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# Nappy Roots, Split Ends, and New Growth: An Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry into The Experiences of A Black Female Educator, No Lye

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NAPPY ROOTS, SPLIT ENDS, AND NEW GROWTH:  
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF  
A BLACK FEMALE EDUCATOR, NO LYE

by

MICHEL LINEE MITCHELL

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

Using autobiographical narrative inquiry, I explore the ways that race, gender, class, culture, and place shape who I was and how I became who I am as a Black woman educator. Family members, colleagues, community members, and students are the main characters in my stories. Building on the works of Collins (2000), Cross (1991), Gay (2000), He (2003), hooks (2000), and Tatum (1997), I use Black women hair metaphors such as nappy roots, split ends, new growth, and no lye to comb through the phases of my life. For the purpose of protecting the characters and myself in my stories, I have fictionalized characters, events, settings, and time to capture the complexities of Black girlhood and to provide the space necessary to identify recurring themes of resilience, strength, and determination embedded in the stories of my life.

Although there is a large body of research literature on autobiographies that explore teachers' personal and professional identities, few texts explore the influence of race, gender, class, culture, and place on the development of identities from a Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought standpoint. I use hair metaphors to narrate my experience as a mobile urban youth growing up in the U. S. South. Each incident, much like the lye in a perm or wave kit, seeps into my pores, creating not only a new and

different style through which to story and (re)story my life, but also a story to be added to the limited body of literature on the complexities of Black girlhood. Although this study focuses on my personal experience of race, gender, class, culture, and place, it has implications for educators, teachers, administrators, parents, and education policy makers to understand the identity development of Black girls, their cultural roots, learning styles, academic achievements, and highest potentials in schools and greater social environments. I hope that my study could in some ways act as a force to demolish “the White Architects of Black Education” (Watkins, 2001). These hair stories are counterstories that challenge the stereotypical meta-narratives about Black women, evoke dialogues about the suppressing and controlling images of Black women, and incite changes in the ways Black women are defined and educated, and the ways they live their lives.

INDEX WORDS: Narrative Inquiry, Autobiography, Identity, Race, Place, Culture, Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory

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B.L.S. Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2003

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and my students. The words in this text are only possible because of my mother's commitment to my biological father, my step-father, and most importantly, her girls. This text is for my mother- LaVonda Jean Hunt-in appreciation for teaching me the relationship between education and independence. These words are for my sisters-Nicole, Candice, and Tangie in appreciation of their love and support and their role in my socialization. To my sister, Kimberly Reynolds, your strength, courage, and resiliency are my inspiration. You are my hero. In appreciation of your hugs and kisses, Jeremiah, Kayla, and Harrison, these words are for you. To my best friend, Rockie Hadley, your love and friendship are the fuel that keeps me going. To my students, we know that urban schools are gold mines-It's up to you to show the world. You all have given me a reason to believe in the possibilities of EDUCATION.

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## PROLOGUE

*“Good Morning. Good Morning. How was your weekend?” This was my greeting to each student that filed in that cold March, Monday morning. Just when I was about to close my classroom door, I heard yelling.*

*“Boy, you come in here any time you want! Look at you, you ain’t even in uniform!”*

*When I stuck my head out a little farther to get a better glimpse of the student being yelled at so early in the morning, I saw that it was one of my students. Never hearing anyone say, “Good Morning” or “How are you?” I started trotting up the hallway, yes, trotting because walking wouldn’t allow me to rescue my “baby” quickly enough.*

*“Why you even come to school? You ain’t got no books, paper, nothing,” yelled Ms. King!*

*Rasheem, not saying a word, was tucking the orange shirt into his Black pants when I heard another voice yell, “They need to get him out of here!”*

*The hallway seemed unusually long. I felt like I’d never get to Rasheem. All I wanted to say to him was, “Good Morning.” The closer I got to him, the more rage I could see in his face. I picked up my trot. As I approached him, I could see that the other voice I heard belonged to Mr. Robinson.*

*“Boy, you late, out of uniform, and you came in here with no books,” Mr. Delany, an administrator walking towards Rasheem yelled!*

*All of us reached Rasheem at the same time. As I hugged his neck, disregarding the adults standing around, Mr. Delany interjected and said, "Get 'em to ISS, Ms. Mitchell. I'm tired of him coming in here when he wants to and how he wants to."*

*"Good Morning Rasheem," I quietly whispered. With rage in his face, I knew what was about to happen.*

*"Ms. Mitchell, I'm tired of this school. I hate these teachers. I quit. I ain't never coming back again," Rasheem screamed as he pulled away from me!*

*I grabbed his arm and spoke loudly enough so that only he could hear me. "Rasheem, listen to me. Calm down. Let Ms. Mitchell handle this. Don't let other people ruin your day."*

*"No, no, y'all teachers don't understand. Y'all think I want to come to school with an orange shirt and Black pants? No, but when that's the only damn thing you got left on the side of the road cause everybody done went through "yo" stuff..." Tears streaming down his face, he paused, turned around, and looked at the administrator, Ms. King and Mr. Robinson, and said, "I hate y'all! Ms. Mitchell, y'all teachers just don't understand what it's like to be put out on the streets and everybody done went through your stuff!"*

*Choked with emotion and feeling the hurt and pain, I (re)lived for the first time since I was in seventh grade, the day I came home from school to find that my family had been evicted...*

Traditionally, in public schools in North America, professional identity is undeviatingly connected to the professional and teacher training which discredits or omits

the knowledge gained from lived experiences. Understanding the significance of eradicating deplorable unjust conditions and treatment in our nation (EDUCATION) and knowledge gained from personal experiences, autobiographical narrative inquiry offers a more inclusive approach to understanding the dynamics that influence the development of my identity. The purpose of education has varied from period to period. During the Colonial period, education's purpose was, as critical theorist Joel Spring (2005) described, "to maintain the authority of the government and religion" (p. 10). Its purpose in the seventeenth century was to allow for social mobility of Whites. As education in the United States has held a hidden agenda to continue oppression and White supremacy, we need an educational system that addresses systemic racism, classism, sexism, etc., and aims for the uplift of the human race. Education that encompasses book knowledge as well lived experiences, is what is needed to uplift our nation from its current crisis. If change is to occur, it must start with teachers since they are the mighty force to challenge the dominant culture and systemic oppression. We must embrace an education that does not ignore personal experiences as a source of knowledge. This approach allows us to understand that the development of identity begins long before the first formal teacher education course, and long before the first group of students are ever assigned. I believe that when education begins to eradicate deplorable and unjust conditions and treatment in our nation, it begins to fulfill its true purpose.

#### Beautiful Beginnings: Autobiographical Roots of My Inquiry

The roots of my *personal~passionate~participatory inquiry* (He & Phillion, 2008) tie to the comment, "Y'all teachers just don't understand!" Time after time, I found myself empathizing, consoling, and/or calming students overwhelmed with personal

adversities; forcing me to come face-to-face with my poverty-stricken past. Through educational degrees I have tried to delete many of the harsh realities that I had to endure, but teaching in urban schools has negated my efforts. My values and beliefs gained from my experiences as a Black growing up in poverty are engrained in the fabric of my very being. My thoughts and actions are driven by values and beliefs.

Sitting in a parent conference trying to understand why every time I “reached out” to Rasheem and he retaliated with contempt towards me, I ruled out the possibility of including my life story in my dissertation inquiry. One day in 2006 I explained to Rasheem’s mother that I met with Rasheem personally and had sent him to the counselor with the intent to understand why he felt that he did not have to listen to me or complete any of my assignments. I asked Rasheem’s mother if she had any suggestions or insights on the situation. Her reply was simple, yet, piercing. “Ms. Mitchell, in all honesty, Rasheem dislikes you because he says you are always lecturing them (the students) about going to college and being doctor before thirty. He doesn’t like anybody lecturing him, besides I don’t see why you talking about that in class anyways. That doesn’t have anything to do with the class.” I sat there frozen. Embarrassed, humbled, and misunderstood, I apologized in a choking voice.

That day haunted me for the remaining days of that school year. I monitored the conversations that included my personal accomplishments and tried to avoid discussing my collegiate experiences. As time elapsed, the memories of that day faded, however; during the spring semester of 2008, while enrolled in Dr. Ming Fang He’s *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* course, I was reminded of that painful reality check rendered by Rasheem’s mother. The major assignment of that course was to:

(1) obtain an overview of curriculum paradigms and shifts; (2) develop a preliminary overview of forms of curriculum inquiry, identify major schools within each form, recognize the representative curriculum theorists within each form, list the original writings by these theorists, and differentiate among these forms; (3) explore the biographical and theoretical roots of the chosen form of curriculum inquiry; (4) come up with analysis and critique of curriculum paradigms and shifts in which these forms of curriculum are developed; (5) recognize the major contributions these curriculum theorists make to the advancement of contemporary curriculum theory and practice...[then]choose one focal form of curriculum inquiry and initiate your own exploration plan. (He, 2006, course syllabus)

I was intrigued by the words of Clandinin and Connelly (2000):

As a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living, reliving, and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. (p.20)

During the 1970s, William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet linked phenomenology with autobiography and introduced *currere* as an autobiographical form of inquiry to study one's experience in the past, present, and future, and the impact of social milieu on experience" (He, in press). . In addition to *currere*, feminist autobiography and teacher biography/autobiography are "three streams of scholarship linked to autobiographical and

biographical research” (Pinar et al, 2004, p. 516). With currere as its nucleus, autobiographical inquiry “seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one’s understanding of his or her life” (Pinar et al, 2004, p. 520).

Rooted in narrative inquiry, autobiographical narrative inquiry with reflection and critical analysis, as stated by Clandinin (2007), is “a way of understanding experience” (p. 5). More specifically, teacher narratives validate teachers’ knowledge and experiences, which allow me and other teachers to tell and retell experiences. Autobiographical narrative inquiry has provided teachers an avenue to theorize their experiences and subsequently revise their practices when necessary (Jalongo, Isenberg, & Gerbracht, 1995; Ritchie and Wilson, 2000).

Autobiographical narrative inquiry in education encompasses four streams of teacher inquiry: (1) teachers’ collaborative autobiography (Butt & Raymond, 1989) (Ayers, 1989); (2) personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988); (3) teacher lore (Schubert & Ayers, 1999); and (4) studying teachers’ lives (Goodson, 1992). All of the streams embrace my efforts to delve into my past experiences that inform my teaching practices. Autobiographical narrative inquiry also allow me to resist, challenge, and revise hegemonic practices, and transform my teaching practices. It serves as an avenue to empower teachers to examine their lived experiences and their interactions with students After presenting a power point presentation on critical narratives and the contributions of narrative inquiry scholars such as Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin, Dr. He immediately suggested that I include narrative inquiry to explore the experience of African-Americans. Puzzled, but not about to raise the question, “*What do you mean as it relates to African-Americans,*” I began my research.

Through autobiographical narrative inquiry, I story and (re)story who I was and who I became. I use nappy roots, split ends, new growth, and no lye as metaphors to comb through the phases of my life cycle as my critical consciousness develops. Metaphors are used to express how researchers come to understand their experiences in relation to their socio-cultural worlds (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Hair care in the Black community is a multi-billion dollar industry. The Black hair terms nappy roots, split-ends, and new growth can be summarized as follows. Nappy roots often refers to hair that is kinky or tangled, but here, it refers to hair in its natural/original state or without chemicals. Split-ends is a term used to describe damaged uneven hair, but I accept the more technical understanding, or one hair cuticle that has split into two parts, but maintains its original root. New growth is the hair that grows from the roots after the hair is relaxed and begins to tangle once-straightened hair. Relaxed hair is most often done with a no lye based relaxer which minimizes burning of the scalp. These hair terms are how I best articulate the phases that I continuously filter through as my identity is constantly developing, as I gain more knowledge and experiences, and as I examine how race, place, and culture influence the development of my identity.

The racial pride was inherited and eventually seeped into my classrooms when I resided in Atlanta, experienced the isolation from my Black peers in Beach City, had a White stepfather, and moved from the south to the South (Cottondale). As teachers, without ever knowing, just as Geneva Gay (2000) pointed out in *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, lived experiences (e.g. places lived, family dynamics, and societal messages) “determine how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn affect how we teach and learn” (p. 9). Our experiences shape our identity.

My cultural, familial, and educational experiences in three Southern cities and my family ties to Kentucky are essential to understanding my identity. As noted by Tatum (1997), identity is “shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (p. 18). Therefore, understanding the culture in which my identity has been and still is being developed is essential. I join Gloria Ladson-Billings (2001) in her assertion that, “Although it is important for teachers to understand their students’ culture, the real benefit in understanding culture is to understand its impact on our own lives” (p. 83). This was affirmed as I emerged into the urban classrooms with my set of beliefs, values, and stereotypes about Black students and the opportunities they were afforded in the name of education. I believed that the students were over-aged and failing, not because they were not given rigorous curriculums and highly culturally qualified teachers. Rather, they did not care about their education and neither did their parents. Seeing the common Blackness without questioning it, I ignored the dynamics that influenced my students’ culture and erroneously assumed that our race and “struggle” afforded us a common culture. My sentiments were simple. If I could overcome all of the obstacles in my life, surely they could. That was what I believed as I implemented scripted lesson plans, wrote my share of disciplinary referrals and exerted my power of the pen by failing students without reflection. Void of the slightest thought that Paulo Freire (1970) was correct when he stated that “Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (p. 79). Subsequently, I actively participated in what Carter G. Woodson (1933) termed the “mis-education of the Negro.” Woodson warned that “Taught from books of the same

bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served for no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do” (p. 23). I neglected to understand the culture that shaped my actions. Rather than point the blame at the lack of preparation from my predominately White institutions of higher education or wallow in anger because of my miseducation, I choose to explore my lived experiences and the influences of the phenomena of race, place, and culture on the development of my identity.

This study presents an autobiographical narrative inquiry into the development of my identity as I teach in high poverty schools, coming face-to-face with my unforgotten poverty-stricken past. My dissertation is a story about struggle. Struggle to resist sexism, classism, and racism. Struggle to name my own destiny. Struggle to understand who I was and who I am becoming. Following the traditions of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde who told their stories of Black girlhood, I tell my stories as a little Black girl ascending from girlhood to womanhood in spite of suppressions, adversities, and struggles to understand the impact that race, place, and culture have on the development of my identity. Using Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework and autobiographical narrative inquiry as a research methodology, I bring my experience to the limited body of literature that portrays and validates the complexities and contradictions of growing up a Black girl in the South. Through my testament of *personal~passionate~participatory inquiry* (He & Phillion, 2008), I hope to create a community of teachers willing to examine who they are changing any of their values and beliefs that are oppressive.

I was born the fourth daughter to a twenty year old mother and the fifth daughter to a twenty-six year old father in Kentucky, began formal education in Atlanta, Georgia (1985), moved back to Kentucky after being evicted (1989), attended my first integrated school in Beach City, (a pseudonym), Florida (1990), became fatherless after my parents got divorced (1991), moved to the “other side of the tracks” when my mother married Buzz, a White man (1992), and then moved to Cottdale (a pseudonym), Georgia, a Southern town (1995). Constant changes and displacement have been consistent throughout my life. Never having a place to call home in the South has posed its own challenges. However it has never derailed me. Being an outsider or the new girl on the block, which is how I prefer to refer to myself, has been a sort of internal motivation for me to persevere as I believe everyone’s eyes are always on the new girl on the block’s actions. Understanding my identity without exploring the experiences that occurred in my life prior to receiving post-secondary education would create an inaccurate depiction of the development of my identity. I, therefore, offer a semi-chronological autobiographical narrative inquiry into the development of my identity.

My dissertation consists of a prologue, five chapters, and an epilogue. A metaphor of the Black hair’s cyclical phases strands through each chapter. As this is not a “traditional” dissertation, I weave the literature through each chapter. In the Prologue, the reader is introduced to the origins of my study and the purposes of my study. Identity development as it relates to personal experiences and formal eradicating deplorable unjust conditions and treatment in our nation (education), my self-created acronym, is also introduced. My *Nappy Roots*, *Split Ends*, *New Growth*, and *No Lye* metaphors are explained.

In Chapter One, *Nappy Roots*, I narrate stories of my childhood memories. I focus on family stories that influenced the development of my values, biases, and stereotypes and my adaptation to the changes in my family. These stories begin with my earliest memory at age five and conclude with a story from my senior year of high school. The stories in Chapter One provide a glimpse into the myriad of social, economic, and political conditions that influenced the development of my identity.

Chapter Two, *Split Ends Strand I*, begins with a story from my first day of college (coincidentally, my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday), and concludes with my acquiring a teaching position. These stories focus on my experiences as I attempt to “split” from parents and define myself, not yet realizing the tremendous influence they have on who I am.

Chapter Three, *Split Ends Strand II*, begins with stories from my first year teaching and concludes with a story from my first day of class in Georgia Southern University’s Ed. D in Curriculum Studies program. I also tell these stories focusing on my experiences as I continued to define my own identity. These stories expose the significance of race and its role in educational disparities.

In Chapter Four, *New Growth*, I tell stories of my personal and professional experiences as I enrolled in the Ed. D. in Curriculum Studies program. Focusing on the significance of critical consciousness and intellectual development, I tell these stories to capture my experiences as my new critical consciousness allowed me to recognize the tone of systemic oppression. The stories in this chapter identify and bring awareness to areas of injustice faced by Blacks in the U.S.

In Chapter Five, *No Lye*, I reflect on my inquiry, discuss the context of my study, the tensions within my inquiry, my literature review, and my theoretical and

methodological findings about the influence of race, place, and culture on the development of my identity.

In the Epilogue, I discuss the current events occurring within my personal and professional life. I also discuss what is occurring in the lives of the characters in my stories.

## CHAPTER 1

### NAPPY ROOTS

Television talk show host Don Imus communicated or affirmed to all of his listeners the meaning of the word “nappy.” The day following the University of Tennessee women basketball team’s defeat of Rutgers University women’s basketball team for the NCAA championship, Imus exposed the long running history of the marginalization and socialization of Black hair in the United States. He referred to the Rutgers’s University women as “nappy-headed hoes.” His derogatory use of nappy communicated the connotation of wild and un-kept leading to a cry of outrage from members of the Black community. Contrary to the wild or un-kept connotation of nappy that mainstream media has attempted to socialize me to accept, nappy for me refers to hair in its natural state without the influence of chemicals. Metaphorically speaking, fused with roots as in “nappy roots,” I use it to mean the beginning of the development of my identity, my experiences prior to becoming an adult.

In the following four chapters I explore the development of my identity as a Black female educator. I use a hair metaphor to explore the phases of my life: my early childhood years; my undergraduate years; my novice teaching years; and my doctoral years. This autobiographical narrative inquiry provides an innovative avenue to fuse fiction, nonfiction, and academic writing to develop an inquiry for untangling the development of my personal and professional identities in educational contexts.

In this chapter I explore my childhood experiences as a transient urban youth. I focus on the ways in which the phenomena of race, place and culture functioned in my childhood years. I tell my stories of change to explore the cultural behaviors, perceptions,

and traditions acquired from parents and family members as I rooted and uprooted from four U.S. Southern cities. I focus on the constant shifting of my culture that runs parallel with the shifts in my family as well as my place, both geographical and societal. I pay special attention to my mother and her influence on my socialization.

I view autobiographical narrative inquiry just as cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson (2003) described, “It’s a way for me to be honest about my roots, about where I come from, and the forces that produced” (p.252). So, how do I narrate the complexities of Black girlhood? Using elements of fiction (i.e. word play and metaphors), I alter the names and settings of the stories to provide in the words of Dyson (2003) “The necessary discretion and respect for others whose lives are unavoidably implicated” (p.251). I also use pseudonyms (Beach City and Cottdale) to protect the privacy of the teachers and school officials who are still employed by the Cottdale school district. The rural nature of Cottdale keeps migrants from rooting there. In other words, community newcomers are far and few in-between, making it necessary for me to also conceal the name of the Florida city that was abandoned for Cottdale. Autobiographical narrative inquiry allows me fictionalize elements of my stories without compromising the authenticity of the experiences.

The stories I tell reveal who I am and the experiences that socialize me into being. As public intellect William Ayers stated (2004):

The destiny of every human being: [is] to be fated, but also to be free; to be both free and fated. Each of us is planted in the mud and the muck of daily existence, thrust into a world not of our choosing, and tethered then to hard-rock reality; each of us is also endowed with a mind able to reflect on that reality, to choose to

be in light of the cold facts and the merely given. We each have a spirit capable of joining that mind and soaring overhead, poised to transgress boundaries, destroy obstacles, and transform ourselves and our world. (p. xiv)

I was born of no choice of my own as a Black female. To be Black, female, and transient throughout the U. S. South means something. I use an autobiographical narrative inquiry explore my childhood experiences with a focus on how race, place, and culture influence who I was and how I became who I am.

Blacks in the U.S. have been marginalized and oppressed since the institution of slavery. My ancestors were exposed to psychological and physical abuse on the premise of race. Racism creates a social hierarchy in the U.S. that many Whites are comfortable with keeping rather than accept it as a perceived subordinate “place,” Blacks continue in the legacy of our forefathers and foremothers to trust in the Lord. There is an old Negro spiritual that goes like this:

*I will trust in the Lord, Oh I will trust in the Lord,*

*I will trust in the Lord till I die, till I die,*

*I will trust in the Lord, I will trust in the Lord,*

*I will trust in the Lord, till I die.*

Trust in God was and continues to be my coping mechanism for dealing with oppression, injustices, and misfortunes of life. It has been my faith in God that has allowed me to triumph over obstacles. The narratives in *Nappy Roots* shed light on the experiences that influenced my identity development with an emphasis on race, place, and culture and how they fostered traits of resilience, spirituality, determination, strength, and liberation through literacy.

Resilience is defined best, at least in my opinion, by my pastor as the ability to “take a licking and keep on ticking.” It is the ability to withstand and rebound from adversity, crisis, and trials that usually have negative effects on the development process. The American Psychological Association’s (APA) (2008) study of resilience in Black adolescents helped me understand the role of individual, environmental, and sociohistorical stressors and their impact on identity, emotional, social, cognitive, and physical health developments. The APA cite racism, discrimination, and prejudice as factors compromising Black adolescents health and well being (American Psychological Association, 2008).

My childhood adversities are documented in “Nappy Roots.” Poverty, abuse, teen-pregnancy, divorce, and separated family, all possible vulnerabilities of life growing up in a low-income family, are highlighted in the stories. How I overcome these adversities are linked the spiritual foundation provided by my grandmother during my early adolescent years. For me, faith in God and my mother’s strength fostered the strength needed to obtain resiliency.

I begin the chapter with a narrative of an experience that occurred while teaching. Why would I open a chapter about my family experiences with a story about an interaction between a student and I is likely to be asked. Well just as noted by Chia-lin Huang (2003) “professional actions echo person experiences [in other words] I am who I am now and will be in the future in large part because of my past experiences and encounters” (p. 171). “Deep Conditioned” provides a glimpse into my childhood experience that fostered my spirituality as well as influenced my response to Anita. “Locked Up” sheds light on the abuse I witnessed my father impose on my mother which

eventually lead to their divorce. In “Processed Out,” the effects of single motherhood are revealed as my family is evicted. In the midst of adversity, the significance of family is highlighted as my mother relies on my aunt to care for my sister and me. Keeping the family together is evidenced in “Weaving the Family Back Together,” a narrative written while I was teaching a narrative writing unit. “Over-Processed,” illuminates a struggle of life in a new Black community. “Breakage” is a narration of the events of the last night I live in the house with both of my biological parents. “Entangled Times” is an illustration of my resilience to endure change. I narrate the transition from the divorce of my parents to the marriage of my mother and step-father, a White man. In “Baby Hair,” I tell the story of my sister, a fourteen-year old, having a baby and my family’s triumph over this adversity. Resiliency, often a trait found in low socio-economic Black families continues to resonate in my life as my step-father takes us from poverty to middle-class. “Super Gro” is about my adjustment from living in South Florida to South Georgia.

Race becomes more salient in my life and my educational experiences influencing me to become more conscious of racism. In “Brush Fire,” my family is a victim of what we perceive as a hate crime. We rebound from the tragedy, but are forced to face the low expectations perceived of Black girls in “Unbeeweaveable” when a White teacher tells me that I am too smart to be a Black girl. My step-father’s outburst is overlooked as his White skin and class privileges allow him this privilege. My educational experiences are interrupted with “Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow;” a narrative about a cultural curse that impacts Black women across all socioeconomic groups. I am forced to begin my senior year of high school watching my mother battle with breast cancer. My ongoing struggles are counteracted in my life with Black teachers who were educated and came of age in

Black Southern communities. These teachers transmitted the values that once linked Black communities and schools; spirituality. “Root Stimulator” is the original text of a speech I gave at my teacher’s church during my senior year of high school. Nappy Roots concludes with “Shear Intensity,” a narrative that depicts class privilege. My mother is able to advocate for me as she is a stay-at-home mother. The stories progress in chronological order depicting the experiences that fostered traits of spirituality, determination, strength liberation through literacy, and resiliency.

### Shear Delight

A month prior to Don Imus’s remarks, I was taken back to my earliest childhood memory. It was a Monday morning in 2007; the day after I had been “refueled with the word of God,” as my pastor likes to say. I arrived at work expecting my “steps” to be ordered by God; in walked Anita. Anita and I had a special relationship. She was my first Hispanic student and I was her first Black teacher. We learned from each other daily, but what I was to learn from her that March morning would be a life-changing lesson.

Anita walked into English class with her head lowered, looking a little weary. I dismissed her weariness as the Monday morning blues. As the period progressed, I walked over to her desk to ask if she was okay. With her head still lowered, she whispered, “Ms. Mitchell, I need to speak with you alone.”

As “I need to talk to you alone” rolled off of her tongue, I noticed a shiny ball in the middle of her tongue. Not knowing if I should say anything or if I was imagining what I thought I saw, I opted to say nothing. Anxiously waiting for my co-teacher to arrive, every negative thought raced through my head. Was she going to tell me that she was pregnant? Someone was harming her? She wanted to quit school? I said something

offensive? I could not have guessed what she would tell me even if my life depended on it.

I approached Mr. Steele, my co-teacher, as he entered the classroom, informing him that I would be leaving the classroom to conference with Anita. He mumbled something, but Anita and I were already heading out the door. By that time, I was burning with anticipation. Finally, after circling the campus, we sat on a bench and Anita began to vent. She ranted about having so many chores, the desire to know and have a relationship with her father, the crowdedness of her grandmother's home, and God's anger towards her. With tears streaming down her face, she cried, "Ms. Mitchell, you don't know what I have to go through. Everyone thinks that just because I have good grades, I have a perfect life. God hates me."

Now, I knew that I was not suppose to talk about God in a public school, but at that moment, only God could offer the needed comfort and peace to the crying child. All I could gather to say was, "God doesn't hate you."

"Yes, He does!" she blurted.

I was not trying to upset her, but I was not trying to lose my job either. God must have sensed that I was between a rock and a hard spot because instantaneously, the conversation shifted. Anita looked up with deep sincerity and asked, "Ms. Mitchell, do you believe in God?"

"Of course I believe in God," I graciously replied.

"No, I mean God like Jesus Christ?" she maturely clarified.

I was amazed at her question, but proud to respond, "Absolutely!" Still trying to get her to tell me what was wrong, I asked, "Why do you think God hates you?"

“Because I pierced my tongue and because I haven’t read the Bible in over a week,” she mumbled in between the sobs.

I was becoming antsy because there had to be more. In my four years of teaching (at that time) I had never had a student sobbing over not being able to read the Bible and sinning against God; therefore, I was sure there was something else going on with her. Rather than jump immediately to what I really wanted to know, why she had pierced her tongue, I asked, “Why haven’t you read the Bible in over a week?”

Clearly physically and emotionally distressed over not reading the Bible, Anita responded, “I don’t know what happened to my Bible and I can’t understand the one my grandmother has.”

Two weeks prior, I had purchased a Bible to keep in my car. It was purse-size with a jean-looking cover. It was the clearest translation I had ever read. I mean I could read this Bible with great ease! I was certain God was not telling me to give it away, but the more I listened to Anita, the more I understood that the Bible was not purchased for me. It was God’s plan for me to gift the Bible to Anita.

Leaving Anita sitting on the bench, I walked to my car to get the Bible. I had no feelings of reservation, not about the job, nor about parting with the Bible. Upon returning to the bench, I handed Anita the Bible. She immediately flipped to Proverbs 5 and began reading aloud. As she finished reading, I asked her what was so significant about Proverbs 5. Her response was life-changing. With a smile rising on her face, “My grandmother makes me read one chapter of Proverbs everyday. Ms. Mitchell, there is one proverb for every day of the month.”

Here I was, learning something so valuable from my student who was learning something so valuable from her grandmother. As I responded to Anita, I thought about my cultural socialization. All I could think was “thank God for grandmothers.”

### Deep Conditioned

Granny’s house was full of love...and people. My Granny was the first one in the family to leave Kentucky for the Black Mecca of the South, Atlanta, Georgia. Soon, we, my mother, my father, my three sisters (Louise, Lurnetta, and Jean), Aunt Linda, her daughters (Tee-Tee and Gina), and my Uncle Babe would follow. We all temporarily lived in Granny’s one-bedroom apartment in Bowen Homes Housing Projects.

My earliest childhood memory takes me back to when I was 5 years old. This was 1985, a time when WWF Wrestling was ruled by Junkyard Dog and Hulk Hogan; a time when kids played games that did not have to be connected to the television or use batteries; a time when Saturday meant playing outside all day unsupervised until the street lights came on; and the time when crack cocaine began to infest the Black community. On this particular Saturday, Granny woke all of the grandchildren and nieces up and told us to get dressed. We all complied without any question. Granny grabbed her bullhorn and told us line up from the youngest to the oldest. That placed me right behind her.

It was still dark outside, but the dark sky was starting to turn light blue. The morning fog was still thick, but Granny’s white shoes were visible. We all filed behind Granny as we started out on what became a Saturday morning ritual. Fearless of the drug invested community, fearless of the gun violence invested community, Granny marched around the entire 650 unit community, with us behind her, declaring “Repent! Repent!

The Kingdom of God is at Hand!” Unaware of disobedience or children’s rights, with just as much passion as she, we declared in unison, “Repent! Repent! The Kingdom of God is at Hand!” We repeated this countless times as we made the morning tour. Besides occasional yells of “Do you know what time it is?” or “You need to repent for waking us up!” each Saturday morning tour went without incident. Saturday morning tours afforded Granny with celebrity-type status in the neighborhood. She was known as the “Church Lady.”

Saturday morning neighborhood tours while living with Granny were my first encounters with God. God would get inside of people and make them talk funny or they would fall out on the floor. I witnessed this in church every Sunday. Granny was Holiness which meant she stayed in church ALL day; women did not wear pants, earrings, or makeup. At her church, there would be “Shut-In” services where we would sleep in church. We really were not supposed to sleep, but sometimes we would doze off.

One particular day, after our morning tour and Saturday playing, we went to church with Granny for Shut-In service. During service, Granny asked if anyone had a song they wanted to sing. My sister Jean whom is only ten months older than me jumped up, “Granny! Granny! We got a song.”

“Give God a hand of praise as my grandbabies come forward,” Granny encouraged the congregation as my sisters and I stretched, put shoes on, and flattened flying pony tails.

Bishop Sweet handed Jean the microphone as we all stood waiting for her to lead the song. She stood frozen like a deer stuck in headlights. Then with all eyes on her, she motioned for us to start singing, but we didn’t know what song she was about to sing.

Jean finally whispered into the microphone, “Come on Michel, Louise, and Lournetta. Y’all know the song.”

“Just start singing baby and they will join in,” Granny encouraged.

“Beat it! Beat it! Just beat it!” Jean proclaimed.

We got in the first “Beat it” of pop star Michael Jackson’s hit song, before Granny stomped out of the pulpit with her bottle of holy oil (olive oil) pleading the blood of Jesus over us. All of us had to get a cross oiled on our forehead and prayed for by Granny and Bishop Sweet.

I am not sure what Granny said to my mother, but that was the last Saturday we ever attended a Shut-in service with Granny. It was also the last Saturday we went on a Saturday morning tour. In fact, it was the last Saturday we lived with Granny.

My early childhood experiences with my grandmother provided a space for my grandmother to transmit spiritual and religious beliefs that she was confident I would need as I matured through Black girlhood. During my short stay with my Granny, a seed was planted, Jesus loves me. This seed would be needed for the life that was ahead of me once I left Granny’s house. Using religion and the Bible as a source of strength was the seed that my grandmother instilled in me. This seed created a consciousness that helped me deal with Anita. Giving spiritual nurturing creates a teaching in U.S. public schools, but my experiences encouraged me to resist Eurocentric policies and offer my student what she needed.

### Locked Up

We moved to Decatur, Georgia, and would not see Granny for weeks at a time. Things were changing, but at least we did not have to go to church all day long anymore.

No longer staying with Granny, we would be awakened on Saturday early-early mornings, but not for the morning tour. One Saturday I awakened to...

“No, Mike, leave me alone.”

“Come on baby.” (the sounds of three slaps followed)

“Mike, you are high.”

“You are going to give me some. This belongs to me.”

“Okay, Mike, you want some?”

“Yes baby.”

“Sit right here.”

“Uhh Uhh.”

“Laurnetta, Laurnetta, you hear that?” Tapping her on the arm, I continued to whisper, “Laurnetta, get up. I think mama and daddy are up fighting again.”

“What?” Laurnetta asked, as she arose from bed.

“I heard daddy slapping mama,” I whispered.

We got out of the bed to see why they were fighting. As we stuck our heads out of the door, we saw my daddy sitting in one of the dining room table chairs. He was naked with his eyes closed and his head leaned back. His arms were taped behind the chair. Mama was busy circling him with gray tape when she noticed us standing in the doorway.

“What are you doing up?” she asked while continuing to circle the chair tapping daddy.

“I heard y’all and I wanted to see what y’all were doing.” I hesitantly replied.

My daddy's head jerked up, looking straight at us standing in the doorway, he demanded, "Get y'all butts back in the bed!"

With his arms taped behind his back, his legs taped together, and his body taped to the chair, he was unable to do anything other than sit in the chair. Before we went back into the room, pointing at the charcoal lighter fluid on the table, my mama said, "One of you hand me that."

As Lurnetta ran to get the charcoal lighter fluid, I eased back into the room. I could still see and hear everything. Still fully unaware of what was going on; Daddy said nothing as Mama marched around him dousing him with charcoal lighter fluid.

"So you want some Mike?"

"Uhh huh."

"Get me a lighter," Mama demanded.

At that moment, Daddy must have realized what was occurring. He jerked, trying to get up from the chair, but was unable to move. Jeannie, "What are you doing? You trying to kill me?" He screamed!

"I am sick and tired of taking ass whoopins from you Mike. You smoke up all the damn money, then you want to come in here and f\*ck me."

"Mama do you want me to call 9-1-1?" Lurnetta interrupted.

"No! Bring me a lighter," Mama insisted.

"Girls, call 9-1-1. Your mama is trying to kill me," Daddy urged.

No longer standing in the doorway, I joined Lurnetta by the telephone. With one parent yelling "Call the police" and the other parent yelling, "Y'all see the ass whoopins I am taking," Lurnetta and I were confused. Just as Lurnetta picked up the telephone and

dialed 9-1-1, a key turned in the doorway. She slammed the telephone down as our cousin Victor opened the door.

“What in the hell is going on?” Puffing on a cigarette and sniffing the air, Victor questioned as he stared at my naked daddy taped to the chair.

Reaching for the cigarette in his hand, Mama demanded, “Give me that cigarette. I am about set his ass on fire. I done took my last ass whoopin’ from him!”

“Cuz, if it didn’t have my finger prints on it; I would let you have it.”

Bam bam bam! Police! Open up!

Holding hands, now sitting in the corner, Lournetta and I watched as Mama let the police in the house.

“There was a 9-1-1 call made from this house and we are here to make sure everything is okay because the caller hung up before any information was given,” the officer stated just as he noticed my daddy sitting in the chair.

“She is trying to kill me officer,” my daddy muttered. “Don’t you smell the lighter fluid?” he continued.

One of the officers went outside with my mother while the other one and Victor untaped my daddy. Noticing Lournetta and me in the corner, the officer said, “Tell me your kids have not been watching all of this.”

“No sir, They must have just come out of their bedroom.” (rep) lied my daddy.

The officer directed my dad to get put some clothes on and then come back out so that they could talk. He then came over to the corner and kneeled on the floor to ask us what happened. I told him that I woke up to them arguing and fighting. Lournetta told

him that she called 9-1-1, but she hung up because our cousin opened the door. Just as the officer was standing up, my mother and the other officer returned from the porch.

“I think this is drug related and domestic abuse,” the officer who had been on the porch with my mother informed the other officer.

I did not know what “drug related” meant nor “domestic abuse,” but whatever it meant, it meant that my daddy would get locked up that night. My father’s abuse of my mother influenced my beliefs in liberation through literacy. I began to believe that education would allow me to be able to resist the abuse of a man. This experience stuck in my mind throughout my childhood years and early adult years. It provided me with a special empathy and awareness about the possibility of “good” students having challenging home lives; knowledge that would prove to be valuable during my urban teaching years.

#### Processed Out

Drugs and abuse continued, but I still knew that Jesus loved me which gave me strength. We had moved four times since we left my Granny’s house. By the time 1989 had arrived, Daddy, Louise, and Jean, no longer lived with us. It was Mama, Lurnetta, and me. We lived in Payton Gardens Apartments. There was a swimming pool, a playground, and plenty of friends to play with after school. During our stay in Payton Gardens, Lurnetta and I got our first “boyfriends,” Junior and Deon. Junior and Deon walked us to and from school daily along the Georgia red dirt filled path, but one November day, Junior and Deon did not wait for Lurnetta and I after school. As we headed down the path towards the apartment complex, we were greeted by Junior and

Deon. In between gasps for air, they managed to say, “Y’all stuff is on the side of the road and there is a note from the police on y’all’s door.”

We all jogged the remaining distance to the entrance of the complex. There we saw everything; our couch, our beds, our clothes, everything. Clothes were spread on the lawn to notify us that indeed people plundered through our belongings taking whatever they desired. Without a word or tear, Lurnetta and I re-bagged our scattered belongings. We sat on the couch and waited for our mother to arrive. Our presence did not keep onlookers away, but it did keep looters away.

Embarrassment or shame, I do not remember feeling either. What I remember most, was that my mother would make everything all right. She was a magician. My mother had a history of making a way out of no way. When she turned the corner and met eyes with us, she immediately turned around and went the other way. Minutes later, Mama returned with a U-haul truck. We all loaded the truck and jumped in. Neither Lurnetta nor I bothered to ask where were we going to live, we knew Mama had already worked it out.

### Whoopti Do

The next day, Lurnetta and I found ourselves living with Aunt Grace in Lexington, Kentucky. *Aunt Grace is considered to be the matriarch of our family. She is not the oldest, but most established, meaning, she was married and owned a large enough home to accommodate two more people.* Lurnetta and I would be house member numbers nine and ten. This was okay because we would get to see our sisters again. Louise lived three houses up the street with Granny Betty, and Jean lived in walking distance with Aunt Wanda.

Despite being recently evicted and separated from our mother, Lurnetta and I were expected to make the necessary adjustments and continue making exceptional grades. Though this was never articulated, it was evident the day we received our first report cards while living with Aunt Grace. Overwhelmed with excitement and pride, I burst through the door waving my report card in the air. “Aunt Grace! Aunt Grace! Look at our grades!”

I was not only proud of my five A’s and two B’s, but I was also proud of Lurnetta’s straight A’s. There was a slight problem though...

“Don’t-you-ever-bring-grades-like-this-in-my-house-ever-again,” muttered Aunt Grace in between pops with the wet dish towel. She stopped washing dishes to discipline me for not making straight A’s. I had never gotten a whooping before and had certainly never been disciplined for my grades. In between the sobs, I do remember managing to say, “Yes M’am.” and “I want my Momma.”

Two weeks passed before my mother would call, but in the meantime I was careful not to bring any more B’s home.

### Weaving the Family Back Together

Teaching is so much a personal task; the following narrative was originally part of a narrative unit that I taught during my second year of teaching.

As spring break approached, we had to decide whether or not we were going to go to Beach City, Florida, to visit with our parents. Just as we thought they had forgotten about us, our mean daddy called Lurnetta and I. He asked, “Do you girls want to come visit our new home during your spring break?”

On the day that we were going to leave, Louise and Jean came to wait with Lournetta and me. When our mother and our father knocked on the door, we all ran to greet them. When the door swung open, I saw the Brown Bomber! The rusty car was big, old, and brown. My sisters and I questioned our daddy about the car making it to Florida. He said, "It made it to Kentucky and it will surely make it back." We all piled in the backseat. The Mitchell family drove off.

We jammed to the radio all the way to Tennessee. That is when the country music blared from the speakers. My mother scanned through the radio stations. There was nothing but country music on the stations. All of a sudden, Louise pulled out a black tape. She asked our dad if we could please listen to her cassette tape. He replied, "Does it have profanity on it."

She replied, "No."

Then he asked, "Who is on the cassette tape?"

My sister replied, "It is Bell Biv Dovo's hit song Poison." She handed him the tape.

All of us sat in the backseat and singing so badly, "That [boy] is poooison." We first sang to the radio version. Then we sang the extended version. After that, we hummed the song to the instrumental. The only time we were not singing was when the tape was flipping over to start the cycle over, radio version-extended version-instrumental. We sang all the way to Beach City.

After a week in Beach City, we headed back up the long highway. Once again, we listened to the radio until it faded out. As soon as it got fuzzy, in unison we asked, "Daddy, can we listen to Poison?" He pushed in the tape. The cycle began with the

singing all over again. “That [boy] is poooison.” Radio version. Extended version.

Instrumental. We sang until my sister whispered to us to do the dance from the video. She said, “Lets see if we can move the old car from side to side. Louise held up her fingers and counted for us to begin. She said, “On three.” One. Two. Three. We moved our arms from the left then down then to the right. Each time we did “the dance”, we moved harder. We did “the dance” until we felt the car weave from left to right. We rocked the car all the way back to Kentucky.

As soon as we got out of the car at Aunt Grace’s house, our dad asked all of us if we wanted to come and live with him and our mother. We told him that we would call him and let him know (not that we really had a choice in the matter). We stood on the porch saying goodbye to our mother, while our dad went out to crank the car. The car would not crank. Daddy came back to the porch and yelled, “You four girls have poisoned my car!”

We moved to Beach City with our parents. They had shown us such a wonderful time how could we resist. I am not sure what my sisters thought, but I was convinced that things would be different than they were the last time the family was all living together.

This narrative continues the reoccurring theme of family. Regardless of the previous struggles with my family context, my mother attempted to reunite our family. Only nine years old at the time of these events, I do not recall questioning my mother’s decision to reconcile her differences with my father. During this study, I learned that she did not want to be a part of the growing number of single Black women raising children. As an educator of Black students potentially being raised by a growing number of single Black mothers, this experience provides me with, as noted by Collins (2000) “a special

angle of vision that Black women bring to the knowledge production process” (p.22); I have a better understanding of the struggle that Black students whose parents are attempting to mend troubled relationships endure.

### Over-Processed

The early days in Beach City were so much fun! The Caloosahatchee River and the Gulf of Mexico were familiar with us. We visited them weekly while we were staying with family. Shortly before school started, we moved into the corner house on Pearl Street. The Brown Bomber died; ending our weekly visits to the Caloosahatchee River and the Gulf of Mexico. Now, don't feel sorry for us! We just created new fun, plus school had started which meant *we* had new friends.

Our house was the dividing line for the school zone. This meant that all of our neighbors attended the neighborhood school, but we were privileged to attend the school in North Beach City. We got to ride the bus twenty minutes, passing our dear friend, Caloosahatchee, each day. What this ride also meant was that we had friends who did not live on neighboring streets. Many of our friends lived on the other side of at least a one mile hike across town which proved to be beneficial to us.

Perhaps sympathetic to our feet, our parents scrambled up enough money to buy two beach cruisers; one for Louise and one for Lournetta. I actually do not remember them delegating who the bikes belonged to, but since they were the oldest it was understood that the bikes belonged to them. Jean and I did not whine it about though because they could not go anywhere without us anyway; and they didn't. They would put us on the handlebars and we, the Mitchell girls, would be all over East Beach City.

Louise and Lurnetta were growing popular for the same reasons as Jean and me, at least this is what I believed to be true, because they were new to their school and they were smart. They had so many friends which meant I too had a lot of friends. My sisters and I shared everything, including friends. One day while we were out riding our bikes, I got to meet all of their, I mean our, friends. We were just about to turn onto our street when a pack of guys called out, “Louise! Lurnetta! Holla at yo’ boyz!”

Being only ten and hearing horror stories about South Florida, my first response was, “Go! Go! What y’all stopping for?” Louise and Lurnetta showed no fear. “Quit whining ole’ scary cat. Them our boyz” Louise informed.

“How y’all know dem?” I questioned.

“Just shush. We can’t take you nowhere,” Lurnetta fussed.

The pack of guys, which I later found out were the PC Boys, pulled up next to us and parked their bikes. Jean and I got off the handlebars and stood to the side of road while Louise and Lurnetta chattered with *our* friends. The next thing I know, Lurnetta runs across the street and knocks on the door. A girl comes out and walks up to the corner where we are all gathered. She starts talking to one of the guys. That’s when one of *our* friends yelled, “Lurnetta!” Of course I look too trying to figure out what was going. He waved a fifty dollar bill. That’s when it went down! Lurnetta ran up in the girls face and knocked her out! She gave her a left, then a right! Then, Louise jumped in! They were throwing punches so fast, I got scared! While Jean was yelling, “Y’all stop!” I took off running home. “Daddy! Daddy! They are fighting down there!” I screamed as I burst through the front door.

“Then what the hell you doing down here? If one of y’all fights, all of y’all fight. Now, get back down there with your sisters and tell them I said they better not have lost the fight or I’m whooping they asses.”

That was his reply and that is what he meant. That would be the first of many more fights during the next year and a half. Life was hard for us our first few years in Beach City, but we learned to become fighters. We constantly had to defend our Kentucky-Georgia accents and why we thought we were better than everyone. Actually, everyone must have thought us to be better than them based on their own presumptions because only we really knew what went on in our house. My mother taught us early in life, “What goes on in this house, stays in this house.” So, considering that we never showed signs of fatigue from late night family brawls, or we always went to school neatly dressed (which I haven’t figured that one out considering the number of times we were without electricity), or maybe it was because there was enough of us to shield onlookers from seeing us buying a piece of candy with a food stamp just to get change to buy toiletries, I can see how we may have put off a slightly uppity persona.

Now teaching in an era of “zero tolerance,” I am placed in a challenging dilemma as what my lived experiences socialized me to understand as neighborhood allegiances are named as gang affiliations today. “Over-processed” described a cultural experience that helps better understand why it is sometimes difficult for me as a Black educator to identify what I believe to be neighborhood affiliations as gang affiliations.

#### Breakage

“Girls I want you to lock yourselves in the room, jump out the window, and go to Bo’s house. I will be okay.”

Those were Mama's instructions that night in 1991, a little less than a year after our family re-union. Daddy had thrown her through the living room wall and beaten her terribly. Perhaps the guilt from us standing in the doorway crying, "Daddy stop, you're hurting her," was enough for him to take a break from beating Mama. Grabbing us in both arms, Mama ushered us into the first bedroom down the hallway.

"Girls, I'm okay, I just don't want him to jump on y'all," Mama whispered.

"Louise, get your sisters out the window and go to Bo's house. Tell him that Mike is jumping on me again."

"Mama, I don't want to leave you," I cried.

"Be a big girl. Mama will be okay," she comforted.

We did just what she ordered. Holding hands, scared of the thick darkness, we jumped out the window one-by-one and then ran up the dark alley. Half way up the alley, we heard a weak, faint voice, "Louise, Lournetta, Jean, Michel." Not knowing who the voice belonged to, we ran even faster.

"Girls wait, it's me, Mama."

"Y'all I think it Mama," I whispered.

Our pace came to screeching halt. We turned around and began running towards Mama who was jogging towards us holding her dislocated shoulder. Tears were streaming down her face and she was gasping for air. In between breathes, she managed to calm us, "Girls, I'm okay. I didn't mean to scare y'all."

My memory has not allowed me to recall anything else from that night. I am not sure if we ever made it to our cousin Bo's house or if we went back to our house. The one

thing that is clear in my memory is that my father never lived with us again after that night. I did not see him get arrested nor did I see him leave.

The tension that has existed between Black men and Black women throughout history was evidenced in *Breakage*. Love and trouble resonated here, but as stated by Collins (2000), “Black women’s troubles with Black men have generated anger and, from that anger, self-reflection” (p. 152): my observation of my father’s abuse towards my mother was a part of everyday life for me as a child, but as I progressed through Black womanhood, it fostered a spirit of determination in me. I believed up to the point of this inquiry that my mother endured the abuse of my father because of her love for him. Through validation checks, I learned from my mother that her tolerance of my father’s abuse resulted from her lack of education. When asked why she accepted the abuse for so many years, she responded, “Because I loved y’all. I didn’t think I could raise you girls without him” (L.J., personal communication, July 10, 2009).

### Entangled Times

My mother and father divorced. I received the news of their definite separation in an eerie way. I tried many times after that warm May afternoon in 1991 to erase the hurt and humiliation that lingered as I approached the house, but teaching in an urban school forced me to regurgitate that painful day...*the day I came home from school to find that my family had been evicted*. It was at that crucial moment in my life, that I realized the significance of education. That night, after my sister, my friends, and I carried our furniture and belongings across the street to our neighbor’s house, Lurnetta and I lay on our neighbor’s floor and pinky swore that our children would never experience being evicted. A few days later, our mother returned from her “work-related” trip with the news

that she was a newly wed. My mother had remarried, but only this time she married Buzz, a White man. Never before had I interacted with White people other than school officials, the rent man, and the police. In my neighborhoods, there were no Whites. They were commonly referred to as “honkies,” “hoogies,” and “crackers.” I had *known* since I was a little girl that White people did not like Black people, so *we* did not like them either. With no warning, my mother told me that I was not to say the word nigger any more and that I was not to refer to White people as honkies, hoogies, or crackers. She actually made me pay her a quarter every time I used one of *those* words: (I actually had money to pay her for Buzz gave me money for making good grades). As if marrying a White man and stripping me of my vocabulary was not enough, my mother did the ultimate; she moved me to “the other side of the railroad tracks.” Though it was not clear then the “double consciousness” of being Negro and an American that W.E.B. Dubois (1903) spoke of, was becoming a reality in my life as I was forced to move to the “other” side of the tracks. Uprooted from the only culture I had known, who I was to become was left unknown.

Now, no longer living within the district zone, I presumed that I would be transferring schools. At the beginning of my seventh grade year, Buzz and my mother drove me to school and met with the principal while I sat in the office (kids did not get in adult business). I did not have to be transferred. I spent the next three years (seventh grade through ninth grade) segregated from my Black peers. I was placed in honor classes. Around all White students eight hours a day, five days a week, I assimilated into the White culture. I used a vocabulary that was quite different from my Black peers. For example, I started my sentences with “like” or “its like” as in “It’s like so cool.” These

language patterns were not accepted by my Black peers. I was taunted for “acting White.” As expressed by Banks and Grambs (1972), family and education are the most influential institutions of socialization; therefore, as my family and education shifted, there should be no surprise that development of my identity would take a shift

### Baby Hair

A year had past since the divorce of my parents. A lot of things had changed in such a short period of time. For starters, my mother had remarried. We had moved to the other side of the tracks. Magic Johnson had announced to the world that he was HIV positive and that he would be retiring from the National Basketball Association immediately.

My sisters and I were all living under one roof together again. I wish I could say happily living under one roof, but I do not recall whether we were all happy, sad, or indifferent. What I do recall however, is that we were enjoying a new found wealth. We no longer waited until Mama brought an outfit home to us, usually from Kmart or The Seven Dollar Store. Rather we asked her to purchase us outfits from department stores like JC Pennys, Sears, and Montgomery Wards. Mama even had a credit card which meant she could buy us merchandise on a little plastic card without using her cash (I had no concept of what a credit card was at that time). To add to that, we no longer had to put clothes on layaway and wait 60 days to enjoy them. Nope, those days were over. Things were going so well with our Mama’s new husband (we did not embrace Buzz as our step-father early on) that Mama did not return back to work since being struck by lightening a year earlier. Gone were the days of no lights, no water, no telephone, no car, and no money.

After returning from a Spring Break trip to Charlotte, North Carolina, from our Granny Pat's (she was our mother's step-mother) house, our new found wealth was threatened.

It was a Monday afternoon. Buzz and Mama picked Jean and me up from the bus stop. Lurnetta did not go to school this particular day, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Driving us home, Buzz exclaimed, "Girls, I am going to take us home a different way. I want to show y'all a house that your Mama and I are thinking about buying."

He did not appear nervous or anything. He drove down a long paved path to a house that had a pier. We walked down the long pier, excited at the idea of living on the river. "Sit down girls. Enjoy the view," he added.

Before we could ask questions, Buzz said, "Girls, we are not buying this house. I brought you back here to tell you that your sister Lurnetta is pregnant and I am leaving. Your Mama doesn't want her grandson raised in the projects and I don't want to raise anymore babies." All I could manage to sob was, "If Magic Johnson can get AIDS and Lurnetta can have a baby, anything can happen." Sure enough, Buzz left that night and even stayed away for days, but eventually he returned, he and his money returned.

Weeks later we welcomed Pooh, the boy that my mother never had to the family. Lurnetta was a 14-years-old mother and I was a 12 years old aunt. Pooh had jet black curly baby hair and looked just like his Mimi, that's the name he grafted on me. He was instantly a family baby. Everyone did their share to care for him. During that period in my life, I recall my faith being restored back in my mother. I had resented her for allowing us to be evicted, moving us to the other side of the tracks, and for marrying a

White man, but standing up for my sister changed my feelings. I knew at that moment that my mother would abandon her new lifestyle to keep her grandson from experiencing the lifestyle we had been delivered from. I am not sure if I understood the huge sacrifice my mother was making at the time, but I certainly understood her stance on family.

As Pooh began to grow, so did the crime among Black juvenile males in Beach City. Auto theft was the crime of choice for juveniles. Our automobile was not exempt. Someone tried to steal our car three times.

### Super Gro

Just before the beginning of my tenth grade year, my mother brought the news that our family was moving from Beach City, Florida, to Cottondale, a rural town in South Georgia. I thought she had to be the stupidest parent in the world. Who would uproot their kids from the one place that they had established friendships besides an idiot? She claimed it was because of the crime in Beach City. Perhaps, it was considering that *we* were awakened to “Buzz! Buzz! Someone’s trying to steal our car” by my sister who would be up warming a bottle for my nephew on numerous occasions. After their last attempt which came weeks before Louise’s graduation, Buzz and Mama announced that we were leaving South Florida. They expressed that they were not going to raise a Black male in South Florida. Two months later, we were living in Cottondale, Georgia.

Despite living geographically in the south all of my life, it was until the year I moved to Cottondale that I realized that there was a difference between living in the south and living in the South. Cottondale was and still is the stereotypical southern city; the one that depicts the large plantations and clearly defined dividing lines between

Blacks and Whites. Just as William Falk (2004) explained in his description of “Black Belt” rural towns in South, Cottondale possessed these:

Nigra neighborhoods; town squares with casual workers waiting early in the morning for whatever work might be available for the day; old slow-moving men in coveralls...Nehi cola or RC Cola signs; women walking with umbrellas opened like parasols against the sun; children riding bicycles along the road or shooting baskets at a make shift basketball goal; wooden houses along the road with up-ended tires buried in the yards to hold flowers...trucks hauling trees to a mill; vegetable stands; melons and other fruits for sale alongside the road...trailers that look like anything but “mobile” homes...unusable trucks, cars, and similar refuse in yards and alongside houses; a hot dusty feeling in summer, a cool sometimes rigid feel in winter accompanied by the expectancy that winter won’t last long; red mud on roads during rainy times; dead animals on and alongside the highways; mangy-looking dogs in yards; and everywhere, winding in, among, and through everything near the road, mile after mile of kudzu vines. (pp.13-14)

This description of Black Belt rural cities, proved to be so close to accurate that when I attempted to validate its accuracy by reading Falk’s quote (substituting Cottondale for Black Belt) to Potee and Mr. Williams, both natives of Cottondale, they commended me on the description of Cottondale.

Race as in most Southern cities, echoed loudly as my mother enrolled me into school. The first question asked by the counselor was which track, college track or vocational track would I be completing? Unaware at that time, that what I really was being asked was whether I would enroll in the education supported by Booker T.

Washington (1901) or the education supported by W.E.B. DuBois (1903), I chose the latter. Before coming to Cottdale, the only question surrounding the “type” of education I would receive was would I be enrolling in honors, international baccalaureate (IB), or advanced placement, (AP)? In all of the classes that I had been enrolled the previous three years, the only option was to go to college.

The first day of school in Cottdale brought a cultural surprise. As Lournetta, Jean and I approached the front doors of the school, the clear racial divide could not be ignored. The White students were all gathered on one side of the school while the Blacks were all gathered on the other side. No longer accustomed to “hanging out” with Blacks, my sisters and I stood on the “White side,” but we did not mingle with them. Sitting in my first class proved even further that I was no longer in the south, but rather that I was in the South. Mr. Williams, my business teacher, knew everyone in the classroom with the exception of me. When he got to my name he paused and then looked at me saying, “Ms. Mitchell, you are not from here. Where are you from and please introduce yourself?” Before I could even think about asking how he knew that I was not from there, I was reminded (by myself that is) that I did not want to be from there either. I quickly responded to Mr. Williams (and the class) that I was from Beach City, Florida. He then asked how did I get to Cottdale and did I live in the green and white house? After explaining how I arrived there and confirming that I indeed lived in the green and white house, Mr. Williams remarked, “Something is different about you” (personal communication, August 1995). I am not sure if Mr. Williams was familiar with Geneva Gay’s (2000) concept of “culturally relevant teaching,” but he demonstrated his

understanding of the belief that “caring is action-provoking” (p. 48.) His persistent inquiry about me demonstrated that he, in the words of Gay (2000), understood that:

The students feel a need to have a personal connection with teachers. This happens when teachers acknowledge their presence, honor their intellect, respect them as human beings, and make them feel like they are important. In other words, they empower students by legitimizing their “voice” and visibility. (p. 49)

The caring exhibited by Mr. Williams was not unique to him. It was exhibited by all of the Black teachers at Cottondale High School (CHS). The school and community closely resembled the cultural community as described by Siddle-Walker (1996). They shared “common religious beliefs, common ways of acceptable communicative patterns, and common beliefs about the appropriate relationship of young people to adults” (p. 213). Just as bell hooks (2003) reflected in *Teaching Community*, “The ethics and values we were taught in our schools mirrored those taught in our home and church. In our schools we were taught the value and importance of self-love,” (p. 83), so was true of Cottondale High School.

### Brush Fire

After an unsuccessful attempt to runaway (even though my mother knew who was picking me up and where I was going), watching the renovations on the house occur, arguing with Mama and Buzz daily about any and everything, and falling in love for the first time, I accepted that Cottondale was where I would be for the next three years. This particular night I slept downstairs because I had been having severe nose bleeds in the middle of the night (we only had air conditioning downstairs at the time). I was awakened in the middle of the night by a persistent cough. Sleep-walking, I got up to get water, but

I was greeted by Black smoke. Now, fully awake, I remembered what I was taught in elementary school, stop, drop, and roll; only I did not know how close the fire was to the smoke. In a panic, I opened the side door and there I stood like a deer caught in headlights. Still till this day, I am not sure how long I stood frozen as I watched the back of our house engulfed in flames. Eventually I ran to the front door. I banged on the door and threw rocks at my parent's upstairs bedroom window. Everyone escaped the fire without any injuries, but the fire was only the antecedent to the lesson that I would learn that year... Though Cottondale's city limits were only home to approximately 4,000 residents and my burning house was less than a mile from fire station, it took thirty minutes for the fire fighters to arrive. By the time they arrived, Buzz had already extinguished the fire. Seeing that the fire was already out, the fire fighters insisted on using their fire hose on the house. After minutes of explaining that the fire was out and that they were going to cause severe water damage, Buzz became irate and ordered them off of his property. The next day, Mr. Richard, the man who owned the business next door to my house, came over to ask what happened. My mother, aware of my presence in the conversation, responded, "Which one of your good ole' boys did this?" It was clear who my mother was referring to, The Ku Klux Klan. He never responded. After a week of investigation, the fire was ruled a combustible fire, in the mean time, while the fire was being investigated, Mr. Richard did not come to his office or around our house. It had to be true those men in the White sheets really did exist. Racism was alive and well.

The fire ignited the conversations about race and place (particularly about the South) among my family. Buzz had a favorite saying. He would always say, "Girls, you better get an education because it is always going to be a White man's world." Even

though my biological parents instilled this in me during my early years, I would cringe every time Buzz made that remark to my sisters and me. Lurnetta and I would lie in bed at night and discuss how he was trying to be a racist on the sly. Unfortunately, I never asked Buzz to elaborate or explain what he meant. Now, six years since his death, my faith allows me to believe that he hears my apology for my accusations of him being a racist. I now understand that he was simply ensuring that my sisters and I were equipped to compete in a society built on the principles of White supremacy and supposedly Black inferiority.

#### Unbeweaveable

“What do you mean she’s too smart to be a Black girl?” asked my mother as Officer Thompson, the school resource officer, stood between her and Mrs. Stewart, my English teacher.

Trying to explain her racist comments, Mrs. Stewart stammered “No, ma’am, it’s all a big misunderstanding. I was trying to tell her...”

“Tell her what, Black kids aren’t suppose to be smart,” my mother interrupted.

Before she could reply to my mother, there was a bang at the door. Though we could not see Buzz, my step-dad, we could certainly hear him. Speaking to the unopened door, in an angry voice, he grumbled “I am here to meet about my daughter!”

Simultaneously, we could hear the school secretary saying, “Sir, you need to get a visitor’s pass and wait in the office.”

We could hear Buzz, still in the hallway, facing an unopened door, “Did that Bitch wait in the office when she made that racist remark to my daughter?”

The resource officer picked up his walkie-talkie and requested another officer to arrive at the school. “We have an unruly parent,” he echoed into the walkie-talkie.

I sat in the corner looking straight at Mrs. Stewart. I could not wait to tell my friends how scared she was looking. As the voice in the walkie-talkie informed that officers were enroute, Mr. Alderman, the principal, stood behind Officer Thompson as he opened the door. Speaking for the first time since the meeting began, he arrogantly uttered, “Sir, you are in the wrong meeting.”

“No, that’s Michel’s father,” my mother interrupted.

In what I felt was embarrassment and uncertainty, Mr. Alderman attempted to regain control of the meeting. “Everyone let’s just all calm down. I know we all have a lot of emotions running. We are all here to do what is best for Michel,” he urged.

Hot-tempered, refusing to calm down, Buzz yelled, “No, we are here to see what you are going to do about this Bitch making this racist remark to my daughter!”

“Sir, you can not talk to my teachers like that,” chimed Mr. Alderman.

My mother was use to Buzz’s profanity. She calmed him down and then asked me to wait in the hall. I am not sure what was said in the meeting after I left, but from that day forward, Mrs. Stewart said very little to me my remaining days in her class; and whenever my parents came to the school, they were greeted and escorted by the Mr. Alderman and Officer Thompson.

#### Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow

It was the last week of school during my junior year of high school. I came home from school to find Buzz sitting in his recliner with puffy red eyes. “What happened?” I asked. Before giving a response, Buzz broke down crying. The tears were uncontrollable.

I began crying just at the sight of his tears. I had no clue what had sparked the tears, but I knew it had to be bad. My mother entered the living room with the same puffy red eyes as Buzz. She sat in her recliner. I stood in the middle of the floor asking the question again, “What happened?”

The family curse never crossed my mind. My mother was too young. Only thirty-seven, there was no way it could have stuck her too. All of the uncertainty was washed away as Buzz spoke the words... “Your mom has breast cancer.”

Treatments of chemotherapy and radiation began to take its toll. My mother would go to her beautician before each treatment as a treat to herself. One Saturday while waiting on her to return, the telephone rang. “I got it,” yelled Buzz! Moments later Buzz entered the den with his keys in his hand. He said, “Michel, I’ll be right back. I’m going to pick up your mama. I just want to warn you, she doesn’t have any hair.”

How could that be? When she left she had hair. Those were my thoughts, but because everyone in the house was so emotional, I didn’t bother to question him. My mom came home with a tiny afro. She later told me that when her beautician was washing her hair, it began falling out.

Eventually all of her hair fell out. She had a bald head, but she was alive. I am not sure if it was her will to live or the fact that she would graduate her last two daughters that year, but my mother took those treatments and refused to become one of the 43,000 women predicted to die from breast cancer that year. (Mitchell, 1998, p. 55).

#### Root Stimulator

By my senior year of high school, I had adjusted to life in Cottondale and all its Southern traditions. I had learned that school, community, and church were

interdependent. The Black teachers at Cottondale High School were often the links between school, church, and the community. They lived in the community and were mostly educated in segregated schools. Black teachers understood the importance of transmitting values.

Ms. Brown was my first African American English teacher. She exposed me to Black literature. During my senior year, in her class, I learned of authors such as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and August Wilson. We read *Beloved*; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Fences*. Ms. Brown further assigned passages from the *Bible*. Once we were assigned to read *The Book of Job*. She then assigned a thematic paper entitled *Suffering Builds Character*.

Ms. Brown's link to the community and church was clear when she extended an invitation to me to serve as the guest speaker for her church's Youth Sunday program.

Nervous, but prepared, I approached the podium and delivered my speech.  
Good Morning.

To the pastor (in his absence); members of the Beulah Church family; and to all my family, friends, and youth gathered here today; it is an honor and privilege to speak to you today.

The youth today are confronted with many opportunities today and with these opportunities comes responsibility.

Personal responsibility is taking account for the choices or decisions we make. Personal responsibility is something that we must have now, more than ever. If we do not have personal responsibility, we will not make it to tomorrow. To me, personal

responsibility is deciding what is right and what is wrong. It is making a choice and accepting the consequences.

Today, teenagers face various pressures such as pressures to have sex, do drugs, or simply “fit in.” However, we must make a choice. Are we going to please our friends or are we going to please the Lord? We will have to make choices like these for the rest of our lives. We must take personal responsibility, we can not say or do things because our mother, father, siblings, or peers do them, because when Judgment Day comes, God is not going to ask what mama did, or what daddy did, or what anyone else did. He is going to examine us individually. God does not expect us to be perfect. He knows that we are going to make mistakes or bad choices. But when we make that mistake or bad choice, He has given us the opportunity to ask for his forgiveness.

If we use the Ten Commandments as guidelines, having personal responsibility will not be such a difficult task. There is no country in the world that has so many laws as the United States. They cover every subject on earth, extend in every direction, and overlap each other. But practically each one of them is founded on the Ten Commandments, those marvelous laws which were given to which were given to Moses on Mount Sinai so many centuries. The entire superstructure of our laws is founded on the first commandment: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. We make this manifest when we engrave upon our coins the words “In God We Trust.” Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: We should never swear or use vulgar language with reference to the name of God. We have no law covering the second commandment. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy-Most states provide that a contract made on the first day of the week is not binding. Sunday is a day of rest. In observance of this

commandment, many cities prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages on Sunday. We may not keep this day as holy as we should, but the law had done what it can to turn our minds in the right direction. Honor thy father and mother-All the laws governing minors and their property are developed from this commandment. We do not have to always agree with what they tell us, but we do have to respect them and their opinions. It is important for us to remember that parenting does not come with a manual. Upon the fifth commandment, Thou shalt not kill, are built all of our familiar laws regarding murder, homicide, and injury to persons. Referring to the Jonesboro, Arkansas killings, it is a sad day when kids are killing kids. This goes back to personal responsibility. All of our marriage and divorce laws are founded upon the sixth commandment, Thou shalt not commit adultery. The seventh commandment, Thy shalt not steal, can refer to stealing a persons will, attention, hope, talents, or belongings. Thou shalt not bear false witness-One of our most important laws is the requirement of an oath upon giving testimony. When we lie, we are violating one of God's commandments. The Lord appears to have laid great stress on stealing because He has further said, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's spouse." Coveting is stealing with the mind. The law can not forbid a man's thoughts, but it can punish at the first outward show. We should not sit around and wish for things that we do not have, we should be content with what the Lord has blessed us with. Last, but not least, Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods. This is stealing, physically taking something that does not belong to us. If we conscientiously strive to obey these ten laws in all of their phases, we will need never to fear that the hand of justice will bring us account for any act.

I would also like to leave you with a reflective poem by an Unknown author.

## The Man in the Glass

When you get what you want in your struggle for self  
And the world makes you king for a day,  
Just go to the mirror and look at yourself  
And see what that man has to say.

For it isn't your father or mother or wife  
Whose judgment upon you must pass.  
The fellow whose verdict counts most in you life  
Is the one staring back from the glass.

Some people might think you're a straight-shootin' chum  
And call you a wonderful guy.  
But the man in the glass says you're only a bum  
If you can't look him straight in the eye.

He's the fellow to please-never mind all the rest,  
For he's with you clear to the end.  
And you've passed your most dangerous test  
If the man in the glass is your friend.

You may fool the whole world down the pathway of years  
And get pats on the back as you pass.  
But your final reward will be heartache and tears  
If you've cheated the man in the glass.

In closing, I would like to leave a final thought with you. The choices that we make today will affect the outcome of tomorrow. So I challenge you all to take personal responsibility in your lives (Mitchell, 1998, p. 16a).

## Shear Intensity

My mom's cancer was in remission. Her hair was beginning to sprout again. She had a salt-n-pepper baby afro. Mama pledged to be at my graduation to escort me onto the field. This had been a long time tradition in Cottondale. Parents of honor graduates would walk his/her graduate on to the field (all graduations were held on the football field) and then place the honor cords around the honor graduate's neck. My mother anticipated the June 13<sup>th</sup> night. She reminded me on numerous occasions, "Baby, if I have

to roll out on the field in a wheel chair, with an oxygen tank and a bald head; I will be at your graduation to place your honor cords around your neck.” I believed her too.

Two weeks before graduation, during a senior meeting, we, the honor graduates were informed by school officials that our parents would not be allowed to escort us onto the field nor would we be arranged in the graduation line by class rank, but rather we would be arranged alphabetically. I do not recall displaying any discontent towards school officials. This was one of those rare moments that I remained silent. I am sure that I recognized this was an adult battle and my mother taught me years before then that children did not fight adult battles.

During lunch, several of the Black honor graduates gathered around one lunch table. We speculated on the rationale behind the sudden change. We agreed that the change was because this was the first year in a while that both the valedictorian and the salutatorian were Black. We also concluded that this was also the first time that the number of Black honor graduates out numbered the number of White honor graduates.

I excused myself from the heated conversation. Now this was before cellular phones became common goods...so I went to the lunchroom lobby and placed a collect call to my house which was less than one mile from the school.

“Michel what’s wrong?”

“Mama, they are tripping. They just told us that our parents will not be allowed to escort us on the field during graduation.”

“What? We’ll see about that. Don’t worry baby. That’s some bullshit. Just get everybody’s number and I will call everybody’s parents tonight.”

“Yes, M’am.”

“Don’t let them upset you. I’ll talk to you when you get home.”

I hung up the telephone and joined everyone back in the lunchroom. I knew that if my mother said she would handle something, she would. I did not need to get everyone’s telephone numbers because I already had them so I just informed everyone that my mother would be contacting their parents that night.

And my mother did. She called six parents, including a BOE member. I remember hearing frustration in her voice as she told Buzz, “These are the scariest Black people I have ever known.”

Buzz responded, “They are not scary. This is just the South.”

“That’s my point. It’s all about tradition here. These Black folks are so scared to go against White folks because tradition done taught them to stay in their place. I fought for my life this year and I promised Michel that come hell or high water, I would walk her out on that field and that’s what I intend to do. The tradition has been that they were lined up according to class rank and the parents escorted them on to the field, and that’s what they are going to do this year,” Mama spewed.

Buzz managed to squeeze in “You know how these Crackers are in the South.”

I did not interject. I learned a long time ago never to get in my mother’s path when she was on a rampage. I doubt if she realized that she was teaching me a valuable life lesson or if I realized what I was learning at that moment, but reflecting back, that moment taught me the importance of persistence, protocol, and policy.

My mother was able to get an emergency Board meeting scheduled days before graduation. She was able to convince several parents to attend the meeting. Some of the parents attended, but told my mother in the “meeting before the meeting,” that they

would not be able to speak because of their positions with the Board and the City of Cottondale.

Mama was cool with that. She just wanted a large parent turnout to send a message. It did.

Drawing on emotion and tradition, Mama stepped to the podium.

“Good evening Superintendent and Board members. I am here on behalf of my daughter and the other honor graduates. Thank you for allowing me to have this meeting since you all did not have the common courtesy to inform me of the meeting that impacted me and my kid’s life. According to the School Board Policy Manual, no changes can be made unless faculty, parents, and students were notified of the meeting of change. Upon coming to Cottondale and experiencing graduation, I thought it was the most beautiful thing that the school gave back to the parents at graduation, allowing them to do this Cottondale tradition. This may not have anything to do with this meeting, but I have spent the last year fighting for my life and I promised my daughter that I would walk, crutch, wheelchair, stretcher or ambulance her onto the field. I would participate in this Cottondale tradition. I apologize for the emotion, but how dare you take something that I have fought for my life to be a part of from me...sigh...These changes were made without proper protocol. If the changes can’t be undone today because of the policy, then the previous Board meeting is void and null because you all did not follow Board policy and protocol. We were not notified.”

Intensity and emotion filled the room. One Board member interrupted, “The decision has already been made.” Murmuring began in the crowd while whispering began among the BOE members.

“A lot of parents have something to lose coming to this meeting, but I have nothing to lose but a promise that I made to myself and my daughter,” Mama added.

The superintendent spoke in an irritated voice, “Okay, we are going to do it this one last time. Y’all are going to get what y’all want, but this is the last year.”

“Thank you, I’ll see you at graduation and the next meeting,” concluded Mama.

### Nappy Roots Untangled

*Nappy Roots*, has highlighted my childhood experiences as a Black American. I have realized that like my hair, my culture and my identity are fluid. They are forever changing and with one alteration, even if it is something (like a perm) that appears to eliminate a burden, its impact can bring on new burdens. I found that shifts in my family structure as well as geographical locations created new cultures and new identities. I learned to adjust and adapt my culture and my identity as each shift required me to do so. Like He (2003) asserted, “When we live our everyday stories in our own culture, we generally pass through this development without any reflection or understanding” (p. 75); I was oblivious to the culture and identities that I was bartering. The immaculate braids and plaits as well as the tangle-free hair that I onlookers marveled at, enigmatically neglected to acknowledge the identity and culture that were trapped beneath the naps and tangles-at the roots.

In the words of Woodson (1933), “The conditions of today have been determined by what has taken place in the past” (p. 9); hence, I have begun to unravel the complexities of my identity by examining the cultures that influenced its development. Reading my stories critically, I learned that I was being acculturated and developing an identity in the midst of classism, racism, and sexism. As my stories tell, classism was

never spoken, but it was certainly lived. Viewing my life with a critical gaze revealed that family and spirituality were at the core of my culture as they were essential for survival in America's Black poor or working-class families. Did I know we were poor? No. But, with a critical gaze, it became clear that my family shared resources and borrowed optimism from our spirituality. When our social class changed, so did our values. We were no longer reliant on family and spirituality for survival; however, the foundation had already taken root. Traits of resiliency, spirituality and family had already become normalized in my Black eyes. No matter the circumstance, my mother would somehow always untangle the kinks of life. She was subtly fostering a spirit of unshakability. In the midst of writing and conducting a sort of "grassroots ethnography" as termed by cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson (2003), I found that entangled in my childhood years were experiences that fostered a dependency on family and spirituality. I also found that at the core of my identity were the development of myths (unshakability and inferiority) about Black women; ones that will later be dispelled as my critical consciousness develops. *Nappy Roots* revealed that my identity was shaped tremendously during my childhood years while living under my parents/family jurisdictions.

## CHAPTER 2

### SPLIT ENDS: STRAND ONE

Split ends are like Black rage, they cannot be ignored and they cannot be ignited. There is a myth in the consumer market that split-ends can be repaired, but it's just that, a marketing strategy myth. Trimming away split-ends to allow the hair to grow under more favorable conditions is the most commonly used remedy for repairing split-ends. For Black women, our thin fragile hair is prone to splitting as we braid, apply heat, relaxers, and dyes. For me, I have always remedied my split ends by trimming the ends of my hair and applying a deep conditioner. The conditioner restores the shine and provides nutrients to my roots, allowing my hair to grow. If not treated properly, split ends can damage hair at the roots resulting in baldness. So it is true in life.

Defining myself on my own terms was my internal motivation as I left my parents' jurisdiction. I did not want to be the woman who had to accept abuse especially not because of lack of education. I did not want to return to my poverty-stricken past, so I set out in pursuit of liberation through literacy. At this stage of my life development, I had not yet realized as noted by Collins (2000) that, "Self [was] not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from other" (p. 113); therefore, I left home in what I presumed to be my journey towards self-definition.

In this chapter I explore my undergraduate experiences with a particular focus on the cultural behaviors, perceptions, and traditions that lingered from my childhood upbringings. I focus on developing and understanding of the relationship between my childhood identity and the identity I develop as a young adult. As psychologist Rolf E. Muuss (1996) pointed out, "The search for identity involves the establishment of

meaningful self-concept in which past, present, and future are brought together to form a unified whole” (p. 51); therefore, I search to develop an understanding of how my childhood experiences influence the development of my identity as a young adult. Looking at my undergraduate years without reflecting on my childhood experiences is like refusing to acknowledge the fact that split ends are no more than one hair cuticle that has split into two, but still retains its original root.

I continue using autobiographical narrative inquiry to explore my experiences to develop an understanding of the influence of the phenomena of race, place, and culture on the development of my identity. This work uses the elements of fiction, nonfiction, and academic writing to explore the experiences that socialized me into being. The names and settings have been altered, but the authenticity of the events has not been compromised. An autobiographical narrative inquiry into my undergraduate experiences is used to explore the relationship between who my parents heavily socialized me to be and who I define myself to be during my undergraduate years.

This chapter begins with “Cut Loose,” my eighteenth birthday and first day on my journey towards liberation through literacy. In “Parted,” I am left broken hearted and forced to become self-reliant. On my journey to become self-defined through my own career in teaching, I witness a “Hair-Raising” episode in a public school that causes me to question teaching as a career. My struggle to become self-defined is met with family turmoil which nearly forces me to quit college. This experience is narrated in “It’s a Wrap.” In “Roots” I recount as noted by Collins (2000) “how othermother traditions work” (p. 179). On my journey towards self-definition, I get side-tracked as I search for family in the wrong place. “Wrapped Up” depicts the events that nearly halted my

journey towards self-definition. A tension between my voice and the voice my parents socialized is evidenced in “Twisted” as I ostracize my lesbian sister. My journey towards self-definition in this chapter concludes with “Pressed,” a narrative that shows the difficulty in separating myself from my family in young adulthood.

### Cut Loose

Empty nest syndrome awaited my mother. All four of her daughters would be enrolled in college despite her lack of education. Nineteen ninety-eight would be the year that my mother would experience this syndrome and I would be cut loose. Cut loose from her influence. Cut loose into a world without the protection of my parents. The time had finally arrived for their years of parenting to be put to the test. I was cut loose to begin my journey towards self-definition. With an education, I could name my own and escape the snares of domestic abuse and poverty. Journey began with my quest for education; liberation through literacy. Off to Georgia Southern University I went.

“When I say EAGLE, everyone needs to arrange themselves by birth months. The catch is no one can talk. This is a nonverbal communication activity. Once you find your birth month group, you need to get in sequential order by your birth date. The August group needs to get in order from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup> then from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup>. This should be done in five minutes or less.”

At the sound of EAGLE, hundreds of us scuffled across the floor of the newly constructed RAC. Some were holding up numbers while others made figures in the air. I scuffled away from classmates whom had made the voyage with me from Cottdale to Georgia Southern University. I held up eight fingers looking for a taker. At last, a White boy motioned me over. I then held up my index finger on my left hand and all five

fingers on my right hand. Everyone smiled as they realized it was birthday. I stood facing Gus, the Eagle Entertainment facilitator. He began counting down, “5-4-3-2-1.”

Gus asked, “Where’s the August group?” We all waved. Looking at me he questioned, “When is your birthday?”

I held up my index finger on my left hand and all five fingers on my right hand.

“Come on up! Y’all, we have a birthday today,” he commented.

As I walked across the RAC, I could not believe I was going on a stage in front of hundreds of strangers. Embarrassed, yet proud, I reached the stage.

“We are going to sing Happy Birthday to...” He paused, covered the microphone, and leaned his ear towards me. I whispered, “Michel.”

“You mean Michael as in Jackson,” he chuckled.

“No, I mean Michel as in Mitchell.”

He snickered and then asked, “Where are you from, Michel as in Mitchell?”

“Cottdale,” I replied.

Speaking back into the microphone, he announced, “Eagles, today is Michel’s from Cottdale, Georgia, 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Let’s sing Happy Birthday to her. When I point to your side of the room sing HA-PPY-BIRTH-DAY-HAPPY-BIR-THDAY-HA-HA-HA-PPY-PPY-BIR-HA-PPY-BIRHTDAY. It echoed all over the RAC. I shyly stood blushing as the freshmen class of 1998 sang me Happy Birthday.

My mother could not make the trip to Georgia Southern. She was busy settling Jean at Middle Georgia College. Lurnetta had driven me to GSU and it would be hours before she would make it back to Cottdale. Cellular phones were becoming popular,

but neither Lournetta nor I had yet acquired one, so I would have to wait to tell her about my Happy Birthday.

### Parted

I was so in love with him. I mean can't eat, can't sleep, shoot for the stars in love with him. He taught me how to drive. He took me out on my first date. He brought me my first diamond (bracelet that is). He showed me how a man was to treat a lady. He loved me and I loved him. Potee was my first love. I met him when I moved to Cottdale, Georgia. It was a sort of city girl meets country guy romance. I was fifteen and in love. We dated throughout high school, but he was one grade ahead of me. Potee enrolled in Savannah State University (SSU) with plans of me joining him the next year. That never happened. By the time I graduated high school, we had parted ways. Rather than SSU, I was enrolled at Georgia Southern University (GSU) having the time of my life. Somehow we managed to find our way back to each other's heart by the conclusion of my first year of college. He pleaded with me to join him in the Low Country and I did. I parted with my friends and the university that I had grown to love.

I arrived in Low Country on July 31, by October of the same year, Potee and I had parted ways. Barely nineteen years old, my relationship was over, but my educational experiences were just on the brink of beginning. It was not time to truly become self-reliant and independent. I was left in a city with no family or friends; my journey had to continue. At that point in my life, I became extremely determined to not only prove to myself and family, but also to prove to Potee that I could do anything I set my mind to. I could triumph over any obstacle.

## Hair-Raising

Perhaps it was the tension that U. S. citizens felt. We had just been attacked and were vulnerable. The attacks on the Twin Towers proved that one of the richest nations in the world was vulnerable. If the U. S. as a nation was not exempt from attack, then neither were teachers in individual schools.

Not being from the Low Country, I was unaware of identified “good schools” and “bad schools.” Each time I received my practicum assignment, my colleagues would encourage me to get it changed. They assured me that I did not want to go to Eastside Academy, Westside Academy, nor Coastal Academy. I took their advice semester after semester, but I eventually reached the semester in which I was informed that I had to complete my practicum in an urban school. I was assigned to Coastal Academy. I arranged a meeting with my mentoring teacher, Ms. Chisholm.

Ms. Chisholm was in her last year of teaching. She was a seasoned African American woman. Her body frame was large. Whether the students were afraid of her or not, I cannot say, but I can say is that she maintained control of her 8<sup>th</sup> grade math class. I sat in the back of classroom and journalized for ninety hours that spring semester.

The urban school was not as bad as my colleagues had implied...so I thought. Sitting in the back of Ms. Chisholm’s classroom one afternoon, the craziest thing occurred. Ms. Chisholm was teaching a lesson on measurement. I heard a harsh voice command, “Ms. Chisholm, in the hall now!” Ms. Chisholm kept teaching. The voice grew closer and harsher as it demanded Ms. Chisholm to the hallway a second and third time. Before she could finish her explanation to the class, the face of the person with the harsh voice stood in the door of the classroom. The lady was larger in weight and height

than Ms. Chisholm who was a pretty large woman. The lady's size coupled with her voice made her masculine in appearance. Less than six feet from Ms. Chisholm and in front of an audience of Ms. Chisholm's students, the lady blared into a mega phone, "Didn't you hear me calling you?" Before Ms. Chisholm could respond the lady, which I later discerned was the principal, blared into the mega phone, "Where are your grades Ms. Chisholm?" Looking humiliated, Ms. Chisholm began to offer, "I am going to do them after school." She was interrupted, "You don't wait to the last minute. I want my grades submitted early. I want them on your planning period." Ms. Chisholm nodded while I, along with the students sat frozen. I could not believe that a principal was allowed to speak to a teacher in that tone. The principal's actions were downright hair-raising to my pre-service ears. Her actions challenged me to question my desires to be an educator. I had not anticipated the reality of Black on Black oppression despite warning from prophetic scholars in the likes of W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson. Woodson (1933) declared:

The Negroes thus placed in charge would be the products of the same system and would show not more conception of the task at hand than do whites who have educated them and shaped their minds as they would have them function (p. 23).

I just assumed that Black principals would be the uplift of the community and would support Black educator, not assert their power oppressively.

#### It's a Wrap

After getting a taste of urban practicum, I was ready and anxious to finish school. A year of coursework stood between me and my first teaching job. My grades were just under the 2.5 G.P.A. requirement and family problems were keeping me from focusing.

At that time, I assumed that Buzz was going through the stages of Alzheimer's and was evolving into a bitter old man. Whenever I called home, I had to listen to his smart remarks like, "I don't know where your mammy is and I really don't give a damn." Cottondale only had 10,000 residents in the entire county, so it did not take long before my high school friends were calling me concerned about my parents. It was through them and my sister Lurnetta that I learned that Mama and Buzz were having verbal and physical disputes daily. According to my informants, the disputes escalated beyond the confines of the four walls of the house. The disputes worsened to the extent that law enforcement had to be dispatched to the house on several occasions.

Embarrassment wed with a spirit of "saving grace" encouraged me to consider quitting school to go home to be the glue that bonded the family back together. My G.P.A. suffered from the stress and my inability to handle the stress. It dropped to a 2.0 placing me on academic probation. I packed all of my clothes and was prepared to call it quits the moment my lease ended but...I came to my senses! They had the chance to be 21. I asked myself the question, "Why should I give up my life because they want to be stupid?"

I made the decision to continue on my journey to becoming self-defined. I did not quit school. I did not return to Cottondale. I did not ever find out what caused the rift between Buzz and Mama. I have my own suspicions...

### Roots

The next semester I focused more than I had in the past. Like Collins stated (2000), "No matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self" (p. 119). I could not risk going on academic suspension or losing

my financial aid. Where would I go? What would I do? My financial aid was my livelihood. My parents no longer had the financial means to back me if I lost my financial aid. As a matter of fact, they were no longer in the position to help me financially anymore at all. I soon felt the effects of not receiving my monthly fifty to one-hundred dollars from them. During the fall semester, I had to complete 150 hours of practicum meaning I had to restrict my work schedule to weekends only. This cut my paycheck tremendously. I did not have enough money to pay my bills. One month I was so short on my half of the bills (I had a roommate), I had to do something desperate...I went to a stranger...a professor in the College of Education. She was not my professor. I had never even met her before the day I walked in her office desperately seeking assistance. My memory of how I knew to go to her escapes me. What I do recall is arriving at her office full of humility and shame.

“Dr. Dandy, My name is Michel Mitchell. I am in the Middle Grades program. I just purchased my books, and now my lights are going to be disconnected today if I do not pay sixty dollars.”

“Well Michel, I am in the process of purchasing a home. I do not have any extra money. If I did, I would give it to you...”

She was interrupted by a knock on the door. A man opened the door and informed her that he was a textbook representative. He stated that he was offering cash for textbooks. The man then named some books that he was looking for specifically. Dr. Dandy pulled the books off of the shelf and was handed an undisclosed (to me) amount of money. She turned to me and asked, “How much money did you need?”

“Sixty dollars.”

Tears trickled from both of our eyes as she opened her hand and counted the money to me. It was exactly sixty dollars. We hugged, and cried, and revered Christ for what felt like hours. When the tears ceased, she pulled from me and looked me eye-to-eye and said these words, “Michel, don’t you ever forget where you came from. Always give Christ honor and glory. Make sure you reach back and help someone else along this journey.”

“Yes M’am.”

“I expect great things from you in the future,” she added as I left her office.

One day. One person. My life was touched. My determination to give back to the community by teaching in the urban was heightened. I was determined to be an urban teacher who never forgot where she came from.

### Wrapped Up

I did not know how to step nor organized dance, so it was clear that those were not the reasons why I joined a sorority. No one in my family was a part of a sorority, so that neither was the reason. When I arrived at Georgia Southern University, the only sorority I had ever heard of was Alpha Kappa Alpha. Several teachers at my high school were members of Alpha Kappa Alpha and they awarded me an academic excellence award. Quite naturally, when I arrived on campus, I looked for members of that sorority. I found them at an on-campus party. They did not speak to me nor did they socialize with nonmembers. But at the same party, there was a group of males and females who wore the same color. At that time, I was unable to read Greek letters, but I later learned that they were a sister/brother sorority and fraternity. They were friendly and welcoming. One of the guys, Kaudafe, invited me and my friends to the after party at his house. We took

him up on his offer. When we arrived, we were embraced by both the males and females. They encouraged us to have fun in college, but to stay focused.

On later visits that year, Kaudafe educated us on the founding principles (finer womanhood, sisterhood, scholarship, and service) of his sorority sisters and then introduced us to more of his sorority sisters. Our minds were not completely made up at that time and besides, we had not earned enough credits to join any sororities then.

Potee, my boyfriend at that time, had joined the same fraternity as Kaudafe by the time I transferred to Armstrong Atlantic State University. Upon my arrival, I found that the bond between the brothers and sisters was just as tight as the bond between the sisters and brothers at Georgia Southern University. Some would argue that I joined the sorority because of my boyfriend, but that was not so.

When my time came to join a sorority, I chose Zeta Phi Beta because I had the opportunity to see its members actually fulfilling its founding principles. The sisters exemplified sisterhood by supporting their brothers of Phi Beta Sigma in everything that they did. The ladies of Zeta Phi Beta participated in community service especially in the local schools. I was quite impressed with their commitment to the founding principles. Zeta Phi Beta Sigma became my family. They filled the missing void in my life each holiday and weekend. They, my sorority sisters and fraternity brothers, gave me an escape; an escape from the chaos that was tearing my family apart. My life became consumed with blue and white (those are our colors). I was so wrapped up in the lifestyle that nothing else mattered. The focus that I finally acquired during the previous semester was gone by the end of the next semester. No one knew (until now) that I neglected the scholarship principle. I earned a 1.0 G.P.A. by the end of the spring semester. I do not

think anyone ever suspected anything with my grades because I was always helping other people write papers for their classes, but I did lose focus.

### Twisted

One Saturday, while hanging out at what became known as the frat house, I got a telephone call. It was Louise. She asked, “Michel, what are you doing?”

“Just chilling.”

“I need to tell you something.”

I went outside searching for some privacy. Nothing could have prepared me for the news she was about to render.

“Michel, I am tired of lying and hiding. I am telling you first because I know that you will understand.”

“What’s wrong?” I was thinking she’s had an illness or something. Not...

“Michel, I am a gay. I am a lesbian.”

“Girl, quit lying. That’s nasty. You are nasty. I am not talking to you anymore. You are too disgusting.” Then I hung up the telephone. I was stunned. It was one of those not my family, not my sister situations. I would not talk to my sister again for months. It was clear why I responded that way. My parents and grandmother socialized me to believe that gay was one of the deadly sins. I had never read it in the Bible that being a lesbian was wrong. All I had to base my beliefs on was what I had been taught. Never mind the countless sins I had committed. Looking back, I dare to say that my sister was an easy target to lash out at. I was angry at parents and I was masking my lack of academic success with excessive love for the sorority and fraternity. My own ignorance caused me to disconnect from my sister for months.

## Pressed

*It was Friday. School had ended over an hour ago. I was standing at my classroom door talking to my teammate. Out of a room half way up the hallway, walked my favorite (they are all actually my favorite) student, Rasheem. He did not look in my direction. As he proceeded up the hallway, my teammate said, "Ms. Mitchell, your child done got in trouble. He got a referral in his hand."*

*I yelled, "Rasheem, come here!"*

*He walked toward me with his head hanging down. "What ever you've done, accept the consequences. Lift your head up!" I commanded. As he approached me, I could see his eyes welling up with tears. I assumed he was crying because he knew that I was disappointed in his actions, but I could not have been more wrong.*

*"What did you do boy?" I questioned.*

*"She hit me first," he replied.*

*Interrupting him, "That's not what I asked you," I chimed, as I lifted his chin, forcing him to lift his head.*

*"I'll talk to you later, Ms. Mitchell. I see you have to deal with your child," my teammate remarked as she walked in her classroom.*

*Rasheem and I went inside my classroom. I sat at my desk and he sat in the All Eyes on Me chair, a chair adjacent to my desk that students sit in to conference with me about their writing or a book that they are reading.*

*"Now what happened?" I asked.*

*"Mahogany kept hitting me, so I got up and hit her," Rasheem replied.*

*"Why didn't you tell someone?"*

*With tears streaming down his face, Rasheem answered, “These teachers don’t care.”*

*Shocked and feeling like I was lumped with all of the other teachers in the school, “Rasheem, so I don’t care?” I asked.*

*“Ms. Mitchell, I know you care, but y’all don’t understand how I feel and what I am going through,” he remarked in between the tears.*

*It was then that I realized that Rasheem’s actions (hitting another student) were the result of him masking something else. Already knowing the answer, I asked, “Have I ever made you feel as though you couldn’t talk to me?”*

*“Ms. Mitchell, I miss my mama. I am tired of wearing the same socks and drawls! He blurted as he lowered his head.*

*Stunned by his response and not knowing what to say, I put my arms around him in an attempt to let him know that it was okay to hurt. As his weeping quieted, I asked him why he had not seen his mother. After moments of silence, Rasheem told me that his mother had been arrested a week ago.*

Nowhere in my program of study did I learn about compassion. Nope, life taught me that. A few weeks before my journey into the classroom began, I encountered a problem. I received an email from the Registrar’s office which stated that my courses would be dropped if I did not provide documentation of my parents’ income. That was documentation that was not producible. There was no way that I could get that information besides, I had been living on my own and supporting myself since a month prior to my nineteenth birthday. The law was the law though and I had not yet reached the age to be considered an independent student.

I stood at the counter in complete embarrassment and humiliation as the receptionist began to elevate her voice. Because it was the last day of late registration, I was pressed to make a decision. Do I speak or allow pride to win. The line was wrapped around the room and everyone could hear the conversation between receptionist and me. I leaned forward and whispered to her, “M’am, I cannot get copies of my parents’ tax information because my mother is jail.”

As if she did not believe me, she raised her voice even louder, “We are going to need proof of that?”

All I could manage to say was, “I don’t know how to get proof of that.”

“You need to call the jail and get the warden to write a letter or send something. If you do not submit proof today, you will be dropped from your classes,” she noted.

I had never been so humiliated in my life! I walked away from that counter feeling as though everyone in the room heard the conversation. I did not know how to get the information; the only option was to sit out of school for a semester. I knew I did not want to do that, but what else was I to do?

As I walked to my car, an option came to me. I walked to the campus computer lab, pulled up the jail web page, and stared at the screen. I looked over my shoulder repeatedly before I hit print. The pain, humiliation, and embarrassment is undescrivable. Replaying the receptionist’s words in my head, “If you do not submit proof today, you will be dropped from your classes,” with print out in hand, I walked back to the Registrar’s office. The line was longer now than when I was here just moments ago, but I waited. “Lord, please let this work,” I repeated silently over and over again as I waited to reach the counter. If it weren’t for bad luck, I would have had no luck at all. Through all of my

embarrassment, hurt, and humiliation, I reached to the counter only to have to tell the story to another White face. I was instructed to wait because this was a “special circumstance.” Eventually, I was in the office of the Director of Financial Aid, who assured me that she would help me...and she did. I was classified as an independent student.

I left the Registrar and Financial Aid office with mixed emotions; half relieved that I would not have to sit out of school a semester and half embarrassed and humiliated. Later that day, I found myself back in the campus computer lab. I went to the same jail website that I had visited earlier that day and typed in Charles Mitchell. There he was, living under the same roof as my mother. Two adults who resented each other so much shared the same address and did not even know it. Both of my parents were incarcerated, leaving me filled with embarrassment, pain, and humiliation.

#### Split Ends: Strand One Trimmed

How could an eighteen year old move three hours away from home to a foreign land with no kinfolks? How could a twenty year old have the will power persevere in the face of obstacle after obstacle? Easily, no matter how dysfunctional her family appeared to be and no matter how much she wanted to split away from her dysfunctional family, she still was connected at the root. My childhood experiences conditioned me for the obstacles that awaited me in young adulthood. I could not see while I was experiencing life's challenges that they would serve a conditioner for my split ends.

*Split Ends: Strand One* was about determination; determination to have my own education (meaning my own money). Determination to escape poverty (which had no name at that time in my life). Determination to become self-defined. During my

undergraduate years, I simply wanted my own identity. I did not want to be like my mother, not realizing that she possessed some great traits. I did not want to go back home, a place that already begun to deteriorate. With no family, I relied on the roots of my split-ends to provide strength and nourishment. No, I did not realize that resiliency, spirituality, and my mother's strength were part of my culture, but in the words of Michael Eric Dyson (2003), "turning a critical gaze on [myself]" (p. 252), has made clear for me that my experiences and culture influenced my thoughts, beliefs and actions.

*Split Ends: Strand One*, was about realizing that no matter how much I wanted to split off from my family, I was connected them at the root. Through a Black Feminist Thought standpoint, I learned to name poverty as a social class. I realized that my temporary exposure to middle class privileges was just enough to allow me to see that poverty did not have to be norm. Though my childhood experiences prior to my middle-class exposure were difficult, they produced character traits that I would later need in pursuit of liberation through education. My determination to become self-sufficient in *Split-Ends: Strand One* was fostered by my eye-witness accounts of my mother's abuse, and helped Rasheem trim one of his split-ends of his home-life.

## CHAPTER 3

### SPLIT ENDS: STRAND TWO

Teaching students of color challenges me to understand my culture, as well as, the culture that of my students. Religion and spirituality are sensitive issues in public education, but are inextricably tied to Latino/Hispanic and Black American's culture. As a Black educator, my spiritual and religious beliefs are impossible to ignore, often posing an internal tension as I negotiate when to meet the cultural needs of my students and when to contest Eurocentric educational policies. I negotiate a space in Black Feminist Thought to validate my culturally responsive ethic of care. As noted by Ladson-Billings (1994), Gay (2000), and Siddle-Walker and Sarney (2004), caring is essential to meeting the needs of students of color.

Teachers arrive in their respective public schools and classrooms from all walks of life. Some arrive as graduates of education programs while others arrive as career changers. Some were educated in elite private schools, while others of us matriculated through U. S. public schools. With 85% of U.S. public educators being White, middle class women, I assert that many educators arrive in urban schools lacking experience with culturally and socio-economically diverse populations. For me, the road to the urban classroom required me to triumph over obstacles, such as generational poverty, divorce of parents, separation of family, and other instances that would deem my family dysfunctional and unstable. It has been determined by scholars of the education of Blacks and Black identity development that family plays a significant role in identity development as well as in fostering a spirit of liberation through liberation (DuBois, 1903; Woodson, 1933; Cross, 1991; Siddle-Walker, 1996).

The significant influence of my family resonates throughout my narratives. The narratives of my childhood experiences promote messages of liberation through literacy: liberation from oppressive living experiences. My journey to self-define, separating myself from my family, is continuously interrupted. Through this inquiry I gain understanding of the fact that my lived experiences within the context of family socialized my traits of determination, resiliency, strength, family and educator.

In this chapter I explore my novice teaching experiences to develop an understanding of how race, place, and culture functioned during my early teaching years. I must clarify: novice teaching experiences includes experiences inside the classroom, as well as, personal experiences that occurred during my beginning teaching years. Personal and professional identities collide. My role as a teacher, does not supersede my personal identity, rather they are interlocking, nearly impossible to separate.

The chapter begins with “Shedding Tears,” which is about my determination to become a teacher even when it meant taking a nontraditional route to achieve my goal. In “Mane Event,” the experiences of my first days of teaching are described. I encounter a cultural shock even though all of my students are Black. During my first year of teaching, I am also forced to deal with my mother having a drug induced stroke and the death of my step-father. These experiences are narrated in “Dyed” and “Too Many Chemicals.” The stories of my first year of teaching demonstrate a legacy of cultural resiliency.

I continue the chapter with “Big Bang” and “Clipped Ends” narratives about dealing with the death of my principal and the implementation of full inclusion in my urban school. Both experiences required a strength and resiliency that no teacher education program could offer. I relied on inner strength and resilience from lived

experiences. In “Brushed Up,” I narrate a classroom experience that includes an altercation between a male student and me.

What happened to the liberation through literacy? I tell these stories to develop and understanding of my misconceptions about liberation through literacy. I pay special attention to my personal beliefs, biases, and values that seep into my professional practices. I explore the role of my “personal practical knowledge.”

Autobiographical narrative inquiry provides a space for me not only narrate my experiences, but also to theorize my experiences. As suggested by Ritchie and Wilson (2000), “Without the opportunity for critical analysis of experiences, teachers... have no way to see how their experience is itself constructed in and through language and through institutional and cultural ideologies” (p. 15). In this chapter, I tell these novice teaching year experiences to unravel and develop an understanding of how race, place, and culture shaped them.

Continuing to use elements of fiction, nonfiction, and academic writing, I narrate my experiences. Names and settings have been altered. Several experiences have been jumbled to recreate a representation of my classroom experiences. These fictionalization techniques are done to protect the identity of the people whom I have shared these experiences. Fictionalizing my stories also creates enough space between me and the stories to allow me to theorize my experiences. Though the stories in this chapter have attributes of fiction, they maintain their authenticity.

## Shedding Tears

My journey to the urban classroom is tangled between a traditional middle grades preparation program, substitute teaching, and a post-baccalaureate alternative certification. My journey is a story of survival. Approaching the second semester deadline to apply for student teaching and with no family financial support, I was charged with the decision to either change my major to General Studies or quit my job to student-teach for sixteen weeks. Born into a society that has taught me to be obsessed with my appearance (hooks, 1992), my decision to change, abandon the “natural” or traditional route to certification, did not come without emotional distress. Knowing that I had completed hours of practicum experiences, the bulk of the program’s coursework, and passed the required certification examinations; how could I not get a degree in Middle Grades Education? What would people think if I got a degree in General Studies? I agonized and shed tears over the decision for weeks. As the deadline neared, making the decision was no easier than when the dilemma initially arose. After receiving my degree evaluation from the General Studies department, I realized that despite being a nontraditional route, changing my major would take me straight to the classroom. I could graduate a semester sooner and I would not have to quit my job.

## The Mane Event

The school year started. My friend acquired a job at Eastside Academy, an urban school. I was working in her classroom, hanging bulletin board paper, when her school’s principal, Mr. Powell, and assistant principal, Ms. Bush, entered the room. The principal introduced himself and then asked if I was Ms. Mitchell. He wanted to know if it was true that I passed the certification test in mathematics and language arts. Once I verified my

scores, he asked if I was interested in being the In-School Suspension long-term substitute until I graduated. Thinking that this opportunity would “put my foot in the door,” my mind was made up to accept the offer, however; I allowed him and his assistant to rave about how they would love to have me teaching math and how they would ensure me a position upon graduation. At that point, I actually needed the morale boost and validation that my decision to change my major was good decision.

On a \$47.50 per day salary with no health benefits package, I served as the In-School Suspension “teacher” until the beginning of October. Comfortable in my position and assured of a math position in December, I was not expecting the offer that I received on a Friday afternoon. After losing two teachers, only two months into the school year, I was offered a language arts position. Though I had passed the certification test in language arts, it was not my area of expertise. Before I could answer, the academic coach handed me a manual. He told me that the manual outlined exactly what to say, what to write on the board, and what I should expect to hear the students say. With all those incentives, how could I refuse?

Monday morning, I arrived at work a little earlier to prepare for my first day of “teaching.” I made the charts exactly like the scripted plans instructed and rearranged the desk. As I waited for the students to arrive, I thought of all the “strategies” (e.g. be firm, don’t smile till Christmas, first impressions are the most lasting impressions) I learned in all of my methods courses. As the students began to arrive, I panicked. By the looks of them, I thought I was in the wrong class. Most of them were taller than me and some of the females were “physically developed.” I picked up the roster and called out the first three names. They were all present. This had to be the right class. At the sound of the

bell, I closed the door and began to introduce myself. Before I could finish saying, “My name is Ms. Mitchell,” students began yelling out things like, “You next?” “We run this school.” “Y’all can’t handle us niggas? I could not believe my ears. They were talking at me and over me. Nothing in that scripted manual or anything in my methods course textbooks instructed me on what to do in a situation like the one I was currently facing. Refusing to be defeated by twenty-five adolescents I sat at my desk and told them to get whatever they needed to get off their chest. I wish that I could say that they orderly voiced their concerns and that we had a magical bond by the end of the period, but that would be a lie. Holding fast to the scripted manual, days passed, and I just continued to talk over the disruptions. I worked with the few students who showed interest while the others talked, slept, ate, walked around, argued, or did whatever they wanted to do other than complete the daily assignments. There was one person who came to check on me and to assistance me with the transition. I never stopped to ask why there were not mentors in place to help guide me through my first year of teaching.

### Flipped Out

Ms. Ruby checked on me daily. She would stick her head in the door and yell “Mitch, you alright in there!” She later confessed to me that she had placed a bet that I would not last in the classroom until Christmas and that she was checking in on me daily to see when she could collect her money from our colleagues. This was reflective of Ruby’s personality. Always joking and having a good time at work. I dropped the title from her name purposely. Ruby never referred to colleagues that were her friends with a title. She would call us by our last name. That was her implicit way of communicating that you were more than her colleague. You were her “home girl” or “home boy.”

Ruby was well liked by mostly everyone in the school. She always joked around with her colleagues and students. One day when I was having a difficult day, she walked up next to me and said, “Mitch, I bet I can make you laugh...Dr. Scholls ain’t got nothing on this...” Ruby pulled up her pants leg...she was using a maxi pad as a shoe insole! Ruby taught me that it was okay for work to be fun. I only recall seeing her angry once. It happened one day when she checked out a media cart from the library. We were both standing on morning duty when she realized that she left something in the car. “Mitch, watch this cart while I run to my car,” she asked as she headed up the hallway.

Just as Ruby disappeared around the corner, the librarian appeared. “Ms. Mitchell, whose media cart is this?” she questioned.

“Ms. Ruby.”

“And where is she?”

“Oh, she had to run to her car.”

The librarian walked off. I thought nothing of the conversation until moments later when Ruby returned. “I don’t know who that heifer think she is, but somebody better tell her, I ain’t who she wants to mess with. Mitch, come here and close the door,” Ruby vented.

I rolled the media cart into the classroom with me and closed the door behind me, all while naively asking, “What’s wrong?”

“That dike came around the corner questioning me about why I left the media cart unattended. I told her you were watching it for me...”

“She just asked me who checked it out. I was standing right next to it,” I interrupted.

“No, she just wants to mess with me ‘cause she knows I can take her girl... That dike don’t know who she’s messing with,” she continued.

The look on my face must have communicated that I was confused because she then offered, “Now Mitch, I know it sounds crazy calling her a dike knowing that I’m one too, but she better leave me the hell alone.”

At that time, I was not one hundred percent certain of either of their lifestyles. I was really confused about Ruby. In my mind, I had just decided that Ruby was just a little tom boyish, not gay. Up until then we were cool. I could not flip out on her like I had done my sister; she was my co-worker. “Mitch, why you lookin’ like you saw a ghost? You ain’t know?”

I must have looked quite stupid as I muttered, “Uhh no, I did know.”

Still being herself, Ruby came back with, “Oh shit, now you know. It ain’t no secret around here; I am real with mines.”

“Well can I ask you a question? How did your family handle it when you came out?”

“They cut me off, but it’s all good. I’m going to be alright. Why you ask?”

“Because my sister is gay and I don’t talk to her.”

“Come on Mitchell. That’s your family. You can’t do your people like that.”

“I think I’m homophobic.”

“No you’re not. You were cool with me before you knew.”

“You got a point.”

“Mitch, don’t do your sister like that though. She’s the same person. She just likes women.”

“Ugh, that’s nasty,” I exclaimed as I left Ruby’s classroom.

Later that day Ruby asked, “Does she look like you?”

Not thinking about our earlier conversation, I proudly replied, “Yes, we look just alike. Why?”

“I’ll holler at her then,” Ruby laughed.

I screamed, “Ugh!”

Ruby was my first lesbian friend. She helped me not only adjust to teaching, but more significantly, she helped me understand that regardless of my sister’s lifestyle, she was still my sister. She influenced me to rebuild the bond that was once between my sister and me. Ultimately, Ruby helped me to dispel many myths about lesbians.

### Dyed

Just as Louise and I began to repair our bond, tragedy struck. It happened two weeks before my graduation. I was in my classroom teaching when Ruby came over to inform me that I was needed in Mr. Powell’s office. When I arrived in his office, there stood Mr. Powell, the counselor, and my best friend. Mr. Powell motioned for me to sit in the vacant chair. He spoke slowly, “Ms. Mitchell, we just received a telephone call from your mother. She wanted us to inform you that your step-father has passed away.”

I sat motionless staring into space. That was the first time that someone close to me had died in years. After what felt like hours passed, my mother was put on speaker phone. Her first words were, “Michel, are you okay.”

Of course I was not okay, but I choose to play strong. I refused to cry at work, but the moment I was alone, I burst into tears. I had not been to see Buzz in years and now I was stripped of the opportunity. I made the decision to miss his funeral. I wanted to

remember him the way I remembered him: a jovial father, with two legs (he had a leg amputation). It was also too close to my graduation. I believed that Buzz would have wanted me to complete my final exams and graduate.

### Too Many Chemicals

Things went from bad to worst. I was sitting on the bus ramp talking with Mahogany, when “Ms. Mitchell, please report to the front office,” blared over the intercom. Mahogany was sharing with me that she missed so many days from school because she spent her nights looking for her mother. I was trying to gather as much information as could so that I could convince the Attendance Committee not to retain her on the premise of attendance, when “Ms. Mitchell, please report to the front office blared again. I knew then, that whatever I was needed for was serious; for they had interrupted the entire school twice calling for me.

Back in the same office that I had received the news of my step-father’s death, with the same people, Mr. Powell, the counselor, and my friend, I panicked. “What happened?” I asked.

“Ms. Mitchell, your sister is on the line,” spoke Mr. Powell.

I took the receiver from Mr. Powell, “Hello.”

It was Lurnetta, “Girl, I just called to tell you that mama is in the hospital. She had a stroke.”

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. She is in ICU. I will call you as soon as I know something.”

Lurnetta hung up. I went back to my classroom and shared the news with my students. They asked typical questions. “Is she going to be okay? Are you going to be okay?”

Why didn't you go home? Are you going to be here tomorrow?" All questions that I did not have answers to.

Scared, but using my first year teacher's salary as an excuse, I did not go to Kentucky to see my mother. I sent my prayers up to God daily for her healing. As my first year of teaching was a challenging, eventful year, I vaguely recall how I was informed that my mother's stroke was drug (cocaine) induced. I do recall though confiding in Lurnetta, that our mother had to bare so many burdens. She was carrying all of the secrets of her four daughters. She had to undergo a double mastectomy at the age of thirty-seven. She had to identify the body of her brother who was shot a point-blank range, just a couple a years prior to her stroke. Most recently, she had to bury her husband. How much could one person endure? In my mind, that is how I came to rationalize my mother's drug addiction and inevitably her stroke. All that she had to endure, I could not dare complain about the challenges of my first year of teaching.

### Big Bang

The next school year started with a bomb dropped on us on the first day. Full inclusion, there is just no way. You are kidding me. There is no way this can be. What do you mean we are all teaching special ed? President Bush must not be well read. Because if he was, he'd know that his expectations are just too crazy. We are urban teachers and our students are so darn lazy. Besides Bush's goals are out of range, but we have to adjust and make the change. MID, SLD, EBD, MOID and OHI, what does all of that mean? These students are going to be left behind and that can be foreseen! Nobody cares what happens to our kids in the urban city. They are all going to be drug dealers, rappers, or the next P-Diddy. At least that is what they think downtown, but what do they know, they

are just some clowns. I have got to learn some strategies or I will be in trouble. We can not catch all of these kids in the bubble. The safe harbor bubble of AYP just will not cut it. If we do not make AYP with our students with disabilities, the budget will be cut just a bit. But what do you do when your inclusion teacher is no help? And he is the teacher union rep? You do all you can do to keep the kids under control; even if it means letting them bring you a fish bowl. That is what I did when nothing else worked. I befriended the leader of the class and even smirked. This kid was a big boy who was known as a bully. But I found out something different when I read his IEP fully. Rasheem, that was his name, had never learned to read so he played the bullying game. He failed so many times it was no big deal. I had to do something because I was scared of him on the real. He was 5'8'' and 200 pounds. I could not beat him in any amount of rounds. I started letting him be my helper in class. That is when he brought me a fish in a glass. We became so cool, he started staying after school. He wanted me to read to him while he fed my beta fish. So I did and made a wish. I wished for Rasheem to experience some success, which included keeping him out of mess. I took on the challenge of molding him. Some days were bright while others were grim. Rasheem and I became the coolest of coolest. He started to scare me when he brought me some flowers...and attended my graduation despite the showers. Though thrown into teaching special education was a big bang for me, the breakthrough for Rasheem was a huge reward you see!

#### Clipped Ends

In the midst of trying to implement the full inclusion model, our school would suffer a tremendous loss. It seemed like an ordinary day, but what it really was, was a life changing day. I arrived at Eastside Academy at my usual time. I thought for a split

second that the parking lot looked full for it to only be 7:00 in the morning. Nevertheless, I got out of the car and greeted the students. As I walked down the hallway towards the time clock, a heavy feeling came over me. I stopped and looked around, but no one was there. I kept walking. As I clocked in, an announcement came over the intercom. “All faculty and staff members please report to the media center.” I panicked because every time the faculty met in the media center in the morning, something tragic had most likely occurred. I gathered my thoughts and walked into the media center. There were so many unfamiliar faces. Teachers and staff members started filing in two or three at a time. Finally, all of the faculty and staff of Eastside Academy were crowded in the media center. Ms. Bush stood up in the front of the media center and began to say, “I don’t know how to tell you all, but...”

She started crying uncontrollably. We all were looking confused and stunned because we did not know why she was crying. She started again, “I am sorry, but our leader, hero, friend...our principal died this morning around 3:30.”

Sobs, outbursts, and moans were the only sounds heard. I nearly fainted. The nurse and some man that I did not even know were fanning me. They were telling me that it was okay to cry. That was not what I wanted to hear. I wanted Mr. Powell back. “Teachers, we want you to tell your students about the death of Mr. Powell during advisement,” said someone. I never looked up to see who was speaking. I thought, I can not tell my students this when I have not even dealt with the reality that Mr. Powell was gone forever. Finally, Ms. Bush came over and hugged me and told me that she had someone to cover my class for fifteen minutes. I sighed and wiped my face. I tried to be strong for my students. As the hallways cleared and I headed for my classroom, a voice

came over the intercom. “Students, please listen carefully. I have something to tell you...” I ran the rest of the way to my classroom, because I knew what was about to come out of the loud speaker. “Mr. Powell has passed away. It is okay to mourn. We have people in the building to help us cope. If you need anything, let your teachers know.” I was so angry. Why would they do that? I wanted to tell my students. They did not even know the voice that came out of the loud speaker. Anger and hurt all took over me.

I cried with two students leaning on my shoulder and one leaning his head on my leg. Even the two students that had only been at Eastside Academy for a week cried. My students and I mourned with each other for forty-five minutes. As I gathered my thoughts and myself, Mahogany asked me to read the book of the month. I picked up Sharon Draper’s (1997) *Forged by Fire* and began reading. “Robbie Washington’s funeral was held on a Saturday. More than five hundred teachers, students, parents, and friends attended...” I started crying. Mahogany started crying. Heck, everyone was crying. I thought to myself, “This is surreal. I have read this book three times and I knew what chapter was next, so why am I crying.” My thoughts were interrupted by a weeping voice saying, “Ms. Mitchell, how did we get on this chapter today? Do you think God knew what was going to happen?” It was Mahogany. She expected me to answer her. I looked up and said, “Sweetie, God knows everything.” We all wiped our weeping eyes and I closed the book. Classes went on and time did not stop. Everyone at Eastside Academy knew that fall morning was the day that all of our lives were changed.

## Brushed Up

The next semester, I was placed in a challenging dilemma. What do you do when twenty-six friends are placed in one class? You give them assigned seats! Trying to break up some of the classroom cliques, I assigned seats. I stood in the classroom door allowing students to file in two or three at a time. Deshawn who was known to “buck” and bully classmates and teachers decided to ignore my request to wait. I pulled the door slightly closed and positioned myself between the opening and door. Deshawn insisted on ignoring me. He did the ultimate no-no. He attempted to squeeze around me and brushed my shoulder. Before I could process that he had touched me in an aggressive manner, I had him pinned up against the door. “Boy, don’t you ever touch me!” I scolded! All I could see was rage. Deshawn had been intimidating students and teachers the entire year and I was not to be his next victim. As he stood pressed up against the door, a look of stun covered his face. His eyes were bulging while his mouth stood wide opened. A vein even appeared on his neck. He managed to stutter, “Mi-Mi- Miiiissss Mi-tch-ell, my my my bad.”

## Split Ends-Strand Two Trimmed

It was Carter G. Woodson (1933) who prophetically proclaimed,  
The chief difficulty with the education of the Negro is that it has been largely imitation resulting in the enslavement of this mind...the keynote in the education of the Negro has been to do what he is told to do. Any Negro who has learned to do this is well prepared to function in the American social order as others would have him. (p. 134)

Woodson's proclamation was affirmed as I entered the arena of public education, with my family, education and culturally socialized identity. I thought I had made it. My faulty beliefs that education was the equalizer were nullified during my novice teaching years. I was confronted with the circumstances that race, place, and culture created in a public school. As pointed out by Clandinin (1986)

Teachers are commonly acknowledged as having had experience but they are credited with little knowledge gained from that experience. The omission is due in part to the fact that we have not had ways of thinking about this practical knowledge and in part because we fail to recognize more practically oriented knowledge. (p. 177)

My personal and professional identities were interlocked during my novice years. I relied on knowledge gained through personal experiences or as termed by Connelly and Clandinin (1988) "personal practical knowledge" to help me survive those early years. I learned that my childhood beliefs were inescapable. Family triumphs over obstacles, determination, and resiliency were all reoccurring themes. I realized that nothing would come easy and that I would have to rely on the internal strength that my childhood experiences afforded me in order to survive my novice teaching years.

## CHAPTER 4

### NEW GROWTH

New Growth can be described as the hair that grows from the roots in-between hair relaxers. When new growth is present in my hair, I refer to my hair as having “swollen roots.” My hair simply refuses to lie entirely smooth. If it does lie smooth in one area, it is wavy or puffy in another. So is true of my new “intellectual” growth. The development of my critical consciousness has made me quite puffy. What use to lie smooth due to my ignorance and mis-education now has begun bulging as systems of oppression that were once invisible become visible.

Since enrolling in the EDD in Curriculum Studies program, I have been in what is best described by some rising scholars at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as “psychological limbo,” (personal communication, November 6, 2008) a mental struggle as I realize that I am not whom I thought I was yesterday and tomorrow I may not be whom I think I am today. This psychological struggle heightened as I read Jonathan Kozol’s (2005), *The Shame of a Nation*. Reading about the injustices perpetuated daily in America’s public schools, and then realizing that my teaching practices mirrored those of the teachers described, I became mentally traumatized. The reading forced me to acknowledge that I was indeed one of the Black teachers that Dr. Carter G. Woodson (1933) held responsible for the “miseducation” of Black students. Prophetically speaking, he warned, “Taught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served no other purpose than to do what they are told to do” (p. 23). Lacking critical consciousness, I taught from scripted lesson plans,

accepted failure as a result of students and their parents' lack of care and interest in education, and wrote my share of disciplinary referrals. Fortunately, my professors at Georgia Southern University introduced me to critical works of scholars such as Lisa Delpit (1995), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), Cornell West (1994), Jawanza Kunjufu (2006), and William Watkins (2005). Angry at the miseducation, that I had received prior to enrolling in the EDD program coupled with the realization that my belief that everyone has equal access at achieving the "American Dream" is a fallacy, led me to this study. Embracing the call of a public intellectual, curriculum theorist William Ayers (2004), "to speak truth to power, to point to contradictions...to resist the unjust and overly powerful" (p. 115), I have collected stories of my experiences as my critical consciousness was developing. In the words of Cornell West, "race still matters" in the U. S. and its public schools.

This chapter may appear episodic as it is a narration of my life as I stood in psychological limbo. As my new intellectual growth exploded, it affected every aspect of my life simultaneously, making its narration difficult. What I have attempted to do here is capture my experiences as my new critical consciousness allowed me to recognize the workings of significance of race, place, and culture in everyday life. In "Cut Short" I narrate my experience as an excessed teacher and how a childhood experience offered the resiliency needed to sustain through the transfer. "Straightened Out" narrates an episode that depicts the unprofessional, uncaring teachers that Black students encounter. In "Faded Passion," my frustration with a teacher lacking similar passion and concern for Black students is narrated. My spiritual beliefs provide a necessary boost of empowerment to deal with my frustrations and discouragements in "Touch Up." A

theme of spirituality also resonates in “Treasured Locks” as I reconnect with my father. This personal experience provides a source of knowledge in my classroom as I attempt to help a student deal with the incarceration of her father. In “Common Strand” I narrate an experience that connected me to a socio-economic class of Blacks that my newly middle-class status separated me from. “Nubian Knots” narrates my attempt to be use my knowledge to be a voice for Black students and the Black community. The social construction of race is validated in “Natural Process.” I recount an experience where a White substitute teacher responds to Black male students in a stereotypical way. I conclude with “Pick It,” a narrative about the events the day I knew my consciousness about race, place, and culture had developed. My deliberate actions attest to the change that had occurred in me. The following stories are interconnected as they occurred while I was gaining awareness of the subtleties of oppression and marginalization.

#### Cut Short

What could being born in Kentucky, educated in Atlanta (grades P-4), Beach City (grades 5-9), and Cottdale (grades 10-12), and my experiences in each of these Southern cities possibly have to do with the way I teach? For three years, I would dare to say nothing, but September 13, 2006, and the subsequent days that followed, would begin to shed light on how I was educated and my experiences in those southern cities would have to do with my teaching practices.

#### *September 13*

*Today I was given the news that tomorrow will be my last day at Eastside Academy. Here we are twenty days into the school year and he comes and brings me this news! I have been a committed teacher at Eastside for the past three years. No one seems to care about that. I am angry! Why me? I know I am not the newest teacher at this school. Why don't they let some the teachers who don't care go? He (the principal) assured me that this would not happen. Now, I don't trust any of these administrators. Why commit yourself to a school, when you can be transferred any time. One thing this*

*has taught me is that I do not work for a school. I work for the Low Country Public Schools System.*

This day in 2006, was the first time I understood the politics of education. Despite being a failing school the previous years, Eastside Academy had never had to lose any teachers. I thought long and hard about why I was being transferred and not other teachers and came to the assumption that it was because of my “mouth.” I always challenged the school’s leadership and backed down to no one. In essence, after pointing blame and understanding the blessing in disguise that awaited me, I accepted that I was transferred because indeed, I was the last teacher to sign my contract that year. Though I was teaching at the school the previous three years, I played Russian roulette with my career that year as I awaited my boyfriend’s decision to either move to Georgia, or my move to Florida. Nonetheless, the concern for the students that I was leaving behind followed me across town as I was placed in a teaching position at Westside Academy. Had George Bush considered the effects that *No Child Left Behind* would have on students who lost their teacher or students who were the recipients of a new teacher? What would happen to the students that I was leaving behind? Those questions followed me throughout that transition year.

Reflecting back on the day I remember receiving the news that I was being transferred, I recall asking my principal, which one of his teachers could he transfer twenty days into the school year and know that he/she would be okay? He humbly lifted his eyebrow and sighed out a “You.” The next day, after the last student departed from the classroom, without telling anyone of the news, in the pouring rain, Lurnetta (my sister whom I had convinced to work at the school that year) and I packed both of our cars with my personal belongings. My futon, bean bag chairs, bookshelves, and lamps

had to stay. There was just not enough room in my car to take all of the things that made my classroom a warm, inviting classroom. Everything in me wanted to cry as I drove home with what seemed like every inch of my car occupied with my school belongings. Even as the lyrics of Kirk Franklin's gospel song *The Storm is Over* blared on my radio, not a single tear fell. As I tried to explain my feelings to Corey, all I kept repeating to him was that I heard the voice of God speak to me saying, "Job well done my child." There was a serene peace over me that day. It was the same peace that I felt at nine years after receiving the news from Junior and Deon (Junior was Lurnetta's "boyfriend" and Deon was mine). As Lurnetta and I walked home from school that day, Junior and Deon greeted us at the end of the path screaming, "Y'all's stuff is on the side of the road and there is a no trespassing sign on y'all's door!" Lurnetta and I sat on our couch on the side of the road and waited for our mother to come from work. We did not shed a single tear. Somehow we knew that it would be okay. This was not the first time that we would be evicted nor would it be the last, but what was certain, was that everything would be okay. The same was true here. My personal life had socialized a trait of resilience in me that helped me get through this unexpected transfer. My childhood experiences did not take the hurt away, but they did help develop my ability to adjust and adapt to change.

#### Straightened Out

The transfer to Westside Academy turned out to be a great move professionally, but the timing brought its share of problems. My thinking was changing as how I was being educated was changing. My doctoral program was influencing me to be a critical thinker and a resister of hegemony, but components of *No Child Left Behind*, more specifically; its special education components were making change difficult.

Westside Academy had implemented a full inclusion model similar to Eastside Academy's model. This paired me with another teacher the entire day. No time for collaboration, just thrown in a room together to direct the lives of students. The differences between the two of us exacerbated the difficulties of teaching in full inclusion models. He came off to me as *ignorant, benighted, uneducated, (un)intellectual, naïve, oppressed, and enslaved*, which were the exact words used to describe myself at the conclusion of my first doctoral semester. Mr. Steele had no business in the field of education. He often provoked the students.

One day during the English, he walked up to Rasheem and snatched his pencil out of his hand. "That's my pencil," yelled Rasheem!

Mr. Steele rebutted, "You ain't doing anything with it."

Rasheem stood up and began approaching him demanding, "Man, stop trippin'! Give me back my pencil!"

"If you say it one more time, I am writing you up and putting you out."

"Give me my pencil!" challenged Rasheem.

Mr. Steele grabbed his arm and shoved him out of the door. Rasheem yelled, "Man, get your hands off me!"

Mr. Steele slammed the door as he left out. All of this occurred during instruction. Moments later he came back in and reached over Mahogany, shutting down her computer. She erupted, "What you do that for?"

"You're not supposed to be on that game site," he replied.

"I am done with my paper."

Just as I turned from my computer, I caught a glimpse of him snatching her paper from her hand. In a harsh tone, he addressed me, “So they can just play games when they are done?”

Without looking at him, I replied, “There is no they, and yes, she can play *Braingym*.”

He walked over to his desk and started writing in what appeared to be a journal. At the same time, my department chair entered the room. Frustrated, I said in a rather loud whisper, “I am so tired of ignorance and stupidity. They need to do something about this because I can’t do this.”

The foolishness went on for weeks and months. Mr. Steele had provoked me and the students one too many times. It was time to straighten him out. We found ourselves in a heated administrative conference. He accused me of not planning, collaborating, or communicating with him. The accusations were partially true. How could I plan with someone who was never in the classroom and who provoked me? Whereas he thought he was getting me in trouble, he got himself in trouble. Mr. Steele had not realized that I had been recording his lessons and documenting his behaviors. As he vented, Ms. Bush, insisted that I was not being fair to him. I pulled out my documentation which included the recorded class sessions and Mr. Holder, the principal, went crazy.

“What is she suppose to do? You were only in the classroom ten out of forty-five days. Where were you? Don’t answer that. This isn’t the setting for you, but we need to see what we can do to help Ms. Mitchell and the students survive the rest of the school semester,” he added.

I was so satisfied at the sight of stupidity left on Mr. Steele's face. I imagine had my doctoral program not challenged me to understand the impact teachers' behaviors have on students; I would not have had the courage to challenge my colleague.

#### Faded Passion

The situation went from bad to worst. When the subsequent school year began, I was placed with a man who seemed to be Mr. Steele's identical twin, Mr. Williams. Mr. Williams complained about everything from the noise level in the classroom to the monthly scheduled fire drills. No matter what I did in the class, it was never good enough for him. About a month into the semester, after having all of my ideas and suggestions rejected, my passion for teaching in the co-teaching model faded. The conversations between the two of us amounted to him having something ignorant to say about one of the inclusion students. One day the students were taking a mock writing examine, Rasheem was the first to finish. Rather than glance over his writing or encourage Rasheem to read over his essay, he took the paper from Rasheem and brought it over to me saying, "Look at this."

"What am I looking at?" I questioned.

He ignorantly answered, "My point. That's what I'm trying to figure out."

I did not know what to say or do. I knew that Rasheem had heard his harsh words, but I said nothing. My silence must have signaled an agreement with his ignorant remarks because this comments worsened. "These kids are too slow and they can't even read," were remarks made daily. Still I said nothing.

Silent frustration made me bitter. I hated being in the same room with Mr. Williams. I would get nauseated just hearing his voice. The tension between us

heightened to the point that the students recognized the contempt that we both had for one another. All the while, I said nothing. I did not try to lead any lessons nor offer any suggestions. Whatever he assigned the students to do I walked around and assisted them. The tension grew so heavy that a verbal altercation nearly escalated. It occurred on a Friday ½ day. The students were busy as usual so Mr. Holder, our principal, placed the school on lock down. Lock down simply meant that there was to be no student traffic in the hallways. Mr. Williams insisted on allowing students to leave the classroom without adult supervision. I attempted to remind him that Mr. Holder did want any students in the hallway. This man took his hand and shunned me off while yelling, “Do whatever the hell you want to.”

“Who are you talking to? I am not one of these kids and you will not talk to me any way,” was my reply.

“Ohhh, Ms. Mitchell told you!” The students went crazy.

As he walked out the door, he mumbled, “I’m tired of this place. I just got to get out of here. There is no support, no teamwork, nobody backing you.”

Mr. Williams felt that I was a lazy co-teacher and I felt that he was an ignorant person. We managed to survive the entire semester together, but that was just it, we co-existed in the same room, not co-taught in the same room.

How different would that semester have been if I would have called the ethics hotline? I imagine we both would have been suspended as I allowed my anger and frustration to influence me to act unprofessionally as well. I am left asking myself, how much injustice is too much injustice. My students cannot afford to wait an entire semester

for two adults to work out their conflicts. In other words, if this event reoccurred, I do not believe my conscience would allow me to let the situation linger.

### Touch Up

When I was a little girl, I used to hear the old folks in church sang, “He may not come when you want Him to, but He’ll be right on time.” I did not understand what they meant by that then, but the older I got and the more trials and tribulations I experienced, the more understanding I received.

During this particular time in my life, I wore a smile on my face daily, but on the inside I was depressed and frustrated. I began to suffocate myself in religious rituals. I listened to gospel music every chance I could; I attended Bible study, Sunday school, Sunday morning worship services, and any other services that my pastor served as the guest speaker. It seemed like nothing was changing though. My pastor’s words, “Faith means don’t quit,” echoed in my mind as I thought about quitting graduate schools, quitting on urban students, and quitting on God. This was an extremely dismal point in my life. Who could I tell? Not a single soul. What would people say? What would they think? So my frustration and depression remained my little secret.

I went through the motions each day. The school year began winding down; I received my denied admissions letter from the Teaching and Learning Ed.S. program; tension between me and Mr. Steele had resulted in several administrative conferences; and church had become minimized in my mind to a Sunday morning ritual. Things had gotten really bad when God dispatched one of his angels, Keith “Preacher” Brown.

I’ll never forget the day I met him. It was Thursday morning and the students were preparing for their high stakes tests. Preacher Brown ripped off his robe and there it

was...*not impossible, but I'm possible*. He turned around and he said read my shirt. It read, "I have two choices. Either I am gonna make it or I am gonna make it!!"

Goosebumps filled my arms. The students were going crazy. I was going crazy. He came to the school to motivate them, but I was getting the motivation that I so desperately needed. Preacher Brown loaded us with affirmations that morning. My favorite one ended up being, "I love myself. I believe in myself. I'm proud of myself. I'm a GENIUS!" I repeated over and over until I believed.

Preacher Brown had no idea how he touched my life. He kept me from quitting on everything and everyone I loved. He influenced me to dig deep within myself and tap into my inner strength. His words and his gifts from God inspired me to live out my dream. Dare to be the voice of my students.

#### Treasured Locks

*I haven't written in my journal in a while, but today I am forced to stop and write. Students were sitting in class talking among themselves. Some were typing while others were writing. Malik pulled out a wad of money and flashed it to Dominique. Dominique said, "Boy, where you get that money from?"*

*"My dadd,y nigga." defended Malik.*

*Dominique asked, "What your daddy do?"*

*"My daddy is an electrician. What your daddy do, nigga?" questioned Malik.*

*"I'm shame to say this, but my daddy is locked up," he answered.*

*"What you shame for, all our daddies are in jail," interrupted Malcolm.*

*"Ms. Mitchell, your daddy in jail too?" asked Dominique.*

*Everyone was awaiting my reply. I broke the silence with, "He just got out two years ago.*

*"You ain't shame to tell us that?" asked Malik.*

*My response was intended to influence them to consider the words I spoke; therefore, I chose my words carefully. I spoke, "No! What do I have to be ashamed of?"*

*"I would be," interrupted Malik.*

*I continued, "There is nothing I can do about the choices he makes. That is the same for all of you. You can only control the choices that you make. Now everyone get back to work..."*

*As I was leaving my classroom, I spotted Mahogany coming out of Mr. Powell's office. From a distance, it looked as if she was wiping her eyes. I yelled down the hallway, "Girl, I know you haven't gotten in any trouble!"*

*She answered, "Yes, M'am."*

*As I was walking towards her, she started, "He always hitting me and nobody does anything about it."*

*"Stop crying," I interrupted, "Who did you tell?"*

*"I told Mr. Steele that Dominique keeps on hitting me. I got mad so I punched him in the eye."*

*Before I knew it, I replied, "When a woman's fed up there ain't nothing you can do about it. That's what his butt gets. I bet he won't hit you anymore."*

*Mr. Steele found his way into the hallway to add his unsolicited comments, "Ms. Mitchell is being bad. She is telling you wrong."*

*"Yes, I am wrong...not," I sarcastically added.*

*Concerned about her suspension, I asked, "Is your dad coming up here for a conference?"*

*"No, he's in jail for back child support."*

I used to abhor my father. Growing up and into my adult years, I just could not understand why he did not reach out to me. Me of all of his girls, I was his baby and for heaven's sake, I was named after him. Locating him in jail was fulfilling to me. He deserved every day of his sentence. I had wished him to rot in hell. When I located him in jail, I used it as a time to vent, to lash out at him. I remember writing once thanking him for how he treated my mother and how he left us. I informed him that he was the reason why I was driven, so motivated to make it own my own. I spared no feelings. I wanted him to suffer, to hurt that way he made me hurt. It felt so good to tell him off...but then he wrote me back and said the strangest thing. He said, "Michel, you writing me is the best thing that ever happened to me. It makes not being in here (jail) so hard."

That was not what he was supposed to say. Selfish or not, that was how I felt. So, I wrote again, boasting about Potee and how he had shown me all of the things he should have shown me and how I had a man in my life who loved me and would never abuse me or leave his children. My father wrote back expressing his gratitude for both Potee and Corey and how he desired to meet them both. The more I wrote him, the more he wrote.

Sitting in church Sunday morning, it all became so clear. Pastor's words were these, "Let it go. You've been mad so long; you don't even know why you're mad anymore. Let it go. Forgive him, forgive her. God has forgiven you. Whatever it is, give it to God and leave it there."

His words pierced me heart, just as the pain of my absent father, but I left church believing that Pastor's words were just for me. I couldn't wait tell my dad that I forgave him...I didn't have to wait because he called me that night. "Hey Michel, this is your daddy, Baby. How have you been doing?"

His words were spoken only like a father could speak to a daughter; the way I had longed for him to speak to me. I always hoped to be a "daddy's girl," and just for a moment in time, I was. My words to him were, "Daddy, I forgive you. I'm not mad at you for not being there. God has forgiven me for some things that you may never know. Who am I not to forgive you? Buzz is gone. He was a good step-father, but my real daddy is still alive and I would like to have a relationship with you."

That moment was the beginning of my healing. The timing was perfect. I had no way of knowing that months later I would have to offer my students advice on how to cope with anger towards an incarcerated parent. This proved to be one of those moments that no college course or professional workshop could provide insight, only life itself. My personal experiences produced knowledge that was taken-for granted, but ultimately proved to be useful in teaching experiences; creating an unique Black woman's standpoint. I am not saying that Black Feminist Thought and Black women's standpoint are the same thing, but what I am saying is that this experience with my father, created a knowledge base linking me to other Black women.

#### Common Strand

I had been waiting for this day to come for the past two weeks. Every time the commercial aired, I called someone else to tell them to mark the date. In anticipation of the day, I purchased a DVD recorder. I had to record the show just in case someone

missed it. Since I am not technology savvy, I had my sister, Jean, come over to set up the recorder.

It was 8:45 p.m. I was sitting in my rocking recliner boiling with excitement. I was not quite sure if my excitement was in anticipation of the potential topics to be addressed, or in anticipation of the opportunity to intellectually critique the possible misrepresentations. All of my nervous energy/excitement caused me to have to use the restroom. It was then 8:58 and I was thinking, if I got up, I might miss the opening comments. Should I wait for the first commercial break, run quickly, or start recording and risk running out of disc space? With the “you better go now” feeling in my bladder, I pressed record and make a dash. In the nick of time, I returned back to my cozy chair. That time, I did not even recline back. I was sitting on the edge of the chair as if I may miss something if I choose to recline. An unfamiliar Black guy began with the following spoken words:

In the next two hours, you will see the joys as black women climb the corporate ladder and buy houses. And the pains as many of them fall on hard times and raise their kids without spouses. You'll see the challenges that black women face from their health to their faith to dating outside of their race to trying to keep their kids away from drugs and thugs and on the path that's narrow and straight. We'll explore all of this and more in "Black in America."

I sat watching the show in its entirety. I paused through every commercial break so that I would be able to watch the presentation without any interruptions. My telephone was ringing, but I refused to answer. I knew that it is someone wanting to talk about the show. Through the entire show, all I could do was nod in agreement and talk to the people on

the television screen. By the end of the show, I was still boiling with excitement. Now I was clear that my excitement was because of the accurate representations of the struggles and triumphs of not just Black women, but Black people in America.

Not knowing which topic to discuss first, I attempted to re-watch the presentation. Just as the show indicated, there was always a potential deterrent or stumbling block in the road as Blacks in America try to enlighten, uplift, or educate ourselves. As I pressed play, to my dismay, nothing had recorded. Just before I panicked, the ever so familiar commercial replayed, only this time it says that the show will be airing at 12:00 a.m. In a frantic scramble, I called everyone I know. No one answered. I began speed reading the DVD recorder instruction manual. I followed the steps precisely. I was determined to make sure that every Black person I knew saw the presentation. With a mixture of sleep, frustration, anxiety, and excitement, in my eyes, I stayed up and began recording, only that time, I did not press pause during the commercials. Instead, I did quickwrites. I write down my thoughts and feelings because I knew that when the show went off at 2: 00 a.m., no one would be awake to talk about the show. Besides, I was mad at everyone because no one answered their telephones when I called them in distress. Sometime during the recording I dozed off. I'm not sure how I awakened myself, but I woke up and its 2:05 a.m. Knowing how upset I was just hours ago when I realized that the show did not record, I hesitated before pressing play to see if the show recorded. I press play and again, nothing had recorded. A single tear streamed down my face, but I could no longer fight my sleep...

I arose early the next day, determined not to miss the presentation on Black men, I went on a search for a tuner. My first stop was the pawnshop. With both the TV and

DVD manuals in hand, I walked my middle class self in the pawn shop. A Black couple was being assisted at the counter. I waited behind them, because there was no need for me to look around because I had no clue what a tuner looked like. They both occasionally looked over their shoulders at me. I gave my usual friendly smile and looked away. It was my assumption that I was invading their privacy as they discussed what I later pieced together to be the details of their agreement to pawn their television, because another clerk came out and called me over to another counter. I explained what I was looking for, showed the clerk the manuals, and then I was directed over to a section by the wall. I stood around acting as though I knew what I was looking at, but in my mind I was thinking, *I am about to go to Walmart and take this DVD recorder back and pay the extra \$40 and get the DVD recorder with the tuner built in.* As I proceed to walk out the door, passing by the Black couple who were leaving the counter, the sales clerk stopped me and showed me an adapter. I told him that I already had one. With Walmart on my mind, I exited the pawn shop. Just as I got in my car and closed the door, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Black couple getting their flat screen television out of their van. A young boy approximately eight or nine years old got out of the van and held open the pawn shop door, while two other boys around the same age sat in the van with a familiar look on their faces. Probably feeling me looking in their direction, both the man and woman took a glance of humility at me. It was at that moment that the ever so familiar feeling of embarrassment and humiliation took over me. I sat in my car with tears streaming down my face. Tears of empathy. Yes, a teacher, Black in America, knew oh too well; how it felt to pawn the very things you had worked so hard to purchase, just to make ends meet.

As I traveled down the road with my tears clouding my eyes, all I could do was think about the familiarity of the issues highlighted in the CNN special *Black in America*. There it was, not even twenty-four hours later since the shows aired, and I was witnessing the realities of being Black in America.

### Nubian Knots

I lounged on the couch debating if I should attend the Organize for America meeting, eventually the possibility of getting my voice heard persuaded me to attend. I arrived about ten minutes late. The room was pretty crowded. There were Black faces and White faces, but only three young adult faces. One was the face of the facilitator; one was the face of the photographer; and one was the face of an OFA team member. Unless the photographer was a community member, none of the young faces were from the community. I kept looking around room wondering where all of the young adults were.

The facilitator gave an overview of the purpose of OFA and then we broke out into small groups. Each group had the task of discussing the possible organizational structure of OFA and the issues in our local communities that are impacted by national policies. I offered the issues with education. I told my group that I believed that the national level (of politics) needed to examine the qualifications of “highly qualified” teachers. I believe we need culturally qualified teachers and it is deeper than skin color. I then gave the example of a Black girl wearing a hair hat to cover unrelaxed hair. One of my group members, a local politician, interjected, “Well if there are rules, they must be followed...”

I was simply just making the point of understanding the culture and why the student was willing to take a day in In-School Suspension rather than remove the hair hat. He then questioned, “Where do we start?”

My suggestion was in teacher education programs and local school district professional learning departments. The politician proceeded to talk over me, so I tuned him out. Our group facilitator shifted the conversation to a discussion on health care. As the group discussed the problem with the lack of health care for people ages 19-24, my memory took me back to when I was nineteen and had to have my gallbladder removed.

*It was January 9, 2000. I had spent my entire previous Christmas break with my soon-to-be fraternity brothers. We played spades and drinking games every night since New Year’s Eve. Paul Mason was the shot to be taken. During the birthday party, I informed the bros’ that my stomach was hurting. Not believing me, they encouraged me to drink more by chanting, “She’s scared! She’s scared! If you’re scared, say you’re scared!” Influenced by peer pressure, I took shot after shot. The pain in my stomach worsened. Eventually, one of the bros’ took me home. Home alone, the pains became more excruciating. It was like someone was ripping my stomach apart. The pain was in my stomach, my back, and my legs. Somehow I managed to roll to the floor and scuffle to the car. I drove myself to the emergency room. After having test after test, I was informed that I was would be having surgery the next morning. An ultrasound had revealed two and a half dozen gallstones with one two and a half centimeters in diameter.*

*The surgery was a success, but with no insurance, I was left with a disastrous situation. Thirteen thousand dollars worth of medical bills ruined my credit rating.*

*Unable to pay the medical bills, I was granted a judgment and would live the next seven years with a bad credit rating.*

Middle class status and a good credit rating had allowed me to temporarily forget about the group of young people whom are no longer eligible for Peach Care and not yet working in a career offering medical benefits. Sitting through this meeting has opened my eyes to the impact of national policies. Why is it that more young adults do not see how we are all impacted? Puzzled, I was left thinking, “If we all wait until our late forties to become active in politics, will we end up like the activist attending this meeting, wanting to solve old problems with old tactics which includes dismissing the voices of younger generations?”

#### Natural Process

“This is the substitute in Room 213. I need some help! These boys are pushing and shoving and brushing up on me.”

I could not believe what I was witnessing. I sat stunned, saying nothing. I knew that it would be only a matter of seconds before the school officers and administrators would come charging through door. The only problem was that the door was locked and I was blocking the entrance into the room (sitting in front of the door was my way of monitoring who entered and exited the classroom). This slowed down the rescue of the substitute. Perhaps it was the dumb-founded look on my face or maybe the stillness of the class, but as I opened the classroom door, all questions were directed to me and not to the red-faced substitute.

“Ms. Mitchell, what happened?”

“Malik and Rasheem were playing by the computer. I told them to sit down. Malik threw a paper ball at Rasheem. Rasheem had to get his lick back. Malik pushed Rasheem. Rasheem bumped into her (the substitute). Neither Malik nor Rasheem were aware that she was behind him.”

“So it was an accident?”

“Yes.”

The fire drill sounded seconds later.

I replayed what had just occurred in my head over and over as I exited the building for the monthly fire drill. Just that quick, those Black boys’ future lay in the hands of that White woman. Had I not been in the classroom or not been sitting in front of the door watching the events unfold, two more Black boys would be convicted felons charged with assault on school personnel.

Perhaps if those politicians at the OFA meeting could have witnessed the events that just unfolded, they would understand why there is a tremendous need for culturally qualified educators. Considering myself a culturally qualified educator, the minute I entered the room and saw an unfamiliar, middle-aged White face, I went into hyper-vigilant mode. Because of my lived experiences, it’s a natural process for me to be weary of White people. Surely, the minute she saw that she was in the only White in the room filled with masculine Black boys, her culture taught her to go into defense mode. This would be the only explanation for why she paced the room the entire period, stood in the midst of the males’ conversation, and disregarded my presence in the room. She had to maintain power and control. Perhaps she was so wrapped up in her role as the authority in

the room, she forgot that I was even there, as she picked up the telephone and acted as the “Damsel in distress.”

### Pick It

“Please stand for the *Pledge of Allegiance* and *National Anthem*,” commanded a familiar voice. Racing against the start of the pledge, I trotted to my classroom door. Not making it in before the start, I peeked my head around the door frame. To my surprise, none of my advisement students were standing. Trying to remain calm, I continued saying the pledge while standing in the hallway. After the moment of silence, I stormed through door with rage in my voice. “You all are phony! Because you did not see me, you didn’t bother getting up to say the pledge! I am so disappointed in you all! What this tells me is that you do not respect those stars and stripes. You just stand and recite the *Pledge* and *National Anthem* because you think that is what I want you to do! I would rather you never say it than say it because you want to impress me. I can’t believe you all. I expected so much more from you!”

“Ms. Mitchell, I did stand up...”

“No you didn’t!” I angrily interrupted as Josh began to lie. “All of you, just be quiet and begin your grammar practice,” I directed. I sat at my desk, still angry and disappointed at my advisement’s behavior. I begin grading portfolios. “Jason, where is your portfolio?” I asked.

“I told you, I buck,” he replied.

“Boy, you don’t have the option to buck. I refuse to let you be retained because you don’t want to do your portfolio. You will not have me perpetuate the failures of African American males.”

My rage had escalated because Jason only needed a 62 to pass Language Arts. Passing Language Arts would give him the opportunity to go to summer school for his other two classes. “Jason, come here!” I commanded.

“Ms. Mitchell, I don’t feel like all that today, I told you, I buck. Now leave me alone!” he yelled.

I was infuriated. I got up and walked across the hall to tell Ms. Campbell what has just occurred.

“JJJAAASSSOONN, get your butt over here!” yelled Ms. Campbell.

“Ms. Mitchell, he will have your work by in the morning,” urged Ms. Campbell.

I walked back to my classroom and Larry was up walking around the room.

“Larry, what are you doing and where is your portfolio?” I asked.

He replied, “I didn’t feel like finishing it last night.”

“What do you mean you didn’t feel like finishing it last night? You don’t have the right to make that choice!” I screamed. My rage was overflowing because Larry needed a 69 in my class so that he will be eligible for summer school. “Get your mama on the telephone now!” I exclaimed. Speaking to no one in particular, I said, “I have told you all, I refuse to perpetuate the systems that are designed to make you fail.”

The class sat in silence while I graded portfolios. I am not sure if they were working or frightened from my unusual rage, but no one said a word. “I know better than this,” I blurted.

“You are kidding me! Do you all think I was born yesterday?” The eerie silence was broken with my outburst. I had just realized that two students copied each other’s

portfolio page for page. I began fussing; “Now you all know I read a zillion books, you had to know I would catch somebody cheating.”

“Ms. Mitchell, it time to change classes,” interrupted Josh.

“Oh, y’all tired of hearing me fuss? Well y’all can’t be more ready for y’all to go than I am for y’all to go. Y’all have plucked my last nerve and it is only 9:15 in the morning,” I remarked. The students filed out, some saying, “Bye,” others saying, “Ms. Mitchell, I hope your day gets better.”

“Good morning Ms. Mitchell,” some students greeted as they walked in the room. I alerted them that I was not having a good morning and to give me a minute to get my thoughts together. After sitting down for a few minutes, I got up and started passing out graded portfolios. When I finished I remembered that I never saw one for Marcus.

“Marcus, where is your portfolio?” I asked.

“Leave me alone!” he replied.

“Leave you alone? Boy, it’s my job to ask you for my work! Now, either you can give me your portfolio now or you can do it in the summer!” I angrily yelled.

“I buck! I bet I ain’t doing no portfolio,” Marcus mumbled while pulling out a sketching pad.

“What is this, I Buck Day? I refuse to let you boys stay in ninth grade because you want to buck. Well check this out, I buck!” I vented. “Lord, what did I do to deserve this?” I asked aloud. “I need to go home. I do not think I can effectively do my job today,” I said to the Shannon, a young lady who sat right next to my desk.

“Ms. Mitchell, I don’t know why these kids want to fail. All they have to do is the work. You trying to help them,” Shannon offered.

“Thank you, Sweetie. If only they all could see what you see,” I remarked.

“Hey Ms. Mitchell,” uttered my Ms. Manning. “Ms. Mitchell, the children say you having a bad day today,” she continued.

“Girl, they made me have a bad day. These boys think I am going to sit up in here and let them fail. They must be crazy,” I replied.

“Well Ms. Mitchell, you can’t save them if they don’t want to be saved,” she shared.

“The choice is not theirs,” I said with my voice sounding more and more irritated.

“Well child you can’t stress yourself out about these boys who do not care. Let them fail. That will teach them a lesson,” she ever so ignorantly said. Trying not to explode on her, I turned my head so that I was looking her dead in the face and attempted to say in the most monotone voice, “Being Black and male has given them two strikes. I will not be strike three.”

“You better stop worrying about people who ain’t worried about themselves and pick your battles” Manning uttered as she headed out the door.

My critical consciousness has forced me to push my students to what Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) coined, “their highest potential.” When I see them or teachers allowing them to fail, I nearly lose my mind. I have made up in my mind that I refuse to stand on the sidelines and watch my students fail. These are my battles and I am committed to fighting them.

Making a commitment to not allowing student failure was stressful at times, but at the end of the school year when grades were submitted, I knew I had made a difference. All of my males passed my class with the exception of one. The guys did not

pass because I gave them grades, but rather because I took a special interest in their education. It would have been easier and less stressful to just say let them fail, but I would have failed too. Not every educator will agree with me, but I believe Black males need teachers who are not going to offer them the option to fail. The one male that failed my class offered me comfort when I asked him what I could have done to help him be successful. He stated, “Ms. Mitchell, there is nothing you could have done, I just didn’t want it.” I want to be the hope for all of my students, but in reality I deal with knowing that I can not save everyone.

#### New Growth Unmatted

In the twentieth century, Black intellectual W.E.B. Dubois (1901) stated, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (p. 10). Unfortunately, race has continued to be the leading distinguishing characteristic in the United States to classify people in social hierarchies as well as to maintain cultural hegemony and socioeconomic class divisions. People of color, more specifically Blacks, have been directly impacted by racial divisiveness and racially discriminatory laws intended to maintain racial subordination.

In the United States, Blacks have been marginalized and disenfranchised through exclusionary laws dating back to 1619. From the time the first enslaved Africans stepped on American soil, education has been an avenue to assign social class positions. Race has determined who has access to education, the type of education, and the amount of education. Prior to Emancipation, Blacks were denied the basic rights to learn to read and write. Knowledgeable of the liberation through literacy, rewards, resources, and opportunities, Blacks erupted from Emancipation in pursuit of literacy skills. Blacks’

pursuit of education was met with opposition as educated Blacks posed an immediate threat to what historian James Anderson (1988) termed the “planter-dominated white South” (p. 23).

Racism was illuminated as Northern philanthropists supported education for Blacks because it would help them maintain social mobility while Southern Whites resisted education because they wanted to maintain white superiority. With contradicting ideologies, northern philanthropists and southern whites conflicted. Rather than allow the myth of Black inferiority to be dispelled and there to be a disruption of the South’s racial caste system, Southern Whites embraced universal education as a means to teach white superiority (Anderson, 1988). In an attempt to perpetuate white superiority and black inferiority, northern philanthropists and southern White educators collaborated in education meetings to develop a plan that offered Blacks universal education while maintaining white superiority (Anderson, 1988).

Using race as an indicator in deciding who received education and what kind of education was delivered has created a nearly irreversible culture of white privilege and socioeconomic hierarchies. Denied equitable education on the premise of race has had a lasting impact on Blacks. Generations of involuntary illiterates created the Black underclass which I was born into and which I teach. As the narratives in *New Growth* reveal, in the words of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), “Inequalities are a logical and predictable result of a radicalized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized” (p. 47). Blacks continue to be treated unfairly solely on the premise of race.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that school inequality in the U.S. is based on three propositions: (1) Race is a significant factor; (2) U. S. society is based on property rights; and (3) Understanding the intersection of race and property creates an avenue in which to examine social and school inequities. The narratives in this chapter have validated Ladson-Billings and Tate's argument. School choice under the *No Child Left Behind Act* allows Whites to purchase property in predominately Black neighborhoods, but does not force their students to attend the schools in those neighborhoods. In "Cut Loose," I was transferred as a result of school choice, but the impact of losing a teacher four weeks into the marking period, was ignored. This, as well as the quality of teachers as shown in "Straightened Out," "Faded Passion," and "Pick It," strengthens the argument that property rights, race and racism are interconnected and cannot be ignored.

Examining *New Growth* through a critical lens, I learned that I possess multiple identities and that race, place, and culture have shaped all of my identities. I learned that my identities are constantly shifting. I learned that the liberation through literacy was instilled in me as a child was not quite the same liberation through literacy that was experienced during my enrollment during my doctoral period.

Understanding the influences of race, place, and culture on who I am has created challenges and tensions. I have been challenged with coping with the awareness that race, place, and culture matter despite the fact I live in a society that insists on subordinating cultures and racial groups that resist White norms and values. When I arrive at school each day, I am challenged with knowing that education alone will not protect my students from the snares of oppression. I am challenged with knowing that my students' parents'

socioeconomic status has placed them in a social class that will be nearly impossible for them to escape. I am challenged with knowing that my own education grants me privileges that allow me to negotiate my own identity and culture; revealing that neither is static. They are both forever evolving.

In the midst of my challenges, I learned that I was progressing through William Cross's (1991) stages of Black identity development or nigrescence. I realized that I been blindly meandering in the first stage (pre-encounter) at least since I had enrolled in college. During the pre-encounter stage, I downplayed race and as in the words of Cross (1991), "[Saw my] personal progress as a matter of free will, initiative, rugged individualism, and a personal motivation to achieve" (p. 191). My encounter (stage two) with critical inquiry and cultural scholars challenged me to unravel my "successes." During this stage, I was just as Cross (1991) predicted, "Enraged at the thought of having been previously miseducated by white racist institutions" (p. 200). I was angry that I had been duped into believing that education would equalize the playing field. I soon emerged into stage three (Immersion-Emersion). I began to identify and speak to injustice. I must admit that I focused on injustice that directly affected Blacks. I was consumed with what Cross described as the "demonizing of White people and white culture" (p. 202). I began to openingly love my Blackness and began moving into stage four (Internalization). The internalization stage of identity development occurred as my commitment to Black students and the Black community began to take root. My movement into stage five (Internalization-Commitment) of Black identity development is my commitment to issues that effect the Black community. As an educator, I am committed to advocating for equitable educational opportunities for Black students and as

a community member, I am committed to advocating for Blacks. My movements through Cross's stages of nigrescence validated that identities are fluid; they are constantly changing and being negotiated.

## CHAPTER 5

### NO LYE

#### Organic Roots: Context of the Study

The United States of America is currently in an economic “downturn.” As President Barack Obama takes office as the first African American president, he is charged with stabilizing the economy. The nation’s spending budget is sure to be meticulously scrutinized to begin minimizing excessive spending. During the scrutinizing process, President Obama and his economic team are sure to examine the costs of teacher turnover. Nationwide, the teacher turnover rate is 16.8 percent and for urban schools, even higher at 20 percent, costing the nation \$7 billion dollars a year (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2007). In addition to financial costs, President Obama and his education consultants are further charged with examining the consequences or impact that teacher turnover is having on student achievement; especially since the lack of student achievement contributes to high dropout rates which cost the U.S. \$329 billion dollars in lost wages, taxes, and productivity yearly (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). To begin analyzing and reconciling teacher turnover and its costs, policymakers must start by examining the current policies that governs education, *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

Former President George Bush enacted the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) that offers students attending Title I *Needs Improvement* schools, schools that have not met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) which is measured by state administered standardized tests, school choice, and the option of transferring to a school that has met AYP goals. As students flee needs improvement schools, teachers and funding are cut

creating a puzzling dilemma: *If a school has been identified as needs improvement, is it not the school that needs more funding and more teachers?* As if the allocation of funding and teachers are not enough to question former President George Bush's NCLB policies, perhaps who are allowed to teach in needs improvement schools is to question. A bachelor's degree, not necessarily in education, and a content area passing score on the state teacher certification assessment can earn a person a state approved teacher certificate. To illustrate, in Georgia, a bachelor's degree and a passing score on the Basic Skills Assessment of Georgia Assessment for the Certification of Educators, GACE, can earn a person a teaching certificate in special education. Yes, teachers granted teaching certificates through these avenues have other criteria to meet before being granted a clear-renewable teaching certificate, but in the meantime, while they are meeting the criteria, they are in classrooms, and quite often urban classrooms, without a single education foundations course or cultural diversity course, affecting the lives of students. This all leaves me pondering upon the following: *Is it the students who need improvement or the teachers?*

Though considered a highly-qualified teacher according to NCLB, how responsible are "culturally unqualified teachers" who *teach* African American students, for the 50 percent graduation rate of African American students? Furthermore, what about the 50 percent that do not graduate? How does a school leader begin to transform a school that graduation is not the norm or that is staffed with culturally unqualified teachers while confronting the federal and state mandates of NCLB? This begins with a paradigm shift; one that requires a leader to shift from an instructional leader to a transformational leader, a leader who is in the words of Thomas, Futzhugh-Walker &

Jefferies (2000) a “visionary, change agent, and expert at dealing with complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty” (p. 20). Understanding that urban schools often reflect the “economic, political, social malaise in urban communities” (Brown, 2007, p. 270), leaders of urban schools are further charged with transforming the culture of the school and creating an atmosphere of hope for students, parents, teachers, community members and educational stakeholders. If the 200,000 Black students in Georgia (State of Georgia, 2007) or the 1.23 million students (Editorial Projects in Education, 2007) across the U.S. dropping out of school yearly is going to decrease, transformational leaders are going to need culturally qualified teachers to help get the job done (Anderson, 1988; Foster, 1997; Siddle-Walker, 1996).

Showing that he recognized that there are some problems in our current educational system, President Barack Obama (2006) expressed that a “commitment to the values of equal opportunity and upward mobility requires us to revamp our educational system from top to bottom, replenish our teaching corps, buckle down on math and science instruction, and rescue urban kids from illiteracy” (p. 22). Because we, teachers, have tremendous impact on the success or failure of students, reform begins with us. Based on my experiences and the current trends of teacher turnover, until teachers are required to reflect and critically analyze our lived experiences and how they impact our teaching practices, I believe teacher turnover rates will continue to rise and have a costly affect on society. Teacher autobiographies must be examined in an attempt to unravel the beliefs, values, biases, and stereotypes that hinder us from helping students reach their highest potentials academically, socially, and emotionally (Delpit, 1995; Howard, 2006; Nieto, 2003). If African American students are to begin graduating at higher rates and the

“education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2007), between Black students and White students is to narrow, culturally competent teachers are going to be needed. This begins with teachers knowing ourselves.

#### Just for Me: Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry

Tracing the roots of the Black autobiography required picking through, in the words of literary scholar James Tackach (2001), “African and African American folklore; the Bible; travel writing; the picaresque novel; the domestic novel; the abolitionist press; the captivity narrative and the American success narrative” (p.15). Matted in the midst were the more widely known first Black autobiographical writings, slave narratives.

Slave narratives published in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were sometimes considered biographies as opposed to autobiographies as they were mostly written by slave narrators. This should come as no surprise as Blacks’ struggle for education traced back to 1618 when the first Africans set foot in Jamestown. During that time, education of Africans was limited to teachings of Biblical passages that taught obedience to authority. The expansion of the plantation system and resistance to the biblical teachings of obedience (Spring, 2005), brought laws prohibiting the education of Africans (Blacks) making it a punishable crime to educate Africans. That produced an overwhelming amount of illiterate Blacks, making a narrator necessary. The 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives were identified by their trademark themes and structure. In the name of empathy, widely written and published in New England and London, 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives transmitted an implicit theme, described by literary historian, Frances Smith Foster (2001) as “the struggle for existence in an inhospitable land” (p. 38). This theme mostly developed in a chronological journey beginning with memories of

childhood, physical struggle, conversion to Christianity, personal accomplishments, concluding with the achievement of freedom.

One of the first testimonies of the Black experience written by the protagonist himself was Obadiah Equiano's (1789) slave narrative *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Unlike slave narratives before it, Olaudah Equiano did not turn to whom Ruth Miller (1971) referred to as "ghost writers," Whites, to script his life experiences. Rather, he wrote it himself. Equiano's narrative became the prototype for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> nineteenth century slave narratives; creating a form of what historian William Andrews (1999) termed, "a black message inside a white envelope" (p. 6). Equiano's narrative opened with a statement of validity authored by White supporters. His narrative chronicled his journey from his kidnapping on the West Coast of Africa, progressing through being sold into slavery, brought to America, learning to read, his acquisition of navigation techniques, concluding with him earning his freedom. Known for its rare description of the Middle Passage, Equiano's narrative defined the slave archetype of its time.

The archetype of one who was literate, triumphed the evils of slavery and earned freedom, was not more elucidated than in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Published over half a century later, Douglass's (1845) autobiography resembled traits of Equiano's narrative. It opened with the following statement of authenticity from Douglass's White abolitionist mentor, William Lloyd Garrison, in Douglass (1845):

I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination;

that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single face in regard to SLAVERY AS IT IS. This experience of FREDERICK DOUGLASS, as a slave was not a peculiar one...Many have suffered incomparably more, while very few on the plantations have suffered less, than himself. (p. 305)

This opening proclamation gave Douglass credibility and probable authority to depict the brutalities of slavery.

Douglass's autobiography recounted the theme of journey in his quest for literacy. Against the will of his master Mr. Auld, Douglass pursued literacy as he equated it with freedom. Douglass's (1845) words:

That which to [Mr. Auld] was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both. (p. 325)

His narrative celebrated his triumphs over psychological and physical struggles, often alluding back to quest for freedom. Reflecting back on his acquisition of literacy skills, Douglass (1845) revealed that:

As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without a remedy. (p. 328)

Feeling beast-like and unable to revert back to illiteracy, Douglass was sold from plantation to plantation. After a battle with Mr. Covey, Douglass admitted that that was his turning-point. He explained it:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. (p. 343)

Douglass's spirituality was evidenced in his narrative through the use of Biblical references and allusions. Though Douglass condemned Christianity or committed blasphemy in the eyes of some readers, predicting criticism of his readers, he offered clarification in the appendix. His words:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference. (p. 365)

His narrative fulfilled the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century prototype as it concluded with his escape to freedom. This theme of freedom through self-determination redefined freedom. Though Douglass struggled and escaped the bonds of physical slavery, he concluded, redefining freedom in subsequent Blacks autobiographies, with the relationship between literacy and freedom. Douglass found true freedom in as cited by Andrews (2001), "the power to use language to change the minds of others," (p. 55) as he spent the remainder of his life as part of the anti-slavery movement.

As Black women's experiences cannot be told through the voices of Black men, to strengthen the Black autobiography genre, Black women embedded dialect, utopian closures, first-person narration, word-play, and experiences that depict the relationship between the Black man and the Black woman into our autobiographies. These qualities along with the reoccurring themes of journey, suffering, spirituality, and triumph, brought voice to the often ignored, Black woman's experiences as she searched for her own identity. Here I explored some unifying qualities that have influenced a still developing body of literature, Black women autobiographies.

One of the first published autobiographies of a Black woman dated back to the 1836 publication of *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving An Account of Her Call To Preach the Gospel*. In the spiritual autobiography, Jarena Lee began by offering a brief chronological telling of her birth, childhood separation from her parents, and her triumphs over obstacles in her journey to preach the Gospel. As this was a spiritual autobiography, Lee's faith in Christ was revealed as she began her journey as a preacher, one that rejected the idea of women preachers. In her utopian closure, Lee (1836/2003) evidenced her spirituality which she credited for her triumphs and her purpose for writing her autobiography, with these words, "But for the satisfaction of such as may follow after me, when I am no more, I have recorded how Lord called me to his work, and has kept me from falling from grace, as I feared I should" (p. 37). Jarena Lee made it clear that she hoped that her life writings would inspire others to tell their story.

I believe it can be safely speculated that Lee's biography inspired Sojourner Truth (1850/2003) to publish *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave, Emancipated*

from *Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, In 1828*. Truth's *Narrative* followed the reoccurring themes of journey, suffering, and triumph as Lee's and the slave narratives of its time, but Truth dared to narrate her journey to freedom through a different lens. She began her story with her birth years and family memories, including her early teachings about God. This reoccurring theme of spirituality was essential to Truth's *Narrative*, as it was her spiritual transformation that influenced her to tell her life experiences; the prelude to her life journey of speaking out against American oppressions and inequities. Truth's biography was absent of the first person narrator that became characteristic of subsequent Black women autobiographies because she was unable to read or write; therefore, we heard her experiences through a third person narrator (Andrews, 2003). Through the narrator, Sojourner Truth's life story progressed with the gruesome details of her life as a slave.

Faith in God was embedded throughout the entire narrative, but Truth devoted a great bulk of her *Narrative* to discussions of her spirituality, a theme that also continued to resonate in Black women autobiographies. In the recalling of her determination to get her son whom was wrongfully sold into slavery, Truth (1850/2003) declared, "Oh, my God! I know'd I'd have him agin. I was sure God would help me get him. Why, I felt so tall within-I felt as if the power of a nation was with me," (p. 65) revealing her spirituality. This episode of her life contributed to what made her life story different from the male slave narratives. Power in reclaiming her child and a sense of family brought liberation to Truth whereas liberation in Black slave narratives was often seen in achievement or persuasion to the White world (Andrews, 2003). Truth's *Narrative* afforded Black women more inspiration to write their lives.

Unlike Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs (1861/2003) possessed the ability to read and write, allowing her to become the first known Black woman to author and publish her own slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Under her pen name, Linda Brent, Jacobs (1861/2003) began her autobiography with a declaration of her purpose,

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own suffering. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I had suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. (p. 204)

This purpose substantiated novelist Toni Morrison's (1984) stance that Black autobiographical writings indeed offered Black women the opportunity to be representative of the group as well as an individual. Jacobs chose the former. Through the telling of her experiences, Jacob wanted readers to understand that her experiences were not her own, they belonged to an entire group of Black women.

The first-person narration of Jacob's journey from enslavement to freedom progressed beginning with her childhood experiences and concluding with her utopian ending as she narrated her escape. She used the plot of her autobiography to depict the degradation of her slavery experiences which began after the death of mother and the death of her mistress. That was when she became property of Dr. Flint's daughter.

Jacob's subtitled one of her chapters "The Trials of Girlhood," leaving me anticipating hearing of her adversities. Referring to sexual abuse that Dr. Flint imposed upon her, Jacob's (1861/2003) described the experience:

He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master.

I was compelled to live under the same roof with him-where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. (p. 223)

Her sufferings worsened as Dr. Flint threatened her life if she ever told of his behaviors. Coerced by his mistress through the swearing on a Bible, Jacobs confessed Dr. Flint's behaviors, only to have his mistress join in on the brutality. Jacob's suffering encompassed verbal, physical, sexual, and psychological abuses. Denied the right to marry a man whom she loved along with the desire to have a piece of triumph over Dr. Flint for all of his abuses, Jacob became pregnant from a White man who she believed would set her free. Sadly, her abuses worsened.

Throughout her autobiography, Jacobs told of wanting to die rather than live the life she was forced live. Reflecting on the birth of her first child who was born prematurely, Jacob (1861/2003) wrote, "I heard the doctor say I could not survive till morning. I had often prayed for death; but I did not want to die, unless my child could die too" (p. 249). Describing the beatings she received from Dr. Flint just days after the birth of her daughter, Jacobs (1861/2003) exclaimed, "My life was spared and I was glad for the sake of my little ones. Had it not been for these ties to life, I should have been glad to be released by death, though I had only lived nineteen years" (p. 263). Only the sufferings of slavery could make death seem so much a viable option.

The abuse endured and the protection of children from the abuses of Dr. Flint led Jacobs into hiding for nearly seven years. She hoped that with her gone Dr. Flint would sell her children to their father. Jacobs hid in a space in her grandmother's roof. The space was only nine foot long and seven foot wide and three foot high. She confessed, "It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave" (Jacobs, 1861/2003, p. 291). After being discovered, Jacob plans her escape to the North. She reunites with her children and brother and lives as a free woman. The risks and sacrifices made for her children, rendered Jacob's autobiography as a testament to the strength and determination of Black women to overcome obstacles.

The same strength and determination to triumph reoccurred in Black women's autobiographies published nearly a century after the publication of Jacob's autobiography. In Zora Neale Hurston's (1942/1991) *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston told her life story using the rhetorical elements of fiction. Like autobiographies before hers, Hurston organized her journey beginning with her childhood and experiences in Eatonville, Florida. She then devoted six chapters to her life's struggles and achievements, concluding with experiences from her adult years and her reflections on her life.

Hurston's sufferings were exacerbated after the death of her mother. She was explicit in the agony of the death of her mother. She writes, "I was to agonize over that moment for years to come" (Hurston, 1942/1991, p. 64). She continued her autobiography revealing the details of her violent relationship with her stepmother, which led her father to shipping her away to a school in Jacksonville. Her father was unable to

pay for her to stay at the school and the school was unable to adopt her, forcing Hurston back to Eatonville. Revealing her suffering, Hurston (1942/1991) shared, “The five years following my leaving the school at Jacksonville were haunted. I was shifted from house to house of relatives and friends and found comfort nowhere. I was without books to read most of the time” (p. 85). Her struggle was explicit in the following lines:

I wanted family love and peace and a resting place. I wanted books and school. When I saw more fortunate people of my own age on their way to and from school, I would cry inside and be depressed for days, until I learned how to mash down on my feelings and numb them for a spell. I felt crowded in on, and hope was beginning to waver. (Hurston, 1942/1991, p. 91)

This psychological suffering in Hurston’s story mirrored that of other Black women’s autobiographical writings. It was through the suffering that determination to triumph was revealed. Dead end job after dead end job, Hurston stayed committed to going to school. She was able to pay her tuition (sometimes with the assistance of friends she met along the journey) and attend college. She exclaimed that she never took her presence in college for granted. The gratitude of her triumphs were evident as she reflects, “It was a most happy interval for me...I felt the warm embrace of kin and kind for the first time since the night after my mother’s funeral” (p. 125). As attending school was a dire passion of Hurston, with the death of her mother, and the subsequent sufferings that followed, Hurston was able to persevere and overcome her suffering to obtain her passion, education. Leaving her work as a testament to her will to triumph, Hurston (1942/1991) concluded the section of her autobiography dedicated to her struggles and triumphs with these words:

It would be against all nature for all the Negroes to either be at the bottom, top, or in between. It has never happened with anybody else, so why with us? No, we will go where the internal drives carries us like everybody else. It was up to the individual. If you haven't got it, you can't show it. If you have got it, you can't hide it. That is one of the strongest laws God ever made. (p. 172)

In other words, either you want to succeed or you don't. It's up to the will of the individual.

Sadly, though both, African-American males and African-American females, wrote autobiographies that revealed the gruesomeness and immoral acts imposed upon them during slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, African-American women's experiences were dismissed or ignored late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Evans, 1984).

Autobiographies of Black women in the likes of Jarena Lee (1836), Sojourner Truth (1850), and Harriet Jacobs (1861), exemplified the themes of struggle, journey, and triumphs, but were not widely referenced. In the 1970s, incorporating the themes of their predecessors, Black women's autobiographical writing (re)emerged with Black women's telling their own stories in their own voices. This debut of African-American women autobiographical writings included the works of Maya Angelou (1969), Toni Morrison (1970), Alice Walker (1970), and Michelle Wallace (1979). These women dared to define Black themselves in their own terms, not the terms of males or White women, blazing the path for Black women to write their lives as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse.

## Dark and Lovely: Black Feminist Thought

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) could not have been more accurate in her assertion that, “The existence of a Black woman’s standpoint does not mean that African American women, academic or otherwise, appreciate its content, see its significance, or recognize its potential as a catalyst of social change” (p. 33). As a beneficiary of the efforts of members of the Civil Rights era who were beneficiaries of the previous movements aimed to uplift the Black race, I initially saw no need to include a Black feminist perspective in my study. In fact, the limited knowledge and belief that only Black lesbian women and Black militant women were Black feminists encouraged my resistance. I did not want to be associated with or assumed to be a lesbian and/or militant. My own ignorance momentarily allowed me to place my race, class, and gender in a hierarchy of oppression rather than acknowledge that they work as interlocking systems of oppression. Black Feminist Thought offered a standpoint that allowed me to resist oppression, examine the legacy of struggle among Black women, and explore the connection between Black women individually as well as members of a heterogeneous group.

Black Feminist Thought has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist movement. Maria W. Stewart, the first Black feminist, urged Black women to “promote and respect ourselves” (Stewart, 1831/1995, p. 28). Stewart encouraged Black women to become self-reliant and to recognize their self-value, both themes of Black Feminist Thought. In her first speech, *Religion, and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build*, Stewart proclaimed this:

How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles? Until union, knowledge and love

begin to flow among us. How long shall a mean set of men flatter us with their smiles, and enrich themselves with our hard earnings; their wives' fingers sparkling with rings, and they themselves laughing at our folly? Until we begin to promote and patronized each other... (Stewart, 1831/2003, p. 12)

Stewart understood that Black women possessed what Collins (2000) later coined a “unique angle of vision concerning Black womanhood,” (p.35). She asserted, “O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep not slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties” (Stewart, 1831/2003, p. 7). Black women after Stewart continued in her spirit. Educator Anna Julia Cooper’s words reflected her understanding!

At any rate, as our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot *quite* put themselves in the dark man’s place, neither should the dark be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman. (Cooper, 1892/1988, p. 6)

Cooper acknowledged that Black women have to be their own voice. Neither a White man nor a Black man can be the voice of the Black woman; she is her own voice. Cooper (1892/1988) exemplified the unifying Black Feminist Thought theme of self-defining as she professed, “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*” ( p. 31). Stewart and Cooper were pioneers in the Black feminism movements, leaving a legacy for generations of women to follow.

The Civil Rights movement prompted another movement in Black feminism. Led by Black women who believed that the Black Liberation Movement focused on the liberation of Black men, and the Women's Movement focused on the needs of White women, the Black feminism focused on the interlocking systems of oppression that race, class, gender, and sexual orientation presented; self-determination and self-valuation; and the importance of Black women's culture (Collins, 1986). Among those leading the movement were Alice Walker, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde. Referring to Black feminism, Collins (1991) defined it as a "process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (p. 39). As the misconception that feminism is for women only and/or a ploy to pit the sexes against one another heightens, hooks (1984/2000) clarified it:

The significance of the feminist movement (when it is not co-opted by opportunistic reactionary forces) is that it offers a new ideological meeting ground for the sexes, a space for criticism, struggle, and transformation. Feminist movement can end the war between the sexes. (p. 35)

Bringing a different perspective to the Black feminism movement, Alice Walker contributed the term "womanist." Emphasizing the similarities between a womanist and a feminist, in her own words, Walker (1983) explained, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (p. xi). Black feminism and womanism movements aim to reject all forms of oppression and pursue a commitment to social justice. Activist and educator Barbara Omolade (1994) asserted, "Black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with the struggles against sexism and racism by Black women who are themselves part of the community's efforts to achieve equity and

liberty” (p. xx). In a speech delivered at the Malcolm X Weekend in 1982, Black lesbian feminist, Audre Lorde (1984) declared this:

Black women in struggle from our own perspective, speaking up for ourselves, sharing close ties with one another politically and emotionally, are not the enemies of Black men. We are Black women who seek our own definitions, recognizing diversity among ourselves with respect. (p. 144)

Though I do not yet define myself a Black feminist scholar, I embraced its themes and joined the legacy of Black women writing their lives. I negotiated a space within Black Feminist Thought to write my life, bringing to light my experiences in my voice, focusing on the significance of race, place, and culture on the development of my identity.

#### African Pride: Critical Race Theory

In the words of bell hooks (1994), “There is much evidence substantiating the reality that race and class identity creates differences in quality of life, social status, and lifestyle that take precedence over the common experience women share-differences that are rarely understood” (p. 4), which influenced me to wed Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. Critical Race Theory emerged in the 1970s, stemming from Critical Legal Studies. As Adrien Katherine Wing (2003) described, Critical Legal Studies was originally organized from a “collection of neo-Marxist intellectuals, former New Leftist activists, encounter-culturalists, and other varieties of oppositionists in law school” (p. 4), in an effort to challenge laws. Serving the founding purpose, critical scholars within Critical Legal Studies challenged and critiqued the “notion of law as neutral, objective, and determinate” (Wing, 2003, p. 4), however; they neglected to include the voices of minorities and women. Despite scholars of Critical Legal Studies

critiquing the hegemonic practices occurring in the endemically racist U. S. society, they more specifically, failed to include race, leading to the birth of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Frustrated with the little to no progress with racial reform after the Civil Rights Movement, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, along with other legal scholars, defined Critical Race Theory and began in the words of Derrick Bell in Ladson-Billings (2003) “unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (p. 9). Critical Race Theory encompassed the following themes: (1) the call for context; (2) the critique of liberalism; (3) storytelling; (4) the insistence that racism is ordinary, not exceptional; and (5) interest convergence (Delgado, 1995). In particular, the call for context was essential to critical race theorists especially in political and moral arenas where rules and laws cannot be generalized for all people. The critique of liberalism challenged the notion of colorblindness and equal opportunity. In a nation built on the subordination of Blacks race could not and still cannot, be ignored. The history of White supremacy was embedded in the fabric of American society, making it sometimes difficult to recognize racism, which was why an inquiry that placed race at its nucleus necessary.

Borrowing the themes of Critical Race Theory as established by Kimberle Crenshaw and other legal scholars at the first Critical Race Theory meeting in 1989 (Crenshaw et al., 1995), educators began using Critical Race Theory to expose inequity in educational policies and practices. To begin with, Daniel Solórzano (1997) identified the following five tenets of Critical Race Theory that can and should inform theory, research, pedagogy, and curriculum and policy in the field of education: (1) the intercentricity of race; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the commitment to social justice; (4) the

centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches. More specifically, these tenets of Critical Race Theory are useful in the analysis and function of racism, as well how it hinders the progress of academic success of Black students. Educators embracing Critical Race Theory in their research included Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that Critical Race Theory was necessary for examining school inequities based on three propositions: (1) race continues to be a significant factor for determining inequity in the United States; (2) U. S. society is based on property rights; and (3) the intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity (p. 59). Together, these tenets and predispositions served as a theoretical framework to analyze and examine the implications of race and racism in my personal and professional lived experiences.

As Critical Race Theory is grounded in counterstory; it lent itself precisely in my research. Through my lived experiences, my autobiography, racism can be highlighted and critiqued through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Since Critical Race Theory particularly embraced stories from marginalized people, it was suitable for my inquiry, as it allowed my storied life to be brought in from the margins. Moreover, as my personal stories and professional stories were told, CRT lent itself as an analytical tool to help unpack how and why my students and I, members of a marginalized group of people, shared similar experiences. In analysis of my stories, including the similarities between my lived experiences and my students' lived experiences, Critical Race Theory lent itself as a theoretical framework as I searched for understanding, because it helped reveal the impact of race and culture on cyclical oppression or hegemony.

In examining the social injustices occurring within the U. S. society including its educational structures, Critical Race Theory commits to social justice. Hence, Critical Race Theory is as Peter McClaren (2003) noted, “dedicated to the emancipatory imperatives of self-empowerment and social transformation” (p. 189), encouraging and soliciting for change. That is as Delgado & Stephanic (2001) noted, “it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better” (p. 3). To illustrate, making a plea for social justice, critical race theorists courageously challenged educational systems’ attempts to regenerate and renew White supremacy that force Blacks and other marginalized groups to ignore their culture and history and accept Euro-American culture as their own (Lynn, 2006). Additionally, critical race theorists acknowledged that without a racial and social reform in the larger society, studies that call for classroom based solutions will only thwart the efforts of scholars and the experiential knowledge of Blacks and other people of color in the U. S. (Lynn, 2006). In brief, critical race theorists used Critical Race Theory as a framework to challenge power, privilege and oppression.

Provided that Critical Race Theory focuses on change within schools and other public institutions (Watkins, 2005) aimed to marginalize Blacks and other people of color, it attracted criticism. Critics of Critical Race Theory argue that it neglected to acknowledge the progress made in race relations in the United States. The accusation of “playing the race card” was also a common critique of Critical Race Theory. In the likes of Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory continues to endure critiques of its heavy reliance on narratives of the oppressed. The subjectivity of narratives offered critics discomfort, but if we do not tell our story, who will? Patricia Hill Collins (2000)

helped clarify this point, “The primary responsibility for defining one’s own reality lies with the people who live that reality, who actually have those experiences” (p. 35). Contrarily to the critiques, in the field of education, Critical Race Theory is committed to confronting racism and seeking change. Combined with Ladson-Billings (1994) culturally relevant pedagogy, Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought had the potential to be powerful catalysts forcing teachers to examine our stereotypes, biases, and values. With this kind of analysis, the needs of Black students may be better met.

#### Smooth Roots: Participatory Research Process

My life of constant displacement taught me (without me ever-knowing) not to become as William Falk (2004) describes as “rooted in place.” For me, change was and still is inevitable and inescapable. For a short moment, three years to be exact, I found a place to call home. I loved Eastside Academy. Yes, it had its share of problems. The students were learning and receiving a rigorous curriculum, at least that was what I believed until I arrived at Westside Academy...and enrolled in the Curriculum Studies EDD program at Georgia Southern University. Written on the first line of my class notes for the *History of American Education* (my first doctoral course) were the following words, “If you want to change how a person thinks, change how they are educated” (personal communication, August 16, 2006). I had no clue what my professor, William Reynolds, was talking about when I jotted his words on the first day of class, but by the end of the semester, which concurrently was the end of my first semester at Westside Academy, something certainly had changed about how I was being educated and how I was, and had been educating. I accredit my identity to the accumulation of education gained from my lived experiences. Prior to enrolling the EDD program, my formal

education encouraged me to ignore my active participation in the educational system of hegemony which insists on marginalizing Black students. Fortunately, as curriculum theorist William Watkins (2005) indicated, “Knowledge can serve a regulator. It creates boundaries for discourse and understanding” (p. 115), I became impelled to untangle my experiences in search of understanding their impact on the development of my identity. As Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought reaffirmed, personal experiences as a source of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2003), I believed they could serve as a lenses for educators, myself included, who dare to teach towards freedom (Ayers, 2004) and take a critical gaze at the development of their identity. I accepted Sonia Nieto’s (2003) assertion:

That all educators, if they are to become effective teachers of their students, need to confront tough questions about their identities and motivations; they need to think about why they do things as they do and ask if there might be a better way of reaching their students; they need to reflect on how a word, a gesture, or an action might inspire or wound for life. (p. 33)

My study was a quest for understanding of how my personal experiences influenced the development of my identity. By composing and critically reflecting upon my lived experiences, I identified the ideologies within my race, place and culture that influenced who I was and the culturally conscious educator I have become. My quest for understanding was guided by Black Feminist Thought and critical race theory perspectives. For my study, I recognize a Black Feminist Thought perspective as one that placed the experiences and ideas of Black women at its core (Collins, 2000) and a critical race perspective as one that illuminated the intercentricity of race, challenged the

dominant ideology, committed to social justice, validated the centrality of experiential knowledge, and utilizes interdisciplinary approaches (Solórzano, 1997). As both, Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory aimed to empower Black women and other marginalized groups of people their perspectives were significant in understanding and identifying the socially constructed ideologies that influenced the development of my identity. Relying on stories of marginalized people in our own voices, Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought blended well with one another as I, a Black woman, unraveled the phenomena of race, place, and culture and their impact on the development of my identity in an autobiographical narrative inquiry.

For this study, I blended my personal narratives with community and historical narratives. The bulk of my inquiry was collected through autobiographical writings. I began by drafting narratives of critical incidents that influenced my views on my relationship with my professional career (He, 2003; Jalongo, Isenberg & Gerbracht, 1995). I arranged the narratives chronologically and then organized them under the headings of Nappy Roots (5-17), Split Ends: Strand I (18-23), Split Ends: Strand II (24-26), and New Growth (24-28). After drafting the stories from my childhood, I shared them with my sisters. This mostly occurred during informal conversations while walking in the mall or through telephone conversations. As Harris (2005) pointed out, “The issue of validation of the autobiographical text is another common concern for Black women autobiography writers” (p. 47). I turned to my sisters for validation of the events and for filling in gaps when my memory proved to be faulty. This data, as well as my thoughts, ideas, tensions, and experiences (Spradley, 1980) that arose while conducting this research were documented in a researcher reflective journal. As my “I” turned into “we,”

I sought permission from my family to tell the stories. I am able to report, that there were no stories that they were not comfortable with me telling. Through telephone conversations, my mother was instrumental in confirming the accuracy of my family narratives. She helped me understand the necessity of telling my life story. Her words verbatim, “Michel, tell everything. Your dissertation will be a testament of the goodness of God” (L.J. Hunt, personal communication, February 2, 2009).

I also used personal journals, letters, and emails, to construct narratives. Originally, I intended only to tell the stories of my students that were collected in my journals. I found that they influenced my very decision to write specific events. This could be expected as autobiographies or personal histories, in the words of Gitlin et al. (1992):

Focus on the individual, revealing how past experiences, circumstances, and significant events may be related to perspectives teachers bring to the classroom, the way they act in particular situations, and what they see as problems or questions to be asked about their and the function of schooling. (p. 29)

Creating a balance, I wrote about both, the professional and the personal. Reading through my collected journals, letters, and emails, I found that indeed, my students’ stories were my stories. They sparked memories of my childhood experiences and helped narrow the list of stories that would be included in my inquiry. This triangulation of stories was intended to offer multiple perspectives (Marshall and Rossman, 2006) of the experiences that have influenced the development of my identity.

The stories in these pages were a representation of events that occurred in my life, one Black woman. I have written a fictionalized autobiography. By fictionalized

autobiography, I do not mean fabricated, but rather altered the names and settings to protect the identities of people in my life. Stories from my experiences as an educator were a consolidation of several experiences. I created a fictionalized co-teacher, Mr. Steele, who was a composite of several of my colleagues (see He, 2003 for details on composite narrative method). Mr. Powell and Mr. Holder were fictionalized characters that were representative of school leaders and officials that I encountered during my years of teaching. In my narratives, I also created fictionalized students. Rasheem served as the main character in several stories. He was consolidation of multiple Black male students that I had taught over the past six years. Similar to Rasheem, Mahogany was too a consolidation of several female students that I had taught. In an attempt to protect the identity of my family, the stories of my experiences within my family were jumbled. Several experiences were combined to create one narrative. Is my inquiry fiction is a question that is certain to be raised, but as Cudjoe (1984) offered:

Obviously the “truth” of the autobiography is neither self-evident not independent of extratextual confirmation. Autobiography and fiction, then, are simply different means of arriving at, or (re)cognizing the same truth: the reality of American life and the position of the Afro-American subject in that life. Neither genre should be given a privileged position in our literary history and each should be judged on its ability to speak honestly and perceptively about Black experience in this land. (p. 9)

Some narratives also appeared in italics. This was to done to identify students’ stories that merged into mine and to identify historical narratives that were mostly or completely transcribed in their original formal.

Since the bulk of my autobiographical writings relied on memory and my perception of reality, I used multiple data sources and relied on my family members tremendously for confirmation of accuracy. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) acknowledged that this type of triangulation “reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objectivity can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representation. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation” (p. 8). Every family, school, church, and community has secrets that they hope are never revealed. To ignore these stories is to ignore their impact on the development of who we are. Of course, there were some events of my past that if I had the opportunity to re-live my life, I would alter the script, but I would not be who I am had it not been for those not so glorious moments. Writing, reflecting, and discussing my experiences from childhood to the present, helped me identify and challenge when necessary, my values, beliefs, stereotypes, and biases.

#### Risks of Relaxing: Challenges

Telling my life story can be equated to taking a leap of faith. In a country prided on the freedom of speech, I understand that I had the freedom to tell the stories of my choosing, but what I do not have is freedom of interpretation. Telling my life stories has made me vulnerable and susceptible to critique (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005). Not only am I susceptible to critique; but the people whom I have lived my life are also vulnerable to the snares of criticism. As my autobiographical narrative infused elements of fiction to protect my family and my students, as well as my professional career, the subjectivity of my inquiry is likely to be questioned. Subjectivity and critiques were not enough to dissuade me from telling the stories of myself as a Black educator who has

grown up in the South as an outsider, or from taking my leap of faith by conducting this autobiographical narrative inquiry into the development of my identity.

Along with agonizing over which stories to tell and which ones to allow to remain sacred, my inquiry posed challenges that could have been expected. Maintaining the authenticity of the events while fictionalizing to protect myself and others posed the greatest challenge. It was initially difficult to condense multiple experiences into one story, but I was able to present a representation of my perceived reality. Telling some of my family stories exposed unhealed wounds. There was one point during my inquiry that I had to withdraw from sharing my narratives with my family. The stories forced us as a family to discuss the whys of incidents that we had for so long neglected to discuss. Although my autobiographical writings elicited hidden anger and pain, in the end they allowed me to question and many times understand why I was angry. I would argue that the tensions encountered while conducting this study made my family stronger and closer.

My biggest challenge while writing about my experiences as a classroom teacher, was presenting myself as a savior. I found myself attempting to apologize for not recalling a time in which I did not act in the best interest of my students. I did understand until the completion of this inquiry that my childhood experiences were equipping me with the necessary empathy to address issues that traditionally occur in urban schools and communities. As I finished drafting the stories from my professional experiences, I accepted the truth of the matter: My lived experiences are responsible for the empathy that I have shown towards my students. I found that I have not always been professional while interacting with my colleagues, but often, my display of un-professional behaviors

was sparked by injustice or wrongdoings done to my students. I am still attempting to understand why I did not recognize my childhood experiences as a source of knowledge in my early teacher years? Also, I am perplexed with how to help my students understand that their lived experiences can be used as strength rather than *damage* (Tuck, 2009). The challenges of writing my life were not always easy to digest. They were all necessary for my growth.

#### Crown and Glory: Findings and Significance of the Study

“Say It Loud-I’m Black and I’m Proud” was released in 1968 by recording artist, the late James Brown to rally Black empowerment at that time. James Brown used his lyrical talents to speak out about the marginalization of Blacks. The song, recorded long before I was a twinkle in my mother’s eye, communicates my feelings at the conclusion of this study. I am now prouder than ever to be a Black. I would go so far as to say, if I had to die and come back again, I would come back still as a Black woman.

I began this inquiry with the hopes of understanding how the phenomena of race, place, and culture have shaped who I am. Combing through my stories, I have found nothing less than culturally socialized traits. I found that traits of determination, spirituality, strength, resiliency and liberation through literacy were fostered through my cultural socialization. This affirmation was uncontestable as I read the autobiographical works of Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Jarena Lee, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, and bell hooks, just to name a few. Through the lenses of Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory, I combed through their stories as well as my stories. Through close reading and analysis of our stories, I was able to define traits about myself that previously left me responding to how do you do it-with I do not know, I just do it.

Their experiences have helped me affirm who I am. The affirmation that has been most profound to me is that I come from a people who have a history of having the courage to resist and challenge oppression and I am a beneficiary of that courage. I join Cornell West (2008) in his beliefs:

It's crucial to understand your history, and then be true to oneself in such a way that one's connection to the suffering of others is an integral part of understanding yourself...If you don't muster the courage to think critically about your situation, you'll end up living a life of conformity and complacency. You'll lose a very rich tradition that has been bequeathed to you by your foremothers and forefathers. (p. 13)

This study allowed me to narrate and explore my lived experiences as a Black female growing up in various geographical places in the South. The research findings from my study indicated that who I am is directly linked to my race and our culture. My race and culture were compromised into “conformity and complacency” at times as I moved throughout the South, but the development of my critical consciousness has encouraged me to resist and challenge conformity and complacency. The traits of determination, spirituality, strength, resiliency and liberation through literacy were fostered through my cultural socialization.

Black Feminist Thought created a space for me to, as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) summarized, join the “Black daughters [who] identify the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives” (p. 102). Through this study, I have found that I am a reflection of my mother, a Black woman. In the words of Dick Gregory (1964), “Like a lot of Negro kids we never would have made it without our Momma” (p. 25). My mother

inherently transmitted the culturally socialized traits of Black women to me. Lacking critical consciousness, I, like many potential readers of this text will, resented my mother for accepting the abuse of my father and marrying a White man then allowing him to verbally abuse her. The thought of an outraged mother in the likes of a Harriet Jacobs (1861/2003), determined to protect her children from the snares of a racist, oppressive society, never entered my mind. Jacobs (1861/2003) wrote, “I feel the [Black] woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (p. 245). It’s my hope that my readers remember that. As an adolescent through my early adulthood years, I questioned how my mother could divorce my abusive father only to marry a White man. Her decision seemed ludicrous in my eyes. I certainly did not understand her decision as a Black woman *doing what she had to do*. I associated my mother’s lack of education with her abuse. Like learning the significance of Black hair, it was one of those things I absorbed from my culture. We never had formal conversations about acceptance of the abuse, but she constantly reminded me that I had no other option but to educate myself.

The strength required to raise four Black daughters in a society that insists on their marginalization is immeasurable. Only my sisters and I know the heartache and burdens we have placed on our mother. But she has always continued to love us. Her unrelenting love for me and my sisters was clear as she always managed to make a way out of no way for us. Just as bell hooks (2002) asserted, “Many black folks from poor and working-class backgrounds were given a foundation of love and recognition... There have always been loving families who lack material wealth” (p.85). My family was one of them. I attribute my resiliency to her implicit and explicit life lessons. It would have been easy for my mother to use poverty as an excuse for not expecting me and my sisters to

become educated women. Rather, she used it as a reason why we must become educated women. This study has shown me that my determination to succeed regardless of unfavorable circumstances is too a reflection of my mother's strength. Enduring abuse, seen as a race-trader, living in poverty, and triumphs over medical adversities, produced an internal strength. I watched my mother triumph time after time, giving me no excuse not to triumph. Her only request has always been that I get an education. This study has allowed me to see this culturally socialized theme repeatedly.

Reading autobiographies of Black educators such as Maya Angelou (1969), Booker T. Washington (1901) and Salome Thomas El (2003), the significance of education to the Black culture was indicated. It served as the uplift of our race. This was evident in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, her autobiography that described her experiences in the South including her triumph in becoming the first Black streetcar conductor in San Francisco and her high school graduation. Recalling the morning of her graduation day, Angelou reflected that:

In my robe and barefoot in the backyard, under cover of going to see about my new beans, I gave myself up to the gentle warmth and thanked God that no matter what evil I had done in my life He had allowed me to live to see this day.

Somewhere in my fatalism I had expected to die, accidentally, and never had the chance to walk up the stairs in the auditorium and gracefully receive my hard-earned diploma. Out of God's merciful bosom I had won reprieve. (p. 175)

After sitting through her graduation ceremony listening to Mr. Edward Donleavy, a White man, discuss the changes that would be made to her school, Lafayette County Training School, Angelou's perception of graduation as a sense of accomplishment

changed. She revealed, “Graduation, the hush-hush magic time of frills and gifts and congratulations and diplomas, was finished for me before my name was called. The accomplishment was nothing” (p. 180). However, this moment was short-lived as the valedictorian led the graduating class and audience in the singing of James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Rejuvenated and inspired, Maya Angelou described her emotions:

We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race. (p. 184)

Though I have not come to accept many of the views of educator Booker T. Washington’s (1901), I have come to respect his contributions to the education of Blacks. In *Up from Slavery*, Washington chronicled his life and commitment to education. He admitted that:

There was never a time in my youth, no matter how dark and discouraging the days might be, when one resolve did not continually remain with me, and that was a determination to secure an education at any cost. (p. 26)

After being indoctrinated with the Hampton Institute; a White supremacist doctrine; Washington championed (I continue to struggle with his ideology) for industrial education that urged Blacks to become self-reliant. In the early plans of Tuskegee Institute, conversion to the industrious education that Washington felt Blacks needed, Blacks enrolled in Tuskegee with prior liberal education. In discontent, speaking of the first day of class at Tuskegee, Washington revealed that:

It was also interesting to note how many big books some of them had studied and how many high-sounding subjects some of them claimed to have mastered. The bigger the book and the longer the name of the subject, the prouder they felt of their accomplishment. Some had studied Latin, and one or two Greek. (pp. 84-86)

Though this does not support his industrious education model, it showed that indeed, Blacks did value education and were proactive in obtaining it. As trivial as Washington's autobiography was to me, I do appreciate his commitment to the education of Blacks.

In a contemporary educator's memoir, Salome Thomas-El (2003), the significance of education continued to appear. Describing his journey into the urban, now principal, Salome Thomas-El recalled a poignant experience that occurred while he was working for PRISM Sports in Philadelphia. Referring to the only other Black employee at PRISM, Salome Thomas-El stated that:

His ability to move ahead faster because of not having a college education would be one more thing I would remember when I began to teach. It was one more example to use in pushing my students to get all of the education they could. (p. 78)

Mr. Thomas-El recognized the impact of not having education could have on one's life. He understood the opportunities that were afforded him because of the choice to obtain an education. He revealed:

The more I thought about, the more I realized that the single most significant fact was that I had chosen to get an education. Just that college degree alone opened doors to move beyond the inner city. (p. 80)

Throughout his memoir, Salome Thomas-El used his lived experiences to urge his tough urban students to stay in school and to believe in education.

Through this study, the culturally socialized trait of liberation through literacy has been extended for me. In the likes of Fredrick Douglass (1845), my true liberation through literacy has come with the privilege to write my life and raise consciousness of the significance of Blacks as well as educators studying their lives. I feel a sense of liberation as I have been able to narrate the stories and experience of not only myself but also my students who are trapped in an educational system designed to keep them disenfranchised. Race has been used in the United States, in the words of Ladson-Billings (2003), “to justify hierarchy, inequality, and oppression” (p. 8). Making race (un)ignorable is crucial to understand the cultural socialization of identities. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), one of the leading pioneers in Black education, professed, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (p. 3). Unfortunately, we are in the twenty-first century and the problem in education is still the color line. Since emancipation, universal education or public education has seldom met the needs of Black students. Based on my experiences, race has served just as William Watkins (2003) argued “to maintain and transmit dominant culture” (p. 37). This was evident in my education as I was told that I was too smart to be a Black girl. I am now committed to exposing and dismantling systemic marginalization in all of its various permutations.

My lived experiences narrated in this study exposed the significance of class. The changes that occurred in my life with the acquisition of a wealthy White were evident. As hooks (2000) declared “Despite grave injustice and all barriers that make it practically impossible to change your class position, if you are born on the bottom of this society’s

economic totem pole, it is still true that a teeny fraction of that population squeezes and militantly forces their way from the bottom up. And we consider ourselves fortunate, lucky, blessed” (p. 156). Indeed, had it not been for my mother’s sacrifice of happiness in marrying my step-father, I am not quite sure of what my fate would have been. Of course the financial means to relocate the family from south Florida to South Georgia was necessary. However, the knowledge of the impact of environment, at least I would dare to say, was a class privilege that my stepfather possessed and was likely influential in his decision to uproot us. This class and white privilege denotes the necessity of educational policies that take in to account the role of race and racism in the creation of class hierarchies.

Writing about my life has also made clear for me the significance of my religious beliefs. Faith in Christ has been the hope that was needed when hopeless situations presented themselves. It was the hope that my people in the likes of Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass held on to when bleakness was all around. Through this study I have been able to affirm my spiritual groundedness as a culturally socialized trait. My affirmation, in the words of Beverly Tatum (1997):

Though Black churches can sometimes be criticized as purveyors of the dominant ideology, as evidenced in Eurocentric depictions of Jesus and sexist assumptions about the appropriate role of women, it is also true that historically Black churches have been the site for organized resistance against oppression and a place of affirmation for African American adults as well as children. (p. 83)

Each of the autobiographies that I read discussed religious beliefs. The Black church has been influential in the development of my beliefs. As Dr. Martin Luther King

Jr. (1963) stated, “Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning. It is the lifting of a burden or the canceling of a debt” (p. 50), I have forgiven both of my fathers for their treatment of my mother and I believe that they indeed did love her and me as well.

I have intentionally left the discussion of my father and step-father for last. I am still attempting to digest the potential fact of the matters. Through this study, I have found that like my mother, they too have had profound impacts on who I am. In American culture, Black and White, patriarchal thinking is engrained. I make no excuses for either of my fathers’ actions, but I acknowledge that they were culturally socialized to in the words of bell hooks (2001) “believe that power is more important than love, particularly the power to dominate and control others” (p. 145). Through the reading of Black autobiographies, physical, verbal, and psychological abuses were vivid. During and after slavery, the abuse of the Black woman was a learned and culturally acceptable behavior, but thanks *be* to God, I never accepted it. I did, however, internalize their abuse to my mother as a control mechanism. I believed that nothing can force me to do whatever a man wants me to do. I have spent my life since leaving my parents house attempting to resist male-domination. This has trickled over from my personal life to my professional life. Reading through my autobiographical writings, it was evident that my challenges and tensions are most often with males. I credit these tensions with my resistance to male domination. Whether the tensions will decrease, that is yet to be determined. However, I am at least aware that subconsciously residue from my fathers has created a tension.

While studying and exploring the development of identity, I was unable to locate life stories of educators past novice years and under thirty. Autobiographies of educators born in the hip-hop era (1964-1984) as defined by Bakari Kitwana (2002) were also not assessable. Contributing to that missing body of the literature as well as the limited body of literature written by contemporary Black women, I offer my autobiographical research as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse that discredits personal experience as a source of knowledge. I believe that my autobiographical inquiry can serve as a testimony for 21<sup>st</sup> century urban school educators.

Telling and retelling my life story not only helps understand the lived experiences that have influenced the development of my identity, but also helps encourage teachers, teacher educators, administrators, and educational policy makers to reflect on the experiences that have shaped their values, biases, stereotypes, and their identities. Teacher autobiographies are as Nieto (2003) implied, “A way for teachers to think about how, through a clearer understanding of their lives, they can become more effective with their students” (p. 26). As teachers are having mass exodus from the field of education within three years of arriving, I hope that autobiographical narrative inquiry into the development of identity will be utilized by teacher educators and novice teachers as a proactive measure to train and retain more critically conscious teachers and school officials.

Leading public intellectual Cornell West (2008) proclaimed, “It takes courage to interrogate yourself. It takes courage to look in the mirror and see past your reflection to who you really are when you take off the masks, when you’re not performing the same old routines and social roles” (p. 9). My study is written for academe. However it heavily

relies on the elements of fiction and nonfiction. Written in narrative form, and sometimes in my acquired Southern dialect, my study steers away from language that does prohibit it from being understood by non-academe audiences. I hope *Nappy Roots*, *Split Ends*, and *New Growth: An Autobiographical Inquiry into the Development of My Identity*, *No Lye* draws an audience of aspiring teachers, pre-service teachers, novice teachers, teacher educators, teacher leaders, administrators, and education policy-makers who are interested in education and who have the courage to conduct an autobiographical narrative inquiry into the development of their identities. I hope that my study will be of great interest to those who work directly with Black students in high poverty schools. Black students in high-poverty schools have a higher possibility of facing similar challenges in their home life as me. These challenges create difficult conditions for Black students to live and progress academically. Nevertheless, they do not define who the students become. I hope that educators of urban Black students will use my stories to create dialogues about the experiences that Black students possibly encounter. Like me, many Black students may not ever reveal outward signs of a troubled home life even though it does not mean that trouble does not exist. Teachers need to be aware and sensitive to the roles that race, place and culture play in the socialization process of Black students.

## EPILOGUE

When I look into the mirror after relaxing my hair, I stand in awe as I notice how much my hair has grown. I comb straight the few tangles before trimming away the split-ends. After blow drying my hair, I marvel at my shiny straightened mane. I step outside and I am immediately greeted by South Georgia's unfriendly natural elements: humidity and drizzle. My freshly straightened mane disappears. The process begins all over. I have come to understand that no matter what I do to my hair, it will always return back to its natural roots.

I began this study with the hopes of tracing the roots of my identity. I assumed that it would lead me to my family instead it led me even further to my foremothers and forefathers. Empowered with knowing that resiliency, strength, faith, and determination were jewels that I inherited and that no one can take them from me-oh, how rich I have become! With such a great inheritance comes responsibility. My liberation and consciousness are useless if I do not use them to help liberate others.

Recently, I viewed Tavis Smiley's (2009) documentary "Stand." At the conclusion of the documentary, Smiley declared, "Sometimes we must take a stand because our conscience tell us that it is right." My conscience tells me that I must use my knowledge to be a voice for my students of color. They are matriculating through a school system that is undergoing a "redesign plan." Under the redesign plan, they are mandated to attend their neighborhood school unless they can meet the yet to be determined admission requirements to a few specialty schools. This may appear fair to some, but consider the reality...where we lived is determined by how much money we make...how much money we make is determined by the kind of education we have

received...the kind of education we have received has been largely based on the color of our skin. So, my students who mostly live in overwhelming Black neighborhoods, under the redesign plan are receiving an education that targets them to specific technical/career plans. This is unnerving for me as it sounds too much like Booker T. Washington's plan that designated a "place" for people of African descent.

So, where does that leave me as an educator teaching in the midst of the redesign? I ask myself that question quite often. I often find myself worried about my students' fate which is inevitably the fate of us all. When these moments arise, I find myself dialoging with my closest friends and family members. The other day, my best friend gave me a card with a picture of Dr. Betty Shabazz on the front. Printed on the inside card were the words, "Believe in the strength of your spirit...the power of your purpose...the dignity of your dream." I have found myself reflecting on the words. They took me right back to my inheritance. My foremothers and forefathers fostered spirits of resiliency, determination, and spirituality, in me. These traits are my source of strength as I live out my purpose: to advocate for not only my students, but all students.

As stated by Lisa Delpit (1995), "We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs" (p. 46); therefore, I am currently developing a culturally responsive teaching professional development workshop. I believe that in an urban district such as mine, culturally responsive pedagogical practices are a start to moving our students forward. I have also made a personal commitment to increasing parental, student and community involvement in our local Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA). I have been inspired by my predecessors in the likes of Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Harriet Jacobs, Mary McLeod Bethune,

Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks, just to name a few, to use my “other mother” role to in the words of Collins (2007) “to forge powerful mechanisms of political action” (p. 394). I cannot do it all. But I will do what I can do.

My mother is surviving. Without a formal education, she is trapped at the bottom of America’s social class hierarchy. On a fixed income and mounting medical bills my mother relies on emergency rooms when medical attention is needed. She is the one who tells anyone, “Don’t feel sorry for her,” she was born in an era that knows that self love and community trumps wealth. I do not worry about her. She is like most other Black women I know or have read about. She knows how to make a way out of no way.

Laurnetta is currently teaching in a local middle school. She is also pursuing a specialist degree at Lincoln Memorial University. Laurnetta is quite busy as her son is in his junior year and her daughter is in the third grade. She and her husband are battling with how to teach their children the values that we have learned through experiences without exposing them to the realities of a lower class status. My niece and nephew are born and living in the midst of a capitalist culture. They have no sense of money as we, all the adults around them, contribute buying them anything and everything they desire. We have attempted to pass down our stories as well as expose the younger generations to stories of our foremothers and forefathers. However, teaching resiliency becomes difficult when obstacles are mystified or deceived.

Louise and Jean are both working full time and attending school, determined to finish their degrees soon. They both have realized that higher education is the only way they will be granted access to social mobility.

My father has been released from jail. I do not get to speak with him as frequently as I would like. Through my mother and other relatives, I understand that he is surviving. With no medical insurance, he is a frequent visitor of the emergency room.

At sixty-nine, my grandmother is pursuing her GED. She is living, teaching, and preaching the word of God. My grandmother is on a fixed income, but is adamant in her beliefs that God will supply all of her needs and that He did not bring her this far to leave her.

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