re trifling and see why they’re trifling life history method”. I have some changes I want to make. I’m going to go through my transcripts and we going to have a phone meeting.

Laketi was also dismayed by the first draft of her responding in an email,

dear mara,

i am so proud of you and i am happy that you are making progress. i just read the draft of my chapter for your diss. i loved it yet i am conflicted. the way it's reading on the page doesn't seem like an accurate portrayal of me. it seems as if i am coming across as privileged. i don't see myself that way but in reading what you have here it feels very much like i am telling a privileged/victim narrative. i don't know if things can be changed but i don't think i am comfortable with how things are right now. we should talk about it tonight.

love you,
Laketi

While their comments and suggestions were at times difficult to hear during the process of writing, member checking made sure that I was constantly engaged/engaging with the women whose stories I was telling as well as engaging their stories. For that reason this is a vulnerably written co-created text negotiated through the give and take, metaphysical process of member checking. I was/am vulnerable (not read as powerless but read as equipped) because their stories and this research called for it; and writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly if not more (Behar, 1996).

Conclusion

Often our methodology defined by the oxymoron “participant observation”, is split at the root: act as a participant, but don’t forget to keep your eyes open. Pull weeds in Vivi’s garden, dance in Theresa’s class, bake scones with Laketi, hug them all. But when the grant money runs out, or the summer vacation is over, please stand up, dust
yourself off, go to your desk, and write down what you saw and heard. Relate it to something you’ve read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci, or Geertz and you’re on your way to doing ethnography (Behar, 1996). This conventional wisdom separates the researcher and the researched, creating an imagined and at times believed division and hierarchy. It allows the researcher a comfortable distance to separate: any emotions felt towards the research respondents or any emotions from the research subjects themselves (perceived as clouding the researcher’s ability to render an objective and truthful account); any emotions or internal struggles that surface for the researcher (perceived as clouding the researcher’s ability to render an objective and truthful account); any believed responsibility obliged to the research subjects and their truths (perceived as clouding the researcher’s ability to render an objective and truthful account). It was difficult in most cases to leave Vivi, Theresa and Laketi. Their stories and our time together became something that I looked forward to and my friendship with each woman is one that kept us in contact on a regular basis long after our interviews ended. Defying conventional ethnographic wisdom, for better or for worse, I continuously carry these women with me; delicately balancing their emotions, my emotions, my struggles as storylistener and storyteller and my obligation to their truths.
Chapter 5

Dr. Vivi South, I Come From A Place

I come from a place where
Fieldwork meant working in a field
Most times from can’t to can’t
A place where Grandma Nan
Was my best friend
And where white folks could do
And say anything they wanted
To a colored girl like me
I come from that place

I come from a place where
Rides in the truck with Poppa
Were landmarked by trees
Where two men were
Lynched, gravestones of Greatgram
And Great Cousin Frank
And the church where Momma
Was married to Daddy
I come from that place

I come from a place where
Not speaking to folks when you
Saw them could get you
Braided switches to your legs
And where lemonade
In mason jars
Seemed to cool even the hottest
Mississippi summer afternoon
I come from that place

I come from a place where
Proper young ladies only wore dresses
And pigtails and
Never roughhoused with boys
And where dark skin
On a woman was akin
To a scarlet letter
Ensuring a certain servitude
I come from that place

I come from a place where
Sunday morning meant watching
Reverend Taylor work
The congregation into frenzy
And where Sunday evening
Meant watching Poppa sneaking off
To play cards and
Drink with Mr. Roberts and Uncle Pete
I come from that place

I come from a place where
My mother learning of
My father’s other wife
Caused her heart to break
And her mind to never be the same
Where when she saw our faces
She screamed
I hate you Joe!
I come from that place

I come from a place where
I had to be raised by Aunt Irene
And Uncle Frank so Nan
Could raised my other Brothers and Sisters
And where Nan’s letters
And Aunt Irene’s homemade cookies
Were the only things
That kept my heart in tact and my mind sane
I come from that place

I come from a place where
My Aunts prayed that
I would one day love
A Man more than I loved my books
And where one day
I loved a woman
More than I loved
My books
I come from that place

I come from a place
Where I was told that
I was one of the best Negro
And Female Students they ever had
And where I was told I should
Be happy I have achieved
This much considering
I Ain’t never been happy
Introduction

My time with Vivi South was like being with a griot. Her storytelling and age position her as both orator and elder; me as both listener and youth. Like all griots, Vivi’s stories hold the re-memories of her family’s history, larger connections to historical moments in American history and her own personal life history. However, rather than the traditional setting of storyteller with a captive audience, or in traditional formal research interviews, with participant and interviewer sitting across from one another with a tape recorder nearby; Vivi and I practiced a style of storytelling fashioned from what Paule Marshall calls Kitchen Poets, where storytelling happened around a domestic task (Marshall, 1983). While Marshall speaks of Black women gathering to make coffee or cocoa and help their children with homework, the tasks Vivi and I engaged in ranged from cleaning, gardening, cooking, canning preserves, to walking her dog. An activity was always the backdrop of our meetings. For Vivi, “work was always accompanied by storytelling and vice-versa. Nan and I always killed two birds with one stone. I learned something important to our survival, like canning, sewing, or cooking and I also learned something else important to our survival, our stories. Two birds, one stone.” During the research process, Vivi and I emulated those intimate times that she spent with her Grandmother Nan in Mississippi and I learned her family’s stories and her personal stories that highlight the pain, joy and consequence of being born Black, female, a lesbian and poor.

In this chapter, Vivi’s life history is presented in her words via interview transcripts. While the interviews were not conducted in sequential order, they are
presented in chronological order so as to show a progression of her life and expand our understanding of her life in context. The chapter begins with a discussion of her early childhood in Mississippi, highlighting her experiences in the Jim Crow south. It then proceeds to a discussion of her move from the South to the Northwest, paying particular attention to the effect of the Great Migration on her family. The chapter goes on to discuss her experiences in school in the Northwest and her “coming out” to her family as a lesbian and explores issues of sexuality, particularly within the Black community. Lastly, the chapter explores her experiences in the academy from her time as an undergraduate to her position as a faculty member with a focus on the binaries of personal and private. Finally, the chapter concludes with Vivi’s reflection on her participation in this project.

**Labor Pains**

I was born on a fall night in 1945 in a five room house in a small town in Southern Mississippi. My mother was 19 years old and my father was 28. I was my mother’s first child and home alone and not knowing what to expect, she mistook contractions for indigestion and her water breaking for wetting herself. Had it not been for my grandmother coming home early from visiting a friend my mother said she would have still been thinking that she had the world’s worst stomachache. My grandmother (we called her Nan) told her that she was in labor and my mother refused to believe her because Nan had told her that she was in labor the day before and nothing happened. They argued for ten minutes before Nan could get her to lie down and push. Nan and my Aunt Sara (Nan’s sister) delivered me at home as Nan says ‘I was making my way into the world without permission’. I came out about 30 minutes from the time that Nan
stepped foot through the door. My mother said that she screamed when Nan showed me to her. She said I had no color to me, just ashy and pinched. Nan says that I was as beautiful as any place had looked before a storm, she said I looked serene, defiantly so.

My grandmother and my mother were at odds with each other from the day I was born and how they acted towards each other that day, on the day of my birth, is how they acted towards each other for the rest of their lives. Nan, worked as a washer woman and a seamstress and Poppa, my grandfather, worked as both a carpenter and a fisherman. Nan and Poppa had two kids; Uncle Drake and my mother Lynn. Uncle Drake drowned in the river when he was five years old; my mother was only three when it happened. Nan said he was swimming with some other kids during a church outing and swallowed too much water after jumping off the dock. Unable to catch his breath he drowned before anyone could get to him. Lynn said she didn’t remember much about Uncle Drake or the day he drowned except that he had given her candy like he always did when she was crying; that day she was crying about not being able to go swimming. Nan and Poppa didn’t talk too much about Uncle Drake but every year on his birthday Nan, Poppa and Lynn would each put a small present of candies, pennies and a candle on a small plate by the front door for him. So from a very young age Lynn grew up as an only child.

Nan and Poppa were strict, demanding but very loving parents. Lynn was their pride and joy. At the time the schools were segregated so Lynn went to the colored schools in town. Poppa and Nan were friends or knew almost all her teachers from the time she was in grade school up through high school. They always made sure that she had the best, especially when it came to education and they made sure they were involved; from staying on top of her when it came to homework to going to school plays or
whatever Lynn was involved in. Nan and Poppa wanted Lynn to be educated so she wouldn’t have to work as hard or as much as they did. When Lynn came home pregnant after completing her first year of college Nan and Poppa were shocked. Lynn had gotten a partial academic scholarship and Poppa and Nan worked to cover the other parts of Lynn’s college expenses. Nan said Poppa was sad not because she pregnant but because she wasn’t married and pregnant, however Nan said she was angry. She didn’t understand how Lynn could squander such an opportunity to be educated and to be educated for free at that. Nan always said education is a ticket to freedom especially for a colored woman and no one could quickly deny someone with an education as quick as they could dismiss someone without an education, especially a colored woman. To make matters worse, my father, Joe was a porter, so he was constantly gone and he was known in town for being a womanizer and an alcoholic.

Needless to say Poppa and Nan were upset prior to me being born. Although Joe wrote letters to Lynn when he was gone and dropped in to see Lynn when he was in town, he never made any clear declaration of his intentions towards my mother or me during her pregnancy causing the rift between Lynn and Nan and Poppa to deepen. Lynn said her pregnancy was bittersweet; she was excited, but because she wasn’t in school and not married, no one around her seemed happy for her, not about her relationship with Joe or about her being pregnant with me. Eventually Nan said she and Poppa came around and became excited about me. She said, ‘Lynn and Joe we couldn’t fix, but you we could give the world to’. By the time Lynn was nine months she had worked out a deal with Poppa and Nan. She promised them that she would return to school the following spring semester and as result they agreed to look after me. While Lynn’s
promise to go back to school helped to ease the tension between her and my
grandparents, she and Nan were never quite right again. Nan was unable to completely
forgive Lynn ‘for squandering an opportunity to better herself and be a free educated
Negro woman’ and Lynn unable to completely forgive Nan ‘for forcing her to become
her dream’.

The night I was born would set the tone for my relationships with my parents and
grandparents for the rest of my life. My father was absent, Lynn was vacant, Poppa was
working and Nan was present. One month after I was born Joe proposed to my mother.
Lynn kept her word and went back to school during the spring semester of 1946 and in
the summer of 1946 Joe and Lynn were married at Nan and Poppa’s church. Nan took in
extra laundry and clothes from white folks and black folks alike to help pay for the
wedding; while Poppa helped Joe buy and fix up a house for him and Lynn near her
school. Lynn was happy she was finally a wife, but she still wasn’t ready to be a mother
and I don’t Joe had ever been ready to be a father. She and Joe thought it would be best if
I stayed with Poppa and Nan. Since she was still in school and couldn’t look after me
while taking classes and Joe still worked as a porter and traveled several days of the
week, they all felt that I would do better if I lived with Poppa and Nan. Nan would take
me with her to collect the wash and clothes people needed to be mended and the rest of
the day I could be with her while she worked since she did everything else at home. In
the evening Poppa would watch me when he came home from work while Nan went to
make deliveries and then on to church. At night they would both be there to put me to
bed.
You know during that time it was not odd for your grandparents to be around to help raise you. It wasn’t odd for your grandparents to be your primary caregivers either, but it was odd for your parents to have nothing to do with you. When Lynn and Joe moved away after they got married, they rarely wrote and seldom called. I would get birthday presents in the mail signed from both of them and they would visit for Christmas but they seemed like strangers. I never called them Momma or Daddy, I called them Lynn and Joe, that’s who they were. Nan would write and call Lynn every week but she only wrote back occasionally and once in a blue moon she’d call. Lynn said she didn’t have time to call and write because of school but she told when I was older that she was ashamed to call or write because things with Joe were less than perfect. I think Nan sensed Lynn’s troubles and reached out as much as she could. Despite her marriage with Joe, Nan would always encourage Lynn to better her relationship with me, but Lynn said she was ashamed that she couldn’t be a better mother and resented that I had gravitated to Nan as much as I had. To her Nan was my mother.

In the spring of 1952 my mother graduated from college. Nan, Poppa and I went to her graduation and on that day she told them that she was pregnant and Joe had runoff. Poppa and Nan convinced her to sell her home and move back home with us. By the end of the summer she moved home. She was like a familiar stranger. When school started in the fall she began teaching English at the local high school and I started 2nd grade. The high school was down the road from my elementary school and on the first day of school Lynn and I walked to school together. We left early so that Lynn could meet my teacher and still have enough time to prepare for her first class. On our way we ran into this white woman that Nan often did laundry for, Ms. Webber. She stopped me and Lynn while we
were walking and said, ‘Where are you girls off to so early this morning’. I could tell that Lynn was annoyed but she answered and politely told her that we were going to school; she was dropping me off and she was starting her first day as an English teacher. Ms. Webber told us that she didn’t know they let colored gals teach English. Lynn smiled a tight lipped smile and said, “Yes ma’am they do” and told her that we were going to be late and needed to get to school. She smiled and let us go on our way. I could tell Lynn was upset. All she said the rest of the way to school was “Damn white folks”. She nearly dragged me by the hand the rest of the way to school and didn’t say too much to when we got there other than to stay out of trouble and have a good day.

Lynn wasn’t like a mother to me. She became more like an older sister. It was clear to all of us that Nan and Poppa were pretty much my parents. Nan knew it bothered Lynn that I had taken to her. If I wanted anything, needed anything wanted to do anything I always ran to Nan and Poppa first for permission. If no one else was around I would ask Lynn. I think it hurt her that we didn’t have a close relationship but I think it hurt even more because Nan and I had the relationship that she wanted with Nan and that she wanted her and me to have with each other.

By the spring of 1953 Joe came back to town and he and Lynn got back together. She got pregnant with my brother Joe Jr. not long after that and she and Joe bought a house in town. I had a choice to live with Lynn and Joe and Joe Jr. but I decided to stay with Nan and Poppa. I knew that hurt Lynn and not long after that she stopped making attempts to reconcile some sort of mother-daughter relationship with me. I think she just accepted my relationship with Nan and Poppa. At any rate it seemed like she was pregnant every year after that and I had a sister and two more brothers by the time I
turned 10. I saw them every day and they knew I was their sister but every now and then they would ask how come I lived with Nan and Poppa and not with them since I was their sister. Nan told them I lived there because they needed me to help around the house. They seemed to believe that answer and didn’t really question things any further.

I could tell having that many children and not having Joe around consistently was wearing on Lynn. Her appearance started to change as well as her behavior. She would drop the kids and they hadn’t been fed hair, clothes hadn’t been washed, hair wouldn’t be combed. Nan and I would feed them clean them up and of course if Lynn didn’t come back I would walk with them to school or help them with their homework. At one point she had gone missing for a week. That was the longest she’d ever been gone. I’m not sure what happened but all I remember is Nan waking me up in the middle of the night once during the summer and telling me to put on some clothes so I could drive over to Lynn and Joe’s with her. She told me the kids were going to come live with us for awhile and we needed to get their stuff. I asked her what happened to Lynn and she said Lynn was sick and needed to get well.

I don’t remember much about that summer. I do know that Nan took me with her to visit Lynn in the hospital. The hospital wasn’t like any I had ever seen. I knew immediately it was different and I knew as soon as I say Lynn that she was different. She didn’t seem to really know me or Nan by just looking at us. She just stared at us. When Nan and I got back home I asked Nan if Lynn was going to be in the hospital forever. She told me she didn’t know.

Things were hard around the house. Nan and Poppa had grown accustomed to only providing for the three of us but now with seven of us things became difficult. Joe
hadn’t shown up and no one knew exactly how to find him. Not even his own family. Nan’s sister came to visit that summer and offered to help her with us kids. Nan didn’t want to admit that she needed help but Auntie knew that couldn’t do all of it by herself so she offered to take two of us to live with her. Uncle had a good job and so did Auntie so Nan knew we’d be well taken care of, plus they never had any children of their own. Nan and Poppa agreed that I could go and live with Auntie and Uncle but the rest of my brothers and sisters were too young to be separated.

I was excited about going to live with Auntie and Uncle. They took trains to places and airplanes, they went to museums for fun, they lived the good life. I thought it was going to be an adventure but I was still sad to leave my brothers and sister and Nan and Poppa. I left with them that summer and my whole life changed.

Friday, September 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1955

Dearest Nan,
Hello from the windy city. (Auntie told me to write that since that’s what they call Chicago). I hope this letter finds you in the best of health. I am well and I hope that you and Poppa and J.J., Sara, Tiny and Phil are well. I miss you all terrible. I started school here in Chicago but Auntie and Uncle said that I will only be in school here until December and then we are moving to California. School is good. There are a lot of new kids in my class. A lot of them moved from the South like we did. I am glad that I’m not the only new kid. They say we talk funny but they’re the ones that sound funny to me. How are J.J. and Sara liking school? Do they have Ms. Lee? She is the best pre-school teacher. I love her. If they do have her tell her I said hello from the windy city or if you see her at church. When you write me back make sure that J.J. and Sara use the back of the paper to scribble a note to me. I love them so much. How is Poppa doing without me? Does he miss me? Tell him he owes me a driving lesson when I come home to visit. Do you miss me? I miss you and our cooking lessons. Auntie and I canned some peach preserves last week but I don’t think they will taste as good as ours. No one’s taste as good as the ones we make. How are things in town? Chicago is a big town. I hardly know where we are going most of the time. Uncle says by the time I figure it out it will be time for us to move to California. I hope things are okay in town. I heard Auntie and Uncle and their friends talking about the little boy who was killed in Money Mississippi. Auntie said it was far away from where we live but it is still in Mississippi where you all live. Nan why did they kill him? Auntie
and Uncle said I shouldn’t worry about those things but I want to know. He wasn’t much older than me. Why would someone kill a child? Please keep J.J., Sara, Tiny and Phil safe. I love you so all much. I miss you. Write soon.

Your special one,

Vivi

Monday, September 10th, 1955

My Dearest Special One Vivi,

I hope this letter finds you in the best of health and on the best behavior. Everyone says hello and misses you something terrible. Poppa told me to tell you that he expects you to grow a few inches before you can get that driving lesson. So keep eating your vegetables and drinking your milk. I’m sure you’re shooting up like a weed in the garden. My garden is full of them now that my favorite weed puller is off in Chicago but J.J. and Sara are doing their best to pull the weeds just as good as their big sister. I am glad to hear that you are doing well in Chicago or the Windy City. Remember to carry a scarf and gloves with you at all times, especially as fall draws closer. Auntie called and told me that you were worried about the little boy that got killed. Vivi I don’t want you to worry yourself too much but yes the little boy Emmett Till was killed here in Mississippi. Money is quite a ways from here about 5 and a half hours. I’m not sure why any adult would kill a child but they say that young Emmett was down visiting family from here in Mississippi while on vacation from Chicago. He supposedly got fresh with a young white woman and her husband and another man went and took him while he was sleeping and killed him. I wish I could tell you that this type of thing would never happen again. I wish I could tell you I can always keep you safe from the worlds hate but my dear sweet special one I don’t know. Your Auntie and Uncle did not want to tell you about what happened to Emmett because they didn’t want you to worry, but I know it is all over Chicago. They probably have talked about it everywhere. Please don’t be mad at your Aunt and Uncle. They want just as much as Poppa and I do to shield you from anything that could possibly rob you of the innocence of being a child. Death and the violence that hatred breeds is not something that we’ve wanted you to have to deal with but we are ever realistic of the times we are living in. Unfortunately being a black girl child in a world full of hate will always mean that we will have to fight for your innocence and that you will have to grow up faster than the good lord ever intended you to. Know that I am here for you no matter what and I will always tell you the truth as close as I know it. I know that may not ease your fears but I hope you know that you don’t have to be afraid to tell me how you feel ever. I love you special. I must bring this letter to a close but never my love for you.

Praying and loving you always,

Nan

My grandmother and I traded letters like that for the next 10 years. I could tell her things in letters that I was too afraid to say over the phone or in person. I told her in a
letter about all the things big and small that mattered to me and she gave me updates and
told me things that she could only do using a pen and paper. When I moved to California
my school work and her letters were my favorite pass times. I had a routine I would come
in the house on Friday afternoon’s finish any homework I had for the weekend, do all my
chores and help Auntie cook dinner. Every Friday she would bake homemade chocolate
chip cookies and between dinner getting dinner on the table I would sit in this huge
wingback chair in the living room and read Nan’s letters or write on back to her. I kept
this tradition all through grade school, high school and undergrad.

It was in a letter to my grandmother that I told her I was a lesbian. It was during
my senior year of high school that my Aunt had grown relentless in pursuit to find me
and date or even more to her liking “a fine young man to go with”. I had no interest in
boys and before I knew what the word lesbian was I knew I was attracted to women. All
the things that people said you were supposed to feel for the opposite sex, like the
butterflies or the sweaty palms or always thinking about the person, I felt that way for
girls. My first crush was a little girl I met in Chicago. She was beautiful. She was the
color of chocolate. Her name was Abigail. She had dark brown eyes, knobby knees, and
she always wore her hair in the most perfectly even French braids. She was 13 and I was
11. She fascinated me. She was quiet and but whenever she spoke she always said either
the nicest thing or the meanest but they were always right on time. She was a little
woman and I was spellbound. My Aunt just assumed that I liked her because I wanted to
be just like her but I liked her because she was perfect. I dreamed about kissing her and
us holding hands and playing together. I knew I felt for her the way I supposed to feel for
boys my age but I didn’t.
I wrote to my grandmother about Auntie bothering me about going out with this boy from church. I told her I had agreed but what I didn’t tell her was that when we finally did go out he raped me. I had told my Aunt what happened and she didn’t believe me. The next morning I told my Aunt what happened, everything I could remember about the attack and she stood right there in the kitchen and told me I was lying. “How could you lie on such an upstanding young man?” I didn’t know what to say. Her words slapped me in the face. Not only had I been attacked but I was told that I was lying. I’m not sure why I didn’t tell Nan. I think I was afraid that if I told her and she didn’t believe me I would have been distraught. Instead I wrote to her and said,

Friday, April 13th, 1962

Dearest Nan,

I hope this letter finds you in the best of health. I have no desire to date boys, none. Auntie and Uncle to some extent have been trying to get me to go out with boys at church and some from school but I don’t want to. I have nothing against them I just don’t feel the way I think most girls my age feel towards boys. Is this something I will grow out of? Auntie thinks I’m doing it on purpose, putting off the boys advances, but I just don’t think its right to lead them on. I don’t want them expecting anything from me. I’m writing to you because, Nan you have always been honest with me. What do you think is wrong? I love Poppa and Uncle and I think they’re great men. They are what men are supposed to be but I just don’t see myself falling in love with a man. I know this isn’t my usual letter where I tell you about how things are but I just needed to speak with you flat out. Kiss Poppa for me and tell J.J., Sara, Tiny, Phil and Betty Ann I said hello and that their big sister loves them. If and when you see Lynn tell her I think of her often and I hope she’s well. I’ll be awaiting your response.

All my love,
Vivi

April 22, 1962

My Dearest Special One Vivi,

I hope this letter finds you in the best of health. Poppa, Lynn, Sara, J.J., Tiny, Phil and Betty Ann send their love. I will get right the matter of your last letter and tell you honestly that on this day the Sabbath I prayed for you. I prayed
that God would give you the foresight to know that inspite of what your Aunt or anyone else thinks or claims to know, that you know love is a gift from God. All God’s children need love in order to grow and be whole and free. If you find love and are called to give it and share it with someone then you have known what God put us on this earth for. I don’t care who you fall in love with, my only hope is that they recognize how special and lucky they are to be in your presence and how blessed they will be if you love them back. I knew immediately that Poppa was the person that I wanted to be with. It took him a little while longer to figure that out and lucky for him I was still around when he figured it out but I have known the love of God because I have been lucky enough to have shared and have been a reflection of God’s love through my relationship with your grandfather. My only hope for you Special One is that you develop your ability to hear God’s voice and if you don’t hear it that is what I am here for to remind you to quiet yourself long enough to hear him. You are becoming a woman and the best thing any woman can do for herself is listen to her own voice, which is only the voice of God pushing us to be free. Listen to your voice, follow it and never apologize for loving yourself enough to listen to your own voice and never apologize for giving the gift of love. I must bring this letter to a close but never my love for you. I carry you in my heart always.

Praying and loving you always,
Nan

I never came right out and said it but Nan knew. I don’t even know if she would have known what a lesbian was if I told her I was one. In one of my letters to her in undergrad I told her that I had met someone named Tracey and she was special. She didn’t bat an eyelash and only asked if Tracey was treating me and loving me as I deserved (Laughs) and she wanted to know if she was in school and what her plans were after she graduated. She said her ambition needed to be equal to mine. That was Nan; never surprised by anything. We continued to write letters throughout undergrad and her letters are what made New England tolerable. I was never surprised by racism in any and all of the places I lived it was alive and well. New England presented a new challenge. There were black folks in the larger cities but in the small town where I went to school I felt hyper visible and invisible all at the same time. Her letters soothed me and often
times worked as the salve for the wounds I encountered at school. I looked forward to them.

During my senior year Nan was diagnosed with Cancer. Poppa called me and told me that she had been diagnosed with Breast cancer but she seemed to be doing okay. He told me not to worry but it would be good if I came home right after my finals were over fall semester. So as soon as I finished finals in December I went home to Mississippi. I knew right away that she was dying. She was up and moving around and still looking after my brothers and sisters and Lynn. Lynn was never quite right after being in the mental hospital so Nan and Poppa took her in and took care of her. Everyone came home for that holiday. Auntie and Uncle seemed even came in from California and Nan seemed happy to have everyone around. I think she knew that this was going to be her last holiday with everyone. Nan passed away just before New Year’s day, on December 31st 1964.

Losing Nan was difficult. I returned to school for spring semester but my heart was in Mississippi. Poppa seemed lost without Nan and he tried as best he could to go on taking care of everybody but I could tell he was falling apart. Joe finally came back into town and we heard that he had broken up with his wife in the next town over and came back to patch things up with Lynn. So they got back together and took my brothers and sisters and moved into a house in town. Poppa was all alone. So he decided to move to Florida and live with his brother and on about an acre of land in Tallahassee. My family had moved on and everyone managed to make it to New England for my graduation but I felt hollow. Nan’s absence from that day and all the days forward was very hard for me. She was my solace.
On Being in the Academy

Hmmm, how did I come to be in the academy? I really think I was born to do this. I loved reading, questioning and writing down what I thought about the things I read for as long as I could remember. I’d ask questions or sit and watch and listen to just about anyone talking or doing anything. I loved people. I was fascinated with them. I was a naturally inquisitive child. Not the kind of kid that pestered folks with questions like why and how come. Papa said I was the kind of kid that asked grown folks questions that made them stop in their tracks and want to answer them, not out of anger but because I sparked their interest.

He used to tell this story, I remember vaguely, about how I was riding with him one late afternoon to drop off some supplies to Mr. Jameson’s house for a carpentry job he was working on the next morning. Papa and I were carrying stuff in and we overheard Mr. Jameson and one of his friends talking about Black folks or “Niggers getting beside themselves with all this civil rights talk.” I was about five and I already knew the word nigger was not something I wanted to be called but I knew well enough not to mouth off in front of folks, especially white folks. Papa and I finished unloading the truck and told Mr. Jameson good night. I knew Papa was mad I could tell by the way he was walking back to the truck that he was upset. I had to run to keep up. I hopped in the truck scooted over to my side and once we started off down the road Papa started talking to nobody in particular about how white folks couldn’t stand us Black folks, “but they show can’t stop talking’ bout us. Can’t go one day without saying something”. He said I turned and asked him,
“Well Papa if white folks don’t like us how come they want us to do everything for them? They want Nan to fix they clothes and make things for them and they want you to fix and build they houses? They want Miss Nancy to clean they house and watch they children. How come they want us to do all that and they don’t like us? Can you need someone and hate ‘em at the same time like white folks need us? I don’t remember asking him that but that’s the story he used to tell that offered proof that I could ask questions that made grown folks think about life about the world. He’d said, “You could see the world real clear before you even had a chance to live in it. A mark that you been here before and that you was more than prepared for everything life would bring to you. You can do anything you set your mind to, you’re already prepared to be nothing less than great!”

Huh, Racism, Southern racism in particular was a good teacher. I learned it was possible for folks to hate you and need you at the same time. But if you looked beyond the hate, it was more a fear and anger at the fact that we were in fact human, something that they had denied us being for so long. An admission that we were just like them or deserved the same rights as them would rearrange and shift their whole concept of who they were. Not knowing who you are is hard. That’s how racism works, it structurally and in passing denies that people of color are human. It others us and privileges whiteness.

You don’t live life with as a Black, woman, hell, as a Black queer woman without being prepared for the academy. My life, living in this here body that is...Diasporically Black, Southern, Working Class, Lesbian, Spiritual, Teacher, Partner, Cancer Bodied, rape surviving, Woman, was, and still is an adequate training ground for being an academician. I’m able to survive because I had to learn to claim and reclaim who I am
every day. Academia seeks to silence anyone that is not white, male, middle class, able bodied, Western, heterosexual, Christian and a capitalist. This place was never meant for anyone other than those folks and no amount of wrist slapping with affirmative action, title 9 or any other band aid policy will stop it from being a place that is silencing. Band aids don’t really work, hell they don’t even come in my color, they only slow down the process of healing. If you remember that, you can survive any attack that folks will wage against you in this place. Every challenge in my life has prepared me to thrive and be able to survive. Every, single, one.

Leaving my family when I was ten and moving clear across the country just showed me sooner the same thing that the academy was going to demand again 11 years later. When I was ten I moved with Auntie and Uncle so that they could “raise me and so that I would have a better life” and I did in some ways, have a better life, but that never made it any easier for me to be away from Nan, Papa and my brothers and sisters. When I was in graduate school in New England and later as faculty in the middle of this secluded town in the Mid-West I was away from my family again, divorced from my community and constantly told by colleagues that my distance from them was for the best, I would have a better life as a scholar, I could do my work. I was told again and again that it was good, leaving was important and necessary for me to be a good scholar. Don’t get me wrong I think it is important to see other places and learn how to be independent, but the academy, especially back then in, asks us to leave our communities both geographically and mentally. That kind of separation is dangerous. We become lulled into this false sense of security that somehow these same institutions that didn’t want us here to begin with will somehow foster our growth and nurture us in the same way that our families
and neighborhoods did. I knew better. Leaving the south at ten, I learned how to create community and evoke home in any space that I occupied. I made sure the South never left me. I carried it with me purposely. It was my buffer when I was ten and it became my shield in the academy.

Even my rape at 17 prepared me for this place. My Aunt had been trying to talk to me about how I would be a lonely spinster if I didn’t put down my books and start paying attention to the boys that had been asking after me. She pressured me for months. I knew I wasn’t attracted to men and that I was attracted to women but I wasn’t ready to claim it at least not to her. I had written to my Grandmother about it but I’d told no one else. My Aunt was so pleased when our pastor’s son asked me out. So I finally gave in. She bought me a new outfit, paid for my hair to be professionally done; she even took a picture of the two of us when he came to pick me up. I don’t remember much about that evening. I know we went to the dance but left early because I wasn’t much of a dancer. I remember being in his car and him pulling off onto a back street and him talking about how pretty I was. How beautiful I was and how just wanted one kiss. I kissed him hoping that would make get from under me but that seemed to be his green light…I tried to fight him off but he was much bigger than I was. He was about 6’6 two hundred pounds. I was 5’8 and 125 soaking wet…It lasted for about a half hour and when it was over all I could think about was how Auntie was going to kill him or me because of the blood stains on my new dress. He dropped me off and my Aunt and Uncle were asleep. I buried that dress deep in my hamper…The next morning I told my Aunt what happened, everything I could remember about the attack and she stood right there in the kitchen and told me I was lying. “How could you lie on such an upstanding young man?” I didn’t know what to say.
Her words slapped me in the face. Not only had I been attacked but I was told that I was lying. Being raped was a tool for silence a tool for oppression and I was silent about that and many other things that happened to me after that. Violence in the academy comes in the form of coerced self violence and it asks you to be silent in the very same way as rape does. I remember being told that I wasn’t good enough, humiliated in front of other graduates students and faculty, having my work literally be ripped to shreds, I mean the physical paper being ripped up in front of me and told that it was no need for a Black woman to think she could be an anthropologist let alone have anything remotely knowledgeable to say about women in Africa, I mean that kind of violence. It’s the violence that begs to be pushed down and comes out in self violence. It’s the violence that happens when we’re forcefully asked to be silent.

I had to learn how to come into my own voice. How to speak Loudly instead of silence…what did Audre say your silence will not save you…it didn’t, it didn’t save me…once I recognized that I aint shut up since. That’s why I knew I had to be a part of your project. What better way to speak back.

During the summer of 2009 Vivi passed away. She ended a nearly a 15 year battle with Cancer in July. Never to be silenced not even from the grave, before transitioning she wrote me a letter,

Saturday, July 11th, 2009

My Dearest Special One,
If you’re reading this, then you already know that I have passed on, I’ve passed on to a place where Papa, Nan and Nan’s cornbread are waiting for me so I will make it brief and say Thank you. You gave this old woman a gift so special over the past two years…You gave me your ears, you listened and for that I will always be grateful. I looked so forward to our meetings, they gave me a chance to reconcile the past, put the present in order and gave me the courage to whisper to God, I am ready; they prepared me for passing. Don’t cry, but if you have to, take
this box of my ashes to the beach and give your salty tears along with my ashes to
the ocean. She will appreciate them. I love you and thank you for listening to my
story.
Humbly Yours,
Vivi South
Chapter 6

Dr. Theresa Bayarea, Dancing to Make Freedom

I danced out of my mother’s womb
And I ain’t stop moving my feet since
Boom boom bit, boom bit

Since as long as I can remember
Dancing to everything from
Djembe’s to the Elements September
Boom bit

Child of the Great Migration, Second Wave
I long for lazy summer Oakland days
When Panthers fed us breakfast,
Holding up Black power fists
Boom boom bit, boom bit

You see when the drum calls
My hips, they always respond
Boom bit
But back in the day I got in trouble
For that sh!t
Boom boom bit, boom bit

Mama said, “Dancing is only for social spaces”
Daddy said, “Can’t do nothing with that. You won’t go places”.
Boom bit

But I saw the rhythm of Dance in everything
From celebrating Katherine Dunham
Or mourning the death of fallen soldiers from Malcolm to King
Boom boom bit, boom bit

I heard eight counts in my heartbeat
And saw dance moves performed by
The way Brothas walked down the street
Boom bit

You see I dance to make freedom
Whether it’s my “I’m the only Black person in my department” pirouette
Or my single mother Grand jete
I move my body
Boom boom bit, boom bit
I plied over tenure
And landed in polyrhythmic pelvic thrusts
With son by side and daughter on hip
When they said it couldn’t be done
Boom bit

Should you enter my classroom
Ivory tower or in the ‘hood
The tears from the middle passage,
Will be the danced sweat on your brow
Boom boom bit, boom bit

Your hips will swing like nooses from trees
Your feet will point to Mecca in the east
And your arms will hold
Elaborate Griot stories Centuries old
Boom bit

I dance for
Tired Black domestic women
In rememories of the South
To round the way girls on
Brooklyn street corners with loud mouths
Boom boom bit, boom bit

For Negras determinata in Brasil
To ladies in brown, red, orange, yellow, green, purple and blue
I dance for you
And us when the rainbow ain’t enuf
Boom bit

I dance for hopes of balance/disruption
Between artistry and the academy
Performance and academic jargon
And child support bargains
Boom boom bit, boom bit

And you’ll know that I was
Here
For I danced for freedom without
Fear
Boom bit.
Introduction

My time with Theresa Bayarea was active. Throughout our time together I was actively listening, actively writing fieldnotes, and from her persuasion and insistence I was dancing or as she says, “actively storytelling with my body”. When I first approached her about participating in the project she daringly said, “If you want me to tell you my life history you have to tell me yours through dance”. Of course I thought she was joking. She was serious. I had done ballet, modern and African dance as a young child, but I had not danced seriously at all as an adolescent or as an adult. She challenged me, “What kind of researcher are you if you only take from your subjects and give nothing back? Giving back can’t start when you start writing. Reciprocity has to be there from the very beginning”. So I danced. When able, I participated in her dance classes at a university and a community center in northern California and afterwards she/we “conjured” (the informal term she gave to our interview process), “You are conjuring your life through dance and sweat when you set foot in the class and I help you deliver that and I’m conjuring my life through words and stories and you help provoke my thoughts and help me deliver my life from the moment you push record”. Unlike my time with Vivi, where we engaged as “kitchen poets” or shared information while simultaneously working together on different domestic tasks, Theresa and I took very clear delineated turns engaging each other. We did not recreate the binary of researcher and subject; neither of us functioned as expert; I was not the expert researcher and even with all her years of dance experience, she was not the “expert dance teacher”. She dismissed the title “expert” at the beginning of each semester, the first day of class by stating, “If I’m the expert on dance then that means two things, one, that you have
nothing to teach me and two, that you have nothing to teach your peers. We work, learn
and teach together. I’m here to push us to learn and help deliver a final product that
shows off everyone’s growth, even mine.” She said the same in an email before we began
the project,

Chamara,

I hope you realize that my challenge to you to dance before confirming my
participation in your project was not a hoop jumping process to see if you were a
serious researcher that understands reflexivity, reciprocity or ethics or to see if
you’re really serious about academia. It was more a challenge for you to give me
the same trust with your life in dance that you are asking from me with my life in
words. If I understand your project correctly you are asking me to share not just
the things that I have experienced in the academy, but the things I have
experienced in my life, including my personal life? I have had the luxury for so
many years to communicate many of the things I have experienced through the art
of dance, abstract theory and abstract text. Translating those things to words that
will equal Theresa Bayarea’s life story is intimidating and seems like the ultimate
act self disclosure, something I know you already know is a double-edged sword
in the academy. I will trust the process if you trust the process. Come dressed and
ready to do some active storytelling with your body (when you come back out
here) and I will come ready to TALK about my life. The process for both of us
will be difficult but we will work, learn and teach together and hopefully end up
with something that shows off our growth.

Peace,
Theresa

In this chapter, Theresa’s life history is presented in her words via interview
transcripts. While the interviews were not conducted in sequential order, they are
presented in chronological order so as to show a progression of her life and expand our
understanding of her life in context. The chapter begins with a discussion of her early
childhood in childhoood in California, highlighting social mobility and class tension
within the Black community. It then proceeds to a discussion of her decision to pursue
dance move, with a discussion of Black women’s bodies and trauma. The chapter goes on
to discuss her experiences as an undergraduate dance major and as a dancer in well-
known dance company, including a conversation of mental health and body dysmorphia
in the Black community. Lastly, the chapter explores her experiences as a faculty member with a focus on the binaries of personal and private. Finally, the chapter concludes with Theresa’s reflection on her participation in this project.

**Dancing Out of the Womb**

I was born in the spring of 1969 in Northern California. I was my parent’s first child. My father was an accountant and my mother a nurse. My father was born in Texas and my mother was born in Louisiana, but they both moved to Northern California with their families when they were very young. My paternal and maternal grandparents both left the south for better job opportunities in the late 1940s. My parents have known each other since they were 6 years old and they went to the same grade school, junior high school and high school but didn’t start dating until after they graduated from high school. My mother says that Daddy asked her out every year since they were in grade school but she didn’t take them him seriously because he was the class clown and a flirt. She said she finally took him serious one Sunday after church when he came over to her house and asked my grandfather if he could escort her to the church picnic the following Saturday. They’ve been together ever since.

Both my maternal grandparents and paternal grandparents graduated from high school and all of them had taken some college classes so my parents said they always knew that they’d go to college, without question. They both ended up going to the same college, a small private Catholic college in Louisiana. After they graduated they moved back to Northern California and immediately got married. My father interned at an accounting firm and not long after interning he started working there full time. My mother worked as a nurse with prominent local Black OB/GYN in a private practice.
They were married for four years before they had me. My parents were both excited to find that my mother was pregnant and so were my grandparents; I was the first grandchild on either side. My parents used to go dancing every Friday after work; it was their ritual. My mother said that while she was pregnant they kept up the ritual and whenever they started dancing I started “dancing”. She said I would still be “dancing” after they got home and that I’d keep her up half the night from all my movement. The doctor my mother worked with delivered me and he said that it was the shortest labor he’d seen. My parents both say it’s because they had danced together in delivery room to help my mother get through her early contractions and by the time doctor came into the room I was ready and I danced right on out. They said I danced out of the womb.

I shudder to use the word middle class but I suppose from the outside looking in we may have, we were. I’ve always thought of us as working class because I knew that my parents worked very hard to take care of more than just the four of us, but even with helping both sets of grandparents and my mother and father’s siblings from time to time, we still owned our own home and managed to have money for lessons or activities that my brother and I wanted to do or were sometimes forced to do, plus Daddy was an accountant, he always kept our money affairs in order.

Growing up my parents kept us active. I went to a private catholic school from primary through high school and I was active in clubs and activities at school at a young age. My parents encouraged it. They always told me and Paul (her brother) that “idol hands led to failure” so they made sure to keep us busy. I mean from the time I could speak I was in the children’s choir at our church and once my brother could talk, he’s
four years younger than me; he was also in the children’s choir. I never remember having a moment when I would even think to say that I was bored.

Even though Paul and I were in all of these activities we spent a lot of time with my grandparents. My mother’s parents and my father’s parents lived a few houses down from each other and we lived no more than 10 blocks away from all of them. Many times during the week my parents worked late so my brother and I were either at Grams and Pops (my mother’s parents) or with Nanny and Granpa (my father’s parents). I credit them for giving me the education of real life. Granpa (my dad’s father) always told me that he would teach me “all the things that the fancy private school wouldn’t get around to like common sense”. He and my father argued constantly about what they thought was best for us. Granpa thought that Daddy was ruining me and Paul by making us go to private school with white children. One evening as Daddy was picking me and Paul up from Granpa & Nanny’s they got into it. After we got home from school Granpa asked us how was school. I told him that a friend and I got in trouble for singing the Black national anthem. One of the sisters said it wasn’t appropriate for us to sing at school. My grandfather was livid. As soon as my father came into the house to pick us up he could barely speak before Granpa started telling him about the incident. I remember my Granpa saying, “Nothing they learn is going to stick out more than that they should hate being a Negro”. There were other kids at the school, Black kids, Latino kids, Asian kids but still the school was fifty percent white and fifty percent kids of color. My grandfather knew that the school and the parish in general at that time really catered to the white students and white parishioners. “Ain’t no Negro Sisters or priests at that school. Nothing like y’all had when you were going to St. Ann’s; No one to protect them from racism. I
hate that you think it’s okay to send them there because of all the fancy buildings and activities. You’d sell their souls for a chance to get into a good college. They need to be around folks that are going to encourage them in their studies and help them be proud of who they are. You new Negroes think that money can buy you out of racism. It can’t!”

He and my father got into it all the time about the price of our education. Daddy said going to those schools would help us when it came time to apply to college. He said it was helping us and Granpa always said it was helping us but at a great cost.

My mother’s family was less combative about their opinions of our education but Grams and Pops were also concerned that only time Paul and I saw Black kids were at our local church unaffiliated with our school or in the evenings when we got home from school. My mother’s friends had helped to start a branch of Jack and Jill so my mother’s compromise was to enroll me and Paul in Jack and Jill. By us being in Jack and Jill we did things with other Black children, but for my grandparents (paternal grandparents) they still didn’t think it was enough. Granpa decided to take matters in his own hands. At the time I didn’t know if he took us to the Panther’s free breakfast program to spite my mother and father or because he overwhelmingly believed in their mission. Regardless he took us to the free breakfast program. When I got older he told me he took me and Paul to the free breakfast program not because we didn’t have enough money to eat or to spite my parents but because of the Panther’s determination for us to be free. He said he would check out the brothers in Oakland and the work they were doing, staying within 50 feet and watching the police as they stopped brothers walking down the street and the things the Panthers outlined in the 10 point plan. He said he was scared of them at first but drawn to fact that they were unafraid to stand up for us. By taking us to the breakfast
program he knew that we would get more in that hour or so at the church with other
Black children and the brothers and sisters that were there, than we would get all day
from the white nuns and priests at our school. We would get a sense of pride in ourselves
as Black children that we would never get from them. He said that Paul I missed that
sense of pride and togetherness that he had growing up in the South. He loved us and he
just wanted us to be proud of being Black. That was Granpa.

He and Daddy never saw eye to eye on their political views, especially when it
came to Black folks. My father was too passive and conservative for Granpa, and Granpa
was too outspoken and liberal for my father, but they loved each other and respected each
other as men. Watching their relationship and how they’d interact was the first poli sci
class my brother and I had. That’s how Paul and I knew what was going on. On Sundays
after church and after we’d eaten lunch Daddy and Granpa would immediately settle
themselves out on the front porch to talk about everything from apartheid to busing in
Boston, to slavery to socialism in Cuba to race politics in Brasil to the Iran Contra
scandal to the permeation of drugs into our community, nothing was off limits. Since
Paul and I played in the front yard where they could see us we’d take a break from
playing and sit on the porch and listen to them talk. We’d listen as long as we could
before becoming bored but most of the time I was fascinated on how long they could go.
They’d talk for hours on end only taking a break to do whatever favors Granma or Mama
asked and then they’d pick up where they left off and go right back to it. They were
always civil but every now and then you could tell if one of them got upset. When
Granpa was perturbed his right eye brow would raise. It would be up so far that it looked
like it was about to meet the start of his hairline. And if Daddy was mad his nostrils
would flare, sometimes on that porch I thought I could see up to Daddy’s brain, his nostrils were so flared. Even then, nostrils flared and eyebrows raised, they were always respectful. No yelling, no screaming, just tense. They were the type that had to agree to disagree. Granpa always joked and said he didn’t know how Daddy was related to him since he didn’t have a rebellious part to his spirit. Granma would always follow and say “he is rebellious; he’s the exact opposite of you and me, besides your kind of rebellion skipped a generation and landed on Paul and danced into Theresa”.

I Chose to Dance

I’m not sure where it came from; my passion to dance that is but I’ve been dancing since as long as I can remember. My mother said not long after I could walk I was dancing. She signed me up for my first ballet class when I was 3 years old. My parents and grandparents all said anytime I would hear any kind of music I danced. As a matter of fact that’s how I got my childhood nickname, Boogie or Boogs as my father still calls me. They said if the radio was on and any type of song was playing whether it was a jingle, a Stevie Wonder song, anything with a beat, I was dancing. People have asked me repeatedly if anyone else in my family was a “classically” trained dancer or took lessons. No one that we’ve ever been able to find on either side of my family has ever been “classically” trained but I mean my parents danced as their thing to do with each other on the weekends and my grandparents told me how they used to dance, you know, socially, but no one ever seemed to be passionate enough about it to study it. I don’t think anyone that really loved to dance and move and would ever study it like this; you spend so little time dancing that it only becomes a word, a noun not a verb. It was the first thing outside of my family members that I ever loved. It was fun, it was challenging,
it was tiring, it was fascinating. I loved it and still do. I think my fascination with dance was because it became a way for me to express myself. I know that sounds cliché but my parents were very rigid; the parochial schools I went to were rigid, even the activities I participated in, Jack and Jill, girl scouts, they were all run by rigid people or governed by unyielding rules. I felt as if I was being controlled within every arena except when I stepped into the dance studio and my grandparent’s homes. That’s not to say that dance teachers I had were lax nor were my grandparents, but I was inspired and encouraged always to create my own identity in each of those places. No one told me who I was in those places. I was allowed to tell them, I danced who I was.

Even though I’ve been dancing every since I can remember my love story with dance began very mundane. Initially, I started dancing because my parents hated the daycare I went to. When I was three years old I was in preschool for half days, from 8am to 12 noon. From there I would go next door to daycare, from about1pm to 5:30pm. Grams and Granma worked as domestics so whoever got off earlier would pick me up if it happened to be before 5pm. The daycare options were limited and my parents, out of lack of time, money, and any other familial options were forced to place me in a mediocre daycare. I was in daycare for about 4 months when Dr. Bell, the doctor my mother worked for, told Mama that his sister in law that had studied at Julliard was returning to the bay to be a ballerina in a local company. He told her that she was starting a private dance class with other young black girls and that she should think about enrolling me in her class. My mother talked to my father about it and he thought it was a great alternative to daycare. So every day, as soon as A.M. session was over I ate lunch, went to chapel and then Sister Francis walked me and two other girls 1 block down the
street to a store front that Ms. Janice turned into a dance studio. Ms. Janice had us from 2:30pm-5:30pm. When I think about it now, that’s a long time for a 3 year old to be in class. That’s three hours, but I don’t ever remember complaining or hearing from my parents that I complained. They always told me that when they came to get me at 5:30pm I was always up front standing right next to Ms. Janice mimicking her every move. I do remember sometimes when they came to get me I would cry, I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to stay, I wanted to dance.

My parents supported my love of dance. They were at every recital, every contest, every rehearsal that they could make. If one of them had to work late, then the other one would make sure to show up early and the times that they both had to work late, then they would make sure that both sets of grandparents were there. It wasn’t until my freshman year of high school that they started to push me to “think about something other than dance”. I ignored them and I mean I didn’t get it, for me there was nothing other than dance. For me “to think of something other than dance” was like asking me to see myself as something other than human. It was thing I woke up early for and the thing that I would be up until 11, 12 o’clock practicing. I knew that I wanted to be a dancer.

It was during the second semester of my junior year when I started to see that we really saw dance differently; my parents saw dance as my hobby and I saw dance as life, I saw it as my life. One day after a dance rehearsal my mother and I were driving home from the dance studio and while waiting at a stop light she asked me if I’d thought about what college I was going to attend. I told her I wanted to audition for Julliard, Alvin Alley or apply to Temple. I remember the look on her face to this very day, it was dead pan and she was quiet. The light turned green and cars started to honk behind her. She
finally started driving and calmly said, “Had I known you would go and screw your life up over dancing, your father and I would have never signed you up when you were 3 years old.” I was horrified. It wasn’t until that moment that I realized that my parents thought of this as a hobby, not something that I could do as a legitimate career. We got home, walked through the front and my father greeted and when we were both silent he knew something was wrong. He asked what happened and my mother walked out the room without answering. I asked my father, “So you and Mommy don’t want me to go to school and become a dancer?” My father pleaded with me, “Theresa you’re an excellent student, you’ve always made the honor roll, you’re bright, why do you want to do something that has no real future, especially a real future for a Black woman?” Forget the fact that the woman that had been my first dance teacher had been a Black woman and a ballerina and later a prima ballerina in a large dance company. Forget the fact that I had been teaching dance at a community center and getting paid for it since I was 14. Forget the fact that I had won scholarships for dance that helped pay my high school tuition. Forget the fact that they had encouraged me to dance in the first place. Forget all of that. “Your mother and I just don’t understand how you’re going to support yourself dancing. We didn’t invest all this money in your education so you could be in and out of work. Plus the average dancer only dances until they’re 30, that’s if they’re not injured. What are you going to do? Retire at 30? Is that the kind of life you want for yourself?” It was. I was young I could care less that the average dancer only danced professionally until they were 30. Hell I figured I had been dancing since I was 3 so dancing until I was 30 meant I would have 27 years of experience, something my father or my mother couldn’t say that they had in their own careers at that time. They tried to get folks to talk to me, Father
Benjamin, Sister Francis, Ms. Janice, Granpa, Granma, Grams, Pops, my teachers, my school counselor. I refused to be swayed and Ms. Janice, Granpa, Granma, Grams, Pops all started their talk with, “Your parents want me to talk to you” and they ended it the same, “Theresa you should follow your own heart and live your own life”; they supported me but even with all their support it still hurt that my parents were so upset about my passion to dance.

I spent the entire summer before my senior year of high school working two jobs, working the front desk at a doctor’s office, Dr. Davis and teaching dance at a day camp. My plan was to save money for college applications and money for college in general. My parents made it more than clear that they would not help me pay for college if I chose to do anything related with dance. I also started dating David, a drummer from my African dance class. I was seventeen he was 19. My parents didn’t like the fact that he was 19, but he was in college and was a history major so they allowed me to date him, thinking that our spending time together would influence me to follow suit and “major in something more traditional and stable”. No such luck, instead, our spending time together led to me getting pregnant. The first month I missed my period I thought it was because I had been working so hard and pushing myself so hard physically. Since I had to send out audition tapes that fall I wanted to make sure I was in great shape and I was using that summer to prepare my body. I just thought missing my period was due to those changes, but when I missed a second period I knew I was pregnant. I asked one of the nurses at the doctor’s office if she could give me a pregnancy test without Dr. Davis knowing. He knew my family. She agreed and so one day I came into work early and took the test. The results came back the next day confirming that I was pregnant. I was horrified, not
because I was pregnant but because my relationship with my parents was already strained because of my choice to pursue dance, but this would kill them. I told David and he was silent. He said he would support me in whatever decision I made, but he also told me that he wasn’t ready to be a father either. I was crushed, not because I had some grand idea that he and I would run off and get married and raise a family, but because even though we had had sex, I was the one that had the decisions to make.

I found out that I was pregnant at the beginning of August, by the end of August I decided that I was going to keep the baby. I didn’t tell David. He was going back to college back east and we hadn’t really talked since I told him that I was pregnant. I figured it would be easier for me and the baby, if I didn’t guilt him into being a parent. I thought about abortion. Having an abortion meant that I could continue on my path to dancing without any interruptions, but it was something about having an abortion that didn’t sit right with me. I don’t really think it was the whole being raised catholic thing, you know the catholic girl guilt. I just felt that being a mother was something that I wanted to do. I felt blessed to be given the opportunity to have life grow inside of me; to be a vessel for something other than dance, for something other than myself, for someone else. I was looking forward to being a mother. I figured I could go to school and major in something that would provide me with stability and still dance on the side or dance later. I just knew I didn’t want to have an abortion. Plus, I had a few friends that had had abortions and I knew I didn’t want to live with the sadness I saw in their eyes, I didn’t want to experience loss in that way or to turn my back on being a mother. Truthfully I was excited to be pregnant but I still hadn’t told my parents. I wasn’t sure how to tell
them. I told Paul, he was excited that he was going to be an Uncle, but he said that, “this is going to kill them”.

It was Labor Day weekend and I had just finished cleaning my room, I was preparing for school to start that Tuesday when my mother came in and told me that she had made a doctor’s appointment for me on Tuesday after school for my annual physical. I didn’t think anything of it since I had to have one each year for dance, so no big deal. So after school that Tuesday my mother picked me up and took me to the doctor. I wasn’t paying attention as she was driving so I hadn’t noticed until I felt her put the car in park and looked up that we were at different office than usual. She turned the car off and I remember she was still gripping the steering wheel and looking straight ahead when she asked, “Theresa, are you pregnant?” I was shocked. How did she know? What was I going to say? I wanted to lie but all I could muster was a soft, “yes”. She started crying and told me that she was ashamed of me, and angry that I could do such a thing. I wanted to tell her that I hadn’t planned it, that I was sorry and that I wanted to keep the baby. She stopped crying long enough to tell me, “Well the people in here are to help you take care of your nasty not to mention girlish foolishness”. I didn’t even have a chance to ask her what she meant before she got of the car and told me to do the same. At this point I was scared to death. I had no idea what was about to happen or what was going on. Somewhere deep inside I knew I was about to have an abortion but I just didn’t believe and never expected that my mother would do something like that. I felt like I was in a movie everything was moving so slowly but so quickly at the same time. We walked into the building that we had parked outside of but I remember we walked into what I felt was like a side entrance or an employee entrance. I remember staring at the door we walked
through as my mother and I were sitting in a hallway. I only remember seeing people
with name tags and scrubs or white coats walk through the door. I remember people
asking me questions, but I don’t really remember answering them. I don’t know if you’ve
ever felt like this? But I felt like my voice was trapped in my throat. I just kept
swallowing. My mother answered most of the questions for me and she filled out any
paperwork that they needed. We waited for awhile and finally a woman that I didn’t
recognize, but I could tell my mother knew, led me and my mother into a room and she
handed me a gown and told me to change clothes. I changed clothes. I put on the gown. I
lay down on the table and stared at the ceiling. I don’t remember much after that. I know
I heard the doctor say the word termination, but I don’t think he was speaking to me. I
don’t know how many people were in the room. I don’t remember really seeing anyone
either. I could only see fragments of people, an elbow, a mouth, a wrist, a nose, eyes;
ever a complete face or a whole body. I don’t remember much after they administered
the anesthesia. I felt like all my senses just shut off except for the music in my head and
the sound of this loud vacuum noise. My body didn’t belong to me. That day I felt like it
belonged to my mother, to David, to my father, to the doctors, the nurses, it belonged to
everyone except me, it didn’t belong to me.

I was heavily drugged so when I fully came to I was home in my bed. When I
looked around I saw Peter sitting at my desk doing his homework, like he usually did. He
said I was trying to get up from the bed and he asked me, “Tee, what do you need? I can
get it for you” He says I told him, “I need my body back. I need to dance”. I don’t
remember saying that but I do remember feeling like the only way I was going to become
whole after that experience was to dance and never again allow anyone to control my
body. It’s like the day they took my little girl from my womb, she was a girl, they took the little girl in me.

I’m not sure what my parents told my grandparents or our other family members but no one really spoke about the abortion. I still couldn’t believe it happened. I told no one. I didn’t tell my friends, I didn’t tell David. The abortion itself and not being able to tell anyone out of fear made me feel silenced. I felt silenced because having an abortion was a choice that was made for me. When I tell people to this day, folks ask why didn’t you scream, or run or tell your mother no or call the police? They ask the questions that will haunt me forever. I don’t know why I didn’t do those things. I felt I couldn’t. I felt powerless, like I had no choice but I know because of that feeling of powerlessness I was adamant about my choice to dance. The trauma of abortion and the trauma of my mother choosing abortion for me changed me forever. At that moment it felt like I controlled so little. I was seventeen years old. My parents were attempting to control my career choices; my mother was controlling my fertility. So when it came time for me to assert myself and reclaim all the power I lost on that day, in those months, I chose to dance. Choosing to dance didn’t just mean going to class after school it meant that I applied to the schools that I wanted to go to for college; it meant that I worked to make sure I had enough money to pay for application fees; choosing to dance meant that I made the decision to become independent and not in the cliché way where you think you grown, but I was womanish in a way that was real.

**Disciplining the Body**

I don’t remember much between the abortion and starting college that fall. I felt like a zombie, a robot. I was on auto pilot. I know I went to school and finished high
school, I know I danced but I don’t remember much else. I do remember that about two weeks after the abortion I did move in with my (paternal) grandparents. I’m not sure if they knew and didn’t want to say anything or if they believed what I told them when I said I needed to live with them because things had gotten too hectic with Momma and Daddy. Regardless of what they knew or didn’t know, they welcomed me with open arms and I appreciated every moment with them. They loved on me, not doting on me or spoiling me, but they were supportive in a way that my parents weren’t. I don’t think my parents knew how to be supportive in that way; the way that my grandparents were. My grandparents had a way of being that was completely different from my parents. Their only expectation of me was to be happy with the person that I was to become and give back to this world in the same way that God gave to me. They’d say, “So baby if God gave you the gift to dance, then you dance for the world the way that you would dance before God. You don’t short change nobody.” Theirs was very much a way of “do what makes you happy and shine” versus my parents way of “do what will make money and provide security”. Being around Granpa and Granma at that time was very healing, but I was still hurting. Deep inside I was still hurting. Even though the physical scars healed, inside my spirit and my mind I carried the pain.

When I started school in the fall I was still carrying that hurt with me but I kept the love that my grandparents had given me near and dear to my heart along with the love and support of my brother. When I left for school I could tell that my parents were still upset that I had chosen to dance and that I had moved so far away, to them the east coast may as well have been another planet, but they begrudgingly gave me their blessing. They didn’t say much, other than, “take care of yourself and we’re always here if you
need us”. I told them thank you, but I was upset that all they could muster up was take care and we’re here. I wanted them to apologize. I wanted my mother especially to say I’m sorry for taking away your right to give life. It would be years before my relationship with my parents would be anything more than civil.

When I left for school I had no idea what to expect. I enrolled as a ballet major and took elective courses in other forms of dance and also took a full academic course load. At that time very few dancers took anything other than dance classes, but I wanted to challenge myself physically and mentally so I had 3 academic classes and 4 dance classes. One was an introduction to dance discipline so we weren’t doing anything physical but the other three were physical. When I left high school I was in the best shape of my life. Ms. Janice and I had developed a sort of dancer’s boot camp that she helped me with beginning the summer before my senior year and we continued it right up until the day before I left for school. During that time she mentored me on dance, physicality, nutrition and technique and she talked to me about what to expect from my instructors and colleagues but I don’t think anything can fully prepare a young black woman to become a ballerina.

I was always confident so when classes started I wasn’t shy about being upfront or in the middle of the bar/mirror. I felt about assured about the training I’d had up until then especially since I had had numerous opportunities to dance with company’s back home and even a few offers to join some of them right after high school graduation but being at this school was something different. First off of course it was all white; many of the students there had been in school together since they were young; their parents were donors or contributors to the school; they knew the instructors; and the majority of them
were upper class, the class distinction was clear. They were quick to tell me and the four other people of color that we were the tokens and had only gotten in because the school needed some color. I mean they were blatant. I remember by the second week of class they started referring to us as the zoo pack. The zebra, the monkey’s and the hippos. The zebra was a guy who was Japanese and Puerto Rican, the monkey’s were the two brotha’s and the hippos were me and this other sistah, you know because of our ass. We’d all started hanging out together because we had five classes together and it because it was strength in numbers. None of us wanted to be caught by ourselves and be harassed. So when they saw us together they’d start making monkey noises or pretend like they were at the zoo and pretend to take pictures of us or throw food at us and pretend that they were feeding us.

I tried to ignore it at first. I ignored it mostly because I knew I didn’t want to get put out of school for fighting. Plus I loved dancing more than anything and being sent home would have only made my parents all too happy. So I refused to let them throw me off. Eventually we did start to talk back, I mean we were scared. We weren’t punks. When they started up with the noises or little comments I would always ask them if they were afraid of a hippopotamus being a better dancer or make little remarks like that. I made it clear that if they wanted to get to me they’d have to do it on the floor and the stage. I dared them to be better than me. I thrived off that kind of competition. For awhile it would stop them from talking shit. They’d see us in dance class and see that we were serious. We’d match them turn for turn, jump for jump, leap for leap. I think we were a little rough around the edges in terms of form, but our execution was just as good if not better than theirs. They knew we could dance and for the most part they left us alone.
Their taunts however didn’t make the other types of racism any better. Our instructors were the worst. They’d see us in class at the bar, and they’d ask if we had taken any other dance classes like jazz, or tap or “tribal dance” as they called it, instead of African dance, they just assumed we only knew those forms of dance, the forms that they associated most closely with Black people. Once we told them that we had been formally trained in Jazz, tap, African Dance in addition to Ballet they’d say things like, “Well no wonder you all are so big, you’re never going to be able to delicately execute these moves. Ballet is about being delicate, soft.” Or when we did execute the moves properly they’d still say things like “There’s too much power and force in your movements!” or “You’re bodies are difficult for Ballet” or “Your body doesn’t agree with Ballet” or “You’re body has too many curves, too much muscle”. It was hard. I had loved Ballet up until then. My teachers back home never talked about our bodies in a negative way and they prided themselves on mixing in techniques from other forms of dance with our Ballet training. What I had been trained to see as a positive thing, being well versed in several different types of dance, being well rounded and well versed as dancer was frowned on when I got to college. It was like being able to speak multiple languages and then being told to only speak one and never speak any of the rest. So I literally began to code switch between all the forms of dance that I knew, in particular I’d code switch between Ballet and all the other forms of dance that I knew.

It’s funny because I can honestly remember thinking before Ballet class, “Okay discount each part of your body. Stiffen up. Be rigid so you can be soft” and then before Tap, or Jazz or African Dance I would think, “Okay, Relax. Be fluid. Move together. Remember all of your body”. When we did shows it was the worst. I remember during
the fall semester of junior year we were doing Swan Lake. Our dance teacher would say aloud during rehearsal, “I don’t know what I am going to do with these large buttocks and dark skin. How am I going to make them resemble anything close to a swan?” This is what we’d have to hear after going through six hours of grueling rehearsal on top of attending all of our other classes. On the day of the performance our director had me and another sista go in early for make-up before the show so she could have the make-up artist’s make us as pale as possible. She told them, “I want these black ducks to be transformed into beautiful pale swans”. Just like that. So plain. Like it was nothing. I was angry not just at that incident but I was angry in general. I was being thrown so many things at one time. Being away from home, being away from my support system and on top of that I never really dealt with all the pain from the abortion and then the difficulty in transitioning from high school to college but on top of it the racism that was coupled with it at times was unbearable. I remember thinking that if I couldn’t make it through all of this then I’d failed and for that reason I really felt like I had no choice but to put up with the things going on at school. I wanted to dance so badly and I wanted to be accepted there so badly. I just felt like if I cracked under the pressure then they would’ve thought, “Oh well she was just one more black girl that couldn’t cut it as a ballerina, as a dancer. I think in my mind if I failed there then it meant that I couldn’t make it as a dancer anywhere. It would’ve meant so many things to me at the time. It would’ve meant that I had chosen the wrong career path, it would have meant that I was being silly to think that I could take the thing I was passionate about and turn it into something more than a hobby and it would’ve meant that my parents were right. (Laughing) I think that’s the part that bothered me the most.
To cope I started binging and purging…yes I was a walking stereotype and a contradiction. The stereotype was I was a dancer that had an eating disorder. No Surprise there. The contradiction was that I was a Black girl with an eating disorder. People act like Black women are somehow immune from things like that. For me binging and purging was a way for me to feel in control of something. I know that sounds crazy but the routine of over eating and then vomiting felt like it was the one thing at that moment that no one else was doing to me. I controlled it. I did it to myself. When I was upset, sad, angry, worried anxious almost any emotion outside of happiness I binged and purged. It was rare when I was happy. I used to feel all my emotions through dance but once I felt like I wasn’t good at that anymore I channeled all my emotions through B(inging) and P(urring). I was 5 feet 10 inches tall and at my sickest I weighed 97 pounds but that seemed to be when I was the most successful in ballet class. I even scored a solo in the spring of junior year. One of my teachers said, “Your body is finally beginning to resemble that of a ballerina’s and less of a brickhouse”. I was horribly sick but I was being rewarded by what I thought was acceptance because I got a two minute solo. I nearly killed myself for two minutes. No one said anything either. I wanted so badly for someone to notice how sick I was but even though I know people knew I was binging and purging no one said anything. I think it was the culture of that particular school and of professional dancers period. You don’t ask and you don’t tell about eating disorders. My parents and family never came to visit. My parents claimed they had to work and my grandparents were getting older and didn’t want to fly. I rarely went home. I always told them I was in rehearsals, working or had exams coming up. My whole four years I only went home three times to visit. When I did go home to visit I always made sure to wear
layers of clothes and no one ever really suspected anything. They commented that I must have been working hard because I was thinning out but no one said anything beyond that.

I finally did get in trouble for binging and purging. I passed out during rehearsals during the beginning of my senior year. We were in seminar doing leaps and remember it was my run and I remember jumping but I don’t remember landing. When I woke up I was in the hospital hooked up to a machine. The nurses told me I had collapsed in class and that I was being treated for dehydration and malnutrition. One of the deans came to the hospital and asked who I wanted to notify. I just remember not wanting them to call my parents so I had them call Ms. Janice. She had moved to New York that summer to start teaching for Dance Theatre of Harlem that fall and so she came to the hospital to get me. She saved my life. She didn’t berate me she just took care of me. I stopped out of school that year and lived with her. She made me call my parents about a week or so after I got of the hospital and they came to see me. I could tell they were mad at me but they were more worried about the way I looked so they acted civil. Ms. Janice told them that didn’t thing I should go home with them and convinced them to let me stay with her and for some unknown reason they did. I think they trusted her. She was an extremely spiritual woman, a child of Yemaya, no one could say no to her. She and her Iya nursed me back to health. I knew what I was doing to myself wrong and that I wanted to get well so I didn’t fight them helping me. Ms. Janice made sure that I ate and she made sure that I went to therapy. I didn’t want to go. I was like most Black folks, I thought therapy was either for white people or for “real” crazy folks but she went with me. I needed her there and I was thankful that she was there. That was the first time, in therapy, that I was able
to really talk about the abortion. I was able to recognize and acknowledge the anger, the fear, the loss, everything. (Laughing) I ain’t knocked therapy since.

As I was feeling better physically I went with Ms. Janice to the classes she taught at DTH. I loved them. It felt like home, not just because I was around mostly Black people but because I got to see dancers create. They had to talk about their pieces. Why they chose the music they chose, what emotion they were tapping into to create. What was going on in their life that inspired their movement choices? That was what was missing from my time at school. The first two years we learned the fundamentals but when we did have the opportunity to create our own pieces they were so constrained by all these other things donor’s thoughts, traditional ballet. I had no freedom to explore who I was as a dancer. I stayed with Ms. Janice during the entire year of what would have been my senior year of college and it was during the time that I got better and figured out how I was going to approach dance from then on out.

The next year I went back to school and finished my senior year. I pretty much kept to myself and did what I needed to do to graduate. I wasn’t cured of the eating disorder, you never really are, so of course I relapsed to binging and purging especially around the time I started going on audition for dance companies. I had done dance company auditions before right out of high school so I knew what was expected in terms of the actual audition itself but I didn’t anticipate casting directors and instructors being upset about my age. Some wouldn’t even see me because at 21 they thought I was “too old” or “untrainable”. Getting a college degree had fucked me over in the world of dance. All those old feelings of anxiety came back and I started to binge and purge again. It
killed me. It wasn’t about my body or my skin, supposedly. It was about the fact that I decided to get a degree and I was old. I was absolutely crushed.

Once again Ms. Janice showed up. We’d remained in close contact after I returned to school but she was amazing because I didn’t have to say anything. She just knew that I was in trouble. She called me one week and I hadn’t returned her call that whole week and she just showed up at my apartment one day after she was done teaching. I opened the door and she just looked at me. I put my head down and started crying and she came in and told me it was no time to cry it was time to figure out what I was going to do to get my dancing feet back.

She asked me what I wanted for myself. I told her I wanted to dance and I wanted to be well. She asked me what I loved about dance and I told her it was beyond movement but all the things that dance could do. I reminded her of the things we’d (me and some of her other students from the dance studio back home) choreographed back in Oakland. We’d done dance to protest dress codes at school, police brutality in our neighborhoods, city wide curfews, etc. She told me well it sounds like you don’t just want to dance; you want to intellectualize your movement, politicize your body. I said yes. She said well then you have to study dance from all angles, not just movement. Grad school…

I had no intentions of going to graduate school, I thought that discussing dance and not dancing was a waste of time. So Ms. Janice had me go and see some folks at some different schools and talk to them. I checked out a few graduate programs on the east coast, a few in the mid-west and some back on the west coast and really liked how a few programs had infused both physical aspects of dance with theoretical and
anthropological articulations of dance so I applied to 5 schools and got accepted to 4. I was thrilled. I felt like I was finally finding my space as a dancer.

**Into the Academy**

To be frank I started graduate school thinking I knew everything, I didn’t know shit. The summer after I graduated from undergrad I went on tour with this dance company and spent three months in Europe. I got paid a ridiculous amount of money and they paid for all of my lodging and the majority of my food. You couldn’t tell me I wasn’t hot. In addition I received two fellowships so I didn’t have to pay for school at all. I decided to start my PhD in anthropology and worked on an MFA in dance at the same time. It was pretty cool because I was allowed to count some of my classes from the MFA for my doctoral course work so I thought I was hot shit to say the least. I was extremely arrogant. I knew most of the folks that came into the anthropology program were older than me and I assumed they hadn’t had as much experience dancing as I had and I knew that the folks in the MFA program weren’t working on their PhD so I thought I was fly. I got slapped back into reality real quick. I was always a good student and most things related to academics came so naturally so of course when I saw how many books I had to read that first semester I didn’t think it was a big deal at all. I thought I had it all figured out. What I didn’t account for was how demanding the MFA program would be coupled with my doc classes. I expected my MFA dance classes to be similar to what I had done in undergrad. They weren’t. I had to put together a show from scratch. Cast people, choreograph, light it, set design, wardrobe, a lot of things other people had done in the past I was now responsible for doing and learning how to do it well. On top of that I had to stay on top of my actual reading and assignments for my other class. I realized
this wasn’t going to be as easy as I thought. I got over myself real quick and managed to do well enough in my classes that didn’t kick me out. (Laughs). My advisor, a friend of Ms. Janice, told me he didn’t think I was going to make it but was glad I had dropped the attitude and started to really work hard.

He was my saving grace. He had taken the same route as me in many ways. He was a dancer and then went and gotten his MFA in dance and PhD in anthropology. He and Janice had danced in the same company for awhile and when I went to visit schools he agreed to be my advisor if I chose to come to school there. That was the first time that I ever worked closely to a white person, a white man specifically. I mean of course I had white professors before but he was the first white professor that I ever worked directly with. (Laughs) I didn’t trust him at all initially. Again apart of my arrogance. Part of being a student is humbling yourself enough to learn and it was clear in hindsight that Ms. Janice would not have introduced me to Tim if she didn’t think I could learn something from him. I just had to be ready. He was extremely patient with me. He let me make mistakes which was infuriating at times especially since there were times I felt like he could have saved me from heartache. You know don’t take a class with this person or take a class with this person or apply for this not that. Focus your energies here. Not that I would have done or believed what he said early on anyway but it was a learning process. We had to learn to trust each other. I had only been in places where white people demanded that I change who I was in order to be successful. Tim had no intentions on changing who I was. Maybe the arrogance but he didn’t want me to deny who I was as an artist to become a scholar or vice versa. He wanted to show me that what I brought to our department was something unique. That’s what he wanted to show all of his students. I’m
still thankful for him for that reason. You can’t underestimate the power of good mentors
and advisors, regardless of what they look like.

Don’t get me wrong, grad school wasn’t a cake walk because Tim was my advisor. At the
time I started he was still junior faculty, he was starting his fourth year when I started my
first, so he didn’t have any tremendous amount of pull, but he was an awesome teacher
and his colleagues knew that. He was also committed to doing excellent research and
molding scholars that wanted to do the same. He couldn’t shield me from racism or
sexism. He was always very honest about it though. He was honest about it existing,
something, I don’t think I expected this white man to ever be honest about.

I remember after a seminar with this one professor that was notorious for being an ass
especially on anything critiquing race, I was in tears. he said something about my
research project. My project looked at dance, race, sexuality in Brasil and as we’re going
around talking about projects he laughed as I was talking about my research and said flat
out, “Take note this research will not make any significant contribution to the field. There
is no place for dancers that call themselves researchers” I was too naïve to understand
that this was not just a dig at me but at Tim too. When I walked in his office after class I
was still in tears. I told him what happened and I will never forget what he said, “So you
think he took something from you by saying that? Look you are and always will be a
Black woman. Off the bat these bastards are going to give you shit for it. Nothing I say or
do and nothing you can do will protect you from other folks ignorance, the beauty of it is
that you already know that this ignorance exists, you just arm yourself with knowing your
stuff and don’t apologize for it.” I don’t think in the moment his words made me feel
better. But his word that day is still something I use to survive the academy. I left
graduate school with two degrees, a job and pregnant. I got pregnant on my last trip to Brasil. The trip was right before I defended. I went back because I helped plan a festival in a favela in Sao Paulo and so I went back to celebrate. I will spare you the details but Bailey’s father was a drummer and I could never resist the call of the drum. When I came back to defend I was about two months pregnant. I didn’t know I was pregnant and just assumed the morning sickness was nervousness about defending. My periods had gotten more and more irregular as an adult so I wasn’t alarmed. I didn’t know I was pregnant until I went to the doctor for a change in my asthma medication. As always they ask you a million times if there is a possibility if you’re pregnant. I didn’t think so but they ran test anyway when they took a blood sample and I was pregnant. I was happy and sad. I was happy because I knew that I was keeping this baby, but I was horrified because I didn’t know what having a baby would do to my career. Plus Bailey’s father still lived in Brasil and we had no intention on being together. Needless to say it was hard. My new job was back on the west coast but it wasn’t close to my family so they couldn’t help me with him on a day to day basis. It was hard.

The academy is not a place that is kind to people in general that give a damn about their families and it’s especially harsh to single parents, particularly women. And of course no one is ever out right nasty, I mean sometimes they are but I know how to deal with folks like that. It’s the nice nasty that becomes a problem. I had Bailey during my first semester on the job. So I taught the first few weeks of the semester and then went out on maternity leave. The following semester I was right back to work. I’d found childcare for him but I had been pressured to teach one of my seminar’s in the evening to accommodate more students so I didn’t have childcare after 5pm, so Bailey was right
there in the dance studio or in the conference room. I was breastfeeding so I would pump during office hours if I could. I would get occasional stares. Apparently some of my students complained about him being there but I was in a city, I didn’t know many people and childcare in the evening would have meant that more than likely I would have to leave him with someone. It was rough. I loved my job but I loved my child and I wasn’t just going to leave him with anyone.

Eventually I got it together and found good extended childcare for him but not before my commitment as a scholar was questioned, and my commitment as a teacher, and my commitment to service were questioned. My first annual review was horrible and the third year review was a bit harsh too but I survived. I was deeply angry about that. I know I how much guilt I had about not doing all the things I wanted to do with Bailey and for Bailey because my job at times came first, so for my commitment to be questioned was like a slap in the face.

Reflections

I definitely think my life outside the academy and prior to the academy prepared me for life in the academy. It wasn’t until this process of talking about my life that I was able to see how much I was prepared to be in this space. The abortion was something I will never forget. Your body never forgets trauma like that. But I can say that experiencing something like, someone taking something from you was unbearable. There is nothing that the academy could ever take away from me that could hurt like that. Nothing. On the flip side I have learned to fiercely protect anything I have given birth to. So to translate that into the academy I fiercely defend any idea that I give birth to. I don’t let anyone tell me no about show ideas that my students and I come up with or conferences or anything
else. Even if it means that I have to find resources on my own. Which I usually do, but once it’s done it always turns it out to be fabulous. I always say during faculty meetings if you don’t like it now you’ll fund it later and they always do. I just refuse anyone to ever take away something that I give birth to away from me ever again, even if they don’t agree with it. I refuse to be silenced like that ever again.

I can definitely say that having an eating disorder helped me find my voice again. I had learned somewhere along the way that pleasing people is what mattered more than anything and silenced myself because of it. I wanted to fit into a dance culture so much that I was willing to kill myself in all senses of the word in order to do so. I think Ms. Janice and Tim were instrumental in helping me find that voice again. They forced me to speak my own truth and not be ashamed. I’ve learned that I can’t be silent here, especially since a place like this was never meant for people like you and me. They expect us to be silent. My life has taught me to defy other folks expectations.
Chapter 7

Dr. Laketi Durban, Mothering

I write because my life depends on it.
Standing under a cave of tree
I hear the leaves rustling as
I try to catch the broken rays of sunlight
that slip through my fingers.
They leave golden dust on my palms.
I write.

I write in search of forgetting.
Passing my hand over my face
I trace stubble-like scars from
That time when my cheek was pressed
against the metallic buzzing of gravel.
When corn was de-husked under a naked sky.
I write.

I write for my grandmother.
Gathering clothes to hang on the line
I hear her voice in the breeze
Singing,
Senzenina (What have we done?)
Sono sethu ubumnyama (Our sin is that we are Black)
Sono sethu yinyaniso (Our sin is the truth)
Sibulawayo (They are killing us)
Mayibuye i Africa. (Let Africa return.)

I write so that I can mourn.
Drinking water on my chair for the ancestors
I feel a slight breeze pick up and
wrap itself around me, entering
the mouth of the bottle to emit a groan.
Today even the wind is weeping.
I write.

I write because just when I think that no-one can
Cause me more pain than my mother,
I give birth to a five-year-old son
And recognize with a devastating certainty
My mother’s intelligence, her depth, her rage
And the courage with which she authored me.
I write.
**Introduction**

Laketi Durban is like a sister to me. She has watched me grow as a scholar and a woman and I have seen her grow in the same ways. She has watched as I have struggled with self confidence to complete my degree and I have watched her take on the struggle of becoming a wife, a mother and a scholar. In the time I have known her she has transitioned from assistant professor to associate professor and soon to full professor. Our relationship began as student/teacher. My first class with her, was devoted to African spirituality in the New World. The class moved back and forth between Africa and the Americas using literature, anthropology texts, films and religious texts as our compass and map. The class asked us to make sense of the same question Melville Herskovits & E. Franklin Frazier attempted to do throughout their careers, did Africans in the America’s bring their culture with them to the new world or was their culture stripped from them through the atrocious process of the middle passage and chattel slavery.

Laketi’s life begs the same question as she notes,

> Being an immigrant in the United States is interesting. It’s the only time I’ve had to ask myself am I an American or South African American or South African or African American or Black? Because some of my family was Coloured and others were Black and others were Asian in South Africa, am I Black, “Mixed” (Bi-racial) or Asian? These are the kinds of questions I was asked once I came to this country? Sometimes I had to pick and choose when I wanted to carry my culture with me and when I wanted to abandon it. Other times the decision was made for me by force. Do I bring it or leave it? It hurts because whether you leave it, put it away for a time or if it is forcibly removed, there are something’s that you don’t want to forget that gets lost and forgotten and other things that you will always remember and yet may want to forget.

It was in her classroom that semester that I grappled with my own identity; although I was born and raised in the United States, my last name Kwakye, loudly pronounces that I am different and says emphatically that I am Ghanaian. Learning about
African spirituality in New World and tackling the question of abandoning culture or the transformation of culture flooded my mind with memories of my childhood. The more I thought about that question the more I was reminded of the teasing that I endured because of my last name (othering); the battles that took place between my mother’s family and my father any time he mentioned wanting to take me home to Ghana to visit (borderlands); the children that told me I wasn’t Black (African American) enough or told me I was weird when they caught me responding to my Ghanaian 1st grade teacher who called me Akua, the name I was called because I was born on Wednesday (quantification); being reminded by the few Ghanaian children that I did know in Los Angeles that I was not Ghanaian enough because I did not speak Twi and was not born in Ghana (colonization/imperialism). While my memories pale in comparison to Laketi’s memories of “carrying an alien card everywhere” she went while in the United States or “the coloured ID card” she carried everywhere in South Africa. The feelings of “needing to constantly shift in order to belong” are feelings that we both shared and often talked about long after class ended that semester.

While it was our feelings of “unbelonging” that initially connected us, Laketi and I later found that our love of Ifa Santeria sustained our connection. Santeria, often practiced in clandestine spaces is frequently defined as a syncretic religion of West African and Caribbean origin. The goal of Santeria is to achieve balance throughout life on earth by paying homage to the trinity, God, the Orisha and one’s ancestors. While neither of us grew up practicing this exact religion (I grew up practicing Church of God in Christ and Akan traditional beliefs and she practicing Khoisan rituals and Hindi rituals), we see our call to practice Santeria as divine and finding each other on our paths
to achieving balance as neither happenstance nor coincidence. We are forever connected by faith. The time we spent together during this interview process we talked about not only our lives in the academy, outside, but we spoke about our lives in connection to what scholar Joseph M. Murray defines as “working the spirit” or recognizing “spirit” or God’s energy in everything and everyone.

In this chapter, Laketi’s life history is presented in her words via interview transcripts. While the interviews were not conducted in sequential order, they are presented in chronological order so as to show a progression of her life and expand our understanding of her life in context. The chapter begins with a discussion of her early childhood in South Africa, highlighting her experiences growing up under the rule of apartheid and her experiences in White boarding schools. It then proceeds to a discussion of her move from South Africa to Missouri, paying particular attention to her families’ status as immigrants. The chapter goes on to discuss her experiences in graduate school and her personal/professional accomplishments/misteps after “making it”.

A Child Who is American

I don’t know much about my parents when they were younger and I don’t really know much about their courtship. I only remember my mother telling me that she was going to marry someone else, that she wasn’t originally going to marry my father. She said she made a mistake by marrying my dad. She said she married my father because he was the kind of man that was willing to let her have an education. Her sister had gone to be a doctor and her sister was going through medical school and then got married and her husband had refused to let her continue. So my mother was determined to get her PhD and she didn’t want to be sidetracked so she said she picked a man that she felt would let
her get an education. She said in retrospect she should have looked for some other qualities (laughing). She was very bent on getting her PhD and finishing her education. She said she picked my father because he seemed like he would let her do that. She said she didn’t marry practically but impulsively and she shouldn’t have done that; a cautionary tale. She told my father that she wouldn’t marry him without his PhD so he says he did that because he loved her and he didn’t want to lose my Mom.

My mother and father were both finishing their PhDs in America on scholarship when my mother got pregnant. My father was working on his PhD in history and my mother was working on her PhD in psychology. They both focused on Africa. My father focused on African history, South African history in particular and my mother focused on African mental health, particularly infant psychological development. She was excited because she wanted to have a child that was American. That excitement was short-lived. The law was clear. The South African government said that for Non-White children that were born outside of the country (even if both their parents were South African citizens) could not return to the country without filing the necessary paperwork to become a citizen which could’ve been a long process given the fact that under apartheid the government moved slowly for Non-White citizens. Given the fact that my parents had to go back to South Africa immediately after they finished their PhD’s my and the potentially slow process that would have to happen in order for me to become a South African citizen my Mom decided to return home to South Africa and have me while my Dad stayed here to finish his PhD. My mother moved back with my maternal grandmother. They both tried to finish up their PhDs. My mother mail her research back and mailed her chapters back to the States to her advisors and did as much work as she
could; both on her on degree and to support me, my grandmother and herself. My father stayed in the U.S. to finish and he would send home as much money as he could, but he was barely making enough money to support himself from his scholarship. I didn’t see him until I was one years old. So I first saw him when I was one! He paid for a passage home to South Africa on a banana boat so it took him awhile to get home. I have these images of him on this banana boat, but the first time I saw him my Mother said that when he walked off the ship, I recognized him immediately even though I had never seen him. I’ve always been a Daddy’s girl. I look like my Father. I’m close to him, even when we were far away.

I obviously don’t remember my first year of life, but that first year I was mostly with my Grandmother. My Grandmother was illiterate. She didn’t have much formal education. She didn’t speak much English at all. She spoke a mixture of Zulu, Kxoe and a little Hindi. She was code switching in all different kinds of languages. My maternal grandfather was a shop owner. He owned a shop near a railroad track in the heart of town. So all the Black workers would get off work and the shop would be right there. It was like a corner store you could buy almost anything you needed from the shop; drinks, pens, pencils, toiletries, food. It was one of my favorite things in the whole world to do, was to go the store and run my hands along one of the big burlap bags of rice. I would always get in trouble. It wasn’t the most hygienic thing. My dirty hands in the rice that people bought to eat, but I loved how it felt.

Even though I remember going to the store and playing there, I wasn’t close to my Grandfather. He was very strict. He would leave the house at five am and come home late. I just don’t remember him. I don’t remember him very much at all. My only
memories of him are when I was an adult and he was much older. But as a young man I don’t remember much at all except that he used to wear these suspenders with his shirt sleeves rolled up. I loved them. That’s all I remember about him. I was very, very close to my grandmother. I don’t know what language I spoke to her but we communicated. I was with my Grandmother all day while my mother went to work. My mother had a teaching job and she would take the ferry out to work and then come back. I was breast feeding up until I was one and I really didn’t like to eat much else, so my Grandmother would take care of me all day and be dealing with a very hungry baby all day until my mother came home.

My mother and my grandmother were very close. But I was close to my Grandmother not to my mother. My grandmother was murdered when I was seven. I, I actually remember the day very well. My Mom and my Dad had a big fight because my Dad kept complaining that my Mom was always going over to my Grandmother’s house. And was saying stuff like “well why don’t you spend time here” “this is your home”, “why are you always going over?”, you know garbage like that. So my Mother hadn’t gone over. It was on the eve of the Soweto Riots, and even though we lived in Durban, about six hours or so away from Soweto, tension was already high and I think two men had broken into the house while my Grandfather was at work. It was a huge house, my Grandfather was very successful. My Grandmother was home alone and they supposedly chased her around the house. I heard two things about her death, one that she was strangled and the other, something that my mother told me, was that she had a heart attack. I remember going over that night and they wouldn’t let me in the house. There were police everywhere. They made me sit outside on the stairs but I do remember
peaking in and seeing my Grandmother lying dead on this big carpet that was in the sitting room with her head hanging over to the side. It haunted me. I still see that in my mind sometimes.

Her death was hard. It was really really difficult for everyone; it was particularly hard on my Mother, my mother kind of feel apart because they were so close. We were all hurting. My Grandmother was really the person that held our family together, my maternal family. My father’s family, well my paternal Grandfather was an alcoholic and so was my paternal Grandmother. My father’s family was dirt poor and quite dysfunctional. My paternal grandfather was abusive physically to my Grandmother so I remember spending a great deal of time with my mother’s family when I was very young, plus my father’s family lived six hours away from us in Johannesburg, so I didn’t see them nearly as often. After her death everyone was fighting. I just remember that everyone was fighting; fighting over the house, fighting over the will, fighting over everything. It was bad. From then on all I remember about my maternal family was the fighting. I had an Uncle that was taking everyone to court over the will on top of my Mother and my Aunts going to court for my Grandmother’s murder. I hated it. The fighting left me with distaste for my Mother’s family. But I think that was a part of my dad’s stuff because my father had a lot invested in making my mother’s family out to be sort of these greedy avarice money grubbing people. I think that was mostly because he grew up poor and so I think making them look bad made him feel that his family was somewhat better than my Mother’s family, because at least they weren’t money grubbing fiends. But her death tore us apart. It brought out the worst in us. I think it was particularly bad because she didn’t die of old age or natural causes. She was murdered. I
don’t think I was the same after that. I missed her. I look back and now I realize that it was “normal” family dysfunction, especially after a death, but that was a moment in my life that I will never forget.

Things really changed for me after that. I was really bright and people all recognized it in school. Things changed for me because my best friend in school applied to a private White school. They were only accepting a few Black and Coloured students. I’m not sure why they did that but I know several of the private White schools at the time were facing financial crisis especially in Durban and because of the large number of people of color living in Durban they didn’t have much choice but to open their doors to students of color, not out of any moral problems with segregation, but for monetary reasons. So a few private White schools decided to desegregate to offset operation costs and by desegregation I don’t mean equal numbers racially across the board, but quite literally maybe two students of color per each grade. So my best friend applied to this one particular private White school that decided to accept maybe a dozen or so kids of color for their K-12 school. She was applying and we were joined at the hip and I couldn’t bear the thought of being away from her so I applied too and what ended up happening was I got in and she didn’t. I knew the school was all white but I only applied because she applied. I wanted to go wherever she was going. I was the only non-White South African girl in the school. There majority of students of color that were accepted were from other countries. There were two American students in the school that were Black and Indian and I’m not quite sure why they were in South Africa or if they ended up settling there but the whole race thing there didn’t apply to them because they were American and they were wealthy.
I was really intimidated. I assumed that because I was not White that I would be the dumbest person in the class. I just assumed that White meant smart. I didn’t want to go. I was scared. But my parents thought that this was a great opportunity and they thought I’d do fine. So I went. I think that it was really one of the most challenging things I’ve ever done. Initially there were people protesting. People would spit on me when I walked onto the school grounds. It was painful, but more than that it was a total culture shock. It was such a different world. It was a world of wealth that I had was not accustomed to. A kind of wealth I had never been exposed to. In South Africa if you are White you’re automatically here (raise her hand above her head and draws a line). You know its like (Frantz) Fanon says; in the super structure, race and class are intimately linked. The school was very much catering for the White elite. We had a summer uniform, a winter uniform. We had field hockey, cricket, basketball, swimming. It was part boarding school. My parents didn’t want me to board and I don’t think that I was allowed since they would have to create separate facilities for students of color. I was a day student, thankfully. But I was provided with an incredible education.

Going to school there exposed me to a lot of things. I think that part of whiteness comes with a particular sort of cultural capital and it’s not that I wouldn’t have learned as much at an Indian school, or a Coloured School, or a Black School and certainly some of those schools were just as good, but I learned other things at this school that I wouldn’t have learned at those other schools. I learned things that the privileged White elite seemed to take for granted. I learned a certain sort of cosmopolitanism; a kind of knowing of certain cultural mores, like for example learning not being quiet. I remember when I was growing up if you were not White and if someone offered you something to
eat you would say “no thank you”, even if you wanted it. I remember this; no matter how bad you wanted it, even if it was your favorite food in the world you would say “no thank you” because it was the polite thing to do. If White kids were offered something and they wanted it they would say “yes please”. It was this kind of shock to me. It was a kind of license and all kinds of liberties that White kids had that I had never seen before and I was exposed to those kinds of things, not that I had the same license; I didn’t have the same license but it did alter me and offer me different possibilities of who I could be.

I was very much a “good girl”, I wanted very much to please everybody and before that I saw being quiet as one way of “being good” and I was exposed to a lot of different ways of being. I was very good at school, academically, but I felt a lot of pressure all the time. I felt like I had to represent the entire Black race. It was just me most of the time in the majority of my classes and I felt like if I couldn’t do something they would say, “Oh well Black people couldn’t do it”. It put a lot of pressure on me. I really was not doing well mentally. I felt always under attack. I started having anxiety issues at school. I couldn’t take tests. I would start hyperventilating. I would pass out. School became really stressful for me. I was also really marginalized in many ways.

There were definitely people who were my friends and they’d invite me to their house but they were…I didn’t have the language to describe it at the time, but now I do, they were definitely people who were liberal and wanted to prove that they were liberal. So even when I had friends I don’t think it was as much as they liked me as much as it was that they liked the fact that they would be shown to be progressive for inviting or including me in things. I remember being invited to someone’s house and being asked to go through the back door. Or if I ever went to sleep over’s at someone’s house and there
were White boys involved, say for instance if my friend had a brother, then I could come over but I couldn’t spend the night for fear of miscegenation. The fear of miscegenation was great on the part of the parents. That’s what happened at my friend Belinda’s 12th birthday sleep over. I remember going to her house and she had two brothers and I remember her parents saying they’d like me to go home.

Similar things would happen all the time. I remember once we had a school play. We were doing “Grease”, (laughing) a nice relevant play for South African apartheid (laughing), but we had auditions from both campuses, the boy’s campus and the girl’s campus and I never auditioned because it was made clear that I couldn’t be around the boys, not even for a play. At that time in my life I felt so ugly. I felt so stupid; which was weird because I wasn’t stupid, but I just felt stupid all the time. I felt ugly all the time and I felt so anxious all the time. I didn’t put very much effort into the way I looked or the way I dressed. I worked at being ugly. It was a protective thing. It drove my mother crazy and she would ring her hands and be pulling her hair out to figure out, “Why don’t you dress pretty? Or at least try”. I wouldn’t. I think it was just too loaded for me especially with my sexuality. People link the way you dress with your sexuality and my sexuality was always seen as deviant and something negative and something that had to be kept from boys, so I thought instead of trying to express in normal girly ways, I would just make things easier if I dressed the part and be ugly.

As I got older I was coping less and less. I was anxious all the time. My mother, having her PhD in psychology, would lead me through guided imagery to try and help and cope with the anxiety. I couldn’t take tests. I didn’t want to go to school. I didn’t have the words to articulate it then; I just didn’t want to go. Now I know that the kind of
pressure that I was feeling as a token and the kind of subtle racism I was experiencing all the time was severely impacting me, but at that time I couldn’t say what it was. My parents thought it was a difficult adjustment for various reasons; racism, being away from old friends, having to make new friends, new environment, et cetera but I don’t think anyone there at the school thought it was difficult. I remember the head mistress called me into her office one day and told me that I should make a greater effort to fit in, because she heard complaints about me not connecting with the other students well. She suggested that I invite them out ice skating or something. I remember being so struck by that comment because even in her advice she had erased me. I was struck because there were no places where I could go ice skating with White people; everything was segregated. She couldn’t even imagine the kind of world I was living in where everyone I was surrounded by could do things and I couldn’t. You know if all the girls were going to the movies, I couldn’t go because all the movie theatres were segregated, or if I did go I had to sneak in. I hated sneaking in. It was dangerous and it just made me feel awful. Or we’d go walking on the beach front but the beach front was segregated, so I couldn’t walk with them. There were no social spaces outside of school that we could be together. And school is not just the hours that you spend on campus but at that age it’s also the time spent socializing outside of school that becomes important. I was alienated. I gave up. I just said I wasn’t going to school anymore. I think I had a version of a nervous breakdown. At that point my parents broke the news that they were making plans for all of us to move to America, so until we moved they enrolled me in private Jewish school.

Being in the Jewish school was like a breath of fresh air. The school was a lot less uptight and a lot less elite, at least not in that way. I mean these were South African Jews.
They’d had a history of oppression in South Africa, but they were still a part of the elite and extremely wealthy it was just in a different way from my previous school. They couldn’t and didn’t claim whiteness in the same ways. I remember them accepting me, but they also knew upfront that I was going to be leaving soon. That was also the first time that me, my brother and my sister were all at the same school. I just appreciated going to that school. It was co-ed and that was a little different but it meant I could keep an eye on my brother. Going to school with boys was interesting because previously being at an all girl’s school with a brother school that did things together only occasionally meant that I didn’t have day to day contact with boys, especially not White boys; and when we did have contact, teachers, parents and administrators made sure that they kept us separated. So I never got to experience what it was like to be around White boys. So at the Jewish school that all changed. I remember having a crush on this one boy and during science class he and I were partnered together for an experiment and I remember if I stood close to him, he and his friends would start singing, “Don't stand, don't stand so…Don't stand so close to me” by The Police. There was a lot stuff about women of color being good enough to have sex with, but they were Jewish, that’s all they were good for. I was older. You know when I started at the all girls school I was eight and by the time I left I was fifteen. So when I started school at the Jewish school I was fifteen going on sixteen and I started to care more about how my body looked. I became much more aware of my sexuality again but in a different way. I could understand it more at fifteen than I could at nine or ten and again unfortunately I was made aware that it was still negative. I had started caring about my appearance and doing my hair and still being
thought of in a negative way sexually, especially when I actually had a better understanding of attraction, was hard. I still felt ugly.

**Coming to America**

I was sixteen about to turn seventeen when my family and I moved to America. My father got a job at Missouri, the same university where he had gotten his PhD. So we moved to Missouri. I hated school there. I was bored. I wasn’t learning anything. It was just a series of jumping hoops. I was trying to understand people’s accents. I couldn’t open my damn locker; that was the biggest challenge, opening the locker every day. I didn’t understand why we had lockers. I didn’t understand why people were so loud. I saw people kissing in the hallway. I was horrified. I had come from a really proper British school and in comparison, this was total chaos. I was so frustrated. I didn’t understand much about the structure of American schools. So I was there six months and then I started taking AP classes at the local community college and then I started taking university classes. I didn’t go back to high school. I petitioned to take the GED and have the college classes that I had already taken to transfer to the university. So I just started college.

The transition to Missouri from South Africa was hard. That first week in particular, was hell. When we first got to Missouri we were staying in my father’s colleague’s home and it was so cold. I just remember never feeling that kind of cold before in my life. We didn’t have adequate clothes. It did get cold in South Africa but warm clothes for South Africa and warm clothes for Missouri were not at all the same. I just remember dealing with the shock of being in a new place and a new school and on top of all that we didn’t have much food or money to buy anything else. My dad hadn’t
gotten paid from work yet and my mother didn’t have a job at the time. My parents used all the money they had to pay for moving our stuff to America. I could tell they were depressed. The situation was wearing on them. It was wearing on all of us. I had all these great visions of America; this place of great equality where I could be who I was. In South Africa I saw myself being exoticized as “other” but in America I was being exoticized as “foreigner”. I had an accent. It was still that feeling of being absolutely marginalized; of not fitting in anywhere, not fitting in at all.

There was nothing my parents could have done to prepare me (or my brother and sister for that matter) for what I was experiencing in America. I remember they told us that where we were moving was cold and that we would be going to public school and that we didn’t have to wear school uniforms, but that was it. They had gone to school and gotten their PhDs in America and spent years here, but they had no idea what American K-12 education was like or what American youth culture was like. They didn’t really know any “Americans”. When they were working on their PhDs they lived in graduate family housing, the majority of their friends were not American, their friends were either from India or Africa, so they had no idea about life outside of the university. They were very isolated so they were just as shocked as we were about the things going on in school.

Even though my parents were university professors they didn’t know the things average American professors knew. They know now, but when we first got here they didn’t know enough to guide me especially when it came to school. They didn’t know how to apply to schools. I remember applying to colleges and they didn’t know how to guide me; guidance I would have gotten if my parents had been American academics but I didn’t get that. I just applied. For instance, I applied and got into The University of
Chicago but I didn’t apply for funding. You know typical mistakes that a first generation college student would make. My parents didn’t know what a FAFSA was, they had no clue. They were very savvy just not in that system, at least not at that time. They learned more as my brother and sister got older and I taught them what I had learned but it was a trial and error period before we all learned how to better navigate different systems.

I was very selfish when I got to America. I was only concerned about myself and my own problems. I wasn’t really connected to my brother and sister, neither were my parents. They were consumed with me and how I was acting out. I was doing fine in school I just was unhappy, sad, angry; I had a lot of angst. From a very early age my mother was very careful to make school my number one job. She criticizes herself for that now but she made me work. So when other kids had to look after their siblings, or do chores, or cook or were in sports or other activities, I was working. On Saturday’s I was in the library almost all day. I think not having to do those other things made me selfish. I was the chosen one and no one paid attention to brother and sister until they both started to have problems in school or at home. It didn’t make for a good situation. College was easy but things at home were bad.

School Daze

I fought with my mother during most of undergrad. When I first started at Missouri I was a chemistry major. My mother wanted me to be a pharmacist so I majored in chemistry. During my second semester I took a literature class devoted to the novel Moby Dick and I feel in love with literature. I changed my major to Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities, so I created a focus centering on Art history, English and African American Studies. My mother was livid. I think she was projecting. She always
felt like she wasn’t getting paid in what she was worth in academia and thought it was in part to being a woman of color and in part because she had a degree in social sciences. She didn’t want me to have the same experience so she wanted me to have a degree in a field that allowed me to provide for myself, instead of being dependent on someone else. I refuse to change my mind so we fought.

We fought about so much during that time. I had so much going on with me mentally and emotionally and dealing with my mother and her kind of constant watchful eye was difficult. (Sighs) Plus I was raped during my first year of college. I think that was part of my acting out. (Sighs) I had gotten into the university honors program and they were hosting a program for honors students. (Pauses) I don’t remember everything, but one of the parts of them program was to hear from previous honors students. So this guy came in and talked about his experience, before he started he made us all stand up say our majors and say where we were from. About a month or two later he called me out of the blue and he told me that he was applying for a Rhodes scholarship and he would like to meet and talk to me about South Africa, which you know was obviously a line, but at the time I was so… I was so… you know, (sighs) naïve and enamored somebody thinks that I’m important and wants to know what I think. So he took me out a couple of times (sighs) and I was so starry-eyed, here’s this senior that wants to take me out, he’s applying for a Rhodes scholarship, he’s smart. I mean he was the guy the school used in the ads for the honors program. He was the handsome White guy that they slapped on the pamphlet to promote the honor’s program and the admissions pamphlet. He was a fencer. He was that guy.
He invited me to his mom’s house for Christmas and it kind of gets blurry from here, but later on he said he invited me because I wanted to be invited, not because he wanted to invite me. Long story short, he was making fun of me in front of his friends and so I was upset so I went outside and walked around on the property. He caught up with me and I don’t remember what was said but I remember he pushed me onto the ground and at first he raped me with a glass bottle that was on the ground. I remember it was painful because the bottle broke and whatever was in the bottle was spilling inside me. Then he raped me with his penis. He took me home the next day. He drove me home and as we were driving he kicked me out of the car shoved my face in the gravel on the side of the road. And…it was kind of blurry. I know I went to the hospital and I called my Dad from the hospital and had him pick me up. I just told him I wasn’t feeling too well and I just wanted to make sure I was okay. I think I told him I had caught a cold while I was at his house in the country. I never told them what really happened. I think my mother knew something was wrong, but we were so estranged so she didn’t really say anything else.

Because we fought so much I wanted to move out after my sophomore year. Of course she was upset that I wanted to move out. Things between us came to an absolute stand still. It was a culture clash. Culturally in South Africa people didn’t leave home until they were married, to leave before that signaled something was wrong. She felt that if people back home heard that I had moved out then they would assume it was because she and my father were bad parents and I think she also felt like I was moving out because she was a bad mother. On top of moving out I had a piece of crap boyfriend. I’m not sure how me and the piece of lint (laughs) even met. (Laughing) I don’t where I
picked up the piece of lint, but he was terrible and my mother hated him. One top of his lack of ambition and his overwhelming desire to do nothing, he was White. My mother could not stand it. I literally went to school, worked and came home and fought with my mom. I remember one time I had just gotten off the phone with him and I’m not sure if she thought we were talking about sex or if she just assumed we were having sex but she said, “I can’t believe you lost your virginity to that man!” and I blurted out, “What virginity I was raped two years ago.” She was shocked and I don’t think my telling her did much for our relationship; at least not telling her in that way. She told me years later that she felt like she couldn’t help me that she felt as if she’d failed as a parent. She was angry because she failed to protect me.

Finally during my junior year my father helped me get my own place and I moved out. My mother and I were estranged. We started having less and less contact. We didn’t talk until well after I started grad school. I mean we were civil but we didn’t have much to each other than the normal, “Hi. How are you? How you doing?”, kind of thing. So the semester before I was about to graduate from undergrad I applied to grad school. I was never a planner but I didn’t think I could do anything other than be an academic. It never crossed my mind that I could be anything else. I didn’t want to be a professor I just thought that that was what I had to be, especially since the whole pharmacist thing didn’t work out and especially since both my parents were academics. I mean everyone else I knew, like my grandparents worked in stores or did manual labor or were illiterate. I just didn’t want to stay home and have babies. I mean all my aunts stayed home. I just didn’t want to be a woman that stayed home and ironed and had babies and changed diapers.
I was a little bit smarter this time. Despite everything that had gone on at home and being raped, I still did really well academically while at Missouri. I had a 4.0 gpa and I applied for external funding for graduate school, funding that I could take with me to almost any institution so I was in better financially, than I had been before. I applied to Berkeley, Cornell, Yale, University of Washington, University of Southern California, Stanford and Harvard. I only applied to schools that had a really good academic reputation. I had several of my professors read the application before I turned them in so my applications were very polished and very well put together. I knew how to use my resources better this time. I got into three of the seven schools I applied to; two schools out west and one back east. One of the schools, the one back east, was going to give me funding on top of the fellowship I already won so I decided to go for a campus visit and the town was so dreary and dismal. I said to myself this feels the same way that the all girls school felt in South Africa. It was very elite and felt very claustrophobic and I just didn’t want that for myself. So at the last minute I called the two schools out west and only one told me it wasn’t too late. It wasn’t too late because I had my own funding and this is a story that makes me mad to this day. They were going to offer me funding on top of the funding that I already had but they told me for the purpose of this minority fellowship that I couldn’t be two races. I couldn’t be both Indian and Black. I had to choose one. If I was Indian I wouldn’t qualify for the minority fellowship and if I was Black I would. So I asked the woman over the phone, “Well how am I supposed to choose one, I’m both?” and she said, “Well how nappy is your hair?” I don’t know who she was. She was just some woman in the graduate admissions office. So she said again, “How nappy is your hair?” and I said, “Well not very.” And she said “Well which one are
“you?” I told her I wasn’t going to choose and she said, “Well then you don’t get the fellowship. You have to choose.” So I didn’t get it because I wouldn’t choose. I mean I could’ve chosen Black and I think in retrospect, where I am now I would’ve chosen Black without question, but I think at the time it was still very important for me not to make my dad feel less than; I didn’t want him to feel less than important to me in any way especially since my mother was always the dominant one. Plus there were so many secrets and lies about race in my family anyway that I didn’t want to go through all that history at that moment. What’s funny is the school probably counted me twice in their diversity numbers but refused to give me a scholarship based on not wanting to choose one race.

Being on the west coast was really, really good for me. I was in place that reminded me a lot of South Africa. It was much more cosmopolitan than Missouri and I met a wonderful woman who I was in love and in a relationship with for eight years. I kind of found my voice. Plus I was working with these powerful Black women, who didn’t question my authenticity, who didn’t question how Black I was; who really just valued my intelligence. They were amazing women who were all pioneers. Don’t get it twisted, they didn’t take me under their wing, they were not surrogate mother’s at all; what they were though was really, really rigorous on me academically. They pushed me very hard. They kicked my butt. They didn’t let me slack. I felt like I was the dumbest person on the planet, for at least the first two years, but they always reminded that as a Black woman I was just going to have to work harder, be tougher, work faster. I was always grateful for that.
My first semester, I felt like I was drowning. Until then I had never been thrown things that were so intellectually challenging that I couldn’t figure it out. My first semester there I was thrown into some really, really dense theory and told to go? I remember I had been assigned Judith Butler and everyone else had read it in undergrad or wherever and I hadn’t so I remember reading Judith Butler on the beach and thinking I can’t do this. I remember I called my mother and I told her that I was coming home. We still weren’t really talking but I called her and told her I quit. I’m coming home. So my parents bought me a ticket. I came home. They fed me my favorite food and then a couple of days later they put my ass on a plane and sent me back. It was a written given that I was going to be a professor. I think they would’ve been surprised if I actually did something else.

School was hard. Even though I had a fellowship and a stipend I still struggled financially. I mean I had just enough money to cover rent and then maybe I’d be left with three hundred dollars for the entire month. I was broke. My parents, well my father more so, helped financially but I wanted to do things on my own so I only asked them for money when I was in dire straits. Meeting Reid helped. She was in my co-hort. She was also a PhD student. We were in the same department. She was from the city and had never left so she showed me around. We had fun together. We became good friends and then we started dating. She was very kind to me. She took care of me and I hadn’t really had that before. Before I started dating her, well really before I left Missouri, I began binging and purging off and on. It had slowly been developing over the years. By the time she and I started dating I had a full blown eating disorder. She was very observant. So she knew before it really got bad, but she said she didn’t know how to bring it up, plus
we were still just friends. By the time she and I started dating I got really bad and I started passing out. I just kept losing more and more weight. I had gotten down to 95 pounds and she finally confronted me and made me get some help. I checked into an outpatient program and she and I started living together a little while after that. She helped nurse me back to health. I don’t think I’d be alive today if it wasn’t for her. She was so kind. I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone care for me like that.

My parents had no idea that Reid and I were together. One year she came home with me for Christmas and my mother knew immediately. She said she could tell just by looking at me and the way I looked at Reid that I was in love with her. My face is easy to read. My mother freaked out and so of course my mother and I were fighting and as usual my father wanted us to stop fighting, which caused he and my mother to start fighting. It was bad. Telling her that I was bi-sexual just pushed us further apart. We became even more estranged.

That moment in my life was really powerful. You know when you go to therapy you have to start unpacking your life. I had to really unpack all the decades and years of self loathing and self hatred. It was an opportunity for me to begin to find my voice. All my life for reason or another I was told not to trust my own voice. I absorbed a lot of things growing up. You know in an essay Lorraine Hansberry talks about A Dream Deferred by Lanston Hughes and picks up Hughes question, “What happens to a Dream Deferred?” to explain her play Raisin in the Sun, but I like to ask, what happens to the racism or hatred that you have to live with everyday? You know you take things into your body and you store it somewhere and I think for most of us we get bigger or get smaller. For me I absorbed it and I just got smaller in a myriad of ways including physically.
Whether it was because I Black, South African, mixed, female, bi-sexual; all the negative things I heard and to an extent that I believed about myself had caused me not to trust my voice. So I would allow people to walk all over me, my mother included. I would shrink. You know I didn’t know how to set boundaries. I would just shrink; my voice would shrink until I couldn’t hear it anymore. But even with all that pain, all the things I had been through in undergrad and graduate school, I am thankful for beginning that process when I did; because I learned how to find and listen to my voice. I had to stop shrinking. I had to start growing. My time in graduate school was some of the most exhilarating moments in my life and some of the most painful and terrifying moments in my life. I had to really learn how to rip open all the secret places. I mean my dissertation was on Black women and trauma in literature. You can’t write about something like that and not sit and think where am I?

**The Personal is Political**

I think the eating disorder was the physical manifestation of the rape and the pain that I had never dealt with. I never dealt with the rape, all the pain of moving to this country, my estrangement with my mother, the pain about my grandmother. I was in pain. It was a really important time in my life. I feel like it wasn’t for my mentors in graduate school, especially my Black female mentors, and Reid…you know all of those women were struggling and that didn’t hide that. It wasn’t a secret. Their pain was in many ways public and in many ways typical of the struggles of Black women in academia. Just seeing them and seeing their failures and their success showed me a lot of things. For the first time I realized what always being the “token” had done and was still doing to me. I realized how much pressure that was on me; to always represent the entire race and be
perfect. It also brought up my own agency and how I wanted to represent myself; aesthetically, intellectually and personally. I started to develop my own style in terms of how I dressed. I started to develop my own style in terms of my writing; really trying to find my own voice, in all aspects. It’s interesting because that was the moment when my work was met with the most resistance and the least success.

All my life I had been successful and the moment I started expressing myself for myself and really creating work that I was proud of then suddenly my work was completely dismissed. My work wasn’t safe anymore. It wasn’t what they expected. It wasn’t the typical or palatable work on Black women as either heroines or victims. I originally wanted to work on Black women in exile in literature and when I found sort of my own groove my project focused on Black women and trauma in the diaspora and the trauma of movement. So the exile, which is sort of very nationalistic, it shifted into trauma and the diaspora which really de-centers the notion of nation, state, etc. and connects Black women all over the world instead of polarizing their struggles into a specific geographic location; all things which I think are very close to my own life and mirror my own struggles. I don’t try and pretend anymore that my intellectual pursuits aren’t connected to my own pursuits in understanding my own life too. It’s not a coincidence that I have a chapter on eating disorders. It’s just not. I use to pretend, I don’t anymore. And it’s not that I’m so narcissistic that the only thing I can think about is myself, but it’s because my work is important to me because it is a work that I am engaged within the things I see around me. It’s not an abstract academic enterprise; it’s something that is very, very personal. It’s been hard ever since in terms of my work being
accepted, but this is the happiest I’ve ever been and once I got tenure it was like well if you don’t like my work well then tough shit!
Chapter 8

Praxis

Introduction

It was Monday morning, a beautiful summer day and I was going to work with my grandmother. She worked as a domestic for an elderly middle class Black couple a few houses down from ours. On our walk over she asked me what I thought about second grade. I shrugged my shoulders and told her, “I didn’t know”. School had just let out the week before and all I could think about was being able to play all day, each day of summer. Once inside their house she pulled up a stool to the sink so that I could peel potatoes for lunch while she made breakfast. She asked me again, “So baby, you still haven’t told me what you thought about the second grade? You just spent almost a whole year in the second grade and you don’t have no thoughts about it?” I looked down at the potatoes and she stopped what she was doing and looked over at me and said, “How you think about the world, leads to how you be in the world. If you don’t have no thoughts about it, how are you going to be? What are you going to do?” I was 7 years old when I received my first lesson on theory and methodology. Beyond asking me about my thoughts on second grade, my grandmother was pushing me to develop a critical theory of the world I lived in and from there soliciting me to develop a method of how to live in that world. To my grandmother theory and methodology went hand and hand and both were necessary in negotiating and navigating one’s place in the world.

In the telling of Vivi, Theresa, and Laketi’s stories, I have been protective of their privacy and the special relationship I have with each woman. They gave me their trust. To attempt to explain, analyze, theorize, or interpret their actions would be a betrayal of
that trust. If I were to further intrude in their lives with theories of their behavior or precise interpretations, I would surely compromise their stories; possibly silencing them.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the significant/major findings for this research project. Rather than analyze the lives of Vivi, Theresa and Laketi, the analysis for this project comes in the form of three important contributions to academic discourses/conversations regarding qualitative methods, feminist theory, memory studies, and the educative use of stories.

My first contribution is to the discussion of theory and its relationship to (conducting and writing up) research. In order to be open to speaking to any and all the experiences of the three women in this project and the experiences of black women in general using a theoretical framework that is fragile, mutable and makes no rigid claims to a concrete theoretical is paramount. Using a theoretical approach that employs any and everything available to speak to Black women’s conditions, experiences and ways of being lessens essentialist claims to Black women’s identities and their subsequent objectification. Using theory in this way thus pushes researchers to not only use larger more encompassing theoretical frameworks but suggests that researchers re-evaluate the common process of choosing a theory before conducting research. This traditional model endured because it was/is believed that ‘practical knowledge (praxis) was context bound while theoretical knowledge was/is comparatively context free’ (Eraut, 1994 p. 50). Loud Silence recognizes that theoretical knowledge is affected by context and a significant proportion of the context was given in the process of listening to and collecting Vivi, Theresa and Laketi’s stories. In addition using theory in this way urges researchers to engage research as one connected process versus a fractured process of data collection.
and analysis which often disconnects us from the very people we are attempting to write up.

The second contribution is to the field of memory. Stories/oral narrative memories by women have the ability to connect us to a larger cultural memory and has the power to impact history significantly because it would not be the same without women stories; women’s memories. In western culture oral narrative memories are often seen as possibly being flawed because of human beings ability to remember every detail of event and thus re-creating a memory that perhaps did not occur and defying a long-standing tradition of written history as objective truth. In addition even in many non-Western cultures women’s storytelling traditions are seen as culturally unimportant as the majority of culturally relevant storytelling is done by men in positions of power. Loud Silence relied exclusively on oral narratives. My goal as a researcher was not that each woman recall every detail of their life experiences with precise accuracy nor was it to triangulate their narratives with other outside data sources existing outside of the interview process rather my goal was to use their bodies and my own body as a means of triangulation beyond their tape recorded interviews. By affectively listening, read as listening to spoken language, body language, tone and syntax as each woman was re-telling memories I was able to revisit places, people, time, spaces and watch as each woman made sense of our lives both then (in the past) and now (in the present). I was able to understand how their memories in particular have helped to make and shape institutions, particularly the academy and how they affect our reconstructions of historical moments.

The third and final contribution comes in the use of cultural memory as a means of resistance particularly in relationship to feminist theory. Cultural memory has the
ability to redress hegemony and oppression. Many of the memories that Vivi, Theresa and Laketi present in their narratives are theirs solely. However their articulation of their experience (private memories) do not exist in a vacuum but rather signifies that memory always exist in connection to various forms of collectivity; a collective cultural memory. Cultural memory allows for the simultaneous articulation of private memory and collective memory. For example each of the women in Loud Silence shares stories of sexual violation. While their stories are each different in context their stories speak to a collective cultural memory of Black women being subject to rape and sexual violation by means of slavery, colonialism and imperialism. I argue that is the telling of personal stories (often made silent by racism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression) in conjunction with a collective cultural memory that create a space for Black women to speak back to subsequently challenge forms of tyranny.

Lastly, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the power of stories and its importance to this project.

**Contribution to Theory: Going a Piece of the Way With Them**

Theory in its simplest form is an explanation, speculation or thoughts about the ways we exist in the world. At the outset of this project my theoretical framework consisted of an amalgamation of Critical Race Feminism, Black Feminist Thought and Womanist theories. I chose these three because together they represented a cross pollination of critical thought about Black women authored by Black women and women of color scholars. Knowing, that often, when research is done on Black women or other marginalized groups as the subject of inquiry, theoretical suppositions from majority group norms are used to explain and evaluate their experiences, I wanted to be sure that
this project included a theoretical framework that was not limiting (Hill Collins, 2000). However in my attempts not to marginalize the voices, identities and experiences of the Black women in my project I gave little thought to the possibility of the theories that I had chosen for my theoretical framework as being limiting or marginalizing to their identities as Black women.

In my initial interview with Vivi she frankly asked, “What is your theoretical framework? I need to know how you are trying to frame my life because it’s not going to fit in some small box. If it does it damn sure won’t fit neatly. How are you thinking about Black women? Black women in the academy? How are you thinking about yourself?” I sat with her questions for a long time. I knew that the theoretical approach to my life is that what I have to say as a Black woman about my place in the world is important and how I understand and see the world is largely from my frame of intelligibility; how I make sense of larger institutions of power and oppression; but would that approach work for the women I was interviewing? Vivi reminded me that theory is not useful if it cannot align, coexist or speak to real life experiences, especially the experiences of those that are already marginalized by heteropatriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, racism, ability or any other form of oppression. Using theory that does not speak to real life experiences only marginalize, oppress and deem unworthy subjects of those who do not fit neatly into an often times Western, Euro-American construct of theory. In addition her questions pushed me to think of theory as only being useful if it can explain and is open to all of her identities, positions and experiences; as a “Diasporically Black, Southern, Working Class, Lesbian, Spiritual, Teacher, Partner and Cancer Bodied, Woman”; all of Laketi’s identities, positions and experiences as a, “South African, queer, middle class, educated,
immigrant, mother, scholar and Woman”; and all of Theresa’s identities, positions and experiences as a “Black women, single mother, dancer, scholar”. In order to be open to speaking to all and any experience of these three women and the experiences of black women in general I would have to use a theoretical framework that is fragile, mutable and makes no rigid claims to a concrete theoretical approach but rather a theoretical approach that uses any and everything available to speak to Black women’s conditions, experiences and ways of being. In traditional, Western theoretics creating a theoretical framework that is mutable, fluid and fragile would be limiting, conditional and constantly open to debunking and criticism. However as Trinh Minh-ha rightly notes:

theory is suspicious when it loses sight of its own conditional nature, takes no risk in speculation, and circulates as a form of administrative inquisition. Theory oppresses, when it wills or perpetuates existing power relations, when it presents itself as a means to exert authority—the Voice of Knowledge (1989, p. 42).

In the essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”, Zora Neale Hurston discusses a model she developed as young girl for dealing with the “strangers” that passed through her hometown of Eatonville. She writes,

I usually spoke to them in passing. I’d wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: “Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-going?” Usually automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably go a piece of the way with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. (Hurston, 1993 p. 152)

In Black Women, Writing and Identity, Carol Boyce Davies (1994) evokes Zora Neale Hurston model on how to deal with strangers to discuss how to approach theory. She writes:

In this model of offering courtesies to visitors, which comes out of several African and African based cultures, the host goes a “piece of the way” with friend
or visitor, the distance depending on the relationship. In using this formulation, then, I want to engage all these theories as visitors. This comes from the recognition that going all the way home with many of these theoretical positions—feminism, post-modernism, nationalism, Afrocentrism, Marxism, etc.—means taking a route cluttered with skeletons, enslavements, new dominations, unresolved tensions and contradictions. Following many of the theories/theorists “all the way home” inevitably places me in the “homes” of people where I, as a Black woman, will have to function either as maid or exotic, silenced courtesan, but definitely not as a theoretical equal. Going all the way home with them means being installed in a distant place from my communities. (Boyce Davies, 1994 p.46)

At the outset of this project I attempted to go all the way home with three similar yet disparate theories; Critical Race Feminism, Black Feminist Thought and Womanism. Critical Race feminism derives from women of color feminists that have passionately and inspiringly written about the racism and classism implicit within the feminist movement. It argues against the absence of a critical analysis of race in the second wave liberal and radical feminisms and the absence of the representation of people of color within feminism (Hua, 2003 p.2). More than revisionist attempt to re-write women of color into women’s history and other social science and humanities research, critical race feminism calls for the continuous inclusion of the voices, representations, activism, experiences, writings and bodies of women of color. Critical race feminism is characterized by three central interventions: 1) it brings into feminist theorizing and analysis of the interconnection of race/racism with gender and other oppressions; 2) it argues for the notions of social difference and multiplicity within feminism; 3) it offers a distinctive and different feminist epistemology grounded in narrative (Hua, 2003 p.3). The emphasis of personal narratives provides a platform to name and relay experiences that cannot be understood within a traditional framework. It acknowledges the multidimensional and dynamic nature of reality and our individual and collective interpretation of it.
Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it (Hill Collins, 2000 p. 16). Explored in depth by scholar Patricia Hill Collins, Black feminist thought centers the narrative of Black women as the most important in talking about, thinking about and retelling the experiences of their lives. Black feminist thought suggests, the legacy of struggle against racism, classism and sexism is a common thread binding all Black women. Scholar Katie G. Cannon observes, throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggles struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed (1985 pp. 30-40).

The most unique feature of Black feminist thought is the attention it gives to cognition. In Black feminist thought, cognition, or how Black women think about their lives, dictates not only how they tell their narratives, but will color how they retell their lives. Through Black feminist thought and life history methods, Black women are given the space to choose what is important to them. They choose what, how, when and why they tell particular aspects of their lives. Through this construct researchers are allowed a picture of how they see their lives and how they construct their lives within society.

Womanist theory or womanism as it is more informally called is a feminist term coined by Alice Walker. In, In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose, Walker opens by saying that a womanist, “usually refers to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior and in most cases Black Women” (Walker, 1983). Throughout the book she gives personal examples and testimonies of how womanism is directly linked to Black women based on their social and historical connections to imperialism, colonization, nationhood, patriarchy and sexuality. She continues that it is
this womanist behavior and mindset that contributes to the survival of Black women both historically and presently. Womanism is often used as a means for analyzing Black Women’s literature, as it marks the place where multiple subjectivities intersect.

Womanism is unique because it does not necessarily imply any political position or value system other than honoring Black women’s experiences. Because it recognizes that Black women are survivors in a world that is oppressive on multiple platforms, it seeks to lay bare the ways in which Black women negotiate these oppressions in their individual lives.

At face value each of these theories speaks to what it means to Black and female. However going all the way home with Critical Race Feminism and Black Feminist Thought would be taking a route with unresolved tensions that would not speak fully to each woman’s identity; limiting my ability to fully analyze their experiences, disconnecting them from their identities and rendering inoperative the creation of community. For example, although Critical Race Feminism would clearly speak to their identities around race and gender and provide a platform to name and relay experiences through narrative that cannot be understood within a traditional framework, it would hardly reconcile any tension in their naming of a class, sexual or disabled identity.

Equally Black Feminist Thought would clearly speak to their identities of race, class, gender and academicians, but it would decenter narratives or discussions of sexuality, ability or nationhood; thus giving me womanist theory.

While womanism/womanist theory is more frequently used in the humanities, particularly in the disciplines of English and literature, it becomes useful as a social science theory because of its ability to build and borrow from established theories without becoming essentialist. For example, Marxist theory is excellent in explanations
of people’s relationship to capital, class, labor and political economy; however it essentializes both the proletariat and bourgeoisie’s identity as white, male and heterosexual. While Marxist theorists have later added race, gender, sexuality and nationhood to the discourse on Marxism, Marxist theory still is limited in its ability to consider these multiple positionalities in conversation with historical facts (colonization, imperialism, etc) and with each other thus limiting its ability to move towards an imagined and real space of equality. Womanist theory, at its core, is grounded and invested in acknowledging all of Black women’s configurations of identities and sees them all as equally important and interrelated. So class is no more important than race; no more important than sexuality; no more important than nationhood; no more important than any another subjectivity. Furthermore, Womanist theory also features narrative, or “every tongue” confessing as the most vital way to communicate, name and relay the experiences of Black women’s journey through multiple subjectivities as they relate to systems of dominance and hegemony; experiences and testimony that would otherwise not be useful or understood within traditional frameworks of analysis.

Womanism foundation as a theory that is fragile, mutable and makes no claims to concrete theoretics, but rather approaches theory with critical relationality; a theoretical approach that uses any and everything available to speak to Black women’s experiences and ways of being. Boyce Davies comments:

In order to read Black women’s lives in a cross-cultural or transnational perspective, the critical consciousness has to demonstrate expansiveness and relationality. Critical relationality is not interruptive or a series of interruptions (as in Marxism/feminism or race/class or gender/ethnicity formulations), nor does it embrace the hierarchy embedded in subalternization. Rather, it argues for the synchronic, multiply articulated discourses, which operate braid-like or web-like as a series of strands are woven. Critical relationality moves beyond a singular, monochromatic approach to any work to a complexly-integrated and relational
theoretics; it allows the situation of experiences in its own context, but provides an ability to understand and relate it to a range of other dimensions of thought. Critical relatedness is then inherently migratory. (1994, p. 56)

My position is that it is this inherently migratory journeying, that gives womanism as a theory its power. By not succumbing to the rigid definitions that traditional theory calls for, womanism allows for adaptable transitions that are necessary under the fragmentation of oppression. More importantly the transitions capable within womanism under the fragmentation of oppression push Black women to remember and embody memory in the retelling to their experiences; in reliving their journeys. Womanism’s ability to go a piece of the way with other theories is not so much an oppositional consciousness to “one main theory”, but rather a consciousness which ignites migration, mobility, movement, departure, return, re-departure, transformation and fluidity in the experiences Black women articulate and the different configurations that prompt different modes of knowing (Boyce Davies, 1994; Gabriel, 1988; Minh-Ha, 1989).

When I first began this project Vivi, Theresa and Laketi each questioned my understanding of theory and methodology and its dialogical relationship. Journeying through theory and trying to understand its complex relationship to methodology left me with, or rather led me to, Womanist theory. Vivi’s warning in our first interview could not have been clearer, “my life…it’s not going to fit in some small box. If it does it damn sure won’t fit neatly”. Her words pushed me to find a wider theory; a theory that could speak to her life and a theory that would not limit me in hearing, seeing and knowing all of her life, consequently shaping not only the theoretical framework for this project but my methodology as well. Her comments demanded a theory where all the pieces of her identity could fit comfortably together. She said, “I need room to move around in, to be
free in these stories. I’ve always known what it’s like to make myself fit into other folks spaces, but if you want me to tell you about my life I need to be nobody’s darling, but my own”. I heard her. Womanist theory as a result is not just a theoretical approach used in my analysis for this project but it also shapes my methodology. If Womanism in its simplest form is the belief that what Black women have to say about their multiple subjectivities are equally important and as a result of that testimony knowledge is produced, then applying Womanist theory to methodology would mean that the ways that I listen, the questions that I ask, the ways that we talk, our ways of being during our interviews would be shaped by Womanism. For example, Theresa challenged me to think about Womanism and its impact on methodology when at the outset she stated,

You want me to trust the process and I can do that but I have to know how are we framing this process...interviewing? That’s too simple a term. I…, you…, we…, need to be specific about what we are doing? How are we naming this space for ourselves?

Initially I was confused by her questions however I came to understand that she wanted to be clear that our interviews or “conjuring” sessions as we began to call them was a reciprocal relationship. She declares, “I cannot testify or confess, if no one hears me, if no one is listening”. More than just a researcher sitting down with a subject and then leaving the space without ever having contributed in a positive way, we needed a space that fully asked of us both to give of ourselves and co-create a narrative. While it is only her life stories that will appear in a subsequent chapter, those stories were retold in a space that existed and was dependent on trust and honesty; a space that begged for us both to be fully present and fully engaged, hinging on the intimate relationship between theory and methodology.
Laketi also asked me to closely examine both theory and methodology during our interview process. She stated,

I am open to telling my life story…my life stories, but it has to be an open space. I have to be open, you have to open, we both have to be open. You know what I mean? Really sitting with the things that are painful, hard, uncomfortable, contradictory…sitting with it long after we hit stop on the tape recorder. There are things that I haven’t talked about in years. I know there will be things that are hard for both of us, how are we going to reconcile these things and keep going? What are we going to do afterwards that will keep us is in this process?

While her questions about the interview process do not explicitly ask about the relationship of theory and methodology her inquiry suggests that if I was using womanism as a theoretical framework, a framework that is contingent on the use of narrative, then I would not only have to engage her voice, but I would also have to acknowledge my own voice (thoughts) and do so without silencing her. Laketi was asking me to engage in what Schwandt names as the process of critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences; an acknowledgement of the inquirer's place in the setting, context, and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand and a means for a critical examination of the entire research process; the process of reflexivity (1997).

Researcher reflexivity represents a methodical process of learning about self as researcher, which, in turn, illuminates deeper, richer meanings about personal, theoretical, ethical, and epistemological aspects of the research question. Qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity because they have reason to believe that good data result (Kleinsasser, 2000). My use of reflexivity represents a deep learning and unlearning. After each interview, throughout the research process, I found myself writing down my feelings, questions, thoughts and responses as a way to process notions of position,
power, bias, gender, race, voice, politics and ethics. For example during an interview session Laketi retells her story of being raped by a white male classmate. During that interview she and I were folding programs for her son’s school event. As she was speaking I jotted down on the back of one of the programs “sweaty/uncomfortable” and later put it in my pocket. Later in my research journal I wrote,

Sometimes I hate being the storykeeper. Sometimes it’s hard to hold the pain from other people’s stories. I have so many thoughts about today. I felt completely uncomfortable when she told the story about being raped. It was a story that she obviously needed to tell but I feel unprepared to handle things like this. I haven’t any formal training on what to say when someone talks about sexual trauma, other than to listen. Is that what researcher’s do just listen? That seems so detached. What was she expecting me to say? Was she expecting me to say anything at all? My hands were sweaty. I hope she didn’t pick up on the fact that I was uncomfortable, she may not want to go this deep again if she feels like I can’t handle difficult things. I don’t know if I should mention the rape again, but I have so many questions. How did she not see his attack coming? She said things about him that had my hair on edge. He exoticized her. It sounded like she was going to his house because she wanted to “fit in”, be a “young American woman”. I feel like she put herself in harm’s way just to fit in. I know there is no justification for rape. Her pain was visible, real and more than I can handle at this moment. How am I going to keep/hold this story?

In this example of reflexivity I struggled with what do in my role as a researcher when Laketi talked about sexual trauma. My line of questions and statement about listening as “something that a detached researcher would do rather”, “saving” her or “helping” her with the “right words” or the “right training” shows that I assumed that Laketi had no agency in the moment of the rape or even in the retelling of her own story. In addition in some ways I cautiously blamed the victim for being raped, when I wrote, “How did she not see his attack coming?...I feel like she put herself in harm’s way just to fit in. I know there is no justification for rape.” Through reflexivity I was able to freely discuss the tensions of doing research, examine my role as a researcher and decipher my analytical and writing approach by examining my reflexivity data in company with my interview
and field note data. Laketi did mention the rape again during another interview and said, “That was so hard for me to say to you the other day. I rarely talk about that moment, but you listened. You didn’t interrupt. You listened. I really appreciate that.” In my research journal I wrote, “I’m glad I was silent when she told me about her rape. She didn’t need me to save her with the right words or technique, she needed me to listen. Perhaps listening is the anecdote to oppression.” Genuine listening has a deep transformative power (Simmons, 2001). The safety of being listened to enabled Laketi to engage in an authentic expression of the trauma of her rape.

Reflexivity and writing thus form an important and close connection, mirroring the connection between theory and methodology. In using womanism as a theoretical approach to interviewing it called for Vivi, Laketi, and Theresa to use all forms of expression, emotions and means to tell their stories. Womanism as a methodology required me to employ all means to hear them. Reflexivity allowed me to work through my biases and reshape the ways in which I actively listened. The interview process allowed them to tell truths, stories and call on memories that were central to their identities. In using reflexivity I was given the opportunity to speak back to the things within their stories, without interrupting their stories and subsequently their identities with my judgments. This back and forth between their words and my research journal deepened my understanding of the research process and in turn deepened my understanding of the data.

**Contribution to Memory: The Politics of Memory**

There are several ways to approach research on Black women in the academy; questionnaires, surveys, statistical disaggregation, document analysis of archival sources,
ethnographies and interviewing are all possible methods. I chose qualitative methods, qualitative interviewing in particular, as the methods for this project as it allows for Black women to tell stories about their lives in their own words. In order to tell their stories they relied almost exclusively on their memories. In the prologue of her autobiography Nina Simone discusses the power of memory. She writes:

> When you sit down to think about your life, as I have had to do for this book, you have to look back over some things you’ve kept out of the daylight of your mind for years, and they can catch you. So I’ve spent a lot of time persuading those lost memories out of the shadows into the light. At times it wasn’t easy, at others the dam broke in a rush and I was flooded by so many memories that I lost count of them all. It’s funny too how you don’t have much control over what it is you do remember; how the most inconsequential, unimportant events sit in the front of your mind as clear as yesterday and the moments you just ache to relieve stay out of reach for days or weeks at a time.

> Memory is political. It is political because it is imperfect and can be shaped and transformed by people, place, time, language and space. In attempting to gain some insight to Vivi, Theresa and Laketi’s pasts as it pertains to our future I used field techniques developed in cultural anthropology and perfected in my development as a Black woman, to become a participant observer as well as gather information. Using the approach which anthropologists call the “emic”, I allowed each woman to carve out the rules of our interview and tell me the things that were meaningful to them; the things they re-membered. Things that were undoubtedly shaped by not only what was important to them but by the ability to be uninterrupted by a list of questions, their ability to ask me personal and specific questions and my ability to show them I was listening to their memories through silence, laughter, “yes ma’am’s”, “Uh-huh’s” and any other verbal and non-verbal cues that allowed their memories to be safe.
When I initially began my interviews with Theresa, Vivi and Laketi, before they even began to tell their stories, they each had distinct opinions about memory and questioned if they would be able to remember everything or particular things they felt I needed to know about their lives. Laketi flatly stated,

I don’t trust my memory because there are things I have purposely chosen to forget. I will try to bring them back for the sake of telling whole stories but I make no promises about how they decide to come out.

Theresa had a similar thought. She noted,

I dance so that I don’t have to remember certain things. I bury them (memories) in movement. The good ones and the bad ones have been shrouded in movement. I trust that my body will remember the things that my mind has forgotten. I hope it remembers the things you need it to remember.

Lastly Vivi held,

My memory is great because it’s not traditional. It’s consciously connected to all five of my senses. I can smell rain heavy clouds in the air and be transported back to a many a Mississippi days on our front porch. I can touch an autumn leaf and remember the many days of fall I spent in New England in graduate school, sitting in parks dreaming about my dissertation. I can taste things, see people and hear noises that jar me into memories I thought were long gone and into others that I comfort myself with time after time. I don’t force my memories to the back of my mind I allow them to roam and take shape just as they want. Are willing to trust my senses to get us where we need to be?

Each woman’s discussion of memory or “traditional memory” alludes to them seeing memory as something that was finite, predetermined and set in a binary of “good” and “bad”. Much like Western views on theory, they viewed having a “good memory” as being able to recall each and every detail about an event that happened. For the sake of this project however memory is constructed through a womanist lens meaning going a piece of the way with the things that are remembered and a piece of the way with the things that are forgotten would make for a far richer journey than only being limited to the things that could be remember exactly. Often qualitative research asks for testimony
from subjects to be triangulated with other sources in addition the participant’s testimony, suggesting that a participant’s is flawed and that somehow triangulation will ensure a more “truthful” or “accurate” account. My primary concern is not that each of these women recall each and every detail about their lives accurately my concern was that they remember those things that were so vivid and more importantly remember the far off things that they had forgotten. M. Jacqui Alexander explains,

Some of us, Black, were captured/sold from a geography so vast, the details would daunt memory to produce a deep forgetting so deep, we had forgotten that we had forgotten; missing memory. Who are my people? How will I come to know the stories and the histories of my people? (Alexander, 2005, p. 121).

She answers, “Trees remember and will whisper remembrances in your ear, if you stay still and listen” (Alexander, 2005, p. 122). My goal is not to interrupt the process of their memories with triangulation from outside sources but rather to use their bodies and my own body as a means of triangulation beyond their tape recorded interviews. By sitting still as Alexander suggests I am able to not only listen to the words that each women spoke but rather listen to the affect present in their bodies and their tone as they were reliving their memories and in addition be cognizant of the affect present in my speech and body as I was listening and the affect that often haunted me after; being present in every moment.

It is this missing memory that Vivi, Theresa and Laketi discuss and affective listening that I do that make this research process rich and powerful. The power of remembering in this way becomes what Vivi says is a “non-traditional way of remembering” that is useful in combating oppression. She notes,

They’ve had our bodies, they’ve attempted to still our minds and tried to banish our souls, but our memories we hold, we pass them on our tongues and place
them in the mouths of the next generation in hopes that they don’t forget them so that we can all live freely and ever connected

The act of memory in this connects us to our whole selves; our minds, to our bodies, to our spirits; defragmenting those things that colonization, hegemony, imperialism and all other forms of oppression have sought to disconnect for the sake of domination.

While memory as a traditional practice may be imperfect, our memory and remembering allows us to revisit places, people, time, spaces and make sense of our lives both then (in the past) and now (in the present). Memory is nonlinear. Memory allows us to look back as if we are standing at a distance; examining life retrospectively we are there and not there watching and watched. For this project memory was central not only because of the benefits that these women’s stories provide to the academy in lessons on diversity, social justice and equality, though not unimportant. Memory and their memories in particular have helped to make and shape institutions, particularly the academy, as a result of their opportunities or lack thereof. Memory has the ability to connect us to a history that is larger than our own and has the power to impact that history significantly because it would not be the same without our stories; our memories.

**Contribution to Cultural Memory: Re-memory As Resistance**

Being a Black women, whether in the academy or outside, is to have accrued a subjectivity haunted by traces of a social, political and ideological history (Young, 2005). Blackness and femaleness is a historically and culturally specific lived discourse, comprised of a tradition of brutal systems of oppression; slavery, rape and imperialism. Embodied in that discourse is the power of memory (private and collective). While the previous section discussed the politics of memory and its impact on qualitative methods, re-memory assuages the politics of memory and allows for a possible means of remedy to
oppression. A re-memory is the process of remembering or being reminded to remember a particular moment. That moment could have occurred in your own life or in the lives of those you are connected to. Regardless of whether it is a personal memory being relieved or a communal moment that one is not present for but experiences in very real ways (knowing a story and re-telling it as your own or through physical affect) the process creates a space that allows a different way of knowing and remembering.

Scholar Hershini Bhana Young discusses the power of re-memory and its utility. She writes,

Memory is traditionally thought of only as a solitary individual gathering of the fragments of experience into a narrative that makes sense and is consistent with our understanding of who we are. We supposedly remember only that which we have actually undergone. If there are other recollections crowding our head, these are supposed evidence of “false memories” externally implanted and naturalized. Re-memory refutes the notion that anything in excess of an experimental memory constitutes a false, internalized suggestion. For communities of the African diaspora, always haunted by the power relations and violence that accompanied the formation of Blackness itself, re-memory allows for a critical intervention of the social memory of our injury; bursting with the potential for mobilizing the political imaginary towards redress (2005, pp. 86-93).

Throughout this project each woman re-tells memories they were not physically present for. For instance Vivi’s recollection of her birth and the fight between Nan and Lynn was an incident that Vivi herself did not witness, however she speaks of night she was born with authority and certainty. That memory is not hers. She does not own it in the sense that she was present for it but she has been told that story of her birth as a way marking her entry into the world. A world that at that moment was rampant with racism, sexism, segregation, highlighted with violence.

Additionally Laketi’s entry in the world is also marked with a re-memory. Her re-telling of her mother’s journey back to South Africa from the United States so that she
could be born a South African citizen and not be separated from her family by American citizen is telling of apartheid in South Africa and speaks to her parents struggle to be educated in the United States. Laketi was not physically present (outside of her mother’s womb) for her mother’s journey back to South Africa but she re-tells the story with the certainty of a witness, owning her mother’s journey as her own.

Re-memory allows for the simultaneous articulation of private memory without damaging collective memory. Many of the memories that Vivi, Theresa and Laketi present in their chapters are theirs, solely. However their articulation of their experience (private memories) do not exist in a vacuum but rather signifies that memory always exist in connection to various forms of collectivity; a collective memory. Collective memory and the process of re-memory is not be misunderstood as all Black people having equal and unlimited access to a presumed, homogenous (Black) collective memory. Rather re-memory/collective memory is a process accessible due to particular historical forces and their constitution of our social bodies; forces that have impacted the very foundation of the academy and consequently the lives of Black women in the academy (Young, 2005).

Re-memory as a tool of redress is not only for telling of the moments of heroic bravery valiant acts, or giving context to historic moments; moments of re-memory are often traumatic and are often accompanied by physical affect. For example during our interviews when Laketi and Vivi re-tell being raped and Theresa re-tells her forced abortion each woman’s speech; expression and body language changed, something that could not necessarily be read in text but was much unfeigned in person. As Vivi recalled the evening of her rape she held a white handkerchief in her hands. When she began talking about “the blood stains on her new dress” she began rubbing the handkerchief
with one hand as if trying to remove a stain from her hands or the handkerchief. In addition she was no longer making eye contact with me, but instead looked off into the distance. The break in her gaze, her preoccupation with the handkerchief and the slowing in her speech are very real examples of the physical effects of a re-memory. Sudden feelings of affect are not unfamiliar in the retelling experiences of trauma. These physical changes cannot only occur when retelling a story but can be triggered by smells, scenery, noises, anything that causes a person to re-member trauma. For example after Theresa recalls her forced abortion by her mother,

To this day I cannot be in an examining room in the doctor’s office without being able to face the door. You know how the nurse or somebody will tell you to have a seat on the examining table? I can’t do that especially if the table is not positioned in a particular way. I will only sit on it or lay down on it after the doctor has entered the room. I have a fear of being attacked with something. It just takes me back to that day. It was even hard for me to give my son his breathing treatments for his asthma because it sounded too much like that machine from the abortion. I would get physically sick whenever I gave him his treatments. I had to teach him how to give it to himself once he turned about five or six, because I would physically get sick if I heard it. I felt like I was reliving the abortion.

The experience of her abortion is triggered through sound and scenery and accordingly becomes a moment that she can relive at any moment if triggered and after being told her experience it became a moment that was ingrained in my consciousness and forced to the forefront with similar triggers; visit to the doctor’s office, the sound of a vacuum, making me always aware of her experience even when not consciously thinking of it.

The pages of this project are by necessity haunted by re-memories both in the retelling of each woman’s own story (private memories) and the re-memories (collective memories) that they share in their narratives: Lynn’s soaked feet from her water breaking, readying Vivi to come into the world; Theresa’s grandfather chair on the porch; the
gravel on the side of the road stained with Laketi’s blood are memories that are alive through the process of re-memory. These re-memories are of fundamental theoretical importance as Black women’s, women of color and people of color intellectual and cultural systems continue to try to be excluded and kept out of mainstream knowledge production. In Gayl Jones’ novel Corregidora stories (whether personal or collective) were never to be forgotten. The character Great Gram made it her mission to pass rape as a fundamental tool of imperialism and colonization through oral story telling; from generation to generation. She emphasized the legalized breeding of Black females when she states,

Because they didn’t want to leave evidence of what they done—so it couldn’t be held against them. I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got evidence to hold it up. That’s why they burned the papers, so there wouldn’t be no evidence to hold up against them.” (Jones, 1990 p. 75)

Vivi, Theresa and Laketi’s stories stand as evidence of not only hegemony and subjugation in the academy but speak to a larger society of tyranny and supremacy. However more importantly than speaking to subjugation their stories ask us to hold them up as evidence re-member them in order to mobilize for change.

**Conclusion: The Power of Stories**

Telling a good story is like giving a mini-documentary of what you have seen so others can see it, too. It is a way to mine deep down and touch the tender heart of the most defensive adversary or power-hungry scoundrel currently obstructing your path or withholding the resources you need to achieve what you want to achieve (Simmons, 2001 p, 12).

Stories do not grab power, stories create power. They are a form of a mental imprint that can mold perceptions and touch the unconscious mind living them a sphere of influence that can last a lifetime. Stories conjure a magical power that does not need
formal authority to work. They create another kind of status and power all their own. A story’s power connects people and helps them to make sense of their world. To be a person is to have a story to tell. Stories are all we have to fight off illness and death. You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories (Marmon Silko, 1988). It has been the tool of choice for more than one revolutionary. A compelling story will re-awaken the oppressed and give them energy to march in the streets and demand their freedom (Simmons, 2001).

Storytelling is a uniquely human experience that enables us to convey, through the language of words, aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined, that we inhabit. Stories enable us to come to know these worlds and our place in them given that we are all, to some extent, constituted by stories: stories about ourselves, our families, friends and colleagues, our communities, our cultures, our place in history. Stories provide rich data that express movement, interpret ideas, and describe from the storyteller’s perspective how things used to be and how they are, as well as how they should be (Feldman, Skoldberg, Brown and Horner, 2004). For two years I have lived with the stories of Dr. Vivi South, Dr. Theresa Bayarea and Dr. Laketi Durban. Their stories tell what it’s like to grow up in three very distinct times; Jim Crow South, under South African apartheid and during the crux of the Black Power Movement in the Bay area. Their stories have given us a transnational glimpse of what it means to come of age as a Black woman. Their stories refute any privilege afforded to academics and not that their personal stories of oppression are no different from those of the academy. Their stories tell of how the academy can move towards becoming more inclusive; suggesting
that listening to stories can create policies aimed at undoing racist, sexist and other oppressive practices.

The excellent stories that Dr. Vivi South, Dr. Theresa Bayarea and Dr. Laketi Durban have given me are stories that hold wisdom that influences others to find their own wisdom. I recognize their words as a gift; words that continue to provide me with a framework on how to structure my life as a Black woman in the academy. Their stories show us vividly the things they have seen and have the ability to move “the most defensive adversary” of racism and “the power-hungry scoundrel” hegemony currently obstructing our path. More than a framework for my life in the academy, their stories hold the wisdom on how to transform the academy if we sit still long enough we can hear.
Chapter 9

Epilogue: Researching Researchers

When I first began this project I had no idea where it would take me or where it would take Dr. Vivi South, Dr. Theresa Bayarea, and Dr. Laketi Durban. I was also concerned about where this project would take you, the reader, and where it would take us collectively. Like an impatient child, I just wanted us to get there; get to their stories. As their stories unfolded I wanted you to feel as if you were right there with me; in Vivi’s kitchen canning apricot preserves or in her garden pulling weeds and turning over the soil while she recalled Nan’s letters. I wanted you to feel like you were there, sitting on the floor of the dance studio with your legs crossed in a sweat stained t-shirt listening to Theresa recall her father and grandfather’s “porch politics” discussions. I wanted you to feel as if you to be present in Laketi’s living room lounging on the couch breathing in her grandmother’s favorite Nag Champa incense, when she remembered life under South African apartheid. As the author, I wanted to engage you in a different way; to allow you to come to your own grounded concepts; to tell you stories that are particular, even if they are not spectacular (though I know they are), stories that could be found in any community if you were listening (Reyes, 1996).

Rather than creating a project that read more like a prescription based on sound bites from Black women to cure the academy’s sicknesses of racism, sexism, homophobia, elitism, et cetera or as Vivi says, “all the other shit that’s killing us that we subconsciously eat, sleep, listen to and deal with”; I wanted to write something that would allow Black women in the academy to tell their whole stories; to reconcile their public selves with their private selves. Above all, I wanted their stories to serve as praxis
within an oral tradition of testifying. Their testimonies became more important than
curing a hegemonic space that was never made for us, as Black women. But like I
learned as a child growing up in the church, testifying is hard and requires just the right
color context (witnesses) and requires that certain conditions to be met (witnesses captive,
participating and listening). Furthermore, I also learned looking out the window in the
backseat of my mother’s car that “getting there” is harder.

I was raised in a Black church and at church the personal was always political.
During church each Sunday there was a space carved out where the personal could be
publicly made political; during Testimonial. Testimonial was the part of the church
service when any parishioner could stand up and come before the congregation and talk
at length about the things that have happened; are happening and sometimes will happen
in their life by God’s grace. They did not talk until they knew that the congregation was
listening. For example, before a parishioner broke into a testimony they might say,
“Praise the Lord saints!” The congregation would follow with, “Praise the Lord!” to give
the testifier a signal that they were listening. If the testifier felt like they didn’t have the
entire congregation’s attention then they would say “I said Praise the Lord Saints!” the
congregation hopefully engaged by then, would all collectively and loudly say “Praise the
Lord!” From there the testifier would rupture into their testimony. Their testimony
almost always centered around one, or a combination of three things. One: testimony for
the purpose of sharing a story of defying or overcoming remarkable odds. Giving their
story as a historical confession of their experience (“Never would have made it without
God’s help”); Two: testimony as means of telling a story or singing a song to specifically
touch and help heal the pain of someone sensed to be in pain. Giving testimony with the
purpose of encouragement and giving selflessly for the betterment of the community
(“God put a song on my heart”, “God me gave me this words for someone in this room”);
Three: testimony as a means of asking for support (“Please pray my strength in the
Lord”).

Vivi can you hear me? I’m taking them to church like you said, and like Nan said
before you.

Testimony does not exist outside of a communal space. At moments Vivi, Theresa
and Laketi gave their testimony in the three aforementioned ways speaking to me but
asking you, the reader, to be their community, to be their congregation; suggesting the
imperative need for us to gather together to collectively not only for the sake of research
but for the sake of re-membering. To the outside observer the practice of serving as a
witness, or in the more formal sense a researcher of Vivi, Theresa and Laketi’s
experiences (testimony) should have been easy, particularly since I am a Black woman in
the academy; I should have felt right at home with their words, their stories, with them. I
was essentially doing research at home.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) states, “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to
European imperialism and colonialism” (p. 1). She continues, “The word itself is
probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary…It is implicated
in the worst excesses of colonialism” with the ways in which “knowledge about
indigenous peoples was collected, classified, and then represented back to the West”
(Smith, 1999, p.1).

Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (2008) write,

Sadly, qualitative research, in many if not all of its forms (observation,
participation, interviewing, ethnography), serves as a metaphor for colonial
knowledge, for power, and for truth. The metaphor works this way. Research provides the formation for reports about and representations of “the Other”. In the colonial context, research becomes an objective way of representing the dark-skinned Other to the white world (p. 1).

Thus the researcher, no matter how good her intentions, becomes a possible tool for colonization. So what happens when the researcher shares an identity with the researched, who are also researchers themselves? When she is supposedly at home? A standoff of sorts. Linda Willamson Nelson writes (1996, p. 16), “On first consideration, anthropological research among one’s own people promises much of the certainty and ease of a tender voyage home. After all, the indigenous researcher knows the geographic terrain, the linguistic code, and the social rules” of home. Gloria Anzaldua notes, the world is not a safe place to live in. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when each community hunts her as prey. Alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within herself (2007, p. 42).

Thus as a result the notion of home is complicated at best. Sharing an identity with those that you research assumes that you likely share a similar history. In our particular case, Vivi, Theresa, Laketi and I, share a history of subjectivity around race and gender; however it did not guarantee sameness in our shared experiences. It also does not guarantee a shared notion of race, gender, class, sexuality, generation, geographic identity, nationhood or any congruence on how we experience those things. Although we are all researchers, we do not approach the process of research in the same way.

In my time at universities I have taken several qualitative research methods classes that spanned humanities and social science disciplines; none adequately prepared me for the things I would encounter researching researchers. Like any good student of qualitative methods I know that qualitative research is typically defined as a form of
social inquiry that focuses on understanding the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live and/or studies social phenomena in their natural settings. Ideally, these practices transform the world. At the very least, they turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. Most simply put, qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). Researchers often go into the field armed with the confidence that know how to conduct good, ethical research. If they are met with any challenges well then they will go back to the text book for there is surely something written or documented on how to deal with or handle any conflict that will arise. I checked the manuals and as Vivi told me “there is no section labeled how to handle Black women that are older than you, smarter than you and have done everything you’ve ever thought about doing and done it better”.

My methodological musings on this project lead me to sympathize with Reema’s Boy, a peculiar character in the novel *Mama Day*, by Gloria Naylor (1988). Reema’s boy, a former resident of Willow Springs, an all Black town on a Georgia Sea Island, returns as an anthropologist to Willow Springs, with tape recorder in hand to “put Willow Springs on the map”. Reema’s boy, even though he was one of Willow’s Springs own, was still seen as suspect. The town’s people note,

But when all the laughing’s done, it’s the principle that remains. And we done learned that anything coming from beyond the bridge gotta be viewed real, real careful. Look what happened to Reema’s boy—the one with the pear-shaped head—came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder …he made it to the conclusion that 18 & 23 wasn’t 18 & 23 at all (the year in which Willow Springs was willed to them by their white master after his Black mistress/slave poisoned him and killed him)—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and
latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map. And we were just so damned dumb that we turned the whole thing around. Not that he called it being dumb, mind you, called it ‘asserting out cultural identity’, ‘inverting hostile social and political parameters’…And he thought was so wonderful and marvelous…The people who ran the type of schools that could turn our children into raving lunatics—and then put his picture on the back of the book so we couldn’t even deny it was him—didn’t mean us a speck of good. (Naylor, 1988, pp. 7-8)

In my quest to study Black women in the academy I was not arrogant enough to think that I was going to put these Black women “on the map”, but I was arrogant to think that they would willing to talk me about all aspect of their lives. I assumed that because they all had done research they would be forthcoming with information about their lives for the sake of academic research and scholarship, especially scholarship that would be created from the things they had to say; things that they had lived. I was wrong and my arrogance made me “suspect”. Initially my naivety was regarded with wariness and while being seen as “possibly untrustworthy” or naïve in any researcher/subject relationship is bad; it creates even more doubt when you are seen as “possibly untrustworthy” and naïve by another researcher. As Theresa reminded me,

I’ve been on the other side of that tape recorder. I know the good that can come from it and the bad that it can record. Stream of consciousness can be ugly when played back to you. You can be ugly when you’re played back to you and even uglier when you’re a research subject. The stakes of scholarship are high. So come correct or don’t come at all.

Not only were Vivi, Theresa, and Laketi keenly aware of my naivety they were also aware of the tape recorder. As Vivi reminded me, “any instrument used to collect data could serve as a mechanism of oppression” and the tape recorder was no exception and it often recorded “the possible contradictions that are painfully clear when telling your life”. After our interviews or after reading interview transcripts, I would receive phone
calls, emails or text that said, “I can’t believe I said that” or “I don’t like the way I sound” or “Wow that was too much information” or “Are you going to use that?”.

Each of the women I interviewed was also at times keenly aware and unaware of my identities throughout the research process; researcher; friend; student; mentee; scholar; doctoral student writing her dissertation all became confluent identities. At times I felt like I was the one being interviewed, “What’s your theoretical framework?” “Are you using SPSS or NVivo?” “Are you transcribing this or is someone else?” “How many people are on your committee?” “Are you done writing?” At times I felt like was not collecting data at all, it was hard to tell between the laughs and “the honey hush” or “child please” and the tears and the silence, whether this was “acceptable” or “real” research. It was and I survived to write about it.

I survived this process by never losing sight of this moment; the moment when I was able to talk to you the reader and tell you about the journey; to give you my testimony. It is here where I can tell you openly that I was naïve in thinking that my job as a researcher was to press record and “let” others talk and just listen. Listening is hard it’s especially challenging when each woman is divulging private information for possible public scrutiny. In moments it became difficult for me to listen because I could not respond. Of course I asked questions for clarity like, “How old were you?”, “Where were you?”, etc. But initially I was aching to respond to their stories with, “Why didn’t you…?” “How could you…?” “What were you…?”, all responses prompted from my ego’s need to analyze and subsequently judge each woman through the stories that they were telling. I was listening with my ego. Once my ego was removed from listening I was able to sit still with their recounts. I was able in a sense to be present in a way that
my ego was forcing me to disconnect. For instance by sitting still and listening I was able to envision the banana boat that Laketi’s father arrived back to South Africa on; the church where Vivi’s parents were married; the front porch of Theresa’s grandparents home. I was able to experience their stories.

My biggest surprise in experiencing their stories is that many of the stories they told had little to do with their lives in the academy. That’s not by happenstance; it’s what they gave me, these were the stories in many instances they demanded I tell. They made it clear in the hours that we spent together that even though they knew they were being interviewed as “Black women in the Academy” the academy is not what defined them; refusing to be relegated to stories where their worth was communicated through their labor in the academy. As Theresa told me when I asked if she noticed that we spent a good deal of our interviewing time talking about her life outside of the academy, “Did I miss the news flash about this place being special? The academy is no different from any other job I could be working. I mean yes is it better to get paid to “think” than doing physical labor? Sure. But that’s like asking if it’s better to be the field slave or the house nigga. The institution of slavery was still the same regardless. I don’t pretend that I somehow have it better or worse because I’m in the academy. Better pay sure, but do I have better racism because I am better paid?”

A similar response happened when I reminded Vivi that we were spending most of our interview time on matters outside of academia. She said, “Well sweetheart what kind of story do you want me to tell, the kind where I end up looking bad or the kind where I’m looking sharp? We can talk about the academy but I don’t want to tell you a story where I just survive ‘cause that’s all we’d be talking about if we were talking about
the academy. Hell I’m old and I have cancer I want to tell you a story where I’m shining; the stories that make me happy when I’m listening to you re-tell it in heaven”.

I didn’t understand their initial response but found that their answers suggested that they rejected the privileges (real or imagined) that came with being a university professor and wanted to make sure that although “being an academician was a unique job, it still is a job” or in other words their jobs are still fraught with the same oppression as any other job any Black woman would have in society. Their attitude towards their work thus prompted them to tell stories that focused on situations where they felt similar if not identical to their experiences in the academy.

I have seen, smelled, heard, tasted and touched Vivi, Theresa and Laketi’s stories. They were shared with me and now I pass them to you.
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Appendix A

Consent for Participation

You are invited to participate in a study that investigates the life histories of women at various ranks in the academy to study how black women’s experiences throughout their lives have impacted the survival strategies/skills they employ in the academy. My name is Chamara Kwakye and I am a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in the Department of Educational Policy Studies. You will be one of 5 subjects chosen to participate in this study.

If you decide to participate, we will audio tape 6 in-depth interviews. Each recording will last approximately 1 hour.

There are no known risks in this study beyond those of ordinary life. However, since part of this study investigates everyday conversations, it is possible that you might sometimes talk about personal matters, and you might therefore feel uncomfortable with being audio-taped in your conversations. The potential benefit of this research is to deepen our understanding of the experiences of Black women professors at predominantly white institutions. No compensation will be made to individuals participating in this study.

Please note that any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you or your institution will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. All audio cassettes will be transcribed using pseudonyms so that no personally identifying information other than your voice on the cassettes. I will keep all cassettes in a secure locked file cabinet.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. You are under no obligation to participate in the study. You are free to (a) discontinue participation in the study at any time, (b) request that the audio recorder be turned off at any time, and (c) request that a recorded session be destroyed and excluded from the study. If you have any questions, please ask me. If you have any additional questions later, I will be happy to answer them. You can reach me at: 217.607.1049 or kwakye@uiuc.edu. Should you have any questions concerning research subject's rights, you can contact the Institutional Review Board Office, (217) 333-2670; e-mail irb@uiuc.edu. You are welcome to call collect if you identify yourself as a research participant.

You are making a decision whether or not to volunteer. Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time after signing this form. You may keep the attached participant's copy of this form.

_________________________________________________________________

I have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the research project described above. I have been given a copy of this consent form.


Signature                        Date

I do agree to have the interview audio taped for the purposes of transcription.

_________________________________________________________________

Signature                        Date
If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, 217-333-3023, or arobrtsn@uiuc.edu or the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu
Appendix B

Oral Consent Script

My name is Chamara Kwakye. I’m from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the department of Educational Policy Studies. I am doing a research to record the life histories of women at various ranks in the academy to study how black women’s experiences throughout their lives have impacted the survival strategies/skills they employ in the academy. I would like to interview you and to audiotape our discussion. The interview will be open-ended and can last as long as you wish. We can do the interview at a place and time that are best for you. We can stop any time you want.

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. There are no risks besides those of everyday life. I will change your name in my research report to protect your identity, unless you ask me specifically to mention your real name. I will keep the tapes secure until my project is finished, then I will destroy the tapes. You don’t have to answer any questions you don’t want to and you can stop the interview or ask questions at any time.

I’d like to start the tape now and first ask you to answer yes or no to these questions about the research:

Do you understand that your participation in this project is entirely voluntary?   [Yes, No]

Do you understand that you can ask me to stop the interview at any time and that you do not have to answer any questions you don’t wish to answer?   [Yes, No]

Do you understand that your identity will be kept confidential?   [Yes, No]

Great. I’ll leave this paper with you. It summarizes what I’ve just told you about this project. If you have any more questions, you can reach me at the following phone number and address:

Chamara J. Kwakye

c/o Educational Policy Studies
Room 351
1310 South 6th St.
Champaign, Il. 61820
(217) 333-7781 office
(217) 244-4809 fax
kwakye@illinois.edu
Appendix C

Phone Script

Dear [Participant],

I am conducting a research project with the main goal of recording the life histories of Black women at various ranks in the academy. The main purpose of the research project is to study how black women’s experiences throughout their lives have impacted the survival strategies/skills they employ in the academy.

The main objective of the project is to contextualize and synthesize these women's life histories and experiences and extract information that will valuable to other professors negotiating the tenure and promotion process, provide helpful information to the institutions they serve, and add to Black women's history and studies done on race and gender in the academy. You are one of 5 people selected to participate in this project.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may decline altogether or ask any questions about the research project at any time. There are no known risks to participation beyond those encountered in everyday life. Your responses will be confidential and data from this research will be reported only in the aggregate. No one other than researcher (myself) will have access to your interview transcripts and all transcripts will be transcribed using a pseudonym of your choosing. All interview tapes will be secured in my home office in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed when data collection, transcription and analysis is complete. Transcripts will be transcribed onto a password protected computer. However transcripts and participant key will be kept for four years after the completion of the research project and be used in possible future publications.

If you agree to participate in this project, I will bring an official copy of a consent form to our first interview that will require signature for full participation. If you agree to participate and our first interview cannot be conducted in person I will send, fax, or email a copy of the consent form and will pay for any cost necessary for the return of your signed consent form. Each interview will be approximately 1 hour and will be scheduled in a place and at time that is comfortable for you.

If you have any questions about this project, feel free to contact Christopher Span (Dissertation Advisor) at Educational Policy Studies, 362 Education, 1310 South Sixth Street MC-708, Champaign, IL 61820, phone 217.333.9865, cspan@uiuc.edu or Chamara J. Kwakye (Investigator) Educational Policy Studies, 360 Education Building, 1310 Sixth Street, Champaign, IL. 61820, 310.237.3622, kwakye@uiuc.edu.

Information on the rights of human subjects in research is available through the Institutional Review Board, 417 Swanlund Administration Building, MC-304, phone 217. 333.2670, e-mail: irb@uiuc.edu. You are welcome to call these numbers collect.

Thank you for your assistance in this important endeavor.